

# A Country In Between

by Nedjo Rogers



For Ardeo, Sasha, Malixi, and Taryn

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# Master Mistress

*A woman's face with nature's own hand painted  
hast thou, the master mistress of my passion*

- Shakespeare, Sonnet 20



*Cobb portrait of third Earl of Southampton*



1.

The master mistress of your passion I  
was once, or so you wrote. Those lines still sear,  
a spear thrust in my breast. The moon, the sky,  
can't hold our mingled loss. Many a year

has passed since last we met, or kissed, or spoke,  
so much as saw each other in the street,  
and yet, this very morn, when I awoke,  
it was from dreams in which we two should meet

time after time, life after life. The space  
we held together shall forever stay,  
an echo of the infinite—a trace  
of that age when, a player in a play,

I longed only to be your willing toy:  
a boy dressed as a girl dressed as a boy.

2.

Was I Viola or Cesario  
to your Orsino? Always it was both.  
Not lad or lass, but lover even so—  
a country in between. You were not loth.

You hungered for the woman's form in me  
as beggars hunger for a lordly feast  
their eyes may savour but their mouths will be  
forever barred from tasting. Such, at least,

was your conviction; but by action may  
the truth be judged. For my part, I would scan  
your face, then with Viola I would say:  
“as I am woman”, and “as I am man”.

I dreamt of an Illyria where no end  
came to the play—where love and life might blend.

3.

The lines I once believed were writ for me  
and me alone, at length I learned you'd shared  
among your private friends, that they might be  
amused by your sweet song. You little cared,

it seems, what I should feel to have our love  
laid bare, as if I were displayed upon  
the stage, a player, while you, from above,  
called out the cues, and multitudes looked on,

with mingled fascination and disdain.

And later, when some false friend passed your verse  
into a printer's clutch, could I complain?

The crowd shall witness what the cast rehearse,

and you, the playwright, dictate, with your pen,  
the lives of boys and mistresses and men.

4.

When you compared me to a summer's day,  
I little thought how quickly seasons fail,  
passing from warmth and brightness to decay.  
Though you had warned how fair from fair may pale,

still I could never doubt I would remain  
the lover you described: flush with desire,  
untouched by time or worldly care or pain,  
your phoenix fresh awakened from the fire.

While you, the turtle dove, would be as true  
as beauty, and as rare. Your crystal voice  
would carry through the years, forever new.  
As you were mine, so I would be your choice.

For you could not conceive then that not my  
desire but yours, with time, could fade, and die.

5.

That you took other lovers I did not  
hold as a grievance but stayed fast and true,  
till hers became the only touch you sought.  
Was I not then woman enough for you?

Your dark haired mistress—even when you asked  
me to her side, that she and I should be,  
for you, a pair, I played the part you tasked,  
only to find you envious of me,

like a playwright grown jealous of the lead  
cast in a role he had himself conceived.  
That you and I, once one, like a frail reed,  
could bend, then break, I never had believed

till that day when you sent me from your sight  
and nothing more the world held could be right.

6.

Come back upon the boards, and I will don  
once more Viola's dress. For though my cheek  
be not as smooth, and though my youth be gone,  
I have not lost the mystery you seek.

I am the clown now, last left on the stage,  
singing soft, hey ho to the wind and rain,  
behind a mask that shows not sex nor age.  
Even so would I have it. To explain

the action is to break the players' spell.  
To beg is to forsake the lover's vow.  
Will, wherever you wend, I wish you well.  
And so I choose to leave you with a bow.

For, whether my address be he or she,  
your master mistress I will ever be.

# Jean[ne]

*She disdains also to give herself up to feminine work,  
conducting herself in all things rather as a man than as a  
woman.*

*- Transcript of the trial of Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc)*



*1505 manuscript illustration of Jeanne d'Arc*



*The year is 1431; the place:  
a castle near the coast of France. Her face  
set with resolve, the soldier known as Jeanne  
speaks in her own defence. No older than  
nineteen, she faces her judges alone,  
this maid to whom the French king owes his throne.*

Time after time to this point you return:  
that I dress me in man's attire. I'll burn,  
you claim, for this supposed mortal sin.  
Do you think God cannot see what's within?  
And if my clothing pleases God, what care  
have you to rule upon what I should wear?  
I am thirteen when first an angel's light  
appears to me, a little to the right,  
while I am in my father's garden. Fear  
comes to my heart, but as it lingers near,  
in time I learn to love my angel guide.  
One day the Voice speaks once more at my side.  
"At Orléans, long under English siege,  
the people suffer daily and their liege

lord, Charles, the rightful King of France, can't see his way to freeing them. Your voice must be the call to arms. Go now without delay. Robert de Baudricourt will aid your way.”

But when I tell my father what the Voice has counselled me, affirming this, my choice, he tells my brothers, “Better you should drown her than that she should bring us ill renown.”

And so I cut my hair short as a squire's and, without leave or blessing of my sire's, set out to war, even as I now am clad.

Before we left for Orléans, I had my scribe prepare a letter to the king of England and his vassals: “You who bring war to the town of Orléans, return to your own distant lands, and you shall earn the mercy of the Maid. Give up the keys to all the French towns you've brought to their knees. But if you won't fall back, I say, beware: The Maid shall soon descend and seek you there, sent forth by God to bring a righteous fight; and you shall learn who has the better right: you, or the Lord.” With hundreds close about, “Be fearless and you'll raise the siege!” I shout. I am the first to plant a ladder on

the fortress of the Bridge. But I have gone  
not five feet up before an arrow, shot  
from a crossbow, pierces my mail. I'm caught  
between the throat and shoulder. Bright the blood  
that flows down my breastplate to stain the mud.  
I fall back then until my men can wrest  
the deadly shaft out and the wound is dressed.  
I hurry back to battle—I cannot  
let others risk their lives for what I've sought  
and not be there with them among the first.  
And so we break the siege and we disperse  
the few remaining English soldiers, thanks  
to God's great grace that brings strength to our ranks.  
I have a banner made, with, painted there,  
a field of *fleurs de lis* and, in the air,  
my angel counsellors. I heft it high  
as we ride forth, an emblem in the sky.  
Mark these my words: before seven years have passed  
the English shall be driven forth at last  
from these, our lands; and, when the English fall,  
my prophesy shall be recalled by all.  
At Tours, my Voices tell me where to search  
near in Saint Catherine de Fierbois' church,  
behind the altar, buried underground,  
where the famed sword of Martel will be found.

There the priests find it, even as I've known,  
and gladly give it to me for my own,  
with a fine scabbard. When I ride to war,  
I bear this ancient blade. The sick, the poor,  
the hungry come to me where'er I wend  
and kiss my hands. And unto them I send  
what help I can: cheese, bread, cloth, counsel, prayer—  
until the traitors catch me in their lair.  
About four months they hold me in the tower  
at Beaurevoir, a prisoner. Each hour  
I spend there is a torment, for I know  
my work of freeing France has far to go.  
At last, one evening, while my captors sleep  
within, commending me to God, I leap  
forth from the open window of my room,  
preferring thus to risk my life and doom,  
but, injured in the fall, I'm caught anew.  
When I seek guidance how to answer you,  
the Voices say, "Speak boldly. God will aid  
you." Angels guide the vows I've made.  
Out in the fields, beneath the heavens wide,  
my men and I slept nightly side by side  
as comrades, there, upon our beds of straw.  
And if, as we prepared for sleep, they saw  
in me some female form, they did not leer,

but helped me as I helped them with their gear,  
the heavy armour that we daily wore.  
You ask me, as you've asked often before,  
if I will take a woman's dress to hear  
mass and receive the Eucharist. Sincere  
I am in saying yes—*if* you will vow  
that, after, I may dress as I do now:  
in these, my tunic, doublet, breeches, hose.  
You state that in my deeds I never chose  
a woman's work, but ever as I can  
conduct myself in all things as a man.  
I say that there are many women who  
do now the sort of work you ask me to.  
You claim to be my judge. I say, take care  
whom you presume to charge. Beware, beware,  
for, in condemning me, you also blame  
the angels who counsel in the Lord's name.  
For nothing under heaven will I swear,  
oh judges, not to arm myself and wear  
this, my accustomed soldierly attire.  
Even when I am condemned and see the fire  
alit, the kindling set, with my last breath,  
I shall maintain what I've said to my death.

*Tried by her foes, cut off from kin or friend,*

*we know too well how Jeanne's ordeal would end.  
For not conforming to her assigned sex,  
at nineteen years of age, Jeanne was first ex-  
communicated, then burned at the stake.  
But, six centuries on, what can we make  
of this brief life? Are those who dare transgress  
unwritten laws of gender, conduct, dress,  
today the true heirs of her prophesy?  
If Jeanne lived now, would she be they, or he?*



## Author's Note

Are diverse gender identities a 21<sup>st</sup> century thing? Not at all.

Trans stories have been with us all along, throughout the world and among our best known narratives.

I'm the proud parent of two trans young adults. My kids, Ardeo and Sasha, have helped open my eyes to questions and perspectives about gender I hadn't closely considered.

The two pieces that form this collection come out of my recent education and reflection on gender identity and on the people throughout history who've pushed against the strictures of gender binaries and norms.

## Translating Shakespeare

The 1998 film *Shakespeare In Love* had Gwyneth Paltrow play a woman enraptured when Shakespeare writes his Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?", for her. But the truth is so much more interesting. Most of the bard's love sonnets were addressed to a young man Shakespeare described strikingly as "the master mistress of my passion" (Sonnet 20).

Wow.

Was Shakespeare's young lover a real person? If so, who? There's no shortage of speculation, much centred on one of Shakespeare's patrons, the third Earl of Southampton, especially since the 2002 discovery that a feminine portrait for three centuries mistaken for "Lady Norton" is in fact a painting of Southampton as a youth (see the image on p. 1).

But in "Master Mistress" my fascination is more literary than literal. How would the "fair youth" respond to the bard? I'm

drawing also on the play *Twelfth Night* and its gender crossing lead, Viola/Cesario.

## Gender Warrior

Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc), the French “maid” who led a valiant military uprising against the English, is so ubiquitous a figure that the essence of her story can easily fade into legend. How many people know the key charge she was condemned for was refusing to stop dressing and acting as a man?

There's a lengthy transcript from Jeanne's trial for heresy. Written by her foes, it's anything but an unbiased account. Still, it's the fullest direct source we have and includes repeated, detailed interrogation about gender nonconformity, as well as often striking responses attributed to Jeanne.

“Jean[ne]” draws very closely on the trial transcript, channelling the source material while reclaiming subversive elements often missing or downplayed.

## Page/Stage

While I hope they work well on the page, I wrote these pieces with performance foremost in mind. I'm sharing them partly in the hope that others may take them up as performance pieces as well as conversation starters.

Enjoy!

Nedjo Rogers

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## About the Author

Nedjo Rogers is a performance poet and songwriter who lives on Salt Spring Island, Canada. His work has appeared in *Subterrain* and *Contemporary Verse 2* as well as online poetry sites including The New Verse News. Nedjo's one-person verse play *The Trois-Rivieres Tales* premiered at the 2014 Victoria Fringe Theatre Festival.



The two pieces that make up *A Country In Between* celebrate gender diversity in literature and history.

## Shakespeare's young lover

Most of Shakespeare's love sonnets were addressed to a youth the bard described strikingly as "the master mistress of my passion". The first piece in this collection is a sonnet cycle that begins from the question: how would the fair youth respond to the bard?

## Gender rebel

"Jean[ne]" is based very closely on the transcript of the trial where Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) was condemned for dressing and acting as a man. The piece channels the source material while reclaiming subversive elements often missing or downplayed.