I sexually identify as an attack helicopter.

I lied. According to US Army Technical Manual 0, The Soldier as a System, “attack helicopter” is a gender identity, not a biological sex. My dog tags and Form 3349 say my body is an XX-karyotope somatic female.

But, really, I didn’t lie. My body is a component in my mission, subordinate to what I truly am. If I say I am an attack helicopter, then my body, my sex, is too. I’ll prove it to you.

When I joined the Army I consented to tactical-role gender reassignment. It was mandatory for the MOS I’d tested into. I was nervous. I’d never been anything but a woman before.

But I decided that I was done with womanhood, over what womanhood could do for me; I wanted to be something furiously new.

To the people who say a woman would’ve refused to do what I do, I say—

Isn’t that the point?

I fly—

Red evening over the white Mojave, and I watch the sun set through a canopy of polycarbonate and glass: clitoral bulge of cockpit on the helicopter’s nose. Lightning probes the burned wreck of an oil refinery and the Santa Ana feeds a smoldering wildfire and pulls pine soot out southwest across the Big Pacific. We are alone with each other, Axis and I, flying low.

We are traveling south to strike a high school.

Rotor wash flattens rings of desert creosote. Did you know that creosote bushes clone themselves? The ten-thousand-year elders enforce dead zones where nothing can grow except more creosote. Beetles and mice live among them, the way our cities had pigeons and mice. I guess the analogy breaks down because the creosote’s lasted ten thousand years. You don’t need an attack helicopter to tell you that our cities haven’t. The Army gave me gene therapy to make my blood toxic to mosquitoes. Soon you will have that too, to fight malaria in the Hudson floodplain and on the banks of the Greater Lake.

Now I cross Highway 40, southbound at two hundred knots. The Apache’s engine is electric and silent. Decibel killers sop up the rotor noise. White-bright infrared vision shows me stripes of heat, the tire tracks left by Pear Mesa school buses. Buried housing projects smolder under the dirt, radiators curled until sunset. This is enemy territory. You can tell because, though this desert was once Nevada and California, there are no American flags.

“Barb,” the Apache whispers, in a voice that Axis once identified, to my alarm, as my mother’s. “Waypoint soon.”

“Axis.” I call out to my gunner, tucked into the nose ahead of me. I can see only gray helmet and flight suit shoulders, but I know that body wholly, the hard knots of muscle, the ridge of pelvic girdle, the shallow navel and flat hard chest. An attack helicopter has a crew of two. My gunner is my marriage, my pillar, the completion of my gender.

“Axis.” The repeated call sign means, I hear you.

“Ten minutes to target.”

“Ready for target,” Axis says.

But there is again that roughness, like a fold in carbon fiber. I heard it when we reviewed our fragment orders for the strike. I hear it again now. I cannot ignore it any more than I could ignore a battery fire; it is a fault in a person and a system I trust with my life.

But I can choose to ignore it for now.

The target bumps up over the horizon. The low mounds of Kelso-Ventura District High burn warm gray through a parfait coating of aerogel insulation and desert soil. We have crossed a third of the continental US to strike a school built by Americans.

Axis cues up a missile: black eyes narrowed, telltales reflected against clear laser-washed cornea. “Call the shot, Barb.”

“Stand by. Maneuvering.” I lift us above the desert floor, buying some room for the missile to run, watching the probability-of-kill calculation change with each motion of the aircraft.

Before the Army my name was Seo Ji Hee. Now my call sign is Barb, which isn’t short for Barbara. I share a rank (flight warrant officer), a gender, and a urinary system with my gunner Axis: we are harnessed and catheterized into the narrow tandem cockpit of a Boeing AH-70 Apache Mystic. America names its helicopters for the people it destroyed.

We are here to degrade and destroy strategic targets in the United States of America’s war against the Pear Mesa Budget Committee. If you disagree with the war, so be it: I ask your empathy, not your sympathy. Save your pity for the poor legislators who had to find some constitutional framework for declaring war against a credit union.

The reasons for war don’t matter much to us. We want to fight the way a woman wants to be gracious, the way a man wants to be firm. Our need is as vamp-fierce as the strutting queen and dryly subtle as the dapper lesbian and comfortable as the soft resilience of the demiwoman.

How often do you analyze the reasons for your own gender? You might sigh at the necessity of morning makeup, or hide your love for your friends behind beer and bravado. Maybe you even resent the punishment for breaking these norms.

But how often—really—do you think about the grand strategy of gender? The mess of history and sociology, biology and game theory that gave rise to your pants and your hair and your salary? The casus belli?

Often, you might say. All the time. It haunts me.

Then you, more than anyone, helped make me.

When I was a woman I wanted to be good at woman. I wanted to darken my eyes and strut in heels. I wanted to laugh from my throat when I was pleased, laugh so low that women would shiver in contentment down the block.

And at the same time I resented it all. I wanted to be sharper, stronger, a new-made thing, exquisite and formidable. Did I want that because I was taught to hate being a woman? Or because I hated being taught anything at all?

Now I am jointed inside. Now I am geared and shafted, I am a being of opposing torques. The noise I make is canceled by decibel killers so I am no louder than a woman laughing through two walls.

When I was a woman I wanted to have friends who would gasp at the precision and surprise of my gifts. Now I show friendship by tracking the motions of your head, looking at what you look at, the way one helicopter's sensors can be slaved to the motions of another.

When I was a woman I wanted my skin to be as smooth and dark as the sintered stone countertop in our kitchen.

Now my skin is boron-carbide and Kevlar. Now I have a wrist callus where I press my hydration sensor into my skin too hard and too often. Now I have bit-down nails from the claustrophobia of the bus ride to the flight line. I paint them desert colors, compulsively.

When I was a woman I was always aware of surveillance. The threat of the eyes on me, the chance that I would cross over some threshold of detection and become a target.

Now I do the exact same thing. But I am counting radars and lidars and pit viper thermal sensors, waiting for a missile.

I am gas turbines. I am the way I never sit on the same side of the table as a stranger. I am most comfortable in moonless dark, in low places between hills. I am always thirsty and always

tense. I tense my core and pace my breath even when coiled up in a briefing chair. As if my tail rotor must cancel the spin of the main blades and the turbines must whirl and the plates flex against the pitch links or I will go down spinning to my death.

An airplane wants in its very body to stay flying. A helicopter is propelled by its interior near-disaster.

I speak the attack command to my gunner. “Normalize the target.”

Nothing happens.

“Axis. Comm check.”

“Barb, Axis. I hear you.” No explanation for the fault. There is nothing wrong with the weapon attack parameters. Nothing wrong with any system at all, except the one without any telltales, my spouse, my gunner.

“Normalize the target,” I repeat.

“Axis. Rifle one.”

The weapon falls off our wing, ignites, homes in on the hard invisible point of the laser designator. Missiles are faster than you think, more like a bullet than a bird. If you’ve ever seen a bird.

The weapon penetrates the concrete shelter of Kelso-Ventura High School and fills the empty halls with thermobaric aerosol. Then: ignition. The detonation hollows out the school like a hooked finger scooping out an egg. There are not more than a few janitors in there. A few teachers working late. They are bycatch.

What do I feel in that moment? Relief. Not sexual, not like eating or pissing, not like coming in from the heat to the cool dry climate shelter. It’s a sense of passing. Walking down the street in the right clothes, with the right partner, to the right job. That feeling. Have you felt it?

But there is also an itch of worry—why did Axis hesitate? How did Axis hesitate?

Kelso-Ventura High School collapses into its own basement. “Target normalized,” Axis reports, without emotion, and my heart beats slow and worried.

I want you to understand that the way I feel about Axis is hard and impersonal and lovely. It is exactly the way you would feel if a beautiful, silent turbine whirled beside you day and night, protecting you, driving you on, coursing with current, fiercely bladed, devoted. God, it’s love. It’s love I can’t explain. It’s cold and good.

“Barb,” I say, which means I understand. “Exiting north, zero three zero, cupids two.”

I adjust the collective—feel the swash plate push up against the pitch links, the links tilt the angle of the rotors so they ease their bite on the air—and the Apache, my body, sinks toward the hot desert floor. Warm updraft caresses the hull, sensual contrast with the Santa Ana wind. I shiver in delight.

Suddenly: warning receivers hiss in my ear, poke me in the sacral vertebrae, put a dark thunderstorm note into my air. “Shit,” Axis hisses. “Air search radar active, bearing 192, angels twenty, distance . . . eighty klicks. It’s a fast-mover. He must’ve heard the blast.”

A fighter. A combat jet. Pear Mesa’s mercenary defenders have an air force, and they are out on the hunt. “A Werewolf.”

“Must be. Gown?”

“Gown up.” I cue the plasma-sheath stealth system that protects us from radar and laser hits. The Apache glows with lines of arc-weld light, UFO light. Our rotor wash blasts the plasma into a bright wedding train behind us. To the enemy’s sensors, that trail of plasma is as thick and soft as insulating foam. To our eyes it’s cold aurora fire.

“Let’s get the fuck out.” I touch the cyclic and we sideslip through Mojave dust, watching the school fall into itself. There is no reason to do this except that somehow I know Axis wants to see. Finally I pull the nose around, aim us northeast, shedding light like a comet buzzing the desert on its way into the sun.

“Werewolf at seventy klicks,” Axis reports. “Coming our way. Time to intercept . . . six minutes.”

The Werewolf Apostles are mercenaries, survivors from the militaries of climate-seared states. They sell their training and their hardware to earn their refugee peoples a few degrees more distance from the equator.

The heat of the broken world has chased them here to chase us.

Before my assignment neurosurgery, they made me sit through (I could bear to sit, back then) the mandatory course on Applied Constructive Gender Theory. Slouched in a fungus-nibbled plastic chair as transparencies slid across the cracked screen of a De-networked Briefing Element overhead projector: how I learned the technology of gender.

Long before we had writing or farms or post-digital strike helicopters, we had each other. We lived together and changed each other, and so we needed to say “this is who I am, this is what I do.”

So, in the same way that we attached sounds to meanings to make language, we began to attach clusters of behavior to signal social roles. Those clusters were rich, and quick-changing, and so just like language, we needed networks devoted to processing them. We needed a place in the brain to construct and to analyze gender.

Generations of queer activists fought to make gender a self-determined choice, and to undo the creeping determinism that said the way it is now is the way it always was and always must be. Generations of scientists mapped the neural wiring that motivated and encoded the gender choice.

And the moment their work reached a usable stage—the moment society was ready to accept plastic gender, and scientists were ready to manipulate it—the military found a new resource. Armed with functional connectome mapping and neural plastics, the military can make gender tactical.

If gender has always been a construct, then why not construct new ones?

My gender networks have been reassigned to make me a better AH-70 Apache Mystic pilot. This is better than conventional skill learning. I can show you why.

Look at a diagram of an attack helicopter's airframe and components. Tell me how much of it you grasp at once.

Now look at a person near you, their clothes, their hair, their makeup and expression, the way they meet or avoid your eyes. Tell me which was richer with information about danger and capability. Tell me which was easier to access and interpret.

The gender networks are old and well-connected. They work.

I remember being a woman. I remember it the way you remember that old, beloved hobby you left behind. Woman felt like my prom dress, polyester satin smoothed between little hand and little hip. Woman felt like a little tic of the lips when I was interrupted, or like teasing out the mood my boyfriend wouldn't explain. Like remembering his mom's birthday for him, or giving him a list of things to buy at the store, when he wanted to be better about groceries.

I was always aware of being small: aware that people could hurt me. I spent a lot of time thinking about things that had happened right before something awful. I would look around me and ask myself, are the same things happening now? Women live in cross-reference. It is harder work than we know.

Now I think about being small as an advantage for nape-of-earth maneuvers and pop-up guided missile attacks.

Now I yield to speed walkers in the hall like I need to avoid fouling my rotors.

Now walking beneath high-tension power lines makes me feel the way that a cis man would feel if he strutted down the street in a miniskirt and heels.

I'm comfortable in open spaces but only if there's terrain to break it up. I hate conversations I haven't started; I interrupt shamelessly so that I can make my point and leave.

People treat me like I'm dangerous, like I could hurt them if I wanted to. They want me protected and watched over. They bring me water and ask how I'm doing.

People want me on their team. They want what I can do.

A fighter is hunting us, and I am afraid that my gunner has gender dysphoria.

Twenty thousand feet above us (still we use feet for altitude) the bathroom-tiled transceivers cupped behind the nose cone of a Werewolf Apostle J-20S fighter broadcast fingers of radar light. Each beam cast at a separate frequency, a fringed caress instead of a pointed prod. But we are jumpy, we are hypervigilant—we feel that creeper touch.

I get the cold-rush skin-prickle feel of a stranger following you in the dark. Has he seen you? Is he just going the same way? If he attacks, what will you do, could you get help, could you scream? Put your keys between your fingers, like it will help. Glass branches of possibility grow from my skin, waiting to be snapped off by the truth.

"Give me a warning before he's in IRST range," I order Axis. "We're going north."

"Axis." The Werewolf's infrared sensor will pick up the heat of us, our engine and plasma shield, burning against the twilight desert. The same system that hides us from his radar makes us hot and visible to his IRST.

I throttle up, running faster, and the Apache whispers alarm. "Gown overspeed." We're moving too fast for the plasma stealth system, and the wind's tearing it from our skin. We are not modest. I want to duck behind a ridge to cover myself, but I push through the discomfort, feeling out the tradeoff between stealth and distance. Like the morning check in the mirror, trading the confidence of a good look against the threat of reaction.

When the women of Soviet Russia went to war against the Nazis, when they volunteered by the thousands to serve as snipers and pilots and tank drivers and infantry and partisans, they fought hard and they fought well. They ate frozen horse dung and hauled men twice their weight out of burning tanks. They shot at their own mothers to kill the Nazis behind her.

But they did not lose their gender; they gave up the inhibition against killing but would not give up flowers in their hair, polish for their shoes, a yearning for the young lieutenant, a kiss on his dead lips.

And if that is not enough to convince you that gender grows deep enough to thrive in war: when the war ended the Soviet women were punished. They went unmarried and unrespected. They were excluded from the victory parades. They had violated their gender to fight for the state and the state judged that violation worth punishment more than their heroism was worth reward.

Gender is stronger than war. It remains when all else flees.

When I was a woman I wanted to machine myself.

I loved nails cut like laser arcs and painted violent-bright in bathrooms that smelled like laboratories. I wanted to grow thick legs with fat and muscle that made shapes under the skin like Nazca lines. I loved my birth control, loved that I could turn my period off, loved the home beauty-feedback kits that told you what to eat and dose to adjust your scent, your skin, your moods. I admired, wasn't sure if I wanted to be or wanted to fuck, the women in the build-your-own-shit videos I watched on our local image of the old Internet. Women who made cyberattack kits and jewelry and sterile-printed IUDs, made their own huge wedge heels and fitted bras and skin-thin chameleon dresses. Women who talked about their implants the same way they talked about computers, phones, tools: technologies of access, technologies of self-expression.

Something about their merciless self-possession and self-modification stirred me. The first time I ever meant to masturbate I imagined one of those women coming into my house, picking the lock, telling me exactly what to do, how to be like her. I told my first boyfriend about this, I showed him pictures, and he said, girl, you bi as hell, which was true, but also wrong. Because I did not want those dresses, those heels, those bodies in the way I wanted my boyfriend. I wanted to possess that power. I wanted to have it and be it.

The Apache is my body now, and like most bodies it is sensual. Fabric armor that stiffens beneath my probing fingers. Stub wings clustered with ordnance. Rotors so light and strong they do not even droop: as artificial-looking, to an older pilot, as breast implants. And I brush at the black ring of a sensor housing, like the tip of a nail lifting a stray lash from the white of your eye.

I don't shave, which all the fast jet pilots do, down to the last curly scrotal hair. Nobody expects a helicopter to be sleek. I have hairy armpits and thick black bush all the way to my ass crack. The things that are taboo and arousing to me are the things taboo to helicopters. I like to be picked up, moved, pressed, bent and folded, held down, made to shudder, made to abandon control.

Do these last details bother you? Does the topography of my pubic hair feel intrusive and unnecessary? I like that. I like to intrude, inflict damage, withdraw. A year after you read this maybe those paragraphs will be the only thing you remember: and you will know why the rules of gender are worth recruitment.

But we cannot linger on the point of attack.

“He’s coming north. Time to intercept three minutes.”

“Shit. How long until he gets us on thermal?”

“Ninety seconds with the gown on.” Danger has swept away Axis’ hesitation.

“Shit.”

“He’s not quite on zero aspect—yeah, he’s coming up a few degrees off our heading. He’s not sure exactly where we are. He’s hunting.”

“He’ll be sure soon enough. Can we kill him?”

“With sidewinders?” Axis pauses articulately: the target is twenty thousand feet above us, and he has a laser that can blind our missiles. “We’d have more luck bailing out and hiking.”

“All right. I’m gonna fly us out of this.”

“Sure.”

“Just check the gun.”

“Ten times already, Barb.”

When climate and economy and pathology all went finally and totally critical along the Gulf Coast, the federal government fled Cabo fever and VARD-2 to huddle behind New York’s flood barriers.

We left eleven hundred and six local disaster governments behind. One of them was the Pear Mesa Budget Committee. The rest of them were doomed.

Pear Mesa was different because it had bought up and hardened its own hardware and power. So Pear Mesa’s neural nets kept running, retrained from credit union portfolio management to the emergency triage of hundreds of thousands of starving sick refugees.

Pear Mesa's computers taught themselves to govern the forsaken southern seaboard. Now they coordinate water distribution, re-express crop genomes, ration electricity for survival AC, manage all the life support humans need to exist in our warmed-over hell.

But, like all advanced neural nets, these systems are black boxes. We have no idea how they work, what they think. Why do Pear Mesa's AIs order the planting of pear trees? Because pears were their corporate icon, and the AIs associate pear trees with areas under their control. Why does no one make the AIs stop? Because no one knows what else is tangled up with the "plant pear trees" impulse. The AIs may have learned, through some rewarded fallacy or perverse founder effect, that pear trees cause humans to have babies. They may believe that their only function is to build support systems around pear trees.

When America declared war on Pear Mesa, their AIs identified a useful diagnostic criterion for hostile territory: the posting of fifty-star American flags. Without ever knowing what a flag meant, without any concept of nations or symbols, they ordered the destruction of the stars and stripes in Pear Mesa territory.

That was convenient for propaganda. But the real reason for the war, sold to a hesitant Congress by technocrats and strategic ecologists, was the ideology of scale atrocity. Pear Mesa's AIs could not be modified by humans, thus could not be joined with America's own governing algorithms: thus must be forced to yield all their control, or else remain forever separate.

And that separation was intolerable. By refusing United States administration, our superior resources and planning capability, Pear Mesa's AIs condemned citizens who might otherwise be saved to die—a genocide by neglect. Wasn't that the unforgivable crime of fossil capitalism? The creation of systems whose failure modes led to mass death?

Didn't we have a moral imperative to intercede?

Pear Mesa cannot surrender, because the neural nets have a basic imperative to remain online. Pear Mesa's citizens cannot question the machines' decisions. Everything the machines do is connected in ways no human can comprehend. Disobey one order and you might as well disobey them all.

But none of this is why I kill.

I kill for the same reason men don't wear short skirts, the same reason I used to pluck my brows, the reason enby people are supposed to be (unfair and stupid, yes, but still) androgynous with short hair. Are those good reasons to do something? If you say no, honestly no—can you tell me you break these rules without fear or cost?

But killing isn't a gender role, you might tell me. Killing isn't a decision about how to present your own autonomous self to the world. It is coercive and punitive. Killing is therefore not an act of gender.

I wish that were true. Can you tell me honestly that killing is a genderless act? The method? The motive? The victim?

When you imagine the innocent dead, who do you see?

"Barb," Axis calls, softly. Your own voice always sounds wrong on recordings—too nasal. Axis' voice sounds wrong when it's not coming straight into my skull through helmet mic.

"Barb."

"How are we doing?"

"Exiting one hundred and fifty knots north. Still in his radar but he hasn't locked us up."

"How are you doing?"

I cringe in discomfort. The question is an indirect way for Axis to admit something's wrong, and that indirection is obscene. Like hiding a corroded tail rotor bearing from your maintenance guys.

"I'm good," I say, with fake ease. "I'm in flow. Can't you feel it?" I dip the nose to match a drop-off below, provoking a whine from the terrain detector. I am teasing, striking a pose. "We're gonna be okay."

"I feel it, Barb." But Axis is tense, worried about our pursuer, and other things. Doesn't laugh.

"How about you?"

"Nominal."

Again the indirection, again the denial, and so I blurt it out. "Are you dysphoric?"

"What?" Axis says, calmly.

"You've been hesitating. Acting funny. Is your—" There is no way to ask someone if their militarized gender conditioning is malfunctioning. "Are you good?"

"I . . . " Hesitation. It makes me cringe again, in secondhand shame. Never hesitate. "I don't know."

“Do you need to go on report?”

Severe gender dysphoria can be a flight risk. If Axis hesitates over something that needs to be done instantly, the mission could fail decisively. We could both die.

“I don’t want that,” Axis says.

“I don’t want that either,” I say, desperately. I want nothing less than that. “But, Axis, if—”

The warning receiver climbs to a steady crow call.

“He knows we’re here,” I say, to Axis’ tight inhalation. “He can’t get a lock through the gown but he’s aware of our presence. Fuck. Blinder, blinder, he’s got his laser on us—”

The fighter’s lidar pod is trying to catch the glint of a reflection off us. “Shit,” Axis says. “We’re gonna get shot.”

“The gown should defeat it. He’s not close enough for thermal yet.”

“He’s gonna launch anyway. He’s gonna shoot and then get a lock to steer it in.”

“I don’t know—missiles aren’t cheap these days—”

The ESM mast on the Apache’s rotor hub, mounted like a lamp on a post, contains a cluster of electro-optical sensors that constantly scan the sky: the Distributed Aperture Sensor. When the DAS detects the flash of a missile launch, it plays a warning tone and uses my vest to poke me in the small of my back.

My vest pokes me in the small of my back.

“Barb. Missile launch south. Barb. Fox 3 inbound. Inbound. Inbound.”

“He fired,” Axis calls. “Barb?”

“Barb,” I acknowledge.

I fuck—

Oh, you want to know: many of you, at least. It’s all right. An attack helicopter isn’t a private way of being. Your needs and capabilities must be maintained for the mission.

I don't think becoming an attack helicopter changed who I wanted to fuck. I like butch assertive people. I like talent and prestige, the status that comes of doing things well. I was never taught the lie that I was wired for monogamy, but I was still careful with men, I was still wary, and I could never tell him why: that I was afraid not because of him, but because of all the men who'd seemed good like him, at first, and then turned into something else.

No one stalks an attack helicopter. No slack-eyed well-dressed drunk punches you for ignoring the little rape he slurs at your neckline. No one even breaks your heart: with my dopamine system tied up by the reassignment surgery, fully assigned to mission behavior, I can't fall in love with anything except my own purpose.

Are you aware of your body? Do you feel your spine when you stand, your hips when you walk, the tightness and the mass in your core? When you look at yourself, whose eyes do you use? Your own?

I am always in myself. I never see myself through my partner's eyes. I have weapons to use, of course, ways of moving, moans and cries. But I measure those weapons by their effect, not by their similarity to some idea of how I should be.

Flying is the loop of machinery and pilot, the sense of your motion on the controls translated into torque and lift, the airframe's reaction shaping your next motion until the loop closes and machine and pilot are one. Awareness collapses to the moment. You are always doing the right thing exactly as it needs to be done. Sex is the same: the search for everything in an instant.

Of course I fuck Axis. A few decades ago this would've been a crime. What a waste of perfectly useful behavior. What a waste of that lean muscled form and those perfect killing hands that know me millimeter-by-millimeter system-by-system so there is no mystique between us. No "secret places" or "feminine mysteries," only the tortuously exact technical exercise of nerves and pressure. Oxytocin released, to flow between us, by the press of knuckles in my cunt.

When I come beneath Axis I cry out, I press my body close, I want that utter loss of control that I feel nowhere else. Heartbeat in arched throat: nipple beneath straining tongue. And my mind is hyper-activated, free-associating, and as Axis works in me I see the work we do together. I see puffs of thirty-millimeter autocannon detonating on night-cold desert floor.

Violence doesn't get me off. But getting off makes me revel in who I am: and I am violent, made for violence, alive in the fight.

Does that surprise you? Does it bother you to mingle cold technical discipline with hot flesh and sweat?

Let me ask you: why has the worst insult you can give a combat pilot always been weak dick?

Have you ever been exultant? Have you ever known that you are a triumph? Have you ever felt that it was your whole life's purpose to do something, and all that you needed to succeed was to be entirely yourself?

To be yourself well is the wholest and best feeling that anything has ever felt.

It is what I feel when I am about to live or die.

The Werewolf's missile arches down on us, motor burned out, falling like an arrow. He is trying a Shoot On Prospect attack: he cannot find us exactly, so he fires a missile that will finish the search, lock onto our heat or burn through our stealth with its onboard radar, or acquire us optically like a staring human eye. Or at least make us react. Like the catcaller's barked "Hey!" to evoke the flinch or the huddle, the proof that he has power.

We are ringed in the vortex of a dilemma. If we switch off the stealth gown, the Werewolf fighter will lock its radar onto us and guide the missile to the kill. If we keep the stealth system on, the missile's heat-seeker will home in on the blazing plasma.

I know what to do. Not in the way you learn how to fly a helicopter, but the way you know how to hold your elbows when you gesture.

A helicopter is more than a hovering fan, see? The blades of the rotor tilt and swivel. When you turn the aircraft left, the rotors deepen their bite into the air on one side of their spin, to make off-center lift. You cannot force a helicopter or it will throw you to the earth. You must be gentle.

I caress the cyclic.

The Apache's nose comes up smooth and fast. The Mojave horizon disappears under the chin. Axis' gasp from the front seat passes through the microphone and into the bones of my face. The pitch indicator climbs up toward sixty degrees, ass down, chin up. Our airspeed plummets from a hundred and fifty knots to sixty.

We hang there for an instant like a dancer in an oversway. The missile is coming straight down at us. We are not even running anymore.

And I lower the collective, flattening the blades of the rotor, so that they cannot cut the air at an angle and we lose all lift.

We fall.

I toe the rudder. The tail rotor yields a little of its purpose, which is to counter the torque of the main rotor: and that liberated torque spins the Apache clockwise, opposite the rotor's turn, until

we are nose down sixty degrees, facing back the way we came, looking into the Mojave desert as it rises up to take us.

I have pirouetted us in place. Plasma fire blows in wraith pennants as the stealth system tries to keep us modest.

“Can you get it?” I ask.

“Axis.”

I raise the collective again and the rotors bite back into the air. We do not rise, but our fall slows down. Cyclic stick answers to the barest twitch of wrist, and I remember, once, how that slim wrist made me think of fragility, frailty, fear: I am remembering even as I pitch the helicopter back and we climb again, nose up, tail down, scudding backward into the sky while aimed at our chasing killer. Axis is on top now, above me in the front seat, and in front of Axis is the chin gun, pointed sixty degrees up into heaven.

“Barb,” the helicopter whispers, like my mother in my ear. “Missile ten seconds. Music? Glare?”

No. No jamming. The Werewolf missile will home in on jamming like a wolf with a taste for pepper. Our laser might dazzle the seeker, drive it off course—but if the missile turns then Axis cannot take the shot.

It is not a choice. I trust Axis.

Axis steers the nose turret onto the target and I imagine strong fingers on my own chin, turning me for a kiss, looking up into the red scorched sky—Axis chooses the weapon (30MM GUIDED PROX AP) and aims and fires with all the idle don’t-have-to-try confidence of the first girl dribbling a soccer ball who I ever for a moment loved—

The chin autocannon barks out ten rounds a second. It is effective out to one point five kilometers. The missile is moving more than a hundred meters per second.

Axis has one second almost exactly, ten shots of thirty-millimeter smart grenade, to save us.

A mote of gray shadow rushes at us and intersects the line of cannon fire from the gun. It becomes a spray of light. The Apache tings and rattles. The desert below us, behind us, stipples with tiny plumes of dust that pick up in the wind and settle out like sift from a hand.

“Got it,” Axis says.

“I love you.”

“Axis.”

Many of you are veterans in the act of gender. You weigh the gaze and disposition of strangers in a subway car and select where to stand, how often to look up, how to accept or reject conversation. Like a frequency-hopping radar, you modulate your attention for the people in your context: do not look too much, lest you seem interested, or alarming. You regulate your yawns, your appetite, your toilet. You do it constantly and without failure.

You are aces.

What other way could be better? What other neural pathways are so available to constant reprogramming, yet so deeply connected to judgment, behavior, reflex?

Some people say that there is no gender, that it is a postmodern construct, that in fact there are only man and woman and a few marginal confusions. To those people I ask: if your body-fact is enough to establish your gender, you would willingly wear bright dresses and cry at movies, wouldn’t you? You would hold hands and compliment each other on your beauty, wouldn’t you? Because your cock would be enough to make you a man.

Have you ever guarded anything so vigilantly as you protect yourself against the shame of gender-wrong?

The same force that keeps you from gender-wrong is the force that keeps me from fucking up.

The missile is dead. The Werewolf Apostle is still up there.

“He’s turning off.” Axis has taken over defensive awareness while I fly. “Radar off. Laser off. He’s letting us go.”

“Afraid of our fighters?” The mercenaries cannot replace a lost J-20S. And he probably has a wingman, still hiding, who would die too if they stray into a trap.

“Yes,” Axis says.

“Keep the gown on.” In case he’s trying to bluff us into shutting down our stealth. “We’ll stick to the terrain until he’s over the horizon.”

“Can you fly us out?”

The Apache is fighting me. Fragments of the destroyed missile have pitted the rotors, damaged the hub assembly, and jammed the control surfaces. I begin to crush the shrapnel with the Apache’s hydraulics, pounding the metal free with careful control inputs. But the necessary motions also move the aircraft. Half a second’s error will crash us into the desert. I have to

calculate how to un-jam the shrapnel while accounting for the effects of that shrapnel on my flight authority and keeping the aircraft stable despite my constant control inputs while moving at a hundred and thirty knots across the desert.

“Barb,” I say. “Not a problem.”

And for an hour I fly without thought, without any feeling except the smooth stone joy of doing something that takes everything.

The night desert is black to the naked eye, soft gray to thermal. My attention flips between my left eye, focused on the instruments, and my right eye, looking outside. I am a black box like the Pear Mesa AIs. Information arrives—a throb of feedback in the cyclic, a shift of Axis’ weight, a dune crest ahead—and my hands and feet move to hold us steady. If I focused on what I was doing it would all fall apart. So I don’t.

“Are you happy?” Axis asks.

Good to talk now. Keep my conscious mind from interfering with the gearbox of reflexes below. “Yeah,” I say, and I blow out a breath into my mask, “yeah, I am,” a lightness in my ribs, “yeah, I feel good.”

“Why do you think we just blew up a school?”

Why did I text my best friend the appearance and license number of all my cab drivers, just in case? Because those were the things that had to be done.

Listen: I exist in this context. To make war is part of my gender. I get what I need from the flight line, from the ozone tang of charging stations and the shimmer of distant bodies warping in the tarmac heat, from the twenty minutes of anxiety after we land when I cannot convince myself that I am home, and safe, and that I am no longer keeping us alive with the constant adjustments of my hands and feet.

“Deplete their skilled labor supply, I guess. Attack the demographic skill curve.”

“Kind of a long-term objective. Kind of makes you think it’s not gonna be over by election season.”

“We don’t get to know why the AIs pick the targets.” Maybe destroying this school was an accident. A quirk of some otherwise successful network, coupled to the load-bearing elements of a vast strategy.

“Hey,” I say, after a beat of silence. “You did good back there.”

“You thought I wouldn’t.”

“Barb.” A more honest yes than “yes,” because it is my name, and it acknowledges that I am the one with the doubt.

“I didn’t know if I would either,” Axis says, which feels exactly like I don’t know if I love you anymore. I lose control for a moment and the Apache rattles in bad air and the tail slews until I stop thinking and bring everything back under control in a burst of rage.

“You’re done?” I whisper, into the helmet. I have never even thought about this before. I am cold, sweat soaked, and shivering with adrenaline comedown, drawn out like a tendon in high heels, a just-off-the-dance-floor feeling, post-voracious, satisfied. Why would we choose anything else? Why would we give this up? When it feels so good to do it? When I love it so much?

“I just . . . have questions.” The tactical channel processes the sound of Axis swallowing into a dull point of sound, like dropped plastic.

“We don’t need to wonder, Axis. We’re gendered for the mission—”

“We can’t do this forever,” Axis says, startling me. I raise the collective and hop us up a hundred feet, so I do not plow us into the desert. “We’re not going to be like this forever. The world won’t be like this forever. I can’t think of myself as . . . always this.”

Yes, we will be this way forever. We survived this mission as we survive everywhere on this hot and hostile earth. By bending all of what we are to the task. And if we use less than all of ourselves to survive, we die.

“Are you going to put me on report?” Axis whispers.

On report as a flight risk? As a faulty component in a mission-critical system? “You just intercepted an air-to-air missile with the autocannon, Axis. Would I ever get rid of you?”

“Because I’m useful,” Axis says, softly. “Because I can still do what I’m supposed to do. That’s what you love. But if I couldn’t . . . I’m distracting you. I’ll let you fly.”

I spare one glance for the gray helmet in the cockpit below mine. Politeness is a gendered protocol. Who speaks and who listens. Who denies need and who claims it. As a woman, I would’ve pressed Axis. As a woman, I would’ve unpacked the unease and the disquiet.

As an attack helicopter, whose problems are communicated in brief, clear datums, I should ignore Axis.

But who was ever only one thing?

“If you want to be someone else,” I say, “someone who doesn’t do what we do, then . . . I don’t want to be the thing that stops you.”

“Bird’s gotta land sometime,” Axis says. “Doesn’t it?”

In the Applied Constructive Gender briefing, they told us that there have always been liminal genders, places that people passed through on their way to somewhere else. Who are we in those moments when we break our own rules? The straight man who sleeps with men? The woman who can’t decide if what she feels is intense admiration, or sexual attraction? Where do we go, who do we become?

Did you know that instability is one of the most vital traits of a combat aircraft? Civilian planes are built stable, hard to turn, inclined to run straight ahead on an even level. But a military aircraft is built so it wants to tumble out of control, and it is held steady only by constant automatic feedback. The way I am holding this Apache steady now.

Something that is unstable is ready to move, eager to change, it wants to turn, to dive, to tear away from stillness and fly.

Dynamism requires instability. Instability requires the possibility of change.

“Voice recorder’s off, right?” Axis asks.

“Always.”

“I love doing this. I love doing it with you. I just don’t know if it’s . . . if it’s right.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“Barb?”

“Thank you for thinking about whether it’s right. Someone needs to.”

Maybe what Axis feels is a necessary new queerness. One which pries the tool of gender back from the hands of the state and the economy and the war. I like that idea. I cannot think of myself as a failure, as something wrong, a perversion of a liberty that past generations fought to gain.

But Axis can. And maybe you can too. That skepticism is not what I need . . . but it is necessary anyway.

I have tried to show you what I am. I have tried to do it without judgment. That I leave to you.

“Are we gonna make it?” Axis asks, quietly.

The airframe shudders in crosswind. I let the vibrations develop, settle into a rhythm, and then I make my body play the opposite rhythm to cancel it out.

“I don’t know,” I say, which is an answer to both of Axis’ questions, both of the ways our lives are in danger now. “Depends how well I fly, doesn’t it?”

“It’s all you, Barb,” Axis says, with absolute trust. “Take us home.”

A search radar brushes across us, scatters off the gown, turns away to look in likelier places. The Apache’s engine growls, eating battery, turning charge into motion. The airframe shudders again, harder, wind rising as cooling sky fights blazing ground. We are racing a hundred and fifty feet above the Larger Mojave where we fight a war over some new kind of survival and the planet we maimed grows that desert kilometer by kilometer. Our aircraft is wounded in its body and in its crew. We are propelled by disaster. We are moving swiftly.