

When I was in the third grade, I thought that I was gay.
Because I could draw and my uncle was.

I told my mom with tears streaming down my face, she's like
"Ben, you've liked girls since before pre-k."

Yeah, I guess she has a point, just a bunch of stereotypes all in my head.

I remember doing the math like
"yeah I'm good at little league."

It's all just a preconceived idea of what it all meant to like the same sex.

"Same Love" by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis

describes how gender stereotypes
affect everyone, even children.

Stereotypes do nothing but discourage individuality,
and arbitrarily define masculinity and femininity.

I am not here to talk about what it means to be gay
or what it means to be straight.

I am here to talk about what it means to ignore society's expectations of yourself
and be your own individual person

these selections demonstrate the struggles

that both men and women go through on a daily basis

when they are being judged by their peers for not acting like their gender "should".

"Manly Man" by Bradley Hathaway

I don't want my long hair, pretty green eyes, with
(no! I do not have on mascara.)
eyelashes, skinny figure, undersized t-shirt,
hip shake too much when I walk confuse anybody.
I am a manly man.

Within this sissy frame, obviously rib laden chest
lies a heart that beats to the drum of a native
American ritual dancing wildness.

It pumps an ever cascading supply of untamedness
that a herd of wild mustangs
have yet to grasp.

If danger lurks about, I will seek it out. If adventure
abounds, there I will be found.

If a damsel be in distress, I will show her who is best. I am a manly man.

Because I don't flush, and I leave the lid up.

Girls don't break up with me, I break up with them first.

(Except the last time, it didn't really work out like that...)

I don't shave the hair on my face (Because I still can't grow facial hair yet...)

But when I can, I won't, because beards are tough.

I fart, burp, and spit when I want, not caring who's nearby.
Disrespect my momma, and I will punch you in the eye. I am a manly man.

Or am I? I tell my guy friends that I love 'em.
And sometimes, sometimes I even hug 'em.
Not because I'm gay, but because I love 'em.
when people talk, I try to listen.
A spirit of compassion, that's my vision.
Surely I am a manly man. I want to be loved and have love and give love.

And not just that romantic kind either.
Although I am looking for that beauty.
Not helpless, but wants to be rescued.
The damsel in distress, man, woman, myth, true.
I will fight for her, climb the highest tower for her, love her,
share with her, delight in her, be her warrior, her protector.
She will be my crown and I will be hers.

My masculinity will be passed down and affirmed to my sons.
And each of my daughters will know they are lovely,
and deserving of authentic romance.

Society tells me all day long that I've defined manhood completely wrong.
But you ask any honest man, and he will agree.
You ask any honest woman, and she too will see,
that I am a manly man.

The final poem is told from the perspective of a female kindergarten teacher who uses her students to teach a lesson that we all desperately need to learn. **“Swingset”** by Andrea Gibson.

“Are you a boy or a girl?” he asks, staring up from all three feet of his pudding face grandeur, and I say “Dylan, you’ve been in this class for three years and you still don’t know if I’m a boy or a girl?” And he says “Uh-uh.” And I say “Well, at this point, I don’t really think it matters, do you?” And he says “Uhhhm, no. Can I have a push on the swing?” And this happens every day. It’s a tidal wave of kindergarten curiosity rushing straight for the rocks of me, whatever I am.

And the class, when we discuss the Milky Way galaxy, the orbit of the Sun around the Earth... or whatever. Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, and kids, do you know that some of the stars we see when we look up in the sky are so far away, they've already burned out? What do you think of that? Timmy? "Umm... my mom says that even though you got hairs that grow from your legs, and the hairs on your head grow short and poky, and that you smell really bad, like my dad, that you're a girl." "Thank you, Timmy."

And so it goes. On the playground, she peers up at me from behind her pink power puff sunglasses and then asks, "Do you have a boyfriend?" And I say no, and she says "Oh, do you have a girlfriend?" And I say "No, but if by some miracle, twenty years from now, I ever finally do, then I'll definitely bring her by to meet you. How's that?" "Okay. Can I have a push on the swing?"

And that's the thing. They don't care. They don't care. Us, on the other hand... My father sitting across the table at Christmas dinner, gritting his teeth over his still-full plate, his appetite ripped away by the intrusion of my haircut, "What were you thinking? You used to be such a pretty girl!" Frat boys, drunken, screaming, leaning out of the windows of their daddys' SUVs, "Hey! Are you a faggot or a dyke?" And I wonder what would happen if I met up with them in the middle of the night.

But the best, the best is always the mother at the market, sticking up her nose while pushing aside her daughter's wide eyes, whispering "Don't stare, it's rude." And I want to say, "Listen, lady, the only rude thing I see is your paranoid parental hand pushing aside the best education on self that little girl's ever gonna get, living with your Maybelline lips, stairmaster hips, synthetic kiwi-vanilla smelling beauty; so why don't you take your pinks and blues, your boy-girl rules and shove them in that car with your stupid issue of Cosmo, because tomorrow, I start my day with twenty-eight minds who know a hell of a lot more than you. And if I show up in a pink frilly dress, those kids won't love me any more, or less."

"Hey, are you a boy or a — never mind, can I have a push on the swing?" And some day, y'all, when we grow up, it's all gonna be that simple.