

Now and Then: A Memory of the LGBTQ+ Struggle

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1991, THE 7th OF MARCH.

yesterday my boyfriend died and i thought three things in that order.

i. nothing. my heart is shattered
in a million pieces on colored sheets because
we couldn't afford white.
look, mom, there he is,
didn't you tell me to fight for what i love?
look, mom. there he is. he's dead. and i am sick—
not like him, don't worry. worse.
i felt his fingers unclasp in mine, held his hand as his pain ended.
but frozen here with a broken mind, broken heart, and broken love,
mine has just begun.

ii. my boyfriend is dead
and the last thing his mother called him was a faggot.
my boyfriend is dead, he loves kids, and the last time
he saw the neighbors' they were being dragged away by the pinky.
white woman, white knuckles, hoarse whisper,
no, honey, we don't go there, and she looked at him like
the raccoon that trespasses her yard sometimes.
my boyfriend is dead and he watched television as he shriveled,
watched how they stared at "three Southern girls killed today in devastating fire"
and looked away from "thirty thousand killed this year in devastating ignorance,"
and my boyfriend is—
he's gone. just like that.

and no one gives a fuck.
let alone 30,000.

iii. i'm next.

i have seen the fires of ignorance rage from fist to fist,
seen it bloom black into the hearts of those meant to love, six years old—
no, carlos! don't you ever try to wear her things again, you're not gay, spat out like poison, ten—
they're brainwashing their sons to turn me black and blue, sixteen—
i said it, finally pulled it out of my throat, gasped at the pinch—
the winds on the street were bitter about something that night.
i remember because i never went inside again.

i have seen four years of a presidency without a single "aids,"
ten years of a funeral every week,
and i do not know why they are so angry.
i do not know why i have been sick for millennia, but this, this i know:
i am next.

EPILOGUE: 2021, THE 7th OF MARCH.

today my coworker asked me if i had a wife and i thought three things in that order.

i. "husband,"

i say politely, wielding a cautious smile. i watch his brows
frown, then shoot up, pull his eyes comically wide. i hear
his apologies, see it on his face, feel his sincerity.
wrestle with his awkwardness. i think:
i am gay.
this man is not.
we do not care.

ii. my ex-boyfriend died thirty years ago today,
and thirty years ago today i could have been killed for my answer,
in the country that threw us away while pulling out chairs to watch—
but was i ever alive?
there's no life in the eyes of a man who gets crucified for a smudge of nail polish,

no flicker in his heart when he gets mysteriously fired from his job. again.
what is life without love,
and what is it when yours isn't even enough for a statistic.
thirty years ago, i bore nothing but the seedlings of pain.
today i flourish in them.

iii. we have come a long way.
throw a liquor bottle at brick, watch it shatter, call it stonewall; and
exhale, finally, to let your life begin.
love is love, we shouted as we flooded through the streets.
and we will have ours, we whispered to keep ourselves listening.

and oh, how they have stumbled, hearing our pride,
oh, how red we have had to bleed.
but somewhere out there, a rainbow still pulses—
women, hurled out of bathrooms by eyes that remain closed and clouded,
cakes, swirled into batter because veils are more important than weddings—
and my boyfriend was killed 30 years ago.

but my husband shines on my ring finger today.