Poetry: For Harvey Milk and Comstock Correctional Upstate New York

Becky Thompson

For Harvey Milk

When you reached your arms out
   to Dan White did you know he had
   a gun? Did his locked jaw warn

you? Is this why you had a camera
   shop, to photograph the
   present? Did you know we lit

   a galaxy of candles on Castro Street
   and that the boy in Iowa saw you
   on TV? When James Byrd was dragged

   through the streets, did you feel his spirit?

Comstock Correctional Upstate New York
   for David Gilbert*

on my first visit ice packs my tire treads
   my car spins around to head home in the snow
   parking lot divides: visitors and corrections
   I drive around in circles, car pacing

the guards see my first time eyes
   search my bag and body, smiling
   my underwire bra the threat they enjoy fondling,
   passing it from one guard to the next

   a series of doors slam shut
   each metal clink I feel smaller
   bathroom walls smell of steel gurneys
   vending machines spit out Hormel's chili
the numbers assigned press us together
rows of women with lipstick holding infants with ribbons
I stare at the door where the prisoners emerge
privacy between visitors an invisible line

you enter the room, stride gentle, palms open,
your hard-earned blue tee under prison shirt grey
yellow formica table stockades our legs
your hands, Jewish dancing, eyes as big as the clock

I start in with questions, you talk fast, I scribble,
no tape recorder allowed, I chronicle long hand
my questions review the drama of Black Power
armed struggle, you explain, another word for defense

my pacifist leanings collide with your logic:
they shot Hampton in his bed, assassinated Malcolm
I couldn’t keep running for white cover in college
underground life teetered our judgments

my body stays tense with secretary’s function
each inmate who enters you hold with your eyes
tender man in this dungeon, life sentence, I am sinking
you see me falling, ask: are you breathing?

you reach across distance, a light brush on my arm
your touch sends electricity I had reserved just for women
my twenty years lesbian falling into your body,
interview shifts from subject to belonging

I leave before count, thirty-five pages in hand
officers’ cajoling, a cover for terror
they unlock and lock the maze to the outside,
a part of me stays, slipped inside your skin.

* David Gilbert, a member of the Weather Underground in the late 1960s and 1970s, was sentenced to life in prison for his involvement in the 1981 Brinks robbery. He continues to do antiracist work in prison.

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