CHELSEA STATION

EDITED BY JAMESON CURRIER
MAY 2014
The Third Buddha
a novel by
Jameson Currier

“Complex.”
Library Journal

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Next magazine

“Extraordinary.”
Lambda Literary

“Marvelous.”
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Amateur night—that’s what they called it back in college, back when he was learning to drink. New Year’s Eve—the night of resolutions and fresh beginnings. Now, though, in the last year of his fifties, there would be far less drinking, tepid interest in resolutions, and no chance whatever that he would be awake for the ritual flipping of the calendar.

Marson Miles, AIA, an architect at the height of his modestly esteemed career, stood in his dressing room, his sanctuary, in the house he had designed but hated. Were it not for his wife, their home would reflect the clean, disciplined aesthetic that had inspired his design of the local performing-arts complex. Questman Center had wowed critics and public alike at its dedication the prior spring and had been featured as a cover story in the autumn issue of ArchitecAmerica, the first such coup to be scored during the thirty-year practice of Miles & Norris LLP.

“Marson?”
“Yes, Precious?” He turned from the framed magazine cover, which was not permitted to be displayed in the public areas of the house, and offered a feeble smile to his wife, who had banished the hard-won trophy to his closet.

“Zip me,” she said with a clumsy pirouette, showing him her back, from which sagged the glittery flaps of a too-tight cocktail dress.

“Yes, Precious.” He called her Precious; friends called her Prue; her parents had called her Prucilla. He zipped her, lamenting her choice of couture, which might have looked comely on a woman half her age—a woman old enough to be their daughter. But there were no children. They had tried, at first, but the lack of offspring had been met with little more than a mutual shrug, so they gave up. And in time, without rancor, without even much discussion, they had fallen into their arrangement of separate beds—in separate bedrooms.

His suite was a tranquil island of minimalism, with spare, contemporary furnishings and a subdued, neutral palette, while her suite wallowed in a florid outpouring of the posh Tudor aesthetic that enshrouded the mini-mansion she had badgered him into building for her. One day during the construction phase, in the offices of Miles & Norris, he had glanced over the floor plans, shaking his head. “It’s a Disney monstrosity, replete with turrets,” he said to Ted Norris, who was not only Marson’s business partner, but also Prucilla’s brother. “All that’s missing is a drawbridge and a moat.”

Tonight in Marson’s closet, Prucilla eyed her husband askance. “You’re wearing that?”

“I think so, yes.” For their New Year’s Eve dinner with Ted and Peg Norris, Marson had dressed in classic, understated good taste—black cashmere blazer, charcoal flannel slacks, white spread-collar shirt, and the tie. Of the hundreds of neckties arranged by color and pattern, hung from carousel hooks on both sides of a full-length mirror, his trusty old Armani provided the finishing touch for most special occasions. Silvery gray damask, with a subtle pattern of jaunty geometrics, it was both dressy and sporty, coordinating with almost anything. He couldn’t recall exactly when he had bought it, at least twenty years ago, but it had cost some two hundred dollars, even then. A shameless extravagance, to be sure—but oh, the silk, the hand, the way it tied—this is what they meant when they spoke of investment dressing.

She watched with a snarky frown as he stood before the mirror, looping and sliding the sinuous tails of silk, which began to form the distinctive V-shaped Windsor knot beneath his throat. She said, “If you insist on wearing that old thing, can’t you at least have it cleaned?”

“It’s clean, Precious. I take good care of my things. Besides, you can’t dry-clean a necktie.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

He glanced over his shoulder at her. “Have you ever tried it?”

“Well, no.”

“I have.” He returned his attention to the mirror, explaining, “They come back clean, but the body or the sizing or whatever—it’s shot. They never tie right again. No, the only thing to do with a soiled necktie is to throw it out.” Marson gave a final tug, pinched the knot with a perfect dimple, and watched as the tip of the Armani dropped precisely over his belt buckle. He spun on his heel to face her and raised both palms, intoning, “Tuh-dah!”
She mimicked his gesture, then scowled as she tossed her palms toward him. “Don’t forget,” she said, marching out of the closet and into the hall, “we’re five tonight.”

“Don’t remind me.” He followed. “I’m not sure what to think of your nephew’s arrival.”

She halted under a velvet-swagged iron chandelier and turned. “You hired him.”

“The job offer was your brother’s idea. Things are picking up, and we could use the help, so I went along with it.”

“See? Everything’s hunky-dory.” Her tone turned menacing: “So what’s the problem?”

He shrugged. “It’s just that I hardly know Brody. How old was he—like fourteen?” The Brody in question was the son of Inez Norris, older sister of both Marson’s wife, née Prucilla Norris, and Marson’s business partner, Ted Norris. Something of a black sheep, Inez had followed her hippie leanings to California and, even now, remained estranged from the family, although she had returned for Marson and Prucilla’s wedding thirty-five years ago, single and pregnant—with Brody. Marson’s only other, postnatal, sighting of Brody had been fourteen years later, when Ted married Peg.

Recalling this, Marson realized that Ted’s wedding, his second, had been the occasion for which Marson had bought his pet tie, the Armani. He had stood as best man. And at the reception, he’d met Brody.

“He was fourteen,” Marson said to Prucilla, astonished by the passage of time. “And now he’s an architect . . . and he’s coming to work for me . . . and we’ve barely met.”

She leaned close, speaking low. “You’ll meet him tonight. Think of it as a family reunion.” Her breath smelled of cucumber as she fingered his tie. “Happy New Year, Marson.”

A drop of something hot and acidic slid to the pit of his stomach.

* * *

A star-pierced sky arched over the frigid night. There’d been a dusting of snow for Christmas, but it was gone now, and the dry, thin air felt clean and invigorating to Marson as he crossed the restaurant parking lot with Prucilla. He hadn’t bothered with a topcoat; she huddled into a black mink cape while pecking across the asphalt, sputtering puffs of steam, churning her arms like the pistons of an old locomotive.

As they entered the restaurant lobby on the stroke of eight (Marson was nothing if not punctual), diners from the early-bird seating doddered out, while those who would be reveling at midnight were still at home dressing, drinking, or both. The hostess looked up from her computer and stepped over to greet them. “Don’t you look special tonight. Happy New Year.”

“Thank you, Connie,” said Prucilla, pivoting her shoulders so Connie could remove the fur.

“Same to you, Connie,” said Marson. “Have the Norrises arrived?”

“About two minutes ago.” Connie draped the mink over one arm; with the other, she gestured toward the far end of the dining room. “You’ve got the prime booth tonight, number twenty-two. You folks enjoy.” And with a bob of her head, she hustled the fur away.

Marson took Prucilla’s arm to guide her past the bar and through the crowded room, but she pulled it back. Though they had often dined here and always liked it, New Year’s could be an ordeal. Booked to capacity, the room was not only noisier than usual, but decorated with a cloud
of gold and silver balloons that floated about the ceiling, trailing Mylar streamers that swayed at eye level. And there would be a special menu—overblown, overpriced.

Prucilla gave a demure wave as they plodded through the crowd. From the side of her mouth, she told Marson, “I don’t know what Ted sees in Peg. Talk about mousy.”

“No, now—she always speaks kindly of you,” he lied.

Booth twenty-two was horseshoe-shaped, with a round table, surveying the entire room from the far corner, backed by mirrored walls. The combined effect of the mirrors and the fluttering Mylar made Marson feel unsure on his feet—and he hadn’t had a drink yet. Brody had not arrived, but Ted and Peg were seated together at the back of the horseshoe, watching and smiling. As their friends drew near, they began to inch toward the ends of the booth, sliding and squeaking on the leatherette, preparing to stand.

With a laugh, Marson waved them down. “Stay put—it’s ‘just us.’” Greeted with cheery handshakes and air-kisses, the new arrivals settled in at the ends of the horseshoe, Marson next to Ted, with Prucilla next to Peg. It was a tight fit. Marson wondered if Brody was not joining them after all—or if he was, where he would sit.

Prucilla was telling Peg, “Love your little frock . . .”

Marson asked Ted, “Did, uh, Brody’s flight get in okay?”

Ted nodded. “Last night. He did some exploring today. He’ll need a place to live—hell, he’s starting a whole new life. He’ll be here soon.” Ted flashed Marson a quiet smile that transcended four decades. Their wives dished the dirt.

A round of drinks arrived. They had known each other so long, Ted had already placed the order: bourbon for himself, a dry gin martini for Marson, chardonnay for Peg, and a champagne cocktail for Prucilla. They were in the middle of a generic toast, something about “us” and “the future” and “new beginnings,” when Marson’s eye drifted to the mirror behind Ted, in which he saw Connie approaching with a chair hoisted overhead, leading someone to the table. Before Marson could turn and stand to greet their guest, Connie had planted the chair in the opening of the horseshoe and—bang—there sat Brody.

Amid the clatter of arranging a new place setting and ordering the fifth drink, amid the welcomes and the musings about the passing of years, Marson marveled at the transformation of the gangly fourteen-year-old he had met so long ago. Now in his mid-thirties, Brody Norris had flowered into an intelligent and affable young man who also happened to be an architect of considerable promise—and jaw-droppingly handsome. Peg’s jaw did in fact drop as she hung on his every word, while Prucilla listened with a look of forced enthusiasm, as if miffed that this had sprung from the loins of her sister non grata.

As for Marson, his singular reaction to Brody’s beauty—which was indeed the right word—was the conspicuous resemblance to Ted Norris in his earlier years. That tousled shock of sandy-blond hair . . . the crooked grin . . . those arresting green eyes. With Brody to the right and Ted to the left, Marson glanced back and forth, seeing two men, nephew and uncle, who looked more like twin brothers at different ages. Yes, there were some knockout genes in the Norris family. To Prucilla’s misfortune, though, their transmission had been restricted to the Y chromosomes.

Brody wagged his hands in a halting gesture. “Before we say another word”—the chit-chat subsided—“I just need to tell Marson that I could not have been more impressed with Questman
Center. Sure, I’d seen the piece in *Architect America*, but the photos didn’t begin to capture what I saw this afternoon. I took the tour—"

Marson interrupted, “Thanks, Brody, but—"

“I took the tour,” Brody continued, resting his fingertips on the sleeve of Marson’s blazer, “and I couldn’t help thinking, My God, this is right up there with the best of Mies, Corbu, Neutra—you name it. Sure, the term has gone threadbare, but Questman truly is *iconic*.”


Marson reminded his partner, “Your name’s on it, too. We’re a team.”

Ted told his nephew, “Don’t listen to him. Marson’s the designer. I mind the business and the engineering.”

Marson laughed. “I need somebody to make sure the roof stays up.”

Brody touched Marson’s arm again. “Well, I was totally blown away, and so were the docents this afternoon when I told them I was coming to work for you.”

“Frog legs!” said Prucilla.

All heads turned to her.

She waved the evening’s menu card. “It’s a prix fixe, and the appetizer is frog legs.”

“Ish,” said Peg. Prucilla was right—Peg was mousy. She spoke little, so when she did, people took note.

“Well, I think that sounds rather *festive*,” said Ted, nudging his wife.

“I’ve never had them,” said Marson, “but it’s New Year’s, and there’s a first time for everything.”

By the time the appetizer arrived, the table was on its second round of drinks, and any squeamishness Marson might have felt about the frogs was quelled by the gin.

“Tastes like chicken,” said Peg.

“They say the same thing about rattlesnake,” said Prucilla, chowing down.

Ted brought the focus back to Brody: “So . . . when did things fall apart with Lloyd?”

Brody set a bone on the plate and dabbed his lips with a napkin. “It started a year ago. I knew something was up when he needed to be traveling over Christmas. I mean, his kids are *my* age, and they’d always come to California, but last year—supposedly—he needed to visit *them*. Turns out he went to Vegas, to meet this guy we’d done a beach house for in Malibu. Five years younger than me, lots of bucks—catnip for Lloyd. It took six months to get everything out in the open, then another six to get it settled. But it’s over.”

Marson asked quietly, “You made out all right?”

Brody nodded. “We were married in California. Now we’re divorced. And the firm is closed. Fifty-fifty.”

“That’s tough,” said Marson, “but I’m glad you had those protections in place.”

Brody smiled. “And I’m glad I landed here.”
"How nice," said Prucilla, licking her fingers. "Everybody’s glad and happy.” The sauce was Asian, sweet, and sticky.

Ted said, “Amazing, isn’t it, how times have changed? The whole ‘gay issue’ is so mainstream now.”

“How modern,” said Prucilla. “Everybody’s so open and evolved.”

Ted turned to Marson. “Remember, back in college? The topic was sort of . . . radical.”

Marson’s brows arched. “Was it ever.”

With a quizzical look, Brody asked, “You guys went to college together?”

“Sure,” said Ted. “Architecture school—that’s how we met.”

Marson added, “We were roommates.”

The table went silent for a moment.

Prucilla cleared her throat, then leaned to tell Peg in a stage whisper, “It makes one wonder if there might have been some antics in the dorm.”

Peg’s eyes bugged.

Brody laughed. “Nonsense, Aunt Prue. I have special powers—that gaydar thing? And I can tell you with absolute certainty that Uncle Ted is utterly, incorrigibly heterosexual.”

Ted lifted his hands in surrender. “Guilty as charged.”

“I’ll tell the world,” said Peg, nuzzling him.

And at that moment, under the table, a table that squeezed five people into the space for four, Brody’s knee drifted a microscopic distance toward Marson’s, and as the woolen fibers of their slacks approached each other in the dry air of a January’s eve, a spark—an actual spark of static electricity—leapt from one leg to the other with a sharp, audible snap that shot through Marson’s thigh and made him gasp.

“Gosh, sorry,” said Brody, moving his knee. Then he eased it back again, letting it rest against Marson’s.

Breathless, Marson dared not let his eyes meet anyone else’s. Staring down at the plate of stripped-clean frog bones—long, thin, and delicate, they didn’t resemble chicken at all—he felt suddenly nauseated by the thought of having eaten this swamp thing, and he saw the array of bones circling the table, circling the entire dining room, and he wondered what they did with the rest of the frogs, and he envisioned a dumpster behind the restaurant brimming with these bloated, legless swamp things, and he wasn’t feeling well at all, and he regretted that second martini, and he was very concerned about that egg-and-spinach thing for lunch, and—

“Marson!” said Prucilla, aghast.

“Precious?”

“You’re white as a sheet. What’s wrong with you?” Her tone was more scolding than concerned.

Brody touched Marson’s hand and looked into his eyes. “Are you okay?”
“Um”—Marson blotted his forehead, then his lips, and set the napkin on the banquette—“sorry. I just need a bit of air. Excuse me, please.”

Brody got up and moved his chair aside.

Marson edged out of the booth, composed himself, and mustered a nonchalant air as he made his way across the dining room toward the lobby. Passing by Connie, he explained, “Forgot something in the car,” and went out the front door.

In the parking lot, he found a quiet corner, leaned over a bush to brace one palm against the wall, and took a long, deep breath of the night air. For a moment he thought the nausea might pass. But he was wrong. And dangling beneath him in the cold breeze, directly in the path of the gushing, greasy frog bile, was his favorite Armani necktie.

*     *     *

New Year’s morning, the house was quiet, save for the lullaby rumble of the furnace.

Marson awoke with a clear head and a calm stomach—the silver lining to his purge the prior night. Having had no appetite for dinner, he was now hungry, so he decided to spiff up for a nice brunch somewhere. He showered and shaved, made a few phone calls, and dressed for the day in velvety corduroys, a comfy lambswool V-neck, and smart Italian loafers.

With the folded, sullied necktie in hand, he went down to the kitchen. Its walls had the texture of rough-hewn stone (faux, of course), like a dungeon from some cheesy production of The Pit and the Pendulum. But this morning the room seemed bright to him, bright with the prospect of change.

Prucilla sat with a cup of coffee in a shaft of sunlight at the breakfast table, reading a newspaper, nibbling toast. She wore a tentlike flannel housecoat and a spongy pink turban. Facing the window, she made no acknowledgment that Marson had entered the room, despite the distinct clack of his loafers on the limestone floor.

He stepped to the sink, opened the door to the trash bin, and tossed in the Armani, where it settled among the coffee grounds. Closing the door, he asked, “Why did you marry me?”

Her head made the slightest turn in his direction. Her lips sputtered with a chortle that sent toast crumbs darting through the beam of sunlight. Then her gaze returned to the paper.

He moved to the table and sat across from her. His voice was soft but sure: “It was a serious question. It deserves an answer.”

She set down the paper, sipped her coffee, and paused in thought, eyes adrift. “What’s the stock answer—‘love’? Let’s just say I married you for the same reasons you married me.”

“I doubt that,” he told her. “You see, I married you because I was deeply—and impossibly—in love with your brother.”

For the first time that morning, she looked at him.

He continued, “I married you to keep Ted in my life. The business came later.”

Her features pinched, then relaxed. “Feel better? Get it off your chest?”

“Prucilla”—he never called her that—“I want out.”

She laughed. “Want out? I’ll suck you dry and spit you out.”
He looked about, whirled his hands. “It’s all just . . . stuff. You can have it.”

“Then it’s true what they say: there’s no fool like an old fool.”

“Maybe.” He knew it was an odd moment to be smiling. Patting a pocket for his keys, he said, “I need to be going.”

“Where?”

“Brunch. At the club.”

“How dreary. Why would you go to New Year’s brunch solo?”

He paused. “I’m not.”

And beneath the table, Marson relived the sense memory of Brody’s knee touching his.

And he felt the spark.

Michael Craft is the author of more than a dozen published novels and two produced plays. Three of his “Mark Manning” mystery novels have been honored as national finalists for Lambda Literary Awards. He holds an MFA in creative writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles, and lives in Rancho Mirage, California. Visit his website at www.michaelcraft.com.
“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
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 isn’t 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
Joy Exhaustible
A Conversation between
Bryan Borland and Seth Pennington

Chelsea Station asked their friends Bryan Borland and Seth Pennington at Sibling Rivalry Press to talk about the inspiration for Joy Exhaustible, the remarkable Issue 14 of the successful literary journal Assaracus, which looks at the work, through poetry, prose, and memoir, of both contemporary and history-making gay publishers and editors. Joy Exhaustible features work by James Mitchell, John Lauritsen, Donald Weise, William Johnson, Michael Hathaway, Felice Picano, Steve Berman, Ian Young, Charlie Bondhus, Ron Mohring, Kirby Congdon, Charles Flowers, Perry Brass, John Stahle, Jameson Currier, Lawrence Schimel, a cover poem by Paul Mariah, as well as a collaborative poem by editors Borland and Pennington.
Seth Pennington: *Joy Exhaustible* is an anthology of queer publishers’ and editors’ written work, both old and new. Bryan, what gave this idea cause?

Bryan Borland: I have too many ideas for my own good, and since you married me, probably for your own good, too. Thankfully, you help me figure out which ones will fly and which ones will likely crash and burn, but sometimes projects are so worthy even a burning might end up beautiful. Honestly, though, I don’t think we were ever worried about this project falling short. *Joy Exhaustible* came about because you and I are involved in a constant struggle between our roles as publishers of Sibling Rivalry Press and our roles as poets. Many writers we respect also juggle or have juggled those same roles. I put out a call to several of them. I explained the concept and invited them to send me anything at all—poetry, fiction, memoir. The only restriction was that the contribution had to make the publisher/editor feel like a writer. I told them: Send us what you love writing. Instantly there was interest. Felice Picano sent his recollection of visiting his own papers at Yale, along with some previously unpublished poems. Don Weise sent a piece about interviewing Gore Vidal, a man he credits with giving him his first break in the publishing industry. Ron Mohring sent a series of poems he built from lines of Seven Kitchens’ chapbooks he’s published. William Johnson sent an essay on Camp—with a capital C. Steve Berman sent speculative fiction. Kirby Congdon, who I think may outlive all of us, sent new poems and an interview. And that’s just a sample of what’s included. It’s really a diverse collection of work, but it’s my hope that through what the publisher/editor chose to send, our audience will get a glimpse of the men behind their respective presses or projects. The only thing working against us was time, especially because we decided to release the anthology simultaneously as *Assaracus* 14—and to get a finished product ready to sell by the Rainbow Book Fair in late March. That gave us two months to put *Joy Exhaustible* together. I’m happy to say we met our deadline, and I’m very proud of the result. The audience at the Rainbow Book Fair was excited about it, and the copies we had sold out quickly. We’ve received some really positive feedback, which is gratifying, and there have already been calls for a second installment featuring the work of women publishers (which I’ll mention to Valerie Wetlaufer, editor of the sister journal to *Assaracus*, *Adrienne*). I’ll admit to another reason the project came about. I wanted our names alongside these publishers’ and editors’ names. These are people we admire. Many of them, through their early, groundbreaking work, made it possible for SRP to exist.

Pennington: Yes, and that’s why we felt this project was so important. Our enthusiasm grew as we assembled the contents. We already respected Perry Brass, for example, but to learn how he created Belhue Press from the ground up, or to learn how Jim Currier (who graciously provided the space for this conversation) worked—really worked—his way into publishing, or to read the poetry of Charles Flowers, publisher of*BLOOM*, who says he hardly ever sends out his own writing; these things were wildly pleasurable. I also want to mention that *Joy Exhaustible* was dedicated to a pair of very important men in contributor Ian Young’s life, Jamie Perry and Wulf Higgins. The dedication was symbolic. Dedicated the anthology to the “men behind the men” is an act of humility and respect, I think, especially for the work that goes into loving and supporting a publisher. In a lot of ways, the job can be another marriage.

Borland: Absolutely. When Wulf learned of the dedication, he was appreciative, but a little baffled. I’m not sure he understands how much of a role he’s had in gay literary history. Just thumb through *Joy Exhaustible*, and you’ll see his name mentioned multiple times by multiple authors. He’s included in Ian’s essays, of course, but also in John Lauritsen’s writing, and even
in our own collaborative poem. I thought that it was fitting that we acknowledge the important partners to Ian’s groundbreaking work, but in doing so, we’re also acknowledging all those partners who have supported us. All the husbands, the boyfriends, the friends. Writing can be an isolating undertaking, but publishing as a profession, particularly as a small press, can be even more isolating. The responsibility you carry for your authors, for their voices and for their visions, is weighty. Add to that weight the responsibility of publishing for a cause like gay rights (or simply gay visibility), and it intensifies.

Pennington: You mentioned the juggling act between publishing and writing. We can only speak of our own experiences, but it’s safe to say that publishing is demanding. You and I both have full-time jobs in addition to Sibling Rivalry Press. It’s hard to make time to write between it all and stay motivated as poets, but we are both writing and pushing each other to be better. We’ve studied the men in this anthology, which you introduced me to. And we’ve studied poets like Rich, Merwin, and Hughes, which I brought into your life. Between editing the next Assaracus or full-length, we send each other drafts throughout the day for feedback. Having fallen in love with your poetry before I fell in love with you, I think your portion of the collaborative poem we included is indicative of growth in your style, and I’m excited for people to get to witness your growth as a poet. I think that’s important, for you to continue to develop as a writer, because Sibling Rivalry Press turns four this year. As a poet, you are two books in now and working on a third. You have grown as an editor since the Ganymede tribute issue, Ganymede Unfinished, where you published everything just as you received it. Now, we get as many eyes on a project as possible to ensure it’s strong. I’ve seen this change in your poetry, too, not only in structure, but content as well.

Borland: Early on, I don’t think I knew enough as a writer to be an editor. I certainly wasn’t confident in my editing skills, but I think, especially in the last year, as my writing has evolved and as I’ve read more, and as we’ve discussed more, my editing skills have improved. I’ve developed, I guess you could say, an opinion. I think that’s a necessary and essential thing for a publisher to have.

Pennington: There was a time at SRP when you didn’t have an opinion?

Borland: Well, no. I’ve always had an opinion, but in the early days, I was a yes man. I was suddenly surrounded by people I was reading as a fan, and they were looking to me as a publisher, and how could I say no to any of them? And with the rare exception, most of those yeses ended up rewarding SRP in spades, fortunately. But rather than my decisions at that time being all instinct, I think they were a little bit of instinct and a whole lot of luck. A right place, right time sort of thing. Now I have to say no. We have to say no. And I think I’m more informed now as to what we should green light and what we shouldn’t. I’m terrible at saying no, but I’m learning. As for my writing, I piggybacked off your senior year of college, Seth, where you were lucky enough to be able to study under poet Nickole Brown. I think she pushed that year’s students, you included, as hard as any graduate students in any MFA program in the country are pushed. Witnessing your study was transformative for me because I came to poetry through another route, a route that had been harmed, I think, by academia. The poetry had nearly been schooled out of me. But witnessing poetry through Nickole’s education of you and your classmates made me fall in love with it again, and it’s true that I didn’t come to Hughes, or
Merwin, or Rich, until I came to you. The title of our collaborative poem is “The Desire to Show You To Everyone I Love,” which is a line from Rich’s masterpiece, “Twenty-one Love Poems.” Throughout the poem we mention Sexton, Hughes’ _Crow_, poems by Merwin, and Rich herself. But we also end with the lines, “Fathers or no we have / what we need: / a thousand poets growing / us into men,” which is a nod to the entire roster of writers we included in _Joy Exhaustible_. As the poem took shape, we wanted it to represent so many who, combined, influenced and continue to influence us as both poets and publishers. The poem, and the anthology as a whole, is our gratitude.

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Bryan Borland and Seth Pennington are the publishers of Sibling Rivalry Press and the editors of _Assaracus: A Journal of Gay Poetry_. _Joy Exhaustible: Assaracus Presents The Publishers_ is available from [www.siblingrivalrypress.com](http://www.siblingrivalrypress.com).
Two years after the events of *The Affair of the Porcelain Dog*, Ira Adler has settled into his new, crime-free life as personal secretary to Oscar Wilde. Adler has just completed transcribing Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* when the author takes off for Europe leaving him unpaid. At the same time, the youth shelter Adler sits on the board of is threatened with eviction. Ira turns to his former lover and mentor, crime lord Cain Goddard, for a loan to help the shelter. But of course the loan comes with strings attached that threaten to pull Ira back into the life he’s left behind.

Jess Faraday’s second Ira Adler book, unlike the first, is more about character growth than it is any individual mystery. In the course of solving three smaller, and only slightly-related, mysteries, Ira continues on the path to become his own man that was so much a part of *Porcelain Dog*, and as with the first book, he is a different man at the end than he was at the beginning. This is what makes Faraday’s Adler books stand out a bit from other period mystery series: the characters grow and change. Adler is not the only one who faces a return of/to his past self: supporting cast members Goddard and Doctor Timothy Lazarus also must deal very frankly with who they have become versus who they were. Each character’s struggle, as seen through the eyes of Adler, is as intriguing as Adler’s own.

The two new supporting characters introduced at the start of the novel provide the reader with interesting counterpoints to Ira. Marcus, a young man just out of prison who reminds Ira entirely too much of when he was turning tricks on the street to survive, creates extra drama in Ira’s home life. Jack Flip, a boy caught stealing from a street market and brought to the youth shelter by a kindly officer, reminds Ira of himself at an even younger age: newly abandoned on the street and exhibiting a sarcastic defensive front to keep the world from seeing too deep.

Jack Flip’s background is one of the three mysteries Ira finds himself attempting to solve throughout the book: where did the boy come from, why won’t he go home if there’s a home to go to, and what is behind his reticence to bathe with the other boys at the shelter? While it is not intended to be the main mystery of the novel, Ira’s investigation of Flip’s history, his concern for the boy’s safety and future, is the most interesting part of the book.

At the same time he’s protecting and investigating young Jack Flip, Ira is also trying to figure out who is behind the purchase of Turnbull House, the building that houses the youth shelter. This minor mystery leads Ira back into the employ (and bed) of Cain Goddard, which brings forth what is supposed to be the major mystery: why do the men Ira delivers Goddard’s messages to
turn up dead several hours later? What new criminal scheme has Goddard gotten involved in, and has Ira inadvertently involved Turnbull House in it? The investigation of this mystery brings the final missing cast member from the first book into play: erstwhile detective Andrew St. Andrews, the Holmes to Goddard’s Moriarty. Even Andrews exhibits some character growth, if only by dint of being “on stage” for more of the book than he was for the first.

Faraday’s in-depth research into the Victorian era allows her to tie her characters firmly to the “real” London of 1891. Oscar Wilde’s absence is not a major mystery, but does set Ira on the course of encountering first Bram Stoker and then Arthur Conan Doyle. Each man helps, wittingly or not, in the solving of the two main mysteries of the novel.

Narrated in the first person by Ira, Turnbull House is a fast-moving read that takes place over the course of a single week. The first person narration does force the author once or twice into having other characters explain things to Ira that he wasn’t present for, but those moments are rare and don’t detract from the fast pace of the book. It also means that we learn details of the mysteries as Ira does, and that allows the author to stay in the “fair play” mode of mystery writing: the reader can solve the mysteries at the same time Ira does, or sometimes quicker, because we are privy to the same information the detective is.

I’m interested to see where Faraday takes Ira, Tim, Goddard, St. Andrews and the rest from here.

Anthony R. Cardno calls northwest New Jersey home when he’s not traveling the country for his day-job as an instructor on regulatory compliance. In his spare time, he writes fiction and interviews real people. His short fiction has appeared in Willard & Maple, Sybil, and Full Throttle Space Tales. His short Christmas novel The Firflake is available through most online book retailers. He can usually be found on Twitter as @talekyn and interviewing various creative types on anthonyocardno.com.
Ed Madden is the author of three books of poetry—*Signals*, *Prodigal: Variations*, and most recently, *Nest*. He is also the editor of *Out Loud: The Best of Rainbow Radio*, a collection of radio essays recently attacked by the South Carolina legislature. As associate professor of English and director of Women's & Gender Studies at the University of South Carolina, his current project is a book based on the time he spent helping with his dying father's home hospice care, which also inspired his recent Tedx talk.
Snakes, floods, a dying father—*all very biblical*, you might say and that would be true. The setting is a small room in a house in the middle of fields of rice. Signs and portents come and go—a bear track, a bird singing through the night, more snakes, a satellite dish—but none make sense. The few necessary props include a watch, a wheelchair, cigarettes, a small blue book that must be hidden but consulted regularly and secretly. Oh, a shovel also. A shovel is essential.

People come and go, and it’s hard to remember some names. The cast is large and yet at the end really quite small: a father, a mother, a son, a brother. And there is a recurring figure of an aunt, commentator, visitant, angel. The dead never come back, and then they do.

Sometimes the plot may seem pretty sluggish, repetitive, but the effect is cumulative, inexorable, inevitable. There are no dramatic scenes of weeping. This is not a made-for-tv movie. We all know how it will end, dear reader, though we hope for something different.

But when my dead father appears in the hallway—it’s him, I am sure it is him.

—Ed Madden
When I open my mouth to ask for forgiveness

When I open my mouth to ask for forgiveness, an armadillo crawls out, all armor and claws, ready to curl up into an impenetrable ball, ready to claw whatever gets too close. It is hungry for something dug up, something helpless and white, dug out of the dark.

When I open my mouth to ask for forgiveness, a rose of Sharon blooms, opening its lavender and white petals, hiding my face. The armadillo digs a den beneath the roses.

When I open my mouth to ask for forgiveness, a snake comes out. It crawls across the yard and up the front wall and into a window, the gap between pane and screen, where it will be seen from inside the front room, where my nephews are hitting each other, my mother pretends to listen to my niece, really listening for my father. Someone will see it, someone will kill it, someone will sever its head, the body flopping, like a belt of black rope on the front lawn, something glistening, something unbound. An armadillo has dug up the zinnias, looking for grubs, the flowers splayed, faded.

When I open my mouth to ask for forgiveness, a little boy crawls out. He wanders off down the ditch bank, collecting pretty things—seedpods, goldenrod, buckeyes, anything that catches his eye. I hope he’ll come back before dark. My mother says someone at church saw a panther on the road one night. There are wolves—she’s seen them—in the fields.

When I open my mouth to ask for forgiveness, a black bee flies out, and then another, carpenter, harbinger. They fill the eaves, the cedar soffits drilled, tunneled with eggs. Next year maybe, a dark halo of humming things. Next spring, next summer, the house hemmed in by the hover of black wings.

When I open my mouth to ask for forgiveness, a man crawls out. He is my dead father. He can walk now, now that it’s all over. He looks at my mother. No one says a word.

—Ed Madden
His shirt

I put on my father’s shirt
now that he no longer needs it.
It’s cold here, and dark.
The flannel is warm, the night long,
the weft grey, the warp black
and strong. Reading Tolkien
when I was young, I envied Frodo
his elven cloak, his silver ring.
A man asks if you could have
a superpower, could be
invisible or fly, which would you
choose? I still don’t know.
The dead seem so insistent
about the past. I ask
should I wear his shirt, now
he no longer needs it—
black-ladder grey, grey-woven
black, fog in the trees, smoke
rising from all that we burned that day,
the day after he died.

—Ed Madden
What Did I Know?
Joseph R.G. DeMarco

What did I know about love? What does anyone really know? As a young man, I was filled with all the romantic notions that everyone else is fed. But my long ago self also had the idea that love would be a shield against and a haven from my fears. That it would be a safe place to live.

I slipped into a relationship, settled down, and thought that was that, one large piece of the puzzle. And, for a long time it seemed to be. The relationship was, like every other, filled with ups and downs, stormy times and smooth sailing. It wasn’t all as romantic as I’d thought it would but that romantic haze never lasts anyway. Overall, we were a couple with all that entailed.

While preparing to celebrate another year together, things took a turn neither of us could imagine. For some time, Bill had been having various physical problems. They were incidents
that could be chalked up to harmless causes. But Bill had a feeling that something more was wrong with him. That began a round of doctor visits and tests.

When, after some frightening and painful tests, a doctor told us that Bill had ALS, every trite expression ever invented for situations like that came to mind when later talking or writing about that moment. Numbing. Surreal. A bad dream. Wrenching. Name it, I felt it.

Bill was devastated. He was aware of the horrors that Lou Gehrig’s disease could wreak and when he heard the doctor give his diagnosis, it took a moment for Bill to take it all in. The doctor left the room to give us a moment to absorb the news. It was just the two of us and a lot of fear, pain, and misery sitting there. Bill opened his mouth to cry and no sound came out but the sobs wracked his body. He was desolate and fearful of what the diagnosis meant for him. I comforted him as best I could, which is to say, not much at all. There is little comfort to be had at moments like that.

It was a numbingly surreal bad dream which wrenched my heart out and in one blinding instant changed everything. The love and pain we’d shared, the happiness, and all the good and bad times any relationship pushes through, all came down to three letters which meant the end of the world as we knew it.

In addition, for me it was also the moment that a shadowy fear, which had stalked me for years, stepped to the front and forced me to confront it.

I’d had an aunt, my favorite aunt, who’d contracted ALS, the same illness as Bill, but many years before. She lived four hellish years before she succumbed.

It was so horrifying a time that the fear of the disease followed me for years afterward. Watching her suffer was more frightening than anything I’d ever faced. And I didn’t face it as well as I could have. I wasn’t there as much as I later felt I should have been. For a while, I watched my aunt battle the illness, refusing to submit to the insidious things it does to a body. But eventually she was unable to cope and had to accept the indignities and the hopelessness it brought. I saw that and it shook me to my core. As the horror deepened, my visits grew fewer. There was nothing anyone could do about the disease she had but I could at least have been present more often. I wasn’t and I live with that failure every day.

After her death, the shadow of her disease haunted me. I was obsessed by the fear and struggled to keep it at bay. I never spoke to anyone about the ever-present dread, instead I held it all deep within and tried to deal with it in my own way. Which, really, was no way at all but to run as fast and as far as I could from anything to do with it.

Somehow I managed to move through the years, going to college, finding jobs, and understanding myself enough to come out. But every day and every night, in those moments when my mind wasn’t distracted by other things, the past was with me, taunting me, shuddering through my day dreams and my nightmares. What I’d witnessed stuck with me and created a set of powerful anxieties in me. The fear of death, the terror of being abandoned, the dread of being forgotten.

Somehow, I imagined that love might be the answer. Sweet, gauzy, romantic love where happily ever after was the rule. Where no one is unfaithful, no one is forgotten, no one leaves anyone, and everyone floats along on rivers of pink frothy emotion.
Now, I shake my head over the idea of Joseph, the romantic but frightened kid grasping at anything to help ease his fears and keep him from drowning in them.

I often wonder how my younger self got through each day burdened with such fear. How he managed to work his way through college, complete a rigorous Jesuit education which had him majoring in three things at the same time, and have just a sliver of a social life outside all that. All the while battling nightmares and demons to keep them from consuming him whole.

That younger Joseph was innocent in some ways, too knowledgeable in others. He was filled with fears but not with self-confidence. He had tons of hopes and dreams but not much support for them. Somehow, he got himself to the point where he came out of the closet and began to think he might be able to realize some of his dreams.

He became an activist and joined gay liberation groups. He integrated himself into the community. But when he looked around, he felt incomplete. Everyone, so it seemed, had a lover. The idea of ‘love’ took center stage for him. He didn’t really know much about that kind of love or why he even wanted it. Except that it might be a haven. He didn’t exactly think through the whole ‘love’ thing, it was just the fantasy of romantic love and of being coupled and safe.

He closely observed the domestic life of the couples he knew. Who seemed to be the spokesperson, who was the real force in the relationship. Who cooked, who set the table, who organized the house, how they managed all the ‘things’ they collected. He watched as they held hands even at home, how they floated in an easy choreographed way around one another while getting things done, how they seemed to present a solid front when dealing with others.

Joseph fell in love with all that domesticity, fell in love with love, and wanted the same things.

So, Joseph went in search of love as if it were something he could find and tag and own. The young, still-innocent kid launched himself into the world of finding a lover. He had notions about what love should be and what it meant for him. What he didn’t realize was that his fears helped shape his ideas about love, which wasn’t what love was really all about.

At some point he set his sights on another member of the Gay Activists Alliance, which now sounds more like something out of science fiction than reality. But it was a real enough organization and it was huge and there was this guy who caught his eye. Tall, blond, stable. Secure, self-confident, and very, very social. Everything Joseph wasn’t. At least that’s how Joseph saw himself and saw in Bill what he felt he lacked in himself.

He made his move and they settled into beginning something. I don’t think either of them knew exactly what they wanted or what they were doing and they certainly had few examples that lasted a long time. But they both saw something in the other and decided it was worth a try.

All through those years of building a life together, Joseph never for a moment let down his guard when it came to his fears. The horrors still came as nightmares to disturb his sleep and as horrifying thoughts to disturb his days. Many things reminded him of that terrible dread he had and never allowed him to forget it. The happiness in life was tempered by the terrors of the past. Joseph felt that no matter what, no matter that he’d built a life that included love, he still had to outrun those fears or they would catch up and overwhelm him. Everyday was a battle.

Then, it all began to happen again. The doctors, the illness, the pain and confusion, the hopelessness and despair. It was as if I’d left the real world for some horror movie version of life. I was confused, frightened, and heartbroken.
One thing, though, had changed. This time, I resolved that I would not run away. That I would be there, be present for this person I loved.

The disease is relentless. It was a time of loss and more loss. ALS takes everything away from a person little by little. All you can do is try to keep up and make life as manageable as possible. Sometimes the changes came too fast. Just when we’d adjusted to one set of losses, everything would deteriorate again. Which meant more equipment, more learning how to cope with new problems, more hollowing out of the place where your heart used to be.

For every day of the thirteen months of his illness, I stayed by his side, cared for him, prayed, cried, raged against everything and anything. I abandoned just about everything else in my life at the time: projects I was working on, my job, any sense of a life outside the walls of our house.

When he died, I was bereft and was left to wonder about love and why I had sought it out all those years before. I wondered why I had romanticized the idea back then only to find that it ended in pain. I thought love was the thing that shielded you against the world and harm. Kept you from being abandoned and forgotten.

After two years working with a grief therapist, I realized that I’d learned some things after all. After more than twenty-five years in a relationship, I learned that love is more than I expected and not at all what I’d fantasized. It had little to do with the romantic notions that my younger self conjured up.

Because of these realizations, I had this notion that I’d like to go back to my younger self and tell him a few things. Why? I’m not sure. All I know is that the lessons I learned might serve him well or give him hope even if it wouldn’t change anything.

That younger self would still do what he’d done, would still get involved in a relationship, would still find the stark horror that he was presented with and had to endure.

Somehow I’d find a moment, just the right moment, to appear and tell him a few things. Things like: wait twenty five years or so, Joseph, and let that time wash over you. Let your soul grow together with Bill’s and see how much a part of each other you become. Let those years bring joy and sadness, let them connect the two of you through the deaths of parents and relatives, the deaths of friends, through arguments and love talk, through the highs and lows of daily life. Let the years bring you anniversaries and birthdays, vacations and quiet times at home. Let those years watch as you nurse each other through one minor illness after another.

Let the years knit you together and make you a tightly woven cloth that warms you both when you have chilly arguments or refuse to speak to one another for silly reasons. Let those years show you the cruel days as you watch the one you love sicken and die, slowly and horribly, knowing there is nothing you can do to prevent it. Then let those years force you to see your love die in your arms, feel his spirit fly up and out of reach, sense his soul hovering around you but not warmly next to you in the same way it had been for more than a quarter of a century.

It won’t be easy but let the years show you those things, Joseph, and in doing so let them reveal to you what love is really all about. All those experiences will tell you that love never really dies, is never forgotten, never grows cold, and is never put away. The years will tell you that if you have learned to love well, you will want to love again. And the person who is gone but not really gone, will want you to love again because he knows love in all its splendor even more fully after death. And he wouldn’t want you to miss out on it, if you are lucky enough to find it in another person. He would not want you to put away your life to mourn, just to demonstrate that you
loved him. Doing that would prove nothing. Loving again, though, might prove you had learned what love really means.

Telling Joseph all that wouldn’t spare him the pain that relationship would bring, but I could at least let him know that it wasn’t all for nothing. That love is worth something. That in embracing that tiny word, we touch something bigger than ourselves.

Joseph R.G. DeMarco is a native Philadelphian. He is most well known for the Marco Fontana series of gay detective novels set in the City of Brotherly Love, but he has been involved with the local LGBT community for decades.

His website is http://www.josephdemarco.com/.
Hollis and Butch

Lee Thomas

from *Butcher’s Road*

Hollis Rossington and Butch Cardinal wore evening attire—dinner jackets and white waistcoats. Each had parted his hair impeccably, smoothing it against his scalp in sleek, oiled sheets. The large men cut impressive figures sitting at the table against the wall. Neither of them smiled. If anything, they seemed awkward in each other’s company, though they did their best to hide it.
Similarly well-dressed patrons occupied the other tables in Galatoire’s front dining room. Chair legs scraped over the small, white, hexagonal tiles. Hushed voices, like distant surf, murmured. The *click* and *clink* of silver on china and glasses meeting in toast, created a soft, syncopated rhythm. Enchanting scents from the kitchen and from fine cigars wafted through the room, and though the restaurant was lovely and the appetizers exceptional, Hollis found himself disappointed.

He’d expected something different from the evening. Galatoire’s was Hollis’s favorite restaurant, but all of the fond memories he attributed to the setting couldn’t breach the crust of disenchantment. Though he could hardly afford the extravagant restaurant, he’d thought a night out would loosen up his friend, get his mind off his troubles, but Butch had carried his distracting concerns across the Quarter, and they’d dropped down in the chair with him. Though the clothes Hollis had given him looked quite fine, Butch fidgeted with discomfort, running his fingers under his collar and rolling his shoulders as if trying to dislodge something captured beneath his jacket. They’d already consumed salads and bowls of a delicious turtle soup, but Hollis had yet to engage Butch in easy banter. All of the talk of the “good old days” had never emerged, despite his numerous prompts.

“What do you think of the place?” Hollis asked, hoping to rekindle the conversation.

“The food is good. Thank you,” Butch replied.

“I’m glad to see those clothes fit.”

“Yeah,” Butch said. He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap. Then he swept his gaze around the room. He seemed to have a difficult time looking at Hollis.

“Is something wrong?” Hollis asked. “I mean, I know a hell of a lot is wrong, Chicago and all, but is something else going on?”

Butch’s eyes lost focus. He appeared to be staring off into the distance, rather than simply across a table. When he spoke, his voice was restrained.

“It’s been a long day,” he said.

“But the list proved useful?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s good,” Hollis said with a smile.

“Yeah,” Butch said, but remained distracted. A prolonged silence followed, in which both men drank from their water glasses and wiped their lips with their crisp white napkins. They busied themselves with the formalities of dining to fill the awkward moments. Hollis considered a number of topics of conversation, but all died in his throat as he struggled to form phrases that would introduce the subjects without jarring his companion.

Then Butch leaned on the table and asked, “Do you believe in magic?”

Clearly Butch wasn’t as concerned about making jarring statements. Of course Hollis didn’t believe in magic. He’d seen the local voodoo nonsense paraded in the faces of tourists and superstitious old women, but he no more believed a needle in a doll would make his neck hurt than he believed a potion would bring him love. He never said these things out loud, because he lived in a superstitious city, but Hollis considered himself a rational man, well grounded, and
though his philosophies might not have been conservative or even moderately acceptable to America at large, magic played no part in them.

“You don’t,” Butch said.

“It’s not that simple,” Hollis said. “We believe the things we need to believe to get through the day. For some that means there’s a god watching their every move, judging their behaviors and threatening punishment. Others believe they interact with their gods, believe they can influence their deities with rituals and gifts. I think it’s all bunk, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t have power. Believing a thing, really believing it, makes it real on some level.”

It appeared that Butch didn’t like this answer. His face sagged and he looked around the room. “I need a drink,” he said.

“They only serve in the private rooms,” said Hollis. “I couldn’t get a table.”

“It’s okay,” Butch said. “A belt would grease my tongue is all.” He ran a finger under his collar and scratched at his jaw. “What I saw today, Hollis, it wasn’t a trick or a vaudeville illusion. It couldn’t have been. I see this thing and I realize I don’t know a damn thing. I’ve been outmatched since this started, you know, and I pretty much figured I wasn’t going to slip the hold. I knew that from day one, but now I don’t even know what kind of game I’m playing, let alone the rules.”

“What did you see?”

“I’d rather not go into it,” Butch said.

“You can’t tip that cart in the middle of the street and then just walk off. What did you see?”

“Hollis, you don’t want to get involved, and I don’t want you involved. It’s better for us both if don’t get mixed up in this.”

“I’d say I am mixed up in this.”

“And I wouldn’t. I appreciate the hospitality, but the less you know the better.”

Hollis thought that was horseshit, but he wasn’t going to waste the whole evening trying to pry information from the man. Things had been awkward enough between them.

“But it’s about the necklace?” he asked.

“Everything is,” Butch said, “but it isn’t. I mean, it’s all connected.”

“You’re not making this easy. But let me see if I’ve got this straight. The bottom line is once you find out what the necklace is, what kind of value it has, you can use it to clear your name?”

“My name is never going to be clear, Hollis. Even if I get out from under the Musante rap, the life I had is over.”

He was probably right about that. Once a scandal got stuck to you, guilty or not, you were pretty much sunk. You didn’t get a second round. “Even so, the necklace is key. If it’s valuable you have leverage. If it isn’t…Then what?”

“I lay low,” Butch said. “There are a hundred towns I could disappear into if I had to. Even here I’m relatively safe, depending on that Lowery kid.”

“So you’re planning to stay on with us for a while?”

CHELSEA STATION
“We’ll see,” said Butch.

Their entrees arrived. Both had ordered the prime rib of beef, and they set into their steaks as the waiter refilled the water glasses and removed the ashtray from the table.

After dinner, over cigars, Butch said, “So how do you know Rory?”

Hollis coughed on smoke and reached for his water as Butch clapped him lightly on the back. “We actually met after a bout I had with Simm,” Hollis said.

“You wrestled Simm?” Butch asked. His brows knit and his jaw went tight.

“Early in both of our careers,” said Hollis. “That son of a bitch about took my head off.”

“The stranglehold?”

“Yeah, he put that hold on me and I tried every which way to slip it. But I dozed off like a baby with a full tummy. Couldn’t turn my head for a week after that.”

“Did Rory teach you how to get out of that one?”

“Nope. He just brought me a drink and some BC Powder, told me to get a new trainer.”

“Did you?” Butch drew on his cigar and held the smoke in his mouth.

Hollis shook his head. “I…did…not. Two weeks later, Rory dropped me with the same hold.”

Butch laughed at this, sending a cloud of smoke over the table. Hollis hadn’t heard the man laugh before and it was a rich, deep-down chuckle that boomed in the high-ceilinged room. Ashing his cigar in the crystal tray, Butch said, “I never got to wrestle the old guy.”

“It was like trying to move a boulder. Rory was some kind of solid.”

“By the time I saw him, he’d lost a lot of his speed,” said Butch. “He still had the strength, but he moved slow and didn’t have the flexibility. I’ll bet he was something to see in his prime.”

“He was that.”

For a time the meal took on the tenor of the evening Hollis had wanted. They talked about the ring, about opponents they’d both faced and those they’d never had the chance to meet. Hollis warmed to the conversation, as did Butch, but the man’s enjoyment seemed to come and go, perhaps replaced by thoughts of magic or a tenuous future over which he had little control. The oddest moment of the night came as they finished their cigars.

Across the room a waiter set light to the contents of a silver chafing dish, likely cherries jubilee or perhaps a bananas foster, and as the alcohol burned the flame rose high, much to the delight of the restaurant’s patrons, most anyway. Hollis turned to Butch to note his reaction to the scene and was surprised by the look of dread and awe drawn across the man’s face. His eyes were large and held fear, as if he thought the flames alive and predatory. The expression only lasted a moment and then passed, but Hollis thought there was something to it, something about the fire.

“Everything okay?” asked Hollis.

“Fine,” said Butch. “Everything is fine.”

* * *

CHELSEA STATION
The umbrellas proved insufficient to their task during the return trip to Hollis’s bungalow. By the
time they reach the gate, both men were soaked from the waist down and their socks squished in
their shoes. Butch, who had spent the better part of a week in one form of discomfort or another,
hardly minded. Though he could not shake the sight of Delbert Keane erupting into flames, a
scene he imagined would always be very near the surface of his thoughts, he was feeling
considerably better physically. The fine meal had helped. So had the conversation as it allowed
Butch to thumb through good memories, memories of the sport, of the ring, of the men he’d
called friends before they’d uniformly turned their backs on him.

Beneath the balcony, both men shook out their umbrellas and laughed at the state of their
drenched attire. Hollis told Butch he had a bottle of decent whiskey to help get the chill off.
“I’m going up to change out of this soaking rag.” Butch remained outside, listening to the
marching rain and observing the big house across the courtyard. The building loomed, enormous
and dark. Though he knew a teaming city went about its business beyond the high and shadow-
drenched walls, Butch felt a sense of pleasant isolation. They were alone here. Anything that
happened here would be between Butch and his host. Anything said need never leave these
walls.

In his room, Butch stripped out of his wet clothes. He draped the trousers and his drawers over
the back of a chair. He hung the jacket from one of the bed’s posters. He wrung the socks out
into the porcelain bowl on the nightstand and then laid them out on the windowsill. Butch took the
silk robe from the armoire and draped it across the bed. At the mirror, he smoothed down his hair
and checked his teeth for scraps of food. Once he felt sufficiently dry, he wrapped himself in the
robe and left the room.

He hadn’t heard Hollis coming down the stairs, so Butch was surprised to see the man in the
parlor, already holding two glasses of whiskey. Hollis had changed into dove-gray pajamas and a
thick crimson robe.

“Nights like this I wish I had a fireplace,” Hollis said. He handed a glass toward Butch. “This
should take the edge off, though.”

Butch accepted the glass and touched it to Hollis’s before downing the contents in a single slug.
Hollis chuckled at the display and reached to take the glass back. “It’s going to be an early
night if you keep that up.”

At the tall silver cart, which served as the bar, Hollis set down his drink and Butch’s empty glass.
Butch stepped forward with feet that felt as if they’d been dipped in lead. Hollis chatted as he
poured another drink, but the words were lost on Butch. He could only hear the sound of blood
rushing to his ears. The whiskey’s warm trail led to a coal burning low in Butch’s gut. At
Hollis’s back he laid a hand on his host’s shoulder. Hollis turned, and Butch grabbed the lapels
of his robe, squeezing the fabric tightly in his fists, wringing it. Surprise widened Hollis’s eyes,
but before the man could voice concern, Butch pressed forward and kissed him.

When their lips touched, the roaring in Butch’s ears intensified, became deafening. His heart
kicked hard behind his ribs, and it felt as though he couldn’t breathe. Hollis’s beard tickled the
soft skin between Butch’s lower lip and chin, and the feeling proved intensely sensual. Hollis’s
hand went around the back of his head, holding Butch tightly in the kiss. Butch kept his grip on
the lapels of Hollis’s robe, choking the material between his fingers and keeping a narrow gap between their bodies.

Then Butch shoved Hollis away, but he maintained his grasp of the man’s robe. He held his host at a distance. His elbows were locked and his arms strained.

“What’s wrong?” Hollis asked.

Butch felt his features tighten. Nothing was wrong. Not really. But he couldn’t help but admit, “I don’t really know how all this works.”

The comment brought a soft smile to Hollis’s lips. He nodded. “The first thing you might want to do is unlock your elbows and maybe take it easy. We aren’t opponents here.”

“Yeah,” Butch said, releasing his grip and letting his hands hang at his sides.

They stood facing one another, and the pause unnerved Butch. It gave him time to think, and he didn’t want to think. He wanted to feel and forget about the rules and judgments he carried like scars. The kiss had consumed him, silenced the rational thoughts, but they were creeping back in. Fears and justifications knotted and uncoiled and wormed behind his eyes. He didn’t want to be a punk. He wasn’t one. He wasn’t like Lionel Lowery. Hell, he wasn’t like Hollis. This was a moment, physical and hungry and necessary. It wasn’t a way of life. He didn’t want it to be a fucking way of life, but he wanted this moment. Why was Hollis just standing there? Why didn’t he say something? Why didn’t he do something?

“This won’t end well,” Hollis said.

“Who fucking cares?” Butch asked.

He tramped forward and backed Hollis to the wall. He placed his hands gently on Hollis’s shoulders and squeezed lightly before he pushed in for a kiss, and this time he didn’t pull away. Hollis slid his hands around Butch’s back and embraced him. Butch moved in even closer, pressing Hollis hard to the wall, experiencing the density of the man’s chest against his. He felt the rigid shaft of Hollis’s cock through the fabric of his pajama trousers, and he ground his hips forward, rubbing his own erection, which had escaped the silk robe, against Hollis’s. Butch stepped back and pulled open Hollis’s robe, then he lunged forward to reattach his lips to the man’s as his fingers worked the buttons of the pajamas free. Every breath brought the scent of shaving soap and salt.

Hollis shrugged out of his robe and then reached down to untie the sash at Butch’s waist. Butch slid a hand over the soft hairs on Hollis’s belly and then gripped the waistband of his pajamas and worked them over the man’s hips. And when Hollis was completely exposed with only the lapels of his pajama shirt draping either side of his torso, Butch buried his face in the man’s neck and wondered at the powerful sensation of having Hollis’s body against his.

They made their way to the couch and Hollis reclined. Butch lay over the top of him and immediately returned to rubbing against the man. He felt Hollis’s hands on his buttocks, holding firmly and pulling to encourage the aggressive massage, and when Butch felt himself nearing climax, he rolled to the side for fear of bringing the encounter to an end. Hollis rolled too so that they were face to face. Butch took in the man’s face, its strength and kindness, and he experienced a moment of complete peace. His passion had ebbed only a fraction, but his concerns were absolutely gone. His thoughts were clear. His body felt light, yet sensitive to
every fiber of the sofa, every hair on Hollis’s chest. Butch closed his eyes. A moment later, he felt Hollis’s lips pressing softly against his. Later, after both men had climaxed, they lay on the sofa with Butch on his side and Hollis on his back. Propped up on his elbow, Butch rested his hand on Hollis’s chest.

(And now, Hollis thought, he’ll make his excuses and go to bed and in the morning, he’ll be angry or deny the act outright, maybe he’ll manage to figure out a way to blame me for what happened. He’ll pull some shit. That much is for sure. Men’s opinions changed about three seconds after their sacks emptied.)

Butch scooted and adjusted his frame on the sofa, but he found the two of them only fit on the furniture together if they were stacked or laid out on their sides. He threw a leg over Hollis and did his best to reach the floor without disturbing the man. At the bar cart, he lifted the glasses of whiskey Hollis had poured and carried them back to the reclining man.

He offered Hollis the glass. Hollis thanked him and raised himself to a sitting position.

“Thank you,” Butch said, clicking his glass against Hollis’s.

“Sure,” Hollis said. (This is it. Now, he escapes to build his excuses.)

After taking a sip of the drink, Butch rubbed the back of his head. He yawned. He said, “I’m going to head into bed.”

“Okay,” Hollis said.

Butch couldn’t help but notice a flash of emotion—What was it? Anger? Sadness?—skipping across Hollis’s face. The expression came and went too quickly for Butch to identify. It was probably nothing. Butch couldn’t think of a thing to be angry or sad about.

“You coming with me?” Butch asked.

Now Hollis looked surprised. Again, Butch couldn’t figure the why of it, but it wasn’t as if he were in familiar territory right now. In fact he’d rarely been in territory this strange. The brief moments with his cousin and the longer, though admittedly one-sided, exchanges with the Weeping Clown bore little resemblance to what he and Hollis had shared. He wondered if he was meant to retire on his own. Is that how this worked?

“Or are you going upstairs?” Butch said.

“No,” Hollis said. He lifted himself from the sofa. He went to the cart and grabbed the bottle of whiskey.

In bed and propped against pillows they enjoyed their drinks in silence. Butch rested his hand on Hollis’s thigh, tracing patterns in the hair with his fingers. Aware that the curtains were open, Butch climbed from the bed and crossed to the window. Before he tugged the drapes together he asked, “Who owns this place? I haven’t seen a soul in the big house since I arrived.”

“And you probably won’t,” Hollis said. “A kid named Travis Brugier owns the property. And when I say kid, I mean it. He can’t be but about seventeen years old, if that. He used to frequent my club. He liked it. He liked me and he offered me this place a couple of years back once he’d had it refurbished. I’ve seen him half a dozen times since then. He’s always traveling. Even when he’s home, you wouldn’t know it.”
Butch closed the curtains and returned to the bed.

“You have to realize how surprising all of this is,” Hollis said. “I mean I didn’t think you—”

“Didn’t think I was a sissy?” Butch asked. He rolled his head along the wall and looked at Hollis.

“Me either.”

“You think we’re sissies?”

“Doesn’t matter what I think. Right here…right now…in this bed, we’re two men who’ve found a good way to get along. But we get out of this bed and leave this house and we’re a couple of fruits, and there’s no arguing out of it.”

“So what happens when you get out of this bed and leave this house?”

“You’re the one that said this wouldn’t end well.”

“You got me there.”

“So why don’t we worry about how this ends when it’s over?”

“And you’re okay with this?”

“Hollis, I’m not drunk, at least not yet. I’m not insane. I made a choice and acted on it, and right now it feels like the best choice I could have made, but I’m not that Lionel kid. I don’t know much of anything—not about this. I’m supposed to believe it’s wrong, but right now I don’t. Tomorrow I might. I have no idea. But when I said thank you, I meant it. It’s the only thing I’m certain of right now. I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for me, and I’m happy you’re in this bed. So thank you.”

“That may be the smartest thing you’ve said since you got here.”

“Don’t get used to it,” Butch said. “Smart isn’t really in my wheelhouse.”

“I’m glad it happened,” Hollis said, “and I’m glad Lionel is gone.”

“Yeah, about that. I feel like a horse’s ass about what I said that first morning, considering how we just spent the last hour. I don’t really know how this happened… It’s not like… I mean, I don’t think I was jealous of the kid. I wasn’t thinking about any of this when we spoke, but I know I was insulting to you, and I’m sorry.”

“I expected you to hightail it out of the parlor when we finished up.”

“I’ve done that before.” He read the surprised expression on Hollis’s face and said, “Those were very different circumstances.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing about them.”

“Maybe after another whiskey.”

He finished his drink and handed it over to Hollis for a refill. When Hollis handed him the refreshed glass, Butch tipped some of the whiskey onto the man’s chest. Hollis flinched. He moved to wipe the booze off of himself, but Butch stopped him. “I’ll get it,” he said and leaned over to lap the alcohol up, allowing his lips to press deeply against the brush of hair and the firm muscle beneath.
Lee Thomas is the Bram Stoker Award and the Lambda Literary Award-winning author of *Stained, The Dust of Wonderland, In the Closet, Under the Bed, The German, Torn, Ash Street*, and *Like Light For Flies*. He currently lives in Austin, Texas.
Fire and Rain
Chip Livingston

from Naming Ceremony

Rain slipped unharmed across the last finger of the Florida fire. She waited a moment, face flushed with heat, sweat streaking across her charcoal face, eye whites bright with adrenaline as she made sure that Wylie and I had escaped the tinderbox pine forest. Wylie’s thick braid hung heavy half-way down his back. He faced the flames separating us from Rain and the river behind her. Wylie took a deep breath and looked back at me. Our eyes met only an instant before he clasped the leather pouch at his neck, turned and raced toward her with a baying cry.
All day we had dodged the fire that woke our campsite, battled our way beside the flames, searching for a Florida spring, a creek or riverbed not dusty-parched by this summer drought, and I found myself making deals with God. Caught in that morning’s blaze, my own shaky religion had returned. I stood agnostic with a prayer. Then I too barreled through the last torching stand of brush and trees before the shallow leg of shining river.

My sneakers burped gray clouds of toy train-engine steam from each footfall in the black mud on the other side of the fire. My shoes met the water with a mad snake’s hiss, soles hit the gravel creek bottom and quickly cooled, conformed to the shape of my achy feet. I flexed my toes, making room to allow the cold water to penetrate the canvas of my tennis shoes, to soothe the hot fevered blisters worn raw, but now so cool, a reminder that my own two feet were still there at the end of my scorched legs.

Rain and Wylie lay in the shallow current. Wylie’s T-shirt still smoked, singed on the dark collar that swirled dusky to black across the peeling decal on its front: An owl tangled in a plastic six-pack holder feet-in-the-air, crying out to “Give a hoot” before a clear-cut forest barely legible behind the stains of smoke and sweat. Wylie’s chest rose and fell in heavy breaths. His lungs seemed close to caving in, then expanded, lifting his body from the waves. “We made it,” I whispered to convince myself. “All three of us.”

The water covered Rain’s body save the tips of her leather boots, her nose and forehead. The clear creek splashed and beaded into opaque pools on their gray skin. Beneath the water the current cleansed, revealed hard goose flesh that glistened in the sun.

Rain bolted upright, hazel eyes alarmed. She looked at me with disbelief then recognition. The circle of my vision narrowed around that expression until I heard the splash of my collapse. I heard Wylie’s voice ask, “Martin?”

And in the silence that followed his question, I could hear the fire still crackling beside us, but my nose found an inch of clean air above the water’s surface.

* * *

I woke with my head on the other side of the creek, where Wylie must have dragged me to keep me from drowning. My legs still hung in the water, and tiny minnows kissed, kissed away the charred pieces of skin, peeling like stubborn hangnails. My head was heavy when I tried to raise it. The sun’s reflection on the surface or was it the sun itself that churned inside a dying cycle. Or maybe it was the fire, still burning, still chasing us. The sudden motion made me heave and sneeze an ungodly water, a fuliginous gray stew thick with tubes black as licorice.

I didn’t even lift my arms to wipe the spit aside. I imagined Rain coming back for me. She and Wylie would stand above me, whispering last rites, quietly making plans for my burial until Wylie notices some small movement, only a twitch in one of my fingers at the water’s edge, that tells him I’m not wholly dead. Then would he kneel to reach my smoky, spit strewn face and gently cup my mouth to his to breathe back life. Yes. And life would come back slowly, beginning at my toes and moving up, like the scent of a single candle filling a large room, until my mouth comes alive and I feel Wylie’s dry lips, then wet by his tongue or perspiration, and I open my eyes. Saved.

But they are still not here.
When Rain and Wylie do come back it is much later. They have gathered dehydrated wild oranges and Rain tells Wylie the water will refresh them. She promises him this. She sees my eyes are open and drops the miniature sun fruits and comes to me. Her hands are sweet with secret oils stolen from the oranges’ dry-puckered rinds.

Rain tells me she is glad that I’m okay. She was worried. They both were worried, she tells me. She has seen death take a person before. Her mother back in Seattle so far away from her now.

I don’t tell her she is frightening me. I don’t ask her why then, why she and Wylie left me alone. I don’t tell her I love her when she bends down to kiss my cheeks, but I do stop her from rinsing her hands. I croak a low “No” and catch her by the tiny wrists, place her sweet citrus hands back over my lips and it is then that I return her kiss.

Wylie stands above me, a giant sun-dial reminding us that the daylight is deceiving. It is later than it seems. His dark face has been cleaned and he is smiling.

* * *

Wylie and I hooked up in El Paso when we were both passing through. He was older than me by four years, twenty-one, and he was from Montana, a place I’d never been. He told me he was Crow. I thought he could fly. He was dark, yes, with hair black as those feathers. He didn’t drink anymore, and I thought “Anymore? No more at twenty-one?”

When I told him how I’d gotten there, how the truck driver who’d picked me up would rub against me when we slept behind the big cab seats, Wylie nodded. He said I could travel with him if I wanted. He was going to Austin where he heard it wasn’t nearly so hot. There were trees and a river. A cool place to stay for a spell. Wylie said that I could go with him.

* * *

We met Rain in Austin. She had an old Dodge swinger that a man had just given her, she said, and she shared it with us, parked by the river, but mostly we slept outside. Sometimes Rain and Wylie slept together in the backseat and I knew what they were doing but pretended to sleep. How could I sleep? I lay frozen with jealousy. Of Wylie or Rain? Maybe I was just jealous they doing it at all. Both were soft skinned and smooth, so different from the coarse truck driver whose hairy face and limbs felt as if they were slicing me beneath him. And both Wylie and Rain touched me, were affectionate and aware of me. They were mother and father. I couldn’t say no when they asked me to go with them to Florida. I would follow them anywhere. Either one of them. This was the first time I had fallen in love.

I had had crushes all my life. On girls who teased then ran away. On boys who bullied after school. The boys rough-housed our way home to the trailer park in Columbus where I lived with my mother and stepfather. But Wylie and Rain I loved differently. They took care of me.

Rain’s car broke down near Ocala where we camped in the national forest. When we walked away from the Dodge, she said they were probably looking for it by now anyway, and I didn’t ask. Because Rain so often shared such intimate details of her life—especially late at night when only the two of us were left awake, when she’d whisper how her mother howled against death, how her father had hit Rain and told her to grow up and quit crying and how she did quit crying, how she had slept with men and women in the hidden dugouts of Seattle before she scraped enough money together to leave for good—that when the details of her lives didn’t always add
up, I immediately forgave her. I knew that sometimes lies were necessary and I had invented my own histories, had happier childhoods. Sadder ones.

So when Wylie suggested we walk west—he was sure we’d find work on a fishing boat or the wharf when we reached the coast—I followed them.

*     *     *

The fire was far away from us the next time I woke, and I chewed the willow leaves Wylie said would calm my stomach. Even though the water was all gone from me, had been expelled from every opening like a stepped on sponge, my belly still clinched and my body would jerk and twitch in syncopated seizures.

Wylie told me to think about the trees when I chewed the leaves. He told me to think about the trees in the dry forest around us, to try and imagine their roots stretching down into the earth like long fingers. The willow leaves were earth and air, he said. He said I was full of water, full of fire. Out of balance. He said chew the leaves.

If we had a pot he would make a tea, he said. He would get a pot when we came to a town. But I would have to get better so we could find a town. He would steal a cup if we came to another campground, but I would have to get better first. I had to get better soon because we needed to move, we needed to find work and decent food, we needed to get to the coast. “Chew the leaves,” he said.

We were never sure if I had caught fever or not, we were all so hot and exhausted from the battle with fire. Rain soaked her T-shirt in the river and wrung the water on my lips. Wylie brought more leaves and found roots and acorns we could eat and that I could keep down. I felt ready to move and then slowly, we walked our way west toward the gulf.

We startled a covey of volunteer firemen who were out in the forest scouting fires. They told us there were wildfires in every county in Florida, save one far up to the north. They radioed to the Red Cross about us, said they would get us to a road in the morning where an ambulance would pick us up. They fed us rations of Swiss steak from tin cans.

I watched how the men stared at Rain, who kept solid and silent. They looked at Wylie. At me. I’m not sure what they made of me. I was still too weak to talk when the firemen asked us again how we came to be in the smoking woods, but I nodded when they said we were lucky to be alive.

Wylie told them we had been camping, were forced to flee a sudden fire’s rage. They wanted to know more. “Where? Which campground?”

When Wylie said it wasn’t no campground, that we had been walking on foot for days before the fire, the men looked at each other sideways, nodded knowingly with their lips poked out and asked if we had been smoking marijuana. If we had an illegal campfire that started the blaze. They expected confession, and Wylie offered them none. We hadn’t started the fire.

What were we doing there?
Camping only.
They would get to the bottom of this.
Wylie asked if we were free to go.
I could have screamed at him then, I was so tired from walking. But I was afraid of what the men might do if they knew no one was looking for us. If they would point us to the nearest town, the nearest road, we would continue, Wylie said. We all three thanked them for the food, for the chance to rest.

* * *

The next day on the road we were picked up by a preacher and his wife. They were dressed for Sunday and Wylie told them we were heading to his auntie’s, who lived in Cedar Key. It was the first I’d heard of a specific destination. Wylie told them about the fire and how we had been separated from our car and our things.

The preacher and his wife were so worried for us that they turned around and took us to their two-story house where the preacher called the church on his telephone. He looked at his watch and said he wouldn’t be able to make it in time for the early service. A minor emergency had come up, he said, and yes, everything was all right, but it did require his immediate attention. The preacher and his wife wanted to call Wylie’s auntie and let her know we were fine, but his auntie didn’t have a phone, we said. Rain and I were brother and sister and were known to be on a two-week spring break vacation. There was no one worried or looking for us, there was no reason to call. A phone call would only make them worry.

But our clothes, the preacher’s wife said. We had to get clothes and what about our IDs? Everything had been left in flames at the camp, Wylie told them. We had been sleeping in the tent when the fire caught us unaware. We had managed to escape with our shoes and the clothes on our backs. We barely made it through the heat, he said, but the Lord had taken care of us in the woods and, as soon as we got to the coast, Wylie’s Aunt Ada would fix us back up right.

The preacher’s wife nodded at this. God certainly took care of His faithful, she said. She said Ada sounded like a lovely woman and did Ada have a church? The preacher and his wife offered to feed us, then made a bed for Rain in the guest room. They never had any children, the preacher said. His wife gave Rain shorts and a clean T-shirt. The preacher’s clothes hung from me but it felt so good to take a real shower. The next day they would take us to the church building, or maybe the preacher would drive over that very afternoon and see what clothes were there in the Good Will drive his wife had organized. It was as if God had given her a special insight that there would be travelers coming through in need, the preacher said.

Wylie said something we assumed to be a Crow prayer then told the preacher’s wife she was a true daughter of the Lord. She said she had always expected that God would lead her to save American Indians, but the preacher had insisted his work was in Florida, where the preacher’s wife understood there were no more Indians at all. Wylie whispered to her there were still Indians in Florida. Miccosukes and Seminoles on southern reservations, he said. The preacher’s wife shook her head like she couldn’t believe it.

“How long is the drive to the Everglades?” she asked the preacher.

“How far to the Big Cypress Swamp?” Wylie asked. He told her there were still Creeks, too, those Muscogees were scattered all over the peninsula. He even knew of a Crow woman living on Cedar Key. The preacher’s wife asked if she could drive us to Aunt Ada’s.

Wylie told such great stories that I imagined we were really going there. His large old auntie was such a fine cook and had such a hearty, good-natured laugh. I couldn’t wait to meet her.
That evening the preacher’s wife made a pallet on the living room floor for me and Wylie. The cool pillow cases were crisp from the clothesline, and the giveaway clothing the preacher retrieved from the church was more than we had worn in days. Rain told us later that she hardly could sleep in the big soft bed. Years had passed since she’d worn a nightgown. But that evening I slept so soundly, curled against Wylie, who in turn, curled against me in the absence of Rain.

* * *

I’m not sure if I still believe it now—more often so than not, though, I expect. But I’m certain I believed it that night on the preacher’s floor, when Wylie told me he would take care of us forever. And Wylie did take care of us for the rest of that hot dry summer. He took care of Rain for eight more years after that. I moved out west and worked my way through college. I heard they married then divorced. I haven’t talked to either one of them in years.

And now, twelve years later in my north Oregon home, I wait through the wet months of spring, planting bulbs in the garden with my wife and our daughter, waiting for the sprouts to rise from the earth toward the sun and to open. I wait for the warm Indian summer to lead me again on my annual pilgrimage to the Montana plains, where I camp by myself and remember.

My daughter says she is big enough to go with me this year, but I shake my head and tell her this is Daddy’s week to go by himself.

“Maybe one of these days you’ll find it,” my wife says somewhat sadly, and I stand up and take her in my arms and I kiss her. I try to reassure her but resist her leaning. She knows there is something missing. She knows I am searching again for the balance when I go searching for the absence of rain.

A Conversation with Rob Lorino

Interview by Steve Berman

Because Rob Lorino's art is intense and queer, I thought it would be interesting if that patron saint of aesthetics, Oscar Wilde, inspired all the questions.
Steve Berman: “A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament.” Of course, temperament can mean several things, but for this consider: 1) unusual attitude or emotional response; 2) a combination of traits, outward or inward; 3) excitability or moodiness. How does your art reveal your temperament?

Rob Lorino: I feel emotions in extremes, and I think my art reveals this in my use of dramatic imagery. The characters I portray are always exaggerated and over-the-top. I’m also an escapist at heart; I try to create a whole other world in my images. I like to think that my work also helps the viewer escape reality, even if only momentarily.
Berman: “Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known.” Your photographs often blur the lines of gender. What are your thoughts on portraying gender in art. Do you always seek to go beyond the binary? Is gender individual or simply biological?

Lorino: I believe 100% that gender is individual. I also believe that our notions of what constitutes masculine and what constitutes feminine are arbitrary. I adore art that draws attention to that arbitrariness. Art that makes you think about why body hair is considered masculine and make-up is considered feminine, and why it all even matters. Everybody has a little masculinity and a little femininity inside them, but it is so taboo to express both. I try to make my artwork about extremes and take things that are hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine and put them together to create a kind of uncomfortable tension. Even when I’m not stepping outside the binary in my artwork, I tend to make a sort of caricature out of gender to show the ridiculousness of it. I was bullied a lot growing up for being too feminine, and I think making the kind of art I’m making now is kind of a way of becoming comfortable with that side of myself all the while forcing other people to confront their own stereotypes about gender.
Berman: “Life imitates art far more than art imitates Life.” Tell us how you came to become an artist. How does your everyday life interact with art?

Lorino: I’ve always been an artist. Some of my earliest memories are of sitting down with my sketchbook and just drawing for hours. Ultimately it came down to what kind of art did I want to pursue as an adult, and after trying my hand at fashion design for a while I settled on photography. I like the aspect of working with reality to create something fantastic. In my everyday life I’m constantly thinking about art and I make sure to spend a good chunk of time every day looking at art and artists online to keep myself inspired. I’m fortunate enough to be working in an amazing library right now that has some incredibly beautiful architecture and artwork. As an artist, I find it’s important for me to be in a visually stimulating environment.
Berman: “The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” A rather naughty interview question--you obviously have no issue with posing nude. What is the most debauched act you would photograph? And what is the most debauched act you yearn to do?

Lorino: I think everyone has a line between what they consider art and what they consider pornography, and I think my line is surprisingly conservative. I think the human form is beautiful, but I think that nudity or explicitly sexual content should only be used as a very specific artistic choice. While it’s true that “sex sells,” I find that for me it’s not exciting anymore as it’s so overused it’s become cliché. A lot of times they are used solely for titillation or shock value. I’d say nothing is off-limits for me to photograph, but there would have to be a strong conceptual reason for me to photograph anything explicit.
Berman: “There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.” What are your aspirations for your art? And what can we expect to see from you in the future?

Lorino: I make my work mostly for myself, but I love sharing it with other people and creating a dialog between myself and viewers of my work. It’s difficult to balance a day job, school, and to propel a career in the arts forward but I hope to finally make the time to put together an exhibition of my work that I can shop around to galleries. I showcase a lot of my work on Tumblr now and I’d also like to get more engaged in that community to expand my audience online as well.

Rob Lorino is a Boston based-photographer. He grew up in a small town in rural New York; population 400. He sought out every creative outlet he could find, and fell in love with fashion and photography along the way. After graduation, he moved to Boston, where he went to the School of Fashion Design for a year. He decided sewing wasn’t for him, so he then began studying photography at The New England Institute of Art in Brookline, MA. He graduated with a B.S. in Photography in May 2010. He is currently pursuing a Master’s in Library Science at SimmonsCollege in Boston, MA with a focus on archives and cultural heritage. His photographer has been featured on volumes of Wilde Stories and in Scuffians! Better Stories of Sodomites by Hal Duncan. Tumblr: http://ethanoille.tumblr.com/

Steve Berman is the owner of Lethe Press and happens to enjoy looking at handsome artwork.
Speculative Fiction is the place for alternatives, for new worlds and new ways of thinking. As a result, it’s the perfect place for a queer reader. Countless science fiction, fantasy and other weird horror fiction has investigated women and feminism—from classics like *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* to Nicola Griffith’s soon-to-be classic *Hild*, feminist and queer sf has offered a lot to readers who find themselves everywhere on the sex and gender spectra. Gay, bisexual and other queer men who are looking for reflections of themselves, though, sometimes have to look a little deeper. Here are 11 novels (in no particular order) that make up my essential SF bookshelf for queer men.
**Troll**  
by Johanna Sinisalo

This astonishing mosaic novel, originally in Finnish, is about a gay photographer whose career and personal life are on the ropes. But then, one night, he finds a troll. In Sinisalo’s world, trolls are a real animal, an anthropomorphic but feline species that has been documented mostly through myth, legend and just a little bit of scientific evidence. To say the least, bringing home this wild and intelligent human-shaped cat creature—who, by the way, excretes powerful sex pheromones—complicates things for the photographer. This is one of those books you want to race through and then can barely believe was real.

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**Lust**  
by Geoff Ryman

Ryman’s entire body of work is really a must—*Was*, *The Child Garden*, and *Air*—are all sf masterworks, but his most important book for queer men is *Lust*. It is really a fantasy or slipstream novel in which the main character finds that he can conjure up anyone (any historical person, characters from novels, ex-boyfriends etc) and they appear in his room and want to have sex with him. What sounds pretty good at first quickly shows how sex can be everything and nothing. The scenes where a conjured Picasso moves in and stays for weeks as this man’s lover stick with me years later, with their slapstick humor of Picasso negotiating his straight machismo and top/bottom dynamics. Overall, though, *Lust* provides a serious examination of love, loss, and emotional honesty.

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**The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay**  
by Michael Chabon

It is likely that this one needs no introduction. Chabon’s Pulitzer-winning novel is a history of fandom and the birth of comics (along with the attendant gay panic from Dr. Wertham), a weird love story, and an urban fantasy with real superheros. Read it.
Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders
by Samuel R. Delany

Delany, now a Science Fiction Grand Master, is known for the largely impenetrable Dhalgren, which is also a foundational text of gay science fiction. His most recent novel—and his first SF in decades—shows a long-term and often messy gay male relationship and follows it into a realistic near-future.

Lava in My Bones
by Barry Webster

This book was one of my strangest reads in 2013. While in Zurich for a conference, its stuffy Canadian scientist-protagonist’s life is opened up by intense attraction for another man. As he discovers his gayness in the most awkward and hesitant, fish-out-water ways possible, he and the narrative are literally and figuratively taken over by geology. The character starts eating rocks; the book itself flips back and forth between his transnational self-discovery and his even stranger and more damaged family and siblings back in Canada dealing with the same deep Earth forces. Although totally weird and almost unexplainable, Webster’s language keeps the reader turning pages.

Under the Poppy
by Kathe Koja

Spark up your opium pipe and drift into Koja’s strange world of fin-de-siècle Europe where puppets say and do the things people can’t or won’t and where a most unusual love triangle is reunited after years apart. As street urchins, two boys and one girl found each other and held on for survival. Now, years later, the woman and one of the men are running a brothel. This setting, temporal and physical, is Decadence with the capital D, and the story keeps pace with it: minor political intrigue, sexual violence, a military campaign, torn silk and stained velvet abound. The primary love story—between the two men—both weighs this all down and inflates its silk balloons enough to drift lazily on the horizon. There is a follow-up coming soon called The Mercury Waltz.
China Mountain Zhang
by Maureen McHugh
Another mosaic novel, this time set in a banally plausible near future where China is the world’s only superpower and has colonized the United States. The terms of this new empire are mostly economic, rather than military, with Anglos trying to pass themselves off as Chinese, and more importantly, where Americans desperately try to go to college in China if their degree is to be worth anything. In all of this, there is a man Zhang, whose gayness and North Americanness are just two things of the things holding him back. The world building is original, the emotions are verifiable, and the mosaic landscape of other characters and situations is bewitching.

Imago (Xenogenesis #3)
by Octavia E. Butler
Butler is mostly known for her sharp dives into race and identity that largely feature women characters. The entire Xenogenesis series (also published as Lilith’s Brood) finds a post-nuclear and dying Earth that has been unexpectedly found—and is being “saved”—by an immensely powerful alien race called the Oankali. Their immense power comes from their ability to manipulate and program genes, a feat the species accomplishes with third-sex individuals, ooloi, who are required for sexual reproduction. In Imago, the third in this series, the main character is a human-Oankali hybrid who appears male at the beginning of the book but surprises himself and everyone else in the novel by metamorphosing into the first hybrid ooloi. This is a lot of summary to let you know that this character, Jodahs, although technically a third, non-human sex, is a compelling and attractive masculine main character with a terrifying and dangerous but ultimately fully emotionally realized bisexual love story.

Day of the Oprichnik
by Vladimir Sorokin (translated by Jamey Gambrell)
It takes a long time for the actual homosex in this one, and the reader has to patiently wait through lots of rape, tyrannical violence and outrageous abuses of power before the author gets us there. It features a near future where Russia is czarist once again and where the officials of the secret police (named after the historical Oprichnik of Ivan the Terrible) thrive on the homosocial—and eventually homosexual—communion of imperial power. It’s a wild, nasty ride that’s not exactly erotic but is exhilarating.
Tim and Pete
by James Robert Baker

This book isn’t really sf, but I include it because it might as well be slipstream and, by now, alternate history of a queer power terror plot to kill Ronald Reagan. A former couple, Tim and Pete get back together unwillingly and then let sex, drugs and violence propel them on a hellacious roadtrip through Los Angeles. Its romantic climax, late in the novel, shows the glitchy reality: “Oh come on! You know the song. Do you need it in block letters? I wanna be your dog!” I got it in block letters, big translucent, three-dimensional block letters floating out of his mouth: I WANNA BE YOUR DOG.” An apocalyptic bathhouse fire, HIV-positive anarchists and lots of subversive queers and surreal episodes all in service of good, old fashioned love are what make this book essential for a queer sf reader.

The Steel Remains
by Richard K. Morgan

This book is high fantasy—magic, creatures, swordplay and all. The main character is Ringil, a famous warrior—think Worf, Beowulf, Xena, Conan—whose heroic feats that have saved the world as they know it don’t save him from social isolation and homophobic ostracism. Instead, he faces this adversity by being tougher and more violent, too badass to mess with. He reunites with former comrades in arms for a new epic battle. This is a great read, although it’s not even necessarily a great fantasy novel, because of how sexily and unapologetically gay Ringil and his desires are.

Joel A. Nichols is a writer and librarian in Philadelphia. Recent stories of his can be found in With: New Gay Fiction, Phobos Magazine, and online at Chelsea Station. He is also the author of two professional books for librarians, iPads in the Library (2013) and Teaching Internet Basics: the Can Do Guide (forthcoming in 2014). He has been a member of the Stonewall Book Award jury since 2013.
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“I haven’t enjoyed or been so moved by modern fiction in a very long time.”

—Jennifer Levin, author of *Walter Dancer and the Sea of Light*
James Powers-Black's work has been published in *Jonathan, Theodate, Anon*, and the anthology *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television*. He is working on his first novel, a re-imagining of Penelope's story from *The Odyssey* that focuses on the partner left behind by a closeted, gay soldier stationed in Iraq. Originally from Kansas City, Missouri, he now lives in central Pennsylvania with his husband and dogs.
Marriage Contracts (Then Expands)

Some people dote on their bed mates, drunk on silent admiration. If I ever did, it was way back when we thought rent and utilities would break us. My name came first on the lease, in alpha order, but you and I both were on it—

and in it—together. The electric bill and phone bill left off your name, the fact of our union less important than the size of the envelope's cellophane window. The lease was the only document we had to prove we shared anything in this life.

So many leases, contracts, and agreements later, seeing our names together became as impressive as observing each other day after day. Oh, you’re still here? Right, of course you are. What mundane luxury we obtained.

Then the mortgage: our names locked together for the next thirty years. Signing our lives away made us realize how much we had to lose. So we put our names on more documents—life insurance, wills, and powers of attorney. What’s mine is yours, and I remain yours-in-consumerism, even if I die first.

Our honeymoon long over, we drive to a neighboring state to set our names side by side in marriage. The almighty hyphen creates something new, something only ours. Returning home, our new rights vanish as we cross the state line. We default to the vows we made to each other long ago when no one was looking

—James Powers-Black
Slowly the queer history of the West is coming out of the closet, the attic, and the barn as descendants of “great-grand-Uncle Joe” no longer hesitate to share the photographs he’d kept in a cigar box. This photographic gem, probably a daguerreotype, comes off the internet. It might have been taken in California in the 1850s or anywhere in the Far West where until the post-WW II period, the number of men greatly exceeded that of women. I can still remember successful farmers and ranchers sending east for school marm’s who were intended as future brides for their sons.

Every town, of course, had a brothel or two, and an “out-in-the-shed” young man or two for certain menfolk, and many towns had a saloon called “The Stag,” which was the closest thing the town had to an exclusive all-male club and to a gay bar. The Stag in Gonzales, CA (where I grew up) was built shortly after the town was founded in 1888. It was a typical western saloon (Spanish salón, meaning “big room”) with wooden floors and darkly stained walls. The swinging
doors were replaced after WW II, when neon light advertising (beers) was also added. Except for a back room where men gathered to play pedro or poker, the saloon was always kept very dimly lit, and even in the 1950s it remained off-limits to wives and “respectable” women. For years it had been the haunt of the original settlers: the Mexican employees of the Gonzales brothers who inherited the Spanish land grant, and the Danish and Italian-Swiss dairy farmers.

Since it served food, even in grade school I sometimes accompanied my father there for lunch. Now anyone who grows up on a farm or ranch gets sex education at a very early age by observing farm animals. I do remember my mother lamenting having to put down a bull because it had absolutely no interest in cows. I suspect I witnessed the full spectrum of both sexual orientation and gender identity in our farm animals, even if we didn’t then have nouns to describe them. I also suspect I saw almost the full spectrum at The Stag.

The only women allowed in The Stag were either the two or three prostitutes who were still plying their trade in the 1950s, and a few lesbian dykes...or frankly, they might well have been transgender men. My recollection is only that transgender women would have been driven out of town.

Like so many small western towns (in the 1950s Gonzales had a population of about 1,000), most of the town was “cleaned up” in the mid-1950s when the evangelical Christians who’d come to California from Arkansas and Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl years attained middleclass status and with it, political “power” in town. But The Stag remained a town fixture until the 1970s. Other than the fact it had become a fire hazard for the bank next door, I suspect it was done in by the gay liberation movement. Straight men didn’t mind rubbing shoulders in a dark saloon with gay men, lesbians, and most likely trans men as long as that reality didn’t creep outside of The Stag. Their wives wouldn’t know and wouldn’t question their manliness. The Stonewall Riots had their negative side. Uncle Willy and his partner had been together for 20 years. They’d bought a home together. The family knew; the town knew. They had no difficulty showing up at The Stag together. But the early 70s changed all that. Even my father turned his back on his younger brother. They had, in fact, been “openly hiding in view” and suddenly they were condemned. It split them apart. Uncle Willy returned to his native Switzerland and, sadly, drank himself to an early grave. The town’s best known and highly educated gay couple moved to the Monterey Peninsula, and commuted to their work in Gonzales. Only the town’s several lesbian couples stayed put because they had never socialized in town, never ate out at one of the three cafes.

Dictionaries don’t fully explain, incidentally, the meaning of “stag” in the west. It did refer to a male deer, specifically the largest and strongest, but also one that, during the mating season, showed no interest in females. Now, my father explained all this to me when I may have been eight or nine by saying the stag had unfortunately been castrated by an accident. It was only years later that I realized that “stag” was a code word for a male deer not interested in female deer and that castration by natural causes was just father’s way of not wanting to explain to me what homosexuality was.

Ray Verzasconi is the editor of The Queer Foundation Scholar and a Professor Emeritus of Spanish at Oregon State University. “The Original Stag Dances” is reprinted with permission of the author from The Queer Foundation Scholar (April 2014), pp. 9-10.
Craig Cotter was born in 1960 in New York and has lived in California since 1986. New poems have appeared in Hawai‘i Review, Poems-For-All, Poetry New Zealand, Assaracus, Court Green, Eleven Eleven, Euphony, the Bicycle Review, Caliban Online and Otoliths. His poetry is featured in the anthology Between and he has a short story in the anthology Foolish Hearts. His fourth book, After Lunch with Frank O’Hara, will be published this fall by Chelsea Station Editions. He can be found on the Web at www.craigcotter.com.
Truth

These lessons were not designed to make me bad, 
but to keep me from getting beat-up. 
The first time I waited at the new bus stop 
on Long Pond Road 
by Lake Ontario 
a boy I thought beautiful 
around my age 
jeans, leather jacket, long dark wavy hair. 
I only looked at him. 
He wrote death threats to me 
put them under a windshield wiper on my dad’s car. 
My dad wouldn’t show me the letters 
(he thought I’d be too upset) 
but told me to be careful. 

After I knew he wanted to kill me, 
I still looked at him. 
He was more beautiful 
that he might want to attack 
with fists or a knife. 
I wanted him to want me, 
to be the aggressor, to teach me. 

I like to be silent. 
I like to be more and more alone. 
That summer 
I found a beautiful blond boy 
who loved me. 
We learned to lie with expertise. 
I had a girlfriend 
so did he later. 
He had four sons with her. 

—Craig Cotter
“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

“Currier’s masterful command of language is demonstrated throughout the novel. His words are rich with the beauty of humanity, fully capturing the essence of the fragility of the hopeful heart.”
—David-Matthew Barnes, Lambda Literary
The shocks in Uncle Zeb’s old Eldorado were shot and so were Kip’s nerves. The night was moonless and a gnat squadron splattered against the windshield kamikaze style. He was late for the one thing he’d looked forward to all week. His uncle had been in an especially chatty mood tonight. Instead of retreating to his room after dinner to watch TV (or rather fall asleep in front of the set until Kip tiptoed in and shut it off), he’d lingered in the kitchen while Kip cleaned up, launching into several rambling tales about (mostly dead) people from his past. Normally Kip enjoyed the anecdotes and the company. Uncle Zeb had a droll, easy delivery. The stories were colorful and crammed with incident, which explained why he was so well-liked and had been such a successful businessman.

But tonight was Thursday, when John G. passed through town. His truck usually rolled in at around ten. John G. was on a tight schedule and didn’t break for more than a half hour, forty
minutes if he was in the mood for more than a service call. Since moving back home to Connors, Kip had endured several truck-stop disasters before happening on John G., who wasn’t exactly handsome but possessed an unforced virility made all the more alluring by his conflicted sexuality. The rest were perilously out of shape and had been on the road for days eating only fast food until they and their cabs reeked of body odor and grease. But John G. was just ripe enough, having showered at home that morning in Knoxville. And he subsisted on the nutritious meals his wife packed for him, which he kept in a cooler in the back.

Kip had met John G. through Gruff, a genius app for rural men with few options, especially one who’d been spoiled by years of living openly, first in Jonesboro during college, then Chicago. He discovered Gruff about six months after settling back in Connors. Until then he’d about despaired of any contact more intimate than cam-to-cam encounters. The few hits from Craigslist had been a bust—mouth breathers, all of them with narrow, disturbingly empty eyes—as had the furtive encounters at the X-rated bookstore down by the train tracks. The exception was Del who’d approached him in the parking lot like a double agent and invited him home. The caramel-colored Baptist preacher’s explosions of desire were such shameless fun that Kip chose to overlook the mumbled prayers for forgiveness that followed. On average it took Del a few weeks before he was prepared to plunge headlong into temptation again.

“You're late,” John G. said, though Kip could tell he wasn’t angry, probably because he’d already taken a toke or two. “Almost went with one of them lot lizards.”

“I can do anything those gals can do and better,” Kip said as he climbed into the cab and undressed.

“That is a fact,” John G. acknowledged.

“What are you up for tonight?”

“Not up just yet,” he said as he passed Kip a lit joint. “Been waiting on you. Now get to it.”

Kip did not have to be asked twice.

Later they chatted for a few minutes and Kip made him laugh—John G. had a sexy, hoarsy chortle and Kip wanted to jump his bones all over again. Then John G. revved his engine and tipped his trucker hat. “A pleasure,” he said.

“All mine,” Kip said as he hitched up his trousers.

“See you next week?” he said and leaned over to kiss Kip, which took him by surprise. “Relax, don’t mean I want to marry you.”

“Even if you did, what makes you think I’d say yes?” Kip teased as he climbed down from the cab.

“’Cause I’m irresistible,” John G. said and flashed his wide tongue.

“That is a fact,” Kip said as the semi rolled across the gravel and back onto the interstate.

* * *

CHELSEA STATION
Kip had scampered back home to Connors when his great uncle offered him room and board and a weekly stipend to look after him. Nothing seriously wrong with the eighty-year-old, but his eyesight was failing and his sense of balance was compromised.

“I’ve lost all the pep in my step,” he explained, “and all the starch in my peter.”

“But not your sense of humor I see,” Kip replied.

“Nope. When that goes, you’ll know it’s the end,” Uncle Zeb laughed.

Zebulon Brown was Kip’s only close kin. The other members of his extended family would barely cross the street to say hello to him, and if they did it was merely to pick up a morsel of gossip to keep their tongues occupied. Kip and Zeb shared the distinction of being the sole unmarried members in the family—not counting the serial divorcees. Unlike his nephew however, Zeb was truly a confirmed bachelor. There’d been several women in his life, none of them long-term; mostly dinner and bed companions who enjoyed his generosity of spirit and open wallet.

Zeb had been a commercial real estate developer and remained in the game long after he had any financial reason to do so. He enjoyed the “horse trading” aspect of buying, reconstituting and selling business properties and had begrudgingly retired three years earlier only because he got tired of having to do business with people half his age who, according to Zeb, “fancy themselves Dixie versions of Donald Trump when they got nothing but cotton between their ears.”

Uncle Zeb was sitting in the old Caddie across the street from the Greyhound stop just outside Connors as Kip gathered his knapsack and two nylon wheelies, the pitiful sum total of what he had amassed in his twenty-three years. He had been glad to leave Chicago, whose big shoulders had not been broad enough to support him.

Whatever sense of entitlement he possessed when he landed there after college was quickly stripped away by the brutal reality of trying to jumpstart a career. He’d knocked on the doors of publishers, p.r. firms and advertising houses, without so much as an unpaid internship to show for his efforts. These days it seemed you needed an Ivy League degree just to be considered for an entry level position. A humanities diploma (magna cum laude, mind you) from Arkansas State inspired little more than a shrug. He considered moving to Denver, Austin, even California, though the competition there would be no less formidable.

For the past two years he’d earned a living as a cosmetics salesman on the first floor of Bloomingdales, for which he’d been hired because of his “good-old-boy good looks,” according to the woman in human resources. He struggled to find the compliment in there.

His days consisted of vainly attempting to revitalize the wizened by rubbing cream into their wrinkles or pitching cosmetic woo for the better part of an hour to bored women who haunted the floor frittering time before a lunch date or a matinee. When it came time to close the deal, they often equivocated. “I’m just not sure. Do you suppose I could have a couple of samples to try at home?” they would say and Kip would watch his commission fly away.

Kip’s clientele also included older gay men who believed they could hypnotize him into bed by staring intently into his eyes while he massaged lotions into the back of their pudgy hands, or frivolous youngsters who fluttered around the counter as if levitated on an air cushion and appeared to be less interested in the products he sold than perpetually gazing at their reflection in
the conveniently stationed table mirrors. The few straight men who sought his counsel were usually rattled and in a great hurry, nervous someone might spot them being vain.

His social life was also stuck in first gear. Tricking was a snap as it had been during his discovery days in college. But dating seemed to have gone completely out of fashion and he’d made few friends except for a couple of his co-workers who unlike Kip took their jobs very seriously. To them life was not a cabaret, it was a parfumerie, whereas Kip’s interest in the comparative merits of Lancome, Estee Lauder, and Kiehl’s was marginal.

Kip jumped at Uncle Zeb’s offer though it entailed eating crow and settling back in Connors, the land of clandestine sex and sub rosa trysts with inappropriate men—from which he’d been desperate to escape.

He’d been raised by his paternal grandparents, after his father gained custody from his painkiller-addled mother. Soon after, his dad disappeared onto an oil rig, and Kip saw him only at holidays, if then. When Kip came out to his grandfather, Zeb’s brother, shortly before high school graduation, the old man cited Scripture and suggested he pray and repent. Instead he turned to Zeb and asked for temporary sanctuary until he went off to college in the big, rambling three-story house his uncle had purchased decades earlier when he thought he might one day settle down and start a family. “But to tell you the truth, I don’t much enjoy being around women,” he once confided. “Too demanding, too fussy, too hard to please. I’m more like you in that way. I prefer the company of men. It’s just that the ladies is where I like to hang my hat, so to speak.”

Uncle Zeb was low maintenance and, except when the dampness got into his bones, pleasant to be around. The un-hectic week consisted of grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning (or rather supervising old Miss Minor the housekeeper), scheduling repairs, taking his uncle to various doctor’s appointments, and making sure he took all his medications at the right time. Amazing how many pills his uncle had been prescribed, especially considering that he suffered from nothing even vaguely life threatening. Now and then (but never on Thursdays), they drove up to Little Rock for dinner and a movie.

They rarely had a difference of opinion and when they did Uncle Zeb was unfailingly respectful. “Hey, Kipper. Now, listen, I hate to put you out and all, but do you think maybe next time you make chicken you might fry it instead? It’s a nasty habit but I do love my fried chicken. And if you would, let’s keep it between us. No need to tell Dr. Taggart.”

Uncle Zeb was comfortable enough with Kip’s sexuality to josh with him about “snake wrestling” or “taking one for the team,” epithets that made him roll with infectious laughter. Though not the kind of man to make florid declarations, a few months after he returned to care for him, Zeb told his nephew that he was the closest thing he’d ever had to a son. Kip just nodded. With little experience at even veiled affection, he wasn’t sure how to respond except to say thanks. Odd, that over eight decades Uncle Zeb had never developed a serious attachment—at least not to anyone worth mentioning. Kip fretted that he was fated to follow the same trajectory.

Soon after moving back to Connors, Grandpa Cal stopped by. Kip had been marking time waiting for the grapevine to reach his grandfather, who was pretty much a shut-in these days. Standing on the porch, his grandfather launched into a rant through the screen door, accusing his grandson of extortion—and of course, perversion.
“Cal is that you?” Zeb called to his brother from deep inside the house pretending he hadn’t heard every word.

“Zeb, you okay?” Cal responded as if his brother was being held against his will.

“Doing fine ‘til you showed up.”

Grandpa Cal marched past Kip, right up to Zeb who was sitting in an easy chair playing Sodoku, about which he’d become obsessed since his nephew first introduced him to the numbers puzzles.

“Have you lost your mind?” Cal said, hands on hips.

“Yup. But fortunately Kipper here helped me find it. Sitting right up on top of the chiffereobe. What do you think of that?”

“Always making with the jokes. How’d this one connive his way into your house?”

“I invited him, that’s how. Now if you’ve come for a friendly visit, pull up a chair. If you want to yell, go back home to your wife.”

Grandpa Cal emitted a low growl, which was as close to conciliatory as he could manage.

“There now. Would you like a beer? Kipper, get your grandpa here a nice cold one.”

*    *     *

After living harmoniously with his nephew for eighteen months, Uncle Zeb got up from the table one morning and fell down—a short fall but enough to break his hip, and be hospitalized, and contract pneumonia. When the doctors wanted to move him into a rehab facility, he checked out, sold some stock and hired a live-in physical therapist. “I worked too hard my whole life to end it stuck in one of them places with people lined up in wheelchairs waiting on the Maker.”

After interviewing numerous candidates he settled on Mike Bissonette, a tall hulk of a man who he believed up to the task, since Uncle Zeb was six foot two and even after the pneumonia weighed almost two-hundred pounds. His bedroom furniture was moved downstairs to the back parlor and the dining room was cleared to make room for the rental equipment needed for his rehabilitation.

Uncle Zeb did not take kindly to the setback. It was one thing to import a paid companion to look after him, quite another to be physically dependent on Mike’s strength to get around and to learn how to walk for the second time in his life. While he still had his good days, the pain medications wreaked havoc with his moods and the very concept of subservience discomposed him.

Kip had rarely heard his uncle cuss before, even with good cause. Now he did so regularly, at the slightest provocation. When Kip, well-intentioned, warned him about losing his sense of humor, Zeb growled, “shut up, fudge packer.” They both got a belly laugh out of that one.

For such a large man, Mike Bissonette was soft-spoken and exhibited unflagging patience during their often exasperating daily interactions. He remained unflappable in the face of Uncle Zeb’s
angry outbursts. “Jesse H. Christmas,” he would storm, “what do you want from me? Are you trying to give me a stroke on top of everything else?”

Mike would simply respond, “I’ll just let you rest a while and then come back,” retreat to his room on the second floor or the front porch and read books on his Kindle.

Kip was almost cowed by Mike’s appealing mixture of strength and gentility and how, despite Zeb’s orneriness, he was never thrown off track, managing with each passing day to inch his uncle back to mobility. He envied Mike’s discipline and centeredness. In the early morning, while Kip was still abed, he would hear Mike in the backyard jumping rope and doing calisthenics, after which, weather permitting, he sometimes went for a run, disappearing for an hour or more, returning soaked through and gasping for air, his normally kempt hair cascading down his face, a single drop of moisture on each loose strand. Kip wished there was a subtle way he could snap a photo of Mike with his cell phone, and look at it later alone in his room.

When he wasn’t working with Uncle Zeb, Mike kept to himself, ate at odd hours and preferred to prepare his own meals with his own ingredients. He always cleaned up after himself, washing every dish and pot, drying and putting them away.

Mike seemed to deliberately avoid direct eye contact, acknowledging Kip with a side glance and a polite nod as one would a passing stranger. He spoke to him only to extract basic information—where to find a skillet or clean linens.

Yet, he sometimes got the sense that Mike surreptitiously watched him and was taking stock of his character, particularly on the evenings when he returned from his weekly rendezvous with John G., or less often with preacher Del. He often found Mike sitting on the porch reading. His impassive face betrayed little, but Kip sensed disapproval—as if he’d been a fly on the wall in John G.’s cab or Del’s musty bedroom.

Kip willingly admitted he might be looking for censure where there was none. Since moving back to Connors he’d fallen back into his former mindset. The townspeople treated him with the same diffidence and distant good-humor as always, no more, no less judgmental than before. But since his college days, he’d thrown off the self-restraints and gotten out of the habit of minding his behavioral Ps and Qs, and resented being expected to do so again.

If attitudes in Connors had changed little, it was merely because there’d been no reason. Concupiscence and passion and vice and betrayal existed here as they always had, just below the surface, and that’s how they seemed to like it. But try as he might, he couldn’t quite refashion himself into the visual equivalent of white noise.

*     *     *

Uncle Zeb’s progress proved to be slow and he decided to extend his agreement with Mike, who didn’t seem pleased or displeased.

“Maybe he’s not the right physical therapist for you,” Kip argued. He was annoyed by how Mike could simultaneously pay him no mind and look at him askance.

“Ridiculous. Mike is a fine man,” Uncle Zeb countered, “patient, dedicated and a pleasure to have around. Isn’t easy putting up with the likes of me.”
“You’re not so bad,” Kip said.

“It’s a sin to tell a lie,” Uncle Zeb scowled. “No, I lucked out with Mike. Another fella would have headed out the first time I snapped at him. He’s cut from good cloth.”

“How can you tell? He barely speaks.”

Uncle Zeb seemed surprised by the remark. “We’ve had many conversations. Yeah, he was a bit shy at first. But as you know, I’m very good at drawing people out. Once you get him going, he’s no different than anyone else. Pees standing up like the rest of us.”

“Well he doesn’t seem to care much for me,” Kip concluded.

“Bilge water,” Uncle Zeb scoffed. “Man’s here to do a job not set off firecrackers every time you walk into the room.”

* * *

One night after he finished brushing his teeth, Kip opened the bathroom door and was startled to find Mike standing on the other side naked with a bath towel around his shoulders. They grazed against each other in the doorway, enough for Kip to register the sensation of his smooth, firm skin. The move seemed deliberate as if he was daring Kip to scope out his physical splendor. And indeed, Kip managed a flash peek.

On his next visit to the truck stop, John G. told him he’d applied for a shorter route. His wife was pregnant and he wanted to be closer to home. Kip said he’d miss him and John G. looked away, which was his way of saying he’d miss him too. On his final pass through town, John G. took him into the back and they both undressed and curled up in a sleeping bag. “I want to leave you with something to remember me by,” he told Kip, though he tried to make it sound like a joke.

By the time he got home, he was feeling depressed not only about losing John G. but that his love life boiled down to a once a week liaison with a married man—and the occasional session with a tortured clergyman. Mike was asleep on the porch and Kip nudged him. “You’re going to get bit up real bad if you stay out here,” he said.

“Thanks,” Mike said and as Kip turned away grasped his forearm. “Did you have a good time tonight?”

Kip nodded faintly and Mike held on to him a beat longer. “You sleep well,” he said, with what sounded like a note of sincerity—or he might merely be projecting again.

But Kip did not sleep at all well, waking several times, and at about three when he traipsed to the bathroom for a piss, he passed Mike’s bedroom and thought he heard the springs creaking. He wondered if Mike was jerking off and what he thought about when he did.

* * *
Uncle Zeb had to be hospitalized for a few days due to a blood clot in his leg. Mike and Kip alternated visits throughout the day, though Uncle Zeb wafted in and out barely registering their presence.

“I usually make Uncle Zeb fried chicken on Wednesdays,” Kip told Mike when he came in, “but tonight I’m in the mood for a little stir fry with vegetables. Very healthy. Would you like to join me?”

“Sure,” Mike said in his typical “don’t care much one way or the other” manner.

Halfway through dinner, Mike had not said a word except in response to direct questions. “Sorry I’m not much of a talker,” he apologized, staring down at his stir fry.

“Uncle Zeb says you and him have conversations all the time. Are you uncomfortable with me because I’m gay?”

“No,” Mike said too quickly. After a pause he added, “Good chicken. Thank you.” Then he took his plate to the sink and washed it.

Later, as Kip was getting ready for bed, Mike rapped on his door and he quickly pulled on a pair of shorts. “I just wanted to say that I lied over dinner. It’s been difficult for me with you just two doors down.”

Kip nodded and took it all in. “If you’d prefer not to share a house with me, I’m sure my uncle would understand.”

Mike seemed annoyed by Kip’s reaction as if he’d deliberately misunderstood. “No, I don’t care about that. It’s just that…well this is none of my business, but when you go out at night, I worry that something might happen to you.”

Kip was completely taken off guard. “That’s why you wait on the porch?”

Mike did not respond but Kip saw the answer in his eyes.

“That’s very sweet of you but…."

“Don’t you want somebody….more of a companion?” Then he chided himself. “You don’t have to answer that.”

“Of course I would. But they don’t grow on trees.”

Mike nodded in acknowledgment.

“What about you?” Kip ventured.

Mike flushed crimson and Kip almost immediately regretted the question. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to pry.”

Mike turned even redder and then lunged forward and stole a kiss before scurrying back to his bedroom.

Now Kip was totally confused.

Next day they drove to the hospital together to pick up his uncle and, as usual, Mike disappeared into himself, which drove Kip bananas. Before he got out of the car, he placed a hand on Mike’s thick shoulder. “If you want to kiss me again, you can. But you have to talk to me.”
Mike stared at him and there was a look of quiet terror in his eyes. “I’ll try” he mumbled, then took off into the hospital as if Kip was chasing him.

Uncle Zeb, oblivious to the tension, chattered the entire way back. “Looking forward to being in my own house again with my boys,” he said. “Them nurses sure are mean. One of them in particular was so out of sorts, I said to her ‘do you think you might be happier in another line of work?’ Should’ve seen the look on her face,” he said, gagging on his laugh.

For the rest of the day Mike made himself scarce and begged off supper.

“How’d you two get on by yourselves?” Uncle Zeb asked as he picked at his meal.

“Ask Mike,” Kip sniped, wildly twirling his spaghetti. “At least he’ll say more than two words to you.”

“Don’t give up on him just yet. Boy’s an open wound. He could use some kindness.”

Kip wasn’t sure what his uncle meant, but was intrigued. After dinner he brought Mike an iced tea and sat opposite him on the porch. “Uncle Zeb says I have to be nicer to you.”

Mike took a sip and a tear escaped and rolled down his cheek. “I’m kinda messed up. Don’t know if I can be fixed.”

“Didn’t say I wanted to fix you. But I got ears and they hear pretty good. ‘Sides, listening to other peoples’ problems is a time honored tradition in Connors. Not much else to do.”

Mike had the good sense to find this mildly amusing.

Progress.

Over several evenings, Mike doled out driblets of information. Kip was struck by the flatness with which he spoke of the more unpleasant periods of his life. An orphan, Mike had bounced back and forth between foster homes. He’d been a scrawny child, frequently abused by his guardians, until one of his foster fathers advised that, for his own safety, he bulk up to better defend himself against bullies and predators. The only good advice he ever received, Mike said, especially since that same man later tried to molest him.

If Kip was being honest, he would have admitted he was much a neophyte as Mike when it came to revealing himself in part because, except for Uncle Zeb, no one had ever expressed much interest in him beyond his daily needs. It’s not how his grandparents had raised their children and they saw no need to change for him.

From the little Mike told him, however, the neglect he’d endured had been mundane by comparison. Moreover, unlike Kip, Mike had never found an outlet like sharing his body with strangers. Kip surmised that there were probably several layers of sadness, anger, and hurt festering beneath the surface. He also suspected that Mike might be a virgin.

“Bet you weren’t expecting all that,” Mike said nervously, as they climbed the stairs.

“I hope it makes you feel better to talk about it,” Kip responded.

“Can’t tell. See, I don’t feel much.”

“I can understand that. Numb can be good. Kind of addictive though.”

At Kip’s bedroom door, Mike thanked him and said goodnight, and just before he walked away said, “I expect you’ve guessed by now that the other night was my first kiss.”

CHELSEA STATION
“No it wasn’t,” Kip said. He placed his lips on Mike’s and kept them there until Mike responded. “That was your first kiss.”

The combination of mirth and horror on Mike’s face was completely worth it.

“I want us to all to start having dinner together,” Kip said the next day as Mike emerged from his morning session with Zeb. “If you don’t like what we eat I’ll cook for you separately. My uncle would be pleased. And I would too.”

“I might not be good company,” Mike said, hesitant.

Kip took his hand and massaged it. “I wouldn’t worry. Between me and Uncle Zeb you won’t be able to get in a word anyways. You don’t have to talk. I just want to hear you breathe.”

“You mean like this?” Mike said. They were standing so close that Mike was almost panting.

“Pity’s sake,” Kip said. He fashioned one hand into a scoop and pretended to reach for Mike’s crotch “What do you think you’d do if I tried that? Hyperventilate?”

“Probably,” Mike said in all seriousness.

“Does this mean the springs are going to be creaking tonight?” Kip ventured with a playful wink.

“You can hear that?” he said, slightly panicked.

“Oh huh. Hope you’re thinking of me.”

“You can hear that too?”

* * *

As he and his uncle drove through Connors’ main street on the way to a doctor’s appointment, Kip saw preacher Del arm-in-arm with a young woman. They were standing at the corner waiting for the light to change. He hadn’t heard from Del in two months and could see that in the interim he’d been beating up on himself and reinforcing his closet door.

Kip honked his horn. Del and the woman both turned. “Hey preacher man,” he called out and blew Del a kiss as he drove off.

“What the hell was that about?” Uncle Zeb grumbled.

“Never you mind,” Kip said, pressing down on the accelerator.

“No wonder Mike is so scared of you.”

“Why, what did he say?”

“Not much. Didn’t have to. Everybody knows how intimidating you can be.”

“Is that code for flamboyant?”

“No it’s not,” Zeb spit back. “If I thought you were a sissy boy I’d say so.”

“Yeah, because you’re not intimidating at all,” Kip said.

“Sometimes I am,” Zeb acknowledged. “But that Mike is as gentle a soul as I’ve ever met.”
“Did you know he stole a kiss from me the other night?”

“Doesn’t surprise me.”

“So is that what this is about? Are you playing Dolly Levi?”

“I don’t know who this Levi lady is, but you can’t be so blind as not to see that Mike kind of fancies you. Whether you wind up in the sack together isn’t important. You should get to know him as a person. A friendship would do you both some good. There’s a good man underneath there trying to get out. But don’t be so selfish that if he won’t lick your Johnson right off, you give up on him.”

“All right. Got it,” Kip said, fuming. “But why does he have to make it so difficult? It’s not as if I’ve made myself unavailable.”

“That’s just the problem. You’re used to casting your rod and just reeling them in. This one’s different. He needs courting.”

“Courting?” Kip exploded. “Should I pull the surrey with the fringe on top out from the barn?”

“Don’t be such a smart ass. Ask the man out on a proper date.”

Kip sighed. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because whatever his problems, he’s better than any of them truckers or that preacher.”

“How do you know about the truckers?”

Zeb rolled his eyes and shook his head from side to side. “When folks see my Caddie parked out there by the interstate, do you think for one minute they expect to see me pop out of a truck licking my chops? Now go fetch my walker. We’re already late for the doctor.”

* * *

“Would you like to go a movie in Little Rock tomorrow night?” Kip asked after dinner, as he washed and Mike dried and Uncle Zeb snoozed in his wheelchair.

Mike sheepishly nodded.

“You actually have to respond with words,” Kip said, handing him a wet platter.

“I would,” Mike said.

“Try not to get too excited,” Kip sneered.

“I won’t,” Mike said.

“You don’t make it easy on a guy, do you?”

“You say that like it’s a surprise,” Michael snapped back.

“Touché,” Kip conceded.

Grandpa Cal was recruited to look after Uncle Zeb. Kip wrote down his cell number and instructions about medication doses for the rest of the evening. His grandfather’s eyes darted back and forth between Kip and Mike during the entire conversation. Kip was tempted to dry
hump Mike right in front of him but couldn’t decide which one of the two would be more shocked.

The superhero movie was indistinguishable from every other one Kip had seen, but Mike was enraptured. He got a kick out of watching him lean forward with anticipation during the action sequences, and how his head bobbed up and down approvingly whenever the protagonist scored a point over the opposition.

“What should we do now?” Kip said as they got back into the car.

“It’s getting kind of late.”

“No. I paid for the movie. So I decide. That’s how a date works.”

Mike didn’t contradict him and sat quietly as Kip drove to an old deserted road and pulled into an arbor. “We’re going to make out now.”

Mike seemed hesitant.

“You’d better cooperate. Else you’re walking home.”

Kip put his hands behind Mike’s head and laid a lavish kiss on him. He practically had to jimmy his mouth open, but once he got past the teeth, Mike’s tongue was compliant—and even a bit eager. Mike started when Kip’s mouth began to suck on his neck. Kip sensed his amazement at having discovered a new erogenous zone. Several nibbles later, Mike buckled uncontrollably and expelled a long, ejaculatory moan.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be, I’m flattered,” Kip assured him.

“Whew,” he said, embarrassed/amused, amused/embarrassed. “Well that sure was …different.”

“Pay me a compliment, why don’t you?” Kip said.

“I enjoyed it. Thank you.”

Kip quickly unzipped. “Now be a gentleman and finish me off.”

Mike’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“I won’t take long, promise. I just need a helping hand.”

When he’d finished, they rode home in silence, but Kip could tell that Mike was not displeased. “So, do you think you’d like to do that again?”

Mike nodded, a little more animated than usual.

Progress.

* * *

While Kip sometimes resented the slo-mo seduction process, a part of him was titillated as well. The necking and the neophyte hand job had been strangely exciting, almost a rediscovery of how to be with a man. He began to eagerly look forward to the next milestone.
During a walk in the woods on a cloudy spring afternoon while Uncle Zeb took his mid-day nap, Mike abruptly asked, “Say Kip, how do I know if I’m gay?”

“If you have to ask…” Kip quipped but quickly asked to retract it. It was a serious question and Mike had probably been working up the gumption to ask him. “Well, for one thing, you creamed your shorts the other night when we made out and I assume you weren’t fantasizing about Jennifer Lawrence.”

“That’s only because I have no idea who she is.”

Kip recalled that Mike’s foster families had all been rigidly devout—no movies, no music, no TV. “Jennifer Lawrence is an Oscar-winning actress,” Kip explained, “but that’s a bad example. I would totally do her. She looks like a very hot boy.”

“What I mean is how do I know if I’m gay if I have no idea who I am?”

The question stopped Kip in his tracks. “Speaking only from personal experience, it was probably the first thing I knew for sure about myself, the first glimmer of identity. Beyond that, I’m pretty much a work in progress. Twenty-five years old and living in fucking Connors with my uncle with no idea what happens next.”

Kip hung his head and leaned back against a tree. “Why did you make me think about that? Now I’m depressed.”

“I’m sorry,” Mike said.

Kip grabbed Mike and pushed him against the tree and yanked down his sweatpants.

“What are you doing?”

“Something to un-depress me,” he said as he crouched down. “And I’m pretty sure you’ll get a kick out of it as well.”

Mike closed his eyes and a few minutes later the clouds separated and the sun broke through.

*    *     *

While Kip took undeniable pleasure in expanding Mike’s sexual vocabulary, his anxiety was not assuaged. For as long as Mike was exposing his vulnerabilities, Kip was distracted from his own festering issues. This time it was he who withdrew, but in his own way, being physically present but otherwise short and evasive. The worst part is that he was conscious of how his behavior impacted on Mike, who would shoot him questions with his eyes but lacked the courage to confront him; which only made Kip feel worse.

After a couple of days of being on the other end of the semi-silent treatment, Mike gave up, retreating to his corner to sulk.

Kip was shutting the lights and locking up for the night when he heard Uncle Zeb call out from his room at the back of the house.

“Why are you still up? Something wrong?” Kip asked.

“No, I’m fine. We need to have a talk you and me.”
Kip did not like the sound of this. “Can it wait until morning? I’m exhausted.”

“No, it cannot. Now get over here.”

“What is it?” Kip snapped.

“Don’t give me that tone,” Uncle Zeb asked. “You’ve being very unpleasant these past few days, rude I’d say. And I can’t think of anything I’ve done that’s worse than usual, so it must be about Mike.”

“You’re imagining things,” Kip said.

Uncle Zeb flapped his lips. “Honestly, Kipper. First you poke at that boy, then the minute he responds, you take off like some hit and run driver.”

“Can I be honest?” his brow furrowed.

“I insist on it,” Uncle Zeb said.

“I don’t think I’m good enough for him.”

“You’ll get no argument from me on that one,” Zeb retorted.

It was like a blow between the eyes and Kip became enraged. “Do me a favor and butt out, Uncle Zeb.”

“Whatever you say, sissy boy.”

“Homophobe,” Kip yelled.

“Don’t give me that,” his uncle scoffed. “If you’re not going to behave like a man, then what do you expect?”

Kip collapsed into his uncle’s easy chair and buried his face in his hands. He explained to his uncle that when it came to romance, he was as much a virgin as Mike. If he’d just wanted someone to introduce him to sex, they could have made a go of it. But if his intent was to push through Kip’s hard shell to the caramel center, he was prepared to resist. It was his only defense.

“Sorry, Kipper,” Uncle Zeb said, backing off. “All this time I assumed you were the strong one.”

Over breakfast Uncle Zeb told Kip that Mike would be leaving the next day. He was going to write him a letter of recommendation and the agency would be sending a replacement by the end of the week.

“Did Mike ask to leave?” Kip said.

“Let’s just say it was mutual agreement,” Uncle Zeb replied, being unusually evasive.

Kip holed up in his room for the rest of the day ricocheting between relief and shock. He told himself over and over that this was the only possible solution. Two people as emotionally compromised as he and Mike didn’t stand a chance. He repeated it enough times that he began to believe that Mike’s absence wouldn’t make a difference one way or another.

At about two in the morning he finally fell asleep. He awoke at four surprised to find Mike curled up on the bed beside him. “I didn’t want to wake you,” Mike said, rousing. “I wasn’t sure I could fall asleep next to you. But I guess I did.”

Kip inched close enough to feel the waves of heat Mike’s body generated.
“I don’t really want to go, you know,” Mike said.
Kip merely nodded.
“Does that mean you don’t want me to either?”
Kip shook his head.
“You actually have to say the words,” Mike said.
“Don’t go,” he said softly.
“What?”
“You heard me. Please don’t make me repeat it.”
Kip nestled against Mike. “This is where you put your arms around me and tell me everything’s going to be okay.”
Mike met him halfway. He enfolded Kip in his arms, but found himself unable to reassure him since neither of them quite believed it just yet. Then they both drifted off again.
Just after dawn, Kip awoke to the amazing sensation of Mike’s full weight on top of him. After kissing for what seemed like several hours—several glorious hours—Mike said “Don’t you think it’s time?”
Kip nodded compliantly and wrapped his legs around Mike’s back.
Progress.

Richard Natale is a Los Angeles-based writer and journalist whose work has appeared in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, Time Magazine, and Variety, among others. He has published more than a dozen short stories and, in addition to the stories available on Amazon, he also has such titles as The Muscle House and the short story collection Island Fever on thewritedeal.org and Google Books. His novella Junior Willis has just been published. Upcoming this fall are the novel Cafe Eisenhower and the young-adult fantasy novel Doubloon. In addition, Natale wrote and directed the feature film Green Plaid Shirt, which played at more than 20 film festivals around the world and was the closing night selection at the Palm Springs Film Festival. It is available through Wolfe Video either on DVD or for streaming.

Read more from author Richard Natale
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—Steve Berman, editor of the Best Gay Stories annual series
Dear Richard and John,

Thank you so much for sending me the invitation to your Impending Grand Nuptials. I’m very honored and touched to be included as part of your Great Day. And I’m certainly impressed by all the grandeur and the expense of the Big Occasion you are mounting. (The invitation alone could become a museum piece—Heavy-weight paper! Embossed borders! Gilded edges! Translucent Insert!) You must be planning an Elaborate Affair for Hundreds—a four o’clock wedding ceremony on the beach followed by dinner and dancing in town. I’m already dazzled and excited! And I just love that “Festive Attire Requested” bit. No black tie necessary! No suits and neckties that no longer fit me because time and gravity have taken their toll!

But I must confess right up front that I can’t exactly place the moment—or place—where we met and bonded enough that you would be so generous to include me in your Special Celebration of
Commitment to One Another. Are you the Rich who works out at my gym or Rick-the-personal trainer who gave me his cellphone number a few weeks ago? There is a Rick-with-a-goatee who lives in the apartment two floors above mine. Is that you? Or are you the Richard who works on the floor beneath me? You’re not the Dick with the huge cock and the sling on East Fifty-third Street, are you? Or Richard the therapist that I met at the Townhouse about two years ago (and who had that fabulous loft)? I’m certain you’re not the Ricky I hired as a hustler last fall—he would need a lot of work before he could land into such nuptial bliss as what you are up to—I mean, even those Queer Eye boys would be hard pressed to convince him to dry out and sober up enough to say, “I Do,” but, then again, he was a beautiful piece of work, with a dick that could get as hard as a good dick can get... And a rich man could certainly entice him into sticking around for the Next Big Thing he could try... Is that you? Are you that Dick? That Ricky? That Richard?

I know there was a friend, Rick, from my ACT UP days, but he is long gone from this planet and that can’t be you. And then there was another Richard who was on my phone tree list—that’s not you, is it, after all these years? Or are you that older Richard, the Richard I met at the Man’s Country baths back in the late seventies? My God, that would make us both, what?—well, almost ancient and shriveled-up and certainly almost-off the marriage-market list!

So it must be John whom I know—Is this John from the Black Party in 1995? (The guy in chaps I gave such a long, delicious blow job to in the balcony?) Or the Jon who was the volunteer at the March on Washington in 1993? (We shared a bagel together while waiting to head down to the Mall). You’re not the JJ from the Gay Pride Parade in Manhattan back in, well, 1986, are you? (Jonathan James Something-Or-Another, as I recall... the guy who was an ex-boyfriend of my ex-boyfriend—the one who was in the hospital at the time and didn’t live much longer that summer?) You’re not Johnny, the chorus boy, whom I dated briefly when I was just out of college, are you? Or are you the Jonathan I had the three-way with back in the early nineties? You’re not the John who was married to Sharon-Lee, are you?—the guy who swore he was going to get a divorce from his wife and wanted me to fuck him a second (and third) time the night we hooked up. You can’t be John from Hewlett Packard—that really well built dude who showed up at my apartment to fix more than just my printer—he told me he was really straight, but didn’t mind having sex with a guy and so he did—have sex with a guy—me—and more than once, too, as I recall. This isn’t you, is it?

So maybe it is Richard I know after all. Are you the Richard on Perry Street with the beautiful nine-inch cock I greedily devoured one night in 2002? The one with the massage table? Or are you the Dick I had a blind date with (about 4,000 blind dates ago)—the guy I met at Starbucks on Eighth Avenue on April 16, 1999 (and who, by the way, looked nothing like the photo he e-mailed me in advance). Are you the Richie from the summer house in 1985 I fooled around with when our boyfriends weren’t around? Or the one on Fourteenth Street in 1991 with a gold Labrador and who liked to do watersports in his bathtub? You can’t be Richard-the-Republican I slept with at the Warwick—I mean, he would have had to gone through a lot of therapy to come out of the closet, you know—but, then again, that was something like fifteen years ago, so, well, it could be you? Are you that fucked up Dick?

Come to think of it, there was the John I shared a heart-pounding handjob with during a van ride from the Miami airport to Key West in 1983 (when that near-monsoon canceled our flight and we were driven south in the blinding rainstorm courtesy of the airline). Or did I meet you on the rooftop of Kevin’s apartment building on the West Side during his Fourth of July party back in—
what—1979? The John with the big blue eyes who was a really great kisser? I hope you’re not the John I threw up on during the boat ride around Manhattan when my boss was retiring in 1987. (Who knew gin and tonics could be so deadly on an empty stomach and a swaying vessel? But then you were so sweet—we went back to your place and showered and fooled around for like, well, hours and hours and hours and hours.) Is this you again, after all these years?

Whomever you are, how ever I know you, I am so glad you have each found your Significant Other and I am thankful that whatever past I shared with either (or both) of you did not make a strong enough impact for you to abandon your quest to find your True Soul Mate For All Eternity and thus, you found Each Other. I am so looking forward to being present at your Special Recognition of Commitment Between Two Gay Men and listening to you exchange your Vows of Companionship—especially, after all the time and memories that have passed between us (unless you’re the Richard from the chat room I met last week—then we simply have to smile and nod and keep our little secret, huh?—consider it one of those things that bachelors do before they get hitched).

So, Yes, absolutely, I’ve enclosed my RSVP card (prestamped by you, no less, how truly generous). And of course, I’ll be sending a thoughtful gift along before the Big Date happens—a quick Google search already shows that you are registered at Bloomies, Tiffany’s, and Crate & Barrel! But my big, burning Question of the Day—the one I am saving up to ask when we meet again—is not really How did We meet? but How did You find each other?—How did The Two of You meet? How did it happen? Where did it happen? Details, details, details, dearies—I want to know all the facts. (Because, God knows, I’ve been trying to meet someone just like you for decades! I have been a Husband Hunter from my Gay Day One!)

I’ll also be bringing lots of Kleenex with me to the Big Event, expecting to sob my eyes and heart out because of your fortunate happiness and new marital ecstasy. I’ll share my tissues with any one who needs one, you know, and I’ll have a few unused condoms in my wallet, too, just in case there is someone who might be interested in seeing what happens. You never know who you might meet next—he could be Mr. Right, after all. Then again, even if he’s not—even if he is just Mr. Right Now, I’m not too old yet to overlook a new adventure—and you never know what else you might find along the way... As I always say (and probably said to you), it’s good to keep an open mind and be ready for the possibility to change.

All my best and see you soon,

xoxoxo

Jimmy

(aka James, Jameson, Jamey, Jim, JC, or just plain J!)

Jameson Currier is the author of six novels and four collections of short fiction. This fall Chelsea Station Editions will publish his memoir, Until My Heart Stops.
It is 1932, and William “Butch” Cardinal, like most of America, has fallen on hard times. Formerly known as “Butcher” Cardinal, a world-class wrestler who “coulda been a contender,” he is now lucky to find work as hired muscle for a Chicago mobster. While collecting a small parcel for his employer one evening, he witnesses the murder of his contact. Himself wounded, he escapes with his life, the clothes on his back, and the package; however, he is framed for the murder, and so flees to New Orleans, where he finds sanctuary with Hollis Rossington, another disgraced wrestler, now manager of a nightclub. While the Chicago mob, the Chicago police, an insane hitman, and two mysterious gentlemen pursue him—each for different reasons—Butch tries to make sense of the mystery he has unexpectedly stumbled into, and discover what is so important about the package. All it contains is a necklace—a necklace with a bent and scratched pendant, not even a single gem—but a lot of people are willing to kill to have it. Kill anyone, including Butch Cardinal. And a lot of people will die on account of it. A lot of people.

The necklace is the mystical element dropped into Butch's world, a milieu otherwise indistinguishable from standard noir crime fiction. Thomas makes sparing use of the occult, however, which centers mostly on the two members of the Alchemi—Brand and Hayes—who shadow Butch in order to regain the necklace. The Alchemi have been guardians and keepers of mystical artifacts for a long time, but whether their desire to reclaim the necklace is part of a larger agenda is not revealed; they, like nearly everyone else in the novel, are morally ambiguous and appear motivated purely by self-interest. In keeping with the air of uncertainty in the novel, Thomas reveals only just enough of their motivations and abilities to further the narrative.

For all the mystic abilities employed by the Alchemi, and the violence surrounding their methods, it is Paul Rabin, whose detached, methodical tortures and killings are far more chilling, and provide much of the horror in the novel. In a city essentially at war—the Italian mob of southern Chicago against the northern Irish syndicate—Rabin stands out for his cruelty, which is evident from his first appearance, when he “accidentally” cuts the hand of a nurse while visiting his wife in the hospital.

Butch's romance with Rossington is the only non-violent subplot in the entire narrative. Even so, it does not begin easily—Butch initially finds Rossington's relatively open life unsettling, partly because it forces him to confront several unpleasant memories. Despite this, it is Butch who makes the first move. Given the setting of the novel, one cannot say that Butch's relationship with Rossington will lead to any greater self-acceptance or even long-term happiness.
on the part of Butch: he is too much a product of his world and time, and is not given to serious introspection.

Gritty, tense, this dark novel grabs hold of you by the lapels and doesn't let go once you begin. Thomas maintains a break-neck pace throughout, as Butch painstakingly uncovers the secret of the necklace and the plot surrounding his own (unwitting) involvement. One of the things Butch learns on his quest for understanding is that he, too, has an affinity for the artifacts the Alchemi collects. This affinity—in much the same way that Butch's relationship with Rossington forces him to reconsider his sexuality—reawakens his sense of wonder, killed by his abusive father when he was still a child. Will Thomas consider a sequel, where these and other themes can be developed further?

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Keith Glaeske is a medievalist and collector of speculative fiction currently living in Washington, DC. His articles about medieval literature have been published in *Medieval Perspectives, Traditio, and Ériu*. 
Will Stockton teaches English at Clemson University. With D. Gilson, he is the author of *Crush* and *Gay Boys Write Straight Porn*. His poems have appeared in journals including *Assaracus, Bloom, Folio, Fourth River, PANK*, and *Weave*. 
Chess

Adam teaches me how to play chess, to move the rook from side to side, the knight across and one over, the queen where she wants, as long as she moves in a straight line.

He never lets me win. We stay up late, watch \textit{Gone with the Wind},
call to check the time, the weather, to hear the robot read the game clock.

\textit{Pawns}, Adam tells me, \textit{move forward one square at a time, except on the first move, and they take from the side.}

I ask him to play my \textit{Step by Step} tape.
Instead he plays Grateful Dead records while I play \textit{Super Mario Brothers}
and he drinks his father’s vodka below the line.

Captured, he gains a story—divorce, drugs, boredom, set pieces.

But not the one about palming me below the surf, holding my hand in the back of the station wagon,
swerving down the Carolina beach, this queen and I, fake Yankee accents, kicking sand castles.

—Will Stockton
Prof and Lily hit my small home town like a Fourth of July fireworks display. It was 1942 and everyone was counting ration stamps, pitching in for the war effort and praying for peace before any more gold stars appeared in the front windows of houses along my paper route. The Boy Scouts collected newspapers, tin cans, clothes for refugees, and played *Capture the Flag* as though we were John Wayne storming yet another Pacific atoll. (Yes I confess to Scout Membership and, before that, to three years as a Cub Scout! Is the Supreme Court keeping track?)

As for Prof, our new bandmaster, he proceeded to up our pace to become the fastest marching band in the state. On top of that, being an old vaudevillian, he decided that we could dance on the march as well. So Lily taught us the Charleston and we practiced on the football field, without our instruments, holding hands in a big circle so that we got the kicks together and just the right height. The next Spring, at the state band festival, we won the championship with the Charleston, dancing our way into the hearts of everyone along the parade route, and just for a few minutes helping folks forget North Africa and Rommel and those Pacific atolls.

Lily, with her ever-present cigarette, black dresses, and pearls, was the perfect match in Prof’s vaudeville skits performed now and again before a squealing and whistling mass of high school girls and boys. She was also the town librarian.
Being a voracious reader, striving for extra points toward a possible future scholarship, I was practically a daily visitor after school, before starting my newspaper route. I was full of questions, and reading was an avenue of escape, a delay in that shadowy, possible step over a very high cliff to a fall from which I might not recover. A step germinated by my reading about homosexuality in medical journals.

One day, Lily motioned me back into the stacks and, explaining to me that it was an English book by a woman, and just a bit taboo, she handed me *The Well of Loneliness*. She said, “Prof and I want you to read this, and it’s just between the three of us. We think you’re old enough to know that it takes all kinds of people to make up this world, and all kinds of relationships between them. Read it, and let us know what you think.”

A week or so later, when I had finished reading it, they invited me to supper and we talked a long time. I asked them first, “Why me?” and they were careful and quick to explain that they knew how much I wanted to go on to college, that I was kidded about my being the only boy who didn’t have to be drafted to act for the other-wise all-girl drama group, and that I was to them special and needed to understand worldly things that perhaps my classmates weren’t ready to accept just yet. They never used the word queer. Remember, this was 1943, before the word gay, before television, before there was any discussion of homosexuality anywhere by anyone and *The Well of Loneliness* remained the only generally known book of fiction on the subject for years.

Their answers calmed my fears that I was somehow guilty or had done anything out of the ordinary and encouraged me to pursue any and all interests toward my college goal, to hold on, and when I got to college, I’d find all kinds of folks just like me. Of course, I didn’t tell them that I had, somewhere way inside of me, figured out that if women could care for each other so deeply and that it was not acceptable, then my secret thoughts for my own sex were equally possible and just as taboo.

Years later, after winning that West Virginia University academic scholarship and surviving Korea and trumpeting my recent membership in Actors Equity, I went to see them as usual on a visit to my hometown. Lily was ill with cancer, still smoking and still as stunning as ever. Knowing I might never see the two of them together again, I tried to thank them for helping me so long ago, when I was young and truly lost and questioning my secret desires. They were as gentle and supportive and as proud of me as anyone could ever ask. Lily took my hand and said, “We hope you aren’t lonely, because you never have to be. Just think of us and our friendship and you will be okay.” She was right. Luckily, I’ve had a number of folks like Prof and Lily in my life. They’ve given me a whirl around this magical ballroom we call the world, and now, in my senior years, I’m still dancing. And, at times, I’m quite sure Prof and Lily are right beside me.

Garrison Phillips is a Korean War Veteran, a graduate of WVU, and a retired actor. He writes a blog, *Everyday Strolls*, for Senior Planet of OATS (Older Adults Technology Services) which teaches the Internet free to senior citizens. 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 a short story in *Apalachee Review*. His short story “Humpty Dumpty” appeared in Chelsea Station in April 2014. “Prof and Lily” was originally published in *SAGEmatters*. 
On Lake Rabun, Jesus Baptizes Peter

Every invitation to white railing
flecked & peeling. The rough of feet
against dock, two naked boys

ought not run on planks
that rot & splinter with stray
two penny nails. I do not mind

you jumping first. Calling out, Follow.
I do not mind the slick of moss
in my hair, your dripping rope of snot.

& because the water will not clean
us, your kiss on my ear, the tease
of a brother, your arms that push
me, laughing, asunder.

—D. Gilson
“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
Set in the 1980’s, *Dirty One* follows a pack of adolescent characters who live in the acid-drenched, suburban town known as Leominster, Massachusetts—the plastics capital of America, as well as the birthplace of Johnny Appleseed.

Praise for *Dirty One*

“The young adults that populate Graves’ fiction are skewed, skittering through their adolescence with a drug- and demon-fueled intensity that leaves the reader breathless and aching to sit down with these poor kids to let them know that things do, indeed, get better. Still, the kids are only following the examples of their even more fucked up parents, most of whom have no business having kids in the first place. But the drama... The drama is delicious and makes for some of the finest reading I’ve had in months. Graves is one of the most original young voices writing for our community today—so pick up a copy of *Dirty One* and you can tell your friends that you were a fan from the beginning.”
—Jerry Wheeler, *Out in Print*

“As debuts go, they don’t get much better than this. Graves, a child of the ’80s, draws diligently on the banal pop culture totems of his adolescence—cassette tapes, pastel recliners, roller rinks, Walkmans, Mario Lopez in *Tiger Beat*. His characters, however, are far from banal. They are antsy, angsty kids, some in their teens, some younger, consumed by jarring desires they can’t resist but don’t quite comprehend, anxious to shed their everyday skins but with barely any sense of the world beyond their suburban existence. And, boy, do they transgress. These stories brand Graves as a next-generation master of prose that is at once remorseless and refreshing.”
—Richard Labonté, *Bookmarks*

“A nostalgic saga of pre-teen drama. It’s like a Wham video with a polymorphous perverse underbelly and a Flock of Seagulls hairdo.”
—Sam Baltrusis, *Boston Spirit*

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
Lying with Men
Sean Meriwether

Two men arrived at an overgrown apple orchard, the trees pregnant with unripe fruit. They swam in a lazy stream and washed a week’s worth of filth from their bodies before dropping onto the sun-warmed grass, naked as newborns.

“Adam,” Steve said. It was the first word he had uttered in days and his voice sounded foreign to his own ears. “I was curious.”

“Curiosity has always been punished.” Adam scratched himself idly as he watched the clouds take new shapes.

“Who was the last person you were with?”

“What do you mean?”
Steve looked over at his scruffy travelling companion. “Before whatever happened, who was the last person you remember? When was it, a year ago? Two?”

“Last spring, but it feels longer.”

“For me it was my best friend. I saw him after gym. We were supposed to get together to study but he never made it. I can’t remember what he looks like.”

Adam tugged on his beard. “Mine was my girlfriend. She was still sleeping when I left her apartment.”

“What were women like?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t remember how women were. It’s all so distant.”

“Where is this coming from?”

“The whole point of this search was to find some women. Continue the species and all that, but I don’t remember much about them.”

“If we keep following this river east we’ll find some and all your questions will be answered.”

“I’ve heard that for weeks.” The stream gurgled but retained its secrets. “Listen, Adam, when was the last time, you know… with a woman.”

“Why don’t you go back to daydreaming? You don’t talk for days and now all these questions.”

“Can you tell me what it was like?”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Remind me of what we are looking for. I’m tired of walking.”

Adam huffed and twined the ends of his beard.

“Come on. I sang all the television theme songs I could remember for you. Why can’t you do this one thing for me?”

“All right, already. Let’s see. Women. They were soft. They had long hair. They smelled nice.”

“I have long hair. I smell,” Steve tested the no-longer lethal odor of his armpits, “better after the swim. That would make me a woman.”

“They smelled better than you. Like vanilla or something.”

“Ice cream?”

“Go to sleep.” Adam looked down the length of his fuzzy body to the river beyond, the road leading east between his feet. “A short nap and we can get in ten miles before dark.”

“Do you think about them a lot?”

“About who?”

“Women. The girlfriend that you left in bed.”

“Why?”

“I, uh, heard you last night. Thinking. About women.”
Adam turned away, the curve of his spine formed a lopsided S.

“Were you thinking about her? Or someone else? Or was it a dream? And who is Mary?”

“Mother of god, will you stop the inquisition!” Adam got up and walked behind an apple tree. He watered the bark and looked up into the interlacing branches at the blue sky above. It was a good day to travel, warm and dry. Then he saw Steve in the tree above him, picking apples. The young man’s lithe body reminded him of… he shook the thought from his head and went back to his trampled-down spot on the grass.

“I’ve got lunch.” Steve jumped down from the tree and placed a few apples on the ground between them. He held out an apple, but Adam shook his head. Steve sunk his teeth into the hard flesh, grimaced at the sharp flavor then savored the juice. He licked the sticky fluid from his hand.

“They’re too green,” Adam dismissed. “You’ll get sick and die.” He lay back in the grass. “We’re burning daylight. We have to leave soon.”

“Adam, I, well you should know. I never…”

“Never?”

“No. And now it’s too late. There aren’t any left. There is just you. And me.”

“Lucky us,” Adam sighed.

“What were women like? I only remember my mother. She wasn’t soft, she had short hair and she never smelled good.”

“You really never? I just figured… you’re a handsome guy. Fit. The girls must have…”

“I’m shy. Really. I never knew how to talk to them. I always got along better with guys.”

“Are you…”

“Does it matter?” Steve dropped in the grass next to his companion and draped his arm over Adam’s shoulders. “Does that make a difference when there are only two of us left?”

Adam shrugged off Steve’s arm and leaned forward, watched the horizon for signs for life. “Women were nice. When one smiled at you your heart beat a little faster. They were hard to talk to. They wanted one thing but said they wanted something else. They expected you to read their minds and were upset when you couldn’t. They were confusing.”

“I’m not confusing, am I?”

“You are right now.”

“Guess I checked off one more box. I am a woman.”

“You’re not a woman, believe me. You’ve got… that.”

“So mine sticks out. Is that the only difference?” Steve finished his apple and tossed the core into the river. They watched it bob in the water, spin around, then give in to the tug of the current. It floated downstream.

“Men are different. Women are different. It is just the way we are made.”
“Sounds to me like women were different from men. We should be more compatible because we have the same parts.” Steve grinned.

“You should have been a lawyer with that kind of logic.”

“It’s what my parents wanted for me.” The men sat side by side as the sun burned away the desire to move. They basked in the sunlight, their skin flush with warmth.

“You were with your girlfriend the night before it happened. What was it like?”

“I don’t know how to describe it. It was nice.”

“Just nice? Was that what you were thinking about last night?”

Adam let silence answer for him.

“Why can’t we think together?”

“That wouldn’t be right.” Adam inched away.

“Why not? It gets lonely when you are on your side thinking about Mary and I’m over here alone.”

“It’s different with Mary.”

“The outcome would be the same.”

“We’re both men.”

“Let me ask you something. When men crossed this country and explored these same regions, were there any women with them? They only had each other. What do you think they did?”

“There were Indians.”

“They were masculine guys, explorers, frontiersmen. Guys who killed and ate animals. Like us.”

“What are you proposing?”

“We don’t have many options. Why don’t we, you know, share our thoughts?”

“And then what? What if we, as you say, share our thoughts? What if we brainstorm all night? What if we think so hard that we get headaches? What happens tomorrow?”

“We’ll stay here. Running water and all the apples you can eat. Paradise.” Steve draped his arm gingerly around his friend’s shoulders. Adam tensed but didn’t pull away.

“But if we stay here, we’ll never find anyone else. We’ll die old and alone.”

“Maybe they are looking for us. If we stay in one place, they’ll find us.”

“You have a point.”

“Life is too short for wandering around. I vote we stay.” Steve raised his hand and pointed at the sky.

“Here?”

“Why not here? And we shall call this place Woman, in honor of the other sex.”

“But the sign said…”
“We get to make up names for everything. That is our right. We shall call this place Woman and we will live here until other people find us. Agreed?”

Adam looked past his calloused feet to the road beyond, the horizon offered nothing but miles of unexplored territory. “Agreed.”

“Good. Now what about the other thing?”

“You and your thinking. It’s too precious. I voted to stay. Don’t push it.”

“It’s a perfect way to christen our new home.”

“I don’t know.”

“Part of you has more conviction.”

Adam crossed one leg over the other. “All this talk about women.”

“You still haven’t explained the difference.”

“We are both men, that’s the difference. We shouldn’t.”

“Because someone might see us?”

“It isn’t natural.”

“The men who explored this country weren’t natural?”

“You are confusing things.”

“Is it evil?”

Adam laughed.

“Are you ashamed? Look, what if I did this… don’t be shy. I’ve touched you like this a hundred times. Remember that ache you had last week? You wanted me to touch you then.”

“But now we are naked and…”

“Relax. It’s good, right? Go with your body.”

“You should stop.”

“What about this.”

“Steve, really… I wish… you would… Stop.”

“And what about…”

“That’s going too far.” Adam lay back on the grass and closed his eyes.

“You can’t mask your curiosity.” Steve plucked an apple from the pile and offered it to his friend. “Why don’t you have an apple?”

Adam looked over at the green orb held out to him. “Why?”

“It will freshen your breath. Then you can kiss me.”

“Who said anything about kissing?” Adam turned away from the fruit. “Why are you trying to confuse me? I love my girlfriend.”

“Eat my apple.”
“It’s not ripe.”
“Where is the danger? Close your eyes.”
“What are you going to do?”
“Feed you.”
“Why do I need to close my eyes?”
“Trust me.”

Adam blinked and let his lids close. He felt something brush his lips, a touch on his shoulder, fingertips across his stomach. A bird fluttered inside of him and he felt helpless against it. The hard skin of the apple parted his lips and he bit into the flesh. Tart juice flooded his mouth. Adam took another bite and smiled as he chewed. “That’s good.”

“My point exactly.” Steve pressed the apple to his friend’s mouth, then replaced it with his lips. Adam allowed himself to be kissed but pulled away. Steve pushed him down onto the grass. They kissed. “See. Was that so different?”

“Not even close.” Adam looked at him, confused. “Now what?”

“What does your body tell you?”

“Too many things.”

The men lay side-by-side, the sun bathed them in light. Steve inched closer to his friend. “If it doesn’t work out, we can always go east.”

“Everything will change.”

“I’m not afraid.”

The sun settled on the edge of the world and slipped off, allowing darkness to blur the lines. The moon soaked the landscape in blue shadows. A hand inched across the grass and bridged two bodies. Their breath quickened, their pulses raced, and in one clumsy movement their flesh joined into a new creature. It moved across the grass with a mute urgency, carving its nest beneath the canopy of branches. The trees stood silently, their fruit glistening in the moonlight.

The men of Woman lived in paradise until they discovered a place downriver called Man.

Then things got really confusing.

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Once upon a time Sean Meriwether was the managing editor of literary magazines *Outsider Ink* and *Velvet Mafia*, but quietly bowed out to have a life. He continues to write quirky fiction despite all the best advice given him. Sean has exposed himself in *Best of Best Gay Erotica 2*, *Best Gay Love Stories*, and *Exotic Gothic* and his work was collected into *The Silent Hustler*. If you want a full frontal join him on GoodReads.

To see more art by Tony de Carlo, visit his Web site www.tonydecarlo.com or find him on Facebook at www.facebook.com/tonydecarloart.
"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
“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
**Fortune’s Bastard**

*a novel by*  
**Gil Cole**

“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*

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**Pacific Rimming**

*a novella by*  
**Tom Cardamone**

978-1-937627-06-5  
$13  
Also available in digital editions
In the early eighteenth century, Thomas Newton, a former worker in a tavern/brothel, has fled London, hoping to begin a new life in Paris. However, his hopes are quickly dashed when he is falsely arrested and committed to the Bicêtre, an “asylum” that is actually a prison for undesirables, including suspected (and actual) sodomites. Newton eventually manages to get word of his predicament to Pierre Baptiste, who springs him from the Bicêtre, but not before hearing rumors that cause him to doubt whether he can trust Baptiste. For Baptiste, who Newton met briefly when still living in London, is a thief taker; a former petty criminal, Baptiste escaped prosecution (and execution) by turning in the former members of his criminal gang. Baptiste currently uses his contacts in the criminal underground to locate missing people, missing items, and information, much like a modern private detective—except that Baptiste’s clients fall on both sides of the law. As Newton learns more about Baptiste and his line of work, he quickly realizes that everything he once knew is called into question: for Baptiste’s latest assignment is investigating Newton’s own father, a peer in the House of Lords, and his connection to the Society for the Reformation of Manners.

So, after escaping the Bicêtre, Newton leaves Paris with Baptiste and returns to London. Newton’s return to England begins a journey of self-discovery: in this respect, The Thief Taker by William Holden is a coming of age novel. For despite his extensive life experience (most of it unpleasant), Newton is not even twenty-one; over the course of the novel, he grows into emotional maturity as he stands up for himself against his abusive father, takes initiative, and eventually learns (some, but not all of) the truth behind his own background. As a piece of historical fiction, Holden incorporates just enough actual history to transport the reader, but not to impede the narrative flow. (For example, the Society for the Reformation of Manners—which here means “morals”—was a real organization that actually did exist in England during most of the eighteenth century.) Holden does not glamorize the past, either: he presents the scenes in the Bicêtre and Newgate as dirty, brutal, and harrowing. Nor does he employ a stilted dialect in order to create atmosphere, but uses a modern idiom throughout.

But The Thief Taker is first and foremost an erotic novel. Newton engages in sex throughout: sex with the other inmates and gaolers while in the Bicêtre, sex with Baptiste once they reunite, sex with former acquaintances when he returns to London...this may be a coming of age novel, but it is hardly one for most young adults. Danger excites Newton sexually; and since he seems constantly in danger...
The Thief Taker is the second of Thomas Newton’s Erotic Adventures, sequel to Secret Societies (Bold Stokes Books, 2012). I had not read the first Erotic Adventure before starting the second, but I found the story easy enough to follow, without constant interruption from explicative back-story. However, towards the end of the novel, when the revelations and plot twists fall fast and furious (and some involving characters who I gathered had appeared in Secret Societies), I think that having read the earlier novel might have benefited me: my recommendation to the reader definitely would be to read Newton’s first Erotic Adventure before picking up the second. And despite all the revelations before the end of the novel, one question still remains concerning Thomas Newton, so I strongly suspect a third Erotic Adventure will be forthcoming.

Keith Glaeske is a medievalist and collector of speculative fiction currently living in Washington, DC. His articles about medieval literature have been published in Medieval Perspectives, Traditio, and Ériu.
“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
New York Stories
Recommended Reading by Jameson Currier

The HBO production of Larry Kramer’s play, *The Normal Heart*, has revived interest in the early years of the AIDS epidemic.

Kramer’s play, which debuted in 1985, was one of the first literary responses to the epidemic. The theater community was quick to assemble and produce plays which provided messages and information for a call to action. Early plays such as *As Is* by William Hoffman and *Safe Sex* by Harvey Fierstein are other, important examples. Even later plays such as Paul Rudnick’s *Jeffrey*, about an HIV-positive gay man living in New York, and *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner’s epic look at AIDS, were important for their ability to disseminate information about the epidemic.

Gay men were among the first to write about AIDS, though any gay man will tell you, emphatically, that AIDS is not a gay disease. It is, however, an important part of gay history. Traditionally gay men, particularly young gay men still struggling with their sexual identity,
have looked to gay writers as guides or for verification of their self-perception; the writings of Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, James Baldwin, and John Rechy are good examples for my generation of men. And in the early years of the AIDS epidemic this was no different. We looked to journalists, playwrights, poets, and novelists to attempt to understand what was going on.

One of the initial purposes of writing about AIDS was to convince readers that the disease, and the threat of it, existed. Who could predict that a virus lurked in our bodies for years, reversing the natural order of things, young men dying before their time? Another reason was to dispel the stigma attached to the disease—that AIDS was not strictly a gay disease, that what was happening was happening to human beings, not to suspected deviates or sinners, that AIDS affected all people regardless of sexual orientation and practices. In responding to the lack of drugs and services from the medical community and any sort of response from local and national governments and agencies, AIDS produced a powerful voice for the gay community within the political landscape that it may never have been able to achieve otherwise.

As the gay community has become more visible and accepted through increased media exposure and cultural acceptance, and as protease inhibitors and other drugs have made HIV manageable, many of the lives and stories of the early years of the AIDS epidemic have been forgotten. The following books are a suggested reading list of AIDS-themed literature, many produced during or written about the first years of the epidemic. It is neither a comprehensive nor exhaustive list, but is compiled from books I read, reviewed or wrote during or about these years. In the United States, the main epicenters of AIDS were San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York, and the focus of this list is to recognize those stories set primarily in New York City, since this is the place I have called my home for more than thirty-six years.


Andrew Holleran was a successful novelist in 1980 when he began writing a column for the magazine *Christopher Street*, the gay literary equivalent of *The New Yorker*. The column, “New York Notebook,” was about the latest thrills and lesser issues of urban gay life—dinner parties with friends, dance clubs and their music tracks, Greek statues on display at the Met or the Getty, and the loneliness one feels at the holidays. Holleran had a strong sense of character, a good ear for pithy dialogue, a focused concentration for theme and metaphor, and a lush prose style that served him well, and when the AIDS epidemic arrived Holleran continued to write about the minutiae of gay life, only now his themes and details swirled around bolder issues: illness, fear, anxiety, death, and grief. By 1986 Holleran admitted that he was writing two kinds of essays: descriptions of New York City as a cemetery and elegies for friends. *Ground Zero*, first published in 1988, collected twenty-three of these essays. It was a bleak, harrowing, and important look at the impact of early years of the AIDS epidemic on the intersecting circles of gay men, particularly the more upscale ones in Manhattan and Fire Island. Holleran wrote of visits to hospitals to see sick friends, attending funerals, memorials, and wakes, and discovering his present-day life as a sequence of memories. And Holleran captured best what many other gay writers seemed to ignore or avoid when writing about the plague (if they wrote about it at all)—the fear and the denial of the times. He also depicted a gay metropolis at change: unruly, nervous, frightened, suspicious, and angry. Still,
what rose to the surface of those grim, beautifully-executed essays was his firm portrayal of gay men and their friendships and how important they were to each other in the course of these trying and uncertain times.

Now out of print, Holleran reassembled his essays in 2008 into *Chronicle of a Plague, Revisited: AIDS and Its Aftermath*. I am a great admirer of the contents of both editions of Holleran’s essays, as I was when they originally appeared in *Christopher Street* and other publications, and I am grateful to the impact of them on my own life in the city and my thinking and writing about the epidemic. Holleran is one of the most vital and distinct voices in gay literature, and to me, these essays represent a point of view of what was happening during the early years of AIDS, even if Holleran, like many of us “worried well,” only arrived at the conclusion that nothing about the epidemic made any sense at all. Also recommended: *In September, the Light Changes*, Holleran’s short story collection, many of which deal with the impact of AIDS on the circles of friends in New York.


Back in the mid-1980s David Feinberg and I were in a writing group together when he learned of his HIV-positive status. In that workshop I had the chance to read the early versions of the manuscript of his first novel, *Eighty-Sixed*, as he was writing it, about an urban gay man’s lovers and friends pre-AIDS and post-AIDS, embellished with David’s biting humor and irony. *Eighty-Sixed* contrasts the life of BJ Rosenthal, a gay man living in the New York City neighborhood of “Hell’s Kitchenette,” before and after the advent of the AIDS epidemic. In 1980, BJ’s greatest concern is finding a boyfriend or satisfying his libido. In 1986, every potential liaison is laced with cynicism because of the fear of infection or the fear of death. As grim as living in the shadow of death becomes, BJ never loses his sense of humor. Anyone wanting to get a sample of David’s wicked and insightful wit should start here, but equally as good are his subsequent stories and essays that can be found in *Spontaneous Combustion* (1991) and *Queer and Loathing* (1993), even as they progressively become sharper and angrier as David’s health deteriorated due to AIDS.

The same year that David published *Eighty-Sixed*, John Weir published his debut novel, *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket*, about a young man who becomes involved in a loveless relationship and learns that he has AIDS. Eddie was a slacker before the term was coined, out but not necessarily proud. But Eddie and his journey are hardly a somber read. The novel is as humorous as it is harrowing. I remember David telling me of meeting John and the giddiness in his voice at finding a kindred soul and someone who could be as wickedly funny as he could. The two authors went on to become best friends. Both authors were active members of ACT UP. David’s death in 1994 at the age of thirty-seven left a deep wound in all of his surviving friends. I also highly recommend John Weir’s novel, *What I*
Did Wrong, published in 2007. What I Did Wrong captures David with uncanny precision in the character of Zack, but it also vividly captured the narrator Tom’s grief and imbalance following Zack’s death. Tom’s “lost boy adrift” sort of life mirrors the lasting affect that AIDS has had on friends and survivors of the gay men who died of the disease—in a way that doesn’t go away with aging and the passing of years. This is also a deeply felt book about having a New York relationship and the experiences of a certain generation living in the city, in the same way that Breakfast at Tiffany’s or Bright Lights, Big City or Slaves of New York are about New York experiences. This was a profoundly good and satisfying read for me; in many passages of this novel Weir’s prose is stellar and lush, particularly in its last, glorious paragraphs.

The Body and Its Dangers (1991) by Allen Barnett

It is always hard for me to pick a favorite story in Allen Barnett’s collection The Body and Its Dangers. The most anthologized story, however, is “The Times As It Knows Us,” and it is this story for the book’s inclusion on this list. “The Times As It Knows Us” takes place in July 1987 and is set at a summer house in the Pines on Fire Island. The story revolves around seven housemates discussing articles in The New York Times. The first is a debate over a lifestyle article about the impact of AIDS on a Fire Island household. The next debate revolves around the obituaries listed in the paper’s Saturday edition, as the housemates fill in information which has been omitted from the death notices, such as the cause of death. What is seldom discussed here, as in the case of Feinberg and Weir, is how life events helped shaped talent. Barnett in died in 1991 at the age of thirty-six of AIDS-related causes.

Dancing on the Moon (1993) and Still Dancing (2007) by Jameson Currier

I arrived in New York in the summer of 1978 after graduating college and lived in a small and expensive apartment in the West Village that I could barely afford. In my early years in Manhattan, I worked as a telephone operator, a legal proofreader, and an entertainment publicist, sometimes all in the same day. Many of my early AIDS stories were inspired from my experiences with my friend Kevin Patterson when he became ill with AIDS. Kevin was a playwright (A Most Secret War) and a theater publicist (he worked at the Public Theater for many years). “Winter Coats,” the story in the collection about two friends shopping for a winter coat—one who is struggling with AIDS—was written after an outing with Kevin. The tale of the two friends with AIDS sharing an impromptu cab ride around Manhattan in “Reunions” was a story I pieced together while I was with friends at a diner on Ninth Avenue after Kevin’s memorial service. The details of “What They Carried” are drawn from my actual experiences while caring for Kevin when he became ill with AIDS—the overwhelming things I and his other friends physically carried to and from his hospital room and his apartment in his final days. In the process, we created our own community, network, family, and support group. This story was written during the week following Kevin’s death as part of my grieving process. It is one of the most truthful stories I have ever written, and is as close to being nonfiction as it is fiction. I always approached this story as a sort of personal therapy and a story I had to tell, not a story.
that would ever be published. Even though I wrote this story when I was thirty-two years old, it is still the story of a “young man.” At the time, I had only had published two short stories with gay themes and a handful of essays on being gay—and felt I was still learning how to write fiction. My early AIDS stories were published in Dancing on the Moon thanks to my friendship with David Feinberg, who showed my stories to his editor, Ed Iwanicki, at Viking.

Still Dancing, published in 2008, collected twenty of my short stories about the impact of AIDS on the gay community written over three decades. Ten were from Dancing on the Moon and ten were more recently written, and for Still Dancing I chose stories that revolved around gay New Yorkers—those lost, those surviving, those displaced, those undaunted, and those who became expatriates. My friendship with David is also reflected in the story “The Chelsea Rose,” which opens Still Dancing, though David and I never lived in the same building. “The Chelsea Rose,” along with “Manhattan Transfer,” is one of the more recently written stories in the collection, about the history of the inhabitants of a Chelsea apartment building, depicting the migratory path of its residents and the deep devastation the epidemic left on a generation of gay men. “The Chelsea Rose” begins in the late 70s, just as I did in Manhattan. “Manhattan Transfer” takes one of the marginal characters in “The Chelsea Rose” and focuses on him twenty-five years later, as he grapples with surviving the epidemic, being HIV-positive, and looking to give a new meaning to his life.

Such Times (1993) by Christopher Coe

One of my first book review assignments was reviewing Christopher Coe’s second novel, Such Times, for the Washington Blade. Coe’s first novel, I Look Divine, published in 1987, was the witty and luminous portrait of a wealthy, intelligent, narcissistic man who believed he was exceptional from the moment of his birth. Shuttling across the affluent, au courant landscapes of Rome, Madrid, Mexico, and Manhattan, I Look Divine recounted the tragedy of Nicholas, the “divine” creature of the title, and his downfall from his obsessive self-love. As narrated by his older brother in a cleverly succinct manner, Nicholas’s life was stylish and divine right up to its end. That same style to life reappears in Coe’s second novel, Such Times, published in 1993, but the journey on which the author propels his characters this time is through the bleak and haunting realities of AIDS. This time Coe slowly strips his narrator, Timothy Springer, of his wealth, health, and good looks, and, in the process, infuses this novel with a humanity that was often absent from I Look Divine; Such Times becomes, then, a Job-like story that resonates for anyone who faced the demands of AIDS. But like I Look Divine, Coe tells his tragic tale in that same great, grand, gay, witty, and wonderful way. Such Times pulsates with the confusions and heartbreaks of gay relationships—from the uninhibited and disposable to those hopeful and unrequited. Anyone who has found himself as the third party in a triangular relationship, will certainly empathize with the pleasures and pains Timothy finds in his love for Jasper. And anyone who has witnessed the changes of gay life during the first decades of the AIDS epidemic, will find Such Times a must read; Coe covers a multitude of subjects, from fistig to taking the HIV test. Coe spends as much energy pondering science and medicine and health as he does on sex and gay men and relationships.
There are scenes of lumbar tests, tales of hospitals overcharging patients, and explanations of the thymus gland. In lesser hands, this sort of diversion could potentially bog down a contemporary novel, but throughout Coe is able to maintain Timothy’s cleverness, particularly on a section about retroviruses. In attempting to explain nucleotides to Jasper, for instance, Timothy conjures up a metaphor of precious stones. “My virus may begin with an emerald, and then go: diamond, diamond, sapphire, ruby, emerald, emerald, ruby. Your virus may begin with a sapphire, and if read from end to end, which they can do now in a laboratory, it might go something like this: sapphire, diamond, diamond, sapphire, ruby, emerald, diamond, ruby, ruby.” Christopher Coe died shortly before the paperback publication of Such Times, on September 6, 1994, at his home in Manhattan. He was forty-one years old.

Diary of a Lost Boy (1994) by Harry Kondoleon

On a book tour for Dancing on the Moon, a reporter asked me if my stories could be read and appreciated by people unfamiliar with gay life and AIDS. I answered that AIDS fiction summons up the greatest themes in literature, among them sex and death and faith, themes that are universal and prominent in every life. Anyone who has lost a loved one from death, untimely or natural, can read AIDS fiction and understand the emotions it forces into place, anyone who has acted as a carepartner for someone who has been ill will understand the compassion necessary in tending the sick, anyone facing death from a life-threatening illness should be able to find strength and companionship in AIDS writing, anyone interested in uncovering the heart of the human soul should read writing about AIDS. It is always surprising when a writer has the ability to infuse such weighty material with a comic touch; even more surprising when it is accomplished with the dexterity that playwright Harry Kondoleon did in his only novel, Diary of a Lost Boy. Hector Diaz, Kondoleon’s thirtysomething gay narrator, has been told by his doctor he has two years to live. "Sex is a memory, eating is a drag," Hector states about his life, and to extricate himself from his own tragic reality he immerses himself in the trendy lives and marriage of his closest friends, Susan and Bill Ded. Hector, having originally introduced Susan to Bill, feels an obligation to either save the crumbling marriage or help each of his friends individually survive the destruction of their union. In this capacity, he becomes a confidant and companion to both parties, for instance accompanying Bill to a Philandering Husbands Support Group and chaperoning Susan on her first blind date following their separation. Episodic in construction, Diary of a Lost Boy is Hector’s interior monologue over the course of a year. As Susan and Bill's marriage unravels, so does the state of Hector's health. "I got my latest T-cell count," he says. "You all know by this point what that is—a kind of sports record of how your immune system is doing during your last inning." Though his health is faltering slowly and unfortunately to the forces of disease, Hector's mind remains razor sharp even as it approaches dementia. In fact, one of the strengths of Kondoleon's writing is his ability to focus so clearly on the lunacy that surrounds Hector, allowing, at times, the reader to forget the narrator is even ill. Kondoleon died of AIDS-related complications in March, 1994 at the age of thirty-nine.
*The Farewell Symphony* (1997) by Edmund White

"The writer's vanity holds that everything that happens to him is `material,'” Edmund White explained in *The Farewell Symphony,* a sentiment that echoes strongly throughout this third and final installment of an autobiographically inspired trilogy that began with publication of the novels *A Boy's Own Story* in 1983 and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* in 1988. White's unnamed narrator, a man driven by "twin appetites for sex and success," is a struggling writer and a gay man who recalls the personal and professional events of his life over almost three decades and across a variety of American and European locales, from the hedonistic back-room bars of Manhattan in the 1970s to the more sedate literary salons of Paris in the 1980s. White is a master of carefully layered descriptive passages, and he uses these to great effect in charting his narrator's early journalistic career on a Manhattan magazine, his writing sabbatical in Rome, and the generous patronage he receives from a noted elderly writer and "man of letters" whom he meets at a gay bar. The strength of *The Farewell Symphony,* however, lies in the enormous cast of characters White has assembled, all finely detailed as well, from a female co-worker whose "cheekbones were dusted with a blonde down" and whose father was a Nazi officer, to the narrator's own grandmother, who "could read only by moving her lips." White also creates a rich assortment of gay male characters, from a Broadway actor with a "face too strong and ironic to go with the waifish role he liked to play," to a roommate who "resembled an old, friendly dog that comes padding up to you." At the core of all this remembrance, however, is the depiction of gay life during a more liberated consciousness in the years before the arrival of AIDS. White clearly delineates how this generation of gay men patterned their relationships so differently from heterosexual ones, how some one-night stands became sexless friendships, and how other sexual partners became long-term lovers. *The Farewell Symphony* is also the author’s most frank and sexually explicit work of fiction. "If I had sex, say, with the average of three different partners a week from 1962 to 1982 in New York, then that means I fooled around with 3,120 men during my twenty years there," his narrator, born in 1940, unabashedly reveals. "Nor did all this sex preclude intimacy," he adds. "The best thing of all were the random, floating thoughts we shared." As White's narrator ages into the era of AIDS, it becomes harder to separate the factual author from his fictional alter ego. Like the author, the narrator of the novel figures as one of the early figures of the Gay Men's Health Crisis, recalling such figures as Larry Kramer and Michel Foucault as friends, and tests HIV-positive. "I'd been most active in New York during what turned out to be the particularly dangerous years just before the disease began to manifest itself and was at last identified," the narrator notes. "I'd always counted myself lucky," he adds, upon finding out his HIV status, "until the day when I heard the long-denied but long-anticipated truth." Also recommended: *The Darker Proof,* White early AIDS stories alongside those of British author Adam Mars-Jones; *The Burning Library,* White’s collection of essays; and *Skinned Alive,* a collection of short stories.
Like People in History (1996) by Felice Picano

Cousins Roger and Alistair become lifelong friends when they meet as boys in 1954. Picano was one of the first literary writers to understand the epic scope of the epidemic, how it was changing a generation of gay men and transform this into literature. The novel opens in New York City in 1991, as Roger and his boyfriend are attending a birthday party for Alistair and flashes back as the two cousins live through major cultural moments of their generation, such as Woodstock, San Francisco in the Harvey Milk era, Fire Island summers, and AIDS activism in New York. Picano is best at recording the dishy dialogue of his characters and his natural ability to tell a story. Roger and Alistair are not so much campy gay characters, as they are an archetypical representation of what a fabulous gay life was supposed to be, which makes its conclusion particularly haunting. Also recommended: Picano’s True Stories and True Stories Too, which includes his nonfiction narratives, portraits, anecdotes and reminisces of many of his friends and colleagues lost to AIDS.

The Hours by Michael Cunningham (1998)

Much has been written about the importance of Michael Cunningham’s Pulitzer-prize winning novel The Hours, and I was fortunate to be asked to review this book for The Washington Post. Clarissa Vaughan, a fifty-two year-old book editor in “unnaturally good health” who lives in Greenwich Village at “the end of the twentieth century,” is affectionately dubbed as “Mrs. Dalloway” by her best friend and former lover, Richard, an ailing gay poet with AIDS. In Michael Cunningham’s evocative novel, Clarissa, like the fictional character created by the author Virginia Woolf, shops for flowers, reflects on her life as she moves through the city streets, sees someone famous, meets an old acquaintance, and is planning a party. Richard, a “man with no T-cells at all” who is “disappearing into his illness,” is being honored that evening with a major literary prize. If it were not for Cunningham’s previous body of work, two richly prosaic novels, At Home at the End of the World and Flesh and Blood, one could worry that the effortless, stream of consciousness prose the author employs in The Hours was achieved by merely mimicking Woolf’s voice, plot, and point of view. But Cunningham has deftly created a trio of richly interwoven tales which alternate with one another chapter by chapter, each of which enters the thoughts of a character as she moves through the small details of a day. Throughout all of this, however, is the spectre and muse of Woolf. Like the parallel story of Septimus Warren Smith and his private world of madness in Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, Cunningham uses the details of each of his tales and characters to illuminate one another.
My first novel, *Where The Rainbow Ends*, took me more than six years to write. The novel, which spans more than fourteen years, follows a set of friends from 1978 to 1992, from the idyllic sexual revelry of Manhattan in the late 1970s to the transformation of the city into the epicenter of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, to the characters' evolution into activists and parents in Los Angeles in the 1990s. I stopped and started the writing of this novel several times—to do other projects, to earn a living, and, to my amazement, to fall in love. But I always returned to this novel, embellishing or adding another scene, struggling onward with developing the theme: a young gay man's search for faith and understanding during difficult times. I reached a point, however, somewhere within the last year I was writing this book, of not wanting to complete the novel. My characters had become, in many ways, as real to me as my own friends, and the intent of my plot was to propel these characters into the initiation, horrors and psychological confusion brought upon by AIDS, from their early shock and denial to their subsequent grief and anger. Several characters die within this book from the unexpected and untimely tragedy of this irrational virus. Writing these portions of the book required me not only to visualize the deaths of these characters but also regurgitate memories of the many friends I had already lost to this senseless illness. Who in their right mind would willingly invite disease and death into their life like this, over and over? This was only one of the problems I faced with writing my own novel about AIDS.

I was a fan of Wayne Hoffman’s long before he published his first novel *Hard*; in the late 1990s we worked together at The New York Blade News. I was always impressed by Wayne’s sharp observations of popular culture (at the time, he was the Arts Editor), but it was also obvious to me that he had a clear and passionate interest in the field of sexual politics (he was also one of the co-editors of the anthology *Policing Public Sex*). Wayne eventually became Managing Editor of The Blade, and throughout his impressive career as a journalist, he has contributed articles and reviews to a number of local and national publications. Hoffman moved to New York City in 1993, shortly after graduating from Tufts University. He set his extraordinary debut novel, *Hard*, in Manhattan in the late-1990s during the city’s “sex wars,” a time when a conservative mayor and the city government were cracking down on public sex venues under the auspices of preventing the spread of HIV. Hoffman’s details and descriptions of city-life and the gay community of this era are superbly drawn (and he does present a “gay community” in *Hard*—from buff-bod hustlers to hunky bears to HIV-positive ex-lovers), and he easily displays how this gay community overlaps with many other professional communities, such as those of journalism, advertising, travel, and, in particular, the theatrical community; many of his gay characters in *Hard* are also actors, playwrights, producers, and critics. While the political construct is what makes this novel so unique in gay fiction, it is Hoffman’s dead-on descriptions (witty and wise) of his characters’ sexual psyche that make it soar. (One character, in fact, runs a delightful cost-analysis on how much his search for sex costs him.) But I am also happy to report, that while *Hard* is political, sexy, comic, and full of social-consciousness, it is
also encased in a surprising romantic yearning. Many critics and fellow-journalists have compared Hoffman’s *Hard* to Larry Kramer’s 1977 novel *Faggots*, another enormously brave, comic, and risky novel that peered into the sexual yearnings of gay men and the comparison of the two works is apt. *Hard*, however, factors in the impact of the anxieties and activism of the modern AIDS era that did not exist in the 1970s that Kramer was portraying. And while *Hard* is a complex weave of nuanced sexual and political situations and scenes, the primary conflict is between two gay journalists: one, Frank DeSoto, an AIDS widower and gay newspaper publisher approaching fifty who wants to see all the sex clubs and adult theaters shut down, and the other, Moe Pearlman, a twenty-six year-old sex-positive activist and would-be journalist who wants to keep them open. While trying to start up an alternative gay newspaper to provide what he feels is a more objective depiction of gay life in the New York, Moe also spends his spare time arranging safe-sex parties and giving the best blowjobs in the city. He views the closures of the adult theaters and sex clubs as a personal assault on his sex life.

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Jameson Currier is the editor and publisher of *Chelsea Station* magazine.
“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

Also by Jameson Currier

Dancing on the Moon

“Defiant and elegaic.”
_The Village Voice_

Still Dancing

“Courageous.”
_Edge_

_www.chelseastationeditions.com_
Nearly twenty years ago, I edited a collection of essays written by gay writers born into a wide range of religious traditions: Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism—but mostly, a rainbow, if you will, of Christian flavors. It’s a collection of arguments called Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men. The book won me a Lambda Literary Prize, and it’s good; I can say that because mostly I didn’t write it, I just gathered the right authors. I was putting the book together in 1994 and people were still dying of AIDS. I wrote to several great writers now long gone—Paul Monette wrote the sweetest teaser, telling me he had the best story to give to the book but hadn’t the energy to write it. He died a week after writing me the letter. The naked civil servant Quentin Crisp rapped out on a manual typewriter a short letter that looked like a poem:
“My dear Mr. Brian Bouldrey,
I’m afraid I don’t wrestle
With anybody,
Let alone the angels
And so it is with regret
That I must say no
To your admirable project.
With admirable admiration,
Quentin Crisp

The signature was here signed with a flourishing cursive “2” for a Q and garnished with a debutante’s circle instead of a dot on the “i”; I have always sought the company of queers who live up to the prayer Ronald Firbank wrote into *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, “O! help me, heaven, to be decorative and to do right.” Crisp was such a decorative, right-doing soul. In that order.

Other authors were not so friendly to the project. The late great anthologist John Preston wrote to me on the back of a postcard, “If anybody were to bother wrestling with THAT angel, I would advise him to take a handful of aspirin and a long nap.” I felt put in my place. That story has a rueful ending, for my now good, lovely longtime pal Michael Lowenthal (also a contributor to *Wrestling*) informed me, years after Preston’s death, that his shunning of faith and religion was curious. Michael was, after all, John Preston’s young protégé, who took over many of Preston’s projects after his death from AIDS a year after my book was published. “It’s curious,” Michael tells me, “because for the last week of his life, he kept a well-thumbed copy of The Book of Common Prayer on his nightstand,” proving once again that there are no atheists in foxholes.

Preston’s response was the norm, not the exception; when I was assembling *Wrestling with the Angel*, I lost a bit of sleep, egotist that I am, wondering whether a bishop might come to my home and throw candles at me, officially excommunicating me from the Catholic church into which I had been baptized, or whether I’d receive angry letters from born agains from around the world. A stoning, a fatwa. Instead, I had a lot of angry people from the gay side of things. Public embarrassment as I stood on the stage with a famous author who mocked any gay attempt to consort with organized religion. Caricatures of me in the gay rags, now cherished mementos among my private papers. How could I be such a hypocrite?, they wanted to know; why would you try to be friends with somebody who hated you? These were real, legitimate concerns. And I get it: it takes real bravery to walk away from somebody who repeatedly abuses you; it seems stupid, even cowardly to try and walk back up to that same abuser. But you wouldn’t believe the number of clergy of all sorts who reached out to me and wished the book well, showing that they, too, were and are caught between two polemical worlds. I realized that there were these others, these priests and clergy I always regarded as opponents, but they were on my side, and we were all wrestling with a narrative that didn’t work, a meaninglessness, a loss of sense—in fact, the germ of the book was my own surprise, at the death of my great lovely partner Jeff, when I rushed to the church to find something to salvage from that bonfire. I rushed into the church that didn’t want me, and I was determined to make them see how little sense, like death itself, that dismissal of me was. That, of course, is the wrestling part. And I wrestle to this day, each day, as if the fight has just begun.
There is a painting in Zurich, the work of Hans Holbein, which uses all his skill as a painter with photo-realist technique, called “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb”. There are many episodes in the life of Christ to which artists are drawn, from the Annunciation to the Madonna with Child to Gethsemenene to the Crucifixion to the Pieta. This Holbein stands alone—nobody in my knowledge went where Holbein went, nor really has since. It is a painting about six feet long, life-sized, which is part of its horror, and depicts a dead body, one that has been dead for two or three days. It is the body depicted just before the moment all the other painters would prefer to predict; it is the body before the resurrection. Here it is:

![The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb by Hans Holbein](image)

The word “grotesque” means “grotto-like”; in the cave. This painting is the definition of grotesque. The mangled corpse, the mouth slack in drawn horror and suffering, the marks and bruises from beatings and nails, that middle finger not extended in the traditional gesture of obscenity, but true obscenity: death by crucifixion, death, the end of meaning. Dostoyevsky’s take: “the face has been horribly lacerated by blows, swollen, with terrible, swollen and bloody bruises, the eyes open, the pupils narrow; the large open whites of the eyes gleam with a deathly, glassy sheen.”

While the art historian John Rowlands looks past rigor mortis and decay: “Far from conveying despair, [the painting's] message is intended as one of belief, that from the decay of the tomb Christ rose again in glory on the third day,” I find it hard to believe—once again, I am wrestling as I have for all my adult life. I’m back at zero, I’ve made no headway, and I’m exhausted by my own doubt. How could this painting make one believe in the resurrection?

“‘That painting! Some people might lose their faith by looking at that painting,’” says Prince Myshkin, *The Idiot* of Dostoyevsky’s novel, which is how I first encountered the Holbein (“Oh,” said my smart-ass colleague when he saw me carrying that book around to lunch and meetings and other pleasure palaces, “is that your biography?”), and certainly, if it does not shake a Christian’s faith in the resurrection, it is by no means a starting place for believing.

And for me, the painting looks clearly like something else I knew quite well: Christ looks like another death from AIDS. Has nobody made this connection before? I’ve looked in libraries and on line, but nothing. My partner Jeff, who died in 1993—it’s the spitting image. The Dead Christ looks like the man I love and loved and all those other men dead from HIV. The bruises like kaposi’s sarcoma, the gaunt drawn face and slack downturned mouth. That painting is for me a grenade of past experience made horribly fresh and present. When I look at it, it sends me back to that moment, and I despair, I have to grieve all over again, I have to start all over, I have to do all the work to reflect upon that experience. In Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*, the picture hangs over the doorway of the house of Rogozhin, The Idiot Myshkin’s (whose response to Myshkin’s fear
about the painting making people lose their faith, is “Yes, I’m losing that, too.”). The painting is over the threshold of Rogozhin’s house, like a horizontal sentry.

Nobody wants to talk about the AIDS era any more, even and especially the ones who survived it, watched our lovers and friends suffer, die, and get buried, but never rise again, a great game of hide and seek in which nobody ever got found. It was terrifying and hopeless, we survivors are all children who still look into clothes hamper and closets and hope they will suddenly just be there, still hiding. Here: look what I’m doing: making a narrative of something that has no story left to it. There was no romance to AIDS, though I think the foolish young me wanted it to be romantic, just as those who want a messiah are romantics. I loved the romantic stories of the saints, which drew me into their useful mythology the way demigods do in Greek myths—men and gods are inert, but the demigods, not quite of this world or that, little monsters, they get the ball rolling. It was God, then, that I had the hardest part with, way up there, just being, rather than doing.

I keep thinking that I have to restore myself in order to honor those who suffered like the man who is the Dead Christ, if you accept that the dead man in Holbein’s painting is the Dead Christ, which is, in itself, a declaration of faith, at least the beginning of one. But what I must instead do is lose myself and dig myself out from the moment. Resurrection, rebirth cannot happen until one dies. Hope dies every time I look at the Holbein. That is the strangest kind of resurrection story.

It’s not just this Holbein, by the way. There is a wooden mask of Christ in the Cluny in Paris that is probably part of a whole crucifix, mostly gone and even what is left is in terrible condition, but so was Christ:

There is that horrible aloneness in these two depictions of suffering. But that is where I must now turn to something that is not so direct, not so obvious about the painting. It is about those who view the Dead Christ. Dostoyevsky, again: “But strangely, as one looks at this corpse of a tortured man, a peculiar and interesting question arises: if this is really what the corpse looked like (and it certainly must have looked just like this) when it was seen by all his disciples, his chief future apostles, by the women who followed him and stood by the cross, indeed by all who believed in him and worshipped him, then how could they believe, as they looked at such a corpse, that this martyr would rise from the dead?...Nature appears as one looks at the painting, in the guise of some enormous implacable and speechless animal, or more nearly …in the guise of some enormous machine of the most modern devising, which has senselessly seized, smashed to pieces and devoured, dully and without feeling, a great and priceless being.”

I nearly want to apologize for quoting Dostoyevsky so extensively, but this is exactly how I feel—and my point is this: it is about how we feel around the Dead Christ, the dead lover, the one who was supposed to make meaning out of the rest of our lives, and in fact did the dead opposite—rendered the world nil. I imagine Holbein, another viewer of his own painting, of his own Dead Christ, working for what were probably hours and days as he put paint little by little to the image. He stared into that abyss for days, dwelling for so long, alone with all hope gone.
Most paintings—most art in general, actually—are in some way mediations, a step away from the raw chaos of life, an artifice, an order that really isn’t there. Holbein’s Dead Christ is just the opposite. It is an expression of scorching sincerity when I’ve grown so used to the safety of lyricism and irony. How can I make you see that painful moment in this essay the way Holbein makes you see it in his painting? How can I write this essay that will remind you of that hopeless moment when those boys died, without making you lose hope from here on out?

And yet we need so much to come back to zero, to start the fight over, to wrestle with the angel of death and of life, to remember if only briefly that there didn’t seem to be resurrection for anybody, especially ourselves, looking there at that body, without transfiguration or irony or metaphor or lesson or redemption Holbein’s is the opposite of lovely and lyric.

And yet: here we are. Proof. Able to live and lose and remember again. It’s those just outside the picture that are the engine of hope.

This is all to say I’m still wrestling with all that loss, and I still stand by that book twenty years later. I am sure there are queers who would take new offense at my wish to change organized religion from within, my wish to consort with the enemy. But if you write to me and call me a hypocrite or toady, I will only love your letter, because it will mean you are wrestling, too, and I will have done my job as a writer. Orwell said, “Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed; everything else is public relations.” Wrestling with the Angel was a watershed moment in my life in which I changed my intentions for writing; I used to write to be loved (public relations); now I write to be understood (writing what someone else does not want printed). And to me, the greater, more terrible hypocrisy is our queer demand for absolute respect, while posting Facebook pictures of a slice of pizza being microwaved on top of a Bible because we had “run out of plates”. Respect is a two-way street. And all of us are both inside and outside the grotto that seals in the Dead Christ.

Brian Bouldrey is the author, most recently, of The Peasants and the Mariners. He has written three nonfiction books; Honorable Bandit: A Walk Across Corsica, Monster: Adventures in American Machismo, and The Autobiography Box; three novels, The Genius of Desire, Love, the Magician, and The Boom Economy, and he is the editor of several anthologies. He is the North American Editor of the Open Door literacy series for GemmaMedia. He teaches fiction, creative nonfiction, and literature at Northwestern University.
“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*
“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
“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
Dennis Rhodes is author of *Spiritus Pizza and other poems* and *Entering Dennis*. His work has been published in *The Jersey Journal, New York Newsday, Fine Gardening, Ibbetson Street, Alembic, Chelsea Station*, and many other publications. He lives in Provincetown and New York City. Rhodes is a member of the Academy of American Poets and the Worcester County (MA) Poetry Association.
“Nothing is to be feared, only understood” said Marie Curie.
Wise woman. I have been working on overcoming fear all of my life and only now do I know: fear cannot be fought. It will always win. It will mock your feeble attempts to reason with it. It is a parasite that feeds on you like a tapeworm.

Fear begins to loosen its grip when your need to understand it is even greater than your courage. Fear begins to lose the minute you get fiercely curious about it, when you shed light on the bastard—let the world see it naked.

—Dennis Rhodes
Glenway Wescott: The Man Behind The Writer

Vinton Rafe McCabe

Glenway Wescott is like that restaurant whose patrons all believe that they and they alone have discovered the virtues of the secret place—the ambience, the complex flavors, the adventurous products issuing from the kitchen, both savory and sweet. For all too long now, Wescott has been something like a secret sauce who key ingredients have been known only to a chosen few.

But like that restaurant, Wescott is now at something like a tipping point, and the author who, in his lifetime, went from fame to obscurity now, after his death, jumping from obscurity to fame once more. And those who were his “early adopters” of this generation can only look on in umbrage as both the GLBT community and the general public tell their tall tales of having known Glenway before he had priapus on his mind.

It is handy, therefore, that we at last have A Heaven of Words, the gloriously-titled gathering together of Wescott’s last journal entries (many in a rather jarring aphorism format, but more
about that in a moment), as edited and introduced by Jerry Rosco, as the journal entries have a way of helping the reader to separate the mythos from the man. In the journals, there is information enough about Monroe Wheeler, with whom Wescott shared a more-or-less lifelong link, and George Platt Lynes, who entered into a long-lasted three-way with the two which likely would have left poor closeted Noel Coward in tears for the sheer freedom of action it represented, and more still about Wescott’s writing, or, in the case of the number of novels produced, lack thereof.

The question of just why Wescott stopped writing novels at the moment in his life in which he seemed poised to jump from writing merely great novels and novellas (see: The Pilgrim Hawk) to writing even more extraordinary things is dealt with quite nicely in the pages of his journals:

“The other night at the Institute my guest of honor, old Edna Ferber, said, ‘I suppose that you may want to tell me to mind my own business, but I really would like to know why you haven’t written more novels.’ And I answered, ‘In so far as I understand the matter myself, it is because I have not had the talent required.’ Whereupon she flew into a temper, so that I had to change the subject to official, Institute business. Everyone does, each according to his prejudice, blaming me for my sex life, or for not having had a university education, or having allowed my family to support me, or for not having been psycho-analyzed, or for having taken my mother to live with me, or something.”

That he had not the talent is, of course, an unsatisfying, even coy answer, although it represents something of the truth when combined with the other possible options, family money, lack of intellectual focus, and that giant bugaboo of sexuality—or, more specifically, Wescott’s inability or disinterest in playing the “gender switch” game when writing of relationships as Coward, Williams, and hell, just about everybody else of his acquaintance did.

Because Wescott produced his first major work, The Grandmothers, in 1927, just in time for him to be compared to Fitzgerald and Hemingway and to run off to Europe with them and the rest of the gang that comprised the “Lost Generation,” he stands with one foot on each side of a strange cultural gap: he had adjectives lovely enough, verbs active enough and details both specific and telling enough to place him among the best of the young American writings, so, had he been willing to write the word she when his memory and/or imagination wanted a he, things might have turned out very differently and Edna Ferber might have instead congratulated Wescott on writing as many Great American Novels as she herself did (Giant, Saratoga Trunk, So Big, Cimarron, and so forth).

In a sly aside on the same subject, Wescott ponders whether a more exciting sex life might have yielded more work:

“Love Life and writing: I wrote the second half of The Apple of the Eye and all of The Grandmothers during an ideal conjugality; The Pilgrim Hawk in an interval of a love affair that was thrilling in intercourse but humiliating and boring in every other way. But Apartment in Athens came at the end of a desert in my life, eighteen months of only grief and masturbation. Good work is more to be relied on to lead to good sex than vice versa.”

To which the reader can only add that “Grief and Masturbation” seems to be a rather excellent potential title.
What amazes about Glenway Wescott is that he never yielded to the needs and demands of the cultural “norm,” either where his work or his personal life were concerned. Instead, he bore the insults thrown in his direction as Hemingway, wrote what he wrote, and lived as he wanted to live. So maybe it was the family money after all...

The particular joy that the journals captured in the net called *A Heaven of Words* has to offer is its insight into the man himself. And the sketches it has to offer of Wescott and the literary lions of his inner circle: W. Somerset Maugham, Isak Dinesen, Thornton Wilder, even sexologist Alfred Kinsey, and that humanoid porcupine, Katherine Anne Porter, whose favorite quotation, shared in a small journal entry, seems resonant with meaning here:

“K.A.P.’s favorite quotation: ‘It doeth make a difference whence cometh a man’s joy.’”—St. Augustine.

Indeed, the idea of where an individual man might find joy seems key to understanding both St. Augustine and Glenway Wescott. For Wescott, the wrestling match, of course, was between Glenway the gay man and Wescott the respected author.

Which brings us to “A Visit to Priapus,” an almost-novella short story in which the two attempt to set their grudge match aside. From Wescott’s journals, November 10, 1964:

“A Visit to Priapus, or ‘Priapus in Maine,’ 1938 [unpublished in GW’s lifetime]: I remember that Paul Cadmus delighted in it. Monroe [Wheeler] didn’t; I didn’t expect him to—it was too unpublishable, and in its scandalous aspect, foreign to him. George [Platt Lynes] didn’t either, come to think of it, he never liked anything I wrote about sex, which discouraged me. I discourage easily.”

Happily, we now may judge “A Visit to Priapus” for ourselves, as it is included among the short stories introduced and edited once again by Jerry Rosco and published by the increasingly impressive University of Wisconsin Press.

In a foreword by Forster biographer Wendy Moffat, “A Visit to Priapus” is likened to E. M. Forster’s *The Life to Come and Other Stories* and *Maurice* in that both were “worthy writing on gay themes that was suppressed for decades as ‘the penalty society exacts’ for its hatred and fear of homosexuals.”

Forster and Wescott had much in common. Both were rather tormented by the burden that society placed upon their sexuality, and yet both, writers born, felt a deep desire to explore homosexuality in their work. As Moffat comments, “In his gay fiction, like Wescott, Forster grapples with the intricacy of intimacy, both the poisonous distortions and the creative complexity of the closet.

“Wescott too agonized over his story, and refused to publish it in his lifetime. But it is a mistake merely to conflate the value of Wescott’s story with the tortured circumstances of its creation. This almost-novella is a wonderful story, [here Moffat quotes Wescott] ‘an intellectual effort, a
moral embrace.’ ‘A Visit to Priapus’ is a meditation on desire and art, a rueful, comic, brutally honest consideration of sex and its human limitations.”

The tale is simple enough: The narrator of the story is, like Wescott, an author of some note, “Alwyn Tower,” a literary stunt-double that Glenway Wescott used from time to time in the telling of autobiographical tales. Tower is having a dry spell where sex is concerned—a spell long enough and dry enough to send him off to the state of Maine on a bus in order to find relief.

As Alwyn/Glenway puts it:

“To think that I should have come to this: sex-starved, in a cheap provincial hotel humbly waiting for a total stranger; and it should be so soon, at thirty-eight! But, I must say, then a certain good nature quickened in

As such, “A Visit to Priapus” represents the end of a long dry spell for Wescott as well, in that he finally was ready to write openly about homosexuality on the printed page. And yet, revolutionary as the story is, while Wescott was ready to explore the urges behind the behavior, the need to be circumspect to the point of near paranoia, and the muddle of emotions that, at the moment in human history, contributed to the overall “homosexual experience,” he was not as yet ready to call a prick a prick.

Thus the “priapus” (and a giant of a thing it turns out to be) and all the other rather extraordinary linguistic embellishments that overhang the branches of our tale.

“Priapus” belongs sexually and spiritually, if not chronologically (it was written, after all, in 1938), to an earlier time—The Age of Innocence, to get all Edith Wharton about it. The sometimes florid language here seems to belong to that of the previous generation, the previous century, actually, as much as it does to the time of its writing. Like here:

“I was under an introspective spell. I was interested only in the wondrous tiresome way my mind works, always the same way, no matter what it has to do, incorruptible by what it has to deal with. It was fascination of only the sense of life in general, in the abstract, all of a piece: life of which, like everyone else alive, I am daily, gradually, dying…”

Which does not mean that “Priapus” isn’t also some wicked good fun. As here, in the moment in which Alwyn comes face to face with the young stranger’s phallus:

“His sexual organ, the symbol of this silly pilgrimage, and also the cause of my severe self-consciousness and unromantic sense of humor, really was a fantastic object. No matter what infantile prejudice you might be swayed by, or pagan superstition, or pornographic habit of mind, you could not call it beautiful; it was just a desperate thickness, a useless length of vague awkward muscle. An unusual amount of foreskin covered it, protruded from the end of it, thickly pursed like a rose.”

“A Visit to Priapus” is a look at the particularities of a one-night stand (“Here was I in bed with Priapus! A thing to frighten maidens with, and to frighten pillagers out of an orchard; a thing to be wreathed with roses, then forgotten...”), and of its consequences. The telling of the tale evokes laughter and a certain queasiness of spirit, in equal parts. It is a tale well told.

The sorrow is that it took more than seventy years before such a tame and even rather silly tale could see the light of day. Surely, had Hemingway written it about a tryst with a barmaid, it would have, like priapus itself, been long ago wreathed in roses and then forgotten.
It is of great importance to note that while “A Visit to Priapus” might be the discovery associated with this collection of short stories, it is not the finest of the works included.

Like the aforementioned journals, the stories collected in the Priapus volume give the reader something of a timeline, and allow for the discovery of changes not only to the author’s content but also to his style.

By the time Wescott again uses his Kilgore Trout, Alwyn Tower, in the story “The Frenchman Six Feet Three,” his language has distilled itself down to its essence. As here, in the moment in which our narrator takes a moment to describe his great friend (based on Wescott’s close friend Janet Flanner) Linda Brewer:

“I regard her as fairly typical of our generation of emancipated, vagabond, international American, with a naturally worried mind but never discouraged in the least, cynical but conscientious—a pleasant enigma to most Europeans. Sometimes, when the matter of her talk or her thought is unhappy she has a look of almost ugly indignation. Then in the other extreme, her good humor will turn to a kind of wildness and glee which is extraordinary, like a Greek mask. She dresses her hair in a lovely rough bob all round her head; it is gray hair, filaments of iron or spun ashes. In those old days in France she wore a monocle.”

There is a joyfulness in “Frenchman” a sense of acceptance, even of home, that is lacking in his earlier stories. And just the suggestion that Flanner and her talent for descriptive reportage had rubbed off a bit on Wescott.

For lovers of literature of every sexual identity and every stripe, having the opportunity to read Heaven of Words concurrently with A Visit to Priapus and Other Stories is an exercise in ecstasy. To have to opportunity to watch the development of the writer, from his admittedly weak experimental story, “Sacre de Printemps,” written in 1923, through “Priapus” and “Frenchman” and then onto another never-before-published story from the late ‘30s, “An Example of Suicide,” to the extraordinary shard of memory that is “A Call on Colette and Goudeket,” in which our author visits one of his literary antecedents, the French author Colette, who lies abed in the Indian summer of her life, to the strikingly beautiful “The Odor of Rosemary,” which found its way into this volume not from Wescott’s fiction, but from one of his essays, which were the mainstay of the last creative era of his life.

To enjoy the journals is to enjoy their many tricks and gimmicks, chief among them the author’s decision to write his entries as aphorisms (“The essential of the aphoristic form: It shall be terse, brief, neat and shall give pleasure by the way it is expressed—and arouse in the reader’s mind a good many more examples than it specifies.”), until whole years of entries seem to be comprised of the contents of fortune cookies. Thankfully, in time, the author’s need to tell a story overrides all other rules and the journal begins to sing with a choir of voices: snide, gossipy, tender, romantic, greedy and kind.

We are, in these two all-too-brief volumes given the man and his life two ways, in the shards and quips of the “nonfiction” journals and the meandering poetry of the “fictional” stories. Together, we are given a map in bas relief of a man, his life and his art. To read these books, and the essential The Pilgrim Hawk, is to experience Glenway Wescott in a most satisfying manner. And to understand what all the fuss is about and why the man deserves the renaissance that he is presently undergoing.
A Heaven of Words: Last Journals, 1956-1984
by Glenway Wescott
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University of Wisconsin
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A Visit to Priapus and Other Stories
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“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 Temperamentals”

—*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*