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Foster- Think Piece #2

## It's a Man's World

There I was. Tutu, curls, itchy tights, sitting on the stage. Bawling my eyes out in discomfort and shame while all the other little girls clumsily danced around me with silly smiles on their faces. Even at three years old, I knew that ballet was no place for me. Get me out of here!

At the time, I had no idea what was going on deep down inside of me. I was far too young to understand what my likes and dislikes meant about me. Growing up in the middle of nowhere, there was an endless supply of mud and thrill-seeking adventures to be had. Sitting pretty in a meant-to-be clean dress just did not work for me. Being the first born, I had no older sibling teaching me what to do to be “cool” or “appropriate,” I just was. All of the friends that I made before being old enough to go to school were boys and girls like me. We all lived where we had fields to run in, mountains to climb, ponds and creeks to swim and fish in, and critters to catch and make our personal pets. My favorites were lizards. I had one in a cage, with a “home” that I made for it, at all times. In my playtime, there were no dolls involved. And not because they had never been offered to me, but because I wanted nothing to do with them.

As I got older, I wanted to play every sport that was available. I wanted to play hard at recess, get dirty, and maybe even chase and torment the boys. During P.E., I was always up for dodgeball or elimination, in which we all had a great chance of

getting pummeled in the face with a fast flying rubber ball. I might have been a little girl, but I was just as tough as any of the boys, and they knew it.

I quickly became obsessed with basketball. I played volleyball, soccer and tennis as well, but basketball was my life. I wanted to be Michael Jordan. I watched every one of his games, and would mimic his moves until dark on the court my dad had built for me outside, nearly every night. I spent time in card shops, saving up my allowances to buy his rookie cards and the highly anticipated Beckett Card Collector's Guides. In third grade, I spent every recess playing knock-out with a group of sixth grade boys that, looking back, were happy to play with me because I gave them a run for their money. It had nothing to do with letting me play out of pity. We were buddies.

During this time in my life, I also liked boys. I had crushes on boys in my class, and even remember having a huge crush on t.v. sensation, Jonathan Taylor Thomas. However, I don't ever remember feeling the need to look "pretty" or put on girl-appropriate clothes to get a boy to like me. I always wanted to be in athletic clothing and the more I sweat at recess or during soccer practice, the better I felt about myself. I didn't even care about makeup until eighth grade. Even then, I still hated dresses, played sports, didn't mind getting dirty, and never daydreamed about getting married or having babies.

All of that said, I never needed science to tell me that I was by definition, a tomboy (I have to note- my computer just suggested an auto correct of the following three replacements for tomboy: athletic child, adventurous child, and active child.) Even right now, I don't need Lise Eliot to give me a breakdown of my DNA to help me accept

my, what some may call, masculine tendencies. I have all of the characteristics of a female with the, what Eliot calls a “disorder,” called congenital adrenal hyperplasia, or CAH. She says, “As children, they are more aggressive, more physically active, more fond of rough play, and spend more time playing with boys than do typical girls. The difference is most pronounced in their preferences for traditional boy toys, such as trucks, balls, and building blocks, and their relative lack of interest in dolls and- usually the biggest attention grabber for young girls- real human infants. As adolescents, girls with CAH continue to be more interested in male pastimes, such as cars and sports, and to express greater interest in pursuing traditionally male careers, such as engineering and airline piloting.” Reading this, I noticed myself wondering if there was something wrong with me. Shouldn’t I be affirmed for my differences, not feel insecure because science says I’m different? I don’t have CAH, but it was still kind of weird for me to read that. I am so happy that my parents let me be me and never forced me to play with barbies or continue ballet. They saw that I loved certain activities and let me thrive in those areas, regardless of gender-specifics. And maybe this is the true motivation behind Eliot’s book.

Skipping ahead about fifteen years, I am still the same person, and still like and dislike a lot of the same things, but from where I stood at 14, feeling untouchable and limitless, I now stand before a new reality. A reality that says, regardless of my scientific makeup, regardless of what I like to do or am good at, regardless of my personal life goals, I am still a woman. I am a woman that, despite not living in Pleasantville, is

expected to be married, want to have, or have children by now, to be good at cooking, go ga-ga over infants, and be ready to settle into a life of following a man around.

Following the CAH characteristics I suppose, I have always been fascinated with architecture. I've excelled in math and have always had an artistic ability that I've wanted to do something with. So, after taking about six years off from university, I chose to go back and pursue a degree in architecture. Something I knew would be difficult, but the difficulty I was thinking of was that of the amount of work that was going to be required of me. I went into it with determination though, knowing that if I put my whole heart into it, I could do it. Then I sat in my first lecture. Architecture 101. During this first encounter with the world of thick-framed glasses, fancy watches and trendy grunge wear, I was confronted with statistics that- in this day and age, where these types of things are not supposed to be an issue anymore, in a city like Portland, where difference is celebrated- shocked me. The statistic was this: only 9% of women who enter into an architecture program will finish their program and become architects. Hearing this, after the shock wore off, I thought, bring it! I got this! I don't know why so many women quit, but I will NOT be one of those women that give up. On that first day, I wish I would've gone to that professor and searched further for the answer to the question of "why?" Why were so few women achieving their dream of becoming an architect? Is it really going to be that hard?

What I realized almost immediately in my first year of the program was that I was utterly in love with this stuff, and I was good at it. The second thing I realized was that it was tough. The professors were tough, the work was tough, the time schedule was

tough. Talk about exhaustion. That was just the first year. Trying to enjoy my summer, I was terrified of what round two would bring. I couldn't have been prepared for the issues that hit me like a smack in the face. I might have been a little more prepared for these experiences had I asked my professor "why"- but instead I spent 365 days, thousands of dollars, and an uncountable amount of hours spent on studio work.

Second year studio was a living hell for me. I'm not trying to be dramatic, just trying to describe the level of mental and emotional stress I went through. My professor was an older man, who from day one, I could tell had little to no interest in my work. If I had a question, I was dismissed. If I struggled, I was scoffed at. Determined to do my best, I worked through this by asking for help from classmates and putting in extra hours. Extra hours in the studio, meaning about 40 per week, on top of my other class assignments, studying for exams, and working 25 hours a week. During our weekly critique sessions, my professor was supposed to give us constructive criticism and suggestions for the improvement of our skills. Sometimes we pinned up our work anonymously, letting him evaluate without knowing who did the work, then afterward he would ask who's it was. This is the only time that he had to admit that my work was good, and when he found out it was mine, it was as if he was surprised and disappointed at the same time. "Dang it, I don't want her to succeed," is what I heard in his voice and saw on his face. This is how I was being treated as a student paying the same amount of money as any other person in the class. Making just as much or more of a sacrifice to be there. I felt greatly discriminated against by my professor, and

noticed that he treated the other two girls in my studio the same. With this, I started to see one of the elements to the depressing statistic.

Going into the holiday season, the professors were putting an immense amount of pressure on us to put in the time and meet their expectations. One afternoon, we were gathered together, all four studios, so about 50 of us, and were given a reaming that ended up being my last straw. We were told that our work was, in a nutshell, disappointing, and that if we even thought about spending time with our families for Thanksgiving, we better think again because we needed to be in the studio working on our piece-of-crap projects. They told us we were a waste of time and were not producing competitive work to be considered for the actual program (which was a portfolio proposal to the architecture department board where about 40 out of 250 applicants, who had already given two full years, get accepted and are allowed to continue.)

This next part is hard for even me to accept and understand. I had to take a step back and evaluate where I was with all of this personally. Architecture is a cut-throat field. School was just a glimpse into the amount of work I would be doing, the time I would be committing, and the discrimination I would be experiencing. The job market for architects is not awesome, maybe getting better, but not awesome. I was looking at another 5-6 years of school and intern hours before I could even take the exam to become a licensed architect. I'm going to be \$100,000 in debt and 32 years old by the time this is all said and done. Also, I might want to get married and have kids somewhere in there. If I were a wife could I do this? If I were a mother could I do this? I

could maybe do it, but something would suffer. I was already being mentally and emotionally battered and it was only the first term of the second year of the program! Not to mention, I was not eating or exercising properly- there was no time. It felt like I was going to have to sacrifice everything to fit into this man's world. It's semi-acceptable for men to be workaholics, but I didn't want that for myself, or my someday, maybe, family. I just wanted to succeed at something that I still think I would've been good at and would have really enjoyed. Sitting here now, I struggle to accept the reality that I quit- despite all of the facts.

This essay has turned into more of a personal story than a dissecting of our week's readings, but for me I feel like I'm living on both sides of the woman coin. I have never seen my life's success in something like a scene out of Pleasantville, and I grew up being more entertained by sports than by babies. That is not to say that I don't want a semi-typical life now; one that consists of an enjoyable career and a family. It is now that I find myself relating to the "When I Was a Boy" poem more than ever. I am still me, but when I was a boy I wanted to get dirty and be an architect. Now, I am a girl. A girl that is part of a statistic of the used-to-want-to-be-an-architects. I will never be the woman who wants to just be a wife and a mother, who cooks and cleans and never puts up a fight. But, I never wanted the possible desire to be a wife and a mother who sometimes needs to cook and clean to be what turned me into a statistic, reinforcing that the majority in a fascinating and wonderful field of design might always be men. This all makes me very sad. So what if I grew up a tough girl, that never meant I wanted to be made to feel like I had to be so tough that I couldn't celebrate being a woman.