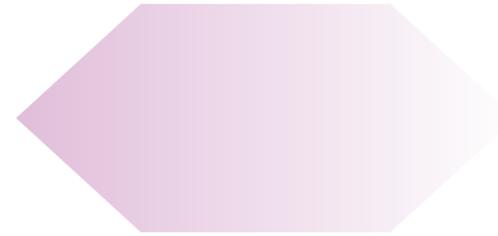


DYKE

NURSE



Words by William J Simmons

Some time ago, I was on a panel about LGBTQ politics with the artist Phoenix Lindsey-Hall, who graciously invited me to take part in the discussion on the occasion of the opening of her exhibition *Never Stop Dancing* in New York. Someone asked that we start the discussion by recounting our first experience in a queer bar, since Phoenix's show commemorated each person who died in the Pulse shooting with a handmade porcelain disco ball. It was posited that gay and lesbian bars are central to the queer experience, as they cultivate a safe space outside of the normative erotic/social landscape. Of course, the Pulse shooting modified that utopian vision in a very obvious and material way.

When it was my turn to answer the gay bar question, I could only lie. I quickly made up a story of a rapturous rendezvous in a back room wherein I got my dick sucked and never asked for names or Instagram handles. I flew out into the night, floating on cum, and it was indeed that archetypal moment — that shift from repression into true self-knowledge. Being gay has nothing to do with boredom. In reality, I waited in line with a friend at a bar called Pieces. She was a hot lesbian whom her girlfriend and I called Dyke Nurse, since she reminded us to take our Xanaxs and to drink enough water. A handsome boy sauntered over and started talking to us about the weather. He and I agreed to meet up on the dancefloor. As he walked away, he ran his hand across the fly of my jeans. He was clearly disappointed by my small cock, because, when I saw him later that night, he avoided my gaze and disappeared into a group of muscle twinks. It was another night of stumbling onto the train with Dyke Nurse and wondering why it all felt so banal and painful (a question that is itself banal). We called that winter the Dark Days. The real darkness, I think, was the embarrassment we felt at not being able to commit to suicide, no matter how much we wanted it. I moved to Los Angeles and forgot about Dyke Nurse

and began to walk back and forth, up and down Sunset Boulevard from my apartment to Akbar. My friend clued me in to a benefit concert in town put on by Justin Long and CHVRCHES. Now, to be honest, I showed up to hear "A Mother We Share", which served as an anthem for a long winter with a boy who I tried to keep by telling him I had gonorrhoea, as if it was a baby he had to support.

I was surprised, however, by the all-queer-women-band MUNA, whose "I Know a Place" seemed to bring everyone in the room to tears. Though the song was written for a dying friend, it became associated with the Pulse shooting as a rallying cry for the sanctity of queer spaces.

My cynicism melted for a moment and then reconstituted itself, and that was in itself discomfiting. Queer skepticism is no less regressive in certain ways than normative skepticism, and it is a conservative strategy to use a negative personal experience to generalize the state of affairs. It all became the Carrie Bradshaw at the computer meme: "I couldn't help but wonder." I walked to my car and wondered. Wonder is akin to wander: to wander past the 'Happy Foot Sad Foot' sign wondering what would make life worth living, wondering if living a life spent wandering like every other queer in one form or another was a sufficiently empowering cliché, wondering where that hot guy at Pieces wandered off to.

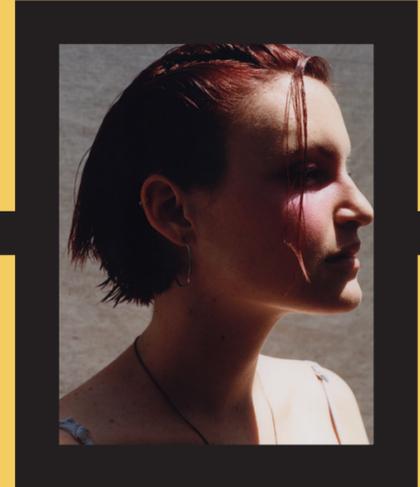
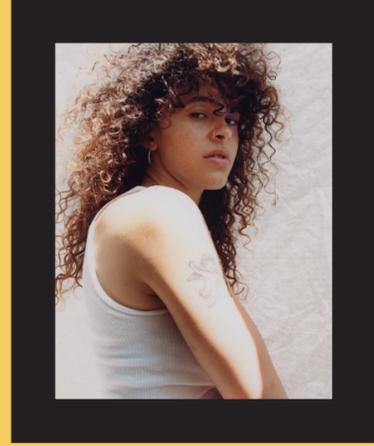
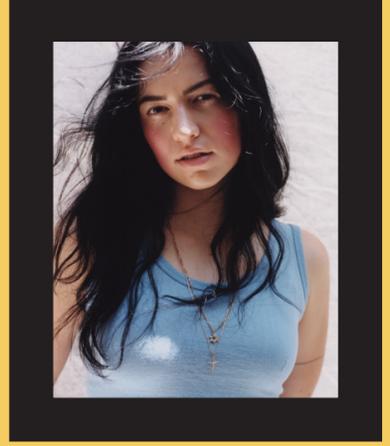
*In "I Know a Place," MUNA declares:
I see all your bruises, yellow, dark blue, and black
But baby a bruise is only your body
Tryna keep you intact*

A bruise is likewise a place, a corporeal memory that cautiously indicates healing. Scars remain but bruises fade, so I can't help but wonder, can scars become bruises? Can the skin soften and explode into those colors instead of those raised, creamy ridges on your wrist? I like to think so, and MUNA might like to think so. But a scar is also a place, too.





PHOTOGRAPHS **PARKER WOODS**
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“I would just like to erase any notion that one needs to torture oneself to make something.”

Interview by William J. Simmons

William J. Simmons: When I first came across your work, I was really struck by “Crying on the Bathroom Floor”. What I thought was interesting about that song was that there's a lot of indeterminacy in it. There is unsurety and insecurity and ambivalence. In the conversations surrounding #MeToo, nuance has been pushed out in some ways. So I wonder about the relationship between nuance and the political, or speaking to a political message and not leaving out the multiplicity of experience.

Naomi: The lack of nuance generally seems to be a cultural shift we are experiencing at the moment. There is always nuance but it's the way things get molded into a conversation that depletes them of that which makes them more complex and interesting. That's what we want to do with music. I know that it will always be cast as politics or politicking, but there's a lot more to the stories that are being told than a clean-cut political message.

Katie: I have a page in one of my journals that's all caps and it's like, 'I WANT TO LEARN TO WRITE ABOUT WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED.' That has become a tenet for me. If you're writing about your authentic experience, there's just going to be nuance and surprises. A lot of my songs come from a place where I'm having an experience and having feelings that are surprising. With “Crying on the Bathroom Floor”, I was interested in why it seemed that relationships that were bad for me were things I was drawn to. They were good in the sense of feeling like I was getting a fix, like it was something I needed. If you're really trying to help somebody who's trying to leave an abusive relationship, it isn't helpful to depict an experience where the person who is trying to leave is 100% sure that they're doing the right thing. I think it's more helpful to be honest about the fact that sometimes you're going to miss the person who was treating you badly. Maybe that's more helpful for people who are trying to navigate a very dark, uncharted space. That's where my impulse comes from as a writer. It's not going to exist in certain spaces, but it should certainly exist in poetry and lyrics.

WJS: There's been a lot of discussion about the ways in which this presidential administration perversely creates good art. But of course, the response would be that there is nothing positive about this situation. People are in danger.

Katie: This is a pattern throughout history that happens when there are conservative or neo-conservative people in power, or this weird fascist-populist-whatever is going on now. There's always going to be a punk, musical, art, or film response to that environment. Some of the best pop music ever came out of the 1980s and that was a similarly oppressive presidency. It's expected. But there is also good art coming out all the time and there is bad art coming out all the time.

Naomi: I wonder whether it's helpful to see art as something that's combative because that's the implication when we're saying, 'We're going to get really good art out of this.' It's like the art world and the political realm have this beef going on: 'Oh, this person released a diss track.' I want to be in a new narrative. I don't want to be at war. I want to be creating in a way that puts us in touch with these deeper questions about what the purpose of art can be. It's these preconceived notions of why art is relevant. I don't think this record is necessarily about combating reality, but maybe trying to transcend it to figure out what your reality is. I think what's going on prompted all of us to take a harder look at ourselves. Maybe when reality is fucking shitty, we have the tendency to want to dip out. Noticing that we wanted

to dip out more prompted us to want to make changes in our own lives, which prompted the need to make this art.

Katie: It's so hard to talk about what feels like a really important time when you're living in it. Maybe someone will write a really amazing thesis in 10-15 years about the years we're living through right now. Maybe we'll have a better retrospective understanding then. But we did call the record Save the World, and I don't think that would have been the title of the record in an alternate universe where the political reality is different. We're inextricable from our reality and the political is just a part of it. It's not the whole reality and we don't want it to be the whole reality. We're just trying to think about the future and the rest of our lives.

Naomi: I remember a teacher talking about the AIDS crisis and how we basically lost an entire generation of artists. We have no idea the amount of art we lost because of how it was handled. There's a balance here because we, as artists, have never had a period of time where we've been hungry, or where we don't have a home, or where we need to get other jobs. That being said, I have a lot of friends who have experienced this type of stretching because of the current political and economic climate. They used to be making art and now they're not. At a certain point, it's not good for art if our artists are sick and don't have health care, or if they have to go back to work a day job. In a very simple way: no dude — the political climate isn't good for art if we're not supporting our artists.

Katie: I would just like to erase any notion that one needs to torture oneself to make something.

Naomi: I resist fucking everything that has to do with preconceived notions of how one should behave based on some destructive nature.

WJS: You are bringing up two really important things; one, art being reduced to an illustration of politics or to a reflection of the artist's inner state; and two, art being reduced to something inherently oppositional. Still, queer women getting together and making a band is totally political.

Katie: That's a good point. With our first record, we were so much more gung-ho, but at the same time, I don't think we can ever not be political because of the nature of who we are as a band. Everything we're going to do is a political message whether we intend it to be or not.

WJS: That sort of ‘tragic artist’ thing often applies to women in a totally different way. And then of course, gay men like myself fetishize that female tragedy.

Naomi: I can't remember who said this — something like: 'All artists have a tendency to suffer and women artists have it doubly because all women are masochists already.' I was like, damn!

Katie: Doesn't it all go back to capitalism and its insidious nature? Is that emotion and not labor? It's a double level of labor being particularly cast on female artists to not only make art but also to be emotionally compelling and raw... Always presenting a page from your diary and flinging yourself onstage.

Josette: Sounds like what I did for this record — emotional labor!

WSJ: I read somewhere about you being inspired by Susan

Sontag's Notes on Camp. For me, that essay is all about loving something and inhabiting it even if you are pointing out its flaws. This makes me wonder about your relationship to a space that doesn't always expect women, people of color, and/or queer people to be critical all the time. But you still engage with those critical spaces in some way.

Naomi: What struck me most about Sontag's essay was the way that she was able to communicate how camp is able to speak to the audience and wink at them, even as you're fully, seriously inhabiting whatever you're doing. It's like — I'm wearing the meat dress, but I know that you see me wearing it and that it's a multifaceted, multilayered performance of whatever sincere emotion I'm trying to convey. And then it made me think about how we've been perceived as a very stoic, serious, political band. But maybe there was a level of how seriously we took ourselves that was kind of funny. That impacted the way we went about naming Save the World and pursuing the idea of us being the motherfucking greatest band in the world! In that way, it's inspired by camp.

Josette: It's a post-Lady Gaga realization of meat-dress-camp. It's like meta-modern camp in terms of being self-aware — so you can't really be camp — but you're trying and it's still inspiring.

Katie: Like you said, it's about loving something but still acknowledging the flaws, which sounds a lot like what we're talking about on this record with one's relationship to oneself. But we are also hoping to represent something bigger than ourselves. Our way of dealing with that without imploding was to say, 'Okay, I accept this role of saving the world like a superhero.' Accepting the hero's journey but continuing to tell my story with a level of nuance that shows how flawed I still am on a daily basis. I told somebody this the other day — that as a songwriter, it feels like I'm coming out in a new way with every song. I will just never stop coming out.

Josette: That's the ultimate camp performance.

“It's like the art world and the political realm have this beef going on.”

