

PEACHES

Holly Painter

“Mom? What’s a sex change?”

The wooden spoon slows in the pot.
Hissing flecks of tomato soup
fling themselves at my mother’s hand.

“Where did you hear that?”

I’m returning from the pantry with peaches,
sunshine slices floating in a sea of syrup
inside the aluminum can.

“At camp. Some kids said I should get a sex change.”

My mother twists a knob beside the burner.
The glowing spiral fades quickly to gray
and appears cool.

“A sex change is when a man becomes a woman. Or vice-versa.”

I pick at the peach can label
with a close-bitten thumbnail.
The edge accordions, stuck fast with a strip of glue.

“How?”

My mother takes the can from me and slides a knife
cleanly under the label, adding it to the pile
she’ll mail in to support my school.

“They have surgery. Sometimes lots of surgeries.”

I drag my stool over to the can opener
and let the magnet grab the can then spin it,
wobbling like a warped record.

“Can kids do it?”

She shoots out a hand to grab the can
as the top lifts off, a jaggedy-brimmed hat
I shouldn't touch.

“No. And don't listen to those kids at camp.
Just because you like Legos and sports doesn't
make you a boy. Now go tell Dad it's dinnertime.”

She flips the peaches into a bowl and turns
to check on the chicken in the oven.
I nod okay. Okay. I'm okay. I'm okay.

PLEASE DON'T HURT ME

The first time I'm attacked in a bathroom,
I'm six, ketchup-smear'd, wild. An elderly woman
swings her Mary Poppins bag at my tiny body.
"Get outta here, you sick little boy!"
Slip on the tile, bang my knee, but no blood,
so I run off to find my mom.

I don't always tell Mom.
I'm eleven: a guard, summoned by a bathroom
cleaner, arrives armed with a bludgeon.
Hands up, dripping, I plead with the woman:
"You can check if you want! I'm not a boy!"
She wrestles me to the ground, pats down my body.

Short hair; sturdy gait; lean, muscular body.
Dresses; headbands; sparkly earrings – my mom
wants the world to know I'm not a boy.
But in the YMCA locker room, the mall bathroom,
there's a posse of preteens, a clumpy-lashed woman
at the mirror. "The fuck are you doing here?" Blood-

curdling scream, keys turned claws, drawing blood.
Outside, a boyfriend, a husband, somebody's
dad. "Just saw some perv sneak into the women's
room!" They wait, nails biting palms. If Mom's
not there to diffuse when I leave the bathroom,
then I have to be ready to run, faster than those boys,

those men. But they're not wrong: I am a boy,
or I would be. The day I start to bleed,
week shy of my twelfth birthday, I cry in the bathroom.
Pink day-of-the-week undies soaked red, body
unrecognizable, a traitor. I don't tell my mom.

I don't want to become a woman.

She asks once: "What's wrong with being a woman?"
Back-to-school shopping at Target, boys'
section, me begging, "Please? But Ryan's mom
lets him wear jerseys and baggy jeans!" Under a blood-
red bullseye, she breaks down. Sobs shake her body.
"What's so awful about being like me?" In the bathroom,

she fixes her makeup, feels the women notice her blood-
shot eyes. I wait in boys' apparel, curse my stupid body
and myself for making Mom cry in the Target bathroom.

WHEN YOU TRANSITION WITHOUT ME

I.

Your new friends,
men who were never boys,
are assholes.

Gender studies majors
turned teenage stereotypes
of try-hard masculinity

burping beers and
grabbing jam jars
from my hands.

Give it here, love.
Let a man have a go.

II.

We're not like this.
We wear blowaway cowlicks.
We read folktales at bedtime.
We pad over kelp to the sea.
We watch Maori television with subtitles.
We wear suits with buttonhole sprigs.

III.

I hate you around them.

Gruffing up your voice

walking elbows out
taking up all the space.

I'm embarrassed
watching you play
rugby-head for the lads

watching you put on
a grave masculine scowl

watching you give
girls the glad eye.

And exhausted, later
when you want reassurance
that you made a good man.