



## PERSPECTIVES *for a* DIVERSE AMERICA

### Gawking, Gaping, Staring

[In this personal narrative, Clare explores multiple facets of the self and questions why gender is still discussed as a binary. She acknowledges the tortured lives that many have lived as a result of their gender ambiguity and declares that all those who "gawk," "gape," and "stare" at those who are different never get it right.]

Gawking, gaping, staring: I can't say when it first happened. When first a pair of eyes caught me, held me in their vice grip, tore skin from muscle, muscle from bone. Those eyes always shouted, "Freak, retard, cripple," demanded an answer for trembling hands, a tomboy's bold and unsteady gait I never grew out of. It started young, anywhere I encountered strangers. Gawking, gaping, staring seeped into my bones, became the marrow. I spent 30 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 look right through? Or will you smile back?*

I come from people who have long histories of being on stage—freaks and drag queens, court jesters and scientific experiments. Sometimes we've been proud, other times just desperate. We've posed for anthropologists and cringed in front of doctors, performed the greatest spectacles and thumbed our noses at the shadow called normal. The gawkers used to pay good money; now they get in for free.

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Being on stage is dangerous. Just ask Khoi woman Saartje Baartman, exhibited as the Hottentot Venus. She paced a cage on demand and posed for French naturalists. After she died, her genitals became a museum display for over a century. I listen to the histories and everywhere hear the words freak, savage.

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The gawkers think I'm deaf or "mentally retarded." They think I'm a 20-year-old guy or a middle-aged butch. 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.

I spent so many years shutting the staring out. 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.

I couldn't imagine anyone, much less a lover, reaching beneath my clothing, beneath all the ugly words, beneath my shame and armor, eyes and hands returning me to grace, beauty, passion.

Never imagined this: 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." Shame and disbelief flood my body, drowning his words. How do I begin to learn his lustful gaze?

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Being on stage is an act of faith. Just ask William Johnson. African-American and cognitively disabled, he stepped up to the freak stage; donned an ape costume and shaved his head, save for a tuft of hair at the very top; became the monkey man, the missing link, the "What-Is-It." He died a rich man, affectionately known by his co-workers as the "dean of freaks." But he could have just as easily been a lonely, frightened man, coerced, bullied, trapped by freak show owners and managers. I listen to the histories and everywhere hear the words savage, defect.

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These days I practice gawking at the gawkers; it's an act of resistance. 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, the folks without legs, the supposed half-men/half women, the conjoined twins, the bearded women, the snake charmers and sword

swallowers—as they took off their costumes, washed their faces, sat down to dinner. I'd gather their words, their laughter, their scorn at the rubes who bought their trinkets and believed half their lies. I'd breathe their fierceness into me.

The gawkers have 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.

*They 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?*

I practice overt resistance and unabashed pride, flirting as hard as I know how. On the Castro, I check out the bears, 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, walk away smiling, 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 I have is the shadowland of neither man nor woman, a suspension bridge tethered between negatives. One day we may have a language to take us to a place that is neither masculine nor feminine, day nor night, mortise nor tenon. But for now, what could I possibly say to the bears cruising me at 3 p.m. as sunlight streams over concrete?

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Being on stage is risky. Just ask Billy Tipton. He worked the jazz stage with his piano, saxophone, and comedy routines; lived for 50 years as a female-bodied man; married five times; and had three sons. 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 defect, queer.

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

There is a freak show photo: Hiram and Barney Davis off stage—small, wiry men, white, cognitively disabled, raised in Ohio. They wear goatees, hair falling past their shoulders; look mildly and directly into the camera. On-stage, they played "Waino and Plutano, the wild men from Borneo," snapped, snarled, growled, shook their chains at the audience. Rubes paid good money to come watch. I hope that sometimes they stopped mid-performance, up there on the sideshow platform, and stared back, turning their mild and direct gaze to the rubes, gawking at the gawkers.

*They 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? 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 fifty feet, 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'm taking Hiram and Barney as my teachers and looking for the places where staring finally turns to something else, something true to the bone. Where strength is softened and tempered, love honed and stretched. Where gender is 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 become home. Gawking, gaping, staring: I can't say when it first happened.

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