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Black Album Mixtape

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### "The Nature of Progress"

Ted Roth

roth@colum.edu

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Ted Roth

Black Album Mixtape

### The Nature of Progress

My phone alarm shrieks with the sunrise. My hand hurries up and slams it, slams it, then it stops. I grab it and turn to my side, yawning and stretching against my pillow. Beneath a veneer of blankets and comforters I steal a glance at my home screen. There, I'm greeted by an entourage of notifications, hungry and waiting for the tap of my fingertip. The glow of the screen tempts me, lulls me. So I sit up and rub my eyes and my heart skips a beat in my chest, because this is the part that I dread. I can't give in. I need to get up, and stay up, and get on with my day. I sigh and run a hand down my face, turning toward the window. The sun blinds my eyes and leaves them seeing green, and before I know it, my body hits the mattress once again.

I scroll Twitter while laying on my side. There I discover JK Rowling wants me dead. To be a woman is to be everything I'm not, she writes from a house made of stone and steel. Women are feminine, cisgender, conformity, fertility. I turn my head and look straight at my closet, where a sliding door mirror reflects my body. Short hair, which I cut when I was fourteen, hair that felt like a shackle, a tether. A body littered with scars, a body dressed in men's clothes. A body that cannot bear children, a body that I do not want to bear children with. Some women hate women who don't look like "women"--an author from my childhood among them.

I scroll down.

A mother of three didn't like the new Disney movie. For five minutes on screen, a boy blushed at another boy, and now she's renounced the good Disney name. It's not

that she's homophobic--don't get it twisted--she just doesn't want her kids exposed to *that* kind of lifestyle. At least she's overt about it. Most people aren't.

I scroll down.

Gay marriage is being threatened in the court of law again. As though it were policy, or political strategy. But I knew I was a lesbian at the age of twelve, when it wasn't legal yet. My future was outlawed, even though the girl in my eighth grade class was beautiful. Sitting alongside her, I didn't have words for the things I felt, or the way my chest tightened when she took my hand in hers. The feeble future I dream of, which I cling to like a rope, burns my hands from the strain--for it was women who taught me to love, women who made me realize I could love. Moments like eighth grade felt more right to me than anything else ever had. How could I let that go? For most of my life, this made me a criminal. And if the Republicans keep this up, I'll have no choice but to slink back into my striped shirt and ski mask.

I scroll down.

Gay people hate other gay people for being gay wrong.

I scroll down.

They keep attacking each other. Arguments about using the word "queer". Some say we shouldn't support Palestine, because gayness is outlawed there. You have to be on hormones in order to be trans. Butches must be manly. Masculinity is evil. I hear arguments so niche and miniscule I wonder why they exist. Why are we attacking each other, why do we rip ourselves apart? Like ouroboros, it continues. Gays worldwide die for what I've known since I was twelve. Gays on Twitter hide behind screens as they tear themselves to shreds.

I scroll, and I scroll, but there's no end in sight.

An hour later, I get a Starbucks ad and remember that I'm hungry.

The Starbucks woman asks me if I'm, y'know, and makes a limp wrist. She hands me a coffee that was harvested by children, which I'll read about later as I drift off to sleep. I sweat at the question, but laugh it off like it's nothing. Well, aren't you cunning? Yes, ma'am, I am, 'y'know', and if you tell my father he'll kill me, really kill me, dead as a doornail. His entire home town would help him, and they'd laugh as they danced on my grave. Gayness is banned in most countries, and I'm asked questions like hers on the regular. Does she know what she's asking, what she's saying--does she know I'm in trouble if the wrong person overhears? Am I proud, or scared?

The coffee is alright, but for six bucks a cup, who does this every day?

I head to my doctor's office. The receptionist, a guy in his thirties, is aggressively neutral when checking me in. My feminine friends get smiles or stare downs, seemingly friendly, always creepy. I went most of my life not knowing women were treated that way. Me, I get glares. He hands me a form and forgets to greet me.

A nurse calls and weighs me and tells me I'm fat, except she doesn't tell me, her eyes do. She looks disapprovingly at my haircut and my arms, the fatness and the butchness almost worse paired together. "Unfortunate," her face seems to say. "Interesting," she says instead. She does not bother asking for a pregnancy test.

I leave the doctor's office and head to work for a shift at the deli. I work in a conservative town slicing meat and cheese. It's busy for a Wednesday, and customers mob the counter. I get called "sweetheart" and "honey" when I wear a mask that covers half my face. With the pink frilly deli hat, I must remind them of a proper girl. When I

take the mask off, and my face and haircut are visible, the nicknames stop. Their voices become harsh, and distant. I don't like the nicknames, and I don't like the silence.

My coworker Antonio is a gay guy. He's tall and loud about his gayness. He wears a pink deli hat like I do, and slicks his dyed hair beneath its small surface. The first time we saw each other, we immediately recognized our shared attribute. He and I don't fight each other about the word "queer". Instead, we lean against the steel deli counter and stare out at customers, laughing. "You know," I tell him, "you're a breath of fresh air. I feel like there's no fuckin' gays in all of Homer Glen." Before us walk straight couples holding hands, teenagers and elders and people my parents' age.

Antonio smiles and looks down at me, pink hat slipping to reveal his purple locks. "We're here," he says. "Always have been. You just gotta know where to look."

We continue watching customers approach us, then pass. I realize that I've never seen two same-sex people hold hands in this store. Not even once. And we're only an hour away from Chicago.

When I come home, my brother is in the room across the hall from mine. I love him, and he loves me, but over VR he calls a kid a faggot. I take a seat at the oak dining table with a fork in hand. I spin it precariously as I scroll Twitter again, where more has happened since I last checked. Donald Trump wants to outlaw gender transition if he's re-elected. My grandma doesn't like what the young gays get up to. People debate, and debate, and they never come together. *Does activism work?*, they ask. *Does any of it matter?* I try to take another bite of my meal, but my stomach is sick, so I go to bed.

When I get to my bedroom it's dark, all-encasing like a casket. No pesky sun to burn my eyes now. I fall back beneath my covers with my phone at my fingertips. The

entire world's pleas, all in my hand. I scroll, and I scroll, and it's more of the same. Everything is falling apart. I put it aside, and stare at the ceiling fan. It laps soothingly, so I close my eyes.

Tomorrow I'll wake up and nothing will change. I turn, and my phone glows beside me. Tomorrow I'll wake up and nothing will change, except me, I'll change, if I try. None of us can change everything. But we care, don't we? God, how we care.

I feel small in my bed, small in this world. The ceiling fan laps, and the darkness envelops me, and the phone shines a light like a beacon in my hands. I sit up. I know the entire world, or at least I try to. But there's so much world and just one me. The cries of a billion people, every one of them scared. I see my face staring back at me from the mirror, lit up like a ghost. A stupid, shitty world. But I'm living spite, aren't I? Fights are winnable, and I'm butch. I whisper it to myself: "I'm butch. I'm alive and I'm butch."

I lay back and shut my eyes. The phone buzzes beside me, and I pick it up. A text from Antonio, attached with a meme about JK Rowling. I smile, and the phone light warms my face. He was right--we *do* know how to find each other, even in the dark.