

If Elizabeth Bishop were alive, and I called her a lesbian poet, she might've kindly sloughed me off in a sympathetic interview, or in a private tete a tete perhaps dismissed me as one of those political faggots. A poet *and* a lesbian? Maybe. Conscious of what we would today call her "brand," Bishop wanted no part of specialized anthologies. Having "The Fish," "Filling Station," or a half dozen of her luminous poems appear beside Eliot and Yeats—this was her ambition, one that balked, politely, at the presence of mentor Marianne Moore. Forget lesbian poet: she didn't want to be a *woman poet*.

As I've gotten older and my tolerance for many things broadens, a line from her valedictory villanelle "One Art" rattles around my head with the stubbornness of an Ariana Grande hook. "Then practice losing farther, losing faster." An injunction. As imperative and weirdly transparent as David Byrne ordering listeners to "watch me work!" in 1978. Well, beginning in 1981, a gay community that had seen a remarkable acceleration of if not heterosexual respect then its mainstream visibility, saw the fallen around them: slow at first, then they—we—lost farther, lost faster. Brothers who died at hospital furtively stuffed into garbage bags. The speed at which an ex we high-fived on Christopher Street on Tuesday was dead on Saturday. His parents wouldn't take the call.

We lost farther, lost faster. It became, if not an art, then a craft. A practice.

By June 12, 2016, twenty years of combination therapy had allowed the doomed to hope. Before the Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision, it became easier for relatives to tolerate us once they realized we weren't going to drop dead on them. We were past Nathan Lane jokes—hell, Adam Lambert couldn't keep up with the changes.

And yet. The disco as stage, analysand's chair, and bedroom replete with polymorphous delights—its primacy hadn't dimmed even when radio programmers called its music "dance," as if to avoid a taint. And they were, for the movements performed every Saturday night from The Anvil to the Tampa Holiday Inn bar at the height of the Carter era precipitated a public disgrace so complete that a White House press secretary and reporters in 1983 could chuckle over fag jokes again.

What offends these Torquemadas and Gradgrinds is frivolity. We offend them because we don't give a fuck about whom we want to fuck. When the Pulse shootings happened, I wrote the following in [a piece for MTV](#):

*A more than decent simulacrum for a good fuck, dancing is how many queer men and women learned to yield to superficiality. A good beat. An amazing stranger. Content-free and proud. Blitheness is the queer's gift to culture. Homosexuals begin their self-development upon realizing the extent to which they're different from siblings and friends; we prepare faces for the faces we will meet.... Shunned by friends, thrown out of their homes, banished from real cities on the plain, they find on crowded dance floors a sense of fellowship that is no less deep for being ephemeral. And, no, rhythm isn't even required — that's the point. We're figuring ourselves out in those spaces, a beer at a time, yielding to that frisson triggered by a passing glance, a smile at the bar, an unexpected nudge on the floor...*

It's likely that a few of the Pulse revelers treated the weekend as their ancestors did a hundred years ago: a grand debauch before the Sunday ablutions; indeed, given the sizable Puerto Rican demographic that night, it's possible their relatives expected them in church the next morning. (Despite quiet humiliations, we Latinos tend to live at home until we find the right opposite sex partner or, if the soul is adamant in its resolve, leave because we've had enough.) No doubt many understood this unspoken fact: the dance floor elides differences between the secular and the numinous.

I want to spend a couple minutes discussing the best film to date about the plague years. In the years before protease inhibitors, when the gay movement fought for every federal dollar, a lifespan was measured in T-cells. *BPM (Beats Per Minute)* follows the Paris chapter of ACT-UP as it debates strategy: whom to pelt with blood, which pharma reps to heckle, should they even *do* these things? At the same time members push to lead something like normal lives, in which the politics of dancing may not be synonymous with the politics of feeling good. By the time Robin Campillo's film ends, there's a sense in which these men and women accept that the struggle is a war. Attending to the sick and dying—a virtue too often claimed by Christians—gives this war its clarity.

[CLIP]

Finally, I remember the Pulse dead not as beautiful souls, nor as martyrs to the late Antonin Scalia's blood-damp interpretation of the Second Amendment, but as bodies—bodies in restless motion, because only when they're dancing can they feel this free. We lost farther, lost faster. We dance faster. Elizabeth Bishop was right again: "Everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!"

Thank you.