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2022

Notes From the Chrysalis: Feminine Beauty, Gender Transition, and My Attempts at Untangling the Two

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“Notes From the Chrysalis: Feminine Beauty, Gender Transition, and My Attempts at Untangling the Two” by Eden Duley (she/her)

ABSTRACT. *In this creative essay, Eden explores the common metaphor of the transgender butterfly as a way of interrogating the broader cultural myth of transition and trans identity. Primarily through personal reflection, she argues that feminine metamorphosis is a poor and harmful understanding of trans identity and that transition is much more like Falling in Love than it is a metamorphosis.*



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Notes from the Chrysalis

Feminine Beauty, Gender Transition,
and My Attempts at Untangling the Two

As a young transfeminine person, I feel as though I cannot escape the metaphor of the transgender butterfly.

Simple caterpillar, quiet chrysalis, elegant butterfly.

Ugly boy, swift transition, beautiful girl.

It follows me everywhere. In articles about the latest trans celebrity, in social media posts made by other trans people, in my own wandering thoughts about my transition, the metaphor flies after me. I will admit that the connection between metamorphosis and transition seems simple, seems self evident. To say that something is self-evident, however, is to say that it is a culturally accepted assumption, and it seems as though the butterfly flaps its wings around our society's assumptions about trans beauty and gender transition. In my experience, metamorphosis is a much better representation of our faulty cultural *idea* of what it means to be transgender, not the true psychological, social, or physical experience of transgender individuals.

I do not seek to criticize the metaphor itself. Many trans people, myself included, have found a poetic beauty in such an innocent and simple representation of trans identity as the butterfly. The pervasive notion of trans metamorphosis, however, is *representative* of a broader, deeper misconception of what it means to be trans, what it means to transition. I sincerely believe that the prevailing understanding of gender transition as an **aesthetic transformation** and as a **binary division of the self** does immeasurable harm to transgender people. As is the case with all issues of beauty and social performance, women and femmes seem to take the brunt of the force. A deconstruction and reimagining of the transition narrative is thus necessary.

I am currently ~~in the middle~~ of my social and medical transition, and I can finally take a moment to breathe for the first time in years. I'm in the chrysalis. I'm here. I'm doing it. In this moment of silence, however, I am beginning to question the nature of the chrysalis around me,

the chrysalis that I myself have constructed. I find satisfaction in the act of transformation, and I revel in my gradual approach of ~~womanhood~~. But why? What informs my method of transformation, and at what point will I be satisfied? If I am intellectually aware of the fact that there is no true and single version of what it means to *be* a woman, then why do I endlessly measure myself against a fictional archetype of femininity? The answer is obviously (and uninterestingly) “beauty standards,” the unending torture of aesthetic inadequacy that seems endemic to femininity itself. The relationship between transfemininity and beauty, however, presents a host of unique and existential challenges to the experience of transfeminine people working through gender transition and is thus worthy of careful consideration.

Through a combination of personal perspective, creative expression, and a tiny smattering of relevant literature, I hope to explore the danger and shortcomings of feminine metamorphosis as a lens through which to conceptualize gender transition. By attempting to reconceptualize what it *means* to transition, I believe that I and countless others can find a peace and sense of wholeness that is unattainable while operating under the dominant cultural myth of the transgender butterfly. As an able-bodied, white college student, my perspective is obviously limited. In the personal, however, there is always a fractal of the universal, and I believe that there is value in my voice.

Ode to the Caterpillar

In a 2008 study published by researchers from the department of biology at Georgetown University, it was discovered that insects like moths and butterflies retain memories from their time as caterpillars (Blackiston et al.) Despite practically turning into liquid while inside the chrysalis, the insects were able to remember the pain of the electric shocks that had been associated with specific odors before metamorphosis. No matter how much they had changed outwardly, they remembered the pain. They remembered.

Amongst many trans women, there is (understandably) a deep and frantic desire to distance themselves from the person that they used to be, the boy or man that they once were.

Many trans women will scrub any pretransition photos of themselves from the internet, have their birth certificate changed to reflect their name and gender identity, and take countless other measures to ensure that the world knows them only as the person into which they have made themselves. I find something admirable and almost noble in that. The world is brimming with hollow calls to “be yourself” and to “be the best you,” but few are able to craft an identity from ~~nothing~~, realize and embody their true selves, and live as the person that they understand themselves. Trans women make it look easy. I do fear, however, that the primary motivation for this pursuit of self-realization is fear and **self-hatred** rather than desire and **self-love**.

Decoding the impossibly convoluted system of gender performance and signifiers that our world is drowning in can seem insurmountable, especially for those just beginning to expand their expressive gender vocabulary. When you have internalized the message that you must fluently and perfectly embody a gender archetype separate from that which you have thus far been socialized to reflect, the natural impulse is to become the *opposite* of who you once were. Rather than move through the arduous and ill-defined process of learning the language of **femininity** itself, trans women learn to recognize the **masculinity** of their former self and express the opposite, think the opposite, embody the opposite. Trans women are taught to kill who they once were, to rejoice in self-immolation and emerge a phoenix from the flames, unrecognizable and triumphant. We are taught to hate and avoid the way that we once spoke, the way that we once dressed, the way that we once stood, the way that we once thought, the way that we once moved, the way that we once looked, the person that we once were. We are taught to hate the ugly little caterpillar that we used to be.

I suspect that a fear of being seen still as that ugly little caterpillar has driven me and many other trans women to annihilate much of who we *truly* are in an attempt to become someone unrecognizable, someone beautiful and delicate, someone familiar to the world. The tantalizing vision of total transformation, of soaring through the sky on iridescent wings and forgetting our years as a creature of the dirt leads us to self-loathing and an unrealistic understanding of gender transition itself.

A pervasive misconceptualization about trans identity and gender transition (a misconceptualization that is central to the idea of feminine metamorphosis and thus a recurring criticism in this piece) is the notion that there is a sharp and meaningful division between the pre-transition, transition, and post-transition self. Transition is, of course, a process of **change**, but I believe that it is meant to be a process of **growth** rather than a process of **replacement**. Transition should be centered on the pursuit of joy and the realization of self-love, not on the aesthetic and internal separation of the self. We cannot kill the caterpillar, we cannot kill a part of who we are, and attempting to do so is an act of existential self-mutilation. We must learn to embrace and celebrate the pain and misshapen identity of our past as a **challenge** that we endured, a **necessary component** of our current self, and as the **experience** that gave us the unique perspective that is endemic to trans identity.

The Chrysalis Cracks

Tiny creature bathing in the sunlight,

You've no idea what wind awaits.

The gossamer clouds you long to touch

Will one day swirl about your wings.

Rest gently now upon the grass.

Your time will come.

Your time will come.

In the trisection of the trans woman, it is the woman in transition that is the most ill defined. Transition is awkward, difficult, and complicated. No one enjoys puberty, and navigating a (potentially) second puberty (often) later in life can be a particularly difficult experience. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that there is little information or public representation of what transition *is*. Out of the few trans celebrities that transitioned *after* entering the public eye, most (if not all) emerge quite suddenly and triumphantly from a brief

disappearance, their transition ~~complete~~. The chrysalis is a separate, secret, shameful event that must be kept out of sight. It is a necessary evil that will yield a future victory.

In my eyes, this idea of transition as a separate and distinct version of the self and period of time in one's life does a great deal of harm. Many young trans people internalize the message that there is an end goal, a light at the end of the transition tunnel, and thus see it as a challenge to overcome. Transition is a mountain, and trans people are encouraged to lower their heads and climb as fast and as hard as they can to the top. Pain and exhaustion are a small price to pay for the promised beauty and happiness of trans-womanhood. This removes the joy of self discovery, the time needed to safely progress through social and medical change, and encourages a deeply problematic understanding of transition itself.

Setting aside the problems presented by the notion that there is a defined aesthetic goal of transition, the idea that pain and self-denial are a natural component of transition may lead transfeminine people to engage in harmful practices in their pursuit of perfection. As one small example, consider the rate of eating disorders amongst trans youth. In a 2014 national study from the department of psychiatry at the Washington University School of Medicine, it was found that trans college students were far more likely than their cis peers to have diagnosed eating disorders and engage in compensatory behavior after eating (Diemer). While no direct line can be drawn between disordered eating and a desire to present a certain body type, trans people quite obviously already tend to have a difficult relationship with their bodies and with self-denial. The valorization of suffering in any form as a means of self-actualization is thus dangerous and potentially harmful to the community.

The chrysalis narrative also denies trans people who are ~~still in transition~~ the ability to see themselves truly as the gender that they identify with. When a trans person has elected to begin transitioning (whatever that may mean to them), they are obviously aware of the fact that they are not the gender that they were assigned and are instead the gender that they identify as. When trans people are fed this narrative of metamorphosis in which one has not truly realized their transgender potential until they have completed the challenge of transition, they will

inherently feel inadequate and incomplete while beginning transition. Personally, I have spoken to multiple trans women that have expressed their desire to “finish transitioning” before they start going by she/her pronouns. When I asked one of them what they meant, they told me, “I feel stupid asking people to call me a girl when I don’t really look like I’m trying to be one.” The tiny space that our culture has for notions of transfemininity is corrupted by this view of transition as an ascetic act of shameful transformation, and I am tired of watching my community suffer through what should be a joyous process.

A trans woman who has just realized that she is trans is *no less* trans than one who has been out for years and has undergone every confirmation surgery imaginable, and the idea that there are certain acts, procedures, medications, behaviors, or clothes that *make* you a woman flies in the face of what it even *means* to be transgender. It is a sly sort of gender essentialism to say that one is not truly trans until one has begun or ~~completed~~ transition. Our very existence stands in opposition to the claim that there are defined and unchanging principles by which one can determine womanhood. I write to you from a chrysalis of my own, but I think I am ready to break free. I think we all are.

Suffocation, Emergence, Flight

When I was nine years old, there was nothing that I wanted more in life than an Insect Lore Butterfly Growing Kit. Every time that the commercial for that piece of mail-order magic flickered across the TV screen of whoever’s house my mom was cleaning that weekend, I would fantasize about rearing a generation of majestic monarchs, of watching them transform. “No,” was always the answer. “Never buy things you see on TV, they’re always a scam.” Absolute agony. Utter injustice.

Then Christmas came, and there it was. Pulling the box from its paper chrysalis, I was overjoyed. I was the proud owner of an Insect Lore Butterfly Growing Kit, and I went on to raise quite the kaleidoscope of butterflies, watching them all transform from wriggling green worms to shiny motionless chrysalides to vibrant, soaring butterflies. All but one, that is. As they began to

emerge one by one from their tiny hanging houses, the butterflies would first break through the shell and then slowly emerge, hanging suspended to dry their wings and expand to their full glory. I breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing the last chrysalis begin the shake and tear open. They were all going to make it.

The last little insect, the one I had already named Alexander (Xander for short, because it's cooler than Alex), had made it halfway out of the chrysalis when I had to leave for church. "He'll be fine, I promise. Now put your shoes on and let's go." I returned from my father's sermon, ecstatic to meet the last of my flock. He had not moved since I left. He hung suspended motionless amidst the rhythmic flashes of his siblings opening and closing their newfound wings. He never made it out of the chrysalis. He had fought to free himself, to emerge triumphant as his final form, but he wasn't strong enough to survive the struggle. He wasn't strong enough.

It is no secret that trans women face a great deal of shame, internal pain, and even violence because of their bodies and physical appearance. Gender dysphoria and general discomfort with one's appearance are extremely common amongst trans people, but transfeminine people face a particularly brutal system of criticism from themselves and from the world. Kate Bornstein, a gender theorist and performance artist, often discusses what she calls "the freak factor" of the transfeminine experience. The world gazes at transfeminine people with disgust, contempt, confusion, and fear. To be despised and reviled on such a fundamental level by society can be crushing, and the only apparent way for transfeminine people to soften the blow from the world and from themselves is to present and internalize something less freakish, something more familiar. Conformity, assimilation, imitation, and the total annihilation of the former self are the only tools offered to trans women desperate for safety, desperate for love. "Being trans causes you suffering? Simply do everything in your power to look, act, and think like a cis person. It's on you" For many, this means an unending pursuit of cis beauty, of **passing**. For others, this means **repression**. "If you can never look like a cis woman, then you can never be happy. Might as well live as a cis man. Might as well rot." Under this understanding of

transition, there is a clearly defined end-goal, a destination at which to arrive. There is the butterfly.

Here lies the greatest and most deep-rooted flaw of feminine metamorphosis as a cultural narrative of transition. The triune division of the transgender individual ends with the beautiful, passing, ~~post-transition~~ woman. She is complete and whole, finished with her period of transformation and now forever unchanging, static. The perfect trans woman.

A Brief and Salty Note on My Frustrations With Trans Representation

This idea of the perfect trans woman has to come from somewhere, and I believe that it is largely derived from media representations. The vanishingly small number of trans women that are admitted to the public eye are required to meet such a strict and nearly unattainable level of beauty, wealth, and/or power that the only *idea* our society has of trans women as a collective are the likes of Caitlyn Jenner, Dominique Jackson, Hunter Schaefer, Laverne Cox, and Gigi Gorgeous. This obviously echoes the problems faced by all women as they deal with our society's warped understanding of the ideal cis woman, the ideal black woman, the ideal immigrant woman etc, but the bar is higher for trans women than seemingly anyone else.

Trans women, especially trans women of color, have forever been pushed to the outermost margins of our society, and they must be unimaginably exceptional in order to gain a place at the top, a place in the public eye. In a world where trans youth are often totally isolated in their experiences and must rely entirely on media for an understanding of who they are meant to be, too many of us have mistook glamor for happiness and beauty for purpose. Cis women of every sort rarely (if ever) go through childhood without a cis woman as a parent, sibling, friend, teacher, or in their life at all. They at least have someone to see themselves reflected in that has not been distorted and filtered through the glittering sieve of pop culture or social media algorithms. For many

transfeminine people, however, all they have is the sparkling misrepresentation that is dangled forever out of reach, the butterfly.

When transition is conceptualized as a method of achieving aesthetic and internal perfection, of emerging victorious from the chrysalis as a beautiful and confident butterfly, there is an obvious issue of expectations management. As much as it pains me to admit, I will (probably) not wake up one day to suddenly find that I look exactly like one of the handful of trans supermodels that I have been offered as representation. Though I have made my peace with that, I and many other trans women still must work to constantly beat back feelings of inadequacy and self-hatred that are derived from a warped sense of what a transfeminine body should look like, what a trans woman should be. These feelings can lead to a whole host of internal issues for trans people and cause others to repress and **detransition**, believing that their only road to happiness has been cut off by an unlucky hand of genetics.

More fundamentally, the conceptualization of transition as a self-contained event that ends with a complete and finished product naturally produces a fixed idea of what transition should produce. The butterfly. The ideal trans woman. This is the source of most of the previously discussed nuances and subpoints, this is the core of the issue. When trans women are not granted permission to imagine their own idea of transition, to explore what their true self looks and feels like, to forge an identity from the life that they have already built for themselves and are all instead compelled to chase the same shining idea of trans perfection, they have no choice but to destroy and hate what they used to be, to treat transition as a necessary evil that must be endured, and to find no satisfaction in a transition that does not result in a beautiful, passing, confident self. The myth of feminine metamorphosis has left us chasing a butterfly right off the edge of a cliff, and I think I'm done with the pursuit.

An Appropriately Sappy Alternative

I will not spend much time or provide much detail on the matter here, but I think it is inappropriate to make criticism without offering *some* alternative. Though I am skeptical of anyone's ability to intentionally change a whole culture's concept of gender transition and transfemininity, I do hope that we begin to move away from metamorphosis and towards something perhaps even more eye-roll inducing: falling in love.

Rather than understand transition and trans identity as a separation of the self in which one annihilates the other through a brief and painful act of transformation, I like to see it as a **romance**. I am not transitioning, I am falling in love with the person I am meant to be. I am not attempting to look and dress and speak a certain way, I am learning how *she* looks, how *she* dresses, and how *she* speaks, and I love her for it. I love myself for it. I am not destroying who I once was, I am accepting an addition to my life and my world. There is difficulty, there is triumph, and there are a hundred banalities that do not bear mentioning, but there is, above all, a continuous growth and sense fulfillment to be found in this love.

I hope that my community learns to fall in love. I hope that you can learn to do the same.

Works Cited

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