

Siege

The light flashed red. The stretcher sprouted metal feet, criss cross legs.
On cue, men filed out of bars, shops, restaurants, a ritual
of grief like dreamtime, a remembering of life lived here.
They swarmed our door until I could see the black bag no more.
The leather boys in chaps and vests, aging queens with kohl-ringed eyes
and silver rings, the shop keeps, bartenders in steel-toed boots,
and boys pausing mid-step, flash of red their doppelganger.

Out the gate, on Castro Street, a sore thumb of a girl,
an impostor in a man's man world, smelling of sleep and stale beer.
Here men married their lovers through adoption papers,
while other fathers, late at night, opened their wallets
to show photos of portrait smiles and freckled faces, pigtails.
War changes you. It changes how you see the world, how bright
the subway cars and grocery aisles, vertigo at the clinic;
the white chalk lines of separation like a hopscotch grid.
You have this little box. Move freely here here nowhere else.
Oh, and words become weaponized. We're onto other wars,
but I remember. T cell count. KS. Thrush. Cocktail drugs.
AZT. Gay plague. Nature's retribution. God's revenge.

Wars of neglect are hard on families. Who were quarantined,
whose friends closed their doors, who knew help was insular.
When the police did show up, they declared everyone
illegally assembled, including in their own homes.

My father's body gone, I left my place, encircled by bloated aunties
who ushered me into the bar. Have this. Another.
They cradled my shoulders. My drunken mothers. Danced me
from stool to table, breath of ashes and fire starter.
The bar a night time crowd by lunch, an impromptu wake. I drank.
And danced my mothers, and we were making history with our tallies, here, here.
My aunties whirled me, their lesions kissed my ear, and they said,
for today, tonight, you are one of us, you dance. We dance through this.
We celebrate. Not one of us is left out in darkness.

SHOSHANNA WINGATE