

GAWKING, GAPING, STARING

Eli Clare

Gawking, gaping, staring: I can't say when it first happened. When first a pair of eyes caught me, held me in their vise grip, tore skin from muscle, muscle from bone. Those eyes always shouted, "Freak, retard, cripple," demanding an answer for trembling hands, a tomboy's bold and unsteady gait I never grew out of. It started young, anywhere I encountered humans. Gawking, gaping, staring seeped into my bones, became the marrow. I spent thirty years shutting it out, slamming the door.

The gawkers never get it right, but what I want to know is this: Will you? When my smile finds you across the room, will you notice the odd angle of my wrists cocked and decide I am a pane of glass to glance right through? Or will you smile back?

Thirty years, and now I am looking for lovers and teachers to hold all my complexities and contradictions gently, honestly, appreciatively. Looking for heroes and role models to accompany me through the world. Looking for friends and allies to counter the gawking, gaping, staring.

I come from peoples who have long histories of being onstage—freaks and drag queens, court jesters and scientific experiments. Sometimes we work for money and are proud. Other times we're just desperate. We've posed for anthropologists and cringed in front of doctors, jumped through hoops and answered the same questions over and over, performed the greatest spectacles and thumbed our noses at that shadow they call normal.

William Johnson—African American and cognitively disabled in the mid-1800s—worked the freak show stage. He donned an ape costume and shaved his

head, save for a tuft of hair at the very top, and became the monkey man, the missing link, the bridge between “brute” and “man.” P. T. Barnum, showman extraordinaire and shaper of the institution of the freak show, named William’s exhibit “The What-Is-It?” People paid to gawk, and William died a well-off man. The folks who performed alongside William affectionately called him the “dean of freaks.” Today that question—What-Is-It?—still lingers, still haunts us, only now the gawkers get in for free.

Billy Tipton worked the jazz stage with his piano, saxophone, and comedy routines. Billy lived for fifty years as a female-bodied man. He married five times and adopted three sons. He turned down major, high-profile music gigs. He died of a bleeding ulcer rather than seek medical care. He was much admired by the men he played music with. This we know about Billy, but there is also much we don’t know: how he thought of himself, his gender; what prompted him to make the move from woman to man; what went through his head as he lay dying in his son’s arms. But really the questions I want to ask aren’t about his gender but about his life as a musician. *Billy, what did your body feel like as your fingers raced into a familiar song, playing in front of great throngs of people?* The gawking started after his death as the headlines roared, “Jazz Musician Spent Life Concealing Fantastic Secret.”

I listen to the histories and everywhere hear the words *cripple, queer, gimp, freak*: those words hurled at me, those words used with pride. When I walk through the world, the bashers see a fag, the dykes see a butch, and I myself don’t have many words. I often leave it at genderqueer or transgender butch. The gawkers never get it right. They think I’m deaf or “mentally retarded.” They think I’m a twenty-year-old guy or a middle-aged dyke. They can’t make up their minds, start with sir, end with ma’am, waver in the middle. They think I’m that pane of glass.

Cripples, queers, gimps, freaks: we are looking for teachers and lovers—teachers to stand with us against the gawking; lovers to reach beneath our clothing, beneath the words that attempt to name us, beneath our shame and armor, their eyes and hands helping return us to grace, beauty, passion. *He cradles my right hand against his body and says, “Your tremors feel so good.” And says, “I can’t get enough of your shaky touch.” And says, “I love your cerebral palsy.” This man who is my lover. Shame and disbelief flood my body, drowning his words. How do I begin to learn his lustful gaze?*

Believing him takes more than trust. I spent so many years shutting the staring out, slamming the door. Friends would ask, “Did you see that person gaping at you?” and I’d answer, “What person?” It’s a great survival strategy but not

very selective. In truth, the door slammed hard, and I lost it all, all the appreciation, flirtation, solidarity that can be wrapped into a gaze. These days I practice gawking at the gawkers and flirting as hard as I know how. The first is an act of resistance; the second, an act of pride. I am looking for teachers.

If I had a time machine, I'd travel back to the freak show. Sneak in after hours, after all the folks who worked long days selling themselves as armless wonders and wild savages had stepped off their platforms, out of their geek pits, from behind their curtains. I'd walk among them—the fat women, the short-statured men commonly called dwarfs and midgets, the folks without legs, the supposed half men/half women, the conjoined twins, the bearded women, the snake charmers and sword swallows—as they took off their costumes, washed their faces, sat down to dinner. I'd gather their words, their laughter, their scorn at the customers—the rubes—who bought their trinkets and believed half their lies. I'd breathe their fierceness into me.

I am looking for teachers and heroes to show me the way toward new pride, new understanding, new strength, a bigger sense of self. Often it is history I turn to, history I grasp and mold in my search. I am not alone in this endeavor. I think of a kid we've come to know as Brandon Teena: twenty-one years old, living as a guy in rural Nebraska, revealed as female-bodied, raped and murdered by so-called friends. In the trans community, we've chosen him. Claimed him as an FTM based on how his life makes sense to us, without listening to his confusion.¹ Named him Brandon Teena without paying attention to the dozen other names he used. We have made him hero, martyr, symbol of transphobic violence. I think again of Billy Tipton. In the lesbian community, many have taken Billy as an emblem of the sexism in the jazz world of the mid-1900s. They shape his life as a man into a simple survival strategy that allowed him to play music. I myself read the life of William Johnson and find someone who turned a set of oppressive material and social conditions to his benefit and gained a measure of success and community. That reading strengthens me. But in truth William might have been a lonely, frightened man, coerced, bullied, trapped by freak show owners and managers. We use and reshape history, and in the process it sometimes gets misshapen.

At the same time, we all need teachers and heroes: folks to say, "You're not alone. I too was here. This is what I did and what I learned. Maybe it'll help." My best heroes and teachers don't live on pedestals. They lead complex, messy lives, offering me reflections of myself and standing with me against the gawkers.

The gawkers who never get it right. They've turned away from me, laughed, thrown rocks, pointed their fingers, quoted Bible verses, called me immoral and

depraved, tried to heal me, swamped me in pity. Their hatred snarls into me, and often I can't separate the homophobia from the ableism from the transphobia.

The gawkers never get it right, but what I want to know is this: Will you? If I touch you with trembling hands, will you wince away, thinking cripple, thinking ugly? Or will you unfold to my body, let my trembling shimmer beneath your skin?

These days, I practice overt resistance and unabashed pride, gawking at the gawkers and flirting as hard as I know how. The two go together. On the Castro, I check out the bears, those big burly men with full beards and open shirts. One of them catches my eyes. I hold his gaze for a single moment too long, watch as it slips down my body. He asks, "Are you a boy or a girl?" not taunting but curious. I don't answer. What could I possibly say? I walk away smiling, my skin warm.

In another world at another time, I would have grown up neither boy nor girl but something entirely different. In English there are no good words, no easy words. All the language we have created—transgender, transsexual, drag queen, drag king, stone butch, high femme, nellie, fairy, bulldyke, he-she, FTM, MTF—places us in relationship to masculine or feminine, between the two, combining the two, moving from one to the other. I'm hungry for an image to describe my gendered self, something more than the shadowland of neither man nor woman, more than a suspension bridge tethered between negatives. I want a solid ground with bedrock of its own, a language to take me to a brand-new place neither masculine nor feminine, day nor night, mortise nor tenon. What could I possibly say to the bears cruising me at 3 P.M. as sunlight streams over concrete?

Without language to name myself, I am in particular need of role models. I think many of us are. Whom do we shape our masculinities, our femininities, after? Who shows us how to be a drag queen, a butch, a trannyfag who used to be a straight married woman and now cruises the boys hot and heavy, a multigendered femme boy/girl who walks the dividing line? I keep looking for disabled men to nurture my queer masculinity, crip style. Looking for bodies a bit off center, a bit off balance. Looking for guys who walk with a tremble, speak with a slur, who use wheelchairs, crutches, ventilators, braces, whose disabilities shape but don't contradict their masculinities.

And in truth I am finding those role models. There is a freak show photo: Hiram and Barney Davis offstage—small, wiry men, white, cognitively disabled, raised in Ohio. They wear goatees, hair falling past their shoulders. They look mildly and directly into the camera. Onstage, Hiram and Barney played "Waino and Plutano, the Wild Men of Borneo." They snapped, snarled, growled, shook their chains at the audience. People flocked to the "Wild Men," handing over good money to gape. I hope just once Hiram and Barney stopped midperformance, up

there on the sideshow platform, and stared back, turning their mild and direct gaze to the rubes, gawking at the gawkers.

It usually takes only one long glance at the gawkers—kids on their way home from school, old women with their grocery bags, young professionals dressed for work. Just once I want someone to tell me what they're staring at. My trembling hands? My buzzed hair? My broad, off-center stance, shoulders well muscled and lopsided? My slurred speech? Just once. But typically one long steely glance, and they're gone. I'm taking Hiram and Barney as my teachers.

The gawkers never get it right, but what I want to know is this: Will you? When I walk through the world, will you simply scramble for the correct pronoun, failing whichever one you choose: he not all the way right, she not all the way wrong? Or will you imagine a river at dusk, its skin smooth and unbroken, sun no longer braided into sparkles? Cliff divers hurl their bodies from thirty, forty, fifty feet, bodies neither flying nor earth-bound, three somersaults and a half turn, entering the water free-fall without a ripple. Will you get it right?

I am looking for friends and allies, for communities where the gawking, gaping, staring finally turns to something else, something true to the bone. Places where strength gets to be softened and tempered, love honed and stretched. Where gender is known as more than a simple binary. Where we encourage each other to swish and swagger, limp and roll, and learn the language of pride. Places where our bodies begin to become home. Gawking, gaping, staring: I can't say when it first happened.

Note

1. The following are used in this essay: *FTM*, a female-to-male transgendered or transsexual person; *MTF*, a male-to-female transgendered or transsexual person; *tranny-fag*, a gay FTM.

