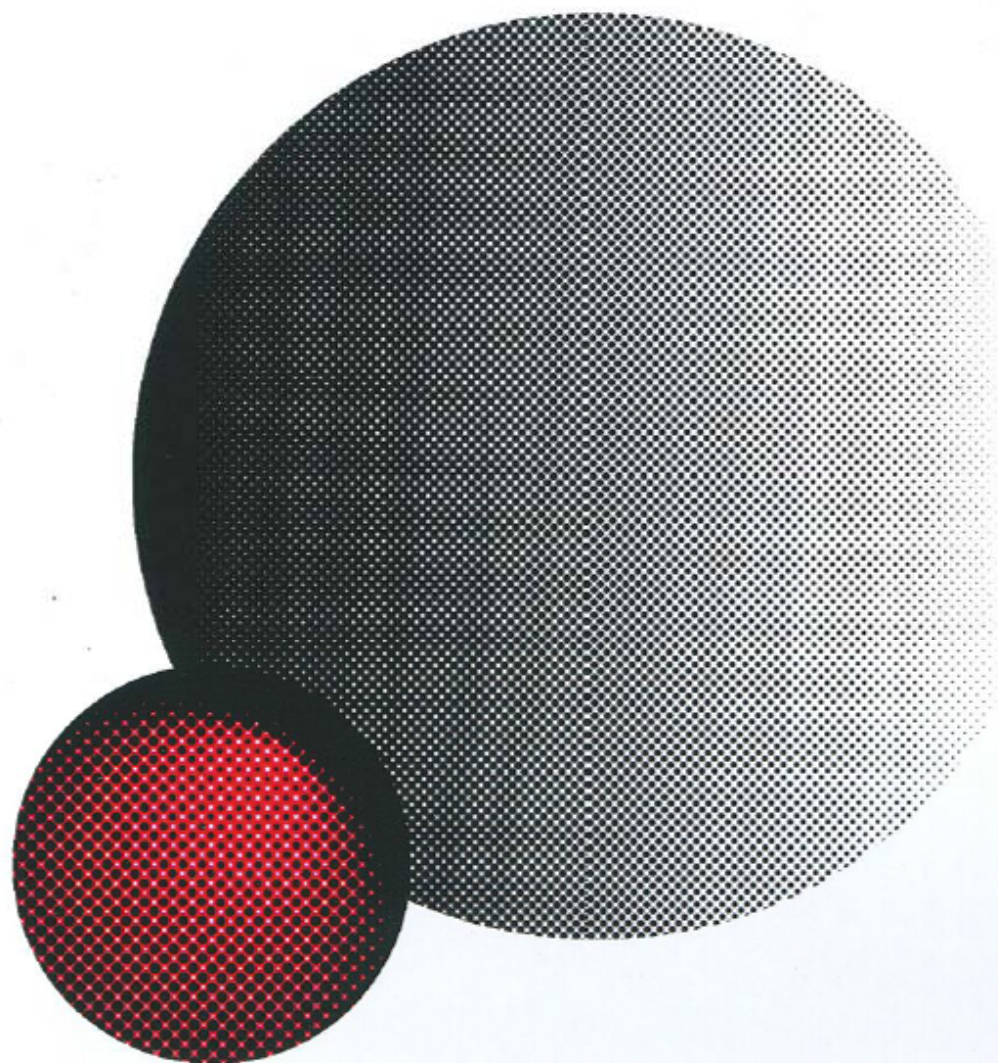


PRISM



*.mooninorbit.*

## excerpt from *gender trouble*

Celeste smelled like a bath and body store at the mall mixed with a hint of mildew, like a house kept too closed up in the rainy season that could never smell fresh, even with every air freshener on the shelf. But it wasn't a bad smell. It was intimate, something that could only be experienced in full through close contact from a friend's hug or a lover's kiss. To smell Celeste was to be let into her world, this swirling orb of anxieties, desires, and opinions, mostly veering toward the conservative and always favoring herself. Her senior year of high school, she cut her tailbone-length hair to her ears and tattooed an evergreen tree on her left rib cage. Afterward, she called her mom, breathless, and shared the news. Her mom rolled her eyes through the phone.

Celeste came to Scripps, an all-girls college, to study philosophy, but also to study women. I met her on the second floor of Frankel Hall, room 204, late August of our freshman year, as one of the three mystery roommates I gambled on when I chose housing. There was also Ruby, a transgender person and English major, and Ellen, a midwest transplant with dreams of the opera. On first meeting, we sized each other up, drew conclusions, and waited for the others to say something. Ruby spoke first.

"I prefer 'they/them' pronouns," they said. "I'm genderfluid."

"Whoa," Ellen breathed. She flipped her mauve hair across the shoulder strap of her knee-length dress and tilted her head. "That's legit."

"Thank you for telling us," Celeste said. "I totally respect you." Her voice sounded like it was the first time she'd spoken all day, a vague crackle rippling through every word. I wanted her to say more. They all looked to me, waiting

for confirmation that I could handle Ruby's proclamation.

"Oh," I said. "Yeah, totally cool." I forced a smile and realized I had been staring at Celeste the entire time.

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I came to consciousness like one would out of a coma — slowly, propelled by an invisible force — but once I understood I knew I had been changed forever.

In September, I broke up with Trevor, my boyfriend from high school, a pasty, excruciatingly average disappointment who never reciprocated oral sex. He had given me attention: junior year, and I couldn't resist the fantasy of a real relationship, especially in the confines of Catholic school. But with him back in Washington and me in Claremont, I initiated my first ever breakup, feeling at once elated and devastated.

In October, Celeste invited me to a Judith Butler talk modeled after her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. I emerged determined to become a feminist. Celeste laughed. "Of course you're a feminist," she said.

In November, while home for fall break, I texted Trevor and spent the evening in his bed, half naked and wondering if closure is ever possible. I left his house reeling and slept until noon the next day.

In December, Trevor called me to tell me he had been seeing someone. They met at a frat party, both drunk, and hooked up that night. Unlike me, she was blonde, lanky, soft, and never stopped talking about celebrity gossip. "Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

In January, I returned to Scripps after winter

break and walked into my room while Celeste was changing. Hunched over her tights, her petite body paled against her black lace bra and underwear; I blushed but did not turn away. Still stuck with her tights halfway up, she hobbled over to hug me. "I missed you," she said.

That's when I knew.

One week later, I returned home buzzed on wine to find Celeste alone, poring over her Nietzsche reading. I poked her.

"Hey," I said. "Wanna know a secret?" She turned to face me.

"I can see the red stain on your teeth," she said. I giggled. Then I asked her what it feels like to be attracted to girls.

"Like you don't know if you're allowed to like someone," she said. "And like God fucked up when He made you." My body tingled and I let the wine take control. I inched closer, but she moved to sit on my bed. "I used to try and like boys, I even kissed a few, but God made me queer. I still don't know why, but I trust Him." I settled in next to her on the bed. She talked about coming out to her parents, how her dad expected it and her mom cried, how they both prayed for her and hid it from their family friends. The first time she kissed a girl, she said, behind a cabin at a church retreat in eighth grade, it was like her whole body was on fire. A boy would never make her feel the same. She did not believe in premarital sex, but she said the first time she went down on a girl it felt like home. When she described it, my organs pulsed. I stared at her small mouth, shimmering with chapstick, and yearned to feel it, if only with my fingers. Then she talked about the bullying, how when her friends found out they deleted her number and gazed right through her, how certain teachers

ignored her in class and men on the street jeered at her short hair.

"Celeste," I said, interrupting her. "I think I'm in love with you."

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Nothing happened that night because I blamed my outburst on the wine and discussing bullies doesn't exactly scream sensual. But something shifted, and I could tell that after that she watched me, scrutinized me, waiting for me to make another move. I didn't, but I watched her too, like I had for months, and because I had said it out loud, it became real to me. Even though I lived with her and spent hours talking to her, I still thought about her in class, remembered the curve of her lips while she talked with that crackle.

And precisely because she dominated my thoughts, I turned to boys. Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, I found parties and, in turn, boys. Boys to kiss, boys to touch me, boys to almost, but never quite, have sex with me. With them, I felt nothing but skin and heat and tasted nothing but alcohol and desperation. I bragged about them to Celeste, assigned defining features like The Short One, The Unibrow, or Rainboots. I felt powerful and wanted; Celeste never looked at me when I told her about them. I wondered if it hurt her.

One night, I came home from an evening with Fannypack. I opened my mouth to tell Celeste about him, but she stopped me.

"Let's take a walk," she said.

We walked to a park a mile from campus, a side effect of a Presbyterian elementary school across the street from an apartment building with no blinds in sight. The trip there was almost silent besides half-hearted talk about school. We

both sat on swings, but neither of us moved. A laughing couple walked past, the girl falling into the boy's arms and nuzzling into his chest; they kissed and he grabbed her butt. Celeste rose and stood in front of me.

"What are you doing?" she asked. She looked tall, towering over me, even though standing I beat her by at least three inches. I didn't respond. That's when she leaned forward and kissed me, soft at first, then with fervor. My whole body was on fire; I understood.

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After that, things were great, for a while. We didn't — couldn't — tell our roommates, so we waited for moments alone or found abandoned classrooms, keeping our rendezvous secret even though we were at a place with people just like us, with a social structure built for just that.

She only held my hand in public when the lights were off, like at Ellen's opera performance or at the local drag show. Not that I would've allowed PDA if she initiated, but the absence of it stung. Still, when I looked at her, I couldn't help but think of forever. I fantasized about telling my parents, my high school friends, imagined the shock on their faces when I would confess that yes, I loved a girl. Would they be surprised, disgusted, curious? Maybe some of them had dated girls too, had ventured into that forbidden world that Catholic school never even acknowledged. Would I tell them over coffee, while drunk, on a run? I could cycle through them, one by one, but they might tell each other before I got to the end, and then they would think I cared about them unequally. Several times, I drafted a mass email. Dear friends, I wrote, College has changed me, or, I have been self-reflecting lately, or, I'm in love. Her name is

Celeste. But I could never bring myself to send them. It had, after all, only been a month, and while I felt certain that it would last, I needed more evidence before I could commit to their reactions. The right time would come.

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But the time never came, because Celeste broke up with me two weeks later. She had invited me to attend church with her and her philosophy professor, a sprightly man in his mid-forties with a face that glowed too much and a wink he employed too often.

I went, because I sensed a disturbance and wanted to appease her, but the sermon that day painted God as a great server of justice and people as breakable subjects, and it was all too much. After, radiant, she asked me what I thought.

"I guess it was too Old Testament for me," I said. "There wasn't much room for redemption." Her face fell, but she didn't respond.

Two days later, she shattered me. We sat on my bed, hip to hip, and she took my hand in her own and told me it wasn't going to work. That our values didn't align and she couldn't keep dating me, morally. That we'd had a good time but it wasn't deep enough to keep investing. I disagreed; I said it was the deepest thing I had ever experienced and that nothing would ever feel so right to me. That I needed her and, maybe, she needed me too. She gave me a sad smile, hugged me, and left. I spent the next three nights avoiding our room, sleeping in friends' dorms and studying nonstop.

On the fourth night, she texted me. *Can we talk?* I despised her for being so cliché, for putting zero effort into personalizing it, for assuming I would say yes without persuasion. Yes, I replied. *When and where?*

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In April, I went home for spring break. The second night, feeling hollow, I tiptoed into my mom's room, where she sat reading a memoir about Appalachia. With her purple robe cinched at the waist, her thick-rimmed glasses, and her pink pedicured toes, she looked so domestic, so right. I felt ashamed.

In May, the numbness went away. I went to all my classes, did all my assignments, and called my old friends for the first time in two months. They told me about all the parties they'd gone to, all the boys they'd hooked up with, all the marijuana they'd smoked. None of them asked how I was doing; I was relieved.

In June, we moved out of our dorm. All four of us into new, separate homes. Ruby would live with four good friends from their intramural rugby team; Ellen moved in with her boyfriend, whom she met at a coffee shop the previous August; and Celeste transplanted into a Christian house, surrounded by believers. I stayed in on-campus housing, switching to an upperclassmen dorm with a friend from down the hall.

In July, I met Luca. He was tall, dark-skinned, lean-bodied, and liberal; everything I'd thought I'd wanted. A sophomore computer science major, he already had an internship with Google lined up and was almost done writing his third program. I went through the familiar pattern, the one I'd perfected in my boy phase earlier that year, and soon enough we were back in my bed. Everything about him begged for me to love him, and I felt nothing.

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In August, Celeste asked me to get coffee, as friends. The day she chose was a week before the anniversary of our first meeting. I spent two

hours getting ready beforehand and hated myself for it. I imagined what I would say, practicing the lines in my head while I straightened my hair and brushed on eye shadow: *Celeste, we're meant to be together* or, *Celeste, why did you break my heart?* Or, *Celeste, I know your religion is so important to you and I promise I'll try to believe in God, for you, if only you'll give me another chance.*

When I walked inside, she waved from a table, wearing the same red jeans she'd worn the first time she kissed me. It couldn't be on purpose, but I was already falling. By the time I reached the table, my mind crumbled and my heart pounded. We sifted through the formalities but I couldn't track anything we talked about. Then she said she'd missed me, that she hoped I was taking care of myself and finding happiness wherever I went. She reminisced about our best memories, about the tumult of our freshman year together, expecting me to laugh along with her. For the first time in months, my body felt ablaze, like my systems were working and I was, after all, alive. I leaned toward her but I couldn't remember saying anything. Her auburn eyes seared through the morning light and I wanted nothing more than to kiss her.

"Listen," she said. My phone buzzed. "I'm transferring to Montana State. I can't afford the tuition here anymore." I stared back, not registering, still lost in my desire to kiss her. I checked my phone.

*Lane*, Luca said. *Are you free? We should talk.* I looked back at Celeste and met her pleading, lingering eyes. Sunlight pierced through the window, slashing our table halfway in a perfect, glaring line. I laughed.