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Queer and Present Danger

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America has a place on our queer alphabet,
An identity hidden and implied,
A nation based on Q: Questioning.
America! Sing America!

From the vantage of purple mountains marching on the edges
of a collective conscience
Sings, in persistent polyphony, a people haunted by a why
of themselves.
On half cadences boldly, triumphantly uncertain in a mass-
chorus America raises to God
And neighbor—to anyone, anywhere who will listen—
the question “What does it mean to be American?”
We trek across the vastness between shining seas, a journey
without a roadmap occupied by questions, by the
answers they dance around.
And, America, I feel lost in you—as you—
striving against waves of voices saying
they are certain who you are
Voices forgetting that our national anthem
ends on a question
Forgetting that we are strangers striving to mend
our every flaw together
Voices so chaotic that I hate you and hate myself and
who I am and that I can’t help but be who I am!

America, they tell who I have to be.
America, only I can tell me who I am.
America, what I am is bound for change
and uncertainty and lingering questions
Like you, surely, like you.
To learn America is to sing myself and assume those around me.
Adaptive to the course of the world like an ocean-vessel
Like an ocean-vessel keeps itself aright.
How can we be when so much of your body-choral
electric tends to the nonconductive,
sings “this is only who we are”?
How can something as massive as you, who reaches
to heaven with the fingertips of Appalachia and Sierra and
Rocky and Ozark
extending from the open prairies
be constrained as if packed storage-tight for a dusty closet to
be forgotten
Or to manifest in only one sort of way?
That an essential American exists who is the answer to the
question of ourselves.
That an English-fumbling tongue born elsewhere
cannot sing the joy and sorrow of America or be within the
body of this nation
Like a trans woman cannot be either if she didn’t play with dolls
as a child or want an essential if-and-only-if
transitioned version of herself.

America, your manifold self and all its indefinites are
“fire in a crowded theater” in too many hearts.
America, sometimes my questions become so many that doubt
manifests hatred. Yet—
America, it is in your nature to be doubted and it is
your truth—
even though it may be painful and confounding—
America, do not forget those who sing your question
and your change.

The prevailing question of you essayed in art and action
Is a performance in changing costume and with fractals
of truth.
We are kings, queens, and in-between in those refractions of
the light cast
In rays of difficult questions and answers more difficult.
America, don’t listen when “the rest is drag” is dismissed as a lie
by the nature of performance.
America, performance is a means of searching,
Endless and inalienable as rights entitled to all people.
We without a defined identity to make a home in,
Explore our truths in drag.
America, the truest you is a bus ride chasing celestial lights
across your geography,
A collection of queer passengers and their indefinite identities
being redefined and performed, ever growing.
An identity from Simon and Garfunkel, haunted, indelible,
growing and growing as the choir of the body of America
intones melody and high harmony and descant in counterpoint
with itself and reifying itself.
America! Sing America!

America! To know you is to sing queer voices!

—To learn from strangers to themselves the heart of a nation of immigrants
—To understand a transcontinental journey inside one self
And why we fling open golden gates like closet doors
Onlooking outwards to a better knowledge of your
unending “why”
And embrace it and grow with it knowing that knowing America
is never gnostic.
America! In paroxysms of joy and confusion and fury and love
are you known, do we know ourself!
America! I know that we have it in ourselves and all of our many
voices and indefinite selves to be angelic!
America! I gaily sing our transcendent self, our God-gilded
queerness, shining and shifting among nations!
America! Sing America!

Pigs 4
Leila Valencia