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In the First Person
Andrew Sarewitz

Write what you know

On a January afternoon while sitting in the courtyard of a bed & breakfast in Key West my father confessed he harbored a nightmare that one day it would be revealed that he was a “total fraud.” I’m paraphrasing. In the forty-seven years he was with me, this was the most vulnerable thing he said to me. I can’t remember what led to that admission, but it was a secret fear he and I have in common.

Write what you know

I came out of the closet in the autumn of 1978. The first place I was passionately kissed by a man was in the balcony of Studio 54. I wore cowboy boots. He was dressed in black. I don’t remember his name.
I don't understand religion. I understand music. From a young age there were contemporary songs I found so moving I wouldn't listen to them. I don't like hearing music early in the morning because it is too affecting.

On the precipice of adulthood, I walked onto my first New York City dance floor. With music pounding so loud you can't carry a conversation, I tapped an undiscovered reverence at my outer-body baptism and unveiled a true respect for holy rollers. Bring me voice, keyboards, tribal beat and orchestrations that build to visceral climax and I am transported. It's selfish. I prefer to dance alone in a crowd (which is how I write best). I have chosen it over romance, over friendship, over sex. My heroin. I haven't outgrown it, though I almost never engage anymore. When I do, it's memory-dancing to the relic period club music, short lived and accidentally elite. But dancing like I'm twenty years old takes its toll. Walking home barefoot by myself, I could sit down on a city curb, fall to sleep forever and die a contented man.

When my boyfriend Tim was leaving me, he said through tear filled eyes, "lucky in cards, unlucky in love." I should have said, "go fuck yourself."

It isn't so much the little things that I want back. Not in the way others talk and reminisce.

When my mother died, my world spilled: no doubt about that. But by the time she passed away, the formidable ally she'd been had faded into another woman I adored but with only perfumes and shadows of the mother I was so scared would leave me. There are horrible blessings to watching age ruin the vital and strong. I was spared immediate abandonment. To the end my mother always knew who I was when she saw me. Her eyes would light up with indefinable joy. What I miss is knowing she is there. Not the specifics that make me laugh or cringe or are placed sentimentally among objects and activities. She's gone and never coming back. There is no home to go home to. And whether deserved or not, no one will ever love me the same.

I see my friends, particularly the women that make up my life, in full color. Brilliant, hilarious, generous, angry, driven, kind, devoted, unconditional. I don't know if I am a good friend but I sure as hell know how to pick them.

For my fourteenth birthday, my parents bought me a guitar. Second only to wanting an acoustic Martin, I chose a six string Gibson. The specific instrument was not a good choice. It was difficult to play. Years later, when I brought it to a music store in New York City, the guitar was diagnosed with having an imperfect neck, the fault of the manufacturers.

Through all the phases that monopolized my attention, I never put down my guitar. I was adequate at best but it was my partner in writing and singing. Reaching my mid-thirties, I was rarely playing and I wasn't
writing at all. Distracted or just a victim of time, I left the guitar sitting dormant, latched in its burgundy lined black case. Within reach but practically decoration.

In a spontaneous move, I gave my guitar to a young colleague on what I termed a permanent loan. The moment I let it out of my grip, I regretted it. I try hard to be practical, not too sentimental. One side of my brain says, “it’s part of your life” and the other says “it’s just stuff.” After twenty five years, I gave away a piece of me.

Less than a week later, a friend I’d known since high school walked unannounced into the art gallery where I was working. He was carrying a black case, in unmistakable silhouette. An obsessive collector of guitars numbering in the twenties, his wife threatened that he had to pare down his treasure trove or she was going to kill him. Without knowing I had given mine away, he handed me an acoustic six string: a Martin. Sentimentality be damned. I have a Martin.

Whether by fate or luck or ridiculous coincidence, I am forever grateful.

Write what you know

On January 10, 1987, at 12:20 in the afternoon, my boyfriend Stephen said he loved me. I remember looking up at the clock in his kitchen. It’s the only time in my life when the right man at the right time said those words to me.

Write what you know

I thought I would be an actor. In a serious attempt to pursue a career, I took class. Whatever natural abilities I had were not enough. Or not good enough. The exception for me was when I sang. Separate from the judgments of my vocal quality, I was able to deliver a performance.

Pitch was innate but vocal placement wasn’t easy for me. Where some hold tension in their neck or forehead or stomach, I clenched it in my throat. Warming up and relaxation were mandatory if I was singing for an audience.

While studying at Lee Strasberg, a terrible experience for me, I enrolled in a singing course. The first time I rehearsed in their theater on the main floor, people from outside walked in to listen. One teacher who had told me how weak I am as an actor said I should focus on singing.

Our class performed two afternoon recitals the year I attended. I was given the final number at both concerts. At the second, I sang “If We Only Have Love,” by Jacques Brel, translated from French by Mort Shuman. During dress rehearsal, I forgot the lyrics when I began the second stanza. This is every actor’s nightmare. In my residual panic, I stared at the sheet music, and like someone born with a photographic memory, saw the page in my mind’s eye. The following day in the dark auditorium watching others perform while anticipating my turn, only gave more space for my terror to escalate. I focused and kept visualizing the page of lyrics. I was so obsessed with remembering the words I didn’t think of anything else. Then it was my time. I took center stage. The pianist began the eight bars before I came in. When I opened my mouth, a voice from some other soul took over. Rich and deep and not mine. I stood motionless, hands at my side, and allowed this otherworldly voice to pour from my heart and lungs. I received a standing ovation and shouts for encore. This is what every actor dreams of.
As narcissistic as performing needs to be, in this public forum it was a wholly private moment. My childlike ego was filled with regret. I hadn’t invited a single person to hear me.

Write what you know

My mother told me that for the first year of my life I cried every night, all night. Yet it seems that as a child of three or four, I was an obnoxiously happy ball of sunshine, tempting my older siblings to consider throwing me out the window at breakfast time. Contradicting that broad brushstroke, I screamed like a crucified saint my first two days at nursery school. The same repeated for many days during the ten months of Kindergarten. Some I remember, including an episode of wailing over absolutely nothing where my teacher stopped what she was doing and asked in exasperation, “please tell me what's wrong?”

In second grade, it—whatever “it” was—ended. The ever annoyingly happy child reemerged and took hold as a permanent inheritance. I have theories, scientific and ethereal. But I’ve never known why without provocation, I cried incessantly like a traumatized prisoner. Or why it stopped.

Write what you know

On a cobalt night in October, Stephen and I were making love. We “came” simultaneously, which was a gift but not unusual. Complete, I fell flat on my back in his bed. He lay across my chest, head buried in my neck, our bodies entangled. He drifted off. I was afraid my arms or legs would become numb from his weight and I’d have to move him. Instead, we fused into a single body pulse, chests rising and falling in sync, exhaling in time, him sleeping, but not me. In the moment, I was conscious to memorize the perfection. Love, both tangible and transcendental. Even now, with blinding focus I can go there, to that dreamlike place, back in time as if we are still young. Like he’s still asleep. Like he’s still alive.

Write what you know

In February, 1980, there was a party at Studio 54 to celebrate the last day of freedom for the club owners, Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager, who were going to jail for tax evasion the following morning. More significant than anyone could have known, this was the end of an era unreplicable, engraving a permanent marker in myth and time. The event was the Prison Party.

Well after midnight, Diana Ross walked into the DJ booth—reincarnated from a mezzanine-level theater loge—picked up a mic and began to sing her current single by Ashford and Simpson, “The Boss.” Next Liza Minelli strutted out onto a steel bridge twelve feet above the dance floor that could move like an elevated barge floating perpendicular down river and sang “New York, New York.” Then Ross joined Minelli on the bridge. The crowd fell silent as they spontaneously discussed what they could sing together. Some idiot from the floor screamed, “sing Judy!” I was standing close enough to see it sparked a shiver in Liza’s wide eyes, almost undetectable. A woman in black Charles Jourdan high heels told the moron to shut up.

Together the two legends sang “God Bless the Child,” a Capella. I was 20. I thought to myself, “remember this.”

Write what you know
In 1971, while I was away at music camp in Brandon, VT, I developed a severe ear ache. I was twelve years old. In what I recklessly call a delirious state, I had a vision that my maternal grandmother, Reggie had died. Now, I only remember remembering it. The next morning I called my father in New Jersey. I asked how Grandma was and he said something on par with “resting comfortably.” Two weeks later, on visiting day, my parents told me that my grandmother had passed away on the evening I “dreamt” she had died.

Forty-three years later, in the fifth weekend of March, 2014, having just turned 91, my mother was home in her final days, being fed morphine. Death was imminent but you’re never prepared. I cried most of Sunday evening before falling to sleep. On Monday morning, March 31, I woke up early by my standards, preparing to catch a train to see Mom. I forced myself to eat something. After putting my dish in the sink, I walked into the bathroom to shower. Feeling a presence as dimensional as rain, a complete calm swept over me. I smiled. Out loud I said, “Mother, it’s okay. You don’t have to wait for me.” Fifteen minutes later I found a missed call from my brother, followed by a text from Mom’s caretaker reading: “your mother is with your father now.”

I think about these phenomena. We know that whales and swiftlets communicate without speech but often condescendingly theorize silent human connections as superstition. I have no religion but there are some things you don’t have to see to accept.

Looking back, I’m not sure Mom was asking for my okay to let go. But she was there. Maybe just to quietly say, “goodbye; I love you.”

_____

Born in South Orange, NJ, Andrew Sarewitz (author) moved to New York City at 18. At 17, Andrew was awarded a Letter of Commendation from the Second Annual American Song Festival competition for music and lyrics. In 2013, a new work titled “A Town Called Home” was performed by Timothy McDevitt at Grace Church, Newark, NJ, in concert benefitting Hedrick-Martin Institute. In addition to drafting more than 100 musical compositions, Andrew has written several short stories as well as scripts for various media, including an adaption of the Off Broadway musical, “SHOUT! The Mod Musical,” for series television.

Michael Wynne (artist) makes artists' books and photobooks, and his short stories have appeared in Crooked Fagazine, Headmaster magazine, and The Holy Male, amongst others. He is based in London and Madrid. See more of his work at kissandtellpress.com.
“One reads Love, Christopher Street to see how other people, like and unlike yourself, encountered and endured and learned from New York, and that’s why this extremely varied anthology is always interesting, even when tangential, and why it’s often moving.”
—Andrew Holleran, The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide

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

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

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

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

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

For the Ferryman
A Personal History
Charles Silverstein

www.chelseastationeditions.com
We emerged out of the sun-parched, red-dusted canyon and onto the rim, him a stride’s length before me. His shoulders eclipsed the sun. His hair swirled into a vortex on the back of his head; the man in the moon. We walked without speech, but the soft rhythm of our footsteps and the sand grinding beneath our boots filled the dead air. Almost a cacophony in the semi-arid silence, the sound bounced across canyon walls, maneuvered down arroyos, landed in the creek below.

“I never caught your name,” he said.

“Chris.”

“Mitchell,” he said, as if I did not already know.
In front of his body, the sun had begun its slide beneath the mesa on the Western horizon. The town awaiting us was cloaked in crepuscular darkness. The trail, the wind-worn outcrops, the creosote, and the landings beyond the ledges were bathed in shadow, recognizable yet undiscernable. Refuges of light dotted the territory, still, from crevasses in the blood red, western hills. The copper-toned ridges would glow, and so would he. Stepping into what remained of the sun illuminated his profile. He let me see his face, his nose a gentle, cresting bluff. From the shadows, I smiled.

“We should go hunting,” he said. “Sometime.” He kept his back to me as he spoke.

A bush rustled, but nothing emerged. Javelina lurk in the brush at dusk and they lurk in my mind. Shadows leapt from leaves like ghosts. Spiders, I assured myself, if anything at all. The iron-rusted earth glowed most vividly before the dusk.

The last of the twilight seemed to consume the backcountry in flames. These hills were on fire and so was I.

“I guess I will see you at the bar, sooner or later,” I said to the back of his amber, dust-streaked hair.

“I am sure of it.”

We stood in the darkness together for just a moment longer in a space just short of eye contact.

* * *

After that separation, I avoided his bar at first. In action became an action in itself. I found other places to drink, whether with co-workers or alone. Work kept me busy between a couple of beats for the Verde Independent and a column in a local magazine, a non-traditional trade publication focused on the metaphysical and the uncanny in and around Sedona. I thought of him when I was the only attendee under fifty at a city council meeting. He crossed my mind when a crystal healer told me that Francisco de Sales sits on my shoulder. I was certain that I saw him at a midnight party where we stacked cairns to welcome visits by friendly aliens, but when I finally resolved to search him out, he was not among the faded faces surrounding the bonfire.

I met a girl named Sara, a student at the college in Flagstaff. We went hiking a few times, and I would stand in awe of the majesty of the ochre colored San Francisco peaks. At nightfall, though, they did not glow, and neither did she. Her green eyes captured the sunlight; light tumbled in and never escaped. I let her drift away.

I found myself back in his bar on an evening when he worked, seated at the farther bar stool, a pot convenient to the drafts from the back patio. He spoke little to me, his figure bathed in neon light as he poured whiskey for tourists. For the most part, he left me to admire the taxidermied mule deer heads that covered my corner of the room. A few times, we made conversation.

“I met the guy who owns my bungalow today,” Mitchell said. “His house was full of parrots, and, I guess, other exotic birds like that. I am not sure how anybody could live like that,” he said.

“Bird shit everywhere,” I said.
“Oh yeah, that place stank. But I got to really talk to the guy about how messed up my windows were. He’s going to pay for new ones as long as I install them.” He glowed when he spoke; his face always caught the light of the jukebox.

“That's awesome, I said.

He went outside to smoke, and I followed him.

“We should go to a vortex sometime,” he said.

“Sure,” I said. “They're a huge part of the reason I came out here.”

“Oh yeah? Where you from, anyway?”

“Down south, both sides of the border.”

“Hell yeah. I need to get out of here. I swore I would leave after high school, but here we are. Maybe I should go to Mexico. They have bars there.”

I stayed late that night, closed out his bar. We fell asleep in the back room.

* * *

Winter turned to Spring, and when Spring turned to Summer, I moved up the mountain, into the land of pines and rumors of off-season snow. I took up a writing job at a magazine, fished for some freelance work. I found myself ghostwriting a mystery novel. With a plot outline and a signature character from the credited author, I filled in the blanks. I would sit out in an aspen grove within walking distance of my house, flesh out the story of Barbara Lee.

I wrote a section in which Barbara Lee, international gumshoe, questioned a bartender who may have served a diplomat a whiskey the evening he disappeared. Trouble was, this bartender claimed an alibi, said that he was stacking rocks to greet the aliens. When Barbara asked if they came to him, the bartender explained, simply, they never left.

That evening, I drove down the switchbacks, off the mountain, into the creek’s floodplain, and then towards the sweeping vistas of the town below. A flicker of fire in my veins; I sat up at the end of his bar.

He ignored me much of the night. It was busy, after all. I waited him out. Once we neared closing time, and, at last, it was me, him, and those who were too drunk to count.

“How have you been?” I asked him after he served me another beer.

“Same shit, different day,” he said. “I'm thinking of going to Florida, getting away from all this woo-woo shit.”

“Yeah?”

“You get it. You left.”

“Just up the road, really. They still hunt for Sinagua Lizardmen up there.”

“I don’t know about that. This town is just a phase I cannot move on from.”

CHELSEA STATION
“You can’t leave just yet.”

“And why can’t I?”

I stared down at my beer. He shuffled away to greet an entrant. We slept in the back of the bar again. Just slept. He had done this recently. He had a blanket, which we lacked before.

* * *

That summer brought a fire on one of the mountains northeast of Flagstaff. Smoke poured over the foothills like lava, crashed into the heart of the town. Had to leave. I drove south again. Not to his bar, this time, but to the canyon, not just one of dozens that ring the town, but the one that we first explored together. Down the trail, into the crevasses, and back out again. At a bench that overlooked the creek, I went the wrong way towards the descent and into the flood plain, turned around, and decided to sit on the bench and gaze out onto the vista.

The vortexes of Sedona are recognized by the presence of two things: first, trees grown into spiral shapes, bark twisting around the base like a whirlwind, and the branches gently twisting around themselves, and second, the uncanny sensation of peace, health, and stillness through energy. Vortexes litter the arid landscape, and so do the tourists, the townies, and the New Agers searching for adventure, healing, and spiritual awakening down among the scrubland. The trails without the warped junipers, though, offered the best hope of silence for those who search.

I passed rosary beads through my fingers as I sat. Bead by bead, beat by beat. Simply a meditation, a stillness. Maybe he was gone by now, maybe he had stayed. I sat in a silence. I could do nothing either way.

__________

Nick Faulk is a librarian from Burlington, Vermont. His fiction has previously been published in Curios, a small art and literature magazine based in and focused on his former home of northern Arizona. His current projects include co-writing a chapter on motivation techniques that enhance student learning online for the forthcoming book Effective Library Instruction: Inspiring Student Motivation from Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Press.
In the late ‘70s there was a massive migration of young gay men to San Francisco. They left home in droves, traveling by plane, bus, Pinto or Volkswagen towards a life free from discrimination. Struggling to make ends meet, many worked in bookstores and restaurants, all the while taking advantage of a scene of sexual hedonism. Kevin Bentley faithfully kept a frank, literate diary of his experiences as this generation of gay men tumbled into the era of AIDS.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praise for Let’s Shut Out the World

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

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

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

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

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
Is it really you? the brief e-mail read. I have many fond memories of the time we knew each other.

Over a year before, on a slow afternoon at work, I’d browsed and left my name and contact information on a high school reunion website. Though he’d moved away well before graduation, Joe was one of only a handful of friends from that time I had any curiosity about. It’s no exaggeration to say that I’d thought of him at least once a day for my entire adult life. We were frequent companions in the seventh and eighth grade; over much of that time, when we were both thirteen and fourteen, on backyard camp-outs and sleepovers, we had very hot sex.

The first time I remember being aware of him, he was burying his lower body in a sand drift against the farthest rock-and-cement wall of the sports field at our elementary school. It was PE period and we were supposed to be playing baseball. Relegated to the distant outfield, I was carrying out my usual tactic of
backing slowly away till I wasn’t really part of the game anymore. How we went from that first meeting to blowing each other for carefully allotted minutes at a time in his backyard fort or my tent, I don’t fully recall.

We operated by a system of forfeits and dares, strictly premised on the absence of available female lays for horny boys like us. Afterward, I’d be panicked and guilt-ridden—till the next time. How he felt, I didn’t know, since naturally we didn’t share any feelings about it, unless you counted his occasional lewd asides as we tooled around the neighborhood on our stingray bikes, or argued over what movie we wanted to bus downtown to see. *Hedda likes you. Head-a my dick.*

We saw less of each other after we started high school, and by sophomore year he and his family had moved away. Later I heard that he’d married before graduating and already had a kid.

I answered Joe’s message with up-to-date information about myself, making clear that I was gay. He responded right away with an outline of his life so far: a failed marriage, two kids, work that takes him around the world. *I don’t have any problem with your lifestyle,* he wrote. Our e-mail exchanges led to a long phone catch-up, though once we’d mapped the fates of family and common acquaintances, the conversation faltered. “Gee,” he said. “What else did we do?” *You first,* I thought. If we were a man and a woman who’d fooled around as teenagers forty years ago, would one of us bring it up now?

Flipping back in my diary and noticing Joe’s name, I remembered that the previous night I’d dreamt about a phone conversation with him, in which I *did* bring up what surely will never be discussed. “Yeah, I remember,” was all he said, and really all I’d need to hear him say.

The first actual reunion, at the weekend place we share with my husband Paul’s long-ago ex in Guerneville, was pleasant, though a little strained. Joe and his adult daughter, who lives in the area, arrived with several bottles of wine and a six-pack. Joe drank three beers and then half the bottle of white as I downed glasses of red while helping Paul with the grill. Physically he wouldn’t have appealed to me but for the freighted past: the thin-lipped, elfin face, wide brow, and jug ears are now atop a broader, middle-aged body. He wore floppy, loose shorts, sandals, and an untucked, oversized shirt. As he’d mentioned once on the phone, his torso’s now thickly furred. While he spoke I’d stare back at the delicately lined china face, then see the fourteen-year-old one again the moment I turned away.

We sat out on the deck and chatted, Paul amiably quizzing Joe about his work—software involving frequent global travel that completely diverged from the baseless mental picture I’d carried all these years of him as a small-town Texas grease-monkey—then daughter Lana on her Army years, her girlfriend
(she’s gay), her restored house in Sonoma. But when Joe and I reminisced, we kept coming back to those odd moments where what we were about to refer to was, to my mind, the chief reason for our association, and he looked me right in the eye and ignored it. “Your mother was nice, but she didn’t like me, I don’t know why,” he said.

“Well, she’d never have named it, but she sensed we were up to no good...” I answered casually.

“I don’t see why. I mean, you and I never even smoked pot together!” he said, laughing heartily.

Monday evening, after the recent afternoon spent with middle-aged Joe, I pulled out the squirm-inducing ’69–’70 diary and read more thoroughly through the first half of it than I have in many years, and found some funny passages, besides the confirmation of several nights a week sleepovers with him. I can date precisely an unusual group sex event by what’s noted for the night Joe and his sometime friend Tad both slept over in the garage with me. I proposed we indulge in a sex-a-thon, a term I made up on the spot. Tad, who must have been briefed by Joe, announced matter-of-factly, “I’ll suck somebody’s dick if they’ll let me fuck them up the butt,” and I fake-grudgingly took him up on it.

There’s record of many petty fights with Joe—like, well, bickering boyfriends—and then our drifting apart at school once freshman year began. The prior summer I had been obsessed with my new backyard “clubhouse”—the cheap Mexican playhouse I’d finally talked my parents into letting me have—wallpapering with wood-grained contact paper (which, like the Reynolds Wrap covering the bedroom windows of our eccentric, muscular, and swarthy next-door neighbor, Mr. Dante, a day sleeper, allowed for further privacy), arranging lamps and pillows, and hanging pictures. I’m embarrassed by how girlish and immature I sound at thirteen and fourteen, despite my reading of Myra Breckenridge and The Crazy Ladies and the secret smutty play with Joe.

Our first accommodations had been a canvas tent pitched in the farthest corner of the backyard, later upgraded to the clubhouse, both setups driven by the fact that I shared a bedroom with my five-years-younger brother, Mark. At this point he was still very much a pain-in-the-ass little kid who informed our mother of my every infraction and howled “Mom!” when I tripped over his maze of orange plastic Hot Wheels tracks on my way to my desk. Our seventeen-year-old brother had his own bedroom, rode a motorcycle, played electric guitar in garage bands, and took drugs. A couple of years later, when a bed and bathroom were added to the back of the house for our wayward brother, Mark moved into the other inside bedroom, and I only half took notice of the parade of adolescent sleepover buddies staggering down the hall red-eyed and rumpled on weekend mornings.

*Woke this morning from what was very nearly a wet dream, dick hard and jumping. I was at a college lecture with Joe, looking much as he did when we first knew each other. The class hadn’t begun, so there was lots of talking and milling around. He crowded into a seat next to me, wearing dressy clothes: tight slacks that hugged his round ass and crotch. While he glanced around and called out to acquaintances,*
discreetly groped the erection I could see outlined in his pants. He’d risen to half stand against the seatback in front of us, so my actions were shielded. I gripped his erection with my thumb and index finger and slowly, tightly, pinch-jacked it like that, whispering in his ear from time to time (“I’d like to suck the come out of you right through these pants...”), acknowledged only by the slow bucking of his hips into my grasp. Then I felt him stiffen and shoot between my fingers, felt the wet spot spreading on his slacks, brought my hand up to my mouth and tasted his spunk, while he chuckled and surveyed the room like nothing had happened, reaching back to buff my skull with his knuckles.

Once my younger brother had his own room we established an indifferent détente. Midway through high school I started getting stoned and staying out late with party friends and I didn’t pay a lot of attention to his comings and goings, other than noting the constant rotation of sleepover pals, some of them fellow school band dorks (Mark played the piccolo), one a sexy Latino neighbor boy, Ricky Marcelo, at whose house Mark spent lots of time. He was on the freshman baseball team and sometimes showed up in his uniform. What was a jock doing hanging out with my brother, I wondered. I had an impression they were up to more than playing Monopoly; it appeared they were getting drunk.

A couple of years later, during my first semester commuting to the University of Texas at El Paso, I brought an older, straight stoner friend back to my room late on a Friday night and, having declared my romantic feelings between bongs exhaled out the open window, coaxed him into awkward sex. Afterward, when we stepped out the front door in the silent suburban dark, we glanced down to see FAGS scrawled in ketchup on the cement stoop. Twenty years later, when Mark, whom I’d long assumed to be asexual, came out to me, he confessed that the graffiti had likely been directed at him and one of his buddies, who were busily sucking and fucking two doors down the hall that night.

Paul and I met and fell in love at forty; we’d both had our share of lovers and one-night stands, and, fortuitously, were each at a point where the thing we most wanted was to love and be loved by one person, with both emotional connection and sexual attraction. For that attraction to have endured, in spades, now past two decades, is the luckiest break of more than a few in our lives.

I checked, just to make sure. “What if it came up, and Joe asked me to blow him for old times’ sake?”

“Definitely no.”

I received an e-mail from Joe saying he was in the Bay Area for work that week and did I want to get together? He was coming to the loft and Paul was going to join us for dinner at the nearby Slow Club, but then Paul came home from the dentist with a numb mouth and a temporary crown, so though he sat for a
drink with us, he didn’t come along to dinner. Which occasioned my first one-on-one talk with Joe, over a bottle of wine. His girlfriend, Liz, called while we were still at the loft and, for the moments before the signal waned, seemed to be very emotional and missing him, judging by his assurances.

As we walked to dinner, I said, “There are things I want to ask you that I’d ask any friend, but I’m not sure if you’d be comfortable with it…” (Here it comes, he must have thought.) “Like, are you still as highly sexed as you were at thirteen?” (This acknowledged that I knew firsthand how horny he was at thirteen-fourteen.) “Yes,” he said. Hence, he explained, his leaving his wife, with whom he no longer got along, and the present relationship with Liz.

Over dinner, naturally, talk of the past. He brought up the scandal in the seventh grade when a backward, bullied boy was taken up briefly by one of the hoods, tricked into blowing him, and then cruelly exposed. And he told me about the young mother on his block whose lawn he mowed, who seduced him while her husband was in Viet Nam. “Was that your first time with a woman?” I asked. Yes, and it was right before he moved away our sophomore year. “That was just the right thing, wasn’t it?” I said. Then I said in a rush, “There’s something important we haven’t mentioned, and I really need to just bring it up once to talk about what it meant to me, versus you. You remember all the sex stuff we did with each other, right?” He put down his wineglass and looked back at me evenly. “Yes, I remember everything we did.”

This was a moment I hadn’t expected to experience. Of course there was no breaking it down, no “Remember the time we took turns kissing each other’s assholes out in your garage?” or “Remember how I liked to lie on top of you and pop the head of my dick in and out of you till I shot?” But it was exhilarating to be able to discuss with the only other living actor in this little drama the irony that he awoke the next morning with a clear conscience, while I raced home in guilty terror—because I knew on some level what it really meant to me. Guilty—not for religious or moral reasons, I’m certain; I didn’t believe any of that by then—but ashamed to think I might be, and possibly be detected as, one of those loathsome queers, the only model I knew, despite my precocious reading.

He seemed comfortable with our discussion, and we parted in front of my building with first a manly handshake, then a Joe-instigated hug—followed up the next day with an e-mail telling me how glad he is for us to be friends, how Paul and I must come visit him on the East Coast, how we’ll have to meet again when he comes out for the birth of daughter Lana’s and her girlfriend’s baby, his first grandchild.

I e-mailed a brief note to Joe since we hadn’t talked in six months, and I mentioned in passing the sudden death of John Edmundson, the slender, brainy student body president at Greenvale when we were freshmen (he always looked abashed at having to break in two the Ysleta Indians’ arrow at pep rallies as tradition required), thinking he’d recall. I don’t have time to think about people dying; I guess I’m too busy living, he wrote back.
From the time I fled to San Francisco at twenty-one to the year leading up to my meeting Paul, my little brother and I barely kept in touch. I sent birthday and Christmas cards when I had an address for him. I vaguely knew he'd married and divorced in the space of a few years, that he'd worked for Texas Instruments for decades, that he still lived and breathed cars and World War II history. Then, within a month of our mother's death, he phoned to tell me he was gay. "When did this happen?" I asked, genuinely surprised—and fighting an ungenerous, primal sibling urge to cry, "Stop copying me!"

"Oh, I've always liked guys, I just didn't announce it to everyone like you did. I was screwing around with all my buddies in high school. I still get together with Rick Marcelo whenever he comes through Dallas. Ricky Truman was gay. He was really the love of my life, I guess. He died of AIDS early on; we hadn't talked in a while. Rick Grassley—closeted gay. He killed himself a couple of years back."

I was flabbergasted—and not a little confused by everyone being named Rick or Ricky.

Following the revelation Mark came to San Francisco for a week's visit, and after that we e-mailed and called fairly regularly, though there were always unexplained periods when he would drop out of sight. He'd been something of a loner all along; it made sense that he was the kind of throwback gay who preferred bathhouses and sex clubs and never had relationships, other than taking in a twink for a few weeks till his credit cards or TV got stolen. On the phone and in person on his half-dozen or so visits over the next decade, he displayed a gung ho, profane, in-your-face-out persona, his good ol' boy West Texas cadences peppered with falsetto cries of "Girl!" and "Snap!" that seemed to me profoundly fake, a response that made me feel mean and all the more determined to be as positive with him as I could. He'd slide a six-pack of Bud into the fridge and then sit on the couch and quickly fetch and down them one after another, like medicine. Maybe it was: he had terrible arthritis as time went on, and couldn't turn his head. Paul said, "He just doesn't seem comfortable in his own skin." The truth was that the rainbow tattoo of Texas on his shoulder, the shaved sidewalls and large hoop earrings in both ears, the rainbow bracelets, the gauche white jeans and white sweater, his loud appraisals of passing men and childish boasting about car, flat-screen, and stereo purchases and sex with barely out black street youths embarrassed me as only family can, and I wept with guilty relief every time he left.

He called in '07 to tell me Rick Marcelo had died in a motorcycle accident—tragically struck head-on by a car driven by his wife on a desolate Texas highway between their home and the nearest town. Mark drove nonstop back to El Paso for the funeral, e-mailing me a photo of his speedometer reading 110.

Things weren't going well with his job, and he was laid off that same year. He mostly stopped picking up or returning calls. On a Saturday morning in January '08 Paul called me to the phone, joking, I thought: "It's the Dallas sheriff's office." A gruff, drawling detective explained that he'd been let into Mark's apartment and had found my number; my brother had been reported missing by one of his friends after he didn't turn up for his first day at a new job and couldn't be located. This time, after several days, one of his friends, Dave, a sober-sounding older guy, e-mailed me to say he'd finally received a cryptic message from Mark: Too much, too soon. Later, there was a group e-mail with no word of regret about letting everyone think he was dead for three days, just It's probably not possible for any of you to understand that a person experiencing a psychotic episode can't be expected to answer voice mail.
He avoided speaking to me after that, though I periodically left messages. When I wrote in April chiding him about how worried everyone had been about his disappearance, he e-mailed only, I don’t know how to respond to this.

Later that year, on the evening of December 23, the phone rang and I let the machine pick up till I heard Dave’s voice: “I have some very bad news. Mark is dead. I’m watching the paramedics wheeling his body out as I speak.” He’d last been seen at a dinner with some friends celebrating his birthday on the 14th. It wasn’t an accident, though the toxicology report was inconclusive as he’d been decomposing on the floor between bedroom and bathroom for over a week; he’d left all his empty prescription and liquor bottles lined up on the table, along with an envelope containing his Social Security card, birth certificate, and Greenvale High ID. He’d apparently disposed of his laptop, phone, and bank records.

After two years’ silence, I had a call from Joe in November of 2010. He’d been in the area on business for a couple of weeks, staying with his daughter in the North Bay. We arranged to meet for lunch in Healdsburg and then drive to several wineries. When Paul and I walked up to the agreed-upon corner I was thrown for a moment because svelte Liz, who’d flown in for the weekend, wasn’t there (she’d gone back to the car for a jacket), and Joe, facing away, was talking to two short, stocky women—daughter Lana and her new partner, Rhia. Lana’s got an affable, husky look; Rhia was pale, and shy to the point of silence; Lana mostly spoke for her.

We went into a thronged brewpub and sat at a long table. Joe appeared, as each time before, genuinely delighted to see me, and did several things at lunch and later that seemed meant to assure me of his affection, or lack of squeamishness: switching seats to put himself next to me; several times wanting me to taste wine from his glass at one of the wineries; getting between me and Liz for the group photo we took outside Seghesio and throwing his arm over my shoulder and patting me. This was the first time we’d met since the news about Mark, so maybe he was thinking of that.

Liz wasn’t unfriendly, but a bit reserved and appraising. Lana asked me point blank, “What was my dad like as a boy?” Well, there’s a story you could read, I might have said, but of course did not. I explained that my perception of him then was skewed by the egocentric tunnel vision common—I hope—to that age.

The following day, shortly after I’d forwarded him some of the photos we’d taken, Joe called. “Don’t post these on Facebook, okay? I keep a really low profile.”

“Don’t worry, I got from our conversation with the kids that you’re averse to online exposure. Now the past is another thing…”

I dreamt, after nibbling a small portion of a pot brownie prior to sex one evening soon after this, of spotting my brother Mark across a room, quite clearly “dead,” in that green-skinned, crumbling dishabille horror movies have taught us to expect, but animated. “What’s it all mean?” I asked. He grinned—or grimaced—toward his groin and said, “It’s all down there.”
My younger brother always claimed to have had a completely different experience of growing up in our blighted immediate family; where I remembered only tension, anger, resentment, and barely controlled violence, he recalled a Disney boyhood of model-car racing, airplane shows with our father, and endless adventures with neighborhood kids and later, fellow school band dorks. For me, his story begins with the day I came in from playing outside and saw my mother, wearing a full-skirted, wide-belted periwinkle housedress, facing the wall in the dark hallway in the center of our tract house, her face buried in her hands, wailing. My father had filed for divorce, though he quickly backtracked, and she had just learned she was pregnant.

Is it fair to imagine, in light of subsequent events, that my brother, who remained closeted for decades in order to remain in the good graces of our parents, might also have woven an alternate version of his childhood? Why did his early adolescent affairs, versus mine with Joe, lead to such a different outcome? Clearly we both never entirely “got over” those early experiences; his grief at the death of Ricky Marcelo seems to me to have played a genuine role in his downward spiral.

The things I did with Joe remain numinous prompts in my erotic landscape, entirely distinct from the contemporary acquaintance; they still fire my imagination forty-five years on because of their original forbidden nature. In all the liberated years since, with brief partners and now for twenty-one years with Paul, that first doing has continually made the unleashing of these desires in the present doubly thrilling and miraculous.

Months after Mark’s death I discovered his MySpace page, glimmering eternally in cyberspace. To a soundtrack of obnoxious heavy metal bleating I scrolled past his introduction (When I see what I like in a bar, I walk right up and say so. You’ll never get what you want if you don’t ask!), to sporadic, manic blog entries that one day spoke of getting it together and starting a new job and the next complained of deep depression and an abrupt split with a bartender friend (I should be used to rejection; I was written out of my father’s will—our spiteful, demented father had left his and our late mother’s sizable estate entirely to his second wife when he died earlier in the same year as Mark—and one of my brothers has grown ever more reclusive...).

There were recent photos of skydiving lessons, auto races—and then, to my surprise, a ghost trip to San Francisco for the Pride Parade the previous June. There were lots photos of shirtless guys and costumed drag queens, and a few unsmiling selfies. We might have passed him on the street.

There was a memorial page for the Ricks, with thumbnail photos cropped from old snapshots or yearbook pictures annotated with birth and death dates and the epitaph Died too soon. I will always love you.
A July night in 1969. There’s an overwhelming smell of damp, just-mown lawns, the dank canvass of the faded green tent; intense full moonlight pulsing beyond the walls like klieg lights. The little B&W portable crackles with the volume lowered, the station identification symbol with the blanket-wrapped Mohawk amid the static onscreen, post-“Tonight Show.” The only other sounds are the distant barking of a dog and the slight hum from the power lines overhead. We’re lying naked and wide-awake side by side in our sleeping bags, their musty mildew funk mixed with our particular body odors.

“You horny?” I ask Joe. He always is.

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 and have been reprinted by Chelsea Station Editions. 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.
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—Paul Lisicky, author of Lawn Boy, Famous Builder and The Burning House

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Pacific Rimming

a novella by

Tom Cardamone
Justin Vicari is a widely published gay poet, critic, and translator. His work has appeared in such journals as *Postmodern Culture, American Poetry Review, Southern Poetry Review, Barrow Street, Spoon River, The Ledge, Third Coast, Oranges & Sardines, Hotel Amerika, 32 Poems*, and other journals. His first collection of poems, *The Professional Weepers* won the Transcontinental Award.
The Sudden Invention of New Light

There’s something in Montgomery Clift’s smile in Red River (1948), sweet and trusting, that doesn’t belong to the dollars on the barrelhead world of rancher John Wayne.

Together they cross sunrises and miles, Clift trying to love and hate like Wayne, finding out, in the middle of the cattle drive, that he loves much more, hates far less. A predictable blind spot caused by the nearness of a bright light. I came out of the locker room after gym class, in my hurry to change, I’d left my fly open.

Ginger Gary in the bleachers frowned away from my flash of white undies. “Close the door,” he said, “we all know what you want.”

I didn’t understand at first, sitting down with a grin on my face just because he’d spoken his first words to me! Then I looked down and quickly did what he told me, tautening my guilty lap beneath the zipper.

Did I die of blushing? It’s not hard to imagine, in From Here to Eternity (1953), how Clift falls hard for the hostess who entertains the G.I.’s.

He’s the only innocent thing in the war and she’s the first mother he’s ever opened, so of course she can’t keep talking to the grunts same as before. When he plays “Taps” for Frank Sinatra, expressive and slow like a solo bird calling from tree top to empty sky, you see what dooms and drives the search for meaning in a savage locale, unspilled blood always reminding a body of the spilled. I liked Gary, he played
baseball, was freckled and handsome
in a way that seemed to solve all problems.

This was pretty much okay
for I'd no problems to solve
except loneliness
for a brother of my persuasion

but he and I were not in the same clique
of longing. When he loped down the halls
past the blank stares of lockers,
I felt like I

was watching a star, the way he feels
in A Place in the Sun (1951), when Elizabeth Taylor
folds herself like two scoops of whipped cream into the parlor
where he's shooting pool, and they're so far apart,
different backgrounds, classes, he works
her father's factory, muscles bulging his sleeveless T-shirt
ornament the assembly line, it's all so far
fetched but that's what breaks your heart,
pains of growing up, learning what people really mean.  
Long story equals I don't want to tell it.
Equals I'll never tell you.  I called Gary once,
years after high school.

He didn’t seem to find it strange
I’d found his number in the phone book
and wanted to know what, how, he was doing,
as if there could be some reason for anything in my life.

He, too, had come out, but it wasn’t the same
as when he was young, unformed, flannel
rag of light to be renamed, boy who pointed out
my exposed undies in disgust.

To me,
Clift lifted his eyebrows like the
sudden invention
of new light. When I need to live in that.

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

Jonas walks along the suburban street between the university and the train station. The school had hired him to teach a physical acting workshop (and how many different things could that mean, he made some choices). Now done with that and feeling pretty good, certainly fully awake and alert, he walks himself back to the train. It's still morning. The street is empty. It skirts a little lake on one side. It would be nice, he thinks, to live in one of these houses facing the lake. One of these nice two-story houses near the university on this clean, empty street, facing the rippling lake. Maybe that one, the green and white one with the shutters and the porch. It's possible these houses belong to the university. Very possible that faculty live in them. This green and white one is the best. Uninterrupted view, commanding presence, things Jonas would value in a house.

He has stopped walking. He can imagine waking up late, around now probably, in the front room on the second floor, opening the curtains to see how the lake is doing this morning. Looking out to see some skinny queer standing out there on the sidewalk looking back at him, some college-associated freelancer staring up at his green and white house. Stepping back from the curtains he'd turn back to the bed. There'd be a man in it, of course, a thick man who sleeps in his briefs and always flings the sheets off in
the night because he overheats. Jonas would smack him on the ass as he left the bedroom. “We slept in again,” he’d say, not at all admonishing, somewhere between a celebration and a surrender. This front bedroom is a master, has a small bath of off it and a large closet. After a satisfying morning pee, Jonas would throw a bathrobe on because who wears a bathrobe? His man has reclaimed the covers, cocooned himself, turned away and returned to sleep. Jonas would chuckle at that. Down the hardwood staircase Jonas walks, down into the mostly open-plan first floor. Fireplace, kitchen island, giant TV they only use for movies. In the big silver fridge he finds yogurt. In the slick hardwood cabinet he finds bran flakes because he knows they’re good for him and has seen the benefits in recent months. Their bowls are colorful but adult. Jonas fills one with a few slops of white yogurt, then a mess of brown bran flakes. He returns the flake box and yogurt tub to the cabinet and fridge before he starts eating. As he eats, Jonas walks to the big front window to look out at the lake again. That skinny queer is still out there, exactly where he was. Jonas finds himself slightly disturbed by that. He crunches. The skinny queer is backlight by the sun reflecting off the rippling lake water, but Jonas can tell he’s staring right at him. Is something wrong? Jonas crunches more slowly. He turns from the window and goes up the stairs. They’ve turned the second bedroom, the back bedroom, into an office. Before turning that way, Jonas peeks at the bed. His man sleeps on, but he’s flung the lower half of the covers off already exposing once again his white briefs, beefy ass and hairy legs. Jonas chuckles. He turns into the office and crunches. What day is it? It’s nice that he can’t remember. He’s had a couple weeks without work, but they’ve been doing fine on their shared income. His man’s been working from home this week, so it’s felt mostly like a vacation. Jonas wakes up his laptop and smiles at the smiling faces looking back from the wallpaper. The picture is from a vacation they took. No, it would be a honeymoon picture. That was the honeymoon. Jonas sits in a beautifully designed desk chair to stare at the picture of himself and his man on their honeymoon. He doesn’t have a bowl of yogurt and bran flakes anymore. Maybe the office is on the first floor, off the kitchen. Maybe the man comes in and catches Jonas staring at the picture, makes fun of him, but in a cute way, in a sexy way. Still in his briefs. Maybe they make love on the kitchen island. And when they’re done, Jonas puts his bathrobe back on. He goes to get the newspaper! They would subscribe to a newspaper just to have to go out to the porch and get it every morning because who still does that? Jonas opens the front door in his bathrobe to get the newspaper but stops when he sees the skinny queer still out there. Still staring back. Wearing Jonas’s fraying messenger bag and dirty movement pants. He’s backlit from the lake, but Jonas can see that he’s weeping, and he knows he doesn’t know why. Jonas bends carefully to retrieve the paper, as if the skinny queer will come for him if he makes any sudden moves. Jonas makes sure to step fully inside the house and put one hand on the door before he waves. He waves to the skinny queer. He shuts the door.

Staring at the house, Jonas wipes his cheek and chuckles. It would probably be nice to live in that house.

Mark William Lindberg is a queer author and educator living with a man and a dog in Queens, NY. His novels Queer on a Bench, Forest Station and 81 Nightmares are available on Amazon. His short fiction has been published by Glitterwolf and Chelsea Station. You can find him on various social media and at www.markwilliamlindberg.com.
Scott Wiggerman is the author of three books of poetry, *Leaf and Beak: Sonnets, Presence, and Vegetables and Other Relationships*; and the editor of several volumes, including *Wingbeats: Exercises & Practice in Poetry, Lifting the Sky: Southwestern Haiku & Haiga*, and *Bearing the Mask*. Poems have appeared in *A Quiet Courage, Calamus Journal, Rat’s Ass Review, shuf*, and *Chelsea Station*, as well as the anthologies *This Assignment Is So Gay* and *Between: New Gay Poetry*. He is an editor for Dos Gatos Press of Albuquerque, New Mexico.
As if there is no other possible explanation, I must have gotten her as my dental hygienist because her ex is gay, only he doesn’t know it, but someday he will, she’s sure, though he actually left her for a fat chick who doesn’t even have a pretty face, you know? I gurgle uh-huh as she runs through the inventory of every date she’s had since the divorce, while I’m trapped in the dental chair, her hands and tools in my mouth, as hers rambles on (uh-huh) while I wonder what event in my life put me here. And can you believe this guy expected a blowjob on the first date? and I can because it was likely the only way he could get her to shut up, though she would view it as synchronicity because most of my first dates with guys included oral sex, not that I would divulge this information to a person I’d just met, though she tells me I don’t even seem like a patient to her, more like an old friend.

Maybe it was synchronicity that my friend Cathy pointed out the “nice man” assisting some helpless woman at a school technology workshop, the man I should be dating instead of the guy with tarot cards I’d been with for months. Maybe it was synchronicity that both men were named David, and that I soon dumped bad David—who claimed I looked just like the great love of his life—for good David, with whom I moved in six months later. It had to be synchronicity when we stepped into a party together as a couple, only to be greeted at the door by another gay couple, one of my exes with one of his, and we laughed about how each of us only needed to sleep with one of the other three to make the circle complete.

And then my doctor tells me how he was a Baptist preacher for twenty-five years until one day while signing up for classes at a community college to try something new, he spotted a brochure on acupuncture, and a voice instructed him to pick it up and read it. Enthralled, he dropped his classes before they began, enrolled in a school of Oriental Medicine, and seven years later is now sticking needles in my lower back to the sounds of harp and flute in the background. But then he repeats the hygienist’s words—It had to be synchronicity, you know?—and I’m reminded of how a word I’ve never heard in sixty-odd years on the planet, like conatus, suddenly appears in the next three books I read, how everything is causal if you want it to be—or even if you don’t—and I wonder when I’ll end up running into the hygienist’s ex gazing across a room full of people at my crotch, whether I’ll be giving or receiving, and whether his name might just be David.

—Scott Wiggerman
“Every essay is gripping, exciting, fun to read, and, yes, entertaining. No wonder Picano is such a popular writer. True Stories is a masterpiece. Buy it and enjoy it.”
—James D. Anderson, Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University, ALA Newsletter, GLBT Reviews

“Telling truths is something that popular, prolific author and memoirist Felice Picano does extremely well. This is most evident in True Stories: Portraits from My Past, his latest collection of expanded personal essays and life reflections. Picano’s memory is impeccable, and his ear for dialogue just as distinctive and richly realized. Appealing and wonderfully anecdotal, the essays shared here harken back to a cloudless era when fun was freewheeling and the consequences of that fun were overcast at best. With this collection, Picano pays tribute to the many unsung heroes of his past who have long since fallen, forever etched both in memory and the occasional bout of inexplicable laughter and tears.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter
“An intensely personal collection centered on the survivor of a fascinating, chaotic time. Picano’s writing is most moving when he’s reflecting on AIDS and HIV, a theme that connects each story and has affected so many people in his life.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“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
A mid-season episode of the highly praised Home Box Office dramatic TV series *Mad Men* has its identity-challenged protagonist, Don Draper, reading a small book of poetry with a dark blue cover outlined in red, the 1964 City Lights first edition of Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*. We first see it while he is at the desk in his office at the Manhattan advertising firm where he works, then later outside while he’s having lunch. Further into the episode it is prominent on his office coffee table and even on the commuter train as he’s headed home. It’s a clever way of placing the character and the episode at a specific point in time, and an even cleverer way of setting up Draper as a successful creative advertising director and as someone who is trying to be in-the-know.
The choice of *Lunch Poems* sets Draper up as an open-minded character, not quite an intellectual, but at least a man with some contact with and context of the avant-garde of his era. O’Hara’s book of poetry was the opposite of the accepted poets of his day, such as the confessional and anguished poems produced by likes of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Instead, O’Hara’s poems were fun, amusing, citified, arty, casual, urbanely referencing singers, painters, and even brand names that everyone did or should have known. At all times, his book was intimate and confiding, letting the reader into the poet’s emotional and daily life, not recollected in tranquility but with wry amusement between sandwiches and martinis. It was the definition of that *Playboy*-era’s highest compliment: cool! So it was no surprise that when Don Draper was divorced the following TV season, he moved to the West Village.

In the mid-1960s after finishing college and a few months in Europe, I moved west myself to the Village, from Manhattan’s Alphabet City, where I’d previously lived. At twenty-one, I was on my own in Greenwich Village, already a legendary Bohemia, in a third floor studio apartment at 51 Jane Street.

My second day in the Village was a perfect autumn one in New York: sunny, with high clouds, breezy and so clear I swore I could make out the Hudson River, several blocks west. After lunch, I took a long walk around my new neighborhood, and two blocks from where I’d moved I met a tall, blond curly-haired, handsomely outgoing young man who told me his name was J.J. Mitchell.

As we were talking, he angled me into a doorway on an otherwise empty street and began assiduously necking and fondling me, which I found both surprising and welcoming. Satisfied with what he’d discovered, my new acquaintance walked us over to the large glass and travertine lobby of a building at Jane Street and Eighth Avenue known as the Rembrandt. We necked more in the elevator, outside an apartment door, and then we were suddenly inside an apartment where a cocktail party was in progress. Men were jammed into a large room and an attached kitchen. Everyone held a cocktail and everyone was talking at once as loud as they could and laughing.

J.J. vanished and reappeared with cocktails for both of us. He then edged me over to another doorway, urging me to drink up. I thought this was odd, but okay: *I’m willing to do this, if he is.*

I was maneuvered through the door and into a darkened room and spun around. Another man was sitting on the bed and, as J.J. continued kissing me, the man unzipped my fly, took out my genitals and began to … Well, you can guess what happened next. This was even more of a surprise, but I was nothing if not game, even if I was a bit perplexed. I was even more puzzled when J.J. vanished from the room, while my new friend held onto me tightly. I was young and horny and he was demonstrating an admirable and accomplished skill, so let’s just say that we completed what we’d begun with the usual result.

Afterward, my newer friend handed me my cocktail glass, stood up and said, “I need another. Thank you.” He herded me toward the door and led me back into the party, adding, “Stay as long as you like. There are all kinds of interesting characters here.”

I had to have looked as stunned as I was by this odd turn of events, but before I could decide what to do—I was trying to find what happened to J.J. He seemed to have left—someone came over to me who I knew, a French airline steward named Ulysses, another tall, handsome blond with curly if thinning hair. He immediately kissed me on both cheeks and began speaking in Frenglish, the speech that he and his other pals usually affected in America. Ulysses said that our mutual friend, Noel de Bailhac, had stepped
out with someone to get more ice. Noel and I had met at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park the previous year and we’d casually slept together whenever he was on layover from Air France, where he also worked as a steward. Noel was a pretty man with a great body and lots of fun in and out of bed. In seconds, Noel and Ulysses’ boyfriend (the long suffering academic, Leo Bersani, who we dubbed Penelope) were back with bags of ice, and I spent the remainder of the party in their ambit until we left to go around the corner to Greenwich Street to a little boîte they knew, for dinner.

At one point, the man who had blown me also came into the café, along with J.J. and a few other middle-aged men. They were seated way in the back where they continued to laugh and chat and drink cocktails as everyone had done at the flat. Noel told me that he was our host for the cocktail party. He was revealed to be a bit below medium height, not yet forty years old, preppily dressed, with receding brown hair, a patrician face, sleepy eyes, and a great, almost Greek-statue profile. Noel said he was Frank O’Hara, a poet. Ulysses knew J.J., who was our age, from before; J.J. had stumbled across my French pals earlier that day in Sheridan Square and invited them to the party. Noel thought the other men with Frank and J.J. were painters.

Two days later, I was walking along Jane Street headed toward the Seventh Avenue subway when I passed Frank walking toward his building. He stopped me and said, “We’re having a big party at Indiana’s loft downtown Saturday.” He pulled out a piece of paper and a pen and leaned against my shoulder and began writing down the address, saying, “I already mentioned you to Robert and he wants to meet you.” Huh? What? Done, he handed it to me and I read the Bowery address. By then, Frank was already halfway down the block, yelling “Bring some of those other cute guys you know.”

Noel and Ulysses were both flying that weekend, so I grabbed David Jackson, who I always thought was all-American handsome, and despite our misgivings about the Bowery space—“Won’t there be winos and bums all over?” he asked fearful—we went. The space we entered was ten times the size of O’Hara’s flat and it was jammed with people. We didn’t see Frank anywhere in the crowd. David and I were about to leave after having had a few drinks and figuring out that we knew no one there when Frank showed up with a striking looking man his own age, but bigger, more solidly built, and really quite dashing in his black cowboy vest, open work shirt, and tight jeans. That was Robert. He grabbed my arm and propelled me out of the big room, into a dark corridor and into an even darker bedroom, where my chinos were all but ripped off my hips, for, you guessed it, a blow job.

When I met David ten minutes later he told me that Frank had held onto him and then done him inside what I guessed was a paint storage closet. Seven other guys their age came onto us that evening and we gave them our phone numbers.

“You know the nicest people,” David said as we walked back to the West Village. We’d drunk a lot, and since no one else seemed to be eating, we’d snacked on a great deal of cheese, salami, and crackers. “They’re all artists. I’ll bet I could find me a husband among this group.”

Semi-prophetic words: in a few months, David, who I’d discovered had been living from one sofa to another around the city for months after failing to make it as an actor in “The Theater!,” was suddenly co-hosting loft parties of his own. The owner wasn’t an artist, but an actor David had met at one of the artists’ many parties. Will Geer was in his fifties then, and he was an American semi-institution as “John-Boy’s” television Grandfather on The Waltons. The loft was on the corner of Sixth Avenue and 9th Street, where
by the mid 1960’s all you had to do was step downstairs for a minute or two before scoring a gay trick: probably why Geer had it there. But he was in Los Angeles shooting a great deal of the time and so David was put in charge.

Rightfully so. Even at that young age, David was the most responsible young man I’d ever met. And since this concerned more or less permanent living quarters at no rent, he took his caretaking very seriously.

Unfortunately, or rather fortunately for me, David had already acquired a passel of gay male friends and among them was George Sampson. George was an up and coming actor, with a uniquely faun-like look, a drama school-honed voice, and a great body that looked even better in the Beatles-Stones inspired outfits we all wore during that time. George could even get away with fluffy blousons open to the navel and suede jackets with fringe. It was at the loft, while visiting David Jackson one evening, that I met George who would become my closest friend and I don’t know what else for the next few years, since it turned out to be a complex relationship (at least on his part: I was more or less dating Noel de Bailhac by then).

David let me into the loft, found me a beverage, introduced me to George, and complaining of “the vapors”—odd in a six-foot-two man with perpetual five o’clock shadow—he then took to his—or rather to Geer’s bed, a huge nineteenth-century Four Poster Affair, where he very ostentatiously shut the embroidered curtains and ignored the rest of us, while pretending to read Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*.

So there we were—George and myself—sitting on the floor of this big room, surrounded by thirty two candles and by three of the ugliest drag queens I’d ever seen. I can’t recall all their names, but I do remember why we were seated on the floor surrounded by lighted candles: they had decided upon a séance around an Ouija board. The object of that attempt at supernatural communication was that one of their quartet had been found a week earlier face down in the Hudson River, south of the Christopher Street Pier that she usually hustled. Her drag name was “Miss Sherry Jackson,” she had just turned thirty-two (thus the number of candles), and she had just that week bought herself a “glorious brand new Marilyn Monroe wig made of real hair,” according to the girls.

One of them had identified her corpse at the City morgue and, when she’d talked to the detective on the case, had been told that no wig had been found on or near the body; nor had one been fished out of any river to date, to the P.D.’s knowledge. This wig was the object of their Envy with a capital E and was not located at Sherry’s digs, despite a most thorough search. They wanted to know from Miss Sherry Herself in the Beyond if she’d hidden or lost the wig before or perhaps during her fatal assault.

Needless to say a great deal of cheap wine, grass, and snort-ettes of cocaine that they had brought (and laid out a bit of on the board itself to attract Miss Sherry’s attention) attended this Delving into the Supernatural. Alas, it never produced a viable spirit but it did end up with us stoned and laughing before it devolved into the girls attacking each other. At which point David Jackson kicked us all out.

The anecdote, as retold by George over the next few weeks around gay circles, gained such power that David Jackson somehow acquired the honorary drag name of Miss Sherry Jackson. He fought it for a while (he was the butchest looking and mostly the butchest acting gay man I knew, muscular and hirsute to a fault) until he good naturedly gave in to it. I would lose sight of David a.k.a. Miss Sherry for years and
then come upon him in the oddest ways. At the Pines for example, where I saw him on Fire Island Blvd. heading to Tea-Dance. He wasn't staying anywhere he told me when I asked. He always just arrived, stuffed his clothing under the boardwalk, took a towel and hung out on the beach. He expected to be picked up by someone, or "even better a house-full, that way I am handed around and come out for many weekends in a row," he explained. I never knew how a boy from Bowling Green, Ohio, hailing from "the dullest family on God's green earth," ever became so serendipitous, but he thrived for decades, taking it all in his own casual manner and deeply guffawing whenever he explained things that had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

The last time I saw Miss Sherry was in the early 'Nineties. At fifty something, he had finally lost his boyish glow, was clearly ill, sporting small KS lesions, and was working at Pierre Deux, on Bleecker Street, the ne plus ultra of French Provincial furniture. He was wearing an up to the throat navy apron with a cream fleur de lis pattern and unpacking and pricing ceramic candlesticks. "Look what they're gouging people for these tchotchkes," he snorted. I'd visited the store because I was headed to L.A. and thought my already fragile-from-overuse 1855 walnut sleigh bed would never survive the trip in a moving truck. I wanted to sell it, figuring someone at the shop would help. "It's all over for me, F.P." Sherry updated me without a tinge of rancor in his basso junior-executive voice. "But I've had a great run. I've probably slept with enough guys to fill Shea Stadium!"

But what of Frank and the painters you may ask. Well .... I was handed around from one artist to the other to the other usually after a few cocktails, sometimes an entire dinner, and of course, the de riguer blow job, usually at their or someone else's downtown loft. One couple had it down to well orchestrated moves and while I was sixty-nining with one of them, another arrived home, got naked, said, "Thanks, Darling. He's cute," and proceeded to fuck first his bf and then me.

That was when Noel wasn’t in town. Noel, sandy haired, handsome/cute in that very fair Breton style, was among other things my French teacher. I had learned French in school of course, but Noel really taught me. How? By telling me and acting out one of Perrault’s fairy tales every night we slept together. After sex, he would become Red Riding Hood’s grandma or Cendrillon, or La Belle—becoming characters in the tales for my benefit. After a year or two, I began to feel comfortable in Frenglish around his Air France fly-boy friends.

Noel was easy come easy go and so we were never serious together. He knew my interest in classical music and revealed that his father was what?—a conductor?—a composer?—and somehow connected to the Aix en Provence Festival d’Art Lyrique, one of Europe’s top summer opera events. He was the youngest child and the only one who was not musical. He blamed his father for that. De Bailahac Sr. had hired composer Francis Poulenc to teach piano to little Noel. But "Poulenc was a big pede," Noel told me. "And every lesson he went after my pipi!" Noel told me he was going to retire some day near Aix and open a gay Auberge. I hope he did.

Several years later, when I was working at Rizzoli Bookstore uptown, a big new art book titled The New York School arrived. I went through it with Antonio Ximenez ticking off the artists, saying, "He did me. He did me. He didn’t do me. He did me. He said he was straight and married but he also did me. He and his lover did me. He didn’t do me. He did me," until the two of us were laughing so hard we had to leave the sales floor.
Antonio and David and other friends asked why I wasn’t still hanging around with that toney crowd of painters. I explained it thusly—“At East or Bridge or South Hampton I drive out with one of them or train out and meet one of them and we would arrive for dinner at eight and have cocktails. At eleven we were still having cocktails. At eleven thirty I thought I heard that someone had begun cooking dinner. At eleven forty two, they were still having cocktails but I was dead asleep.”

Then came the awful news of O’Hara’s death by taxi-cab on the beach at Fire Island. Me and my hetero social worker pals used to take those taxis every Saturday from our Ocean Beach rental to Cherry Grove to go dancing. Who knew they were so dangerous?

At the time I wasn’t aware of it, but I had also met writers at these painter parties. In years to come James Schuyler, John Ashbery, Richard Howard and others told me that they’d first seen or met me during my Year of the Painters. Ashbery told me at a dinner party at his flat in WestBeth, that my reputation preceded me: I didn’t ask what he meant. But I could understand why it was that Howard turned his literary attention away from me so quickly when I didn’t take any of his rather broad hints, “So, Felice. Do you have a boy friend? Are you in love with anyone?” Little did I know how easy I was thought to be. And for the first few years I was at Fire Island, before Bob Lowe came along, I was super cautious, to the point where I developed a completely false reputation as an “Ice Queen.”

It was only then, at The Pines twenty years after I met O’Hara, that I actually sat down and read the Lunch Poems, and O’Hara’s Meditations in an Emergency. I was sorry I’d not gotten to know O’Hara better. But often I wondered if I ever could have—really. Because while only a decade apart, Frank’s gay New York was so fundamentally different from mine: they drank, we drugged; they had cocktail parties, we went out clubbing with drugs; they had complicated affairs and adulteries, we had orgies with drugs; they had scandals, we had be-ins—with drugs. In the later ’70’s and early ’80’s, through Edmund White’s older friends, I was certainly able to get to know a little better and thus to appreciate more Manhattan’s gay generation before mine: I still can quote Schuyler and Merrill poems. But even so it was a foreign land: a land where Lunch Poems was the passport, the guide, and the dessert all at once.

I was reminded of all this by my recent visit to the fab new modern art museum we have in downtown L.A., The Broad. As I went around the main floor I ticked them off for, I’m sure, my newer, and completely unbelieving friends: “He did me. He did me. He didn’t do me. He did me. He said he was straight and married but he also did me. He and his lover did me. He didn’t do me. He did me. . . .”

Felice Picano is the author of more than twenty-five books of poetry, fiction, memoirs, nonfiction, and plays. His work has been translated into many languages and several of his titles have been national and international bestsellers. He is considered a founder of modern gay literature along with the other members of the Violet Quill. Picano also began and operated the SeaHorse Press and Gay Presses of New York for fifteen years. His first novel was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Since then he’s been nominated for and/or won dozens of literary awards. Recent work includes True Stories, True Stories Too, Nights at Rizzoli’s, Twelve O’Clock Stories, 20th Century Un-limited, and Art & Sex in Greenwich Village.
Erik Schuckers (poet) studied writing at Allegheny College and the University of Sheffield. He picked apples, cleaned theaters, and sold books in the US and UK before moving into nonprofit work. He lives and writes in Pittsburgh. His poems and nonfiction have appeared in *Assaracus*, *Clockhouse*, *PANK*, the *HIV Here & Now Project*, and *The James Franco Review*. His essay “Summer: A History” appeared in the anthology *Not Just Another Pretty Face*.

Michael Wynne (artist) makes artists’ books and photobooks, and his short stories have appeared in *Crooked Fagazine*, *Headmaster* magazine, and *The Holy Male*, amongst others. He is based in London and Madrid. See more of his work at kissandtellpress.com.
Metastasis

Because you like my boots: the black
Docs I buy in Sheffield years before we
meet and scuff to glory dancing to The Charlatans,
The High, the Paris Angels.

Because this winter Fatboy Slim is everywhere.

Because we talk in the hotel until it’s too
late to leave, but you do. You knock on my door.
_There’s something I forgot._ The kiss a Hollywood
cliché, and we are indie boys, but we
forget to be embarrassed.

Because we drive to Everyday
Music to replace my copy of _The Charlatans_,
down the Oregon coast to a pastel boardwalk lit
with rain, the aquarium where crayon to stone
we raise Pacific octopodes in green wax.

Because you cook risotto, the mushroom funk
and steam of your kitchen an English flat where I boil
spaghetti for boys whose names are lost, but I know
yours even now, and the wooden spoon you fold
against the pan, the trail of hair at your wrist.

Because we drive to the airport.
Because we write letters, buy phone cards, leave
messages on answering machines.

Because you come to Brighton, and we go
for a curry. Our waitress falls for you, the fluttered
check her flustered testimony. We clatter stone
beach as Fatboy Slim seeps from clubs,
verdigris railings slick on our fingers.

Because you take my hand as we climb
a Glasgow tenement and fold together through
laundry pulleys, jampots and box beds,
as a docent hurries us along another portrait,
piano, bequeathment of rosewood.
Because we are indie boys who leave
messages and airports, ash in hotel sinks
boots and *bon mots*, tulips in doorways, an accumulation
of absences, before our bodies turn a language
of error, our syntax nostalgia, our tense past.

Because we ride the train
to Gatwick, and I drink my way back.

Because you open a restaurant, and I fly
to New Orleans, and I never learn
to cook risotto, and you move to Austin, and our
companies fold, and you move to Michigan,
and I move to Pittsburgh, and nobody
talks on the phone anymore.

Because on the bridge above the Lost Neighborhood, the debulked Cloud Factory, padlocks
bloom singly in air worn with rain and laundry.

Because on January 15, 2012, the legacy of things
still in the world includes plum jam sealed in Glasgow
1929, a photo of you in Paris, wooden spoons
and Hollywood and answering machines.

Because in Schenley Park at night, on cool
green railings with graffiti raised in silver, two
lovebuds, hair tulip-bright, slouch together, and
I turn, one more tender and defiant twilight
assemblage, along the old stone steps.

—Erik Schuckers
Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex

stories by

Jameson Currier

“Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex surpasses any expectations ten-fold. The characters speak with wisdom and understanding. Jameson Currier gives us people who are starving for attention and have an insatiable appetite for human contact. Readers will not only sympathize with his creations, but will imagine themselves there as well, among the wreckage.”

“Currier’s stories are all about sex and love and how they occasionally overlap; he writes eloquently and elegantly about the continuum of gay male sexuality, from the tickle of desire to the pull of lust to the power of passion to the satisfaction—though not always—of sex.”
—Richard Labonté, Books to Watch Out For

“Linking wit, heady sex, longing, and the agony of a hollow love life, Currier beautifully romanticizes the hope and the hunt for love, the rarest flower. At times this journey to find Mr. Right is agonizing, sometimes sad, and sometimes erotically titillating. But every scene is written with such beauty and poetic grace, it becomes an easy voyage to embrace, even though at times all the misfires and near-misses cut like a knife.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter

“Currier’s masterful command of language is demonstrated throughout the novel. His words are rich with the beauty of humanity, fully capturing the essence of the fragility of the hopeful heart.”
—David-Matthew Barnes, Lambda Literary

What Comes Around

a novel by

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Lance Garland
Inbox:

Apr 21st, 2011: 11:32AM
CoolMail Team
Welcome to Coolmail...

May 1st, 2011: 3:59PM
Jeremy Cisco
Nice to meet you last...

May 13th, 2011: 8:12AM
University of Washington
Registration is open for...

June 1st, 2011: 5:25AM
Jeremy Cisco
FW: Travel Itinerary...

June 1st, 2011: 3:53PM
Jeremy Cisco
Richard, you are ridicu...

June 15th, 2011: 12:12PM
Jeremy Cisco
Pictures...

June 21st, 2011: 10:58AM
Charles Bradley
It's been a long time...

June 22nd, 2011: 6:32AM
FlyFall Enterprises
Skydiving Dates...

June 25th, 2011: 4:42PM
Wilson Chenovich
Dude! Let's do that again so...

Outbox:

May 2nd, 2011: 12:15PM
Jeremy Cisco
RE: Nice to meet you last...

June 1st, 2011: 11:12AM
Jeremy Cisco
Viva La Puerto Rico!

June 28th, 2011: 2:23AM
Jeremy Cisco
RE: Pictures...
June 28th, 2011: 9:23AM
Wilson Chenovich
Let's bareback together...

June 28th, 2011: 10:13AM
Horseback Backwoods
FW: Ride Itinerary

June 28th, 2011: 12:12PM
Wilson Chenovich
On it! Hope you're ready...

July 2nd, 2011: 11:32PM
Wilson Chenovich
FW: 4th Fireworks Fiasco!

July 3rd, 2011: 8:32AM
Jeremy Cisco
Are you free tomorrow?

July 5th, 2011: 4:23AM
Jeremy Cisco
I saw you with him...

July 5th, 2011: 4:30AM
Jeremy Cisco
How dare you! We had...

July 5th, 2011: 4:39AM
Jeremy Cisco
Nevermind. Goodbye...

June 28th, 2011: 2:25AM
Charles Bradley
Chuck B! I miss your...

June 28th, 2011: 3:01AM
Wilson Chenovich
I'll freefall with your ass...
July 7th, 2011: 11:21AM
Charles Bradley
RE: Chuck B! I miss...

July 7th, 2011: 12:50PM
Wilson Chenovich
Drinks? Talk? I’m sorry...

July 12th, 2011: 3:34AM
Charles Bradley
I need to get out of here...

July 13th, 2011: 5:23PM
Charles Bradley
Frisco is waiting!

July 15th, 2011: 4:41PM
Charles Bradley
FW: SEA to SFO Itiner...

July 16th, 2011: 9:12AM
Charles Bradley
See you tomorrow morn...

July 19th, 2011: 2:36PM
Wilson Chenovich
No harm no foul. Lets...

July 19th, 2011: 3:57PM
Wilson Chenovich
I get back in two days...

July 20th, 2011: 1:57AM
Wilson Chenovich
My house, 7:00PM, bring...

July 21st, 2011: 1:16PM
Charles Bradley
Don’t expect me to ever...

July 22nd, 2011: 3:57PM
Wilson Chenovich
Yes! Why? Are you?

July 23rd, 2011: 3:36PM
Wilson Chenovich
Are you clean?
July 26th, 2011: 2:45AM
CupidMen Dating Team
Welcome! You have 3 matches...

July 26th, 2011: 3:03AM
FaceBoard Welcome Team
Add more contacts from you...

July 27th, 2011: 11:53AM
CupidMen Dating Team
You have 17 new messages...

July 28th, 2011: 4:39PM
FaceBoard
You have reached 400 frien...

July 30th, 2011: 5:15Pm
Welcome to FourCorners
Checkin, Checkout, Checkup...

Aug 2nd, 2011: 2:12:AM
FaceBoard
Checkin at SkyRave with 3 oth...

Aug 2nd, 2011: 2:12AM
CupidMen
Checkin at SkyRave with 6 oth...

July 2nd, 2011: 2:12AM
FourCorners
Checkin at SkyRave with 3 frien...

July 3rd, 2011: 11:59AM
CupidMen: DiscoChamp says...
Hell Ya! Last night was...

July 24th, 2011: 1:13AM
Charles Bradley
I'm so sorry.

July 24th, 2011: 2:36AM
Wilson Chenovich
Yes, I'm sorry. I can't any...
July 3rd, 2011: 12:47PM
CupidMen: Bicep4U says...
What a tight, sweet, lovely...

July 3, 2011: 3:32PM
CupidMen: 10 out of 10!
You are hott and wanted!

July 7th, 2011: 2:37PM
CupidMen
Your inbox is full

July 7th, 2011: 3:36
Western Bank
Insufficient Funds Warn...

July 8th, 2011: 1:12AM
FourCorners
Checkin at Private Party

July 8th, 2011: 1:12AM
CupidMen: Private Party
Checkin with 16 others

July 8th, 2011: 1:12AM
FaceBoard
Checkin with 2 others

July 9th, 2011: 6:17PM
CupidMen: IIFilmUS say...
I'll give you 200 dollars...

July 9th, 2011: 7:13PM
Western Bank
Warning!

July 9th, 2011: 9:29PM
Run Vise Credit Card
Late Payment Warning!

Jul 10th, 2011: 8:19AM
Janson Rental Agency
We have not received rent...
Jul 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2011: 10:31AM
Williams Used Car Deal…
Late Payment Warning!

Jul 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2011: 3:32AM
CupidMen: IFilmUS
RE: I’ll give you 200 d…

Jul 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2011: 7:32AM
IFilmUS Welcomes you!
IFilmUS as a career opp…

Jul 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2011: 10:37AM
IFilmUS Thanks you!
Add a new position to your…

Jul 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2011: 9:13AM
IFilmUS Appointments
You have 3 events coming…

Jul 27\textsuperscript{th}, 2011: 7:17PM
IFilmUS Appointments
You have 7 events next mon…

Aug 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2011: 8:12AM
Williams Used Car Deal…
Repossession Imminent!

Aug 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2011: 9:11AM
Run Vise Credit Card
Warning! Late Fees!

Aug 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 2011: 10:12AM
Janson Rental Agency
You still owe a month’s rent…

Aug 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2011: 11:12AM
Western Bank
Insufficient Funds Warning!

Aug 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2011: 3:29PM
Jeremy Cisco
Are you OK? I saw you…
Aug 9th, 2011: 8:00AM
Janson Rental Agency
Notice of Eviction

Aug 10th, 2011: 9:29AM
Wilson Chenovich
Did I just see a video…

Aug 12th, 2011: 3:54PM
Jeremy Cisco
I’m sorry for the late response…

Aug 19th, 2011: 7:12PM
Charles Bradley
Ricky! REALLY!?! 10 men…

Aug 21st, 2011: 11:19AM
IFilmUS Appointments
You have no new events…

Aug 25th, 2011: 8:49AM
Jeremy Cisco
We can fix this together…

Aug 25th, 2011: 3:13AM
Jeremy Cisco
I’m in trouble…

Aug 25th, 2011: 9:15AM
Jeremy Cisco
Thankyou, thankyou, thankyou…

Sep 1st, 2011: 8:00AM
IFilmUS
Your profile is erased…

Sep 1st, 2011: 8:07AM
CupidMen
Your profile is erased…

Sep 1st, 2011: 8:11AM
FourCorners
Your profile is erased…
When Lance isn’t firefighting in Seattle, climbing the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, or sailing the Salish Sea, he writes. He is an Amazon top 10 bestselling author whose writing has appeared widely in print and online formats, both nationally and international. Second-Class Sailors, his debut novel, was featured as “a courageous exploration of the power of love and sexuality to transcend institutional boundaries,” in Kirkus Reviews. His poetry chapbook, Sailboat Living, is an honorable mention for the 2016 Homebound Poetry Prize. www.lancegarland.com
“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
“Old-school theatrical storytelling meets gay liberation history in Marans’ off-Broadway play, based with emotional veracity, campy humor and provocative sexiness on the lives of the Mattachine pioneers who founded the first gay-rights organization in pre-Stonewall America. Introductions by political activist David Mixner and actor Michael Urie (of Ugly Betty fame)—he plays fashion designer Rudi Gernreich—provide cultural and theatrical context. Not every play translates well to the printed page, but Temperamentals—code for homosexual in the 1950s, it seems—reads like a good short story.”
—Richard Labonté, Bookmarks

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

“The Temperamentals was code for ‘homosexual’ in the early 1950s, part of a secret language gay men used to communicate. Jon Marans’ hit off-Broadway play, The Temperamentals, 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.

“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*
The Gay Redneck Rationalizes Pie Day

First, because he needs a break from the low-carb diet:
the damned eggs and bacon, eggs and bacon;
the lean cuts of meat, meat, meat;
the Virginia Quickstep courtesy of Splenda;
the cruel absence of pasta, corn, and buttermilk biscuits.

Second, because he can’t punish fundamentalists:
punch the pious pamphlet-toting pricks
who come to the door with witnessing
in mind;
take a sword to the Republican politician
who wants to return anti-sodomy
statutes to the state’s legal code;
aim a bazooka at all those churches
whose members voted to outlaw
same-sex marriage in Virginia.

Third, because onanism is the only option
in a mountain town so small:
he can’t grope the chunky-assed, blond-bearded
Food City clerk;
can’t court the no-doubt-straight dark-goateed
and tattooed Tractor Supply employee;
can’t abduct and ravish Jessy Ares and Hunter Marx,
Heath Jordan and Trent Locke,
RJ Danvers and Damien Crosse,
the DVD gods of his gay porn universe.

Every Friday’s Pie Day at the Draper Mercantile.
Excitedly, he ogles the options:
blueberry, pecan, coconut cream, butterscotch,
Dutch apple, lemon chess, strawberry/rhubarb.
He settles on the coconut. Master of sublimation,
for a few minutes lord of sugar’s accessible heaven,
he takes his time, as he would riding a man—
savoring each bite, sweet distraction
from hate, creamy substitute for ardor.

—Jeff Mann
I didn’t speak French. He didn’t speak English. So what choice was there but to kiss?

In crowded Cocteau Bar, on Rue des Archives my second night in Paris, we jettisoned words and consummated our introduction with lips. He’d been drinking rum. The taste drenched his mouth. I wondered if the cheap Scotch—the only thing I could order in French—drenched mine. The kiss attained a mind of its own. It rambled like a lunatic stream of consciousness: from wildfiery recklessness to slowed-down savoring to flippant, jokey lip-smacking. He mostly led, I mostly followed, but I occasionally finessed control away from him and he allowed me before reasserting himself. The drench of rum in his mouth dissipated. I had licked it clean.
The lunatic stream crescendoed, then eased to a full stop and we were, once again, two men whose spoken languages were useless.

We had met twenty minutes earlier. Me: leaning with my back against the bar, sipping my drink, surveying the field of Frenchmen, watching them arrive and greet friends with that light, suggestive kiss on both cheeks. Wall-to-wall guys jammed the mid-sized bar. The overflow crowd swelled out the door and onto the sidewalk. Laughter and French fired up the air. The crowd was white, but dappled with color: an Asian guy with booming pecs and muscled arms almost bursting out of his long-sleeved spandex; an Indian in black leather short shorts squeezing his behemoth thighs. A couple of black guys. I had thought—foolishly—that I would be the only one. But Paris’s diversity blindsided me. I was shocked to see Arabs, Asians, a wig store for black women. I strutted into Cocteau Bar thinking that my muscled build and lanky, still supple-at-age-forty-six physique would make me the beautiful, exotic alien who would tantalize the white Frenchmen.

But I was invisible.

I ordered another Scotch, paid for it with the Euros that had been rocketing out of my wallet since the vacation began. A vacation I had no business taking. I had been out of a job for three years, living at first on unemployment while buoyed by an invented confidence that a job would surface at any time. Then I subsisted on retirement savings and handouts from family until bludgeoned by the true confidence that, at age forty-six, my best job years were behind me.

I paid for the trip with a “loan” from my father. He was at his mahogany desk. Thirty-eight years a cutthroat corporate lawyer, his palatial office gobbled up acres of his firm’s most coveted real estate. I stood in front of that imposing desk like a peasant granted a royal audience. “Just one more time, dad, please. This is it, I promise.” The old bastard resisted. Scowled. Lectured. Begged. Railed. And finally scratched out a check in his lovable scrawl. “There!” he said. “Be reckless! Go hang yourself!” He huffed and he puffed and he threw the check in my face. “Dexter, you’re forty-six years old and still a marketing coordinator. A coordinator. Practically an intern. You should be a VP by now.” With probing eyes he scrutinized me, almost microscopically, hunting for even an atom of something he recognized. Then his imperial anger withered. My dad pinched my cheeks like he did when I was a kid, with the affection but minus the playfulness I so cherished then. “I wish we understood each other,” he said. I nodded, hung my head, walked away with the meek gait and deflated soul of a child who has failed at everything he’s tried. But when safely out of the building, I burst into a smile. A rebellious, jaw-cracking grin. Within the hour I had deposited that check, booked the reservation, and whirled into Lord & Taylor then Bloomingdale’s then Saks to shop for the trip.

I downed the Scotch. When I turned from the bar to cruise the crowd he was in front of me, so close his lips could have skimmed mine.

“Um... Bon soir. Comment allez-vous?” I said in phrasebook French.

A tornado of French. It blasted me. I didn’t know what to say, so I took my time and inspected him. His imperfections: dazzling. A mild paunch. A chest, part pillowy man-breast, part hard muscle, the weight jutting heavily against his tank top. Biceps unsculpted but large and meaty. Silky black fur bloomed on the backs of his upper arms and on his shoulders and crept up his chest and over the crest of his tank. His face: a medley of pretty (cherub cheeks, clear, sunny skin) and rugged (prickly black hair, wooly eyebrows). A rakish sweep of dark beard stubble almost hid the oblique beginning of a double chin. His eyes didn’t flash or pierce, were nothing like the sun. But their earthy brown arrested me more than any gaudy star. His open-mouthed smile exhibited a gallery of big teeth. By traditional standards, this forty-something man was no beauty. To me, he was beautiful.

I attempted language again. We couldn’t just look at each other all night. Could we?

“I’m Dexter. Je m’appelle Dexter,” I said, too loud, as if the guy was deaf, not French.

“Et moi, c’est Luc. Enchanté.”

I didn’t know what the hell he said. My face must have betrayed my ignorance because he gestured to himself and said, pointedly, “Luc.” Then he gestured to me and said, “Dexter.” Dextair in his French accent.

I drank more Scotch, let the French (and the Frenchman) lull me.

We communicated like prehistoric people, with gestures and with sounds that might as well have been grunts. I paid for a round of drinks—yet more rocketing Euros—as we laughed at our blundering attempts at language. When I managed to convey that I was from New York, he jumped up and down as if he’d discovered he’d been talking to a celebrity. He said he was from Marseilles, then said, “Paris,”—of course it was Paree—while holding up eight fingers, which I took to mean he’d lived in Paris eight years. Or did he mean he came to Paris when he was eight years old?

What was it about Luc? Maybe his goofy smile. His silliness. His exuberance. Or the nothing-like-the-sun brown eyes. The innocence that belied a virile six-foot-three body with fur blooming on its chest and shoulders.

A precious soul frolicking in a strapping man’s body.

Night began falling. The fluorescent lights inside Cocteau Bar extinguished and the bulbs in the wall sconces flared in hazy embers.

“Allons dehors, j’ai envie de fumer,” Luc said.

He started to walk away. I panicked. I was invisible to every man in this bar, every man in this city, except him. He couldn’t leave. I couldn’t let him. I touched his back. He mimed smoking a cigarette. I was relieved when he clutched my hand and pulled me with him through the crowd.

Once outside he lit a cigarette, offered me one. I accepted, took a drag. The July night was warm, though not incinerating like New York. The maelstrom of guys hadn’t thinned—more arrived each minute—and the crowds from the bars on either side and across the street weaved and flowed in to each other. Flirters. Players. Wallflowers. The sultry stink of pot roasted the air as a joint migrated from mouth to

I smoked my cigarette. Deep, lung-filling drags followed by luxuriant exhalations.

Night settled in. There is something about night in Paris. Something sacred and solemn, in an ancient sense. So many phantoms of so many years, so much history. I had always longed to visit Paris. Ever since fifth-grade social studies class where I learned the city began as a craggy settlement tucked onto an island in the middle of the Seine and, over the course of centuries, flowered across the water and onto the land flanking its left and right. It mesmerized me: that something could start so small, so shyly isolated, and then fly.

The voices on Rue Des Archive spiked, then receded to a rumble. I absorbed it. My crises fell away. New York fell away, erased like a language that I no longer spoke and, perhaps, never truly did.

Luc’s eyes landed on one of the black guys I’d seen earlier. They didn’t stray from the tall, slim shirtless boy, from the tattoos inked into the grooves of his sculpted stomach and ringing the perimeters of his taut pecs. Flanked by a clique of admirers, the boy attracted the attention that I had hoped to. Now I was embarrassed: I was middle-aged. What made me think I could be the toast of Paree?

Luc kept ogling the boy. Lengthy stretches of leering interrupted by darting glances at me along with a smirk.

Leer. Dart. Smirk.

Leer. Dart. Smirk.

My insecurity—and anger—welled up like tears. I hurled my cigarette to the ground and stomped back inside. My Scotch was still where I left it on the bar. I downed what was left, ordered another, thought about invisibility, how it went hand-in-glove with insecurity, with age.


Jealous. I was certain that’s what he’d said. I flushed. Sweat burned on my forehead and spurted down my underarms. I was embarrassed. I was furious: at myself for being transparent, at Luc for calling me on it. I faced him. Mischief bubbled on his smirking mouth, like a brat who’d just carried off a sparkling prank. Was he ogling that boy on purpose, just to get a reaction from me?

I savored the thought that he had.

I ordered us more drinks, then had an idea: I downloaded a translation app on my phone. Luc downloaded the same app and then we typed phrases, comments, questions, and translated them, back and forth.

I learned he was a pediatric nurse, liked French pop music, and adored American R&B, and idolized Aretha Franklin. His mother had also been a nurse, his father a pharmacist. Luc was forty-four.
The translations weren’t always precise. Luc typed something in French, translated it to English, and it came out as *What America in you do for work?* Marketing, I answered via the app. I thought a moment, typed something else, then showed him the translation. *J’ai perdu mon emploi:* I lost my job.

His mouth leapt open, then slowly closed (And trembled? Just a little?). He placed his hand on my neck, slid this thumb up and down. Tender friction.

“*Je suis vraiment désolé,*” he said, and then typed into his phone and showed me the output: *I am very sorry.* He typed more: *Can’t you find another one?* I typed: *I’ve tried.* Much easier than explaining that a stodgy forty-six-year-old didn’t have a chance in a job market gushing with hip millennials with cocky fingers expertly poised on the almighty pulse of American Popular Culture. Luc scrutinized me, not unlike the old bastard. His eyes pored through me, digging for something that made sense. I held my breath. He typed and translated: *Shouldn’t you be home looking for a job?*

I could have said my unemployment ran out. Could have said I had purged my retirement savings and my stocks. Could have said I had nothing left, so why the hell not fly to Paris, fulfill a lifelong dream before the chance permanently expired? Instead I told him, *If I was home I wouldn’t be here, with you.*

What a thing to say! I feared Luc would roll his eyes, not take seriously someone who spouted such a cringeworthy cliché. But his hand returned to my neck, his thumb massaging in a firm but gentle circle. *You’ll be OK,* Luc said. *Paris will revitalize you. You’ll go back to New York refreshed. Then you’ll find a job.* I typed: *Sure. Of course. Sure I will.*

Light from the sconces glazed Luc’s downy shoulders the color of flames. I noticed yellow stains on the underarms of his white tank top, detected a not so subtle and not at all disagreeable odor of sweat. I wedged my thumb inside his black jeans, kneaded the creamy flesh of his hip bone. We kissed. Job, money, what to do when—if—I went back to New York—all evaporated. Or, at least in that charged, ephemeral moment, mattered slightly less.

_____________

Joe Okonkwo’s (author) debut novel *Jazz Moon*, set against the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance and glittering Jazz Age Paris, won the Edmund White Award for Debut Fiction from the Publishing Triangle. His stories have been published in *Shotgun Honey, Best Gay Stories 2015, Cooper Street,* and *Storychord.* Upcoming work will appear in *The New Engagement.* Joe serves as Prose Editor for Newtown Literary and Editor of Best Gay Stories 2017 published by Lethe Press. He lives in Queens, New York.

Michael Wynne (artist) makes artists’ books and photobooks, and his short stories have appeared in *Crooked Fagazine, Headmaster* magazine, and *The Holy Male*, amongst others. He is based in London and Madrid. See more of his work at kissandtellpress.com.
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**
"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" by Jameson Currier begins in a small university town in the South when a gay college student is beaten. In the ensuing days as the young man struggles to survive in a hospital, the residents of the town and the university find themselves at the center of a growing media frenzy as the crime reverberates through the local and national consciousness. Using details and elements from actual hate crimes committed against gay men, Currier weaves personal and spiritual layers into a timely and emotional story.

**Lambda Literary Finalist**

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

— Eric Andrews-Katz, Seattle Gay News

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

— Gary M. Kramer, Philadelphia Gay News

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

— Frank Perez, Ambush

"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

"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 wonder of emotive writing and intuitive imagination, and a fitting tribute to the community-scarring event which inspired it.”

— Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter
The end is near. My two-week assignment reviewing the cafés of Vienna is almost over and I’ve left them all to the last minute. You can occupy a table here as long as you like, and I’ve been here for a week. I found the perfect one in the back corner of Berggasse and Wasagassa in a café that also doubles as a gay bar.

My plan for my last two days was to drink only coffee. Nose to the grindstone, and all that. I swore to take motivation this morning from the cold, overcast and threatening day outside, the entire city covered in gloomy grey light.

Unfortunately, a piece of eye candy at the other end of the bar caught my eye. My guess is that he is twenty-six or twenty-seven. He sits with perfect posture, very German, at a table by the only floor to
ceiling window in the place. I can see everything from his trendy footwear, tight jeans, soft sweater, thin torso, brown hair, ears you would call elven if they had been sharp; they are soft, oval, and without lobes to nibble on.

Small moles dot the visible side of his face and neck. His left hand cradles his chin, then brushes lightly at his forehead, lifting the bangs there as he pages through a magazine with the long fingers of his other delicate hand. The hand darts to the phone on the tablecloth, and he swipes, glances my way, dismisses me and goes back to tapping. He hasn't shaved. Sparse, dark whiskers emerge from translucent skin and give him a dirty appearance, like he'd been up late with someone somewhere and was on his way home in the middle of the afternoon when he stopped here to have some breakfast.

He came in, like everyone else, from the side street through a kind of airlock, which is a good thing since it is February. My time here has been cold, with an empty bed warmed only by a down comforter. I'm not used to sleeping alone for more than a few days. I don't know what's stopping me. Probably all the smoking. The weather app warns of an approaching southern storm. Rain is forecast when snow would be far more romantic.

This café is one of the few I've seen that has a separate smoking section sealed off from the main areas by a glass wall. I hate smoke. Most Vienna establishments allow smoking, so this is an oasis for me. I sit in an alcove at the other end of the bar that contains booths, as far away from the smoke as possible. A doorway past the magazine rack leads into a hall with a bathroom.

The wall up to the alcove is taken up with one long bar with a granite counter, a blond rail, red leather sides, a row of high-backed wooden chairs, and a steel foot rail for comfort. To my delight, there are hooks underneath the bar rail for hanging coats and purses; a required feature in any respectable bar in my opinion, and one of my pet peeves if missing. For that reason, and for the charming and clean atmosphere, the younger clientele, and the excellent lunch specials, I'd given Café Berg an excellent review.

What I like most about the place is the half-meter high mirrors that top the chair railing all around the room so patrons may watch each other without staring directly.

This is a gay café after all.

The boy gets up, walks in my direction, meets my eye and smiles a sad smile. The vibration in my pocket is more than a text. It's his expression that keeps me from checking my phone.

He comes the length of the bar, entering the booth area where I sit watching from one of the Italian marble four-tops but whose surface I have entirely claimed with tea, the remnants of a salad, my laptop and a worn notebook. Earlier, a pen had leaked through my shirt pocket, but it is under my fleece vest so the boy can't be smiling at that. I check anyway.

He enters the alcove and goes to the floor-to-ceiling magazine rack, and I watch the tight contours of his thighs through a pair of blue jeans sanded down in all the comfortable places. Does he reach up to the highest shelf for my benefit? Allowing private glimpses of the unbranded underwear and pale skin under the lift of his sweater? His calves swell as he gets up to his toes. He is wearing high-top Adidas sneakers with baby blue panel inserts.
Adidas. All Day I Dream About Sex is the mnemonic my old college roommate taught me, a blond boy from the fundamentalist backwaters of Findlay, Ohio. We'd had drunken sex during finals at the end of our sophomore year and he never spoke to me again. Totally worth it. My grades had been good, good enough to pass. I'd heard he crashed and burned in the next semester, some fundamental conflict, and he transferred out.

The boy, sifting magazines, still stretching to the top shelf, lengthens and stretches his torso like a cat at a scratching post. He reaches back to smooth the jeans on his rump as he returns to earth.

Without a glance my way, he walks to the bathroom and disappears through the door.

I'd forgotten that there were others in the café. Two older men, obviously a couple, are reading newspapers and sipping coffee. A man and woman occupy a table against the wall sharing a large bowl of soup. She carves the froth from her latte and savors it like ice cream while he glances around. He sips at his carrot juice, stirring the soup with his other hand all the while avoiding her eyes. Two university students, one with a swanky beret, the other a large hooked nose, scribble on paper and use their phones as calculators. Their bodies bend toward each other as if conspiring, perhaps adding up the chances of a romance. Too bad the forecast is for rain.

Did I mentioned that I'd already given Cafe Berg a high rating? Today, I am reviewing Cafe Savoy down in the gay district south of the Ringstrasse, the Naturhistor and Kunsthistor museum, the Albertina and the Opern cafés. I should actually go there, of course, soak up the atmosphere, write from experience about the decor, the vibe, the food and service, but I have an aversion to smoke and they, like almost all the cafes in Vienna, allow smoking at every table. That kind of atmosphere soaks into my clothes, constricts my airways, and makes me tear up and cough for all the wrong reasons.

The magazine blog I work for will get their Vienna Café Review series, but will never know that I have written all of them from this table. It is a little too Rolling Stone of me, I know, but the magazine I work for is less famous and even less scrupulous.

It was my own fault that I was sent here anyway, and in winter. I'd somehow stumbled into a good run of articles based on trendy cafes in cities around the US, beginning with one in Portland, Maine, and followed the next month by one on Boston cafes. Readers emailed and tweeted praise and my editor noticed and bumped me up in pay and sent me around the country for the next year and a half: New York; Washington, DC; Savanna, Georgia; Tampa; New Orleans; Dallas; Chicago; Omaha; Seattle, Spokane; Takoma; Portland, Oregon; San Francisco; Los Angeles.

The only negative posts, and only from a small number of readers, was that I reviewed many more gay cafes than straight. So what? I'm queer. It used to be a great way of meeting guys until I came home from Seattle and met Eric. That was seven months ago and we have been on a spiraling relationship ever since. Which way the spiral turns depends on the day.

Eric is not exactly my type. He's a redhead with thick, rough skin. My age. Very handsome. He hardly drinks. He's an aerospace engineer with LMC and works on things that fly high in orbit. There are times when I'm with him that I feel like I'm one of them. The earth and my cares lie far below as I float above the surface of his body, the sandy deserts of his skin, the odorous peaks and valleys, followed by a fiery reentry.
Other times, it's a failure to launch, usually when I've been drinking too much because an article wasn't going well. Or any number of other excuses. He comes over, interrupts, and we fight. But he likes that I'm a writer, an artist he says, and he puts up with more crap from me than I ever would.

You should know that I've never been in a relationship that lasted more than a year. Bob, the dancer with the tight body, lasted three months until he left with a traveling troupe. Sam, the soft-spoken carpenter with great forearms and a nice smile, fell back in with his ex, also known as heroin. And so on.

If you asked me, the only chance I'd ever get at a long-term relationship with a guy was if the two of us were stranded on a desert island for twenty some years and had no one else. The day we were rescued he would probably hook up with the cabin boy.

Yes, it's part the age thing. I'm thirty-seven, just thirty-seven last month, but thirty-seven is a long way from twenty five or six, an age when you are still young, still pretty, have a somewhat stable job and life, are intimate with the mating dance and can stay out and play late and still get up clear and alive and singing brightly the next morning. You are at the peak of your existence, and with a simple act such as stretching up to reach the top shelf of a magazine rack you can get someone like me to follow you into the bathroom for the sheer fun of it.

* * *

In front of the gay bed and breakfast where I'm staying, seven streets converge to make a grand stone square with a large wading fountain that effectively creates a traffic circle. In its center, a bronze woman in a toga with one tit bared holds a serpent in her left hand and a lyre in her right. She is on a pedestal, of course, and there are four cherubs around the base, one at each cardinal point. They are all naked as cherubs go and three of them face away from the pedestal, holding fish that normally would spew into the surrounding pool if there was any water. Three cherubs have carved ribbons draped over their genitals. One might think the artist was a prude but in truth a decree by Pope Innocent X in the mid-1600's said all male members must be covered.

All across Europe, masterworks containing perhaps the most exquisite male genitalia ever carved, shaped, molded, or chiseled was covered up with leaf appliqué, and if the penis was too large, it was lopped off. All the drooping goodies in Europe disappeared practically overnight.

The artist that made my fountain was a rebel, and I adore him for it. The fourth cherub's uncovered butt faces southwest toward the Vatican, and he is not as much wrestling with a fish as hugging it close to his chest as he looks southwest over his behind. Smiling. Taunting. If you look from just the right angle you'll find the artist covered nothing up, his ass dimple and dangly bits are all there.

Lying on the outer ledge of the fountain from the mooning cherub is a bronze youth partly on his side looking into the fountain at a huge bronze carp that would be underwater if they hadn't drained it for the winter. In his raised right hand he holds a trident poised to throw. The boy's muscled back and backsides are the last thing I last see at night from my window, a dream boy forever aiming at a perfect fish he will never catch.
The most interesting thing about that empty fountain is that there isn't a single coin in it. Only trash and frozen puddles of rain. At first, I thought that the nearly invisible homeless had gathered them all up, but that isn't so.

Most writers understand the literary standard that water is a metaphor for the unconscious and, in the city that gave us Freud, cigars, and the license to blame our parents for everything, I think the Viennese are holding true to standards. They know that when you toss a coin into a fountain that you are paying the fates for your wish. Your greatest desire enters your subconscious the moment the coin breaks that metaphorical surface.

At that instant, your subconscious takes over and everything you do from that moment forward unconsciously moves you toward your heart’s desire. That is my theory of fountains and wishes.

It was in Chicago last year that I woke up very hazy and warm from a night of chasing wishes around various watering holes. One wish tricked me and took me up to his 42nd floor apartment with a view of Lake Michigan. It was also winter, and there was plenty of ice piled up in huge mounds around the shoreline with shards of it angled toward the sky for as far as the eye could see.

We were still drunk when we woke up. I rolled away from him and stood, went to the bathroom, and then stood naked in front of the floor to ceiling windows. The cold lake seemed far away but below me was a beautiful Gothic cathedral with glowing stained glass and delicate spires stretching heavenward. Around it were little five story walk-ups with terra cotta tiled roofs like you see everywhere in Europe. I noticed other buildings: an ancient Bank with Ionic columns; a Romanesque church squatted around the corner.

I heard movement behind me, the rustle of sheets, the strike of a match, the strong suck on a joint, and so I returned to that warm island, with that warm man and later made the mistake of writing in my Chicago review about the local architecture being reminiscent of old European cities. Cities like Vienna.

The hate mail flooded in, angry tweets and posts everywhere claimed that I was ignorant of real architecture, demanded that I go to Vienna to see for myself. Six months after that article, the criticisms were still flooding in and my editor finally broke.

"We are sending you to Vienna for two weeks," he said. "Review the cafe scene there and make the world love you again. If you do, we'll send you around Europe like we did here. If you don't, well, you figure it out."

* * *

Three o’clock in the morning. The eternal time of Fitzgerald’s dark night of the soul. I lay curled against the sleeping Berg Boy, under the down comforter that was too small for two. A knife of cold air sliced my skin along the gap between comforter and mattress. The taste of him mingled with the zwetschken schnapps we’d drunk. I was contemplating the vintages when Eric’s text buzzed on the night table.

He sent: Miss you. Are you awake?

Yes.
He sent: Call me?

Rolling out of bed, I slipped on sweatpants and shrugged into the complementary bathrobe and slippers, then stepped onto the tiny balcony outside my room through the floor to ceiling window. The sky was black. Spotlights on the fountain were turned off by midnight and the statues there were softly illuminated by street lamps and business signs. It had warmed noticeably and the wind had died.

I shouldn’t have looked at the phone. I should have let it go, pretended I was asleep to avoid any awkward moments. But I was dialing anyway, despite my own self-interest, and eager to hear his voice though I’d be home in a few days.

“What are you doing?” I said when he answered.

“Hey. It’s Friday night. Reading a new space opera. What else? You’re not here to corrupt me after all.”

“Yeah. I feel guilty about that.”

“We all have to work.”

I nodded, glanced inside at the sleeping contour in my bed. “True.”

“Did you go out?”

“For a while. It’s too smoky here. I should have come in the summertime.”

“Maybe we can go back then? Did you meet anyone interesting?”

It would have been easy to lie or to hurt him with the truth but I didn’t want either option. Eric, this nerdy engineer, was at home reading science fiction and happy about it. And he was thinking about me. That was his personality, honest and unpretentious.

Mine was an addictive one, so old habits died hard for me. I found myself lately with good intentions submarined by drinks and impulses I didn’t want to control.

Evidently I’d let silence answer for me and he said, “What’s his name? Oh, never mind. We’re not officially a couple yet so I guess I can’t complain.”

He’d said, “yet.”

Somehow, out on the balcony in the cold, that word made me feel warmer. I slipped my free hand into the robe’s pocket, and found a coin there. One euro. It rolled between my fingers easily enough. I could flip it. Make a decision. But that wouldn’t be a decision at all, would it? Not one that I made.

It started to drizzle; the kind where you could see streaks illuminated in the open spaces but couldn’t feel the drops yet.

“Maybe we should talk about that?” I said.

“I’d like that.” Somehow I could hear him smiling. “Okay. When you get home, then.”

“When I get home.”
“Good night, then. Sweet dreams, George.”

“You, too.”

I stood there in the rain rubbing the coin and staring down at the fountain, at the youth lying on the ledge there with his poised trident. What the hell, I thought, and heaved the coin out into the rain. It hit the backside of the mooning cherub and bounced toward the fish and I lost sight of it.

Behind me, I heard a soft thump against the glass. Berg Boy was awake. He’d thrown a pillow at the window and lay facing me on the edge of the bed looking hungry. I thought of Eric and his book. The boy took my immobility as a tease and started tempting me. I watched, then heard him through the glass pane.

“Jorgy, you must come back to bed now.”

It was pouring then. My robe was getting soaked. In an hour there would be an inch or more of rain in the fountain.

Enough time for one last drink.

R R Angell is credentialed but he would just as soon have a good conversation over a cold beer. Find out more at www.rrangell.com. This story was started in Vienna, Austria while tagging along as the spouse on his husband’s business trip.
The Third Buddha

a novel by

Jameson Currier

“Complex.”
Library Journal

“Remarkable.”
GLBRW

“Courageous.”
Next magazine

“Incredible.”
Edge

“Extraordinary.”
Lambda Literary

“Riveting.”
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“The Third Buddha

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ALA Rainbow Book
I was driving the Recycling Truck for the Bloomfield Department of Public Works when I found her. Her pale face was exquisite: a perfect cameo, with high cheek bones and cool blue eyes. The arch of her pale eyebrows suggested she was thinking, *I should be surprised—but I’m not.* Those red lips were parted in the hint of a smile, daring you to say something clever. Her small head was tilted to the right, quizzical but encouraging. Like Jane Fonda in *Barbarella,* her magnificent breasts were just the right size, in the sweet spot between what my co-workers called squeakers and honkers. She was bald, which only added to her allure and oh, she had no arms.

She was stuffed head-first into a garbage can on Watsessing Avenue, not far from my apartment in Bloomfield, New Jersey, June 1981. She was half a mannequin someone didn’t want anymore. I was a tall, scrawny, divorced shipwreck someone didn’t want anymore. I brought her into the truck’s cab and
stuck her between my co-workers, Schatzie and Chad. Chad named her Lovey after Mrs. Howell on Gilligan’s Island.

Our truck was 607, a dinged-up canary yellow four ton dump truck. There was the vague promise of a new recycling truck on the horizon but we had to make 607 work for us until it arrived. Our assignment was to drive through town, different neighborhoods on different days, and pick up the residents’ curbside newspapers, bottles and aluminum cans. Chad was the youngest and smallest of our crew. He looked like Tweety Bird as a rock star with long golden hair, a golden moustache and wispy goatee. He was a good natured boy with a cowboy swagger, a booming voice and an abrupt hearty laugh. It was easy to make him laugh.

Schatzie was full-bodied, dark-haired and ruddy. He had soulful brown eyes, a permanent five o’clock shadow and a pretty mouth that lisped like a baby’s. His specialty was sound effects: sirens, airplanes, car crashes, animals (especially monkeys and elephants) and the tribal war chants he learned from Tarzan movies. His remarkable imitation of zipper opening and closing was accompanied by a nod to his crotch and the words, “Skull for one,” his rococo version of the standard “Blow me.” It became the favorite snappy come back in the break room. Schatzie’s real name was Robert. He was 28 and lived with his parents, the Schatzingers. I was 30, had a 10 year old son who lived his mother. Chad, Schatzie and I were all hired at the same time two years ago and we each spent those two years bouncing from department to department. Our randomly tossed together boy band was, luckily, a harmonious one. Though we were always covered in grime and slightly behind schedule, we laughed most of the day.

We were a little shy around Lovey at first; we just stared at this beautiful creature tucked between us. Then we looked at each other and busted out laughing. As we drove, I got an idea: I took off my blue denim shirt and put it on Lovey. I sat at the passenger window and put Lovey in my lap. I poked her head out the window while I stared straight ahead. I turned Lovey’s perfect little head slowly from side to side so that she looked like a queen who was curious about her subjects. If she had arms she would have waved. We drove through the center of town several times just to make sure people got a good look at her. About three out of five noticed her and the reactions varied: a shout, a wave, a whistle, a hoot, a honk. Somebody threw a donut at us. I had to keep a straight face because I was, you know, used to a beautiful bald woman in my lap, in my truck.

After an hour of Lovey’s Grand Tour we pulled in front of Buff’s Diner and howled for fifteen minutes. We put Lovey under wraps, locked the truck and went inside for our usual monster breakfast: pancakes, bacon, fried eggs, home fries served by Rose, our scowling but tender-hearted waitress. Every time we thought about Lovey’s Grand Tour we howled.

“You ain’t laughing at me, are you?” Rose asked as she squirted whipped cream on Chad’s blueberry pancakes.

“No, baby. Never.”

“Then I don’t give fuck,” she said and shook her copper-red head. “The way I figure it every knock is a boost.”

“Yes,” Schatzie said, “and it’s important to know your boosters from your knockers.”
On the way back to the yard we stopped by my place on Watsessing Avenue so I could drop Lovey off at her new home. I wouldn't bring something so beautiful back to the maintenance yard. Those animals would destroy her.

When we got back to the yard we were called into the management office. Our foreman, Richie Rastiello waited with his arms folded.

"Are you ladies done playing with your dollies?"

There were reports from all over town about the beautiful bald passenger incident. He tried to make it a general accusation but his focus kept drifting back to me. All I could do was shrug. "It won’t happen again.” Though I couldn’t guarantee it.

Richie was short and dark with big, moist brown eyes and a glorious, towering pompadour. Even when he was being stern his eyes twinkled. He looked like a heroic mouse from a fairy tale and some of the guys called him Mouse or Ratso to his face. Though he got the job because he was Chubby Venello’s son in law, he was a by-the-book professional and I appreciated that

Lovey had an exalted place in my spare and sunny apartment, where she sat between a mimosa bush and a little maple tree. My apartment, furnished with stuff I found on my route, was above a barber shop on Watsessing, a block away from the train station. The barber, Willie Feather, was also the super of the building. He was a wiry little bird of a man who looked like he’d fit right into the ensemble of a Preston Sturges movie. The barber shop didn’t do much business. It was mostly a hangout for the remaining older white men in the neighborhood. Though Willie was pleasant enough, he always called me Randy, which wasn’t my name.

The Watsessing section of Bloomfield was in the town’s funkier South End, on the border with even funkier East Orange and it was in rapid decline. The halfway decent diner down the street closed suddenly and the bar across the street from it went topless and got shut down. Half of the storefronts were vacant. The Watsessing train station was just a dark scary platform that a handful of commuters used to get to Newark, New York or Hoboken. I assumed the name Watsessing came from some Hessian who helped us out in the Revolutionary War--General Gunter Watsessing! While we walked through Watsessing Park my son told me the word Watsessing actually came from the gentle Lenni Lenape tribe, the area’s original inhabitants, and it meant crooked. The crooked thing it referred to was the Third River, which may have been a real river once but now was just a sluggish stream that zigzagged through the neighborhood and collected shopping carts along the way.

Lovey was the perfect roommate. She was quiet, for one thing, easy on the eyes and very soothing to the nerves. Like me, she enjoyed listening to the radio, WNCN, the classical station and funky, listener-sponsored WBAI. Her perpetual sidelong glance was non-judgmental no matter how foolishly I acted when I was with someone or alone. Though my day times were loud and lively, most nights were solitary and sleepless. A few times when I was really drunk and lonely I brought her into my lumpy fold out sofa bed for a chaste cuddle. I just wanted something to hold on to. While I held Lovey’s hard body, I thought this is really, really sad and that realization along with the gin acted like a sedative. I felt like a failure. There were a million reasons why I couldn’t stay married but I missed being a full time dad and I especially loved the bedtime stories part.
Chad usually brought his mini boom box to the truck and we had it cranked up to the two best rock stations most of the day. Schatzie loved Rush, Chad and I weren’t crazy about them but the way Schatzie sang along with Geddy Lee on *Limelight* so impressed us that we actually shut up and listened to him. Chad’s theme song was AC/DC’s *Dirty Deed Done Dirt Cheap*. We all joined in the chorus with Chad’s rock star gravelly pipes taking the lead. My band for that year was Foreigner. I could hit the high notes on *Waiting for a Girl like You* and, no matter what the situation, I always had to dance to *Urgent*.

It came on the radio one late summer morning while we were on a quiet street near the Glen Ridge border. I was on the truck stacking the piles of newspaper in a crisscross pattern based on a crochet double stitch I learned when I tried to quit smoking. It really did keep the papers from tumbling over. I started my *Urgent* dance, which included a lot of fist pumping, kicks and jumping up and down. I imagined that my long hair looked like David Lee Roth’s when I tossed it. It didn’t. When it got to Junior Walker’s scorching sax solo, I ripped my shirt off and waved it in the air like a flag and as the song powered down I jumped off the back of the truck into a perfect dismount, landing on my feet. Chad and Schatzie cheered and I put my shirt back on. When we got back to the yard, Richie called us into the office.

“What the fuck! When you ladies ain’t playing with dollies, you’re stripping. Nobody wants to see your bony ass, Ribs.” (One of my nicknames was Rack O’ Ribs) “Can you keep your fucking clothes on and pick up some fucking newspapers for a fucking change? His tone was withering, his delivery spot on but his big brown eyes still twinkled. “And P.S, Ribs, your blouse is on backwards and inside out.”

We also went through patches where we said everything with exaggerated English accents. Chad had to stop at home to pick up his radio. He’d told us his mother had been born in England and that his full name was Chadwick. I saw his mom waving at him from the window. I loved the movie *The Lady Vanishes* and when we pulled up I did my Dame May Whitty impersonation as Chad’s mother, “Oh look, it’s Chadwick, stopping in for a spot of tea. I *do* hope he likes the crumpets and watercress sandwiches.”

Our fantasy was that people would put out their newspapers in bundles neatly tied with twine, but they rarely did. They liked to stuff them in brown paper shopping bags, which were not recyclable. The shopping bags were like ornery brown life forms, hard to fold and hard to tear. No matter how skillfully we crumpled and crammed them into every available inch of the truck, they always sprang back to spiteful life and defeated us. When I talked to Richie about it, I channeled Walter Cronkite using my deep voice and big words. Richie smiled as he listened and gave us permission to put the bags into garbage cans IF we were ahead of the garbage trucks. I was proud of the way I used my vocabulary to create a system that made our job easier, body and mind working as one. Our new system lasted only three glorious days. On the morning of the fourth day, as I stuffed shopping bags into a couple of cans at the curb I heard a scratchy female voice behind me.

“Hey you, Get away from my garbage can! Get away from my can!”

I turned and saw a scrawny old white woman in a faded pink robe and pink slippers, with pink curlers in her hair, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, defiantly standing on her lawn.

“It’s OK, Ma’m. We’re from the town’s recycling department. We got permission from the town to put the paper bags in garbage cans if we were ahead of the garbage trucks,” I said feeling and sounding
reasonable. The poor woman just didn’t she understand how important this system was to us. Not yet, anyway.

“Get the hell away from my garbage can or I’ll call the cops!”

“It’s okay Ma’am, The garbage truck is a block or so behind us and they’ll take it all away. I promise,” I cupped my hand to my ear. “Listen. You can hear them.”

“Get away from my house, you! I’m calling the cops!”

I started walking toward her. “Ma’am, you don’t understand. We work for the town. See our truck and the town insignia?” And can’t you see how smart and presentable I am? I’m even using my Walter Cronkite voice for you.

“Get away from me, you! Get your ass off my lawn. I’m calling the cops right now!”

I lost my temper. I pointed at her. “Get back in the house!”

“Fuck you!” she said, backing up.

“Get back in the house right now!” I kept pointing and advancing. My voice was big and filled the block. She backed up toward her door, still yapping.

“Get back in the house! Get back in the house!” I kept jabbing my finger toward her until she was back in her house, yipping at me from behind her screen door. She held her pink Princess phone in her hand and was talking to someone. I heard a distant siren and braced myself for a big scene.

As I approached 607 the siren got louder then sputtered into a raspberry. It was one of Schatzie’s sound effects. He and Chad were howling.

When we got back to the yard, Richie was aware of the dust up and surprisingly mellow about it. Apparently the old bag called the cops all the time about something. But because of her we lost the paper bag/garbage can option and my experiment in combining my body and mind through diplomacy failed. I was just a guy on a truck.

Besides paper bags some creative town folk used duct tape or panty hose to bind their newspaper bundles. One family used pet droppings as a glue to keep their bundles intact. We came across a big pile of these waste product monstrosities and as I sifted through them, I did the Dame May Whitty voice, “I say, Chadwick. Look at these bundles! How bizarre!” “Bizarre!” became our word for soiled, unrecyclable newspapers that went into their own pile of shame. The glass and aluminum we picked up were kept in barrels on the truck, which we tied together to keep from tipping over. We had three bays in the maintenance yard, a small one for garbage (bizarre!), and two bigger ones where we dumped the aluminum and the glass at the end of the day.

We took the newspapers to Garden State Paper, one of the first newspaper recycling plants in the country and the last vestige of the late great Newark Evening News which had patented the process. It was nice to get out of town and a pleasant ride on Route 46, along the Passaic River to get to the recycling plant in Garfield. Garden State Paper was a big white complex that took up 16 bustling acres. We had to check in at the front office where the smiling ladies always offered us cookies. Then with our
paper work squared away we lined up behind other trucks to get onto the ramp. We turned the truck around and backed on to the ramp, making sure we were lined up properly with the restraints that kept the truck from sliding off it.

We got out and watched the ramp lift our truck and dump its newspapers into a giant vat, the size of a backyard swimming pool, full of swirling soapy water. An enormous, jagged wire arm stirred and swooped through the water, snagging and scooping out any debris like string, staples or glue. The washed paper was funneled into another big vat where it mixed with water to create slurry, the base component from which new paper was created. It was thrilling and somehow soothing to watch the flowing, swirling process. The gray slurry looked like the gruel Oliver Twist had to ask for more of at the workhouse.

This satisfying tail end of the operation was efficiently overseen by a tall wiry Polish man whose name tag had a lot of consonants on it. As a joke I referred to him Lazslo Pierogi. He was always remarkably pleasant, as were the rest of the guys in the plant and the gals in the office. You knew they believed what they did was important and as a result the whole place hummed with purpose, like a working class Oz.

One day, after a couple of puffs on a joint, Chad slipped and called our Polish friend Lazslo Pierogi to his face.

“Hello, Lazslo Pierogi!” he said in his booming voice.

“Lazslo Pierogi? Lazslo Pierogi!” our Polish friend repeated, making sure he heard it right and then he let loose with a wonderful cackle. Every week after that, we always boomed out, “Laszlo Pierogi!” as he approached us. This tickled all of us immensely and we wound up laughing too much. Then Laszlo had to say, with a smile, “OK. Knock it out, you guys. Knock it out and let’s get back to work.”

Garden State Paper was later bought by Enron, yes that Enron, and when they went belly up they shut down Garden State Paper in 2001 and 750 people lost their jobs. The blue collar magic of the place lingers on a Facebook page where former employees reminisce about the good old days and plan reunions where I imagine Lazlo is the DJ and unleashes his joyous cackle.

Before I got the DPW job I worked for the Erie Lackawanna Railroad as a carpenter. We rarely built anything, instead we knocked things down before they collapsed and killed somebody. I was there for five years and watched the railroad die a slow, gasping death before I got laid off. Then I was out of work for six months with no job prospects as the economy tanked even deeper.

I was the sole support of my wife and son then and for a while we were on food stamps.

Things changed when Jimmy Carter initiated the CETA program (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act). I was one of a dozen or so men, including Chad and Schatzie, hired by the DPW under it. We were all of diverse ethnicities and ages because diversity was part of the mandate. For all of us, the program and the job were lifesavers and the goal was to do well and be hired by the town as a permanent employee. The pay and benefits were decent, the hours were easy and you didn’t have to commute.

Before CETA most of the guys got their jobs through nepotism and most of them were from the connected Italian families in town. Everybody had nicknames, sometimes more than one. Chubby Venello was the Director of Public Works and Chubby Tortola was in charge of street signs. There were
two guys named Junior and one Tiny, who, of course, weighed three hundred pounds. Stinkweed and Useless were the nicknames for the pair who drove the “honey dipper” the truck dispatched to handle sewer backups. There was Binky, Blinky, Shakey Jake, Tony the Horse and Ray the Horse and Twitchy Gugilotta, to name a few. Twitchy’s other nickname was Deep because of his deep pockets and short arms and anything that wasn’t nailed down wound up in those deep pockets. He sometimes came to work in his pajama tops and left them on all day.

The DPW was the repository for the less than stellar relative who’d have a hard time keeping any other kind of job. A prime example was Lucius Castelli, the nephew of a councilman. He was 35 with the mind of a 12 year old, a short, solid body, a jack-o-lantern head with wide-set saucer eyes and a sweet grin. His mother ironed his impeccable shirts and pants every day and filled his gleaming stainless steel lunch box with fragrant, homemade calzones and sausage and pepper sandwiches that he ate very, very slowly. We worked together for one week picking up bulky waste and all day long he asked me the same two questions in his strangled little voice.

“What’s your name?” And, “how many girlfriends you have?”

I tried to come up with a new exotic name every time, as I would with a child.

What’s your name? Pinchus Marinkus.

How many girlfriends do you have? 27.

What’s your name? Shlomo Nostromo,

How many girlfriends do you have? 9 and a half.

What’s your name? Larry Caligari,

How many girlfriends do you have? None.

That last answer was accurate. I was gay. Lucius giggled every single time so it was hard to be mad at him.

Lucius had a huge dick according to Mugsy (Neil) McGinty, who was the grandson of an ex fire chief. Mugsy was short and talked like a Lollipop Kid from The Wizard of Oz. There were big flakes in his greasy dark hair and his glasses were taped at the bridge. The grimy, ripe blue jumpsuit he wore every day was covered with cat hair. After punching in he took a swipe at his assignment, and then went to the house cleaning service he owned. No job too big or too small was on his station wagon. What about cat hair?

He was married to a woman who looked just like him (Mrs. Mugsy) and their son, (Mugsy Jr.) completed the munchkin family portrait. Even though he talked about eating pussy all the time, Chief Inspector Mugsy knew what everybody was packing and reported on it, like an FBI of the urinal.

“Chubby Tortola needs a compass and a map to find his teeny weeny scaloppini.”

“Mike Tonzola’s piece got a big head with dents in it.”

“Lucius, the Doofus is number one. It’s like an elephant trunk—and Nicky Nardone is number two. His is like a sword—and it glows!”

CHELSEA STATION
“You mean like Excalibur?”

“Who’s that?”

“How do you know all this stuff?” I asked him.

“Don’t worry, you ain’t doing so bad,” he answered.

There were a few Polish guys who were distant relatives of the Polish mayor. The three black men on the roster were Lawrence, in his fifties, tall, quiet and dignified (and number three on Mugsy’s list) and Lenny, close to retirement and playing the shuffling fool. The other was a gigantic young black man with an afro and beard who bristled with attitude, Bartlett Lee Ruffridge. He was treated like a star because he drove the street sweeper and handled all the heavy equipment like the front loader, back hoe, fork lift and bulldozer. He had a deep, booming voice and looked like he could snap any guy in two, though his wide open face looked like a happy baby’s when he smiled. He was referred to as Big Black Bart and I was warned not to mess with him.

At the end of the work day the break room was like a black-hearted social club with poker and gin games and darts that were sometimes aimed at your head. It took me a long time to adjust to the brutal gossip. Nothing was off limits, wives, kids, or mothers. I didn’t know men talked that way. The railroad’s locker room was no tea party but it seemed like a country club compared to this slugfest. For the first year, I kept my trap shut after Shaky Jake Fiore listened to me talk to Richie in the break room one day and announced to everybody. “Ribs, when you talk, it’s like, it’s like…fucking Masterpiece Theater!”

I was with a crew chowing down at Buff’s Diner on a blizzard night. Rose scolded them.

“My God, yous eat like animals. Why can’t you be dainty—like my boyfriend here? “She patted my head. The dainty thing took a while to die down.

I was weird, I was different. I was gay. I kept my trap shut and felt the buzz all around me until Twitchy Gugliotta broke through. Twitchy was a little cross eyed and I’d pegged him as dangerous. He marched up to me while I played gin with some summer college kids.

“So what are you, Cuban or Puerto Rican or what?” The whole room waited. I took a beat.

“None of the above.” It kept them at bay for a while but I had been breached.

A few months later Twitchy came up to me again.

“So what’s your name again, is it Garcia, or Jimenez or Rodriguez?”

“None of the above.”

It didn’t work as well this time and I became Rodriguez, then Regis, then Ribs.

Twitchy and I almost came to blows shortly after that. I was still married when his daughter and his two bratty grandsons moved on to our block. My son was seven then, smart and mellow with a wicked sense of humor and an iron will. Twitchy’s mutant offspring started to pick on him. He was no pushover and could handle himself. One Sunday afternoon I looked out the window and saw Twitchy’s brats sneak up behind him and knock my son off his bike. I bolted down the stairs and chased them down the street and
all the way up to their kitchen, where their grandmother, Mrs. Twitchy, was at the oven, stirring Sunday gravy in a pot while they hid under her apron.

“Keep those brats away from my son!” I shouted and left.

The next day Twitchy confronted me in the break room.

“Stay away from my family, you spic. I can have you rubbed out for a measly hundred dollars.”

“Go ahead,” I said. I felt so righteous that I wasn’t spooked at all. Besides, I knew Twitchy would never spend $100 on anything.

I was still married those first two years before I got on the recycling truck. After one last scorched earth argument I stormed out of the house and left everything behind. I bounced around, sometimes sleeping in my car until I found the apartment on Watsessing Avenue. I was raggedy and raw and taking it one day at a time. The day Lovey and I found each other was a good day.

I bounced around the DPW too going from department to department. In the spring I was assigned to pot hole repair and street paving. In the summer I got assigned to the Tree Crew, the rock stars of the DPW and their truck was The Magic Bus. The same dinged-up yellow as the rest of the trucks, it had a hollow, covered wagon body and a long thick arm with a bucket big enough for one man. When its long, graceful arm was extended the truck looked like a dinosaur, the Diplodocus, as it grazed among the tree tops. It often trailed a baby Diplodocus behind it: the wood chipper. I liked working on Linden trees the best. Their branches sailed easily through the wood chipper and gave off a sweet spray. When you sawed them, the wood was soft and tasty looking, like fresh turkey breast. Best of all, in the summer the Lindens sprouted fragrant yellow blossoms

The tree crew was headed by volatile, charismatic Nick Nardone, number two on the Mugsy list. Short, wiry with black hair and coal black eyes, he sported a snappy Clark Gable mustache that he used like a prop. When he stroked it, you braced for impact. Most of us had mustaches but nobody used his for punctuation like Nick. He was married and had two young sons. When there were three men in the truck Nick insisted I sit next to him because he liked the way I smelled and the sound of my voice. We were usually elbow to elbow and when he shifted gears, the silky graze of soft hairs on our forearms gave me jolts of manly pleasure.

Lenny, the old black fool, wore the same khaki flak suit every day and may have worn it on duty in Korea way back when. His long, convoluted stories usually included some reference to Korea and were meant to assure the white assembly that he was harmless—and a patriot. If he went on too long, I noticed Big Black Bart groaned and left the room. One morning Lenny walked in to the break room and announced, “Hey Ribs. I was driving by your building last night and I saw you. You had on your little short shorts and you was skipping across the street with your little boyfriend.” I did not see it coming-- from that direction.

Everybody stared at me. I huffed and puffed but had nothing to say.

I considered, that wasn’t my boyfriend, just some guy I met at a bar.

Just in time Richie came out of the office.
“Okay ladies. Time to get on the road. Move your asses out!”

Some guys heard Lenny, some didn’t. Some understood what he meant, some didn’t. I was big and strong and worked hard but I was weird. Wasn’t I married? Wasn’t I seen around town with my wife and kid? How could I be gay? I didn’t proclaim it. I didn’t hide it. I didn’t back down from it. I gave up a lot to be a gay man and there was no turning back. Lenny’s proclamation nudged the gay fact forward again. Some of the guys didn’t care. And some did.

I was on the tree truck with Nick that day. When we got to our first stop he turned off the engine and stared at me.

“So. Are you gay or what?”

“Yes.”

“I knew you were fucked up. Now you’re even more fucked up than I thought you were.”

Now when it was just the two of us in the truck, Nicky often took his big dick out, “to give it some air.” It did glow like Excalibur but it was golden in the sunlight.

“Look at this, Ribs. Look but don’t touch.” Nick said.

“Okay.”

“For a fag like you this is a fucking banquet, huh?”

“Oh yes. For all us fags, you know, everywhere.”

“Okay,” he said, as he waved it back and forth. “I was just checking to see how much of a fag you are.” Then he put it away.

A storm blew through town and knocked over more than fifty trees. We were out all day and into the night, cutting them up, and pushing them through the wood chipper. I was tearing through a juicy sycamore with a power saw. Its spray choked me and made my eyes water and I was pouring sweat. Nick came up behind me and pressed up against my butt.

“If only your little friends on Christopher Street could see you now,” he whispered in my ear. I wished I had little friends on Christopher Street who could see me.

One morning he had to go up in the extended arm of the bucket to reach some upper branches.

“Come with me,” he said, holding open the little hinged door.

“There’s only room for one,” said.

“It’ll be OK.”

I squeezed in, in front of him and we rose, shakily, into the upper reaches of a Norway maple. I used the pole pruner with the extended arm to trim the lighter branches while Nick tore through the sturdy ones with a power saw. He was pressed up against me with his hot, Chesterfield breath on my neck. His own pole pruner was extended and I felt its hot nudging at my butt.
“This is nice, ain’t it, you and me way up here alone?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“I bet you’re thinking about what it would be like to in bed with me, huh?”

“I certainly think that would be, um, interesting.” We laughed, but with the wood and the sweat, one twitch and he would have been inside me.

They came in waves, the airings, the unsheathings and the whispers. Always when it was just the two of us. Yes, it was a big beautiful cock. And yes I was gay but two and two did not have to make four this time. Nick had a hair trigger temper. His mighty sword waved but it was attached to a stick of dynamite.

One otherwise pokey afternoon I watched him play gin with a couple of new CETA hires in the break room. Suddenly, he whipped out a switch blade and sliced the wrist of the guy opposite him because he thought he cheated. Another CETA hire, a scrappy Latin guy with a bad attitude was assigned to the tree truck before me. Nick was in the truck, the guy was yapping outside of it. Nick jumped out, punched him in the face and pushed him to the ground. The guy went home bleeding and never came back. In the DPW yard, Nick Nardone was the boss.

Nick did what he did and I smiled. He was playing me and I was playing him. This mating dance was just sexy enough for me as it was. Anything else was too dangerous and not worth it. So that was that.

And then it wasn’t.

Nick and I were at the Preakness Pub for lunch. We all loved Kitty, the pretty blonde barmaid. Some of the guys asked her out but she turned them down. She had plans: she was working her way through business school and wanted to open a chain of nail salons. Her voice was tuneful and perky and her dazzling smile was genuine. I had a bit of a crush on her myself and always asked her about school.

Nick worked her over from the minute they met. He flattered her, built her up, and then knocked her down. He tantalized her, then demeaned her, rotating his weapon array so that she was always off balance. After a few months of Nick’s toxic attention, Kitty smiled less, gained a little weight and seemed scattered and anxious. He had her where he wanted her. I was sure Nick was fucking her because he never bragged about Kitty the way he did about all the others.

It was pay day so Nick and I split a Preakness Pizza with the works and drank boiler makers. He told Kitty her hair looked pretty all hanging loose.

“But I better not find one of them bleached blonde hairs in the pie.”

When Kitty turned to get us more whiskey shots, Nick said, “Oh yeah. That’s my favorite view. And it looks like you went up a pant size, Mama. More to love.”

Kitty looked crushed and she spilled some of the whiskey.

I went to the bathroom and was at a urinal doing the final shimmy shake when Nick came in. He stood at the next urinal.

“Look at this, Ribs. Look at this thing.”
I looked. It throbbed and glowed even in the dreary bathroom light. Was that for me or for Kitty? How many birds can you kill with one big dick?

“You want this, right?” He shook it.

“Yep.”

“You want to suck on this, don’t you?”

“More than anything in the fucking world.”

“I bet you dream about sucking on this, right?”

I was drunk. I was pissed off. I didn’t like the way he treated Kitty. She was a good kid. And—most important—never tell me what I dream about.

I zipped up and stepped toward him.

“Yeah. I want it. I want it right now. I want you to give it to me right now:”

He looked scared. His cock got soft.

“It’s just you and me here right now. Nobody has to know.” I blocked the door.

I held out my hand and beckoned him, beckoned it.

Nick backed up and wound up against the toilet stall door.

“Yeah, that’s good, baby. I can do you in there. More privacy,” I said.

I locked the bathroom door, stepped toward him and growled.

“I want it. Give it to me, now. Give it to me. Come on. Give it to me.”

He screamed like Jamie Lee Curtis in Halloween, squeezed past me, unlocked the bathroom door and ran out. When I came out, he was gone. I paid the check and found him in the truck. “Let’s get back to work,” he said and we were quiet for the rest of the day. That was the end our mating dance. Now and then a few sparks went off and fizzled out.

Nick, of course, was the one who developed the system for rating breasts. Big ones were called Honkers and small ones were Squeakers. Nicky and crew felt it was their duty to let women know how their racks rated. They would lean on the horn and yell out, Nice honkers, sweetheart! Or: Show me those squeakers!

On the way to a fallen tree one morning, we saw a pretty, well-dressed woman in her thirties crossing Broad Street just in front of us. I got the feeling this was a big day for her, a new job, a new dress--something was up. Nick blasted the horn and shouted, “Gorgeous honkers, sweetheart!”

The pretty woman jumped. She was startled and upset. You could see she lost her momentum. Nick started to honk again.
I grabbed his arm. “Let them live, Nick. Let them live.”

He stopped and stared at me with his blunt black eyes and shook his head at my strangeness. Later that day we passed another good looking woman and Louie (Rags) Ragazzi reached past me for the horn. Nick stopped him.

“No, Rags. We can’t do that no more. Let them live! Right, Ribs? Let them live!” he said in a whiny singsong voice.

In the fall, all power was deployed to leaf removal and Richie was like a general leading his balky troops in battle against the forces of nature. The bright green leaves of summer were now the crispy, red, brown and gold enemy, clogging streets and drains. With his walkie talkie glued to his ear, Richie seemed to be commandingly, adorably everywhere. Some of the guys called him Mouselini but if it weren’t for him the town would have been smothered in leaves that were dangerous when wet and even more deadly if they froze.

Don’t mess with Bart. I learned why one golden autumn afternoon. I was one of the Mouselini’s army of peons raking leaves into piles. Bart was working the Front Loader. He scooped up the piles of leaves in his bucket and dumped them into a fleet of waiting trucks. We rakers decided to take a break but Bart wanted to finish for the day. He singled me out of the crowd and shouted in his booming voice, “Move your bony ass, Ribs!” I didn’t look up or turn around, just leaned on my rake and gave him the finger. I didn’t see him jump out of the loader. I was 6’2 and 180 pounds. Bart was 6’3 and packing around 300. He grabbed me, picked me up like I was sack of dirty laundry and tossed me into a truck where I landed on a bed of fragrant, crunchy leaves. It was fun to fly through the air and land safely. I should have been pissed but I wasn’t. Bart and I nodded at each other in a guarded friendly way after that.

A month later there was a blizzard. We got the word a few hours earlier and were sent home to prepare. I knew that I might be on duty for 24 hours or more so I laid out my thermal long johns, fleece ear warmers, a bulky sweater and two pairs of heavy socks. I slathered my work boots in mink oil and set a small bottle of sambuca on my kitchen counter. Then I lay down with Lovey and tried to sleep while I waited for the call from Richie. I never used an alarm clock. I would set my mind to the time I needed to wake up and that system worked for me. Now that I had Lovey, I placed her within view so I could wake up looking at her sidelong glance.

Richie had me on his short list of first responders because I was dependable and good at the prep part of a blizzard, getting the trucks ready by attaching the plows and putting chains on the tires. It was a tough, cold and sometimes dangerous job, but it was important and made me feel valuable. I didn’t mind getting dirty.

The trucks, lined up in the garage bays side by side, were shuddering, slobbering, behemoths. We jacked up their rear ends and wrapped the cold, coarse chains around the big wet tires, sliding under the truck to make sure the chains were securely connected on all sides. It was disgusting and sexy to be underneath the truck, our faces intimate with its greasy, fragrant rear end. We worked quickly just in case the heavy duty jack decided to collapse under the truck’s grunting, shivering tonnage. After a couple of hours the rest of the crew showed up and took the trucks out. There was a pair to every truck, plow guy and wing man, since not everyone was proficient in plowing. I usually got stuck with the peons with shovels,
sometimes with Schatzie and Chad. We would often be out all night and came up with a rule: you get to say 'it's cold' three times. Anytime you let it slip after that, you got a face full of snow.

Don't mess with Bart, Lesson Number Two came when I was part of a crew clearing out a municipal parking lot. Bart was working the front loader and I had a shovel. I was cleaning around a parking meter and Bart wanted me out of the way so he could scoop out the whole lane. I held up my hand, wait, and he blasted the front loader’s obscene *Fanfare for Satan* horn. I jumped out of my skin and shouted, “Fuck you, you fat bastard!” I wanted to say ‘You Fat Black Bastard’ but, luckily something stopped me. On his throne way up high Bart stared at me and leaned on the horn again. I knew he hated the cold and wouldn’t get out of the warm cab so I was safe. I stood my ground and held my shovel in front of me like a lance, the village idiot squaring off against a dragon. In one graceful swoop, Bart scooped me up in a bucket full of snow and dumped me and the snow into the body of a dump truck. It was big, bad and wrong, just like Bart but so bold and brilliantly executed that I was exhilarated.

The next big snow, he slipped on ice getting off the front loader and sprained his ankle. I was there when it happened and drove him to the Emergency Room at Columbus Hospital. I stayed with him through the waiting room and treatment and we talked the whole time. He said my two brave, stupid stands with the rake and the shovel tickled him and he thought: Who the fuck is this guy? He didn’t know whether to kill me or kiss me, so instead he just tossed me. Bart was a year younger than me and unhappily married to his tough, pretty high school sweetheart, Kayla. They had a beautiful two year old daughter, Kenya, who looked just like Bart. Instead of going back to his tense apartment, Bart began to stop by my quiet pad with beer and pizza or a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken and hang out. He often didn’t show up when planned and but would pop by unexpectedly at other times

“What’s up with that?” I asked.

“It’s a black thing,” he said.

Bart had a crush on Lovey. One night he picked her up and held her in the air in front of him. “She’s the perfect woman,” he said. “She’s beautiful—with no voice for nagging, no hair for shedding, and no arms for grabbing.” Then he kissed her on the lips and I thought I saw a blush on her alabaster cheek.

One night snowy night we were assigned plow detail. I had never operated the plow and wanted to learn how but Bart only let me be his wing man. It wasn’t a big snow and we were just cruising around, racking up overtime until Richie told us to stop. We listened to the jingle bell chant of the truck’s chains, talked trash and got buzzed on my trusty little bottle of Sambuca. The truck was running smoothly but we kept hearing a strange, rhythmic whirring sound. We were near the Animal Shelter and pulled into its quiet dead end street. Bart turned off the engine and we still heard the sound. He turned it back on and we heard the sound. Bart was a gifted amateur mechanic and tinkering with cars was fun for him. On/off. On/off.

In the quiet of the cold night I thought the whirr sounded like a shy little flying saucer looking for a safe place to land and I said so.

“No, it’s not that. I know this sound,” Bart said. “Let me think.”

He stroked his goatee and announced:
“The belt has slipped off the alternator and now it’s just a motor.”

“What?” I asked him to repeat it.

“The belt has slipped off the alternator and now it’s just a motor.”

We were completely buzzed on the Sambuca now.

“Say that again.”

“The belt has slipped off the alternator and now it’s just a motor.”

I took his hand.

“I think that is one of the most beautiful sentences I have ever heard,” I said.

He blushed, completely taken by surprise. We started making out and I wound up blowing him in the truck while the possible little flying saucer hovered around us sending photos of skull for one back to Mars. When we stepped out of the truck to pee, I noticed that the flashing red beacon light on top of the cab was out. It was still turning but the light was dead. We got into the truck and Bart flipped a switch above his head. The whirring sound stopped and the Martian invasion was averted.

One Saturday night he wanted to go out but he didn’t have any money. That’s OK, I said, I have money. I had twenty dollars. When he showed up it turned out his idea of no money was twenty dollars, so between us we had forty, just enough to make some noise. We drove into New York and wound up at The River Club, a big gay dance warehouse in the far West Village. It was Bart’s first time in a gay bar and he was nervous. A pack of sweet guys from Staten Island thought we were a cute couple and offered us coke and bought us drinks. It’s Raining Men was blasting through the club and I didn’t want to spook Bart by leaving him to go dance but our Staten Island friends came and dragged us onto the floor. Bart was a good, showy dancer. At one point he picked up the smallest Staten Island guy, tossed him in the air—and caught him. It caused several involuntary ejaculations throughout the club. We got cranked and hammered and danced all night long, crawling through the Holland Tunnel at 10am. I wondered how he squared this with Kayla, who was no pushover. All I had waiting for me was Lovey, sitting propped by the window like a beautiful Mrs. Bates, you know, Norman’s mom. She didn’t have to be apologized to, walked or fed and her shapely shadow at the window kept burglars at bay.

Bart and I fucked around a couple of more times but it wasn’t about sex at all. We had great chemistry and lots of mutual nerve. I knew I was a mess, always skimming just a pubic hair’s length above disaster. Scrawny, broken-hearted, hungry I was full of some kind of hissing juice that could be sweet or turn sour in an instant. I was in freefall. Bart chose to tag along for the ride. It could seem like fun sailing through the air but the direction was down, down, down and the landing wasn’t soft. The stakes were different for Bart. He was playing at being crazy but I really was crazy.

Hanging with Bart fueled the hothouse gossip of the break room. We came in together from a job and Nick stood up, smoothed his mustache and announced,
“Well, well. Here comes Mr. and Mrs. Ruffridge.” All eyes were on us. He pointed at us and said, “I don’t wanna say nothing…but I’m not sure who’s fucking who here. One always got a hole in the front of his pants and the other one always got a hole in the back.”

In response, Bart kissed my hand and I curtsied.

Whenever you heard that phrase, “I don’t wanna say nothing,” it was always followed by a big BUT and something hateful being said.

Chester (Binky) Binkowski was the supervisor of the Water and Sewage Department. He was a notch above Richie in seniority and a sour little Humpty Dumpty with a crew cut who always had a Parliament dangling from his frown. Binky’s wife was a big shot in the Board of Education. Binky cruised around town on personal errands in his pickup and showed up at job sites where he watched, hands on his hips, and barked out a few orders. Nick called him Meat Byproduct. Binky got sick, was out for awhile. It was cancer. He came back to work for a bit and looked terrible. One afternoon, he was in the full break room talking and then he left. For some reason he didn’t go all the way outside. I could see his shadow in the doorway.

“I don’t wanna say nothing, Nick said, touching his upper lip “BUT who wants to get in on my pool?”

“What pool?” Twitchy asked.

“Pick the month that Binky dies.” I looked at the shadow in the doorway. It shuddered.

When the town decided to start a curbside recycling program, I was happy that Richie chose me for it. As a former hippie I believed in recycling and faithfully brought my newspapers and glass to the one recycling center in the area. Recycling was an important and satisfying job and, despite some hiccups, life was good on truck 607.

“RECYCLING PROGRAM REPORTS PROGRESS” was the headline in Bloomfield Life, below which was a picture of us loading the truck. “In an average week the Bloomfield Recycling Department picks up between 16 and 20 tons of newspaper, glass and aluminum. The program has brought $25,000 into the town treasury in less than a year.”

Hot on the heels of that headline, a black cloud descended on our glorious, well-reviewed Camelot of Refuse and his name was Fausto Farina. He had been appointed Recycling Supervisor to oversee the operation. Fausto was the aluminum siding czar of Bloomfield. Just about every house in town was covered in aluminum siding and posted a sign with his name on it. His wife, Albertina Farina, was the town administrator’s secretary, a powerful position. Her picture was always in Bloomfield Life, dressed up in a toga gown at function or dressed down at a Little League game. With her olive skin and bleached blond hair she looked like a grouchy cocker spaniel.

Fausto wore black all the time, including a black trench coat and a black fedora. He was short and dark with slicked back thinning hair, a broken nose and dazzling white caps that accentuated the cheerlessness of his infrequent smile. Tinted shades always covered his bulbous eyes. You could tell he knew something about something: who stole the meatballs and where they were hidden. I wondered if this job was some kind of pay off for him, like if he landed the rumored new experimental truck, he’d get
the contract to cover Town Hall in aluminum siding and nobody had to know where those meatballs were—ever.

We hadn’t heard we were getting a new boss so we were surprised when Richie introduced Fausto to us one morning as we were getting the truck ready to pull out.

“You guys been doing an OK job so far but now that I’m in charge I want one hundred percent performance one hundred percent of the time.” Fausto said. “We are on the short list for a brand new recycling truck and I want to make sure we get it. If you got a problem with any of this, better speak up now so you can kiss this job goodbye.” Then he added, “Capiche?”

“Nice to meet you too,” I said.

Chad and Schatzie looked at the ground and I looked at Fausto in disbelief and a displeasure it was impossible to hide. We were off to a bad start. A brand new prototype recycling truck had been designed in Canada. Thanks to our work and the aggressive recycling program, Bloomfield was on the short list to try it for three months. If that test went well, we might even get to keep it. Fausto, with his greasy combination of skills and connections, was brought on to ensure that we got a shot at this miracle truck. Schatzie already had a voice for the truck, a seductive whisper with a lisp. In our fantasy we drove around town and our new truck whispered in its sexy voice to the refuse collected at the curb, “Come to me. Come to me”. The papers would then fly through the air like swans and the bottles and cans would march to the back of the truck like little soldiers and hop into the back of the truck to be happily crushed.

We had to be on our best behavior because we were often trailed by a mini fleet of state officials and reps from the recycling truck company to gauge if we were worthy of this sexy whispering miracle truck. They all dressed in black, just like Fausto, and followed us in official black cars. And, like Fausto, they even wore silly little black fedoras. Schatzie called them The Black Hat Brigade.

For us it was like Lent. We had to give up singing, dancing, weed, monster breakfasts at Buff’s and getting into fights with ugly old women. The Black Hat Brigade sometimes got out of their cars and watched us at particular stops. They talked about us like we were lab rats but never directly to us. If they did have a question they asked Fausto who had to ask us since he didn’t know anything about the job. All this trailing and stopping and starting, in addition to daily reports we had to fill out, put us consistently behind schedule.

Fausto sucked up to the Black Hats and when they were gone, tore into us. He started at a growling sneer and worked himself into something like a scream. His rage was so out of proportion that it stunned us into silence at first. He used the word sabotage a lot. I was surprised that he knew it. We were just doing our job as usual so I didn’t know who the saboteurs were. I had never seen someone froth at the mouth before. His fits sucked all the joy out of our merry band.

The miracle recycling truck had passed its trials in Quebec and three big towns in the province bought them for their fleet. I didn’t hear this from Fausto but from Rose, our Buff’s waitress. I bumped into her at Food Town, in her civilian clothes with her copper hair in big pink rollers covered by a big pink scarf. She was worried about us because we just disappeared, thanks to this punishing new schedule. She waited on Fausto and Chubby when they met with reps from the truck company. From what she gathered, the Canadian reps were going to drive the truck down in a few days and present it to us.
A few days later I turned the corner at the DPW yard and saw a big, beautiful green entity through the chain link fence. There was a small crowd around it. A first glance it looked like a jolly Disney-fied stegosaurus without the bony plates on its back. It was our gorgeous new recycling truck: 20 feel long, 8 feet wide, almost 9 feet high. It had two axles, 200 horsepower, and a 5 speed manual transmission and weighed over 30,000 pounds. Schatzie, Chad and I all got to it at the same time and jumped up and down, clapping our hands.

"Don't touch nothing," Richie said. They're gonna give you a demonstration."

While Fausto, Chubby and the Canadian reps were having breakfast at Buff's we crawled all over the gigantic yet fragile beautiful green monster. Its snub nose and two big windows gave it a merry face and personality and the complicated dashboard, loaded with dials, buttons, gauges and levers was like a boy's wet dream. Bart jumped into the cab and instantly figured it all out, then he explained it to us.

When the truck reps and Fausto showed up they were accompanied by a television crew and some reporters. The jolly Canadian rep gave us a very cursory tutorial on the truck's operation, playing to the cameras the whole time. A state senator breezed into the yard and, after a quick huddle with the other rep, went on camera to say, "This is a wonderful day in the history of recycling." Then he left.

The truck's cavernous rear end had a giant auger in it that leisurely turned and massaged the papers into its gaping maw. A TV reporter wanted a demo and Fausto barked at me to throw some paper in there. All we had on hand were a couple of filthy bundles from the bizarre bin that were tied with panty hose. The camera man gave me the cue and I tossed the bundles into the maw, pulled the lever and watched as they were spun and drawn deeper into the truck's black hole. Later that night I watched the segment on the News at Seven. I saw my bony arms toss the bundle in and then the camera pulled back and showed me unhappily staring into the truck's big ass as if I were going to throw myself in too.

That camera captured me looking at my immediate future. The truck was beautiful that was true but our honeymoon with it was short and Schatzie never did use that sexy whisper. Yes, the cab's cool, sleek lime-green interior had a new baby/new car smell. Yes, the luminous dashboard looked like it belonged on the Starship Enterprise. Unfortunately the truck's handsome head didn't match it's enormous, clunky rear end. And, in operation, the truck had the technical and emotional problems (its ignition didn't like rain) of a French sports car. The leisurely auger in its big ass turned clockwise in a circular motion, like a washing machine. Papers tended to get jammed unless you inserted them, carefully, a few at a time. When it jammed, we had to open up the back and manually remove the paper. Time lost.

There were two jaunty square containers on the passenger side designed to hold glass and aluminum. When they were full, we pulled an equally jaunty lever and the containers rose shakily like little elevators in pre war buildings. When they reached the top, arms attached to their sides stretched out, tipped them over, and dumped their clanking passengers into the truck's hollow body. The containers often got stuck in the tipping position, which meant one of us had to climb up there, bang on them and help tip them all the way over. More time lost.

At some point every day, Fausto's car screeched into our path. He jumped out and charged at us, screaming, "What the fuck! What the fuck! What the fuck!" He was in over his head and it was going to be our fault. Sabotage! Those hidden meatballs were coming back to haunt him.
I dreaded coming to work now. We were always off balance and felt stupid. Chad and Schatzie launched into long, soaring anti-Fausto arias in the safety of the truck but trembled under the assault of his foul, foaming mouth. I tried to keep my trap shut because when I piped up it usually got me in trouble.

We were behind schedule at a stop on East Passaic Avenue that had called in a complaint about their piled up recycling. We sorted through their bizarre newspapers and wet boxes overflowing with empty bottles of Old Crow bourbon. The auger was jammed and the jaunty containers were stuck in mid air. Since the bottles hadn’t been rinsed I was getting a nice buzz from whiffs of the cheap booze. It was a cold day in early November.

We heard the screech and there was Fausto.

“What the fuck! Why are you still here? What's taking so long?”

We pointed to the jammed auger and the suspended containers.

“Fix it!” he screamed. “I’m tired of getting crap because of your lousy work, you bunch of retards.”

I saw Chad and Schatzie wince and shrink.

“You can’t talk to us like that!” I shouted.

Fausto’s eyes bugged out behind his shades. The spit bubbled around his shit-crack lips. He was right in my face, well in my chin, since I was a foot taller than him.

“Who do you think you’re talking to, asshole?”

“I’m talking to you.” My voice was bigger than his.

“You just made the biggest mistake of your life!”

There was a whoosh and Time Stood Still. It whistled with its hands in its pockets and played pocket pool. I was no longer standing on East Passaic Avenue in Bloomfield, New Jersey, next to a shiny green truck and two shrinking friends with an ugly little man spitting at me. I was transported to another dimension, the one where you rated the mistakes in your life. The sky turned into a giant green chalk board and on it, in white cloud chalk, every mistake I had ever made was being written, slowly, in a clear, open hand. All I could see so far were the glowing words The Biggest Mistake of My Life and the numbers: 1, 2, 3. It looked like the title of a new, bad game show. I thought number one was dropping out of college and knocking up my girlfriend. Nah. We had a few good years and I got my wonderful son out of that mistake. The Biggest Mistake of My Life! I was thinking hard about it in this wonderful timeless bubble when the radio in Fausto’s car crackled.

“Attention all Supervisors and Foremen. We just got word that Binky, uh, passed away. Please return to the yard.”

There was another whoosh and we were back on East Passaic Avenue. Fausto wiped the foam from his mouth, pointed at the truck and the stalled not so jaunty jammed buckets.

“Fix this shit.” He peeled away.
The miracle truck went back to Quebec for repairs, never to be seen again. Instead of assigning us our trusty old dump truck, 607, Fausto rented us vans from Rent a Wreck. We never knew the reason why. I didn't understand and I didn't like it. Wasn't the program a success that brought in new revenue? It said so in the paper! Couldn't we at least get our old truck back? We knew how to stack and pack a dump truck but the Rent a Wreck vans were something junkies used to move their soiled futons from one shooting gallery to another.

Everything was so clear before Fausto; our work was sunny and wide open, now we dreaded every day and the days were filled with shadows and secrets. There was a big lie in the middle of all this and we kept tripping over it. Along the way, the spirit of our merry band had been broken, a lot less laughter, no singing and dancing. The Case of the Stolen Meatballs had returned and I had an idea about who stole them. Whenever Fausto scolded us now, he ignored me and talked to Schatzie in a somewhat gentler tone. Schatzie did very few sound effects and Chad's hearty laugh was seldom heard.

The first week of December was cold. We were now days behind schedule chugging around town in a succession of Rent a Wrecks that kept breaking down. One afternoon as we turned the corner on a busy street, the strap holding the barrel full of aluminum cans snapped in the cold. The can fell off the truck and rolled into the middle of the intersection, scattering cans in every direction. They sounded like a stampede of cowbells as we chased after them and tried to avoid oncoming traffic. Schatzie radioed the office and a squad car came. Two cops directed traffic while we cleaned up the mess. When we got it sorted out, we pulled onto a side street. Our carefully stacked newspapers (that crisscross pattern) had collapsed into a slippery chaotic sea of newsprint. When we had everything re-stacked and ready to go, the truck wouldn't start. We sat in the dirty cab, tired and defeated, radioed the yard to get a jump start. We got the tire screech and Fausto.

“What the fuck is it now?” He started at a scream this time.

“You’re kidding, right?” I said.

“I ain’t talking to you, asshole.”

“Well, I’m talking to you!” I started pointing, usually a bad sign. “This is all your fault. We lost the new truck. We lost 607. We are going backwards not forwards since you showed up. You’re no manager.”

“You’re a dead man,” he said. His eyes bulged and the mouth foam flew into my face.

I kept pointing and he started backing up.

“You’re pathetic!” I shouted. “You fucked up somewhere and now we’re stuck with this stupid truck and nothing works anymore. We were doing great until you showed up with your lies and your meatballs…”

“Meatballs? What are you talking about, you stupid spic?” He looked scared. I hadn't meant to say meatballs. To me, he was now the same as the yapping old lady. I kept pointing and advancing.

“You’re pathetic! Get the fuck out of here. Get the fuck out of here!”
He got in his car, wild-eyed and screeched away. Chad, Schatzie and I were quiet until we got a jump and drove the truck back to the yard. I thought I was defending us, defending them. Did I go too far? Probably. I was a stupid spic—and crazy too.

The next morning in the break room we were told that Fausto had a heart attack that night and was in Intensive Care at Columbus Hospital. Everybody looked at me and then looked away. The looking away took root because nobody really looked at me again after that. Fausto was right. I was a dead man. I was right there in front of them but I was not to be seen, for any reason. Except for the end of that day when we assembled in the break room and Nicky stroked his furry upper lip.

“I don’t want to say nothing,” he said “BUT--Ribs you gave that man a heart attack.”

Was I supposed to feel bad? I didn’t. I was a wild animal like the rest of them now and it was him or me. I was braced for a big, ugly payback.

Richie gave us back trusty old 607 back but Schatzie and Chad were quiet and glum now. The bond was broken. Schatzie started to give orders, in a new voice with the same lisp. Chad’s girlfriend was pregnant and he was getting unhappily married. The job limped along, drama-free and joyless. Fausto was making a recovery, damn it. Christmas was around the corner and the CETA guys were supposed to get a bump in pay. I was a Dead Man Walking, except to Bart. He said it would all blow over.

The morning of December 23rd I went to punch my time card. It wasn’t there but in its place was a handwritten note: report to the office. Chubby Vennello, handed me an envelope and said “Sorry.”

Richie, the beautiful mouse, shook my hand and squeezed it. I wanted to kiss him. I was terminated with two weeks’ severance. I walked out, went to my car. My ears were ringing. I drove to my apartment. I turned on WBAI and lay on the couch with Lovey next to me with her quizzical look, what happened? My head was spinning. Me and my big mouth. I asked Lovey: Was this the biggest mistake of my life? I thought she turned her beautiful head a millimeter and lowered her eyes infinitesimally, which I intuited as Ask Again Later.

Merry Fucking Christmas!

I had been fired for Misconduct and my unemployment claim was denied. I appealed it.

An appeal tribunal was scheduled. The town had a long list of complaints: lewd behavior, foul language, terrorizing a senior citizen, insubordination, (insubordination!) among other crimes. The hearing took place in a windowless back room in the unemployment office. I was flattered that so many high-ranking officials, including the town attorney and star witness, Mrs. Albertina Farina, were assembled to testify against me. The arbitrator was a pretty young woman, Miss Silvestri. She was well dressed and looked familiar. Wait. Was she the woman Nick spooked when he hit the horn and yelled out “Nice Honkers?” Maybe.

“And another thing you may not know about me, Miss Silvestri, is that I said, Let Them Live when they tried to honk the horn again and no woman was ever harassed again, thanks to me,” I wanted to say. It would certainly help make the case that there was a pattern to the universe.
I wore a jacket and tie to each hearing and brought one of my favorite books with me, Grace Paley’s *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*. Her bracing prose helped me focus. I borrowed Lovey’s cool, steady gaze and felt rooted in what I knew to be true. Whenever a charge was leveled against me, I channeled Lovey. I tilted my head, raised an eyebrow, suggesting I should be surprised, but I’m not. The magic word was *inscrutability*.

“You punched in late 150 days in a row,” the attorney said. They had doctored my time cards. He waved a fist full of them in my face. They were out for blood.

“That’s not true,” I said. My voice low and calm. It seemed to stop everybody in their tracks.

“He drove around town with a naked dummy!”

“That’s not true.” She was wearing my shirt and she’s no dummy.

“He attacked my husband and almost killed him,” Albertina said.

“That’s not true.” It was just luck that he had the heart attack.

“Nothing personal,” the angry villagers said to me as they walked by after lying about me.

“Nothing personal,” I said after I calmly testified that this witch hunt was created to cover Fausto’s incompetence and some shady deal that lost us the new recycling truck. You know, the stolen meatballs caper.

My Lovey-inspired inscrutability spooked them. There were three hearings. After the third hearing when the angry townsfolk left with their pitchforks, Miss Silvestri squeezed my hand.

“You’re right and they’re wrong. There’s something fishy here,” she said.

I didn’t win the appeal but by then the six week penalty period was over and I was able to collect unemployment benefits.

I fell behind in the rent. I told Willie about getting fired and the unemployment thing.

“That’s a tough break,” he said, looking at the ground. “I don’t know what to tell you, Randy.” (Which wasn’t my name.) “The landlord wants you out of the building.”

A day later someone banged on my door. I was doing pushups and opened the door with no shirt. Fuck it all.

It was the landlord, a waspy, handsome man in his fifties. He was startled.

“Nothing personal,” he said, “But I can’t have this. You’re going to have to leave.”

There was a whoosh and time stood still again.

I was struck by a thunderbolt of courage and logic. My back was against the wall and I had nowhere to run. I would not run. Enough is enough. I felt calm and strong. I was Excalibur and I glowed with righteousness.
“I understand. I’m not going to give you a long sad story. I lost my job and I’m not collecting unemployment so I have no money.” I said in my steady appeal tribunal voice.

He was startled. He started to walk away and then turned back.

“Can you give me something?”

“I can’t promise that right now,” I said. I took a beat. “So you do what you have to do and I’ll do what I have to do.”

Those words rang out loud and true like my own private Liberty Bell. They sounded so good in the timeless bubble that I said them again.

“You do what you have to do and I’ll do what I have to do.” I smiled this time.

“I understand,” the landlord said. He smiled too. He was impressed (phew!) “Keep me posted.” He shook my hand.

“I will,” I said.

“Thank you!” He was still smiling.

I was shaking after I shut the door. I picked Lovey up and lay down on the couch with her.

I held her above me and there was a glow in her cheeks. Was it the sunlight or was she, could she be—proud of me? I kissed her and lay with her cheek to cheek. She felt warm. I thought I felt a tremble in her cheek. Was she smiling? Was I? We fell into a deep, happy sleep even though things were really, really fucked up.

__________

Though he has always been a writer, Manuel Igrejas is known in theater as the longtime publicist for Blue Man Group, among many other innovative artists. Igrejas fiction is included in Men on Men 4 and “Egghead Payne” is available on Amazon.com. His poetry is included in A New Geography of Poets, among other publications. His first two plays were the well-reviewed Shrinkage, Kitty and Lina. Other plays: Miss Mary Dugan and Hassan and Sylvia (Best Play Awards at the 2010 and 2011 Fresh Fruit Festivals). Margarita and Max was named Best Short Play in 2013 Midtown Festival. Miss Mary Dugan, Hassan and Sylvia Margarita and Max and NSA are available at www.indietheaternow.com. NSA, was an O’Neill semi-finalist 2013 and well-reviewed in its Stage Left Studio run, July-August 2014. Other plays include Chantal, Doofus, Chair and Pittsburgh! www.mannyigrejas.com.
The Troubleseeker tells the contemporary odyssey of Antinio, a native-born Cuban who confronts his gay identity in post-revolution Cuba and as a refugee in America. Narrated by the ancient Roman Emperor and demigod Hadrian, The Troubleseeker weaves Cuban Santería traditions with classical Greek mythology to depict Antinio’s quest to achieve both freedom and love.

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

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

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Walking in Greenwich Village

I can still remember the first time
I walked along these streets — Christopher,
Grove, Barrow, Perry. It was spring
and the night was alive with voices
and car horns and the random shout
of one friend calling out to another.
A wind swept in off the Hudson, calling me
to cross the highway and stand on a pier,
the lights of buildings gleaming
on the other side of the river. Tonight,
as I leave the pier, I feel the same way
I did years ago. On tree-lined streets,
some brick, even cobblestone, brownstones
rise above me, their modest edifices
unable to block out the imposing sky,
and on one corner I stop when I see him
—his face vivid in the darkening night—
for I can’t help but imagine he is like
another young man—a sailor, perhaps,
or a castaway longing for a better life—
who, a century before, found himself
bundled in a coat on a cold spring night
as he lingered on this corner, having spent
a week on a steam liner crossing the Atlantic,
heading for the New World. He discovered
a home he did not realize he had until
he walked along these streets for the first time,
their names speaking to him from
street signs illuminated by moonlight.

—Paul Alexander
A native of Louisville, KY, Richard Linker now lives in San Francisco, CA. Many of his poems are inspired by his work at the California Academy of Sciences. His poems have appeared in *The James White Review, Raven Chronicles, Co(m)fusion*, and *Holy Titclamps*, among others.
Two Springs

Spring breeze played at the window this way once
When I lay spooned with John, and far from us
The ocean pumped the vast breath of the air,
Poetries of salt and temperature its genius.
My eye wandered his hair, the back of one ear.
Against my chest I felt his breath press and withdraw,
The physical fact of him impossibly true.
Now Spring enters again, stirring breath in that curtain-tranced day
Of slip in, suck out, belly and sway at the game of loving this world,
Eternal in its marking off time.
How good, that sweet breeze, lucid, watery air
Bearing a voice, laughter, lilac and dogs
As if a quiet Eden lay beyond, unobtrusive in its bounty.
Was I ever as peaceful as the smell of his hair enticed me to believe?
Yes—the body does not lie, but hopes.
He slept; the room, charged with our presence,
Took light at the windows like a great thirst satisfied,
And every detail was clear to me
Through to the still water at the heart of things.
Then all of it seemed contained within that room
Where we were shooting stars
As Pan opened up again his ageless rites among the flowers.

—Richard Linker
Lutèce
William Moeck

***

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CHELSEA STATION
“She’s a frump,” said Paul Bridgewater, contemplating a glass of Zind-Humbrecht Gewürtztraminer in his natty grey-flannel suit and Hermès tie. We had been led upstairs by Madame Soltner some fifteen minutes earlier to a pair of plump upholstered armchairs at a table next to the unlit fireplace. Madame was wearing a paisley print dress with a single strand of pearls.

“A fleering frump.”

“What?” I asked bewildered.

“I know that Jane helped you come out of the closet in high school, but look at how she dresses!” Jane Newcome and I starred in our drama club’s production of Eugene Ionesco’s The Bald Soprano at Franklin High school around the same time that André Soltner took ownership of the townhouse restaurant on East Fiftieth Street. In the decade or so after 1972, while Jane’s artistic career floundered, Lutèce had skyrocketed to the top of every best-restaurant list in the country. That it had managed to remain there despite Soltner’s flagrant heterosexuality did not surprise Paul at all.

“The coat she had on was a Salvation-Army reject,” he said, “and with hair like that, she could have been auditioning for the circus.”

“Jane didn’t help me come out of the closet,” I protested in defense of my former girlfriend. “I was bisexual in college, remember?” When perusing Lutèce’s menu, I had made the mistake of saying how Jane thought Paul seemed distracted last week at dinner. I had taken them both out for burgers at 103 Second Avenue at the corner of Sixth just before Christmas, and along tagged Stephen Western, Paul’s older lover, after we had watched My Beautiful Laundrette together.

“Perhaps she hopes to convert you back to your former self, but no one who eats beef that well done should be allowed through the Lincoln Tunnel.” Now that I was living in Manhattan and virtually out of the closet, Paul had explained how a chef’s sexual orientation was not the sole factor in determining a restaurant’s clientele. Paul had proposed that the gayness of 103 Second Avenue last week depended on its Gestalt, which he did not scruple to define.

Yet a foolish consistency was not a hobgoblin of Paul’s mind. He inferred Lutèce’s gayness that evening from the tooth-and-nail fight between gastronomes and gourmands for reservations there. They were fanatics of the same ilk, he proposed, as the opera-lovers who made Bayreuth pilgrimages, or the connoisseurs of the suntanned male form flocking summers to Mykonos and Ibiza. The pursuit of excellence was to him a certain signifier of homosexuality, he said as soon as the captain finished taking our dinner orders, for only heterosexuals contented themselves with mediocrity.

I stowed the paperback that was my subway reading material under my seat when a lidded copper pot was suddenly set before me. It contained fresh snails baked in butter, garlic, parsley and cepes, and it was served with crusty baguette slices for dipping in the butter. Paul had ordered one of the house specialties for himself, an Alsatian onion tart famous for the rich, flaky crust. He put a wedge of it on my bread plate, the grateful aroma of sautéed bacon and onions commingling with the hint of a pungent yet unexpected flavoring.

“I can’t figure out what’s in this.”

“Oh yum,” I said, taking out my notebook. “I don’t know what it is, but the pastry is delicious. So buttery!”
“You should ask for the recipe.” Paul knew my specialty was pastry, a major part of the cuisine in Alsace, and we ate in awe of Soltner’s genius.

“What are you reading?” Paul asked.

“A High Wind in Jamaica. Lance gave it to me.”

“You must miss him.”

“I do,” I admitted. Lance Norebo was an unemployed drag queen I had befriended one night when Paul took me dancing. Lance was a member of an avant-garde performance troupe, which was called Hot Peaches, and a strict macrobiotic. When I called to speak with him on the telephone in October, his roommate informed me point blank that Lance had died of the gay plague. Too shocked to press for details, I imagined that the less I knew about the disease the more likely it would go away. I never called back.

“You two were suited for one another well,” Paul scolded. “Just because I didn’t like him didn’t mean you had to spurn his advances. It’s not that I don’t like drag queens, either. I lost my virginity to a Dorothy-Lamour lookalike in the Port Authority men’s room. But each one that I’ve met has been a tissue of clichés from top to bottom. Mostly bottom.” Paul and Lance had gotten along like oil and water.

“Lance was not a cliché.”

“Didn’t you say his name was Oberon spelled backwards? The fact you two were so different should have been a draw, like the kids in the Laundrette movie: the one, an immigrant Pakistani, and the other, a working-class Brit. You missed countless opportunities to sleep with him.”

I was, on the other hand, alive.

“I remember how erotically he danced with you at the Mudd Club,” Paul continued.

“It was the Pyramid,” I corrected him, “and he danced with both of us.” I looked down at the cuff of my worn blue blazer and blushed. “Lance did like me, I know that. But I was too shy, I guess. It had less to do with your disapproval than with my own timidity.” I hadn’t had sex in over a year, for I was no good meeting people at bars and clubs.

Our main course arrived—Poussin roti aux fines herbes—a small roast chicken on a silver salver presented by the captain before being removed to the sideboard, where it was deftly carved into equal portions. The tender flesh was juicy, yet firm, and the crisp skin, fragrant with the heady aroma of fresh thyme, tarragon, and parsley. Golden new potatoes lay reposing on our plates next to little heaps of buttered haricots verts, and the sommelier presented Paul with a 1971 La Tâche from Domaine de la Romanée Conti. As headwaiter at the Four Seasons, Paul had the disposable income to treat me, a poor grad student, to luxurious dinners.

“I’m sorry Stephen can’t be here,” I said, “but cheers to good health.” We sniffed the dark red liquid and toasted. Paul’s lover of six years, Stephen, was a medievalist at New York University who vainly tried to offer me advice with the doctoral thesis I was stalled on.

“Don’t you worry! He’s boozing it up with his egghead friends.”
“Don’t you ever speak to him about his alcohol consumption?” I asked. It’s hard to believe now Stephen was going be dead in less than a year, but it would not be as the result of alcoholism.

“Well, you can lead a horse away from water, Walter, but you can’t stop him from drinking.” He fiddled in his breast pocket for something. “By the way, he wanted me to give you this.” Paul handed me a book review about Christine Froula’s *To Write Paradise: Style and Error in Pound’s Cantos*. Stephen liked clipping articles about literary modernism, the subject of my dissertation, from the *Times Literary Supplement*.

“Thanks.” Swirling my glass again, I said, “I smell ripe cherries.”

“There’s a hint of tar, too,” said Paul, putting the glass to his nose, “and barnyard.”

“No vegetables?” I grinned. It was an epithet for the worst vintages, Paul had said. “No wet dog?”

“No not a one.” It was Paul’s fondest hope to turn me into a food critic and have me forsake my scholarly career. He didn’t think future job prospects for academics looked good, which is why when we graduated from Rutgers he moved to the city to write poetry and wait tables while I stayed on in New Brunswick to earn a Master’s.

As we savored our main courses, a fat little man with a white toque and apron made his way round the room greeting patrons. Paul said unnecessarily loudly, “Lutèce’s Poussin is even better than Bocuse’s *Volaille en Vessie*.” Paul had celebrated his thirty-first birthday with Stephen in France the previous January, when the ten-to-one exchange rate made buying a Gaultier wool skirt for men affordable. The two took a plane for the day to restaurant Bocuse where they lunched on the chef’s signature chicken breast cooked with mushrooms and truffles inside a pig’s bladder.

“Some news,” I said. “I found out about Milton. I stopped by the library, and he told me that when he got home from work the night he was supposed to join us at Odeon, he discovered his apartment had been burglarized.” John Milton was curator of the Berg Collection at The New York Public Library, where my hours were consumed poring over Ezra Pound’s correspondence with Eliot. When I idly mentioned how I found someone from the library attractive, Paul insisted I invite him to dinner downtown. But John never showed up.

“He said they took his stereo and a leather attaché with his address book in it,” I added. Paul looked doubtful. I had also fibbed that Milton had an apartment on Beekman Place to make him sound more interesting to Paul, who could be a bit of snob sometimes. It was fortunate that Milton did study at Cambridge. “John said that when he got home, he realized he didn’t have my number.”

“You’re not listed?” Paul remained unconvinced.

“He said he didn’t know how my last name was spelled.”

Chef Soltner was at hand. “Monsieur Bridgewater! Comment ça va? How is the Professor?” He was like the Pillsbury dough boy with a thick French accent.

“Très bien, Chef. He’s away for work this week, so I came with mon ami, Walter Grony.” My father had shortened Grozynski when he came to the States after the war. My brother Anton hated it: *Groanin’ Tony,*
he was called at school. "Walter's a restaurant critic, and he's writing the first gay guidebook to Manhattan." Mortified, I nodded weakly and said nothing. Although I let Paul pick the places where we ate, I was never crystal clear about what constituted a gay restaurant.

"O really!" Soltner cried, his eyes widening in mock terror. "I never hear this before! Why you not tell me at beginning of the meal?" His English was not so fluent. "You let me take care then of the dessert."

"S'il vous plaît," answered Paul, whose French was good enough to salt sentences with key phrases, but not good enough to sustain an entire conversation with someone actually from France. Paul was sophisticated enough to order a six-course repast in Lyon, but his Middletown roots were inevitably betrayed by the ice cubes he demanded with pastis. "Walter has a big favor to ask you. He wants to know—actually we both want to know—the secret ingredient in your onion tart."

"I am telling you it is no secret. La tarte à l'oignon alsacienne is a dish I am preparing chez Lutèce since 1961. You are ready to write?" he beamed, spotting my notebook. "It is le muscade—nutmeg en anglais. You make ready the butter, the eggs, the yellow onion and lardon, no? You make first the bacon crispy. Then the onion, very thin, you sauté until they are changing color. Then you cover the pan very, very tight and you smother low for fifteen minute au minimum. Meanwhile, you are beating the egg avec la crème fraiche and you add le bon secret, le muscade, one teaspoon only." He raised an eyebrow. "Vouz comprenez tout ça?"

"He asks if you understand," volunteered Paul as I nodded circumspectly.

"When the onion, she is cooling, you are adding the bacon in the mix and you bake for trente, thirty minute, at 400 degrés, et voilà! Okay? You are getting it all now? I tell Madame Simone to write it."

Our table was rapidly cleared as soon as the chef departed and set with dessert forks and spoons. I asked if Paul had heard from Stephen, who was on a departmental search committee interviewing candidates specializing in Deconstructive approaches to the Renaissance. Paul said that of the five hundred and eighty five applicants, only ten were being interviewed at a Florida convention, when suddenly a succession of different sweets appeared, all compliments of the house, and each more delicious than the previous. A sensuous apple charlotte in a crème anglaise sauce was followed by a tart lemon bavaroise. Then came ethereal chocolate soufflés with a little platter of dense champagne truffles before an assortment of petit-fours accompanied our espressos.

Paul ordered two 1963 Bas-Armagnacs and lit a Rothman. The captain returned with big round snifters and a folded slip of paper on a silver tray. In crabbed handwriting could be read the following list of ingredients:

- 8 stripe bacon
- 4 egg
- 3 onion very thin
- 3 tbl. butter
- 1 cup crème fraiche
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. pepper
1 tsp. nutmeg (le secret!)
400 degree, 30 minutes

Paul gave it to me even though it was not the crust recipe I had wanted. I had been trying to master the all-butter crust since having learned as an adolescent to make strudel from a Polish-American cookbook my mother never used.

“A good recipe is like poem, ne c’est pas?” Paul asked smiling.

I smiled back at him. Paul used to mail poems on the back of postcards to friends, but the frequency had diminished over the years. There was something else I wanted to ask, but I didn’t know how to get to it politely.

“Soltner should publish a cookbook of his recipes,” he went on, “and you could help him polish his English for it.”

I wanted to press him about our dinner with Jane and Stephen last week at 103 Second Avenue. Paul, who had been sitting across from me, had evidently ogled some blond guy at a table behind me, or so Jane afterwards told me when I walked her part way to Penn. Coward that I was, I could only inquire whether Stephen was planning anything special for Paul’s next birthday.

“Stephen’s flying to Tennessee right after MLA. His father had a stroke, and his mother isn’t capable of acting as caregiver any longer. I don’t think we’ll get to go anywhere till summer.” The two had traveled abroad ever since Paul first became obsessed with all things Gallic. As tourist, Paul longed for nothing more than being mistaken for a native in Paris, where the very sound of the place names intimated another language hidden beneath the surface vowels and syllables. It was as if Paul’s rough-hewn mastery of French might grant him momentary access to an alien authenticity entombed behind the mute stone walls of the hôtels particuliers lining the boulevards of the seventh arrondissement.

“Anyway, Stephen expects he will have to spend the rest of winter break figuring out care arrangements for them, so I agreed to work on my birthday. Why don’t you come have dinner with me in the Grill Room?”

“Seriously?” I asked. I had never seen the Picasso tapestry at The Four Seasons.

“Just don’t bring Jane.”

It was wrong of Paul to be dismissive of my oldest friend, someone I once imagined myself to be in love with. We had continued to stay in touch after Jane’s mother got a divorce and when Jane was earning minimum wage at an independent bookstore. She still lived at home in New Jersey.

“How about John?” I asked sulkily. Despite my crush on him, I feared Milton might be straight. “I feel bad about his apartment.”

“I’m a little surprised a building like his is without an alarm system.”

“You can tell him about the one you and Stephen have.” Stephen’s position afforded him and Paul a shabby genteel penthouse on East Tenth Street. “John said he was willing to give you some feedback on your poems. He wanted me to give you his address so that you could mail him one.”

CHELSEA STATION
“I wish you wouldn’t do that, Walter. I rarely mail cards nowadays.”

“Well, I have written three reviews so far, Paul, and you’re introducing me to the world’s most famous chef as the next Mimi Sheraton.” Sheraton had been a longtime restaurant columnist at The New York Times while I was unsure what the stars in my gay rating system were supposed to mean. “It’s totally absurd!”

“All right, all right. Write down his address, and bring him along.”

I tore a leaf from the notebook in my breast pocket and handed it to Paul.

“What’s this?” He looked puzzled. “971 First Avenue?”

“That’s right. Apartment 1A.”

“You said he lived on Beekman Place.”

“It’s basically across the street. The same zip code.”

“I’m sorry. Beekman Place is not across the street. Beekman Place is an enclave of elegant townhouses and prewar coops where Auntie Mame lived. First Avenue is a commercial strip of dilapidated tenements with rusty fire escapes hanging off their facades,” said Paul witheringly. “Small wonder he was burglarized. Couldn’t he afford window gates?”

Annoyed, Paul asked for the bill, and I never got to ask who it was at dinner last week that Paul had been salivating over. Yet the more I thought about it, the more it really bugged me. What was the point of living together with Stephen if Paul was going to cheat?

I was too faint hearted to take my own feelings seriously, but it had been obvious during senior year that Paul was attracted to me. Our Pell Hall dormitory rooms abutted one another, and Paul would take naps on my bed if he chanced to find me studying afternoons at my desk. One morning when I was returning from the showers at the end of the hall, clad in a towel and hair dripping wet, Paul appeared suddenly at my door to borrow Frank O’Hara’s Selected Poems. But when he wanted to linger in my room and watch me get dressed, I balked at the prurient request, no matter how casually framed. Paul smiled stiffly and bowed, and when he departed I felt painfully aware that he wanted more from me than friendship.

The two of us fell out of touch until I moved to New York three years later and enrolled in the Ph.D. program at CUNY, by which time Paul was shacked up with a tenured college professor fifteen years his senior. Scarcely able to make ends meet as an adjunct, I felt lucky when Paul started taking me out to eat at fancy restaurants, his excuse often being no more than a desire to vent his frustration at having exchanged his freedom for domesticity. Though Paul could sense my disapproval of the anonymous sexual encounters with which he regaled me at dinnertime, his performances might have been calculated to provide more than entertainment. Yet I never felt aroused, not because I didn’t find Paul attractive, but because he came on too strong. Or so I soliloquized to myself, having lied for many years as to my true nature.
Descending the staircase to Lutèce’s coat check, Paul almost missed a step and fell, a sign perhaps of incipient cytomegalovirus. We passed a lone diner in dark glasses and a floppy purple hat, who sat hunched over her bowl of soup in the vestibule outside the Garden Room.

“That was Mimi Sheraton,” said Paul as he waited at the bar for the camel cashmere overcoat Stephen had bought him at Paul Stewart. When the bartender wasn’t looking, Paul pocketed a ceramic ashtray with the restaurant logo on it.

“Someday it won’t be kitsch anymore,” he prophesied as I buttoned up a down jacket. “How was your Mother’s exhibition, incidentally?”

My mother, who took up photography once my father died, invited me to attend a showing of her works at a library in the suburbs where I was raised, but I feigned illness instead. She had ceased asking me about Jane or my personal life, and though she continued to help each month a little with the rent, we had grown apart.

“I didn’t go,” I said nonchalantly, as if nothing could touch me.

Outside Paul hailed a cab before we went our separate ways into the night. I would continue to write restaurant reviews—The Four Seasons, The Ninth Circle Steakhouse, and Maurice, to name a few—during the height of the AIDS crisis. But once Paul died and The New York Times started using the word gay on its editorial pages, there didn’t seem to be much more need. Jane became involved with someone named Jean, and Milton turned out to be more closeted than I. So I finished my dissertation, entitled Sinking Down into the Unknowable, and accepted a community-college job in Santa Monica.

__________

William Moeck worked in the restaurant business while earning a doctorate at the City University of New York, and he currently teaches L.G.B.T. literature at SUNY Nassau. His story was adapted from an unpublished novel called A Discriminating Palate.
I’m not sure exactly why it took me so long to tell my mother about Enda. Never the best at timing, I broke the news on the day of her colonoscopy appointment: “By the way mom, could you make another pound cake this Saturday?”

“Who is it for?” she asked, sitting opposite me in a booth at the Collegiate Grill, a small 1950s-style diner in north Georgia that she loved—her reward for enduring Dr. Tarna’s pipe snake and two rounds of colon cleansing liquid. “That lady with cancer?”

“No”—I answered, trying to avoid the mound of French fries I had ordered and stick to my bittersweet salad. “It’s for Enda.”

“Enda?”
A pause. “I’ve been dating him the last two months.”

Without missing a beat, she started on her slaw drenched hamburger. “Oh, I see,” she answered between mouthfuls. “He’s the one you’ve been spending the weekends with? Where does he live?”

A sip of chlorine filtered water and a nervous gulp. “Midtown.”

_Oh God._

Maybe that was part of it. She tended to speak disdainfully of Atlanta. Whenever the subject of the big city came up, she was known to shake her head adamantly and give her well-anchored assessment. It didn’t even require a segue. She breached the subject cold.

“People get killed in Atlanta, Don. I hear about it all the time in the news… it’s a _dangerous_ place.”

Usually, the conversation occurred in her Camry as we navigated our way through the bustling metropolis of Gainesville, a small lakeside town near the Blue Ridge Foothills. Approaching retirement, my mother relinquished control of her car at the close of each work week and appointed me as chauffer.

“People _get_ killed everywhere,” I’d retort.

“I don’t care. You are _not_ a practical person. Wish I understood you. You’re very _strange_.”

Sometimes I would respond with, “Strange is a good thing.” Other times, I’d remain silent, give a complacent smile, and pat her knee a few times in dismissive defiance.

But I wondered what she meant by _strange_. Yes, over the years, my hair had been every color in the rainbow. Sometimes it was every color at once. Ever the introvert, I loved books and movies, but nothing that rolled off a mass market assembly line. My tastes usually gravitated toward auteurs like David Lynch, Pedro Almodovar, or the visceral master of sexual horror, David Cronenberg. Tastes that quickly barred me from picking out entertainment for family movie nights.

Though my mother had always supported my talents, I was also an artist; an artist in a town where art was a dirty word. To be an artist among the sports-minded denizens of Gainesville was almost unheard of. So, if she meant strange by the Deep South’s megachurch-on-every-corner standard, then yes, I was certainly strange.

After paying our bill, a sense of relief hit me. _She knows_, I thought as we walked out of the diner, heading along the sidewalks of Gainesville’s historic square. _She knows and she’s okay with him._

Maybe she always knew. Mothers tend to know far more than they let on. She had long suspected her brother—my Uncle Rick, a tan, fit, mustached clone of the 80s complete with a gold necklace that glinted in his chest hair—before he summoned the courage to come out to her. If she knew about him, then I was a shoe-in.

Growing up, one didn’t have to exactly be Jessica Fletcher from the _Murder, She Wrote_ television series to figure _me_ out. I had two older sisters with a Prince infatuation to help me along. And I had started out life as a tumor. At least that’s what my mother claimed.
Over the years, she explained it many times... about how she had gone to the doctor at the behest of abdominal pains, thinking she might have a tumor.

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” the doctor said, smirking. “You’re pregnant.”

“Pregnant!” mom exclaimed. “How in the world can that be?!”

Often, she joked that aliens had touched down and impregnated her. “I don’t know where you came from,” she insisted. “You aren’t your father’s seed. I know that much.”

Father. Dear ole’ dad. I was secretly happy to hear any comment that distanced me from him. Yes, he was my father and I loved him, but he was not a very loving person in return. My parents were always fighting. Always. By the time I was thirteen years old, my mother and I had endured as much of his alcohol fueled rages as we could handle.

Once, after he had given my mother a black eye, I plotted to poison him. Just a little bit of rat poison at a time... gradually increased over the span of several months; something that would prolong his suffering for as long as possible. Fortunately, he and my mother parted ways before the rat poison strategy had time to be implemented. In hindsight, I’d settle for being the product of space aliens any day.

Maybe my mother’s qualms about Atlanta stemmed not only from the daily news, but from the antics that surrounded my first boyfriend, Steve. At the wise age of nineteen, I met a man who seemed to be cut from the same cloth as my father. Shortly after we began dating, he and I had a horrible argument on the phone. It would be the first of many. This should’ve been the first clue that things weren’t going to end well, but with youth and naivety on my side, the relationship dredged unhappily on, well beyond its prime.

“Don, what’s wrong? Is Steve your boyfriend?” mom asked after my argument with him. She was sitting up in bed, late at night, worried.

I couldn’t bring myself to answer, even though she was about to cry. “I have to go,” I managed, before hopping into my car and enduring the long trek from Gainesville to Atlanta, where the argument could proceed in person.

If only it had been easier to meet other gay men. In such a small conservative town, there was nowhere to go, nothing to see, and no one to meet (at least openly). When another gay unicorn came along, a chance generally had to be taken, even when it turned out to be a lost cause.

I’ll never forget the toolbox scenario. At a certain point, Steve and I were living together. One afternoon, I needed to hang a picture, so I used a hammer from his kit that he kept in the hallway closet. When the task was finished, I put the hammer back and fell asleep. It had been a bad day at the bookstore where I worked at the time, an upscale place in the Buckhead area of Atlanta where Peachtree Street prima donnas delighted in making a hell of heaven.


“What is it?”
“Just come here.” I followed him into the hallway—where he opened the closet door. He gestured toward the toolbox. “Do you notice anything?” he asked in his dry robotic voice. “Did you use my toolbox?”

“Yes,” I answered groggily. “What is this about?”

“You don’t notice anything wrong?”

I looked down at the toolbox again. “No, Steve—what are you talking about? I don’t see anything wrong.”

Frustrated, he sighed, bent down, and gave the toolbox a swift 180 degree flip. “You turned the toolbox the wrong way when you put it back in the closet.”

“How can the toolbox be turned the wrong way?”

“With the way that you put it down, somebody would have to open the toolbox from the opposite side, and it makes it hard to get the necessary tool out if you’re not wanting to take the toolbox out of the closet.”

I looked at the toolbox, then to him… his earnestness in the matter very evident. “So, you woke me up after a long day at work to bring me in here and tell me that a toolbox was turned the wrong way?”

“It’s important. I want you to put things back the way they’re supposed to go.”

And then there was the incident at the waterpark in Florida. Steve and I, along with a few of his friends, made a pilgrimage to Universal Studios. Along the way, one of his buddies noticed a large waterpark by the interstate. “Can we stop?! the friend pleaded. “Oh man, can we?!”

As we made the impromptu stop, dread filled me. Around that time, I had gained weight. I rarely took my shirt off on a good day at the beach, much less to walk around a massive waterpark with three guys that didn’t have an ounce of body fat on them. After entering, we stopped at a locker station, where Steve and the others quickly stripped off their shirts and stowed them away.

“Aren’t you taking yours off?” Steve asked, looking at me like I was committing a grave crime.

“I’ll keep mine on,” I replied, trying not to bring more attention to the matter.

He seemed to have forgotten the recent evening at our apartment, when we were getting ready for bed. He had given me odd looks the whole day. “Something wrong?” I asked.

As if summoned for a necessary duty, Steve walked over to me and put his hand at my waist. “You’re okay from here, down.” Then he put his hand at my neck. “And from here, up.” Next, he put one hand at my neck and the other at my waist again. “But in-between here and here, you need some work.”

Lovely—I thought—as if the mirror didn’t point it out to me.

The waterpark was the culmination. Eventually, we came to a large waterslide. For that particular ride, all guys had to remove their tops. Steve’s friends ran ahead, anxiously climbing the long stairway to the top. Steve turned to me. “I hope you know how silly you’re being.” Three months and one mental breakdown later, I finally realized just how silly he was being.

Now in my mid-thirties, as mom and I settled into the Camry and drove to the first of three grocery store stops that day, a barrage of thoughts struck me. Maybe it’s not mom. Maybe it’s me. Maybe I don’t want
to be vulnerable or hurt again. Maybe I don’t want to put her through any sort of Steve drama again. I had my reasons. Financially, Enda was far beyond my meager capabilities as a starving artist and writer. He seemed so put together; so structured. What could Enda see in me? What could he possibly? Anything can go wrong. Anything. Nothing is guaranteed. But… I’m falling in love with him. And he’s sweet. And he told me that he understands. And he—

“Sure you still want a pound cake?” my mother asked as we walked the bake aisle of the grocery store, the gaseous effects of her unromantic doctor’s appointment still haunting us intermittently. “I could make a peanut butter one… or some other.”

“No, mom,” I answered, smiling as I placed a bag of King Arthur flour into her buggy. “A pound cake is fine.”

___________

Don Gaddis loves ‘80s music videos, vinyl records, old bookshops, cats, David Bowie, root beer floats, Kate Bush, Kenneth Anger short films, dinosaurs, nightclubs, Edward Gorey, space documentaries, David Lynch, Halloween, and taking the subway from Brooklyn to Coney Island. But more than anything, he also loves to draw and write. His artwork has been included in art anthologies from Bruno Gmunder, as well as independent comics and magazines. In 2009, a few of his pieces were acquired by the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York. Don's written work includes two poetry books and a yet to be published novel, Portraits of Familiar Strangers. He resides at the end of a lonely road in rural Georgia, but often escapes to Atlanta in order to be near fellow artists and night creatures.
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Jeff Walt’s poems have appeared in journals such as Alligator Juniper, The Sun, Los Angeles Review, Connecticut Review, Inkwell, New Millennium Writings, The Good Men Project, Harpur Palate, Cream City Review, The Ledge, and Slipstream. Several poems from his chapbook, Soot were selected and scored by composer David Sisco and performed at Carnegie Hall. He is a Regional Editor with the San Diego Poetry Annual. www.jeffwalt.com.
Sidekick

I live to ride in the sidecar
next to the Caped Crusader, sinewy
in snug Spandex, masked

dark anonymity—fist-tight, chests puffed—ready
to jump kick alley fights—BAM! POW! ZAP!—
utility belts loaded:
spear gun, gas torch,
missive boomerang & mini-mines. Gotham lit
and scraping the scum-night sky.

Testosterone-fueled and bomb-quick, we explode
to thwart each foe’s terrorist scheme
to take over the planet. For you, dear citizen,

we’ve hung, hands bound above boiling urns
of toxic, chemical-green broth,
tortured, uncertain

of escape. We wriggle and squirm
to loosen a pinkie finger,
always finding

the loop in a knot
and trap door for lightning
escape. Unsuspecting denizens,

watch us flash past after
each fight. Me tucked
in the sidecar, black-winged,

leaning into slick, megalopolis
curves, his silent devotion
to clean spotless a city of sinister crime.

You clap, toss pansies, cheer, point
at our capes, fanned and flapping
in unison, proud as the American flag, headlong

past sirens that come too late, toward the next
life dangling from a smoking high-rise, worlds
more heroic than our own, alive

to eject each criminal from his riddling mind.

—Jeff Walt
The rent on the apartment was a bit more than he’d hoped to pay, Douglas told Hillary, the real estate agent, who assured him that it was the going rate for a pre-war building in the West Village, and actually a steal for a top floor apartment. “Besides, you should always live slightly beyond your means,” she replied through what sounded like a deviated septum. “It makes you work harder.”

She offered to show him a similar unit in Murray Hill that went for thirty percent less; and if he was willing to live up by Columbia, she had a place that was even cheaper, larger and with better amenities.

But Douglas hadn’t moved to Manhattan to live in personality-free Murray Hill and certainly not to commute from Morningside Heights to Wall Street every day. Back in Muncie, he’d developed the
romantic notion of one day residing in New York’s famed bohemian enclave, tracing the footprints of the writers, artists and performers who had either lived or gotten their start in the Village; the cradle of gay liberation (as least officially), a safe haven where he could be himself and not have to button it up and deflect as he did at Lyman, Steers, the brokerage firm where he’d just been promoted to junior account executive.

He wasn’t exactly in the closet at Lyman, and wasn’t the only one who chose to skip the after-work male bonding ritual to go home and rest up for the next day’s trading session. Not that he would feel comfortable discussing any aspect of his personal life with his cohorts, who persistently sniffed around for frailties, actual or perceived.

While pricey, the apartment, located off Abingdon Square, was undeniably a find, a one-bedroom penthouse both light and spacious. The main rooms were festooned baroque moldings and the bathroom featured the original black and white checkerboard tiles. The standout was a wraparound brick terrace with an on-a-clear-day-you-can-see-forever view of midtown on the north and a suggestion of the Hudson on the west. He would be sharing the floor with only one other tenant whose mirror apartment across the hall faced east and south. According to Hillary, it had not been on the market in more than thirty years, since the mid ’50s. The tenant, she said, was also a single man and “not a party type. Quiet. Keeps to himself.”

Another plus: a freight elevator was ample enough to accommodate his prized Yamaha. The black lacquer, meticulously waxed piano, had been bequeathed to him by his Uncle Fritz, a virtuoso, under whom Douglas had studied beginning at age six. While he did not possess Uncle Fritz’s innate talent, he tried to make up for it with the kind of emotional investment he found so difficult to access in his daily life. On days when the tension of the sales floor rendered him as demon-eyed as a speed freak, he would return home and toss off Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in G Minor to restore his equilibrium. And if he was stymied in his search for personal connection, a sojourn with Brahms’ 6 Klavierstucke, soothed him and enabled him to sleep afterwards.

The costly flat proved to be money well spent, Douglas’ sanctuary in the sky. For his summer vacation, instead of travelling abroad or trekking out to the Atlantic beaches, Douglas holed up for ten days, subsisting on takeout and viewing TV shows he’d recorded on his new video tape recording device, playing piano and nude sunbathing on the terrace.

The cocooning led to a scolding from his best friend, Leila. “I don’t understand,” she said. “You move to the Village and instead of exploring the neighborhood you’ve always wanted to live in, you decide to float above it.”

What could he say? Since childhood, he’d always been a little too Midwestern Methodist for his own good, tending toward the solitary. Never had many friends, was hopeless at small talk and, unless a man propositioned him in graphic detail, was oblivious to even the most blatant come-ons. His idea of flirting was a gawky stare, which had the opposite of the desired effect.

In early fall, Douglas had a brief affair. Leila set him up with Andrew Solomon, a gynecologist she’d met in Yoga class. When he refused to even meet Andrew, his friend arranged an accidental encounter at the Buffalo Roadhouse. The ruse was transparent as was Leila’s rushing off to an appointment she’d forgotten. Douglas didn’t mind. Andrew was glib and self-confident. Not bad to look at either. When the doctor invited him to a concert the following Friday, he accepted, in part because it was an encore performance of the Goldberg Variations that had been well reviewed in the Times. Andrew stroked his leg during the concert. They spent the night together and had breakfast the next morning at the same Buffalo Roadhouse.

From the onset, Douglas prophesized the affair’s eventual dissolution. His ruddy Scandinavian features might keep Andrew on the hook for a while, but he’d eventually grow weary of Douglas’ asocial
demeanor. He tried to offset his lack of social grace by being amenable in bed, content to fulfill his partner’s fantasies while rarely proposing any of his own. Andrew came armed with an encyclopedic repertoire, including some borderline hilarious role playing. Apart from that, they shared no real connection and eventually, Andrew did lose interest.

Though hardly enamored of his erstwhile beau, Douglas took the break-up hard. Despite Leila’s reassurances that he would someday meet someone of a similar feather, he was so distracted by melancholy that he almost failed to notice the man in the elevator getting off on his floor. Only as he was unlocking the apartment door did Douglas think to turn and, on impulse, say “Hi. I’m your new neighbor, Douglas.”

“I know,” the man replied with a grin and mimed playing the piano with both hands. “Mackenzie.” With a terse nod, the man entered his apartment and shut the door. Slammed it, actually.

Douglas was intrigued. Not only was this Mackenzie fellow striking, and in a completely original manner, but his smile seemed to harbor a precious secret. Then he quickly backtracked on his fleeting impression. In all likelihood, the next time he ran into Mackenzie and got a closer look, he would prove to be ordinary. And exactly what did he mean by “I know,” when Douglas introduced himself? Was it a jab at Douglas’ piano playing? If he had a complaint, he certainly hadn’t voice it. And the door? Did he actually slam it or merely shut it soundly?

Perhaps his curtness had to do with another kind of disapproval. Not that it really mattered. He’d been in the apartment for six months already and this was the first time they’d crossed paths. He probably wouldn’t see Mackenzie again until Christmas at the earliest.

Funny how that worked. On his way downtown, he saw many of the same people in the morning and sometimes coming home as well. The elderly woman who clung to the bannister at the bottom of the stairwell until the train doors opened, as if in constant fear that someone might push her onto the tracks; the schoolboy who counted backwards from a hundred under his breath and, if the train had still not arrived, started all over again; the tall man who tapped his foot incessantly and sat on the edge of his seat as if to venture further back would wrinkle his suit; And several others who stared blankly into space like automatons whose battery pack was running low. Yet, here he lived not fifty feet from someone he’d likely run into no more than twice or three times a year.

Two Saturdays later, his doorbell rang. A UPS man held out a package and a clipboard for his signature. Glancing down at the carton, he noticed the name Mackenzie Frost. “No, this is for the apartment across the hall,” he said. Douglas shut his door and immediately flipped open the peephole latch and watched as Mackenzie, clad only in gym shorts, signed for the package. Only after he’d slipped the copper cover back into place did he exhale.

Good work, Douglas, he chided himself. Was spying on a partially clad straight guy his idea of healthy behavior? Yet, the image lingered, and Douglas embellished it with details he couldn’t possibly have discerned from his compromised vantage point. Beads of sweat on Mackenzie’s chest, abdominal ridges, meaty thighs, large feet. He had a thing for men’s big toes. Not a fetish. Just a thing, like other guys have for armpits. Then he mused about Mackenzie’s armpits. Very hairy? Sparse?

Seeking refuge from his aimless ruminations, he sat down at the piano and decided to finally risk Chopin’s Fantasie Impromptu. Uncle Fritz had recorded the piece and had given it to him as a birthday present the year before he died. Less a gift than a rebuke; as if to say that his nephew lacked the technical skills to handle the initial movement of the Opus 66, which required equal parts dexterity and speed. He’d studied the sheet music and listened to Uncle Fritz’s recording many times but had to drum up the courage to tackle it.
The initial attempt confirmed his cowardice. No more than four bars in, his fingers began to skim along the keys as if they’d been oiled. Punching the ivories in exasperation, he jumped up and threw on his coat.

Why did he imagine that in his befuddled state he could attempt such a complex work as if it was nothing but a mere etude, he thought? When he saw the Out of Service sign on the elevator door, he raced down the stairs and ran smack into the workmen loading a Steinway onto the service elevator. He ogled the piano, which was as beautiful as an African princess, then burst out onto the street, rounded the corner and headed straight for the White Horse Tavern, to drink himself into a Dylan Thomas coma. Like most of his foolhardy plans that day, it backfired. Douglas had little taste or tolerance for undiluted spirits, and certainly not on an empty stomach. After a double whiskey, he stumbled to the men's room and surrendered it.

Determined to work up an at least passable allegro agitato, over the next couple of weeks he devoted all his spare time to cracking the Opus 66, but made scant progress. What was it about this particular movement (not even the most difficult Chopin) he found so elusive? When he discussed his failure with Leila, she rolled her eyes. “You really need to go out and get your horns trimmed.” When he gasped, she added, “What? It always works for me. And Andrew says you're actually good at it.”

“He said that?” Douglas asked.

“Not directly. Something about ‘it’s always the quiet ones.’ It’s a compliment, Douglas. Take it.”

“Then why did he break up with me?”

Leila let go an extended sigh. Douglas replied with one of his own.

Perhaps Leila was right. But he was no more successful at finding a horn trimmer than he was at the Fantasie Impromptu. He returned from the bars at one a.m. empty handed and a little nauseated from drinking ginger ale. As he was checking his mailbox in the lobby, Mackenzie popped out of the elevator and waved at him. The best he could summon up in return was a pained grin. “Don’t let it get you down,” Mackenzie said, stopping a moment.

Douglas’ face twisted into a question mark.

“The Chopin. The first movement? It’s a bitch,” he said, then disappeared through the double doors.

Douglas pondered Mackenzie’s comments and his mind double backed to the previous week when he was out on the terrace and heard what sounded like a recording of the Moonlight Sonata. He couldn’t tell whether it was coming from across the way or an apartment below. Then he remembered the Steinway. No, the playing was too proficient. It had to be a recording. Maybe Gould? No, not that good. Horowitz? Possibly. Curious, that. The Beethoven and the Opus 66 shared thematic similarities. Almost as if the player was using the piece to mock his inability to get farther than eight measures into the Chopin. Like Uncle Fritz from the beyond.

Only in the elevator going up, did he remember that he’d only been two feet from Mackenzie, close enough to notice the luminosity of his skin. His eyes were dramatic, wide and large and brown-black. And he was wearing a knit cap. And he looked great in it. Whenever Douglas tried on a woolen hat he resembled a serial killer. Once, during a blizzard, Leila yanked it off his head. He complained that it was freezing out (and snowing). “I don’t care,” she said. “I will not be seen walking next to a Most Wanted poster.”
Oddly, he took Mackenzie’s comment to heart and decided to give it another go. But when he sat down at the piano, his fingers fell onto the keys as if they were weighted down. He wanted to cry but he’d didn’t have much of a facility for that either.

Douglas crawled into bed and in the middle of the night fell into a dream in which he made it all the way through the first movement; a simple, competent performance that left him pleased and relieved. Even his unconscious was not foolish enough to conjure anything more than a workmanlike effort. In the morning, he rose extra early and, before heading off to work, attempted to move his fingers as easily as he had in the dream. But only six measures in they seized up.

The dream recurred over the next several nights, and each morning he managed to advance a measure or two. If only he could play the first movement through to the end, it would give him the confidence to attempt the key and tempo change of the piece’s middle section, before it reverted back in the third movement. But if he conquered the first part, he could surely handle that as well.

***

Shortly after the closing bell, his boss, Barry Gray, called Douglas into his office and asked if he wouldn’t mind mentoring an actor the following week—what his colleagues referred to as a Don Corleone offer, one you dared not refuse. Ethan Lack was researching his role as a trader for an upcoming movie about Wall Street. Douglas recognized the actor’s name. He’d seen him in something on Broadway or maybe on TV.

Ethan was personable and unobtrusive and, though Douglas normally disliked his actions being monitored, he quickly adapted to the visitor’s presence and his constant note taking. During lulls or at the end of a trading day, Ethan would ask him to explain bits of terminology he’d heard. Douglas’s responses were clear and succinct and, at times, even affable.

“I know this is a lot to ask,” Ethan said one Friday afternoon, “but could I take you out for an early dinner tonight and pick your brain? If you don’t want to give up your Friday, I’ll understand.”

“Tonight’s no different than any other night, except I don’t have to show up here first thing tomorrow morning,” Douglas said, an unusually candid admission. He didn’t mean it to sound pitiful, though it likely did.

“Great. You pick the restaurant. My treat.”

They ate at Dino’s, a hole in the wall in Little Italy and Ethan peppered him with questions. Then after a couple of glasses of wine, and a hearty but not heavy lasagna, Ethan leaned in and said, “I’m going to ask you something. I would never do this if I wasn’t tipsy, and you don’t have to answer. You’re not out at work, are you?

When Douglas’s tongue tied, Ethan added, “I didn’t mean closeted as much as you just don’t share it with the others. I know because I’m the same way.”

“I’m a private person. It’s just who I am,” Douglas said in his own defense.

“But you are, aren’t you?”

Douglas nodded.

“Oh good. Because I hope to use it as subtext in my character.”

Douglas was bemused, unable to imagine what that would look like.
“And just so you know,” Ethan continued, “if I didn’t have a boyfriend who is crazy jealous, I would so put the make on you right now.”

Douglas turned beet red and was sufficiently well oiled to reply, “And I would probably take you up on the offer. I’m flattered.”

Then they both laughed to ease the tension before returning to stocks and bonds.

Standing on the sidewalk after dinner, Ethan hailed a cab. “I’m going uptown. Can I drop you off?”

“Abingdon Square,” Douglas directed the driver and when they pulled up, Ethan said, “is this your building? You wouldn’t happen to know if Mackenzie Frost still lives here?”

“Yeah, he’s my neighbor across the hall. You know him?”

“Oh. This is more than a two-minute conversation,” said Ethan. “Driver. I’m getting out here too.” He pulled some bills from his pocket and stuffed them through the divider.

They retreated to the Elephant and Castle for coffee and a shared dessert. Ethan did most of the talking and Douglas listened, rapt. Hard to tell who was more excited, Douglas to hear about Makenzie or Ethan to tell him.

“We were at Performing Arts together,” Ethan said. “He was wicked talented and peculiar like most near genius guys are. Worked like a motherfucker. Could do anything. But other than school projects, he kept to himself. The only reason I know where he lives is because I grew up on West 11th Street and would see him going in and out of the building. I think he was born there. His dad was Jonas Frost, a big shot corporate honcho. I want to say Monsanto or Xerox.”

“Anyway,” Ethan continued, “Mackenzie got a scholarship to Julliard and everybody was predicting big things for him. Then he dropped out during his first semester. They said he had a nervous breakdown, but I also heard that his father had taken sick and he quit school to play nurse. A few years back I read in the Times that the old man had passed away after a long illness. The obituary listed Mackenzie as a survivor, and I think a sister who lives in Boston. Haven’t heard a word about him since. Tell me, does he still have that aura?”

“Aura?” Douglas repeated.

“Not handsome but really compelling,” he clarified.

Douglas nodded. Yes, that was it. Compelling. “But I’ve only run into him once or twice and I’m guessing he’s probably straight.”

“Well...,” Ethan said with a shrug. “There were rumors of him fooling around in the school bathroom. There were rumors about me too. And those happened to be true,” he laughed. “He never came on to me and we did a couple of plays together. ‘Much Ado’ and ‘Guys and Dolls.’ He was the lead of course.”

“Do you know if he played the piano?”

“Oh yeah. Guitar too and I think the trumpet. So talented. Poor bastard. Wonder what really happened? Anyway, next time you see him, say hello for me. I’m curious to see if he remembers me.”
When they parted outside Elephant and Castle, Ethan kissed him on the lips at the subway steps. Douglas walked home, puzzling about Mackenzie the entire way. He got in after midnight and promptly fell asleep on the sofa, again falling into his recurrent dream. In the middle of his recital reverie, he rolled over on the couch and the sensation of falling off woke him up.

But the Chopin continued to play. The first movement. Over and over. Not his Uncle Fritz’s Fantasie Impromptu—unembellished and dispassionate, stripped down almost like a tutorial. When he peered out through the keyhole, he noticed Mackenzie’s front door ajar.

Douglas threw open his door and sat down at the piano. The moment Mackenzie finished, he began to play, making it almost three quarters of the way through before missing a note. Mackenzie immediately picked up the composition and took it to the end. Douglas began again and again. On the fourth attempt, he played all the way through. As he hit the final note, he became almost giddy. Sure, it was sloppy, more agitato than allegro. But what mattered is that he’d done it, which meant he could surely do it again.

He looked up and across the hallway. Mackenzie’s door was wide open now and he was sitting at the piano in a pair of shorts and a floppy tee. He was looking directly at Douglas and smiling. Then he raised an index finger like a baton. They began to play in unison and Douglas thought his heart would explode through his chest.

Afterwards, Mackenzie rose and walked to the door. “Thank you,” he called out to Douglas.

“Me? For what?” Douglas said.

“I’ll explain at another time,” he said. “But for now, just thank you. So, tomorrow night? Same time?”

“Really?” Douglas said.

“And have fun with it, Douglas. Don’t try to be perfect. It’ll mess you up,” he said with a hint of sadness in his voice.

“It’s not that. I don’t want to let you down,” Douglas said.

“I wouldn’t worry about that. Just do it for yourself,” he said. “Well, goodnight,” he added softly as he slowly shut the door. The last thing Douglas saw were Mackenzie’s dark eyes shooting through him.

Richard Natale is a Los Angeles-based writer whose stories have appeared in such journals as Gertrude Press, the MCB Quarterly, Chelsea Station, Hashtag Queer, Wilde Oats and the anthologies, Men in Love, Image/Out, and Off The Rocks. His published novels include Cafe Eisenhower, Love on the Jersey Shore, Junior Willis, the fantasy adventure The Golden City of Doubloon and the short-story collection Island Fever. Natale also wrote and directed the feature film, Green Plaid Shirt, which played at twenty-five film festivals around the world and is a best-selling title for Wolfe Video.
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Anthony Zedan, a San Francisco native, has been writing poetry since his undergraduate days at college where he was known, among his peers and a few professors, as the unofficial poet laureate of the College of Notre Dame in Belmont, CA.
You Will Have Dark Days And Even Darker Nights or Advice To Young Gay Men In Despair

Hold on another day, believe in my faith in you, feel my fingers running through your hair and brushing softly against your face, gaze into my telescopic eyes, past gaseous hazel nebulas into the blackness, and feel me there, my ever-expanding love for you, this now is your reason for being, feel the connection I have with you and how that love swallows up the darkness inside you and makes you overflow with unexpected joy and a generous smile, I know better than any god your reason for being and I wait patiently for you to come around to my way of thinking.

Let me hold you up when you feel alone, desperate, in despair or as darkness approaches, I am the pure redeeming light that destroys all shadows and their doubts, feel my warmth tingling your skin, holding you in a tight embrace, words as useless as usual, let me trace my fingers along your bare skin, anoint you as a chosen one, until you feel a sun start to burn inside you, as needed and as special as you are, you are needed by so many, no time to linger in misery, you have too much good work to do, find your purpose in your connection to others, an essential piece to the puzzle of existence, I know exactly how you feel, I could sense you crashing and so I came running, feel the miraculous warm breath so close to your bluish Lazarus lips, breathing fire into your lungs, I know you feel me now, friend, there are no more secrets, do not despair in your darkest of nights.

The old sorrow and pain you feel now that aches to your very bones will fade,
will lessen from hour to week, from month to year until you will be reborn into a new kind of confidence, you will awake to the world that offers itself to you every morning, a renewed belief in yourself, because I see the goodness in you, I see all of the potential of your best efforts, and I accept every part of you that hurts, I am the salve to your wounds, the salve that saves.

You are not alone, not tonight or any night.

Open your eyes, there is nothing left to fear, it is just me here right beside you

I will deliver you each and every night inches from your own death.

—Anthony Zedan
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
A native of Chicago, Richard Johns (poet) now lives, with his boyfriend of many years, in a small town on the far western fringe of that lovely city’s metropolitan sprawl. Three widely unavailable chapbooks bear his name: 2000 Poems, Hollywood Beach, and Explicit Lyrics: Poems. He sometimes checks his inbox at: richardmjohns@hotmail.com.

Michael Wynne (artist) makes artists' books and photobooks, and his short stories have appeared in Crooked Fagazine, Headmaster magazine, and The Holy Male, amongst others. He is based in London and Madrid. See more of his work at kissandtellpress.com.
Little Comedy

One day, in the middle of my routine,
I saw this guy across the gym
lashed to a hellish-looking machine

that was attempting to dismember him
—viciously contorting his body
this way, now that, limb by limb.

It seemed like an ungodly
way to stay in shape,
and the image was oddly

reminiscent of Emerson’s great
_Things are in the saddle and ride mankind_
—it was that Bosch-like and reprobate.

And of course, given my twisted mind
I thought: “In this circle of fitness hell—
what’s next: three reps of being crucified?”

It _was_ pretty laughable. And yet, well,
I began to feel for the damned guy
who, as far as I could tell,

was every bit as exercised as I
was over some of those glistening physiques…
Something about the weird glint in his eye

told me he was one of those freaks
for whom bondage is a passion,
especially when tied to the vice of the Greeks…

And then, suddenly, his face went ashen
—or mine did, that is, since _his_ was _mine:_
in mock-doppelganger fashion

I’d been seeing a man all this time
who wasn’t at all really there,
except as contrived by my mind

as I saw myself in some mirror.
Clearly overwrought and overheated,
before things got any queerer

I decided that what I needed
was a slight shift of perspective,
and so gingerly extricated
my limbered-up, middling self. To give
shape to the soul, as a poet would have it,
you must revise how you live,

with the perverse caveat
in my own case that that's a piece of cake
compared to working out a less gravid-
looking body. Whatever I make,
it seems, as the last step
of the recipe ought to state:

“And now you might as well strip
and add directly to waist.”
Being a body is such a huge trip,

what with my insatiable taste
for the many good things of life
and my constant desire to cut the waste

marble from the figure... I've
an image of myself being nicely toned
—which is a frustratingly elusive

reality I seem condemned
to strive for, heart and soul,
as if eternally needing to be atoned

for physically... And so
I dragged myself off to be reproved,
yet again, by some ripped Apollo's torso,

through which a muscular smile had moved
derisively down to those loins
where the genitals burned, unmoved.

Impelled by what enjoined
it, my lust had cathected a crotch
that seemed a likely nexus of both joys

and pains for me—so veiled, and yet rich
in the kind of revealings
that seem always just out of reach...

And as I kept stealing
outrageously meaningful glances that way,
the incredible vision of peeling

the baggy fabric of those shorts away—
shimmering fold after fold—
more or less completely slayed
me, old make-believe fool
that I was. But my sagging breasts and gut
rendered me all but invisible

to such a gorgeously skin-tight
specimen of masculine flesh;
and so, in the gray, ghostly, see-through fright

costume of my body I dashed
off like a banished shade,
as my hot skin wept, and my dentures gnashed,

and my rebuffed heart convulsed with need.
And even though it felt like the broken muscle
buried in my chest would cause it to implode,

Praise be! I fell upon a bicycle
(stationary and, thank God, recumbent)
that by a sort of miracle

kept me from coming completely unbent,
at least physically, and for a while.
Pedaling away quite quickly, I went,

of course, absolutely nowhere, as every dial
on the control panel plainly showed,
and as each non-existent wheel

spun invisibly in space, until I slowed,
and then stopped. And when I read: “Press start
to begin,” at an even faster speed

I began to pedal again—heart
pounding resoundingly in my ears—
and, though short

of breath, punched in the number of years
and the height, weight, and sex
that in large part correspond to yours

truly. It felt a bit like sending my stats
to some guy in a chat room online,
but without the usual pic requests

or blunt questions about the kind of scene—
club, sexual, whatever—I was into.
Since mostly my answers provoked the line

“X left the room or is ignoring you…”
things seemed to be going along for once
a good sight better than they’re wont to do
—until, that is, I began to sense that something was not quite right: the ear-splitting sounds the controls were making while all of its lights kept garishly blinking hinted as much, as did the blindingly bright, ticker-type, urgently flashing red message: SESSION ABORTED! MACHINE SHUTTING DOWN! As an old poster child for self-image concerns, I have, to be sure, been around (once or twice) the proverbial block, so deep ego-bruises are not unknown. Still, I’d never quite been told to go fuck myself by a machine before, with the result that the shock to my poor mind left me in pretty dire straits, and feeling a new kind of awful. Even so, one last delight lay in store for me, as I found when I hobbled—wounded pride and all—toward the one machine still available: a sort of stairway-cum-scaffold affair designed to maximize the toil involved as, step by step, one tries to shuffle off a pound or two of this mortal coil. With all the zeal, then, of a man condemned, I began to climb, Sisyphus-style, repeatedly toward that elusive end: at once near the top of that trim cascade I was swiftly forced to descend, which was rather like being conveyed in an upward way down, and vice versa… Such a strange sensation: as if I had strayed, say, into a dreamworkout, or worse: a nightmare routine in some carnival of fitness, where an intense inertia thwarted everything carnal, until all strivings—and all desires—were made to seem pointless, and eternal.
To grow old is to be assailed by fears,
I know: as when flayed skins and limps souls
hang from the hooks in the showers

—not what's really there: just shorts and towels.
While that grim vision would afflict me soon
enough, no doubt, another of this hell's

less than pleasant fates appeared to loom
up before me: there, in the pitch-black window
made mirror-like by the night, one lone,

sad figure seemed wearily to condole
with me, and to visibly share my pain.
It was my own disembodied and droll

self, of course, facing me in that windowpane,
like a human film, on that darkened glass,
of what was to come: to see my self-same

image endlessly—haunted by what in the past
had caught and relentlessly held my eye,
as if it all were vividly lost

to me now, there: in the bodies behind me.

—Richard Johns
The Dahlia Field
stories by
Henry Alley

The Dahlia Field assembles fourteen short stories by Henry Alley, written and published over the past two decades, which explore the inexorable force of male-to-male attraction. Poetic and diverse, Alley’s stories portray the business man, the actor, the house painter, the arborist, the student, the scientist, the gardener, the professional athlete, the musician, along with the women allied with them, all facing the truths of their inner lives and outwardly seeking a safe gay haven. Expanding beyond the Oregon settings native to the author and his characters, these stories travel to Seattle, to the Olympic Peninsula, to Washington, D.C., and Vancouver, B.C., to look at the coming out of the soul in ways that are both flamboyant and subtle.

Praise for The Dahlia Field

“With sensitivity and deadpan humor, Alley’s luminous stories explore a wealth of characters and social types thrown into fertile combinations. His prose is limpid and straightforward, laced with droll psychology. The results are funny, poignant, and engrossing. A fine collection that explores and celebrates the ebb and flow of gay life.”
—Kirkus Review

“In this exceptional collection of stories, Henry Alley delineates an endearing picture of the Pacific Northwest as well as some points beyond. In his precise yet vivid prose he gets to the heart of both a physical setting and the emotions of its inhabitants. These inhabitants, more often than not, are gay men of a certain age who are still at the height of their sexuality and draw. The men he writes of are waking up to the possibilities of their sexuality and striving to break free of society’s limitations. But the problems of those cities, especially the scourge of AIDS—the very fear of it—still touch their everyday lives.
—John Francis Leonard, A&U

“A piercing, gripping, somewhat gloomy yet expressly poignant collection that presents men at various stages of life in relationship circumstances that range from familiar and relatable to questionable and avoidable.”
—Christopher Verleger, Edge

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A Conversation with Henry Alley

Interview by Eric Alan

This spring, Eric Alan, music, arts and culture host for KLCC, an NPR station in Oregon, spoke with author Henry Alley, about his new short story collection, *The Dahlia Field*, recently published by Chelsea Station Editions.

Eric Alan: These stories have been written over a couple of decades. What recurring themes do you find in your work, over time?

Henry Alley: I'm fascinated by the obstacles that stand between people, especially gay men, when they are working toward intimacy in their lives. There are multiple forms these obstacles can take, and this diversity ties in with the rainbow vision of the book--the various colors of the dahlia field.
Alan: Do you also see a progression, in the characters and themes?

Alley: I think so—in the way I've sequenced the stories in the collection. The early and middle stories emphasize personal dramas, but as we move toward the end, the context gets larger. We are suddenly at the March on Washington of 1963, in the midst of a mixed race romance between two young men. The final and longest piece, "Would You Mind Holding Down the Body," explores a relationship between two men with opposing political views that reflect the "conservative versus liberal" outlooks on the world. The men come together through athletics, with the conservative one not knowing that his intimate friend is gay. The story gains momentum as more and more is disclosed about their private histories, eventually leading to the transcendence of the barriers between them, once gay man is "out."

Alan: How do those stories and progressions reflect social changes, as well as your own personal growth?

Alley: It was a slow process for me to come out in my writing. I was a published author by the time I began to open up about my gay identity. I gave myself a lot of time to incorporate the gay element in my fiction, because I wanted to remain true to the kind of landscape of imagination which I thought was typical of my writing. My first published novel arrived in 1979. The book that finally dealt with a character who saw himself as at least in part gay did not appear until 1988. Similarly, my first fully gay story did not come until 1991, although it was certainly much bolder—it was about gay disco singers—about the world of gay intimacy than the novel.

And, yes, my writing reflects the growing acceptance of being LGBTQ in our American culture, but it also reflects the struggles that have come as a cost of greater visibility and greater openness. It's been shown that the more out we all are, more resistance can arise from the bureaus of bigotry.

Alan: What particular aspects of gay relationships do you find yourself wishing to illuminate in your stories?

Alley: I find myself fascinated by those societal barriers that I just mentioned—the ones that come up between men and men, women and women, women and men that involve race, age and social status. And one thing that is particularly striking about LGBTQ relationships is that they frequently defy those barriers.

Alan: From your perspective, are gay male relationships different than straight ones, or is love universal at the core?

Alley: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that love is universal among people, but no, in that gay men have the macho stereotype to surmount when they get close to each other—to arrive at a sense that it is OK for both partners to be vulnerable without considering themselves weak or subordinated in any way when they are.

Alan: The landscape and location of your characters’ lives has also been a common theme, including the frequent appearance of a fictional Oregon town called Carleton Park. What role does
Oregon itself play in your stories? What relationship does the fictional town of Carleton Park have with real Eugene?

Alley: I like having the freedom of making Carleton Park my town and not being bound by the particular details of real-life Eugene. I can rearrange this imaginary place in relation to the plot of the story I want to tell. I can make it more idyllically beautiful, for example, and I can move landmarks around. I am not being held to actual facts. I am interested that William Faulkner called himself "sole proprietor" of his Yoknapatawpha County. He could have the most incredible things happening there.

On a more general level, the compelling nature of the landscape in the stories goes back to the Arcadia of the Romans and the Sicily of the Greeks, places where things were so natural it was all right to be gay. In back grounding my stories in nature, I am hoping that the gay characters will seem more natural to the reader.

Alan: What further stories do you wish to write on this topic, that you haven't yet written?

Alley: Chris Bram has said I tell the stories that no one else is telling. I would like to tell more of those stories. I am currently writing a novel about two brothers, one straight and one gay, and I am planning to sketch out a story about a married man who, struggling with his bisexuality, suddenly discovers he has been betrayed by his psychotherapist, to whom he is attracted. I also have a story about a young lesbian woman who suddenly disappears from her family and her sister goes out looking for her in the other side of the state they are living in. I have a comic story that I have been working on intermittently called, "Roll Over Beethoven." I started it when I was a resident artist at Centrum in Port Townsend in 1992. It's about a former university president, a widower, forced into retirement, a man of dubious sexuality, who, inspired by a then living Chuck Berry, dances his away in gay bars across America.

Alan: Clearly your writing speaks to people within the LGBT community, whose perspectives are often marginalized. In what ways do you see the stories speaking to those within the straight community?

Alley: I think that my stories are upbeat and in that sense are distinguished from many other gay stories, because they start on a lower step and proceed to a higher one. We have a past tradition of gay men's narratives being tragic--it's been true since the Renaissance with Marlowe's Edward II. And then consider everything that was to follow, right up to the film Philadelphia or the more recent Brokeback Mountain, which was both a famous short story and film. For my part, I like seeing people getting on their feet with their partial successes, and I like having a kind of upward inflected movement to my stories. Hopefully they will serve to break the stereotype of gay men having unmitigated tragedy in their lives.

Alan: Do your stories speak in any prescient way to the shifting landscape of prejudice in this country at the moment?

Alley: My last published novel, Precincts of Light, dramatized the Measure Nine crisis in Oregon, when a fanatic group got the upper hand of the state and tried to ban a positive presentation of LGBTQ people in the schools. I showed a family under pressure from this movement and the various resolutions the mother, the stepfather, the son, the daughter and grandson arrived at. This time around, in this collection, the stories go from this kind of war zone to a more recent time when marriage and partnership between men is not seen so much as an anomaly—which is more typical of the milieu we live in now.
Alan: Is there an ultimate goal for you, in writing these stories?

Alley: Not a philosophical goal. But I am especially interested in the upward inflection I mentioned, because I see life more as a quest than I do as a tragedy. And as I said, I love the idea of pursuing people who are just getting started, getting on their feet, whether they're fifteen years old or eighty years old. This process of getting established, of emerging or coming out, if you will, is primarily psychological, although it manifests itself in the outer world in diverse ways--hence, again the dahlia field. Alice Walker said everybody has a best self. She loved writing about people who were going after their best self. And I feel exactly the same way. These characters may not know exactly what they want and they may falter in tracking down what they consider best in themselves, but they are all a part of a quest which I find admirable.

Henry Alley is the author of four novels, *Through Glass, The Lattice, Umbrella of Glass*, and *Precincts of Light*, which explores the Measure Nine crisis in Oregon, when gay men and lesbians were threatened with being made silent. His stories have appeared in journals and anthologies over the past forty years, including *Virginia Quarterly Review, Seattle Review*, and *Chelsea Station*. He lives in Eugene, Oregon, with his husband, the poet and teacher Austin Gray.

Eric Alan is KLCC’s music, arts and culture reporter. The interviews and performances he hosts air on KLCC as local inserts during programs including *The Takeaway, Morning Edition, All Things Considered, Fresh Air*, and *The World*. Previously, he spent seventeen years at Jefferson Public Radio in Ashland, where he was music director and host of the daily music show Open Air. He is a nationally published author and photographer with three books to his credit, ranging from nature spirituality to major league baseball. He also works with *National Geographic* photographer Dewitt Jones, regularly contributing words and photographs to the project “Celebrate What’s Right with the World.” He is an accomplished lyricist as well, with credits ranging from international recording artists Gypsy Soul to the Oregon Cabaret Theatre. He has served on the board of the Lane County Cultural Coalition, and is a founding board member of Cerro Gordo Land Conservancy.
Two men, well past the shady side of sixty-five, sat alone and comfortably ensconced in plush outdoor garden chairs on the terrace of a private residence in San Francisco. The glass enclosed terrace overlooked the Castro neighborhood and offered an unimpeded view down the length of Market Street to the Embarcadero and the Ferry Building, with its attached Clock Tower framed by the rippling water of the Bay. Both men, dressed in black on black ensembles, had come to celebrate the life of a mutual friend who had passed away two weeks earlier.

The men shared a twenty-five year acquaintanceship linked by their professional connections to the decedent, a famous San Francisco investment broker, whose advice had transformed many hardworking, low profile persons, into millionaires.
In an act of incomprehensible proportions, the decedent, without explanation, had willed his entire fortune, less 25k stipulated to pay for this party, to the Internal Revenue Service. His three ex-wives, all legally divorced and remarried, had already filed law suits contesting the will.

“Well, I never expected Ben to go that way,” said Charles, the first of the two men sitting on the terrace. “I mean, getting hit by an historical trolley car on Market Street… after surviving the San Francisco Fever of the nineteen eighties (as local residents referred to the Aids epidemic before anyone knew what it was), emerging unscathed from a downtown office tower after the 1993 mass shootings by a lunatic client determined to kill his attorney for an unfavorable verdict, and losing twenty-two percent of his portfolio to the financial debacle of 2008.”

“Yes, after all that, to meet such a pedestrian death,” said Tommy, the second of the two men sitting on the terrace, “was such bad luck.”

“Bad timing,” corrected Charles.

The timing for the event couldn’t have been better; after only a few testimonials were spoken at the funeral home’s swank, but modestly sized chapel, the guests either drove their cars, if they could endure the search for a parking spot, or took cabs to the decedent’s house.

Drake, the decedent’s brother, had simply invited everyone for whom he found an e-mail address or a telephone number in his brother’s personal phone book and confidential Yahoo e-mail list. The last sentence of the invitation, “Lunch and an open bar will be provided,” assured a healthy turnout of celebrants and dangerous levels of aftershave and cologne. The terrace provided an escape from the deleterious effects of the expensive scents.

Looking somewhat uncomfortable and sartorially out of place (wearing a dark grey, double breasted suit) among the well turned out guests (all dressed to the nines and tens), Drake nevertheless had used a B to B+ caterer for the food (Asian Fusion) and an A to A- beverage provider for the open bar, (featuring only first rate labels), assuring the two bartenders, neatly turned out in black suits and bow ties, of generous tips and the opportunity to make new contacts.

“Have you seen Lydia here?” asked Charles. “I didn’t see her at the funeral home, but, of course Daniel was there, in dark glasses and wet cheeks.”

“Yes,” said Tommy. “She’s here. I saw her chatting up the bartenders. She hasn’t stopped smiling and kissing everyone since she made her entrance. She still thinks she’s the Bette Davis character from All About Eve, only older.”

The story of Lydia, rumored as the women the decedent (an unabashed sexual athlete who batted for both sides) had once slept with on a dare, and Daniel, the questionable result of what may have been an apocryphal coupling, spread from cocktail receptions, to dinner parties, and was glibly repeated by hair stylists in high toned salons to a rich clientele.

Finally, after years of repetition, the story gradually attained the level of lore. The cognoscenti decreed that Daniel was indeed the decedent’s progeny.

“Well,” asked Charles, “how long was she in that T.V. soap before they killed off her character? Twenty years…twenty-five years?”

Both men laughed. Laughing momentarily rekindled their past relationship with Lydia.
“Lydia’s had the last laugh,” said Charles. “With all the money she makes from the American television residuals, not to mention the money from the English, French and Italian licensing fees for the reruns, she probably earns a high, annual six figure income. And that’s without taking into account the value of all the jewelry her paramours have given her over the past twenty-five years.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Tommy. “Do you think she could trade her diamonds for a villa on the Cote D’Azur?”

“I don’t think the stones are good enough for France. She might have to settle for the Cote D’Miami.”

At that moment, the French doors to the terrace opened and Daniel joined the men. This handsome young man, just twenty-one years old, and newly graduated from U.C. San Diego, had recently become engaged to a fellow classmate named Rachel who graduated third in his class. Daniel stood on the terrace with somber aplomb, and greeted the two men.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Ramsey,” he said politely to Charles. “Hello Uncle Tommy,” he said, and gave Tommy an affectionate punch on the shoulder. “Mother is gathering and storing adoration from the guests. She needs to restock her supply.”

“For ego maintenance, no doubt,” said Charles.

“You should know,” said Daniel, matter-of-factly, “You were her agent for twenty years.”

“Yes, I was her agent until she fired me, two weeks before signing with the network, thereby robbing me of what would have been a sizeable commission.”

Daniel, serenely ignoring the sneer and the comment, turned from Charles to Tommy. “Mother wants to know if you can give us a ride home.” With a knowing sigh, he added, “Both cars are in the shop.” And then, sotto voce, “You know Mother’s phobia about riding in cabs.”

“I know it.” interrupted Charles. “When will your mother learn that cab drivers always insist on being paid?”

Neither Tommy nor Daniel concealed their smiles or contradicted the fact of the statement.

“Of course, I can take you both home. Just tell me when you want to leave.”

“Oh no, Uncle Tommy, you tell me whenever you want to leave. Don’t worry, I can move her out.” And with a wink aimed at Tommy, Daniel left the terrace and the two men regained their privacy.

“I never realized you still held such a grudge,” Tommy said.

Visibly annoyed, Charles leaned forward in his chair. “No? Two weeks prior to signing what became a multi-million-dollar contract with the network, Lydia fired me as her agent and went independent so she wouldn’t have to pay me any commission. And do you know whose advice she followed? Do you? Yours…” By now, Charles was red-faced.

“Yes, but it wasn’t until you blew her chances for a prior offer with another network for a similar contract because you asked for über money. In fact, you asked for so much money that the producer told you to go fuck yourself and banned you from the network offices. It was your bulging… vanity, your own Cupiditas that lost you the commission. Not my advice. Everyone else told her to dump you.”

“How did you get that information? Who told you those lies?”
“It was common knowledge. Not only was I Lydia’s optometrist, but in those days, I had many patients from the networks. Network assistants and network clerks and secretaries loved to tell stories. Storytelling inflated their feelings of self-importance. A lot of what I heard was unreliable gossip. Nevertheless, over the years I developed the ability to strain the truth from the bullshit. Your story was all over the industry in two days. Your demands destroyed your credibility and ruined your reputation. Networks refused to take you seriously and thus you lost most of your television clients.”

“I blamed you for convincing Lydia to dump me. And I’ve resented you ever since.”

Tiny beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead as Charles leaned farther forward in his chair. He had to grip the chair’s handles to keep from falling out. And now, he began his aria of anger.

“I knew you had a crush on Lydia. The gay optometrist falls for the straight actress. It wasn’t until I realized that you were shamelessly besotted, hopelessly in love with her that I could simply laugh at your efforts to woo her. How ridiculous, trying to turn an eye examination into a date by providing a catered lunch from Max’s Opera Café. How pathetic, inviting her to the bar at The Fairmont Hotel to deliver a new pair of prescription glasses, and inviting her back to your office for an adjustment. And then, after a proposed tryst, she stood you up!”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t Lydia invite you to meet her one night, right?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t she write a letter asking you to come to her hotel?”

“Yes,” Tommy admitted, “I did receive such a letter from her, but no one else saw it. I burned it the same day I received it.”

“And then what happened?”

“I met her the next evening, as planned.”

“You liar,” Charles shouted, at fever pitch, as the perspiration slid down his sideburns and ran down his cheeks.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? So you showed her letter to no one else? You burned the letter the same day you received it?”

“Yes and yes.”

‘My Darling Tommy, Please meet me tomorrow at my hotel, suite 800-804, at 8 p.m. I want to thank you. I must see you. Signed, Your Lydia.’ “Wasn’t that exactly what the letter said?”

Puzzled, Tommy said, “Yes, exactly.”

“Do you want to know why I know exactly what your letter said? Do you!”

“Yes.”
“I know what it said… because I wrote it! I wrote that letter because I wanted to humiliate you. I wanted to
demolish any fantasies you had about Lydia and yourself. I wanted to inflict pain. I wanted you to suffer
as much as I suffered from the loss of Lydia as my client. That’s why I know that you are lying to me now.”

Charles released his iron grip on the chair’s arms and relaxed into the back cushion, catching his breath
like a sprinter breathing hard after crossing the finish line in first place.

“But, I did meet her…I…”

“How could she know about a meeting when she never wrote the letter?”

“She knew because I answered the letter. I sent a messenger to hand deliver my response along with her
new, long distance prescription.”

“You answered the letter! But… I never considered that you might answer…”

“Well, I did. Lydia replied to my letter with a personal phone call to my office the next morning to confirm. I
met her that evening at her hotel and left the following morning.”

Thunderstruck, Charles stared at Tommy. “So, you managed one night alone with her. Did you manage
to… get it up?” Charles laughed. “Only one week later she hooked up with our decedent and nine months
later she delivered a baby.

“Following the birth, she exploited your crush on her by making you the baby’s titular uncle. How
deliciously cruel,” said Charles, regaining some of his lost dignity, and a normal pulse rate.

“She never married our decedent, or anyone else,” said Tommy.

“No she didn’t,” Charles gleefully added, “instead, she had a succession of high profile lovers until her
looks gave out. She has managed to keep her figure, though. And all these years you played the part of
Uncle Tommy. Exploited, humiliated, and embarrassed to be known as the gay boyfriend. Lydia is almost
sixty now, but she’s got plenty of money, modest fame (in demand for T.V. panel shows and perfume
ads) and is still invited to A list parties. And what have you got?”

As Tommy rose to leave, he replied, “I’ve got Daniel.”

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
Christopher P. DeLorenzo earned his MFA at the University of San Francisco, where he currently teaches in the Department of Rhetoric and Language. He facilitates writing workshops in his home in San Francisco, CA, and has led writing retreats in Mexico, Hawaii, and Europe. His poetry, prose and personal essays have appeared in several magazines, including Karamu, The Rockhurst Review, and Bluestem. Christopher has written three novel manuscripts, and is currently finishing a memoir cookbook.
The Next Generation

Beautiful baby gay boys, with your faces full of youth, and tight, flat stomachs, you're oblivious to the struggles that happened before you were born: Stonewall, where drag queens fought the cops with bricks and bats to stop the raids, or ACT UP, where 1000's marched to help their friends who were dying of AIDS. You weren't even born when Judy sang for us, when Freddy Mercury belted it out, when Sylvester got us groovin' in the streets: literally. You weren't there. Now, unabashedly arm and arm, you're 17, 18, 23, living your lives out loud, through urban streets and high school hallways, senior proms and suburban malls. Proud. So naive, you baby gay boys, in low slung jeans you have to save for months to buy, secondhand shoes you got for only $90.00, wondering what's up with this political game? All this talk about legalizing marriage, adopting a child in every state (except Florida: it's a nice place to visit, but—). Your turn now, thinking we're all the same, except:

you grew up with a gay parent (or two), and a straight male friend (or two) reaping benefits from your forefathers, having a ball. I won't envy you. It's your turn now.

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

Praise for The Haunted Heart and Other Tales

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

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

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

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

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

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
“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

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
The Happiness of Pursuit

Jameson Currier

I’d seen the skulls from the shuttle bus I had taken to the French Quarter from the airport—images molded on greenish ochre colored plates with swirls of white paint and dark hollow eyes. They possessed a haunting, gloomy beauty that could not be overlooked, though I had no idea what they would be used for except to be put on display or to jump start a conversation. They were in the window of a store selling kitchen and cooking specialty items, souvenirs, and gifts, and I made a mental note of their whereabouts, about three blocks from the hotel where I was staying.
I didn’t seek them out that first evening. Travel tires me because I invest too much time in it even when I try to simplify it—I had flown non-stop from New York but had arrived at the airport hours too early. Now it was dinner time and I had an anxious hunger so I only crossed the block from my hotel to eat at the seafood restaurant I dine at every year on the first night of my stay in the Crescent City. I never take a table since I am dining alone—it’s a loud, noisy boisterous restaurant full of locals and tourists, families and frat boys and coworkers arriving in large groups. I always sit at the bar near the waiters’ station, ordering the same crab platter year after year, now going on for more than a decade. But tonight there was not a seat at the bar at all—I couldn’t even compromise and take a different seat. I waited in the reservation line to ask if there might be a table for one—something I knew would be impossible—but there were so many groups with special needs I was defeated in even getting the receptionist’s attention, so I walked out the door. Another place would be fine, I decided, there are so many undiscovered eateries in New Orleans, which is part of its charm. It was a glorious spring evening, temperature in the low 70s with the undertone of humidity that always belies more tropical locations, though as usual in New Orleans my gray hair—what I have left of it—decided to plump and curl—and the T-shirt I wore beneath my polo shirt began to moisten with sweat. I walked a block, looking for a new place I hadn’t noticed before, got distracted by watching a wedding party parade through the streets, then decided to return to the restaurant again, thinking someone might have departed their seat at the bar, or perhaps I would just wait for a vacancy. It was my favorite restaurant in New Orleans. It was where I always dined on my first night in the French Quarter and where I wanted to eat that night.

Inside the restaurant again, I noticed a woman arranging to pay for her order at the exact seat at the bar that I desired. I went over and stood behind her, trying not to look impatient, taking her seat before her dishes and napkins had been cleared from the counter. But soon enough I had a glass of wine and the crab platter was on its way. It was an amazing feast: crab au gratin, stuffed crabs, deep fried crab claws, and a soft shell crab, all on a bed of French fries with dips of horseradish, cocktail sauces, and ketchup at hand. Not a healthy, gluten-free calorie to be found. An hour later I crossed the block and was back in my hotel room, satiated, lying in bed, flipping channels on the oversized TV with a remote control.

The next morning I dressed and walked to the hotel where I was attending a literary conference and picked up my registration material. The weather was swampier than the day before and my head was cloudy, perhaps from overeating too much seafood the night before, but my mission was to walk as much as possible throughout the day, in hopes that the exercise would release the tension I had carried from my day job in New York, and, more importantly, to jump start the weight I wanted to loose. Yes, that’s right, at that moment I naively, or, rather, stupidly, thought I could lose weight while visiting New Orleans. But an appointment the week before with my cardiologist had ended with my doctor’s stern suggestion that my expanding weight was getting too much to overlook. My weight is something that rattles me every day. I see my lost youth in
mirrors and reflections and in the invisibility of others’ eyes.

The cooking store was a block from the conference hotel, and having remembered the skull plates, I decided to examine them further. Since the aftermath of Katrina—more than a decade before—even year when I attend this conference in New Orleans, I try to purchase something special—nothing extravagant, but at least significant for me and hopefully the trader—I have commissioned paintings from local artists, one year I tossed a chuck of money into an open violin case in Jackson Square after hearing a young man and his wife, both violinists, play soaring melodies while a baby, less than a year old, hung from a knapsack on the man’s back, another time I had my fortune told by a woman who seemed to be a drag queen imitating Barbra Streisand and purchased her overpriced scented candles and good vibe voodoo charms.

The store was large and on a quiet block of Chartres Street close to Canal and when I stepped inside it I discovered cooking classes were held in a large room beside the store. There was a class going on and I tried to listen in through the glass window that separated the spaces, but couldn’t make out what was being taught, so I wandered through the aisles of the store until I found the skull items. An artist had handcrafted the haunting skull designs onto a variety of bowls, mugs, plates, and shot glasses. They were beautiful, special, but as I looked at them, I couldn’t see how I would use or display them. I live in a tiny apartment in Manhattan and don’t entertain guests there, so the plates seemed a frivolous, unnecessary purchase to me. But sitting on a pedestal above their display was a ceramic vase, clearly created by the same artist but exceptionally different. It was about eight inches tall, with a design that seemed to be more Mexican than Creole, of a body of skeleton with a smiling skull with his arms reaching out around the curve of the vase. Behind the figure were circles—plates of colors, in complimentary shades of brown and red. I didn’t find it macabre at all. The design had a hint to the skulls you see on artwork created for the Day of the Dead festivals, the Mexican tradition that celebrates the spiritual journeys of family and friends who have died. It also reminded me of the skulls I had seen at the Sedlec Ossuary at Kutná Hora, a subterranean chapel outside of Prague which contains more than 70,000 skeletons, whose bones have been artistically arranged to form the decorations and furnishings of the chapel. I had stumbled onto it unexpectedly on a tour I had taken on a cold, rainy day. It had been a surprise to everyone on that tour—darting through the rain to find beautifully crafted rooms of skulls and bones fashioned into chandeliers, altars, coat-of-arms, crosses, and pyramids. It made everyone smile and laugh and cheer and celebrate—a joyous journey and transformation of a rainy day. It remains to this day one of the most enchanting spots I have ever visited.
I picked up the vase to examine it and check the price. It was pricey, but affordable. I put it down, circled the store, returned to look at the vase one last time, then decided I did not want to make an impulsive purchase so soon in my trip and wanted to see what I might find in other galleries, and if I saw nothing more compelling than the vase, then I would return and buy it. Maybe not today. But before I left New Orleans three days later.

The moment I was out of the store the fear that I would lose the vase overwhelmed me. What if someone found it as remarkable as I did? I walked along Chartres Street, visiting a bookstore and then a gallery where I saw many beautiful and desirable paintings, all too expensive or too large for my apartment. After an hour of wandering I was tired, my feet felt swollen, and I walked back to my hotel room to nap and rest before attending an event I had scheduled that afternoon. The hotel room was chilly and my T-shirt was damp from sweating, and I knew that if I didn’t change out of it, I might catch a cold, or something worse—I was at the age now, just past sixty, when colds could quickly develop into more serious problems. The need to change clothes, however, set off an alarm that I had under packed for the trip—something quite unusual for me. Usually I carry too much and too many things, but this time I was traveling with a small overnight bag and had purposely tried to pack only what I would essentially need.

Changed, dry, lying in the bed, I couldn’t relax because I was now fretting about food. In New York, I sometimes skip lunch, only eating a banana or an apple, trying to trick myself that less food means less calories and therefore less potential weight gain, when this doesn’t factor in, of course, all the alcohol I pour into my mouth in the evenings when I get home from my taxing day job. Still, in New York, I knew how to budget my hunger, something I never know how to do in New Orleans. I had purchased tickets for two theater productions that afternoon and I was worried that hunger from not having a proper lunch would pitch me into a headache, but I didn’t want to sit in a restaurant because I had scheduled a dinner at a nice restaurant with friends later that evening. As hard as it is to believe after seeing my waistline, I don’t like to eat out twice in one day.

I got out of bed, and stopped at the pharmacy to buy water and a tiny plastic bag of mixed nuts, the only healthy item I could find in the store—the shelves had been stripped bare of their nutrition and protein bars and there were no fresh fruits to be found (the edible kind)—and then headed to the theater on St. Peter’s Street. The first production, a one act play with three characters, was adequate. I wasn’t entirely bored, but I also wasn’t fully engaged, and it ended too soon and I found myself with more than an hour break before the next production began.

I knew that if I walked back to the hotel, I wouldn’t have the energy to walk back to the theater for the next performance I had bought tickets for. I no longer have that kind of stamina due to an ongoing health issue with my heart, so I sat in the lobby and read until it was deserted, then decided to walk and shop. I only ended up across the street, when I saw a store selling gelato. I rarely eat ice cream, I get swirls of gas in my intestines that never seem to disappear, just change positions, but I decided that a flavor titled “Bourbon Pecan” was too special to pass up, so I asked for a scoop and sat outside at a table and watched tourists wander along the street. Afterward, I shopped for the next forty minutes, feeling my feet swelling and my clothes growing damp. I was scheduled to attend a reception later at the far end of Royal Street before meeting my friends for dinner—at a restaurant further down Royal—and the thought of all that walking was now frightening and tiring me further. I texted my friend to see if he was attending the
reception—he wasn’t—and if he was amenable to meeting at his hotel and eating nearby—he was—so I was relieved that the path forward for the rest of the day was now an easier one.

The second production was more interesting. Six actors performing unpublished short stories by Tennessee Williams written during the author’s early years living and working in St. Louis. St. Louis was also the setting of Williams’ earliest success on stage, The Glass Menagerie, but it’s safe to say that New Orleans was Williams’ spiritual home, a place that transformed and inspired him. Legend has it Williams had his first sexual encounter with another man in New Orleans, and the playwright later used the city as the setting for another one of his major successes, A Streetcar Named Desire. It’s also safe to state that he was the inspiration behind my trip to New Orleans. The conference I was attending, the Saints and Sinners Literary Festival, was now an adjunct of the larger Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival.

After the show, I decided I would walk along Chartres Street toward my hotel, thinking maybe I might stop in to look at the vase in the cooking store again. I was tired, my head was spinning. I stood on a street corner, watching traffic, when I suddenly fell off the curb as if I had missed the step. I wasn’t walking. I had only been standing still, balancing myself as I checked the street traffic, waiting to cross the street. But it was as if I was drunk and had missed the curb. I felt the muscles in my left ankle twist as I caught myself and restored my balance. I’d spent more than two years trying to correct problems with my feet, first from bouts with gout, and then from a nasty sprain I had taken on a near tumble down the stairs of my apartment building while I was surreptitiously trying to dispose of my heavy apartment window air conditioner unit by leaving it at my building’s garbage site before anyone was awake.

As I waited for the traffic to clear and cross the street, I tested my weight on my foot, hoping I had not aggravated the healed sprain, and then had the sudden thought that maybe some supernatural force had pushed me off the curb. I like to believe in the myths and legends and ghosts of New Orleans, comically investing my own psychic superpowers on a minute by minute basis to ward off potential negative and destructive energy. But I also believe things happen for a reason. Something or someone pushed me off the curb. It was then that I decided that maybe luck wasn’t on my side on this trip and I should just purchase the vase before anything else happened to me.

Back at the store, I circled the skull plates and mugs, circled the vase, looked at the vase again, realized I was too exhausted to think properly, picked it up and carried it to the counter, telling a saleslady I wanted to have it shipped. I was looking in my wallet for my credit card and a business card with my address to give for the shipping address, when I heard a woman, not the clerk who was assisting me but another one, say, “Do you want to know something about that vase—and the artist who created it?”

I lifted my head up as if it had been preordained and said, “Yes.”
The saleslady, a nice looking short woman with long gray hair, said the artist was from Florida, used the moniker “Skullee,” and only sold his work in New Orleans in their store. He had no web site or email address to contact. She had never met him and the store communicated with him only for orders and payments. “He never names his art pieces,” she said. “But he named this one. Do you want to know what it’s called?”

“Yes, of course,” I answered.

“The Happiness of Pursuit,” she said. “If you look, the figure of the skeleton is reaching around the vase in pursuit of something.”

I stood there and realized she had just explained my day. And my life. I took a photo of the vase before I left, stumbled back to my hotel shaking my head in disbelief and pleasure, just as I had done that rainy summer morning outside of Prague.

Later, after a nap, a shower, and a change of clothes, I met my friends for a dinner of Cajun flavored feasts, and shared the story I had of finding the vase and the photos I had snapped of it. I still had two more days in New Orleans, but a memory of the journey had already been made. And I am happy to report that nothing more momentous happened on the trip, good or bad, with the exception, of course, of falling in love again with the charms of the Big Easy.

Jameson Currier is the author of seven novels, four collections of short stories, and a memoir. He is the found and publisher of Chelsea Station Editions, an independent press devoted to gay literature.

Author’s note: Skull plate and vase designs are by the artist Skullee. Illustrations of these artworks are by Jameson Currier. Sculptures and tableware by Skullee are sold in New Orleans and online by Crescent City Cooking School.
“William Sterling Walker is a wonderful writer, fluent, warm, intelligent, and real. His stories about gay life in New Orleans are firmly rooted in place, and all his characters, gay and straight, are observed with a wise heart and a deep soul.”
—Christopher Bram, author of *Gods and Monsters* and *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Equal doses of wit, longing, poignancy, hope, seduction and loss, all woven together by this talented author. I give it a full five stars out of five.”
—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*
“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’œil 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
Michael Montlack (poet) is the editor of the Lambda Finalist essay anthology *My Diva: 65 Gay Men on the Women Who Inspire Them* (University of Wisconsin Press) and the author of the poetry collection *Cool Limbo* (NYQ Books). His poetry recently appeared in *The Cortland Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, Gay and Lesbian Review, Barrow Street, Cimarron Review*, and other journals. In 2017 he had an article published in *The Advocate* and was awarded a residency at Ragdale. He lives in NYC.

Michael Wynne (artist) makes artists' books and photobooks, and his short stories have appeared in *Crooked Fagazine, Headmaster* magazine, and *The Holy Male*, amongst others. He is based in London and Madrid. See more of his work at kissandtellpress.com.
The Staten Island Fairy

said Sayonara to his family,

boarding a flight newly English-degreed,

aiming to teach Japanese kids to speak,

already breathing stronger than the weak

boy who was nothing like his two brothers

engaged to young silhouettes of their mother

and mortgaged to the town where they were raised,

where tough-guy talk, not bookishness, was praised

and Italian blood meant everything

but being queer was like being Left Wing.

So with his two left wings this fairy flew:

Asia, Europe, Lebanon, Peru …

Ten years later, his brothers now envy

what made him sissy had made him worldly.

—Michael Montlack
“Currier is a masterful essayist, adept at lingering over a meaningful detail or capturing a complex emotion in a simple phrase.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Everything in this collection resonates with authenticity. The sections where Currier writes about AIDS are particularly powerful and heartrending.
—David Swatling, Chelsea Station

“Achingly poignant and full of humor. Currier addresses topics familiar to gay men—sex and the search thereof, love and relationships, AIDS and loss—all rendered in vivid details that ring with the clarity of Truth.”
—Hank Trout, Art & Understanding

“A remarkable collection of hard-earned, melancholic wisdom.”
—Kirkus Reviews
Chelsea Station is a new magazine devoted to gay writing. We accept for consideration original and unpublished fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, memoir, humor, narrative travelogue, interviews, and reviews (books, theater, television, and film) relating to gay literature and gay men.

Please query about reprints or promotional excerpts.

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

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

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

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

We also welcome recommendations for material and writers for consideration.

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