

*Jenny Johnson*

**In the Dream**

I was alone in a dyke bar we'd traversed before  
or maybe it was in a way all our dives

merging together suddenly as one intergalactic composite,  
one glitter-spritzed black hole,

one cue stick burnished down to a soft blue nub.  
Picture an open cluster of stars

managing to forever stabilize in space  
without a landlord scheming to shut the place down.

Anyways, I was searching for someone there  
whom we hadn't seen in years—in what

could have been Sisters, Babes, the Lex, the Pint,  
the Palms, or the E Room? but the room

had no end and no ceiling.  
Though I could see all of our friends or exes

with elbows up or fingers interlocked  
on table tops zinging with boomerangs.

Maybe the tables were spinning, too. I can't be sure.  
But just as a trap that trips before

hammering a mouse is not humane  
the dream changed—or the alarm

that I carry in my breast pocket in my waking life  
was sounding. Because in the dream,

three people on bar stools, who were straight  
or closeted? but more importantly angry

turned and the room dwindled  
like a sweater full of moths eating holes

through wool. Or they were humans, sure,  
but not here to love

with jawlines set to throw epithets like darts  
that might stick or nick or flutter past

as erratically as they were fired.  
You could say their hostility was a swirl

nebulous as gas and dust,  
diffuse as the stress

a body meticulously stores.  
Like how when I was shoved in grade school

on the blacktop in my boy jeans  
the teacher asked me if I had a strawberry

because the wound was fresh as jam, glistening  
like pulp does after the skin of a fruit is

peeled back clean with a knife.  
I was in the dream as open to the elements,

yet I fired back. And I didn't care who eyed me  
like warped metal to be pounded square.

I said: *Do you realize where you are?*

And with one finger I called our family forth  
and out of the strobe lights, they came.

from *In Full Velvet* (Sarabande Books, 2017)

*Charles Jensen*

**Weeks After the Pulse Nightclub Massacre, I Hold Miguel's Hand in Los Angeles**

—and I like how it feels, his hand, a little thick. The way it spreads my fingers open to make space for itself. How we have similar heat and feel familiar in our touch. His soft skin. How in between our palms we hold a feeling. Words we haven't yet said.

—on a slow night in downtown Los Angeles. “Faggots!” a voice shouts. The word knocks against the buildings like a pinball, upsetting an otherwise quiet street.

Miguel looks around. “It's a homeless guy.”

I look Miguel in the eye. His expression has surprise. For me it is all too familiar—the word, the setting, the way my heartbeat accelerates.

We don't let go.

—after midnight with Miguel's friend Dominique, visiting from Oakland. At the corner of Broadway and 7th, we wait for the light to change. A man crosses against the signal, wheeling his bike at his side.

His eyes bore into mine. With his free hand, he's raised a fist and holds up to me his middle finger, steady, his expression unchanging.

Miguel doesn't see it. Just Dominique and me. When the man passes, I look at her. “What the fuck,” she says.

“Right?” I agree. Miguel looks at us quizzically. I explain.

He shakes his head. We look across the street, where the patio at Bar Mattachine swells with gay men and their voices.

We don't let go.

—on Sunday afternoon, crossing Spring Street. It is bright, sunny, warm. Postcard Los Angeles. The Downtown Farmer's Market bustles with people passing through. Bikes flash through the intersection next to us.

A man, wearing a wrinkled shirt speckled with stains, stands on the corner. He moves to get our attention as we pass. I look him in the eye.

“Be careful out there, guys,” he says, and nods gently.

We keep walking. I count the number of straight couples who pass us hand in hand. Middle-aged. Twentysomethings. A mix.

I count five in the space of a block.

Do they worry?

We don't let go.

—and Miguel says, “This kind of thing hasn't happened to me before.”

“What?” I ask.

“The shouting,” he says. “The comments.”

I came out when gay bars had blacked out windows to protect the people inside. When gay people were so rare that I volunteered through the campus LGBT center to speak in residence halls about what it was like to come out. When I was commonly the first gay person someone ever knew they met.

I was called faggot almost daily in high school. Miguel wasn't. I squeeze Miguel's hand a little tighter. “It's familiar to me,” I say.

We don't let go.

—at a Bird and the Bee concert at Teragram Ballroom. I stand close to him. I put my arm around him. I want to be near him.

He looks up at me, smiles in a way that I know what he is feeling, an echo of what I'm feeling. We kiss.

Throughout the show we are like this. We are clearly two men in love who cannot help but radiate it.

After the show, a woman taps his shoulder. “I'm sorry,” she says, “but I just need to tell you you're like the cutest couple I have ever seen.” We laugh.

“Thank you,” Miguel says. He glances at me, eyes sparkling. I smile at him as widely as my face allows.

We don't let go.

from *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction* (September 2021)

*Mark Doty*

**Homo Will Not Inherit**

Downtown anywhere and between the roil  
of bathhouse steam—up there the linens of joy  
and shame must be laundered again and again,

all night—downtown anywhere  
and between the column of feathering steam  
unknotting itself thirty feet above the avenue's

shimmered azaleas of gasoline,  
between the steam and the ruin  
of the Cinema Patee (marquee advertising

its own milky vacancy, broken showcases sealed,  
ticketbooth a hostage wrapped in tape  
and black plastic, captive in this zone

of blackfronted bars and bookstores  
where there's nothing to read  
but longing's repetitive texts,

where desire's unpoliced, or nearly so)  
someone's posted a xeroxed headshot  
of Jesus: permed, blonde, blurred at the edges

as though photographed through a greasy lens,  
and inked beside him, in marker strokes:  
HOMO WILL NOT INHERIT. *Repent & be saved.*

I'll tell you what I'll inherit: the margins  
which have always been mine, downtown after hours  
when there's nothing left to buy,

the dreaming shops turned in on themselves,  
seamless, intent on the perfection of display,  
the bodegas and offices lined up, impenetrable:

edges no one wants, no one's watching. Though  
the borders of this shadow-zone (mirror and dream  
of the shattered streets around it) are chartered

by the police, and they are required,  
some nights, to redefine them. But not now, at twilight,  
permission's descending hour, early winter darkness

pillared by smoldering plumes. The public city's  
ledgered and locked, but the secret city's boundless;  
from which do these tumbling towers arise?

I'll tell you what I'll inherit: steam,  
and the blinding symmetry of some towering man,  
fifteen minutes of forgetfulness incarnate.

I've seen flame flicker around the edges of the body,  
pentecostal, evidence of inhabitation.  
And I have been possessed of the god myself,

I have been the temporary apparition  
salving another, I have been his visitation, I say it  
without arrogance, I have been an angel

for minutes at a time, and I have for hours  
believed—without judgement, without condemnation—  
that in each body, however obscured or recast,

is the divine body—common, habitable—  
the way in a field of sunflowers  
you can see every bloom's

the multiple expression  
of a single shining idea,  
which is the face hammered into joy.

I'll tell you what I'll inherit:  
stupidity, erasure, exile  
inside the chalked lines of the police,

who must resemble what they punish,  
the exile you require of me,  
you who's posted this invitation

to a heaven nobody wants.  
You who must be patrolled,  
who adore constraint, I'll tell you

what I'll inherit, not your pallid temple  
but a real palace, the anticipated  
and actual memory, the moment flooded

by skin and the knowledge of it,  
the gesture and its description  
—do I need to say it?—

the flesh *and* the word. And I'll tell you,  
you who can't wait to abandon your body,  
what you want me to, maybe something

like you've imagined, a dirty story:  
Years ago, in the baths,  
a man walked into the steam,

the gorgeous deep indigo of him gleaming,  
solid tight flanks, the intricately ridged abdomen—  
and after he invited me to his room,

nudging his key toward me,  
as if perhaps I spoke another tongue  
and required the plainest of gestures,

after we'd been, you understand,  
worshipping a while in his church,  
he said to me, *I'm going to punish your mouth.*

I can't tell you what that did to me.  
My shame was redeemed then;  
I won't need to burn in the afterlife.

It wasn't that he hurt me,  
more than that: the spirit's transactions  
are enacted now, here—no one needs

your eternity. This failing city's  
radiant as any we'll ever know,  
paved with oily rainbow, charred gates

jeweled with tags, swoops of letters  
over letters, indecipherable as anything  
written by desire. I'm not ashamed

to love Babylon's scrawl. How could I be?  
It's written on my face as much as on  
these walls. This city's inescapable,  
gorgeous, and on fire. I have my kingdom.

from *Atlantis: Poems* (HarperCollins, 1995)

*Audre Lorde*

**A Litany for Survival**

For those of us who live at the shoreline  
standing upon the constant edges of decision  
crucial and alone  
for those of us who cannot indulge  
the passing dreams of choice  
who love in doorways coming and going  
in the hours between dawns  
looking inward and outward  
at once before and after  
seeking a now that can breed  
futures  
like bread in our children's mouths  
so their dreams will not reflect  
the death of ours;

For those of us  
who were imprinted with fear  
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads  
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk  
for by this weapon  
this illusion of some safety to be found  
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us  
For all of us  
this instant and this triumph  
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid  
it might not remain  
when the sun sets we are afraid  
it might not rise in the morning  
when our stomachs are full we are afraid  
of indigestion  
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid  
we may never eat again  
when we are loved we are afraid  
love will vanish  
when we are alone we are afraid  
love will never return  
and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard

nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive.

from *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (Norton & Company, 1997)

*Brenda Shaughnessy*

**Gay Pride Weekend, S.F., 1992**

I forgot how lush and electrified  
it was with you. The shaggy  
fragrant zaps continually passing  
back and forth, my fingertip  
to your clavicle, or your wrist  
rubbing mine to share gardenia  
oil. We so purred like dragonflies  
we kept the mosquitoes away  
and the conversation was heavy,  
mother-lacerated childhoods  
and the sad way we'd both  
been both ignored and touched  
badly. Knowing that being  
fierce and proud and out and  
loud was just a bright new way  
to be needy. *Please listen to me*, oh  
what a buzz! *you're the only one*  
*I can tell*. Even with no secret,  
I could come close to your ear  
with my mouth and that was  
ecstasy, too. We barely touched  
each other, we didn't have to  
speak. The love we made leapt  
to life like a cat in the space  
between us (if there ever *was*  
space between us), and looked  
back at us through fog. Sure,  
this was San Francisco, it was  
often hard to see. But fog always  
burned off, too, so we watched  
this creature to see if it knew  
what it was doing. It didn't.

from *So Much Synth* (Copper Canyon Press, 2016)

*Kay Ulanday Barrett*

**song for the kicked out**

the streets are not paved with gold, they lied  
I got a rough throat, i got a rough life  
the streets are not paved with gold, they lied  
I got too much queer in me to live their way tonight.

she found me waist up in you  
she had found me mouthful, drinkin' you  
mama said that I was the devil, made this journey here a waste,  
made too American and too unruly

couldn't I just wear dresses, make money, and behave?  
mama said leave this house, her spirit broken by ache  
all my belongings freckled the streets  
I slept outside, spirit stayin' up, my journey isn't self-made

I say all you laughin' & jukin' in the alleys  
I say all you sleepin' to roaches cries  
I say all you couch surfin' until the next night  
I say all you kissin' despite the fists and the fights

together we are a prayer, a chant, a song, no matter what  
together we are an anthem despite their cis hetero fuss  
together we are stronger than the world's unsaids  
together we are as mighty as our ancestors up from the dead

we are bigger than the skylines that hold us  
we are bigger than the sirens that stab our hearts  
we are bigger than the talk of boystown progress & bars  
we are bigger than bleeding our blood to the stars

together we are a prayer, no matter what  
together we are an anthem despite their cis hetero fuss  
together we are stronger than the world's unsaids  
together we are as mighty as our ancestors up from the dead

from *More Than Organs* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2020)