

PANSY INTRODUCTION

BY JASPER JOYNER

I won't be telling you my birth name. She's dead to me.

I do not hate her. No. She's cute or whatever, it's just that...*she*. She served her purpose. Carried me through childhood (girlhood, if you're nasty) within various countercultures of the infamous southern city of Memphis, Tennessee. Sputtered out of me like an upchuck on my first day of third grade when my first-ever friend, who hadn't known she'd been my first friend, asked, "What's your name again?" at lunchtime. This friend hadn't been there when I'd whispered my name hours ago in homeroom. And, often, that was the case. Her bashful entry, so delicate on the ears. Like a sweet kiss, perfectly inoffensive yet memorable. I never forgot how sweet she was; how sour I felt holding her, even when my hands were full of other things.

She was always kind. Rarely got mad when I'd inevitably announce I hated her shortly after the various discussions—within my mind—of her existence.

"What do you mean you hate your name?" My mom would ask, flabbergasted! Like it was the first time she'd ever heard such a thing.

It wasn't. It never was, except the first time, which was *ages* ago.

"Too girly!" I'd declare, all scrunched up and befuddled.

Mad as all get out about a thing I couldn't quite explain beyond its aforementioned *girliness*. For a while, I didn't even know what girly meant. Didn't care that my predilection for hair styling and obsession with the color pink made me a mighty fine candidate for "girly."

It wasn't some elusive girlie or boyishness that made her and I worlds apart. It was a more complicated thing than that. I didn't have language for that dissonant feeling of a wrong name bestowed on you like a funny-fitting shoe. You simply wanted to take it off. Too uncomfortable. You'd rather go barefoot, but there's too much dirt and debris on the ground, and ain't nobody tryna sludge through all of that with no protection. What if there are nails?!

She's retired now, thrown up the old jersey in the proverbial Name Hall of Fame, and I thank her for her service. She's beautiful. She always was. But I haven't been called by her in years. I bask in the unfamiliarity of her. A distant whisper of a soft kiss. No hard feelings, Unless you asked my body...

My body is less forgiving than I am. When I say that I am fine, you might wait for my silence and listen closely to the cries of my own body. It would tell you that I am hurting, that in moments in which we fought, I'd disappear.

They disappear often, my body would say.

My body might tell you that sometimes the pain it feels does not belong to me, that my ancestor's pain has found home in my bones, and so we all live together. Sometimes there is no space to breathe. They tell me to try. They speak to me through poetry. I learn to listen. They say that I, like many of them, come in a more ambiguous shape. That, once before, there was no shame in shapes like ours. But today, I need armor to exist as I am.

My ancestors tell me that I will be confused by what's required of my existence, because though Somebody's have made rules against our living and tried to erase the proof of our people and told us that there are no other genders but The Two, they will also try to destroy the proof of our gods, who show us we have been here, forever and always.

It's by design, they say, and it will take me years to understand this. So, this will not be a story about my armor, though it is vital to my existence. Armor is needed so that when I am greeted in this world, I am not called a liar without even opening my mouth. So that the alarm bells do not sound, alerting beasts that I am one of *them*, in need of elimination. I'll work like hell to protect myself. I'll replace makeshift bandages with permanent top surgery. I'll remove some of my own flesh. I'll grow a beard and relax my own vocal cords, and take my own father's face to be free of this dangerous siren. But this will *not* be a story about my armor.

This will be a love story. With the rockiest of roads and pit stops at everyone else's doorsteps but my own, until finally, I understand the constant shape of me. I'll draw you a picture of it, and I will color outside of the lines. It will be messy. But it will be beautiful and true.

My name now? Jasper. Sometimes I go by Jaz. It means "bringer of treasure" in Persian. A gemstone symbolizing nurture, protection, tranquility, and wholeness, characteristics I hope to represent one day or today. Whichever comes first.

Anyway, nice to meet you. I hope that upon reading this story, you will see why a soft whisper of a kiss of a name doesn't suit me at all. Not now, not then, not ever. Here I am, whole. It is my only way to exist. Curling, curvy, hard then soft, square and wavy. Still feminine and masculine in ways both aren't often called. Still flowery and effeminate and pink, and sometimes green, blue, always Black. On my best days, full of love and on my worst, timid to the core. A pansy, if you will. A soft and vibrant pansy, hence the title of this book.