

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.

3

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.

4

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 whirl
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.