JENNY JOHNSON

Aria

1
Tonight at a party we will say farewell
to a close friend’s breasts, top surgery for months
she’s saved for. Bundled close on a back step,
we wave a Bic lighter and burn her bra.
At first struggling to catch nylon aflame,
in awe we watch as all but the sheer black
underwire melts before forming a deep
quiet hole in the snow.

Sometimes the page
too goes quiet, a body that we’ve stopped
speaking with, a chest out of which music
will come if she’s a drum flattened tight, if she’s
pulled like canvas across a field, a frame
where curves don’t show, exhalation without air.

Then this off-pitch soprano steals through.

2
Then this off-pitch soprano steals through
a crack that’s lit. A scarlet gap between
loose teeth. Interior trill. We’re rustling open.
Out of a prohibited body why
long for melody? Just a thrust of air,
a little space with which to make this thistling
sound, stretch of atmosphere to piss through when
you’re scared shitless. Little sister, the sky
is falling and I don’t mind, I don’t mind,
a line a girl, a prophet half my age,
told me to listen for one summer when
I was gutless, a big mouthed carp that drank
down liters of algae, silt, fragile shale
while black-winged ospreys plummeted from above.
While black-winged ospreys plummeted from above, we were born beneath. You know what I mean? I’ll tell you what the girls who never love us back taught me: The strain within will tune the torqued pitch. In 1902 the last castrato sang “Ave Maria.”

His voice—a bifurcated swell. So pure a lady screams with ecstasy, Voce bianco! Breath control. Hold each note. Extend the timbre. Pump the chest, that balloon room, and lift pink lips, chin so soft and beardless, a flutter, a flourish, a cry stretching beyond its range, cruising through four octaves, a warbler, a starling with supernatural restraint.

A starling with supernatural restraint, a tender glissando on a scratched LP, his flute could speak catbird and hermit thrush. It was the year a war occurred or troops were sent while homicide statistics rose; I stopped teaching to walkout, my arms linked to my students to show a mayor who didn’t show. Seven hundred youth leaned on adults who leaned back. We had lost another smart kid to a bullet in the Fillmore, Sunnyside, the Tenderloin. To love without resource or peace. When words were noise, a jazz cut was steel. I listened for Dolphy’s pipes in the pitch dark: A far cry. Epistrophy. A refusal.
5
A far cry. Epistrophy. A refusal.
A nightingale is recorded in a field
where finally we meet to touch and sleep.
A nightingale attests
as bombers buzz and whir
overhead enroute to raid.
We meet undercover of brush and dust.
We meet to revise what we heard.
The year I can’t tell you. The past restages
the future. Palindrome we can’t resolve.
But the coded trill a fever ascending,
a Markov chain, discrete equation,
generative pulse, sweet arrest,
bronchial junction, harmonic jam.

6
Bronchial junction, harmonic jam,
her disco dancing shatters laser light.
Her rock rap screamed through a plastic bullhorn
could save my life. Now trauma is a remix,
a beat played back, a circadian pulse we can’t shake,
inherent in the meter we might speak,
so with accompaniment I choose to heal
at a show where every body that I press against
lip syncs: I’ve got post binary gender chores . . .
I’ve got to move. Oh, got to move. This box
is least insufferable when I can feel
your anger crystallize a few inches away,
see revolutions in your hips and fists.
I need a crown to have this dance interlude.
7

I need a crown to have this dance interlude
or more than one. Heating flapjacks you re-
read “Danse Russe,” where a man alone and naked
invents a ballet swinging his shirt around
his head. Today you’re a dandier nude
in argyle socks and not lonely as you
slide down the hall echoing girly tunes
through a mop handle: You make me feel like. . . .
She-bop doo wop . . . an original butch
domestic. The landlord is looking through
the mini-blinds. Perched on a sycamore,
a yellow throated warbler measures your
schisms, fault lines, your taciturn vibrato.
Tonight, as one crowd, we will bridge this choir.