

Dysphoria

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Language is a funny thing, you know? Different “conglomerations,” I like to say, of spaces and letters mashed together to indicate what’s this and what’s that.

I wonder if all the people squished together on the bus this morning are a language. What would it sound like? Would it be nice? Or would it sound, I don’t know, German?

I laugh as I step to the ground, imagining myself as a letter breaking free and floating away in the wind.

Or maybe I am a space.

What would I be a space for? Or for whom? And what kind of space? An apologetic one, probably. I feel like I always hear people say “take up space!” but really, they mean “you may only take up space if you fit into my picture perfect ideal of humanity.”

Sometimes these combinations of spaces and letters, these “words,” have what I call hard meanings. They mean exactly what they say they mean, what they are told they mean: chest, t-shirt, hair, etc. I also have what I call soft meanings. These are the words pulsing with subtext, the words meaning more than what’s been given to them: alive, happy, pain, etc.

And sometimes, actually sometimes more often than not, I find myself realizing it’s rare to find a truly hard word that isn’t secretly soft in some context or other. And I think sometimes words are taught disguised to us, as if learning the true softness of the word will somehow break the fabric of society.

While I walk to class after stepping off the bus this

morning, I am pleasantly surprised by an image. No, not an image. Reflection. I am pleasantly surprised by a reflection I see in the window of some science building I never cared to learn the name of.

I am distracted by the way his faded orange t-shirt accentuated the flatness of his chest, the way the bottom of his boxers pushed against the blue of his jeans. I like the way his backwards baseball cap hid his unwashed hair.

Three letters popped into my head:

B O Y.

See this, this is why language is a funny thing. Because in the dictionary, reflection just means an image seen in a mirror or a shiny surface. But it’s more than that. It’s a feeling, a memory that isn’t a memory. It’s reaching out into the darkness and finding a heart I forgot is mine beating *home home home*.

In the dictionary, hair just means any of the fine threadlike strands growing from the skin of humans and other animals, but this definition doesn’t capture the euphoria of my first hair cut, the euphoria of actually being able to wear a hat backwards.

You know that feeling of running down a hill in the middle of summer, wind in your face, blue skies and green fields forever? Yeah. Imagine getting that feeling from a backwards baseball cap. The dictionary could never capture that. But that doesn’t make it less real.

Right?

I sit down in my seat after walking to class after

stepping off the bus that morning and I am late. I can feel everyone's eyes on me, burning through me like they're trying to pry me open so all of my secrets fall out. I try to ignore all of it by focusing on the blank page of not-yet written notes in front of me.

But sometimes, God, sometimes, when I try really hard to focus, my thoughts get really loud, and I can't quite hear the sounds of the real world around me. The teacher asks a question, and I am dreaming about the boy in the science building window. But the teacher is asking me a question, and the moment of euphoria turns sour, shocking me into sticky sleep paralysis. I watch someone else answer for me and I am assaulted by a different three lettered word:

S H E.

I know that "she" is pronounced like the quieting of a room, but all I can hear are alarm bells ringing in my ears SHE screaming SHE red lights SHE I couldn't think SHE I can't think SHE is it hot in here SHE is it a lie SHE am I real SHE how do I get out of my skin SHE I hate this body SHE I can't see SHE I can't move SHE no no no no no SHE I'm not SHE I don't pass SHE I can't pass SHE I can't think I can't think I can't think

Am I breathing?

A far away voice that doesn't seem like mine asks my body to smile and nod. Pretend you can hear, pretend you are there and maybe they won't notice.

But they don't notice. That's the problem.

I smile.