

STRAY DOGS

by Alaric Goodman

We come together every weekend,
congregating outside the bar
like homeless dogs lured
by promises of temporary belonging.
I am always here,
sitting on a stool and trying my hardest
to learn whatever lessons
this place has to teach.

Around me, people engage
in exultant celebration of who they are.
My grandmother never taught me much about pride,
but here I can learn the virtues
of that cardinal sin.
I watch as men play tricks for one another—
eyebrows wagging, mouths uplifting to obvious smiles—
in the hope of a single night's cohabitation.
I don't know these tricks.
Being here will teach them to me and extend my education
in how to move,
how to see,
how to understand.

Beads of every color
shine from his wrist.
I don't think he knows these tricks either.
Too fast he sits next to me,
too fast fingers graze knees,
too fast do we speak the truth
and shove triviality aside.
The bar grants its blessing,
the way he and I share with words
not unlike the way we have with each other's bodies.

In our late drunkenness,
we sniff out questions to ask,
learning each other with hands and sideways stumbling.
The full breadth of our knowledge
of the bar
and who we were that night,
won't become apparent
until the hungover haze of the next afternoon.

It is only then we learn
of something that happened
far away from Spokane,
yet as close as the sticky sidewalk
outside the bar.
It is only then we learn for the first time
what violence and hatred mean.

Such atrocity is only committed
by an animal much more vicious

than we could ever be capable of.

Returning to the bar of our origin,
he and I rejoin the others.

As one, we face cruelty with everything we are
and learn the names of those we lost,
so we will never forget them.

Together, we listen close,
asking the bar to teach us about ourselves,
to give us a reason for senselessness
that will never be mended.

This place cannot always answer.

But it can provide some comfort
in the knowledge that we are home
and that stray dogs can become a pack.