“Jameson Currier’s debut novel, Where the Rainbow Ends, moved me to tears more than once and, simply put, is one of the best pieces of gay literature I have ever read. Rather than focusing on and wallowing in the heavy melodrama that the AIDS epidemic seems to produce in most writers, Currier shows both the highs and lows. The lives of these incredibly well-drawn, three-dimensional people encompass all of the emotion that is found in gay/lesbian life. The book is about creating a sense of family, and most of all, it is about hope. In Robbie, Currier has created a gay Everyman we can all identify with, love, and root for. This is one novel that I was sorry to see end. With this work, Currier has established himself as one of the preeminent gay novelists, not just of the 1990s, but of all time. This book should be required reading for every gay man, period.”
—Greg Herren, Impact
Contents

October 17: “Laughing,” poetry by Charles Springer
October 18: “The Dancing Bear,” from The Sea is Quiet Tonight, memoir by Michael H. Ward
October 19: “Cache,” poetry by Dennis Rhodes
October 20: “Bringing Home the Colors,” excerpt from Back on the Cheat, fiction by Garrison Phillips
October 21: A Conversation with Alan Lessik, interview by Dave Robb
October 22: “Old Movies & Iris,” poetry by Stephen Mead
October 23: “Tea in Coburg,” fiction by Henry Alley
October 24: “After Learning My HIV Is Undetectable, It’s As If I’ve Never Seen the Trees Breathing on the Mountaintop in the Distance,” poetry by Darius Stewart
October 25: “A Body Tale,” fiction by Peter Toppings
October 26: “Contemporary Zouaves,” poetry by Jeff Mann
October 27: “Bro,” fiction by Dave Wakely
October 29: “Satellite Rules, Stranded Longings,” fiction by Dale Corvino
October 30: “Into Human Bondage,” poetry by Richard Johns
November 1: “Accent! 1983,” memoir by Richard Marino
November 2: “Voicemail,” poetry by Noah Fields
November 3: “Dissonance,” excerpt from Fashionably Late: Gay, Bi, and Trans Men Who Came Out Later in Life, memoir by Vinnie Kinsella
November 4: Sentimental Ex-Patriot, essay by William Sterling Walker
November 5: “The Fragrance,” poetry by Raymond Luczak
November 6: “Fireworks,” fiction by William Torphy
November 7: “Fact Sheet 484: HIV and Inflammation,” poetry by Noah Stetzer

November 8: “A Gay Man Among Men,” memoir by Garrison Botts
November 9: “At the Main Street Bar,” poetry by Frank Adams
November 10: “A Room Apart,” fiction by Brodie Gress
November 12: “My Life, Starring James Franco,” fiction by Jameson Currier
In thirteen candid and provocative essays, author Jarrett Neal reports on the status of black gay men in the new millennium, examining classism among black gay men, racism within the gay community, representations of the black male body within gay pornography, and patriarchal threats to the survival of both black men and gay men. *What Color Is Your Hoodie?* employs the author’s own quest for visibility—through bodybuilding, creative writing, and teaching, among other pursuits—as the genesis for an insightful and critical dialogue that ultimately symbolizes the entire black gay community’s struggle for recognition and survival.

**LAMBDA LITERARY FINALIST LGBT NONFICTION**

Praise for *What Color Is Your Hoodie?*

“Truthful, blunt, and thought-provoking. This unusual book is a good read that may actually change minds.”
—Terri Schlichenmeyer, *The Bookworm Sez*

“A gifted writer. Neal wants to promote dialogue, for gay people to listen to each other, to share stories and memorialize our victories and injustices. Homophobia, misogyny, and racism are all intertwined, so if we want to combat them, we must truly embrace diversity, which can only be accomplished if, as Neal strongly urges, all LGBTQ people learn to work together.”
—Brian Bromberger, *Bay Area Reporter*

“There’s much to love and think about in *What Color is Your Hoodie?* from an academic perspective as well as the street view. And one is as valid as the other, because if we can’t grasp both, we really can’t get a handle on either.”
—Jerry Wheeler, *Out in Print*

“A unique insightfulness about often-unexamined experiences. Neal’s strong embrace of the personal as political and of popular media as culturally critical also drives him to explore queer racism and black homophobia, class conflict, and the effects of marginalization on self-esteem and self-expression. Moments of the collection shine as either memoir or sociological treatise.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

**AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS**
“A brilliant debut novel by Canadian writer Jeffrey Luscombe that explores the inner and outer life of a ‘latent homosexual,’ Joshua Moore. Luscombe revitalizes the over-romanticized ‘coming out’ novel by subjecting it to a cold shower of literary realism.”
—Dick Smart, Lambda Literary

“Shirts and Skins is a novel that will speak to anyone who has ever felt the inextricable bonds of the past, or felt the long shadow of family and home places as they strive towards the light of wholeness of identity and self-ownership. A first novel deeply felt and skillfully told, by a writer with insight, compassion, and talent to burn.”
—Michael Rowe, author of Enter, Night and Other Men’s Sons

“Shirts and Skins is authentic in its pathos, eloquent in its delivery, and well worth the read.”
—Kyle Thomas Smith, Edge

“Each story brilliantly captures a mood and paints a vivid picture... I’m not a huge fan of coming out stories, but this one I can highly recommend, because I feel it is more about overcoming a lifetime of bad choices to finally savor that sweet wine of triumph. It is about battling one’s culture and past, to find one’s identity. Shirts and Skins is a story that, I feel, everyone can relate to.”
—Alan Chin, Examiner.com

“An intriguing, at times disturbing, peek into the mind of a character who is only half aware of his own feelings. Luscombe is clearly after something different in this book: it is less about coming out than it is about going in. Josh’s repression is far more interesting than his liberation, which is a much more familiar story. In his adherence to the closet, as in his father’s depression-fueled withdrawal from the world, we see the tragedy of self-denial. Unlike his father, though, Josh eventually finds the strength to pull himself out of denial and embrace his truth. It’s a journey that still resonates for us all.”
—Lewis DeSimone, Lambda Literary

“In the depths of despair, standing outside looking in, Josh touches the hearts of those who have lost their way to their dreams and aspirations. His inability to find himself finally leads to an epiphany of his hidden, yet acknowledged, desires.”
—American Library Association GLBTRT Newsletter
Charles Springer has degrees in anthropology and is an award-winning painter. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is widely published in the small presses. His first collection, Juice, is forthcoming from Knut House Press. He writes from Pennsylvania.
Laughing

Next to me my boyfriend wakes up laughing. He says sleep makes him hold it back because he might wake others up. He says in some beds, it’s against the law and you can wake up with a ticket under your pillow or stuck in your ass crack. Now he’s got me laughing and the dog showing his back teeth and drooling. Now the dog is pissing himself. Without so much as a tickle, my boyfriend and I are too. We get out the garden hose to hose off. Next thing you know the whole neighborhood is out washing their cars, laughing at the spots they’ve missed on their fenders. Fortunately the city shuts the water off and my boyfriend and I check into a motel until everything dries out. There’s where we see ourselves on the 6 o’clock news holding back laughing at the anchor’s gone limp coiffure.

—Charles Springer
We arrived in St. Thomas early on a Saturday afternoon. Though it was only mid-May, it was already very hot, a shock to those of us still recovering from the winter in New England. Mark and I had taken a 6:00 a.m. flight to San Juan, where we met our boat mates, then took a puddle jumper to St. Thomas. I had expected it to be lush, like Puerto Rico, but much of the island was rocky, more desert than jungle. The small airport was crowded with both locals and tourists, the latter identifiable by their expensive clothing and dazed expressions. The space was noisy and felt pleasantly foreign.

Mark took charge and commandeered a taxi. He had been to St. Thomas many times and knew exactly what needed to be done. After we piled our luggage and the Styrofoam containers of food into the boot of
the jeep, the driver took us out to the marina and deposited us near the dock. Mark and Kirk then went on with the taxi driver to a market to buy fresh fish, milk, eggs, and produce. John and I stayed with the gear, moving everything via the long wooden walkways to our rental boat, the *Dancing Bear*.

She was a beauty, forty-three feet long, a heavy two-masted vessel with a wishbone rig that allowed the sails to be trimmed to suit the wind. Her decks gleamed white in the bright sun. Everything was clean and polished, including the wheel. Below-decks there was a galley, a crawl space for the engine, two berths forward where John and Kirk would sleep, and a tiny aft cabin where Mark and I bunked. I found the arrangement of space below claustrophobic, but I figured it would be manageable, given that presumably we would spend every waking hour on deck.

After stowing all our gear and the many bags of groceries Mark and Kirk brought back, we had a quick lunch and met with the leasing agent. Mark demonstrated his knowledge of handling the boat and paid the balance of our deposit. His signature on the contract made him completely accountable for the yacht and its passengers. Since both John and Kirk had some experience with sailing, they acted as crew. Knowing practically nothing about the tasks at hand, I tried to stay out of the way as we cast off from the dock and threaded our way through the marina. At last we headed out into the great blue sea.

We sailed for at least several hours every day, rain or shine, moving from one area to another: Trunk Bay, Robbins Bay, Great Bay. The vistas were even more beautiful than I had imagined. The Caribbean is filled with tiny islands, some just large outcroppings of rock, scrubby, mountainous, and dry. Brown-green shapes rose in the distance as we flew along in our boat. Mark used the engine as little as possible, except when it rained or there was no wind. The sun was fierce, especially in the late afternoon, and we kept the canopy up much of the time. We rarely wore more than our swimming trunks from one end of the day to the other. It felt sybaritic to me, so much flooding my senses: heat, light, the air on my skin as the boat cut through the waves.

Each day began with checking the anchor, which Mark did several times during the night as well, to make sure it had held and that we had not drifted. He then spent time poring over the charts to see where we might head and how the weather looked. We ate breakfast and did chores, then checked the lines, the supplies, and the engine before leaping off the boat into the sea.

At first, the others did the leaping, and I would climb down the ladder with my life vest on and reach out for a hand before I would let go of the ladder. I loved the feeling of the water, the color and all the life in it, but I still carried years of phobia about drowning. Both Mark and John stood in for Coach St. Onge, encouraging me, supporting my body when I would sputter. Snorkeling did not come naturally to me, despite my daily attempts to master it. John had a fit when he saw the fins Mark had encouraged me to buy, big heavy rubber things that were meant for scuba diving. Mark, being thrifty, said he hoped we would scuba one day; John, being pragmatic, knew that I would learn to snorkel a lot faster wearing the lightweight blue silicone fins he had, and he insisted I use them throughout the trip. No matter where we swam or snorkeled, I was hyperconscious of where I was, and for the first few days I was relieved when the adventure was over and I could clamber back up the ladder to the relative safety of the boat.

Kirk had more experience than John with sailboats, so he assumed the role of first mate, which meant, among other things, that he helped with securing the anchor. At the end of each sail, as we prepared to settle into a new bay for the night, Mark would recheck the charts and then station Kirk at the helm while
Mark lowered the anchor from the front. Kirk had to move the boat very slowly forward and back until Mark felt the pull that indicated the anchor had set. This was a hit or miss proposition, as we soon found out. Mark would call out "forward" or "reverse," and Kirk would respond with the boat in gear, then Mark would yell, "No, no, Kirk, too far! Stop!" When Mark did this the second time, Kirk lost it.

"Goddam it, Mark, stop yelling at me! You said 'Forward!'"

"I know I said forward, but I only meant a little bit forward, not ten feet."

"Well, how the fuck am I supposed to know how much forward you mean? Might you be a little more precise?"

John told me the first afternoon that our job during anchoring was "to look pretty and stay out of the way." He also dubbed this daily event "the anchor snit." John and I were both conflict-avoidant, so after that first day we would go down to the galley and begin cocktail hour during the anchor snit, no matter the hour, emerging onto the deck with a large pitcher of rum punch once the yelling had abated. There never seemed to be any bad feelings between Mark and Kirk, so everyone could move happily into the next phase, which lasted several hours.

We played music on the cassette player during cocktail hour, ranging from Ella Fitzgerald and Dinah Washington to Peter Allen and Bette Midler. Mark usually swam a bit, a break from being in charge, and then set about preparing meals, ably assisted by Kirk. They both loved fine food. Mark had purchased excellent cuts of meat in Boston, prepared vegetables and stews which he had heat-sealed and frozen, and to which they added fresh produce. They also grilled the fish from the shopping expedition in St. Thomas. Our breakfasts and lunches were usually simple, but each dinner was an event. There was the occasional cooking snit when Mark made a preparation choice that Kirk disagreed with or vice versa. Nevertheless, dinner was generally my favorite time of day. The late afternoon and evening on a sailboat in good weather is as close to heaven as I imagine I will get in this life. Rum punch was plentiful, as well as wine with dinner, and the food was superb.

I announced one night at dinner, "You know what? This is male bonding! Drinking, farting, gross jokes, peeing off the side of the boat. I love it."

"Darling," Kirk said, "straight men would never put the effort into food that Uncle Mark and I have done."

We had taken to calling each other "Uncle" for some reason that no one could remember.

"Then it's gay male bonding," I replied. "And straight men don't call each other 'darling,' Uncle Kirk."

"Not unless they're giving or receiving a blow job," John chimed in.

And so it went. John and I did all the clean up, starting with dishes and ending with scrubbing the grill, which got a lot of use. Kirk and Mark would kick back and relax, Mark often dropping off to sleep in my lap when I'd sit down with them after KP duty. We'd watch the sunset fade, then clouds move across the face of the moon, which was waxing into fullness during our week on the water. Mark and I were both Cancerians, and I felt caught between moon and sea in a delightful way. The universe felt very large.
I had spent limited time with Kirk and John before this trip, and I discovered that they could not have been more different from each other. Kirk was high strung, funny and quick-witted, but prone to taking offense and flying off the handle. John had an ever-present grin, a silly sense of humor, and an easy-going nature. He exuded an effortless maleness that I found both disarming and attractive. Mark was the link to each of us, and there was a moment at dinner early on when Kirk and I realized, as we had at Craig Jackson’s apartment, that we had each slept with Mark at the starting point of the relationship. After teasing Mark a bit about “flaunting his tail feathers,” we agreed that most friendships we had with other gay men had begun as sexual encounters. The Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969 had galvanized gay men and lesbians to fight police oppression and to organize politically. By this time the four of us had all been involved in the movement for years and had a defiant attachment to sexual freedom.

As our captain and chef, Mark felt the weight of his responsibilities. He didn’t sleep particularly well and was always ready to tuck in soon after dinner. Kirk would usually go below when Mark did, and their banter carried to the deck as they brushed their teeth. I wondered if Kirk had a crush on Mark. There was an emotional intimacy to their spats and their easy laughter. The thought made me more curious than jealous. In some subtle way we seemed to have paired off, Kirk with Mark and John with me. After John and I finished cleaning up the dishes, we would lie on the upper deck, still in swimsuits, watch the stars and drink more rum, Anejo this time, a Bacardi rum that tastes almost like liqueur. We would make jokes about the anchor snits or other amusing things that had happened during the day, and we also lay in companionable silence watching the night sky. My father and John’s mother had both been severely alcoholic when we were growing up. In obvious and not-so-obvious ways, our lives had been shaped by this fact. We traded stories from childhood, both painful and funny. Until late in the evening we lay under the stars, brilliant in the Caribbean sky, sipping our Anejo. By midweek I had a terrific crush on John, the adolescent version, supported by his mischievous humor and unfailing thoughtfulness. And he was handsome as the devil.

This kind of time with other men was new for me. From the age of fourteen I had worked after school and on weekends to earn the money for my school clothes, books, and tuition to a Jesuit boys’ high school. I had never been to camp, played team sports, or joined clubs. I had no idea how “normal” boys bonded in those situations. My sexual attraction to other boys isolated me in high school, and tortured me. While my nature is essentially social, the person I presented and the person I experienced myself to be were very different from each other. On the boat I felt a familiar discomfort in not knowing exactly how to belong. What were the rules in this “club”? I knew how to be in a couple with Mark in our ordinary life, but what about here, where our foursome was our whole world for a week, and in this club, in which the boys were gay and I was the only one who had not had sex with all three of the others?

For months I had anticipated that the trip would be very romantic with Mark, but the reality of four adults on a medium-sized sailboat meant that privacy was nonexistent. And Mark was preoccupied with all he had to manage. We had sex a few times early in the morning, but in a haphazard kind of way, more for relief than romance. We were good-humored and easy with each other but not emotionally intimate. I began to wonder if something had changed, if in the natural course of being together we were becoming “buddies.”

I was also aware of the deep level of respect I felt for Mark’s leadership. He was competent and tireless, managing the boat, getting us from one bay to another, supervising meals and cleanup. I could easily
envision how this could be a career and a way of life for him, but where I might fit into that felt uncertain. Over the week I developed some skills in helping with the sails and taking my turn at the wheel. But the experience felt exotic, something to do occasionally and enjoy with friends but not what I could imagine as a lifestyle. This was something else to ponder: how could we possibly construct a future that worked for both of us?

Midweek we crossed from the American to the British Virgin Islands. That morning John, Kirk and I left Mark aboard the *Dancing Bear* and rowed into Road Town, on Tortola, where we had our passports stamped and paid duty to the British. The Customs House was unprepossessing, an old building with bales of hay stacked against an outside wall and a goat wandering around the dusty yard. An officious woman named Miss Meyers told us in her clipped British accent that, before she could perform her duties, we were to “make a neat line in front of the kiosk,” even though there were only the three of us and one man from another boat. We then walked around the area, enjoying the odd sensation of regaining our land legs. Kirk, who had visited the island as a child, surprised us by reciting verbatim the words on a plaque commemorating the visit of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, to Tortola in 1966.

By the time we rowed back out to the boat, clouds were gathering. Mark had used the time we were gone to reorganize the lines on the deck and straighten out the galley. He looked preoccupied and encouraged us to “step on it” as we came aboard.

“Tie the dinghy securely,” he directed. “We’re going to have some weather. I want you to make sure your things are secure below and let’s get out our raingear.”

John, Kirk and I said, “Aye aye, Captain!” in unison, which garnered a laugh from Mark, and we scurried below. We emerged back on deck promptly, all wearing ponchos, as the wind began to pick up. Mark took the helm as Kirk released the anchor and we headed into the wind toward Robbins Bay.

Soon the rain began pelting down, and Mark and Kirk frequently shifted sails to maximize using the wind. Once underway, we huddled under the canopy and discussed what we’d seen in Tortola, making jokes about Miss Meyers and her goat. Very slowly the wind died down, but the rain continued to fall in sheets. Mark increased the motor and we continued on our way for several hours. I made sandwiches and brought them on deck. Then Kirk went below to read, John to nap, so Mark and I had a little time to ourselves.

“Do you get nervous when it rains like this?” I asked. Mark seemed surprised at the question.

“Do I look nervous?” he asked.

“No, I guess not. You actually look very cute with your hood up. Sexy, even.”

“Men!” he said, quoting a familiar line from my mother. “You’re all alike. Are you nervous?”

“Not in the least. It’s weird how secure I feel with you. It’s as if, as long as you’re in charge, I don’t have a thing to worry about.”

“Well, there’s nothing to worry about today, that’s for sure. Are you having a good time?”
“Absolutely. I’ve loved every day.” While that was an oversimplification, this didn’t seem like the time to open a discussion of my ruminations.

“That makes me very happy,” Mark said. “I want you to learn to love the water like I do.”

We motored for another hour or so. The rain eased up, and I called Kirk to come help as we entered Robbins Bay. By the time we anchored, the rainsqualls were intermittent.

It remained overcast and humid through the evening and night. We had to have dinner below, Mark heating a stew he had prepared in Boston, Kirk parceling out what we had left for salad. It was hot and sticky in the cabin and we all got cranky. John had the patience of a three year old and kept irritating Kirk, interrupting and teasing him. Finally John and I were able to clean up from dinner and return to the deck, sprayed with Cutters repellant to fend off the mosquitoes, and drank rum while Mark and Kirk read below. “Another night in Paradise,” John said as we clinked glasses and watched the moon try to poke through the clouds. The air was cooling off and I was aware of John’s body lying next to mine on the upper deck. I wondered idly what he would do if I initiated something, but despite copious amounts of alcohol, common sense said, “Don’t fuck up a good thing.” Mark and I had an open sexual contract with several agreed upon limits, which included not sleeping with each other’s friends and not doing anything that would embarrass either of us. Clear breach of contract here, I thought to myself, and sighed. At least I was spared the risk of rejection.

The next morning was Friday, the beginning of our sixth and last full day on the boat. We all awoke early and were greeted by a luscious sunrise, layers of grey/blue changing to pink, then an intense orange/red. Dozens of pelicans were diving for fish. They looked prehistoric, long skinny birds with a huge wingspan. They would circle and circle, then—*splat!*—plummet into the water to snatch up a fish in their beaks. As they swallowed, they wiggled their tail feathers like hootchie kootchie dancers.

After a quick swim we ate breakfast and decided to head back to Peter Island, our favorite spot from the week. The wind was up and we had a spectacular sail. I’d been taking a turn at the helm for several days and felt thrilled on that day to be sitting in the Captain’s seat, wheel in hand, skimming across the water as the others adjusted sails or lay in the sun reading or dozing. I reflected on my last few years in Princeton before I moved to Boston, how constrained my life had felt. I never imagined that this feeling of freedom was possible.

Great Harbor and Peter Island did not disappoint. We anchored early in the afternoon and had plenty of time to read, chat quietly on the deck, and swim. By this point we were unselfconscious about being naked in front of each other, and John asked me to put suntan lotion on his back and the backs of his legs before he put his swimsuit on. It was briefly painful, a moment full of desire on my part, but in no time we were all jumping off the deck into the sea.

I never did fulfill my hope of snorkeling without the life jacket, but I did swim without it, both on my stomach and back. Even without masks we could see the remarkable variety of ocean life beneath us, brain and fan coral in fantastical shapes, fish darting in and out of their crevices. I jumped off the boat over and over and even made one aborted dive, which ended as a belly flop. It made no difference. We were all sublimely happy, and my mates praised my progress.
For our final dinner Mark grilled a butterflied leg of lamb, the last of the food prepared and frozen in Boston. It was perfectly tender and flavorful, as were the grilled potatoes. Kirk mixed up the last of the vegetables and we celebrated the feast with wine and music, Peter Allen belting out the lyrics to “I Could Have Been a Sailor” and Mark finally leading us in the old sea shanty, “Blow The Man Down,” eliciting a few bawdy changes to the lyrics.

As the full moon rose, John, Kirk, and I each made a toast to our Captain, who was tired and happy and only a little drunk. “Bravo!” we cried, pouring more rum, and we vowed to repeat the trip together in a year. We stayed up late, finally and with great care making our way down the ladder to brush our teeth and crawl into our berths for the last time. I curled around Mark, tucking him against my body. Just before I fell asleep I realized I had not had a last Anejo with John on the deck. I thought of having applied the suntan lotion to his legs and smiled to myself. At least that was something.

The following morning we were slow to move, feeling the effects of the heavy dinner and alcohol. We took turns working on deck and working below, cleaning and securing what remained and packing what went with us. Kirk pulled up the anchor for the last time and we headed toward St. Thomas, less than two hours away. Very little was said as we enjoyed a cool, clear morning, finally finding our way back into the marina.

Mark went to the office to complete the business of returning the boat, while the rest of us unloaded the gear and carried it up to the gate. Our original plan was to stay in St. Thomas overnight, then fly back to Puerto Rico for our flights home. But after looking at the dusty and crowded streets of Charlotte Amalie, Mark said, “I have an idea. Let’s go to San Juan for the night.” The crew cheered. Mark made a phone call to the airport and had us on a Prinair flight in slightly less than ninety minutes.

When we entered the airport in San Juan, we were buffeted by noise and stimulation. Other than our brief encounter with Miss Meyers, we had spoken to no one but each other for a week. Here at the busiest airport in the Caribbean, there were thousands of people, all seeming to talk at once. It felt like the Tower of Babel. We made our way to the baggage area, having no idea where we would go from there.

I called the Beach House from a pay phone, but they were completely booked, so we looked in a gay guide that Mark had brought and chose Arcos Blancos. It was also on Condado Beach, but the atmosphere was totally different. The two large white houses with arches were protected by a high security wall, which prevented passers-by from seeing the swimming pool where gay men swam or sunbathed, many of them naked. There was a bar and restaurant, open to the breeze from the ocean on the beach side, that was very crowded and cruisy. After a week sailing, the whole scene was a shock to the system.

Mark and I showered together, luxuriating in the abundance of hot water, shampooing each other’s hair to remove errant bits of sand and salt. He then lay down on the bed and instantly fell asleep. I was tempted to crawl in next to him but could hear the call of disco music, so I went out to the bar, where I found John and Kirk. They had conveniently positioned themselves so that they could see both the sunbathers and swimmers at the pool and also see the muscle boys walking along the beach. A handsome Latin waiter appeared at my elbow with a pina colada and purred, “Welcome to Arcos Blancos.”
In retrospect I would probably have benefitted more from the nap, but the three of us drank and laughed our way through a few pleasurable hours of cocktails and cruising. By the time Mark appeared, it was time to organize for dinner. We changed clothes and took a taxi to Old San Juan, where we savored our favorite moments from the trip over a great meal in the courtyard of Los Galanos. By the time we got back to Arcos Blancos I was exhausted. John and Kirk wanted to go dancing, and I made a weak effort to talk Mark into it, but I knew there was no chance. He graciously suggested that I “have a night out with the boys,” but I followed him to our room and fell upon the bed, still fully clothed. He helped me undress and we talked briefly about seizing the moment, but this moment was clearly about sleep.

We made up for that lost opportunity early the next morning. I had worried that the “buddy connection” I’d felt with Mark on the boat was a transition in the relationship to something less intimate, that maybe my expectations for a deeper relationship were too high. But our lovemaking was intense and passionate, with all the elements of lust and affection that made sex with Mark unique. Once again I was flooded with love.

The four of us had a quick brunch on the patio at the guesthouse and headed back to the airport. The goodbyes to Kirk and John were good-humored and sweet. After just twenty-four hours back on land, I was an adult again, not a fifteen-year-old boy with a crush. When I hugged John goodbye, I felt simply affection. Mostly.

Mark’s flight for Miami left an hour or so after mine to Boston, so he came with me to my gate. It felt odd to be without our crewmates, odder still to be in such a noisy and public place together. I wanted badly to hold his hand, but a kid on a bicycle had yelled, “Faggot motherfuckers!” as we’d loaded our luggage into the taxi at Arcos Blancos, and I felt self-conscious and mildly paranoid in this crowd of people.

“We seem always to be saying hello and goodbye,” I said.

“We’re still just getting to know each other,” he replied. “I learned some new things about you on this trip.”

“Like…?”

“How silly you can be.”

“I assume that’s a reference to screaming and camping with John?” I felt myself tense a bit.

“Yes. And you don’t need to ask: I love you more for it. It’s a part of you that I don’t seem to bring out.”

I laughed. “Your sense of humor is more refined, I think.”

“Either that, or I’m too tightly wound.” There was a little silence, then he quoted Popeye: “I y’am what I y’am.”

“You’re a wonderful man, Mark Halberstadt. I really love you, and I’m beginning to trust the love, that it’s got a life of its own. I still don’t have the faintest idea how we’re going to work this thing out, where we’ll live or what we’ll do, but I want it.”

A woman’s voice announced my flight over the loudspeaker and we stood up. I had teased him earlier about kissing me goodbye at the airport, never imagining he’d actually do it, but he leaned up and kissed me firmly on the lips.
“I want it too,” he said.

_________

Michael H. Ward is a retired psychotherapist. He was instrumental in the development of *The Shared Heart*, which presents the portraits and coming out stories of 40 gay and lesbian teenagers. *The Shared Heart* won the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Book Award in the nonfiction category in 1998. It was also on ALA’s Best Books for Young Adults list in 1999. Happily married, Michael lives on Cape Cod with his husband, Moe, and cat, Jack. His new memoir, *The Sea is Quiet Tonight*, recounts the early years of the AIDS epidemic in Boston.
“One reads Love, Christopher Street to see how other people, like and unlike yourself, encountered and endured and learned from New York, and that’s why this extremely varied anthology is always interesting, even when tangential, and why it’s often moving.”
—Andrew Holleran, The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide

“No matter what your relationship is with New York City, you’re bound to find something here to make you smile, laugh or be homesick. And if you are one of those few people who have no relationship with the Big Apple, maybe this will spark your desire to establish one.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“Love, Christopher Street will leave readers impressed, inspired and enlightened. Despite their differences in age, gender and ethnic origin, these essayists all share a fondness for New York, and their combined stories are proof that the city’s immeasurable impact on LGBT art and artists continues today.”
—Christopher Verleger, Edge

A TOP TEN FAVORITE BOOK
ON THE
2013
AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
OVER THE RAINBOW LIST
OF LGBT BOOKS FOR ADULT READERS

A memoir from the noted psychologist and co-author of The Joy of Gay Sex about the author’s activism on gay issues in the medical and psychiatry professions and his personal relationship with a younger man and his partner’s decline into addictions.

“Charles Silverstein has written a memoir about the great love of his life—an eccentric, androgynous genius whom Charles adored and cared for despite all his flaws and addictions. Most writers idealize their lovers, especially if they’ve died young, but Silverstein presents his William with all his charm and sexual allure and intellectual brilliance—and all his maddening faults. I wept at the end of this brave, honest book—and I suspect you will too.”
—Edmund White, author of City Boy and Sacred Monsters

For the Ferryman
A Personal History
Charles Silverstein
www.chelseastationeditions.com
**The Temperamentals**

a new play by Jon Marans

2012 American Library Association Stonewall Honor Book in Literature

“Old-school theatrical storytelling meets gay liberation history in Marans’ off-Broadway play, based with emotional veracity, campy humor and provocative sexiness on the lives of the Mattachine pioneers who founded the first gay-rights organization in pre-Stonewall America. Introductions by political activist David Mixner and actor Michael Urie (of *Ugly Betty* fame)—he plays fashion designer Rudi Gernreich—provide cultural and theatrical context. Not every play translates well to the printed page, but *Temperamentals*—code for homosexual in the 1950s, it seems—reads like a good short story.”

—Richard Labonté, *Bookmarks*

“Temperamental” was code for “homosexual” in the early 1950s, part of a secret language gay men used to communicate. *The Temperamentals*, Jon Marans’ hit off-Broadway play, tells the story of two men—the communist Harry Hay and the Viennese refugee and designer Rudi Gernreich—as they fall in love while building the Mattachine Society, the first gay rights organization in the pre-Stonewall United States. This special edition includes Marans’ script and production photos from the off-Broadway production of the play, along with a foreword by actor Michael Urie; an introduction by activist David Mixner; a look at Gernreich’s fashion career by journalist Joel Nikolaou; and an afterword on Harry Hay by journalist Michael Bronski.

“The Intellectual, emotional and sexual.”

—*The New York Times*
A contemporary story of betrayal and new beginnings, *A Strange and Separate People* by Jon Marans is an emotionally rich new play about a young Manhattan couple who find their world shaken when a gay doctor’s passion for his new religious beliefs challenges theirs and questions the meaning of love. This special edition includes Marans’ script along with a foreword by the playwright, theatrical production photos, special selected material, and afterwords by LGBT activists Jayson Littman and Chaim Levin.

“This engrossing three-character drama addresses the struggle for many to accept their homosexuality while adhering to their religious beliefs, in this case those of Orthodox Judaism… the play explores intriguing questions and yields affecting observations as it considers the courage required to make waves in any environment, from the synagogue to the New York State Legislature.”

—David Rooney, *The New York Times*

“A brilliant and insightful play about the intersection of God’s law and man’s love. “A Strange and Separate People” is rich in drama and Jewish tradition. The title comes from comments supposedly made by the late Queen Mother, who said she liked the Jews ‘very much, but they were a separate people and a strange people’ — perhaps in more ways than she ever expected.”

—Curt Schleier, *The Forward*
"A delightfully spooky, often kooky, gay vision quest. Currier’s Avery Dalyrymple is larger-than-life and intricately flawed, and the fact that he just can’t seem to get out of his own way makes him primed for misadventure and gay mayhem. One of Currier’s strengths has always been the ability to soak his narrative in a rich, authentic ambiance and *The Wolf at the Door* is no exception, with sentences that resonate with the decadent rhythms of the French Quarter and paragraphs that positively drip with Southern gothic moodiness. Genre fans will find plenty to appreciate in Currier’s otherworldly version of *It’s a Wonderful Life* fused with all the ensemble wit of *Tales of the City* and the regional gothic texture of Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire*. Savor this one like a bowlful of spicy jambalaya and a snifter of fine aged bourbon on a hot, humid night."

—Vince Liaguno, *Dark Scribe Magazine*

Praise for *The Wolf at the Door*

"It’s not easy to classify Currier’s novel. The New Orleans setting leads naturally to spirited spookiness, with supernatural proceedings and ghostly manifestations, including that of a gorgeous young man, the late partner of Mack, who is dying of HIV in an upstairs apartment—adding a touch of realistic melancholy to the tale. And the story is also infused with erotic passages. So let’s just classify the novel as really good—a masterful blend of genres that comes together like succulent literary gumbo. Currier’s crew of querulous aging queens, offbeat beautiful boys and assorted oddball friends constitute an endearing found family of queers, while the author’s historical flashbacks conjure the Big Easy’s atmospheric past."

—Richard Labonté, *Bookmarks*

"Currier is a master storyteller of speculative fiction, and this novel is unique in that it takes a group of unbelievers (whom I can identify with) and gradually forces them to accept the reality of what they are experiencing. Very creative story, told with a dry wit by a group of highly diverse, realistic, flawed individuals who become links to the past and instrumental in helping some tortured souls find their rest. Outstanding for those who appreciate this genre of fiction. Five ghostly stars out of five."

—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*

"Refreshingly light and witty.... The chatty first person narrative is augmented by historically accurate journals, diaries, and slave narratives. The bright, hopeful tone of the prose and Currier’s love for his imperfect characters makes this a charming read."

—Craig Gidney, *Lambda Literary*

"Stirring a gumbo pot of characters and subplots, Currier keeps his unlikely mix of ingredients at a perfect simmer as they meld into a singularly delectable story with a sense of place so rich, readers may be enticed to head to Louisiana and experience the novel’s setting firsthand."

—Jim Gladstone, *Passport*
“In his introduction, James Currier writes of forming the desire a number of years ago to move beyond his reputation as an AIDS writer. In reinventing himself, he remained concerned as ever with issues relevant to the lives of contemporary gay men. Setting down a list of topics to address, he included—substance abuse, gay marriage, serving in the military, domestic abuse in gay relationships, hate crimes, homophobia, and living outside of urban areas—all represented here. At the same time, Currier began a study of classic ghost stories, a genre that had fascinated him since boyhood. (Favorites mentioned are the works of M. R. James, Henry James, E. F. Benson, Edith Wharton, and Ambrose Bierce.) The best of the resulting collection draws upon the past in observing the present, and in doing so never fails to disturb and entertain.”

—Joyce Meggett, ALA GLBTRT Newsletter

Praise for The Haunted Heart and Other Tales

“I am completely amazed by the range of ghost stories in this collection. These are awesome ghost stories, and the literary connections to gay life are deep and complex.”
—Chad Helder, Unspeakable Horror and The Pop-Up Book of Death

“Currier’s characters are sumptuous, his plots are freshly twisted and his prose magnificent. A perfectly chilling collection of tales from one of the modern masters of the genre. Powerful stuff, indeed.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“Currier’s writing is flawless and his knack for conveying emotion, with both the spoken words and thoughts of his characters, is unparalleled. Fans of the author have come to expect that his work isn’t exactly light or escapist, which makes it all the more affecting.”
—Chris Verleger, Edge

“I found each of these stories just as satisfying and unique as a full length novel, so much so that, as I often do with longer stories, I thought about each story for days after I finished reading it. Give it five twisted stars out of five.”
—Bob Lind, Echo Magazine

“Jameson Currier’s The Haunted Heart and Other Tales expands upon the usual ghost story tropes by imbuing them with deep metaphorical resonance to the queer experience. Infused with flawed, three-dimensional characters, this first-rate collection strikes all the right chords in just the right places. Equal parts unnerving and heartrending, these chilling tales are testament to Currier’s literary prowess and the profound humanity at the core of his writing. Gay, straight, twisted like a pretzel...his writing is simply not to be missed by any reader with a taste for good fiction.”
—Vince Liaguno, Dark Scribe Magazine

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
An unexpected encounter with an otherworldly spirit at a holiday party in the Orenda Valley sends Seth Davis, a gay journalist from Manhattan, on a profound religious journey. Along the way, Seth stumbles into a quarreling coven of witches in the charming tourist town of Hope Springs, Pennsylvania, formerly known as Hell’s Ferry, and one of the most haunted destinations in America. As Seth learns more of the town’s remarkable history, he also uncovers his own shocking past, and in order to seek peace for his troubled soul, he must determine the fate of the coven, the town, and the entire Orenda Valley. True Religion, J.L. Weinberg’s debut novel, is a genre-bending fusion of paranormal horror, spiritual therapy, American history, and New Age enlightenment.

“Weinberg thoughtfully stitches together several different traditions—Christian, Celtic, Egyptian and Native American, in particular—into a synthesis that delves deep into the profound without becoming too new-agey. True Religion thus serves as an invocation to a new era of religious integration and earth revitalization. The effect is like getting breathlessly zipped through a haunted house in a spiraling cart while being schooled on (local) spiritual philosophy.” —C. Todd White, Out in Jersey

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
“Simply put, Michael Graves’ debut novel, Parade, magnifies the talent on display in his short fiction.”
—Tom Cardamone, Lambda Literary

“Michael Graves has a keen eye of the farce and facts of life. Parade is a page-turner of surprise that holds the attention and a skillfully crafted novel to be savored for its uniqueness.”
—Bill Biss, Rainbow Reads, Edge

“An entertaining story full of timeless lessons and ingredients for living. A touching novel that deserves to have a significant place in LGBT literature.
—Jason Anthony, Chelsea Station

Parade
a novel by Michael Graves
978-1-937627-26-3
$18
Also available in digital editions

“Dirty One is a searing, single-sitting read. Michael Graves employs a masterfully minimalist prose style that gives each of these stories the razor-sharp edge of brutal, unapologetic poetry.”
—Christopher Rice, New York Times Bestselling author of The Moonlit Earth

Dirty One
stories by Michael Graves
978-0-9832851-0-6
$16
Also available in digital editions

Dirty One is wild, heartbroken, funny, and fresh. Michael Graves writes like the heir to George Saunders and A.M. Homes, but he breaks them down, turns them inside out, and makes them all his own.”
—Paul Lisicky, author of Lawn Boy, Famous Builder and The Burning House
Dennis Rhodes poems have been collected in *Spiritus Pizza and other poems*, *Entering Dennis*, and most recently, *The Letter I*. His work has been published in *The Jersey Journal*, *New York Newsday*, *Fine Gardening*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Alembic*, *Chelsea Station*, and many other publications.
Cache

Love letters don't lie
least of all yours which I
have kept for twenty years
in an elegant tin box
once full of chocolates--
on those rare occasions
when I see you, with or without
your long-time lover, I sometimes
go home to read them just for spite
I savor the words you labored over
to get the feeling or sentiment
just right; those letters blare
with the dulcet tones of truth
A certain part of your heart is still mine.

—Dennis Rhodes
Icy paused at the doorway to the living room and pressed her clenched fist tight against her forehead. In her left hand she carried Robbie’s French Horn.

“Icy?” Darrell was settled deep into his lounge chair when he looked up and saw her. “You all right?” He was running for the West Virginia state legislature and had been going over his speech to be delivered the next day at the Legion Hall.

“It’s about Robbie’s ashes.” Robbie, their son, had been lost to AIDS early that spring of 1988. “I’ve gotten so used to them being here. With us. And now they’ll be in the river.”

“That’s what he wanted.” Darrell sat up.
“I know that. But just having them here. In the house. Well, I’ll miss them.”

“He loved Cheat River. I taught him to swim at Stuart’s Park. Like my daddy taught me.” Darrell thought of the many Boy Scout hikes and all the camping he had done growing up during the Depression and World War II. There was a short cut to Cheat River and Stuart Park but a scary one. The railroad tunnel through Kelly Mountain was an early test for any boy in the area. It made the five mile hike a good mile and a half shorter. Darrell had conquered his fear and huddled into a shallow wall niche as the train roared by him when he was a Cub Scout.

He kept his adventure a secret from his parents, but friends spoke of his daring to their folks and word got back. Questioned by his dad as to the truth of the rumor, Darrell confessed. He had his butt booted good for being so foolhardy. Now, he smiled at the memory.

Darrell found out it was Bunny Atkinson who had tattled, and he challenged him to a fist fight. They each had a bloody nose by the time Mr. Holloway, the science teacher, discovered the fight back of the junior high school and separated them. Chores were assigned to each by the principal, and Darrell got his butt kicked again. Bunny and Darrell had become good friends and now, grown up and parents themselves, they golfed together.

“It’s so pretty there.” Icy spoke softly as she sat on the sofa, the horn beside her.

“Where are you going with his horn?” The cool, gleaming metal reminded him so much of Robbie. In his last two years of high school Robbie had been first chair.

“I thought I’d polish it.”

“Today? We’ve got a lot going on.” Darrell gestured to the notes spread across his lap. He tried to block the thought of whether Robbie had disobeyed and braved the tunnel as he had done. If he did, Darrell hadn’t heard, and now he would never know.

Darrell wondered again, for maybe the umpteenth time, when did Robbie start thinking that he was attracted to other boys? Had Robbie experimented with his Boy Scout buddies? Darrell had never even dared the “You show me yours and I’ll show you mine,” when the other boys displayed themselves. The thoughts of his boyhood bothered him now as they hadn’t before Robbie died. And, too, for the first time in years, he had dreamed of the Sergeant’s drunken advances in Korea. The shocking, brutal attempt to seduce him had left a far deeper mark than he ever acknowledged. But Robbie’s death had roused that long buried, sleeping nightmare.

Icy’s voice rattled on. “It’s something of Robbie’s to be here with us after we scatter his ashes.”

“What?” His reverie had blocked whatever Icy said. Taking a deep breath he made a stab at the lost conversation. “You know, I’ll always think it was that Tom who got Robbie sick.”

“Darrell, it doesn’t matter. They’re both gone now.”
“Yeah.” Darrell felt it best to end this turn of the conversation. “Time to finish up my speech. Hank and Judy and the kids will be coming over, and I’ve got to get this ready. You know Bush will be riding Reagan’s coattails this fall.” Darrell shook his head in disbelief. “I have a tough fight on my hands.”

Icy continued her defense of Tom. “He was a nice boy. Good family and all.”

Resigned, Darrell finally addressed his true feelings. “I didn’t much care for him. I had to grit my teeth when he was here. He was just too, well, too, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. I liked him.” Icy stopped as she tried to shush the persistent conversations playing over and over in her mind. They had begun the day after Robbie’s death. Today, it was the voice of Tom’s mother, inviting Darrell and her to Oregon. “If you come west, you must stay with us. Robbie was such a gracious host when we visited in New York City last spring.” Icy pushed her fingers, hard, against her temples and murmured, “Oh, my.”

“Are you okay?” Darrell’s question revealed his concern.

Using her index finger Icy traced the big bell of the French Horn nestled in her arms. “I’m fine. Tom’s parents are both teachers. Like you. Out in Portland.”

“I know that. But why did Robbie have to bring him here?”

“They were together.”

“I could never figure out how that boy got through service.”

“Like all the other boys got through it. He was a soldier.” There was starch in her reply. After all, Icy had been defending Robbie to his dad as long as she could remember.

Darrell had used the word “neat” to describe Tom in a conversation with Robbie. “He’s a little too neat, don’t you think?”

“If you mean precise, yes, I guess he is. He’s a painter,” and Robbie had walked away before Darrell could comment further.

Darrell felt like he was walking on eggs the entire time the two of them were visiting. How could this happen to his only son. Queer? Darrell hated that word, but he also hated to even think the term homosexual. And when Robbie confided to him that he was gay, that word, too, became difficult.

“Daddy, it’s the way he was born. He’s still the same son, the little brother I’m so proud of.” Judy, backed up by Hank, tried to soften the obvious shock it had been to Darrell.

Again, Darrell’s train of thought was punctured by Icy as she rattled on. “Robbie never talked much about Vietnam. They both survived that awful mess and still died so young. Oh, Darrell.” Icy started to cry.

Darrell knew this would happen. Too often he had witnessed Icy’s habit of worrying a subject, shaking it like a dog would shake a stick. Pushing at the concern, picking at it until the only relief was in tears. It was not unexpected, and he was prepared. A bit anyway. “Hey, get over here. Come to Papa.” Darrell opened his arms to embrace Icy.
BACK ON CHEAT
Stories of West Virginia

GARRISON PHILLIPS

CHELSEA STATION
Icy carefully laid the horn on the sofa cushion. She crossed the room and snuggled into Darrell's embrace. His touch always quieted her, even after all these years. "Oh, Darrell, why did it have to be him?"

"God's will, honey." It was a pat answer, and Darrell hated to use it. But what could he say? Cautiously, softly, he continued, "It's over, Icy, done with. Okay?"

"Sometimes I think I hear him call out to me. 'Mama, Mama,' like when he was little." Icy dried her eyes and stopped crying. She hadn't told Darrell about the voices or the ghostly figures that appeared now and again to her. Last week when she stepped into his old room, bright with the afternoon sun, Robbie was sitting on the bed, a book spread across his lap. He had smiled at her, that broad, beaming smile that had been such a part of him and then, before she could say his name, he was gone. The quick vision had taken her breath away and she gasped, leaning against the door jamb for support. A book was open on the floor beside his bed and the counterpane rumpled as though someone had sat there. She remembered the sun, warm across her shoulders, as she stretched out her hand to call Robbie back into the room. Icy hadn't told Darrell about that either.

"You got to stop thinking about what was. Life goes on, Icy."

"Doctor Harrison said 'Time heals everything,' he reminded me of that. He's such a caring man."

"Are you gonna help me with my speech?"

"Of course. Let me hear what you've written. Now, imagine you're the president delivering the State of the Union speech."

Darrell laughed, "Icy, I'm running for State Legislature."

"So? It's still important. And don't rush."

"You gonna listen or preach?"

"Of course I'll listen. But stand up. That gives you more energy and presence."

"All right, all right." Darrell stood and dropped his notebook onto the chair. "Okay, now, here goes. There were two thousand of us guys saluting that grand old lady as we sailed into New York harbor. The first division to come home from Korea, to bring back the flag, stack arms, and fold the colors until the next time. Bringing Home The Colors, that's what's its called." Darrell paused, proud that he had gotten through the beginning of his speech. "So?"

"Well, Mr. Darrell Benson, I think I'm going to vote for you. That's a lovely start, and you do it good."

"That's to remind folks that I'm a veteran."

"You didn't tell them that Life magazine put it on their cover. I pasted it in my scrapbook. I was so proud of you. We all were. The Army was trying to get all you returning soldiers home by Easter, and everyone in the country had their fingers crossed."

"No time for all of that."
“You flew in that Sunday morning from Washington and when you stepped off the plane I handed you Judy. She was only six weeks old.” Icy laughed, “You were so afraid you would drop her. Oh, such memories.” Icy stopped, gave a little laugh again, and leaned to kiss Darrell on the cheek. “I do go on, don’t I? I have a feeling you’re going to win. I just know it.”

“Anyway, then I have to get into the issues. The landfill and the new water plant and about the schools. A whole bunch of stuff I have on note cards. And about my volunteering instead of waiting to be drafted. Just like I’m stepping up now to represent folks in Charleston.”

Icy laid out the cards on a small table in front of Darrell. They studied them, briefly, and Icy switched two of them. “I think talking about your years as a teacher works better at the closing. Don’t you?”

“Maybe, let me see.” Darrell perused the cards, touching them one at a time as he silently pondered her suggestion. Then, remembering, he blurted, “Oh, did I tell you they’ve gotten three Veterans to be on the stand with me? One each from the Army, Navy and Marines. How about that?”

“You should get all the veterans’ votes.”

“I’ll wear my Army cap, but they’ll be in full dress uniform.”

“I don’t think your friend, your opponent, Mr. Miles Callison, served, did he?” Icy had emphasized “opponent.”

“He had a medical exemption. But Miles has the money and the coal interest on his side.”

“You got lots of teachers. And veterans. They all know you from the Legion Hall.”

Darrell pictured the Legion Hall and thought of the many meetings and social gatherings over the years. In some ways, the Legion Hall was the center of life for the town, certainly for the men and woman who were veterans. When he joined after his discharge in 1954, the oldest members had served in World War I.

One of them, John Barton, an older friend of his father, had been an early hero to him when he was growing up. John was an old man when Darrell was a boy, and many times he had listened to the stories of the trench warfare of World War I. John was a teller at the bank and vacationed every year with Mason Whitehead, the county clerk. John lived down the road and Darrell would see him limp off to the liquor store every Friday afternoon after the bank closed. With his little wicker basket hanging from his arm, he would pick up two bottles of wine. Always two, never more. Once, Darrell heard his dad remark to his mother, “That’s the joy kick for the boy’s weekend.” When Darrell had asked what that meant, he was scolded by his father who said, “His wine and who he shares it with is his business. You pay him respect. He was wounded in France.” Of course, Darrell had heard the whispers about the two old bachelors and their vacation together every summer at Ocean City, Maryland. John lived with his mother until she passed on and Mason lived in the old family farmhouse at the edge of town. But it was an open secret that John was often seen early mornings making his way from Mason’s house into the bank for the day’s work.

In response to neighbors questioning his early morning walk into town, John would say “We gardened late last night so I stayed over.” A simple, direct statement which never changed over the years.
Now, Darrell realized that their relationship probably had been just what folks speculated. Yet no one bothered them, and they were both deacons in the Presbyterian Church.

Darrell wondered if Robbie and Tom would have been like the two old bachelors if they had lived? He was jolted back to the present by the sudden appearance of their daughter, Judy.

Judy burst into the house, shouting, her voice shrill, “Daddy, Daddy, someone painted the garage. Red paint all over the side.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Paint, Daddy. Big letters in red on the garage.”

Hank, Judy’s husband, angrily stepped into the living room. “I guess you haven’t been outside this morning. It must have been done last night.”

“Paint? On the garage?” Darrell dropped his notes and hurried out the door with Hank close behind.

Icy, confused, asked, “What? Someone painted our garage?”

“No, Mama. Just big letters on the side facing the road.”

“Let me see.” Icy pushed past Judy and followed the men out of the house.

Icy, supported by Judy, came back into the house first. They were soon followed by Darrell and Hank.

Quietly, Icy asked, “Why would someone do that? Those big letters smeared all over the side of our garage.”

Darrell cursed, “Damn, damn damn. You can see where they got out of the car ‘cause there’s paint dribbled all across the grass.”

Hank’s anger matched Darrell’s as he blurted, “It’s the damn Republicans. Mike Callison’s men. A sneaky, cheap trick! I’ve never seen anything like this before. Ever!”

“Why AIDS do you think?” Darrell looked around helplessly, truly baffled.

“Oh, Daddy. It’s about Robbie.”

“We said pneumonia in the newspaper. That’s what took him. The doctor even wrote that on the death certificate.”

“Yes, Daddy,” Judy explained. “Pneumonia brought about by AIDS.”

“People know about Robbie? I mean, no one’s said anything like that to me.”

“Oh, Daddy, of course they haven’t. And no one would. But everyone knew about Robbie. Have known for years.”

Carefully, Hank said, “I guess everyone knew Robbie was gay and that he died far too young. And, Darrell, you’re running for State Legislature. Dirty tricks are dirty tricks. As they say, ‘all’s fair in love and war and politics.’”

CHELSEA STATION
The words “love and war” hit Darrell like he’d been punched in the stomach. He got a little sick every time he remembered his one sexual encounter with a man. It was his first week on the front line in Korea, and he had been standing guard duty when the First Sergeant of the company suddenly appeared out of the darkness. O’Reilly was a World War II hero who had been decorated by Eisenhower for parachuting into France before D-Day. O’Reilly was tough, middle aged, ruggedly handsome, and ran the Headquarters Company with a tight, iron fist. Darrell was totally unprepared when the sergeant slammed him against the sandbagged bunker with such force Darrell’s helmet fell off. The sergeant had slapped him across the face, grabbed his throat with both hands and hissed, “One word and you’re court-martialed. My word against yours.” The sergeant whispered, his whiskey breath overpowering as his mouth pressed close to Darrell’s ear, “Say one word and you better head for North Korea ’cause I’ll testify you’re a fag.” Darrell felt his fly roughly pulled open and the hot mouth of the sergeant quickly slobbering over him. He had been so surprised, so frightened at the sergeant’s assault, that sex was beyond him.

The sergeant had avoided Darrell after that night and rotated back to the states the week after the war ended in July. Troops in the Company compared notes and found that several of them had been raped by the sergeant. Not one of the young men reported their encounter to the company commander, and it was known that some had welcomed the sexual release the sergeant offered. He remembered guys talking of several regulars from the motor pool. This had been a shocking revelation to Darrell, and he never spoke of it other than to buddies in his company. Once he found out about Robbie’s sexuality, the sergeant had twice appeared in Darrell’s dreams. What haunted him was the mental picture now and again of Robbie with some young man. Finally, Darrell had talked with Doctor Harrison who had suggested therapy. That helped but Darrell never told Icy. Since Robbie’s death, the dream had happened once again. He had awakened, sweaty and aroused, and the arousal was even more alarming now for in his dream the sergeant looked like Robbie’s friend, Tom.

“Folks burned those little boys’ house down in Florida.” Hank’s voice broke Darrell’s reverie.

“What?” Darrell brushed his hand across his brow, in an effort to erase the Sergeant’s image.

Hank, always patient, explained. “Darrell, down in Florida, neighbors burned the house of those three brothers who have AIDS. The little boys got it through transfusions.”

“How do you know that?” Darrell’s words tumbled out as he tried to blank the sergeant from his thoughts.

“Susan, my cousin, lives in Sarasota about forty miles away. The brothers are hemophiliacs. The school board said they could attend school and folks burned the house. It’s been in the news.”

“Miles Callison wouldn’t sign off on something like this. He’s a politician but he’s a good man. Of course, there are folks with vested interests, and their money is riding with whoever wins. But burn a house, that wouldn’t happen here.”

“Daddy, Annie came home from a sleepover last week crying about AIDS. She said the girls asked her if she had it because of her Uncle Robbie. I tried to reassure her and explained that the illness wasn’t passed by touching or drinking after someone.”

“When I came home that evening, I told her the same thing. Obviously, folks are talking. Even little kids like Annie.”

CHELSEA STATION
Darrell looked at Icy and Judy and finally back at Hank. "Annie’s only a little girl. She shouldn’t have to think about things like AIDS."

“Amen to that.” Hank quickly added, “Dealing with her Uncle Robbie’s death is more than enough for a ten year old.”

“You know, Hank, I tried to persuade Robbie to wait and go to Morgantown, but he enlisted right after graduating high school. He said, ‘No, Dad. I want to help. You volunteered against your dad’s wishes.’ Robbie had laughed. ‘Why don’t we make volunteering a family tradition?’"

“I didn’t know that, Darrell. I do know I’m damn proud of my brother-in-law. Here he was, sick as all hell, but still helping others and still protesting.”

Icy took Judy’s hand. “We taught him and Judy to help others when they could.”

Judy turned to Hank, “Are you going to tell them or shall I?”

“Go ahead. You tell them. He gave them to you.”

“Tell us what?” Darrell, still lost in the unwelcome recall of the incident in Korea, heard Judy’s voice as though coming from far away.

“Hank, make sure I get it right. Mom, Daddy, you know we were in New York for Hank’s business meeting this past February. We didn’t realize how sick Robbie was until we saw him in the hospital.” Judy hesitated, then, softly, she went on. “He reached under his pillow and pulled out a small linen bag. He asked me to open it. There was a picture of Tom and him at the campfire. And there were his dog tags, two sets. He asked me to give them to you.”

Hank interrupted, “You forgot to tell them Tom died Christmas Eve. Tom’s parents had flown in to take both Tom and Robbie back to Oregon to recover. But, it wasn’t meant to be.”

Judy opened her purse and pulled out the dog tags. “Someday, not now, but someday, Daddy, I hope you’ll give these to Annie and Peter. They adored their Uncle Robbie.”

“Oh, my. Darrell, let me see.” Icy took a chain of the tags and carefully slipped it over her head. “I’ll wear these this afternoon. For his memorial.”

Judy started to cry, unable to continue.

Hank picked up the story. “He told us The Gay Veterans Group in New York City had been granted permission to place a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Robbie said when folks saw the gay banner, some of them turned their backs. The group placed the wreath the morning of the Gay March on Washington last October. We caught a bit of it on TV watching it to see if we could spot Robbie.”

“Folks turned their back on them?” Darrell stared at Hank in disbelief.

“What gets me is that every single one of those veterans had to lie about their sexuality in order to serve.” Hank’s voice was harsh as he continued. “It’s a damn good thing I wasn’t there.”
“I don’t know what to say. Thank you, certainly, for telling me.” Darrell remembered the picture of Robbie and Tom. It had been taken on one of their hiking trips. The two of them, dressed for the woods, smiling at each other, their faces lit by a brightly burning camp fire. He had made Icy put it away, out of sight. Now, that picture flooded his vision.

“Daddy, Robbie held my hand, real tight, so tight it left a bruise.” Judy stopped, took a deep breath, and continued. “Oh, Daddy, I am so proud of him. He was helping guys write their Wills from his hospital bed.” She started to cry again.

“Shh, shh.” Hank looked at Darrell and then Icy. “I want to paint over those letters before we go. There’s paint and brushes in the garage, right?”

“Wait, Hank. Give me a minute or two.” Darrell stood slowly, a pair of the dog tags dangling in his hand. “Excuse me, I’ll be right back.” He strode to the hallway and his heavy footsteps marked his ascent of the stairs.

“He’s upset. I should go help him.” Icy started to get up.

“No, Mama.” Judy reached to stop her mother. “Give him a little time. I know this has hit him hard.”

“But, Hank, what about the kids? I have our picnic lunch all ready.”

“They’re with my mom. We’ll pick them up on the way.”

“How is Ethel? What’s her doctor say?” Icy asked.

“Her doctor told her to lay off the gin before noon, and she’d be fine.”

“What?” Shocked, Icy continued. “Ethel’s drinking with her medication? Why, she knows better than to do that.”

“Hank. Stop that.” Judy wiped her eyes with a handkerchief, pulled out a hand mirror, and began to touch up her makeup. “Mom, he’s kidding. She’s doing just fine.” Judy turned to Hank and playfully punched his nose with her powder puff. “You know, Mom worships you and believes your word is gospel.”

“Oh, Hank, you cutup. I’m happy Ethel isn’t drinking. Well, sometimes we do have a glass of wine. You know, when we meet for our needlepoint.” Icy laughed, the most relaxed she had been all morning.

Darrell slowly walked back into the living room. He wore his Army cap, the other set of Robbie’s dog tags about his neck, and carried the picture of Robbie and Tom. “I knew right where this was. I made Icy put it away. But we should have it here, with us, in the living room. You know?” He paused and sat beside Icy on the sofa. He gestured to the French Horn. “Icy, we’ll polish this up later.”

“Oh, can we? Judy, you remember, Robbie played first chair down at Morgantown.”

“I knew that, too.” Hank, grousing, went on. “Too bad the football team doesn’t play football the way that band plays music.”

Icy carefully traced the big bell of the horn. “We’ll show this to the kids this evening. Remind them about the band.”
“Maybe we can change Annie’s mind about wanting a set of drums,” Hank laughed.

“Hank, Judy,” Darrell raised his voice to gain their attention. “Thank you for giving us Robbie’s dog tags. And thank you for telling us about Arlington. It wasn’t right for folks to turn their backs. Veterans are veterans. You know, we have to explain to Annie so she’s not afraid. So she knows that her Uncle Robbie helped others, that he was a hero. That she won’t get sick.”

“Oh, Daddy, I know this is a lot to hit you with all at once. And today, of all days, when we’re going to scatter Robbie’s ashes.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m proud of him.” Darrell hesitated, then continued. “Proud of Tom, too. They both served and were honorably discharged. You know, I’ve been so worried about my speech tomorrow. But what you told me about the wreath and all, well now I know what I need to say. About all of us working together. We don’t have time to quarrel among ourselves. I want to tell them about Robbie volunteering, too. He lost the battle against AIDS, but he was helping other folks right to the end.” Darrell stopped, unable to go on.

Hank stood. “Before we leave, I’ve got to do something about that paint on the garage.”

“Oh, dear, the paint. I forgot about that.” Icy looked at Darrell for an answer.

“Wait. Wait a minute.” Darrell paused for a moment. “I’ve been thinking, folks ought to see the paint. Maybe this senseless vandalism will help people to be more understanding. You know? So, if you all say okay, let’s leave it.”

“Leave it?” Icy looked at Darrell, then at Judy. “What do you think?”

Judy nodded to Darrell, “Yes, Daddy.”

Hank knelt beside Judy and quietly whispered, “Yes. Fine with me, too.”

Darrell coughed, cleared his throat and placed his hand over Icy’s on the French Horn. After a moment, his voice firm, he said, “Then we’ll just leave it.”

Garrison Phillips is a Korean War Veteran, a graduate of WVU, and a retired actor. He has had articles and letters published in the quarterly journal of the Allegheny Regional Family History Society, The New York Native, The SAGE Newsletter, monologues in By Actors, For Actors, and short stories in Apalachee Review and Chelsea Station. He recently published Back on Cheat, Stories of West Virginia, set in the mountainous region of the Cheat River.
The Third Buddha
a novel by
Jameson Currier

“Complex.”
Library Journal

“Courageous.”
Next magazine

“Extraordinary.”
Lambda Literary

“The Third Buddha”

Jameson Currier

“Remarkable.”
GLBRW

“Incredible.”
Edge

“Riveting.”
Echo

“Marvelous.”
Out in Print

978-0-9844707-2-3
$20
Also available in digital editions

2012
ALA Rainbow Book
a new destination for gay literature

Distinctively fabulous

Delightfully queer

Speculative fiction of wonder and fear

Be sure to download our free recommended reading list of Ghost stories by Gay Authors, available on our Web site at http://chelseastationeditions.com/SuggestedReadingLists.html

www.chelseastationeditions.com
A Conversation with Alan Lessik

Interview by Dave Robb

On a foggy summer morning in San Francisco, Dave Robb sat down with Alan Lessik over a plate of homemade waffles. Lessik’s debut novel, The Troubleseeker, published by Chelsea Station Editions, was recently released and has been getting positive reviews.

In addition to being a writer, Lessik is a Zen practitioner, amateur figure skater, LGBT activist, and non-profit director. His non-fiction works include news articles published in the Advocate, San Francisco Bay Guardian, and Frontiers. His contribution to KQED Radio Perspectives, “Judge Not His Death,” was one of the most commented on in 2014.

Dave Robb: The Troubleseeker ties together so many unexpected elements—Santeria and Greek gods, mythological figures, a Roman emperor—with scenes of post-revolutionary Cuban life, life as an asylum seeker in the US, AIDS, mental illness, sex, and aging as a gay man. In many debut novels, characters
are inspired by real-life people or events. From the book’s dedication, it appears that Antinio, the hero of your tale, was based on a real person.

**Alan Lessik:** Yes, the Mariel boatlift in 1980 brought over 64,000 Cubans to the US, one of whom was my later partner, René Valdés. He left Cuba after several run-ins with the authorities due to his sexual orientation, and after arrival in Key West, he was sent to the Fort McCoy Processing Center near La Crosse, Wisconsin. Alone without relatives to support him, he was rescued by a group of gay activists. He had a ten-year fight with the INS to become a citizen. He was infected by the AIDS virus shortly after he arrived in the US.

His story was an immigrant story, a story of survival during the bleakest period of the AIDS crisis, a story of love and finding home. My willingness to believe his well-honed survivor’s tale meant that I was blindsided by his death. Despite my understanding of his fatal mental illness, I was left confused and wanted to understand why he died.

**DR:** So you set out to write a book explaining this—why he died.

**AL:** That question was sitting in my unconscious and permeated the story as it emerged. Each of the elements you mentioned earlier, the gods and mythological elements, appeared as I wrote. Since I was not there for much of René’s life, I had to imagine what had happened. And once I started to do that, all sorts of interesting characters appeared.

Their origins came in part from thinking about his mother, who was a teacher of ancient history in a high school in Havana. I only knew her through René’s stories, so she herself is a mythical character to me. From there the ideas flowed, of using *The Odyssey* and other stories, of naming the hero Antinio, after Antinous, the lover of the emperor Hadriano...

**DR:** You point out that Odysseus was both storyteller and actor in his story. Just as Odysseus would comment on his story, you use this form of commentary in your book.

**AL:** Zen teaching says that each of us creates a story of an entity called “me.” The mind that controls the “me” attempts to make sense out of the world and the experiences it encounters. But the created story of the self has little to do with reality; the story is only an internal prism to break down feelings and experiences and sort them as fitting or not fitting with who we think we are.

Over time, our story becomes an amalgam of events, loves, hurts, losses, and mistakes that shape our narrative. Most of us believe this invented story of who we are is real. However, the truth about any storyteller is that the story is always on their terms. What is revealed is what we want to reveal; what is not is kept a secret, perhaps even from ourselves.

As I wrote, René’s story (which were his own inventions describing his life) changed as it became the story of Antinio. And when I brought in Hadriano as the narrator, he demanded to tell his story. As a demigod he had access to the pantheons of gods throughout the world and two thousand years to reflect on life. At this point, the narrow world of post-revolutionary Cuba expanded significantly.
**DR:** Let’s talk about sex. I love that you are so sex-positive in the book.

**AL:** Gay men love each other against all odds. We have lived through an extraordinary 50 years of blossoming LGBT rights, and I want to celebrate what we as a community have to offer the world. With the advent of same-sex marriage, there seems to be an attempt to “straitjacket” gay men into monogamy as our only choice. Sex is just one part of our lives. We don’t believe that our partners will be our only source of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual support, and it makes no sense to assume this one person can meet all of our sexual needs. All relationships are by nature complicated. That is their beauty.

**DR:** The Greek gods and Santería orishas in your book seem to see something special in LGBT people.

**AL:** One can’t read about the Greek and Santería pantheons without appreciating the fluidity of gender and love. Almost all of them have multiple sex partners, and many have both same- and opposite-sex partners. The orishas are especially fluid with gender. Most have various caminos or identities that can be both male and female. So, of course they would love LGBT people over straight folks. As the orishas tell their stories, a different narrative emerges about our place in the world.

**DR:** I have never read a book before that includes the point of view of the AIDS virus.

**AL:** As I was writing, I could not reconcile how Apollo and Babalu Ayé were gods that simultaneously brought about disease and cured disease. It occurred to me that if there were gods of humans and various animals, why not a god of the tiniest beings, viruses? Just as the gods can’t control human or animal nature, they cannot control how viruses interact with their world. The epidemiological journey is their own Odyssey. The stigma attached to AIDS is a human invention, not a viral one.

**DR:** I saw that Elías Miguel Muñoz compared you to Reinaldo Arenas. That’s quite a compliment. How did you manage to capture Cuba so well?

**AL:** I have been to Cuba six times since 2002 visiting René’s family and friends. Cuba in my first visit was in many ways little changed from the 70’and 80’s depicted in the book. Staying with family provided insight into everyday Cuban life that tourists never see. I did a lot of listening and watching as I wanted to understand how people managed around the shortages and repression and how gay people managed their secret lives. Walking around decaying neighborhoods and talking with friends, family or people on the street, I discovered that most people still saw the city as it had been in the days of past glory.

Cuban life centers around the home and extended family members and close neighbors came in and out of the open front door without announcing themselves. I quickly became integrated into the family and its web of relationships which have continued after René’s death. As death of the older generation and migration of the younger have taken its toll, I am one of three remaining family members, all of us in-laws who continue to uphold the family history.
In my latest visit this last summer, I could see the historic grandeur of Havana was coming back, block by block. At night, hundreds of Cubans would gather to connect to Wi-Fi that was available in a central park in each major city. Very few sites were blocked, and it was easy to connect with Cuban men on Planet Romeo. People were still talking about President Obama’s visit and his unprecedented access to the Cuban airwaves for his speech. Despite all this, Cubans have too much experience with disappointments, so there is still quite a bit of uncertainty and concern about the future.

**DR:** I have one final question. If *The Troubleseeker* were made into a movie, what part would Meryl Streep play?

**AL:** Ha, that’s an easy one. Yemayá, the mother of all orishas and of all waters. Yemayá has a bad-girl attitude. She was married to several of the orishas and therefore has the skinny on all of them. She’s in charge, but still no one listens to her. And when she gets angry, she is willing to spite them all and wipe out the earth. In the end, though, she knows she has to be the responsible adult in the room and whips everyone together in action. Only Meryl has the skills to inhabit a role like that.

__________

Dave Robb is an editor and writer living in San Francisco.
"Alan Lessik’s *The Troubleseeker* succeeds on several fronts: as a passionate gay story that documents the devastation caused by AIDS in the epidemic’s early days; as a vivid depiction of post-revolutionary Cuba leading to the disastrous Special Period; and as a clever retelling of myth where the gods of the Greek pantheon and those of Santería mingle, compare notes, and join forces. The compelling tale of Antinio, the protagonist, in some ways evokes the life and times of the great Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas: a life where sex is a site of pleasure but also a means for empowering self-expression and identity. Lessik’s writing is rich in descriptions, by turns poetic, and delivered by a narrator whose own captivating story lures us in like the Siren’s call. A book you won’t want to stop reading, *The Troubleseeker* offers the best that literature can give: a moving human chronicle that both entertains and lingers in our hearts."

—Elias Miguel Muñoz, author of the novels *The Greatest Performance, Brand New Memory*, and *Diary of Fire*
A resident of NY, Stephen Mead is a published artist, writer, maker of short-collage films and sound-collage downloads. His latest P.O.D. amazon release is an art-text hybrid, "According to the Order of Nature (We too are Cosmos Made)", a work which takes to task the words which have been used against LGBT folks from time immemorial. In 2014 he began a webpage to gather links of his poetry being published in such zines as Great Works, Unlikely Stories, Quill & Parchment, etc., in one place: Poetry on the Line, Stephen Mead
Old Movies & Iris

Murdoch, these are
the most necessary balms
wrapping swathes around me for a slumber
after tea with cognac, whatever remedy
is necessity to bring life through—

Marrow, marrow, my bones
could be x rays of glorious
Cinemascope, or 1940’s blacks & whites.

Such film fills my eyes, the comfort
of tales, & I mum for days with an inner
dialogue of Cagney, of Bogie, 'til I turn
over, prop a flashlight, to find Magi print:
Iris M., radiant, that light of the mind’s
heart rising to baptize all the consoling
characters amid her plots schemes
of redemption…

I dream of this to keep faith, night
by night, ‘til the returned world escapes
back to chaotic managerial heels
clacking, & I, not Bette, not Marlene D.
enough to slips from covers, acting like
I write: a book of nerves, a curving spine,
with page after page turning reels to a gun
of blanks

—Stephen Mead
Noah Aiken's family lived on some filbert acreage just north of us. Their nearest town was Coburg, center for antiques. The Aikens people had been there for years, first running a dairy, and then later retiring into gentleman-farmership. Mrs. Aiken, Noah's mother, oversaw what she thought was a proper household in a place that had been active all the way back to the 1880s. This glowing homestead was white with two stories, along with an attendant cottage which they sometimes rented out. When Mrs. Aiken got wind that he and I were "seeing each other" seriously, we were invited over there for tea one Saturday afternoon. Noah, very closeted even for the 1980s, made it plain, in his own mild way, that I, a veteran of the Seventies and early Eighties San Francisco and Portland disco scene, was never to mention the word "gay" in his mother's household. She knew what we were, so no need to mention it. Noah's older brother Mel was gay, too, had been in San Francisco where I had been (although we had never run into each other), and might well be joining the soiree.
The yard behind the farmhouse was a single plane of soft green lawn, with the perfectly gathered filberts in the distance to the south across the road. There was nothing like those dark emerald shadows between the trees on a summer’s day. One afternoon, Noah had shown me the place when his mother was gone. We had stolen into the furnished cottage between renters, and had made heated love in the summer light which came through the lace curtains, reflections spinning everywhere. Its being early in our romance back then, I remember going wild with this quiet red-haired lumberjack, who went out on arborist calls for trees all over the county, this man with the heavily squared chest, even though he was lean. His skin had had a nutty taste, as though he had assimilated the whole filbert orchard in the years of growing up.

I was driven wild—which was completely consistent with the way I had been back then in the mid-1980s, the best time ever for disco. Just ask anyone. Being in a frenzy of grief over my lost wife and children, I was looking for something, anything, to ease things. I had been a loose cannon out on the dance floor, also an admirer of Loose Cannon Beer. And everything else that could be labeled as beer. Then one time, drunk in the afternoon, I had handed out teddy bears to children who were just getting out of school, and I was jailed for that until it was clear no one could prove I had suspicious motives. Which I hadn’t—I was just trying to assuage a general sense of guilt.

But Noah was absolutely solid. February brought a hugely unseasonable snow storm (eight inches’ worth) which predictably melted suddenly and caused numerous trees in our town (we lived ten miles apart) to collapse into one another like frozen glass. Noah was out sawing, stacking, and hauling, enabling Carleton Park Water and Electric, eventually, to restore people’s power. I saw him as my means of getting the energy back into my life, too, even while I was ruthlessly ignoring our education gap (he never finished high school, and I actually taught it), and the huge conversational black holes which came with the relationship.

Toward the end of these two years that we were together, I would just about get the nerve to end things, and the green shadow of the Coburg Hills would fall over us while we were out secretly enjoying casing his family’s property, and I would slip into the delirium of kissing him. The neighbors down the road, summery and friendly, knew about us and would flag us down on our bike rides with an invitation to go floating out in their pond—anytime we wanted—behind their farmhouse, which belonged to the 1880s as well. Then with our hosts gone. Noah, naked, would sit on the mud on the edge (ironically, he had never learned to swim, even with that name), while I would float, also naked, out to the center on my back, with an emerald mountain in view and the luxurious water underneath.

As the tea in Coburg neared, things seemed full of promise. With Noah saying that some of his “investments” were going well and that his tree service was bringing in much more money than he expected, I thought I could let him down easy and say that his life, successful as it was now becoming, could separate from mine. Truth was, if we went through one more blank conversation, I was going to scream. Just let me stay out of the delirium of making love, and I could keep my head on straight and guide us out. My routines were helping me stay on task. Weekends, when Noah was working during the day, I would go dumpster diving, especially across our university campus, fishing out all the still usable clothes and knick-knacks and bedding and even food. I could spend up to twenty hours a week on my travels (rubber gloves and knapsack), then clean everything up (those industrial sized washers and dryers at the laundromat) and then give everything to the Oregon Gift Drive or Goodwill or Clothes for All.
There was a penurious side of me which wanted to squeeze the most out of the least (take my house for instance, something I bought for $30,000, because it was going to be demolished otherwise)—this was the side which came from my penurious mother, who would save breadcrumbs—but I could turn my grasping hand toward giving, too. I was like a gambler whose winnings could have been vicious had he not have them raining down like golden coins on the poor. Recently, I had been written up in the local paper, because I had hit, in all that trash, on a stamp book, which, after one appraisal, might bring in up to $4,000, which all could go to Clothes for All.

“I’m happy for you,” Noah said, when we met one evening at the one gay bar in town.

I stared at him directly, but as usual his natural shyness always caused him to look away.

“I’m happy for you,” he went on. “But we never get together anymore. And you don’t move in.”

A common argument. His hands were cupped around his drink. He had also wanted us to adopt a child.

I still didn’t have anything to say. In the silence, I had recognized that after my wife, I’m not the marrying kind. Over in the corner, three television sets percolated with images of naked men, working out, in the fashion of the mid-Eighties. “We could think of other ways of spending time together,” I answered at last.

“When we can go over to Coburg and see Mom, that will be time,” he said. “Time together.”

So that when we finally arrived out at the farmhouse and Mrs. Aiken seated herself beside the teapot, I knew this was serious business, despite the fact that Noah’s good fortunes had given him a much better fallback position. I had told myself back at the bar that if I had any courage or any humanity, I would say something then, and not go over to be previewed by “mother.” But I hadn’t had the heart or the courage.

The living room of the homestead had been ruthlessly updated—knotty pine and plush black leather chairs and sofa—but the fireplace, even though it was summer and nothing was lit in it, still cast a certain antique spell. I believe I was thinking of my own mother.

“Noah,” Mrs. Aiken said, “bring that chair over here so that you and Colin can sit together.”

By sitting together, she meant side-by-side, I suppose. So now we were to have the conversation where no one was to mention the word “gay.”

Noah moved the chair, and we cozied up some, but not too much. Two weeks back, when attending the Ashland Shakespeare Festival’s The Tempest, Noah and I had huddled in the open-air Elizabethan Theatre and held hands underneath the blanket. The stars had formed a lovely archway over the rainbow set on the stage. Prospero was quite young for the part, somewhat in the manner of Jesus Christ Superstar, with beard and long hair. Still, he seemed capable of magic.

She started pouring from the antique tea pot. It was white porcelain, with red scrolls at the center, forming a kind of double heart. It seemed to vibrate a little. “What do you think of my antiques?” she asked.

“Noah’s brother’s friend Rudy when he brings him along always likes them. He’s a specialist.”

She spoke her “r’s” as though they were “w’s.” It sounded like “Wou-dy” rather than “Rudy.” She was a slender woman with snow-white hair and a blue gaze that seemed a little silly. Unlike her son, she kept her eyes on everything.
“Very impressive,” I said. “I covet those gold enameled teacups on your shelf.”

The shelf put them on display.

“Those my great-cousin painted,” she said. “With real gold. I don’t use them because it might come off.”

Noah’s father came in. He seemed dusted from the orchard. He was on a larger scale than Noah, more sinewy, and the attraction in me was instantaneous, especially when my glance caused him to look down shyly, in perfect imitation of his son, and in complete contrast with his wife. “Pretty big party down the road. They’re eventually on their way to the Fair,” he said to me, without an introduction. Or perhaps this was his way of an introduction. The breeze from the open front door blew through his hair.

“All these antiques in this room are mine,” Mrs. Aiken went on. “I have the names of my family on the bottom of each piece on a piece of tape, so that everyone knows who they belong to when I croak off.”

It sounded like “cwoak out.” At first I heard “cloak off.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. “Croak out?”

“I didn’t say ‘croak out,’” she answered. “I said ‘croak off.’”

There was a silence. That was supposed to set everything in good order. All when “gay,” my principal identifier for being here in the first place, couldn’t be mentioned. I remembered trying to have a conversation with Noah just after our seeing *The Tempest*. “Well, that was delightful” was all that I could get out of him. When I complained about this to a gay mentor of mine, he said, “Well, he’s just a man of few words!”

She said, “Noah may not be able to afford to stay in that place of his. I said I would sell a few of his antiques for him bewore I cwoak off, but he said not to do it.”

A glance from the two of us at Noah caused him to look away. His father smiled and stared at the floor. “You don’t have that right, Mother,” his father said. “Noah’s life has turned around recently.”

Outside—it was late June—some early fireworks went off. I thought I saw a flash through the door. Down the road, someone was practicing violin, against the sound of some chickens, and then the sound of a car approaching.

Mel, Noah’s older brother, bounded in. I hadn’t met him before—the man was pale with a skimpy beard, and I thought, in comparison, how healthy Noah looked. Noah introduced us.

“So,” Mrs. Aiken said, looking at me, “I told Noah he could live with you in the cottage if he wanted to. You both could move in together.”

Mel smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”

“But it was my understanding,” I said with exasperation, “that things were going well for you—moneywise.” I tried to catch Noah’s glance.

“Ha!” Mel answered. “Our flower shop over to Corvallis had a car run right straight through the front window. Going well? No.”
“Is that where most of your money is?” I asked Noah directly. “In a flower shop?”

“Yes.”

“A demolished flower shop,” Paul added.

“This is all news to me,” his father said. “Demolished flower shop.”

I sat back in my Princess Anne chair, and felt as though I were being forcibly arrayed for the bridal. I could run straight out of here, followed by Noah, and jump into the neighbors’ pond naked, and eventually fuck Noah silly in the woods or have him fuck me, but that was simply to play out the old scenario.

Suddenly I heard disco music of the diva Sylvester out in the car in glorious falsetto. The car had brought Rudy. The song was “You Make Me Feel Mighty Real.”

“Rudy got that music for you,” Mel said to his brother. “He heard what demons you are out on the dance floor. He just out there test-listening to it.”

Well, one thing I could say for Noah, he knew how to dance. He was crazy about going down to the bar and kicking up his heels in his running shoes, under the shower of colored lights. I could keep up with him but just barely, and that challenge (I was in good shape with swimming and weight lifting) kept our romance going. When Rudy, then, came running into the living room with the Sylvester tape, and Noah’s face lit up, it was not altogether a surprise, and certainly a relief, even though this tea party was turning into something of a mad one.

Mrs. Aikens sent a cup across to Rudy and then to Paul. I felt as though this would be a perfect time to announce that I was a demon on the dance floor with no one. So no cottage for me, thanks, since dancing and choice of extended play disco singles seemed to be the only thing we had left in common outside the bedroom.

Just then, a woman with an avian face came flying into the room. She seemed dressed all in light rose diaphanous scarves—a true hippy—and she was yelling about her son. I couldn’t make it out at first, but then I recognized her as the woman of the couple who owned the pond. “I can’t find my boy,” she said. “Where is my boy? Is he here?”

We were all up at once. The teapot went down with a crash. “Just like the piano store window,” Mrs. Aiken said. We learned quickly that the woman’s pre-Fourth of July party had exited from her home and gone on to the Festival in downtown Coburg. She and her son Dylan had been left behind. She had just turned her back to take some of the plates and things into the house. When she returned, she had found him gone.

“He’s not here,” Mel said, “so he must be back down at your place.”

“Go down there on a ‘w’un,” Mrs. Aiken said, excited, pointing toward the door. “And you’d better look in that pond. He thinks he’s a tuwtle.”

And I did remember he was wearing a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (Tuwtles) T-shirt last time I saw him. However, he was hell on two legs, scampering everywhere.
We ran down the road, which was ribboned with the green of outlying Coburg. We reached the pond, with the two bowed, dark jade willows in front of it, just in time to see a triangle of white at the center begin to sink. I stripped myself to my shorts, and threw myself in. The water was frigid, even for June. Mel and Noah were suddenly in their shorts, too, and were following me.

“Noah,” I called, “remember you can’t swim!”

Mrs. Aiken and her husband had finally caught up with us. “Remember! Remember!” (but with the “w’s” for “r’s.”) The sight of Mr. Aiken holding the needy Noah back, nearly slowed me down as I turned toward the bit of white once more. The bottom of the pond was so slick, I nearly fell face-forward in the brackish water. This swimming hole had now lost all of its romantic trimmings. Mel was nearly up with me, and was being waved to by his boyfriend. “You Make Feel Mighty Real” kept going through my head.

I was at the point where I could lift off the mud and swim without my toes striking the bottom. Dylan’s body was within reach—it eluded me once and disappeared—but I snatched at the T-shirt and pulled the little body to the surface. His blond hair shone. He spat and coughed water, and then Mel was up with me, We spoke calming words. I pushed him forward into Mel’s arms, as though he were a toy boat, and Mel, taller and still on his feet, turned and walked toward the group on the pond’s little beach, floating the Ninja turtle beside him. I hadn’t realized it until now, but Dylan’s mother had been yelling hysterical instructions the whole time.

Drawing up to dry land, we tried to get Dylan to lie down, but he scrambled up into his mother’s arms. They both broke into tears. A heavy wind crossed all of us, as I stood shivering there in my shorts. The willows were making a scything sound. I looked over at Mel’s body—it was not his brother’s. He was white and thin and bony. By then we heard the ambulance, and although Dylan seemed perfectly all right, the burly medic, emerging from the white and red van, insisted on whisking him away. The mother rode along with him.

*     *     *

Back at the house, Mrs. Aiken swept up the ruins of her teapot, and ordered Mel and me to the two separate showers in the place. Noah sat in his former chair, and looked despondent. I found myself in a bathroom with small fish painted on the walls. They were bright crayon colors. There was a similar motif on the shower curtain. The flood of hot water was soothing, and I realized how over-amped I had become by nearly losing Dylan. Thank God for Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle T-shirts. I don’t know how long I just stood there, but I felt blessed again by the sight of the green Coburg hills outside and the sound of wind coming from the orchard. I felt almost sexy. At last I stepped out of the tub, and coming into the master bedroom where I was to dress, found Noah there.

“My mother says you’re supposed to have these.” And held out a pair of his own underpants, Calvin Klein, Waist 30.

I smiled. “They’ll never fit. I’m so much bigger.”

“I don’t know. I don’t like walking around without underwear on myself. It’s kind of nasty.”

Just then, Mel busted in with a towel around his waist, holding his own pile of clothes in the crook of his arm. He was followed by Rudy, who had a tape in one hand and a ghetto blaster in the other.
“Get to watch a couple of hunks get dressed to disco,” he said.

Evidently this was the room which Mrs. Aiken had assigned to all us gay guys. Sylvester started up again on the tape.

I drew on my jeans, which I had brought back from the pond, along with my polo shirt.

“Hell, Noah, your boyfriend belongs in Playguy with arms like that,” Paul said.

“No doubt about it,” Rudy said. “A definite ten. We all agree.”

I self-consciously put on my T-shirt.

“You can rescue me any day, Sir,” Rudy said. And I have to say he was in his own way attractive. African American and nimble and looking like the lead in Village People. There was a beautiful luster to his skin.

We heard the sound of Mrs. Aiken out in the living room. “Boys, hurry up! We’re going to start tea all over again. Then we’ll visit Dylan in the hospital.”

Mel and Rudy led the way out, but I detained Noah a minute. “I’ve ignored you today somehow, and I’m sorry,” I said. “Even before Dylan happened.”

He held his head as he sat on the bed again. I put my hands on his back.

“I just feel so useless,” he said. “I should have been out there in the water with you.”

“No if you’re going to sink like a rock,” I answered.

At last his gaze meant mine. “We’re not going to adopt, are we? And you’re not moving in, not here or anywhere else?”

Despite myself, I could feel right now in my very tight loins, the old stirrings for every vulnerability I had seen in him, from his reddish skin when he was embarrassed to his wrong grammar (“had went”), to his charming gold chain which he only took off for lovemaking and then a shower.

“No,” I said, pushing up against him, and putting my hands on his bowed shoulders. I remembered the moment out in the pond when I had tried to soothe Dylan with touch and soothing words. Just beyond the door now, I could hear Mrs. Aiken say, excitedly again, above everything else—”Wudy, Wudy, turn down that music!”

But it was still going on, the gay disco. I kept my hands on his shoulders until the song stopped.

Henry Alley is a Professor Emeritus of Literature in the Honors College at the University of Oregon. He has four novels, Through Glass, The Lattice, Umbrella of Glass, and Precincts of Light, which explores the Measure Nine crisis in Oregon, when gay and lesbian people were threatened with being made silent. His short story collection, The Dahlia Field, will be published next year by Chelsea Station Editions. He lives in Eugene, Oregon, with his husband, the poet and teacher Austin Gray.
Five fascinating tales linked by the sea. An aging architect must decide to give up his grief, even if it means losing the vestiges of a lover’s memory. An object of erotic fixation galvanizes men against the isolation of exile on a cruise liner. As he watches the disintegration of his picket-fence fantasy, an ex-soldier looks to the sea for absolution.

Praise for Part the Hawser, Limn the Sea

“In these stories, it’s not necessarily the big events that are the most revelatory: it’s the glance, the nod, the two men sitting on a boat while ‘neither of them was making an attempt at conversation.’ Dan Lopez peoples his sea narratives with gay men, both white and of color, and in doing so reexamines the genre, not unlike Annie’s Proulx’s reexamination of the cowboy narrative in Brokeback Mountain. An impressive collection.”
—Ken Harvey, Lambda Literary

“Don’t be deceived by its diminutive size. Dan Lopez’s just released debut story collection Part the Hawser, Limn the Sea is a powerhouse of literary dexterity. There are five stories collected here, and all are linked by the sea, the seduction of water and tide, and the release of waves and surf. It takes immense skill and intuitive finesse to formulate such characterization and story development in the span of just a few pages. There is not a word wasted or a false note throughout this 60-page slice of gay fiction. Lopez demonstrates an artistry not often found in a debut collection; there is cohesion, passion, and searing pain in his writing.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter

“While the setting doesn’t define these stories, the sea maintains a constant presence. It is both serene and treacherous. And the characters of these stories are too distracted with their own intimacies to notice it. Each story is so delicately layered with tension that it’s worth multiple reads.”
—Jonathan Harper, Chelsea Station

“These stories are unique and powerful in their simplicity, and I found this to be an impressive collection I couldn’t stop thinking about once finished.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
Darius Stewart is the author of *The Terribly Beautiful* (2006) and *Sotto Voce* (2008), each of which was an Editor's Choice Selection in the Main Street Rag Poetry Chapbook Series, as well as *The Ghost the Night Becomes* (2014), winner of the 2013 Gertrude Press Chapbook Competition for Poetry. Other poems have appeared in *Bloom*, *Assaracus*, *Callaloo*, *Meridian*, *the Potomac Review*, two volumes of *the Southern Poetry Anthology*, *the Best Gay Poetry 2008*, *Verse Daily*, and several others. He received his MFA from the University of Texas at Austin where he studied at the Michener Center for Writers as a James A. Michener Fellow in poetry. He currently resides in Knoxville, TN with his dog, Philip J. “Fry.”
After Learning My HIV Is Undetectable, It’s As If I’ve Never Seen the Trees Breathing on the Mountaintop in the Distance

which might explain why my limbs slacken as if I’m crossing the threshold into a brand-new house, barely able to turn the key in my new key hole that opens a new door into a home so desperately empty yet utterly pristine with its white walls, the aroma of lemon-scented Pine Sol, but also the lingering gloss of linoleum scrubbed clean, each cranny like a dried-out ravine I become almost devastated to the point of a nervous breakdown as if somehow I could in an instant lose it all—the beauty of the well-kept oak cabinetry, the fluorescent glow inside the ceiling’s frosted globe light fixtures, three bedrooms, any one of them I can choose to belong only to me, but especially the windows so abundant all I can relish is the possibility of so much natural light rousing me as I wander each room all day until the day falls away like a scab, until what’s left is the vibrant wound of night with its stars & moon & haze of mountaintops pulsing with all these breathing trees in the distance that surely, come each evening, I’ll be beholden, twisting open the vertical blinds to lean in so close to the pane my breath will appear parcelled against the glass as if the last breath I’ll ever take, this breath condensing like tears on the glass, like dew falling from tree leaves to the grass I’ll feel slick against the soles of my bare feet whenever I step outdoors marveled by a kernel of want fleshed out to a full-bloomed sensation to live in this house forever, even if an empty space still in need of furniture, a perennial wreath to hang on the door, a WELCOME mat large enough for as many visitors as I can stand.

—Darius Stewart
I sometimes imagine my corpse lying naked and exposed on a mortician's table. With some strange man poking and prodding at my body—that in itself would not be anything new. Would this stranger take the time to read my body—see my story laid out before him in my face, limbs and torso. Would my tattoos and piercings be markers for the life that had once inhabited it—or have they become so commonplace that they would not even get a consideration.

I got my ear pierced once, twice, three times in the right ear. The right ear because I like my right profile better. I got my right ear pierced three times on different occasions. The first time because I was a
budding faggot recently released from the confining arms of family and was finding my way into a myriad of new embraces. La vie en rose. The second time because I was bored with life and thought a new stud was just what I needed, something to get the blood moving. The third time just because things always come in three. There are the three wise men, three men in a tub, the three little pigs. What I’d give to have someone come huffing and puffing to my door to blow me.

An American psychiatrist has written that ear piercings are acts of self-mutilation, linked to personality disorders. But what do psychiatrists know? Van Gogh cut off part of his ear because he was a man of passion. Ok so an ear piercing is not as drastic but I too am a man of passion, more subtle perhaps, but still a man of passion. A boyfriend once described me as a dormant volcano. Probably because he only inspired minor tremors in me. The big eruption lay awaiting more impassioned hands. I am still waiting.

I got a tattoo for Christmas, in one of those punk places where the punk guy tried to get a rise from my middleclassness by farting and picking his nose. Little did he know that this faggot had developed one thick skin. And so I sat quietly and watched my skin colour. I rather liked the sensation, a gentle massage of my arm with just the occasional prick when the needle went too deep. I got a tattoo of a little black cross on my left arm. I don’t know why my left arm, to balance my pierced right ear or because I subscribe to the left. Just like in movie theatres I always sit on the left. I got a tattoo of a little black cross for Christmas, the birth date of our beloved baby Jesus. He too got a cross, from his father, years later when he was 33. One made of wood. I’ve always liked wood.

Perhaps I got this tattoo as a testimonial. I was born into a devout roman catholic family, with an aunt who was a nun and an uncle who was a priest. I was shuffled through four of the holy sacraments before I was old enough and before I was able to say no more, that god did not exist. I was baptized and confirmed, the holy ghost entering my being through osmosis. I received communion and was coerced into confession, making things up for fear of having nothing to say. Yet I am fascinated by and drawn to collect crosses and crucifixes, adorning my walls with their art. And so I marked my skin with a little black cross to attest to this contradiction. I tell people that my family is catholic and I am but a moment in the history of the universe.

I got my nipple pierced, the left nipple because it contrasts nicely with my tattoo on my left arm. I’ve always liked nipple play. I’m not talking about a simple suck or lick, but hard-biting, back-bending play where you are forced to pull your lover’s head away by the hair. The piercing itself was three to five seconds of absolute joy terror. That thin line between pleasure and pain. And I floated out of the piercing parlor on endorphins. And I floated all the way to my boyfriend’s house to tell him that his one emotion was not enough.

The dyke piercing my nipple said to think of it as a rite of passage. And so I did—a passage from one end of the country to the other, from east to west, from good-bye Montreal and Toronto to hello to Vancouver. Goodbye to the naivety of youth, to the many ghosts that haunt, to the lovers, boyfriends and anonymous cocks. Good bye to it all and hello to new experiences, to new sights and sounds and sensations and all the rest. My covered wagon is still somewhere in the prairies following slowly. You can never really escape baggage, only delay its arrival.

I got a second tattoo. This one some years later in a trendy boutique that was welcoming and aseptic. For a while, I was thinking of having queer written on the body. But I don’t know. Maybe it was the result of
getting older, or a west coast sensibility but the energy that fuelled my queer zealoussness waned. Instead I got a tattoo of a leaf on my right calf. My right calf because it balances the tattoo on my left arm. And I like the illusion that a leaf fell perchance against my leg while I was out hiking. I got a tattoo approximating a birch leaf. Why a leaf, because I have always felt safest amongst trees. Why a birch leaf, because I have always been drawn to birch trees. With its bark, white and pure, and that peels away like skin after a bad sunburn.

Maybe this tattoo is one small measure to feel rooted. I have long given up on my fantasy of becoming a tree. To have chloroplasts inserted into my cells, so that like a plant, I could photosynthesize and become self sustaining on sunlight, water and some dirt. So like many others, I too look for ways to become grounded. The same way I grow tomatoes on my balcony. The same way I travel to desolate places. The same way I carry a piece of wood in my pocket.

That is likely it for piercings and tattoos although I sometimes feel the tug of a third tattoo, the unrelenting power of triads. Disclosure of the scars that mark my body is matter for another body tale.

__________

Peter Toppings works in community health in Vancouver, British Columbia. A long time community activist, he has authored articles on LGBTQ health issues for a variety of not for profit organizations. He navigates life’s journey as best he can and draws strength and inspiration from nature, the arts, and social justice movements.
“Dennis Rhodes’ poems show a deep love of the natural world, they also show a strong empathy with human frailty.
—Provincetown Banner

“Craig Moreau’s Chelsea Boy is a true original, in many senses of the word. It’s simultaneously a serious collection, and a book of poetry intended for readers who don’t usually read poetry at all. Moreau is a passionate, gifted poet, and with Chelsea Boy he enters terrain far too seldom poetically traversed.”
—Michael Cunningham

“Holland’s major achievement here is to build a persona that is as unabashedly gay as it is charmingly decorous. I never thought about how much I tend to worry about the speakers of gay poems—how damaged and endangered our speakers tend to be. You never worry about Holland. He seems refreshingly adult… These are the poems of a healthy, well-adjusted happy man.”
—Lambda Literary

The same accessible, conversational, gay-as-a-box-of-birds approach that O’Hara championed, though Cotter’s poetry is not at all an imitation or a parody of O’Hara’s style.”
—Roberto Friedman, Bay Area Reporter
Contemporary Zouaves

“But most resplendently attired of all,” writes Bell Irvin Wiley in The Life of Johnny Reb, “were the Louisiana Zouaves, whose trousers were of scarlet cloth, cut in such fashion as to suggest the term ‘bloomers’ to derisive comrades, belted at the waist with large blue sashes and bound at the ankles with gaiters of white; jackets were heavily adorned with varicolored lace; shirts were of blue, cut low to reveal sunburnt throats and hirsute chests; headpieces consisted of fezzes, perched at angles indicating the jauntiness of the wearers.” My Rebel forebears in that conflict were, in contrast, “natives of the Southern Appalachian area, ambling along in bear skin blouse, nondescript trousers and rawhide leggings,” as nondescript as I must appear today, bushy-bearded midlife mountain man restlessly prowling the restless French Quarter, hankering after contemporary Zouaves, you descendants of those colorful Creoles and Cajuns who fought beside my ancestors in the long War of Northern Aggression. Inveterate admirer of men, too-polite predator consigned by age and propriety to ogle, not devour, let me praise nevertheless the honey-bearded, tattooed dick-dancer with perfect pecs gyrating atop the bar at Oz, the chunky-assed cub serving Sazeracs in Desire Oyster Bar, the scruffy-goateed guitarist in a purple fedora playing beneath Royal Street magnolias, his open shirt revealing a sun-burnt throat and hirsute chest. You’re as jaunty and resplendent in peace as your great-great grandfathers were in war, oh tasty sons of Louisiana. This gourmand praises your oysters, muffulettas, etoufées. This frustrated asshound of a Daddybear salutes you. This celebrant of Southern manhood would gladly pay.

—Jeff Mann
“An involving, sentimental tale of love, secrets, and relationships.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Fans of interpersonal dramatics will find much to savor in Currier’s deceptively simple narrative as intimate histories and close friendships mingle with explosive results.”
—Kirkus Review

“Gifted novelist Jameson Currier, has an incredible knack for portraying gay men as complex and flawed yet like-minded, mostly likable and relatable individuals. His latest, Based on a True Story, presents an intriguing, introspective examination of two gay couples who spend Thanksgiving weekend together in a rustic mountain cabin.”
—Christopher Verleger, Edge
A Gathering Storm begins in a small university town in the South when a gay college student is beaten. In the ensuing days as the young man struggles to survive in a hospital, the residents of the town and the university find themselves at the center of a growing media frenzy as the crime reverberates through the local and national consciousness. Using details and elements from actual hate crimes committed against gay men, Currier weaves personal and spiritual layers into a timely and emotional story.

LAMBDA LITERARY FINALIST

“A gathering storm is much more than another factual retelling. Currier infuses subtle details from other true hate crimes incorporating them into the storyline. His third-person, journalistic style allows the author to speculate about the characters feelings, thoughts and emotions. This technique allows the facts to easily be conveyed allowing a ‘silent observer’ effect for the reader to be in on the scenes developing before them. Currier explores the thoughts and reactions to the two assailants’ girlfriends, the sheriff involved in the case, relatives to all three boys, the doctors working to save his life, and various people directly (and indirectly) involved showing the unmentioned butterfly effect a horrible crime can have on so many others. An important book to read and it’s definitely worth your time to read it!”
—Eric Andrews-Katz, Seattle Gay News

“The point and the power of A Gathering Storm is the impact the crime has to transform the characters—spurring some to come out or stand proud against hate, and others to vocalize their homophobia. An absorbing read about an important topic.”
—Gary M. Kramer, Philadelphia Gay News

“This book is not an easy read but it is a worthwhile read. It is a thoughtful exploration of the emotional complexities of homophobia and a reverent tribute to the victims of hate crimes. Despite its grim subject, the novel does manage to strike hopeful notes.”
—Frank Perez, Ambush

“A wonder of emotive writing and intuitive imagination, and a fitting tribute to the community-scarring event which inspired it.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter

“A captivating, highly detailed, and impressively impartial, almost journalistic, profile of a Southern college town shaken by the after-effects of a hate crime when a male student is beaten and left for dead for no reason other than his sexual orientation. The powerful prose effectively conveys why it was written, as well as the inherent need for it to be read. Despite — or perhaps because of — the unpleasant circumstances and outcome that shape this novel.”
—Christopher Verleger, Edge

“Currier weaves throughout strands of outrage, courage, uncertainty, denial, doubt—all typical human responses to tragedy. His approach allows us to learn not only the immediate effects of the crime on the community, but also the dormant seeds that led to the crime in the first place.”
—Keith Glaeske, Lambda Literary

“The Gathering Storm begins in a small university town in the South when a gay college student is beaten. In the ensuing days as the young man struggles to survive in a hospital, the residents of the town and the university find themselves at the center of a growing media frenzy as the crime reverberates through the local and national consciousness. Using details and elements from actual hate crimes committed against gay men, Currier weaves personal and spiritual layers into a timely and emotional story.

**LAMBDA LITERARY FINALIST**

“A Gathering Storm is much more than another factual retelling. Currier infuses subtle details from other true hate crimes incorporating them into the storyline. His third-person, journalistic style allows the author to speculate about the characters feelings, thoughts and emotions. This technique allows the facts to easily be conveyed allowing a ‘silent observer’ effect for the reader to be in on the scenes developing before them. Currier explores the thoughts and reactions to the two assailants’ girlfriends, the sheriff involved in the case, relatives to all three boys, the doctors working to save his life, and various people directly (and indirectly) involved showing the unmentioned butterfly effect a horrible crime can have on so many others. An important book to read and it’s definitely worth your time to read it!”
—Eric Andrews-Katz, Seattle Gay News

“The point and the power of A Gathering Storm is the impact the crime has to transform the characters—spurring some to come out or stand proud against hate, and others to vocalize their homophobia. An absorbing read about an important topic.”
—Gary M. Kramer, Philadelphia Gay News

“This book is not an easy read but it is a worthwhile read. It is a thoughtful exploration of the emotional complexities of homophobia and a reverent tribute to the victims of hate crimes. Despite its grim subject, the novel does manage to strike hopeful notes.”
—Frank Perez, Ambush

“A wonder of emotive writing and intuitive imagination, and a fitting tribute to the community-scarring event which inspired it.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter
I shouldn’t be seeing you like this.

As I made the coffees, needing one to face you as much I guessed you would need one to face the day, Polly had texted. “I guess he’s with you?” it said. “Just checking. I don’t want to talk to him.”

A simple “Yes, he’s here” was as far I ventured. I didn’t feel up to knowing more. Certainly not to asking questions.

“Poor you,” came the surprisingly quick reply. I left the phone on the table.

As I carry the mugs down the hallway, I’m wondering what the sympathy is for, beyond having to face you so early in the day. After all, I wasn’t the one who went to bed with a bottle of Scotch. I tighten my
dressing-gown belt and take a deep breath, and then a mouthful of my coffee, before I nudge open the door to the spare room.

*I really shouldn’t be seeing you like this.*

The thought repeats like a self-help mantra as I look down at you, slumped half-dressed against the wall, knees drawn up to your chest. You were supposed to be—no, you always were—the Golden Boy, the one who made it all look effortless. The handsome athletic one with the walk of a panther, while I was the spindly antelope whose presence you tolerated while you kept one eye on the possibility of moments for unobserved torture. For all your lazy, loose-limbed loping, those haunches somehow always carried the promise—or the threat—of muscle.

You shouldn’t be sitting here, so far past shame you don’t even seem to care that your dirty T-shirt has ridden up over the baby paunch that last night’s baggy sweater managed to hide. Against the whiteness of your sweating belly, its faded baby pink looks strangely colourful. Ride Hard or Ride Home, it declares, the slogan stretched and skewed, its bike-wheel image stained with last night’s spilled drink. You’re not looking exactly saddle-ready.

And standards aren’t the only thing that have slipped. Their presence no more invited than the rest of you, I can see your balls, as unshaven as your chin, fallen from the leg of your crumpled grey boxers.

*I shouldn’t be seeing you like this…* 

Old underwear at that. We were never alike. You’ve always mocked the way I groom and preen, as if you can sense the underbelly of anxiety. Do you still remember those teenage fights where you’d tell me how women judge on more than mere appearances—that you weren’t just the handsome one? Luckier in love, you always boasted, even if that wasn’t always the most accurate four-letter word for your liaisons.

Even bedhead hair used to look good on you, where you inherited Mum’s sleek locks and I got Dad’s unruly curls. So this is how you look when your luck runs out. I watch as you comb your fingers through your new-grown beard, its mannered Edwardian pomp out of tune with your carefully composed nonchalance, and realise I enjoy how much it disfigures you. It hides that cocksure chin that’s always jutting slightly, like a man sneaking home in a photo-finish. That always seems to be saying I could, if I wanted to. The exact verb has never mattered.

No wonder you never liked Paul. The only one who ever bested you, that time you shared the hall mirror, optimising yourselves before the dinner guests arrived. As Paul set to work with gels and brushes, taming the waves I adored and he detested, you couldn’t resist. “Don’t you ever wish you were naturally straight?” I heard you wisecrack. “So much easier.” Smug, maybe, but not quick. Paul just eyed your reflection up and down and sighed. “Well, less of a handful, I’m told,” he said, softly but firmly, his eyes lingering a precisely measured moment too long on your groin’s reflection.

I squat down next to you, nursing the black coffee I’ve made you. Behind me, Trigger’s claws clack gently as he pads down the hallway, curious as to why I’m in an unused room. His old-dog eyes squint in the sunshine streaming through the open curtains.

You almost make a matching pair, his ageing black fur turning brown in streaks just as the ends of your exuberant moustache glint with threads of orange. He stops in the doorway, rubbing his neck against the
doorframe, marking his territory as he eyes the intruder. Satisfied with his labours, he ambles forward, sniffing the air suspiciously. I watch you hold out a hand, palm up the way I taught you. He pauses, nostrils flaring, and then starts to back away, lips curling.

“Here,” I say, holding the coffee out to you. Your bloodshot eyes look up at me. “See if that brings you round.”

There’s no affection in my gesture, but before I can straighten up you’ve wrapped your arms around me and pulled me to your chest. Behind me, a low growl crawls out of Trigger’s throat, his claws clicking against the bare wood floor as reflex extends them.

“Thanks, bro,” you mutter into my hair, so self-pityingly it’s almost believable. “I love you.”

“And you stink,” I protest as you crush me into your t-shirt’s musky folds.

“Hey, that’s not nice.” You actually have the nerve to sound indignant. “I’m not one of your bloody primary school kids. And I thought you were pleased to see me?”

I let the question pass but the stench is unmissable, a sad bachelor’s cocktail of whisky and wanking. Your inhibitions have always been highly soluble—two drinks and the satyr’s out of its shirt and dancing. And blood may be thicker than water, but these walls are thin. Any flimsier and I’d might have even seen you, silhouetted by the bedside light. One hand wrapped round your glass and the other busy with wishful thinking. I hope you drew the curtains before you passed out.

I shouldn’t be seeing you like this.

Understandable, I tell myself. Under the circumstances. Or your account of them, at least. Wandering back from your brother-in-law’s pitch on a family camping trip to find a bare stretch of flattened grass. No tent, no car, no wife. Just a note tent-pegged to a tree, telling you she’d left you and not wasting many words to say it.

“Remember what Grandpa used to tell us,” I say, prising myself free and standing over you. “He’d leave us in the living room, let us stay up to watch a late film.” I can hear the schoolteacher in my voice now, but you’ve earned it. “Sleep well, boys, and I don’t want to hear anyone rubbing Aladdin’s lamp, you get me?”

You start to laugh before it’s clear I won’t be joining in, standing here blank-faced, one hand on hip and the other gesturing down toward you. It’s a posture you would normally mock, but there’s no comeback this morning.

“I’m loading the machine. Take it off and I’ll wash it. It’s not like you’ll fit anything of mine.”

I look away as you peel off your T-shirt, reaching over you to unlatch the window and push it ajar.

“There you are,” I hear you say, holding up the ball of crumpled cotton for me to take, your face taking offence as I handle it cautiously between pinched fingertips. Trigger leans forward to sniff and then recoils, sneezing.

“Bro, behave. We share DNA.”

“Not this directly we don’t. Bro.”
You fumble to your feet, either still drunk or fighting the after-effects, and stand looking at your toes. Behind me, I hear Trigger backing away.

“I’ll put the shower on. Leave the boxers here—I’ll wash them too.” You’re already reaching for the waistband, about to suck them off, and I turn to walk away. “There’s a spare robe in the bathroom,” I say over my shoulder. “Put it on, afterwards. I’ll make breakfast.”

*   *   *

This morning’s lack of explanations hasn’t come as a surprise. It took you two years to get round to introducing me to her, one messy Sunday pub lunch. “This is Poppy,” you said. “Isn’t she intoxicating?” As I reached out to shake her hand, she waved it away and kissed me, told me how lovely it was to meet me. I remember thinking you had the wrong plant metaphor. Not intoxicating but hardy. Upright and reliable, ready to root and propagate.

Sturdy too, from another moment I remember. You were trying to impress her brother with your globe-trotting piety, the whole Mr Cool social entrepreneur shtick I’d heard a hundred times. All those tales about how you charm ‘the locals’, especially the ones you call ‘the females’, as if anything that happens beyond Basingstoke is a wildlife documentary. “Sometimes I think my husband won’t be happy till he’s irrigated every canal south of Tripoli,” Poppy said, and Ben laughed slightly too loudly. I remember thinking that, aside from the obvious, he seemed more your type than she did. Cocky, self-assured, never quite able to pass his reflection without pausing to admire it.

And then one day, Ben ditched the girlfriend and arrived with a man. Not unusual, Poppy said, for him. All those years of snide asides you’d made at a little brother you could torment, I thought, and now you’d have to deal with it with a friend.

I’ve always preferred Poppy, to be honest. When it was obvious that Paul and I were having troubles, she was the one who found quiet moments to take me aside, check that I was okay. You never asked. Ben was worse. That dinner party after we’d finally split up, he wouldn’t let it go, telling me drunkenly that it was a tragedy when lovers become brothers, that in a free world it should be the other way around. He didn’t stop there. Under the table, his hand landed on my thigh and worked its way up to my crotch as I squirmed to get away. “Boundaries are for geography teachers,” he whispered in my ear, though it felt more like a hiss.

All the while you sat opposite me, pissed and smiling, while my head flooded with memories. All those teenage years I avoided any sight of you less than fully dressed. Steered clear of the bathroom if you were in it, buried my head in a book when you changed on the beach. No matter how desirable you might have been if you’d had different blood in your veins, just the thought was enough to make me squirm. And you’d known too, never missing a chance to tease.

I shouldn’t be seeing you like this…

It was Poppy who saved me, that evening, shouting at Ben to shut the fuck up till the pair of you slunk outside to kick a ball round the garden. “If he wasn’t my brother,” she’d said to me, putting an arm round my shoulder as we watched through the window, “sometimes I could fucking kill him.” She turned and looked straight at me. “You probably know how that feels.”
As I sit as the kitchen table, Trigger at my feet, I can hear the roaring water and your groans as it starts to bring you round. You used to sing in the shower when we were kids. Rugby songs, or dirty versions of hits of the day. Anything to embarrass me as I sat on my bed, waiting my turn. This morning, you’re silent.

My phone sits in front me, tempting as a tantalus, as I tell myself Poppy deserves a moment of concern.

“OK,” I type, “what did he do?”

I put it back down, not expecting a response, and get up to load the washing machine. The sudden burst of jolly music startles me as her reply arrives.


I sit staring at it, not sure what to feel, listening to you cursing in the bathroom. I smile at the thought of you washing shampoo from your eyes. The discomfort seems only right. And then it sings again, rattling on the table as it vibrates.

“Ben. He screwed Ben.”

Before I can even pick it up, it serenades me again.

“I saw them. I guess you don’t want to see the video?”

I’m not sure how long I sit staring, sipping my coffee and hoping it won’t ring again. Long enough for you to finish your shower, wrap a towel round your waist and pad unheard into the kitchen on bare feet.

“Any tea going?”

Your voice startles me, and I splash my coffee over the photocopied lesson plans I’d left on the table. Outline maps of Europe soak up the spill, borders dissolving as the hot liquid reunites Czechoslovakia and blurs the boundaries of the Balkans.

I spin out of my chair to grab a cloth, scaring the dog, but you’re blocking the way to the sink, water dripping from your beard. I’m too slow again, and your arms are back around me.

“More lovable now?” you say, pressing yourself against me, your nauseating confidence obviously starting to recover. As your wet moustache grazes my neck, I lean as much of my body away from you as I can, but you only push yourself forward more firmly.

I start to protest, voice muffled in your hair as I squirm. I try to wrestle free, smaller and less strong, and I can feel the towel slipping down between us, feel you more than I would ever wish, insistent now. And then the music comes again.

As your hand lets go of me to reach for the phone, the towel falls to the floor. “Shit,” I hear you shout as you peer at the phone’s screen, and I lose my footing on the towel as I try to swivel round. As my elbow hits the floor, I see Trigger jump, teeth bared.

For a second or two, there’s a chaos of screams and growls, his jaws firmly attached to your naked backside. And then a sickening crunch before you collapse over the table and he runs howling from the
room. Face down in the coffee-soaked maps, blood running down your thighs, I can hear you swearing over and over.

“Stay still,” I say, as I grab the first aid kit from its cupboard. Flicking on the striplight, two things are obvious. The hairy arse leant over my kitchen table, bitten and bleeding, is recognisably the same as the one on the phone in your hand, albeit less mobile now. And sitting proud from its skin, a yellowing stump in the crease of your buttocks, is a dog’s broken tooth.

As I put my hand on your hip, I feel you flinch. “Trust me,” I say, as I watch your anus gasp like a landed fish. I grip the broken stump and yank it free, a fresh ooze of scarlet running down over your balls. Beyond a clench-jawed wince, there is no sound from you, although the phone is still broadcasting your energetic grunting.

*I really shouldn’t be seeing you like this.*

“Phone,” I say. An order, not a request. I snatch it from you and silence it, scrolling through my address book.

“Ambulance?” I hear you say, lifting your face from the table. Your beard is striped with different colours, my photocopying finally dissolving in a mixture of coffee and cold shower water.

“Vet.”

“But he bit me!” you almost squawk, trying to lever yourself back upright.

“You’ll live,” I mutter, spilling the contents of the first-aid kit across the table to rummage through them. “And he’s an old dog now.”

“But he was being aggressive, vicious. He was being…”

As you realise I am about to rub stinging ointment into your buttocks, your words fade to silence.

“Loyal,” I tell you. "He was being loyal."

I watch my hand slide past the antiseptic cream, fingers closing quietly round a pot of salt.

___________

Raised in London, Dave Wakely has worked as a musician, university administrator, poetry librarian, and editor. Currently a freelance copywriter after completing a Creative Writing MA in 2014, he lives in Buckinghamshire with his civil partner and too many guitars. His stories have appeared in *The Mechanics’ Institute Review, Ambit* and *Glitterwolf* magazines, are forthcoming in *Holdfast Anthology #2*, and he was recently longlisted for the University of Sunderland Short Story in Association with Waterstones Award. Dave is MC of the Birkbeck Poets at the Duke of Wellington and blogs at [http://theverbalist.wordpress.com](http://theverbalist.wordpress.com).
“Every essay is gripping, exciting, fun to read, and, yes, entertaining. No wonder Picano is such a popular writer. *True Stories* is a masterpiece. Buy it and enjoy it.”
—James D. Anderson, Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University, *ALA Newsletter, GLBT Reviews*

“Telling truths is something that popular, prolific author and memoirist Felice Picano does extremely well. This is most evident in *True Stories: Portraits from My Past*, his latest collection of expanded personal essays and life reflections. Picano’s memory is impeccable, and his ear for dialogue just as distinctive and richly realized. Appealing and wonderfully anecdotal, the essays shared here harken back to a cloudless era when fun was freewheeling and the consequences of that fun were overcast at best. With this collection, Picano pays tribute to the many unsung heroes of his past who have long since fallen, forever etched both in memory and the occasional bout of inexplicable laughter and tears.”
—Jim Piechota, *Bay Area Reporter*
“Felice Picano, as his name suggests, is both a happy and piquant memoirist. Gifted with a prodigious memory and an inexhaustible curiosity, Picano observes everything—Japan, Berlin, his own family—in a fresh and indelible way.”
—Edmund White

“An intensely personal collection centered on the survivor of a fascinating, chaotic time. Picano’s writing is most moving when he’s reflecting on AIDS and HIV, a theme that connects each story and has affected so many people in his life.”
—Kirkus Reviews
When you bump into someone from your past, who is the last person you'd want to see? If you had asked me a month ago, I wouldn’t have known the answer. But recently, I learned the hard way that the answer to this question was Brian, an ex-friend of my husband who had ghosted us four years prior.

I ran into him, almost literally, while speed walking towards the Dupont Circle Metro station. At first, I didn’t recognize him. Brian was smartly dressed with a distinguished beard and confident smile. He was talking with a trendy-looking woman, giving her the kind of flirtatious smile that gay men often give their female friends. I must have looked ridiculous: hunched over, wide eyed and sweating through my shirt. I had put on weight since our last interaction. Brian gave me a casual look, no nod of recognition, and simply turned back to his conversation. We had held each other's gaze for only a few seconds, but it was
enough time for me to feel embarrassed and panicked, so I kept walking towards the Metro, telling myself not to turn around.

I didn’t understand the term ghosting — the act of severing ties with someone by ignoring all communication — until about a year ago, even after it had happened to me. I understood the concept: many of us were active participants in our high school years, when hormonal teenagers are at their most passive aggressive. Back then, it was never enough to let a friend know your anger, you wanted to make sure they felt it. And due to the physical space of high school, no one ever fully disappeared and so nothing was ever permanent.

I now find myself in my mid-thirties. This is a strange time when my need for close friendships is greater than ever but the demands of adult life make them harder to maintain. We are lucky to connect with people a few times a month. And yet, I cling to those old fabled moments when a group of us would chug coffee in all-night diners, smoking cigarettes, and talking about anything. Together, we’d discuss our artistic projects, analyze video game plots and song lyrics, tell our best sex stories… these were the safe spaces where we could afford to be a little embarrassing and know it would be forgiven.

But my gay friends have an additional importance: we can be even more honest with each other.

Despite the increase in acceptance, the queer community is still an isolated one and partly concealed thanks to the anonymity of the internet. To various degrees, we remain disconnected from the mainstream. Childhood bullying and disapproving parents taught us the value of discretion. We learn quickly that not everyone should have access to our private lives. We learn to be secretive to our classmates, our coworkers, and even our healthcare providers. Too many of us were disowned by our families. An older friend of mine once explained that gay bars are always open on Christmas because there were so many of us who had no place else to go. So, we learn early to see out others, to find our people. We may look for sex or partners, but many times companionship. We want confidants, those who share the gritty details. Our communities become insulated with same people cycling in and out. So, in a way, queer friends and ex-lovers stick around. We become each other’s families.

Brian was one of those elite friendships that had lasted for a decade and his loss was especially disturbing. Not just because of our history, but because of the manner of how it had happened: abrupt, cold and ultimately cruel, the very antithesis of the person we knew.

I’ll be honest. I used to have fantasies of running into Brian again. It seems like a ridiculous thing for a man in his thirties to do, but I couldn’t help it. Being ghosted had made me an emotional wreck — I had no idea if I should feel guilty or betrayed. At first, I imagined us running into each other at a restaurant and he would sheepishly ask to join me. He’d apologize and our friendship went back to normal. Over time, the fantasies became angrier. I wanted him to feel uncomfortable in my presence, to leave the party early because I had walked in, to have him beg me for forgiveness so I could reject him. I had played these scenarios out in my head enough that I knew exactly what to do should the opportunity ever arise. And when it did finally happen, I was surprised at how unprepared I was for it.

My friendship with Brian stems from my husband, Gordon. They had been part of the same social circle in New England and when Gordon relocated to D.C., Brian was one of the few who stayed in touch. It was always important to me that Gordon maintain some of his own previous connections, that he have friends.
outside of our relationship. But I found myself instantly drawn to Brian. He was a quieter personality than I was used to, but was personable and a very attentive listener. He read books; he traveled; he was interesting. He knew how to be funny without being cruel. Over the years, he became a regular fixture in Gordon’s and my life together. He visited us in D.C., he got along with our friends, joined us on vacations, and attended our wedding. When he announced he was moving down as well, we were overjoyed and ready to offer assistance.

Looking back, I realize that transition was hard on Brian and we could have been more attentive. I was working full-time while in grad school and Gordon’s job had him traveling often. There was never enough hours in the day for anything. We already had a wide network of friends that tugged at us from different directions. At first, Brian only had us. We usually included him in large group settings to help increase his network. Even though Brian lived just down the street, we rarely saw each other one-on-one.

Eventually, Brian found a boyfriend to occupy his time. They were an odd pair. In contrast to Brian’s reserved polite nature, Sid was assertive and loud-mouthed with a delicious wit that was just on the right side of snarky. With the growing demands of adult life, we saw each other less and less. I was consumed by my grad school thesis. Gordon’s job took unexpected turns, which added to our anxiety since we had just purchased a house. Between Sid and Brian’s family obligations, they were away more than they were home. Eventually, they announced their engagement and preparations took up even more of their free time.

Several months before the wedding, Brian was hospitalized. And while it didn’t sound life threatening, Gordon and I had recently learned not to take anything for granted. We were already making weekly hospital visits to two other friends, one dying of cancer, the other of a heart condition. We were ready to add a third. Sid, however, advised us not to come. Brian’s family was there and hovering, leaving poor Brian feeling suffocated and embarrassed. We were told to wait until things had settled down. Eventually, our other two friends died (both times with us bedside) and Brian had been released without us even knowing it. And while we couldn’t be everywhere at once, there was an underlying tone that we had failed in our duties and that damage had been done.

We took Brian on a bachelor’s weekend with an intimate group of friends, including old favorites from up north. We avoided all discussions of death and illness. Brian seemed healthy, though easily perturbed, if not agitated. Then the wedding happened, coincidentally on Gordon’s and my anniversary, and we quietly toasted from our table, crammed at the far back of the reception room.

Later that summer, Brian and Sid joined our group for a gay boy’s beach week. This was a long-standing tradition in which we crammed ten people in an overpriced house with only two bathrooms. We’d divide our time between the beach and boardwalk, convening later at some restaurant or bar before settling in for drinks around the hot tub each night. We had all arrived giddy and drunk off of the idea of vacation, hugging each other as if we had won a prize. So we were unprepared for how quickly things soured. Sid was very controlling and irrational over group management. Friction between him and our other friends quickly escalated from side-eyes to raised voices. I took long walks at night to escape the tension, only to return to the house where Sid was playing Risk with the boys, joking around as if nothing had happened. So, I figured there was no need to mediate what grown men could handle on their own. Brian, who had seemed so happy at first, was suddenly withdrawn until he disappeared from all communal activities mid-
week. He barely left his bedroom and avoided us on the beach. Our last morning, I had rushed out to hug him goodbye, to which he tensed up and screamed, “No, no, no!” with the intensity of a child on the verge of a tantrum. I was so jarred by it, I numbly patted his shoulder while he flinched and I backed away.

I did not know it at the time, but that was our last interaction.

When we talk about ghosting, we talk about the complete disappearance of a person from your life. In reality, they remain as an apparition that hovers over you long after. Brian was in our photo albums, our recipe book, buried in old email threads. He was permanently attached to some of our most vivid memories. In the small circuit of gay bars, we’d recognize other guests from his wedding, giving each other side eyed glances and wondering what the other was thinking. Other mutual acquaintances would ask us about Brian and Sid. Did we hear they had bought a house? I always smiled, acting as if we all had simply fallen out of touch. “You should call them,” I was told more times than not. I felt so phony that I quit going out altogether.

The truth was I had called. I had sent all sorts of communication. Shortly after the beach week, I had crafted a short but sincere email inviting him out for coffee. By the second week, I had figured he’d overlooked it and sent another. I sent him a Facebook message asking if he was alright, an evite to a party, a text message for Thanksgiving. I never got a response.

I did hear from Sid, who offered no insight into the situation, but still encouraged me to keep sending notes while Brian sorted out his feelings. I reluctantly agreed to meet Sid for dinner one evening after work. I still have no idea what his intentions were as he chatted in his usual gossipy fashion. But when I asked how Brian was doing, he perked up as if he had waited all night for me to do so. Sid became defensive, acted as if I was purposefully digging for information, as if by mentioning Brian’s name I had somehow broken a rule. At one point, he even muttered under his breath, “Brian would be dead if it weren’t for me.” I left feeling bruised and humiliated, vowing never to put myself in that situation ever again.

The grieving process is a long one. Gordon and I had two other friends recently dead and buried. They deserve just as much attention. For one of them, Greg, we were part of the cleanup crew. This was a common practice during the height of the AIDS epidemic, when friends would sanitize the deceased’s apartment before the family arrived. For Greg, we removed the soiled mattress, uncovered the hidden stashes of porn and sex toys, closed down the internet accounts. We removed anything his conservative sisters shouldn’t find. I thought to myself, we’re lucky if we can acquire one good friend in our lives to do this. And there were five of us there.

Brian was the third friend we lost, except that he was alive and well someplace. Life continued on in its usual manic pace. But every few weeks, some small reminder of Brian would cause time to stop. In these moments, we were overwhelmed with the sense of unfinished business. And with all that brooding silence, I began to remember him differently. Hadn’t there always been a tone of disapproval to him? I could remember his endless sighs, the perturbed facial expressions and dismissive hand gestures, as if he could barely tolerate what was happening around him. He rolled his eyes at video games, he called Dancer from the Dance the whiniest novel he’d ever read, he was easily annoyed by bad jokes and people who laughed to loud at them. He criticized others, sometimes on a deep personal level. I had heard the phrase, “What the hell is wrong with him?” so many times. As for Sid, his snarky comments
were remembered as not funny but mean-spirited. He had a habit of cutting you off mid-sentence and
telling you how to feel. It had been suggested that Sid convinced Brian to cut himself off from us mid-
beach week. It had gotten back to us from one person, who heard it from another, that Sid had told Brian
that the fact we didn’t visit him in the hospital so long ago proved we were not the friends they thought we
were. Hadn’t Sid told us not to go?

None of this could be 100% true. Memory and perception are the enemies of facts; no one ever learns the
full story. When you’re left with that much ambiguity, you start asking questions you didn’t know exist until
you’re sure the answer was staring you right in the face for years. And then, I would turn to my husband
and ask, “Have you heard from him? Any news?” Gordon’s face would droop solemnly as he said, “no.”
And then I realized I was spending more time on a ghost than I was on the one man I was sworn to
protect.

The part I haven’t mentioned was that Sid still emailed me once every few months. They were needling
little prods to see if I was still paying attention. He wrote once to congratulate me when my first book was
published and then to wish me a happy birthday. Once he mentioned he’d be near my work with no
invitation to meet up. I didn’t take the bait. My responses were always polite but short enough to show I
was not interested. Perhaps this was Sid’s way of keeping the line of communication open, proof that he
actually hoped our relationship would repair. If I was not as cruel as Brian, I was worse, because I clearly
knew what I was doing.

It took us almost a year to accept the end of this friendship. And then three years passed before I ran into
Brian on the street corner. Our eyes locked for a brief moment and we moved on as if we didn’t know
each other. For a moment, all the old questions resurfaced and I actually wondered if Brian ever regretted
the distance between us. It probably doesn’t matter. He looked happy. And Gordon and I are also happy.
Even with all that animosity and left over grudges, we had managed to heal, to continue living a well-
meaning life. It feels wrong to assume that Brian had not done the same.

I waited several days without expectation. There were no new messages, no pokes or prods, anything to
say, “We saw each other. Wish you had stopped to say hello.” I didn’t send anything either. But I finally
did pull up his Facebook page, the last link I had to him. His life had not been disrupted by our chance
encounter and there was no need to chase after someone who didn’t want to be found. So, I clicked the
“defriend” button and said, “It’s done.”

Jonathan Harper is the author of the short story collection, Daydreamers, which was a Kirkus Indie Book
“J.R. Greenwell does a lovely job of relaying the comic as well as tragicomic aspects of the over-the-top dramatic world of drag queens, and he nails it exactly.”
—Felice Picano, author of True Stories

“Winning, witty, and wise. Greenwell has a talent for creating immediately recognizable yet slightly weird around the edges characters, and he puts them through some wonderfully silly paces as well as some heartbreaking ones. His prose is admirably restrained, conveying a great deal yet never sounding overwritten. But it’s his characters that shine and sparkle like sequins in the spotlight. If you’re looking for a light read that has some substance behind its humor, you’ll hardly go wrong with this collection.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“Eleven clever and engaging stories based in small Southern towns, some sweet and emotional, most amusing and often full of campy bitchiness! The stories are character-driven, with a diverse cast that includes drag queens with attitudes to reckon with, clueless parents trying to deal with their “fabulous” kids, criminals without a lick of common sense, and men “coming out” late in life. This is a home run for this first-time talented author, and a Southern-fried treat for his readers. Five stars out of five!”
—Bob Lind, Echo

“A slew of bizarre stories, some hilarious, some heartrending, and almost all of them as original as an Ionesco play with a good dose of David Lynch trompe l’oeil thrown in. Today’s gay literature needs more voices from Greenwell’s South, and here’s hoping Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? has called them out of the wilderness.”
—Kyle Thomas Smith, Edge

“If you haven’t picked up a copy of Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? yet, then allow me to tell you that you should.”
—‘Nathan Burgoine, reviewer and author of Light

“Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? is a collection of eleven short stories about being gay in the South and I loved each of them... Greenwell gives us a wonderful cast of characters with heart and we laugh and cry with them. Written with wit and emotion, we are taken into the world of Southern drag queens and feel what they feel as they navigate life.”
—Amos Lassen, Reviews by Amos Lassen
Satellite Rules, Stranded Longings
Dale Corvino

The budget hotel’s blinky sign pulsed over its empty parking lot as the shuttle dropped Dave off; the buzz of electrical current skittering through neon matched the chronic hum in his head. This at least was a comfort, he thought. He was skeptical of the hotel’s advertised claim as centrally located, though it hulked very near to the confluence of three rivers, the locus of Milwaukee. Once inside the curation of dusty plastic flowers that was the lobby, flush, name-tagged Kimmy gave him a big “Hello! Welcome. Last name?” How did she summon cheer without narcotics, he wondered, as he pulled the credit card with the lowest balance. It had been a long day at the Convention Center.

Dave was in town for a Harley trade show because, through no agency of his own, he was a sales rep for their line of protective goggles and sunglasses. His cousin had done it for thirty years, until a heart attack
knocked him off his bike. He focused on the good it afforded him. He helped make bikers a little safer. He’d gotten to know the shapes and sizes of their heads, and the curvature of their brows. It was a kind of intimacy, a way to care for others. He’d put on his tepid impression of a biker, and earnestly sell them on the products. Truth be told, he was a New York homosexual who liked his quiet, and whose preference for two-wheeled locomotion involved no motor, just a nice bell.

He’d make the annual trek to some American city with adequate convention facilities to meet with his accounts, the merchandise managers of dealerships in the Northeast. Most of the dealerships were run by aged-out boomers. It was the same with the sales force, all men in their sixties, clinging to misspent youths. At 47, Dave was the youngest rep on the national team, so he was welcomed as a shot of fresh blood, though not without raising some eyebrows. He spent the first day of the trade show maintaining the charade while checking out the few hot guys in attendance—mostly the grown sons of owners, who had taken up the family business. All day, he scoped these sturdy, well-fed young men, and how they filled their jeans. They’d occasionally catch him, and return the most oblivious smiles.

On a break at the coffee station, in a corner where no one could see his phone screen, Dave opened the app—one of several mobile platforms for male-on-male cruising. He wanted to see if anyone else at the show was stealth, like him. None of the sturdy sons were there. A few brown-skinned guys showed non-identifiable parts of themselves—probably waiters from the dining hall.

Once Dave got settled in his hotel room, the app started pinging. He happily noted several promising pings from not too far off. Living in New York City, he was accustomed to pings from close proximities. In the grid of prospects, some were in the same building, some next door. Others were on the next block, but in the back of the building, separated by only a hundred and some odd feet, two exterior walls, and a chasm of rear space. In Milwaukee, distances were measured in miles.

Dave would have gladly walked a few miles to break the strangeness and share pleasure with someone, or they could come to the hotel—if they could get past Kimmy. It said right there in the Bible in the nightstand, ‘love thy neighbor,’ and with the help of the satellite array encircling the Earth, transmitting location data into his pocket, that was the plan.

He checked out this guy only 1.4 miles away. The guy was smiling in his photo, that was a good sign. Dave did not appreciate scowlers. The smiler had dark hair and eyes, and a somewhat large forehead. Dave found him compelling in an otherworldly way, plus he had a sense of humor. His name was also Dave, and they joked about that. The Daves exchanged some photos, first candids, then more intimate shots, like a flip-book striptease. Other Dave looked squat and sturdy, although maybe there was some distortion going on in the mirror shots he sent? They complimented each other, and asked the ‘host or travel’ question, to which Other Dave specified that he’d prefer company. This suited Dave just fine, as it was a clear night, and he wanted to get out after a day spent in a forced-air environment.

Dave prepared to break out, take a well-planned urban hike, and love his neighbor. He mentally rehearsed a sequence of actions—getting Other Dave’s address, mapping the location, determining the best walking path, brushing his teeth, fixing his hair, changing out of his work shirt—when Other Dave messaged him: ‘So UR ok with me being dwarf?’ To which he added the bicep, mouse, and winking man emojis. He felt a flush of embarrassment, which was a weird thing to feel alone in a room. He checked Other Dave’s stats, and sure enough, his height was listed as 4’-9”, on the tall side for a dwarf, as Dave
learned from the results of a hasty dive into search engines. An image flashed of a porn he once came across, a bull-like, street-tough dwarf fucking two full-sized girls. His mind searched for any prior interactions with dwarves, and came up blank.

Dave once hooked up with a guy with flippers for arms, a thalidomide baby. Flipper Man was handsome and owned a brownstone in Chelsea. Dave was surprised when he opened the door, since Flipper Man had not shared his circumstance with him. Right there on the stoop, he understood the photo cropping decisions Flipper Man had made. He imagined all the men in his situation who turned around and ran back down the steps, and right there decided he did not want to be one of them. Flipper Man had a serious expression. Dave gave him his ass because he couldn't give him arms, riding him while holding on to his shoulders.

Dave hooked up with a Wolf Man in Boston, who'd lost an arm after a drunken motorcycle accident. They sat next to each other at an AA meeting, and afterwards made out in Wolf Man's pickup. He had a sense-memory of the electrical discharge that ran up his arm when Wolf Man gently touched him with his mechanical claw prosthetic. Recalling these past encounters, Dave panicked. He shouldn't sexualize Other Dave just because of his dwarfism, even if he sexualized everyone else, really. That would be exploitation—but then he remembered that he'd been attracted to Other Dave before he even knew. He found himself replying: 'Yes I am cool.'

Dave took the anticipated steps in preparing to meet Other Dave. The path he'd mapped took him across the Menomonee River along 6th Street; its cable-stayed bridge hummed too. He walked past the vast museum, where he'd later spend a morning feigning interest, and into Walker's Point. At .7 miles, a drunk stumbled out of a Mexican place called Conejito’s. The man cried incomprehensibly, and then stumbled over a bike rack. It broke the solitude of Dave’s Milwaukee night. He wondered if Other Dave was a furious rabbit.

The app showed smaller distances between active users as Dave advanced on the destination, leading him to surmise he was in something of a gay neighborhood. Other Dave lived on a block of working-class houses, outside of a looming factory complex with a clock tower. It was modest wooden structure with shabby asphalt roof tiles and a projecting front porch. The steps creaked under his feet, and Other Dave appeared at the window, smiling, even before he had a chance to knock. He must have been tracking his approach on the app.

"Hello Dave! Welcome to Milwaukee," said Other Dave in full voice, and as they shook hands, he pulled Dave in for a hug. Their bodies touched now, after all those signals burning through mass and space, bounced from medium-earth orbit. He burnished his large forehead against Dave's chest, which he found arousing, but once the hug was over, he didn't know what to say or how to move.

Other Dave led Dave in, and invited him to sit on a full-sized recliner, while he sprawled on the low sofa, which was a standard size, but with the feet removed. They had a nice chat; Other Dave worked at that factory complex down the street. He was an engineer developing automation processes for manufacturing. Dave told him about his work among the bikers, and how that came to be. Other Dave explained how his interest in robotics emerged from trying to solve the problems of access in a full-sized world. Then he mentioned that he used to dance shirtless on a bar, pouring shots for straight crowds, to put himself through engineering school, and Dave got really aroused.
Dave was turned on by Other Dave’s compact musculature and the size of his forehead. His brow was broad and flat and perfect in its way, and he longed to touch it with his eyes closed, to snug it like a pair of extra large goggles. “You have kind eyes,” Other Dave told him. “They make me want to do bad things to you,” he said with a smirk. “Oh?” replied Dave. He was hoping the reply would come off as confident cheek, but he nearly gulped it down is it came up. Dave lowered his eyes and fidgeted.

Other Dave stood up and wordlessly led Dave into his bedroom, where Dave tried something he’d been thinking about: he got on his knees and nuzzled into Other Dave’s chest, just the way Other Dave did at the front door. Dave felt Other Dave’s arousal through his pants. They removed their shirts and Dave inhaled of Other Dave’s armpits, and licked a nipple. Dave admired Other Dave’s muscular arms, although he saw something baby-like about the proportions. With Dave kneeling before him, Other Dave silently took charge. The hum stopped.

Other Dave ordered Dave to undress with a stern look, then pushed him down into a cross-legged position. He reached back in time for some of his bar-top stripper moves, and gave Dave a slow striptease, to his briefs. He said while gyrating, “You know, Dave, if it weren’t for out-of-towners, I’d never get laid. The locals treat me like a pet.” Then he pushed his crotch into Dave’s face.

When they lay down together on Dave’s low bed. The height difference melted away, but not the power dynamic. Once they found each others’ triggers, Other Dave crawled on top of Dave and laid on him like a sinky pool raft. They stayed like that for a while, glued together, all difference fused away.

“We should grab dinner one night if you’re free,” said Other Dave as they dressed. Dave initially believed it was a sincere offer, before spasming with doubt. He mumbled something noncommittal, and returned to his hotel a different way, because he didn’t like to backtrack. The return walk took him right by the Confluence, where he entertained the notion that tonight a GPS satellite was passing right overhead. GPS was invented by the government for military and navigational purposes, and here he was applying it to his longing for intimacy. Currents of aggression, exploitation, and lust ran along the same channel, he mused. Is that source of the hum? he wondered. “That’s confluence,” he found himself saying aloud as he craned to face the moon.

After another airless day of sales rites in the Convention Center, Dave walked the trail along the banks of the Milwaukee River, crossing bridge after bridge. It was a warm evening, and the city’s waterways were buzzing with locals on leisurely outings in pleasure boats. The app came to life as he cut through various neighborhoods, mapping trajectories as men left their jobs and sought each other out.

Dave came to life too, breathing briny air and seeing new things, remembering fondly his encounter with Other Dave. At least his airless day had been a good one for sales. He hesitated to acknowledge his specific longings for tonight, but after last night, he wanted to stand head-to-head with a man, and not feel any awkwardness. He’d remember to review all stats that night.

“Yo ho Dave!” he made out from a terrace overlooking the trail. It was another rep—the one from Texas, large and loud—drinking a beer with the rep from Florida, who was pink and smiled all the time. “Come join us,” he yelled, as the two of them waved him up, and Dave smilingly joined their table at the riverfront brewpub. They exchanged war stories from the day—tales of difficult buyers and big sales that got away—over brats and pale ales. At a lull in the background clatter of the establishment, Dave’s colleagues heard
the distinctive ping of the app coming from his phone, and their confused looks cut lines across the table. He was usually so careful to silence his phone around work colleagues.

He left them to their last round of ale, and checked in with the app. One of the pings seemed promising, although it was from 7 miles away. His screen name was Victor, also a good sign. Dave liked when users went by their names, not some invented handle boasting of prowess, or staking a claim on a sexual position. Victor reported that he was just finishing work and needed to travel.

Victor was 25, a tall, good-looking Latino. Dave had grown accustomed to attention from younger guys; he didn’t especially like being called ‘daddy,’ but was in the end grateful they called him anything. Victor hadn’t used the word. He appeared in his profile photo in a bright blue t-shirt, and the background is all glossy white brightness recognizable as an Apple store interior. Dave twitched with lust over the prospect of hooking up with a Genius.

Dave had a back catalog of delectable fantasies about ravaging those nerdy-hot tech guys he’d encountered in Apple stores. He couldn’t help messaging Victor: ‘Been an fan since the days of Mac Classic w/9” monochrome screen and 4 MB memory!’ That was when he first started hooking up with men, through the America Online chat rooms. Victor changed the subject. Perhaps that was an overshare, Dave thought, his confidence wavering. Victor explained to Dave his preference for older guys: ‘They r just nicer,’ he messaged. ‘Guys my age r mean selfish take yr pick’. Victor offered to meet him at his hotel in about an hour. He’d take the bus from Wauwatosa.

Victor arrived at the hotel after the long trip, the blue dash of his bus having lurched along with hundreds of faster dots. He was friendly and talkative, yet Dave detected an air of sadness. It was later than expected, and Dave struggled to keep alert for Victor’s chatter. “I actually prefer the late shift,” he said. “It’s when the wizards come. I learn a lot.” Dave struggled to follow along, and sensed that Victor talked about work so much to avoid other subjects. Victor launched into yet another work story— “This one bald wizard dude, you could almost see his brains through his skin”— when Dave pushed himself on him, kissing his open mouth and reaching around to cup his buttocks.

Dave was smitten with Victor’s smooth brown skin, his lean frame, his meaty ass. Victor whispered to Dave: “I’d like to stay the night, is that okay?” His voice trembled and Dave wondered why Victor felt safer with him, a stranger, than at home. Maybe he liked being in a random hotel room, where no one could track him. They had a romantic night, hours of kissing and grinding. As dawn light leaked between the vertical blinds, Victor lifted his legs for Dave, who fucked a stubborn nut out of him. Between the conversation and the slow-burning sex, they’d been up for hours, and Dave was completely spent. Even with a tired smile on Victor’s face, the dark brown dots of his eyes looked miles away, fixed on the Canadian shore of Lake Michigan. Dave had hoped to sex the sadness out of him, but had apparently failed. Victor slept nestled into him. After a few hours, the alarm sounded, and Dave dressed as silently as he could manage. He left Victor sleeping as he made his way towards his final day of capitalist frenzy.

Dave zombie walked through that morning. On his break, he ran over to the coffee bar to throw back a double espresso and check the app. He was scheduled to leave the next day, and that night he’d sleep, so there was really no reason; it had just become reflexive. Dave found a new guy who went by ‘Swingl’ just 51 feet away. Otherwise it was mostly the same array of faceless brown body parts. Swingl’s profile photo showed him on a motorcycle, geared up in leather, wearing a helmet and goggles. All Dave could
make out was his nose, straight along the bridge, but swollen with cartilage. It looked powerful and a little sunburned. Just as Dave was about to scroll on to the next profile, Swingl hit him up: ‘Hey Dave,’ with an added tongue-sticking-out emoji.

Dave seized with anxiety. His first impulse was to block Swingl, but then what? He scanned the area in a 50 foot circumference, then 100 feet, then an even wider circle, but didn’t see anyone who might be Swingl. He was scanning for that nose, for someone on his phone. It was the most alive he’d felt inside that coffin of a building.

‘Hi. Who’s this?’ Dave replied, trying to sound cool.

‘Hows MKE meet any QTs?’ asked Swingl.

Dave didn’t know what to make of this. Was Swingl ignoring his question, or hadn’t he seen it before asking his own? This person obviously wanted something of him, even if it was the vicarious pleasure of hearing about his hook-ups. Maybe Swingl just wanted to taunt him. Knowing so little about him was unsettling, but knowing there was someone like him among the bikers was electric. Dave replied:

‘Been nice–want to hear about it? Have we met?’

‘YES please.’

‘Ok. What will you tell me about you?’

“Nah but yr name’s on yr shirt.’

There was a pause as Swingl’s replies caught up to Dave’s questions.

‘Hehe. I’ll show U under my 1-piece…’

It was a provocative offer. Dave texted a recap of his first night in Milwaukee, omitting the detail of Other Dave’s stature. It seemed too much to give away. How many gay dwarves could there be in Milwaukee? Swingl replied by sending another photo in the one-piece, but with the zipper down. It was cropped just above the mouth, showing Swingl’s full lips, thick stubble, and just a peek of his hairy body beyond the zipper.

Then he told Swingl about Victor, who was probably still sleeping. Dave offered some details about their sexual encounter. Swingl replied with an approving ‘mhhm’, followed by the tongue emoji. Swingl next sent Dave a photo of him with the one-piece pushed down. Dave made out a shoulder, a pec, and an ear in profile. It was enough to get Dave to delve into intimate details about Victor: his furry ass, his broad feet, his panther-like skull. He omitted the part about the sadness. Swingl in return sent Dave a short video file of him dropping the one-piece to the ground with his back to the camera and pulsing his juice cans. Dave did not know you could send videos over the app, and nearly swooned right there in the Wisconsin Convention Center, although the low airflow likely contributed to his response.

With that, Swingl and his files were gone. He must have blocked Dave. Dave lurched to the restroom and splashed water on his face. He spent the afternoon scanning the lumbering crowds for that nose: so many large bodies, like a beast herd raised for butchering. He was scanning the crowd when the rep from
Texas approached him, and had to yell “Dave, yo ho Dave!” to get his attention. Dave felt the silos of his existence crumbling; yet it was liberating to imagine a life without stealth.

Dave decided to lay off the app on his last night, after this risky interaction. He took an aimless wander along the Riverwalk, then drifted off into the unknown, past brewery complexes and over train tracks. He came upon a farmer’s market. The vendors were closing up for the day, but at a cheesemonger’s table under a striped canopy, the goods were still out. The table was manned by two strapping young activist/farmers with full beards. They were so earnest about their organically fed animals and their small-batch approach. Dave sexualized the cheesemongers, too. He lamented that he found nothing in this life to be earnest about when he was their age, or even now. Those young men made things every day. He bought a little wheel of sheep’s milk cheese, which he was told was “buttery, with a salty finish.” He had no idea when he’d have occasion to eat it.

The next afternoon, following that museum tour, Dave made his way to the airport, with his branded backpack on this back, wheeling his branded rolling luggage through long corridors, carrying his artisan cheese in a brown bag. He recalled the perky museum guide from that afternoon’s tour with annoyance. After walking the group through the company’s technological advancements by the decade, she blabbed about how leveraged and recognizable the brand was, how it was in hundreds of product categories—outdoor furniture, golf clubs, phone cases. Then she said something Dave found most irksome: “Yet it still represents a spirit of rebellion to our customers!”

This public relations pablum made Dave want to zip out of the one-piece of his own skin and announce to the pack of big bodies obediently following Miss Perky that he’d been fucking men all over town. He didn’t care who knew anymore. He even hooked up with a dwarf! A brown-skinned Genius! And two cheesemongers! (Okay, that didn’t actually happen). In his internal fury, Dave interrupted her spiel, bursting out of complacent silence. To the guide: “I cross more lines than you can draw, Miss Perky.” To the other tour-goers: “One of your sons showed me his ass.” Back to Miss Perky: “How’s that for technological advancement? How’s that for rebellion?”

Dave relished his imagined rebellion as he trudged through the airport. The internal dialog muted the hum, the grinding of his luggage wheels against the terrazzo, and the metronomic swing of the bag of cheese. He managed to follow the arrows pointing towards his gate. It seemed like he was rolling through the same corridor on a loop, past the same black chairs, past the same digital screen, blinking the same departure data.

Then a sight in the distance knocked Dave back to consciousness: a Harley-clad posse boarding Delta flight 4445 to Detroit. Repeated on two young men talking to one another, and there once more, on an older man who surely must be their father, was that nose, large, straight, and ample. Just as they were handing their tickets to the gate agent, Dave yelled abruptly, something you really shouldn’t do in airports these days:

“Swing!!”

One of the young men, in a pair of sunglasses Dave sells, cocked his head in his direction, grinning, and gave him a biker salute, its trajectory arcing along the space frame and landing right in Dave’s throat, before disappearing into the jetway. Struck with a wave of self-consciousness for his outburst, he
scanned the terminal for TSA agents. He sheepishly made his way to his gate and threw his luggage down on the carpet, as jet fumes spiked his senses. He didn't even notice that his flight was listed as delayed. Any time he got someone next to him, he thought, the satellite would reassert its rule, stranding his longings deep in the exosphere. He opened the crumpled bag, and the tang of the cheese released, conjuring a vision of grass pastures dotted with ovine clouds. He took a bite, warm and runny, and waited for the promised finish.

__________

Dale Corvino found his confessional voice recounting his kept boy youth at “Dean Johnson's Reading for Filth.” Under a pseudonym, he blogged for rentboy.com (now shuttered by the Feds), appeared in Dan Savage’s podcast, and contributed to the anthology Johns, Marks, Tricks and Chickenhawks. Under his government name, he’s written an account of his family's relationship to Marilyn Monroe for Salon, an appreciation of Blondie for ImageOutWrite, a short story for the journal Jonathan, and an essay on sex and technology for the Rumpus. He’s participated in live storytelling for RISK! and is the 2015 recipient of the Christopher Hewitt Award for Fiction.
A native of Chicago, Richard Johns now lives, with his boyfriend of many years, in a small town on the far western fringe of that lovely city’s metropolitan sprawl. Three widely unavailable chapbooks bear his name: 2000 Poems, Hollywood Beach, and Explicit Lyrics: Poems. He sometimes checks his inbox at: richardmjohns@hotmail.com.
Into Human Bondage

When the walls of your bedroom split apart
and that dark figure beckoned from the cleft
to you who knelt there¾shivering, naked¾
aware as never before of the abyss
that underlies the world of consciousness¾
how could I not wonder when you told me:
what was more broken: your mind or my heart?

Everything seemed so real, of course, and was,
I suppose, at least in a certain sense,
made clearer by the crystal you were on…
Either that, or the head cleaning solvent
that you found had such a frightening effect¾
visions of evil compressed in a can¾
and was so aptly named: Maximum Impact.
I look at that sinister canister
now, having taken it away from you,
and have to wonder why our fierce pleasure
and its memory¾pent up in the body,
released with force¾shouldn't also be
labelled Caution: Contents Under Pressure.

It was only later that I realized¾
much later, in fact, after we'd split up¾
how much of what we were together was,
or had become, my own bad habit that I needed
to break. It hit me in that club we'd gone
to months before: the one where you danced alone
and then inexplicably disappeared
¾so totally fucked up and so blind drunk
in the end that you stumbled into a cab
and headed home because you thought I'd left.
(Which wouldn't have happened, of course, as you
later complained, if I'd been watching out
for you the way I should have been.) I heard
my fault in all of this obsessively
described one night in the words of the latest
hit impelling me onto the dance floor¾
I'm addicted to you. I'm addicted
to you. I'm addicted to you... and lost myself in the lyrics as the crowd swelled.

That's what it was like: being in a trance and all carried away by the impulse of movement, and not wanting it to stop, even though, if I turned up the drama, I knew you were the worst thing for me when all was said and done. Because, over and over, in brutally honest ways, you kept making me confront the utter impossibility of our being together, and what my constant desire for this said about the complicated nature of my heart: that obstinate thing within me that thrived as it was beaten.

As I look at it now in retrospect—my eyes all over your thrilling body as the dilated pupils of yours consume some fucking video in your spare room—the end was there, implicit from the start, just as it was in those late-night classic affairs that we'd watch drowsily sometimes: the ill-starred lovers rehashing their fates, the pain in their sad lives leaping off the screen. That's just the way it was—as if destined to be—the night you lay there beside me unresponsively asleep and I watched the story unfold, in plain old black and white, that weirdly seemed to mirror my own life. Poor Philip Carey and his love-hobbled heart's descent into human bondage! "You keep looking for him," he says in a moment of sudden insight, "the way that I keep looking for you." How could I not be struck by all the stark parallels in our scripts? Lines like: "If you want a man to be nice to you you've got to be rotten to him." and—with its haunting contrast of voices—"There's usually one who loves and one who is loved."
What more is there to say, really?
You've taken another apartment now
and, in our different ways, we've both moved on.
Still, so much of what happened between us
lingers somewhere in me, and various
scenes and images keep coming oddly
back. Like that one afternoon when you left—
you were headed off to work—and I watched
as you walked through the yard, your devoted
dog following joyfully on your heels.
That's all. Only, after you disappeared
he wouldn't come, but just sat there instead,
impatiently waiting at the garage.
I called and called and called, then called again,
but it was no use. And then I recalled
how excited he always became
when he saw he was going out. And so,
sad beast, when I showed him his leash he came,
and we both went in.

—Richard Johns
Bob the Book
by David Pratt
Chelsea Station Editions
ISBN: 978-0-9844707-1-6
paperback: $16.00
Now available through bookstores and Web retailers
also available in digital formats

“Bob the Book is smart, funny, learned and, like the best bibliophiles, just a little crazy.”
-Christopher Bram, author of Eminent Ulysses

Lambda Literary Award winner
Debut Gay Fiction

“Bob the Book is a book that affected me at the same level as some of the best books I’ve read.”
-William Egan, Lambda Literary

“My Movie is absolutely essential reading.”
-Tom Mendicino, author of Probation

My Movie
by David Pratt
Chelsea Station Editions
ISBN: 978-0-98323851-7-5
paperback: $18.00
Now available through bookstores and Web retailers
also available in digital formats

“You know how favorite books talk to your soul? Well Bob the Book is the story of what they say when you’ve left the room. It’s a delightful read in one sitting book, and after you’ve read it up, you’d rather buy another copy to that discontent friend then lend your own—since with this book would be like turning off a necessary light.”
-Jameson Fitzpatrick, Next!

“Pratt’s greatest talent lies in creating locally insular, separate worlds that exist inside our own, then blurring their boundaries just enough so that we can peek inside, see what awaits us, then scurry back to our own safe spaces. Those worlds are dark, unrelentingly heartfelt places that we can only stay in long enough to find the answers we seek before we return to reality and try to apply what we’ve learned. David Pratt is an amazing writer, and this is a showcase of his varied talents—artistic but never pretentious, disturbing but never gratuitous, sentimental but never maudlin. Highly, highly recommended.”
-Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“My Movie showcases the versatility of David Pratt, confirming that he is an important voice in LGBT literature.”
-Alan Chin, Examiner.com

“I haven’t enjoyed or been so moved by modern fiction in a very long time.”
-Jennifer Levin, author of Water Dancer and The Sea of Light

www.chelseastationeditions.com
Hello. My name is Peter Pan.

...is what I tell the little girls who came here to see Snow White and Rapunzel and are understandably a little taken aback by the tiny ginger guy hopping around in green tights. They want to know which princess I belong to. This would be where a professional would grab the chick dressed in blue (I don’t know her real name and she hasn’t earned the right for me to refer to her as Wendy), but she finds me irritating, preferring the company of Prince Charming. I’ve told Cinderella in private to watch out; blue chick looks like the type to push her in front of a carriage. So I give them a little bow and introduce myself, before pointing at the brilliant blue sky and explaining that I live in a place far beyond the reach of an aeroplane, but if they ever need to find me it’s second star to the right and straight on until morning.
In case you haven’t guessed yet, I work in Disneyland. And I take my job extremely seriously. You have to, here. Skive off for one second and you’ve ruined some little innocent’s childhood forever. One time Sleeping Beauty took a smoke break and a six-year-old stumbled across her. She wouldn’t stop crying until I took her in my arms and whispered to her that those little white sticks were the side-effect of a curse she’d had put on her, but if one little girl wished hard enough, that curse might just be broken.

I’m pretty sure Sleeping Beauty heard. I never saw her touch a cigarette again.

I think I just have that effect on people. Considering I’m not in the Big Three, or even the Big Ten (who are all girls by the way, which I would be absolutely fine with if they weren’t up there almost solely because of their looks – even in a world where pirates live in fear of ticking crocodiles and princesses sleep agelessly for a thousand years, you can’t escape consumerism), I’ve become pretty popular over the last three years on the job. I started when I was twenty, fresh out of university with an English degree and absolutely no career prospects. I was dating an older and infinitely richer woman at the time, and for my birthday she brought me down here for a treat (I think in some ways I was as much her son as her lover). I stayed. She left.

I am the only person here who truly wants to be. Mickey Mouse is here for his girlfriend Minnie, who is saving up to go back to school. Jasmine is supporting her grandmother single-handedly, and she is just thankful she didn’t have to find another way to use her looks to her advantage. Gaston wanted to be a Shakespearian actor and this, as he often says with a heavy sigh, is as close as he’s ever going to get.

Everybody else has given up on this place, if they ever believed in it to begin with. To them, the Happiest Place in the World is smoke and mirrors, which they begrudgingly work to uphold. They think that because underneath their smiling masks are red eyes and frown lines, and beneath their beautiful clothes are stretch marks and scars, that makes it all a lie.

As far as I’m concerned, they’re overthinking it. All you have to do is watch a child’s face light up as their favourite cartoon character hugs them to know that this is the happiest place in the world.

Personally, I love the freedom. All I do all day is mince around, sit cross-legged on various surfaces, watch the world and take it all as it comes. If a family looks lost I dart right over, crouch down beside the kids and murmur that I don’t talk to grown ups but if they could ask Mummy and/or Daddy to tell me what the problem is I’ll do whatever I can to help. The parents normally eye me slightly distrustfully but much as I’d like to (and know I probably should) shoot a wink at them over the children’s heads, I never do. I don’t think of what I do as acting. I think of it as being. In my little green suit, I am Peter Pan. And it’s a damn good thing too, otherwise I’d just be a twenty-three year old in a little green suit and that’s just sad, don’t you think?

* * *

Hello again. I am now in an oversized T-shirt and loose sweats, and my name is Simon Reed. I walk like a normal person, the weight of the world settled like dust all over my skin, and I live on the third floor of a block of flats with my boyfriend, Eric.

Yep, it’s a Disney name. Let’s not dwell on it. A complete accident, I assure you. He’s got nothing to do with that part of my life, you understand, and I don’t talk about it with him. Peter Pan does not his spend
his nights in a shabby apartment, in bed with another boy. Much as I think it would make for an interesting piece of cinema.

Eric is always tired when he gets home. He works at a law firm; works his way up. We met when he brought his little niece to meet Mickey Mouse and ended up getting hopelessly lost.

This is how I know the place where I work is magical: I could just as easily have not been where I was. I could just as easily have not looked up and seen him. It could just as easily have been that the sunlight didn’t glance off of him in such a way that completely dazzled me. I approached, crouched, asked the little girl if her Daddy was lost.

*Daddy’s not lost,* she giggled. *Daddy’s at work.*

*Then who’s this wonderful creature holding your hand?*

*That’s Uncle Eric, silly. Who are you?*

*What a question! I’m Peter Pan. Silly. Now, what can I do for you little lady?*

*I think Uncle Eric’s lost.*

*I think he is too. Do you think maybe he needs some fairy dust to guide him?*

*Yeah huh.*

*OK.*

Then I did something I had never done before, and will never do again. I stood up straight, looked him right in the eye, and blew gently into his face. Even though technically Peter Pan can’t produce fairy dust.

He stepped back blinking like a baby, his jaw slack with shock.

I bowed low to him, before silently pointing him to Aladdin. He knows his way around better than anyone, and he does not have Peter’s selective mutism.

I thought that would be it and my heart ached a little because he was so beautiful…but then he came back, just before closing time. Or rather, his niece did, dragging him by the hand declaring *There he is, see!*

Although it killed me a little I completely ignored him, dropping down to her level again. *What is it, friend? Did you want to say goodbye?*

She shook her head. *Uncle Eric says he wants to ask you out on a date. Is that allowed?*

Startled, I looked up at him. He was bright red but he bit his lip, nodding in confirmation.

I returned my eyes to hers. *You can tell Uncle Eric that if he meets me by the gate at seven, he can ask me out then.*

She commanded that he bend down so she could whisper it in his ear like it was a sacred secret, and when he whispered something back she repeated it to me. *Will you say yes?*
I smiled, tapping the side of my nose. *Ah, that would be telling. He'll have to wait and see.*

By the time I met with him again I was Simon and he was alone. He took me for dinner and we talked about everything – everything except my job.

We haven’t really spoken about it since. I guess he thinks it’s a little weird, and I can’t blame him. He’s only seen me at it that one time and I leave every piece of Peter Pan behind me when I walk out of my changing room. That’s part of the job: no one can know who I am. No one can know my real name. If they did it would ruin the magic. If he came to see me and kissed me in the middle of the park, it would ruin the magic – as surely as if blue chick started making out with Prince Charming. My duty is, first and foremost, to the children.

I love Eric though. He makes me feel real in a way that I don't when I’m Peter, or when I’m alone. For a while before I met him I was starting to doubt whether Simon even existed at all, or if he was just what was left of Peter after I took the costume off. Eric brought back the Simon in me, so now I shift between my personalities relatively smoothly.

Simon?

*Yeah, babe?*

*How was your day?*

*Alright, you?*

*Not bad. Hectic.*

It must be awful, I muse, to not think your job is the best thing in the world. *You look tired.*

*I am. Don’t think I’m up to dinner, babe. I need some sleep.*

*You go lie down, I’ll bring you something.*

I look after him. I want to. It’s in my nature to sacrifice; to protect. Even my fling with Older Woman was, although enjoyable and quite exciting, mostly because I thought she seemed lonely. She was one of those women who’d paid a lot of money to have every trace of her past scrubbed from her features: the remains of laughter; concern; love. But a few stubborn emotions still stuck in the corners of her eyes and lips. I liked to seek them out and kiss them because they tasted like salt.

Eric is only twenty-five now, but he has a furrow between his eyebrows. I think it’s my favourite part of him, except maybe his eyes. Sometimes they’re blue and sometimes they’re grey and sometimes they’re green. I can use them to guess the weather without looking out of the window.

I bring him food and we eat in bed, both too tired to speak. When we’re done and the trays are on the floor he settles down into the sheets, turning on his side. I do the same so we’re parallel, and then he wraps his arms around me because this is how we sleep when we’re past doing anything else. He’s slightly bigger than me, just enough so I fit like a coin in the slot of a machine. In his arms I dream of bricks and cogs and puzzle pieces, falling into place.

* * *

CHELSEA STATION
Peter Pan, once more at your service.

A lot of the kids I see are just that: kids. 2-10 year olds in pink and blue dresses, swept away on the surrealism of this dreamy world but really believing, somewhere in their hearts, that this and not the outside, is reality. They ask me what it’s like to live here, and if they can come and stay with me. I explain that I don’t in fact live here but fly back to Neverland every night, although the lost boys sometimes simply set up camp amongst the trees if they’re not up to the journey. But, I explain, they’re used to making do. You couldn’t survive here, I shrug apologetically, you’d be too cold when the lights were out. Even princesses need something warmer than a bouncy castle.

Anyway. That’s the majority of them.

But once in a while, there’ll be someone different. A teenager, perhaps tagging along with their family, who’ll recognise me (my dedication to character apparently hasn’t gone unnoticed online: from what I hear I’m something of a Youtube sensation. They can’t get enough of the confused expression I get when I’m told to say hi into a lense – *But why can’t I justsay hi to you? You’re standing right there*) and come up for an autograph or a hug. Sometimes her sleeves will ride up as she holds out her arms and I’ll see raised silvery scars on her wrists and I’ll understand why she wanted to see me.

*I can tell you’ve been fighting a lot of pirates, I’ll whisper as we embrace. You’re very brave, but leave that to me from now on, OK?*

Sometimes it’s a he and most of the time I’ll know. I’ll hug him as hard as I can and give him a big kiss on the nose because it always makes him laugh.

Once it was a tiny girl in a wheelchair, who begged me to make her fly. I whistled for a nearby Dwarf and asked him to round up the lost boys and Tinkerbell for me and together, with permission from her carer, we lifted her into the air as high as we could. I remember I could feel her spine straining out of her back, like at any moment it would break in my hands.

Once it was a small boy who had gotten scared when Jafar, forgetting as he does sometimes that he’s the bad guy, made a playful lunge for him. He wasn’t crying but he was holding himself, shrinking, in a way that made me think he knew well what position to take when people came too close too fast. I approached him slowly, making sure he saw me well before I was close enough to go down on one knee and questioningly hold out my arms. He glanced up at his sour-faced mother who rolled her eyes but nodded, and then he walked into them. *Don’t worry about the bad guys here, I murmured. They’re only good guys in disguises.*

*I know, he whispered back. My bad guys wear disguises too.*

*Well that’s not fair at all, I countered, hoping he didn’t hear the tremble in my voice. But don’t worry. Bad people can never truly fool the good. They always get found out.*

I lied. But I’m not all talk. I kept an eye on him until they were safe in the belly of a rollercoaster, and then I found one of our security guards and explained what had happened, pretty much the only time I’ve ever broken character. He was skeptical at first, but he knows me so he agreed to check it out. Later he told me that the boy had been taken into care.
I guess what I’m trying to say is that sometimes it’s hard playing a boy who never grew up when I come across so many children who have, for all the wrong reasons. Sometimes I wonder about the things that even I don’t see; things worse than dirt tucked under their fingernails or food colouring staining their teeth. How many children force-fed into adults have I really spoken to as Peter?

Today, something bad happens. Bad things rarely happen here past temper tantrums and vomiting, but even the Happiest Place in the World can’t completely keep out evil.

I’m sitting on the marble edge of a fountain, legs swinging, beaming at anyone who catches my eye. I like it because even the sweatiest, most exhausted-looking parents always smile back.

Then my sunlight is blocked out as four large boys step into my sight, very close.

I tuck my legs up, my heart accelerating a little. But I’m still Peter. *Hello friends. How can I help?*

*God, you’re a queer,* one of them scoffs. *What the Hell are you wearing tights for?*

*They keep me streamlined,* I improvise. *To help me fly.*

*Christ, you’re fucking retarded as well, aren’t you?*

*Fucking fairy.*

*Oh, I’m not a fairy,* I correct, smiling sweetly. *If you want a fairy you should go find Tinkerbell. But I don’t think she’d like you very much.*

One suddenly shoves me in the chest. I just manage to stop myself toppling backwards into the water, hopping up on my feet. *Can’t catch me!* I cry, my voice higher than normal, pulse throbbing in my throat as I skip away. By now people have noticed and are looking around worriedly, concerned for my safety but afraid to step in in case it turns ugly. They’re clasping their kids protectively and I can’t blame them for keeping them out of harm’s way. A slow burn of anger starts inside me; these people are polluting the magic.

They run after me, and one kicks out. His foot collides with my ankle and I trip, falling. Before I can move he kicks me again, this time in the back. My windpipe closes off as pain explodes up my spine, but I manage a mocking laugh. *Is that the best you can do, you mean pirates?*

For a second I have absolutely no doubt that I will not live through the next ten minutes (just because I can’t grow up doesn’t mean I can’t die) – but then a gravelly voice bellows *Did somebody say pirates?*

It’s Hook, in all his red-and-gold glory, and normally I’d be off like a shot but I’m still struggling to breathe.

It’s OK though: he hasn’t come for me. *Who dares call themselves pirates on my land!* he roars, brandishing his padded hook. *I should have you all walk the plank!*

Two of them scoff – but two of them swallow. Hook can be quite threatening when he wants to be.

At last Security shows up and they’re carted away. The crowd clap, perhaps truly believing that it was an act all along.
Well, I can’t let them down. I leap up, suppressing a wince as I round on my arch-nemesis. This will never be your land, Hook!

Wait til I get my hands on you –

I stick my tongue out, put my thumbs to my ears and wriggle my fingers, and then I’m gone.

* * *

When I take my T-shirt off, Eric sees the bruise spreading across my back. Hey, what happened there?

I’m often scraped up like a toddler from stumbles and the scratchy material of the little girls’ princess dresses, but even I have to admit that I look pretty bad tonight. You can practically see his footprint, dyed in blue and purple. I ran into some trouble.

Jesus Simon, you work at Disneyland.

I shrug. There’s evil everywhere.

You’re telling me. He climbs out of the bed and gives me a hug, his hands hovering over my injury. I understand why a bad guy might get a few punches but who could possibly have anything against Peter Pan?

I don’t answer, just nuzzle into his neck. I don’t want to talk about work. I don’t want to talk about Peter.

He understands. He pulls me under the covers and massages my shoulders, which feels very nice for a while – but I can feel his stress and tension in his hands so soon I turn around and return the favour, until he falls asleep. He needs comfort more than I do. Corruption and evil only show themselves sporadically where I work. They surround him all and every day like a cloud of tear gas. I think he needs me to make sure they don’t pull him under. He said it to me once; he said The only reason I don’t let them turn me bad too is because I wouldn’t be able to look you in the eyes.

That’s not a good enough reason, I replied fiercely. Do it for yourself, not for me.

He smiled. But I do everything for you.

Why must people be so dependant? I love him and I want to keep him forever, but I don’t need him in that way. I’ve learnt to look after myself, I did it before him and I could do it after.

Sometimes I wonder if too many people need me. Those children need me – well, not me but what I represent: innocence and defiance and permanence. My Mum needs me to give her a reason to live. My sister’s cat needs me to remind her to feed him. Eric needs me to save him from himself.

I’m only twenty-three.

Is it time to move on? There’s only so long I can be Peter Pan after all, what with the slight problem that, unlike him, I can’t stay young forever. I can already see crinkles by my eyes. Wendy got fired for gaining six pounds.

Why do I want to leave? What’s wrong with me? Even if I did get fired, it’s not like I need to support myself. Pretty much the only thing I spend my money on is books, and I’ve barely read any of them so I’d
have something to do. Eric would be happy to support me until I figure out what I’m going to do with my life. In fact I think he’d be happy if I could just stay in this flat forever.

And that’s what scares me. It’s why I let Older Woman leave. I don’t want to be anyone’s pet. I’m like Peter in that way, I suppose. I won’t be captured. I won’t be confined. I won’t be domesticated.

And this is dangerously close.

I wriggle out of the bed and tiptoe to the kitchen. I brew some tea and sit on the washing machine to sip, making a conscious effort not to cross or swing my legs like Peter does. I used to do this when I was a kid, except it was hot chocolate (I’m surrounded by so much sugar during the day that I really can’t face any outside of work) and I would be wearing one of my Dad’s jumpers (when he walked out I shredded the ones he didn’t take with him). Doing it now makes me feel very small.

I could leave right now, I realise. Like my Dad did. Just saunter right out of the front door. There’s nothing here I could, or need to, take with. I could get the train as far as away as it would go, get off and start all over.

But, I realise at the same time, I won’t.

I finish my tea, gazing at a glass on the table that I forgot to put in the dishwasher and wondering whether it’s a metaphor for something (if it is, I don’t figure it out), and then go back to bed. I slip between his arms and fold them around me, then wait wide awake for morning.

* * *

Oh my God it’s Simon!

They’re running toward me and for a moment I draw a total blank: Who’s Simon?

Aww that’s so cute he’s staying in character! A gaggle of teenage girls hysterical with excitement, clutching each other like I’m a member of One Direction or something. We love you so much, Simon, you’re so amazing!

They know my name. Blind panic clutches me and I can feel myself slipping, unstoppably, dangerously, into Simon. No, no, I’m Peter Pan. Children are stopping, frowning. I try desperately to salvage the situation. Did Hook send you to distract me? Are you mermaids?

They squeal like piglets. One of them is in tears. It’s OK Simon, we know it’s you! We came all the way here just to see you; don’t you know you’re famous?

Famous? Me? For what?

I notice the camera in one of their hands and relax a little as I latch onto a familiar trick I use – no, no, it’s not a trick, it’s just what I do, I’m Peter, I’m still Peter. What’s that? Is it magical? Can I see it?

She shoves it right into my face.

I shove it straight back and she nearly drops it. Don’t be aggressive, I reprimand. Don’t you know it weighs you down, so you can’t fly?
She gapes at me – and then beams. *He’s so cute!*

They all explode into *Simon, we love you Simon, you’re so amazing Simon, I know all about you Simon, Simon, Simon…*

But Simon doesn’t exist here. He can’t, because Peter is Simon and Peter’s the one who belongs here so if Simon exists here then Peter has nowhere to go and he’ll disappear and I won’t be able to get him back.

But I can hear him in my voice as I murmur *Guys, please, can I just talk to you after work?*

One of them winks, as if she hasn’t shattered the spell. *What do you mean work, Peter?*

I don’t care at this point, I just need them to get out of here. *Please.*

And, thank God, they go away.

I still haven’t recovered by the end of my shift (I’ve never called it that in my life), and when Mrs Potts tells me that the boss wants to see me, I nearly have a nervous breakdown.

She gives me a hug, and as always I remember that she’s a teapot and start giggling because I’m being hugged by a teapot. She chuckles too, and pats my bum to send me on my way (it’s OK; she’s sixty. And anyway, she’s a teapot).

My boss is looking ominously serious. *Simon.*

I don’t bother to correct him. I’m not even sure who I am anymore.

*You know you’re a fantastic Peter Pan. Your enthusiasm is a real boost to the entire team.*

I hate his clinical language. We aren’t a team. As if I’d be on the same team as Hook. Besides I work alone, except for maybe Tink and the lost boys.

*But we have a problem.*

*What’s that?*

*High schools are closing for the summer, and over the past few months your Internet fame has sky-rocketed. Most teenagers who go on Tumblr know who you are. And they’re all making plans to come and see you. Those girls today must have skived off early.*

I stay silent, trying to process it. How many people does that make who depend on me?

*And we really can’t have that, can we? We can’t have the kids seeing you being harassed by teenage girls; hearing your real name.* He hesitates, looking uncomfortable. *Do you see where I’m going with this?*

Kind of. But I want to hear him say it so I hold my tongue.

He sighs. *I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go.*

Silence.
Like I say, you really have been wonderful. Maybe the best character we’ve ever had.

No. Not character.

You’ll get a month’s wages and a flawless reference, obviously. I’m very sorry, Simon.

But…what about them?

Who?

The girls who are coming to see me. What are you going to tell them?

They’ll still see a Peter Pan, they just won’t know his name. I think I’ll give the role to Michael.

Michael, who plays a lost boy dressed as a bear and wouldn’t know what to do with Peter’s elegance and lightness of foot even if he had it. But they wanted me.

Life’s full of disappointments. That will be all.

I can’t move. If I move, I will lose Peter for good. Sir…

I’m sorry, he repeats. Once you’ve changed you can pick up your wages from the information desk. You really have been a joy, Simon. Goodbye.

On autopilot, I turn and walk away. I change and leave Peter in a flannel bag on a hook, take the envelope Rose hands to me on the way out and leave the building as no one, scrubbed completely clean.

Eric doesn’t come home for hours and I drift around the house relentlessly, not daring to try and walk through the walls in case I succeed. I don’t know my name. I don’t know what I look like. I don’t know anything.

When he texts me to say he’s working late I text back with I love you because I know that at least. Then I take one of his jumpers from the wardrobe – the threadbare one he only keeps because he can’t stand to throw things away – and my wallet from my bedside table, and the next thing I know I’m hitting the ground walking, heading for the train station, like I’ve been dreaming of doing for the past three weeks.

He texts me again when I’m on the train: Where are you?

Simon?

Are you OK?

Christ Simon this isn't funny, please tell me you’re OK.

I want to. But I’m not Simon. Not anymore. If I told him Simon was OK I’d be lying because Simon doesn’t exist anymore.

I buy a sandwich from the trolley, wrap my phone in the napkins and stuff it in the box, which I then drop into the bag they bring around. The second it’s gone I desperately want it back; want Eric; want my life – but they’re not mine now.
I get off the train when they tell me to and sit on the platform for a long time, cross-legged, watching the world come and go. Maybe I could just stay here forever. It wouldn’t get boring. I might get a bit hungry though. But I would be interesting to see. A boy just sitting, perfectly still, day after day until only a skeleton is left.

They must think I’m waiting for someone.

Maybe I am.

A couple of people stop, ask if I’m alright. Only one asks my name: a policeman. It occurs to me that Eric will have dialled 911 by now. If I tell him my name is Simon he will bring me back to him. And I so want to go back to him. It would be so easy. So safe.

Son? Your name?

I smile innocently up at him. Peter.

Chris Downing is 18 years old and is on a gap year, after which he is going to study English Literature and Creative Writing at Birmingham University. While he was in 6th Form at school, he won third place in the Lancaster Creative Writing Awards and he was commended in the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award. Recently, one of his short stories was published in the Fresher anthology. As an LGBT individual, he is very committed to creating novels with queer characters who have rich lives and fulfilling relationships.
In the late ‘70s there was a massive migration of young gay men to San Francisco. They left home in droves, traveling by plane, bus, Pinto or Volkswagen towards a life free from discrimination. Struggling to make ends meet, many worked in bookstores and restaurants, all the while taking advantage of a scene of sexual hedonism. Kevin Bentley faithfully kept a frank, literate diary of his experiences as this generation of gay men tumbled into the era of AIDS.

Praise for *Wild Animals I Have Known: Polk Street Diaries and After*

“Difficult to put down... These brief portraits of gay male egoists eventually amount to a small epic of neurotic behavior that may be endemic to pleasure meccas like San Francisco. *Wild Animals* is a graceful, sad, and very skillful tale…”
—Andrew Holleran, *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*

“Body heat is the essence of Mr. Bentley’s memoir... The encounters he had in plenty may have been anonymous in some sense, but they were also tender and rich in loopy narrative detail. ...There is an antic, winning quality to Mr. Bentley’s chipper progress as a sexual adventurer.”

“*Wild Animals I Have Known*...is that rare mixture of Marcel Proust and Boyd McDonald. ...An astute, psychologically complex journey of a young gay man growing into a complicated, intelligent, and caring adult, it never avoids what’s at the heart of the human condition: sex. What makes the book so refreshing is his continually unassuming attitude towards himself, his friends, and the men he loves.”
—Michael Bronski, *The Guide*

“This is the kind of book that gives promiscuity and sleaze a good name... raw, brave, brash, even witty erotica.”
—Richard Labonte, *Bookmarks*

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
The narrator of these autobiographical stories and personal essays has man trouble—trouble with his homophobic father, his horny best friend, his rigid high school principal, and a slew of “fauxmosexuals” and elusive boyfriends—and a knack for butting heads with fundamentalist Christians. Bitingly funny and at times harrowingly sad, *Let’s Shut Out the World* traces the man-hungry and misanthropic journey of an intensely bibliophilic young man following his natural bent from a desolate Texas landscape of tumbleweeds, Jesus freaks, and compliant straight boys to the gay capital of San Francisco in pursuit of sex, drugs, a lover, and more.

Praise for *Let’s Shut Out the World*

“14 essays...each one rewarding on its own. Taken together, they represent the arc of a lifetime as Bentley moves through the hedonistic days of pre-AIDS SF into the horrifying, soul-expanding detour that would follow.... With an amazing economy of prose and complete believability, [he] captures the whole tawdry sweep of events from the ’70s to the present day.”
—Robert Julian, *Bay Area Reporter*

“*Let’s Shut Out the World* assumes readers’ calm intelligence, a way of seeing that matches Bentley’s own part unsentimental, yet heartfelt, observation; and part essential, emotive humor. While grounded in this intelligence, the writing remains devastatingly physical throughout. Every essay concerns gay liberation, but no two are alike, except in their careful structure, cinematic in their focus on details that seem to have a life, a jilted psyche, of their own.”
—Ari Messer, *Edge*

“Funny and sad but never narcissistic, *Let’s Shut Out the World* notices all the absurdities and anomalies that lurk in the transition from goth youth to middle-aged monogamy.”
—Jan Richman, *SF Gate*

“...Channels [his] experiences into prose beautifully accented with understated emotion and gentle, self-deprecating humor.”
—Perry Kramer, *Men* magazine

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
“You brought the Sunshine”!

That’s what my brother John said to me when I arrived here in San Francisco for my vacation on March 14th, 1983. Little did I know the year 1983, was to be one of those pivotal years in anyone’s life that produce’s life-altering changes.

John picked me up at San Francisco International Airport. He told me that I missed weeks of rain and clouds and floods. While that sounded difficult, the first months of 1983 were quite a challenge in my life for other reasons. New York had typical cold winter weather and snow too, but it was aggravated by poor health problems I was experiencing at the time. It started early in January with a laryngitis that turned into
a nasty flu that took about 3 weeks to heal. My friend Steve was experiencing something similar, and we both felt pretty much back to normal the last weekend in January.

I met Steve five years earlier in the St. Marks Baths where we both worked. He was 5’11 with milk white skin, jet black hair, blue eyes, thin and lots of fun. He was my best friend girlfriend. He left North Carolina years before and had become Manhattan; fashionable, well groomed, and party reveler, not to mention taking in lots of drugs and sex.

Steve seemed to get me to do things as he was a reveler. In 1978 when he asked me if I would join him for The Rocky Horror Picture Show, he was surprised that I knew nothing about it. That changed and we went together and had a blast. He turned me on to Star Wars after I told him that I missed seeing it in 1977. We went for a double feature; Star Wars and the new sequel The Empire Strikes back. I was excited and about both movies and fell in love with Mark Hamill. It was also powerful to watch Steve repeat the dialogue as if he wrote it. We had many encounters in the same vein over the years.

That January I had tickets for the Joan Rivers party at Studio 54. She was celebrating her debut at Carnegie Hall. It would be on February 2nd that we went and danced and celebrated Joan Rivers. Neither of us had gone dancing in a while, so it was a great pleasure to do it at Studio 54. After-all it had been our haunt in the 70’s.

However just a few days later my flu came back and then turned into bronchitis. I was having a bad time breathing and sleeping. It seemed to last through early March. I was also diagnosed with Amebiasis, and that caused enough grief.

As for my friend Steve, he was feeling weak and losing weight. He had a rather bad drug experience that made him challenge his addiction, which consisted of LSD, MDA, speed, and hot sex. He told me that he had a guy come over for sex and instead he shit all over his own bed. It was uncontrollable. He called me very frantic and embarrassed. It was time for rehab. Steve began group therapy that was suggested by his doctor.

So on March 14th, I took a vacation and came to San Francisco. I found myself loving the city and all of its hills. It had much warmer weather. I really felt that I could “fit in.”. My brother took me to a party of his co-workers. I was surprised that he had gay friends. They encouraged me to give San Francisco a try. It sounded fresh and new.

So I had much to think of when I got back to New York. At that time The Thorn Birds was on TV with my favorite star Barbara Stanwyck. I went to Steve’s to watch it with him. He made a cake since it was his birthday. He looked awful, having lost a lot of weight. I was frightened about it since there was so much illness in the gay community, never mind fears I had about AIDS. He went to see a gay doctor that was familiar with the crisis and he told Steve that he did not have it and that his weight loss was stress related due to his withdrawal from addiction. So we accepted that and enjoyed the cake and movie.

Since my return from San Francisco, I found myself still loving my vacation and I did get carried away and dressed for San Francisco not for New York. My bronchitis came back with a vengeance. By Easter Sunday, April 3rd, I thought I was dying, with high fever, chest compression, constant coughing etc. It was terrible. Steve and I would only speak on the phone since he was also not well.
But I braved through and did get better. In fact by Friday, May 13th, the River Club had a Black Party. Steve and I had not seen each other in weeks and we got dressed up in our leather and went. He looked terrible and told me that he could not ride his bike any longer. He was reluctant to dance and he left me on the dance floor. I found him in the bathroom, splashing cold water on his face. He wasn’t breathing right either. I took him home and we lied down on his bed and I hugged him and stayed until he fell asleep. That Sunday he was well enough for brunch so we did that. As usual he had a lot of complaints about everything and he wanted me to stay close to him. I needed to get to work and I refused. He stormed off. Steve always needed time to chill. So I let him storm.

Around this time I was involved with a fellow for a short lived romance. We did a couple of weekend trips to his country house, but we never got close enough to be lovers. I did try to contact Steve several times but he was not at home. Finally on June 3, I called his boss and she told me that he had pneumonia and that I should go see him at St Vincent’s Hospital.

When I got there I saw two people in the waiting room. An older man that looked like Steve and a heavy set blonde woman that I did not know. A nurse was explaining the hopelessness of “this disease” and she said we are doing all we can for Steve. I felt weird and did not want to accept what she was saying. After all he was told by an informed doctor that it was not AIDS. It was bizarre and a little too surreal. So I just stayed there and waited. I assumed that the older man was his father.

Then a little while later, the nurse came into the waiting room and announced that he was dead. I really could not believe it; this can’t be happening. I was floored. Sadly it was true. Steve had died.

What flashed back was all the great times we experienced together at the movies, in clubs and bars, Fire Island etc. He was 36 and the first person I knew very well that died of this awful disease that was attacking our lives. It was all too much.

But now I needed to talk to these people in the waiting room. They were crying. I felt terrible. What if they feel I arrived too late, would they reject me?

I hesitated a little but mustered the courage to introduce myself. I said “my name is Richard Marino and I knew your son.” His father grabbed me and hugged me passionately. I have heard so much about you from Steve, his father said. He really liked you and appreciated your friendship. The blonde woman introduced herself as Steve’s coworker Vanessa. I vaguely had heard about her. She was Slavic looking, about 5’5 with sparkling blue eyes. She too said I am so glad to meet you. As I said before it was so strange. All I can think of was all the good times. The song “Young Turks” by Rod Stewart, flashed through my mind, one of Steve’s favorites.

By this time I had been thinking a lot about moving to San Francisco. I was done with my job and I had been to most clubs and party’s and I felt I needed a more compact version of New York. I became restless and tired of the dynamics of the city and all of the bustling and noise. I really had no one else that I was close to in New York since Steve had been it. Plus there is nothing like the city by the bay. I was 30 years old and needed the change.

The Saturday before I moved here, Vanessa gave me a going away party. I hardly knew anyone there but it was sweet and thoughtful. There was a genuine feel to it, these people hardly knew me but for Steve’s connection, and maybe that’s why it was so special. “Young hearts be free tonight” as Rod Stewart sang.
I moved to San Francisco on August 1st, 1983. It was a beautiful sunny day. I had missed a week of cool damp foggy weather. My brother picked me up at SFO and once again said:

You brought the Sunshine.

Richard Marino is member of a memorist writing group called the Gray Gay Writers.
Noah Fields is a student at Brown University. He finds joy in avocados, techno, and musical theatre. Making Cali queerer since '95.
Voicemail


--Noah Fields
Still damp from the shower, I stood silent before him wearing nothing but a towel. He faced me from across my tiny bathroom, a mere three feet away, also silent. His outfit matched my own. I scanned his hairy body as he scanned mine. When our eyes met, my heart beat faster. I had something I needed to say to him, but the words stayed locked in my throat. I took a deep breath to calm myself. Anticipation was written on his face. I knew what he was thinking: Say it! I want to hear you say you love me. He was well aware of my hang-ups about loving a man like him, an unapologetically gay man who didn’t give a fuck about who did or did not approve of him.
He was the kind of gay man who held an opinion about which drag queen should win on RuPaul’s Drag Race and who would light up at the mere suggestion of watching a Meryl Streep movie. I’d avoided men like him the entire thirty-fours years I spent living in the closet. I couldn’t risk being seen with them because I didn’t want anyone suspecting I was one of them. Even though I was now thirty-six and had been out for over two years, I still found it difficult to be around such men. Chalk it up to internalize homophobia, I guess. But the further I got from the closet, the less threatened I was by the stereotypes such men embodied. I even found myself enjoying their company more than I did the masc-for-masc-only guys I pursued when I first started seeking out gay friends. Men like the one standing before me directly challenged my need for acceptance among the most privileged members of society: normative straight white men.

White and male, I could do. Straight, I could not. Normative, I could fake. The more I got to know those who didn’t care less about attaining the acceptance I always sought (or who were well aware they could never attain it anyway), the more I questioned my own need for it. I was growing fond of these outsiders, but to admit my love for one was still a stretch for me. If I told this man I loved him, that meant fully embracing him. It meant I couldn’t expect him to rein in his gayness when we were in public. In fact, I would have to become as unapologetically gay as he was, standing up for him when others disdained him for simply being who he was. I wasn’t sure I could do that, but I wanted to. I wanted him to know I loved him just as he was, no matter what anyone else thought of him. So I opened my mouth to say those three little words, but they stayed put. He just stood there waiting. I broke the silence between us with an exasperated sigh and then exclaimed, “This is ridiculous!” Those were not the three words he wanted to hear. “I can’t do this,” I said. “What kind of man says ‘I love you’ to his own reflection?”

When my friend had suggested that I try this peculiar exercise of professing love to my reflection, I initially dismissed it as feel-good nonsense. It brought to mind those old Saturday Night Live sketches in which self-help TV show host Stuart Smalley would declare, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!” To use a pejorative phrase I normally hate, it was the gayest thing I had ever heard of. But I trusted the friend who suggested the exercise. She had held my hand throughout my coming-out process, and I knew she had my best interests in mind. I was also eager to avoid another downward spiral of self-loathing like the one I had recently fallen into—a depressive state brought about by the bitter end to a messy relationship. So I decided to give it a try.

Having failed at my first attempt, I psyched myself up and again opened my mouth to speak.

“I lo—”

The words refused to go any further.

I tried again.

“I lo—”

It was useless. The words had anchored themselves inside of me. Not wanting to see the disappointment on my reflection’s face, I averted his gaze.

“Why can’t I do this?”

Was it really impossible for me to love him, this man—this me—I saw in the mirror?
My mind began to wander to a time just prior to my coming out, a time when I’d had nothing but harsh words for him.

* * *

I was thirty-three years old and living on my own for the first time in my adult life. Throughout my twenties, I had taken up residence in what is best described as Christian communal living. Not quite a commune but pretty damn close. There would be no less than six people living in the house at any time—and every resident was a zealot for Jesus. Many weeknights were filled with Bible studies, in-home worship services, and prayer meetings. The owners of the house, a couple who’d met and married during the height of the Jesus movement of the sixties and seventies, were always eager to revisit the glory day of their early adult years, when born-again hippies gathered together to speak in tongues and prophesy over one another. They were deliverance ministers (the non-Catholic equivalent of exorcists) in the church we all attended. Coming home, I never knew when I’d be walking in on people having demons cast out of them. Weird as it was, the house had always been abuzz with activity, and it had suited me well. What better way to ignore my own issues than to busy myself with constant spiritual activity? There’s little time to entertain gay thoughts when you’re too busy hanging out with Jesus’s most dedicated followers.

After moving out of that house and finding myself living alone for the first time, I found the silence almost too much to bear. There was no one around to distract me from my thoughts. When the desire to be with other men overwhelmed me, I couldn’t just walk down the hall and join in on a prayer meeting. Personal time in prayer and Bible study helped a little, but I could only do so much of both. When spiritual distractions weren’t enough, I tried non-spiritual ones. TV was no help, as it just provided me with attractive men to feel guilty about lusting over. The internet, with its easily accessible guy-on-guy porn, was an even worse distraction. Hanging out with my male friends from church was a setup for frustration, as I would inevitably find myself fighting off the desire to be intimate with at least one of them and then later engaging in a guilt-ridden masturbation session once we parted ways.

I would occasionally find solace in the company of my female friends, but even that was troublesome. In the circles I ran in, if an unmarried woman was spending time alone with an unmarried man, questions would be raised as to whether or not they were romantically involved. Too much time together led to suspicions about them being sexually immoral. It felt like a catch-22. I could spend time with women without having to rein in my sexual desires, but spending time with them raised questions I didn’t want to answer. I felt damned no matter what I did.

No matter how hard I tried to distract myself from thoughts of being with other men, I would find myself losing the battle in some way, be it by giving in and watching gay porn or setting up (and then promptly deleting) profiles on gay dating sites. The only supposed victory I could claim was that I had never succumbed to the point of actually having sex with another man.

By this time in my life, I was beginning to seriously question why God was refusing to make me straight. I had tried it all: counseling with pastors, subjecting myself to exorcism to cast out the demon of homosexuality, fasting (once for forty days), endlessly studying the Bible, and dragging myself to every church service and conference I could attend. I became so good at being a Christian that I became a leader in my church, promising others the blessings of God I could not rightly guarantee and judging them as insincere in their faith when they wavered in their expectations. I even attempted to counsel other
young men in my church struggling to rid themselves of same-sex attractions. I did this under the misguided belief that helping them might help me. But my fervent service couldn't make my feelings go away. And eventually, after paying careful attention to the stories of men who had been held up by church leaders as being delivered of homosexuality, it became apparent that the claims made about them were exaggerated. When pressed, these men would all say the same thing, even those who had married women: their attraction to men never really went away—they just kept it at bay for the sake of their beliefs and their marriages. I saw this as nothing more than an elaborate sham—men being falsely exemplified as cured for the sake of covering up God's inability or refusal to do what they asked of him. Pull back these claims of a cure far enough, and someone would shout, “Pay no attention to the gay man behind the curtain!”

One night, the deafening silence in my apartment got to be too much. The sum total of all my doubts and frustrations was greater than I could handle, and no distraction was strong enough to keep me from thinking about how much I had failed to be the man I wanted to be. So I decide to go out and get a drink. In five minutes’ time, I found myself inside a dive bar across the street from my apartment complex. I had passed it countless times but had never gone in, mostly out of fear that someone from my church would spot me walking in and get me into trouble. I had no qualms about drinking (Jesus and all his followers drank wine, after all), but I had serious qualms about being seen drinking by people who believed consuming alcohol was a sin. The bar was dark and occupied by blue-collar men, the very type of men I found most attractive. I ordered a stout and took a seat on the nearest barstool, turning my back to the patrons who no doubt immediately pegged me as a non-regular. I didn't care if I was invading their space. I wasn't there for them. I was there to get away from my thoughts.

Halfway through my beer, the atmosphere shifted. Mellow music was replaced by dance music. The crowd behind me began to clamor with excitement. I remained focused on my stout, not caring about whatever event was being announced over the speaker system. It wasn’t until a pair of long legs in black heels and fishnet stockings stepped right behind my pint glass that I understood what was going on. I looked up to see a young woman in a black bra-and-panty combo dancing on top of the bar before me. I panicked. As a good Christian boy, I would never knowingly go to a strip club!

Feeling my insecurity, the woman moved on to dance before another man down the bar. I felt compelled to run, but I stopped myself. This is what straight guys do. I should try to like it. I was grasping at straws, and I knew it. Nothing about her turned me on, but the sexual excitement emanating off the men in the room nearly short-circuited my emotions. All around me were men eager for sex. For one brief moment, I envied the young woman. I wanted these men to want me the way they wanted her. The truth of my thoughts sent me running out the door without finishing my drink. On my way out, I swore I felt the judgment of every man in the room follow behind me. Look at that fag run. Boy did he pick the wrong bar.

My distraction had only made things worse. Instead of getting away from the gay voices in my head, I had given them a microphone. I needed to silence them. I needed to get drunk.

After a trip quick trip the store and back, I was watching TV on my couch with a six-pack of porter in front of me. One episode of Glee later, the bottles were empty and I had to pee.
I stumbled into the bathroom, did my business, and then went to wash my hands. That’s when I saw him. The sight of his man-loving face filled me with rage. I decided to put him in his place.

“You!” I screamed as I pointed my finger at the mirror. “I hate you! I hate your fucking guts! Why can’t you get a grip on yourself? Why can’t you stop liking men? It’s like you want to be gay! Is that what you really want to be, a faggot? Faggot! You should just kill yourself! I. Hate. You!”

For most of my life, I had hated my reflection. I had hated him because he was the one person I could never fully deceive. Through all my years of working to appear straight, of doing everything I could to hide my true nature behind a religious façade, he was the only one I couldn’t fool. I would look at him and see nothing but a gay man who knew the truth about me. I hated him because I wanted to be him, but I couldn’t be him because he was everything I had been taught to despise. And I absolutely refused to accept that he was me.

*    *    *

Even after I came out, his presence was still bothersome to me. I stopped hating him once I accepted there was nothing wrong about being gay, but I had to unlearn my old thinking patterns before I could grow beyond a mere tolerance of him.

That first year after coming out brought many confrontations to my way of thinking. One thing that growing up among evangelical Christians had instilled in me was ideological certainty, even when that ideology was undermined by fact. So what if biology, chemistry, genetics, geology, physics, anthropology, archaeology, and numerous other fields of study had confirmed the evolution of all species? The evidence meant nothing to me then because it conflicted with the interpretation of Genesis I had been taught. “God said it. I believe it. That settles it” was the mantra I had heard growing up. Or put another way, “Don’t waste time challenging me with facts.”

Although the certainty of my religious beliefs had been waning for a few years prior to my coming out, it took accepting that I was gay for me to concede that all I knew to be true could be wrong. If I was wrong to believe I could change my orientation, what else was I wrong about? Like the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes, I felt like I couldn’t trust my own sense of reality. So, like him, I emptied out the full apple basket of my beliefs to examine them one by one and throw away any that were rotten. I took the stance of a skeptic, allowing contrary evidence to challenge my assumptions. It might sound like a purely intellectual pursuit, but it wasn’t. Beliefs are often emotionally charged. And when you challenge a charged one, it will put up a fight.

I recall the first time I set foot into an LGBTQ-affirming church. I had been raised to believe such churches weren’t true houses of worship, that they were heretical organization under the sway of the devil. Just walking in the door was an act of defiance for me. I went because I needed to know what it felt like to be around Christians who would fully embrace me. Carrying with me the disapproval I received after telling my church community I was gay, I entered into the service not knowing what to expect. I was surprised by how familiar it was, save the fact that there were obvious gay and trans people in the pews and at the pulpit. The songs they sang were the same ones I’d sung at other services. The verses they read were the same verses. Even the people spoke with the same Christianese I was fluent in. At first, this sameness comforted me. I wondered how anyone could say the members of this church weren’t true
Christians. But in asking that question, I opened the door for many others. Who got to determine the true definition of Christian? How is it that so many churches that worship the same god, a god they claim to be unchanging, can hold such opposing beliefs about him? Someone had to be wrong about God. Or maybe everyone was wrong about him. Or her. Or, for that matter, them.

Having never really questioned my own beliefs so thoroughly before, I had to wonder where my sense of religious assurance had come from in the first place. The answer, of course, was the source of assurance for all evangelicals: the Bible. But if the Bible was a source of assurance, then what about the disconnect I saw in many churches between their beliefs about the role of scripture and the way they went about interpreting scripture? In particular, I wondered about the disconnect I saw between what the Bible said about women and how churches seemed to softball these passages or explain them away. Scriptures repeatedly make it clear that women and leadership don’t mix. Yet so many churches I knew of, even those most fundamental ones, were putting women into positions of leadership. They were often given titles like director to avoid calling them pastors and upsetting those who took the anti-women-in-ministry verses seriously, but they always functioned as pastors. It made no sense to me that churches would say they believed our lives should always conform to the teachings of the Bible while they worked to reinterpret the verses they didn’t want to fully conform to.

All this questioning came to head on the day when I said my good-bye to one of the owners of the commune-like house I had lived in. The mother of the house felt the need to confront me about my coming out, warning me of the path of destruction I was headed down. In her eyes, she was attempting to rescue me from the clutches of hell. As misguided as her actions were, I knew she was acting out of love. After all, if she truly believed my actions would lead me to hell, then the most loving thing she could do was try to stop me. Forget the fact that her doctrine of hell came more from interpretations of Dante’s Inferno than from the Bible itself.

“How can you disregard what is so clear in the Bible?” she asked. “It says homosexuality is an abomination. Abomination! That’s a strong word.”

In that moment, a list of other biblical abominations came to mind, including eating lobster and women wearing men’s clothing. I thought about all the many violations of scripture I saw at the church I had attended with her, yet they were ignored because they seemed silly or archaic. Her words were meant to convict me, but instead they repulsed me. What came out of my mouth next likely shocked her. It sure shocked me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but I have a hard time hearing that coming from a woman who holds leadership in the church, who teaches and counsels men despite the clear biblical opposition to that. There are far more scriptures prohibiting what you do than the six verses that reference homosexual acts.”

“That’s not the same, and you know it!” she snapped back. “Those verses about women are from a different time and culture and have been grossly misinterpreted.”

“And you can’t say the same thing about the few verses about homosexuality?”

“No. I just can’t. It’s heresy.”

With that, the conversation reached a dead end.
After we parted ways, I finally understood the trap I had been in. By believing the Bible was always correct, I was forced to take up the never-ending task of explaining away its contradictions (both internally and with the historical record) to preserve my sense of assurance. Doing this meant there was no end to figuring out when the Bible was literal and when it was metaphorical. It would be easier and more logical to accept that the Bible was at least a mix of flawed writing and divinely inspired writing or, even scarier to my fundamentalist thinking, wasn’t divine at all. My belief in the certainty of the Bible was the first rotten apple I had to discard.

Other rotten apples soon followed, not all religious. Some were simply bad beliefs that arose from ignorance. One in particular was the belief that gender identity and sexual attraction were inherently connected.

Shortly after coming out, I was asked out for coffee by a man I had been chatting with online. I said yes, knowing little about this man other than the fact that he seemed nice and was interested in me for some reason. I arrived at the coffee shop early and found us a table. When he walked through the door, I noticed something different about him. He has really wide hips for such a slender man, I thought. They almost look like a woman’s hips. When he sat down and we began to talk, other things about him began to catch my attention. He has no Adam’s apple. How could a guy that slender have no visible Adam’s apple? And his voice seems just slightly feminine, but not in an effeminate way. It was then that I realized he was a transgender man.

I wanted to ask him a million questions, but I didn’t know if it would be appropriate to start asking. We parted that day with me never once acknowledging that he was trans, and mostly likely with him noticing how awkward I was around him. I feared he thought my awkwardness meant I had a problem with him. I didn’t. I was simply caught off guard by the fact that was both gay and trans. It was an intersection of identity I had never encountered before.

I had connections to a few trans people even before I came out, but they were professional connections, not social. Most were students I taught in my job as an adjunct instructor at a local university. The ones whose personal lives I knew anything about dated people of the opposite sex. Based on that small sample set, I had assumed all trans people dated people of the opposite sex. It made sense to me: you become a man, you date a woman; you become a woman, you date a man. My mind didn’t know how to process meeting someone outside of the sample set. If he was once a woman who dated men, that means he was straight before he transitioned, right? But now that he’s transitioned, he’s gay? Or was he always gay because he was always a man at heart? It finally clicked that his attraction to men wasn’t a part of his gender identity. This was an insightful realization for me. Not just in my understanding of trans people but also in my understanding of myself. As man who likes men, I often questioned what that said about my gender. Perhaps fueled by the misogynistic insults I’d heard lobbed against gay men growing up—sissy boy, girly man—I had internalized the idea that being a gay man somehow diminished my manhood. Although I did not subscribe to the belief that women were somehow inferior to men, I had for years buried any feminine qualities about myself for fear that letting them loose would only feed the gayness I was trying to overcome. Finally understanding that sexual attraction exists independent of gender, I was rid of another bad apple.
Being attracted to men made me no less of a man, and having feminine qualities made me no more gay. From that day forward, I would no longer worry about if my actions were perceived as either masculine or feminine. I would just be me. It was a corner that my reflection was happy to see me turn as it pushed me one step closer to fully accepting him.

*    *    *

Even with that corner turned, there were still things I saw in my reflection that led me to keep him at arm’s length. I didn’t like seeing the awakened desire in his eyes after I came out. I had spent years perfecting the image of being the good little church boy, and I wasn’t about to throw that away easily. For several months after I came out, sex wasn’t on the agenda. Although I had accepted that it wasn’t wrong for two men to have sex, I still clung to the idea that they should only be having sex if they were married. I had a long list of sexual action I would not do. Eventually, though, I did indulge my desires.

My first sexual encounter with another man was exhilarating. After dinner and drinks, we made out in his car underneath one of Portland’s numerous bridges. I felt like a teenager who had snuck out of his home to avoid getting caught by his parents. After a few minutes of kissing in the front seat, we moved to the backseat and started taking each other’s clothes off. Although we didn’t go “all the way,” as teenage me might have said, we went far enough for me to put to rest any lingering doubts about my sexuality. No woman had ever turned me on like he did.

But as exhilarating as that experience was, it paled in comparison to the first time I actually did go all the way with another man. I’ll call him Walt. Walt was a handsome bisexual pastor in an LGBTQ-affirming denomination, and we had met while I was on vacation. He had told me about his experience coming out, and we talked about how, in his denomination, premarital sex wasn’t blanketed as sin, that people were free to live by their own convictions on the matter. I found him to be quite sexy, and as an added bonus, he was a caring man. That night I discovered that empathy works as an aphrodisiac on me. Walt’s being a pastor made it easy for me to say yes to going to bed with him (if the pastor does it, it must be okay!). It was a beautiful experience—all I had ever fantasized about. I woke up beside him the next morning with a smile on my face.

After we parted ways—Walt going to church to preach a sermon, me leaving to go back home—my happiness was overtaken by an onslaught of guilt. The guilt was not because I had had sex with another man. Nor was it because I had had sex outside of marriage. No, I felt guiltily about my lack of guilt over what I had done. Two years prior, I would have shunned any man in my church who’d done the same. I spent days feeling bad about how bad I didn’t feel, though clearly the me in the mirror felt no remorse about it.

Those feelings quickly turned to self-deprecating thoughts. I bet that guy hated me. I was probably just an easy lay to him. No man could ever really want more than sex from someone like me. I’m such a mess.

When the man texted me to reconnect, I broke into tears. You mean I’m not so fucked up that he wouldn’t want to spend time with me again?

Untangling the complex web of feelings after that encounter took weeks. Through the process, I began to see how the restrictive sexual mores of my upbringing turned something as beautiful and natural as two people expressing connection to one another through their bodies into something vile and shameful in my
mind. As a result, I realized I had been handed a set of convictions about what is right and wrong, but I wasn't really owning them as my own. To be honest, I never really had. I'd just accepted them as the price I needed to pay to secure my sense of belonging among a community of believers.

With that community fading deeper into my past, my religious beliefs were losing their value to me. This was scary at first. My whole closeted identity had been built around my beliefs. I didn’t know who I would be without them. But as I grew more comfortable with myself and the values that were truly mine, the less I needed the identity my old beliefs had given me. And the less need I had for that identity, the more repulsed I became by it. In particular, I was repulsed by the things I had done to maintain that identity.

Coming out of the closet is one thing. Overcoming the shame that kept you there is another. But different from both is dealing with the guilt of what being in the closet forced you to do. It’s easy to tell a man who just came out that he shouldn’t feel guilty because he hid who he was, to remind him that it was a necessary defense against bigotry. It’s easy to see him as a victim of a prejudicial culture, but it doesn’t erase the fact that he lived a lifestyle of lying and that his lies impacted others. For me, one of the biggest sources of guilt I had to face after coming out was the knowledge that I had done nothing when others in my church left or got kicked out after it came to light that they were gay. It happened several times over the years, and each time, I joined in on the judgment against them in order to keep my own secret hidden. I sided with the oppressor to avoid being oppressed. It still pains me to think that there are people out there, some I called friends, who assume I hate them for being gay.

Staring at the me in the mirror, I realized this was one of the reasons I couldn’t bring myself to say I loved him. After all, how could he love me back knowing I had played a part in hurting so many others?

*    *    *

Despite my hatred for the version of myself I kept behind the glass, I had admired him at times even when I was closeted. He always seemed freer, happier, more at ease with himself than I did. Although I did my best to keep him hidden away, I’d occasionally let him out for a little while just to see what he’d do (though I always kept him on a tight leash). One place where he enjoyed this freedom was in my classroom.

For almost eight years, for most of which I was closeted, I taught editing classes in the publishing program at Portland State University. For a sum total of fours hours a week (two classes at two hours each), I was away from the scrutinizing eyes of my church community. My students didn’t care if I was gay, straight, pansexual—whatever! They just cared that I taught them well. When I taught, I felt little need to act the part of a straight man. Who I found attractive was of no consequence in the classroom. It was in these few hours that the me I saw in the mirror would show up. He was funny. He was engaging. He was sometimes a little flamboyant. My students no doubt pegged me as gay, but I was always careful to never say anything that would outright confirm their suspicions.

For many people, going to work means putting on an uncomfortable and restrictive uniform. For me, it meant taking mine off. Driving home from class, I would often feel a sense of sadness when I had to put my straight uniform back on. After coming out, one of my greatest joys was the day I left my classroom and realized I would never have to put my uniform on again.
As I stood there in my towel, looking at the man I had once hated, had sometimes admired, and had now grown to enjoy, I felt resolve to push forward with the exercise I had agreed to do. I took a deep breath and began again.

“I—”

“I love—”

I started to avert my eyes once more but quickly returned my focus.

“I love you.”

The words had finally broken free. I had done it!

Now what?

Suddenly, my reflection burst into tears.

I was stunned.

I didn't know how to respond, so I asked, “Why are you crying?”

He didn’t need to answer. I knew why.

* * *

Almost a full year after I came out, I thought I found my chance at true love when I earnestly began dating an attractive man. Attractive, but completely wrong for me. But I didn’t care. My desire to be in any relationship took precedence over my need to be in a healthy one. And the fact that he was so good-looking made up for a lot of his character flaws. From the very start, I knew the me in the mirror didn’t approve of our relationship. But I ignored him. I had denied myself a boyfriend for thirty-five years, and I wasn’t going to let anyone—not even myself—take the experience of having one away from me.

Had I not ignored the warning signs I saw early on, I would have been spared much heartache. Throughout the time we dated, I never felt like I was the object of this man’s affection but rather a source from which he received affection. Mixed signals abounded, such as the time he asked me to be his date to a wedding and I asked if he planned to introduce me as his boyfriend. He had no response. It was clear he wanted me there to play the part of his boyfriend but didn’t want to actually cast me in the role permanently. He would often blame his lack of commitment on his financial instability, having been out of steady work for months before I’d even met him. Even when we downgraded our relationship to friendship, this song and dance continued. I should have just walked away from him, but in my desire to be loved, I found myself always snapping back to him, hoping he would commit to me fully once he found a good job. Eventually, though, he fell in love with another man two states away and decided to move in with him. His parting gift to me was to expose my deepest insecurity—the core of what had kept me in the closet for so long.

Just days before he moved away to be with his new boyfriend, he texted me several naked pictures of himself. I had no idea why he did it. He had already told me he had moved on from me. He had already publically declared his love for this other man. I stared at the pictures, stunned. He knew I wanted him,
and he had told me he now belonged to another. So why was he sending me these pictures? He was probably just seeking attention, but to me, it was as if he was saying, “I still want you to love me, but I don’t want to have to love you back.”

I was so heartbroken over the experience that I slipped into one of the worst states of depression I had ever experienced. For weeks, all the negative events of my life played in my mind: my parents’ divorce when I was ten, being separated from my dad and older siblings for the decade that followed, watching helplessly as my mother destroyed her home through hoarding, losing almost all of my friends after I came out. In revisiting my history, I saw a pattern of what felt like abandonment by people who knew me best. The loss of my first boyfriend reinforced that pattern in my mind. He was just another person in a long line of people who’d proved to me that I wasn’t worth sticking around for, that at my core I was fundamentally unlovable. I even spoke those words out loud, “Why am I so fundamentally unlovable?”

There are times in life when we say things that illuminate the dark places inside us. This was such a time for me. I realized then that I had always seen my true self—my gay self—as unlovable. I believed that to such a degree that I had spent my whole life trying to be someone lovable in the eyes of others. I had never given anyone else the chance to love the true me—not even myself. It was upon sharing this realization with my friend that she challenged me to express my love to the me in the mirror.

* * *

As my reflection continued to cry, I felt his tears streaming down the flesh of my own face.

“I do! I do love you!” I said. “And I’m so sorry for all that I’ve done to hurt you. I’m sorry for all the times I hated you when I should have been kind to you. I’m sorry for all the times I ignored what you were feeling because it scared me. I’m sorry for all the shitty things I made you do to fit in with people who themselves would never truly love.”

“I forgive you,” he choked out. “And I love you too.”

As both our tears began to slow, I saw a smile break out on my reflection’s face. I noticed in that moment how beautiful his smile was.

I noticed something else about the man before me. He was no longer different from me. Instead, he was me. And I was loved.

Vinnie Kinsella is a Portland–based writer, editor, book designer, publisher, and workshop presenter. He uses his broad knowledge of the publishing industry to assist and educate up-and-coming authors. After coming out as gay at thirty-four years old, he founded the PDX Late Bloomers Club, a social/support organization for men who came out later in life. Drawing from this experience, he has developed a passion for supporting those entering into the LGBTQ community at an older age. Vinnie can often be seen performing with the Portland Gay Men’s Chorus or reading a book in one of Portland’s numerous coffee shops.
Chelsea Station is a new magazine devoted to gay writing. We accept for consideration original and unpublished fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, memoir, humor, narrative travelogue, interviews, and reviews (books, theater, television, and film) relating to gay literature and gay men.

Please query about reprints or promotional excerpts.

Submissions and queries should be sent to info@chelseastationeditions.com.

Manuscripts should be emailed as Word attachments. Please include your name, address, and e-mail contact information on the first page of your document. Please also include a brief bio of 100 words. Please query before sending any artwork.

Please do not send more than one prose work or more than four poems for consideration. Please let us know if you are making simultaneous submissions of your work to other journals.

Due to the volume of submissions, we are unable to respond with rejection notices. If you do not hear from us within three months of your submission, we are unable to use your submission, though you are always able to submit additional material for us to consider.

We also welcome recommendations for material and writers for consideration.

We currently do not offer monetary payment to contributors.

If you are interested in guest editing an issue of Chelsea Station magazine, please email us at info@chelseastationeditions.com to request the guidelines for guest editing.
“At about this time a punk interviewed me on television and asked, ‘You are known as a homosexual, a writer and an American. When did you first realize you were an American?’ ‘When I moved to France,’ I said.”

From Edmund White’s “Skinned Alive,” first published in *Granta*, 1989

**Sentimental Ex-Patriot**

*William Sterling Walker*

The *flâneur*, writes Edmund White, quoting Walter Benjamin, the literary *flâneur* with whom he is most simpatico, “is a creation of Paris.” Published in 2001 as part of Bloomsbury’s “The Writer and the City” series, *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris* shows that Edmund White was still in that city’s thrall three years after he quit his voluntary, fifteen-year exile there. And whether consciously or not,
he attempted to “document every corner” of his subject as he describes in words what the documentary photographer, Eugène Atget, sought to create—a “visual record of a vanished Paris.” Not quite a memoir, not quite a history, not quite a “sentimental” travelogue—though it contains elements of these forms—*The Flâneur* may be regarded formally as a monograph on what White, again quoting Walter Benjamin, calls the quintessential “Parisian Art Form:” *flânerie*, the art of strolling and sauntering in a sensual embrace of this city. In six short chapters White alights on a plethora of places and personages, as we follow him glancing from left to right on a wide boulevard of history, culture and memory. White not only focuses his attention on the Left Bank habitués who haunted in their times Les Deux Magots or Café de Flore in the St.-Germain-des-Prés, Collette, Sartre and de Beauvoir, writing, drinking, smoking, and gossiping, he also discusses Foucault and the two Jeans—Cocteau and Genet. Significantly, White devotes considerable attention to the African-American expatriates after World War I who fled oppression in the States, delving into the hope and myth of freedom in France. In extended sections White covers the stories of Sidney Bechet, Josephine Baker, Ada Louise Smith, (also known as “Bricktop”) and James Baldwin. Then White turns away from the Second Empire Paris of Baron Haussmann and wanders into the “teeming quartiers” of the Arabs, Asians, and North Africans, the “strongholds of multiculturalism,” with a long foray through the Marais, the very heart of Jewish and Gay Paris. In these chapters White emphatically declares his empathy in the places and “traces left by people on the margin—Jews, blacks, gays Arabs and he succeeds in painting a vista of the whole city, albeit in broad strokes, as much as E. B. White does in his equally slim volume, *This Is New York*.

His fascination with Paris should not surprise a reader, considering the duration of his exile. In his *New York Diary*, Ned Rorem quotes John Ashbery, “Once you’ve been happy in Paris you can never be happy anywhere else—not even in Paris.” White certainly endorses a subtle variant of the same sentiment when an alternate of Ashbery’s quip appeared as an epigraph to White’s most recent memoir, *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris*. “Having lived in Paris unfits you for living anywhere, including Paris.” The proof, as it were, of the centrality of that city in White’s *oeuvre*, is in his literary production. To date, White has probably written more words about Paris and Parisians than he has of any other city or its citizens, including two memoirs, major sections of two autobiographical novels, and biographies on Genet and Proust.

Years after I first devoured it, *The Flâneur* still remains one of my favorite books by White because, for its brevity and simplicity, it brims with feeling. For one of my first visits to Paris I re-read *The Flâneur*, to glean a few morsels of useful information and secret tips. And while I did not carry my annotated copy of *The Flâneur* around Paris quite like Lucy Honeychurch wandering Florence with her *Baedeker’s* in Forester’s *A Room With A View*, I had certainly used it as a resource. I had planned to take in two sites discussed by White—the Musée Gustave Moreau and the Musée Nissim de Camondo—museums I might not have seen or tried to see without White’s book to pique my interest.

But using *The Flâneur* as a travel guide is contray to the spirit of *flânerie*. In the book, White warns that Americans, including me, are “particularly ill-suited to be flâneurs,” because we are “driven by the urge towards self-improvement,” the opposite of the true nature of *flânerie*. In the end I saw only the silent, intense Musée Nissim de Camondo near the Parc Monceau, for the Moreau was closed at the time for either renovations or because its workers were *en grieve* (on strike)—but I digress.
In retrospect, I came to an inkling of the true nature of flânerie on another visit to Paris a decade ago. One bitterly cold January day, I wandered the Île St Louis, stopping to browse in Shakespeare & Company, then strolling the Maris with one of my three traveling companions. Bristling under the yoke of a twelve page, single-spaced, hour-by-hour itinerary that two of my traveling companions had zealously devised for us, I had strayed off the plotted course into an arcade on the rue de Rivoli to see a fountain pen shop; my friend—the one who had not devised the strict schedule—was sent to corral me. More than once during that trip, I had been accused of being too enamored of “bright, shiny objects” to follow such a draconian itinerary. My friend, Vance, decided it was best to send them onward without us, and we veered off into a tangle of streets in the Second Arrondissement, sauntering aimlessly until we came into the rue Daunou, and I struggled for a second to recall why the address number five had been stuck in my mind—27 rue de Fleurus being the only other Parisian address I knew by heart. Realizing suddenly, miraculously that we stood before Harry’s Bar at “SANK ROO DOE NOO”—as I had remembered now from once reading a piece in Esquire mentioning Ian Fleming’s short story “A View to a Kill”—we proceeded to while away the rest of the afternoon guiltlessly drinking too many Manhattans.

If Paris, as White writes, “is a world meant to be seen by the walker alone, for only the pace of strolling can take in all the rich if muted detail,” then the ideal audience for The Flâneur is probably the armchair traveler who hardly ever goes anywhere geographically, but who has a keen mind and vivid dreams, perhaps someone like the great solitary Manhattan walker, Joseph Cornell. He never went to France. He hardly strayed from the five boroughs of New York City. He traveled exclusively in the mind, but Cornell “longed to build memorials to the feeling of wanting to go to France,” wrote Adam Gopnik. A reader like Cornell would have no trouble imagining White one of his grand perambulations, crisscrossing the city’s arrondissements, enjoying their vitality, whether the cruisey hamam in Mosquée de Paris or the Tuileries Gardens. Ironically, though, The Flâneuris best experienced by readers in the plush comfort of a recliner and swallowed in a single sitting—the ultimate indulgence. As White writes, “The flâneur is by definition endowed with enormous leisure . . . [A] close rationing of time is antithetical to the true spirit of the flâneur.”

In flâneur fashion, let us wander back to John Ashbery’s quip and ask, how is one happy in Paris? White addressed that question in his 1994 BOMB magazine interview with visual artist, Alain Kirili:

I relax more and I practice the art of the flâneur. I spend hours walking around looking at books and things like that, without worrying about wasting time, which I used to worry about all the time.

That remark contains a whole city’s worth of thought. What White leaves unspoken is that he used to worry about wasting time, all the time, in New York, and what he left behind in New York was the city of his young adulthood, of his friends dead and dying of AIDS. White seems to have wished to escape less for the necessary solitude of the writer than for relief from the clatter of America’s too many voices. Had we but world enough and time, would we not all live in Paris?

White proceeds from the premise that the most important way to understand flânerie “is to know Paris,” not only on a pedestrian level, but to feel it as a completely immersive experience. “Flanerie is the best way to impose a personal vision on the palimpsest of Paris,” he writes and indeed flânerie becomes his strategy for living in the moment. Of Charles Baudelaire’s The Painter of Modern Life, an essay on
Constantine Guys, White says that Baudelaire (whom White regards as the “consummate Parisian”) “extols the modern artist who immerses himself in the bath of the crowd.”

For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate observer, it’s an immense pleasure to take up residence in multiplicity, in whatever is seething, moving, evanescent, and infinite: you’re not at home, but you feel at home everywhere; you see everyone, you’re at the centre of everything yet remain hidden from everybody.

One must have a near erotic susceptibility to the charms and inducements and unique pace of Parisian life, to be alive to its sense impressions. Interestingly, French grammar (as well as the grammar of Romance languages in general) distinguishes the knowledge or acquaintance of a city from the knowledge of a skill by the usage of the verbs connaître, (to be acquainted with, as one would know a person, or archaically, to know one sexually), and savoir (as one would know a skill), respectively. For White this idea is not merely metaphorical. The perceptual difference is hard-wired into the Latin language and temperament, as opposed to Anglo-American attitudes. Lest a reader miss the connection between eros and art, White raises the subject of flânerie and “amorous adventures.” Cruising and flânerie, White offers, are co-joined, intertwined. In the first and penultimate chapters, White, as he has more than once in other works, considers cruising as a subject, with a focused discussion on the “amorous adventures” of the Surrealists. White finds common cause with the (mostly heterosexual) Surrealists and believes their biographies are instructive.

As throughout the book, White waxes elegiac, writing in this section, “Some of my happiest moments have been spent making love to a stranger beside dark, swiftly moving water below a glowing city.” He continues:

When I arrived in Paris I was a fairly young-looking forty-three and when I left I was nearly sixty, snowy-haired and jowly. In the beginning I’d cruise along the Seine near the Austerlitz train station under a building that was cantilevered out over the shore on pylons. Or I’d hop over the fence and cruise the pocket park at the end of the Île St Louis, where I lived. There I’d either clatter through the bushes or descend the steps to the quay that wrapped around the prow of the island like the lower deck of a sinking ship.

To titillate in not White’s sole purpose. The freedom to allow oneself to experience pleasure is for White the essence of what it means to be a flâneur and White offers cruising as the American corollary to flânerie. The essential difference between White and the other great flâneur-writers of the past, from August Strindberg, to Charles Baudelaire, to Honoré de Balzac, to André Breton, is the degree to which each writer balances the tension between being in the city but not of it, between the voyeuristic and the participatory. If Benjamin’s model of the flâneur is an archetype of modernity, White adds his version: the middle-aged cruiser, with natural affinity for the street, a connoisseur of its theatricality, even at the risk of unfulfillment. Gay Americans of his generation saw through the prudishness and the work ethos, to cruising as a subverse revolt against standard mores. I am reminded by White’s openness to experience of a favorite epigraph to Forster’s Howards End and its powerful command, “Only connect.”

The whole book is about how White interweaves this story, his story, his reading and personal history and how his personal history intersects with gay history. To read The Flâneur is to retrace the contours of White’s own reading life in the “land of novelty and distraction.” Books are coordinates on his mental
map. *The Flâneur*’s rambling form becomes meaning—the text itself is flâneurable and this is one of the books particular joys. The text itself moves at the ease of a casual conversation and stroll. It ambles, it flows without middle and ends in a stream of consciousness with great wit. And the book is as much about the lost art of reading as a leisure activity—as attested by White’s extensive, if eclectic bibliography, one that displays a singular depth and breath of his reading. Every landmark White notes in the text calls to mind either a book or a historical figure. A friend once said to me that White has always turned “the lack of a plot into a stylistic virtue,” and what comes across in this book is that White is a consummate stylist.

And for me, the narrative’s breeziness and brevity, its warm, discursive tone, its confidence and candor, its lightness of touch, all belie a depth of feeling for the subject of flânerie and its concomitant solitude, a feeling all writers understand. For *The Flâneur* encapsulates, or rather attempts to recapture his fifteen years in the City of Light, and he means for us to know that certain city’s “sadly gay” loveliness (to paraphrase the Douglas Cross lyric of “I Left My Heart in San Francisco”), that flush of nostalgia similar in feeling to watching for the umpteenth time Rick Blaine say to Ilsa Lund at the end of *Casablanca*, “We’ll always have Paris.”

White’s vision captivates and seduces, yet it hints at the sadness and yearning for home that creep into the narratives of most exiles, no matter the reasons behind the decision to embark. Henry James wrote in his biography on the nineteenth century American expatriate sculptor, William Wetmore Story, “a man always pays, in one way or another, for expatriation,” and implicit in wandering is detachment, loneliness and loss. To be at home everywhere is to be at home nowhere.

__________

“William Sterling Walker is a wonderful writer, fluent, warm, intelligent, and real. His stories about gay life in New Orleans are firmly rooted in place, and all his characters, gay and straight, are observed with a wise heart and a deep soul.”
—Christopher Bram, author of *Gods and Monsters* and *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*

“Desire is a sensuous, nostalgic, and evocative collection of stories set in sultry New Orleans before that dreamy dream got washed away.”
—Valerie Martin, winner of the Orange Prize for *Property*

“These are stories that ask to be lived in—gorgeous, moody, sophisticated—not unlike the vividly conjured New Orleans that William Sterling Walker’s haunted characters inhabit, flee from, inevitably return to. Walker is a brilliant guide through the labyrinth of this city and these seething lives, fluent in the mutually reinforcing tropes of desire and regret.”
—Paul Russell, author of *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*

“This beautiful collection is not so much a set of stories as an intricate song cycle, one that arranges and rearranges recurrent fragments of memory and sensation—light, fragrance, and music—like the tesserae of a mosaic, the shifting patterns converging into a haunting panorama of the life of our ecstatic, fated generation of gay men.”
—Mark Merlis, author of *American Studies* and *An Arrow’s Flight*

“Desire is dreamy and affecting, stories of a New Orleans that was gone before Katrina ever got there. It’s been a while since I’ve read a collection so well written, so intricately composed, with such beautiful and evocative descriptions of a time and a place.”
—Caroline Fraser, author of *God’s Perfect Child* and *Rewilding the World: Dispatches from the Conservation Revolution*

“William Sterling Walker’s *Desire* feels to me like a welcome heir to Ethan Mordden’s classic *Buddies*—picking up perhaps where he left off and setting us down amid the lives, loves, and sexual adventures of a community of gay men in New Orleans. These linked stories are alternately poignant and seductive, and the structure is elegant and deceptively casual—they build in force until you feel like they belong to you, or you to them.”
—Alexander Chee, author of *Edinburgh*

“Full of vivid characters, *Desire* serves up a delicious slice of gay life in pre-Katrina New Orleans with plenty of nostalgia and heart, with stories as steamy and sassy as the city itself.”
—Jameson Fitzpatrick, *Next*

“A wonderful book. Walker’s characters are very real and he writes of them from his heart and he imbues his stories with sophistication that is truly a New Orleans characteristic.”
—Amos Lassen, *Reviews by Amos Lassen*

“This compilation of short stories stands to prove that gay men are not always the exuberant, funloving queens portrayed on TV. Each story looks at how New Orleans has played into the characters’ identities, how the city has shaped them, how it has sucked them in.”
—Katie Abate, *Edge*

“*Desire* is a guilty pleasure of a read, conversational and conspiratorial. It’s almost as if these people are welcoming you into their private chats, dishing out the latest neighborhood gossip about who picked up whom, whose ex is now someone else’s current.”
—Sandy Leonard, *Lambda Literary*

“Equal doses of wit, longing, poignancy, hope, seduction and loss, all woven together by this talented author. I give it a full five stars out of five.”
—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*
Raymond Luczak is the author and editor of 18 books. Titles include The Kiss of Walt Whitman Still on My Lips, QDA: A Queer Disability Anthology, and Mute. His debut novel Men with Their Hands won first place in the Project: QueerLit Contest 2006. His work has been nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize. He is the editor of Jonathan: A Queer Fiction Journal. Luczak lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and online at raymondluczak.com.
The Fragrance

I haven’t washed the flannel sheets since you’d left so early that morning. The crispness of winter then was an insistent reminder of the need I had for warmth, yours enveloping my slender fingers in the taxi, clinging as we watched the downtown struggle to awaken while we awaited our train to arrive and take us south to the airport where we wouldn’t be a we but a you and I separating further and further apart until you were thousands of feet up in the air.

I tell myself each day today is the day when I will peel the last of your flanneled presence off my sturdy bed and put into the washer where the alchemy of detergent and water will dissolve the fragrance of you still lingering in my memory. You are an absence breathing, a god waiting to be turned back into flesh right here on this bed.

—Raymond Luczak
Mary Ann had asked them to get to her condo in Sonoma two hours before the fireworks. The park filled up early and she wanted to make sure there was space for the whole gang to claim a spot.

“We’ll be there,” Robert promised. “We’re skipping the barbeque. You know how long it takes Will to get out of the house.”

They really should have left by now. He stood at the bedroom door watching Will, dressed in an olive green polo and boxer shorts, sort through a humped mountain of pants piled on their bed. He was fretting about which pair of khakis would best survive the grass stains and wine spills.

“Why not go with jeans or shorts,” suggested Robert, trying his best to be patient.

“Jeans are so pedestrian and it’ll be too cold for shorts. We froze our asses off last year.”
He *remembers*, thought Robert. Strange how sharp Will could be at times, then just bonkers. The doctors told them this was normal after brain trauma. Memory function should improve with time, but no guarantees.

He was numbed by it all at first, protected from reality by disbelief. Then grief set in, so deep and cutting he wondered if he would survive it. After Will was released and Robert took a leave of absence from the museum, he sometimes felt trapped, like an actor contractually obligated to perform in a reality show.

Friends asked him if he was angry the driver was never caught. He told them that punishing the perpetrator would not undo what had undone Will. He was angry about what happened, that Will was damaged and would never be the same man he dated, courted and married. He did not add that he was angry at himself for not yet fully accepting the damaged Will.

One day last week Robert returned home after running errands and found him stringing a network of lines between the side of the garage and the back of the house. Will explained it was for hanging the wash, recalling how his mother dried clothes in summer. Robert explained that no one did that anymore, showing him the washer and dryer in the laundry room and demonstrating how they worked.

“Oh, yeah,” was all Will said.

Robert wasn’t always so forbearing. He had to keep reminding himself it was the accident that caused these lapses, not his husband’s fault.

In the seminary, exercising patience was his biggest challenge, an only child thrown into a family of brothers enjoined by the Franciscans to silently repeat Corinthians 13:4 whenever they became annoyed or angry. “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”

Will held up a light khaki and a darker pair Robert purchased for himself at Banana Republic. “What do you think?”

“Whatever. Just put one of them on, for God sakes! We have to go.”

Will screwed up his face, looking hurt. “Help me please.”


Will considered, then tossed the other pair onto the bed. “With you in a jiffy.” He smiled, the dazzling smile that first attracted Robert on the Atlantis cruise to Mexico years ago.

Will had lost weight, fifteen pounds at last count, since he was taken to the ER that night six months ago. They were now the same size. Mary Ann said they really had begun to look alike, a long-married couple even though they exchanged vows at City Hall only two years ago, married by an elderly justice of the peace with a Dutch accent who hesitated at their names, then pronounced them “man and wife.” Will laughed. Robert felt cheated of their moment.

After the ceremony, their friends took them to lunch at Zuni, and again Robert felt let down—not by Ben and Paul, Mary Ann and Sheila—but by the haughty attitude of the wait staff who treated them as a nuisance, a party prolonging their shift.
Robert grabbed two bottles of wine from the kitchen counter on his way out. The garage door rolled up with a rattle and he pulled the Jeep onto the driveway. To his surprise, Will was waiting for him at the end of the sidewalk, dropping his windbreaker along with a Trader Joe’s bag onto the floor of the backseat.

“What’s in the bag?”

“Aren’t we supposed to bring wine?”

“I told you I had it covered.”

“I don’t remember.” Will’s tone was defensive.

“I’m sorry, Will.” Robert felt guilt invading and beat it back. Love was supposed to conquer all, but apparently not always. Shitty realities came along with love too.

For some reason, he thought of the lyrics to a song he used to roller-skate to in the basement of his boyhood home.

He played his mother’s Billie Holiday albums along with show-tunes, rolling across the concrete floor wearing a sheet tied around his head like a bridal veil. He forfeited the skates and show-tunes years before entering the seminary. He didn’t like musicals now, and saw them only because Will liked them: one of a thousand compromises people make to mutate into a couple, a singular noun defining two, accommodations that supposedly made you a better person. He had drawn the line, though, at paying good money to see Mamma Mia.

Robert chuckled.

“What is it?” Will studied him quizzically.

“Oh, just how strange life is.”

“Tell me.” Will meant it as an affirmation, not a request.

* * *

The drive from their house on Vicente was mostly downhill to the freeway. If only everything could be this easy, thought Robert. He spotted the jam-up of cars on the 80 heading west into San Francisco and elsewhere, carrying families anticipating the late afternoon sun and barbeques, looking forward to helping their kids light sparklers and hoping fog wouldn’t ruin Fourth of July fireworks.

The traffic going east was lighter. He might make up for some lost time.

“You shouldn’t store air freshener in the medicine cabinet,” Will declared.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s easy to confuse with the cologne.” Will offered his wrist for Robert to smell. Mango peach.

“How’d you manage that?”

“I wanted to smell nice. It was on the bottom shelf.”
Oh yes, Robert thought, the pink and green-colored ‘Mango Fruit’ bottle was a dead ringer for Calvin Klein’s “Eternity.” Will never used to wear cologne, claiming it was pretentious, minor evidence of a man who had been altered.

He sped through the Fastrac lane on the Carquinez Bridge. Sad-looking motels, fast food restaurants, a boarded-up Family Diner and auto body shops lined this strip and always depressed him. He heard Vallejo’s waterfront was being revitalized. Two of their friends renting in San Francisco were considering buying a house there. It’s really quite nice,” they claimed. “We can actually afford three bedrooms and a view.” Yeah, and live next door to a meth lab, Robert was tempted to say.

The exit to the 37 curved past Six Flags Marine World, the Medusa’s metal monolith looming over the vast filled parking lot.

“Can we go sometime? Will asked. “Maybe on Pride night.”

The former Will would never— “Okay. We can do that if you like.” Did Six Flags have a Pride night? Will would probably forget anyway.

One moment irritated by Will’s forgetfulness, then banking on it the next. Everyone championed their own agendas in relationships, but he held an unfair advantage with Will. Guilt again.

He decided to take the 12 to Sonoma through rolling hills and vineyards, veering north via Napa.

“Why are you going this way?”

Will apparently remembered there was an alternative route. “The 37 can be a pain in the ass on holidays. NASCAR at the speedway, cars cutting across from the 80 to the 101. Besides, this way will be prettier.”

As if contradicting his assertion, they passed a Walmart and a McDonald’s. “Hey,” exclaimed Will. “There’s a drive-through Caffino kiosk here. For people in a hurry to get more in a hurry!”

“They have drive-through funeral parlors in Southern California.”

“No way. Death on the run.” Will snickered.

Robert’s throat constricted. That was nearly Will’s fate, a hit-and-run. One moment jogging alongside the road, the next hugging a tree, blinded by blood streaming from his forehead. Robert was at a meeting that evening with the museum’s director. Will said he’d fix something for dinner after his run and a shower. “Shower” was their code for sex. He got the call at his meeting and rushed to Kaiser ER. An off-duty surgeon had been called, a team to assist him hastily assembled. Will was in the operating room four hours before Robert could see him.

He veered onto the 12, most traffic hopping on the wine-trail treadmill of 29.

“Wouldn’t that be fabulous!” enthused Will.

“What’s that?”

“I was just thinking. Wouldn’t it be great if we continued driving all the way to the border.”

“Which border?”
“Oregon, or maybe Canada. I’d like to visit Vancouver—”

“Again.” Robert finished the sentence. Will’s expression revealed confusion.

“Remember our visit three years ago with Mary Ann and her ex, John? We took a ferry to Vancouver Island and stayed at that rustic hotel for a couple nights.

“Oh, yes.” Robert knew Will was faking it.

“We borrowed waterproof jackets from the front desk for a walk in the rain forest but got soaked anyway. It was the first time we ever saw Mary Ann with flat hair. You made a joke of it.”

“I did?”

They passed a café owned by a celebrity chef and sped by yet another sparkling new example of some vintner’s fetish for chateaus.

Robert slowed down. “There’s the diRosa Foundation,” he pointed out, “that museum with the eccentric art collection.”

“Oh, yes,” Will brightened. “There was a Cadillac inside the entrance completely covered with objects. A fake rhinoceros head stuck out of the hood.”

Passed with flying colors.

“And when we went outside in the back,” Will continued, “a peacock swooped down from the roof and you screamed really loud. Even the tour guide jumped.”

“I didn’t scream.” Robert straightened in his seat. “I yelled.”

“You screamed. The two dykes standing next to us were in stitches, a fag afraid of a flying pheasant.”

“Peacock. And I’m never afraid of beauty.”

Will smiled, savoring his moment of one-upmanship. Robert focused on the road, feigning offense, but secretly delighted. His husband still had juice, bent but not broken.

Traffic slowed at the outskirts of Sonoma. The sun hovered above the hills in the west, as if reluctant to leave behind a perfect summer day.

“Where are we?” Will asked, suddenly anxious. The doctors said this would happen sometimes, “mood episodes”, happy one moment, disoriented and lost the next.

“We’re almost there.” Robert pulled onto Jack London Street and made a right into the driveway lined with palms. Four-unit buildings sat among English plane trees he heard were unsuited to California’s climate. The fenced pool area was loaded with kids cannon-balling into the water, their sunburned parents sipping glasses of wine and hoisting bottles of beer. Thankfully, Mary Ann hosted her friends in her home.

“You can bring the wine.”

“Both bags?” asked Will.
“One will do since everyone has a head-start on us.” He caught himself before he said, “and we don’t want to have an accident driving home.”

Mary Ann’s door was open, voices coming from inside.

“I told the guy if he was only interested in sex, he should look elsewhere.”

“Mary Ann, you are such a WASP!” bellowed Ben. “You should have taken him up on his offer.”

“We know you would have, Ben.” Sheila’s voice.

Robert entered the living room, Will behind him. Their friends sat around a glass coffee table littered with bottles and empty plates. Sheila sported a new girlfriend, introduced as Becky, and a new haircut, short, spiky, dyed jet-black. Ben’s partner Paul stood to greet them. Pushing sixty, he was still handsome, a tall, sandy-haired Midwesterner. Ben’s dark curly hair was chased with silver, the Italianate cherub turned aging roué.

Mary Ann hugged them, beige silk pants marked by a red wine stain, the wineglass she held veiled at the rim with lipstick.

“Sorry we’re late— the traffic.” He didn’t embarrass Will and explain about his prolonged wardrobe conundrum.

“The important thing is you made it.” Mary Ann turned to the others. “Ready?”

*     *    *

The park was packed, but they found an unclaimed patch of ground and spread their blankets. Will sat with Ben and Paul, who were treating him to horror stories about their landlord in San Francisco. Robert wondered whether his husband could focus on what promised to be a long story.

Cozying-up with Mary Ann, he gave them both generous pours. They clinked their plastic glasses.

“What’s happening there?” he asked nodding toward a cluster of Adiroindack chairs off to the side. Two waiters dressed in white shirts and black shorts were busy organizing flutes and buckets of champagne on a cloth-covered table.

Mary Ann took a sip. “Reserved VIP seating. It’s one of those hotel package deals. Guests pay an extra $100.”

Robert shook his head in disbelief. “For fireworks in a public park?”

“Just because you’re cheap.”

“I’m not cheap. I’m prudent.”

“Well, Prudence, how is our man?” She glanced in Will’s direction.

Robert didn’t quite know where to begin. “He’s doing okay, I guess. He has his good moments. He gets depressed sometimes. Yesterday, I found him in the kitchen crying. I asked what was wrong and he told me he had forgotten why he was there.”

CHELSEA STATION
“I do that sometimes.”

“But he gets afraid that he’s really losing it.”

“What do the doctors say?”

“Only that he’s making good progress. Nothing specific.”

“So how are you doing?” Mary Ann put a hand on his knee.

“It’s hard. Sometimes it’s like living with a different person. Not a stranger, exactly, but—our rhythms together are different now.”

“How so?” Her eyes held his.

“The balance we achieved, the responsibility we shared, is gone. He’s like a child, relearning his world.”

“Will’s lucky.”

“What do you mean?”

“Living partly as a child sounds wonderful.”

“It’s really not. He knows he’s been damaged.”

“I think I like him better now,” Mary Ann whispered.

“You didn’t like him before?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I mean that he’s softer. He used to be so cynical. His humor could be so cruel. Remember the last 4th? John and I were breaking up. It turned out to be our last holiday.”

“I remember you two weren’t sitting together that night.”

“John was complaining about one of his clients, going on and on how difficult the owners were being about the renovations. Will was obviously bored. He kept nodding up and down like one of those bobble dolls as John kvetched, shaking it so fast I thought he was going to hurt his head. Oh, sorry—“

“That’s okay, Mary Ann. Sorry is my forte.”

“Will eventually blurted out: ‘John, you’re like a whining queen, except you bitch in baritone.’ I couldn’t stop laughing, which may have finally finished things between us.

“My funny man.”

“But it never stopped, did it? The sharp judgments and snappy rejoinders, I mean. Will is—kinder now, innocent in a way. It’s like he’s starting over, a kid in awe of the big world.”

She leaned over and kissed Robert on the cheek. “Oh, I know it’s been hard for you.”

“It could have been a lot worse. I almost lost him.”

“He’s still your Will, just different.”

CHELSEA STATION
“Yeah,” he sighed. “That’s what his therapist keeps telling me.”

“You’re in it for the long haul, right?”

“Of course. For better or for worse.”

“Because if you bailed, I’d kill you.”

“That’s one viable alternative.”

They were suddenly startled by a high-pitched whistling sound, followed by a series of stuttering explosions. They raised their eyes to the sky. A glowing white chrysanthemum burst against the darkness, crackling like a bridal veil as it gradually dissolved. Missiles shot into the air, erupting into cascades of red, white and blue, shaking the ground with their booming and leaving behind smoky white clouds. Glowing fountains of gold blossomed like lotuses.

Robert gazed toward Will, his handsome face illuminated by the fireworks, eyes bright with delight. It was the face of a boy-man who might not remember this moment tomorrow, but was clearly savoring it now.

William Torphy’s poetry, critical essays and articles have appeared in *Sebastian Quill, Artweek, High Performance, Exposee, The Fictional Cafe* and the *Occupy SF* anthology. Ithuriel’s Spear in San Francisco has published “Love Never Always” (poetry), “Snakebite” (young adult fiction) and “A Brush With History” (biography). Short stories were recently featured in *The Fictional Café* and Volume 5 of *ImageOutWrite*. William works as an art curator in the San Francisco area.
Noah Stetzer is a graduate of The MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and also a scholarship recipient from the Lambda Literary Retreat for Emerging LGBT Writers & from the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. His poems have appeared in various journals including: James Franco Review, A&U Magazine, The Collagist, The Volta, Tinderbox, & Phantom Press. His chapbook *Because I Can See Needing a Knife* (Red Bird) will be published in 2016.
Outside the doctor’s office a fuse will sparkle behind you and smudge the sidewalk black at the bus stop. The time tables in your head will mix with infection rates (both are ratcheting fast, your nine lives are almost up).

Right on time, eight wheels will stop in front: the heaving bus, sweating metal and warm rubber will exhale in your face while seven floors up, a file with your mistakes in it burns hot.

There won’t be five minutes to spare on who might worry or want or wait—this bus goes east to the airport where you can go west, and fly back four hours, to before results and diagnosis and days left and plans in order.

See, you’ve been busy tearing out seams as quickly as they’re sewn, pulling at threads along the cuff of your shirt, chewing your fingernails down to the quick, and twisting the skin of your eyebrows until you bruised.

Distracted by disrepair and deconstruction, you ask yourself what’s the point, you’ve been at odds with what you hold in your hand: this pill, some medicine, works like magic, maybe the opposite of ignition or maybe like a slow match fuse.

An empty nightly choice: either take on another day: keep the windows closed and insulate the attic, store a transistor radio, have a flashlight, and forget the black powder in the basement—or drop it down the toilet.

The bus door hangs open, steps up will take you out, the stuff ahead lighter than what’s behind; with both your hands tight by your sides, one step up and Newton’s Third Law ignites behind you.

Ten steps from the doctor’s office door you will have stopped on the sidewalk—medicine or magic has failed and choice is off the table, infection has you burning hot enough—and you say out loud, “at last.”

—Noah Stetzer
A Gay Man Among Men
Garrison Botts

“I am sorry to tell you that Bruce passed away two months ago in April.”

My fear’s were realized when Bruce’s sister spoke those words. She had phoned to tell me she received the note I had sent her brother asking if he was okay. Now I knew. He wasn’t.

I had called Bruce’s apartment about a week earlier, after not hearing from him for a while, and got a recording stating, “this number is no longer in service.” It seemed very odd that his phone was disconnected. I immediately mailed my note to him inquiring about his whereabouts. He did like to travel a lot, so maybe he was wandering about Cairo, but that wasn’t the case. Bruce’s sister informed me he had a stroke and fell to the floor—and probably didn’t suffer at all. Bruce was eighty-three and had been coping with his share of system breakdowns. So, it wasn’t a shock to hear this, but it was a sad and lonely note of finality, one that has echoed for weeks, months, and years later. Bruce had been my
I started seeing Bruce for counseling during the late 1970’s. I had been living in New York City for close to two years and struggling with trying to have some kind of career and with coming to terms with my sexual orientation. My therapists at college had been trying to guide me into the straight life, convinced I would be happier once I had a relationship with a woman. However, I was now 24, living in a city that was erupting into full-blown gay liberation, and wanted nothing to do with the passionless option of heterosexuality. I wanted to follow my deepest yearnings, and that was very possible in Gay Gotham. Clubs, baths, bars, multiple gay publications in the newsstands; it was a world I never thought possible, a cornucopia of gay delights, and I wanted to throw caution to the wind and indulge myself.

However, as much as I wanted to partake in the feast that waited outside my upper Westside apartment door, I was inhibited, and conflicted about my feelings. I was still semi-closeted, unsure of myself, and fearful of what giving myself over to gayness might mean; after all we had been taught that it was a certain road to hell and a prescription for potential madness. My entire gay generation was in the process of coming out at that time, and many of us were tiptoeing out of our common closet. We weren’t sure if the waters were safe. We were on an untraveled road; few had gone before us, so there were no directions, no advice, and no assurance of where we might end up. We could have used some guides. I was lucky to find one.

I saw an ad in the *Village Voice* for an organization called Gay Counseling. The organization was a group of therapists and counselors who wanted to help gay folk like me deal with all of the psychological difficulties we face growing up feeling alienated, abnormal, rejected, and even despised. I made an appointment, and after my intake interview, I was referred to Bruce who became my counselor. He was a volunteer and clients’ fees were based on income. My income was so low at the time, that I paid a very nominal fee of $10 a week to see him. It is almost a miracle that something like Gay Counseling was ever created. Who would have dreamed when I was a budding gay adolescent that there would be, ever in a thousand years, an organization created to help people like me? Its establishment was certainly an act of great charity and compassion, and Bruce was a saint for volunteering his services to the organization, and to our LGBT community. We had been oppressed for so very, very long, and the time was right to say to the world, and to ourselves “no more.” Gay Counseling and Bruce were there to help us find that voice and strengthen it.

For two years, I met weekly with Bruce in a small plain room in a church in Gramercy Park. It was very simply furnished with two folding chairs and a desk with a phone on it, an obvious shoestring operation. Bruce was a gentle presence but not a shrinking one. He was tall, thin, graying and graceful, and a generation or more older than I. He was compassionate but didn’t offer pity or tolerate self-pity. He was direct and honest. We talked about everything and, of course, explored my difficult childhood and the resulting “unfinished business” I had accumulated over the years. Bruce told me over and over again that my major issue was that I was too self-critical. I had internalized the criticism I received from society as being “different” from other boys, and from my own father who was so critical of me that he didn’t speak to me for two years. Bruce became my non-critical father. He had had a similar experience growing up, and felt he had an affinity for my particular problems and issues. He took an interest in me, supported me, and accepted me for who I was, faults and all. During our time together, I began to feel my burden ease; my
heart open up, and my self-criticism abate. I was learning to accept myself as a gay man and enjoy it. I was eventually able to enter a relationship and it still continues 34 years later.

I continued to see Bruce on and off through the years, privately at his apartment whenever I needed his help. He was there to help me through several crises. Over the years, I became involved in Eastern Philosophy including both Yoga and Buddhism. Bruce was well versed in those subjects, and was able to help me understand them more deeply and apply the teachings to my daily struggles. Bruce embodied one of the main tenets of Yoga and Buddhism—selfless service, and a dedication to helping others find enlightenment and liberation. He offered his skills and experience as a counselor to a new generation of gay men that didn’t want to live a life of lies and repression. He understood that by working to uplift his community, he in turn uplifted himself. He is an unsung hero, that rare individual who walks the walk, and reaches for the highest good.

Many young gay people today have elders to look to who have gone through the coming out experience and can offer advice on a myriad of topics from safer sex to wedding arrangements. We had much less of a support network, with perhaps a smattering of gay elders who could help us learn how to navigate in a world of secrets and duplicity. Bruce was somehow ahead of his time in learning to come out of the closet and accept himself. I don’t really know what prompted his progressive nature. Perhaps it was those years he lived in Europe as a young man, and sat at cafés and talked philosophy on the left bank of Paris. Perhaps it was the time he spent in therapy himself. He went through a long stint of psychotherapy earlier in his life, which he claimed had a tremendously positive impact upon him; so much so that he thought it essential to pass on his lessons learned to others in need. I recall seeing him walking down the street one Spring day in New York City when the sun had finally come out after a long grey and cold spell, and everyone had come out of their dark, small apartments to soak up the warmth and light. He was walking down Seventh Avenue, his posture tall and erect, and his arms swinging freely as he glided down the street; only gravity seemed to be keeping him from floating above the sidewalk. His face displayed a blissful expression of joy and freedom in the moment. I watched him from afar, inspired by his confident stride and obvious delight in the day. I thought to myself—I hope I can feel that free and comfortable and proud some day. Thanks to Bruce I was eventually able to have my own moments of gravity free happiness.

How many people can say they helped transform someone’s life into a more rewarding and joyful experience? Bruce did this for me out of the goodness of his heart, and because he came to care about me, and wanted to see me have a fulfilling life. He was a very intelligent, sensitive, caring man with a great sense of humor. We would often laugh together over gay jokes or memories of embarrassing sexual experiences. To think that during an earlier time of his life, all of his extraordinary qualities might have been dismissed because of one factor—sexual orientation. He would have been deemed damaged goods, possibly institutionalized; undoubtedly cast off to the fringes of society. It took the Mattachine Society and the Stonewall rebellion to begin to alter society’s views on homosexuality, to help people see that sexual orientation is not a defining quality of one’s personhood. I could see that in Bruce, and he taught me to see it in myself. Regardless of our sexuality, we realized we were talented, bright, caring, fun-loving, hard-working, socially concerned individuals deserving of love, respect and equality. We were gay, yes, but so much more.
Bruce comforted me, educated me, and helped me to experience moments of freedom and total acceptance. Along with all those brave souls who began the gay liberation movement, he led me out of my dark oppressive world of secrets and repression, and into the streets and the world at large to claim my freedom and worthiness. He was a man among men, a gay one, and an exceptional one. I salute him and send him unfathomable gratitude for lifting up my life.

Garrison Botts is retired from a career in film, television and theater, and now writing memoirs. The bulk of his career was a broadcast programmer at WNET/13, NYC’s public television station, where he oversaw LGBT programming for the station. He lives in Rhinebeck, NY with his husband of 34 years.
Frank Adams is a Lambda Literary Foundation Fellow in Poetry. His poems have appeared in *Chelsea Station; Down-go Sun; Glitterwolf; Grist; Iris; Poetry for All; Q Review and Vox Poetica*. His poems have also appeared in the anthologies; *Between: New Gay Poetry*, and in *Kansas City Metropolitan Verse*. He is the author of *Crazy Times; Mother Speaks Her Name; Love Remembered; Shadows, Mist & Fog; Strangers, Men & Boys*, and of a chapbook, *Marilyn*. 
At the Main Street Bar

I admire their youth,
beauty,
taunt bodies
and caustic remarks -
as they sit in judgement
of all who enter.
I admire them,
but do not desire them.
I am satisfied
to be a dinosaur
in their midst.
A relic
from a forgotten time -
who has learned
that soon enough
these boys
will follow me
to the hinterland
of faded beauty
where dinosaurs flourish.

—Frank Adams
Outside the house where Saul grew up, I practice my smile in our Mini Cooper’s rear view mirror. Too false, squeeze the cheeks. Squint the eyes more, if that’s possible. After a minute, I quit, thinking whatever, she’s not gonna like me, even if I’m an altar boy.

She has an indoor porch covered with screens. Out in the pasture a cow’s munching some grass and whipping its tail around, indolent in the hot autumn day. A calf runs underneath its belly trying to bite an udder, but the mother shakes herself and chases the youngster off. Casting a shadow over them is a wooden barn, not freshly red but dark green and black like moss on stone, looking so waterlogged I expect it to shiver. Shadowing the crop fields is a tall metal grain silo—Saul taught me a little farm
vocabulary before we left. A rock road stretches itself to the highway. Ireland, Indiana. This is where Saul grew up.

“Tsu, get up here!” Saul beckons from the porch steps. He sounds like a hick already, the country’s broken back into him so fast. He rings the doorbell a couple times and scrapes his loafers on a wire mat. Another one above it, white and cottony, says Welcome Home in sewn-on letters. There’s a little angel flying in the corner. “That’s where my brothers dipped themselves in tar.” Saul points out a little culvert besides a smaller barn. I can’t remember if he’s told me that story or not.

The door opens, and a strong scent of aged wool hits me. I hold my breath as I see a little old lady with wispy, curly grey hair and dainty glasses answer. She wears a frumpy, plain mauve sweater above a pair of jeans. She looks up and laughs when she sees Saul.

“There’s my youngest boy!” Her arms quiver as she holds them up, and Saul squats a little to hug his mother. They catch up: how are you. I’m doing good. Did you bring some souvenirs from Colorado? Ernie—Carl’s boy—loved the postcard of the plateau. Verna has an old lady’s voice, wobbling and trailing off. Its warmth irritates me. Saul lets go, and I face Saul’s mother for the first time.

“Mom, this is my husband,” he says. Takes him long enough to introduce me.

She catches her smile before it falls off, and so graciously holds a hand out. “I’m Verna. Pleasure to meet you … Teesu, is it?”

“It’s pronounced shoe. Nice to meet you, too.” I smile and shake her hand.

She beckons us in. She and Saul talk about the drive, that long fourteen hour drive. The only memorable detail was Saul slugging me on the shoulder because I asked him to make a bet how long Verna would go before calling me his friend. I take a look around the house. It looks like we entered some anteroom. There’s a crucifix on the wall. Ceramic magi sitting with baby Jesus on the mantelpiece. A doily drapes around a piece of crochet, this one saying do not let your hearts be troubled, trust in God. Saul tried to convince me his mom was a more relaxed Christian.

“Shannon and Gary have moved into a new house,” Verna says.

“Oh really, by the Bechers?”

“No, up more, by the Grundhoefers.”

“Oh.” Saul nods his head knowingly. I’m confused. We used street signs where I grew up. The only neighbor I ever met was the dealer on the street trying to get my dad hooked on heroin. Something clucks, and I glimpse into another room, a little wooden cuckoo withdrawing into its clock. The cuckoo clock is made of a light brown, unpainted wood.

“We got that from a Deutsch farmer we hosted,” Verna says. “It’s from der Schwarzwald.”

“The what?”

“Mom, quit speaking German.”

“So ein mist,” she mutters. “Well, he’s got his Japanese.”
This woman.

“Let me see your computer,” Saul interrupts her. Verna leads Saul through the kitchen, where I can smell bacon sizzling. He mouths an apology before he disappears through the doorway. A little later I can hear shrill whispering but don’t bother making any of it out.

When the whispering subsides, I walk in and see Verna watching corn cook in a saucepan on the stove. A tray of lasagna heats in the oven, and some rolls cool down on a yellow plate on the counter. It’s been so long since I cooked. I get mad when my mouth starts watering and gnaw my fingernails to calm myself.

“Do you want me to help?” I ask. “I can fix up a nice salad or butter those rolls.”

“It’s fine, honey, I like cooking dinner.”

We can hear Saul cursing in the nearby office, quiet as he is. A chair scoots out, and he walks back into the kitchen.

“You been downloading anything, Mom?”

“What do you mean, downloading?”

“D’you ever click anything that looked shady?”

“Shady? I don’t know. Just get my computer working already.”

Saul rubs his hand over his eyes. “Well, you got a virus. It’ll take me a while to fix it.”

“You have the whole night. Dinner’s almost ready. Take a seat.”

Saul slides a chair out and plops himself there, one arm resting on the table. The golden bands on our fingers glint under the kitchen light. I take my time sitting down, setting a napkin and some silverware next to my plate.

“So what were you two talking about?” Saul asks.

Verna mutters something in German and checks the calendar on the cabinet. He looks at me, and I shrug.

“Nothing? Well, Tsu, tell Mom about Indy! You’re from there, and we’ve been up there for the state fair. Go on, Tsu,” he says. I want to knock his grin off.


“Is that right?” Verna says. “Dear, I didn’t even realize.”

The corn sizzles in the pan, and Verna rushes over to that.

“Well, Tsu, it isn’t the city here, but we’re comfortable,” Verna says. “Suzanne’s old room is warm, but if you get too hot there’s a fan near her bed.”

“We’re sleeping in your sister’s room?” I ask Saul. He pulls his hairy arm off the table, and his head bows down. We always sleep together. I like that hairy arm over my chest, it feels like a shield against the dark,
and he’s hot as a furnace. I swear he glows sometimes, just real dim like a scented candle with an almost burnt out wick but still emanating a comforting light.

“He’s sleeping in his old room.” Verna says.

Saul didn’t tell me this. He said she let his brothers sleep with their wives all the time. He’s a liar, and she’s a cranky, wrinkled, Bible-hugging …

“Ridiculous,” I say.

“Tsu.” He reaches for my hand, but I move it away.

“It is not ridiculous! I can ask this at least!” The corn sizzles again, but Verna can’t care less. Her rheumatic hands steady themselves on the handle of the oven, and she’s mustering all five foot four of her at me.

“You can’t possibly think that,” I shoot back. “Your own son—”

“Has made his decisions. But he still respects this house.”

“Bull crap.”

“Tsu!”

“I could care less what you boys do in your house, in mine you—”

“Enough!” Saul shouts. “Mom, I’m sure that corn’s cooked by now, and Tsu, you’re gonna stab yourself, watch your hand.”

It almost nicked a sharp bread knife on the table. I pull my hand away, and Verna sets the rolls before retrieving the corn.

The lasagna finishes later, and Verna sets it and a salad next to the corn and rolls. She grabs tongs and stirs the salad then dashes a portion of spinach leaves, tomatoes, and olives onto her plate. I’m eating away at a roll. Saul ladles some lasagna onto his plate, efficiently, like it’s a familiar routine. He adds parmesan onto his serving and forks it into his mouth, too fast like he used to. I had taught him to enjoy his meal more slowly. He’s never enjoyed my cooking that voraciously. Everyone finishes a serving and starts on the next.

“This is delicious, Mom.”

“Thank you.” She waits for me to say something. I enjoy the roll melting in my mouth.

“It’s good,” I say.

“You boys are lucky,” she says, sawing her roll into even smaller squares. “I haven’t cooked lasagna since your dad and I’s anniversary.”

“Oh, hey!” Saul kicks his chair back a little, like his idea’s so great it’ll bowl him over. “Tell Tsu some stories about Dad, in World War II. I love those stories!”

“What do you know about Saul’s dad, Tsu?”
“Not much,” I say. I don’t really care to learn much.

“I told you he was in the war, right? That he was a spy?” Saul says. He might have, might have not. I hate how Saul pretends he’s told me all his family lore. We’re always busy going to the movies, having friends over, taking trips to New York or California or London. But I’m sure now he doesn’t share all that with his mom in their phone talks.

“He wasn’t a spy, Saul,” Verna chastises him. “Elmer knew perfect German. He spoke it as a child, like only a few in this area could at that time.” She grabs a cob, saws it back and forth along a stick of butter, and takes a delicate bite. “So when he was in Germany serving as a soldier, sometimes his commander sent him and a few others to listen in on Nazi meetings.”

“Like a spy,” Saul says.

“One time, he was by himself, squatting under a window listening on one of these meetings when one of the Germans said ‘halt!’ and Elmer heard a rifle click.” Verna puts her corn down and rests her chin on her interlaced fingers. “He hightailed it out of there, across an open field. Didn’t look back once until he was back with his squad. The next day, his commander took him to the field. ‘Do you know what you ran across?’ the commander asked. Elmer said no. ‘You ran across a minefield,’ the commander said. ‘You ran all the way across, and not once did you hit a mine.’”

They look my way for my reaction to the war tale. I reach in for another role.

“I’ll tell you what Elmer told me, many, many times,” Verna says. “There are no atheists in foxholes, Tsu. When someone could get blown up any second, everyone needs a God.”

I flex my fingers, wondering how much more she’ll hate me when I say this next thing on my mind.

“Doubt there’s many Catholics on Sunday mornings, either,” I say. Saul munches loudly on his corn while Verna’s knife scrapes her plate. I scoop some lasagna onto my plate, and slurp up the noodles. The saucy flavor warms me up, and I lick the parmesan off my teeth. “Delicious dinner,” I say. Verna pushes her plate away.

“I’m full, and tired. I’ll be in the living room.”

Before she walks out, Verna puts a hand on the doorframe, stopping for a breather. Saul gets up and offers his arm, but she waves it away. The cuckoo clock clucks again.


She continues on, and her son frowns after her. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him go to church.

After dinner, Saul decides to clean the dishes. I loiter around the kitchen, snatching looks at the corner of the room, wondering if Verna’s asleep, even this late in the evening. When I hear the TV humming, I sneak up to Saul putting dishes in a sink half-filled with soapy water. While he scrubs a plate, I wrap my arms around his waist, putting my bulging jeans zipper between his butt pockets.
“Hey,” I slither in his ear, “I was thinking, she put us both on the second floor, and she’ll probably nod off to sleep down here any time. So, say later in the night, I sneak into your room, and we uh,” I clench his hips and sway like we’re slow dancing, “bring a little sin in here.”

Saul straightens up and shakes my hands off. He turns around, his face a sober gargoyle, which means he’s livid.

“Absolutely not.”

“Oh, I just mean cuddling and stuff.”

“No.”

“Saul, your mother’s tyrannical. We haven’t even held hands, it’s like she’s pretending we’re just two bros.”

“My mom’s house, my mom’s rules.” Saul turns away to scrub a bowl but I jostle him at his side.

“I can’t believe you put up with this. You’re not mad at all.”

“Of course I am!” He slams his rag into the sink. He’s heaving, huffing, blowing, a wolf caged up in its own disciplined rigidity. Loosening his fists, he wipes his hands with the towel, the suds slipping off and splattering the countertop. Then he picks up a plate and starts washing it, lathering dish detergent, then grabbing the spray hose and rinsing. He dries it spotless and sets it on the rag. I try to grab his hand to calm us down, but he snatches it away.

“You can dry the rest.” He tosses the towel to me, hands me a cup. A wooly scent settles in, and I notice Verna on a chair in the anteroom, staring hard and cold at her family’s pictures on the wall. Saul doesn’t notice.

After we clean the dishes, I look around the anteroom. Verna snoozes lightly on her chair, her head lightly tilted over. I see some paintings of a farm by a mountain, more stitched Bible quotes: trust in God, stay away from evil, don’t take it up the butt, stuff like that. On one of those tack boards where kids pin their school ribbons, I notice a picture of Saul in an old photo, colored yet saturated. He’s a short, bucktoothed, bowl-cut kid standing in front of a cow, shaking hands with a thick armed, beer-gut blessed man dressed in a suit without a tie and a cowboy hat handing Saul a pink ribbon. Saul used to do 4-H. That’s right. He talked about how all his siblings won for livestock rearing so many times. When he started he was so crappy at it, but he and his dad worked on heifer after steer each year until finally, that picture. There’s another one of him, with all nine of his siblings, and his dad and Verna. He grew up here. He wasn’t born as a sexy poker player in Colorado, working a well-paying IT job that now supports us.

“He had the damnedest eyes.”

I jump. Verna’s got a nasty talent for sneaking.

“You mean the judge in the picture?”

“Yes. Saul’s father.”

“Oh.”

CHELSEA STATION
She walks outside. I look at Saul’s iridescent eyes set on his father until following Verna.

Dusk falling, the fields waver in the breeze, dark and unsettling like a murder of crows will fly out cawing any second. I find Verna on the edge of one field, one foot propped on what looks like a metal pogo stick. She stakes it down then draws it back up, and a cord of clotted soil slips out from a crevice in the bottom tube. As I walk up to her, she kneels down to grab it.

“Where’s Saul?” she asks from the ground.

“He’s out talking to his brother somewhere,” I say.

“They got a lot of catching up to do.”

She pops the cord into a small zip-up bag, then drops that bag in a plastic bucket. Verna then stares at the soil in the earth. Or nothing. Or everything. I don’t know. Her face is a tangled up ball of yarn, with some thoughts like string crossing over itself, all obscure.

“What are you doing?”

“Measuring the soil.”

As we walk, inch really, me carrying her bucket and pogo stick for her, she goes into a long explanation about farming science: different soil types, soil tools (“Soil probe,” she tells me the name of her stick), proper seed dispersal, crops that cycle back and forth, planning around market demands and government regulations (“Die Commies”), machinery care, and problems with the EPA. I’m stupefied.

“Aren’t you a little old for this?” I ask her, though I’ve noticed she doesn’t shake as much outside. She pulls out a dirty rag and wipes her forehead off.

“It’s good exercise.”

“Don’t learn any of this growing up in a city.” We stop at another patch of soil.

“Saul and you should visit more.”

Verna next uses her rag to clean out the crevice’s inside, wiping away every speck of dirt. Her wrinkles wrinkle more, and she points her shoulder at me. I crack my wrists and change my tone.

“I know we didn’t look good in the kitchen,” I begin. “But Saul and I are happy. We go to the movies, we visit plateaus, buy groceries together. We have our jokes. We have friends over for dinner. All of us celebrated someone’s birthday last week with some cake. It was a hill, with a four and a zero tumbling down the side.”

“I know. Saul told me on the phone.”

“So you understand then. What making us sleep in separate rooms, what that’s saying.”

Verna stakes her probe in the ground and steadies the tool, not quite cemented in the loose soil. The tool’s rusty with one bent handlebar, like it’s been bought at a flea market. I’ll wait until the fleas finish eating it up. I’ll wait until they eat her up, to get an answer out of her, whether it’s some Bible quote or
disgust disguised as parental concern. Verna leans forward on her probe like it’s a walker, staring into the setting sun, as if she’s daring it to hang in the sky a little longer.

“Saul’s father never did forgive the fact that Saul was gay,” she said. “Lot of unfinished business between them. Now there’s all that and six feet of earth between them. So Saul and I, we’ve made our peace. He’s gay and I’m Catholic.”

“You won’t make this one concession?”

“I won’t do anything that’ll stop me from seeing Elmer again.” Her fingers drum the handle. She talks slowly, not one to smash through her thoughts like a train. “I suggest you leave it, Tsu. I’ve made a lot of concessions, already. And he wishes you would, too. That’s what was pushing his buttons in the kitchen, in case you didn’t notice.”

“So this is Catholicism for you? What about treating others the way you’d want to be treated, or respect thy neighbor?”

“We could quote the Bible all day, won’t get us nowhere.” Her back straightens, as if pride could pad her spine up. I can’t think of anything to say back, because that sounds like something I would say. She holds out the probe. “Want to measure the soil?”

The sun moves before either of us do. Then I grab the tool and set a foot on one bar like it’s a shovel then press down. The tool’s surprisingly heavy, and I wonder how she carried it so long. We try it a couple more times and my soil fails to get up, until we finally get a decent cord of soil. Looks like a turd. I watch it roll out of the probe, flopping like a calf just birthed. I walk Verna back home, taking our time, not reaching the house until nearly sunset.

While Verna heads to the living room to rest, I go to the office and watch Saul work on Verna’s computer. It’s a Windows 1991, an old thing. Strips of paper are taped around the screen with typed passwords like Stuttgart and Rosie. Saul’s madly keying lines of code into a white window, occasionally switching windows to a website with instructions, long enough to shrink the scrollbar to a tiny square.

“I’m almost done,” he says. “Just hope it works.”

“Cool.”

It’s a wonder his wrists aren’t sore yet. They probably will be when we get back home, and he feels freer to complain about it.

“Saul,” I say.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Above the computer, on a book shelf, is a picture of him as a kid, smiling with his mom and dad. Here he wears glasses like Saul has, with two rims, one on top and another bridging the nose. He has his eyes.

Later, we’re all in the living room. Saul turns on a surprisingly modern widescreen TV from Fox to MSNBC for a second. There’s an opinion columnist spouting. She requests that conservatives, or a bunch of old,
CHELSEA STATION

white, stubborn religious fanatics, homophobes, misogynists, racists as she calls them, to either get with it or move along. The TV shows more images of picketers at a gay person’s funeral. Some of them toothsome, shredded shirts, signs with crude lettering spray painted onto them. Verna isn’t shaking so hard now. Her eyes are drooping, like she’s bored with the rhetoric being fed to her. Her couch looks too big for her.

“Turn the television off,” she asks quietly. Saul presses the remote, and we sit in the living room, under Jesus’s feet.

“Alright, it’s time for bed for this feller,” Saul announces. He pushes off the couch, walks over to Verna, and kisses her good night on the forehead. He walks past my way and stands a little away from me. He knows how we normally say good night, when we’re at home.

“Good night, Tsu.” Saul walks away upstairs. The cuckoo clock clucks. Verna swirls her glass of water, the ice chinking together.

“Isn’t it past your bedtime?” she grumbles. It takes a while before I can pick myself up and go to bed, leaving my tempests with her on the couch with her.

After midnight, I’m lying in Suzanne’s old twin-sized bed. I look at the door cracked open. There’s a faint light coming from a candle inside Saul’s room, the only luminescence in the dark. He did say he used to sleep with a nightlight when living here, but that was years ago. I shrug the blankets off, and the corner falls to the floor, right above where Verna’s sleeping. I wonder what she thinks about at night, after turning off the TV that’s just shown her a new world wanting to spin on without her, more and more people on it waiting for the crooked-back, spasmodic hag to join her husband, for all the Vernas to pass on.

The door creaks open, and Saul sneaks in. Slowly, like a monolith, the monolith I love, he comes to me, caresses my forehead and lightly kisses it. I look up, wanting more so badly. He just smiles at me, caresses my hair, and leaves.

On the way back to Colorado the next day, I notice something in the Mini Cooper’s backseat, underneath that gaudy magi display Verna insisted Saul keep. It’s the picture of Saul in front of his cow with his dad. Maybe that’s not all she’ll will to Saul.

“Tsu?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, too. You don’t have to visit anymore, if you want. I just wanted you to meet her once, before—”

“It’s alright,” I say. The sun blazes across his frown. “I can come back. Learn a little more about your mom.”

Alit by the afternoon blaze, his eyes pay homage to his father. Those eyes. A room where both Verna and I stand.

__________

CHELSEA STATION
Brodie Gress is a graduate of the Creative Writing class Spring 2014 from the University of Evansville. He has published fiction and poetry in *Forces Literary Journal*, *Polaris Literary Magazine*, and the *Ohio River Review* and received Writer of the Year from the Department of Creative Writing upon graduating. He served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cambodia and is currently freelance writing in southern Indiana. He hopes to sooner or later enter an M.F.A. graduate program and then pursue a PhD to continue his writing studies. His work often focuses on the lives of gay men in rural Indiana.
Love Letter to My Huge Mistake
Warren J. Winkelman

In the 1940s, comforting, recognizable hate against the outsiders, the dirty dark-skinned Jews became a single unifying force for the self-professed racially pure, paranoid and stupid, and the total annihilation of a people more a personal mission of individuals than governmental edict. The scars lived on. Because the victims and the survivors knew, way before, a thousand years or more, that it was biologically plausible to hate darkness to the point of murder. But when faced with supreme powerlessness, knowledge was buried and hate internalized, as millions upon millions turned to ash. My grandmother knew, the lone survivor, but she could never let go, no matter how many years had passed. I tried to assuage her guilt, but hurt myself instead.

In the 1980s, the fear of men loving men reigned supreme. As so many fell ill, good people felt powerless, ignoring needs and wagging fingers instead, turning a blind eye. At the hospital, maintenance men and
cleaning ladies were allowed to refuse to service the rooms of the infected, because it was biologically plausible to catch gayness and gay disease by breathing gay air. Doctors pontificated like evangelical ministers that disease was deserved. Because of how they loved, they asked to be sick. Politicians spat, not daring to utter the words, as hundreds of thousands fell in the shadows.

Hate, even self-hate is not about difference; it’s how we rationalize difference.

I refused to be summed up as quilted panels, and fought for others, on the surface, like a showgirl. Deep down inside I thought myself lucky to have been weird and unattractive, privileged by sexual constraint. The angel of death passed over me, night after celibate night, and I breathed smug and hyper-intellectual sighs of relief. I believed I would never get AIDS, but hurt myself instead.

The Heavens laughed at me much shriller than the bullies from Hebrew School, and peril came down upon me in form of a horse-hung seraph. Maybe I could’ve recognized the possibility that he was wrong from the start; his strawberry-pink dick; his priggish debasement of all lesser men who dared cross his path empty-handed; perhaps I could have recognized how capable he was of hurting me, that I had become irrelevant. Maybe I did it to myself, welcoming his inevitable gift into my willing opening because suffering was what I deserved, with my own toxic cocktail of self-deceit and hubris.

It hurts, no matter how easy the newer medications are to take, or how well put together my outward appearance. But it hurts not because of the scowl of my father when he caught me staring at dicks, equating man sex with dirt, Biblical thumping, criminalization, minimization with jokes, terror, powerlessness, ignorance, indifference, and greed.

It hurts because I knew.

He never wanted to break bread with my family. He would be unreachable for hours and reappear in the evening, derisive of me as if I was crazy for being concerned. Acquaintances on the street, at the gym, strangers passing during Pride festivities, and in the coffee shops of the Boys’ Town would smile at him and steal momentary knowing glances right in front of me. Once or twice, a man’s hand would brush against his that he would quickly push away. He gave me a wart when we’d been together for two years. My doctor said he could’ve had the wart for a long time or he could’ve caught it in the last month. My best friend refused to speak to me when I brought him into my life. I saw the signs, over and over again, and I should have left, I wanted to leave, but I didn’t.

I ignored his flu-like symptoms, swollen glands, and evanescent skin rash. The large sized condoms in the bright golden wrapping sat on the table right next to my side of the bed like ancient shekels, and still I let his tainted essence inside my body. I knew enough to know it was biologically plausible, that other pink cocks could’ve fucked his ass, despite his insistence of being a pure top, probably bareback as I witnessed in the darkroom of the bathhouse, and the symptoms could’ve been an acute HIV infection, but my self-hate played Russian roulette with my body and lost.

He didn’t cause my disease. It was my arrogant, intentional blindness to what I thought he signified. The things I needed to leach from him. Perfection. Confidence. Manhood. The things I assumed I lacked.

No matter how much I want to believe it was an accident, and I hunger to rip my arteries open and drain the life force from my soul, I was less than a man.
I thought myself immune to brain suppression with drugs, to drowning my true reflection in crystal meth, to stopping breathing under the steaming waters of a hot tub, or to stopping my heart’s beating in a lonely single room at the rear of a bathhouse, but it could happen to me. There was nothing special about my brain. I am not some sort of chosen one. I fucked up my life just as anyone who’s internalized shit thrown at him over decades.

Ah, but I want so much to believe God does exist, perhaps as an amorphous net of linear streams, incalculable energies linking all essences of the universe as one. In an infinitesimal chance rare as the creation of life itself, God bore me his penultimate gift. He was aberrance, a disturbance in the force, what my overthinking mind told me I needed, not what my yearning heart begged me to want. But, even after all the change, the suffering, God opened my eyes just at the right instant to see love right in front of my face, before it was too late. And I drank a true love in, like sweet nectar.

Hate is an overthinking man’s construct. Hate is not the opposite of love. I refuse to live the precious remainder of my life thinking in hate.

He stayed with me when I needed him. He stayed when I first became sick, and remained until he thought the new me would be ready to live on his own, to survive and thrive, and to be able to find a true love: he didn’t dump me, he let me go. So, I forgive you, my murderer, because I was complicit, and because you’ve managed to create a purgatory for yourself way worse than anything I could’ve possibly concocted. I love you and forgive you, and will forever want your beautiful strawberry-pink monster cock, but don’t ever want to hear from or know or see you again. If that means never sojourning the hallways and darkrooms of the bathhouse or cruising the lustful streets of Boys’ Town, then so be it. True love and I will create our family, our shared language, and our unique worldview. I can never forget what you did to me, my murderer, but won’t poison myself any longer on your behalf.

Warren J. Winkelman is a writer, physician, patient, actor, singer, qualitative researcher, patient advocate, business coach, and ehealth and skin health innovation guru. He has written four novels, and has had three of his musical plays produced at the Montreal Fringe Festival and the Maison de la Culture, Montreal. His peer-reviewed non-fiction work has been published in several prestigious periodicals including the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology, British Medical Journal, and The New York Times. Follow him @WarrenWinkelman.
“Hold onto your codpiece—Shakespeare has never been hotter. Gil Cole’s lusty yet literate Fortune’s Bastard is a thrilling, imaginative, and above all romantic homage to the great bard.”
—Wayne Hoffman, author of Sweet Like Sugar and Hard

“Gil Cole’s adventure is epic, operatic, and Shakespearean. He writes with complete confidence as he rolls out a grand pageant of heroism and love on the fifteenth century Mediterranean. On every page I found fresh surprises that kept my pulse racing.”
—David Pratt, author of Bob the Book and My Movie

“From the torrid depths of the Manhattan gay club scene, Cardamone snatches the precious jewel of wisdom that Blake prophesied could only be found in excess. You’ll find no political correctness, smugness or marriage activism in Cardamone’s gay universe: this is the visceral underbelly of gay life, and his language makes it shimmer like paradise.”
—Trebor Healey, author of A Horse Named Sorrow and Faun

“Exhilarating! Pacific Rimming is an eloquent, gorgeous reminder of why, when it comes to the mystery of desire, we persist in doing all the abject, crazy, beautiful things we do.”
—Paul Russell, author of The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov
“Currier is a masterful essayist, adept at lingering over a meaningful detail or capturing a complex emotion in a simple phrase.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Everything in this collection resonates with authenticity. The sections where Currier writes about AIDS are particularly powerful and heartrending.
—David Swatling, Chelsea Station

“Achingly poignant and full of humor. Currier addresses topics familiar to gay men—sex and the search thereof, love and relationships, AIDS and loss—all rendered in vivid details that ring with the clarity of Truth.”
—Hank Trout, Art & Understanding
My Life, Starring James Franco
Jameson Currier

Dear Friends, Colleagues, Fellow Writers and Readers:

I apologize for having to do this by posting it on an old-fashioned blog, but for some reason I have been locked out of my Facebook account and I’ve learned that most of my emails now get dumped into spam folders, and since Twitter is limited by character strokes I wanted to be sure that you understand all the reasons behind the fabulous news I wanted to share with each and every one of you. I am so pleased to announce that my life story has been acquired by Full Life Pictures to be made into a feature film written, directed, and starring James Franco.

And to answer the first question that I am sure is popping out of your lips right now—No, I have not had a chance to meet the multi-talented heartthrob yet, but during the negotiations to acquire my life story there
were many questions and concerns that I was told was of particular interest to the man who once played James Dean, so, of course, I was flattered and star-struck, but I kept my wits about me at all such times, even during the most stressful moments of negotiations.

Unlike real life, movies are about collaborations and compromises, and since Mr. Franco has made so many wonderful, noteworthy movies, I knew that an artistic triumph would be certain if I entrusted many details of the depiction of my humble life story to this legend’s vision, such as his desire to alter my unpretentious beginnings on the descent of a dirt road atop a mountain in north Georgia to a more suitable gadget-filled room in a suburban hospital in Palo Alto, California. I had no problem with that change in the details of my birth, since the modern day successor to Orson Welles felt that it was important to modify the roles of my parents from those of an Eagle Scout troop leader and his pregnant wife on a vacation to that of an uber-intellectual couple in their sleek, ultra-modern home near a famous university now known for its high tech alumni. I also agreed to several other changes, such as relocating my formative years in the suburbs of Atlanta in the 1960s to those similar neighborhoods in northern California south of San Francisco during the 1980s. As an artist myself, I know how important it is for Mr. Franco to be able to use all of the resources he learned studying method acting to be able to method write and method direct the story of my all-so unexceptional life. If a more suitable location is required for his creative vision to rise up to the magnitude of his talents, then I knew it was the best choice for the movie version of my life. Why wouldn’t I entrust my life story to the man who has successfully filmed a literary work by Cormac McCarthy?

I am also pleased to say that I handled all of these negotiations myself directly with Full Life Pictures, without the aid of hiring an agent, mostly because of my horrific history with agents as a writer trying to sell a literary manuscript to a big name mainstream publisher (who are never interested in reading a work with a gay protagonist unless the writer has an M.F.A. degree or a celebrity parent). It was such a relief to accomplish this without having to wait to hear from an agent because he was on a vacation in Palm Springs, not that I have anything against Palm Springs, I don’t, I’ve been there several times with several boyfriends, some of them who even identified as gay even though they were married to a woman or advertised as gay-for-pay, but luckily I don’t believe that Palm Springs will be of focus to Mr. Franco’s retelling of my life story either, even though his latest feature film venture where he portrays a man wanting to become a gay porn actor and producer will be of continual interest to many residents in Palm Springs for years to come (no pun intended). But I also thought it important to thrust some of my confidence into Mr. Franco’s hands because of his ability to achieve several higher academic degrees from several different academic institutions all at once, all while making a film and teaching a class about it. If he can accomplish that and still not lose his looks, who am I to hold him back on the way he wants to see the narrative of my own life?

But as all of you dear friends, colleagues, writers and readers know, I can also be stubborn and defensive about obtaining and maintaining my own creative vision, and I felt that there were certain things about my life that could not be changed. So I also negotiated with successful aplomb the way this film auteur will handle the depiction of my immigration from the conservative South to the liberal North of the United States. Instead of telling my life story as a young man fresh out of college who left his traditionally religious family in Georgia for a hedonistic sex-fueled bachelor pad in Greenwich Village, which was overpriced even in the late 1970s, I have agreed to let this wunderkind shift the focus of the narrative to
open with the depiction of an unruly teen who rebelled against all authority by getting drunk, spray painting graffiti, and shoplifting cosmetic items which could be sold on an underground teen market, but who was ultimately able to find his talent as an introspective would-be painter at a private school (and we all know that standing pensive in front of a canvas with a paintbrush in hand is much more romantic and character revealing on film than an actor sitting on a park bench reading a book). This will allow Mr. Franco to fully develop the character who is to be me on the rainbow-wide Technicolor screen (even though I expect he will film his screenplay using the most up-to-date digital technology, though I would be grateful with even a shaky hand-held Super 8 depiction of the story of my life).

Full Life Pictures also expressed a desire to have the screenplay about my life avoid the devastating, early years of the AIDS epidemic which were an integral period of my writing career in Manhattan, even though they understood it could be both a dramatic and heartfelt depiction of a challenging period in anyone’s life. The co-producers, who spoke to me on behalf of Mr. Franco, had concerns that such events would overshadow other key elements of my life that they felt were so important to depict in a larger than life fashion, and suggested instead that Mr. Franco might want to shift these coming-into-my-own years of my life story to Hollywood, where the actor Mr. Franco could depict me as a would-be writer trying to learn his craft and along the way meet a lot of hip, funny guys who also wanted to be writers, but who were, in real life, really would-be stand-up comics or handsome dudes wanting to become more famous actors, and which would allow Mr. Franco the opportunity to cast many of his good pals in these supporting roles, such as Seth Rogen and Zac Efron and Ryan Gosling. Of course I had no problem negotiating this change either, because I inserted a clause in our contract which allowed me to ask for visitation rights to the movie set on the days that Zac Efron or Ryan Gosling might be filming their scenes. And as a bonus perk, I also successfully negotiated a clause that would compel Seth Rogen to answer any question I had about filming The Guilt Trip with Barbra Streisand.

But there was also a considerable discussion about how gay these writer pals would be portrayed in the script of the movie version of my life, because all of my writer pals are gay men or lesbians and I felt it was important to be open and out and honest about one’s sexual identity during the depiction of any moment of a character’s life and especially in a movie in which I am to be the central character as depicted in the physique known as James Franco. The team at Full Life Pictures assured me that Mr. Franco would be respectful of any character’s sexual identity, even if it was presented as innuendo, gossip or scandal, and I successfully negotiated a clause that would allow the man who deconstructed, rewrote, and filmed a William Faulkner storyline not once, but twice, to add any sexually active, sexually fluid or sexually transitional character he felt was important to be included in the narrative of my life story.

That, of course, led to my largest concern about a movie version of my life: how all of my dates, tricks, boyfriends, lovers, sex partners, sex buddies, casual hookups, and pick-ups would be presented, especially in the dinosaur ages before Grindr and Scruff and Craigslist and Rentboy.com? And as someone who felt like he slept with several generations of the entire male population who either lived in or visited the northeastern corner of the United States, I knew that it was important not to revel in the pleasure of this but to use it to depict the challenges of a gay man trying to find a long term relationship when there are so many options available to him and every option he chooses turns out to be the wrong one because he has a penchant for going with the most attractive man with the worst possible ethics or settling for the nearest neighbor with the biggest dick. Full Life Pictures reiterated that they would be fully
behind the story of a gay man’s inability to find love even if he were the same one as the chiseled face behind the expensive eyewear sold by Gucci.

So I cannot tell you how excited I am that I will become a member of a pantheon that includes Allen Ginsburg, Tristan, Darl Bundren, Benjy Compson, the Wizard of Oz, Milton Katselas, Hart Crane, Harvey Milk’s boyfriend, Aron Ralston, Harry Osborn, James Dean, and, of course, James Franco as Himself.

And I am proud to say that I did this all without consulting a lawyer or any other professional advisor with bleached teeth who charges a four-figure hourly rate. And at the last minute before signatures were requested on the final revised document that was submitted to me with a clause that allowed for financial rewards at a later date, I was able to get an additional perk added as being the inspiration behind the story of the man behind the movie of my life that would be brought to the big screen by a man who once hosted the Oscars: Full Life Pictures agreed to my request for a private, personal trainer/nutritionist/stylist to assist me in all matters necessary to ensure my participation at any future red carpet event!

All best, your dearest friend,

Jimmy

__________

Jameson Currier is the author of seven novels, four collections of short stories, and a memoir of intimate writings which was a finalist for a literary award he did not win. He is the founder and publisher of Chelsea Station Editions, an independent press devoted to gay literature.
Desire, Lust, Passion Sex

stories by
Jameson Currier

“Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex surpasses any expectations ten-fold. The characters speak with wisdom and understanding. Jameson Currier gives us people who are starving for attention and have an insatiable appetite for human contact. Readers will not only sympathize with his creations, but will imagine themselves there as well, among the wreckage.”

“Currier’s stories are all about sex and love and how they occasionally overlap; he writes eloquently and elegantly about the continuum of gay male sexuality, from the tickle of desire to the pull of lust to the power of passion to the satisfaction—though not always—of sex.”
—Richard Labonté, Books to Watch Out For

“Linking wit, heady sex, longing, and the agony of a hollow love life, Currier beautifully romanticizes the hope and the hunt for love, the rarest flower. At times this journey to find Mr. Right is agonizing, sometimes sad, and sometimes erotically titillating. But every scene is written with such beauty and poetic grace, it becomes an easy voyage to embrace, even though at times all the misfires and near-misses cut like a knife.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter

“What Comes Around

a novel by
Jameson Currier

978-1-937627-05-8
$16
Also available in digital editions

www.chelseastationeditions.com
Crunching acorns underfoot, the high school boy
On summer Saturdays walked to the private
Rice Institute library which was open to the public
Though non-students could not check books out,

Stepping toward it down an avenue of live oak trees
Where boat-tailed grackles screaked and plumed.
He liked the great spaciousness of its several floors,
How air-conditioning solved Houston's humidity

For hours. Its quietness. Back then,
Reference librarians kept their voices down. And
The boy knew where in one reading room he wished
To sit: next to The Collected Works Of W. H. Hudson.

Sixty-three years later, though the leather chair is no longer
Eggplant-purple but is now teal green, boxy yet welcoming,
The man the boy became niches within arm's reach
Of those squads of volumes in the remembered tall bookshelf.

Shifting weight, the seat cushion altering with him,
He settles, looking up at youth from time to time,
With a Hudson outspread in his lap, musing how I would like
To write one more poem, this time a poem avoiding the use
Of personal pronouns. Without “I” or “you” or “we”
I would picture simply and well the excellence
Of Dent and Sons’ 1922 twenty-four volumes,
Books of just-the-right size, with gray-green covers
Opening onto pages whose slight fragrance savors of England
For those who have sniffed many books, the prose
Detailing nature rambles, rare birds, quiet village scenes,
Most of the volumes still nearly pristine, so few takers-down
Having ventured beyond Green Mansions or The Purple Land
Or Far Away And Long Ago!

How relieved and delighted he is to have found on this visit
The seat in the nook by the tall bookshelf
Unoccupied after all those years he has been gone away
Though it is no longer eggplant-purple but is teal green!

—Jonathan Bracker

CHELSEA STATION
“Jameson Currier’s fifth novel, The Forever Marathon, is a compelling, brutally honest examination of two days in the life of a long term relationship between two men, who seem to have stayed together more out of habit than their desire for each other.”
—Christopher Verleger, Edge

What would you do if you realized you’d spent half your life with the same man and you weren’t sure if you loved him any longer? Enter Adam and Jesse, both 49. I found myself trying to predict the outcome throughout the book. The ending is honest and true to the characters, something that is not always the case in happily ever-after land.”
—Scott A. Drake, Philadelphia Gay News

“Currier has accomplished something truly remarkable: He has presented two highly unlikeable, self-absorbed, clichéd characters, and woven them into an interesting story that keeps the reader turning pages. This is a funny, exasperating, touching read.”
—Alan Chin, Examiner.com

“The opposite of love is not hate but rather indifference. Thanks to the talent of Jameson Currier, readers are never at risk for feeling indifferent to the couple at the heart of his The Forever Marathon. Adoration mingled with aversion at this pair’s antics ensures every page will be read with enthusiasm. We should all be grateful that Currier has not shied away from presenting an honest depiction of gay men in their late forties.”
—Steve Berman, editor of the Best Gay Stories annual series

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
Chelsea Station is a new magazine devoted to gay writing. We accept for consideration original and unpublished fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, memoir, humor, narrative travelogue, interviews, and reviews (books, theater, television, and film) relating to gay literature and gay men.

Please query about reprints or promotional excerpts.

Submissions and queries should be sent to info@chelseastationeditions.com.

Manuscripts should be emailed as Word attachments. Please include your name, address, and e-mail contact information on the first page of your document. Please also include a brief bio of 100 words. Please query before sending any artwork.

Please do not send more than one prose work or more than four poems for consideration. Please let us know if you are making simultaneous submissions of your work to other journals.

Due to the volume of submissions, we are unable to respond with rejection notices. If you do not hear from us within three months of your submission, we are unable to use your submission, though you are always able to submit additional material for us to consider.

We also welcome recommendations for material and writers for consideration.

We currently do not offer monetary payment to contributors.

If you are interested in guest editing an issue of Chelsea Station magazine, please email us at info@chelseastationeditions.com to request the guidelines for guest editing.