

Andragon

People always ask me, “Where are you from?”

I say “Kalamazoo.”

They say, “No. I mean where are you *from*?” In my twenty-one years I’ve been mistaken for a variety of ethnic identities including Chinese, Italian, Native American, Latino, and Cher. My whiteness is abstracted. I’ve come to think of myself as a veritable ethnic wildcard, a choose-your-own-adventure, a venue for projection and portraiture.

Is it just my looks? My elbow-length black hair and oversized lips? Are two features all it’s taken for me to have become a stand-in for Asians, those of Mediterranean descent, and various indigenous peoples? Is this simply because those groups have such little visibility in the Michigan towns I’ve been living in? Yes, perhaps. Yet I probably encourage these exotic readings in the way I dress: often formally, sometimes scantily. (You know, three-piece suits, silk ties... grass skirts.) Most of the time I just wear a lot of animal print shirts from the plus-size women’s section at TJ Maxx. “But you are not plus-sized, nor are you a woman,” you may protest. I’m technically not a tiger or a snow leopard either, but that doesn’t stop me from dressing like one.

I guess I also come off as foreign because I don’t have a strict Midwestern accent. I’m more “expressive.” This means that I complete sentences. See, Michigan men normally tow the line between being laconic and being dead. Most

barely utter a word. They just tap their feet and release a few “er”s, “well”s, and “but”s through their teeth like stifled after-dinner burps. You know the type I mean-- these guys are all discourse markers and no discourse. And in the Midwestern vernacular everyone chokes their words, sticks close to the consonants. Pop. Grocery. Tanner. Pp. Grcry. Tnner. Vowels have no futures here. In Michigan our vowels are stillborn.

I let my open sounds hang in the air. I like vowels. They travel. In fact, I prefer to imagine myself as someone who does away with consonants altogether. I want to exist as an ooh, an ah, even as an eww.

In addition to being an ethnic wildcard, I've also become something of a sexual buffet. All you can eat. Like the Sunday breakfast specials at every chain diner off of I-94 from Paw Paw to Livonia. Oh, I've been with men and I've been with women. And I question which of those I am, if either one. Some days I feel that I am a cowboy—aloof, tough, grimy, and proud. I have a swagger. Other days I feel like a haunted young woman, one who is beset by visions and who hears the thin voices of the dead calling to her in her sleep; a woman who loses track of where she ends and others begin. Also, I envisage myself as being at once very old and very young, maybe because gender neutrality belongs to those early and late stages of living. Anyway, I never know who will be attracted to me, or to which aspect it is they're attracted. I just try to roll with it. You could say I'm a liquid asset in the economy of desire. Converted easily.

I have never met another person who is the way I am. For this reason, perhaps, I occasionally entertain somewhat eccentric delusions of grandeur. For

example, a couple of months ago it occurred to me that I might actually be some sort of black hole. Once an unsuspecting person sleeps with me, I mused, their entire existence might A.) cease, or B.) henceforth continue inside of me. I should test this hypothesis, I decided. So when my best friend from high school, Jacob, came over and spent the night, I came onto him, which I've wanted to do for years anyway. (He is straight, but one day a couple years ago we kissed while a girl gave us both blowjobs so I figured he might be the anything-goes kind.) The two of us were on our fourth or fifth glass of dark rum and we were listening to La Traviata on the record player. It was about 3AM. As Jacob got comfortable on the couch and put his feet up on the table, I waddled over to him, walking on my knees across the carpet, and whispered, "Can I touch you?"

"No," he said immediately, like a reflex. He paused and added, "you're a stunning creature, but I can't."

I never turned the record player off that night. Traviata finished and I listened to fuzz for three and a half weeks, until the machine finally died.

Creature, I thought to myself. That's what I am.

I'm not at a loss for admirers. There are many in town. The bisexual shuttle bus driver made his feelings known months ago. He could barely keep his eyes on the road. The goth cashier at Kroger also springs to mind. I see her fidgeting with the pewter anklet around her neck every time I come striding through those automatic sliding doors. And the gas station attendant on Main Street? He practically propositions me every time I get a fill-up. I think he's American, but he might be of Middle-Eastern or Israeli descent, I can't be sure.

He's not awful looking, but there's something creepy about him. I first suspected he had a thing for me when his fingers lingered in mine as he gave me my change one evening last month. My suspicions were confirmed the next time I entered, when he made kissy faces at me and then asked if I wouldn't like to come by after hours. It's a twenty-four hour gas station so I'm not sure how that would have worked. As I was going out the door he said, "god, you're beautiful," rapidly and under his breath, as though it were a subliminal message or the result of a special type of Tourette's syndrome where you can't help but compliment people. I turned around. "You're so andragonous," he added. "I fucking love that."

Andragonous is what he called me, which is, it seems, a combination of androgynous and dragon, elaborating the notion that beyond my gender not being distinguishable as either male or female, it is perhaps not even human. I bid the clerk adieu, but the word stayed with me. Andragonous! The term describes a creature of mythic proportions, I thought to myself. A tragic beast, terrorizing the kingdom, waiting to be slain. *Andragoness*? Maybe it's part dragon and part princess. In either case, the being awaits penetration by an armored man.

I had nearly forgotten about both the clerk and word until last night. See, I went in to pay for my gas and to pick up a Rice Krispies Treat (my favorite) and the guy actually cornered me behind a wall of Wild Cherry Pepsi six packs. He grabbed my hand and guided it over the bulge in his pants. I have to confess that I momentarily considered giving him a hand job, speculating that I might be able

to get a couple more free Rice Krispies Treats out of the deal.

“The first time I saw you, I didn’t know if you were a man or a woman,” the clerk confided. “I just knew I wanted you,” he said with a lusty snarl. If he doesn’t know what I am, does he know what he is? I asked myself. At that moment I wanted to split him in two, a man and a woman, let them fight over me. I wanted to be the gleaming green andragon between them, their argument.

So I gave in. I led the gas station clerk to the far back aisle, my dragon’s lair, the dark corner with the kap-oo-**chee**-noh machine. He pinned me hard against the display case of Hostess snack-cakes, causing an avalanche of Twinkies. I reached for a shelf to steady myself, but I dislodged it, sending a medley of packaged snacks tumbling to the ground. “I’m still not sure what you are,” the clerk gasped, unfazed by the mayhem. I didn’t want to tell him. I wanted to spread my andragon wings and soar from gender to gender. We dropped to the floor and he kissed me. He wrapped his tongue around me like I was a foreign language. My head was nestled in among many bags of Funyuns, which crinkled noisily with our every movement. From then on, we said no words, only made vowel sounds.

The clerk smelled of sweat, menthol cigarettes, and Doublemint gum. I breathed him in. Our bodies moved in sync, pounding against the chilly, grubby tiled floor. When our tempo slowed from largo to grave, I knew the two of us were entering into that impossible, parallel world known as *after hours*, where time unfurls and seconds become vast. The clerk grinded me, and my skull ground relentlessly against those Funyuns, destroying them. Refining them.

We were intertwined, trapped in each other. And in the icy glow of the drink cooler the clerk suddenly appeared to me to be turning the color of Christ in one of Giotto's *Crucifixions*, a pale green. My vision had begun playing tricks on me. I watched his nostrils open as wide as eyes. Then, just before it was slipped back into my mouth, I saw the clerk's slender tongue extend almost all the way down to his Adam's apple. I squeezed my eyelids shut as I received it. As he exhaled, I inhaled. I began to notice that his breath was pungent, just a tinge rotten. This only made me hungrier for him. My ecstasy remained unbroken even as I heard the bells on the gas station door jingle, followed by the footsteps of somebody else heading toward us. I kept my eyes closed and held on tight to my clerk. I'll never leave, I vowed silently, never. I could feel him breathe fire down my neck.