“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

“Defiant and elegaic.”
The Village Voice

“Courageous.”
Edge
Chelsea Station
Spring 2016

Edited by Jameson Currier

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Design by Peachboy Distillery & Design.
In thirteen candid and provocative essays, author Jarrett Neal reports on the status of black gay men in the new millennium, examining classism among black gay men, racism within the gay community, representations of the black male body within gay pornography, and patriarchal threats to the survival of both black men and gay men. What Color Is Your Hoodie? employs the author’s own quest for visibility—through bodybuilding, creative writing, and teaching, among other pursuits—as the genesis for an insightful and critical dialogue that ultimately symbolizes the entire black gay community’s struggle for recognition and survival.

Praise for What Color Is Your Hoodie?

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

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

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

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

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

—Elías Miguel Muñoz, author of the novels *The Greatest Performance*, *Brand New Memory*, and Diary of Fire

**AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS**

**FALL 2016**
Jay Kidd’s poetry has appeared in *The Florida Review, Atlanta Review, Mason’s Road, Ruminate Magazine, The Bellevue Literary Review* and *Burningword Literary Journal*. He was a winner of *Atlanta Review*’s 2015 International Poetry Competition and was a 2013 winner of *Ruminate Magazine*’s McCabe Prize for Poetry. He was nominated for inclusion in the *Best New Poets* anthology for 2012. He is also a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee. He studies the craft of writing at The Writers Studio in New York City, where he lives with his husband.
Where I Come From

What was it I wanted to say
at a dinner the other night when
someone asked me if I thought
that this bad thing that happened
to me wasn’t really a blessing
in disguise? Such an annoying
phrase. As if the bad thing didn’t
actually occur, didn’t do real
damage. As if bad things were
mere delivery devices for
hidden blessings. In between
the nodding of my head and
well, yes of course, followed
by funny how things work out
that way, my mind was
in quiet retreat. Where I
come from, bad things,
like secrets, held their breath
and hid behind wild privet hedges
and bowls of fruit, behind
Judy Garland albums and
Joni and tacos and
tubes of Ban de Soleil,
greasy and orange.

—Jay Kidd
“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
Border Guards
Henry Alley

The sun was rising on a park which we call “Amazon” here in Carleton Park. There was a pooling of mist over the hills, a part of that juncture where the Cascade mountains meet the Coastals. I think they give the park that name because of the green slough that runs along the wood chip bike path. The water is rich with willows and the sound of frogs. Wearing my “Pride” cap and t-shirt, I had just come over our Iron Butte, through the patterned shadows from the maples, past the Stone Face, where the shirtless climbers with their magnificent deltoids test their moves. Today one electrician (I know because his truck was parked right there by the stone) was inching his way up, with the sun just touching his naked shoulder blades. After I had plummeted down the hill at a full run, reluctantly leaving him behind me, I entered a Sunday city with the morning light spangled all over the streets. I saw three bronze spider webs in three separate gardens—one had interstitched three crimson hollyhocks at once.
I was finishing my long run, which was at the start of every week, my shirt all soaked. The route I chose was truly all over the map, but one I had clocked several times in my car. I felt very strong—even at sixty-five years old—a retired judge with part-time literary ambitions—and I knew that I could have added another five miles if I had wanted, but I was tapering down for the Gay Games ahead—a 10K in Vancouver, B.C. The park before me, this multi-shaded Amazon, was like a reward for a coming out process that had taken most of my adult life. First the reward of the water fountain just under the eaves of the white-stone, green-roofed public restrooms, and then a quick chance to pee inside. With the sun like a full flower in the sky now, and the temperature rising to 70 degrees. I took my shirt off and wrung it out, just as a gray police car pulled up, with two men inside—and I mean in the front seat. At first I thought they would get on my case for splattering the sidewalk with sweat. One of them took me in—looking at my chest and back in a way that I had learned—and not too long ago—was a “cruise.” Now even if I do say so myself, my torso looks good. All of my life (and it has been an unmarried) one I have been blessed with a physique which reminds you of the shirtless man on a pulp fiction cover.

I don’t mind being admired, especially with all the memories I have of being hated by some of the people I’ve sentenced. “I’ll get your ass, I’ll get your ass,” one of them said in court not too long ago, just before I retired. And I’ll have to admit that I wouldn’t have minded getting my ass “gotten” by a vagrant, this attractive man who belonged to “rough trade,” who said that. But right now, visited by troubling thoughts, I felt spooked by these lingering policemen—two of them—in the car (we have the partner system in this town), and ducked into the bathroom, leaving my wet t-shirt on top of my car.

I’d scarcely finished at the urinal and was starting to wash my hands (no soap, as usual) when one of the policemen came in and went to the back booth, even though he had nothing more to do than stand and pee. Despite all the tension that exists between men in this situation, I was moved to washing my hands slowly and taking my time with the paper towels.

“That pride cap,” he said. “I need information.” He stood waiting for the basin with the same intent expression. “Can you give me something fast? My partner is waiting.”

Outside I could hear the police car still going. It sounded restless.

“What would you like to know?” I asked.

“Is there a place in town besides the bar where I can be proud?”

I observed him, returned the cruise. He was lean and in his late twenties. He looked familiar. “Plenty of places,” I answered, “although I haven’t checked them all out myself. I’m new to this business as well.”

My heart misgave me a little. The moment I realized how attractive, actually beautiful, he was, instantly I went to the suspicion that he wanted an encounter with me now—even with his partner waiting with the car running!

He answered, “Just give me one quick example now.”

I said, by way of penitence for even having a doubt, “We have a small LGBT
running group just across the street at the shelter by the running trail. Every Saturday morning, 9AM. You can call me for information if you like. I’m—“

“I know who you are—Judge Behn. I’ve seen you in the paper. Heard about you on the Force.”

“And I know you.” It occurred to me. I’d seen him in the paper, too. You’re —"

"Jimmy Melbourne. Pole vaulter."

But he seemed familiar beyond that.

“Although sometime pole vaulter,” he added. “Presentday policeman.”

We shook hands. “Sometime judge for me,” I said, smiling.

He moved gracefully away. There wouldn’t be any doubt in his capacity to run a few miles. Part of his story was that his career had been ruined by a broken foot, but there seemed no trace of that now. He was six foot two, in emphatic black, and he moved the way accomplished swimmers move, although there seemed to be catch to his shoulders.

“I’ll get in touch with you,” he said.

“You can get my email address off my website—I have one now for my poetry. Herbert Behn.”

“A judge writing poetry,” he observed. “How does that work?”

“Pretty well.”

That night I tried writing a poem about how he looked, but I found him impossible to capture.

*  

Jimmy did email me, and eventually we did talk over the phone. He finally decided against the Frontrunner training runs, out of fear of being found out on the police force as well as by his athletic dynasty of a family here in Carleton. I knew all about that, recollecting. Instead he joined me for one of my Sunday long runs, saying that just because I was wearing a Gay Pride cap, people didn’t have to conclude he was gay, too. I took him on my Hilton Street route, one that, unusually, crosses the entire city. Approaching our biggest hill toward the end—and in the eighty degree heat—he said, “That whole thing is underhandedly devastating, Man. I mean, to look at.” At that moment, I was grateful to him for defining what I had been feeling for years when I arrived at this last hill. At this point, it seemed as if we had to run through a great bar of sun, across the railroad tracks, through the district of old houses and the Keystone Café (funky, overpriced, and featuring poached eggs), and up to the top of a mountain pass which promised a mirage or an oasis of green trees and much shade. The Iron Butte Climbing Columns (where we shared our admiration of the nearly naked young athletes, who were wet and tanned against the stone, again) were now behind us. And in this context, once he had heard about my plans to go to the Gay Games, he seemed intent on joining me.

“But what about you being found out there?” I asked, toweling off—we were back at Amazon Park by the time I got wind enough to say all this.

“Who’s going to know in Canada?” he said. “Seems like the perfect opportunity to find out about Gay Pride, since I’ve chickened out on all the places here and in Portland. Isn’t there a parade along with a sports festival—in a safe zone? The only thing is—would you be willing to share your car and your hotel room with me?”
“That’s not a problem,” I answered. “I wasn’t able to find a roommate in the first place, and I’d be glad to split the cost. What with the retirement and limited income. But do you think you can get the time off?”

“I have a week coming to me,” he said. “That’s what it would take to do Vancouver.”

He was right. Five hundred miles did not seem far off, but if you were going to take in a chunk of the sports festival besides your own event, and allow for arrival and exit, that’s what it would take, for sure.

So a few weeks later, we launched out. The drive up there was smooth and sunny, after an unusual intervention of early August rain. We spent a night in Seattle, where I took him to Golden Gardens—the beach, sacred to me, where I had scattered the ashes of my father, just a year before. The huge and dignified cirrus clouds in their glowing burnt orange, and the assemblage of sailboats on the perfect blue below formed a kind of heraldry for the remembrance of my Dad, who, although living in Carleton Park, had made a special request to be cast among the atoms which had been my mother; she was in the very veins of the yellow trees which grew at the base of the cliffs, because her ashes had been scattered there as well.

The meditativeness, brought on by this visit, followed us the next morning as we neared the border into Canada. Jimmy was wearing a tank top at the time, and he blushed as the flattened roofs and the chain link fence of the holding station came into view.

“Already, already,” he said, “I have pulled many people over as a police officer, and found they didn’t have their driver’s licenses with them. I feel as though my karma may be coming up now. This woman will find something, I’m sure.”

He took his passport from the pocket of his jeans. I had mine out as well. The Canadian agent who leaned into our window looked Jamaican. “And what are your reasons for going into Canada?” she asked.

“We’re doing a sports festival,” I said.

“Ah, congratulations,” she answered. “The Gay Games. We’re very proud of you here.”

With the sound of “congratulations,” Jimmy’s hand shook holding the passport.

“You’re Jimmy Melbourne?” she went on, leaning in further. “The famous pole vaulter? Do they have a pole vault event? I wasn’t aware of that.”

“No,” he told her. “We’re just running.”

His face had broken out into sweat, and she smiled again. “Have a good time. See you in a week.”

We were silent for a mile or two into Canada. “By God, that woman was informal,” he said.

“That’s the gay part,” I told him. “No doubt she’s one of us.”

“I’ve never been to Canada before,” he said. “Although I’ve been in meets all over the world, never in Canada. Somehow I thought I might be able to slip in without any association with the gay thing.”

“I don’t know what you might be expecting, really.”

“I could have told them we were going to the Butchart Gardens in Victoria,” he
said. “As a kid, I had the Viewmaster slides of them.”

I had seen those myself. English boxwood and the Star Pond. The Quarry Fountain seventy feet high. Endless burning red and yellow begonias beneath geraniums in a green house.

When we arrived in Vancouver an hour later, we found, in the courtyard below our rooms, a garden of similar flowers, accenting a swimming pool. The Gay Games 10K was the next day.

“I have the strongest desire,” he said, unpacking his underwear, “just to jump ship now, and take a slow boat to Victoria. 'I'd Love to Get Ya on a Slow Boat to Victoria.' Get hidden behind the ferns, and then have an exit reason for being in Canada once we go back into the U.S. Five will get you ten the American agent wouldn’t say he’s proud of us if we told him.”

“And who cares?” I asked.

I was setting up my toiletries in the bathroom. I was calling to him over my shoulder. I could see him in the mirror. Through with his unpacking, he was taking off his sweaty pink tank. Although, because of our running together, I had seen him wear far less, the intimacy of the situation caused my chest to tighten. He had remarkable blonde-reddish hair and a kind of perfectly formed abdominal cage which was no doubt one of the past secrets to his success as a pole vaulter, all of which had, still, come to crash. I had the presence of mind to add, “Are you afraid the media’s going to get a hold of your name up here, or see you in the parade?”

“No. I’m known,” he answered. “But not that known.”

“Well, then, what, then?”

He stripped off his underpants and slacks. “It’s what I said about karma,” he told me. “Ten years ago, at eighteen, I gaybashed a drag queen. It was just outside what was then called Pedro’s, the one gay bar we had in town. The man was known as the Young Divine. Really very handsome, really very pretty. He came on to me, and I was drunk. I hauled off and punched him in the face. My case would have been sent to your court, but the D.A. dragged his feet so much in bringing everything to trial, it was cold by the time additional evidence arrived—a woman had seen me punch the queen on the street, and she had been slow to come forward. Also my parents had just the right pull. They knew which attorney to hire. My name as a brilliant athlete even then helped me. Later I won the decathlon. It was set right.”

I came out of the bathroom. I remembered reviewing the case. Now. He was right —it had been plain as day it would have gone into my court. My relief back then had been extraordinary. I knew there was no way in hell I could have sentenced this near teenager (two years past the incident now made him twenty) without overcompensating and throwing the book at him. Being closeted myself, I had everything to prove to the world and to myself that I was sympathetic to gays and to all the political groups that had rallied behind the "Young Divine." It was at that time I began to feel I was walking around with a time-bomb ticking inside myself. Or I could think of myself as doing pole vaulting and being just on the verge of falling down on my face.

I came out of the bathroom, took out my running gear and put it in the one drawer below the television that was still free. Jimmy had gone naked to the window.
and stood behind the filmy white curtains. My refusal to respond immediately was raising a tension altogether different from the one we had first known in Amazon Park.

“I wish you had something to say,” he told me.

“Your story isn’t altogether surprising,” I answered at last. “At eighteen, you were just a walking mass of hormones anyway.”

“I’m in A.A.,” he went on. “In A. A. now. He’s one of the amends I’m going to have to make in order to stay sober, hormones or no hormones. His charges were right, but I was told by my attorney to deny them.”

Again, I waited to answer. His nakedness was so strong, I felt nearly ready to pass out. I had known this was on the horizon for some time. At sixty-five years old, I was new to sex (some flings with women and a few men, but all out of town and all ephemeral and under stress), and the prospect of making love with a man in his late twenties in a protected room nearly frightened me out of my wits—and even my desire to make up for the past.

“You’re rather well known,” he said, “for lecturing convicted criminals in court about their offenses. All this time I’ve been imagining what you would say to me once I told you.”

“I would want to tell you to go and sin no more—that is, come out and live an open life, then you wouldn’t have to go backwards into violence and booze as cover-ups, but how could I do that, when I couldn’t come out myself?”

Relieved, he came over and put his hands on my shoulders. Then I took off my sweaty shirt and undershirt, and stepped out of my trousers and pants. He put on a lubed condom and I draped myself across the white bedspread of the appropriately queen-sized bed. He entered me and then came up against my back pressing his thin but heavily muscled chest into my body. I went straight over the crest and emptied myself while he continued thrusting. At last he reached his peak, widened himself inside me, and then we turned and came down into an embrace. Lying there, I noticed the thickness of my chest, my arms, as well as his. I felt muscular from my hips to my ass, because everything was for him, and was him, moving straight at me. It was as if, in the Greek myths, I had been visited by Athena, who enhanced men’s bodies, to make them more beautiful for the beloved.

“I have another confession to make,” he said, as we lay together, spent and under the covers this time. “I informally tracked your movements—as a runner—throughout town. I knew you’d probably be in that bathroom on Sunday morning the way you always are when you’re done. I work Sunday mornings so it took some ingenuity to figure out a way of ‘running into you.’”

“Did you want me that much?” I asked.

“I wanted you,” he answered tactfully. “But I wanted even more the pride you had on your cap. How was I to get that when I’ve been ashamed all my life?”

“You’ll see tomorrow how to get it,” I said. I was stroking his hair, his chest. He sat up and kissed me on the neck.

“I never imagined this would be something to be proud of, too,” he observed. “But it is.”

*
The next morning we ran the 10K in Stanley Park, right along the stone sea wall. The sun came up, a blinding torch above the water—so blinding I wanted to keep my head turned while I was running. Jimmy, in a yellow tank off, was gone and away from me in the first minute, and finished in overall second place. He was given a medal and had his picture taken. I finished third in my age division (there were only three of us), but I thought it was part of my humility to take the medal anyway. Next morning, we marched with all the gay athletes in the vanguard of the enormous Vancouver Gay Pride parade, and I could see that Jimmy was moving past his reluctance to be known while still resting in the assurance that no one on the endless streets of the city would know who Jimmy Melbourne was. Besides, along with the balloons, drag queens, topless men, and nonstop disco floats, there were contingents of gay firefighters, gay policemen, gay doctors. I suppose I should have looked for one for gay judges. It was a thrill to wave our multi-colored Gay Games flags, and clank our medals with the rest of them.

Back at the hotel room, we made love again. We drew and drew at each other as though trying to restore ourselves for our return. I could feel there was everything to face once we got back to Eugene. This time through, we would not be stopping in Seattle. I had already paid my respects to my mother and father. In many ways, I wished that we could do the same with Jimmy’s parents, since they, perhaps, formed the most formidable obstacle, should he and I think of going on together. They were alive.

We had the border nearing us again the next morning, when Jimmy, who was driving, said, “You have no idea what it’s like having a line of athletic champions in your family history. If you were to look at my family tree, you would see a line of discus throwers like a row of flying saucers. And then my father the revered decathloner who didn’t win in Mexico in 68 but certainly distinguished himself. What would they say if they knew about me?”

“They’d have to say you were in line with the Greek tradition,” I answered. “All athlete and all gay.”

“Unfortunately,” he said, his face falling as the line of stopped cars came into view—we were at the check point — “we’re not living then but in the present day where the men in the locker room—at least at the police station—put a towel around them even when they’re pulling on their shorts.”

A kind of freeze came over us now, not just because we were about to be checked but also because we were nearly back to our own original lives.

Our agent was a skeptical man—damn!—and wasn’t thrilled to hear we had been at the Gay Games. He was dark and mustached—a man in his thirties whose eyes suggested cunning. He handed our passports back. Good, I thought, good. At least we’re past stage one.

However, many things had been stacked in the back seat, including some pillows which Jimmy had brought for his back when he was sleeping. They covered our clothes underneath.

The man asked, “And are you two the only ones in the car?”

Jimmy and I looked at each other.

“The only ones?” I asked.

“Is there any one else in the vehicle—hiding?”
“No,” Jimmy told him. And started to sweat.

Seeing that, the agent asked Jimmy and me to get out of the car while the back seat was searched. Finding nothing, the man then asked for the key to trunk. “Always good to have a look,” he said, slamming it after a glance. “You can go on now.”

Instinctively I knew Jimmy was too shaken to drive off, and so in a kind of dance that might have belonged to an aged couple, I simply got out and took the wheel while Jimmy sat in my place and slammed the door.

Looking straight ahead, we were silent a mile or two upon entering into a new country and what was to be a new life.

"What the hell do you think he was looking for?" Jimmy asked, and put his hand on my shoulder.

In the future, I would always think there had been a couple of bodies—our own—under those pillows—the old invisible selves we had brought back for burial.

Henry Alley is a Professor Emeritus of Literature in the Honors College at the University of Oregon. He has four novels, *Through Glass* (1979), *The Lattice* (1986), *Umbrella of Glass* (1988), and *Precincts of Light* (2010), which explores the Measure Nine crisis in Oregon, when gay and lesbian people were threatened with being made silent. His stories have appeared in journals over the past forty years.
My First Same Sexed Marriage

Tim Patten

President Obama was on TV! It was June 26, 2015, and the president was making a speech about marriage and how it now represented marriage for all. My eyes watered. Not that I had ever thought marriage would be good for me—but I knew many other queer people had been dreaming and hoping to marry. It was time to celebrate. I was wearing my Lady-Gaga, fifteen-inch, come-fuck-me pumps, ready to dance into the night.

San Francisco’s Pride celebration was two days later, and my friends Sean Lee and Lars Johnson came to visit. We watched the Pride Parade live on TV. Other friends dropped in throughout the day. Everyone in my circle of friends and family was much younger than myself, and I could tell these events touched me differently. I was sixty-five years old, and had been living with HIV for over thirty-two years. I had survived, but all of my friends and boyfriends from my life before AIDS had passed away. Sean and Lars were thirty years old. It hit me that new generations of
gay people will reach adulthood at a very different place in the continuum of opportunities—one that took me fifty years to reach. The 2015 marriage decision represented a monumental leap forward for an old sissy like me. There were deep emotions, and I was at a loss for words.

Come along with me for a brief journey…back to a time when most queer closets were closed and dark.

It was 1974, and I was a naive gay man searching for a new sexual identity in the post-hippie/pre-yuppie/pre-pre-tech-nerd culture of the City by the Bay: San Francisco. In the 1970s, freedom rang in the air, and our city and was a chrysalis bursting with flavor. Closets were opening for a select few. In the 70s, I was the belle of the ball in the city of liberty’s shimmering cocoon. My queer peers and I discovered our identities and unleashed upon the world our magnificent, tarragon-tinged selves. No one thought of marriage back then. We planned our disco attire, recreational drugs, and visits to the baths. We were searching for our hearts’ desire.

We shucked off the usual, ho-hum, salt-and-pepper trappings, and assumed eccentric, thyme-infused, Worcestershire-sauced delights. We became exotic, zingy creatures wearing paprika-sprinkled get-ups to express our new, savory selves. For gay men, there was no need to feel down, because we could always stay at the YMCA.

San Francisco girly men merged into a community of individuals, each of us expressing our needs, desires, and cotton-candy dreams. We wrapped our hot bodies in skintight clothing, and donned slog boots for the manhunt. Large, vacant buildings became dick-pounding bathhouses and sex clubs. Old dive bars sprouted glittering wings, and we danced as if morning would never come. The party queens reigned over weekends wrapped in goosebumps, but this dream world encompassed only a few butternut-rum zip codes. We knew how our hand-blown bubble of existence appeared to those in the outside world: a Sodom and Gomorrah dungeon of carnal hedonism.

My city has often been characterized as a cesspit of sin and excess, but people today are somewhat more enlightened. Society’s reappraisal and acceptance of our community has been an amazing evolution to witness, but it didn’t really hit home for me until the day I learned that my ex-flat-mate, Sean Lee, and Lars Johnson were engaged to be married.

Yes, California—and all states—now allow same-sex marriage. Mm-hmm. Sean Lee and Lars Johnson: gay married! Well, it made sense—hell, yeah! Pop the champagne cork, sound the party horns, and throw on some Katy Perry. Much like the inauguration of the first black U.S. President, it was a day I never thought I’d live to see. Sensing my jubilation at hearing the news, Sean invited me to witness the ceremony at City Hall. Through a flood of joyful tears, I managed to choke out the words, “Yes! Mazel tov!” I was so happy that I wasn’t just gay—I was Jewish, too.

My heart skipped a few beats as I looked back into the black hole (not a literal reference about glory holes) of gay history and saw the proud streetwalker strides made within this short, disco-to-hip-hop span of my lifetime. In that moment, I realized how the millennial generation is reaping the benefits of the struggles of the generations preceding them. In my early years of frilly faggotry, I had never expected that the freedom I enjoyed within my tiny, insular community would extend to the general population.

At three minutes to eleven on the morning of the happy occasion, I stood at the corner of Filbert and Kearney Streets, awaiting my Municipal Railway trolley. As I nervously bit my lip and
watched the sun beating back the morning fog, a J-car soundlessly wheeled up. Grinning widely, Sean and Lars welcomed me aboard. Lars’ family was already seated, a flurry of nervous hands and friendly anticipation: his mom, dad, two sisters, and young niece. As the trolley sauntered forth, I teetered about on three-inch heels. I was introduced as Tim, Sean’s “gay godmother.” Warm smiles were beamed, giggles rippled, and handshakes proffered as we rattled our way into the underground and headed downtown.

All of a sudden, finding my gay self socially conjoined with the hetero-normative made me feel self-conscious. I felt as if I were wearing the lilac dance gown Rita Moreno wore in *West Side Story* and singing “America” right next to the Brady Bunch. To be myself and respectful at the same time was a death-defying balancing act performed in spiked heels (*the good thing about spiked heels is they keep you balanced—or you fall over*). As soon as my adrenaline spiked and my girlish excitement took control, I was able to relax a little. During the trolley ride, I learned that Lars’ family was nothing but wonderful and understanding. They were genuinely pleased that he had found happiness with the man he loved.

After the trolley ride, we walked the short distance to City Hall and entered the awe-inspiring domed building. I was familiar with the immense, art-laden complex, as I had worked there as a programmer analyst back in 1975. Feeling amazed and reverent, I recalled a somber moment in ’78, when I had stood uneasily beside the caskets of George Moscone and Harvey Milk, who’d been assassinated by a death-defying balancing act performed in spiked heels (*the good thing about spiked heels is they keep you balanced—or you fall over*). As soon as my adrenaline spiked and my girlish excitement took control, I was able to relax a little. During the trolley ride, I learned that Lars’ family was nothing but wonderful and understanding. They were genuinely pleased that he had found happiness with the man he loved.

Our little party grew when we were joined by three of Sean’s homo-friendly cohorts. We all huddled outside of the office, listening to footsteps clack and echo across the polished granite floors. City Hall’s epic grandeur had survived much social and geological upheaval. The Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 had nearly destroyed it, but thanks to painstaking renovations, the dome and lofty bulwarks still stood majestic.

I observed handsome Sean interacting with the smaller children. He was every bit the doting uncle. I smiled to myself as he rocked each child in his arms, communicating familial affection with his warm hugs and gentle gaze. Watching him that day, I knew he’d be a great dad. He made the kids laugh. I felt envious of the fact that he might someday have a child. This was another possibility I had never had the luxury of considering.

The magistrate emerged from the rear chamber wearing a long black gown, but no spiked heels. Smiling, with paperwork in hand, she escorted our group to the highest gallery. As we gathered beneath the vaulted canopy, the echoes of our whispered conversations and squeaky shoes ricocheted around its circular ridges. My legs and arms began to tingle with anticipation.

Lars and Sean gazed into each other’s eyes. They seemed to embody the deepest possible connection between two souls. My heart took flight. They had been happy together for over a year, and legal marriage seemed the appropriate and necessary next step. I felt like a proud father. With the rest of us surrounding them in a circle, Lars and Sean stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the justice of the peace.
“We are gathered here today to unite in matrimony Sean and Lars,” said the magistrate. “The marriage contract is most solemn and profound, and it is to be entered into thoughtfully, with deep appreciation for the meaning it imparts and the responsibilities it entails. My words do not marry you; it is the love in your hearts that binds you to one another. Today, you are taking a pledge to enrich each other’s lives, to stand together as partners, to cushion the difficulties and to celebrate the joys. Please remember that love, loyalty, and respect form the foundation of a happy home. Please face each other and hold hands. Do you, Sean, take Lars as your lawfully-wedded spouse? To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” said Sean.

If the events of the ‘70s and ‘80s could be compared to an exploding nuclear bomb with the dust settling afterward, their wedding day felt like the first vestiges of a new life emerging from the rubble: a renewal of gay hope, cherubs making love atop the cultural detritus of the past. I felt giddy. It seemed that all my growing pains and heartbreak had been worthwhile. To see gay love validated by society and sanctioned by law—I couldn’t believe what had just transpired before my eyes. My heart raced as the bright sun scattered its rays across the ancient sculptures. My chest filled with joy, and I could feel the tears clinging to my eyelashes. My face reddened. Was I about to cry? I hadn’t expected this.

“How do, Lars, take Sean for your lawfully-wedded spouse? To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” Lars said.

“You may exchange rings.”

Nobody made the obvious joke or snickered, which sort of shows how far we’ve come.

Sean slipped one ring onto Lars’ finger, repeating the ceremonial words. Lars placed the other ring on Sean’s finger, and made his own pledge. Mrs. Johnson softly wept. Standing beside her, watching her son embark upon this journey, I felt paternal warmth toward Sean. All things seemed right and good. Tears spilled down my cheeks. I wasn’t embarrassed.

“Now that you have joined yourselves in solemn matrimony, may you strive to meet this commitment with the same love, devotion, and friendship that you possess today. And have fun! Do you promise each other?”

Well, that’s one promise any gay couple can easily stick to.

Sean and Lars smiled into each other’s eyes in a silent pledge.

“And so, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the State of California, I now pronounce you spouses for life. Congratulations! You may kiss if you wish.”

As their lips touched, my knees weakened. I completely lost it. Bawling, Mrs. Johnson and I fell into each other’s arms. The magistrate beamed at our group, her eyes tearing up. “This is a love for all time. I just know it.”

Outside City Hall, Lars and Sean posed for photos—first just the two of them, then the entire wedding party. The magistrate who had performed the ceremony came out through the big doors
in normal street attire, and asked to have her photo taken with the couple. “I want to add my blessings. I have a good feeling about you two.”

I, too, had a good feeling about them. I fully appreciated that Sean and Lars were entering a union that was just right for them. Perfect, in fact! My life had taken a specific course without the option of marriage or having children. Sean and Lars were my favorite lovebirds, and their relationship was so beautiful.

To this day, the wider social significance of this event astounds me. I’ve survived cancer, progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy (PML), Miller Fisher syndrome, and HIV, which have caused me to form my own unique rainbow perspective. I see life as a pink ribbon of wonders. Yes, sometimes it’s complicated and difficult; but I am certain of one thing. Our magic is our love. Each moment you or I experience deep love for another—and feel that love returned—we have captured the essential prize of the universe.

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Tim Patten is a retired software engineer and author of the coming out autobiography My Razzle Dazzle, under the pen name Todd Peterson.
All the stories, incalculable as new-green leaves burgeoning this Kentucky spring while the past grades down to humus. Here, for 26 years, a man sold gas along Route 25, mixed spices for fried chicken batter, and the tourists flowed through, the tourists fed, and now I am part of it, I superimpose myself, viewing the replicas of the 30’s dining room and kitchen, sitting by a life-sized model of the Colonel and grinning for a Facebook photograph.

My brief history here is entirely transfixed by a hot redneck boy in his twenties whom I study over my husband’s shoulder. Solemn green eyes, brown beard, spiky tattoos revealed by short T-shirt sleeves, and his right arm in a sling. I have a leg; John has a thigh.

“Best biscuit I’ve ever had in a restaurant,” I growl, licking my lips. “He’s disabled,” jokes John, “I’ll bet we can take him.” “Oh, for a sweet breast of white meat,” I sigh, watching my prey leave with a gaggle of older female kin. At age 53, I regard with both regret and relief the approaching day when I might choose a biscuit over a boy’s bare buttocks, though my guess is that death might precede such an abdication.

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

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

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
One of the complications of a relationship between men of unequal ages is the compatibility of those men’s friends with the couple.

When we fell in love and settled down together, Adam was twenty-one, I ten years older. Neither of us was a native of the east Tennessee mountain town, but Adam had lived there longer, had graduated high school there, so he had the opportunity to acquire more friends and acquaintances. I had been there barely a year, having come up from South Carolina to manage a downtown bookstore. The confines of both my job and my newness had not been very conducive to friend-making. I had good relations with my co-workers, but as of yet we had not begun to “pal” around outside work.

So in a sense, Adam’s friends became my friends as well.
There were, invariably, naturally a young bunch: people he had gone to school with, some still in school, and his fellow employees at the music-movie shop which just happened to be located in the same mall where I managed the bookstore.

The latter worked together and socialized together rather frequently, not always a common occurrence among co-workers. One ritual they established was a monthly “movie night” held at different homes and apartments in the area, usually on Saturday nights, and featuring the most offbeat fare from the bins of Melody Mountain, their place of employ. No conventional movies were allowed. No musicals. No “dramedies.” No chick flicks. Not even porn, which MM sold discreetly in the store’s remotest corner.

No:

Movie nights favored such titles as Teenage Bloodsuckers, Scum of the Earth, The Wizard of Gore, and Human Centipede.

I was a bit of a cineaste, I suppose, when it came to movie-watching, preferring foreign films and Hollywood classics. But I wasn’t a snob by any means, so when Adam announced that it was our turn to host Movie Night and that the attraction that month would be a little item called I Drink Your Blood, I nodded, not enthusiastically exactly, but convincingly enough, and said, “Why not?”

Actually my agreement came as a result of gentle coercion. There was very little if anything I would have denied Adam Norton. Not that Adam was spoiled or selfish or unreasonably demanding. He was the love of my life, and a mere glance from his beautiful brown eyes rendered me agreeable to most anything, even sometimes against the dictates of my own conscience or better judgment. Besides, Adam believed strongly in equity, and I knew a favor to him would be repaid handsomely with supper out or a book from my own store I’d been eyeing with interest (and which Adam could scarcely afford), or a long night of creative, indulgent copulation.

Adam’s friends were a motley bunch of youthful stereotypes—a “hippie chick” with multi-colored hair, boys inked from neck to wrist, another with a towering Mohawk that obliged him to stoop under low doorways, one more with face piercings, and a couple who could, relatively speaking, be termed “normal.” Like Adam, they were employees of Melody Mountain. Adam himself did not affect any unusual attire or transformation to his body other than the fact the last couple of years he insisted on keeping his head shaved of its normal brown locks in protest of the Bush foreign “policy” in Iraq. Otherwise he had the height and build and high cheekbones and generous mouth of a model. He was beautiful but hardly aware of it and certainly not preoccupied by it. A heart of gold beat beneath that handsome, smooth chest. That is what made him so loveable, not just to me but many others in the town, teen and adult, who had fallen under his considerable charms, his beauty, his natural friendliness, his unpretentiousness, his willingness to help others, even strangers. In fact, his co-workers at Melody Mountain comprised just a fraction of his friendships.

It was a tribute to Adam that when news got out he was in love and living with another man that few of his friends—and only some of his family, all Mississippi Baptists—abandoned him.

“I Drink Your Blood,” I pronounced and held the DVD case up for inspection, using the inflection of Zacherly or some other old-time TV horror movie host. Then my voice normalized as I went on. “Why not Bambi? Why not The Sound of Music?” It was my lunch break, and I had slipped away from
the bookstore downstairs to Melody Mountain where Adam was working a shift. He stood behind the cash register, arms crossed, next to Mike, the shift manager and one of Melody Mountain’s “normal” associates. Nearly thirty, highly amiable, he carried a slight paunch and a heavy East Tennessee mountain brogue.

“The Sound of Music?” he cried incredulously, most of his voice passing through his nose. “Jesus Christ! We don’t even carry that sucker in the store and we won’t as long as I’m working here!”

Adam and I laughed.

Mike gently removed the DVD from my hand and raised it to my face.

“David. Dude. This is a classic. A certified classic of seventies sleaze. You understand me?”

“That’s right!” called another MM worker from the rear of the store. This was Bridget, whose dark blonde hair was shot through with streaks of green and pink. “It has everything. Sex, violence, bad acting, rabid dogs, rabid hippies, more sex, more violence. And oh yeah: goat slaughter.”

“Goat slaughter?” I repeated, aghast. “Animal cruelty?” I shook my head. “No. Absolutely not,” and I snatched the movie from Mike and slammed it face-down on the counter, effectively abnegating Adam’s and my contribution to Movie Night.

Adam, for the moment choosing colleagues over boyfriend, spoke up. “Hey! Bambi’s mother gets killed. You wanted to watch Bambi. That’s animal cruelty too!” And Mike chimed in that The Sound of Music had slaughtered the eardrums of millions of human animals with its poor excuse for a soundtrack, and he demonstrated by doing a severely redneck rendition of “Do Re Mi.”

Everyone laughed, including me, and that seemed to settle things.

I Drink Your Blood it would be.

I had that Saturday off. Adam worked an early shift at Melody Mountain and got home shortly after noon. So we had the whole day ahead of us and hours in contemplation of Movie Night. We shared a home, a duplex, a block or so north of downtown, where so much tourist hubbub transpired. Years ago—many years—it was a quaint little mountain fastness attracting families from the immediate area and surrounding states (my own Carolina people frequented it and frequent it still, sometimes several times a year). It was the vacation spot for folks who did not like the beach, although in summer, in contrast to popular assumption, the mountains could be just as hot and sun-drenched as the beach. As a boy, I loved this getaway with all its opportunities for putt-putt golf, for treks past cool mountain springs, for buying in novelty stores arrow-tipped spears and richly-colored feathered bonnets, cheaply made, reputed to be used by actual “Indians” (a claim my young mind purchased without doubt). As an adult, I liked the place. Tourist tackiness had drained it of a lot of its charm. Political correctness claimed the “Indian” weaponry and headgear. Franchise restaurants crowded out many native-grown eateries with their unique charm and menus. Storefronts flared with tie-dyed T-shirts sporting all manner of innuendos.

Adam emerged from the bathroom naked as the moment he was born (but without doubt much more appealingly filled out). He, like a lot of young people, was an inveterate shower-taker and clothes changer. This was his second shower of the day. There would be at least one more before Movie Night began. He grinned as he came toward me, his erection bobbing against his flat belly. I lay on the bed reading a Scandinavian mystery which I set aside immediately upon Adam’s stunning entrance. Adam dove onto me, and we kissed. My hands made a quick
inventory of his smooth flesh, his wide shoulders and back, his small, rounded buttocks, his cool flanks, before coming back to where they’d begun, at his exquisite face. He pushed up my shirt so he could graze my hairy chest while he dug into my crotch with its own wincing hard-on.

After a half-hour’s loving, we napped fitfully, trading bits of inchoate conversation. I asked Adam about the nature of our guests.

“They’re all cool,” he answered. “You know all of them.” Then he stopped. “Except Bridget’s girlfriend. Lilith Kuykendall.” His pronunciation of the name was laced with venom.

“So what’s the matter with Lilith Kuykendall?”

“You’ll see. She has a flair for the dramatic. In fact, it’s more a whole fireworks display for the dramatic. Very entertaining, if you’re in the mood for that. Her nickname is ‘The Chameleon.’ You’ll see.”

We dozed a bit more then woke fully and noticed the day had begun to dim, and it occurred to us the responsibility that lay ahead. Movie Night! So we scrambled up and dressed and did some tidying of the den, where I Drink Your Blood would make its debut. I checked the kitchen for sufficient beer, wine, and snacks. I’d offered to cook something, but Adam demurred with a smile.

“I don’t think canapes would rightly go with rabid hippies and goat slaughter. Whatever canapes are…”

True enough. So it was pretzels and popcorn and cans of Bud Lite, bottles of fruit punch, and bags of Oreos and Chips Ahoy!

The rest was waiting. But not for long.

The first guest to buzz our door was Mike, appropriately enough, since he was the one bringing the DVD. He also had his own cache of goodies—chips, dip, Mexican beer, and a plastic bag of habanera-flavored candies he’d gotten from a hot sauce and pepper shop in the same mall where we all worked. Bridget followed almost at once on Mike’s heels, accompanied by her girlfriend Lilith Kuykendall, about whom Adam had warned me. She lived up to her reputation so far and was, that night anyway, as vivid an example of “Gothic” as one was likely to find outside a medieval European cathedral (and certainly in the East Tennessee mountains). Beneath her jet-black wig of spidery hair and her heavy, white face paint, she was a strikingly attractive young woman, putting me in mind of Morticia Addams from the old TV show and Vampira, the TV horror movie hostess from the 1950s. (You see, my cultural references aren’t all high-brow and confined to opera and foreign movies. I scrape the dregs along with anybody else. In fact, I’ve got all manner of secret, guilty pleasures.) She wore a black silk blouse with see-through shoulders of netted gauze and black cotton jeans and black and white sneakers. From her and Bridget’s entrance she fixed her dark eyes on Adam and me and never turned them away, at least not before the start of I Drink Your Blood. I mean wherever I went for the next half-hour, whatever I did, I could feel Lilith’s stare recording me. Or Adam. I watched her watch him but never said anything about it, figuring this was just another aspect of the young woman’s overall peculiarity.

A couple of other Melody Mountain regulars showed eventually, one of them named Alfred, a UT student whom Adam and I (and others) pegged as a closet case. He was shaggy-haired, blond-bearded, with thick, horn-rimmed glasses that appeared one day at the store, disappeared the next (according
to Adam). That night he eschewed them. (My most memorable encounter with Alfred up to then occurred at the store. Melody Mountain always had a CD playing in the background. That particular day it was a Lynyrd Skynrd disc and the track playing was the venerable “Sweet Home Alabama.” It was Mike who had made the selection, not surprisingly. Adam had been present too and was the reason I happened to be there. At the sound of the familiar opening guitar chords, Alfred let out a piercing wail probably audible in other nearby stores. “I hate, Hate, HATE that song!” The outcry had the pathos of Callas. Alfred’s people hailed from Alabama, and he strongly disapproved of their Neanderthal social and political views. The song, however, played to its end.)

MM’s owner and general manager, Tony Almodore, never came to Movie Nights. When not in the store he was busy pursuing his chief sideline — the promotion of rock and country music concerts in the area.

Some general milling-about followed everyone’s arrival. People loaded up their paper plates with snacks—excluding me—and found strategic places on the den floor for the best watching, commentary, and jeering. Then Mike slipped the disc into the player. Even the menu screamed “Sleaze!” and what followed for more than an hour and a half bore out this early promise of grimy cinema.

The plot had satanic hippies making mischief in a small town. When an elderly man is beaten up by the gang his grandson exacts revenge by filling meat pies with rabies and selling them to the unsuspecting demonists, who subsequently turn into blood-starved zombies. All hell breaks loose, a la Night of the Living Dead, as more and more townspeople become insanely rabid. Bridget had been correct. I Drink Your Blood possessed all the desiderata necessary for a horror cult classic. The violence was crude but effectively brutal. The acting and music were enjoyably inept. There was nudity a-plenty, male and female, and even a gangbang featuring one rabid redhead taking on a whole crew of frisky construction workers. The ending was a classic set-up for a sequel, with one last key character showing signs of infection. Oh, yes, and goat slaughter. The whole thing was pulled off with such grimy competence, one couldn’t help but experience a bad taste in one’s mouth, a fetid sheen on one’s retina.

“Man, I never get enough of that flick,” Mike confessed as the garish DVD menu reappeared. “Let’s watch it again.”

“Man, no,” Bridget answered for all of us. “You can’t repeat something like that so soon. You have to let it sink into your pores and absorb it. Anything else would be overkill. Absolute celluloid poisoning”

That seemed to be the general consensus, so Mike, with visible reluctance, removed the DVD.

A discussion broke out in the den immediately following the disc’s removal about the movie’s merits. Those were few as far as actual aesthetic values went, but everybody agreed that as an example of seventies sleaze, it was primo, top of the line.

Only one person seemed disinterested in the whole matter, and that was Lilith, who had spent pretty much the duration of the movie casting less than surreptitious glances at Adam and me. In fact, her watching of the two of us distracted me at times from the flick. The lights had been turned off for greater effect, and in the glow from the wide-screen TV I could see Lilith studying us with her dark gaze, and for some reason that scared me more than anything in I Drink Your Blood. So it was a relief to have the movie over and the lights back on.
After the movie and talk about the movie, there was time for more snacking, more drinking, and more talking of cinematic matters and other topics. Movie Night turned out to be a mostly pleasant way of wasting a Saturday evening. I enjoyed it and even thought ahead to the next time Adam would be responsible for hosting the festivity. What in the world would be the feature of the night? I Eat Your Sweetbreads? I Remove Your Eyeballs? I Dismember Your Lower Extremities? Perhaps I could sneak in Bambi in place of one of those gems and give these bohemians a real shock.

Time elapsed and disappeared, became irrelevant. Things were mellow and grew even more so when Alfred removed from an undisclosed location a marijuana cigarette. He brandished it to the group, which reacted with collective delight. Now my own views on recreational drug use are mixed. I’m basically a civil libertarian when it comes to “lifestyle” issues. It is none of my damned business if a man wants to sit in the sanctity of his own home and toke. However, if that same person leaves his home after toking or snorting or shooting up or whatever else to drive a car or an airplane or a bus, well then, that’s a whole different matter, one on which I tend to be a bit reactionary.

“What’s the matter, David?” asked Mike. “You don’t toke?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Never have.”

“Mexican gold!” Mike shouted, eyes gleaming like a child’s on Christmas day. Alfred lit the weed and partook of it first before handing it off to the very eager Michael. The blunt made its rounds until it reached Adam and me, sitting beside each other on the den couch, slightly removed but not too far from our guests to be rude. When the cigarette was offered to me, I held up my hand to pass.

“What’s the matter, David?” asked Mike. “You don’t toke?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Never have.”

“What?” Mike cried.

“You lie!” announced Bridget. And even Adam laughed.

“I didn’t know that,” he said.

“Swear on a stack of Bibles,” I replied, suddenly proud of my non-conformity.

“But you’re a Democrat,” Adam went on. “A liberal.”

“What does that have to do with it,” I asked. “The way I vote determines whether or not I toke?”

Adam shrugged with an unfaded grin.

“Well now,” Mike put in, “here’s your chance to live at last!” He nudged Alfred, who held the cigarette, to offer it to me again. He did.

“Go on,” Mike continued. “It ain’t going to hurt you. It won’t turn you into a crackhead or a heroin addict. Ignore the bullshit the government puts out. Enjoy yourself!”

There it stood: this twisted bit of white paper, glowing slightly at one end, offering a heretofore rejected experience. And I couldn’t help, even in my thirties, but to wonder what my parents would think could they, sitting down in little Harding, South Carolina, in Bible-belt security and ignorance, see me pull upon the devil’s weed after all these years of assuring them that I had never done drugs and never would.

“Mom, Dad,” I said aloud. “I’m sorry!” My unknowing guests laughed.

I kissed the tip of the blunt ever so gingerly, as though it were a potential lover whose affection I had not yet fully decided to accept.

“Imagine it’s Adam,” called forth Lilibeth, surprising everyone. She spoke breathlessly, like a bad actress in an even worse play. “Imagine it’s the phallus of a very beautiful young man.” Her eyes flashed and gleamed so brightly, so wickedly, it made me wonder how many blunts she herself had consumed prior to coming to our house that evening. Or maybe it had been something much more potent.

Bridget and Alfred laughed at her analogy. Mike looked away from everybody else with an embarrassed half-grin. I almost gave away the blunt, refusing this new experience, feeling somehow violated by Lilibeth’s invocation, as though she had thrown open the door to Adam’s and my bedroom, finding the two of us engaged in the very act she had just evoked.

But I went ahead. I sucked.

“Not so hard. Not so fast,” Alfred told me.

“Right,” said Mike. “It’s not a regular cigarette. Do it slow. Breathe in slow. Hold the smoke in your lungs as long as you can. Let it burn you, man.”

I did. I tried. And it burned. So much so I choked and tears sprang to my eyes. The gang laughed at my discomfort, but when I handed the blunt over as a sign of defeat, they wouldn’t have it, urging me to give it a second try – Adam among them.

So I cleared my throat and wiped my eyes and prepared for another gulp, careful to keep Alfred’s and Mike’s instructions. I breathed in the acrid smoke, held it as long as stamina would allow, until my lungs caught on fire and my throat sizzled, then pushed it back out to the delight of the onlookers.

“All right!”

“’Atta boy!”

“How does it feel?” Adam asked, wide-eyed.

I shrugged. “It feels like…nothing. I believe this whole toking thing is wildly overrated.” And I sat back self-satisfied, happy to have resisted my younger friends’ attempt at indoctrination. I didn’t realize the delayed reaction a toker can experience. Minutes later the room began to grow fuzzy, taking on unsettled edges, but it didn’t alarm me. On the contrary, I found it very pleasant and artistic and welcomed it, like I would an interesting new abstract painting. I was amazed at the changes in the faces of my friend, the wavy indefiniteness, the echo-chamber resound of their voices, almost musical. What lovely, lovely mellowness came upon me! It was akin to being submerged in a warm pool, everything swimming languidly in front of me. Surely it was the glass or two of wine I’d drunk slowly during the movie. Or the lateness of the hour. Or the two combined.

Whatever the cause, the effects stretched out for an indefinite period of time, and what I remembered most from the first phase of my high was the earnest, even intense face of Lilibeth, Bridget’s girlfriend. Hers was a frank, round, lovely face with large, dark eyes and scarlet mouth. Her voice too. She was speaking to me, or at me. Both were close, her face and voice, and she was saying, as well as I could interpret her:

“I love gay men. Yes I do! I’m obsessed with them. You’re the luckiest group of human beings on the planet Earth. Your bravery. Your risk. The hard, hard way of your love. You live and fight for love like nobody else alive. God, it’s hot and beautiful all at once! If I had one wish…just one…I’d wish to become a gay man.”

“Lilibeth!” I heard Bridget cry from the undulating depths of the den. “If you got that wish, then what would happen to me? To us?”

Lilibeth turned rapidly to her lover and embraced her fiercely. “Oh baby! It’s just a
fantasy. Just that. No worries.” Then she
returned to me and went on.

“You and Adam. Just beautiful. The two of
you. You should be on the cover of a book.
A beautiful gay book. Or a magazine at
least. Gay couple of the year. No! Of the
century!” She edged even closer. Her voice
dropped to a husky whisper. “Listen. Do you
think…maybe. Maybe we could play a little
game. You. Adam. Me? Where I could come
upon the two of you in connubial bliss? I
could pretend I just stumbled on the two of
you naked, going at it like porn stars.”

I opened my mouth to ask her why she felt
the way she did and had the wish she had,
but at the same time Bridget yanked her
from my direct field of vision and again
cried, “Lilibeth! Enough is enough!”

Almost directly afterwards someone else
handed me something he or sure assured me
I needed to partake of. So I toked it or
sniffed it or something and soon lost
consciousness. I mean the room went black,
like a stage losing its spotlight.

When the light returned, it was very, very
dim and concentrated in a fuzzy blob to my
distant right. I was prostrate and felt waves
of coolness eddying up and down my chest
and belly. Why so chilly? I touched myself.
Why shirtless? I reached further down and
found I was clad only in my boxers. When I
moved my hand again, it was arrested by
another hand, one not my own. This
sensation of touch startled me into focus. I
was lying on my and Adam’s bed, where
hours before we had made love. The light
came from the den. Voices filled the light,
laughing, gabbing, unsteady, drunken
voices.

And someone had me pinned down to the
mattress.

“Adam?” I called out softly, hoarsely.

No.

Things became dramatically clear, even in
three quarters darkness.

It was Lilibeth! Naked. Lilibeth without
Bridget. Lilibeth straddling me, with those
big dark eyes trained on me as though she
wanted to hypnotize me back into
unconsciousness. I struggled slightly, feebly,
to no avail.

“What…?”

“I love a gay man,” she said above me. She
had removed her dark clothing. Her flesh
burned snow-white in the dark room. Her
conical breasts, composed two-thirds of
nipple, pointed straight toward my own
chest like a pair of DOT stanchions. “Let me
have some of that gay essence,” she
continued, and without an answer from me,
without consent, she flicked her tongue from
her straight lips and began a saliva line on
my torso, beginning with my own chilled
nipples and going further south. Again I
tried to stop her but felt curiously inert, as
though the marijuana had sapped me of life
force. Then I panicked. Was I hallucinating?
Or had the Melody Mountain gang stuck
another horror DVD into the player – I
Drain Your Homo or something – and I had
been sucked into its ludicrous mis-en-scene.
After a bit more tossing and turning while
Lilibeth took phallic matters into hand, I let
out a howl and passed back into
unconsciousness.

Awake again, God knows when, I stared up
into the smiling face of Adam Norton. That
was certainly cause for relief. He sat on the
edge of the bed holding a coffee mug. I
scrambled onto my elbows to make sure I
wasn’t suffering another illusion and found
myself once again fully dressed. Then I
looked back at Adam and felt sure my face
was the very picture of dumbfoundedness. I
sat up fully. Adam handed me the mug.
“You’ve had quite the night, haven’t you, tiger?” he said, unable to keep from laughing afterwards.

I accepted the coffee and shook my head quickly, like a dog trying to rid its ears of gnats. Adam went on.

“It was a night of firsts for you. Your first toke. Your first time with - . Well, I’m assuming it was your first time with a woman?” His eyebrows arched.

I set down the mug and screamed. “What?”

Adam took the coffee and smiled.

“Adam, did what I think happened actually happen?”

Adam stared into the mug.

“You know, David, we’ve never really discussed your experiences with women. Or even if you had any experiences with them.”

I stared at him incredulously. It certainly was not the time to talk about one’s past run-ins with heterosexuality. Nevertheless, in my dazedness, I tried to appease him.

“Not like you, I’m sure. I used to fool around with a very distant cousin at my grandmother’s now and then. Some kissing. A little feeling up. She initiated it all. It wasn’t a bad thing. At least it made me aware of sex. But nature steered me in a different direction.”

“But no homeruns with the cousin, huh?”

“Adam, why in the world are we talking about baseball? How far did Lilibeth get last night?”

“This morning,” he corrected. “Not too far. But we interceded before she could score a touchdown.” He realized he had mixed his metaphors in front of a former English teacher and grimaced then smiled again.

I heaved a sigh and retrieved the coffee cup and drank deeply from it. “Thank God. Thank you.”

“Yep. We heard you holler and came right away. Mike and Alfred took hold of her together and pried her from your crotch.”

“Thank God,” I repeated.

Adam paused a moment then said, “Are you that sexually afraid of women?”

I thought and said, “No. Not really. But I was afraid of Lilibeth. I was scared she might sprout fangs or claws and do me in a la True Blood. I didn’t know if she planned to blow me or sacrifice me to Marilyn Manson or Lady Gaga.”

We sat silently before I asked, “What is it about Lilibeth? How did Bridget wind up with her?”

Adam shrugged. “Don’t know about the second. As for the first, well, that’s a mystery too. Lilibeth’s just crazy. That’s all. Rumor is she’s not really gay, that for her it really was a choice. Just woke up one day and decided to try the ‘gay lifestyle’ – “

“Whatever that is,” I interjected.

“That’s right. Now she’s got this hang-up on gay men, as though she’d ever have the chance to be one of us. Not that I’d put anything past her. It was the last straw for Bridget. She ran in with us on your little scene this morning then turned without saying anything and ran out the front door.”

“Good for Bridget!”

“Lilibeth went around years ago bragging in Knoxville that she was a Young Republican and had voted both times for Bush. Now she says he ought to be tried for crimes against humanity.” Adam shook his head.

“A real stable personality,” I responded. Then he told me of Lilibeth’s other transmutations –the ones he actually knew of – her flirtations with vegetarianism, the Green Movement, Satanism (of course), Roman Catholicism, PETA, the NRA, and on and on and on.
At the end of this litany, I remarked, “Well, I’d love to know what she means by a ‘gay lifestyle,’ but I’d be afraid to ask her back for her to explain. She might jump my bones and yours in the bargain. And that must not happen again, even for the sake of knowledge.”

Adam laughed and said, “That’s right.” He took a graceful little leap from his chair and was beside me on the bed. He snuggled close and kissed my cheek, neck, and left temple.

“Only one person’s jumping your bones,” he said with a growl. I warmed instantly and felt the confusion and horror of the previous evening fade peacefully. His lips met mine and remained there, making way for probing tongues. Hands began exploring by-now familiar but still delightful places.

Poor Lilibeth. May she soon find her rightful place in the human scheme of things.

She had been right in at least one respect, however.

It certainly was wonderful being a gay man.

Ron Radle is the author of two novels, Two Sides of the Coin and Degrees of Passion. His shorter works have appeared in Best Gay Erotica 2012, Nice Butt!, Manthology, Sweat Sex, and Show Offs, among other anthologies. He will soon bring out his first collection of stories, A Place For Us To Come. He delights in writing gay love stories in Greenville, SC, the silver buckle of the South Carolina Bible Belt.
“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*
The Third Buddha
a novel by
Jameson Currier

“Complex.”
Library Journal

“Courageous.”
Next magazine

“Extraordinary.”
Lambda Literary

“Marvelous.”
Out in Print

“Remarkable.”
GLBRW

“Incredible.”
Edge

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2012
ALA Rainbow Book
The Abdication of Voicelessness:
LGBT Activism As Necessity
Alan Jude Ryland

Xulhaz Mannan knew he would die. Perhaps he pushed the thought aside. Humans are dodgy on the subject of their own mortality; we mustn’t blame him. But he knew he would die for abdicating voicelessness, for daring to be visible. This is a crime older than loving the wrong person, or the right person, as it were. He would meet his end by machete, age 35. A group of five or six young men posing as couriers attacked a security guard in the lobby of his apartment building before making their way up to his apartment on the second floor. His friend, Tanay Mojumdar, died with him.
Mannan was the founding editor of Roopbaan, Bangladesh’s first and only LGBT magazine. He launched the magazine in 2014 to promote greater acceptance of his community. This choice rang his death knell. He lived atop landmines of social unrest. Ansar al-Islam, a Bangladeshi division of al-Qaeda, took responsibility for the murders, which are the latest in a long, sobering series of killings of bloggers and academics in the country. In a statement made via social media, the organization condemns Mannan and Mojumdar as “pioneers of practising and promoting homosexuality in Bangladesh” who “were working day and night to promote homosexuality among the people of this land since 1998 with the help of their masters, the US crusaders and its Indian allies.”

The war on secular writers and bloggers goes beyond Bangladesh’s borders. The release of a purported hit list from Islamic extremist group Ansarullah Bangla Team threatening people in the United States and Europe made headlines in September. A statement accompanying the list asks that Bangladesh “revoke the citizenship of these enemies of Islam.” The list contains the names of eight people in the United Kingdom, eight in Germany—even two from the United States; that Bangladesh’s government lacks the authority to revoke the citizenship of foreign nationals did not even cross their minds.

Mannan recently helped organize a Rainbow Rally in the capital of Dhaka. The rally, designed as a safe space for LGBT youth, drew threats of violence. Police cancelled the event in response, saying it offended religious sentiments. Additionally, Roopbaan regularly fielded death threats from various Islamic pages on Facebook. "They knew that basically, there was a danger,” said a British photographer who did not want his name released.

That’s putting it rather mildly. The murders of Mannan and Mojumdar came just days after the killing of English professor Rezaul Karim Siddique, who was slain at a bus stop in the city of Rajshahi. ISIS claimed responsibility for Siddique’s murder. The group said it targeted Siddique for calling “attention to atheism.” There have been four attacks this month alone, with six bloggers killed in the last 12 months, including Avijit Roy, who called the Charlie Hebdo massacre in France “a tragic atrocity committed by soldiers of the so-called religion of peace” in one of his final articles.

Writers, thinkers, bloggers, LGBT activists: all of these and more are fighting to preserve their freedom of self-expression and are willing to pay a steep price for their views. LGBT activists forced into exile claim that Bangladeshi authorities are not responsive to their complaints. The police warned these people they could face arrest for “unnatural offenses.”

Stoning, hangings, beheadings, hackings. Consequences we discuss over coffee, around the water-cooler at work. But they can never happen here; these aberrations cannot cross our shores. These are but stories we tell. It is my right to write this down, I tell myself, but these rights afforded to me in my relatively cushy corner of the world are the cheapest bargaining chip available to the men, women, and children who know what defines an unnatural offense depends heavily on the whims of the state.

Vagueness and generality are legality’s most biting foes. In their hands, any yardstick with which to measure the quality of human life disappears. In a country where the death of a blogger is becoming almost as regular as the sunrise, that’s a dangerous thing. These people dared to be open. They knew there was a danger. They knew they might die. Mortality is a dodgy subject,
but activists do not value their lives over the sanctity, security and liberty of the lives of others. Recently, we’ve started taking lawmakers across the southern United States to task for the passage of laws designed to limit the rights and curtail the progress of the LGBT community. It is the fashion of the educated and the elite to be respectful of any difference in culture, belief or opinion. North Carolina passed a measure that requires transgender individuals use the restroom that corresponds to the gender assigned to them at birth. The House called a special session to pass the measure; said session cost taxpayers approximately $42,000. Politicians in Tennessee seek to deny mental health services to LGBT youth by allowing therapists and counselors to cite a “sincerely held and religious belief” when denying services to anyone. Hate is hate. Nothing more, nothing less.

I was ten years old when, in the middle of a geography lesson, I asked my teacher why anyone would be afraid of visiting the Middle East. It was closer to the equator than New York, well, much of it, I reasoned. What was there not to like?

“They don’t respect women over there,” my teacher replied. “They hate all kinds of people who are not like them. Gay people, black people, anyone who’s not Muslim. You don’t ever want to go there.”

I shrugged, but her response seared itself into my mind. We can condemn the actions of extremists abroad, but we must never turn our eyes from the war at home. We are not equal. Far from it. How can we decry the actions of despots in countries not our own with such loud, impassioned fervor, yet look the other way regarding our own?

We look across the ocean, across thousands of miles of desert, beyond a sea of trees, into villages, towns, cities teeming with life, uncivilized lives. We look at these places, Dhaka, Rajshahi, pityingly. We say, *Well, in contrast to what they have going on over there, we have it pretty good.*

But Xulhaz Mannan did not see it that way. He looked around and chose to be out, then busied himself with the betterment of lives very much like his own. And I reckon he looked beyond his city and the scattered towns and villages, the sea of trees, the miles of desert and all the way across the ocean before saying, *But it’s not good enough,* before getting back to work. He was not a hero, but an activist, a man capable of extraordinary things. His life had value because he knew he was necessary.

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Alan Jude Ryland is an editor who lives in New York City. His articles have been published in *Elite Daily,* *Second Nexus,* and *The Daily Buzz,* among others. This is his second feature for *Chelsea Station.*
“An involving, sentimental tale of love, secrets, and relationships.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“A dark, glimmering gem of a read.”
—Jim Gladstone, Passport Magazine

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

“Gifted novelist Jameson Currier, has an incredible knack for portraying gay men as complex and flawed yet like-minded, mostly likable and relatable individuals. His latest, Based on a True Story, presents an intriguing, introspective examination of two gay couples who spend Thanksgiving weekend together in a rustic mountain cabin.”
—Christopher Verleger, Edge
“A Gathering Storm is enraging, engrossing and impossible to put down.”
—Christopher Verleger, Edge

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

**LAMBDA LITERARY FINALIST**

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

“Currier explores Matthew Shepard’s murder in richly empathetic fiction. The large cast shows how widely a crime’s ripples extend. Written in powerful, choppy sentences and consciously patterned after screenplays and true-crime stories, Currier’s novel is told in the present tense, shifting among the perspectives of the many characters involved. A compassionate tribute to hate-crime victims.”
—Kirkus Reviews

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

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

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

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

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

www.chelseastationeditions.com
Dennis Rhodes poems have been collected in *Spiritus Pizza and other poems*, *Entering Dennis*, and most recently, *The Letter I*. His work has been published in *The Jersey Journal*, *New York Newsday*, *Fine Gardening*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Alembic*, *Chelsea Station*, and many other publications.
A Moment

The last time I was struck by my Muse? Oh, God it had to be the sight of him hailing a taxi at Lexington and sixtieth. We had just had lunch at Bloomingdale’s and although we had never lived together, I stood there as if in an empty apartment, my throat swollen with grief collecting the few things that were truly my own… one thing was absolutely certain: another poem would not come for years. Hurt, bereft of creativity, resigned to a precarious future I slipped, wordlessly, into the crowd.

—Dennis Rhodes
When Angels Fall
Marc Frazier

The black whores in tight body stockings hang in doorways, prowl outside bars, snarl like wolves defensive of their territory, lip gloss glowing in the fluorescence of the city night, teeth bared. The smell of lust in the air.

When no one calls he hits the streets, winds in and out of alleyways, hanging outside the gay businesses watching drunks stumble past. He does some coke and hustles stoned. His body aches from a feeling of being trapped within itself. A heaviness. He has visions of being weightless, an angel, a stoned archangel in brilliantly lit stained glass. Stoned mindless. Busses whir past. They are real. His connection. His body is real. His bottle of gin.
He needs to remain straight enough to make some bucks. He enters Touché’s. The smell of leather intoxicates. Some know him and are blasé; others find him extremely hot: leather jacket, curly black hair, tight levis, practiced swagger. It takes all of ten minutes for someone to find him. In a dark corner it is all over. He is too stoned tonight. Too stoned to make a buck.

His mind dies in his brain. And shrivels. But his body burns. He knows only his body. He knows two things well: his body and his vision of the archangel (some sense of purity and purpose) though trapped in glass.

Morning. Dreamless. Spring heavy with its sap. The change of seasons doesn’t affect him much. Nothing seems to lately. He rubs his eyes. A haze in his mind filters the sunrays as he lifts the shade and sees tree branches, buds pushing themselves outward, their vulnerable tips, a phallic rising, an energy that pulses and pushes without control, despite itself, like his daily routines, his lust. He rubs his chest and flops back naked on the bed. How can it be? His body still desires as if he is apart from it but goes with its flow, like buds stretching and stirring only to lose themselves.

Centered so in this world, he never considers how one commits unconsciously to a life, however dull or destructive. There is this feeling of something forever slipping through the spaces between his fingers. He begins to feel panic. As he smokes a joint, he realizes he hasn’t eaten in two days except for snacks at the bars. He feels weak. Sadness closes his eyes and he remembers:

Midnight. The lights of a city aglow with the energy of millions of lives, of peoples’ dramas: brilliant, miraculous, violent. He cruises into Sidetracks checking out the men lined up along the bar. Music pounds intensely, caught in a repeating loop like the hours of his days. Insistent. A reggae song slows things down and he proceeds to the bartender rubbing against the eager men. He stands sucking on his straw watching the men on the dance floor, the traffic to and from the men’s room, the whirling lights captivating him and he forgets.

He hears a voice, “And another for my friend here.” A guy presses close beside him. Michael gazes at him through the smoky haze.


“Just got into town. Been on the road for a while.”

“Oh yeah, where from?”

“L.A. Ever been?”

The two letters enrapture him. The freedom of sun. Hollywood. Warm sand on bare skin. Foamy surf splashing the beach. Sex at sunrise or on the beach in the middle of the night. No one is a prisoner there, he thinks.
The man has a model’s well-defined features: square chin, long lashes, soft skin, curly blond hair. His unbuttoned shirt reveals a muscular build. He presses against Michael lowering his head to his ear asking him to dance. The room pounds with vibrations. A slow electrocution. Pain and pleasure. Eyes on crotches. Hands lost in their own caresses up and down thighs. The smell of poppers.

The man takes off his shirt. A rare slow song begins. Michael heads off the dance floor, but the man puts his arm over Michael’s shoulder and pulls him face to face. He is sweating. Half-naked. Insistent. They fall into and out of the rhythmic beats. Music pours over them in erotic waves. Michael sees the dance ball whirling, the man’s blond head, the sun on the ocean all as one. “What’s your name?” he whispers.

He stirs to lips sucking his nipples, slow, wet, erotic. Running his hands through Eric’s blond curls he mumbles, half-asleep. The morning has passed them by like an early bus. He hears birds. They fly like tiny angels through his mind. Traffic hums.

“I’ll fix breakfast. Do you have eggs?” From seeing the looks of Michael’s apartment he knows the answer before finishing the question. “Well, I’ll come up with something. You never answered by the way.”

“What?”

“Have you been to L.A.?”

The images reappear. The sun hangs suspended over the warm city of angels. Surf roars. “No, but I will.”

“Did you grow up here?”

“Well, we moved around a lot. My mom was always moving away from her old man. He beat the shit out of her. I moved here when I finished high school.”

“Don’t know if I can last through a winter here, but I’m gonna try. “I’m sure I’ll stay warm, right?” He kisses him on the lips wet and hard.

He knows there will be no getting over him. Like knowing what one wants to eat when one’s hungry or like a dog senses danger. It slows him down; it speeds him up. Golden down of skin, muscular thighs. After sex he gazes into his blue eyes as they massage one another, silent. A different kind of touch. He pours wine into his eye sockets and licks them out. The center no longer holds. Directionless in space. A disembodied fragment of a spaceship falling. Stars and space. Wheel without spokes.

Last night they had been listening to jazz in Washington Street Underground. Old ceiling fans. Summer’s heat. Emotional overload. Like a fire or riot could start at a spark’s notice. They were languid. Melting of limbs and soft touching of lips like kissing the soft spot on a baby’s head. That delicate in their approach. He had looked into Eric’s eyes and been afraid.
Today as he strolls along the lake he feels the same sinking feeling his stomach had felt the night before. He drags the weight of his arms along, surprised they don’t leave grooves in the sand. The water is rough. Small craft warnings. He stands along the pier and gazes at the lighthouse. It’s the most solid thing he has ever known. Fixed like the points on a compass. This is some comfort. But he is not a lighthouse. Or a compass. Just a point not fixed. A grain of sand on the beach.

People sprawl everywhere. He steps around them—mines ready to explode. Lightly. A form of prayer in his head. This delicate approach reminds him of their touching last night. A tentativeness like walking through this mine field. As he walks, he sees the waves peak and splash upon shoreline. They are the thoughts in his head. The movement of his feet.

He walks and walks, sees children playing. They have made a channel in the sand and diverted water to form their own tiny lake. A little girl drops stones into its center at timed intervals like a mechanized toy. He sees the concentric ripples. They mesmerize. People he had loved had widened in circles like these around him and vanished. He sees everything now as suspended in time. He sees the young boy push the girl aside and splash wildly in his usurped lake. The circles gone, the spell broken.

Michael glances at the lighthouse over his shoulder, feels a chill even in the burning sandy heat and heads out for the strip.

After the break up with Eric some part of Michael gives in. Collapses like a building for urban renewal. Without the renewal. This is not the same loss he knows. It’s his own death. He goes on but sleepwalking. He is depressed and doesn’t eat for days. He stares out the window, seeing and not seeing the busy street. He awakens in the night sweating and shaking. He feels bodiless, the core of his body a heavy weight apart from himself.

Then he feels better one morning. Not the same person. He will never be him again. The part of himself that had collapsed is restored. But it is hard. Made of some very solid, some very durable material.

Michael enters the theater. As he takes a seat, he sees the familiar images of flesh upon flesh, hears the familiar sound of wet lips on flesh around him. He isn’t in the mood (active or passive) but he needs some funds. He is bored. This is part of his life like children are a part of so many adults’ lives.

He heads into the lobby and picks up the latest issue of *Gaylife*. The headline reads: “Rapists Claim Fourth, Maybe Fifth, Victim.” The article is about the latest of several reported rapes of men on the north side. In his neighborhood mostly. He has never thought of this. It takes three men and a van to do it. Why go to all the bother, Michael thinks. It is out of violence, hate. Sex is easy to get. They call the victim “faggot,” knock him over the head, drag him into a van, tell him they are going to show him what it’s like.
to be with real men. Afterwards, they dump him in an empty lot. Semi-conscious. If he’s lucky.

He begins the day hanging out at the train station. North Shore line. Ones with money and a lot to hide. Fifty bucks a blowjob. Often more. He tries to make eye contact. Takes his cruising stance. Hip thrust forward. A loitering look but not so much so as to be noticed by police. There are always interested men. He wonders what the rest of their lives are like to have to do this in a men’s room. For that matter what was his life like?

Standing in the crowd he sees the woman’s open purse. An oversight. She looks wealthy. Probably usually very cautious. Probably didn’t carry much cash. He sees the sandy beaches. Feels the sun’s heat. He moves beside her. She snaps the purse shut.

He stops by a cafeteria and has some soup and a hot dog. Watches traffic. He doesn’t hear all the honking of horns that he hears in movies and on TV. as urban realism. A grey day. He feels some tide rising in him like that at Malibu. It does not recede but continues to rise.

Later that day he takes a trip to the suburbs. He hates them but he has a chance to make a couple hundred bucks from an old fairy with a PhD. Advertising has helped. He feigns interest. The man needs to be convinced he is somehow still appealing. He isn’t, but anything Michael can do or say will help. He wishes he had had a few drinks before this one.

On the way back to the city a tired calm overtakes him. A beautiful, young woman in a long, grey coat sits across from him. A man of about thirty comes and sits beside her. They immediately look like a set of something. He is gorgeous. Meticulously trimmed beard. Stylish, layered hair hugs his scalp as he runs his fingers through it. His deep set blue eyes avert easily. Both of them read books. Michael notes how the woman eyes the man, noting his beauty. The train hits some very rough track and the man pauses in his reading and raises his eyes. She smiles as she reads. Michael recognizes that look either from a lost part of himself or movies he has seen or people he has known. A woman will keep on reading, he thinks, but a man, well, it must be smooth sailing.

The two of them seem to shine clean and bright. Like angels in a blue sky. So unlike his world. It is time for her to get off. She stands in the aisle waiting to exit. The man keeps looking at her back hoping she will turn around. She doesn’t. Even after she exits, he gazes across the aisle and out the windows to see her figure walking along the platform. He smiles in his seat alone except for his eyes. He glances back at his book. He can’t read a word and puts it in his black valise.

Michael looks at the man as he gets off the train. For the rest of the way and all that evening he sees the man’s eyes and the woman’s smile. He thinks of Eric’s eyes and how the men at the train station had once felt about their wives. The old professor paid for such a pair of eyes, not really sex. It gives him a warm feeling to think about the couple on the train. Like a beautiful dream one thinks about all day.
He feels anxious on the bus all the way to the Art Institute. Listless. It is the dead of winter and everyone, everything, shows it. Worn. Withdrawn. Waiting. He checks his coat and saunters through the corridors. He is early to meet him in the men’s room at 2:00 o’clock. Like every Thursday. No questions asked.

Being here is like church. He looks forward to it. His life slows down. He feels serene. The echoes of high heels in huge spaces. Other sounds muffle like piano hammers striking a sounding board without wires. Audio draped with heavy, velvet cloths. Everything is orderly, arranged, and clear: Renaissance, Modern, French impressionist. Some people huddle in organized groups. Others pause in thoughtful reflection, alone. He overhears the guide:

“The Last Judgment was painted by van Eyck, a Flemish painter of the fifteenth century.” Michael’s eyes are riveted to the painting. The background of the upper half is blue. Hands clasp in prayer. Flying angels blow trumpets. Midway down an angel stands guard over Death’s wings, a skull with bat wings keeping those in Hell from the light of salvation above. Below unfolds a nightmare of naked, deformed bodies and writhing flesh—Hell’s concentration camp. A porcupine head on a black voodoo face. Eyes peer out of black, between bodies crisscrossing, flesh against flesh, in every direction. This bottom half haunts him.

Above, angels rejoice. The angels he is used to seeing. He comes here to see them. They are the good in his life. His hope. But he knows buried somewhere below at the bottom of the mass of damned bodies lie the fallen angels. The first in a line. They will not rise triumphant; they will suffer endlessly. God didn’t make deals. Once an angel or a life falters, there is no getting over it. But they had been so holy and good, he thinks regretfully. He wishes that someone in the group will point this out, empathize with the damned, the fallen angels, buried under others who are also buried, some nearly invisible.

No. The group sees the folded hands. The angels triumphant. The blue sky. He stares at the bottom half. He remains after the tour group departs, their sounds muffled as if receding through clouds.

“Hello?” He stretches, yawns, collapses on the bed. “Yeah, what is it?”

“Michael?”

“Yeah, whatcha need? A hundred bucks a…

“This is Tim.”

“Tim?”

“Where are you?”

“At home. How about taking a trip out to the sticks?”
Michael watches the countryside, patches of green and black, as it passes by his train window. Another world. This motion is conducive to thinking. As he watches the images appear and disappear, he relaxes a little, closing his eyes. The train rocks him to sleep. He dreams a city of night and perpetual darkness. Inside and out. Superimposed upon this sleeping vision are patches of green hills. He feels the moist, dark fields like one feels things in dreams. Is the train moving out of the darkness and into the light?

The conductor is shaking his shoulder. He gathers his bag and walks down the aisle half awake. Tim is waiting. He throws his arms around Michael. His arms feel different than other men’s. This gives him the same good feeling he had in thinking of the couple on the train: warm earth, sloping green fields.

Tim said how good it was to see him.

“It’s nice to get away.”

“How’ve ya been?”

“Alright. How about you?”

“Real good.”

“Why don’t you move up to the city?”

“Don’t know. Used to it here. It grows on you.”

“Like leprosy.”

“No, really. At first I thought I’d go out of my mind. But it’s been good for me. I’ve changed.”

This kind of discussion made Michael nervous. What does that mean? One changed a tire. Or deodorant.

Tim fixes dinner while Michael sits on the back porch watching the sun descend. It does not sink. Ships sink. He thinks this as he inhales. The sun is too graceful to sink. It’s a dream of harvestable fields somewhere like forgotten parts of himself. After dinner they sit and talk. The sun has warmed the room. Plants hang everywhere. Deep, dark wood surrounds them.

They talk of old times. Michael is evasive about his life. But Tim senses immediately that Michael’s life isn’t his own. That one can’t possess what one is not fully aware of. Something in Michael has been used up and not replenished. That’s why he looks older. They talk late into the night then sleep together, Tim holding him most of the night. Michael dreams, curled up, safe. The sun warm and bright in his dreams.

Before Michael leaves, Tim asks if he needs anything. “Really, if you ever need anything, let me know. I’ve been able to save some money. I’d be glad to help.”

“Thanks, Tim.” They embrace again. Michael boards the train. The sun through the tinted window puts him to sleep. He has a sinking feeling in the pit of his

CHELSEA STATION
stomach. About halfway home he awakes. It is dark. He sees a city of night in his mind’s eye. A city of perpetual dark. Inside or out. Day or night.

It’s nearly three in the morning when he decides to give it up for the night. He shivers a bit clutching his leather jacket tightly. The surf continues to rise inside him. He will make a clean break. Go to California. Turn blond and wear sexy dark glasses and speedos. He is lost in thought. He has hardly had anything to drink, just a few hits off a joint. He hears a voice ask, “Hey, buddy, how about helping a fella out?”

He turns and sees a man leaning against a building in the alleyway. Michael slinks into the alley. A voice inside tells him not to. He ignores it. “Listen, I’ll make it worth your while. How’s a hundred? Look.” The man shows him his wallet thick with bills. He must be vice Michael thinks. He is hesitant, afraid. The light from the street casts eerie shadows upon the sides of the brick buildings.

He approaches the man grasping him by his belt. Seemingly out of nowhere appear two other men. The first hits Michael in the face. Pushes him into one of the others who knees him hard in the thigh. They drag him to their van which is parked in the alley and throw him inside. One of them takes off his belt and puts it around Michael’s neck. The last thing he remembers is lying on his stomach clutching the shag carpeting, riding it like a wave, grasping tufts of it like swatches of hair torn from the men’s scalps.

Corridors buzz with activity. Men and women in uniform scuffle. Voices on radios and scanners create a static that’s unnerving. Calls click on and off. A sense of urgency is lacking, just a sense of efficiency, or attempts at it. He hasn’t thought out what he’s going to say. He just feels he should be here now. He is nervous and shaky. Again he has not eaten. What should he say?

He can’t go through with it. He fumbles in his pockets for coins for the vending machines. For coffee. He sits and stares at the floor. After a while he approaches an important-looking desk with a large black woman seated behind it. What should he say? “Excuse me, Miss? I’d like to talk with someone.”

“Is it regarding a crime?” She eyes his ragged appearance and asks, “Are you alright, honey?”

“I think so.”

“What kind of crime?”

“Well…” He froze, hesitated.

“Don’t be shy. I’ve heard it all. Was it a robbery?”

“I, Uh…”

“Honey, I can’t help you out if…”

CHELSEA STATION
“Rape”, he interrupts.
She looks puzzled. “Okay. Rape. Did you bring the victim, honey?”

“It’s me.”
She tries to rise above it. After all her training… She guesses him to be about 5’10.”
“Rape?” She will be efficient, concerned. She calls over an officer. “What’s your name, baby?” she asks.

“Michael.”
“Well, Michael, Sergeant Collins is gonna get some information from you and make sure you’re alright. Okay?” She staples a couple of forms and her preliminary intake report together and heads with Michael across the huge, fluorescent room. Metal desks and metal waste baskets. He hurts as he sits among file cabinets and metal clips and miles of forms. And starched uniforms. Starched smiles. His mind begins to race. This is all a mistake. Before he realizes it, he is talking with the sergeant.

“So, you’re reporting that you were raped by three men. Sorry to hear that.” His voice betrays him ever so slightly. The starch has failed. “Tell me more.”

“Well, I was walking along Clark Street…”

“What time was this?”

“I don’t know exactly—around 3 or 4.”

“In the morning?” Michael nods. “I see.” The sergeant lowers his head to jot down a note.

“I was walking along when a man by an alley called out to me.”

“What did he want?”

What should he say? A blowjob? Sex in an alley? This is a big mistake. The cop glances over the top of his glasses, waiting, a bit impatient.

“He came on to me.”

“I see. Go on.”

“Well, I went into the alley…”

“Excuse me, but what for?”

“I… he had a lot of money.”

“Go on.”

“So when I got inside the alley a couple of other men came up and started to work me over.” He continues until he has told it all. All that he recalls. The sergeant listens like he has heard it all before. The rest is routine. Descriptions of the assailants. And so on. No mention of the other rapes Michael has read about. Then the cop says, “You’re aware accepting money for sexual favors is illegal?”

CHELSEA STATION
He says no more. Just goes across the room where a young officer sits working on a report. The young cop glances at Michael as the two of them have a short conversation. When the sergeant returns, he is a bit cooler. Matter-of-fact. “Follow me.”

Now the probing hands. A gentle pressing on his side and stomach. Starched people in action. The room is cold. They send him for a specimen. He overhears some officers talking… “two-bit hustler…” The comments come in bits and spurts like an audiotape that has been erased in spots… “bunch of fags.”

He walks back to the examination room. He feels heavy, then light, cold and shivering. His sense of balance is off. A part of him gives in. It feels like the last part. He feels dizzy. The metal and starch all around him no longer support him. The room swirls and he loses consciousness.

First the smell. A clean smell. His eyes open. “You must have been tired boy.” She flattens the sheet over his chest. “Been sleepin longer than old van Winkle. How ya feeling?”

“Sore. Tired.”

“I’ll say. The doctor’ll be back shortly. Get your rest.”

She bustles out. He feels odd. Like he has just dozed off from his life for a while. The doctor examines, lectures, and questions him.

“How ya feeling?”

“Sore. Tired.”

“I’ll say. The doctor’ll be back shortly. Get your rest.”

She bustles out. He feels odd. Like he has just dozed off from his life for a while. The doctor examines, lectures, and questions him.

“No, really. There’s no need.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

The doctor leaves. He looks around the room. White and enamel. Metal. Hard surfaces. Nothing to give way against his breathing skin.

“There’s a reporter and policeman who would like to see you. You up to it?”

“A reporter?”

“Yep. What do ya think?”

“Send ‘em in I guess.”

The reporter crowds in first. Harried. Self-important. A bag over his shoulder and notepad in hand. “Hi, I’m Lee, from Gaylife.”

“Hello…”
“I’m here to make others aware that we must report such matters to the police. We have the right to be protected too. You did the right thing. I’d like to get some information.” His pedantic manner is annoying.


He must be stronger than the surfaces that surround him. He dozes off. The nurse peeks in and escorts the men out. He sleeps. She feels somehow solicitous toward him. One of those short-lived moments when sentiment rises high within us. She is touched as she tucks his sheet around him and shuts off the light. Doing everything softly. The kind of silence you listen to. The sound of padded-sole shoes in a quiet hallway.

Something must matter. If not a great passion, something. After the assault he is morose, silent, even worse than in the days after Eric’s departure. The intent of his assailants is always with him and this alters something important. He knows that they viewed him as something less than themselves. Anything is then possible, he thinks.

He goes there because he feels he has to. A kind of farewell. To himself. He presses through the crowd and stares at the painting. People bump against him. Oblivious. This time he focuses on the top half. Its visionary brightness. When he walks away he is crying. It has been awhile. He goes to the bathroom and washes his face, staring at it head on. It just takes resolve, he thinks positively.

He is glad he had called Tim and told him he was leaving for California. Tim’s word had been good. He wouldn’t starve. He boarded the bus for the train station with his tattered luggage. He feels he has some knowledge he can use should he choose to. He had reached out. This must count for something. Like learning to walk again.

He hears coins dropping. The bus is nearly full. Coins and tokens ping as people board the bus. This reminds him of someone once saying that such sounds mean another angel has gotten his wings. He would not hope against hope. He had seen. He knew.

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Size queens would agree: the bigger the better. This might be true of the male appendage, as my husband calls it, but it’s not always true of the writerly ego.

All my life I have dreamed of possessing inordinately large self-importance. Indeed, given the proper nourishment, my ego would wax obnoxious, swelling into as bloated a bulk as many I have encountered at writers’ conferences and book festivals. However, being both a regional and a gay author makes ego-food hard to come by. Such difficulties have kept my potential arrogance and bad behavior very nicely in check.
As a writer whose work most often focuses on both the gay male and the Appalachian experience, I get an unspoken message from many sources, that my literary labors do not in the long run count. From mainstream editors, publishers, and reviewers. From certain colleagues at Virginia Tech. From urban LGBT folks who regard rustic or regional identity with patronizing contempt. From Appalachian folks who regard gays with pious fear and loathing. Even from certain MFA students, many of whom are fascinated with the urbane and the faddish and have no respect for or interest in artists who speak for subcultures or minorities. To be both queer and regional, these sources tacitly insist, is to be doubly limited in scope, twice as dismissible. LGBT is not universal. Appalachian is not universal. Who, in other words, wants to read about hillbillies and queers? (In order to achieve a more respectable literary reputation, perhaps I should write distanced, obscure lyrics and witty postmodern narratives about heterosexual life in the DC suburbs, but I fear that might require more research than my impatience would permit.)

Many days, these facts make me bitter and disheartened (though the regular consumption of martinis helps lighten my mood). When I brood, I chew over my curmudgeon’s litany of disappointments. The public library in my hometown of Hinton, West Virginia, possesses, I am told, of my fourteen books only one. The state newspaper, The Charleston (WV) Gazette, entirely ignored my memoir Loving Mountains, Loving Men, the first book to deal with gay life in Appalachia. What recognition I’ve achieved I have scrambled and fought for, while enviously watching fame come with ease to so many straight folks and city dwellers who successfully network within the literary mainstream. I am often wont to hum, along with Mary Chapin Carpenter, “Everything we got / we got the hard way.”

I am not alone in these frustrations, of course. So many of us writers—straight or gay, urban or country—have faced the same tsunamis of indifference and trudged through the same sloughs of self-doubt. We’ve continued writing as best we can in the face of neglect, obscurity, and the dwindling possibilities of publishing in a world where fewer and fewer people seem to read with any regularity (the seductions of text-messaging, television, and computer games apparently being too powerful to resist). Stubbornness gets us through, sheer orneriness and the inescapable urge to express what we must.

Humor also rescues us. When I want to make laughter out of how unwelcome and invisible I, as a gay author in Appalachia, sometimes feel (like that evil fairy not invited to Snow White’s christening), I tell the tale of Princess Puppy.

A straight friend of mine, Tiffany Trent—author of several popular young-adult fantasy novels from both Simon and Schuster and Mirrorstone Books—was invited to be part of the Second Annual Author Fair at the Pulaski County Public Library, in the very same Virginia town where my husband and I live. Tiffany encouraged the organizer of the event to invite me, since I’ve published a goodly number of books and live only a few blocks from the library. The invitation came via e-mail, asking for a description of what I published and a list of my book titles. I responded, honestly and in some detail. I received no reply. When, a few days before the event, I e-mailed the organizer again, she replied by withdrawing the invitation, telling me that the event had too many authors as it was.

Pulaski is, like many small mountain towns, infested with fundamentalist Christians. Was this a case of homophobia? I don’t know. I try not to assume the worst, despite my
tendency toward paranoia. I do know, thanks to Tiffany’s breathless report afterward, that almost all the authors who were celebrated that afternoon were self-published. Tiffany and a poet from Radford University were the only exceptions. The most colorful presence at the author fair was a woman whose make-up rivaled Tammy Fay Bakker’s. She chided Tiffany for writing young adult dark fantasy. “Oh dear,” she said. “Why can’t people stop writing that nonsense and just write wholesome books with good Christian values like mine? You aren’t saved, are you?”

Her wholesome Christian books, it turns out, were a series of children’s books about Princess Puppy. Best of all, said princess was actually present at the library event. As Tiffany describes it, “a poodle lunged from a cavern of pink tulle piled under a book table. It wore a tutu and tiara and yipped so vociferously that the tiara slid down over its face.” Tiffany was later to note, upon closer examination, that the princess was a prince. Yes, here was “a Christian author who turned her dogs into ballet drag queens!”

Tiffany spent the remainder of the event being annoyed by the poodle’s manic yapping and listening to a clutch of other authors talk about the importance of letting Jesus into one’s life. She was, however, allowed some pleasure as she was packing to leave: “Without warning, the puppy drag princess lifted his leg and pissed all over his pink tulle bed.”

Ever since I heard Tiffany’s tales of this prissy canine, I’ve been joking that I need a T-shirt with the slogan “Trounced by Princess Puppy.” Part of being marginalized is being excluded—from literary journals, networking opportunities, chances for recognition and publicity—but sometimes being excluded is a blessing. It spares you many an irritation. If I am invited to participate in next year’s Pulaski author fair, I think I’ll pass.

All that said, snickered, and snarled, there are some sweet advantages to being a gay regionalist who’s stubbornly remained on native ground. First of all, filling a literary niche that hasn’t been previously occupied is bound to garner at least a little recognition. The fact that no one had ever before published a book about gay life in Appalachia certainly made it easier for me to wrangle a contract out of Ohio University Press for *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*. My very distinctive literary identity also got me a little attention when a certain much-talked-about film was released soon after *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*: The Roanoke Times christened me “the Brokeback Professor.” Let’s just say that writing about the gay/Appalachian/leather/bear experience might limit my audience, but at least I’m unique.

Second of all, what audience I have wonderfully fuels my determination to keep going. E-mails and letters arrive, infrequently but regularly, thanking me for my publications about gay life in Appalachia. Those who read my work are starved for reflections of themselves and affirmations of their identities. They’re most often other gay men from rural backgrounds who don’t relate to the urban gay community, with its youth culture, its emphasis on consumerism, sleekness, and refinement. They’re pleased to find reading material that reminds them that openly gay and proudly Appalachian are not mutually exclusive states, that one can make a queer life far from gay meccas. Their letters to me are enthusiastic, grateful, and very kind. In moments of my deepest discouragement, their voices remind me that I’m not wasting my time writing about hillbillies and queers.
Responses from thankful readers are not entirely sufficient to quell my complaints. I still make bitter jokes. When will my hometown be erecting a statue in my honor? Why is my latest poetry reading not crowded with clamoring paparazzi? Where is that coterie of young, muscular, goateed groupies to dote on me and offer me their submissive sexual favors? I still quietly envy those writers whose paths have been easier and more conventionally successful. These are the sour feelings of that secretly bulky writer’s ego mentioned earlier, one denied the attention it has always believed it deserved.

Still, notes from my readers have led me to a position I never thought I’d inhabit. When I was younger, my father and I used to argue about art. He sided with Tolstoy: the greatest art should contribute to a sense of human unity. I was a firm advocate of aestheticism: beauty first, art-for-art’s-sake, and all that. Very Oscar Wilde, very fin de siècle. Since those long-ago arguments, my position has shifted. I’m not suggesting that writers are obligated to produce works that obey Tolstoy’s dicta—after all, we write according to our obsessions, not according to literary or aesthetic theory—and I’m still big on beauty, whether it’s literary—a well-turned phrase, a memorable metaphor, a moving image—or physical—a mountain range, a snowy pasture, a black beard, a hairy chest. But art that provides not only aesthetic pleasure but also social benefit achieves, it seems to me, the best of both worlds, an amalgam of which both Wilde and Tolstoy might approve.

Being a regional gay writer has limited and marginalized me, I have no doubt. Minority writers rarely have burgeoning majority audiences. The tutu-clad adventures of Princess Puppy, the angst-ridden lives of metropolitan heterosexuals are literary fare more palatable to many than my frank, occasionally erotic, often angry prose and poetry about mountaineer queers. But being doubly marginalized has cultivated a passion in me—much as certain hothouse conditions can force a bulb—for literature that insists not only on beauty but on justice. Frequent frustration such a writing life can be. It is also exhilarating unity—to stand with one’s clan, intractable queers past and present—and it is heady privilege—to be part of progress in whatever ways circumstances allow.

Jeff Mann has published five books of poetry, Bones Washed with Wine, On the Tongue, Ash, A Romantic Mann, and Rebels; two collections of personal essays, Edge: Travels of an Appalachian Leather Bear and Binding the God: Ursine Essays from the Mountain South; a book of poetry and memoir, Loving Mountains, Loving Men; four novels, Cub, Fog: A Novel of Desire and Reprisal, Purgatory: A Novel of the Civil War, and Salvation: A Novel of the Civil War; and two volumes of short fiction, Desire and Devour and A History of Barbed Wire, which won a Lambda Literary Award.
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, was published by Chelsea Station Editions. He can be found on the Web at www.craigcotter.com.
You're bent over, barefoot,
long black hair oily young.
5-7, 120, white.
Some black hair on legs.
Our faces don't connect
*
I walk to my car
roll down the windows
mid February in Pasadena—
was 80 today, the evening warm.
I sit in the car 20 minutes
thinking of your beauty.
*
After shopping—greens, cheese, flatbread—
Curtis not there—
I see another you
with a guy like me, his arm around your shoulder
walking in.
I drive forward slowly watching you to my left
not looking where I'm driving.
*
Two perfect guys within a few minutes of each other
it's too much. Reason
to avoid suicide.
During the yoga meditation we were asked to focus on one thing we want
I wanted to be David Geffen but specifically to have
765 million dollars in the bank.
We have the same taste in dark-haired twinks.
*
I like how my yoga teacher doesn't lecture
about what we should want.
I usually bring her a poem every class.
Tonight it was “To A Blossoming Pear Tree.”
I reread it twice before class
liking all of it still. Still loving the ending.
I stopped after the first reading
*
to talk to a cute guy waiting for class.
He comes with a woman every week.
He can bend in half
his stomach arched to the ceiling
his forehead touching the ground
his hands holding his feet.
*
Driving home
windows down
a crescent moon does her thing
I feel how lucky I’ve had 24 years in LA.
Even if it all falls down
and I’m buried alive under rubble
die a horrible death over 5 days—
Even though you might feel sorry for how I went out
*
don’t forget I got to live in paradise so long
everywhere, Michigan, New York, Los Angeles—
went to visit Asia, Europe, Central America—
fell in love many times
and not like these guys tonight we'll never meet.
Hopped up on pain meds
*
surprised to see an ex's car in my garage
when I get home.
He has a key and remote
and comes over whenever he wants.
He was using my computer—this computer—
because his couldn’t pick up the router signal.
I got his going
*
then told him I was going to write.
He stayed and talked about his trip tomorrow to the Thai Consulate.
We talked about maybe returning to Thailand for his dad's 80th birthday.
He massaged my shoulders, we hugged a couple times.
He’s in the shower now.
It’s been grand
maybe 30 left.
*
And maybe not you know
and I was thinking in yoga today
*
I live the life of a rich man in America.
Allen Ginsberg invited me to his farm in New York
the summer I was 19.
In front of the Angel’s dugout in Anaheim
I saw Al Kaline in the TV booth
and yelled up, “Hey Al Kaline!, and waved.
He leaned out with a fist pump.
*
He knew from my yell
I was one of those kids driven to Tiger Stadium
many times as a boy
to watch his line-drive homeruns into the left-field stands,
his cannon arm in right.
*
Bernie reminded me by email that today
is the first day of Lent.
When my grandfather was mildly upsetting my grandmother
she would turn to him, smile, and say,
“William, I'm giving you up for Lent.”
They're both gone now.
But Al Kaline, 2 twinks and I hold on.
*
Now I've got to type up the quotes I like from Troyat's biography of Tolstoy.
I do this to help my writing—
and for the college course I'll teach one day
when I'm invited.
It will be a poetry workshop.
Although when I was asked at the yoga meditation
last night
*
to focus on this dream, and to have another person enter into the meditation
it was Marlon Brando when he was 70 dressed like he was
for the Larry King interview, in beige slacks too small for him,
in Birkenstocks and barefoot, with a denim shirt, red tie, jean jacket
his hair combed forward.
And I told him about wanting a writer-in-residence job
and he told me,
*
“Fuck that shit, that’ll fuck-up your writing.”
We were asked to share
how our meditations went.
It appeared some of my fellow classmates
did not appreciate Mr. Brando’s language.
This is the 31st year I’ve been writing poetry
*
how does anyone get writer’s block?
It seems impossible
as there is everywhere
and such a need to process it so I can make our lives better.
And remember when it was hard to get published?
You get in a zone
and everything gets published.
*
Yoga twink boy
you can sustain me a week.
Brando’s right about the university probably.
He died of fibrous lung disease and liver cancer.
I'm heading right there with him.
I hope to be the Brando of poetry some day.
But Wally Cox?
*
Well, glad he loved him.
Maybe my little yoga twink
is very like Wally when he was 19.
“Mine” in the sense I'm thinking about him.
Why get out gracefully?
Why do you think burning your papers near the end
*
will make what's left better?
I’d like my ashes mixed with Brando’s
but not with Wally’s.
Is there any method for separating them?
They're scattered already I think.
The Clinton River will do.

—Craig Cotter
“Araminta, isn’t it? What a pretty name. Please come in,” Eric von Grauling said, answering his young neighbor’s ring on his doorbell.

“It’s after the ancestress who made our family fortune in Charleston,” Minta told him, looking collected despite the flutter in her gut. She was inexperienced at being up to no good. The necessary demure-and-mature social front and the novel conditions of malice and forethought, taken together, amounted to complex choreography. And, even though her business here was with Eric’s teen sons and even though Eric was old, probably forty, he was a glamorous man. In her sensitive state, she found his looks distracting. All the von Grauling males had astounding eyes … she yanked her focus firmly back to the family-tree palaver.
“How did she make her fortune?” asked Eric, regarding the girl with the warm adult approval and courteous interest she was used to. And she picked up the dance of adult conversation, which she had mastered passably at almost-sixteen.

“Oh … indigo. Rice. Phosphates. Slavery. I came to see … I wondered … if Winslow can go to Lakewood with me. For ice cream.”

“Sure, after he finishes practicing. It’ll get his mind off that mess at school. We’re all still pretty upset about it.” Luckily, Eric sounded upset for Winslow rather than with him. She could hear Winslow’s piano a few rooms away.

“I’m glad you don’t mind. I mean, I thought you might’ve grounded him after the fight,” Minta said, and self-scolded: You’re babbling. See, you don’t know how to act natural misbehaving.

But Eric shook his head. “No, no, no. I know it’s Forest’s doing. Our boys’ve grown up in a very protected, privileged situation … well, not that Dogwood Downs isn’t nice. But if these messes at the school continue, Melanie and I think she might stay on and finish her year teaching at Ferrier and let me take the boys home and put them back in their school there, because I’m not going to stand for … just because Forest doesn’t get the social dynamic here.”

“What’s it like, your home place in West Virginia?” She’d heard they were obscenely rich and that the money was new. Maybe that was true and this sweet man wasn’t used to it yet? An old-money person wouldn’t have been so forthcoming. An old-money person would have had the maid bring her a lemonade and left her to wait. This man talked to her almost as if she were an adult at a drinks party. Too nice to be old-money-rich, she thought.

“Well, Haliburton’s a tiny little town with a tiny little school,” he began, shrugging. “My wife’s family owns the only industry there, and most of the property, and Forest, he’s always played the best kid roles in the little theatre productions, he was Franz in the ballet studio’s Nutcracker there every year until he got too big.” Eric gestured toward a row of photos of his elder son in ballet costumes. “And that’s partly because he deserves it, but partly because of who we are. And the homefolks are used to him. He probably could show up at school in a tutu there without too much flack. But if he acts natural here, his kind of natural, he’s going to stir up all that rich white trash at the school, and Winslow’s going to catch damage fending them off. We call Forest Trees sometimes because he’s a stickler about little things … can’t see the forest for the trees … well, in this situation, Forest can’t see either the forest or the trees. Or the wolves, for that matter. I guess it’s my fault Forest doesn’t know we can’t just do what we want all the time.”

Forest is about to ride the old learning curve, thought Minta. She said, “Cornell and Yale Wasserman and the Incagnoli boys are wolfish.” Her parents didn’t allow her to say white trash, but it sounded right for upperclassmen who fought thirteen-year-olds.

“And you’ve hit it off with Winslow,” Eric said. “That’s super, sometimes he isn’t easy, he can be uncommunicative, he was so late to talk that we worried he was autistic.” The heat and emphasis of this statement confirmed a personal fact Winslow had shared with Minta: I’m my Daddy’s favorite even when I’m bad.
“I like Winslow’s silences,” Minta ventured. “And I like what he has to say, once he gets ready to say it.”

Eric beamed approval at her approval, then turned the same look on Winslow when his younger son appeared, his left cheek a bruised plum, with a vicious gouge from Yale Wasserman’s class ring. “Already bigger than his dad,” Minta noted to herself, seeing Winslow and Eric together. And you could tell Winslow’s current bulk was just the beginning. Despite that pudgy teddy-bear look Winslow had when he slouched, he was going to be six-four or more, with great lumbering heavy-boned strength. His hair was so blond that it was almost white, and his eyes were a pale and startling blue-green, the color of broken safety glass. He was a work in progress now, an overgrown teenager, but his appearance already had extraordinary effects on Minta. When he grew up, she thought, he would be spectacular.

“Hey, sport,” Eric greeted him. “You’re in luck, here’s the fabulous Miss Tattnall wanting you to go get ice cream with her.”

Perhaps reluctant to show his damage off his home premises, Winslow volunteered that they had ice cream in the freezer. “We could take it up in the tree house,” he ventured.

“Your young lady friend wants to go to Lakewood, so go get your bike,” Eric urged. “My treat.” He handed Winslow a ten.

Winslow did what Minta wanted. From their first meeting, he’d looked at her as if she were diamonds and gold. At the ice cream shop, they ordered a vanilla malt—another thing she knew about Winslow was that he didn’t like complicated flavors. He actually liked kid junk food like coconut snowballs and Twinkies. Ordinarily he loved vanilla malts, but soon he pushed the glass in her direction and in his telegraphic style explained: “Hurts. My tooth. Too cold. You have it.” So she did, and he watched her drink it, concentrating on her in that way he had, as if listening to light. Once the glass was empty, she led him into Wendy’s Beauty Supply.

Winslow took a vaguely alarmed look at the ranks of conditioner and shampoo and wrinkled his nose at the aggressive sweet reek. “What’re we doing here?” he ventured. The clerk there wondered too and looked curiously at the two of them, butter-blonde girl and blonder boy, pondering shades of brown hair tint.

Minta explained what they were doing there. Dedicated from day one to Goals, to Achievement, to Maturity or at least to adultlike behavior, this would be the first time in her life she’d gotten down and dirty with a peer or planned a vendetta. For what she had in mind, they needed hair dye. “Féria’s supposed to be the best brand,” she noted. “Though I hear Garnier’s good too. Which shade do you think is Forest? Rosewood? Walnut? Expresso?”

Winslow had not protested any detail of her plan. Getting down to logistics, he noted, “Well, we need one dark enough to cover blue.”

Actually, Electric Teal was what Forest called the shade in question. Forest had a coif that he described as “asymmetric,” or “chromatic,” or both, though other people had other words for it. His straight brown hair came down just below his earlobe on the left side, but all the way to his collarbone on the right. A vivid stripe of fluorescent blue was dyed into it on the long side. When the von
Graulings first arrived in Dogwood Downs, Forest had revealed that he’d gone to New York with his mom and paid someone there $200 to do this to him. The peer-powers-that-were at Dogwood Downs Country Day School might have forgiven Forest his ballet dancing, his clogs, and his clothes, which seemed chosen to inflame any local pederast past endurance. Minta wondered where he got them. Did Victoria’s Secret have a department for teen boys? Unforgiven and unforgivable, though, was that hairstyle with its manic turquoise streak. Surely as God made both lice and lilacs, the bullyboys of Dogwood Downs Country Day School would make Winslow’s life a misery until someone did something about Forest’s hair.

Winslow chose Teakwood Brown, and Minta paid for it.

“You can say I did the whole thing,” she told Winslow, who probably wouldn’t have finked on her under torture. Once back at his house, in the brothers’ bathroom, they opened the box and read the directions.

“You wouldn’t do this to your brother,” Winslow murmured.

“My brother doesn’t get me into fights so I get hurt,” Minta returned smartly, and the boy put his large hand up to the thunderous blue of the bruise. “Now,” she asked him, “have you got any sharp scissors?”

Winslow fetched kitchen shears. “These cut melon rind. It won’t hurt him, will it?”

“Not if we don’t get it in his eyes.”

They hunkered down in Winslow’s walk-in closet and awaited Forest’s return from ballet class. “This is like a surprise party, only different,” Winslow observed. Yes, it would be different, Minta thought, and inhaled him in the warm closed space: the vanilla on his breath, Ivory Snow and fresh starch from his clothes. His sweet skin, implausibly soft over those muscles—the skin of his arms felt like a baby’s.

Finally they heard the appropriate noises: Melanie von Grauling’s Saab purring up the drive, the front door’s exuberant slam. And Forest scampered upstairs and into the huge sunny blue-for-boys room, with its white fur rugs and its two desks and two beds with comforters done in pale blue pinpoint Oxford cloth, its Bowie and Nureyev posters.

Forest finished his bottle of mango juice, turned on the ceiling fan, and shuffled his clothes. He dawdled a moment, probably just liking the air on his hot skin, then headed for the shower. And Minta and Winslow slipped out of the closet. Winslow turned on some music, an ancient Meat Loaf album at the highest volume he dared: a sound screen. It would just seem that he’d come in and decided to play music. Not that Forest had time to ponder, for Winslow jumped him from behind, pinning his arms. Seventy pounds and six inches is a size difference that makes struggle almost meaningless, but Forest struggled anyway.

“Sorry, Trees, we’re gonna do it,” said Winslow, perhaps an unfortunate choice of words since Minta had just taken up the scissors. Forest kicked wildly; Winslow hugged harder.

“Hold still or you’ll get cut,” Minta told Forest. “I won’t mean to, but I might if you thrash.”

“What the fuck do you mean, get cut—”
“Oh, nothing permanent. Just your hair,” Minta said, and tried not to smile. To Winslow, she said, “Now, hold him so he can’t shake his head.” Winslow bearhugged his brother in one big arm and got an unambiguous grip on Forest’s right ear with his other hand. Forest began to understand his situation.

“Winslow, did you put her up to this?—I’ll tell Daddy—he’ll ground you till you’re forty! Minta, I’ll tell your folks, and you won’t have to worry about getting into every school in the Ivy League because they’ll kill you dead and donate you to science to get dissected!”

“More like they’ll only talk to me for strictly necessary reasons,” Minta thought, “a month or so. And everything they say’ll be in the imperative mode.” That had happened after an unprecedented lapse on her part, a B in sixth-grade French. “No eye contact, and the temperature around them’ll fall to about -15. Oh, well, you take what you want. And pay for it.”

When Forest tried to yell, she stuffed a washcloth in his mouth—a big plushy one that amply filled it. His muffled grunts were drowned out by emotive lyrics about a motorcycle crash. The kitchen shears were very sharp. They snicked efficiently; brown and blue tufts drifted around Forest’s bare feet. Minta chopped out as much Day-Glo blue as she could without leaving an obvious bald patch. She cut the rest brutally short—it would stay that way a while!

Winslow contemplated him worriedly: “It’s not his style.”

“That’s the whole idea. His style is what’s getting your teeth knocked loose and your face messed up.”

This process was somewhere between chemistry and cooking. The dye directions instructed her, next, to snip off the tip of a squeeze bottle full of syrupy white liquid, take the cap off, empty a little poisonous-looking vial into it, screw the cap back on, seal the snipped tip with her gloved finger, and mix thoroughly. She did, and slathered Forest’s head with Féria’s Teakwood Brown. The dye pervaded the closed space with its wild reek.

Winslow sniffed and coughed. “Yuck! Looks like Hershey’s syrup. Smells like cat pee.” For Winslow, quite the descriptive mouthful. He had to like you a lot before he ventured much beyond yes or no. Minta had spent a good bit of this warm autumn encouraging Winslow to communicate in words of more than one syllable.

Before they could rinse the dye off, they had to wait twenty minutes—through one song about date rape, and another about adultery. Minta had to keep blotting the dye so it wouldn’t drip into Forest’s turquoise eyes and blind him, which was not part of the plan. Angry heat rose off his skin and made her more aware of his nakedness than she wanted to be. She tried to look over Forest’s shoulder and out the little high window, green-gold with September sun through an oak, away from Forest’s tan lines and rageful gaze.

“I’m sorry he’s naked,” Winslow muttered, abashed.

“That’s okay, I don’t care about his dick. I care about making him stop provoking every Neanderthal at school and making you take the heat.”

At nineteen minutes, Minta turned the shower on so it would run warm, and at twenty she signaled Winslow to let Forest go. He jerked the gag out of his mouth and flung it at her, hot with his
spit. Minta ignored this gesture and held out the special shampoo that had come with the dye: “Here, we’re done, now you can wash it off.” Forest smacked it out of her hand with his left and would have slammed her into the wall with his right, but Winslow intercepted him and shouldered him into the shower.

“Don’t hit girls,” pronounced Winslow. “Me if you want to. Not her.”

If looks could kill, they’d both have been carrion. Forest gave them one more smoking glare and stepped under the spray. They sat on the end of Winslow’s bed and awaited developments. Once showered, Forest wasted no time taking Winslow up on his invitation.

“This is for you,” Forest said. He marched over to his sibling and slapped him on the left cheek, getting his whole wiry arm into it. Winslow didn’t drop his eyes, make a retaliatory move, or even stir. His expression was the same mute, regretful obduracy that Minta had seen in horses’ eyes when they were refusing to go in some direction that spooked them. And they’d just keep refusing, even if you used your crop.

Forest plucked something from a drawer and stepped into it, then turned back to them. “Before I shop you two,” said Forest, “you want to tell me what that was all about? I mean, I’ll still shop you, but I’m interested. Weird shit naturally happens around my kid brother, but it’s a new one when I walk into my own room and get lynched by some sub-deb in Dogwood Downs, North Carolina.”

“So shop me,” Minta shot back. “Your dad likes me. He thinks I’m a nice, mature young lady, and he’ll listen to me. I’ll tell him that you carry on at school so Winslow has to fight people to keep them from killing your slatty ass dead. And you let him get hurt, not because of stuff you can’t help, but so you can walk around with blue hair and those stupid shirts that show your navel, because you think everybody ought to want a piece of you. You tease those stupid jocks who probably do want a piece of you, but they don’t want to want a piece of you, and so they go after you to tear you up, and Winslow goes after them so they can’t, and he gets hurt. And I warned you last week that if you didn’t lighten up, something was going to blow.”

“Define lighten up,” Forest said, his arch hands on his hips, his blue silk thong underwear. He hadn’t bothered with the rest of his clothes yet.

“Wear chinos and a button-down shirt and some regular shoes! Like my brother!”

“Then I might not ever link up with anyone I’d like,” Forest protested. “I mean, your brother’s clueless.”

“Well, he doesn’t get me into fights! Believe me, Forest, it's better if you don't link up with anyone now. You can date when you're in college.”

But Forest wasn’t buying that. “This is the twenty-first century, girl! Why should you be allowed to date, and I can’t?”

“I'm not allowed to date! And let’s keep this thing on-topic, it's not fair to make Winslow fight for you. He's only thirteen!”

“But he's big for thirteen,” Forest pointed out superfluously. “Hell, he'd be big for twenty. And he wins. Jacob Incagnoli’s going to have to have his nose job redone after Winslow’s left hook.”
Minta put this argument back where it belonged. “I’ll tell Eric that you get off on provoking those dufuses. Your dad’s a sweet man, he just thinks you’re dense, he’d be shocked if he found out what I could tell him—that you like stirring the shit and watching when the situation blows up. You get off on it. And you let Winslow get hurt for you, and I’m not going to stand for it.”

This silenced Forest for a second or three. Then a visible light came on in Forest’s head, and a grin spread from one reddened ear to the next. “You really … I thought you were just putting up with Baby Bro here. Like, sorry for him. But you … amazing! You like him!” At this revelation, Forest’s mood did a pivot. “OHMYGOD. Miss 2400 SAT, Altruism Award, Twenty Tennis Trophies, National Merit Scholar, graduating-early, sure-to-be-valedictorian … and an eighth grader! OHMYGOD! This is better than shopping you. Wait till this gets out, they’ll forget about me and I can kick back and watch the crucifixion … OHMYGOD!” Then he surveyed himself in the mirror. “Jeez, Minta. It’s a good thing you aren’t a real hairdresser.”

“So go see a real hairdresser,” Minta managed to say. “And blab anything you want. You will anyway.” Forest grinned again: He would. He wriggled briskly into jeans and one of his slutty little jerseys, grabbed his mobile, and sauntered out.

The tensile strength seemed to go out of Winslow’s body as his head tried to process everything coming at him. “Come here,” Minta told him, and he said, “What?”

“You’ve heard the expression take what you want and then pay for it?” said Minta, who could feel her pulse … where it belonged, and also further down, where she didn’t usually feel it.

“No, not really. I haven’t heard that one.” He stepped nearer, though, and she put her hand on his just-slapped cheek.

“Well … we’ve just heard how we’ll pay for it. So let’s have what we want. You have to come close for that.”

Laura Argiri’s present and future publications are her novel, The God in Flight, which will have its second edition published by Lethe Press in summer of 2016, and her short story volume, Guilty Parties: Leighlah and Others. These stories are about the rewards and other consequences of bad behavior—and, as Nick Nolan, author of the Tales from Ballena Beach series, says, “clever, wicked people.” “Want” is about some of those folks. Lethe Press will publish Guilty Parties in spring of 2017. She can be reached at https://www.facebook.com/laura.argiri.
In the Spring Garden

The lost cat paces the driveway as Jim walks slowly along the edge of the flowerbed, turning the weakly spraying hose this way and that. Nothing is showing through yet, but he knows what’s coming: peonies, creeping phlox, iris. He wants everything drenched, and the lost cat just wants her private yard back. I tried unsuccessfully, a few days prior, to put the cat in a carrier, to take her to the vet so they could scan her, see if she was chipped, if she belonged to someone who might be looking for her. But she seemed determined to remain lost, gave me three deep scratches across the top of my left hand, flew out of the carrier in which I’d just placed her, and hid under the bare dogwoods. I could see her. The shrubs were still bare. But I left her there, thinking perhaps she was lost because she wanted to be lost, and maybe she was better with us.

Jim finishes watering—the soil is so ripe with life—and coils the bright pink hose at the base of the spigot. He comes back into the house, and through the dining room window—in our house, the dining room is for books, not dining—I see the lost one walk slowly back to her garden, stepping carefully on the newly soaked beds.

—William Reichard
“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.”
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“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.”
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In her car, after we dropped him off at his house.
“So, I have to tell you something.”
I expect her to say they hooked up finally because that’s what we’ve both been hoping for and pushing him towards.
“Turns out there is indeed a reason he hasn’t hooked up with me yet.”
Oh no. I feel it already. Cassandra-like, I see it all coming. I have one final delicious moment where I get to be naive, oblivious, young.
“What is it?”
“He’s gay.”

Now all of that is over. She doesn’t know it yet. But I do. It’s all over now.

“I’m the first person he’s ever told. I told him to talk to you. You’ll talk to him, right? He was really scared to tell me.”

“Of course.”

I’ll talk to him. I know I will. I know everything that will happen.

--

In his car, after he picked me up to just go somewhere and talk.

“So she told me.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you wanna talk about it? I don’t know, ask me questions or anything?”

“Not really.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve known for a long time, just never told anyone.”

“Oh.”

Did he know she had fallen for him? Did he know she thought he was into her? Did he know she and I had been planning their wedding already?

“But I just told my sister, and it went fine, and she thinks my parents will actually be ok with it.”

“Wow. That’s great.”

I was supposed to give him advice, now I feel like I should be asking him for some.

“I’ll probably tell them soon, I don’t know, maybe tonight!”

“Really? That’s so… fast.”

“I just feel so good telling people! It’s really freeing!”

He’s so damn cute.

“Well if you’re on a roll, go for it!”

He puts his hand on my hand.

“And since I’m feeling in the mood to tell people things…”

Cassandra prepares herself.

“Yeah?”

I should look in his eyes, not at his hand on my hand.

“I like you.”

There it is. I honestly had no idea. I honestly had no idea about any of this. But now I know everything.

“I like you, too.”

--

In her car, later that night, after I got out of his car, after we made out and never actually went anywhere to talk and I called her and told her we should go for a drive.

“He told his sister already.”

I can’t say the real news.

“Wow, that’s great!”

“And he thinks he’s gonna tell his parents tonight.”

I can’t say the real news.

“Oh my god! That’s so… fast.”

“Right?”

I can’t say the real news.

“What else did you talk about?”

I can’t. I have to.

“He… told me he likes me.”

“I thought so.”

What?

“You did?”

“Yeah, I mean, as soon as he told me, I figured it must have been you and not me that he liked.”
“I had no idea.”

“Really?”

She had no idea either. Did she?

“We kissed.”

That just came out.

“Nice.”

“Is that ok? Is this weird? If it doesn’t feel ok to you, I can stop, I don’t have to.”

Can I stop? Don’t I have to?

“It’s ok. I’m ok with it.”

“Ok.”

“You two will be super cute together.”

Cassandra shouts at me, but I can’t hear her.

--

In his car. The back seat. Slightly later in the summer.

“I don’t know what love is supposed to feel like, and I feel like this is too fast, but I can’t imagine feeling more strongly for someone.”

“What are you saying?”

I know exactly what he’s saying, but I want him to say it.

“I love you. I think I love you.”

“I think I love you, too, and I also don’t know how or if it’s right or too soon or-”

I’ve been stopped with a kiss. I’ve been stopped with a kiss and with hands and with a body on top of me.

--

In her car. The next night, driving toward the ocean.

“I’m not ok with it.”

“What do you mean?”

I know what she means, but I want her to say it.

“I’m not ok with you seeing him.”

“Why?”

She won’t want to say why.

“I’m just not. And I don’t think it’s right, he’s too new, you know, he’s too, like, young.”

“He’s two years younger than me.”

“I don’t mean age.”

“He is not that young. He’s more mature about it than I am.”

“I think you should stop seeing him, ok?”

“But… No.”

Her car pulls over and stops.

“Look, it’s really uncomfortable for me. It’s kind of a big deal to me.”

“That we’re together?”

“Yeah.”

“But…”

“You said you would stop if it was weird for me.”

“Yeah.”

I said that what feels like a lifetime ago.

“So you’ll stop?”

I’ll try to. For her.

“Ok.”

--

In his car.

“How’s she doing?”

I can’t even try to.

“She’s fine.”

--

In her car.

“I just don’t understand. I know you’re in a terrible situation, but, like… this is me, I thought…”

“I know, I just… I’m like…”

CHELSEA STATION
I’m like not saying that I love him.

“It’s not that hard.”

She thinks it’s just fooling around. I can’t even speak up for myself. Not to her. Not to her, who has spoken up for me in my life more than anyone. Not to her who I literally owe my life to after my own traumatic coming out process.

“It is hard. But…”

But why can’t I have both? I shove my anger into the closet. She starts to cry.

“It’s me. I thought we were together in everything.”

I can’t blame her for her feelings. She’s losing two friends.

In his car.

“She doesn’t want me to keep seeing you.”

“That’s none of her business, right?”

“We’ve been through a lot together.”

“I love you.”

His anger is out and marching. Again, I sit in awe and feel like he’s the veteran here. I adore him.

In my own car, alone, parked at the ocean, I cry and cry.

In her car, parked in my driveway, after a lot of silence.

“How will you make it work when you go back to school and he’s across the country?”

It’s a good question.

“I don’t know.”

I’m so damn confused.

“Well, I wish you the best.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s ok. I do. I hope you can make it work, you both deserve to be happy.”

I can’t let her go. So she’s letting me go. I get out of the car.

In his car, parked in my driveway, after a lot of silence.

“I’m sorry.”

“I just don’t understand.”

“I know, I just… It’s how it has to be.”

How can I be saying this?

“Ok.”

I get out of the car.

In my car, driving back to school, I roll down the window and breathe as deeply as I can while sobbing. Cassandra sits in the passenger seat and takes my hand. She tells me what will happen. It will take a few years, but friendship will win out. It will never be what it was, but my best friend and I will ride in cars together again. We will forgive. We will move on. In three years, I’ll ride in a car with him one more time. I’ll apologize because after some distance and perspective I’ll realize that he was the one who really lost out here, who got caught up in the existing drama between she and I, in stuff we were already trying to work out between us. I’ll throw myself at him pathetically one last time, and he’ll politely refuse because he’ll already have someone. I’ll know I never could have held on to him anyway. He’d have been too free, evolving too fast for me to keep up. There were signs if I had known to look for them. If I could have seen anything at the time.
In my car, driving back to school, breathing as deeply as we can, Cassandra and I look ahead. And I ask her, just for the rest of this car ride, to stop speaking.

______________________________

Mark William Lindberg is a queer author, theater-maker, and educator, living with a man and a dog in Queens, NY. His novels 81 Nightmares, Forest Station, and Queer On A Bench are available on Amazon. You can find him on Facebook and Twitter, posting tiny poems on Ello and fiction fragments on Tumblr, and interviewing other humans who write things at www.markwilliamlindberg.com.
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
“Every essay is gripping, exciting, fun to read, and, yes, entertaining. No wonder Picano is such a popular writer. True Stories is a masterpiece. Buy it and enjoy it.”
—James D. Anderson, Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University, ALA Newsletter, GLBT Reviews

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

“An intensely personal collection centered on the survivor of a fascinating, chaotic time. Picano’s writing is most moving when he’s reflecting on AIDS and HIV, a theme that connects each story and has affected so many people in his life.”
—Kirkus Reviews
2014

Last evening Paul walked in from work and handed me his iPhone with a typical curt haiku from his sister onscreen: *Mom sleeping all the time/Talking to new doctor/Next phase.* As if Josephine were going through a classic model of dying—or was she just resting up from her recent manic couple of days when she was yelling for the police and demanding to be taken home? Someone had helped her dial Paul at work: “If you and your sister aren’t here in five minutes I’m calling the cops!” Earlier that day I bashed my head on one of the sub-basement beams when I went down to look for an old letter in a box still unpacked since our move six years ago, and at some point I forgot to remain half crouching, slammed the top of my skull, and fell backward and rolled in the dust and cobwebs managing not to hit my head a second time on the cement floor. For several hours after, I thought of Natasha Richardson’s fate and worried. That night I had one of my frequent *I-see-dead-people* dreams: I was out with a group of friends and Richard—
my second lover to die of AIDS, over twenty years ago now—was there, performing
silent film-style capers, mugging and mouthing at me, but only I was aware of him.

Prior to our meeting, Paul and I had both lived through the plague years in San Francisco,
both lost people close to us. (I’ve been HIV-positive but asymptomatic and
nonprogressing for thirty years; on an HIV cocktail since ’11, per the latest protocol, with
zero viral load, healthy T-cell numbers, and no side effects other than “vivid dreaming.”)
Now, in our fifties, we’ve been oddly surprised to find the grief reprieve over—sure,
Death’s gone on wildly swinging his scythe in the headlines, but for a long stretch he
hadn’t seemed to be paying attention to our circle of contemporaries and close relatives—
and the more natural cycle of older-generation deaths picking up pace. Dead in the last
seven years: my gay younger brother, Mark (suicide), my much-loved eldest aunt, Joyce,
two former teachers and lifelong friends, Daisy Meacham and poet Robert Burlingame,
an old friend’s partner of forty-five years, and Paul’s father, Sam.

We’re what lifestyle pieces call DINKS (double income, no kids)—though since my last
in-house layoff a decade before, my freelance erotica copyediting (pussy lips! asscheeks!)
meant that Paul’s CFO position with a wealthy individual brought in the double income
and I paid some bills and impulse grocery-shopped—and so we have been free to live
pretty much as we would have thirty-five years ago, sans the disco dancing and sex with
strangers: a liberal, highly sexed male couple with a comfortable house in San Francisco
and a shared weekend place at Russian River, an elderly dachshund, and a couple dozen
longtime friends between us. We go out when we feel like it, cook nice dinners, drink
wine and smoke pot in relative moderation, occasionally have a drink in a gay bar. “This
can’t go on forever, you know!” Paul regularly warned me as I tossed another trick towel
into the laundry basket, but the panting orgasms were only more frequently wrested from
us after this kind of talk.

Climbing back up the steep hills from Glen Park village and lunch out with a friend, I
passed the big old rundown corner-lot Victorian we’ve always speculated about, and saw
piles of clothes and linens on the sidewalk and plastic garbage bags being dropped from
the high steps above, a slapdash estate sale. Inside, when I wandered up, there was debris
spread everywhere, as if a storage locker had exploded: junk on every surface and the
place a dusty, moldy wreck. There were stacks of framed tourist-spot and baby-animal
prints on tables and leaning against the water-stained walls, some mildewed, weighty
Victorian poetry volumes I wouldn’t use to stop a door—Browning, Tennyson, Bryant—and
up the filthy shag-carpeted stairs, rooms full of women’s clothes on racks. This old
lady was—and it seemed clear she’d expired—quite the clotheshorse and hoarder. I’m
my mother’s son in this at least: I’d like to leave behind a clean house. It wasn’t lost on
me that we’d be facing a similar, if far less cluttered, process at Paul’s parents’ house in
Union, New Jersey in a few days—and who knows what situation with Jo herself, who’d
been in a rapid decline in the year and a half since Sam died.

Up till Sam’s slow-moving cancer, they’d carried on remarkably well for being in their
late eighties, living as they always had since his 1980s retirement in the house they’d
occupied since 1959, rather like the miniaturized, bottled citizens of Kandor Superman
stowed and occasionally shrank himself to drop in on at the Fortress of Solitude. Jo

CHELSEA STATION
In the late ‘70s there was a massive migration of young gay men to San Francisco. They left home in droves, traveling by plane, bus, Pinto or Volkswagen towards a life free from discrimination. Struggling to make ends meet, many worked in bookstores and restaurants, all the while taking advantage of a scene of sexual hedonism. Kevin Bentley faithfully kept a frank, literate diary of his experiences as this generation of gay men tumbled into the era of AIDS.

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

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

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

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

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

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shouted at Sam till he got hearing aids, then Sam shouted at her when it turned out she was also near deaf. When she wailed at his deathbed, “Why did you die and leave me here all alone?” it wasn’t just a thing you say; she took to her bed soon after the funeral, announcing she wanted to die, and nobody could tell how much was depression and dementia that’d been held at bay till now, and how much conscious determination.

2007

Four sisters, with a fifteen-year gap in the middle: of the elder, one had been my mother, mostly estranged, now twelve years dead, the other, Joyce, more like a mother to me since I’d moved to California at twenty-one; the youngest, Janet, had always been more of a fun big sister; her three-years-older sibling Libby, my nemesis, was a pursed-lipped, pontificating evangelical. Joyce and Janet had flown to San Francisco for the “celebration of life” (I wasn’t directing the event) when Richard died in ’92. That was the last time I’d had to speak at a memorial for someone I dearly loved; I’d gotten off easy since.

We’d driven to LA a day after getting the news, which was sad and awful but by then not unexpected: Joyce’s cancer, in remission for seven years, had come back over the past year, spreading to her bones. She’d barely survived one blast of chemo the first time, before a magical recovery; now, at a frail seventy-eight, she had declined invasive treatment. The cancer’s progress and the necessary pain medication addled her and quickly halted our weekly phone conversations. I’d flown down for a weekend in June and she was in bad shape, weakly shuffling with walker and wheelchair, sitting in front of the TV and unable to distinguish the commercials from the programming, my uncle struggling to care for her. (Janet and Susan would both come to help for long stretches, and finally, a young Filipina home health aide.) Bill got her in the car one muggy afternoon and drove us to a lookout point along the Pacific Palisades, and she was enough herself to make a face and pick out the capers I’d put in our tuna salad sandwiches.

Only ten days prior to her death, at the end of a trip Paul and I had taken to New Mexico and El Paso to see several of my old school friends and Aunt Janet, she and I had stood with both our ears to the cell phone when Uncle Bill put his phone up to Joyce’s ear as we prattled about the visit. When Janet asked how she was doing that day, she got out “So…far…so good?” Then Bill came back on and explained she’d been put on oxygen, his voice breaking, and Janet and I started bawling and everyone on the patio around us looked aghast. “Did she…?” someone asked. No, we just knew it was coming soon.

The spare brick ranch house was a hub of activity when we first stepped inside, old photos and artifacts spread over the dining table, Janet’s Chuck scanning snapshots to a laptop to be played in a loop at the memorial; Bill dazed and wiping his eyes but being kept busy; Cousin Susan’s partner Anne cooking dinner, our Oscar barking anytime one of us wasn’t holding him, a social worker dropping by to check on the emotional aftermath (was she, I wondered, the same upbeat lady who’d visited a while back, asked my dying aunt to suggest a favorite song, and when Joyce vaguely, possibly sarcastically, said, “I don’t know…’Jingle Bells’”?, led a macabre sing-along of the Christmas carol, though it was closer to Halloween?), a church representative stopping in to make notes for her eulogy. “Janet’s speaking, and you will, right?” Susan asked.
“You and Joyce have a special relationship,” my Uncle Bill would say. Our closeness over the past several decades tapped all the familial love I’d missed with my mother, who’d never gotten over her anger and embarrassment at my being gay. Joyce had felt a similar sting: my grandfather disowned her for several years after she eloped to California with Bill in 1948. I thought her high-strung and strict the infrequent times I was around her as a child: my older cousin, Linda, was an early 1950s preemie with severe physical disabilities—though she survived to become a plucky, smart, sharp-tongued wheelchair activist—and coping with her care dominated and stressed their family. My cousin Susan, a year older than me, came out about the time I moved to San Francisco, and Joyce fiercely supported us both. After Linda died at forty, not from her ever worsening health but in a freeway accident the weekend of the Rodney King riots, our connection only grew more tender.

2014

We arrived at Newark Airport early on a cold Friday morning in late March, picked up the rental car and navigated rush hour traffic to sleepy Union, drove to Paul’s sister’s for the key and then to the family home on Hawthorne Avenue to throw our luggage in, clean up, and drive to City of Hope. Diane had been adamant that the end was imminent and Paul should see Jo while it was still possible. City of Hope, at ten grand a month, had a spacious, pod layout, with arts and crafts décor, WiFi, a crackling fireplace and coffee and fresh cookies in the public rooms, and a noticeable lack of that disturbing rubbing-alcohol hospital odor. Sure, there were rooms you didn’t want to glance into as you passed the half-shut doors, and a couple of residents who could still get out of their rooms flailing their arms and desperately trying to make eye contact like you were the waiter and they wanted the check, or sitting slumped in wheelchairs. Jo had been sleeping all the time, not eating, not speaking if she did wake, not opening her eyes—and that was the case when we walked into her room. Soon Diane arrived, and then Paul’s nephew and his wife and child; periodically Paul would shout into Jo’s flattened ear beneath the head cap covering her remaining wisps of hair as she lay slightly propped up in the hospital bed, “It’s Paul! We’re all here!”

Back at the silent house we fell into bed and slept ten hours till the dusty avocado-green dial phone rang anachronistically at nine a.m.

When we returned to the hospice, one of the Caribbean aides met us smilingly in the hallway. “Oh, it’s so great you’re here, Josephine was just awake and talking and eating her lunch!” Paul was able to get her to open her eyes, take some sips of ginger ale, and even respond, hazily, to gossip about our friends in San Francisco and the flight—a blip in the downward spiral, if it is one, and she seemed able to appreciate we were there—that Paul was there. Communication was rudimentary: “Are you thirsty?” “Do you want to sit up?” Her only partly decipherable speech is either yes or no, or obscure, e.g., “Is that one coming that mostly lived in Italy?” But at least Paul could feed and stroke her, hold her hand, say, “We’re here all week, Ma.”

The following day, a Sunday, was our first real start at cleaning out the house. We carefully emptied the china cabinet and packed up the simple white and gray Sango dishes. Stepping on the carpet over the loose floorboard just in front of that hutch and
hearing the dishes tinkle as it swayed always gave me a sensory pleasure. That, and what looked like a corn husk tied with a ribbon stuck in a hole in the little white porcelain Mary behind the glass—Jo’s palm from Palm Sunday. We gathered and boxed all of great-nephew Chase’s scattered toys, and drove those and the china crates to Paul’s nephew’s house. It was garbage night, and we stuffed all the cans. The work was fraught with clichés; clearing out the history and accumulation of two familiar lives, one more thing I’d completely avoided thanks to the longstanding break with my parents. We stopped work for a two-hour visit to the hospice, where Jo was sleeping again; when we returned, Diane was at the house and willing to go through more stuff, and even got animated when we came across several dramatic ’70s dresses of hers hanging in the back of a deep hall closet upstairs, some of which I recognized from the fading, round-cornered snapshots in Paul’s pre-SF photo albums where everybody’s twenty-one, smoking and holding cocktails at parties in pine-paneled basements. There was her wedding dress, and Jo’s wedding night peignoir of yellowing white satin and lace. More big plastic bins were filled and loaded into her car and driven away. Then Paul humored me with a drive out for Sicilian pizza at a fusty Union Center pizzeria; when we walked into the nearly empty room festooned with plastic plants across the latticed ceiling and in planters along the wood-paneled pony walls, he stopped and gaped at an older couple till the woman, staring back, said, “Paul?” It was his close high school pal Jerry’s sister, Laney, unseen in thirty years. “What next—Aunt Bea?” I said. “Floyd the barber?”

Monday, more major clearing, dumping, and boxing; several afternoon hours with Jo, mostly sleeping again. Back at the house later, after glasses of wine and a sneaked toke scrounged from a friend, I coaxed Paul upstairs—in former times he’d generally shrugged off any sex suggestions, spooked by the proximity of his folks, not that either could hear anything with or without the high-volume television in the evening—and knelt to blow him as he sat on the edge of the bed with his pants yanked down, while he gripped my head and talked dirty, and I stroked hotly into the blue shag.

Next day, more sorting out, then a drop-off of old bestsellers, CDs, and clothes at Goodwill, then more hours at the hospice. Emptying a midcentury record cabinet in one of the dormer bedrooms, I uncovered a yellowed bundle of letters Paul had written to his parents starting with his first arrival in San Francisco in June ’77, tied with a stiff piece of ribbon. I sat back in the floor and put them neatly in order by postmark and began reading, quickly adrift in the sunny, boosterish, but quite recognizable voice. Unlike my few letters home from the same place and time, there were no mentions of hookups or STDs. “Promise me you won’t toss these out and will let me read them,” I told him when I went downstairs with my find. He hadn’t wanted me to read the little packet of letters from the same period Diane sent him back a few years ago.

Wednesday the shredders came: all the decades-old tax, business, banking records, gone. Earlier, Paul stood with cobweb in his hair in front of the tall file cabinet down in the finished basement reading through a file folder full of receipts for jewelry Sam had bought Jo back in the day. I packed up and labeled all the old photo albums and shoeboxes of loose snaps, from which we’ve culled favorites on past visits. We drove over to spend time with Jo at four: she’d been awake, talking, and had actually been put in a big, wheeled lounge chair that morning, but was back propped in bed when we walked in. All the aides seemed surprised and amazed at her rally. It’s jarring to go from
photographs of Jo’s girlhood and prime to the wizened, sunken-eyed, hairless condition she’s reduced to now. Sitting by her bedside I remembered the surreal sequence in 2001: A Space Odyssey, when Keir Dullea as astronaut David Bowman is looking at the shrunken, ancient dying man tucked in the French provincial bed, and then the POV shifts and it’s Bowman in the bed, looking out.

When we pulled into the driveway back at the house—31 degrees outside and brutal wind—Paul looked up and yelled: a six-foot length of aluminum siding had been wrenched off the eave high above and was violently slapping against the house. We’d never be able to sleep if we didn’t do something about it. I saw when I raced up the dormer stairs and stuck my head out that at one point in its arc, the strip of siding swung close to the window. There was a slapstick sequence where I tried to catch at and then hold it in place with freezing fingers while Paul raced around looking for string, and icy wind snapped the curtains in my face, till he could lasso the strip against the house and anchor the other end of the string to the metal banister, then close the sash on it. “If this were a Buster Keaton movie,” I said, “the next blast of wind would yank out the window frame and drag the stair rail after it.” This incident seemed a physical manifestation of Sam’s absence: his well-maintained house is coming apart, something he fretted about in his delirium (“They’re wrecking my house!”) as he lay dying in a hospital bed in the middle of the living room, exactly two years ago.

Back in San Francisco, doodling instead of working, I peered at the Google Earth view of 3028 Brandwood in El Paso—the last house I lived in with my family, from ’67 to ’77—the front yard only dead grass, dirt, and blown trash, the shrubs dead; from above, I could see the backyard, also brown, with a little white bar sideways in a far corner: the fake marble “poet’s bench” purchased in Mexico and trucked over, which used to be shaded by the willow I planted alongside it, since cut down.

Dinner at the wildly popular Boon in Guerneville last night, crowded with warm-weather visitors. We sat between tables of twentysomething straight couples, the boy at my right side reiterating his and his twelve-year-old-looking date’s ages in a piercing nasal voice: “Okay, sure, you’re almost twenty-seven, but you’re not old-old!” Talk of Jo on the drive up, and how long her dying can go on—eighty-seven pounds now and mostly unresponsive. Speculating morosely about “how much time do we really have?” Paul said, “You’ve had to acknowledge death, of course,” meaning my losing Jack and then Richard up close. “Yeah, but I’ve had plenty of time to unacknowledge it!” I said.

2007

The Wicked Witch of the West flew in the day of the memorial. When we let ourselves back in the kitchen door at Joyce and Bill’s house Sunday morning, the first person I saw was Aunt Libby, and a thickened Uncle Dolph, wearing a clerical collar, which I guess anyone can if he feels like it, though as far as I knew he was a retired HR executive. The two of them gave couples seminars at their church with racy titles like God’s Plan for Biblical Intimacy in Your Marriage and Lordly Loving with Dolph and Libby Wigant. It’d been thirty-five years since the last time I’d seen her other than in photos; her shortish
gray hair fell stylishly over her brow, so the trademark lack of eyebrows was obscured. She still spoke with that Southern belle affectation. Before I could say, “This is my husband, Paul,” as I’d intended, Dolph rushed out his hand to Paul and said manfully, “Dolph Wigant.” Libby smirked at me and wheeled away toward the dining room, trilling, “He looks exactly like Max!” (my late, much-despised father), to which deliberate insult I smiled and said, “I’d hate to think that’s true, but I guess you can’t fight genes.”

“And that’s just what Max would say!” Was she determined to provoke me? I just blinked and kept smiling, thinking, Be gone, you have no power here! Aunt Janet, probably worried I’d throttle Libby, interjected something about the unfortunate “Stone family cheeks,” and I said, “But wait, I’m not doing the Stone Scowl!” (Their fraternal Grandmother Stone frowns balefully in her few surviving photos, probably with good reason.)

“No, his face isn’t quite that puffy,” Libby called over her shoulder as she draped her pashmina, and I thought, Maybe she’s seen the nasty things I wrote about her if she’s being this rude. Uncle Dolph glared at me.

My cousin Susan’s one-time high school girlfriend, Rhonda, a nonstop talker, rode with us to the lofty Palos Verdes venue; as luck would have it, Libby and Dolph were emerging from their rental car alongside us in the parking lot as we climbed out. “Where did you get those shoes? They’re darling!” Rhonda stage-whispered to Libby. “DSW! Aren’t they cute? And they’re so comfortable!” A chummy discussion of the difficulty of finding cute yet comfortable shoes ensued. You’re flirting with a lesbian! I wanted to say.

2014

Six weeks after the last trip we were back in Union—where we’d foresightedly left our suits behind in an empty closet—headed for Jo’s viewing at Galante’s Funeral Home from four to eight. The call came on a Tuesday morning before Paul left for work, his old friend Rosemary, who manages the place, reporting that “Josephine has begun the dying process,” unresponsive, breathing lightly with oxygen, stopping and starting. Then he called me a couple of hours later from work to say she’d died and he’d already been booking flights and a rental car.

Prescriptions filled, dog-sitter booked, ride to SFO arranged; another five-hour red-eye; this time the window seat to our middle and aisle was occupied by a large young woman with a well-behaved service dog tucked at her feet; she alternated eating bulky, healthy-looking wraps from a shopping bag and sleeping with a blanket draped over her head as if she were being taken into custody. Across the aisle, a jittery, sexy professional soccer player sprawled with his big legs spread, his shoes off and black-socked feet stretched out in the aisle. The arrival was all Groundhog Day as we went through the same jet-lagged hoops to get to the house and fall into the pushed-together twin beds with the same sheets we’d lain on six weeks before for deep, crazed sleep till the old dial phone by the foot of the bed jangled us awake at noon. We met Diane at Galante’s to make “the arrangements” an hour later; Galante’s, with the sagging French provincial furniture, elaborate oil portraits of the founders, and persistent paint odor—or was it? There we
The narrator of these autobiographical stories and personal essays has man trouble—trouble with his homophobic father, his horny best friend, his rigid high school principal, and a slew of “fauxmosexuals” and elusive boyfriends—and a knack for butting heads with fundamentalist Christians. Bitingly funny and at times harrowingly sad, Let’s Shut Out the World traces the man-hungry and misanthropic journey of an intensely bibliophilic young man following his natural bent from a desolate Texas landscape of tumbleweeds, Jesus freaks, and compliant straight boys to the gay capital of San Francisco in pursuit of sex, drugs, a lover, and more.

Praise for Let’s Shut Out the World

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

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

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

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

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were again, staring across Paul’s friend Donna’s older brother’s desk at the same eagle-in-flight paperweight we had two years before. Tension, because Diane felt that, Jo having expired only twenty-four hours before, this was all too rushed, and as usual, Paul was the bad guy for wanting to take the reins and move things along. Four hours later we’d made all the choices at the funeral parlor (schedule, prayer cards, coffin)—I drafted the obit, which isn’t so different from book-jacket copy, if you think about it, and came up with several personal bits that passed muster: first and foremost a homemaker and homebody, happiest cooking for and surrounded by her family—ordered all the flowers, and gone to the cemetery, Hollywood Memorial Park, to sign off on the pricey crypt opening and closing. Paul’s folks had landed in Hollywood because Holy Sepulchre on East Orange in Newark, where all of the earlier generations are buried, got too dangerous to visit. The last time Sam reluctantly drove Jo and Aunt Doris there, some years back, they had a flat and were aided by a concerned elderly black gentleman who told them, “You folks should not be out here.” Some relatives ranged as far as Gates of Heaven in East Hanover for a Catholic burial plot in a safe neighborhood.

After two overcast, humid days, with rain on and off and the lulling sound of it overnight, it’s now sunny. There’s no reason for this house to feel more empty and abandoned than it already did, but with all the frantic arrangements done and Paul still asleep upstairs, it does. The viewing, or wake, went smoothly. There was the dreaded first stepping into the room at Galante’s and seeing the open coffin up front surrounded by all the flower arrangements we’d selected the previous afternoon, and Jo’s upper body and propped-up head. Paul had asked if we should consider a closed casket; “Oh no, Mommy would not like that!” Diane said. It turns out the woman who does the cosmetology at Galante’s is very good, and with only a photo, restored Jo’s face and arranged a wig to an amazing semblance of her last good days. Then, a four-hour blur of hugging and chatting up the throngs of elderly relatives and former neighbors and childhood friends of Paul’s, friends and workmates of Diane’s, and Paul’s niece’s and nephew’s. Maybe because I too was a bit of a stranger in this crowd, I found myself walking up to and engaging people who seemed lost, and so spent half an hour struggling for conversation with a young woman I’d last seen dirty dancing at niece Julie’s sweet sixteen bash (“Funeral homes freak me out,” she said, her eyes sweeping the room as if she’d misplaced her date), and let myself be trapped by speed-talking Yvette, the excitable Trinidadian neighbor Sam and Jo used to hide from when she rang the doorbell.

The next day, Saturday, began with the drive from the funeral home to the church, Paul, Diane and me in a limo with Julie, nephew Jared with the pallbearers. Stepping out at St. James, my eyes filled up for the first time that day, seeing the cinematic coffin being rolled in ahead of us. Then came all the alien rigmarole; Paul, Diane, and the kids had no more idea than I of when to rise or sit. After several awkward pauses, the priest (who looked more like an insurance salesman than the two gay bears last time around) began hand-signaling up and down. I lowered my head for the stretches of praying, but didn’t do any reciting back or amen-ing. The priest cited a Carly Simon lyric I didn’t recognize about “going home” after cribbing my obit line about Jo being a homebody, segueing to “But when you think about it, hasn’t she returned to her true home, at Jesus’s house?” Only when it got personal, when her name was pronounced and I thought of her smiling
body in the casket a few feet away in the aisle alongside us did I have to struggle with the rising sob in my chest and I felt the pew trembling like the dining room hutch with identical efforts around me.

“Thence,” as we’ve started saying with air quotes, to Hollywood and the final, short service in the mausoleum. You stay seated in folding chairs while the funeral director and some workmen get the coffin into the other room and jacked up to the just-above-eye-level drawer, or “crypt,” alongside Sam’s, and then everyone troops in to drop a flower on a pile and say one more good-bye. Earlier, before we left Galante’s and the lid was shut, people went up and bent to kiss her face; I went up with Paul but stayed a step back.

2007

My Aunt Joyce and Uncle Bill had moved from one increasingly liberal denomination to another till they settled on Unitarianism, or, as my grandmother Beulah, a grumpy Southern Baptist, had called it, “a G. D. book club.” Now, squirming in my uncomfortably buttoned collar and tie and wandering around the soaring glass enclosure of the chapel echoing with amorphous organ music, I was thronged by shyly smiling strangers wanting to introduce themselves: “Are you the nephew?” There was a long table with the slide show and guest book and various mementoes, but no urn to monitor the obsequies; the ashes wouldn’t be ready for several more days, after which they’d be sensibly placed in a cupboard to await a future merging with Bill’s. Soon we were guided to a front pew: Bill, Susan, Anne, Janet, Chuck, me, Paul—the remainder of what Janet had dubbed the Crazy Eight, who’d met up for birthdays in Torrance or, a couple of times, at our place in Guerneville. Libby and Dolph were seated just behind us. The minister lit a chalice and briefly addressed the Source of Life and Blessing, the closest thing to a prayer we were going to get. Aunt Janet spoke; Bill and Joyce’s friend of sixty years, Martha, spoke; then I had to make my way up to the podium.

“…then when I moved to San Francisco, I found my cousin Sue already there, on a summer of love sabbatical from law school—and found out we had more in common than those childhood family visits—Cousin Sue was playing for our team! Joyce visited Sue’s Haight Ashbury women’s household, gamely climbing a ladder to Sue’s attic room—and the three of us had a talkative and adventurous night out together. ‘We’re your family now,’ she told me. …When I sent Joyce copies of the book I dedicated to her, again with warnings about the sexual frankness of some of the content, I was astounded when she called to say proudly, ‘I shared your book at church on Sunday!’ …I was especially proud of her tireless efforts to get this church certified as a Welcoming Congregation. ‘Well, we finally got a gay couple last Sunday,’ she’d say, as if she and Bill had been driving down Torrance Boulevard and she’d yelled, ‘Pull over Bill, there’s one!’ I told her I thought she and Bill were going to have to start hanging out for cocktails in West Hollywood to find more potential conscripts. ‘Oh, no,” she said matter-of-factly. ‘They’re not going to drive that far.”

They dragged a microphone stand to the side of the dais and let other congregants who wanted to speak come up one by one—and nearly every one talked about her gay outreach, and how she and Bill were the first to step forward when there was talk of starting up a P-FLAG chapter. One after another carefully enunciated “Gay, lesbian,
biological, transgender,” and I longed to turn around and see if Libby’s eyes had rolled back in her head. And indeed, when the service wafted to a close, I did glance back to see that Libby and Dolph had leapt from their seats in hot pursuit of the minister as he headed to his office, to bitterly complain, we later learned, that “god” hadn’t been mentioned and no proper prayers had been said.

The family were to head back to the house, but Janet had volunteered Paul to drive the young Filipino home-caregiver, Shirley, and her silent, sultry, tattooed boyfriend, back to Whittier, an hour on the freeways each way, which meant, not coincidentally, we missed any further contact with the Christian contingent, who had left for the airport before we returned, though not before handing Bill a religious tract and expressing their worry that “we won’t all be together in heaven.” Back at home, telling my friend Bob about the trip, I said, “I’ve just got to get past Libby and Dolph. I’ll probably never have to see them again.” “Well…” he said, drawing the word out in his peculiar way, as if struggling for a tactful reply. “They are your family, you know,” which at first seemed to mean, They’re all you’ve got. “No, I mean they’re all crazy!” he said with a snort.

2014

I woke from a Bollywood-style dream: Paul’s father was an Indian patriarch, but then I saw him have tearoom sex with another, younger Indian guy, then shoot him, seemingly dead, so he couldn’t tell anyone. But then the younger guy recovered and slipped back into the party, and I kept worrying about what the older man would do when he realized it. Then I was confronted with a manuscript in need of copyediting—the victim was penning a tell-all—and I’d sent it to Daisy, my old friend and long-ago journalism teacher who died horribly two years ago within weeks of Sam, after being badly burned when her clothing caught fire at the stove. The rest of the dream was a long phone message from Daisy—her familiar, cranky voice—saying she wasn’t sure what she could do with the manuscript, there was someone named Fiona she needed to confer with, and then she realized her time was up, the message space was running out and she was talking faster, saying, “Aw, Kevin, I used to be better with these things…” This has happened to me before: in the aftermath of one death, I dream vividly about another, as if the portal’s creaked open and anyone can pop through.

This morning Paul packed up the clothes in his mother’s bedroom bureau and closet, and, at last, he broke down in the middle of it and came out and wept in the kitchen while I held him and patted his back and said, “She loved you; she knew you loved her; you came back often…” Diane came over and helped sort the rest of the clothes—Shoes! Pocketbooks!—and we made another run to Goodwill. Then she and Paul went downtown to get the will from the safe deposit box for Diane to take to the lawyer the following week. When they pulled back up in front of the house, I was playing an old Laura Nyro LP from an upstairs closet on the living room hi-fi, waiting to ask if they’d pose for a reenactment picture on the front steps, mimicking the ’72 one in the pyramid of framed family photos in the tiny paneled den, showing the two of them as teenagers, both sporting shags, sitting with the family dog, a Lhasa apso named Jethro, on Diane’s lap. I’d lugged down the near-life-size ceramic version of the dog for them to hold, and
though Diane’s usually unwilling to have her picture taken, they both complied and I got several good shots for a then-and-now Facebook post.

2007

In the immediate aftermath of her death I’d had lots of busy, crowded, unremarkable or unremembered dreams that may have included my aunt, but the special, portentous one I vaguely expected came a few nights after we drove home from LA. In it, Paul and I each gripped one of her arms as if helping her along, except then she seemed to be slightly ahead of us and picking up speed and we were whizzing down a futuristic version of Market Street, toward a brightly lit BART entrance. I wondered if we were on ice skates, but didn’t want to look down. I was saying, “Joyce! Joyce!” wanting to glimpse her face—and she turned back just enough for me to see that she wore a flesh-colored, mesh fencer’s mask with a strap running around the top of her head and down under her jaw, like some Victorian sleeping gear, or, I thought in the dream, something to keep a corpse’s mouth from falling open. She looked straight into my eyes and I felt her so vividly acknowledging me. But she couldn’t speak; couldn’t tell me anything, neither comfort nor terror, just This is how it is.

In her last, pain-mediated months, if I got anything out of my aunt when the phone was held up to her, her responses were either monosyllabic, or repetitions of familiar phrases (“So far so good…” “We’ll see…”). In the past, she’d often say, verbally tossing up her hands and expressing a Zen resignation at some political or personal issue, “This too shall pass.” In the end her catch phrase came out: “This too shall come to pass.”

2014

On our way out the door to drive to the airport, we looked around at the ransacked ’70s gold-and-brown kitchen for the last time. No more turning back the clock, coming in from dinner out with Paul’s high school friends and helping ourselves to cookies or chocolate pudding and glasses of milk while Sam and Jo dozed in their chairs in front of the blasting console TV in the den. No more red-eye arrivals to find Jo in her nightgown and house slippers making us French toast. Good-bye to bumping our wheelies out the front door and down the cement steps while Jo wipes her eyes, and those sharp, simultaneous feelings: relief at watching the little Cape Cod and the two old people at the screen door disappearing in the rearview mirror of the jerking cab; that pang, knowing each time might be the last.

Kevin Bentley is the author of *Wild Animals I Have Known: Polk Street Diaries and After*, a Lambda Literary Award finalist, and *Let’s Shut Out the World*, a collection of memoirs. These two books, and the author, were featured in a 2005 *New York Times* Sunday Styles profile. He has edited three literary erotica anthologies (*After Words*, *Boyfriends from Hell*, and *Sex by the Book*) and his personal essays have twice appeared in the literary journal *ZYZZYVA*.
Gettysburg Ghost Tour

He looks like the sort of boy I’d be willing to pay and does seem aimless in an erotic sort of way, loitering on a low wall as we tourists congregate for a ghost tour. To my ever-tolerant husband, I’m conjecturing the fee and preparing to catalog the exact positions in which I’d arrange the handsome stranger when, horrors, a whoresome vixen shows up to grip the boy’s arm. “What does a Yankee gigolo bring along on the job? His girlfriend! Ha, ha.”

I came to Gettysburg for Pickett, of course, and for Lee, for Stonewall, whose God-sure presence might have turned the tide, for dilatory Stuart, for Longstreet and for Armistead, farthest trickle of that wave of gray, for the thousands who fell in peach orchard, wheat field, Little Round Top, Devil’s Den, Culp’s Hill, but that’s tomorrow, the battlefield driving tour.

Tonight’s a sidetrack, a ghostly lark, following our guide, tiny woman in period clothing and lantern, along dark summer streets, hearing about a broken suicide pact—she stepped forward, off the roof; he thought better of it and stepped back—about Civil War surgeons still laboring bloodily away in Old Dorm, and a blue boy scratching Help me into ice coating a high window. All more than interesting, true, but military history and insubstantial ectoplasm don’t hold a candle to tonight’s fuckable scenery: lean studlet in his twenties, twinkling diamond earrings, a scruffy brown beard and a curly mop of hair sure to tickle my bare chest in close cuddling after the vigorous and brutal sodomy I have planned. “It won’t hurt for long,” I mutter beneath my breath, as he leans back against a wall, displacing his T-shirt long enough to scratch his navel, long enough to give me glimpses of his bare belly and briefs. My only PhD’s in veiled stares. Ah, as usual, to be desired I would have to give over my self entirely, trade my Daddybear graying goatee, chest hair, bench-press pecs, bourbon-and-biscuit gut, and, most especially, my (dare I say it?) above-average appendage, for the lissom blonde dime-a-dozen banality tonight’s prey seems to favor. Fuck age-appropriate, beauty wasted on the straight. Fuck the probable; give me porn.
The ribald scene I have in mind? Rebel captain caring for Yankee prisoner of war, something involving shackles, futile pleas, gentle rape become reciprocal rapture, punishment become a cherishing, and loads of whatever passed for lube in 1863. Too late for sating. The tour ends, boy and cheap consort disappear into firefly night. Perhaps it is there, as ghost-guides insist, beyond the solid world we walk: shimmery spirit-orbs, restless soldiers, the world of those who used to be, and far beyond that, dimension twice as flimsy, twice as clear, pure as torment, a glass globe of wishes, the world that never was.

—Jeff Mann
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—Paul Russell, author of The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov

978-1-937627-06-5
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Also available in digital editions
William Sterling Walker’s debut collection of short fiction, *Desire: Tales of New Orleans*, was named a Lambda Literary finalist and Walker received the first Emerging Writer Award presented by the Saints and Sinners Literary Festival in New Orleans. What was also memorable about Walker’s debut collection was that author created the collage that was used for the book’s cover. Walker is also the artistic genius behind the photographic rainbow people logo for the *Chelsea Station* magazine Website. Recently, *Chelsea Station* editor and publisher Jameson Currier had a chance to speak with Walker about his expanding body of work as a visual artist.
Close Cover
collage by William Sterling Walker

July 5th
collage by William Sterling Walker

CHELSEA STATION
Currier: There’s a long history of writers being visual artists and visual artists being writers. What drew you to working in the visual medium of collage?

Walker: What drew me to collage was the total freedom from anxiety in its practice. I discovered that the tactile process of cutting and pasting and tearing, and layering and reconstituting was meditative. Composition and placement were meditative. I found, to paraphrase the artist, Nicole Eisenman, who said recently (at a lecture she gave at the New Museum), that the process of painting creates the space to meditate on an idea, even if one is not always conscious of what the idea is. I feel that way about collage. I am aware that my collages are the direct result of conscious and unconscious choices and time is the fundamental element in composition and placement. The more time one spends in the studio, the richer the work becomes. I have also found that to be true of writing, but I am a slow writer. I need time to let ideas gestate. The difference for me between making art and writing is that I experience no anxiety while making art. I can sit for hours doing it and not feel time passing. It’s easier for me to get into a zone. Making art feels less like work than writing.

JC: When did you begin making your collages?

WSW: I was always visually oriented. I had my first Polaroid and 35-millimeter cameras at an early age. I took painting and photography courses outside of my high school classes. I was keenly interested in photography and at one time thought I would like to be a professional photographer.

My first experience of making collage was in an art course at the University of New Orleans. For one of our exercises, the professor had us paint on paper a rainbow of swatches and combine them to illustrate various properties, like hue, value, or saturation, or aspects of the color wheel and precepts of color theory. I loved mixing the paint to achieve that pulsating, simultaneous contrast you can achieve by placing red and chartreuse together or orange and teal, or crimson and cyan. But it wasn’t until the early 1995, that I began to work in that mode in earnest. I was home with a strained lower back for a week and bored. I had just moved in with my future husband, Jeffrey Dreiblatt—who is a painter and his studio at the time was the living room of our small apartment in Prospect Heights. There were always art supplies around. I began at first to repeat my undergraduate art class experiments and most of those early pieces owed much to Matisse’s late career cut-outs, but on a very small scale. It was a bit of an epiphany when an artist friend, Meridith McNeal, likened my inclination to the fact that I was a reader and writer—that the distance between one’s face to the pages of a book while reading was a natural proximity for me, the perfect distance. And I agreed with her.
Etat de Ciel

collage by William Sterling Walker
JC: Where do your inspirations come from for the collages? Are they similar to how you think up ideas for short stories? Do you collect images and then build a story around them, or do you think of a story and find corresponding images?

WSW: I take inspiration from seeing the work of artists Hannah Hoch, Kurt Schwitter, Max Ernst and, particularly Joseph Cornell. But I believe my spiritual predecessor is the late artist and writer Joe Brainard. I have a number of his collages and drawings in my personal collection and I believe we shared a sensibility. I also love the Dada-esque collages of one of my favorite poets, John Ashbery, whose poems, of course, are collages in and of themselves, but who has a long personal history with practicing visual art outside of writing.

The gestation for my collages is much shorter than my stories and usually, the only predetermined idea for a piece is the size of the composition. That said, I rely in my stories and my collages upon material I have collected in some cases for years from various sources—my journals, jottings, note books and clippings files for narrative and ephemera and found objects for my collages. In this way, and I believe this holds true for other writer-artists like Brainard and Ashbery, the process represents the art itself—collage is its own metaphor.

JC: Is your working process with collage the same as with fiction? Does “narrative” play a part in your collages?

WSW: Definitely, though I would say that in my collage work I feel a greater freedom to experiment with narrative, to confound narrative, to play against it in the surrealist mode, or in a cryptographic way to suggest the evanescence of time and memory. I am a very elegiac artist and writer. There are a lot of incomplete words and phrases in my collages and lots of numerals, and half-expressed thoughts, lots of innuendos. But they are also meant to be artifacts from a lost world,

JC: Do you think and produce work in series or on an individual basis, piece-by-piece?

WSW: The only conscious series, per se, is the occasional work I’ve made reconfiguring elements from the single issue of a magazine. The impetus for this work happened some years ago. I had taken work to a Williamsburg gallery owner who specializes in art on paper. After spending over a half-hour perusing my work, he told me that my pieces were very beautiful, “but not conceptual enough.” I said (probably not disguising my irritation), “Let me get this straight. If I had cut all of the elements in one of these collages from a single issue of a magazine—say, a vintage issue of LIFE magazine from the Forties, would that be conceptual enough?” Of course, he responded, “Yes.” Since then I have continued to make work in this “conceptual” strain, though not necessarily in his honor. Most of these collages are figurative, and surrealistic. I cannot say I prefer them over the abstract work I make. I get the same sense of enjoyment making them.

I have also used manuscript pages of what eventually became my first published book, Desire: Tales of New Orleans, as the basis of a series of collages after the original publisher that had accepted it shuttered its imprint, canceled the contract, and sent back the manuscript. I’ve collaged about 50 pages thus far—and have made paintings of some of the pages.
Fire Islander

collage by William Sterling Walker
New Orleans Rue Royale Kitchen

collage by William Sterling Walker
Say Goodnight

collage by William Sterling Walker
JC: **How do you select your sources? Materials?**

**WSW:** I am a bit of a hoarder of pulp—books, magazines, newspapers—from antiquarian marbled paper to candy wrappers. And I collect recycled and repurposed material whenever possible. I prefer to work with vintage paper (at least thirty years old), material gathered from my travels and my used bookstore hauntings. I’m drawn to, particularly old magazines. For me the color and texture of old print evokes the nostalgia I feel.

JC: **What has been your biggest challenge as an artist?**

**WSW:** I believe my biggest challenge is to break out of my comfort zone with respect to scale. Size does matter and space is always an issue for urban artists—particularly in New York City. I’m fortunate in that my studio is a portion of the basement of my house, but it’s not that big of a space. I have tried to work on larger pieces—but I believe it’s harder with collage than painting. Scale drives the whole dynamic of seeing and making. You must be able to step back from the surface to work. There is a direct correlation between the size of a work and the distance needed to step away from it. The recent Matisse retrospective at MOMA of his cut-outs was such a revelation for me—giant pieces, whole rooms of collage—it was all very exciting to experience and learn from.

JC: **How do you see your art evolving?**

**WSW:** I would love to show more (and sell more). The artist and curator, Peter Ketchum, has included me in a few group shows over the years. I tried finding a gallery and it’s hard! I don’t fit in any category. I have an MFA, but it’s not a visual arts degree. I’ve shown work but not enough. I have a definite sensibility but I’m not “conceptual enough.” I am too educated to be considered an “outsider” artist, though I consider myself primarily self-taught. So I hope one day to be discovered! But in the meantime I continue to make work.
Seine

collage by William Sterling Walker

Still Life with Jackie

collage by William Sterling Walker
UNTITLED (NYT Women’s Fashion 08-24-2014)
collage by William Sterling Walker
"Then how?
"Maybe it's old.
Butler said it was so.
Easter Sunday went
Butler did not
old eggs, and
was a violinst
may, before God
And they
something
feel old
use.

LA COURONNE
Photographie pendant l'epope du 22 janvier 1900.

"Where's Styborski tonight?" I asked.

Where's Styborski Tonight

collage by William Sterling Walker

CHELSEA STATION

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

All art © William Sterling Walker and used by permission of the artist.
“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

“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

“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

“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
An Unexpected Museum
Jameson Currier

On the morning the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution guaranteed a right to same-sex marriage, Andy began to be haunted by his ex-boyfriends. He had slept late because of a business dinner the night before, and read the news of the ruling on his laptop as he was drinking his first cup of coffee, immediately awed and astonished, proud that the American legal system had finally caught up with social consciousness. But his euphoria was short-lived. As he stepped out of the shower, the ghost of Mark appeared in his bathroom.

“You’ve let yourself go,” Mark said.

“Who let you in?” Andy asked.

“I still had a key,” Mark answered. “Though I didn’t need it. Want to see me walk through a
“You always were a show-off,” Andy said, reaching for a towel to dry off and preventing the ghost’s further inspection of Andy’s anatomy. Mark had liked to prance around the apartment nude, showing off his trim body and large endowment. Andy was more modest and had grown even more modest with age. At least this ghost of Mark was fully clothed, he thought, although his shirt and jeans are decidedly retro, just like when we had met. Andy wasn’t alarmed by the visit (or visitation). For years he had been having arguments with his least-favorite now-absent-from-his-life boyfriend, wishing for the opportunity to say all of the things he had never had a chance to say when they were together. Truthful, honest thoughts and replies that always devolved into a phrase highlighted by obscenity, such as “Fuck you,” and “You really are a piece of shit.” Now his wish had been granted and he patted down his spiky gray hair and said his favorite response to the ghost of his former boyfriend and then added, “Feel free to walk right back through the closed door you came in through.”

“Aren’t you glad to see me?” Mark asked. “It’s been, what? —Twenty-two years?”

“How time flies when you’re happier.”

“You’ve gotten a gut, you know,” Mark said, smirking and crossing his hands across his chest, as if he had decided to stay and taunt Andy, just as he had done when they were a couple.

“It’s called aging, something you didn’t stick around for.”

“I would never have let that happen to me,” Mark said. “I would have kept up with the gym.”

“You mean the steam room, don’t you?”

“No one ever objected to anything I had to offer.”

“Except the management.”

Andy missed Mark’s retort because he had turned on the hair dryer and was drying his scalp. When he turned it off, Mark leaned in close and said in a loud whisper, “You’ve even got hair growing in your ears!”

Andy found his hair trimmer and waved it at Mark. “You were always pointing out my flaws because you were jealous of my looks,” he said. “That’s another reason why we broke up.”

“I thought we broke up because you were seeing someone else—Geoff, I think that was the guy’s name.”

“We broke up because you started seeing Geoff,” Andy answered. “After I introduced him to you.”

“What’s a little blow job between buddies?”

“You were fooling around with him for months! You took him to Vegas right behind my back! You never could get your story straight.”

“I was never straight a day in my life,” Mark said. “And proud of it.” And then he was gone, disappeared, vanished, not even bothering to dramatically walk through the closed door.

Andy spent some more time arguing with Mark, the absent one, not the ghostly one, as he dressed, checked his work emails on his cellphone, replied to his assistant and a client, and then made his way out into the city. On the morning of the Supreme Court ruling Andy was fifty-nine
years old, a baby boomer on the countdown to retirement. He had seen technology change his life—from color TVs to answering machines to video tapes to DVDs to faxes to cellphones to tablets and instant messages. Sometime in his late-forties, after decades of picking the wrong guy, Andy grew tired of dating men who tagged themselves as horny but romantically “unavailable” and became content sleeping alone, and which also gave him the opportunity to focus more on a career and a business. He bought out the retiring owner of the small accounting agency where he had started working after he realized that becoming a successful actor or cabaret singer or even a yoga instructor was an unlikely path and his desire for a company-sponsored health insurance and pension plans became a greater requirement. But all of a sudden thirty-seven to forty-two employees (depending on the season) were his most immediate concern—not securing clients or offering new services—but learning how to balance benefits and raises against profits and losses—and as his office family grew larger his gay one diminished. Like any good businessmen, he added up his pluses and minuses of fate and choice, realizing that even though he was single and unattached and decidedly less gay he had still outlived or outlasted thousands of lovers, partners, boyfriends, tricks, and blind dates. He was lost in this calculation when the ghost of his former boyfriend Jay sat down beside him on the subway.

“Did you read it?” Jay asked, pointing to the cellphone Andy held in his hand.

“Why are you here?” Andy asked. Jay was so thirty years ago, when Andy was in his thirties. They had sung show tunes together every weekend driving to a rented house near the beach.

“Because you want me to be with you.”

“I do not.”

“You need someone to celebrate this historic occasion,” Jay said, and began to read aloud in a grating sing-song way from the ruling that Andy had downloaded onto his cellphone, “No longer may this liberty be denied. No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were.”

“Stop, you’re torturing me.”

“Think of all the history we’ve lived through—Kennedy’s assassination, Nixon’s resignation, 9/11—and gay history, too—Harvey Milk, Rock Hudson, the March on Washington, and now this!”

“If your mission is to make me feel old, you’ve been successful, so you can go now.”

“You used to be a really nice guy,” Jay said. “Lots of fun to hang out with. Now you’re just mean and boring.”

“When did you change? We never talked about historic moments. You weren’t interested in politics or even paying your share of the rent. We only sang show tunes together. All you wanted to do was to get high or drunk.”

“Was I really that shallow?”

“I never felt more lonely than when I was in a relationship with you. You were always off to meet someone else behind my back. As if I didn’t know about it.”
“Everything is not always one sided. Your side of the story. You are not the only martyr in the world because someone you liked liked someone more than you. And by the way, I only came back to see you today because I forgot to tell you that I loved you,” Jay said.

“You didn’t forget. You told me, then you changed your mind.”

“But you were the one who walked away.”

“How can you say that when you had already left me for somebody else?”

And then Jay was gone, just as the subway car pulled to a stop and the doors sprang open.

The ghost of Paul was waiting for him when Andy entered his office.

“I had a feeling you would be next,” Andy said.

“Isn’t this great? Gay men can get married!”

“Did you forget that you were already married?”

“To a woman. That doesn’t count.”

“It seemed to count when we were together.”

“I didn’t love her.”

“But you wouldn’t leave her. You wouldn’t get a divorce. We could never live together because you didn’t want her to know your dirty little secret even if you got up the courage to divorce her.”

“I had kids. I wasn’t going to leave them.”

“You didn’t want them to know what their daddy was up to. So you gave up on me. Didn’t even say goodbye.”

“It took me months to get over you.”

“Ditto.”

Andy was grateful when they were interrupted by his assistant, Elaine, knocking on his office door, annoyed about rescheduling a meeting Andy had missed because another one had run late. Elaine was absent more often than she was at her desk—leaving early for a doctor’s appointment or to something before it closed or because her mother or her husband couldn’t do something and she had to do it herself. She took no notice of Paul—why should she, since he was only there to haunt Andy—and she mentioned she would need to leave in an hour to pick up her son from elementary school and that the report she was working on wouldn’t be completed until next week. Andy held his annoyance in check, knew he couldn’t demand of his workers the high standards he held himself accountable. And the truth was, he liked having Elaine around, liked giving her the space he wouldn’t give others, liked hearing her excuses and the sure-to-be follow up anecdotes of blunders and more requests for time off—as if this was his new cross to bear, absent the miserable boyfriends. His life was more complex now, he convinced himself, filled with meetings and conferences, reviewing reports and presentations, entertaining clients and keeping employees inspired. But even with Elaine and the thirty-six to forty-one others in the office, at the end of the day, Andy still went home to an empty apartment. And he knew on those days when the ex-boyfriends weren’t haunting him, loneliness was.
“You should take the rest of the day off, too,” Paul said mockingly, when Elaine had left the office. “I heard a lot of guys are looking for you today. Word is out that you were once a heartbreaker too.”

“Unfortunately, I have a lot of people who rely on me. I have obligations now.”

“Look who’s finally the responsible one! You’ve turned yourself into a straight man.”

“What does that mean?”

Paul waved his hands dramatically around Andy’s office. “Show me one thing in here that proves you are a modern gay man? I bet you don’t even have a dildo in your drawer.”

“Paul, this is not the appropriate place…”

“A condom?”

“You’re mocking me.”

“I bet you can’t even tell me the last time you had sex with a guy,” Paul said.

“Go away.”

“Even the art in here is dreadful. A blurry photo of downtown? Where’s the Warhol? You can afford it now.”

“I’m an accountant. I don’t spend money. I only make sure the math is correct!”

“How gay is that? I bet you wouldn’t even give all of this up if I told you you were the one and only one for me.”

“You’re dead and even if you weren’t, you’re dead to me!”

“See, now it’s you doing it. You’re breaking my heart.”

Andy ignored Paul, downloading a spreadsheet that showed the expenses he bore for his employees over the last three years. His business dinner the night before had been with his attorney, discussing an offer an international firm had made to acquire his company. The offer was too good to refuse—but the acquisition would mean terminating several employees. Andy went down the list of the potential candidates for severance—all of them invaluable to him and the company. What would happen with Ben? he thought. Would Carson become an addict? Would Gina file bankruptcy?

“You used to be so proud,” Gus said. “Marching, chanting, zapping.”

Andy looked up from his dual computer screens and saw Gus standing before his desk, as handsome as he was thirtysomething years before. Andy and Gus had marched together in pride parades, demonstrated against pharmaceutical companies, testified before investigation committees. In the end, Andy had become Gus’s care partner in the last year of Gus’s life.

“They didn’t expunge my arrest record, you know,” Andy said. “It cost me a lot when I needed a loan.”

“And look at you now. One of them. I would have never thought you would become a capitalist.”

“I’m not,” Andy said. “And I’m not part of the one-percent, either. I’m as broke as I always was.
I’m just a formal part of the system now.”
“But you know all the ins and outs. All the dirty little corporate secrets instead of the sexy ones.”
“Only a few. And they’re called loopholes.”
“But you’re the boss.”
“More like the guy behind the curtain.”
“But in charge?”
“If you say so.”
“So you’ll introduce me to the cute guy in the last cubicle?”
The comment exasperated Andy. He knew who Gus was referring to— Jason, the extraordinarily good-looking twentysomething accountant Andy had hired a few months before.
“Even if you were alive, you’re too old for him. He could be your grandson.”
“How do you know he doesn’t like older men?”
“Well, for one, I don’t know whose team he’s on. And as his employer, I am not allowed to solicit that kind of information from him.”
“My gaydar is still working and it is pointing directly at him.”
“After all I did for you, this is what I get? You’d steal the only good looking guy in the office right from under my nose so I can’t even have age-inappropriate indecent thoughts?”
“I’m not the enemy,” Gus said. “I’ve always been on your side. I always wanted you to be happy. Or to find happiness.”
“I’m sorry,”
“Accepted.”
“What’s it like being dead?”
“Empty. You’d even be bored. But I have to tell you something before I go.”
“You always had to have the last word.”
“This shouldn’t stop you.”
“What shouldn’t stop me?”
“This—” Gus said, waving his ghostly arms around the room. “This office, this business, these employees. You’re using this as an excuse not to live your life.”
“You’re wrong. This is my life.”
“You’re gay. Have you forgotten that?”
When Andy didn’t answer, Gus said, “So I don’t want to hear any complaints when I steal that young man from you.”
“My hands are tied. He’s all yours.”
Gus disappeared, and Andy began to fret that it would be Jason he would have to terminate, who
would be out of job, who would suffer disappointment, and out of need and necessity would end up with a gorgeous boyfriend like Gus who would eventually dump him and break his heart. And that Andy would be the cause of it—that because he would be laid off, Jason might never reach his full potential. And this would also be all of Andy’s fault.

The ghost of Dan found Andy a few minutes later in the restroom, in a stall where Andy was seated with his forehead pressed into his hands, worrying about the employees he would have to terminate.

“We could do it here,” Dan said, whispering in his ear. “Stand up and spread your legs a bit.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No, just horny, like you.”

“This is not the place. Or the time.”

“Which only makes it hotter. Dangerous. Exciting.”

“Don’t you realize—it wasn’t just sex.”

“But the sex was great.”

“But it was all you were interested in—and it wasn’t enough to keep you around. Now go away.”

When Andy returned to his office, his worries grew deeper, and his memories continued to haunt him, as if he had wandered unexpectedly into a museum of his past relationships. For more than forty years he had tried everything to meet the right man: bathhouses, personal ads, hotlines, speed dating, chatrooms, sex clubs, social apps. No one wanted love more than he did. But he had the uncanny ability of choosing the wrong man, always a guy who wanted someone else. _But was it them or was it me?_ he thought. _Whose fault was it? Was I the lousy boyfriend? Were my standards too high? Did I expect too much of others?_

When he looked up again from his dual computer screens, there was a crowd of men glaring through the sliding glass door which separated Andy’s office from his employees. All of them the ghosts of former lovers. Dead, horny, unavailable.

“Go away, all of you,” Andy said. “There’s nothing here. There’s nothing left.”

But he couldn’t look away from the crowd of men who had shown up to torment him. He was counting, recognizing, when his office phone rang.

“You’re not answering any of my texts,” a voice said harshly.

“Sam?”

“You promised when this happened you would be there for me,” Sam said. He had the same annoyed tone that Andy’s assistant Elaine had had earlier. As if Andy were not doing enough and not doing it fast.

“Where are you?” Andy asked.

“We’re downtown. Waiting for you.”

Sam was the first guy Andy had slept with. They had met in college, paired together in chemistry lab. But their friendship had grown when they had both joined the glee club, then the drama society, and then pledged the same fraternity. Sam had taken Andy to his first gay disco, his first
gay bar, his first bathhouse, his first pride march. They had made it through the death of Sam’s father and brother, Andy’s mother and nephew. Sam had never wanted to settle down with Andy, but Andy had never wanted to have Sam absent from his life, so their friendship had endured decades. Andy had accepted things about Sam that had infuriated him in others. They had traveled together to Florida and California and London and Tokyo. They spoke on the phone every other day. Sam had been there through Mark and Gus and Dan and Paul and Jay, just as Andy had been there for Sam through Wayne and Ralph and George, and finally when Sam had met and settled down with Phil. Andy often thought Sam might be the last link to his gay life. And now he had forgotten the promise he had made to Sam—that he would be there for him.

Andy found his jacket and hurriedly left the office, leaving all his ex-boyfriends to stare at an empty chair. But on the subway downtown to meet Sam, the ghost of Mark found Andy again.

“I can make my body split apart,” Mark said. “Want me to show you?”

“Not necessary,” Andy said. “Do you really need to torture me?”

“I come in peace,” Mark answered, holding up two ghostly fingers for Andy to see.

“That’s so unlike you.”

“But you’re never gonna be rid of me. Our lives are entwined forever.”

“Please tell me that is impossible and a lie.”

“I’ve made an impression on you,” Mark said. “I’m up there.”

Mark took his two fingers and tapped them against Andy’s skull, or at least tried to.

“You made your mark, so to speak,” Andy said.

“Clever. Your wit always impressed me.”

“Flattery got you everywhere. And then nowhere. Why are you here?”

“To remind you of your faults.”

“That’s so like you.”

“Right, huh? Let’s start with the weight.”

“I’m almost sixty, why should that be a problem?”

“It’s holding you back.”

“From what?”

“From meeting someone.”

“Are you body shaming me?”

“Is it working?”

“Go away,” Andy said. “Where’s Geoff? Why don’t you go haunt him?”

“Oh, Geoff got married when it became legal in Boston.”

“Then go find someone else to stalk.”

Exiting the subway, Mark faded away as Andy outran him up the stairs. Andy walked a few
blocks huffing from the exertion, lost in thoughts about being too heavy, too out of shape, only surfacing to consciousness when he noticed that photographers and camera crews were outside the building where the marriage bureau was located, circling around couples who wore rainbow sashes and waved rainbow flags to gather illustrations and sound bytes for the evening news. Andy felt odd without arriving with some kind of gift for the newly-to-be-happier couple, so he stopped and bought a small bouquet of multi-colored flowers from a street vendor before finding Sam and his partner Phil inside. He kissed both men on the cheeks in greeting and handed the bouquet to Sam. The couple was stylishly dressed in white shirts, black ties, and gray suits, red carnations in each of their lapels. Their happiness was infectious, and Andy shook hands with Ian, who was there as Phil’s best man.

Slowly, Andy’s circulation calmed, his breathing became regular, though now Andy’s thoughts of high blood pressure and unexpected heart attacks worried him. The small group waited in the corridor outside the chapel as other couples went in to have the ceremony performed by a city officiate. There was a gleeful communion between all those gathered in the hallway, and Phil and Sam struck up a conversation with the lesbian couple waiting behind their group, while Andy eavesdropped on the conversation Ian was having with the two gay men ahead of them while answering work emails on his cellphone. Gina was writing to see if Alan had a copy of the new statutory audit requirements. A client had accepted a meeting invite that Elaine had rescheduled. Ben was forwarding a request for information the state had sent to the firm. The steady river of business emails continued until Andy finally had to step away from it.

Inside the chapel, the wedding party was greeted by the city officiate who wore a pale blue suit and had a bushy moustache. He reminded Andy of a guy he had dated back in the late Seventies, when bushy moustaches were all the vogue, but he let the memory fade away quickly, worried that another ghost might appear and stalk him. Sam placed the bouquet of flowers on a chair as they stood before the officiate. Andy tried to hold his cellphone steady and take pictures as the vows were exchanged, but by the end of the ceremony, he was simultaneously smiling and sobbing with happiness and all he was able to capture were blurs of joy.

As Andy was exiting the chapel, a thickly built man with a salt and pepper goatee and wearing a ridiculously bright rainbow bow tie who was with the lesbian couple touched him on the sleeve of his jacket and said, “Don’t forget the flowers!” and Andy, embarrassed, retrieved the bouquet from the chair where Sam had left it.

Back outside the building, Andy said goodbye to the couple and Ian. Everyone was on their way to other appointments. Sam and Phil would have a party on Sunday, Sam said, and he pressed Andy to make sure he would show up.

“Of course,” Andy answered. “You’re so lucky. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

They parted at the subway stop. Andy needed to find an ATM before he returned to the office. Ian hailed a taxi and disappeared.

At the bank, Andy checked the transaction history of his bank account, then stood in the lobby and read more work emails. In the time since he had left the office word had leaked of the proposed sale of the company. Gina was now asking how she could take a loan from her 401(k). Ben was worried a client wouldn’t accept an assignment and assumption agreement if the sale went through. Andy’s cellphone rang and he saw that it was Elaine calling him from her home, no doubt trying to confirm the office gossip. He let the call go into voicemail.
He allowed his worries to follow him out onto the street. Andy hadn’t prepared himself for breaking the news to his employees of the impending sale so soon and it wasn’t like him to be at a loss for explanations or plans. He always tried to think things carefully through before he acted or reacted. Sometimes to exhaustion. Andy wasn’t even certain there was a position for himself once the transaction was complete. He might be the one most likely to lose his job. *What would happen then?*

Andy wandered through the queer euphoria that was accumulating and escalating in the park that surrounded City Hall, aware only now that he still carried the bouquet he had bought for Phil and Sam as he tucked his cellphone into the pocket of his jacket. He thought about tossing the flowers into the trash because he wanted his hands free, to be able to knead his fingers together with worry, but he couldn’t part with the sentiment the flowers held. He wasn’t the sort of guy to toss the memory away, no matter how many invisible arguments he had, no matter how annoyed and hurt and frustrated he was, no matter how straight his life had become. Memory was memory. It was a part of him, just as Mark had reminded him. Perhaps Andy would have the bouquet preserved, pressed into a keepsake he could give to Sam and Phil as a wedding present.

When he reached City Hall, Andy found a bench opposite the building, sat down and had a strong cry, releasing both his joy and frustration. Then he sat calmly and played witness to the fascination of city life, watching others move around him with a purpose he had shed for a few minutes. He thought about the future, his future—about selling the company, about retiring, about traveling to all the places he had never been before, about learning new languages, about exercising again and losing all the extra weight he had gained once he had become the boss. Sixty was approaching speedily. How many years did he have left to enjoy? Was time running out? Was it time to get in shape, get things in order?

A few minutes later Andy recognized a man walking across the park. At first he thought it was the ghost of another boyfriend hunting him, then he realized it was the man with the goatee and bright colored bow tie who had been with the lesbian couple at the marriage bureau, the one who had reminded Andy of the forgotten bouquet. The man nodded as he approached Andy and sat down on the bench beside him. He smiled tentatively and dropped his eyes to the flowers that rested on the bench between them. In a soft voice, he asked, “Are you Andy? Andy Bowen?”

Andy turned and nodded, though he was worried this man was a ghost and not a real person.

“We had a mutual friend. Long ago. Keith Howell. I recognized you from his funeral. We met then.”

“Keith? Yes.” Andy nodded and pressed his lips together, feeling uneasy with this memory. Keith had died in the early Nineties. “I wished I could have helped him more,” Andy added. “But Gus was sick too, and I didn’t have the…”

“This probably sounds funny,” the man said, interrupting Andy’s loss of words. “But Keith kept telling me I should call you up and ask you out.”

“Keith?” Andy asked. “But Keith never gave me a chance.”

The man looked directly at Andy then and their eyes locked. After a moment he introduced himself as Nick. They spoke some more about Keith, about the years that had passed, and their lives in the city. Finally, Nick said, “I thought I would get some coffee. Would you like to join me?”

CHELSEA STATION
Andy regarded the invitation as if it held a secret formula he would only discover at a later date, but he answered instinctively, following the impression he felt in his oversized gut. “Yes. That would be nice.”

The two men stood up together and Andy awkwardly retrieved the bouquet from the bench, wondering why he suddenly felt lightheaded and giddy, as if he was embarking on something for the first time.

As they walked away, Andy felt Nick place his hand against the small of Andy’s back, as if it had always been there, as if it were the perfect place to be.

Jameson Currier is the author seven novels, four collections of short stories, and a memoir. He is the editor and publisher of Chelsea Station.
“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

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Ticket to Ride
Richard May

It was just an unpainted wooden box, with vertical slats holding up a pale blue sign. Sometimes the sign read “Lemonade 50 cents,” only there wouldn’t be any lemonade. Other times it commented on current affairs.

I almost didn’t look that morning since I was hurrying to buy something I couldn’t live without at Cliff’s Hardware. But the message drew my eyes and slowed my steps. “Time Machine Rides 5 cents, return 25 cents.” I put down three dimes and continued my trek, chuckling. A good laugh was worth more than 30 cents.
On the way back, my dimes weren’t there of course but there was an envelope hand-addressed to me. After a look over both shoulders, I shrugged and tore it open. Inside were two rectangles of yellow construction paper. The first said in pencil: “To Wherever.” The second said in ink “From Wherever. P.S. don’t lose.” Each had a disclaimer printed in tiny, precise letters on the back.

“Ticketholder may go to wherever he/she chooses. No time limit on stay. Must have From ticket to return. (Or else it’s not my fault.)”

I thought what a good joke it was until I remembered to ask how they knew my name. I pondered that while slapping the tickets against my palm. Anyway, if I were going to wherever, which wherever would it be?

The answer came to mind immediately. I would go back thirty years, to Chico. I closed my eyes and pictured myself there but nothing happened, of course. I heard someone say, “Try again.” I looked around but no one was nearby or even grinning from a window. “Out loud,” the voice prompted. I stared at the tickets to ride. If I were going crazy, why not go all the way?

“I want to go back to Chico when I was eighteen before…”

In the middle of my sentence my head jerked, I saw my room in Chico and me, lying on my rumpled bed, breathing heavily. I had just come. And then I was there.

“Aaron,” I heard my father call, which almost made me cry since he’d been dead nearly twenty years. Next, he’d bang on the door and yell “breakfast!” Bang, bang, bang! “Breakfast!” I jumped out of bed, pulled on my boxers and opened the door.

“Dad!” I yelled, grabbing him in a bear hug.

“Hey, big guy!” he said in surprise. “What’s the occasion?” I just held on until he pulled away, hands on my shoulders. “What’s wrong, son?”

“Nothing, Dad,” I told him, pulling him close again, smelling his aftershave, feeling the scratch of his stubble on my cheek. He patted my shoulder. Neither of us knew what to say. Neither of us ever did. Finally, Dad pulled away again and I let him go.

“You better get dressed, son. Your mother’s chomping at the bit. Remember we’re going to the coast today after breakfast. You sure you want to stay here on your own? It’s gonna be a scorcher.”

“Yeah,” I said uncertainly. Why exactly was I staying home?

“You and Kevin don’t tear up the place, okay? No wild parties.” Oh, right. It was this weekend.

I went across the hall to the bathroom I used to share with my little brother. And there he was, brushing his teeth. He looked back at me in the mirror. “Don’t say it,” he mumbled through the toothpaste.

“What?”

“You always ask, ‘Why ya brushing your teeth before breakfast?’ and then you mess up my hair.”

“Okay, I won’t ask. Anyway, Ben, it’s your mouth.” He was still staring at our faces in the mirror. “What?” I asked again.

“You called me Ben.”
“That’s your name, isn’t it?”

“A million times I ask you to stop calling me Benny and you never do. Why today?”

He was right. I didn’t call him Ben until he went in the Army. “Yeah? Must be your lucky day...Benny.” He made a face, showing me all the toothpaste in his mouth, and went back to brushing.

I hopped in the shower. When I opened the door and reached for my towel, it was gone and so was Ben. Funny guy. I dried off as best I could with the hand towel.

The mirror was all mine. Damn, I used to have a lot of hair! Now I was about as bald as Dad and Grampa. Grampa. He was gone too. I combed my long, luxurious hair and ran to get dressed.

When I walked into the kitchen, my family was eating pancakes, like we did almost every Saturday back then. I sat down to mine, wondering what chores my dad would have for me while they were away. On cue he said, “Be sure to mow the lawn today, son.”

“I will, Dad,” I promised, glad to say the word Dad again to him.

“Then and only then can you and Kevin go for a swim in the pool.” That’s right. Dad had the pool put in that spring, in time for summer.

I got the mower out of the garage and yanked the cord to get it going. The noise was louder than I remembered. I had almost finished the section between the two crepe myrtles when my family came trooping out the front door. I cut the motor and brushed the hair out of my eyes. I still did that sometimes, even if it was just phantom hair.

“Here’s the number of the motel we’re staying at,” my mother said. I stared at her hand. It was so smooth and pale. Now it was wrinkled and mottled with liver spots.

Dad handed me some money. “Enjoy yourself.” I pocketed the bills, realizing my credit cards were thirty years ahead of us in San Francisco.

“We’ll be back late Sunday,” Mom said as she got in the front passenger seat of the old Buick. Benny slid in back. I waved goodbye and stared after them. Dad was dead, Mom was in a retirement “village” and Benny lived in Massachusetts. Maybe I should have gone with them. But that wasn’t why I came back. I cranked the mower up again.

Once I’d finished the backyard, I reached in my pocket to let Kevin know my family was gone. Oh, right. No cell phones yet.

“Hello?” Kevin’s voice answered after I called him from our house phone. My brain couldn’t get my mouth to work. “Aaron, is this you?” he asked after I just kept breathing into the handset.

I wanted to shout “I love you! I’m sorry!” over and over but all I said was, “Yeah. How ya doing?”

“Great. Your folks gone?” Kevin was always a get down to business kind of guy.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. See you in ten. Bye!”

The dial tone buzzed in my ear. I was about to see my dead lover. What would I say to him after what I’d done? Only, I hadn’t done it yet.

It seemed like only seconds before the Mustang’s tires screeched when Kevin hit the brakes in our driveway. The car door slammed, his big feet slapped along
the sidewalk, the doorbell rang and there he was, all 6’3, 220 pounds of him, in sleeveless shirt, baggy shorts, and flip flops. I resisted the urge to throw my arms around him and cover him in kisses. Neighbors in a small town are always watching and I wasn’t out back then.

“Why’d you ring the doorbell?” I asked, hands inserting themselves into my jeans pockets.

“I always ring the doorbell.” Something else I’d forgotten. That said, he closed the door behind him and leaned down to kiss me with those soft full lips no one could forget. “You wanna?” he asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Uh, let’s go for a swim first.”

“Huh?” He looked at me like I was crazy. Maybe I was. I mean, was any of this really happening? But he felt real when he put his arms around me so I wiggled my eyebrows yes.

“That’s better, baby,” he said and led me off to the bedroom. We got undressed and into bed. Kevin took his time. Nobody was home to knock or walk in on us.

After sex, we lay naked on top of the bed, him smoking those damn cigarettes, one arm around my shoulders, my head against his.

“I wish you weren’t going away this summer.”

I was going away? Oh, right. The Forest Service. Oh, no! Geoff! “I have to make money for college,” I said, like there hadn’t been a pause. “And you’ve got football camp anyway.” We were going to UCLA. Kevin had a football scholarship. I wanted to go to Berkeley but he had talked me out of it.

“Yeah, I know, but that’s not ‘til August. You coulda still taken the road trip with me.”

The past came back to me with a thud. After this weekend, I had spent that summer cutting brush with a machete and chain saw and fucking Geoff. Kevin had ridden the Harley around eleven western states before he went off to UCLA. I had gone to Berkeley after all, with Geoff.

“Come visit me in Arcata,” I suggested.

“I am. Hey, what’s with you today?” He stubbed the cigarette out on an empty coke can and turned towards me, his fingers automatically attaching themselves to my left nipple. “You’re gonna miss this, baby. And this.” He put his other hand on my cock and started jerking.

“I sure have,” I said, gasping.

He laughed. “You talk like it’s been years or something.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, making myself laugh too.

I spread my legs when his hand slid between them. He fingered my ass, then pushed both legs up. I didn’t stop him this time and suggest we use a condom. Neither of us had one anyway. AIDS hadn’t entered Chico’s consciousness yet.

It always amazed me that the All North State quarterback fucked me on a regular basis. “You close, baby?” he asked in a hoarse croak. I gasped out a yes and Kevin went into overdrive. He started groaning, that uh, uh, uh that always made me come.

He wiped us up with the rag we always used. “Whew,” he said, flopping against the mattress. When he reached for another cigarette, I tried to stop him. He
slapped my hand away, lit up, took a puff and asked, “So, what do you wanna talk about?”

I gulped. My ticket to ride had brought me back to Wherever all right, the last minutes before I’d ruined my life, before I told Kevin I didn’t want to go to UCLA, that I thought we should break up. What should I say instead? Kevin smoked while I thought.

“Knock, knock,” he said, rapping his knuckles against my forehead.

“Uh…well…I just thought maybe we should make some plans for your visit. To Arcata, I mean.” Good save, Aaron. Everything would be all right now. It had been so simple. I could go back to 2015 soon.

“Oh, yeah. We should decide when and where. I gotta fit it into the ride.”

We settled on a date. As for where, I said, “I have a room,” remembering Mrs. Grundy’s big, white, two-storey house. “I’ll give you the address.”

“Yeah, I’ll need it to drive you up there like we planned.” He took a drag on the cigarette and blew the smoke away from us. It hovered in the air at the foot of the bed like the specter it was. In eighteen years, he’d be lying in a different kind of bed. I yanked the cigarette out of his mouth and pushed it down the Coke can.

“Hey! Why’d you do that?”

“You know why. Cigarettes are going to kill you.”

Kevin slumped and stared up at the ceiling. “Yeah, I know. I know,” he said, looking me. “I’ve tried to quit. I don’t know if I can.”

“You can. You will. Otherwise, you’re dead at thirty-six.”

“What, you have a vision or something? Sounds like you know the exact date.”

I did. Where was a nicotine patch when you needed one? Not invented yet. I could probably “invent” all kinds of stuff. We could be millionaires.

“Earth to Aaron. Come in please.” Kevin was waving his hand in front of my face. I blinked. We were still on my bed, totally naked, his big football body still muscular and full of life. And his beautiful hair. I ran my fingers through it and thought of his chemotherapy. He closed his eyes and hummed happily.

“Baby, when did you start doing that?” His eyes opened. “Okay, let’s make our plan.” It was back to business.

Kevin drove me the two-hundred miles to Arcata in the Mustang, with me playing GPS. Mom and Dad offered to take us but I needed to be alone with Kevin as much as possible before I met Geoff for the second time.

The house was at the end of a cul de sac. Huge blackberry bushes filled the lot behind the gravel parking area next to the kitchen porch. I was looking forward to seeing Mrs. Grundy, remembering how nice she was to me that summer. I’d been so unhappy when I arrived. The Mustang sent the gravel flying as Kevin stomped on the brakes just before he ran over the blackberries. He hopped out, popped the trunk, and hoisted both my bags out.

“Let me take one.”

“Nah. I got em.” He looked towards the porch and turned on his Mr. Popularity smile. A friendly looking older woman smiled back at him.

“Aaron?” she asked, looking at Kevin.
“I’m Aaron, Mrs. Grundy,” I said, moving towards her. “This is my friend Kevin.”

“Welcome to Arcata! Let me show you to your room. It’s upstairs,” Mrs. Grundy said in her always optimistic sounding voice. We followed her into the house and up the narrow flight of steps, down the equally narrow hall. At the farthest room, she turned the knob. “I’m sorry there’s just the one bed.”

“That’s okay,” Kevin said. I was glad Geoff wouldn’t arrive until the next week.

Mrs. Grundy opened the door and showed us the one bed, which was occupied at the moment by a large dark haired person about my age. Geoff was here already! I must not have remembered correctly.

Mrs. Grundy looked flustered too. “Oh, Geoff! I’m sorry. I was just showing…oh well, Geoffrey Freudlich, this is your roommate, Aaron Cohen. You’re both working for the Forest Service this summer.”

Geoff stood up in his short shorts and tight T-shirt, displaying a body I definitely had not forgotten. He shook my hand, then reached out to Kevin, whose mouth was wide open.

“Uh, this is my friend Kevin Roberts.” I tried to look at Geoff like we were strangers.

Kevin closed his mouth, put my bags down, and shook Geoff’s hand, squeezing hard enough for Geoff to wince. They held on, like two bulls competing for the same cow. Finally, Kevin said, “I gotta go,” and lurched away. I followed, trying to talk to him as he tromped down the hall and pounded down the stairs. He finally answered me outside by the Mustang.

“Where am I going to stay, Aaron? In bed with you and your roomie? I don’t think so.”

“We could get a motel room. Please Kevin. Don’t be mad. Geoff wasn’t supposed to be here until next week.”

“Oh, it’s Geoff already, huh?”


“I’m not jealous,” he said automatically. He leaned against the car. “Okay, I’m jealous.” A big sigh lifted his big chest. He looked up at the second floor.

“It’s a long summer.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, giving him a hug and kiss out in public. “I love you, remember?”

“Wow,” Kevin said. “Who are you and what did you do with my boyfriend?” I pulled away fast and he grinned. “Yeah, I remember. I love you too, babe,” he said, socking my shoulder. “I’ll come through on the bike like I promised. Then, we’ll be together at college and next year we can get our own place. What’s one summer anyway?” Kevin had life planned out for us, down to his career and mine. He would play in the NFL, and I would be a doctor. I knew the N.F.L. wouldn’t be ready for an openly gay quarterback in 1988, but we wouldn’t have to face that situation anyway. Kevin would become a copier salesman after college and work his way up at Xerox. He was their youngest district manager when he died.

“Right,” I agreed, trying not to picture his funeral.

“Don’t look so sad, baby. I saw a phone in the kitchen. We’ll talk.” He gave me
another hug and a kiss with plenty of tongue before he hopped in the car and drove away, honking three times like always. When there was only empty street and settling dust, I wiped my eyes and turned around to face the house. No one was staring or calling the police. I went inside.

Mrs. Grundy was in the kitchen, too obviously stirring a pot. She looked around at me. “Is everything all right, dear?”

“Yes,” I assured her—and myself. “It’s just that my friend had planned to stay the weekend.” The lie the words my friend told hovered in the air between us.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I wish I had another room but when the Forest Service called I told them I only had the double bed. I thought they’d tell you.” I said it was okay even though it wasn’t and began trudging up the stairs to start avoiding my summer fate.

The door was open and Geoff was sitting on the bed when I walked in. He stood up, showing me again all I’d have to say no to. I remembered what he looked like naked, how his cock felt, how sweet….

“I hope everything is okay, Aaron.”

I focused again on the past present. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m sorry about the bed. I didn’t know either until I got here. I called the Forest Service, but they said basically take it or leave it.” I thanked him for trying.

He moved to the chest of drawers. “I saved half for you. You want the top or bottom?”

“Huh?”

“Do you want the top two drawers or bottom two?”

“Bottom, I guess.”

He smiled. “Good. I’d rather be on top anyway.” Then, he gave me that lopsided grin I had loved so much the two years we’d dated at Berkeley.

“Oh, okay,” I said, looking away towards my luggage.

“Here. Let me help you with those.” He yanked both bags onto the bed as if they were Ziplocs. I bent over and started unpacking, trying not to sweat. He stood behind me and the room temperature went up even higher. I kept unpacking and not looking at him.

“Well, I guess I better get out of your way,” he said after several minutes of mutual silence. I said okay without turning around. Once I heard the stairs creak, I sat on the bed and asked myself how I was going to do this.

That night, Geoff made it harder when invited me to dinner. Mrs. Grundy cooked breakfast for her boarders, but at lunch and dinner we were on our own. I tried to say no to the invitation but Geoff wore me down.

At Angelo’s, we sat across from each other like we were on a first date, which in 1984 we had been, as it turned out. Geoff was a good listener and matter of fact about himself. He was a sophomore at Berkeley and on the baseball team. He asked lots of questions about Kevin, except the one I knew he really wanted the answer to.

Back at the house, Mrs. Grundy was watching “Family Ties” on her new Sony in the living room. I thought about Michael J. Fox’s Parkinson’s in the future and felt sad for him. Geoff and I said good night to her and went upstairs.

“You want the bathroom first?” he asked. “Hey, you like hiking? There are some great trails around here.” I said no.
We had fucked and sucked on some of those trails. I collected my toiletries and took my turn in the bath. Back in our room, Geoff was sitting on the bed with a towel wrapped around him. His chest was everything I remembered.

“All done?” he asked, hopping up.

“Yep.”

I waited for him to leave, only he didn’t. He just stood there in his towel, watching me standing there in mine. His chest was everything I remembered.

“I can’t,” I said quietly.

“Boyfriend?” he asked and I nodded. “The guy today?” I nodded again. “Too bad.” He rewrapped his towel so his erection was against his body, took one more look at mine and left for the bathroom. I exhaled, slipped back into my Jockeys and got into bed. When Geoff came back, he turned off the light. I heard the towel drop and his underwear slide on. I remembered how good his ass felt.

“Ouch!”

He must have bumped into something.

“You can turn the light back on.”

“It’s okay.”

I listened to him settle into bed and not say anything for several minutes. I was drifting off to sleep when I heard him whisper, “I wish you didn’t have a boyfriend.”

I wanted to say, “Me too,” but just pretended I didn’t hear.

The next morning we were spooning when I woke, my ass against his erection, his arm holding me close. That summer, Geoff and I fell asleep like that almost every night and woke up in the same position almost every morning. We fit together well, but then so did Kevin and I. Kevin. I tried to pull away but Geoff mumbled something in his sleep and his arm tightened around me. I tried again and woke him up.

“Oh, God! I’m sorry. I was asleep. Really!”

“I know.”

The second night it happened, I said, “I could get a sleeping bag.”

He leaned over me. “Don’t be stupid. Maybe we could put pillows down the middle of the bed or something.”

“That won’t leave much room, especially for you.” I sat up while Geoff considered that. “Look,” I said. “We can do it. We don’t have to have sex.”

He gave me his crinkly smile. “Won’t it be more like not doing it?” So, we spent the weeks before Kevin came back not doing it, although anyone who saw us and knew from gays, assumed we were. We worked together, ate all our meals together, shopped together and slept together, his cock against my ass every morning. Mrs. Grundy treated us like a couple. People in Arcata stared at us. The surveyors we worked for made insinuations frequently.

By the time Kevin called to remind me when he’d be back in Arcata, I was so horny I was ready to jump him in the blackberry bushes. I booked a motel room instead.

“Hey, this is a nice room,” he said as he opened the door. I closed it behind us and started kissing him fast and furiously, then went down on him and sucked him hard. “Wow! I missed you too, babe!” he yelped.

We fucked twice before coming up for air. Post second coitus I lay on his chest, waiting for him to light up, but he didn’t.
“Three weeks, no smokes,” he said, grinning down at me. “Do I get a reward?” I laughed until he rolled against me, cock to ass. I froze immediately.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

“Nothing,” I assured him, rubbing my ass against his hard on.

“That’s my hot man,” he whispered into my ear, teeth nibbling the lobe, one hand guiding his cock back inside me, the other starting to jerk me off. I’m ashamed to say I closed my eyes and pictured Geoff some of the time, but at least I didn’t yell the wrong name when I came. Tuesday morning, when I woke up spooning with Geoff, I tried not to think of Kevin’s cock up my ass and what Geoff’s would feel like up there. Anyway, I remembered how it felt. I pulled away, Geoff woke up and we began our new workday.

Another month passed, with Kevin in Chico working for his dad and me in Arcata working for Uncle Sam. We talked every day, which really ran up my phone bill since I usually dialed the numbers, but reminding myself I loved Kevin was the only way I couldn’t fall in love with Geoff again.

When we all turned the calendar to August, Kevin flew south for football camp at U.C.L.A., no cars allowed. Phone calls got fewer. Geoff and I got closer. When he told me about his life at Berkeley, I remembered more than he said. It had been our life after all, once upon a time.

Not having sex became increasingly difficult for both of us. One Saturday morning it became impossible. I got a sleeping bag after that. Geoff said he’d sleep on the floor but I made sure we took turns.

At the end of August, my last day in the Forest Service and taking turns on the floor finally arrived. Football camp was over and Kevin was flying north to pick up his car, pick up his boyfriend, and drive both of us back to Westwood. I was going to be a tennis team walk-on so he and I could be roommates in the jocks dorm.

Geoff and I said goodbye at a gas station off 101 in Arcata. After they gassed up, he and the surveyors were driving to Gasquet for the rest of the week.

“Thanks for everything!” he said, with what looked like tears in his eyes. The surveyors glanced at each other like, yep, homos. I didn’t care anymore. I leaned across the seat and gave Geoff a long hug. I wanted to say let’s keep in touch but just got out and waved goodbye.

The green Forest Service SUV pulled out of the gas station, and I ran up the overpass sidewalk. From the center of it, I watched the Suburban merge onto 101 north. I waved again, in case Geoff was looking back. Then, I walked the long sad blocks to Mrs. Grundy’s.

Kevin was waiting outside the house. I tried to smile for him. He looked so happy and healthy. He hadn’t smoked all summer. Seeing him, I knew I’d made the right decision coming back, not changing our plans, not screwing up my life and his.

“I put your bags in the trunk already,” he told me. “You good to go?”

“I’ll just say goodbye to Mrs. Grundy.”

“She had to leave. She told me to give you a big hug.” I hugged him back, so tightly I could feel his heart beating. He gave me a kiss and I didn’t worry about the neighbors.
“I’ll just go in and take another look around,” I said after he let me go.

“Okay, babe. Take your time.” Old Kevin would have taken his pack out then and had a smoke while he waited, but New Kevin just settled his bubble butt against the Mustang, folded his arms across his chest and smiled.

The house was locked so I used my key. I wrote a note to Mrs. Grundy and then wandered around, saying goodbye to my summer. In my room with Geoff, I looked at the bed we’d slept in and, once, made love in. I felt a tsunami of regret and, for better or worse, also wrote him a note, with my address and phone number. In the final moments, I couldn’t face not knowing him. And anyway, I’d be safe and sound in Los Angeles with Kevin. It wasn’t like I’d be living in that funny old house on Channing Way.

On my way out, I stopped at the kitchen window. Through the curtains I could see Kevin leaning against the Mustang, trying not to be impatient. I could also see Geoff’s MG farther away where he always parked it. What would their lives be like now that I had changed the past? Would I still know Geoff? Would Kevin start smoking again? And my dad. If he just ate healthier food, got more exercise and had his cholesterol checked, he wouldn’t have his stroke, at least not so soon.

I pulled the return ticket out of my wallet and read the words again. I had come back to change my life and I had. The thing was though, I would never actually get to live it. But I could. All I had to do was not do just one more thing. I heard Kevin honk the horn, a bugle call to action.

Without another thought I tore my return ticket in half and quarters and eighths and let the pieces flutter into the trashcan under the sink. My stomach dropped with them. What had I done? Kevin honked again. I looked outside. He was walking towards the door.

“I’m sorry,” I said, opening it for him.

“No problem,” he lied, one foot tapping.

I locked the kitchen door behind us, slipped my key under the mat, and took my first steps into the next thirty years. I wasn’t sure what would happen through all those years but I was ready to find out. Kevin opened the passenger door on the Mustang and I slid in. He popped the gearshift into reverse, backed up, and then we roared off, leaving dust and gravel flying behind us. I settled back. I no longer had a ticket, but I was ready to ride.

Richard May’s work has appeared in several literary journals, short story anthologies and his book Ginger Snaps: Photos & Stories of Redheaded Queer People. Rick also organizes literary readings and events, including the annual Word Week literary festival, Noe Valley Authors Festival, and Magnet San Francisco author events. He lives in San Francisco, in exile from Brooklyn, New York.
Ironically, no one ever entered the Hide Away Lounge without being noticed. The pool table was the center of attention, except when the front door opened and the next customer walked in. The quaint club was the perfect place to hang out, especially on the dismally slow Monday nights where regular weekend customers stayed home to regain their vigor before setting their eyes on the next weekend of debauchery and decadence. The few patrons in attendance ranged from a couple of hustler types needing cigarette money to a handful of old drunken neighborhood queens too tired to compete with the younger patrons searching for the infamous dick of death to play with.
No one ever bothered Daphne while she pretended to play pool, nor did they really care that she performed in drag somewhere else. The Hide Away Lounge was only a few blocks from the apartment she shared with her roommate, Sam. Perhaps it was the stench of last night’s beer on the floor, or maybe it was the dim rays of light from the hanging lamps with working bulbs, but for some unknown reason Daphne felt safe and comfortable at the Hide Away Lounge. In her somewhat delusional mind, this was the perfect getaway for an aspiring twenty-one year old entertainer to hang out incognito, free from paparazzi or adoring fans.

Daphne leaned against the post adjacent to the pool table, holding a fresh gin and tonic in her left hand while waiting her turn to hit at least one ball in a pocket before the bar closed for the evening. She awkwardly twirled the pool cue as if it were a silver baton. Wearing a bit of mascara and a touch of gloss on her lips, she felt feminine even out of full-drag makeup and dressed in tight jeans and an oversized pink T-shirt with a giant-sized image of Miley Cyrus’s face.

“Okay, Daff, it’s your turn,” Donnie said as he backed away from the table after missing his shot. “And be careful with that stick. You’re gonna hurt somebody.”

Daphne smiled at the young man she’d met a few weeks earlier. She didn’t know much about him other than he was short and slightly handsome with his shaved head and tattooed neck, and he liked to play pool. And she adored the way he called her “Daff.” His name was perfect with hers, she thought as she would play the scenario over and over in her head. Daphne and Donnie, Daphne and Donnie…they sounded so cute together.

“Daff, pay attention and take your turn.”

Daphne really didn’t like playing pool. She didn’t quite understand the obsession some players like Donnie had for hitting one ball after another in a pocket, nor did she quite get why the holes in the sides of the tables were even called pockets. But the options for an enjoyable evening were minimal. She could either attempt to play pool or hang out at the bar and sing Liza Minnelli and Judy Garland songs and listen to the old queens talk about how great it was to be gay in the 1970’s.

“Which ones are mine?” she asked as she batted her eyes.

“The same as last time. You have the solid ones.”

“I think I’ll hit the red one,” she announced as she sat her drink on the ledge mounted on the wall. She picked up the blue chalk and ground it onto the tip of her cue.

“You’ve been trying to hit the red one for the past fifteen minutes,” Donnie quipped.

“I like red balls,” Daphne replied, not realizing the innuendo.

“Careful what you wish for.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” she said defensively.

“You know you have better shots to make other than just the red one.”

“I’m gonna shoot the red one in first.” The illusive red ball sat behind a cluster of at least five balls as though it were deliberately avoiding any contact. Just as Daphne leaned over the table, pulling her mid-length dirty blond hair to one side behind her ear and pointing her cue at the same time, the front door flew open. Daphne raised up, her eyes focusing on the tiny silhouette posing in the middle of the entryway. A sense of uncertainty came over her.

“Hey, everybody! It’s time to party!”

“It’s that damn Jackie Lynn Peterson,” Daphne whispered to herself.
Barely five-feet tall and weighing no more than ninety-five pounds, Jackie Lynn Peterson was every drag’s nightmare. She had mercy on no one, verbally lashing-out spiteful barbs that would put even the most seasoned and snarky fast talker to shame. She was Birmingham’s queen of trailer trash and feared by most, except Daphne’s mentor Stella, who kept Jackie Lynn at bay simply because she was three times larger than the pint-size bundle of terror.

As she walked by the bar, Jackie Lynn yelled, “Don’t look at me you sick faggots unless you’ve got money to put in my back pocket!” Without hesitation, the patrons quickly turned their backs to the bully. “Just as I thought. I didn’t think any of you bitches had any money.”

“My, my, look what we have here,” she said as she sashayed toward Daphne and Donnie. “Why, it’s Daffy and Donald Duck!”

“Hello, Jackie Lynn,” Daphne mumbled, doing her best not to rile the little tempest. One of the pitfalls of hanging out in a half-empty bar was having nowhere to hide when someone like Jackie Lynn Peterson arrived. Unfortunately, Jackie Lynn and Daphne shared the same preference for the same club. “I like your hair,” Daphne said.

“Why thank you. This is my new Miley Cyrus look. It fits me perfectly, don’t you think?”

Daphne stared straight ahead for a moment, thinking that the two short twisted clumps of hair on top of Jackie Lynn’s head made her look like a dwarfed devil with horns, or better yet, an underfed goat. Except for the fact that she was over forty, she did resemble Miley Cyrus more than anyone in Birmingham. But luckily for all the entertainers who performed as Miley, including Daphne, Jackie Lynn hardly ever hit the stage. For Jackie Lynn, the streets were her domain.

“I said, ‘How do you like it?’” Jackie Lynn asked raising her voice as she put her hands on her hips and demanded an answer.

“It’s perfect,” Daphne replied.

Jackie Lynn spun around. “You like my outfit?”

“It’s nice.” Daphne smiled just to reassure her antagonist that she was in no mood to tangle with the feral street queen, even though the short jumper-inspired costume looked as though Jackie Lynn had stolen a red-and-white checked tablecloth from the local diner on Third Street and forced her half-blind mother at knife point to sew it for her. “It’s really nice,” she added.

“And how about these legs, Donald Duck? Ever seen anything like them before?” Jackie Lynn asked as she shifted her attention to Donnie.

Not amused with the interruption to his pool game, he blurted out, “Yeah, on a dead chicken.”

“Well!” Jackie Lynn huffed. “There is no need for your bad manners and lack of respect.”

Daphne was a little disturbed with Donnie’s remark, knowing well that Jackie Lynn would eventually take out the wrath of the insult on her and not Donnie. With her cue in her hand, she stepped next to Donnie just to feel protected from the ire that might be coming her way.

“Okay, bitch, take his side,” Jackie Lynn said wryly. “But remember, I do get even.”
“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
pocket. And without any warning, Jackie Lynn bent over and began to twerk. She gyrated for a good sixty seconds before she stood up straight and snapped her fingers at Daphne. “That’s how you do Miley Cyrus!” She strutted past the bar with her hands on her hips. She opened the large metal door, and before she exited, she yelled, “And now you faggots can talk about me, but don’t forget I’ll hear every word you say!” The door shut behind her and not a word was said at the bar, as though the regulars were convinced that Jackie Lynn Peterson could really hear them through brick and mortar. After a moment of silence, except for the Liza music in the background, an overweight effeminate man standing at the end of the bar began to belt out the first line of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” The others joined in.

“She really has a long tongue,” Donnie said as he broke the awkward silence. “And hey, look. You finally got your red ball in the pocket.”

“Yeah, I guess I did,” Daphne said with disappointment, and relief, in her voice.

“Why do you let that old queen get to you? You could take her out in a second.”

“Take her out?”

“Yeah, beat the shit out of her.”

Daphne bit her bottom lip for a moment. “Stella said I need to pick my battles. Not exactly sure what she means by that. I don’t want to have to pick any battles.”

“I think she means that you should pick the ones you can win. Want me to beat up Miss Chicken Legs for you? I ain’t scared of the freak. In fact, I get tired of her coming in here and messing with my game.”

“No. I’m not scared of her either, but as a professional entertainer I have to be careful not to tarnish my image with my fans.”

“More advice from Stella? Not sure you’ve noticed, but I don’t think anyone here even knows who the fuck you are, let alone what you do.”

“Well, you never know.”

“So you perform as Miley Cyrus?”

Daphne nodded. “But not all the time. You need to see my show. You said you would come see it last week.”

“Been busy, but I will. You twerk like Miss Chicken Legs?”

“I really wish you wouldn’t call her that. She has a way of hearing everything...at least that’s what I’ve been told about her. She can be mean. Slash your tires, sugar in the gas tank, cut you...I mean the list is endless.”

“Not scared a bit. You didn’t answer my question. You know how to twerk?”

“Well, not really. And to tell you the truth, Jackie Lynn twerks better than anyone in town, probably better than Miley Cyrus herself. I really need to work on it, but you know, it just feels so dirty.”

“Hey, you wanna get out of here?”

“And go where?” Daphne asked sarcastically. “It’s almost two o’clock. Everything will be closed soon.”

“St. Louis. Wanna go to St. Louis with me?”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, tonight. Actually, this morning. I’m supposed to meet my family later on for dinner. Kind of like a homecoming. I haven’t been home in two years.”

“I don’t know.” Daphne paused with her mouth wide open in a moment of thought, an unusual habit that always irritated her friends. “Where is St. Louis? I mean, I’ve heard of it, but I’m not really sure where it is.”

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“Missouri. About seven hours away. Come on, it’ll be fun, and anyway, I really don’t want to drive all that way by myself. You could keep me company.”

“Well, I don’t have much to do until Wednesday night. I’m going to Miley Cyrus’s concert on Wednesday. I can’t miss her concert.”

“Perfect. We can come back Wednesday morning. We can stay at my mom’s house. Plenty to eat.”

“I have to make the concert. Stella says that if you perform as a real-life star, you have to study them. I’ll have you know I’m a method actress. I’ll be watching Miley perform and then I’ll perfect my moves and expressions so they’ll be exactly like hers.”

“Why don’t you just follow Miss Chicken Legs around and watch her? She does a pretty good job of being cheap and easy.”

“That’s horrible! Miley is an artist, and I am an illusionist. Jackie Lynn is just a…”

“Nasty old bitch way past her prime,” Donnie interjected. “Come on, go with me. You can bring your Miley Cyrus outfit with you and we can go out to one of the clubs. I’ll pretend I’m out with Miley herself.”

“Well,” Daphne said as her interest suddenly peeked.

“And I can take you to see the famous archway by the river.”

“The famous archway? I think I’ve seen pictures of that.”

“So, whatta ya say?”

“We’ll have to go by my place and pack. My roommate, Sam, isn’t going to like this one bit, but if we hurry, we can get there before he gets home.”

“Just leave him a note or text him,” Donnie said as he headed for the door. Daphne followed close behind him.

“Alright, Daphne!” someone yelled from the bar as the pair exited the club, insinuating that the two were headed for a hot tryst. “Do it once for me!”

“See,” Daphne said as the door closed behind them. She put her nose arrogantly in the air and began to skip. “Someone does know who I am.”

***

Daphne’s eyes opened one at a time. The truck was motionless in the dark, sounds of speeding cars the only noise she could hear. “Where are we?” she asked, lifting her head off of her pink Miley Cyrus backpack she used as a pillow.

“A rest area outside of Memphis,” Donnie answered. “I was tired so I pulled over for a nap.”

“Memphis? Stella says Elvis Presley lives here,” Daphne said with a bit of groggy excitement in her voice.

“Lives? Lived. He’s dead.”

“Oh. That’s sad,” she responded still half awake. “I have to pee.”

Within minutes the two were back on the road as the sun came up, and a few hours later they were in St. Louis. Donnie treated Daphne to breakfast at White Castle and then they drove downtown to see the Gateway Arch. Daphne had never seen anything so big and so beautiful. She suddenly pictured herself as a young ingénue being filmed with the Arch as the central set piece, just as Audrey Hepburn had in Breakfast at Tiffany’s, with New York as her backdrop. Since moving in together, Sam had introduced Daphne to old film classics, and more importantly, legends of the silver screen. More than once she tried to replicate, costume and all, famous scenes from her new favorite movies.
“Didn’t Judy Garland make a movie here?” Daphne asked, eyes wide open with the thought.

“Probably.”

And just as quickly as one question was barely brought up, another popped right out of her mouth. “So that’s the Mississippi River? I thought it would be bigger.”

Donnie looked at her and grunted in disbelief that someone could have been so sheltered for so long, yet still be so eager to learn.

Later, Donnie showed Daphne some of his old haunts, like the ballpark where he played softball in middle school, and the high school he attended until dropping out in eleventh grade. Daphne was in awe of both schools since she had never attended one. Being homeschooled by her overprotective and zealot grandmother throughout her childhood, Daphne never experienced what many other children had in their lives, things like close friendships, a favorite teacher, music classes, and spelling bees.

“Were you ever in a spelling bee?” Daphne asked.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Did you ever win?”

“Not that I remember.”

“One day I will be in one. I learn a new word every week. Sam teaches me the word and I have to spell it and use it.”

“A word a week?” Donnie asked. “That’s not a lot of words.”

“But they’re really big words, words that make me sound smart. This week’s word is…”

“And here it is, my house,” Donnie interrupted.

“…magnificent. Your house is magnificent!”

“Well, thanks, but it’s really my parents’ house. This is where I grew up,” Donnie said, parking the truck.

Daphne had never seen anything like it. The two-story building looked as though it came right out of a fairytale with its aqua blue vinyl siding. There was even a magical sparkle of glittering silver strewn around the sides of the driveway. The abundance of dandelions in the front yard only enhanced the yellow shutters framing each window. A wreath of plastic flamingos accented the blue front double doors. And the gnomes, gnomes of all sizes, were everywhere along the edge of the house, with clusters of artificial flowers tucked in between them.

“Magnificent,” Daphne repeated. “Are those flowers real?”

“Naw. My mom volunteers at the cemetery and she brings them home. She says there’s no need to waste them.”

“Your family must be rich.”

“Not really.”

“ Heck, a house like this would cost a fortune in Birmingham.”

“Well, maybe. Come on. Let’s go in. I want you to meet my mother.”

“I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Oh, and Daff, there’s one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, my mom doesn’t know anything about drag queens and entertaining and…”

“So you don’t want me to talk about my career?”

“Well, if you wouldn’t that would be good, you know what I mean?”

Daphne paused, again with her mouth open in deep thought. “You don’t want me to be myself? You want me to pretend to be somebody else?”
“Yeah, like buds.”

“Buds?”

“Like buddies. Best friends. No Daphne Delight, just Daff.”

“Well, I am an actress.”

Carrying their bags, the two anxiously walked up the driveway where shiny beer cans littered the edges of the cracked concrete. Suddenly, and up close, the house didn’t look so magical after all. The vinyl siding seemed warped, the paint on the front doors was chipped, and the flamingos were faded by overexposure to the sun. Donnie opened the door and called out to his mother. Within seconds, a large, screaming and overemotional woman appeared, running up the hallway from the kitchen, every inch of her jiggling with excitement.

“Oh, my baby! You’re home. You’re finally home!” she exclaimed. As mother and son embraced, Daphne stood back and enjoyed the scene, one she had never been a part of with her own mother.

“Mom, you’re hurting me,” Donnie playfully said.

His mother slapped him upside the head. “What the hell are you doing here so early? I ain’t even close to having things ready for your party. You told me five o’clock and here it is just barely after twelve.” She smacked the side of his head again. “Mom, quit it,” Donnie snapped back. “What’s the big deal? We just got here a little early, that’s all.”

“And who’d you bring with you?”

“Mom, this is my good bud, Daff.”

Daphne wasn’t sure if she should courtesy, hold out a hand, or hug Donnie’s mother. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs…” Daphne paused because she couldn’t recollect Donnie’s last name.

“Don’t you ‘Mrs.’ me. Call me Earlene. Any friend of Donnie’s is welcome in my home, except for that no good Bobby Rae Tucker. Caught him stealing more than once. No, that thief ain’t ever welcome here.”

Earlene guided them to the kitchen. “You boys must be hungry. Let me fix you a couple of sandwiches and then the two of you can take a nap or something ’til dinner time. Daff, you like baloney sandwiches?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” Daphne sat down on a stool at the counter and watched as Earlene prepared baloney sandwiches with more mayo than meat. Daphne didn’t much care for mayonnaise, but she also knew to be polite and just eat. She was, after all, a guest.

Earlene scampered around the kitchen, putting out a bowl of barbeque flavored chips and a pitcher of iced tea. Her long jet-black hair bounced as she moved around the room, and there was a twinkle in her eyes as she kept embracing her son over and over to her son’s objections. “What’s wrong?” she said. “You scared of your fat mama’s squeezes?” And then she kissed his neck as though she might not see him for another two years. When she decided her son had been given enough affection, she turned her attention to Daphne.

“So, Daff’s a strange name. Doesn’t sound American. Are you American, or is it a nickname?”

Daphne sat silent for a second. “It’s a nickname. And yes, I am American.” No one had ever asked her if she were American before.

“How’d you get the name?” Earlene asked.

Daphne paused again, her mouth wide open, her mind suddenly racing. She wanted to keep her promise to Donnie and could see the nervousness in his eyes as she tried to come up with an answer.
Donnie came to the rescue. “Mom, Daff got his nickname because when he was a baby he couldn’t hear and they thought he’d be deaf for the rest of his life. So they called him Daff.”

“Oh, you poor dear!” Earlene said sympathetically, her voice suddenly raised as though she were talking to someone who really couldn’t hear. Then she laughed and smacked Daphne on the back. “Better to be called Daff than to be called Dumb, right!”

Daphne smiled and felt relieved that she had escaped the situation unscathed. She liked Earlene. Maybe it was Earlene’s large size, her fearless wit, or just the fact she was overbearingbly rough around the edges. She reminded Daphne of Stella. Large, loud, and in control.

“Donnie, take Daff up to Sissy’s old room when he’s finished with his sandwich.” Earlene turned to Daphne and raised her voice, “Sissy is Donnie’s sister. Ran away with a black man twice her age about three years ago. Her daddy never got over it.”

Daphne thought for a moment that Missouri wasn’t a whole lot different than Alabama. “You can use her room to take a nap. The bathroom’s at the top of the stairs.”

Daphne thanked Earlene for her hospitality and followed Donnie up the stairs. “Why don’t you get cleaned up and get some sleep?” Donnie suggested. “It’s already after one, and dinner will be at five. I’ll wake you up when it’s ready. Sound like a plan?”

“Yeah, sounds like a plan,” Daphne replied. She couldn’t wait to hit the shower and lie down in a real bed.

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Daphne took a deep breath. The aroma of fried chicken permeated the room. “Do I smell fried chicken?”

“Yeah. KFC. Mama says if you can’t make it better than KFC, then don’t try. She puts it in the oven to keep it warm and then tells everybody she cooked it herself. Smells great, yeah? She knows it’s my favorite.”

“That’s nice,” Daphne said stretching her arms in the air.

“I see you’ve got a red one too,” Donnie said referring to Daphne's red Miley Cyrus T-shirt.

“Yeah, got one in four different colors. It’s okay to wear to dinner, isn’t it?”

“Sure. You and my cousin Vincent will get along fine. He loves her. Always talking about how he’d let her use that tongue of hers for something really good.”

“Ugh, can’t wait to meet him.”

The two walked down the stairs, Donnie acting like the proud host, and Daphne nervously following her nose to the fried chicken and side dishes that filled the table. “Everybody, this is my friend, Daff.”

“Hey, Daff!” the family yelled in unison. Earlene had told everyone that Daphne could not hear.

“Hey,” Daphne replied as she raised her hand and gently waved back, moving her fingers as though she were signing.

Earlene jumped up and hollered, “Sweetie, you sit over here next to Debbie Ann. She’s Donnie’s cousin. Just finished high school and still looking for a boyfriend.”

“Uh, Aunt Earlene,” Debbie Ann protested. “I told you I don’t want a boyfriend.” With or without the plaid flannel shirt, it was obvious to Daphne that Debbie Ann was a
lesbian. *Couldn’t the rest of the family see it?* she thought to herself.

Once seated, everyone went around the table and with boisterous voices and over-enunciation introduced themselves as platters of food moved from one set of hands to another. Daphne was barely listening, knowing that after the third introduction she had already forgotten names. She figured that after tomorrow, she wouldn’t remember any of them. Her ears began to hurt. She wanted to let them all know that she could hear perfectly fine without them screaming, but then she didn’t want to talk at all.

“Like your shirt,” Vincent said, grinning like a goofy inbred. Daphne just smiled as she put a forkful of mashed potatoes in her mouth.

“That woman’s disgusting,” Grandma Ballard stated with contempt. “I liked her when she was Hanna Montana. Now she’s just a…”

“That’s enough, Grandma!” Earlene interrupted. “Don’t get riled up. You know it will encourage your reflux.”

Donnie’s father, Larry, sat stoically through the onset of the meal, staring at Daphne with piercing eyes barely visible from under his dark blue ball cap with the edges worn. Daphne could feel his glances but ignored them as she reached for another piece of chicken.

“What the hell happened to your eyebrows?” Donnie’s father asked. The chatter at the table came to a halt.

Donnie looked up and around. *Eyebrows?* She thought for a moment for an answer to his question. She had no response to having no eyebrows. It occurred to her that at that moment, it would be convenient to lose her sense of hearing, if she could.

“Oh, Larry,” Earlene interjected. “Probably an aerosol or meth explosion.”

“Yeah, like that,” Daphne replied, not at all sure what Earlene was referring to.

Suddenly, Donnie stood up and walked around the table, positioning himself directly behind Daphne. Daphne paid no attention and took a bite of a chicken breast, hoping the whole situation would just go away.

“I have an announcement to make,” Donnie proclaimed with his eyes nearly shut. Earlene put her fork down, and all the family members followed suit. Donnie made sure he had everyone’s attention before he nervously stated, “I just want you all to know that since I went to prison, I’ve changed.”

Silence ensued until Vincent asked, “How? Did you get your GED?”

Donnie placed his hand on Daphne’s shoulder. “I’m gay.” Daphne could feel the mouthful of chicken breast suddenly lodge in her throat. *This is worse than the old man asking why she had no eyebrows,* she thought. Every person in the room stared at Daphne as though she were the culprit in changing the sexual orientation of their prodigal son.

“You’re a faggot, a queer?” Donnie’s father blurted out. “And this must be your faggot boyfriend you brought to our house. First, Sissy, and now this?”

Debbie Ann leaned over to Daphne and whispered, “Welcome to my bigoted world.”

“Oh, dear Lord, my grandson’s a homo!” Donnie’s grandmother wailed. “Get me the Pepto. Earlene, get me the Pepto!”

Daphne sat motionless as though she wasn’t even there. As the morsel of chicken finally made its way down her esophagus, she wished these strangers would all go away, but they didn’t. It was, after all, their home and not hers. She could feel the contempt and anger as the voices were raised even louder. Earlene tried to get everyone to calm
down, but between Grandma Ballard’s drama and Larry’s hateful rhetoric, along with the snide comments of the rest of the family, the noise just got worse. Remembering what her mentor, Stella, had told her many times before, Daphne decided she could not win this battle, so she stood up and walked out of the house, closing the blue door with the pink flamingo wreath behind her. She made her way to Donnie’s truck and climbed into the passenger seat. Donnie soon followed carrying his bag and Daphne’s Miley Cyrus backpack.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” he said as he started the engine. “I should have known better.”

“Prison?” Daphne asked.

“Yeah, I would have told you…eventually.”

“The chicken was good, didn’t you think?”

Donnie didn’t reply as they headed down the street.

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Daphne jumped from the chair when the phone rang, startled by the loud old-fashioned ring of a landline. She stared at the black rotary phone then glanced at the clock sitting next to it. It was eight in the morning. The last thing Daphne remembered was sitting in the wingback chair next to the bed, watching Maury where a black woman in a bad orange weave was beating the crap out of her two-timing boyfriend for having sex with some overweight vagina with two legs.

“Hello?” There was a pause on the other end. “Yes, this is Daphne.” There was another pause. The caller then went on to explain he had just been released from jail. Donnie had been stopped for speeding and had old outstanding warrants as well. The man said he promised Donnie to call and let Daphne know about his arrest and that he might be out in a day or two, and that Daphne needed to stay put until his release. “Okay,” Daphne said at the end of the short conversation before hanging up the phone. She stared at the ceiling in deep thought with her mouth open as she normally did when confused.

Still half asleep, she remembered that she and Donnie had checked in at the Motel 6 on the edge of St. Louis, far away from the archway and right off the Interstate ramp. The plans for the evening were simple. Donnie would go meet one of his old friends for an hour or two and then pick up a bottle of gin, and when he returned, he and Daphne would go out to a local club and possibly play pool.

Daphne stared at the items on the bed. She had unfolded her skimpy Miley Cyrus costume, brushing out the matted pink fake fur collar. The glittery powder-pink leotard was created by Stella for Daphne’s act, and she couldn’t wait to wear it to the concert in Birmingham on Wednesday night. She was sure every Miley drag in the city would attend, and Daphne wanted to make sure she stood out and looked like the “real” Miley and not some lame redneck imposter like Jackie Lynn Peterson. Going out with Donnie was a chance to “feel” like Miley and practice her “tongue and twerk” on strangers.

Daphne was a trained “method” actress, a technique Stella had explained to her protégé. “If you want to be somebody else, then you have to practice being that person. You can’t fake it.” Though Daphne might appear eccentric to strangers, she was often just pretending to be somebody she wasn’t. One Sunday morning she caused a great stir when she walked in the Waffle House dressed in a black suit and placed her breakfast order like a drunken Marlene Dietrich. And there was the time she and Sam were stopped at a red light in Birmingham and she suddenly jumped out
of the car and began spinning around, totally immersed in becoming Julie Andrews, belting out lyrics from *The Sound of Music*.

Daphne had waited for Donnie until eleven thirty. She had polished her nails twice and moisturized every inch of her exposed skin. She had practiced her tongue extensions in the hand mirror and when her bottom felt numb from sitting too long, she had practiced twerking. She’d flipped through an assortment of television shows throughout the evening, so many that her thumb was beginning to hurt from using the remote so much. She finally found *Maury* on an obscure station and was immediately caught up in the baby-daddy drama before nodding off.

Suddenly aware that it was now Wednesday morning, she opened her mouth and screamed, “Miley! Miley Cyrus! Her concert is tonight!” She began to panic, pacing back and forth, all the time looking at the clock. She grabbed her cell phone and texted Sam. Hell, she remembered, he’s not even in Birmingham. He drove Stella to Mobile. There was no way that Sam could make it to St. Louis from Mobile and then drive them back to Birmingham in time for the concert.

Daphne paced some more, then walked to the window and pulled back the shades. The side lot was full of semi trucks. “I could hitch a ride,” she said out loud. She thought of going from one rig to another, knocking on doors in search of the one possible trucker heading to Birmingham, but that would be time consuming, and then she quickly dispelled the idea because of the concessions that might have to be made. There had to be a better way to get to Birmingham by 8:00 p.m.

The idea of taking a bus popped into her mind, but she had less than ten dollars in her pocket. With her adrenaline peaking, she grabbed Donnie’s bag out of the closet and dumped his belongings on the floor. She unrolled his socks and searched through his pockets for any indication of cash, finally finding a plastic bag of rolled-up quarters. She counted exactly twenty taped-up rolls—a gold mine and a way back to Birmingham. Within the hour, she was packed, in a cab, and on a Greyhound bus headed home with one connecting stop in Nashville.

The ride was arduous, to say the least. Daphne found herself befriending an elderly lady when she made her connection in Nashville. Sitting together on the bus, the two exchanged pleasantries, and of course, Daphne began to tell the woman about her career as an entertainer: an illusionist, a female impersonator. It wasn’t until she said, “I’m a drag queen,” that the old lady perked up and replied, “I know what that is,” and the conversation became engaging. By the time the bus pulled into Birmingham, Daphne had revealed her entire life story to the stranger.

The bus station lobby was crowded and bustling, and Daphne walked swiftly to the men’s restroom, her Miley Cyrus backpack over one shoulder. She had exactly one hour to get in drag and make it four blocks to the arena.

She headed for the stall at the end of the room and entered it, closing the door behind her. Like a professional, she sat on the toilet and took a deep breath, then pulled her makeup out of her backpack. With a tiny mirror in one hand and her brushes in the other, she gradually transformed herself into Miley Cyrus. She pulled back her hair and donned the short blond wig, feathering it with her fingers and then spraying it in place with heavy applications of Aqua-Net. Next, she slithered into her costume, and once every piece was in place, she put on the pink satin boots, stood up and gave a sigh of relief. All that was left to do was to fill her backpack with her “boy” clothes and

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makeup, and head to the arena. She shifted into method mode and closed her eyes, imagining she was the one and only Miley. With her backpack on and her concert ticket in her hand, she opened the stall door. A man at the urinal was the first to see her. Another guy at the sink stopped washing his hands, not sure if he was in the right room.

“I guess you boys weren’t expecting Miley in the men’s room, were you?” The line was totally unrehearsed, but Daphne felt she needed to say something just to get a head start in case one of the men decided to chase her down.

She walked as quickly as she could down Broadway, avoiding any eye contact with passing strangers and drivers who were blowing their horns. After trekking two blocks, she found herself standing and waiting for the light to turn. It wouldn’t do to wait. Miley would never wait, she said to herself. She raised her hands and walked forward, creating a traffic jam as she crossed the street. The arena was in her sight.

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As usual, Monday night at the Hide Away Lounge was slow. It had been two weeks since Daphne had made the trek to St. Louis with Donnie. She was resigned to the reality that she would probably never see him again. Instead of hanging out at the pool table, Daphne decided to sit at the bar with the regulars, people she had seen but never actually been introduced to. She met Ron, a retired cashier from Kroger who drank dirty martinis and who amused the others with size-queen encounters of his past. Max was a red-eyed jovial drunk on assistance who had succumbed to being unemployable after being hit by a car ten years earlier on his way home after a night of drinking at a bar downtown. And then Thelma, a sixty-something drag wannabe who knew the words to every Judy and Liza song ever recorded, charmed Daphne with her quick wit and snarky attitude.

“Need another gin and tonic?” Dave, the bartender asked.

“Sure. One more,” Daphne replied.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Dave added as he refilled her drink. “Jackie Lynn Peterson came by earlier. Said she needed to see you. Told me she’d be in later.”

“Oh, that Jackie Lynn is something else,” Thelma chimed in as she rolled her eyes in tribute to a bawdy Betty Davis.

“Yes, she is,” Daphne agreed. “Why are all of you afraid of her?”

“Afraid?” Thelma responded. “We ain’t afraid of her. We just ignore the crazy thing. She’s all bark and no bite, but she’s a loony for sure. Imagine a queen her age pretending to be someone like Miley Cyrus. It’s disgusting.”

“I heard she’s hung like a horse,” Ron blurted out.

“Hardly,” Max quietly muttered. “I ought to know. I dated her years ago when she thought she was Cher.”

Just then and on cue, like in a sitcom entrance, the door opened and Jackie Lynn stormed in wearing white denim hot pants and a matching halter top.

“Hey bitches!” she yelled in a slow southern drawl.

“Oh, girls. Time to turn the backs,” Thelma cautiously whispered.

“Daphne Delight! Get your ass over here now!” Jackie Lynn demanded as she headed to the table in the back. Daphne slowly slid off the stool and followed. She sat in a chair across from the little terror not knowing what might happen next.

“What is it?” Daphne sheepishly asked.

“Not much. Just wanted to say that I saw the You Tube video and how you jumped up on
stage and stuck out your tongue and then twerked. Impressive.”

“I thought Miley was in trouble. When her shoe broke, I knew she needed my help. That’s when I jumped on stage and did the tongue and the twerk, you know, to give her time to put on another pair of shoes and come back out. The whole video thing has embarrassed me. I just wanted to help Miley.”

“Well, you stole the show, and when she came up behind you and you turned around and fainted, well, it was priceless. And if I may add, I think you twerk better than Miley does.”

“Thanks, but can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure.”

“I was imitating you, not Miley. You are the best twerker in Birmingham.”

Jackie Lynn sat motionless as her eyes filled with tears. “That’s the best compliment I’ve had since I was twelve when my aunt Ethel told me I had eyes like Barbara Mandrell.” And just as though she had an off-and-on mood switch, she scowled and said, “And don’t you ever tell anyone you saw tears in my eyes, you hear? In fact we never even had this conversation.”

“Sure,” Daphne said, a bit confused.

Jackie Lynn stood up positioning herself in front of Daphne at an angle where everyone in the bar could see the two of them together. She was aware she was being watched as she began to twerk, her best one ever. Then she snapped her fingers in the air and declared, “And, bitch, that’s how you do Miley Cyrus!” She gave Daphne a huge wink with her left eye. Daphne responded with a squinting half wink in return. With her hands on her hips, Jackie Lynn strutted out of the bar.

Daphne slowly made her way back to her stool, amazed that she and her nemesis had shared a secret and a wink. She calmly sat down, her mouth wide open in deep thought.

“Well,” Thelma huffed. “A woman her age acting like that.”

“How does she hide that big wiener in those skimpy outfits?” Ron asked in awe.

“I still get a little twitch when she shakes that ass,” Max thought aloud, a smile coming over his plump face.

*It felt good to be at the Hide Away Lounge,* Daphne told herself as she stirred her gin and tonic with her little finger. Somehow, she felt drawn and enamored by the Monday night patrons, and now, even less threatened by Jackie Lynn Peterson.

Thelma took a deep raspy breath then exhaled, a pattern she acquired from years of smoking. “Honey, how come you’re not wearing a Miley Cyrus T-shirt tonight?”

Daphne thought for a second, then replied. “Time to move on to something bigger and better.” She paused. “Did Judy Garland ever make a movie in St. Louis?” she asked her new friends.

“Did she ever!” Thelma responded with excitement. The old storyteller smiled and began to emote, “There once was a little girl named Dorothy who had a dog named Toto…”

“Oh, shit. Here we go again,” Ron quipped sarcastically.

Daphne sat in awe and listened as Thelma and the others bantered back and forth about unaccountable facts and sequences of events in the life of the famous singer and actress. After about twenty minutes of a cinema and musical Garland history lesson, Daphne asked her friends, “Did Judy know how to twerk?” What followed were seconds of shocked silence, then the small group of misfits broke into a fit of laughter as Thelma awkwardly portrayed Judy twerking while singing *Follow the Yellow Brick Road.*
Daphne giggled as she watched Thelma wobble back to her stool, holding her back in anguished pain.

“Dave,” Thelma gasped, “I need a double with an OxyContin on the side!”

Max turned to Daphne and said, “Stick around another thirty minutes and you’ll see the real Judy Garland right before your eyes.”

Daphne’s eyes opened wide with anticipation. She couldn’t wait.

In the 1970’s, J.R. Greenwell was a premiere headliner for many years at the Sweet Gum Head in Atlanta, GA, and performed as a female illusionist across the country. He later earned a Masters of Education at the University of Louisville, and now devotes his time as a queer writer creating plays and prose at his home in central Kentucky. He is the author of a memoir, *Teased Hair and the Quest for Tiaras*, and a collection of short fiction, *Who the Hell is Rachel Wells?*

For more information on J.R. Greenwell visit his Web site at: [www.jrgreenwellmga79.com](http://www.jrgreenwellmga79.com).
Something Like the Rain
Alex Ebel

I stood just inside the door of a daiquiri shop, deciphering graffiti that had been scratched into its glass pane with a blade. 2Hott. The acid green latex paint that had been used for the interior walls was peeling top to bottom, revealing behind it layers of old paint leading the way back to naked drywall. The light grew dim as I watched porch lights come on one by one across the street, grey clouds rolled south towards the river.

“What’s in the ‘Miz Peach’?” Elias asked, moving his weight back and forth to opposing feet, his hand on a laminated menu held with masking tape to the glass countertop before him.

The cashier looked up at a blank space on the wall behind him, reading off an invisible list of ingredients, “Peach, mango, strawberry, and a float of 151.” She counted out the flavors with her fingers.
“Hmm, okay, and what about the ‘Wet Wet’?”
“Peach, mango, strawberry, blue, coconut, and a float of 151.”
“That sounds good, get that one.” I offered loudly, trying to rush him.
“Of course it sounds good,” he barked back, “it has blue in it.”
“It’s the most popular.” A gesture of the cashier’s hand led our eyes to a pallid lump of a man sitting barely upright on the blown out cushion of a bar stool. He clutched the bar with one hand and raised his cup with the other, giving a nod, exposing a herd of skin tags that had been tucked away beneath his chin. Thick strands of blonde hair fell out from beneath his hat, growing darker with sweat, they stuck flat against the back of his neck and retreated down into the collar of his shirt. Elias look directly at the man, then quickly snapped his head back to the cashier.
“I think that will be just fine, thank you.”
The girl left the register with an empty Styrofoam cup and began to walk down the row of whirring daiquiri machines. She pulled on handles affixed below different spinning paddles and let out layers color one inch at a time. She dipped her hand into a nearly empty jar of maraschino cherries, red syrup dripped from her splayed fingers as she dropped a single cherry onto the top layer of slush. Elias took crumpled dollar bills from his pocket and pressed them onto the counter, flattening them for the cashier as she returned to the register with a bottle of copper colored liquor, she poured it over his mix of off white and blue ice, cherry dye bleeding out onto the surface and dissolving into the rum as the rest of the cup filled.
“Going to the parade?” she asked as she worked her French tip nails around the plastic lid, fastening it tightly to the rim of the cup. Sugar and alcohol pushed itself up through the cross-shaped hole. She wiped away the spill with her finger and handed Elias a straw.
“If it doesn’t end up raining,” I said, “but it looks like it’s about to.”
“We’re going.” Elias said, glaring back at me from the register, “rain or shine.”
I laughed as he turned towards me in his freshly cut jean shorts, bleached white and paired with faux leather black combat boots, altered remnants from Mardi Gras the previous year.
“I didn’t put this shit on for nothing.” He gestured with his cup at his cutoffs, which were short enough to make the fabric of his front pockets hang below their tattered hems.
“You look like Britney Spears.”
“Thank you.” Elias gave a bow.
“No, I mean like scary Britney Spears, barefoot at the gas station with a frappucino and a baby Britney Spears.”
“You’re a bitch, you know that?”
The restaurant next door was open and the smell of hot grease hit us as we stepped out onto the sidewalk. Hand-painted signs bolted into hot pink plaster walls advertised fried oysters and roast beef debris. My eyes stung as old bay fumes and boil steam rose from the open lid of an aluminum pot a man stirred on the sidewalk. With a wooden hook the
length of a baseball bat he latched onto a handled mesh basket and raised it to the rim of
the pot. Teeming with hundreds of struggling little brown and purple crawfish, I watched
him lower it into the water. I always expect them to scream, like miniature lobsters, but
they never do.

“Maybe we should eat first.” I looked beyond the basket towards the display case and
examined biscuit sandwiches half-wrapped in white wax paper, craggy sausage patties
sweating under a heat lamp.

“Ugh, not here, I’m not trying to shit my cutoffs before the parade starts.”

Entire rows of houses that were normally vibrant and colorful became pale and washed
out against the grey sky. Our reflections disappeared from windows behind shutters as
people prepared for the rain. I scraped the ice at the bottom of my cup and slurped the last
mouthful through my straw, then stopped, pressing my tongue hard against the roof of my
mouth and shutting my eyes tightly, trying to force the cold back down my throat and
into my stomach. “Shit.”

Elias picked up a dead palm frond that had fallen from one of the trees lining the street
and tore a single thin leaf from its stalk. “We used to make these into little crosses every
year the Sunday before Easter, you can fold them up like origami, but you have to do it
while they’re still green, otherwise they get brittle and break into pieces.” He bent the
long strip back and forth a few different ways, looking at it from different angles, before
giving up and dropping it back onto the ground. “Whatever, I don’t have time to figure it
out, we gotta go by the convenience store to get champagne before the parade starts. Text
Jan and tell her to meet us outside The Golden Lantern.” We ducked below dripping
window units and went down an alley past the floats and carriages waiting in line for the
parade to start, looking away so as not to spoil the surprise.

By noon, the parade started and it almost looked as though night was falling. The rain had
begun but only so lightly as to add a slight weight to our clothing. I didn’t feel it land but
it was present in the dampness between the pads of my fingers. Tiny clear beads were
forming in Jan’s eyebrows as she approached through the drizzle; she poured sparkling
wine into her half-empty bottle of Minute Maid on the corner of Royal and Barracks.

“Beads.” she called out unenthusiastically as a horse-drawn carriage full of drag queens
passed.

“You have to at least look at them, Jan.” I took her drink and pointed to the floats rolling
down the cobblestones, “They aren’t going to throw you anything if you’re screaming
into your orange juice.”

“Whatever, y’all are just getting stuff thrown to you because you’re boys, these queens
have no love for a bald-faced dyke like me.” Just as the words came out of her mouth a
plush rose hit Jan in the tits and bounced off of her towards the ground. She hurled her
arms forward and latched onto it just before it fell into a puddle of beer draining down a
network of cracks leading into a gutter. “Yes!” she called out triumphantly, “It never
touched the ground, it counts!” Jan raised the rose skyward from its fleeced foot long
stem and looked back at the man in drag, seven feet tall in heels, wrinkles spackled with
foundation and blush the color of a burning house. She blew Jan a kiss and waved a
gloved hand in our direction before disappearing into a port-o-potty being pulled behind a minivan. She seemed stately, royal even.

“See,” Elias said, “Easter is fun for everyone.”

The blue lights of police cars followed the last float down Royal Street towards St. Ann, signaling the end of the parade. As we walked further into the French Quarter the sounds of laughter and shouting echoed down the narrow street and from behind the police cars, a second parade had begun. Camouflaged by the blinding neon that hung from storefronts, the signs of protestors began to make their way down the same path the parade floats had just taken. I began to make out the black letters of their slogans, things like *AIDS CURES FAGS* and *HOMO SEX IS SIN*. No one seemed shocked. The signs, and the people who carried them, had become a sort of tradition of their own.

A crowd formed at an intersection a block away, hordes of gay men and women began to move into the path of the protesters, laughing and dancing with one another to the music playing from the open doors of the club on the corner. A middle-aged troll of a woman lead the group behind her with a sign that said *NO TEARS FOR QUEERS*, the background fading from red to yellow to blue. She held it high above her head, the same way guides ushered tourists through the French Quarter with brochures.

“Oh fun,” Elias said, “a little Easter gay bashing.” We stood still and watched the woman approach a group of dancers, lithe men wearing low-cut white briefs with powder puff cotton tails sewn on the backs and pastel bow ties. Pink and white rabbit ears were held in place with elastic cords wrapped under their chins like party hats. They bobbed their heads and bunny hopped after one another. As the rain picked up the crowd parted down the middle, stepping up onto curbs and moving for cover beneath wrought iron balconies. We stood outside the gay bars on St. Ann unbothered by the line of protestors trudging forward through the storm. It began to pour; their signs dripped and shook violently in the wind. The poster board of the first woman’s sign came loose from its tacks and fell from the wooden stake she held. Stumbling through a puddle in an attempt to retrieve it, she moved too far ahead of her group and stopped. Temporarily alone, eyes frozen ahead of her, she began marching in place until the rest of the congregation caught up with her. She wiped the wet hair out of her face and took half her make-up with it, leaving her looking as though she had been dragged from a mall makeover before it could be finished. They marched on towards the end of the street.

They passed everyone without incident, their chants and jeers tangled and lost in the noise of the crowd until we could no longer hear them at all, the accumulation of our singing and laughter drowned out their voices so entirely that they all just sounded like ambient noise in the distance, something in the background, something like the rain.

When the storm passed we watched the crowd grow thin from a deserted stretch of bar. I tried to imagine what the woman at the front of the protest would be doing with the rest of her holiday. She was probably already on her way home to feed her cats, maybe an iguana, then while microwaving a tv dinner, she might stand alone in her kitchen, watching her reflection move in the window above the sink, rubbing a damp washcloth into the fold of her eyelids down to the corners of her mouth, her face red and sore from the rough terry cloth. I wondered what she thought about in those solitary moments spent each night before saying her prayers and falling asleep in her twin bed, staring up at her...
massive wall of decorative Hobby Lobby crucifixes, breathing quietly though lungs sore from screaming.

The week before, she could have been leading a group of children at her church, going over the meaning of Palm Sunday. I pictured her quietly talking to a shy little boy, a smile on her face, affectionately showing him how to fold his long green palm leaf into the shape of a cross, her hands working gently over his, the warmth between them might make her feel loved. I wondered if she might consider that the little boy could one day forget that feeling, forget her, that he might forget the meaning behind the palm fronds; he might forget the ways they fold. I wondered if she struggled to connect that shy little boy to some of the young men that she had spent the day condemning to hell, I wondered if she connected them at all.

Did she have friends? A boyfriend? I pictured her analyzing her reflection, twisting and turning in the mirror, checking for blemishes, picking out different outfits she thought would be complimentary to the make-up she had worked so hard to perfect. Had she done it for someone specific? Did she worry about not being pretty enough? Did she worry about not being loved? Was she lonely? Thinking about how disappointed she looked as we all ignored her, her Tammy Faye Baker mascara spilling down her face like India ink, I wondered if she went home feeling accomplished or defeated. I almost started to feel sorry for her, but that woman’s personal fulfillment, or lack thereof, was her own cross to bear.

We laughed to ourselves at a group of men who had waltzed through the French doors of the bar soaked to the bone. They wore elaborate handmade Easter hats adorned with fake birds and tulle the color of different marshmallow Peeps. They pressed together closely and drunkenly repeated the same corny joke, announcing it to the remaining partygoers until everyone present had heard them.

“He is risen!” One man shouted while another reached over to pull back the elastic of a resting go-go dancer’s underwear, they paused for effect, “He is risen indeed!”

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Alex Ebel studies nonfiction writing at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts. He work has been previously published (or is forthcoming) in places like Hello Mr, The Rumpus, and Punchnel’s. Follow him online @alexsebel.
“Jameson Currier’s fifth novel, *The Forever Marathon*, is a compelling, brutally honest examination of two days in the life of a long term relationship between two men, who seem to have stayed together more out of habit than their desire for each other.”
—Christopher Verleger, *Edge*

What would you do if you realized you’d spent half your life with the same man and you weren’t sure if you loved him any longer? Enter Adam and Jesse, both 49. I found myself trying to predict the outcome throughout the book. The ending is honest and true to the characters, something that is not always the case in happily ever-after land.”
—Scott A. Drake, *Philadelphia Gay News*

“Currier has accomplished something truly remarkable: He has presented two highly unlikeable, self-absorbed, clichéd characters, and woven them into an interesting story that keeps the reader turning pages. This is a funny, exasperating, touching read.”
—Alan Chin, *Examiner.com*

“The opposite of love is not hate but rather indifference. Thanks to the talent of Jameson Currier, readers are never at risk for feeling indifferent to the couple at the heart of his *The Forever Marathon*. Adoration mingled with aversion at this pair’s antics ensures every page will be read with enthusiasm. We should all be grateful that Currier has not shied away from presenting an honest depiction of gay men in their late forties.”
—Steve Berman, editor of the *Best Gay Stories* annual series

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

—Richard Labonté, *Bookmarks*

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

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

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

“A brilliant and insightful play about the intersection of God’s law and man’s love. “A Strange and Separate People” is rich in drama and Jewish tradition. The title comes from comments supposedly made by the late Queen Mother, who said she liked the Jews ‘very much, but they were a separate people and a strange people’ — perhaps in more ways than she ever expected.”
—Curt Schleier, *The Forward*
It was Colton’s proposition to leave the city for the summer and since I loved him I agreed to it. I wasn’t enthusiastic just for Colton’s sake. I do enjoy adventure. This, though, had the whiff of something—maybe the pull of inevitability for us as a type of couple—that I had to stop myself from balking at.

We had taken the train up the Hudson for a day trip to a little hamlet in the process of rediscovery and refurbishment by exurbanites, those who wanted space to do their art installations or pursue their dream of selling artisanal shaved ice. The trace elements of a
township that had hit the rocks some time ago were still present, but coated over, patched, not unlike like a wobbly, pocked wooden floor disguised with a bright, festive new rug (woven of cruelty free yak, here, presumably). Now the extant derelict storefronts alternated with the refashioned, those that entreated weekenders to buy their hand blown glass dildos or dine on locally-sourced vegan comfort food. Dreamcatchers abounded. There would be kale.

Colton was wearing his mint green J. Crew shorts and New Balance sneakers that afternoon, and I loved how he looked in those shorts, how they hugged his crotch, and during our ride back to the city, with our thighs pressed together and my head resting on his shoulder I drowsed as he monologued about the possibilities of spending a month or two out of town.

Sebastian, he said, we could probably find an affordable place equal to what we’d pay for like a week in the Pines or P-town. I could use the time and space to work on my film. We’d be close enough to the city that I’d go back on weekends if need be. We’ll get Marci to water the plants.

Though it was not even late May it was already wiltingly hot in Manhattan and if this weather was a harbinger of the summer to come, then the sooner we left the better. I nodded as he went on. I can cover most of the cost, he said. His proposed generosity made me feel like a grateful hostage to his largess, even though it wasn’t that large. He was funded by a grant to finish his documentary, and had some money stashed away from a steady run of editing work. I hadn’t planned to take the summer off necessarily, though I had done little to nothing to procure any employment. Still, this semester I’d taught two online classes for a somewhat shady educational property, on top of my adjunct position, and I had set enough cash aside to hopefully float me until the fall if need be.

So by the second week of June we were once again on our way up the Hudson Valley with our luggage, set to occupy a “homey” apartment built over a former soda shop. The building stood a bit outside the main part of town, offering more privacy but less of the glamor—if one could call it that—of being centrally located.

Colton had handled the rental details while I spent my time wikipedia-ing the town and investigating the Chamber of Commerce’s website: History, population, economic upticks and downturns. I clicked on articles in the Times about the area’s hipster renaissance and felt a mild sense of foreboding, including a piece about a former frazzled rock star now residing there in blissful repose, leading Reiki classes and music workshops for parents and tots. She claimed the town had given her back her soul. Oh.

I tried to temper a pang of disappointment as I sniffed at our lodgings, opening windows to chase the dust clinging to the surfaces and trying to rid the cloying scent of its rightful occupant. Colton was oblivious, instantly stowing his belongings and adapting his tall, lithe frame to the space. The apartment would grace no spread in a glossy shelter magazine or merit a feature on a design blog, but it would be inhabitable. It wasn’t quite what I imagined, but then it wasn’t overstuffed with embarrassing tchotchkes and crocheted samplers either. The owner, a forthright, middle-aged lesbian, was down in Florida tending to an elderly relative and happy to have us as seasonal tenants.

After unpacking, Colton lay down to nap. That is one thing that I envy about him, his ability to sleep anyplace, anytime. He pulled me down on the bed next to him, his long grasshopper legs tucked together. Stay with me, he murmured, already drowsy. I lay next to him, trying to settle,
but I felt squirmy. Sensitive to my movements, he said, sleepily, or you could go for a run. I had quit smoking and taken up running approximately one year, four months, and three days ago. Colton was someone who could still manage to smoke occasionally, at a party say, or outside a bar, and then the need would not grip him again past the moment he discarded the cigarette butt. I was not built that way, so now I run.

I scooted myself close and began to dart my hand into the waistband of his shorts, but Colton was already near-asleep so I retreated, resting my palm on his flat stomach and inhaling the scent of his hair. He kept it long-ish; it was a honey blond color and it always smelled earthy and herby like a small patch of fertile garden and, sometimes at home when I found myself missing the scent of it and if he’d gone to work before me, I would press my nose deep into his pillow. I could not, however, drift off. So I took his suggestion, as I usually did, and set out for a run. It would give me a chance to see the town again.

When should I disclose that Colton hit me? Only once. And I forgave him. It did not, in that instance and contrary to the song, feel anything like a kiss. In the interest of full disclosure, it was because he thought I had been cheating. I hadn’t. Not technically. He forgave me. But that’s something each couple must parse for themselves, right, what constitutes fidelity; where do boundaries of propriety lie?

It had been a misunderstanding on both our parts. We had been a nasty fight in our kitchen, late one evening this past winter, shortly after we first began living together. It escalated rapidly from a light shove to the actual moment, the crack across my cheek and the reverberation of that sound, knuckles connecting with flesh, followed by tears and then we were a tangle of groping limbs on the linoleum which progressed to a tangle of limbs in the bedroom. The thing is, Colton is not at all violent and I’m not one to stray, at least in the way we both present ourselves, so I can’t entirely justify it but to say the season had been exceptionally cold and who does not go a little crazy by mid-February?

Why the incident came back to me as I made my loop around the town I couldn’t say, other than we were about to negotiate our “us-ness” in a new setting. My path took me once more near the river, then the irregular slope of green park, past a rushing watermill and up a small incline. I tried to stick to the back roads and side streets, to get a better sense of how the town was put together, how the pieces fit and where the seams showed through, removed from the scrim of a blissful weekend visit. I ran over disused train tracks and passed still-abandoned factories: one had a Banksy-esque mural on the wall, while most of the other facades were tagged with the amateur graffiti scrawl of disaffected youth. A college friend of mine currently lives in Frankfurt, Germany, and when I went to visit her, and she was guiding me around the town, she told me of a game played with the different buildings: Bombed Not-Bombed. It was the way of distinguishing any construction from the edifices that had survived from WWII. I thought of that as I turned down a back road near the South end of Main Street, behind the diner. From behind me roared a large 4x4 truck, coated in a Rorschach blot of dried mud. It came to an abrupt stop near a dumpster. A man, young-ish and loud who I felt appeared casually menacing, hopped out. He was tan, his dark hair kept trimmed close to his scalp. He spit on the ground after swinging himself out of the truck. I had paused to stretch and he now caught me looking at him. He appraised me coolly for a second before entering a screen door of one of the buildings facing the parking lot.

CHELSEA STATION
Colton was awake and staring at his laptop by the time I returned from my run. There was a little desk by the window, painted robin’s egg blue, that he had already commandeered, a yellow legal pad scrawled with notes and other important detritus from his current project spread out. He gestured to the Formica table in the cramped, L-shaped kitchen where several white cartons sat, ready to be opened.

**Chinese takeout? Really?**

Um, you’re welcome. I mean, unless you wanted to buy groceries and cook? He returned his attention to his laptop.

I didn’t particularly. Pulling off my running clothes, I tossed an air kiss towards him before muttering something about the one single Chinese restaurant in town and then ducking into the shower.

We went down to a small wine bar on Main Street, after putting away the leftovers, to toast the beginning of our little summer idyll. We killed a bottle of Sancerre and discussed how we’d spend our time. Colton had already amassed a collection of maps, marking the trailheads to hikes he thought we should take. We listed certain nearby galleries to visit, ones that we’d overlooked on our first trip, and omigod maybe we can score some shrooms for fun, Colton said. We briefly considered but nixed signing up for weekly transcendental meditation classes. There is only so far one can go native. As we were waiting for the check I brought up the guy I’d seen in the parking lot.

Cruising for town trade already, Colton joked, but with an edge to his voice.

It was the way he looked at me.

Seriously?

Not in *that* way. It was like he was taking note. Of my arrival.

Oh sure. Maybe he’s with the welcome wagon and will show up at our doorstep with a *big* basket.

Ha. No, but. I can’t quite explain but I thought. I mean, I sensed.

You’re drunk. Or paranoid.

Fine. Let’s drop it.

We sat in silence until our change arrived, and then I followed a pace behind Colton as we walked back to our little rental.

We should have fucked that night, to christen the new space. I started to initiate something but Colton blamed the wine and the greasy food as he shifted away from me.

The yarn we’d spun for ourselves, the one of green market weekends and leisurely strolls, had not exactly come to fruition. I barely made a dent in my ambitious summer reading list—now’s the time to tackle Proust I told myself—and Colton dug deep into his film, a piece centered around Frank O’Hara as flâneur. So I would attempt to read, take runs, shop, and Colton would be in front of his laptop, researching, logging interview footage and emailing and texting with his producing partner. Trying to get the narrative to coalesce. It was all very much like our life in the

CHELSEA STATION
city, only with more fresh air and isolation, and seemingly more togetherness, but only because we occupied the same space more hours of the day.

I started to get creative in a manic happy homemaker way, experimenting with meals that were beyond my capacity to cook well, and devising a series of intricate cocktails based on the imported spirits at the one liquor store in town that provided such a stock—Aperol Negronis, or something with Lillet. Which is how we managed to fall into a routine within our break from routine. Colton would usually turn to me in the early evening, as I, apron-clad, was banging around and muttering to myself in the kitchen, trying to manage a recipe with ramps or sorrel, or whatever, kohlrabi, and ask something along the lines of what’s farm to table tonight Sebby? And I’d reply smartly, and then I’d say something like Colty would you like your evening cocktail and he’d reply ooh yes and I’d serve him that day’s specialty and we’d toast and drink, then he would return to his screen and I would go back to the kitchen to bang and mutter some more.

The cutesy “y” we appended to our names, that had begun shortly after we had started dating. I think it was Colton who initiated it, but we were in such a cocoon of bliss and single-mindedness early on I’m not certain where his thoughts ended and mine began.

I started watching Colton in bed at night—I found it hard to sleep minus the white noise of the city, the insistent thrum—marking the easy rise and fall of his breath. He would drift off to sleep and I would softly pad back into the kitchen, repeating my cocktail recipe or more often just pouring whatever liquor was at hand straight into a glass, and then finishing that nightcap fumble my way back under the sheets. I thought about the amount of time I had spent looking at him, how I knew the planes of his body, his dimples, the way he absentmindedly flexed his calves when sitting on the subway, the manner in which he scrunched up his face and tilted his head when I was imparting some bad news or unfortunate story to him, his pale lunar ass. What features of mine, I wondered, what attributes, did he know, notice, catalog?

Then, sometime around the end of the first month Colton returned to the city.

I finally secured an interview I’ve been desperate for, he said, the morning he left. It could only be shot during a very small window, he said, meaning tomorrow. Oh, ok, great, go, I told him, having a hard time masking my disappointment. You could come back too Sebby, he said, but I’m only going for like thirty-six hours so it doesn’t seem worth it. Stuffing clothes into his green overnight bag, he was preoccupied. No, no, I said, I shall remain here and swanned off into the kitchen to rinse and dry dishes.

Colton gave me a perfunctory kiss as I stood at the sink and promised to text upon his safe arrival. The moment the door clicked shut I fell into a mood. The thing is, I don’t mind being alone. I just dislike being left alone. The distinction is important.

I stood on the small woven rug unable to make a choice as to what to do with myself and the day. This was part of the arrangement after all, the idea he might shuttle back and forth, so why did it irk me? We had fought, a few days prior, over money. He made a comment about my wanting to purchase something useless and extravagant, and I should have let it pass but I didn’t. We were both sensitive and touchy for the remainder of the afternoon. It was our second fight of the summer about money.
When Colton contacted me, it was to say that the interview had been pushed back, and he’d be staying in the city for at least another day, maybe two. Fine, whatever, I replied. Don’t be mad, he responded, and asked if there were anything from the apartment I wanted him to bring back. Nope!!!, I wrote, hoping he’d read into my breezy response my intended sense of irritation.

Though it was only early in the afternoon I fixed myself a drink—an Old Fashioned—and began to obsess over Colton’s imagined movements through the city.

I awoke around eight that night groping at the bed next to me but finding it empty. I checked my phone and, not seeing any more messages, stifled my impulse to write to him. Instead I reheated leftovers, fixed myself a Manhattan, neat. I went to a bar, that first night without him, and then every subsequent one he was gone, which turned out to be four. It took some searching to find the right place. The place I settled on was not one of the newer drinking establishments but an old, grizzled thing nestled off a side street—a dive. A true, proper dive, not some designer’s approximation of one, not some cute simulacrum fashioned to lure young, trendy cocktail enthusiasts. This bar was the repository of the tears, sweat and fistfights of an untold number of blue collar boozers. Long, and faintly mildewy smelling, with a blinky neon sign out front. The only nod to cheer was the strand of Christmas lights strung up behind the bar, and even those were coated in a film of filth and dust. A fly strip hung from the ceiling. I likely would not have had the courage to come in had I not been fortified with my pre-outing cocktail. In contrast to the space, the bartender was shockingly young. We chatted for a bit: Her name was Rosie, she was Irish, and had moved to the town with her carpenter boyfriend. She was polite but adequately disengaged, as the bar seemed to require, and after she gave me those brief details of her life she returned to rinsing pint glasses.

The second night there I recognized the boy from the parking lot, the one with the mud-spattered truck. He had a beer and a shot in front of him, arm curved protectively around his drinks, head lolling from side to side. Something emanated from him, something prickly and caged-animal tense. Or the alcohol was just making me anxious. He lurched up from his seat and tottered towards me and I immediately began fumbling with my napkin, then stirrer, anything to look busy, but as he passed I realized his was only going to the toilet. Still, following that I finished my drink in one swallow and left.

The third night, after having communicated obliquely with Colton, and he had adamantly stated his return the next afternoon was definite, I still went to the bar. It had become the thing I did to occupy my nights without him, and it made sense (at least to me), my inhabiting this lost-in-time, unkempt space. Rosie acknowledged my presence with a half-smile, but then carried on with the task that occupied her attention this evening: slicing wedges of lime.

Colton was distant when he returned, there was a haze over his responses, a fuzzy nimbus obscuring his usual demeanor. I could have chalked it up to his being busy, or the difficulty with the interview, how the project was not quite coalescing, but I was not feeling overly generous.

He scrabbled through his bag, then flipped through his notebook, then grabbed his laptop and toggled through multiple the tabs in his browser after flopping onto the bed. We did not know how, here in this space, to negotiate each other’s temperaments. I began to tidy up—I’d let things become dismally cluttered in his brief absence.

I guessed he had seen Max, though he didn’t say it. Max had been on the fringes of the whole
documentary since its conception. Max was also Colton’s ex-boyfriend. He and Max were now, he assured me, fervidly platonic. I found it hard to dislike Max, and I also found it hard to not. Colton was, well is, a serial monogamist. I was the first and only person he began seeing after he and Max parted ways. I was, prior to meeting Colton, the opposite, not quite so ready to nest. Which is why it surprised me when I did with him, the ease with which we came together. I had met Max only a handful of times, as he and Colton kept a cordial distance from each other’s social circles. Colton has a way of containing the different portions of his life, hermetically sealing off the different portions.

Since I’ve admitted several unpleasant truths already, I suppose I can admit that I felt superior to Colton, during those first giddy months, when I was falling for him and him for me. Alright, after too. Which is ridiculous. We generally read the same books, received roughly the same liberal arts education. Yet there it was. Maybe it was the way he downplayed his intelligence, or how he let his enthusiasm overtake him in moments, something I had difficulty doing. The fact that he was a terrific artist but wasn’t invested in his own success. Maybe we’re too similarly wired, and I needed some wedge—imagined, but there—to pry between us.

In bed that night I did the things—Colty, I whispered, would you like and shall I, and then before he could answer—to which his body responded, I knew the locations and methods, tongue in places. When he submitted, it was just that...a surrender. Hadn’t I always been the one, of late, to initiate things?

Do you think this was a mistake? He said the next morning, without inflection, over bacon.

I clutched the handle of my coffee mug tighter. The faraway aspect I had noticed had taken root. I knew he was obsessing over his film. In that moment I wanted him to go back to the city, and the instant I had the thought I regretted it, because I knew that was exactly what he was going to do. So naturally I suggested it to him.

It was with this second departure I began to think that this whole thing was a set-up, that he’d brought me up here to gaslight me. That this was an elaborately constructed ploy to break up with me (or get me to break up with him). I vowed I would not act like some nervous heroine, left to shred tissues and fret and take to bed in the afternoon, nervous and overcome. I was not faithful in my vow. What happened was, I did take to my bed. The bed, the rented one, in the rented apartment. When we texted the responses I sent were curt, tart. I wrote to mutual friends, however, how much I was enjoying my time away: how refreshing it was, how revitalizing. I was intent on muddying the signal.

From afar neither of us addressed the things that needed to be said. He ramped up his enthusiasm. I really needed to be back in the City. I want you to stay and enjoy the place. Enjoy it for both of us. Are you sure you’re ok? I mean, it’s paid for. So. Be back soon. This weekend. Next week. See you soon. Soon.

I entrenched myself, invested in my solitude. I began to move in the similar patterns of the locals, locating the ebbs and avoiding the swells of day-trippers. I learned new routes and took short cuts and side streets, I clung to the outskirts. I ran. I sunbathed in the park. I took a flyer for the meditation class. I still did not read Proust. I vamped, I marked time, I dawdled. I continued making elaborate recipes for dinner, and trying out new cocktails, despite my dwindling bank account, the balance I loathed to check. Evenings I generally found myself at the bar, the dive,
which I’d taken to calling Doldrums. I appreciated that Rosie was pleasantly disaffected, and that there was a group of elderly men that played darts in the back often.

I returned from the restroom to find, seated on the bar stool next to mine, the boy with the truck. I had not seen him in some time, though I had seen the truck often on my runs, midnight black and mud-caked always, generally parked near the alley where I first encountered it, and him. He was concentrating on something. I saw it was a game on his phone. His squinting made him look I thought like a confused old man. His head jerked up when I sat down, then his focus went back to the shiny, staccato plinking. He gestured to Rosie for another drink, just two fingers thrust into the air, not breaking his woozy attention to his device, and after she’d brought him another bottle of beer I signaled for another round as well. I pretended to read a day old copy of the *Times* that someone had left at the bar but my attention was drawn to this guy, for no other reason than I wanted a distraction. I wanted something different than Colton: raw, unpolished, inconsiderate, callused. He might damage me, I thought, and the idea held a sick appeal. When he got up to go outside, I followed, first placing a napkin over my drink, to reserve my place and it, even though this was not Manhattan and the bar so occupied that to leave your stool was ceding hard-won territory.

He was standing under a lamp in a pool of yellow light and the whole set-up, it occurred to me, felt too cinematically porn-y to be dangerous. He had a cigarette clutched tightly between his thumb and index finger.

I bum one of those? I said. Or slurred. And there it was. How quickly when the chips are down we gravitate back to the comfort of our vices. He fished a pack of Winstons out of his pocket and when he offered it to me I noticed a constellation of freckles on his right hand. I took one, and he then offered me a light.

Thanks. Sebastian, I said, and already my named sounded too faggy coming out of my mouth. I should have made something up, Brock or Jake or Flint, something with one syllable, less precious and lilting.

Huh?

He’d misheard, and now I was forced to repeat my name, and my embarrassment quickened.

Sebastian, I was introducing myself.

Oh, uh huh. Andy. He said, and hissed out a stream of smoke from between his front teeth, which I noticed now were large and square, like two marble tombstones side by side in a graveyard.

Thanks, I said, waving the cigarette towards him, trying to keep the conversation going for whatever reason, I quit but, yeah. And I let the sentence trail off. The burst of nicotine had made me woozy, and I wondered if I’d puke.

He did not seem to want a dollar for the cigarette, nor was he interested in engaging in the requisite small talk that seems to accompany these exchanges, the social currency I’d known at home. We stood in amiable silence. I nodded to myself, as if I were in some reverie of thought. He was fit, though more from actual labor I guessed than a gym membership. He flicked the spent butt of his cigarette into the night in a furious arc, like a dying comet. He was halfway back

CHELSEA STATION
inside before I managed to sputter out thanks again, and spent the next second contemplating the burning end of the cigarette I should not have bummed and had not wanted to finish, before trailing back inside.

So this would be a reprieve, a vacation of indulgence, a return to vice and bad behavior. A walkabout, free of Colton and our stagnating roles. There was a time when the quickest way for me to get over someone was to have them profess their affection. I had assumed this flight behavior stopped when we began dating.

When I got back inside Andy was in conversation with a boozy Asian man of indeterminate age, a rotten front tooth prominent in his raw-looking mouth. I tried to psychically signal my return to Andy, but he was engrossed; his body language, his attention to this clearly sodden individual—a neighbor, a co-worker—could have also read as a hustler vibe? Or maybe he was just a good listener? Remaining attune to his conversation, I had another drink. Then another. Heady from the cigarette and the thrill of embracing something, or jettisoning something, or both. In the back of my mind I knew I was running out of money, and would have to limp back to the city, broke and shamed, but I did not want to acknowledge that fully, not yet.

I must have “rested my eyes,” or whatever euphemism is appropriate, but I came to when Rosie was tapping on my forearm with her black lacquered nail. I smiled, composed myself, and lurched off the stool, steadying myself for a second before heading out the door. There was some weather pattern rolling in, and the night had grown muggy, thick. I was orienting myself towards the apartment when I saw Andy opening the cab of his truck. Overeager, I called out to him, hey hey, and when he turned back I stopped, halfway between the door to the bar and his vehicle. I just...can I bum another cigarette?

He patted the pockets of his jeans as I moved closer.

This, I’m sure you’re thinking, is where the trouble starts. You’d be wrong. The violence we expect is seldom the violence we receive.

Here, finish these, he said, tossing a soft pack containing the two remaining Winstons. I watched his taillights weave down the road. I stuck a cigarette in my mouth, then remembered I was without a light.

I woke up late the next morning, well, early afternoon if we’re being honest, my mouth feeling gummy and foul, remembering I had forgotten to charge my phone. I plugged it in while I made toast, and when I looked over it there were a stream of texts from Colton, an escalating barrage of entreaties. Need to talk; project fucked; Saw Max; Miss you; Need your guidance; Coming up this Sunday; Sebby? Sebby!!! My finger hovered over the keypad as I waited for the coffee to percolate. I wanted to know how far we could hurt each other so we would never go that far again. I set my phone back down and a poured a cup.

I showed up at the bar that night with a fresh pack of cigarettes and the will to see Andy again. I was up against a timetable, an inevitable reckoning, and I didn’t like being cornered. So, I ordered a whiskey neat and waited. And waited. And was ultimately rewarded when Andy did show up, sawdust-covered and tense-seeming; ready to unwind. He settled in and the bartender, not Rosie tonight, but instead a sour and puffy Greek man, pushed a bottle of beer towards him and collected the requisite bills. I let him collect himself before offering a gentle wave of
recognition. He signaled back, a head nod, an affirmation. We sipped our drinks, and then another round, and then, when I caught his eye, I signaled with my pack of smokes. Would you care to, the meaning. He gave me a thumbs up.

We convened outside, under the yellow lamp, and this time I, the generous one, supplied him with cigarette and fire.

Stephen, right, he said.

Er, Sebastian.

Yeah sorry. He messed around with his phone for a minute, his thick fingers mashing out a text message.

You like to play poker? he asked.

Is that an attempt at euphemism, I said.

He responded with a blank look. Perhaps even blinking.

Never mind. Sure, I mean, why?

Got a game set up.

Then why not?

Come on. Let’s finish our drinks and go.

My feet rested on take-out bags and balled up paper towels and who knows what else as we rode the few short blocks to the apartment. We walked up a flight of steps outside the main structure and he rapped his knuckles on the weathered red door, which was opened by a witchy, blousy woman, grey hair kinky and disheveled, wearing a loose black smock and thick jangly bracelets.

Come on in, took you long enough, she said. Introductions were made, and while she busied herself in the kitchen, fishing out bottles of beer from the fridge, I scanned the room, which contained a few worn leather couches and some framed art prints. The only real light, aside from a few flickering votive candles on the mantle, came from the fish tank, where a collection of saltwater creatures sluggishly glided around. A door, from down the hall, banged open.

Kostya’s just leaving she said. Right kiddo?

Kostya, thin but jagged, all sharp angles, conveying a weariness with life beyond his age, dug his fists into his thin jacket and eyed me before he scooted out the door. Roommate? Relative? Boarder? The arrangement was unclear. I took a bottle of lager and was ushered onto the back porch, where on a forest green plastic table the game was arrayed. I met the other players, sort of: two guys in their mid-twenties to early thirties, if I had to guess, thick and hard and inscrutable—Joseph and Gil. Andy took a seat to my left, Callie, whose house we were at, to my right.

I know nothing about poker. Texas Hold ‘Em was what we were playing, and, being tipsy and intimidated, my strategy was just to wait until I came across a pair of cards. Otherwise I bluffed. This, as it turned out, was not a terrible strategy. The buy in was twenty bucks, I won more hands than not, and by about three in the morning I was up two hundred dollars. Gil had left by this point, frustrated, and Callie was yawning, Andy teasing her about her advancing age. I’m calling
it, she said, and began to clean up the table. Andy shrugged and started to help, emptying ashtrays and scooping up bottle caps, and I pocketed my money. I’ll just, I can walk home, I said, feeling vaguely confident I could do just that. Andy was disappearing down the hallway, and said see ya, and I said thanks again Callie and was out the door.

Someone waved to me from the base of the staircase. When I reached the bottom to address the figure there were suddenly other shapes, bodies, limbs, hands groping and I was enveloped, caressed in a near-clinical fashion, then released, spat back, minus, of course, my winnings and my phone and my credit cards, the encounter punctuated by one final sharp blow.

I jogged after the figures for a few paces before tripping over my own feet. The fall knocked the wind out of me. Rolling over onto my back I lay staring up at the sky, dotted with stars. So plainly visible. I hadn’t bothered to notice the stars since I arrived here. Through the swelling slit of my left eye I was convinced I saw a UFO. It wasn’t a shooting star, or comet. This object, shimmery and in flux, remained, in my (albeit limited) field of vision for several minutes, moving not only left and right but up and down. It seemed intent on observing, commenting. It hovered like a poem. Colton was my immediate thought, I should tell him about this, he’d want to record it, and reached instinctively for my stolen phone.

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“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.”
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I remember the afternoon we spent at the beach and he remarked why would anyone want to bring reading material along when there was so much to see. Look at that one, he said, tipping his head in the direction of a young man whose shoulders were broader than his hips. Dark and handsome, I thought. Sexy, not smart, he said.

That was not the only one who caught his eye. He had a fascination that summer for tall blond men. I remember I had known him long enough by then not to be jealous of his attraction to other men. I was old enough and smart enough to know that I had something of his which they, even with their masculine perfection, at that moment did not possess—his friendship of many years. I knew then, that summer, that we were never destined to be lovers, that what we were to be to one another were simply and especially, best friends.
We went to the beach together for many years. But that summer our first day on the beach he spent staring at the water, staring at the sky, staring at the constant parade of unclothed bodies. He refused to go into the water, afraid it would make his hair stand up in spikes, but he took every opportunity to walk away from where we had laid our blanket, journeying to the concession stand, the boardwalk, in the direction of a tall blond man.

I did not mind that summer, I was lost in books I remember. I was caught up in my own need to escape, my own dissatisfaction of a year of frustrating dates. And I felt sure that someone would interrupt my reading, that the act of reading itself would intrigue a man into approaching me.

Fantasy, he said, when I explained it to him. He had rented a large green and yellow striped beach umbrella and shoved it, tilted, into the sand. When he walked away I looked up and watched the wind flapping the brim. I sat underneath it reading and waiting. I remember I fell asleep and when I awoke he had returned. He was again staring at the water, staring at the sky, staring at the boys. He, too, that summer was waiting for someone. I remember he nudged me and I looked up at a man passing by. The man returned my look and I felt my heart quicken. I knew then anything and everything was still possible.

He would recall the anatomical details, of course. He would remember the bare chests and tan lines and bulging swimsuits. The body as its soul. He met the same kind of men at the beach that he hated dating in the city—shallow and narcissistic, only interested in one night stands—but there, the mere fact that they were skin against the skin of the sky, mesmerized him. One night at the bar when he had stopped dancing he stood beside me, sweating, and said—Anyone can look perfect with the proper lighting. And he went home with anyone who would ask.

This summer I went back to the beach. He was not there, of course. Nor were any of the others we met that year. I wondered if they, too, had died. I sat with another friend on a towel, not far from where we had, years ago, pitched that crazy oversized umbrella. This summer I noticed I needed to wear sunglasses; I was forever squinting. Radios, this summer, seemed to be spilling music everywhere. I could not stay at the beach for more than an hour. This summer, I noticed, I was more restless. Everyone seemed younger, more beautiful than I remembered. But I learned that though times change, a handsome man still rends the heart helpless.

And this summer I drove past that shack of a diner off the highway where we ate so many meals. The shutters had been repainted and hedges planted along the walkway. But it also seemed smaller, I know, because my memory had enlarged it over the years. But I was afraid, though, to continue toward the house, afraid that it, too, might have changed.

He would have tilted back his head and produced a sharp, rowdy laugh, saying I was silly and that it was only a house. He would have remembered the warped front door, the bald spot on the lawn beneath the hammock, and the way the soles of our bare feet turned black from walking on the sooty floor of the kitchen.

These are only remembered fragments of our summer together, examined, now, with the same curiosity as the shards of shells along the shore. There were, of course, the days it rained that summer, the days we spent hunched up in blankets playing backgammon and watching old movies on TV, and the mornings we walked through fog so dense we could only sense each other’s presence. And there was the night we sat together on the empty beach, bathed by the warm ocean breeze beneath a sky of fiery constellations. Isn’t it perfect? he said, not expecting
anything more from me, not a touch or a kiss or even a word. And all I expected was for him to be a part of my life forever.

So this is what happened: a young man moves to a city and meets another young man. They become friends and share a house near the beach one summer. The part that is difficult is when one man dies unexpectedly. Who would believe that the images of one summer are what would be remembered if the larger portrait of life had not been stolen before completion? Time passes; little things provoke: the smell of coconut oil, sand between the sheets. “My friend” becomes an emptied phrase repeated throughout the years.

And I have not forgotten the sound of the waves that summer, rising, falling, and breaking, silver blue to the horizon, engraved in my memory like an etching on glass.

Who knew then where we were headed, my friend? Who knew then I would remember it like this?

Jameson Currier is the author of ten works of fiction and the editor and publisher of Chelsea Station. His collection of intimate writings, Until My Heart Stops, is a Lambda Literary finalist, Gay Memoir/Biography.
“Currier is a masterful essayist, adept at lingering over a meaningful detail or capturing a complex emotion in a simple phrase.”
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