

# 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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