

How Queer! New Voices in Contemporary American Poetry

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On Gay Culture

Cafe: 3 AM, Langston Hughes, 1951

Detectives from the vice squad
with weary sadistic eyes
spotting fairies.
Degenerates,
some folks say.

But God, Nature,
or somebody
made them that way.

Police lady or Lesbian
over there?
Where?

At the Old Place, Frank O'Hara, 1955

Joe is restless and so am I, so restless.
Button's buddy lips frame "L B T T H O P?"
across the bar. "Yes!" I cry, for dancing's
my soul delight. (Feet! Feet!) "Come on!"

Through the streets we skip like swallows.
Howard malingers. (Come on, Howard.) Ashes
malingers. (Come on, J.A.) Dick malingers.
(Come on, Dick.) Alvin darts ahead. (Wait up,
Alvin.) Jack, Earl, and Someone don't come.

Down the dark stairs drifts the steaming cha-
cha-cha. Through the urine and smoke we charge
to the floor. Wrapped in Ashes' arms I glide.

(It's heaven!) Button lindys with me. (It's
heaven!) Joe's two-steps, too, are incredible,
and then a fast rhumba with Alvin, like skipping
on toothpicks. And the interminable intermissions,

we have them. Jack, Earl and Someone drift
guiltily in. "I knew they were gay
the minute I laid eyes on them!" screams John.
How ashamed they are of us! we hope.

At Pegasus, Terrence Hayes, 1999

They are like those crazy women
who tore Orpheus
when he refused to sing,

these men grinding
in the strobe & black lights
of Pegasus. All shadow & sound.

"I'm just here for the music,"
I tell the man who asks me
to the floor. But I have held

a boy on my back before.
Curtis & I used to leap
barefoot into the creek; dance

among maggots & piss,
beer bottles & tadpoles
slippery as sperm;

we used to pull off our shirts,
& slap music into our skin.
He wouldn't know me now

at the edge of these lovers' gyre,
glitter & steam, fire,
bodies blurred sexless

by the music's spinning light.
A young man slips his thumb
into the mouth of an old one,

& I am not that far away.
The whole scene raw & delicate
as Curtis's foot gashed

on a sunken bottle shard.
They press hip to hip,
each breathless as a boy

carrying a friend on his back.
The foot swelling green
as the sewage in that creek.

We never went back.
But I remember his weight
better than I remember

my first kiss.

These men know something
I used to know.

How could I not find them
beautiful, the way they dive & spill
into each other,

the way the dance floor
takes them,
wet & holy in its mouth.

In Time of Plague, Thom Gunn, 1992

My thoughts are crowded with death
and it draws so oddly on the sexual
that I am confused
confused to be attracted
by, in effect, my own annihilation.
Who are these two, these fiercely attractive men
who want me to stick their needle in my arm?
They tell me they are called Brad and John,
one from here, one from Denver, sitting the same
on the bench as they talk to me,
their legs spread apart, their eyes attentive.
I love their daring, their looks, their jargon,
and what they have in mind.
Their mind is the mind of death.

They know it, and do not know it,
and they are like me in that
(I know it, and do not know it)
and like the flow of people through this bar.
Brad and John thirst heroically together
for euphoria--for a state of ardent life
in which we could all stretch ourselves
and lose our differences. I seek
to enter their minds: am I fool,
and they direct and right, properly
testing themselves against risk,
as a human must, and does,
or are they the fools, their alert faces
mere death's heads lighted glamorously?

I weigh possibilities
till I am afraid of the strength
of my own health
and of their evident health.

They get restless at last with my indecisiveness
and so, first one, and then the other,
move off into the moving concourse of people
who are boisterous and bright
carrying in their faces and throughout their bodies

the news of life and death.

At the New York City AIDS Memorial, Stefania Gomez, 2022

Your absence is a bisected city
block where a hospital once stood.
The footprint of a yellow house on Providence's east side
we once shared. Demolished. A white pickup you drove
decorated with black dice. The ground beneath it
crumbled—poof—then paved over, engraved like verses
into stone. When I was told what happened to you,
I sank to the wet floor of a bar's bathroom, furious
that you left us to reassemble ourselves
from rubble. To build, between subway stops,
some saccharine monument
pigeons shit on, empty except for a circle of queens
chattering, furnishing the air like ghosts. Your death
means I'm always equidistant from you,
no matter where I travel, where I linger,
misguided, hopeful. Last night, by candle light,
a woman unearthed me.
Together, she and I grieved
the impossibility of disappearing
into one another. Poof. Since you died,
erasure obsesses me. Among the photos at the memorial,
one of a banner that reads WHERE IS YOUR RAGE?
ACT UP FIGHT BACK FIGHT AIDS, carried by five
young men. Your face in each. Your beautiful face.

I Can't Breathe, Pamela Sneed, 2020

I suppose I should place them under separate files
Both died from different circumstances kind of, one from HIV AIDS and possibly not having
taken his medicines
the other from COVID-19 coupled with
complications from an underlying HIV status
In each case their deaths may have been preventable if one had taken his meds and the
hospital thought to treat the other
instead of sending him home saying, He wasn't sick enough
he died a few days later
They were both mountains of men
dark black beautiful gay men
both more than six feet tall fierce and way ahead of their time
One's drag persona was Wonder Woman and the other started a black fashion magazine
He also liked poetry
They both knew each other from the same club scene we all grew up in
When I was working the door at a club one frequented
He would always say to me haven't they figured out you're a star yet
And years ago bartending with the other when I complained about certain people and
treatment he said sounds like it's time for you to clean house
Both I know were proud of me the poet star stayed true to my roots
I guess what stands out to me is that they both were
gay black mountains of men
Cut down
Felled too early
And it makes me think the biggest and blackest are almost always more vulnerable
My white friend speculates why the doctors sent one home
If he had enough antibodies
Did they not know his HIV status
She approaches it rationally
removed from race as if there were any rationale for sending him home
Still she credits the doctors for thinking it through
But I speculate they saw a big black man before them
Maybe they couldn't imagine him weak
Maybe because of his size color class they imagined him strong
said he's okay
Which happened to me so many times
Once when I'd been hospitalized at the same time as a white girl
she had pig-tails
we had the same thing but I saw how tenderly they treated her
Or knowing so many times in the medical system I would never have been treated so terribly if I
had had a man with me
Or if I were white and entitled enough to sue
Both deaths could have been prevented both were almost first to fall in this season of death
But it reminds me of what I said after Eric Garner a large black man was strangled to death over
some cigarettes
Six cops took him down
His famous lines were I can't breathe
so if we are always the threat
To whom or where do we turn for protection?

To Be Seen, Jericho Brown, 2014

You will forgive me if I carry the tone of a preacher.
Surely, you understand, a man in the midst of dying

Must have a point, which is not to say that I am dying
Exactly. My doctor tells me I might live

Longer than most, since I see him more than most.
Of course, he cannot be trusted nor can any man

Who promises you life based on his being seen.
Understand also, then, that a point and a message are

Indeed quite different. All messages issue forth from
The chosen: a prophet, an angel, the whitest

Dove — those who hear the voice of God and other
Good music. A point, on the other hand, is made

By one who chooses but claims to have been chosen
So as not to be punished for bringing bad news:

The preacher, the poet, my doctor — those who talk
About God because they want to speak in metaphors.

My doctor, for instance, insists on the metaphor of war;
It's always the virus that attacks and the cells that fight or

Die fighting. I even remember him saying the word siege
When another rash returned. Here I am dying

While he makes a battle of my body — anything to be seen
When all he really means is to grab me by the chin

And, like God the Father, say through clenched teeth,
Look at me when I'm talking to you. Your healing is

Not in my hands, though I touch as if to make you whole.

On Violence and Shame

Charlie Howard's Descent, Mark Doty, 2012

Between the bridge and the river
he falls through
a huge portion of night;
it is not as if falling

is something new. Over and over
he slipped into the gulf
between what he knew and how
he was known. What others wanted

opened like an abyss: the laughing
stock-clerks at the grocery, women
at the luncheonette amused by his gestures.
What could he do, live

with one hand tied
behind his back? So he began to fall
into the star-faced section
of night between the trestle

and the water because he could not meet
a little town's demands,
and his earrings shone and his wrists
were as limp as they were.

I imagine he took the insults in
and made of them a place to live;
we learn to use the names
because they are there,

familiar furniture: *faggot*
was the bed he slept in, hard
and white, but simple somehow,
queer something sharp

but finally useful, a tool,
all the jokes a chair,
stiff-backed to keep the spine straight,
a table, a lamp. And because

he's fallen for twenty-three years,
despite whatever awkwardness
his flailing arms and legs assume
he is beautiful

and like any good diver
has only an edge of fear

he transforms into grace.
Or else he is not afraid,

and in this way climbs back
up the ladder of his fall,
out of the river into the arms
of the three teenage boys

who hurled him from the edge—
really boys now, afraid,
their fathers' cars shivering behind them,
headlights on—and tells them

it's all right, that he knows
they didn't believe him
when he said he couldn't swim,
and blesses his killers

in the way that only the dead
can afford to forgive.

Seven Circle of Earth, Ocean Vuong, 2016

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1. As if my finger, / tracing your collarbone / behind closed doors, / was enough / to erase myself. To forget / we built this house knowing / it won't last. How / does anyone stop / regret / without cutting / off his hands? / Another torch
 2. streams through / the kitchen window, / another errant dove. / It's funny. I always knew / I'd be warmest beside / my man. / But don't laugh. Understand me / when I say I burn best / when crowned / with your scent: that earth-sweat / & Old Spice I seek out each night / the days
 3. refuse me. / Our faces blackening / in the photographs along the wall. / Don't laugh. Just tell me the story / again, / of the sparrows who flew from falling Rome, / their blazed wings. / How ruin nested inside each thimble throat / & made it sing
 4. until the notes threaded to this / smoke rising / from your nostrils. Speak— / until your voice is nothing / but the crackle / of charred
 5. bones. But don't laugh / when these walls collapse / & only sparks / not sparrows / fly out. / When they come / to sift through these cinders—& pluck my tongue, / this fist rose, / charcoaled & choked / from your gone
 6. mouth. / Each black petal / blasted / with what's left / of our laughter. / Laughter ashed / to air / to honey to baby / darling, / look. Look how happy we are / to be no one / & still
 7. American.

Dear Gaybashers, Jill McDonough, 2012

The night we got bashed we told Rusty how
they drove up, yelled *QUEER*, threw a hot dog, sped off.

Rusty: *Now, is that gaybashing? Or
are they just calling you queer?* Good point.

Josey pitied the fools: who buys a perfectly good pack of wieners
and drives around San Francisco chucking them at gays?

And who speeds off? Missing the point, the pleasure of the bash?
Dear bashers, you should have seen the hot dog hit my neck,

the scarf Josey sewed from antique silk kimonos: *so gay*. You
missed laughing at us, us confused, your raw hot dog on the ground.

Josey and Rusty and Bob make fun of the gaybashers, and I
wash my scarf in the sink. I use Woolite. We worry

about insurance, interest rates. Not hot dogs thrown from F-150s,
homophobic freaks. After the bashing, we used the ATM

in the sex shop next to Annie's Social Club, smiled at the kind
owner, his handlebar mustache. Astrud Gilberto sang *tall and tan*

and young and lovely, the girl from Ipanema... and the dildos
gleamed from the walls, a hundred cheerful colors. In San Francisco

it rains hot dogs, pity-the-fool. Ass-sized penguins, cock after cock in
azure acrylic, butterscotch glass, anyone's flesh-tone, chrome.

All the Dead Boys Look Like Me, Christopher Soto, 2017

Last time I saw myself die is when police killed Jessie Hernandez

A 17 year old brown queer // who was sleeping in their car

Yesterday I saw myself die again // Fifty times I died in Orlando // &

I remember reading // Dr. José Esteban Muñoz before he passed

I was studying at NYU // where he was teaching // where he wrote shit

That made me feel like a queer brown survival was possible // But he didn't

Survive & now // on the dancefloor // in the restroom // on the news // in my chest

There are another fifty bodies that look like mine // & are

Dead // & I've been marching for Black Lives & talking about police brutality

Against Native communities too // for years now // but this morning

I feel it // I really feel it again // How can we imagine ourselves // We being black native

Today // Brown people // How can we imagine ourselves

When All the Dead Boys Look Like Us? // Once I asked my nephew where he wanted

To go to College // What career he would like // as if

The whole world was his for the choosing // Once he answered me without fearing

Tombstones or cages or the hands from a father // The hands of my lover

Yesterday praised my whole body // Made angels from my lips // Ave Maria

Full of Grace // He propped me up like the roof of a cathedral // in NYC

Before we opened the news & read // & read about people who think two brown queers

Can't build cathedrals // only cemeteries // & each time we kiss

A funeral plot opens // In the bedroom I accept his kiss // & I lose my reflection

I'm tired of writing this poem // but I want to say one last word about

Yesterday // my father called // I heard him cry for only the second time in my life

He sounded like he loved me // it's something I'm rarely able to hear

& I hope // if anything // his sound is what my body remembers first.

My Lover is a Woman, Pat Parker, 1974

I.

my lover is a woman
& when i hold her
feel her warmth
 i feel good
 feel safe

then—i never think of
my family's voices
never hear my sisters say
bulldaggers, queers, funny
 come see us, but don't
 bring your friends
 it's ok with us,
 but don't tell mama
 it'd break her heart
never feel my father
turn in his grave
never hear my mother cry
Lord, what kind of child is this?

II.

my lover's hair is blonde
& when it rubs across my face
it feels soft
 feels like a thousand fingers
 touch my skin & hold me
 and i feel good

then—i never think of the little boy
who spat & called me nigger
never think of the policemen
who kicked my body & said crawl
never think of Black bodies
hanging in trees or filled
with bullet holes
never hear my sisters say
white folks hair stinks
don't trust any of them
never feel my father
turn in his grave
never hear my mother talk
of her backache after scrubbing floors
never hear her cry
Lord, what kind of child is this?

III.

my lover's eyes are blue
& when she looks at me
i float in a warm lake
 feel my muscles go weak with want
 feel good
 feel safe

then—i never think of the blue
eyes that have glared at me
moved three stools away from me
in a bar
never hear my sisters rage
of syphilitic Black men as
guinea pigs
 rage of sterilized children
 watch them just stop in an
 intersection to scare *the old*
 white bitch
never feel my father turn
in his grave
never remember my mother
teaching me the yes sirs & ma'ams
to keep me alive
never hear my mother cry
Lord, what kind of child is this?

IV.

& when we go to a gay bar
& my people shun me because i crossed
the line
& her people look to see what's
wrong with her
 what defect
 drove her to me

& when we walk the streets
of this city
 forget and touch
 or hold hands
 & the people
 stare, glare, frown, & taunt
 at those queers

i remember
 every word taught me
 every word said to me
 every deed done to me
 & then i hate

i look at my lover
& for an instant
doubt

then—i hold her hand tighter
& i can hear my mother cry.
Lord, what kind of child is this?

When I Was Straight, Julie Marie Wade, 2014

I did not love women as I do now.
I loved them with my eyes closed, my back turned.
I loved them silent, & startled, & shy.

The world was a dreamless slumber party,
sleeping bags like straitjackets spread out on
the living room floor, my face pressed into a

slender pillow.

All night I woke to rain on the strangers' windows.
No one remembered to leave a light on in the hall.
Someone's father seemed always to be shaving.

When I stood up, I tried to tiptoe
around the sleeping bodies, their long hair
speckled with confetti, their faces blanched by the

porch-light moon.

I never knew exactly where the bathroom was.
I tried to wake the host girl to ask her, but she was
only one adrift in that sea of bodies. I was ashamed

to say they all looked the same to me, beautiful &
untouchable as stars. It would be years before
I learned to find anyone in the sumptuous,

terrifying dark.

Córdoba, Eduardo C. Corral, 2020

In a bathroom
with turquoise walls,

my reflection bleeds. I reach
to clean, with my thumb,

an oval mirror speckled
with toothpaste

& smeared, now,
with penicillin-rich blood,

then I remember—
pull back my left hand.

I don't touch mirrors. It's wrong,
my father always said,

to touch a man.

On Domesticity

Epithalamium, Phillip B. Williams, 2016

A kiss. Train ride home from a late dinner,
City Hall and document signing. Wasn't cold
but we cuddled in an empty car, legal.
Last month a couple of guys left a gay bar
and were beaten with poles on the way
to their car. No one called them faggot
so no hate crime's documented. A beat down
is what some pray for, a pulse left to count.
We knew we weren't protected. We knew
our rings were party favors, gold to steal
the shine from. We couldn't protect us,
knew the law wouldn't know how. Still, his
beard across my brow, the burn of his cologne.
When the train stopped, the people came on.

My Son Wants to Know Who His Biological Father Is, Blas Falconer, 2019

My son wants to know
his name. *What does he look like? What does
he like?* My son swims
four days a week. When my son swims
underwater, he glides
between strokes. When he glides underwater, he is
an arrow aimed
at a wall. Four days a week, his coach says,
*Count—1...2...—before
coming up for air.*
My father had blue eyes, blonde hair,
though mine are brown.
My father could not speak
Spanish and wondered, *How can you love
another man?* We rarely touched.
When my son
is counting, I count
with him. *I say, I am
your father, too. 1...2...*

I Never Felt Comfortable in My Own Skin So I Made a New One, Xan Phillips, 2022

I was on a walk when I was struck by the precarity of the gender that wore me,
which moved my matter, wrote books, and fell in love. as a child, I scoured
the forest for brittle cicada skins abandoned on trees. husks present differently now
a pair of nylons caught in the thicket, a beak surviving its decomposing bird,
a mural of George Floyd with a purple cock spray-painted on his beryl cheek.
among these discreet mutilations, I pull a line of thought through flesh
where a misled margin slept. I was uninhabitable before I snared a man
for his hide. I was not unlike the skin of a drum thriving under a stamina
that made music of me before I split. you wouldn't recognize me now
if you saw me in the trees, played out, scattered to the undergrowth. I took a life
and returned it to scale and membrane. I foraged a life coated in plastic
and mud from the highway overpass. it reeked of wheatpiss and it was mine.

Daytona 500, Kayleb Rae Candrilli, 2022

Where we're from, we know ballet as Dale Earnhardt
gliding through the traffic of Daytona; we know dance
as our hands moving across a table of drunk Miller Lites.
This is universal because I say it is. When my mother called
me Kayleb for the first time, I remembered the haunted house
on Clifton Hill, how she was tugged away by a hired actor.
I screamed until they took us out the fire escape. To care
is to call a name. To care is to call your mother's name,
as your father pulls at her ankles. Dear Ma, you know your
hands were always too blue in the winter, strapping snow
chains onto the Ford Expedition. This is a happy memory
because it's a memory. It is warmer now. Blame global
warming, blame the divorce. It doesn't matter. All that
matters is the heat of the sun, and both being here to feel it.

Mistaken Shape, Michael Walsh, 2021-2022

Whenever I thought of becoming a horse,
I assumed it could start with my spine

sprouting a tassel. From the waist up
a man would remain, but my legs

would double beastly. As a gay wish,
it was typical as a unicorn.

Had I forced it, the transformation
would've proceeded unexpectedly

as I grew tiny instead of large,
my legs vanishing into a curling, hairless tail.

I got it all backwards.
I've never really wanted to gallop.

Instead, my longing has been to shrink
as far from human as a body can dare

without losing the self among microbes.
My desire isn't to hunt like a centaur,

but to change into a seahorse
and carry the young within my womb.

I never wanted to stampede
and shoot arrows—I want to give birth

among oysters changing genders
to protect my brood from gulping schools.

Dear —, Donika Kelly, 2018

I am not land or timber
nor are you
ocean or celestial body,

but rather we are
the small animals
we have always been.

The land and the sea
know each other
at the threshold

where they meet,
as we know something
of one another,

having shown,
at different times,
some bit of flesh,

some feeling.

We call the showing
knowing instead of *practice*.
We seem to say,

at different times,
A feeling comes.

What is the metaphor
for two animals
sharing the same space?

Marriage?

We share a practice,
you and I,
a series of postures.

Here is how I
become a tree
[]

and you
[]
a body in space.