Dear Everyone

A Gender Mosaic in letters



Sara Wan

An exploration of gender

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The Letters

Before the Letters	4
My Earliest Understanding of Gender	5
Everyone Had Me Figured Out	9
Fate of Stars	13
The Troubles of the Pursuit of Passion	14
A Standing Ovation vs. a One-Way Ticket	16
Dear Gloria	20
The Youngest Has Something to Say	24
Do I Have Hope for Women?	28
After the Letters	31
Works Cited	32

Before the Letters

Dear Reader,

I HAVE A few people to write to. My father, for a start. Shakespeare, who has some explaining to do. My sisters, who will probably read this and have something to say. Some of these letters could go into our family group chat. Others have missed their recipients by several centuries. I am sending them anyway.

When I put these pieces together, I kept finding gender in places where nobody had bothered to announce it: a piece of fish in my father's bowl, a haircut, a question asked at practice. I also found it onstage, where a woman could give a wonderful performance and still have nowhere to work the next morning. I wanted to understand why these things stayed with me, and why being understood so often seemed to require becoming somebody a little easier to explain.

So these are letters. I can admire someone and still have a question for them. I can love my family and look again at what we inherited. There is room here to be annoyed, and there is room to change my mind. I would like to think there is room for you, too.

Yours,
Sara

My Earliest Understanding of Gender

Dear Dad,

FOR A WHILE I thought my grandfather was a feminist, which says something about how little I understood the story you were telling me.

You were the oldest of three children and the only boy, and your father, you told me, had never spanked his daughters. Only you. I knew that a man was not supposed to hit a woman. Here was a family observing the principle.

You had never spanked me. I knew you adored me, and because this was the father I knew, I had trouble imagining the boy you had been, or the father who had treated you so differently. Did my grandfather not love you? I was trying to understand the family by deciding which child had been loved. The rest of the story made this considerably less simple.

You had to practice calligraphy every day. Your sisters were not encouraged in the same way. When you got it wrong, a ruler came down on your palm. I try to imagine you at it, trying to get something right because someone expected you to get it right, and then I remember the other detail you told me: at dinner, the first piece of meat went into your bowl. So did the tenderest part of the fish. It was "good for the brain."

The boy whose hand was struck was the boy whose brain was being fed. I keep returning to this idea because I didn't like how favoritism came tangled up with punishment. You received more, and more was expected of you, and somewhere within that arrangement was a future the family had begun preparing before you could have known whether you wanted it. I wonder how much room there was for you to disappoint them, and I wonder what your sisters understood from being expected to do less.

Eventually you became the "successful" one, successful in the education-and-income sense, which is a distinction I feel obliged to make. To me, my aunts are equally successful, though my grandfather would think otherwise. You did well in school and, as far as I understood, earned the most money. Conventional success. I question the definition and still find myself using it. By the time I heard these stories, the outcome was already known, and my grandfather's expectations could look like foresight.

Whenever I saw my aunts, they praised you for your intelligence and resilience, even, sometimes, for some questionable worldviews that seemed to favor men. When they referred to your accomplishments, though, you would look uncomfortable and ask them to tone it down. I wondered why you could not simply accept the compliment. Perhaps you disliked the attention or weren't used to praise growing up, since spanking seemed to dominate the stories of your adolescence. You did not seem to hate my grandfather for his strictness, however; you could sound almost grateful when you talked about it. Maybe hearing the praise also meant remembering opportunities your sisters had not received. I could only wonder.

I also wondered when my aunts had begun to admire you. Had it started with your accomplishments, or earlier, when you were still a boy being given the best part of the fish? I do not want to explain away their love for their brother. They know you in ways I never will. But I wonder what it means to grow up beside someone whose future is treated as a family concern, while your own is given less attention.

I will stand on the hill that you worked for what you achieved. I believe it more than anyone. But I also recognize how much my grandfather's expectations shaped the opportunities you received, and what those expectations cost you. What makes me think is that he had chosen you before there was anything to show for the choice. You could've been a dropout, a jerk. But because you were the boy, the fish would still have gone into your bowl.

Love,
Sara



My father with his sisters.



My father at the top of a mountain. He had only bought one egg to eat that morning because that was all he could afford, yet spent the day exploring. This is why I believe in his hard work.



My father, grandfather, grandmother, and aunt.



My father with his family.

Everyone Had Me Figured Out

Dear Everyone Who Had Me Figured Out,

IN "SKELETON WAR," the third episode of *Scene on Radio*'s MEN series, Celeste Headlee names something I recognized: "That's internalized sexism" (Biewen and Headlee 21). She is discussing a woman who helped justify other women's exclusion. I kept thinking about the much smaller judgments we make about one another. Despite the struggles women have waged for equal rights, there seems to be an underlying, subtle hostility among us. I personally think the fights against gender and racial inequality are inseparable, but sadly people often view them quite separately, which is a story for another day.

I've observed a pattern: ever since I began creating content for social media about four years ago, I've encountered indirect hate in my real-life interactions. While I've been fortunate enough not to encounter mass cyberbullying, my social media presence has led to indirect bullying in the real world. This form of bullying is so subtle that I didn't even notice it at first. Yet, once people connected my online persona to who I am in real life, they began to define me through a rigid set of stereotypes. For a long time, I leaned into what could be described as a "hyper-feminine" aesthetic. People, especially teenage girls, assumed that was all I did – cater to the male gaze – because I guess I "adhered" to society's conventional beauty standards just by following viral makeup and fashion trends. They perceived me as lacking intellectual thought, essentially casting me as the stereotypical "dumb blonde" people refer to in the US.

I was labeled a "vase," a Chinese term implying that one is just a decorative object, serving no purpose other than to look good. I find this quite strange, because a vase carries beautiful flowers, just like the beautiful qualities I have. Even a female math teacher from my middle school once characterized me this way, telling me directly that I only "sat there and looked pretty in class," even though I did well in her class. (Of course, academic performance is beside the point; even if my grades had been poor, I still wouldn't have deserved to be treated that way.) I'll admit that I wasn't always fully focused in class, but that is certainly no

justification for inflicting such a label on me or subjecting me to such prejudice.

No matter where I go, how hard I try to hide this constructed online "identity" (and we all know that once you've established a presence on social media, there's no turning back), or how much I strive to show that I am worthy of being truly understood (having a social media account doesn't preclude that, for the record) and valued for my intellect rather than just my appearance, I am invariably dismissed as "pretentious" or "fake." In reality, I am not catering to the so-called male gaze on social media at all; the clothes I wear are no different from what I would wear in a casual social setting, and I never "objectify" myself. And shoot, I shouldn't even have to explain myself for something I never did and never will do. In truth, some of the people targeting me are other women. I wonder whether they see me as a competitor, although I cannot pretend to know what they are thinking.

To combat this, I cut my hair short and adopted an androgynous, tomboyish style in middle school and my freshman year of high school. All of a sudden, that sense of "soft femininity" vanished. People began to assume I was attracted to women, and it sure did stop all the mild hate. In fact, they would confide in me about things they had never shared with me when my hair was long, sometimes things they had never shared with anyone: their crushes, the people they hated, or even personal struggles. It was as if they saw me as the perfect "male" figure – someone with a gentle, sensitive heart who truly understands women, yet possesses a "masculine" aesthetic.

I would often hear comments like, "You're so gay for that" or "If I were gay, I'd definitely date you." Yet these remarks had nothing to do with my actual sexual orientation (I have never defined myself as gay or straight, and I avoid doing so). They were likely triggered by something as trivial as the way I wore a hoodie or my go-to poses in photos. I realized that, for these people, sexual orientation and gender expression were conflated; but one wouldn't just casually say to someone, "You're so girl for that." Indeed, when I "looked like a guy" – though that was never my intention – that subtle, underlying hostility completely evaporated. People became even more willing to share their secrets with me, perhaps because, in their eyes, I no longer posed any "threat."

But oh, gosh, when I dated a guy in sophomore year, oh, the hate! Everyone thought I was faking being “gay,” which put me in an even more terrible state. Mind y’all, I never gave myself that label! Don’t assume that just because my hair is short. Why did nobody say I was faking being straight?

But I digress. Let’s return to what I’ve been calling “Queen Bee syndrome”—my shorthand here for the indirect aggression I’ve experienced from other women. For a long time, social media served as my entire social circle. Within that space, I felt I could avoid being pigeonholed by labels – a reputation that I, frankly, quite enjoyed, apart from the later hate I couldn’t simply ignore. Yes, when my online image followed me into real life, the public nature of social media amplified certain traits of mine that, in reality, represent only a tiny, minuscule part of who I am. Some women have directed meanness toward me because of that image. This may be because they compare themselves to it, or perhaps it stems from a sense of rivalry, or reasons along those lines. I don’t know. I want to know. We are all women. Why do we have to be so mean to each other? If you had me figured out from a photograph, I wish you had asked me a question instead.

Still figuring it out,
Sara



Sara, short-haired.



Sara, when she thought she wanted to pursue social media influencing.

Fate of Stars

Dear Will,

I FIRST TOOK Sebastian at his word. In Act 2, Scene 1 of *Twelfth Night*, he believes Viola has drowned, his stars shining darkly over him. The decent thing, apparently, is to leave Antonio before his bad luck becomes contagious (2.1.3–7). Antonio has saved his life. Sebastian pushes him away. I find this touching, and exhausting.

What I notice now is how carefully Sebastian explains his vulnerability. Close to tears, he describes himself as "so near the manners of my mother" (2.1.39–41). He has survived a shipwreck and believes his twin is dead. I would have accepted either explanation for crying. Instead, his mother must account for the part of him that cannot remain composed.

Antonio offers to become his servant and companion. After Sebastian leaves, he declares, "I do adore thee so / That danger shall seem sport" (2.1.34–35, 46–47). He follows, knowing he has enemies at Orsino's court. If Antonio were a woman, I suspect we would have recognized a love scene several speeches earlier. With two men, we seem willing to tie the astrology and travel arrangements to a chair and interrogate them. We will notice almost everything except the longing.

Sebastian's resolute speech and refusal can express care without confirming romantic desire, and grief makes a poor occasion for demanding emotional clarity. Still, he recognizes Antonio's devotion as love (2.1.7). I want to leave room for a queer reading of that exchange without making either man say more than he does. The uncertainty is part of the scene's intimacy.

Will, I began with the stars because Sebastian gave me the stars. They offered an explanation for why he should leave, and I was willing to follow it. Antonio, though, keeps asking to come with him. I want to keep looking at that tenderness without having to explain it away.

Sincerely,
Sara

The Troubles of the Pursuit of Passion

Dear Viola,

IN SHAKESPEARE IN Love, you disguise yourself as Thomas Kent to pursue acting, a profession closed to women. When the boy originally cast as Juliet can no longer perform the role, you step in without hesitation. Asked if you know the play, you reply, "every word" (Norman and Stoppard 104). Taking the stage means risking the exposure of your identity and everything that might follow. You do it anyway. Your performance captivates the audience and earns the Queen's approval. Whatever people believe women are incapable of doing, you have just done it in front of them.

Your help in developing *Twelfth Night* also shows your creative ability. Although the play will bear Will's name, you help shape its story. Your relationship with him challenges the expectations behind your arranged marriage, too. You pursue your own desire for love while other people plan your future around wealth and status. Still, wanting that love does not mean you can escape the marriage arranged for you.

The Queen's protection has a similar limit. By insisting that you are a male actor, she allows the performance to stand without challenging women's exclusion from the stage. She can recognize your talent, and she can protect you for the moment. Apparently, letting you keep your job is another matter.

In the end, you have to leave with Wessex while Will remains free to continue his career in the theater. I don't want to dismiss what you achieved just because you couldn't overturn the whole arrangement. That seems like a ridiculous amount to ask of an actress making her debut. But I wanted your rebellion to give you more than one successful performance. You had shown everyone what you could do. I wanted you to be allowed to do it again.

With admiration,
Sara



Viola and Will onstage in Shakespeare in Love.

A Standing Ovation vs. a One-Way Ticket

Dear Marc and Tom,

GOING INTO YOUR film, *Shakespeare in Love*, I expected a comedy like *Twelfth Night*. Instead, I thought the ending felt more like a tragedy, though not in the conventional way. Viola disguises herself as a man to play Romeo, only to end up playing Juliet as herself. I kept thinking about how much work it took for her to be allowed to play herself.

I also have some concerns about Shakespeare getting a masterpiece while Viola gets a boat ticket. Viola survives, yes, and she successfully falls in love. But after watching her risk so much to act, I wanted her to have somewhere to perform and show her talents. The whole situation with Juliet is, to me, almost ridiculously ironic. Viola disguises herself as a man to play Romeo, then ends up replacing the boy playing Juliet. Now she is a woman playing a woman, which is apparently where things become unacceptable. The Queen rescues her by insisting that she is a male actor, even though she sees Viola start to curtsy and quickly turn it into a bow.

When the Queen mentions knowing what it means to be “a woman in a man’s profession,” I thought, finally, someone with enough power to do something—a woman helping another woman despite societal pressure (Norman and Stoppard 112). Here was a woman whom everyone in the room had to obey. Surely Viola’s ambition would mean something to her, and it does, briefly. The Queen protects the performance, then upholds the marriage that will take Viola away. Elizabeth understands the problem perfectly well, and given her own position as a woman in power, I was hopeful that more men would respect Viola like they respect the Queen. Soon, though, I realized it was just recognition, no change. The Queen protects Viola by pretending she is a man rather than challenging women’s exclusion from the stage. Which, hey, kudos to Elizabeth, but Viola still has to leave.

Before Viola leaves, she inspires Will to write *Twelfth Night*. He almost quits writing because he's so depressed about her leaving, but she tells him that she would be even sorrier if her leaving meant he would never write again (114). This puts her back in the role of Will's muse rather than recognizing her as a great actress in her own right. It saddens me that the loss of her acting career and freedom is overshadowed by lamenting a man who may never write again, especially after the film builds up her courage to expose herself in front of a huge audience, knowing the consequences of doing something "illegal." I worry about how easily caring for someone else can leave your own needs unspoken. I get she's a lover girl, but come on. Could someone ask about her career before resuscitating his? Her tenderness makes sense to me. What bothers me is how much room the farewell gives his creative despair while leaving hers largely unspoken.

Of course, Will finds hope in this tragic ending, as he is in a better position than Viola, considering he isn't forced to marry someone he does not love and leave with them on a boat. He immortalizes Viola and makes her the heroine of *Twelfth Night* (as he should). Viola basically helped invent the masterpiece. She supplies Orsino's name and the heroine's disguise, actively participating in its creation. The immortalization, I guess, is the supposed "consolation" the film offers the audience, but it enrages me because the rewards are so unevenly distributed—Will can continue making theatre; Viola must leave with a husband she does not love, while her story lives on in his play. Even after contributing to its creation, she still has to ask him to honor her character: "Write me well" (116). She asks almost pleadingly, and even so, Will can change whatever he wants. Her creative contribution becomes part of a masterpiece that bears someone else's name. The future of her story still rests in his hands.

Your film does recognize the cruelty of that arrangement, though I'd argue that its "romantic ending" is also a lame way of persuading us to accept it. Why did you build up girlhood and the strength of women through the Queen, only to send another woman away in a marriage she doesn't want? Will explicitly describes Viola as having been sold into marriage (115). He recognizes it, which makes the consolation of a play feel even less satisfying. It's still terrible! Even with a woman on the throne, a woman's future remains something other people can arrange.

And so, given that context, let's just say that imagining *Shakespeare in Love* as a prequel to *Twelfth Night* makes it harder for me to appreciate the play like I did before. If the film offers the play as consolation, I want to know what kind of freedom its heroine actually gets.

For a start, doesn't Orsino feel like a bit of a playboy??? He pursues Olivia for so long, yet as soon as he learns that Cesario is a woman, he turns to her. Is it just because he recognizes that Cesario "looks up" to him? Did Shakespeare not know what it feels like to be in love? You kind of have to fall before you love. Where was the process? Maybe his attachment to Cesario has been growing all along. That possibility interests me more than the speed with which the ending gives it a socially acceptable name.

Then Orsino connects Viola's future as his wife to her return to feminine clothing, although she is still dressed as Cesario when the play ends. Gender has not been tidily settled before the curtain falls. I want to think she can be androgynous; she doesn't have to marry Orsino. She didn't have to like him in the first place. Gay people exist! Not that she has to love Olivia, but I wish Shakespeare had addressed Olivia's attraction to Cesario maybe just a little bit more before giving her Sebastian. The power dynamic between men and women comes back again, which frustrates me.

Both the play's and the film's apparent romantic endings leave me with a bitter aftertaste. And when I come back to the film's Viola, I still want her survival to mean having continued access to the stage, as well as a place in Shakespeare's imagination. I wanted her to have somewhere to perform and show her talents after the applause was over.

Still thinking about that boat,
Sara



Viola as Thomas Kent.



Queen Elizabeth and Viola in Shakespeare in Love.

Dear Gloria

Dear Gloria,

TODAY I LEARNED about your death. We watched your 2008 interview in class, one that wasn't released when you were still alive. And there you were, answering questions, looking perfectly capable of answering another.

The interviewer brought up your "sexually liberated" life and asked about your experiences (The New York Times). You answered clearly, acknowledging that women can appear liberated while still being expected to service men.

You mentioned that, although virginity is less glorified as the standard for a respectable young woman, oral sex is prevalent among younger people. It reminded me of one fockey practice—yes, of course it's a girls' team and there's going to be boy talk. Girl 1, let's call her Hailey, pointed at Girl 2, let's call her Nadia, and demanded, ridiculously bluntly: "You, Nadia, how many dicks have you sucked?"

As Nadia went quiet, I instantly felt my face burn for her, because you would never expect a question like that when you're practically already dying from the sun, but also this is something that is just, in general, way too personal to demand an answer to. Hailey asked with the casualness of asking how much ice cream someone wanted. The question she posed, however, seemed like something Nadia should be allowed to think about before being expected to say anything at all. Reasonably, Nadia looked like her clothes had been stripped off, staying silent and obviously uncomfortable. Hailey, as if she found her composure, offered her own answer, an apologetic attempt at being vulnerable: "Unfortunately, for me," she whispered, holding up a closed fist to indicate zero, "I have only sucked this number of them." As she said it, she made the sad doggy face.

Unfortunately? I thought to myself. I thought about what you had said, Gloria. Was this about something she wanted, or something she felt she ought to have done?

But even more, it's normal for a young woman to not have done that at what, sixteen? Why has sexual experience become another "standard"? Is it cool—or, in her words, fortunate—to have it rather than not? And of course, someone can want that experience. No judgment for personal pleasure any day. What doesn't sit right with me is the idea that not having it should feel like a failure. This is a personal topic that deserves more care. And I wondered whether Nadia felt left behind, whether the silence was her natural response or something she thought she ought to display. I could not know. What made me sad was that neither girl seemed particularly comfortable, and somehow, we were supposed to call this openness.

There is nothing shameful about wanting sexual experiences; Hailey might sincerely have wanted them. But there should also be room for someone who isn't interested yet, or isn't sure, or would prefer that everyone stick to asking about ice cream.

I had thought giving up the old fixation on protecting virginity at all costs would leave us with fewer things to prove. Instead, here was another number that could be "wrong." A girl could still end up watching herself from the outside, trying to work out whether she looked sufficiently grown-up. I hate how familiar that feels, even when the question has nothing to do with sex.

Gloria, how do we learn to want things without first checking whether wanting them makes us the right kind of girl? Nadia should have been allowed her silence, and Hailey should have been allowed her zero.

And I wish this were the sort of letter you could still answer.

With love,
Sara



A quotation attributed to Gloria Steinem, from the image supplied with this essay.



Gloria Steinem passing a hostile sign. Image sourced through Pinterest in the original draft.

The Youngest Has Something to Say

Dear Grace and Kelly,

OUR FAMILY HAS two rooms. One contains the dining table, the living room sofa, and the bathroom cabinet stocked with your skincare products and half-used bottles of shampoo. The other is our family group chat. It is smaller, and far riskier.

As the youngest of three daughters, I entered womanhood early and without much ceremony. While my friends were learning about menstruation through whispered gossip, I already knew about cramps and pads. The *American Girl* books about the female body were within reach on the lowest bookshelf. So were your skincare products and half-used bottles of shampoo. Bodies came up in conversation as easily as money or makeup; injustice could be discussed in the same tone as either. I didn't think of this as an education at the time; you were simply the women I lived with.

And as we grew up, discussion on any of these categories was a fairly ordinary use of our family group chat. For a supposedly insular Asian household, ours spends a great deal of time discussing gender. So for me, girlhood was a corridor full of voices. I never had to open the door alone.

I wanted to be like both of you, although it was difficult to decide which one. Kelly, you once knocked on a distant relative's car window because you thought you recognized the driver. "Do you remember me?" you asked. I watched with alarm and envy; I would probably have waited for the relative to remember me unassisted. Grace, you were quieter, though bold in your kindness. A homeless woman approached us in New York City for directions, and I wanted to pull you away. What if she was trying to scam us? Before I could reach for your hand, you had reached for Google Maps. "Sara," you said afterward. "She was just asking for directions. You can't just assume the worst of people." You were much more willing to notice the shades of gray in human nature.

For a long time, I thought of myself only as a combination of the women who raised me: Kelly's courage, Grace's gentleness. Then, one

afternoon, I took a personality test that changed my perspective on what I brought to our conversations.

The test was called SBTI, a wannabe, funny version of MBTI circulating on the Chinese internet. Everyone was sharing their results. I expected to be told I was a tragic poet, perhaps, or a Golden Retriever with secret, calculating thoughts. I clicked through until question 22 stopped me in my tracks.

Question 22 · translated from Chinese

> "I'm not just a loser; I'm a joker and a slacker. I've never been in a relationship. I'm timid and insecure. My youth has been one fantasy of girls after another. Every day I imagine having a girl to walk around with, go shopping with, hang out with. In reality, I've drained my parents' money, attended a lousy school, drifted through life and then found a job: no ideals, no goals, no ability. Every time I see you making jokes about losers online, I want to cry. I'm a rat underground, peering through the cracks in a manhole at all the beautiful things above. Every time I see something like this, it wounds me and squeezes the space I have to live in. Please, bro, give clowns like us a chance to live. I really don't want to soak my pillowcase with tears in broad daylight."

A. I cried…

B. What is this…

C. This isn't me!

I knew my empathetic instincts could feel sorry for a lonely boy, but I couldn't stop thinking about the girl he imagined. She had no particular desires in this little tragedy, no afternoon she might want to spend doing something else. She appeared in the fantasy to make his life bearable. I was uneasy about how much hope had been assigned to her before she had even arrived. He had called himself pathetic before anybody else could, and now objecting to what he wanted felt unkind. I was annoyed, then embarrassed by my annoyance. The girl had acquired a job she hadn't applied for, and I was worrying about my manners.

My thumb hovered over the answers. "I cried" was out. "What is this?" suggested a confusion I did not feel. "This isn't me" came closest, except

that I wasn't merely failing to recognize myself. I wanted to argue with the question. There was no box for that, so I quit the test and sent a screenshot to my family.

"Do you guys know that SBTI test?" I typed. "It's been making the rounds lately. I thought it would be fun, but it turned out to be gross." I kept typing. "Why did the guy make fun of himself while making a girl the answer to his misery?"

Kelly, you replied first. "Wait," you wrote, "I rushed through it earlier and didn't look closely." Then: "Okay, now that you put it that way... it really is gross."

Grace, you responded not much later: "It is disgusting. Why does his worth depend on whether women want him, and why does the girl have to be either a fantasy object or a judge?"

Those are my sisters. Kelly, your motto is to "just do it," but you are willing to look again when you miss something. Grace, you try on someone else's shoes without forgetting to ask who else is in the room.

I had spent years listening to you, hearing your voices in my own and hoping I could live up to you. But I was beginning to see that I had something of my own to offer: the instinct to pause over something others might dismiss as a joke and ask a question that made them look again.

I never did finish the test. I still liked the possibility of being a tragic poet, preferably one whose family found her perceptive rather than exhausting. But for once, I wasn't trying to decide which of you I would become. I was thinking about what I wanted to say next.

Your youngest,
Sara



Kelly, Sara, and Grace.



A birthday with my sisters. Kelly, Sara, and Grace.

Do I Have Hope for Women?

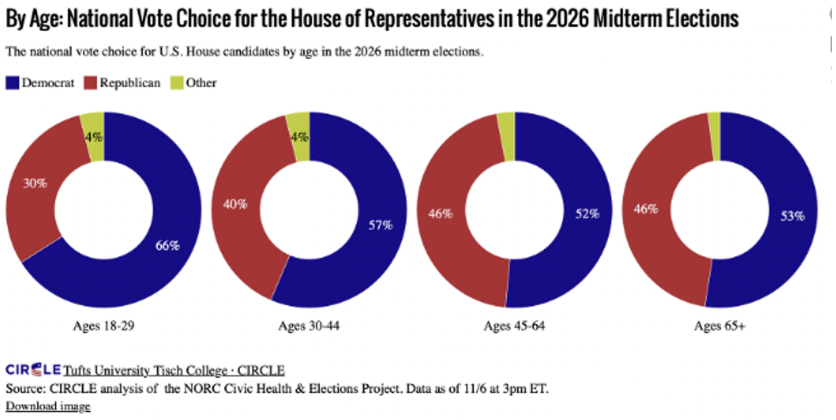
Dear Friend Across the Cafeteria Table,

I'M WRITING THIS in the school cafeteria while you read a CIRCLE article about the recent midterms aloud, sipping cereal milk between sentences. I've barely written a line, yet I've learned more about voters our age than I had in weeks of scrolling. You read the headline: "2026 Youth Voter Turnout Second-Highest for a Midterm Election in the Last 30 Years" (CIRCLE, "2026 Youth Voter Turnout"). You tell me you can sleep well tonight, less afraid that young women might lose the chance to get an abortion. I know one election cannot promise you that. Still, I understand your relief.

What keeps me here, pen hovering, is that the person bringing politics into this ordinary morning is you, my close friend. It wasn't Dr. Sgro's lunch announcement, my great-uncle Fred during Thanksgiving, or some middle-aged man that would make the conversation feel far away. You are drinking the milk left over from your cereal and talking about the future because you know we have something to do with it.

So yeah, I have hope for women. One of my reasons is slightly embarrassing: caring about politics seems to have become "cool." I'm interested in what can happen after someone first wants to look like they care.

The numbers give me somewhere to begin. As I looked into the article, I noticed CIRCLE's updated analysis puts Democratic support among voters aged eighteen to twenty-nine at 66 percent, compared with 30 percent for Republicans. The age comparison here shows that young voters gave Democrats the strongest support of the four age groups. In a separate breakdown, 70 percent of young women and 59 percent of young men voted Democratic. I notice the men's number too. It makes me hopeful that women might have people beside us supporting the same rights you and I care about, although a party preference can only tell me so much about what those people believe (CIRCLE, "Historic"; CIRCLE, "In Shift").



Vote choice by age in the 2026 U.S. House elections. CIRCLE; chart supplied with the draft. Percentages describe voters, not everyone in each age group.

A Democratic vote also doesn't really tell me how someone treats women, or whether women's rights motivated their decision. Your relief tells me what the result means to you. What I really care about beyond one election is whether women can help decide what happens to us. The Georgetown research in my notes connects women's status with the strength of democratic institutions, while acknowledging that the relationship does not establish which causes which (Ortiz et al. 1–2). What stays with me is the idea that women's equality belongs inside the definition of democracy. The election results give me a reason to hope, but I still want to see what the people we elect actually do.

I've noticed something else, too. Political awareness, especially caring about women's rights, feels increasingly like something you are expected to have. My friends repost news and arguments, and sometimes I feel insecure (in the best way possible) because I don't know as much as they do. My consolation is that wanting to catch up because other people care seems like a useful kind of discomfort.

Even the supposedly feminist guy online interests me. You know the type. He wears an "I hate period cramps" shirt and holds his feminist book conspicuously enough. *A Room of One's Own* is a popular choice; *The Feminine Mystique* if he wants bonus points. I find the performance

ridiculous and almost hopeful: I wonder what he thinks he is being rewarded for. At least among the audience he imagines, caring about women makes him more appealing.

Of course, he might never open the book. Still, I don't think wanting to look informed is an entirely useless place to begin. Sometimes you start reading because you don't want to be caught pretending. You might keep reading for a better reason.

As much as I hate it, we are not going back to a world without social media. So yes, let's use it. Let a post lead us to the full article and a NYT subscription, and let what we learn affect the questions we ask at school or the candidates we choose when we can vote.

I keep coming back to you in the cafeteria. I don't want to dismiss your relief or mistake it for a guarantee. What gives me hope is how ordinary the conversation is becoming. Someone I love can talk about our rights over something as mundane as cereal, and I can admit I have more to learn. For now, though, I would like to finish listening to the article you are reading to me.

Listening,
Sara

After the Letters

Dear Reader, Again,

I KEEP THINKING about how often I wanted somebody to ask a different question. What did Viola want to do after the performance? Did Nadia want to answer at all? Could someone ask me who I liked before deciding that my haircut had already told them? I don't have an answer to every question I've raised here. I am still annoyed about the boat.

But I also have my sisters, willing to look again at a joke they had already scrolled past. I have my friend across the cafeteria table, reading aloud while I try to catch up. Those moments don't settle everything that came before them. They do make me want to keep talking. For years, I listened to other women and hoped I would eventually sound like someone worth hearing. Now I would like to leave a little room for what I have to say. And if you write back, I would like to hear that, too.

Yours,
Sara

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A Note on the Images

Family photographs and the two portraits of Sara are supplied by the author. Film stills from *Shakespeare in Love* were sourced through Pinterest in the original essays. The Steinem images were supplied through Pinterest. The quotation graphic is retained as supplied, with its attribution noted in the caption. The election chart is by CIRCLE at Tufts University. Photographs retain their original color and proportions.

A Note on the Text

References to *Shakespeare in Love* use screenplay page numbers. References to *Twelfth Night* use act, scene, and line numbers. The *Scene on Radio* quotation cites the episode transcript. The SBTI passage is reproduced in English translation from the author's draft; its question number refers to the version she took.

Dear Everyone

A Gender Mosaic in letters

“And if you write back,
I would like to hear that, too.”

SARA WAN · 2026