A Place to Land

- On Oscar Eriksson Furunes' *Svæveveninder*

By Mathias Danbolt

It was never a given that I would end up in a love triangle with a man and a budgie. I wasn't really into birds. It was the twins who insisted that little Pjuske, whom their mothers had given them for their birthday, naturally needed two homes, just like they did, and should spend every other week with us on Gothersgade. At first, I was quite hysterical about losing control of the airspace and soundscape of our home. But I soon had to put my anthropocentric chauvinism aside and acknowledge that Pjuske, of course, deserved the same freedom of movement indoors as the rest of us. Pjuske preferred adults to kids, and when he developed the habit of perching on my shoulder while I wrote and announcing that I was a "fine fellow," my heart quickly melted. When the mothers eventually bought the children a cat, the bird moved in with us permanently. After four years in this two-men-and-a-bird *throuple*, the shock was immense when, one morning, the little blue bird was lying lifeless on the apartment floor. The silence was brutal. We don't know what happened, but birds die, too. Months later, we still haven't removed the branches poking out between the books on the bookshelf where he used to hold court.

It is with the tenderness of a bird widower that I arrive at Oscar Eriksson Furunes' solo exhibition *Svæveveninder* at Bonne Espérance. It is difficult to think of a more sensitive examination of the bird as a queer-historical totem animal. *Flight* (2019–2026) sets the tone for what I see as the exhibition's meditation on the conditions that make safety, belonging, and community possible. On two narrow shelves extending from opposite walls of the small gallery space sits two bird's nests in verdigris-green patinated bronze. Among the many spikes that form the circular resting places, some base plates are visible, pointing back to the material's previous life. The nests are made from casts of anti-bird spikes—the devices attached to building facades, lampposts, statues, and other structures to prevent birds from perching or settling down. Here, the sharp obstacles designed to create a controlled and orderly urban environment have been recast as a home.

The ability to take something designed to cause harm or exclude and transform it into a basis for new forms of identity and community is central to queer history. But even this forceful alchemy may come at a price. If one's understanding of identity remains rooted in opposition, is there a risk of romanticizing exclusion? Might identification with what deviates from the norm also obscure the power dynamics at play in one's own negotiations of community? The encounter between the empty bird's nests and the title *Flight* introduces an ambiguity into the work's transformation of an instrument of exclusion into a place of

rest: Are these nests made of bird spikes something to fly or flee from, or something to seek refuge in?

If the birds have left the nests in *Flight*, they flock together in *day's passing* (2026). Here, 23 cockatoos stand close together on a narrow white ledge, with their brightly coloured porcelain feathers ruffled. Each one is different. Some face one another in small groups, while others appear alone in the crowd. Slightly above the flock, a white cockatoo stands in solitary majesty. Its lamp glows warmly, releasing a musky fragrance into the room.

This is not the first time Furunes has incorporated pieces from his collection of vintage bird-shaped fragrance lamps into his artistic practice. *day's passing* can be read as a companion piece to the installation *night watch* (2023–2024), where a large group of owls, each placed on its own shelf, light up and turn dark in a rhythm that also functions as a Morse code signal. *night watch* not only uses code as a means of communication but also refers to a historical warning system used in gay bars in Amsterdam before homosexuality was decriminalized. The owl lamps were switched on to warn patrons of approaching danger, such as the police or other strangers who might threaten the community.

The brightly coloured cockatoos in *day's passing* do not have the same collective responsibility for communication as the owls in *night watch*. Still, these birds also bring gay bars to mind. There is a long tradition of using ceramic fragrance lamps to mask the smell of cigarette smoke in bars. To me, though, the image of all these well-dressed birds standing close together in far too little space also recalls the clubs many of us still flock to on weekends. Bird metaphors have played a central role in the history of queer nightlife. In 1950s New York, people talked about taking the "bird circuit," referring to a string of underground gay bars with names such as The Swan, The Blue Parrot, The Golden Pheasant, and The Yellow Cockatoo. Even today, in several cities across the United States and Europe, you can go "bird-watching" at The Eagle, which, as its name suggests, is also a good place to go hunting. The atmosphere on the ledge at Bonne Espérance is brighter than that of the hunting grounds of the night. Still, I cannot shake the fear that one or more of the birds might fall, or be pushed out of the flock, and come crashing to the ground.

The work *Svæv, veninde* (2026), mounted on the wall opposite *day's passing*, consists of a pair of red Nike Air sneakers that seem to hover magically in front of the wall. Each shoe is fitted with something resembling a wing made from a pink glass flower from a Murano glass chandelier. The shoes are filled with crushed glass that glitters. Here, too, destruction becomes a starting point for transformation. Although Nike is named after the Greek goddess of victory, the shoes' extravagant wings make me think of Hermes, the messenger

of the gods, who, with wings on his sandals, moves swiftly between the worlds of mortals and gods. Perhaps, here, the movement is just as much between the living and the dead, the archive and memory, those who came before us and those we are now.

As in his solo exhibition *Glitra* (2026) at Møstings Hus, Furunes has also drawn inspiration from material in the archives of LGBT+ Denmark. This time, however, it is not archival photographs that are reactivated, but an audio recording from 1990 of an oral history interview with an older gay Danish man, born in 1927, that provided the starting point for the work's title. At one point, the man recalls an expression that he says was widely used in Copenhagen's gay community when he was young: "Svæv, veninde" ("Soar, girlfriend"). The expression, he explains, comes from a story about an unhappy incident involving a *hanpige*—a term used for an effeminate young man in the gay community of the time—who lived on Gothersgade with an older gentleman. During an argument late one night after a party, the gentleman announces that he is going out to "walk the dog." The *hanpige*, meanwhile, climbs onto the windowsill and, in frustration, rage, or disappointment, jumps from the fifth floor and dies. The interviewee's account of the grotesque origins of the expression "Svæv, veninde" is surprisingly casual, and he tells us nothing about how the phrase was subsequently used in the gay community: Was it used ironically or laconically, or as a sorrowful farewell?

I have tried searching old newspapers to verify the story from Gothersgade, but so far without success. There are, however, many stories in queer history that bear a resemblance to this one, some more well-known than others. I cannot help thinking of the dancer, choreographer, and musician Fred Herko, who, in 1964, went to a good friend's apartment, took a bath, and then danced naked to the sound of Mozart. The dance ended with him jumping out of the window to his death—a realization of a performance idea he had been proposing to his friends for some time.

Svæv, veninde can be seen as a memorial to those who have seen flight as their only way out. The red shoes are caught in the moment between flying and fleeing, hope and destruction. Their hovering presence may also be an image of the power of *svæveninder*: those soaring friends—animal or human, dead or living, historical or yet to come—that we live with or carry with us as we flutter about, trying to find a shelf or a haven to gather.

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