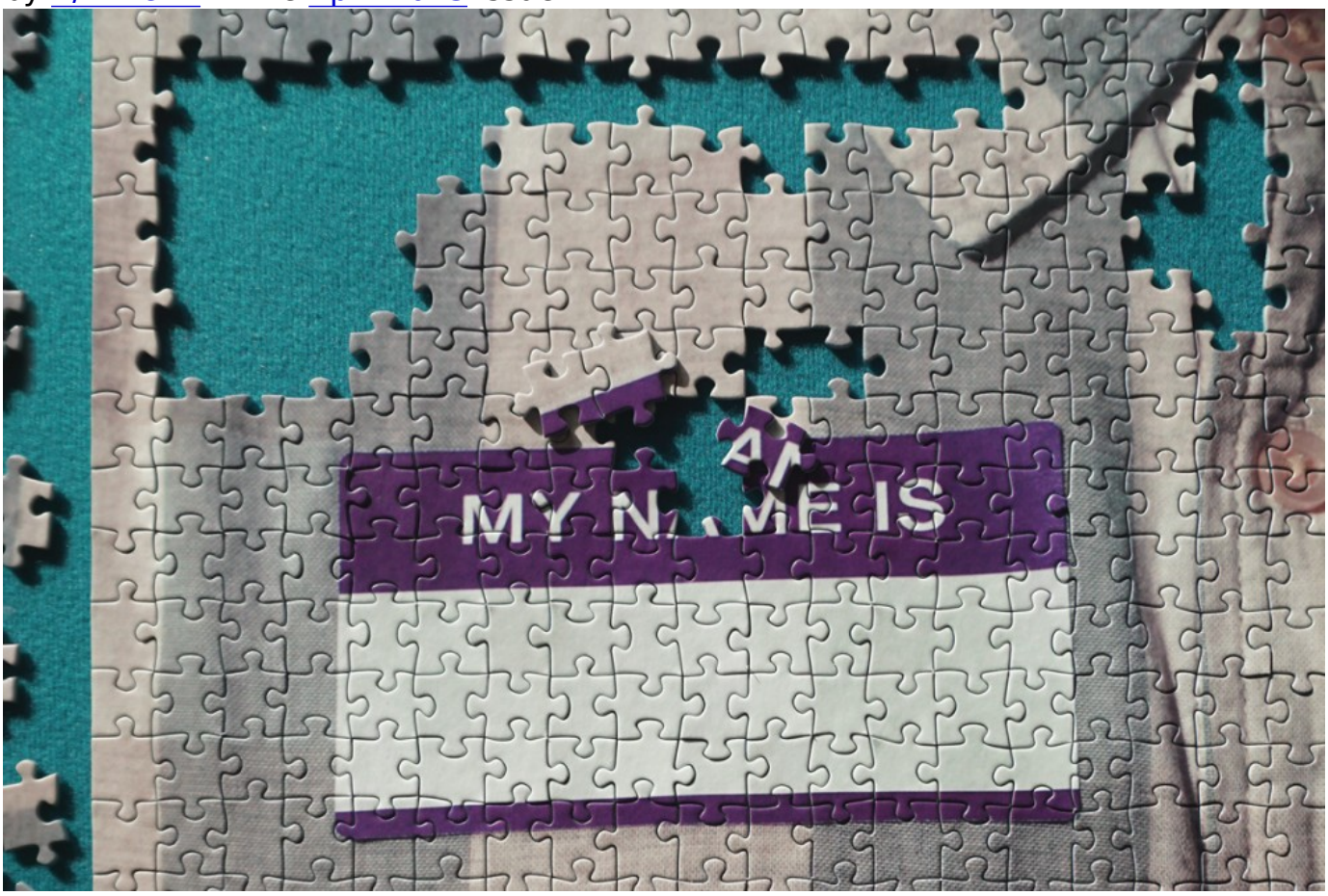
My gender is a circle

So I took a new name—as many characters in the Bible do.

by R/B Mertz in the April 2023 issue



(*Century* photo by Daniel Richardson)

The day i was born, my dad mowed the name my parents were giving me, Rebecca, into the yard of the house he rented with my mother. This might seem charming, but I came to recognize it as just another assertion of his control, which in the end was not charming but abusive. It nearly killed me.

I wasn't named after anyone. My mom just liked the name Rebecca, and she said it was one of the only names she and my dad agreed on. (The other was Tiffany, which I wouldn't have survived.) I didn't know any famous Rebeccas growing up, but I

knew there was one in the Bible. When I read about her in my illustrated children's Bible, it turned out that she was sort of a jerk.

The wife of Isaac and the mother of Esau and Jacob, she tricks her husband into thinking one of her kids is the other because she likes him better. I was the oldest of seven kids and couldn't imagine our mom playing favorites. To me, Rebecca was the preferential parent writ large—except she wasn't taking one kid to the mall and leaving the other at home, she was screwing one kid out of his divine inheritance, stealing his patriarchal blessing. Rebecca is why we refer to "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" and not "Abraham, Isaac, and Esau."

By elementary school, I didn't want to be Rebecca anymore: I was Becca, I insisted to everyone. My dad refused to make the switch. He told me it wasn't up to me. This went on for the rest of his life.

I was known as a low-key troublemaker, though I was never sure why. "Being smart" was a scold I received a lot, along with "talking back." One day in fourth grade, the teacher went around the room and said something nice about each student. When she got to me everyone laughed, as though it would be difficult for an authority figure to compliment me. I waited expectantly.

"I like Becca," she said, pausing dramatically, "because she stands up for herself."

"Yeah!" my friend Brian exclaimed. "She's a *man*-woman!" He roared with pride and illicit laughter. I laughed too, because he was saying something ridiculous but true, and because everyone else was laughing.

The Bible is rife with name changes, name altering, the giving of additional names, and the use of temporary symbolic names or nicknames. Adam's first job in the garden is to name the other creatures, to create language for what he sees. After her sons die, Naomi asks people to call her Mara; God calls Solomon Jedediah and changes Abram's name to Abraham, Sarai's to Sarah, and Jacob's to Israel. When Gideon takes down Baal's altar, "they gave him the name Jerub-Baal that day, saying, 'Let Baal contend with him'" (Judg. 6:32). Esther's other name is Hadassah. Daniel's name is changed by an official to Belteshazzar, Hananiah's to Shadrach, Mishael's to Meshach, and Azariah's to Abednego.

Jesus likes renaming people too. Peter springs to mind first. When his follower Simon declares that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus declares that he will call Simon "Peter." In

Revelation, Jesus says he will give the victorious a white stone with a new name, known only to the one who receives it.

I was raised Catholic. We knew Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada as Teresa of Ávila, Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin as Thérèse of Lisieux, and Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu as Mother Teresa. We also knew them all simply as St. Theresa. (Then there was St. Teresia Benedicta a Cruce, who we referred to in my philosophy classes as Edith Stein.)

If you study the history of names, you'll find the particularities vary widely from culture to culture, but there's usually a combination of things at work. Names are often portmanteaus, a blending of two or more words. This was popular among the Romans. For example, *Wilgefortis* is a combination of *will* and *strength*. There are also names based on adoption (taking an existing name you like and giving it to your kid, or taking it on as your own) and names based on creation (making them up). Naming a child for someone in the Bible or for their father is adoption. Names based on occupation, location, or reputation are names of creation. Many people carry their given names their whole lives, but it's not unusual to take nicknames of greater or lesser significance or to change one's name for marriage or other reasons. (A story about people named "Hitler" springs to mind, annoyingly—you see my point.)

My dad had a joke about someone named "Ima Hog." If Ima thought about changing her name, who would blame her? Changing one's name can be innocuous, or it can be an act of protection. It can also be holy.

But it is sometimes seen as deceptive, as in the case of Brandon Teena, subject of the film *Boys Don't Cry*, who was assaulted and killed by men who discovered he was trans. The documentary I watched about his life when I was a teenager evoked the long-held suspicion of trans people as liars, even criminals. Brandon's chosen name was just another lie.

I CAME OUT as gay in my early 20s. After elementary school, I'd been homeschooled and then had gone to a conservative Catholic university. I had conflated being a trans woman with being a drag performer—something that happens onstage, not in real life. I didn't know trans men existed. I'd never learned in an academic or social or artistic context that there were people like me—people born female who did not identify as women.

Growing up I had thought of Brandon Teena often, but the movies I'd seen offered no context; they left me thinking he was the only person who'd assumed a male identity since those women we heard about in elementary school who dressed up to be soldiers in wars. (Were they women? I wonder now. Weren't there other ways of helping out besides changing your entire identity and going into a situation where your discovery could result in sexual assault, abuse, or death?)

Since the only people like me in the world were considered performers or criminals, I had the learned tendency to categorize my own instincts about myself as inauthentic, deceptive, and wrong. I had heard the word *binary* only in philosophy class and when my stepdad talked about computers, never with a "non" in front of it.

I had also encountered radical lesbians and feminist thinkers, some of whom were as opposed to trans people as the mainstream culture was. We would now call them trans-exclusionary radical feminists. They didn't see trans women as women or trans men as men, or they saw all trans people as confused or broken and transmasculine people in particular as betrayers of feminism. I struggled with some of the same questions TERFs do. Could men become women? Weren't men the enemy of feminism? Pondering my own identity, I found myself stuck between a rock and a hard place: I could betray myself or betray women.

My sister came out as trans before I did, and I finally had to confront the mystery of gender in my life. At first, I was uncomfortable. I had taught her to drink milk from a cup and to tie her shoes, but now she was teaching me. That's when I realized that the most consistent sin of older people is hubris—the hubris of thinking that they know and that younger people don't. I knew my little sister was right. The many younger people teaching people my age about gender and sexuality are right.

By my late 20s I was living in Homewood, a historic Black neighborhood in Pittsburgh. The children in Homewood were taught to call adults Mister, Mizz, or Miss. I made a lot of art with little kids who called me "Miss Becca." My girlfriend sometimes tried to get the kids to call me "King Becca," but for the most part we didn't correct them. Some were the children of lesbians or had other queer relatives who would make appearances; others were taught that gays and lesbians and transgender people were dangerous. I just answered questions if they asked and did a lot of listening.

One day I was coloring with a little girl named India, and a light bulb seemed to go on over her head. She smiled like she'd figured something out. "You're not a girl or a boy, are you, Miss Becca?"

"That's right," I said.

She looked very satisfied with herself, and I imagine I also looked very pleased with myself. She still called me, "Miss Becca," but after that "Miss Becca" meant something else, at least to those of us who'd been at the table that day.

AS A YOUNG ADULT, my body had absorbed so much emotional pain that I wasn't sleeping, eating, or moving enough. I had become ghostlike, as if I hadn't survived what everyone around me kept saying I'd survived. I had to find some way of being whole. So I wrote and wrote and wrote until I was able to make simple, declarative sentences about my identity: "I am trans." "I am queer." "I am nonbinary." "This is my wife."

When I started publishing poetry, "Becca Mertz" didn't look right. I knew a lot of writers changed their names or went by initials. My first favorite poet was W. H. Auden, who said, "Proper names are poetry in the raw. They are untranslatable." But I didn't like my initials, which spelled RAM. Rams, cool as they are, weren't what I wanted people to think of when they saw my name. R. A. Mertz made me sound like a resident assistant at my Catholic college, the dorm monitors we were afraid would write us up for having alcohol or a boy or a cigarette in our room. B. A. Mertz sounded like a degree.

I needed a name that encompassed the potential for whatever kind of future I might grow into. I had been using slashes a lot in my poems, to indicate contradictions and connections between words. Something like "here I am with/for you" conveys possibility. I realized R/B could do the same—stand in for Rebecca/Becca while also allowing for the possibility of changing my name later to Robert or Bill or anything else that starts with an R or a B. I am R/B Mertz. This is another simple, declarative sentence I've written my way toward.

But my passport still says Rebecca Amanda Mertz, F. When I flew last summer in a suit, masked and wearing sunglasses (bright lights bother me), every person who checked my ID did a double or triple take. My legal name doesn't represent what I

look like. I haven’t transitioned in the strictest sense of the word. But of course, I have transitioned. I have changed, mightily.

I don’t make sense to the TSA agent, who’s looking at the “F” on my passport, then back again at me like he’s on a quiz show. *He’s* sweating. I’m making *him* nervous. Likewise, when I’m wearing my mask and sunglasses and suit to my sister’s graduation, the women in the women’s restroom look alarmed. I look like a man, but the truth is I’m not a man, not the way they’re thinking, not *just* a man.

The same thing would happen in the men’s room, I imagine, or if I had an “M” on my passport instead of an “F.” I will be applying for the “X” as soon as I can, and I imagine this will confuse people less. I try to only use gender-neutral bathrooms, because those are the only bathrooms where no one will be alarmed by me. That’s where I fit in, where neither category is rigid. When I envision my gender, it is not as one of two sides but as a circle. I am R/B Mertz. I am not one or the other; I am both, between.

But I’ve grown to appreciate my biblical namesake, Rebecca. Now that I am an adult, I can see that there might be reasons to transgress even the divine right of kings, popes, or fathers. It isn’t always the older brother who’s fit to inherit the kingdom. The oldest dude in the room isn’t necessarily the wisest, the strongest, or the most fit. He might not even be a dude at all.

Rebecca contained contradictions. When she questioned why her children were fighting in her womb, God said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two people from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the young” (Gen. 25:23). To ancient folks, that upending of the hierarchy must have been so radical as to be frightening. The upending of patriarchy still feels radical. But I no longer read Rebecca’s story as a malignant deception. Instead, it’s an act of subversion, even a liberating disruption. The law was made for us, not us for the law. To imitate God is to be creative—and to change.