

I sexually identify as an attack helicopter.

I lied. According to US Army Technical Manual o, 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-karyotype 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?

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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.

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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.

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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.