

In *The Year You Bloom*, *Memory Switch*, and *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, author Lizz Bronson explores themes of queerness, heterosexism, and individuality through poetry while utilizing a variety of literary devices. I will begin with *The Year You Bloom*, which is a metaphor in itself for change directed from within resulting in the transition of the state of being, as humans do not literally bloom; a flower blooms in phases from seed to sprout to bud to leaf to blossom to bloom. The word "transition" is key here because the initial setting and plot is a mother and daughter eating dinner together, during which the daughter tells the mother that she wants to "switch sex" (Bronson, *The Year You Bloom*, line 2). This description is a direct action implicating transgender intention, the desire for switching from one sex to another; the sex chromosomes being XX classified as females and XY classified as males. There is an element of greater linguistic interest in this phrase as the repeated "s" consonant sound creates alliteration, The mother replies to the daughter's statement, saying "-it's not the answer" (Bronson, *The Year You Bloom*, line 3). I believe this response displays an element of "heterosexism" (Halley & Eshleman, 61) in the mother's behavior, as heterosexism can be defined as an alternative term to homophobia meant to describe systematic queer prejudice in a patriarchal society. I believe this term is more descriptively accurate in the sense that it encapsulates the behavior past the quality of fear present in the word homophobia. The mother is not afraid of the daughter because she wants to transition, instead, the mother holds a line of "prejudice" (Halley & Eshleman, 53) towards the notion. Prejudice can be defined as an aversion to something due to societal influence or personal factors. I can't help but believe that this prejudice is due to a "limited definition of normal" (Halley & Eshelman, 53) present in the environment of the story which is a commonplace reflection of our American society - a society where women gained the right to vote only in the past 100 years, one in which morality and basic family structures were enforced by the predominance of the culture adopting longstanding classic Christian values stating that relationships are meant to exist between a cisgender man and

woman where both sexes have specific social roles to play. A limited definition of normal is meant to describe our socialized definition of normal that comes to define our social prejudice: the word normal is classified as expected behavior and abnormal is unexpected behavior - the display of the later in a limited society is where prejudice begins to fruit.

Now, the daughter begins to display severance from the mother, setting a boundary between the two by stating, "You say I am not you" (Bronson, *The Year You Bloom*, line 4) and "You are not me" (Bronson, *The Year You Bloom*, line 5) - in this case the word "You" is used in a royal context in order to create a greater depth of understanding through the perspective of the daughter to the reader, you is meant to encapsulate both points of view with this second person narrative. The repetition of the word "You" additionally serves to add an element of anaphora to the piece, resulting in the impression that although first person language is not being used, the transgender identity is still a first person reality; one which is a matter of fact, not opinion. After the daughter severs the branch of connection, she states that she is not the same as her mother. I believe this is notable due to the extension of the self, the enmeshment often witnessed in parent child relationships grown from a limited definition of normal in a historical patriarchy. In the patriarchy structure - the sex someone is born as will label the category of their gender, which then determines how they are socialized and taught what they may be expected to be based on their assignment. This is all to say that gender becomes a key part of the way that a parent identifies their child, so the child's choice to challenge this convention can lead to heterosexist pushback from the parent. The last line in the first piece does an amazing job challenging heterosexist pushback, stating, "The body is not the only ocean" (Bronson, *The Year You Bloom*, line 7) - this line is particularly powerful due to it containing assonance as well as a metaphor. The line additionally brings up a notable point surrounding the metaphysical complexity of the conscious perception of

others. By this I mean that the metaphor describes the sentiment that every person's existence serves as an ocean - one that is constantly moving and changing its size, shape, perspective, systems, and complexities which exist below the surface. There are so many pieces to behavior and personality, concepts of reality and the soul. However, when transness becomes a part of the conversation; the soul and the self that exists in the body is reduced to the physical body through the lens of the patriarchy and heteronormative systems. The sentiment is that there are many oceans outside of the body, and so trans folks deserve to be viewed as something more than one part of an object.

Next, I'll move to the second piece titled Memory Switch by Lizz Bronson. The first stanza contains anaphora through the repetition of the word "you" used in a royal sense in order to continue to create a more relatable perspective to the reader while restating that this conversation about switching sex is still occurring over a Pad Thai dinner between the mother and daughter. The second stanza begins with, "It can't be because" (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 4) - which is meant to be read with an element of sarcasm considering the rest of the poem goes on to explain the ways in which the daughter goes through historically heterosexist experiences while trying to keep a voice of her own. I believe this initial peppering of irony stands to add depth to standards present in cultural materialism. "Cultural materialism...a theory that critically examines cultural ideologies, including how expectations regarding gender and 'compulsory heterosexuality' emerged in the United States through a heteronormative political economy." (Halley & Eshleman, 56) - this passage stuck out in regards to the self doubt exhibited in Bronson's second poem - as the undermining of the female experience is a way in which the cultural materialism of the patriarchy is able to continue to live and breathe so freely. Cultural materialism is relevant in describing systems that exist outside of the patriarchy as well, as it's more broadly defined as the

intersection between how culture and society influence each other: not all cultural materialism systems revolve around the patriarchy, but the patriarchy is an element of some cultural materialism systems. I will mention the remainder of the second piece wherein the daughter states the experience of walking by a man where, “A thin skirt of desires dances across his mouth— You remember That you completely forgot You’re a woman. No, it must be something else.” (Bronson, *Memory Switch*, line 7-12). I bring the remainder into one quote because I believe the combination is important in making a cohesive point. The repetition of thin skirt in line 7 creates assonance with the “i” consonants while adding to the visual imagery of the scene of femininity through clothing. There is enjambment present from line 7 to 8 which serves to pay attention in the break between the assessment of a woman by a man and then the immediate lustful reaction that follows. The next bit of the passage transitions to the experience of the daughter after this interaction, with a hyphen at the end of line 8, then moving to line 9 which displays a caesura, creating a pause in the experience through the punctuation. Lines 10 through 12 stand alone past the caesura at the end of stanza 2. I believe these stand alone lines are formatted as such in order to add emphasis to the immediate reaction of the daughter internalizing being viewed by men with hunger while reinforcing the negative aspects of the heterosexist experience. Of course this piece starting from the beginning of the second stanza to the very last line of the poem includes sarcasm, because being viewed with hunger is meant to draw consideration to systems of compulsive heterosexuality; being the system which is the conscious and unconscious reinforcement of heteronormative interactions under the patriarchy.

The third poem by Lizz Bronson titled *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things* seems to serve as a spillage and continuation of the recognition of a needed individuality outside of stereotypical gender in the first and the initial understanding of heterosexist systemology in the second. My point is

solidified in the first stanza, “You never tell her this pillow book of unsaid things” (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 4) - the communication of the want to change serves as a metaphor, as a pillow book is a traditional Japanese diary, the phrase means to compare the unspoken feelings and thoughts of the daughter about her own gender and perspective to her mother. The second stanza opens with, “There are days you are a lion in the labyrinth” (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 5) and “-but caged.” (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 6) - together, this works as a metaphor of the queer experience, as the daughter isn’t a literal lion but navigating queer issues in a society that isn’t built to handle them can feel like navigating a full bodied puzzle as a caged animal. The remainder of the second stanza brings the daughters' experience with men to light with lines such as, “Men put their mouths up to your house” (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 7). The repetition of the “m” consonant serves as alliteration as well as a callback to the symbolism of mouths present in *Memory Switch*. The men aren’t putting their literal mouths up to the daughters house, this is instead meant to symbolize the spiritual predation and consumption of femininity through masculinity. “They try to un” (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 11) and “peel you like a mango” (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 12) contains enjambment through the break and continuation of the thought to the next line without punctuation as well as simile because there is a direct implication between a man stripping a woman and a man stripping a fruit while using the word like to make the comparison. Next, “Even though you tell them we cannot be a collection of things” (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 14) and “Even though they wrap their limbs around” (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 15) contains anaphora through the repeating of the first two words for line 14 and 15. The “even though” phrase is notable as it makes the connection that although women are consumed, this still does not make women sheer objects. The third stanza ends with the daughter's reflection

towards what can only be assumed as romance when viewed with the perspective from the previous stanza. It's stated here that, "Baby, I am not you" (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 22) "You are not me" (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 23) "And we are not the same" (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 24). These three lines serve as a reference to what the daughter said to her mother in *The Year of Bloom*, this repetition creates the generalization of the point that maintaining individuality transcends familial and romantic relationships. The nail in the coffin to this perspective is, "Just because a woman is a fleshy moon." (Bronson, *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things*, line 25) which serves as a metaphor comparing womanhood to the complexities of systems relating to planetary cycles that can reflect the multiple phases of the self. The comparison is also notable in the sense that there is only one moon, one self; by extension the point is there is variety in every individual woman and every woman is an individual.

Overall, I believe that this set of three poems being *The Year You Bloom*, *Memory Switch*, and *The Pillow Book of Unsaid Things* by Lizz Bronson touches on the themes of queerness, heterosexism, and individuality; supported by culturally relevant terminology in the included piece by Jean Halley and Amy Eshleman.