Death of the Firstborn Son (In Red Revlon Lip Gloss):

Moving Out of Primogeniture, Moving toward Diverse Selves

By Elijah Bowen

Looking back, it’s hard to recall all of the details of the day I came out to my parents. Over the years, that day has slouched through my memory into a kind of vivid blur. I’ve long forgotten the exact date, the time, the place, and the words I used (or just the stifled lack of them).

Yet a single strand of the memory has remained- painful with clarity. It contains the simple image of my father, running his fingers through his dark short hair, staring at the kitchen tiles where we stood. He was unable to look at me for several hours after I broke the news. When my mother later asked me to understand how hard it was for him, I told her that I did. I understood. Just like I understood when he did eventually look straight at me with tears in his eyes. Still, it was startling to see him like this. At age thirteen, I had only seen my father cry once before. Nine years prior. As we bathed my baby brother’s chemo-swollen body before they took him to the funeral home. So, in a strange way, those tears made complete sense to me when he finally said, “It feels like I don’t have a son anymore.” His voice broke. He looked away again, in anger. I told him, quietly, that I understood. And I remember thinking, in that moment, that I did. I remember thinking that I ought to.

Looking back, I’ve tried to understand how my parents saw me in the early months of 2001 after I was born. Particularly my father. In every one of my baby photos, he is the happiest I have ever seen him. He is the epitome of a new father. Beaming and proud. So much so that I can hardly recognize him. We are less our *Selves* in these pictures, and more so the perfect archetypes of *Father* and *Son*. In them, I find the ineffable mythos that envelopes every firstborn son arriving at a patriarchal world. To our parents, we are often seen as promises of a stake in the future. Often, we are loved, and loved *deeply* for what we will become- Men. Husbands. Fathers. Businessmen. Property owners. The power of the primogeniture is pervasive- and its nothing new. It’s understood by all of us. We implicitly know, for example, why that tenth and final plague in Exodus was the slaughtering of Egypt’s firstborn sons. It’s not just the pain, nor the senseless deaths of children. The Old Testament God wanted to puncture a nation’s pride, so he passed over the bloodied doors and came knocking for all its darling, privileged sons.

Looking straight into the mirror, I think of this as I apply my Red Revlon lip gloss with a delicate sort of ease. It practically glides on by now- the most glossy and vivid shade of ruby you’ve ever seen. I used to think that this dolled-up reflection before me was an impossibility. When I first came out 7 years ago, I thought that I just *had* to find a way to be my parents’ firstborn son again. To regain that identity, for their sake. Even with this anxiety lodged in my brain, however, I kept finding myself slowly drifting towards something else. A new Possibility for my Self, yet one that had somehow always been glimmering in my mind’s periphery over the years. Queerness. That strange euphoria of reveling within our differences. The art of artful “failure” (to conform, that is) in a World whose goals inherently exclude us. The repudiation of normalcy in an abnormal society. One which always seems to want to swallow us whole- whether by banal attempts at assimilation or by simply legislating us out of existence, altogether.

In Revlon’s ruby red lip gloss (my favorite), a pair of Size 11 heels I bought to match it, and this black maxi dress I got a Goodwill last week- I feel like the most gorgeously stunning failure of a firstborn son that my Baptist parents could’ve asked for. In the past, this reflection would’ve likely felt like a death blow. In a way, it might’ve been for me then. My body housed a falsehood growing up. A living, breathing, straight, cisgender, Baptist, white male falsehood. When I came out, a small part of that parasitic falsehood died. Over the years, I’ve managed to discard many, many parts of Him that had been eating into my Self. It will still be, I’m sure, a lifelong process. Yet its one I am truly eager to embark on every day. Being opened up to my own diversity- this multiplicity of shifting sexualities and genders that I hold- alongside the profound diversity of other Queers and marginalized groups, has been the biggest gift of my life. The “death” of that firstborn son in the quiet kitchen of my parents’ house seven years ago has set me on a trajectory that many privileged firstborn sons don’t get to take. It is a path marked by radical empathy, truth-telling, and self-actualization. This is what queerness holds for me. This is how I hold myself to be diverse. And this is what enables me to better understand (and stand in solidarity with) the diversity of others.

When I look in the mirror now, I feel lucky. I think this might be why its so hard to remember the details of my coming out. I’ve moved so far out of that social death that it seems like a past life. I don’t want to revive the primogeniture for myself- these privileged selves we bestow some children at the expense of others. I want them gone. Dead. For me. For you. Because, staring straight ahead, I feel the most alive I’ve ever felt. And I want this feeling for all of us. We only have to reach for it.