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

Also by Jameson Currier

Dancing on the Moon

“Defiant and elegaic.”

The Village Voice

Still Dancing

“Courageous.”

Edge

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August 2014

Chelsea Station
Edited by Jameson Currier

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This is a tribute for Felice Picano’s most recent book, *True Stories Too: People and Places from My Past*. There is a compelling cadence to his remembrance where the depth of detail is so beautiful with the excitement of a life lived to the fullest. His stories took my breath away. I am a gay man senior to Mr. Picano by more than a decade and I tried to match my experiences of where I was and what I might have been doing at the time of each of his stories. This rich memoir led me on a journey of remembrance which I might never have taken but for *True Stories Too*. Although the wrenching coverage of the time of AIDS reduced me to tears, it provided me the opportunity to recall the memory of my many friends and the important role they each played in my life. Like Mr. Picano, I was a caregiver to many and the staggering loss stirred me to greater involvement as an activist for gay rights.

Picano’s recounting of Greenwich Village as the home of gay establishments is a wonderful record of its long history as a mainstay for many New York City gay men and women. Men of my age joyfully compare our conquests at the old haunts of the Mineshaft and The Eagle, to mention just two of the great hangouts, and the foolhardy, daring, night visits to the crumbling piers along the Hudson River. Mr. Picano reminds us of the history of Greenwich Village from the time when it was just that, a colonial village. How many folks know of the extensive landfills that added acres of land to lower Manhattan? Or the site of Herman Melville’s long tenure as a shipping clerk or the pier where the survivors of the Titanic stepped safely ashore? We are indebted to him for this gentle reminder of Greenwich Village and how much it has meant to the gay community.

Then, just when I thought I could catch my breath in my read, I was whisked away on a wonderful visit to the Federalist on West 11th Street. This beautiful memory recounts the site where much of Mr. Picano’s writing was done and, apparently, was a very happy period of his eventful life. The history of this beautiful house and his time there as a tenant cries out for a more detailed story of the inhabitants through the years. The images of the nineteenth-century, ghostly housekeeper in her embroidered apron with the heavy ring of keys and the unfortunate Rachele Wall are haunting.

Picano took the time to tell us of his immigrant family, his youth, and his continuing adult involvement with relatives both here and in Italy. The harshness of his early childhood, the sometime love, and the growing respect of his Italian heritage gives us a hint of an insight to the source of some of his writing. His breaking away from family to struggle on his own for an
education was an early sign of bravery in a life of challenges which he has met full on and not only conquered but excelled with his fine, penetrating writing.

Whether tales of his life partner, book tours, writing, friends, publishers, Greenwich Village, Tokyo, Berlin, Los Angeles or New England, they all resonate with the specifics of the particular locale and time and the importance each of them has had in his life. Early on I realized I must slow my reading pace to fully savor these all encompassing stories. For me, this memoir moves Mr. Picano to the head of the line of gay storytellers. I urge you to read it as soon as possible.

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Garrison Phillips is a Korean War Veteran, a graduate of WVU, and a retired actor. He writes a blog, Everyday Strolls, for Senior Planet of OATS (Older Adults Technology Services) which teaches the Internet free to senior citizens. He has had articles and letters published in the quarterly journal of the Allegheny Regional Family History Society, The New York Native, The SAGE Newsletter, monologues in By Actors, For Actors, and a short story in Apalachee Review. His short story “Humpty Dumpty” and his memoir “Prof and Lily” appeared in Chelsea Station.
“Telling truths is something that popular, prolific author and memoirist Felice Picano does extremely well. This is most evident in True Stories: Portraits from My Past, his latest collection of expanded personal essays and life reflections. Picano’s memory is impeccable, and his ear for dialogue just as distinctive and richly realized. Appealing and wonderfully anecdotal, the essays shared here harken back to a cloudless era when fun was freewheeling and the consequences of that fun were overcast at best. With this collection, Picano pays tribute to the many unsung heroes of his past who have long since fallen, forever etched both in memory and the occasional bout of inexplicable laughter and tears.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter
“Felice Picano, as his name suggests, is both a happy and piquant memoirist. Gifted with a prodigious memory and an inexhaustible curiosity, Picano observes everything—Japan, Berlin, his own family—in a fresh and indelible way.”
—Edmund White

“An intensely personal collection centered on the survivor of a fascinating, chaotic time. Picano’s writing is most moving when he’s reflecting on AIDS and HIV, a theme that connects each story and has affected so many people in his life.”
—Kirkus Reviews
Five Vague Conclusions Concerning John Weir
Review by Vinton Rafe McCabe

The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket
by John Weir

What I Did Wrong
by John Weir
On June 26th of this year, the following post was included in my Facebook feed:

“It’ll surprise you to hear that I don’t like to advertise myself, but: the 3 AM guy is tired of living in obscurity, and he told me I had to share this piece in the Sunday Times Book Review, wherein David Leavitt, in a swell act of generosity, mentions my name. I swear no money was exchanged.”

The mention of “3 AM guy” will tip off the authorship of the post to those who, like myself, follow author John Weir’s ongoing assessment of life and literature via social media, often as a ventriloquist act between Weir and that 3 AM guy, as they take turns sitting on each other’s knee.

He followed the post with a link: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/books/review/david-leavitt-by-the-book.html?smid=fb-share&_r=0

Clicking the link I jumped off to the Times’ website, where Leavitt, most recently the author of the excellent The Two Hotel Francforts (in an attempt at full disclosure, my own review of that novel at The New York Journal of Books can be found here: http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/two-hotel-francforts-novel)

was undergoing the typical author’s interview and being asked the usual questions that one asks an author, among them these:

—What book is on your nightstand? (Dorothy L. Sayers’ Gaudy Night, among others),

—If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be? (which allows him to invoke the sacred name of Grace Paley, which leads him somehow to Yale and Gordon Lish, which mysteriously allows him to conclude: “Through Grace I learned a lesson I would learn again, years later, from Chekhov: From the most humble of experiences, great fiction can be made.” Note the first name basis.)

Most important, Leavitt is asked:

—Who is your favorite novelist of all time? And your favorite novelist writing today?

The pertinent part of his answer is: “Among writers working today, I have the greatest admiration for Norman Rush. I also admire John Weir, who deserves to be far better known than he is.”

Admittedly, such a comment would be quite enough to get any of us to post it on our Timeline. It’s heady stuff. A mandate of sorts. The sort of quote that any author marvels over—that, if it can’t be used immediately on the dust jacket of a next book, is at the very least to be considered for one’s tombstone: Here lies (fill in the name), who deserves to be far better known than he/she is/was.

But would we need the 3 AM guy to goad us into posting?

There is, to me, something so amazing, so honest in Weir’s posting of it, the admission of the desire to be better known, better loved, the willingness to take whatever validation that he can get, and then, in grasping hold of it, his willingness to show it off to the digital world, like wearing the blue ribbon won in the spelling bee to school the next day.
Which is not to say that all our 3 AM guys (or husbands, wives, or dogs who speak to us when no one’s around) would not have importuned us to do the same, but only less directly, most likely in that humble-brag kind of way that would imply somehow the wish that David Leavitt would stop talking about us to The New York Times, as the constant need to blush that he comments cause is making us quite weak with all the blood rushing to our heads.

Or as part of one of the oblique posts that are so fashionable on Facebook right now, in which the author would post a single word, “bizarre,” say, or “piquant,” and then post the link and wait for the praise to roll in.

So, intrigued, I Amazoned copies of Weir’s two novels The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket and What I Did Wrong, as I had, until Leavitt’s comment and Weir’s post, never read either of them.

Certainly I wanted to know why as accomplished a writer as David Leavitt had suggested that Weir should be better known. But more, Weir’s posts and the discourses that he placed on the Amazon site in answer to those who reviewed his books there, made me want to know more of his writings, if not the man himself.

(Of these, suffice to say that anyone searching for a topic for a dissertation could do much worse then to poke around in these glorious Amazon reviews and rebuttals. Like this one, dated May 20, 2001: “It’s me, John Weir, responding to the guy/girl who hated my book so much. Yo: I hate it, too. It’s over-written, and I didn’t make nothing in royalties. Plus, where was the hype? Was I hyped while I wasn’t looking? Dude, it sold 4000 copies.” The comment grinds its teeth on from there. And note that Weir’s review, entitled “Sorry, Dude” gives the book in question (Eddie Socket) five stars, in spite of his stated hatred of it.)

The first thing I noticed about Eddie Socket is that in it, the protagonist, who has conjured up the name Eddie Socket for himself, has a 3 AM guy all his own. This one is quite simply called “the pig.” And he stakes his claim early on, on the second page of the text, with this:

“He was having a pig attack. Mirrors always activated the pig, the punishing voice inside Eddie’s head, which he had tried to neutralize by giving it a size and shape, a constant perch on his left shoulder, and a voice like Mercedes McCambridge forcing obscenities through Linda Blair’s innocent mouth in The Exorcist.”

Indeed, variants of the 3 AM guy are everywhere in Weir’s writings. In What I Did Wrong, it’s the dead best friend Zack who heckles from the sidelines:

“Dead people talk to me, and the living scold. Richie wants to know what the hell my shirt means. The dead guy gets too personal. ‘You’re over forty,’ I hear Zack saying. ‘Aren’t you too old to be wearing a teenager’s T-shirt?’”

Which leads me to the first of the conclusions I’ve reached concerning John Weir:

1. He Hears Voices.

Perhaps it is his Gemini nature. (Weir often mentions astrology and astrologers in his Facebook posts, until the reader comes to think that he is a strong believer, something that he denies in other posts on other days, when he insists that he is just joking.) But it does indeed seem to be
the case that “mirrors always activate” the author’s need for “the other.” The voice in the head. The goad.

In *Eddie Socket*, the pig comes to a sad end, which is to say that he is simply dismissed one day when our protagonist realizes that he has not been heard from in some time, kind of like suddenly realizing that you can get back into your skinny pants. But *Socket* is a work of youth, a little papoose of a thing. Which allows it to zing with potential, as, in it, Weir unleashes the power of his words, even before he has developed a narrative to contain it. By no means over-written (as Weir self-chastises on Amazon), it is, however, a first novel, with the problems that can face a first novel. The narrative is incomplete, as the AIDS plotline comes to dominate to the point that other story arcs (like our poor pig and the torment he has to offer) are abandoned rather than resolved. And there is a zippity-do about the book that is at once charming and off-putting, rather as if Shirley MacLaine in *Terms of Endearment* had sung and danced for the nurses rather than scream her head off to get her daughter’s pain medicine.

But no matter. The good by far outweighs the bad. The tale is deeply moving, and Weir manages to take as simple an act as buying shoes and breaks your heart with it. Here, as in everything else he has written (including Facebook posts), John Weir can turn a phrase so that it can slice you to the bone as he masterfully moves from comedy to tragedy somewhere between the subject and the verb of a single sentence.

Like here, in which we move from a delicious moment of trick-or-treat to a poignant description of the ravages of AIDS in one of the first books to deal with the subject:

“Polly crouched down, then straightened her legs and pulled him up from the floor, stretching him our full-length like an unfolded crepe paper Halloween skeleton. In places, his skin had turned almost orange. ‘Into the bathroom,’ she said.

“He sat on the john precariously, while she filled the tub. Then she helped him over the side, into the water.

“‘People always want to wash me,’ he said, smiling shyly. She had seen him naked thousands of times, had touched his penis erotically once, long ago, massaged his shoulders, pressed her cheek to his back falling asleep. But she had never felt, not with him or anyone, the terrible hush and hotness of intimacy that she now felt, looking at his ruined body. He blushed and pressed his knees together.”

John Weir won the Lambda Award for Best Gay Debut in 1990 for *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket*. And he got a review from Booklist that read, in part: “This richly romantic comitragedy recalls…the work of Fitzgerald. Weir may have as distinguished a career.” And these things may, in and of themselves, explain why his second novel, *What I Did Wrong*, did not appear until 2006.

By now it may appear to the reader that I am trying to piece things together about Mr. Weir as if he were a sled that I never saw burning in the furnace when the guy is very much alive and a Facebook friend to boot. Why not simply send him a message and hope that he reads it before 3 AM?

Suffice to say I tried. Suffice to mention the two Facebook messages sent, neither responded to. Suffice to note that I then asked contacts who know him how best to reach him. Suffice to say that I went into this with both eyes open, after having been warned that he likely has an email
"An engaging allegorical pursuit of the mirage that is beauty’s transcendence."
-Kirkus
address where he works that he hardly ever checks. Suffice that I go on to mention that I finally
did reach him through devious Facebook methods and received a very nice note from him with
an email address, but that, when I wrote to that address, seeking to conduct an author’s interview
with him consisting of questions very like those that The New York Times asked David Leavitt
( but also including the uber question of: when might we expect your next novel? ), I got no reply
from the email, leaving me to follow what trails of breadcrumbs I can.

The books, of course, are what are important. They are the works of record. None of us should be
held accountable for the things we post on Facebook.

Weir’s two novels represent the BC and the AD. Somewhere between them the man took control
of his voice. Further, he perfected the use of his own life as source of his fiction.

Which gives rise to the second conclusion I’ve reached concerning John Weir:

2. Booklist got it right in evoking Fitzgerald. He is both Scott and Zelda, battling for supremacy
in yet another ventriloquist’s act with Weir supplying both voices. Only Zelda wears pink All
Stars instead of ballet shoes.

Like Fitzgerald, Weir at least creates the illusion that he has had to live through the things he
writes about, including a fixation with Scott Fitzgerald himself. From What I Did Wrong:

“At home I sit up late nights in the mudroom with Buster, smoking my mom’s Benson and
Hedges cigarettes and reading novels by Scott Fitzgerald, This Side of Paradise and The
Beautiful and the Damned. I’m in love with Scott and Richie at the same time, conceptual and
actual loves. Like Scott, I have a profile; like him, I’m notorious and pretty. I stare at his
photographs in a biography: Scott looks girlishly pretty at age fifteen, and tragically pretty in his
army uniform, and snobbishly pretty publishing his first novel at age of twenty-three. Like me,
he has a deviant body part—not his hips, but his mouth. It’s ‘a delicate long -lipped Irish mouth,’
Earnest Hemingway says. ‘It worried you until you got to know him, and then it worried you
more.’

“Scott has dainty features, Hemingway says, and a prose style fey ‘as the pattern that was made
by the dust on a butterfly’s wings.’ Clearly he’s part fairy. His ‘fair wavy hair’ is buzzed short
around his ‘good ears.’ I wonder if my ears are good. Scratching Buster’s ears, which are furry
and long, with cool undersides and silky tufts, I’m sorry I don’t live in the twenties age of the
Arrow Collar ads, when men were fops and you could be pretty as Scott and cross a room
without anyone but Ernest Hemingway calling you fey.”

Instead, both Weir and his character, Tom, exist fifty-odd years later, during a time in which, all
of America’s youth’s sexual adventuring aside, the term faggot, flung around openly by the more
“normal” youth and never seemingly censored, shaped a portion of his mentality.

How could it not?

As Weir recalls in a recent Facebook video (he took a weekend out to visit his old home town in
New Jersey recently and made several videos in which he shared the memories that the trip
conjured), there is the matter of his graduation.

He sat toward the back in his gown and cap and, when his name was called, he had to make his
way to the stage, hearing that word hissed at him, rather quietly at first, and then louder and
louder, in open catcalls, as he walked. As the teachers and staff of the school sat by, mute. As his
parents, who had come to watch him graduate, looked on.
That no one found offense enough for his sake to shut the thing down appalls. That Weir had the strength to put one foot in front of the other and to quietly complete his journey amazes.

Weir’s face is calm as he tells the tale, standing in front of the school building as he talks. But obviously, that word faggot echoes but does not fade.

The term intrudes in the pages of What I Did Wrong, and is wince-causing on every occasion.

But then there’s this:

“I’m in choir class. It’s my sophomore year, 1974, and I’m fifteen. We’re practicing ‘The Hallelujah Chorus’ when our instructor, Mr. Brendan, raises his hand high and says, ‘Hold everything.’ Then he looks at me and says, ‘You know, you walk like a girl.’

“It’s so unexpected that everybody laughs.

“‘I’m serious,’ he says, shushing us. He waits until we’re quiet. ‘Everybody knows it,’ he says, circling his hand wide to include the whole room. ‘Somebody get up,’ he says, ‘and show him how he walks.’

“For a minute, no one moves. We’re not sure he means it. Then a few guys raise their hands. Mr. Brendan picks Joey Fontana, the school nerd. Joey still wears his hair big in front and slicked back in a duck’s ass. If it were six years from now, he’d be Andy Kaufman, and he’d have a sitcom. Irony hasn’t happened yet in Clinton, New Jersey, however, and Joey springs to his feet and does me. He goes to the front of the choir room and strikes a pose. His arms are chest high at the sides and his wrists go limp, and then he walks forward a few paces, wildly swinging his hips.

“‘That’s how girls do it,’ he says, when Mr. Brendan stops him.

“‘Isn’t it more like this?’ Mr. Brendan says. ‘He walks like this,’ he says, and then moves big-hippily across the floor, dangling his arms.

“My classmates, feeling bold, yell suggestions.

“‘It’s more like he waddles,’ one of them says.

“‘And he holds his hands really high.’

“‘Do his laugh,’ someone says, and everyone giggles.

“Mr. Brendan stops in front of me. I’m in the first row. ‘You’re not Mae West,’ he tells me, putting hand on his hips and swishing them from side to side.

May Mr. Brendan burn in hell.

This brings to mind the third of my conclusions:

3. He does not blink. Not metaphorically, nor physically. In all ways, John Weir stares straight ahead in telling his tales, on video, in print, never blinking or shying away from the things that the rest of us either pretend we never experienced or thank God that we did not. Either way, our innerfaggot holds his breath and blushes a bit before we can reassert our pride.

The fourth and fifth of my discoveries are these:

4. He sounds like John Cheever. This is perhaps the least of my conclusions and yet, I am surprised when, after watching his videos (including a perfect piece of performance art in which
John Weir rides a ride of some sort at his old home town’s summer carnival, during which the camera moves with the ride and his hand that holds it, while his head and face remain as constant and implacable as Buster Keaton’s), I YouTube Cheever and am amazed at the similar quality of their voices.

I do this because Cheever makes cameos throughout Weir literature and because Weir has recently made the case over and over again for his desire to buy Cheever’s house, which seems to be on the market at a very reasonable price. From the photos he supplies on Facebook, the place looks very sweet, but the matter is dropped when his mother weighs in firmly against it. (Weir’s mother seems to be his 3 PM voice of reason.)

And then, finally,

5. He has trouble with titles.

With books such as these, the man needs better titles. *Socket* and *Wrong*, after all, represent promises made and promises fulfilled. Both give the reader his money’s worth and then some, but the titles (and the covers upon which they are emblazoned) are either cutesy (*Socket*—the sort of title that I have hated since Duddy Kravitz and *The Coming Asunder of Billy Bright*) or generic. Neither sings a siren’s song for wooing readers.

And don’t think that trolls over at Amazon don’t know it.

Lawrence Elk, in a review entitled, “Meh,” writes:

“Mr. Weir’s second novel is convoluted and more than a little boring. Before you buy it, flip through a copy at your local bookstore. That should suffice.”

Others agree (but not all, there are plenty of five-star reviews, as well as a statement from the author that begins, “My mother told me never to respond to critics—she meant my 6th grade gym class—but, whatever, I can’t stop myself, and so I just want to ask: What’s all this about my novel, *What I Did Wrong*, not having a plot? Or “much of a plot?” For one thing, it has a lot of plots. Somebody dies, somebody has sex in a doorway, somebody gets a job in Queens, somebody boxes naked with his high school best friend: Is that not enough action for you?”), but many state that they had trouble discovering an actual plot.

And, indeed, Mr. Weir does seem to be hiding his plotline, bit by bit, under the carpets and behind the vases and automobiles and shirts that litter his literary landscape.

But then I get towards the end of it. I’ve spent the evening reading, and leaving little sticky notes to mark notable passages. My books is clogged with stickies.

I want to finish the second novel before I sleep. Not far to go. But by midnight I’m losing gas and by one I awaken to find the book on my chest. Only the last chapter to go.

Now the thing about the last chapter is that I have been told, warned, whatever, about how good it is. A perfect ending.

A perfect ending I figure deserves a clear head. I close the book, turn off the light.
At two, I’m up again. Blame it on old age. But it’s two o’clock in the morning and I am wide awake. I find *What I Did Wrong* on the floor next to the bed and pick it up.

The final chapter is entitled “Abgesturzt.” It means “fallen,” “crashed,” “precipitated,” or “grounded.” Google insists that I meant to spell it with an “e,” “abgestuerzt,” and gives the choice for the meaning: “crashed.”

Let’s go with that.

There is a quote from Cheever (“Jesus, what a morning!” from “Goodbye, My Brother,” I think, which makes the meaning even thicker) then there’s an encounter with the dead, angel wings, an “86 Honda Accord the color of a can of Starfish tuna with its label peeled,” a long car ride to Iowa and back home to New York City, which gives rise to that damned Fitzgerald again (“The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time,” which is Gatsby, of course. Always always Gatsby Gatsby Gatsby.).

And then this:

“So many entrances and exits. So many highways leading home. I was in the rain, now I’m out of the rain, years passed, people died, I can’t remember why I miss them. Tunnels carry me under, bridges across. To Manhattan. I open my eyes. Home is what you don’t deserve, says Robert Frost. I’m forty-two years old. “Want what you can have,” Ava says, and there it is. Manhattan. The skyline of Manhattan. The missing and the dead. I gather change for the toll. Last breath. Wheee. Here we go.”

And damned if it isn’t perfect. It’s poetry.

It’s handmade lace. Homemade fudge.

It’s the green light across the bay.

“Tunnels carry me under. Bridges across.” That slays me. I read it again and again.

This is, simply put, a work that demands your attention. Read it, by all means, if not for the first time, then again, read it again. Embrace the benediction, with its giddy “wheee,” and learn to love the things you can have, this book among them.

And when you’ve read it, go to Amazon and give it five stars and a review that demands a third book, and a fourth and fifth, that says, “the glory of this thing is that it exists at all. A story told in a clear voice, one that resounds, one that fills the space between reader and print with grace notes.”

Vinton Rafe McCabe is the author of ten nonfiction books on subjects related to health and healing, and is the author of the novel *Death in Venice, California*. He has also reviewed restaurants for New England Monthly, theater and film for PBS and books and fashion for the *New Haven Advocate*. A member of the National Book Critics Circle, he now reviews books for *The New York Journal of Books* and *Chelsea Station Magazine*.

photos of John Weir were obtained via the author's Facebook page
Bob the Book

A delightful romance of book meets book and boy finds boy

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

“David Pratt takes a classic device from children’s literature, the humanized object, and uses it not for a tugboat or lighthouse or valentine rabbit but for a book on gay erotica. His voice is pitch-perfect as he follows his hero out into the world, evoking a picturesque epic about books and bookstores, readers and collectors, conferences and bonfires. There’s even a love story. Bob the Book is smart, funny, learned and, like the best bibliobooks, just a little crazy.”
Christopher Bram, author of Eminent Outlaws

Lambda Literary Award winner Debut Gay Fiction

“Bob the Book is a book about books and books about books.”
—Tom Mancini, author of Probation

“Bob the Book is a book about books.”
—Tom Mancini, author of Probation

“I like this book because it makes me think of my favorite books.”
—Tom Mancini, author of Probation

“My Movie is absolutely essential reading.”
—Tom Mancini, author of Probation

My Movie

by David Pratt
Chelsea Station Editions
ISBN: 978-0-9832851-7-5 paperback, $18.00
Now available through bookstores and Web retailers also available in digital formats

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

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

“I haven’t enjoyed nor been so moved by modern fiction in a very long time.”
—Jennifer Levin, author of Water Dancer and The Sea of Light

www.chelseastationeditions.com
I tend to distrust anthologies that include “Best” in their titles, taking for granted that any kind of judgment of what is “best” depends entirely on the views of the editor: at worst, the selection will be idiosyncratic; at best, it still will be subjective. However, having read Best Gay Stories 2014, I cannot deny that the quality of writing for this anthology is indeed excellent. I read this anthology straight through, unlike other anthologies, where I typically read my favorite authors first (or at least those stories written by names I recognized), and then follow up with the writers unknown to me, if the title or length of the story tempts me; seldom do I read an entire anthology, but I found these stories compelling enough to do so.

Begun in 2008, the latest installment in this series contains twenty selections published during the calendar year 2013, which first appeared in a wide variety of venues: other anthologies, literary magazines, and two are translated into English from German and Russian. Both established authors and new writers are represented, as are writers both male and female. And just as Berman has cast his net as far as possible to find these stories, “stories” itself is interpreted broadly, for not all of the selections are fiction: two are memoirs, and one is an essay about gay stories—a kind of meta-story. Most of the stories are realistic fiction, but other genres, including speculative fiction and noir, are represented. But just as LGBT people defy easy categorization, some of these stories do as well, and may best be described as interstitial.

The only common thread among all the stories is that at least one character is a gay male; otherwise there is no common theme shared by all the selections. However, I did notice that while only two selections are obviously labeled as memoirs, at least seven of the fiction pieces read the same way, where the characters, while in the present, are recalling their own pasts. This looking back allows for explorations of mortality (“Werewolf” by Michael Carroll and “Lloyd” by Michael Thomas Ford), desire and longing (“The Cervantino Baby” by Trebor Healy), redemption (“Jimmy” by Stefen Styrsky), or the need to try to make sense of what has happened before (“Pelion” by Mario Alberto Zambrano).

Perhaps not surprising, as a former academic, and as a reader of speculative fiction primarily, my personal favorites include “Proem: How to Read Gay Pulp Fiction,” by James Gifford, and “The Country of Dead Voices” by Sam Miller. The former is an essay about the subversive quality of pulp fiction, both within the context of GLBT literature and of English literature as a whole; the latter is a time-travel story, wherein the protagonist somehow manages to communicate with a man from the future. (The theme of looking back holds true for these selections as well: the former, quite obviously, examines the literature of the past to determine what value it holds as
part of our literary heritage, and even the latter, while it ostensibly is about the future, has a
strong nostalgic feel to it.)

Above I decried the use of “Best” as a criterion for selection in an anthology; hence, as a
reviewer, I will not tell you that these two stories are the “best.” They are simply the ones that I
enjoyed the most; other readers will (and should) discover their own favorites. Just as Berman
cast his net wide to find these stories, I encourage every potential reader to sample as widely as
possible the contents of this book.

Keith Glaeske is a medievalist and collector of speculative fiction currently living in
Washington, DC. His articles about medieval literature have been published in Medieval
Perspectives, Traditio, and Ériu.
“J.R. Greenwell does a lovely job of relaying the comic as well as tragicomic aspects of the over-the-top dramatic world of drag queens, and he nails it exactly.”
—Felice Picano, author of True Stories

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

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

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

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

“Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? is a collection of eleven short stories about being gay in the South and I loved each of them... Greenwell gives us a wonderful cast of characters with heart and we laugh and cry with them. Written with wit and emotion, we are taken into the world of Southern drag queens and feel what they feel as they navigate life.”
—Amos Lassen, Reviews by Amos Lassen
Set in the 1980’s, *Dirty One* follows a pack of adolescent characters who live in the acid-drenched, suburban town known as Leominster, Massachusetts—the plastics capital of America, as well as the birthplace of Johnny Appleseed.

Praise for *Dirty One*

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

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

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

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As a consumer I have only recently embraced ebooks and electronic reading devices for books that I want to read for pleasure. (I spend hours reading emails and manuscripts on a computer screen, so often the last thing I want to do is read a book on a screen.) Mundo Cruel by Luis Negrón was one of my first ebook purchases, intended to be read as I was traveling through Europe, and it came recommended to me by several readers, many reviewers, and a literary organization that gave it an award. I began the book when I arrived at an airport several hours in advance of my flight. As I was reading the first story on my new ebook device (which shall remain nameless in hopes of not recommending one retailer over another) I was distracted by small gray font at the bottom of the screen that indicated that I would finish the book in 48 minutes. Really? I never finish a manuscript in 48 minutes. I thought it was a mistake, a glitch in my first time use of the device, but soon finished the first story in only a few minutes.

“The Chosen One” is the opening story of a collection of nine stories set in the Santurce, a working class neighborhood of San Juan, Puerto Rico. This is an engaging tale narrated by a fifteen year-old boy on the day of his baptism. This young man, adored by his mother and despised by his brothers, has had more sexual adventures with men than most adults four times his age. The story ends with the minister who baptizes him promising to take him to Orlando. It was nicely told and I definitely wanted to read more of Mr. Negrón’s stories.

Next up was “The Vampire of Moca.” It is a humorous story about an aging queen who befriends a younger more macho “real man” and takes him in as a tenant at a substantially discounted rent, only to witness his close friend, another aging queen, bed the young man. “It’s just that us chumps give anything to charm them and to put them on a pedestal,” the narrator whines at the conclusion of the story, certainly not a profound insight, since this sort of situation could happen in any culture and location (and does). I also finished the story in a matter of minutes. I did miss that the story did not offer a more firm resolution, such as the macho tenant being evicted or the narrator hatching a revenge scenario.

“So Many, or On How the Wagging Tongue Can Cast a Spell,” is another slice of life story, this time presented in the structure of dialogue in a script and concerns two women throwing shade at the number of gay kids in the neighborhood, musing on the possibility of sending them to camp in Florida so that they will come back “nice and straight.” Less successful are “La Edwin” and “Junito,” which use the technique of one-sided phone conversations to unveil the toxic lives of
their characters, the insight of the former becoming “the world has been the world for a long
time,” and the latter being “If I was you I’d get the hell out of here.”

As I reached the midway point in the reading of the book, the use of gimmicks to tell stories
disappointed me a bit, though I did accept that they were each cleverly done. The most
interesting story in the collection is “For Guayama,” told through notes left for a friend who
never materializes about the narrator’s desire to have his beloved pet stuffed. Naldi chases his
friend Sammy to the Dominican Republic where the dog is eventually stuffed. When Naldi
returns to Puerto Rico, he is arrested because the dog has been stuffed with illegal passports,
social security cards, and birth certificates.

The most affecting tale is “The Garden,” told without the use of any special narrative technique
by a man whose lover is dying from AIDS who decides to throw a New Year’s Eve party. The
most intriguing and successful narrative in the book belongs to “Botella,” a story which follows
the bad luck of a man who discovers one of his older tricks dead and, fearing he will be charged
with the murder, he tries to erase his presence with a bottle of bleach. “Mundo Cruel,” the most
perplexing story in the collection, is about gay men who are horrified by other gay men,
themselves fluctuating between machismo and tears.

_Mundo Cruel_ was first published in Spanish in Puerto Rico in 2010 by Editorial La Secta de Los
Perros, with subsequent editions published by Libros AC. The trade journal _Publishers Weekly_
reported that the book first came to the attention of Seven Stories Press through the
recommendation of an intern. Suzanne Jill Levine, who has translated the work of Manuel Puig,
among others, translated the text from Spanish to English.

Individually, each story is well written and nicely crafted, even those which use special narrative
techniques such as the one-sided phone conversation, letters, or playscript. None of these stories
have complex plots. Characters are sketched. The prose is simple and concise, though it did not
have the unique resonance to me that it seemed to have to readers of the Spanish editions, where
much of the Spanish was in phonetic spellings. Collectively, these stories present a portrait of a
neighborhood with a myriad of social problems, rife with intolerance, poverty, ignorance, and
rampant with sexuality.

Like Justin Torres _We The Animals_, Luis Negrón’s _Mundo Cruel_ is a slender work that
showcases and displays the promise of its author. And like Torres’ work, it also disappoints,
giving the reader only a taste of a culture, not an immersive experience, and leaving the reader
with hope that the author will pursue a longer, more complex narrative.

As a reviewer, it also bothered me that I could not figure out how to make notes in my digital
reading copy on my new electronic device (as I often do when I read printed galleys). I suppose
there is a way to do this, but my device made me feel a bit like a dinosaur. But I did not need to
worry about my battery life. I finished the book in 46 minutes.

Jameson Currier is the author of ten works of fiction. He is the editor and publisher of _Chelsea
Station_ magazine and Chelsea Station Editions, an independent press devoted to the works of gay
literature.
I admit I initially approached reading *Death In Venice, California* with a healthy dollop of curiosity and a pinch of skepticism. While I understand the inclination to “recast” or “update” classic works of literature, enjoy what these retold works reveal of writers’ motivations and artistic choices, and acknowledge the truth of the biblical proverb, *Nihil novi sub sole—There is nothing new under the sun*, I believe, nevertheless, the resultant works are extremely difficult to pull off successfully. Like modern-dress productions of operas or plays, these retellings usually force inorganic correspondences between the old and new texts, creating unnecessary anachronisms and doing little to advance character or plot. And while an obvious test of a successful adaptation is how well it stands alone, a successful retelling must also achieve a subtle balance: it must not stand completely alone, nor may it tediously appropriate every element of the original; it must be independent of the prior work or risk redundancy. Authors who attempt these retellings deserve an honorable mention for gamely trying. After all, one never knows if a story will work until it’s tried! Three successful exceptions immediately leap to mind, all favorites—*An Arrow’s Flight* by Mark Merlis, *Mr. Dalloway* by Robin Lippincott, and *Monsignor Quixote* by Graham Greene—“originals” in their own right.

So to enumerate every poignant or humorous echo with Thomas Mann’s 1912 novella (in English since 1924) in Vinton Rafe McCabe’s contemporary retelling, *Death In Venice, California*, would do this excellent book a great disservice and spoil the fun and reward of reading it. Suffice to say that McCabe’s skillfully bandies about in his first novel all of the allusions to Mann’s text. I will describe a few echoes here along with one amusing allusion to Mann McCabe offers early in the book. Instead of the Charon-like gondolier ferrying to the Lido the protagonist, Gustav Aschenbach, in a gondola, a recalcitrant limousine driver carries in a sleek, black Town Car the protagonist, Jameson Frame, from LAX to the less grand Hotel des Bains in Venice Beach.

However, McCabe makes two pivotal innovations over Mann’s original story. First, McCabe imagines his Jameson Frame as openly gay—and why wouldn’t he be! As in Mann’s story, McCabe’s adaptation charts the decline of a fifty-year old writer “weighed down by the finery that life had provided.” Frame is a “collector of words,” we are told, whose literary reputation rests (a little too comfortably) on a novel called *Pennyweight*, a family history, and a very precious-sounding volume of poetry. In fact, seven of the most important words in *Death In Venice, California* are Frame’s own: *Youth has only youth to offer.*
Frame (the word “frame” echoes throughout the text, one of the few flourishes in an otherwise careful prose style), a frequent guest on public television’s program Charlie Rose, lives a very comfortable life (with his “best work behind him”) in a posh Upper East Side townhouse. As a protagonist, Frame struck me as quite vividly drawn, though rather prissy, pretentious, and preposterously wealthy for a literary writer. When we finally learn in the third chapter that Frame is the scion of a banking family and had written Pennyweight about his father (much like the poet, James Merrill, who had published in 1957 his own roman à clef called The Seraglio about his famous father, the broker Charles Merrill), we understand the source of Frame’s wealth and one of the wellsprings of his character. McCabe contrasts widowed Achenbach’s ascetic middle age life with Frame’s privileged and rather dilettantish one.

Through a series of flashbacks in the beginning we learn that Frame rather impetuously decides to break with his routine of retreating to a cabin in Vermont and light out for the California coast. People and events in Venice, California track more or less to Achenbach’s forays into Venice from the Lido. I admit I didn’t quite buy that Frame would head to California—he seemed to me more of the Waikiki-type, at the very least. But we are given to understand for a variety of reasons, least of which is the role the West plays in the American psyche, that Frame’s trip to the West Coast is indeed fated.

McCabe’s second innovation over Mann’s story is integrally linked to the first. McCabe fleshes out the “object” of Frame’s fascination, making the youth an active catalyst in Frame’s demise. Whereas Mann’s Aschenbach obsesses over a barely adolescent princeling surrounded by his family and retainers, Frame follows a twenty-something surfer of dubious character (aptly, though a tad transparently named, “Chase”), surrounded by a motley band of queer folk. Mann never develops Tadzio as a fully drawn character—Tadzio is a mirage, literally and figuratively, because of his age and his inapproachability. But McCabe’s Chase is quite corporeal. Using his beauty and the promise of sex as a lure, Chase methodically reels in his catch, enthraling Frame in a completely illogical, helpless way.

A friend advised me that McCabe accurately depicts the boardwalk of Venice Beach. “It could never be accused of ravishing the senses as its namesake city,” I was told and McCabe describes in some detail, the beach littered with needles, the ragtag inhabitants, bedraggled homeless, the bodybuilders, the tourists. The shabbiness and tawdriness of Venice Beach easily substitute for the mystery and menace of Venice and the Lido. To the mix of characters that Frame encounters, McCabe adds two eldritch lesbians, Elsa and Vera, denizens of the beach in their batik tent with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of pills and marijuana. Elsa and Vera act as den mothers to a motley band of queers and hustlers and it is they who introduce Frame to Chase after Frame spots the young man on his first day at the beach.

By the middle of the book, McCabe’s story hits its stride and one need not know Mann’s original story at all, though it helps to appreciate it, which is why I recently re-read it this spring. Chatting about books with the novelist Christopher Bram at a party, I told him I had recently re-read the Death in Venice on vacation in Venice. I complained how frustrating I found re-reading Mann’s novella twenty-five years later. (I knew the story best from Britten’s austere and percussive opera of the Seventies, specifically, the English Chamber Orchestra recording with Britten’s longtime lover, Peter Pears, singing the role of Aschenbach with Steuart Bedford conducting.) Britten’s opera somehow seemed more direct than Mann’s prose in translation.
Bram suggested that I had responded to Mann’s “obfuscation” of the homosexuality in the book, wrapping it in layers of myth, allegorizing his internalized homophobia as a battle between Dionysian decadence and Apollonian restraint. The anxiety of homosexuality—Mann’s sexuality—is sublimated and ultimately transmuted into his prose, as is Achenbach’s into his character. As Colm Tóibín relates in his review of Anthony Heilbut’s biography of Mann Thomas Mann: Eros and Literature, quoting Heilbut that because Mann saw all of German history “as one long queer epic, . . . Mann was able to suggest that his concern with homosexuality was an aspect of his German heritage, and therefore it was literary, rather than personal.” (Interestingly, we learned the secret that Death in Venice was indeed a roman à clef in only the Seventies, courtesy of Katia Mann, Mann’s his wife.)

I enjoyed the way McCabe’s cool, authorial, curatorial eye lingered over individual scenes in his story, his prowess in describing the surfaces of things and how they neatly reflected Frame’s acquisitiveness. Frame seems constantly to evaluate or appraise, grade, and assay the worth of objects and people. Death In Venice, California is rich in themes: ageism and self-loathing, gay culture’s consumerism. Offering and withholding are central to McCabe’s story as are privilege and class in all of its forms and abuses.

Desire is written on the skin, performed on the body. Hence, Frame and Chase show a fixation on skin, its pores, blemishes, and scars, its moisture, elasticity, color, texture and tone, and pliability. Together or apart, they explore exfoliation, tattooing, tanning, Botox and liposuction. Frame spends a great deal of time before a mirror. Is McCabe holding up Frame to us as our mirror? Most definitely. Frame becomes the person he despises: needful and youth-obsessed. The “voluptuous feel” of scratching an itch, a perfect metaphor for wallowing in desire itself past care to the point of degradation. Frame is too acquiescent in this torturous relationship with Chase and therein lies the point.

Foolhardily too late, Frame poses to himself the question, “What is the cost of such kisses?” Of course, we intuit the answer, as we have been asking the same question since July 3, 1981, when we first read in The New York Times about the strange cancer affecting gay men. While Frame blames events on the Tarot or of paranormal “vortexes,” clearly to the reader it is Frame’s hubris that leads him into trouble and is thus worthy of only a modicum of compassion. Yet McCabe manages to make the reader complicit to this downfall by witnessing Frame’s choices. Frame’s flaws and mistakes are the same ones a reader might also make, if he were privy to such luxury and the proximity of temptation.

And travel, after all, is essentially a fictitious luxury, since we really see only what we choose to see. Desire is a fiction too for the same reasons. As Chase taunts him, Frame lets go, lets caution fall away. The emotional truth of this retelling reminded me of the recent second episode of this season’s Mad Men. Don meets to pitch with the Royal Hawaiian hoteliers a new advertising campaign and in his inimitable way Don “frames” his approach not as advertising the Hawaiian locale but as selling the experience of travel, the letting go, if you will, with a new slogan—“The Jumping-Off Point.” He soothingly describes the proposed advertising copy, and we can picture the unseen traveler’s abandoned clothes on the shore, his footprints in the sand. We hear from Don that travel should place one in a state not unlike unraveling, certainly not geographical, but emotional, characterized by “the utter lack of homesickness,” where, with defenses lowered, “air, water, are the same temperature as your body—‘The Jumping-Off Point.’” The Royal Hawaiian Hotel’s stewards point out that the advertisement reminds them of James Mason at the end of A
Star is Born and Don seems quite taken aback by the response. More literarily, the scene Don sets reminded me of Kate Chopin’s The Awakening.

There has to be a hook, an incentive, a mystery, to propel us forward in a story where we already know how it must end. The craft of writing is to make the plot seem simultaneously fated and driven by the character’s flaws. McCabe does not disappoint. Frame might have checked out of this particular California hotel any time he liked, but he was never really meant to leave Venice Beach. The situation in which Frame finds himself, we know, is largely his own doing, blindly or consciously—though not completely. It is perhaps the one predicament that most gay men have experienced, the inherently unequal power dynamic of unrequited attraction, though perhaps not someone as perversely unavailable as Chase. There is a delicious tension that develops between the two characters in the inexorable march to the end of the book. McCabe artfully sets up Frame’s fall, turning on its head all the classical allusion in the original about the Erotic’s relationship to Wisdom, if not ditching the mythology completely. If Frame’s demise did not quite rise to the level of classical Greek tragedy, which is, as I believe McCabe intended, we do feel a guilty empathy for him. Who among us could afford to scorn Frame’s hubris for long? We must identify with certain aspects of his character. We all know how much life in the epoch of AIDS feels like a place from which there is no escape. And yet, make no mistake, Death in Venice, California is simultaneously serious and deeply funny. I found the last quarter of the book a compulsive read, frighteningly sexy and tinged with a chill-touch of schadenfreude—a true burlesque, in a word, of the original, perhaps the only plausible, truthful “update” for such times. McCabe’s book too becomes its own “original.”

William Sterling Walker is the author of Desire, Tales of New Orleans, which was a Lambda Literary finalist and the winner of the Emerging Writer Award from the Saints and Sinners Literary Festival in New Orleans. His stories have been anthologized in Best Gay Stories, Best American Gay Fiction 2, and the Lambda Award-winning Fresh Men: New Voices in Gay Fiction, after first appearing in modern words, Harrington Gay Men’s Fiction Quarterly, and The James White Review. He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from Brooklyn College. A native of New Orleans, he now resides in Brooklyn, with his spouse, the artist Jeffrey Dreiblatt.
“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

Desire: Tales of New Orleans
by William Sterling Walker
978-1-937627-02-7
$18
Also available in digital editions

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**Fortune’s Bastard**

*a novel by Gil Cole*

“Hold onto your codpiece—Shakespeare has never been hotter. Gil Cole’s lusty yet literate Fortune’s Bastard is a thrilling, imaginative, and above all romantic homage to the great bard.”
—Wayne Hoffman, author of Sweet Like Sugar and Hard

“Gil Cole’s adventure is epic, operatic, and Shakespearean. He writes with complete confidence as he rolls out a grand pageant of heroism and love on the fifteenth century Mediterranean. On every page I found fresh surprises that kept my pulse racing.”
—David Pratt, author of Bob the Book and My Movie

“From the torrid depths of the Manhattan gay club scene, Cardamone snatches the precious jewel of wisdom that Blake prophesied could only be found in excess. You’ll find no political correctness, smugness or marriage activism in Cardamone’s gay universe: this is the visceral underbelly of gay life, and his language makes it shimmer like paradise.”
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“Exhilarating! Pacific Rimming is an eloquent, gorgeous reminder of why, when it comes to the mystery of desire, we persist in doing all the abject, crazy, beautiful things we do.”
—Paul Russell, author of The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov

**Pacific Rimming**

*a novella by Tom Cardamone*

978-1-937627-06-5
$13
Also available in digital editions
Wayne Courtois lives in Kansas City, Missouri with husband Ralph Seligman. They were married in New York in October of 2013. A graduate of the MFA Program at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, Wayne is author of the memoir *A Report from Winter* and the novels *My Name Is Rand*, *Tales My Body Told Me*, and *In the Time of Solution 9*. His poetry appears in *Assaracus* and *Hibernation and Other Poems by Bear Bards*. Wayne serves on the board of The Writers Place, a community center that provides readings, workshops, and educational programs for all ages.
Almost Nothing

When you saw me,
you saw almost nothing.
Flash of mustache,
speck of blue eye. Some guy.
Your glance barely
caught, and then—
what was that? More
than a surface? A bit of heart,
smidgen of gristle, scrap of light
from a star that died eons ago?
We are so slight—made of eternal
stuff, yet barely enough to last a lifetime.

II.
When I saw you,
I saw almost nothing.
Too focused on the room,
the past—that poor place—
the future, and the present
imperfect. What others thought,
if they thought at all.
You might have slipped away,
Leaving me none the wiser.
Hard to picture today,
bound together as we are.
That first time—Did we speak?
Nod? Shake hands like straight boys,
strong grips soon forgotten?
When we walked, did I
lag behind, as I tend to do?
Or did we match our steps,
afraid not to? It was cold,
we regretted the weather.
I wasn’t glib enough to say,
“We’re not in these skins
forever.” I knew so little,
not enough to measure. Now,
when my spirit feels small,
a chill passing quickly, like
a draft from a door already shut—
(No, not alone forever,
not in this skin forever)
—I recall that night
when things might have gone otherwise.
Was it chance?
Randomness catching our eyes?
Or was there
something more? Does God dance
on the head of the pin
we call now?

—Wayne Courtois
The classroom is as quiet as Charlie Chaplin as we take our psychology test. It’s over abnormal disorders, a lesson I zealously took notes on in the hopes of being able to make my social anxiety disappear like a cloud of smoke. Every now and then I stare at the waistband of Aaron Gregson’s Hollister boxers which is currently playing peek-a-boo. The pattern is checkered 3D red and blue. I’m a boxer briefs kind of guy but Tyler’s boxers have made me want to go out to Firewheel Mall and make my mom buy me the same exact pair. Even if it means her having to dip into our rent money.

When I’m through answering every question right on the test (I’m just sure of it) I take the runway length walk from my seat in the back of the class to Ms. Taylor’s desk. Along the way my black shorts begin to slide down and I realize I left my belt at my old house. (Mom and I are currently in the process of moving into our new two bedroom apartment. We took everything
with us except for Phillip, my step-dad.) So I pull my shorts back up and walk the rest of the way with my left index finger hooked around one of the belt loops.

I lay my test on Ms. Taylor’s chalk-grey desk. She’s too busy furiously typing away, as if she’s playing whack-a-mole with her keys, to look at me. “Thanks,” she says to her computer screen. It always seems like teachers spend more time checking and answering their emails than teaching. Ms. Taylor commonly stops in the middle of her powerpoints when an important email notification pops up. It’s annoying as Aaron Gregson when he makes fun of my squeaky feminine voice.

I’m too busy thinking about this, and trying to look at Aaron Gregson’s toned calves, to remember to hold my shorts up like I try to do my self-esteem when Aaron calls me Ms. Sasha Fierce. (He calls me this, with an accompany finger snap, because I made the mistake of spending Freshman year dancing to *Single Ladies* at any and all times.)

My shorts fall down to the rainbow confetti-colored carpet.

The next five seconds drip slower than honey.

As luck would have it Lanie Sowers, our homecoming queen, is perfectly eye level with my crouch. My vomit green boxer briefs have a tighter hold on my junk than a mother holding her crying baby so Lanie’s eyes, which are now as large as quarters, gets an IMAX viewing of it.

I swoosh my shorts back up.

“I’m so sorry,” I spit out to Lanie. I try to ignore the soft orchestra of muffled laughter being played by five or six people that can go straight to Hell. Lanie stares up at me with wide eyes. She opens her mouth but no words walk out of it. She looks as if she is watching 9/11.

“It’s cool dude,” she says, rapidly shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head. She’s obviously lying right now but I lie to myself by saying she isn’t. And while I’m at it I also tell myself that no one but Lanie looked up in time to see me standing in my Fruit of the Loom boxer briefs.

I scurry to my seat in the far right corner. When I sit down the entire class turns around to stare at me. Some have puckered up lips as they try to hold in their laughter. Others, like Aaron Gregson, are liberally letting their chuckles fly out and slap me in the face.

My navy blue plastic chair squeaks as I squirm around in it. They’re all staring at me as if they’re expecting a second act. I reach deep down inside of myself like an oil drill and find the strength to throw out a laugh faker than Joan River’s face. But they’re not satisfied. They’re still staring at me and it’s making my armpits drizzle. I dart my eyes from person to person: Aaron Gregson, whose chiseled acne-covered face is radiant with laughter. Hayden Burnett, who’s languorously chewing his gum like a cow, the usual look of boredom in his puppy dog blue eyes. Ms. Taylor, who’s sitting with her head in her hand and her face as blank as printer paper. I try to shout at each of them with my mortified eyes: “Stop looking at me!”

Ms. Taylor shrugs her shoulders and smirks at me, “That’s why you should always wear a belt. Alright everyone, finish up your tests.” And everyone returns to bowing their heads over their papers as if they’re in prayer.

But Aaron Gregson can’t stop laughing.
He’s trying to swallow his laughter but he keeps choking on it, every now and then a giggle escaping from his chest. Lanie and him keep looking at each other and smiling, exchanging sentences with just their eyes.

I imagine the sentences are something like:

Lanie: *I can’t wait to tell everyone about this.*

Tyler: *Could you see his dick? How big was it?*

Lanie: *Yeah. All I have to say is: yawn.*

Tyler: *Jesus I thought him dancing to Single Ladies at the pep rally last year was going to be his ultimate gift to the school.*

I stare ahead at Ms. Taylor’s poster of this year’s boys’ varsity soccer team. For six months I’ve thought about it long and hard and have finally come to the conclusion that I want to lick eight out of twelve of the boys’ faces. But now I try to reconsider my veto on Zach Neu as my right foot taps uncontrollably.

I try to tell my amygdala to calm down. That there is no fear or anxiety to process right now (question #32, answer: B). It doesn’t work. My brain is still telling my body to stay in “flight or fight mode” so it feels like the Fourth of July is inside my chest and my fingers are shakier than the San Andreas Fault line.

I thought that by taking this Psych class and learning the mechanisms behind this warm feeling of anxiety inside me I would be able to be my own therapist and make it go away. That then I wouldn’t have a silent panic attack during something as simple as getting a haircut or riding the school bus.

But I see I was wrong.

It’s going to reside inside me forever, like a guest who doesn’t know when to leave.

Just like every person in this room’s hippocampus is going to make sure the memory of when André Wheeler’s pants fell down in the middle of AP Psych class never goes away.

________________

André Wheeler is a nineteen-year-old Texas native currently studying Journalism at New York University. His work has been featured in *Chelsea Station* and *Mr. Beller’s Neighborhood*. You can find him on twitter @andre_daren or on tumblr @andrenaquian. He spends his free time reading, dancing to Beyonce, and chasing his dreams.
"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
“A brilliant debut novel by Canadian writer Jeffrey Luscombe that explores the inner and outer life of a ‘latent homosexual,’ Joshua Moore. Luscombe revitalizes the over-romanticized ‘coming out’ novel by subjecting it to a cold shower of literary realism.”
—Dick Smart, Lambda Literary

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

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

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

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

“In the depths of despair, standing outside looking in, Josh touches the hearts of those who have lost their way to their dreams and aspirations. His inability to find himself finally leads to an epiphany of his hidden, yet acknowledged, desires.”
—American Library Association GLBTRT Newsletter
Five fascinating tales linked by the sea. An aging architect must decide to give up his grief, even if it means losing the vestiges of a lover’s memory. An object of erotic fixation galvanizes men against the isolation of exile on a cruise liner. As he watches the disintegration of his picket-fence fantasy, an ex-soldier looks to the sea for absolution.

Praise for Part the Hawser, Limn the Sea

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

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

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

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

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
Gary Coughlin wove inconspicuously through the midtown throng, twenty minutes late for his 10:30 appointment. Even when he occasionally cut someone off or bumped a shoulder in his haste, people rarely reacted and then usually looked down or up—in any direction but his.

Though not a small man, Gary deflected attention by compacting himself, slumping and narrowing his wide shoulders, casting his eyes down at the pavement—bulging orbs that seemed to be perpetually gaping. He always had a scarf wrapped around his neck to partially conceal his broad chin and too-wide mouth and thick, flat lips. The little hair left on his head was clipped short and hidden under a baseball cap, which combined with pale skin the color of spilt milk, and gave him the appearance of a chemo patient.
Gary also had some notable features, particularly a husky *basso profondo*, which he tried to soften by mumbling like a supplicant, walking the tightrope between humble and needy.

Gary’s entire wardrobe was camouflage. In winter, he wore a dun colored knee-length overcoat with the tiniest pattern over baggy dark khakis and an olive pullover. Same slacks in summer with a long-sleeve brown polo so his hairless arms were not exposed to the sun. Everywhere he went, he carried a crinkled brown paper bag containing the tools of his trade.

While he slinked through midtown Manhattan unremarked, among a certain coterie Gary was in high demand: a small circle of aging beauties who rarely left their homes but clung stubbornly to their past glory. Stunners in their day, they had photos scattered about their apartments attesting to their once astounding photogeneity.

He had happened upon his profession by accident. A lonely and taciturn boy, he was befriended by his lively and sometimes obstreperous next door neighbor, Gia Machado, a “stylist extraordinaire.” Said so right on her mauve business card. Gia’s apartment became his refuge, and for years he sat inconspicuously off to the side and watched her work, absorbing the art of illusion by osmosis. Or he would carry her makeup and wig boxes when she made house calls. One day when she was in a bad mood, Gia said, “Don’t just sit there. Be useful.” She tossed him a teasing comb and a ratty old wig and told him to “make something pretty.”

Which he did.

Then another challenge. “See what you can do with this tired, old face,” she said after her last customer had departed. Gia’s impeccably applied make-up had faded and smeared from hours of working on other women. For such a large, ungainly young man, Gary proved to have a light touch. A half hour later Gia gasped at her reflection and broke into a giant smile. The business cards were soon changed: “Gia and Gary: Artistes extraordinaire.”

When Gia died, he inherited her clients, a few of whom while lamenting her passing, ungenerously told Gary that he was the superior talent. The death while tragic, was not unexpected. Gia had been madly in love with Hector, who for years, came and went as he pleased, until he came no more, and Gia swallowed pills.

Until Gia’s parents came down from the Bronx to claim her, Gary didn’t realize that she’d been born Jorge Machado, the same name which would grace her tombstone.

One of Gary’s best customers was a former world-class screen siren, courted by playboys and princes. Now a recluse, on her last outing a decade earlier, on October 5, 1972, she’d been arrested for shoplifting. Kleptomania was nothing new to her, a lifelong affliction. In her heyday it had been a pardonable offense, her stunning face and captivating physique being the best defense. Shopkeepers often apologized to her and insisted she keep whatever item she’d pilfered. That was before she committed the unpardonable offense of fading. The grainy front-page photo in the *Daily News* the day following her arrest featured her being escorted out of the store flanked by two policemen. After paying a fine and agreeing to community service, which she didn’t show up for, she never left her apartment again.

Ten years now.

But she still had mirrors in every room and Gary’s responsibility was to make certain they reflected upon her kindly. Twice weekly he dyed her wispy thin locks and augmented them with fillers and extensions until the sprayed helmet compared favorably to the luxuriant coifs of her...
Hollywood years. He moisturized and exfoliated, shrunk every pore and carefully spackled in the creases, before applying liner and shading her once fatally seductive almond eyes, a regimen that cleverly maintained the semblance of glamour—if for no one else, then for the only person to whom it truly mattered.

Clients paid Gary generously for his wizardry—he had a dozen regulars and a waiting list of referrals, most of whom he would reject, particularly those who’d undergone extensive plastic surgery. A dermabrasion was permissible, even understandable. If they’d chosen to distort the original proportions of their physiognomy deliberately, however, he wanted no part of them. Gary preferred to turn back the clock with trickery, not needles and knives. And he was willing to put up his results against any of the best doctors in town—or Brazil or Switzerland for that matter.

Gary lived with his mother in the same shabby five room apartment uptown he’d inhabited since he was born nine months to the day after his father returned home from the Pacific theater in the waning days of World War II. Except in Gary’s bedroom, not a stick of furniture had been replaced since his then newlywed mother took possession, though Gary had recently purchased one of those large, unwieldy video recorders to tape broadcasts of golden era classics which he watched repeatedly, moving his lips to the dialogue, relishing every overblown emotion, laughing and crying on cue.

He was partial to the films of Barbara Stanwyk. Not so much the vulnerable Stanwyk of Stella Dallas or Sorry, Wrong Number, but the brash and seemingly invincible Stanwyk of Double Indemnity and The Furies, and much later, TV’s The Big Valley.

Each evening after he prepared her dinner and got his mother ready for bed (she usually turned in around eight), Gary went to work on his greatest creation. A firming mask and a long, bubble soak were followed by skin toning and moisturizing lotions to prepare his face for the several layers of artfully applied paint from the nape to the forehead, blended so expertly as to escape the notice of all but the most trained eye. The large flat lips were reshaped, outlined and plumped with color until they seemed to be in an eternal pucker. The eyes were similarly recalibrated and dramatically outlined. Eyebrows carefully penciled in, exaggeratedly long lashes glued on, and depending upon the sartorial choice for the evening, a vibrant splash of color or metallic sheen was washed across the lids. Now instead of offending, the dramatic eyes drew in the onlooker, curious to unlock the secrets therein.

The focal point of Gary’s sparsely furnished bedroom was an extended parson’s table featuring a row of expensive and lovingly attended coiffures ranging from screeching platinum to lacquered ebony. Spoiled children rarely enjoyed the kind of doting he bestowed upon these headdresses. (Gary’s Sundays were devoted exclusively to washing, setting, teasing, spraying).

Before donning the corona, a trip to the armoire, which he’d had built and held every variety of spectacular custom-made gowns and complementary heels (for a tall man, Gary had a noticeably small, slender foot, shapely calves and a ballet dancer’s balance). The garments were festooned alternately with light-catching bangles or rivets or beads or fringes. The bodices hugged the body or flowed away from it. (The snugger the ensemble the more restrictive the undergarment, since Gary’s middle was a bit doughy and he insisted on a V-shaped waist).
Then came the fingernails. Gary had two professional manicures a week from a sullen Vietnamese grandmother on upper Broadway, so all that remained was to paste on pre-colored extensions of which he had at least a dozen varieties to suit his every mood.

The final touches: accessories, accessories, accessories. Evening bags, jewelry (hoops, bangles, pearls, broaches, pendants and rings), and sometimes gloves, white or black, almost always elbow length.

From bath to out-the-door timed in at no less than three hours. Worth every minute. With Gary safely in abeyance after a long day, the night belonged to Starr Sapphire.

Unlike Gary, Starr Sapphire did not travel by subway or bus and took a cab only in a pinch. A car and driver waited outside the building every night at eleven. One of two chauffeurs, Roscoe or Guillermo. They were not paid, in cash anyway, though they sometimes crawled into the back seat to sample her wares before spiriting Starr to Contralto, a club on Twelfth Avenue where she reigned supreme, unchallenged, not a serious rival in sight.

Starr Sapphire was extraordinary in every way that her creator was not. With the help of flawless maquillage, features that had appeared almost strangely alien morphed into a kind of magnificence that was not only the envy of every run-of-the-mill cross dresser, but even those who made their living at it.

The allure was more than skin deep. The cast of her eyes swallowed men whole and the pout of her fleshy lips was an invitation to bliss. This was not drag, but transformation. She reveled in her self-engendered persona, but with one significant difference. While Gia had endeavored to “pass,” Starr Sapphire’s goal was not to “mimic some hyperbolic image of femininity. She had no desire to be mistaken for a woman. No tucking, no breasts (fake or otherwise), and that deep, raspy voice, sheepish by day was replaced by a bold vulpine growl.

“Fantasia,” is how Starr herself once described it. “That’s ‘fanta-see-ya’ from the Italian,’ she explained, and not the mispronunciation foisted upon the world by Walt Disney.

Dressing as a woman brought out her inner virility. The contradiction was intentional, the dichotomy irresistible.

Contralto was a specialized club catering mainly to suburban men and their wives or girlfriends, all with a similar bent. A disproportionate number were blue-collar types from New Jersey, but also Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and upstate. From time-to-time “chicks with dicks” aficionados wandered in. They didn’t stay long. Contralto was not the habitat of the sexually ambivalent. The clientele was hard core and determined, and they made it uncomfortable for anyone else. This was their turf and they had no desire to share. There were plenty of other venues for men attracted to cross-dressers or the genetically reassigned.

The drones who buzzed around Starr Sapphire’s barstool were in the thrall of her paradoxical masculinity, an exotic façade over a booming voice, a prominent Adam’s apple, broad shoulders, and the way she towered over them in her heels. She was also acclaimed for her “gift.” One of the men who fell under her spell referred to it as a “generous endowment” to which she laughingly replied, “oh honey, say what you mean. You make it sound like a donation from the John D. Rockefeller Foundation.”
Make no mistake, however. Starr brought more than a package to the table. Lovemaking was her true gift—from the seduction to the afterglow. And men lined up for the opportunity to be brought to heel.

Her chauffeurs Roscoe and Guillermo and all the other men (and their wives and girlfriends) came to worship Starr Sapphire, to have her take possession of them and not vice versa. They were the flip side of men who clung to the pretense that they were having sex with a woman who just happened to possess a man’s genitalia. Starr’s suitors were exquisitely aware of what was expected of them, to play servant to her master.

Nothing vaguely sadistic or masochistic about it, save for the precisely choreographed dance they were asked to perform. This subset of the male population (and some women as well) was rabid and loyal. They would gladly have taken out a second mortgage to lavish Starr with expensive gifts. But she was not the pay-for type, which only complicated the challenge. Unlike men who purchase desire, this was a meritocracy, completely Starr’s choice. She ran the show and they understood that the best they could expect was to be a supporting player. Night after night they stood around the bar at Contralto, waiting, praying that her eye might travel in their direction. And then they waited some more until she granted them permission to approach.

If she did not grace them with her favors, they made do with the runners-up, the asteroids around Starr Sapphire’s sun.

Starr took her time sizing up the prospects, testing their mettle. By the time she invited one of them to submit to her attentions they had worked themselves up into a lather; thugs and A-types reduced to tittering like geishas, offering themselves (and sometimes their women) up to Starr for her delectation.

Her chosen ones spirited Starr home or to a first-class hotel—only the best for Starr—where for a few hours, their dreams were realized.

Sadly, however once was never enough.

To have been bitten by Starr Sapphire only whetted the appetite. They would return to Contralto and resume the wait, standing around biting their lips hoping for even a flutter of those absurdly long lashes. A lucky few received return invitations at some point according to her whim. Those who were never again afforded the privilege continued to live on a razor’s edge of aspiration, a few of them crumbling in the process. “Oh be a man, honey,” she’d remonstrate them when they sometimes approached in tears, pleading for mercy. “I can’t possibly be that good.”

It was a taunt, meant to evoke the desired response, violent disagreement, until Starr had to insist, “Stop. You’ll turn my head and it took me forever to put it on.”

One such devotee, the grizzled son of a mob boss, suggested she strangle him while she straddled him since he could not live without her and could think of no better way to die. Twin Wall Street moguls she had once conquered offered her palaces and any luxury she desired for just one more night, fools that they were. “Don’t be vulgar, honey,” she told the twins. “Not everything is for sale.”

*  

Gilbert Shaffer lived in Somerville, New Jersey in a split level and worked as a manager for a company that owned shopping malls; a well-paying job with benefits, bonuses, and a pension. He had married Ella right out of school and never had children. While they were devoted to one
another, neither was in the least bit sexually curious or adventurous but no less content for it. Shortly after their twenty-second anniversary, Ella died after a mercifully short battle with uterine cancer.

How a suburbanite like Gilbert wound up at Contralto is anyone’s guess. He may just have wanted a drink after the theater; he had just been to *Cats* for the second time, after having originally seen it with Ella shortly after its Broadway debut.

Or it might have been the fatal crossroads of grief and loneliness that directed him there.

Surprise would be one way to describe Gilbert’s reaction when it dawned on him what kind of establishment he’d entered. But since he’d found a place to park—no easy feat in midtown Manhattan—and already ordered a whisky sour, he decided to stay for one drink. He didn’t take particular note of Starr Sapphire who had arrived shortly before him and was in a decidedly frisky mood that evening. She was, as usual, surrounded by at least a dozen apostles, who despite keeping a respectful distance, bought her drinks and hung on her every gesture. But Starr was not in the mood for a rematch and none of the untried sparked her interest, the one exception being the lady friend of one of the men. She sometimes went home with couples but forced the men to watch while she lavished all her attentions on his partner. Drove them crazy. Led to at least one divorce.

Then Starr noticed Gilbert, the only person in the room not paying attention to her and she seemed to find this worrisome. A challenge might be just the thing. Hearts crashed as she sidled up to Gilbert and introduced herself.

“It’s always good to see a new face,” Starr said. “Freshens up the place.”

Gilbert thanked her, noting the gravelly purr of her voice.

“Are you a tourist in our fair city?” she said, affecting coyness.

“No, just plain old bridge and tunnel,” Gilbert said.

“Let me guess,” she said, putting a finger to her lips. “The wilds of New Jersey?”

“Right you are,” Gilbert said with a smile. “Somerville, though I can guarantee you there is nothing wild about it.”

Then Gilbert had a question of his own. “You’re a man aren’t you?”

“Oh honey, isn’t it obvious?” she said with a toss of her lacquered mane.

“No, just plain old bridge and tunnel,” Gilbert said.

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Then Gilbert had a question of his own. “You’re a man aren’t you?”

“Oh honey, isn’t it obvious?” she said with a toss of her lacquered mane.

“Why yes, it is,” he said. “But I didn’t want to presume, and come to think of it, if you’d been a woman, I would have been terribly embarrassed.”

Starr thought this was hilarious and her bellowing laugh bounced off the walls. In their recollection no one had ever prompted such a roar from her. “Oh honey, you’re delightful,” she said projecting so that everyone could hear the comment. Then she removed her pale pink gloves and pinched his cheek and made him blush.

The gathered men wished Gilbert dead, and a few of them were in the position to carry out that threat.

“Have you ever been with a man before?” she asked, trying to enchant him by fluttering her eyelids, a maneuver that never failed.
“No,” he said with no particular intonation, “only with my wife.”

“And where is she tonight?” Starr asked.

“She passed away last year.”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry to hear that,” Starr said, taking his hand and enfoldng it in both of hers.

“That’s very kind of you,” he said.

“Tell me, Gilbert, do you enjoy mixed drinks?” Starr asked.

To which he held up his half empty whiskey sour.

“I was thinking more along the lines of a gin and tonic, you being the gin and me being the tonic.”

“I’m not quite sure what you’re getting at,” Gilbert said, appearing somewhat puzzled, though the eavesdroppers were already buzzing.

“Well, you see the one is incomplete without the other. Imagine Rodgers without Hammerstein or Kander without Ebb. Gin and tonic. Words and music. You do like music, don’t you?” she said leaning in.

“Oh, I get it,” Gilbert said. He shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

“What’s the matter honey, you don’t find me attractive?” Starr pouted.

“No disrespect Miss Starr but you know and I know that every eye in the place is on you, like you’re standing under some permanent spotlight. Not that I blame them.”

“You’re behaving like a broom, Gilbert and I am in danger of being swept off my feet.”

Gilbert had the good sense to laugh at the remark.

“And if I fall off these five inch heels, I may never walk again.”

“That would be a great loss,” he said and Starr’s spirits buoyed.

“What do you really think so, Gilbert? Do you?”

Gilbert nodded. “But you and me, how would that work exactly?” he asked.

She leaned in and whispered.

Gilbert did not seem alarmed, nor did he take offense. “I can’t imagine doing anything like that. I’m not homosexual.”

“Well, I don’t think of myself that way either,” she said, looking deep into his eyes and flicking the tip of her tongue against her top lip.

“Then tell me this. Do you consider yourself a man in woman’s clothing, or a woman with a man’s equipment?”

“I’d say the first more than the second,” Starr said as if she’d never given the matter any thought. And perhaps she hadn’t.

“That’s good because you see, I don’t think I could ever be with another woman after Ella. And I’m not attracted to men. But you’re kind of…neither here nor there. I mean that as a compliment of course.”
That’s when Starr knew she had him.

“So will you take me to…where was it again you said you lived?”

“Somerville. Somerville, New Jersey.”

“I’ve always been curious to see Somerville.”

“You don’t have to say that,” Gilbert countered, wise to her fiction.

“Why? Don’t you think I’d like it, honey?” Starr said, her throaty voice dripping with suggestiveness.

“I think someone like you would be bored in Somerville,” Gilbert said.

“Try me,” she said.

Gilbert shrugged and pulled the car keys out of his pocket. “Okay, then. Let’s go.”

* 

The next morning Gilbert was in his kitchen shirring eggs and sizzling bacon. He was whistling, something he hadn’t done since his wife passed. Quite a night. Never experienced anything like it before. His imagination just didn’t stretch that far. That Starr was a magician, a hypnotist, and a snake charmer rolled into one. He felt more alive and more like a man than ever before. No shock. No guilt.

Starr was still abed in the split-level in Somerville, a few birds chirping outside the window. She had never spent the entire night with anyone since she preferred to sleep alone. And besides, Gary had to be up by eight to prepare his mother’s breakfast. She was probably at home now, furious, but he’d think about that later.

Starr too felt a renewed sense of manhood. Not Starr Sapphire the conqueror, but rather Starr the nurturer. The lovemaking had been forceful but also tender. There had been such trust in Gilbert’s eyes, such innocence and sweet acquiescence that their moans of pleasure had bounced off one another. And there’d been laughter, especially when Gilbert said “that wasn’t half as uncomfortable as I thought it would be.”

“But honey did you enjoy it?” she asked, uncharacteristically insecure.

“How could you ask that? You were there. Practically raised the rafters.”

And as he fell asleep he kissed her and added, “Thank you, Miss Sapphire.”

Starr had never had breakfast in bed before, and she’d also never had sex in broad daylight as she was moved to do afterwards. The simple desire in Gilbert’s eyes was different from any of the other men or women she’d been with—not submission so much as permission. Her pleasure mattered to Gilbert and for that reason, she felt similarly inclined. She wanted to leave him totally satisfied, so he would remember being with her but not in the same manner as the others. She already knew that it would stand out among her experiences due to the purity of the connection.

Starr did not for a moment consider that Gilbert would be anything more than a one-time (okay, two times) encounter. The concept of attachment or even sincere affection had no place in the Starr universe. Men could fall in love with her—and quite a few did—but never with
reciprocation. How could she? Starr Sapphire was, with this one exception, strictly a nocturnal mammal.

She asked that Gilbert not take her home but rather call a car. He argued but eventually acquiesced. They enjoyed a mid-morning kiss at the door then Starr turned and proceeded down the walk and willed herself not to look back.

* 

Gary had already left the morning Gilbert appeared at his door carrying a dozen pink roses. His mother answered after the third knock and when Gilbert said “these are for Starr,” slammed the door in his face. Stunned, and uncertain on how to proceed (the building had no doorman), he took the elevator down to the lobby, where he passed Gary on the way out.

“I’m glad you’re home,” his mother said when he walked in. “Some kook just rang the bell and said he had flowers for Starr, whoever that is.” She knew full well, but they adhered to an agreed-upon mutual pretense of ignorance.

Gary remembered that Gilbert’s card was in the Judith Lieber kidney-shaped evening bag and he fished it out.

“I heard that you came by,” he said into the phone, which Gilbert heard ringing just as he walked in the door. “You shouldn’t have. Starr is not around during the day.”

“That’s not strictly true. I seem to recall having breakfast and making love to her one wonderful morning.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” Gary said, frustrated. He was using his day voice, uncertain and whiny.

“I haven’t had all that much experience in the romance department, but I can tell when someone is frightened of it.”

Dead silence on the other end.

“I’m driving back into town. I’ve bought you—Starr—something. Won’t you meet me downstairs?” he said, and hung up before Gary could object.

The sooner this charade was over, the better, Gary thought. Once he saw him in all his plainness that would be the end of it. The illusion of Starr would wither in his mind almost instantaneously.

When Gary rapped on Gilbert’s car window, he expected to be met with a look of horror or at least extreme disappointment. Nothing of the sort. Gilbert hopped out and came over to the passenger side and opened the door for Gary the way so many men had for Starr.

“I’m so pleased you came down,” he said.

Gary sat with his head hung, almost shrinking into his large overcoat. “Won’t you introduce yourself?” Gilbert said. “I mean, I know perfectly well who you are. I can see Starr inside you, waiting to get out. But what is the name you use the rest of the time?”

“Gary,” he mumbled.

Gilbert repeated the name and nodded. Then he stretched over the seat into the back and retrieved the bouquet. “These are for Starr. Would you see that she gets them?”
Gary nodded weakly, wishing he had the power to disappear.

“I won’t keep you,” Gilbert said. “I came to thank Starr and invite her to my house in Somerville this weekend. Or if she’s busy, next weekend. I want to make her dinner. I’m a pretty good cook. I hope she’ll say yes.”

Starr Sapphire would have been able to handle this touchy situation, would have taken control and informed Gilbert, in no uncertain terms, that his attentions were unwelcome. Gary however could not speak for Starr, didn’t have the gumption.

“Tell her to think it over and call me. I’ll leave both weekends open,” he said.

Gary bobbed his head up and down.

“Excellent,” Gilbert smiled. “If I might be so bold as to ask for a kiss?”

Gary started as if he’d been accosted. “Gary doesn’t kiss men,” he said angrily.

“I understand completely,” Gilbert said. “I’ll wait.”

Gary tried to open the door. He couldn’t get out fast enough. But the bouquet was enormous and he didn’t seem to have enough hands.

“How rude of me,” Gilbert said and scurried around to open Gary’s door and relieved him of the flowers. “Until next time,” he added as Gary got out and handed him back the roses. “So good to meet you, Gary. And my best regards to Starr.”

* 

Starr had never been on a date before and had no idea how to dress down. She didn’t even own a pair of flats. Yet, tonight she didn’t want to dwarf Gilbert. She settled on a pair of mules with a three-inch heel and the least flashy of her gowns, an above-the-knee number that showed off her lithe calves. When Guillermo came to pick her up at seven, he seemed concerned. It was not quite yet dark and Starr had asked him to drive her to some suburb in New Jersey. It was unprecedented, though he had no choice but to obey.

Halfway there he pulled over and asked if he might have a taste. Starr told him no. But unlike in the past, she didn’t keep him hanging. Perhaps tomorrow night she said. She owed him as much for agreeing to pick her up early and taking him out of his way. Guillermo was on a high for the rest of the journey.

“My heavens, aren’t you a vision,” Gilbert said when he opened the door. Guillermo had already left because she’d ordered him to, and now was not the time to displease Starr in any way. Not when he was so close that he was practically exploding at the thought of it.

* 

* 

South Pacific was on the stereo when Starr crossed the threshold. “Hello Gilbert, honey,” she said and sauntered past him, leaving a trail of sweet-sour cologne. She’d actually been nervous on the trip down but when Gilbert inhaled her scent and closed his eyes, she felt her power returning. “A gin and tonic before dinner?” he suggested.

“Oh no, honey, I don’t dance,” Starr said when Gilbert put on a rumba record after dinner and extended his hand.
“Then let me teach you,” he implored.
“Okay, but only if I lead.”

“Of course,” Gilbert said.

It took some doing, since Gilbert had to rethink the steps in order to execute them backwards. Starr caught on quickly and particularly enjoyed keeping a firm hand on the small of Gilbert’s back as they swayed. Once or twice the hand slid down to Gilbert’s glorious rump.

“Now, now,” Gilbert teased. “All in good time,” he added with a wink.

* 

As Guillermo went to town in the back seat the following evening, Starr was distracted; and though she pretended not to know why, she understood all too well. Still, she had made a promise to Guillermo and he was a polished performer, far more advanced than Gilbert, though last night he’d put his heart and soul into it. So like Gilbert. Such a giving man.

Starr had inflamed the ardor of dozens of men, but the pleasure she gave Gilbert was different, complex, and multi-faceted; a euphoria infused with pure joy and adorned with attention and affection. “I’m sure I’m not the first person who’s remarked at what an amazing lover you are,” he said during their post-coital embrace, “though I guess one can never hear those words enough. Now it truly doesn’t matter whether you’re a man or a woman or a combination. You’ve stirred something in me that goes beyond the physical.”

Truly, Gilbert was not the first man (or woman) to compliment her abilities. Nor the most passionate; or the most attractive (he was actually rather ordinary). But he was the first person whose satisfaction mattered to her, though she preferred not to ask herself why.

When he drove her home the next morning, Gilbert asked “Do you think Gary might like to take in a movie with me sometime? They’re having a film noir revival down at the Archives, and I’m a sucker for that kind of thing. Would you do me a favor and ask him?”

Starr promised that she would. When Gary phoned the next day, however, he was agitated and unusually forthcoming. “I don’t want to go to the movies with you, Gilbert. I don’t go out with men. Now would you please leave us alone?”

“Are you speaking for Starr as well?” he asked, just for clarification.

“I don’t want to argue. But I think I know what’s best for Starr.”

“You’re sure about that?” Gilbert said.

“You just don’t get it,” Gary fumed.

“I’m sorry, Gary. I didn’t mean to upset you and I would never think of displeasing Starr. Do you think I might speak to her again, if just to thank her and say goodbye?”

“Anything you have to say to Starr, you can say to me.”

“Very well. Will you tell her how much I valued our time together? It meant a great deal to me and I’d hoped it would continue.”

“I’ll tell her. I have go now,” Gary said, cutting him off.

“You take care now Gary,” Gilbert said and clicked off.
That night, Starr was ablaze. She phoned Roscoe and asked him to pick her up at the usual time—“but honey, this time I want you to be naked.”

Roscoe thought he’d misheard and she got testy about having to repeat herself. At eleven, he was standing dutifully outside the building wearing only his chauffeur’s hat. He felt self-conscious, and humiliated, and incredibly excited. “You’re looking well tonight, honey,” Starr smiled as she brushed his cheek with her gloved hand and slid into the back seat. “Thank you, Starr,” he said and by the time he got behind the wheel he was fully aroused.

At Contralto, she was especially aloof, studying the ceiling most of the evening, biding her time. The sound of desperate hearts palpitating was almost audible over the loud music. At around midnight, Julius, the mobster’s son, entered and a few minutes later Starr asked the bartender to send him a drink—a gesture she never made. Julius almost fell off his stool. He clumsily tried to offer up a toast but was so addled he spilled half a glassful. Starr turned away in a huff and he collapsed into a despair so absolute he almost didn’t hear the whoosh of taffeta behind him. “Are you coming, honey, or not?” Starr groaned, and he spun around and followed her out of the bar always two steps behind.

In his Riverside Drive penthouse apartment overlooking the Hudson, Starr choked Julius almost to the beyond. Afterwards, he thanked her profusely and said he could now die happy. “Oh honey, you’ll die when I tell you to, and not a minute before,” she said.

Julius hastily agreed. “Yes, Starr. Of course.”

Her once casual cruelty towards men was now edged with bitterness. Her acolytes didn’t seem to notice, so swelled were they with gratitude whenever Starr chose to grant them rapture. The other ladies (genuine and ersatz), however, recognized that a pea had lodged itself under the princess’s mattress and, try as she might, she could neither remove it nor get any rest.

All of them had, at one time or another, been similarly afflicted.

Their suspicions were confirmed a few months later when Gilbert reappeared. He didn’t come every night, but he was there regularly, sitting alone, pensive but not downtrodden, drinking though not excessively. He did not fixate on Starr like her other courtiers and if on occasion his eye fell on her haphazardly, it didn’t linger. If another lady approached he was convivial but always left alone. His male rivals were contemptuous and cold-shouldered him. Gilbert’s presence, for reasons they chose not to acknowledge, had caused a seismic shift in the room.

Starr tried not to let Gilbert interfere with her plans but became increasingly agitated, night by night, until she could no longer endure the effrontery. “How you doin’ honey?” she asked in that rounded tone of bonhomie, as if Gilbert was a newcomer.

“I’m fine, Starr, thank you for asking,” he said, polite but clipped.

“I’m wondering if you could do me a favor and get up on that bar and dance a little rumba for me,” she said.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“I would look very kindly on it if you did,” she said with a certain steeliness.
“I see what you’re trying to do,” Gilbert said. “I will not allow you to humiliate me or denigrate my feelings. Not you or Gary.”

No one had ever spoken to Starr with such effrontery, and she felt the desire to strike him and beat him to a pulp. It would be so easy, since Gilbert was too much of a gentleman to defend himself.

Instead, she swiveled and walked out of the bar, provoking a collective groan from the other men. She phoned Roscoe to pick her up and, down by the piers, took out her rage on him in the back seat. He was thrilled—down to his toes.

Starr Sapphire never set foot in Contralto again.

* 

When Gilbert saw the town car idling in front of his house, he didn’t rush to the front door. He’d been back to Contralto several times and soon surmised that Starr would not be returning. She was likely engaged in a pitched battle with Gary and, until that was resolved, her life could not move forward.

It was a particularly cold day and the motor was running to keep the heater going. Unless she owned a fur, Starr was likely to be severely underdressed. Gilbert threw on an overcoat and grabbed a woolen shawl that was draped over the sofa. Starr had come this far. It was only fair that he meet her the rest of the way.

Starr rolled down the rear window as he approached. “Why hello, honey,” she said in a soft growl.

“Hello Starr, it’s very good to see you,” he said. “Won’t you come in?”

“Are you sure about that?” she asked, and Gilbert heard a bit of Gary creep into her voice. “Aren’t you tired of men begging you? Isn’t it enough that I ask?”

With a gracious nod, she got out of the car, and Gilbert placed the knit wrap over her shoulders. “Why thank you. Your wife made this, didn’t she? It’s lovely.”

Gilbert reached for her hand but she asked him to wait a moment. She walked around to the driver’s side where Guillermo was sitting behind the wheel. “Guillermo honey, I can’t thank you enough. I’m going to miss you.”

Guillermo’s eyes misted and he shrugged, “love. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, honey. I’m all at sixes and sevens,” she responded sounding uncharacteristically mystified.

Over warm tea and honey, Starr told Gilbert that she was considering moving to Somerville, and did he know of anyone who might need a roommate.

“You don’t have to be coy with me. We’ll go get your things tomorrow. There’s plenty of room here for all your clothes and the rest of it.”

“Thank you, honey. New York is still my home but it’s no place for an older woman.”

“You’ll never be old,” Gilbert said, caressing her ring-enclustered fingers. “Certainly not in my eyes.”

“Honey, you always say the right thing,” she smiled.
“Before we proceed I need for you to assure me that we have Gary’s approval.”
“Gary and I have come to an agreement.”
“An agreement?” Gilbert asked, his voice brimming with curiosity.
“I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow, honey. Tonight just let me enjoy your company.”

* *

“Well, I’m willing to give it a try,” Gilbert said, uncertain as Starr laid out the elaborate plan the next evening from the bubble bath he’d drawn for her. Gary, she said, would be moving in with them, though he would continue to service his clients.

“Which is as it should be,” Gilbert said. “He can’t very well deprive them of his talents.”

“He will be very happy to hear you say that,” Starr opined.

A few days later, a moving van brought the armoire and the dozens of wig boxes and other appurtenances to Somerville, where they took up residence in a special room Gilbert had cleared on the second floor. The next morning, Gary reappeared and Gilbert drove him to the train station and said he’d pick him up at seven and have dinner waiting for him.

After dinner, Gary informed him that Starr was taking the evening off, and Gilbert said he understood. “Are you ready?” Gary said.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Gilbert said, trying to be flippant.

In his special room, Gary sat him down in front of a mirrored vanity and went to work. Not much softening was needed since Gilbert’s features were small and unremarkable, though his stubble was pronounced and required an extra layer of pancake.

By the time he was done, Gilbert’s plainness had disappeared and, thanks to Gary’s magic, he appeared quite fetching. Starr might even have been jealous if he’d waltzed into the Contralto.

“Have you thought of a name?” Gary asked as he zipped up the back of Gilbert’s dress.

“I have,” he said. “What do you think of Encantada?”

“Ooh, a Spanish girl,” Gary said with a glimmer of delight. “I could go for a Spanish girl. Is she a redhead or a brunette?”

“I think she goes back and forth,” he said.

“Well, for the first time anyway, a redhead.” Gary reached for an auburn bouffant.

“Yes, quite,” Encantada declared as Gary put the finishing touches on the headdress, her voice more assured than Gilbert’s.

After making a toast, Encantada boldly asked Gary for kiss. Her ruby lips set his heart aflutter. The kisses grew more passionate as Gary gave himself up to his new enchantress, reveling in the newness of it all.

“Encantada,” Gary said in a melting voice, “would you teach me to dance? Perhaps a rumba?”

“I would like that,” Encantada said, flashing him a seductive grin. She put on a Benny Moré record and held out her arms.
Gary stepped forward and got into position. Just before taking their first step, he looked up into Encantada’s eyes and implored, “You lead.”

Richard Natale is a Los Angeles-based writer and journalist whose work has appeared in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post and Time Magazine. He has published more than a dozen short stories. His novella Junior Willis has just been published and his short story collection Island Fever is available on Amazon. Upcoming this fall are the novel Cafe Eisenhower and the YA fantasy novel The Lost City of Doubloon. In addition, Natale wrote and directed the feature film Green Plaid Shirt, which played at more than 20 film festivals around the world and is available through Wolfe Video either on DVD or for streaming.
“If you like well-written, quiet stories that have a wealth of emotions bubbling right under the surface, and if you’re looking for a read that is an intensely fascinating character study as well as a wonderful, if necessarily subdued love story, then you will probably like this novella.”
—Serena Yates, Rainbow Book
“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
“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
“Fag” is a bad word at your school, so the guys call you a “nancy-boy” so they don’t get in trouble. Yet it’s weird. The two most popular girls in your eighth grade class are both named Nancy.

You spy on the Nancys.

“Are you ready, Nancy?” Nancy X asks. She’s holding her friend’s arm down on the desk.

Nancy X begins to quickly rub a pencil eraser back and forth on the skin of Nancy Y’s delicate forearm. She winces in pain. You watch from across the room in complete awe as a nasty wound appears: a mark of bravery and popularity. The Sissy Test is complete. Nancy X and Nancy Y were already close, but now they are bonded like sisters.
You watch *The Sissy Test* becomes an epidemic in the final weeks of eighth grade: five girls are suspended for hurting each other trying to be like the Nancys. They’re all willing to experience pain to be popular.

And so are you, nancy-boy.

The irony of the name *The Sissy Test* is clear. You know you’re a big sissy but you don’t know what to do about it. You’re being crucified for being gay even though he haven't had sex with anyone yet. You can’t deny your attraction to your male classmates, but the crude labels hurt you. You deeply want to be popular. Or at least liked.

You don't have a close friend to administer The Sissy Test, so you decide to give it to yourself. Back and forth the pencil eraser digs into your forearm, but the experience isn’t what you thought it would be. None of the girls in your class described the euphoria you’re experiencing. With each scrape on your arm, the desecration sets you free. You can’t control anything in your life, but this you can control. The pain of The Sissy Test cancels out all the emotions of being queer.

The relief is short lived.

Once the wound scabs over you’re still broken.

“What happened to your arm?” your mom asks.

“I got burnt at school,” you answer.

“That isn’t from that Sissy Test I heard about at your school, is it?”

“No. That’s just for girls,” you reply.

But you can’t wait to try it again. Wounding yourself takes over your every thought. You shift from pencil erasers to nails to any other sharp objects you can find. Your whole day revolves around The Sissy Test. How can something so rabid and bloody bring you such solace?

Admit it. Your now addicted to self-mutilating. By the first day of your freshman year in high school you’ve got marks all over your body.

The Nancy's have long forgotten about The Sissy Test over the summer. It's ninety degrees outside and you sit behind Nancy X and Nancy Y in third period Latin class hiding your arms with long sleeves.

“Okay, Latin to English: what does 'Vi Veri Vniversum Vivus Vici' translate to?” Mr. White asks the class.

"By the power of truth, I, a living man, have conquered the universe,” Nancy Y answers.

All the girls swoon over Mr. White. His good looks don’t escape you, either. He’s tall and muscular with a beautiful, trust-worthy face. His thick, blond hair is parted on the side and his teeth are perfect and white. You could love and marry a man like him if you didn’t hate yourself so much.

But your heart sinks when you spot two messy scars on his wrists peeking out from his long sleeved shirt. It makes sense now that he always wears a long sleeved shirt, too. It takes one to know one.
You can tell those scars are self-inflicted. The shape and the bumpy ridges are a dead give-away. You stand in line at his desk with all the better students so you can ask a fake question and get a better look at them. They're the jagged and mean-looking type that come from really slicing and digging at your flesh. You know he would have to be very determined to mess his wrists up like that. More than likely he wanted to kill himself.

Admit it. Your obsessed with his scars. Once you saw them, you can’t see anything else in front of you. Deeper and deeper you dig into your own flesh with a nail, or that file, or your favorite scissors. Cutting isn’t helping like it used to and you’re tearing yourself up inside and out.

It’s impossible for you to imagine that the beautiful and well-liked Mr. White could ever be troubled enough to hurt himself or want to die. Yet there’s a sick and guilty comfort in the possibility that he could be just like you. You always assumed that no one on earth who would understand how you feel. Maybe he does.

Admit it. You’ve fallen in love Mr. White. It’s not a love that’s romantic. Or a love like you have for your mom or a friend. It’s a love that comes from fear. A love from trust, whether mutual or not. A love in your heart that really matters too much.

There might be something more to learn from your favorite teacher.

“Alright class, pop quiz. Everyone take out a piece of paper. First, you will conjugate the following verbs,” Mr. White announces.

The verbs don’t mean much. You haven’t been paying attention in class for weeks and you know you are going to fail Mr. White’s test. You sit undone in his third period Latin class.

Admit it. You’re raw. You just don’t have any skin left and you know you need help.

The bell rings and class is over. You quickly write a message on your test to your teacher.

“...to save, saved, saves, saving—I need your help. I cut myself on purpose in order to feel something. Save me.”

Dennis Milam Bensie’s first book, Shorn: Toys to Men was a pick in the International gay magazine The Advocate as “One of the Best Overlooked Books of 2011”. The author’s short stories have been published by Specter Magazine, The Ink and Code, Bay Laurel, Everyday Fiction, The Round Up, Fuck Fiction, Cease Cows, and This Zine Will Change Your Life and his essays have been seen in The Huffington Post and The Good Men Project. One Gay American is his second book with Coffeetown Press, which was chosen as a finalist in the Indie Excellence Book Awards. He was a presenter at the 2013 Saints and Sinners Literary Festival. Dennis lives in Seattle with his three dogs.
LEAVING FLAT IRON CREEK

John S. Lloyd

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OF A MOTION ADDICT

STEPHEN PETRONIO
“Stephen!”
Whip cracks across a cottony Novocain void...
“STEPHEN!”
Searing pain shoots from ear to ear then rockets up to the crown of my skull.
One eye snaps open on a tighty-whitey close-up: fabric...a pillow...saliva.
“STEEEEEHEN!”

Cowboys In London
Stephen Petronio

from Confessions of a Motion Addict
Down deep inside, the voice clangs again. “Wake up!”

Right, that’s me.

I register the sound of air sucking in, then resurface to the pounding glare of an unbearably bright morning. 1989. Awake again. My jaw is slack and my head throbs with the creeping half-memories of yesterday’s debauchery: coke (Charlie), E (ecstasy), endless chatter, shards of music (Bowie, Johnny Rotten, X-ray Spex, Morrissey) and violent dancing, belly laughs morphing into deep tongue kisses, massive amounts of Glenfiddich, then vodka w/white wine (Car Crash), ever growing mountain of fags (cigarettes), Charlie, alcohol, Charlie, alcohol, alcohol, Charlie, then sleepers; spiraling fuck into blackout.... “Artistic research” I slur to myself.

I shift on the bed and a hive of hornets stings my brain in unison. There’s a body next to me. Relief. He’s still there, tangled in the sheets. I lean into his monster-pouty lips (delectable) for a sign of breath. It’s detectable. Barely. He’s out cold. Suspended mode.

The body belongs to Michael Clark, notorious British choreographer with whom I’m spectacularly in love, a seismic affair. He’s deep in the coma I just emerged from. Through my haze I can decipher only one clear thought: “Coffee.”

London in the late ’80s means no real coffee in our flat in Shepherd’s Bush, or in any cupboard across the Commonwealth. It’s all about tea. I take an aching deep breath, then exhale; roll off the mattress and onto the floor, gingerly crawl my way up my legs, hand over fist. I achieve vertical sloooo—o—ooooow—ly, see-saw to the loo where I plunk a couple of fizzy Solpadeine in water and suck them down in a gulp. Solpadeine, the over-the-counter hangover cure I covet for its dose of legal codeine. “Civilized. I love London.” The throbbing fog hints that it might soften and lift.

Codeine aside, I’m in a honeymoon phase with London. A hopeless Anglophile, really, I love everything about it: the accent, the manners, the wonky English name equivalents of mundane things: crisps for potato chips and loo for toilet. My friends are my mates. I’m not exhausted, I’m dead knackered. I live for these linguistic twists.

And there’s comfort in the clear division between good and evil in the culture: establishment vs. underground. One stratum is so politely mannered and polished, queuing up (forming a line) eagerly without complaint, while another is roiling punk rock, anarchy destroy! The turf is clear as high school. There’s no “mincing about” concerning one’s place or class. Except for when one speaks. There’s nothing direct about social communication. It’s more of a minuet that’s downplayed, without emphasis: “Would you like some porridge?” comes the request to have some breakfast to a famished friend.

“I don’t mind,” comes the reply that translates to “Yes, I’m starving, heap it on.”

It’s the art of understatement—formal, polite, of not revealing what’s obvious. Discreet.

I’m a choreographer as well, a recent transplant from New York who’s received generous amounts of attention and support here. In London, this translates to cultural kudos of mainstream order. I also happen to be engaged to the most notorious dancer/punk icon London’s ever seen. (That’s him drooling in the other room.) The phrase “Bad Boy” comes up frequently in relation to us—the press seems to need it—and we’re drawn as counterparts from different sides of The Pond. The irreverent, quite queer, frank and open, fashion-fixated, velocity-addicted Angry Young Men.
In truth I’m a well-raised, well-intentioned guy who hopes for the best, expects it and assumes it for others. But I’m at a point where the politics of my sexuality are paramount, on the tip of my tongue, pressing a cultural moment of change. The ground shifts with Michael. The power of two is exponential and there’s considerable buzz around our union. Fabulosity.

It’s assumed. It’s easy. It’s the way it was meant to be. I throw on a fresh long-sleeved cotton tee from the neatly folded pile near the bed, long sleeves for propriety’s sake. The bruised crook of my arm is displayed less and less these days, though it’s balmy August. I vaguely notice what I’m putting on, the Ariel brand’s fresh laundry scent, the over-the-fingertip bondage sleeves that mark the shirt as one of Vivienne’s.

Vivienne Westwood, harbinger of punk, just won the Designer of the Year at The British Fashion Awards, after years of shaping what London’s youth wear, what they listen to, how they see the world as rotten to the core. She’s royally subversive and so much fun. My mind smudges out a little aside: “This’ll do for a quick coffee run.” Plus Michael and I love wearing each other’s clothes when we’re not pasted together at the hip.

Out the door and on to Shepherd’s Bush Green, the unusual crowd and blaring music remind me that Nottingham Carnival weekend is in motion. It’s a Caribbean cultural festival and a bank holiday, a chance for a long weekend, everything shut down and gone fishin’. Bank holidays are perpetually popping up in Britain. Civilized.

I snake my way through the crowd, make it as far as the local chippy (fish and chip shop) when without warning, the world jolts and screeches to an abrupt halt. There in the doorway he hovers, a magnificently sweet vision. He’s the blondest, squarest-jawed, sky-blue-eyed, translucent-skinned angel, an oasis in uniform. Standing before me is a perfectly hot Anglo-blond Bobby. He locks right on me, smiles into me; eyes shift down my body, then nods me over. I’m extremely loyal but Michael is asleep back at the flat and I see no harm in a little harmless flirtation.

We’re face to face when he tells me: “I like your shirt.”

I look down and clock the Wild-West cartoon cowboy erotica on my chest. I look up and thank him, a bit taken aback. Can Bobbies flirt in uniform? London is fabulous. When his Bobby buddy appears out of nowhere, it occurs to me...this is not going where I think it’s going. It all turns wrong as he orders: “Please come with me, mate.”

Bobbies don’t carry guns but it shocks me how much power they retain and I follow along sheepishly. He asks me my name as they escort me to the police van.

“Jack Peroni,” I blurt out in a flash of defensive panic that somehow morphs me instantly into the heir to an Italian beer empire (the brew I was drinking all night).

I’m inside their cub van—the wagons used for transporting the riffraff—driving around the crowded carnival streets, when I hear my perfect blond Bobby report to his station that he has a suspect with a “porno-graphic jumper” on and is awaiting instructions. It seems my T-shirt has an unseemly message on it. It’s not till then that I have a good look down at my chest and the upside-down image shifts planes and comes into focus. It is one of Vivienne’s extremely graphic cartoon cowboy/sex shirts with the slogan “Fuck Your Mother,” scrawled on the shoulder. A bit of punkish fun with fashion.

Bobby assures me we’re just going to drive around a bit, that his superior will have them drop me off eventually to pursue more fractious criminals. When the radio finally crackles back that
they need to “’Ave a look at me,” my Bobby and his buddy are instructed to haul me in. He apologizes in a sheepish way and I realize that I am fucked. My steamy cop porno is suddenly titled *Done by the Old Bill.*

*     *     *

We arrive at Hammersmith Station, just next to the Hammersmith Apollo where every great band has taken a turn. Irony twists the blade as it hits me that we’re just blocks away from Dance Umbrella at Riverside Studios, the venue that was my first stage as a dancer in London, the home to my loyal producers and enthusiastic public. How could I be in such intimate proximity to my dancing glory, now standing hung-over and shirtless, looking up at a pasty officer, who is in turn looking down at me in disgust from his lofty perch? How can he not comprehend my entitlement, know I’m decent, intentions pure? Can’t he see? What he does see is the message in my outfit.

“That shirt is revolting. What would your mum say if she saw you in it?” he bellows in a cartoon British accent.

“She wouldn’t say much. My mother is dead,” I offer in a return that’s too abrupt (“Who said that?”). I mean to state a fact and separate my mother’s memory from his crusty mouth. It doesn’t seem to help matters. They remove my shirt and I’m forced to stand for ages, bare torso-ed and nipples at permanent attention, surrounded by a flock of London’s best-in-blue. Morning drags into afternoon. I demand my right for a phone call and he laughs: “You’re an American national and ’ave no rights ’ere in London.”

I’m at their disposal. I tell him I’m a well-known American dancer who performs here often, which just seems to deepen his pleasure at retaining me. I make a desperate attempt at release by mentioning I have severe asthma and need my medicine at home. This jostles him enough—I don’t think he wants a death on his hand and he arranges to have a police car to take me around to my flat.

Don’t know what I am doing here. (I mean really, right now, and in the big picture. *I am* a good guy, loyal friend of the underdog, kind to children, didn’t mean for it to...and yet here I stand, strung out, arrogant, arrested and in a sweat in a precinct in London. Alone.) I’m improvising like hell in hopes that I’ll see Michael to at least let him know where I am.

My arresting Bobbies fade out and then, replaced by a new team of mixed origin and sex, off we go for a nationally sponsored drug run. We get to the door of the flat and the officer knocks but no one is home. I see the state of the flat in the look of horror on her face. There are beer cans, pizza boxes, books on top of books, videos, sketches and mountains of trash everywhere. In one light “a good weekend,” in another, “mayhem.”

I go in to get my inhaler and look around to see if there’s any incriminating evidence, should they search the place later. Miraculously I don’t see any, though it was everywhere when I left.

We get into the van to return and I’m defeated. We start down the street and through the tiny back window in the rear compartment I spot Michael. I point him out and implore them to speak to him. I’m still concealed in the back as they ask him if he knows a Jack Peroni. He replies a definite and somewhat paranoid “No.”

As we pull away I see it dawn on him. Then Michael’s ballet-running after us, flailing at the van, but it’s too late for them to notice.”

CHELSEA STATION
They isolate me in a coffin-sized single cell because I tell them I have a compromised immune system (which I don’t) to keep myself apart from whatever else I’m certain I’ll want to avoid in the communal lockup. I’m hysterically claustrophobic, post-weekend run-down, depressed at the thought that no one knows my whereabouts. Hours crawl by. Finally Michael shows up to demand my release and gets a snicker at his claims of grandeur and fame. In a fit of giggles, the captain mentions the state of the flat. Michael promises to sort me out and I beg for swiftness.

He vanishes for another day. I am in prison—In Hammersmith—On a bank holiday weekend. It’s looking pretty grim.

The night is long, punctuated by waves of panic and indignation. Early next morning, I’m released unexpectedly into the custody of my Michael and Steve A, an American photographer and friend who’s dating George Michael. Steve called a friend at the American Embassy and had me liberated. The discharge form reads “Public behavior to incite civil unrest,” with a court date set for the following week.

For a few days my knickers are in a twist: paranoid, guilty, without my passport. It’s too overwhelming to enlist legal counsel, and then it all eventually begins to fade away. When my day in court approaches I realize I have but one choice. I get up in the morning, groom thoroughly, then dress myself from head to toe in my best Vivienne Westwood gear: jumbo white-on-pink polka-dot shirt and gray lightweight-wool bondage pants (complete with restraint strap connecting my knees) and de rigueur biker boots. Michael and his mum, Bessie (whom I adore), come for support and we all head off to for my day in court.

When my moment comes I’m cleaved from my family and led to the far end of a cavernous wood-paneled hall and up to what can only be described as a tiny pulpit, a perfect stage for the upcoming drama (or is it more like the plank I must walk and prepare to drop off of?). To my left on the main floor, against the wall and halfway down the room, is a rectangular box with the rest of the day’s accused waiting for their cases to be heard. At the opposite end of the courtroom, looming even higher and on grander display, is the magistrate, flanked by his minions on either side but slightly lower. Between us the stage is set with great sea of lawyers and an audience of our friends and family, support teams of the day’s defendants.

The magistrate asks for the charges to be read and the minion on his left begins:

“Said defendant was picked up on the on Shepherd’s Bush Green wearing a garment intended to incite civil unrest.... The shirt he was wearing was emblazoned with the text...”

He pauses. Murmurs and giggles.

“And there was depicted the drawing of two cowboys engaged in a lewd act: One cowboy had his fist...”

Pause.

The whole courtroom seems to tip forward in their seats. “I—I— in...” he halts and stammers.

Then, like putrid gas that slips from twixt his pinched and puckered lips he decries: “Cowboy 1 is lording over Cowboy 2, who is reclining with his legs akimbo.

Cowboy 1 has his fist inserted to the forearm into the...anus of Cowboy 2.”
Up rises a great din of laughter and cheering from the crowded room that completely disrupts the proceedings in the most delightful way. I am now certain I forever love London.

When the court settles down, the magistrate asks me for a statement and I offer this: “Your Honor, it was an innocent mistake. I was quite hung over when I got up and threw the shirt on without a thought, to pop out for coffee. No malice at all was intended. And besides, Vivienne Westwood, London’s own beloved designer and cultural hero, has recently won fashion’s highest honor. As an American, I’m proud to wear her clothes. Pause here. And in my own small way, genuflect here, I’m doing my part to fuel the economy of the British Crown.” Pause 2, 3, 4.

The court breaks out in hysteric once again.

A barely discernible smile tempts his stern lips as he rules the charges “Overstated. Case dismissed.”

I shoot my hand up and urgently but politely ask, “Your Honor, Your Highness, sir...my shirt? It was quite expensive and one of my favorites. May I have it back?”

He looks back at me with a stony stare and proclaims in measured rhythm:

“The COURT will KEEP the SHIRT. You get the story.”

Stephen Petronio was born in Newark, NJ, and received a BA from Hampshire College in Amherst, MA, where he began his early training in improvisation and dance technique. He was greatly influenced by working with Steve Paxton as well as the dancing of Rudolf Nureyev and was the first male dancer of the Trisha Brown Company (1979 to 1986). He has gone on to build a unique career, receiving numerous accolades, including a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, awards from the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, an American Choreographer Award, and a New York Dance and Performance “Bessie” Award. Petronio has created over 35 works for his company and has been commissioned by some of the world’s most prestigious modern and ballet companies. Petronio, whose training originated with leading figures of the Judson era, performed Man Walking Down the Side of a Building in 2010 for Trisha Brown Company at the Whitney Museum. In October 2012, Petronio received the distinction of being named the first Artist-in-Residence at The Joyce Theater in New York City. In 2014 he authored a memoir, Confessions of a Motion Addict. For more information on Stephen Petronio, visit his Web site at http://petron.io.

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

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

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

“Dennis Rhodes’ poems show a deep love of the natural world, they also show a strong empathy with human frailty.
—Provincetown Banner
Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac, San Francisco, 1952

A year before my own birth, the two of you stood and posed for this photo—
launching the Beat Generation—two men fresh from the road—
one born from Lowell’s seaside harbor
one born to Denver’s skidrow and squalor—hustler—cut-up—
the madman driver
lovers of speed and wanderlust—writer—Jack of the liquor—
drunken and misfit—
Jack of the keyboard and East Village rooftops—Jack as the object of Allen’s obsessions—
Neal—the talker—lingo man—thinker—Neal of the cannabis—
railroads and women.
Here’s to the boys who traveled the highways—here’s to the men and women they fooled with—
from coast to coast and byway to freeway—here’s the mantra of modern America.

—Walter Holland
“Don’t forget the olive,” my father instructs, his watchful eyes monitoring my every move as I finish mixing our Bloody Mary cocktails. He’s a firm believer in the olive garnish. All a celery stick does is fill up the glass and leave less room for vodka.

My father’s Bloody Mary recipe is simple, but specific. Based on the number five it’s also easy to remember. Take a red plastic go cup and add a five-count pour of Clamato juice. Spice it up with five dashes of Tabasco and five squirts of real lime juice.

The fourth ingredient is the vodka, poured while counting to five very slowly, but only into my cup now that dear old dad is “on the wagon.” Nine months ago, he slipped off a bar stool in the kitchen after one too many before-dinner cocktails and knocked himself out. My father is a big
man, so when all three hundred pounds went down, it shook the kitchen like that Virginia earthquake did a few years back.

I wasn’t there for the incident. My brother called me with all the juicy details.

“The dog wouldn’t quit barking and Linda (my stepmother) was crying. An ambulance came and the neighbors gathered out front. Once he came to, it took three EMS guys to carry the old boy upstairs and get him into the bed. When they pulled back the covers, an empty bottle of Smirnoff rolled out!”

Not seven days later, my father checked himself into a top-notch rehab program in Williamsburg and he’s been sober ever since.

The fifth and final touch to the perfect Bloody Mary is a single, fat, pimento-stuffed Spanish Queen Olive.

My father lifts up his red cup, inhales, and then takes a deep swig. “You know, son, I don’t even miss the vodka.”

He’s fibbing. You don’t end a fifty-year relationship without some regret. I keep my mouth shut, though, because he really did need to quit drinking. Even before the big fall, my father had gotten into the habit of taking a Bloody Mary along with him when he drove his daughter Ashley (my half-sister) and her friends to high school in the mornings. A drink certainly might have made that particular chore easier, but, hey, it was his decision to have a second round of children later in life. One of the girls tattled.

“Son, let’s go out on the porch. We need to talk about some things.”

“Is your drink okay?” I inquire.

“It’s perfect. Bloody shame there’s no vodka in it. But that’s okay.”

We carry our red cups out onto the screened porch. My father settles into a cushy rattan chair, and I take the rocker. He’s driven eight hours to have this conversation with me. It’s part of what Alcoholics Anonymous calls “making amends.” The point is to apologize to your family and friends for things in the past and, in the process, restore trust and repair damaged relationships. I find it odd, almost perverse, that such a talk is occurring over a cocktail. But he insists…

He stares at me through large, outdated, gold-framed glasses, and I brace for the unknown. The old man wasn’t a great father. He was mostly absent, preferring to go off and build golf resorts than spend time with his family.

My father is quiet, but I notice him fidgeting. I wait, sipping my Bloody Mary, listening to the hum of the ceiling fan. This is his show. He starts to say something then stops. Finally, he speaks, going into an exaggerated apology for getting mad at my inability to fly cast during a trout-fishing excursion on the New River. I honestly don’t recall the incident.

“I’m also sorry, son,” he says, “For laughing that time you punched your arms through the glass front door.”

That, I remember. Only it was my brother, not me. He still has the scars on the belly of his forearms to prove it.

I bite my lip. That’s all he can come up with? What about the times he forgot my birthday or how he belittled me because I excelled at tennis and not punt, pass and kick competitions? Little
Lord Fauntleroy, he used to call me in front of his friends. Then one day he just walked out on us.

Through AA he has come to believe that all his poor choices and bad behavior were a result of drinking. It’s a premise that seems way too convenient to me, sort of like a “get out of jail free” card.

I start to sweat when he begins talking about a homosexual experience with a work buddy back in the “swinging 70s”—he actually uses that phrase. The old boy can’t be coming out of the closet, not now at the age of seventy-two. I briefly envision him cruising about in his big pearl-white Cadillac with a hustler named Danny, asking me, the writer son, for assistance in crafting his lewd and alluring personal ads for that “Silver Daddies” dating site.

Luckily, he just wants to say he’s sorry for never talking to me about my being gay or about what it was like for me coming out.

Is he kidding? This kind of personal conversation isn’t something we have in our family. We’re more comfortable talking about hurricanes, fried chicken, and SEC football. Yet again, I remain silent. This is about him, not me, and the process is straightforward—his confessions, my absolution. It’s not meant to be reciprocal. Even if it were, what would be the point? I’m not the one making amends. And I’m positive my father wouldn’t want to hear about the first time his son sucked dick. Or worse, learn he helped facilitate it.

Back in 1984, I was a college student needing funds to go to Ft. Lauderdale for Spring Break. It was back in the day when a quarter million kids took over the beach, seeking sunshine, suds, and sex. I’d squandered almost all my money on new Lacoste shirts and pot in preparation for the trip, and my mother refused to give me one more dollar.

I thought about pawning my college signet ring, but the paltry seventy-nine dollars it would fetch wasn’t going to get me very far. Just when I had resigned myself to subsisting for ten days on all the Doritos, Slim Jims, and Diet Cokes I could charge on my Shell gasoline credit card, a roommate suggested I simply ask my father for the money.

Despite the fact that my father and I had barely spoken in the ten years since my parents’ divorce, it wasn’t a totally crazy idea. He was wealthy. If I could fabricate an emergency, a situation in which I could only turn to him for help, it might work.

A little later, with inspiration from a lot of bourbon whiskey and some of the most clever college boy minds in the South, I found my father’s phone number through directory assistance and called him to ask for $500 to pay for my girlfriend’s abortion.

“Yes,” I acknowledged, “it is a lot of money.”

“Of course,” I assured him, “we have thought it through.”

I waited for more prying questions, whose answers I’d rehearsed, but they never came. The entire conversation lasted no more than two minutes and ended with him saying how touched he was that I had come to him in a time of need.

The money arrived at the Western Union desk in the university student center the next day, just in time for the nineteen-hour drive from central Virginia to south Florida, the trip where I planned to hook up with drunken college girls and banish all thoughts of sex with boys.
A few days later, I was in a cheap Ft. Lauderdale hotel room on my knees in front of a big, drunk, redheaded boy wearing a Notre Dame t-shirt. He said he was a football player. I had to chug two beers afterwards to wash away the taste of shame.

Naturally, my father knows nothing about any of this. In the thirty years since, we’ve never spoken about that phone call, though I’ve often wondered if he remembers.

I remind myself that it was a good lie because it broke the ice between him and me and my brothers. I give the old boy a smile and decide to let sleeping dogs lie.

“How about another Bloody Mary?” I ask. “It’s your turn to mix.”

Rich Barnett shuttles between his work for an environmental think tank in Washington, DC, and his writer’s life in Rehoboth Beach, DE. He writes the popular “Camp Stories” column in the magazine Letters from CAMP Rehoboth and is the author of The Discreet Charms of a Bourgeois Beach Town: Rehoboth Beach Stories. Other work has appeared in Saints and Sinners: New Fiction from the Festival 2014; Shore Life Magazine; The Beach House: Rehoboth Beach Reads; and No Place Like Here: An Anthology of Southern Delaware Poetry and Prose.
P.H. Davies is an English poet and writer living in Oxford. He specialises in writing about issues such as same-sex marriage, gay identity, gay childhood and adolescence. He has published a number of poetry collections, including the volumes *Early Poems* (2010) and *Suburbanite* (2012), as well as a novel, *Veneer* (2007). His recent works are a series of ebooks, including the new title *Blood* (2014) about a gay vampire. He plans to publish a third volume of poetry on growing up gay, to be released later this year. He can be found on www.phdavies.co.uk.
Two Figures on a Bed

The sheets of the bed gleam white, are too vivid—draped so that the king-size bed is the only object apart from the two men nakedly coiled upon it.

I stand in a glow of bathroom light petering out, watching these limbs wrestle, some hair-covered, some ending in long fingers pinning flesh tightly.

Two men are caricatures—a stranger and a lover. In the blur of rapid movements one hunches over the other’s back, so they become interchangeable.

I fix upon the oval mouth, a grimace of a scream, but it does not scream. It emits a strange groan—an utterance caught between his pain and ecstasy.

From out of a shadow I walk towards a bed edge, a ghost of pale flesh. Thus my lover dissolves to whiteness and I am taken by this faceless stranger.

The wet orifice of his mouth is negated in favour of a fissure from which the often dread sensation of flesh abrading flesh is met head on, teeth gritted.

He is on my back like a jackal, his grip holds firm, a piston conveying the brute force of energy, until a totemic motion of pleasure rises in an abdomen.

Impenetrable secretions are spilt, pale as gossamer, they are sticky, binding and fragile as spider thread. As he leaves he scrawls an address on hotel paper.

Within the pale glimmer of dawn the figures return to their old opacity, the room re-appears, the other has gone, leaving two figures in a painting by Bacon.

—P.H. Davies
He was preparing.

He did a lot of things to get ready:

He made a playlist. He added Mariah Carey’s “Dreamlover.” And Aretha Franklin’s version of “Swanee.” He added Beirut. The singer not the city. And if he thought about it long enough, there was plenty of love in Beirut too, despite all the war. He decided playlists of love were about ratios. Ratios of fast and slow. Ratios of love and apathy. He was preparing for 80/20, but 70/30 seemed like it would do.

He made reservations for two on Friday nights at restaurants called Wild Orchid, La Crema, and Whisk. He showed up alone, in a tie and sometimes his only vest, a silky, cream-colored affair with periwinkle trim. He didn’t wait expectantly, glancing at the door, at the couples coming in
and pulling chairs out for each other, but he ordered a bottle of wine, appetizers, and two entrees, one with halibut or lamb and the other with chicken. He ate the halibut or lamb, slowly, sipping his wine, one hand placed calmly halfway across the table. He ordered dessert, chocolate mousse or coconut flan, and ate half. He got a box to go for the chicken because it would taste better than the halibut or lamb as leftovers and a very small box for the rest of the chocolate mousse or coconut flan. He ate them for brunch on Saturday mornings.

He only wore brightly colored polo shirts with animals on the left breast. He felt like the animal represented his heart on that day: the alligator, the squirrel, the penguin, a horse. And if his heart were visible then you would know what you would get. He shaved his surprisingly hairy chest (considering his already thinning hair even though he was only thirty-two).

He took one picture of himself every morning before he left his one bedroom for the day. So far, he had 158 pics of himself at arms length, sometimes smiling, sometimes with eyes squinted against the flash, sometimes with his Persian cat, Parmesan, held up to his cheek, her poofy head turned demurely away from the camera. He thought when he was at 365 days, someone else would know him for a whole year even if they only met him a month ago. On day 56 he was wearing a black hoodie with white stripes and glasses. He covered his mouth with his fist and knit his eyebrows as close together as he could.

* 

He imagined love would be like an indie folk singer: dark hair, blue eyes, a banjo, and sometimes: wings.

* 

On day 159, after taking a picture of himself holding his purple plaid tie over his mouth, he quit his job as a marketing agent for FitPup, an alternative diet high in protein and Vitamin D for small dogs (this did not seem like a good job for the kind of preparation he was preparing for) to become a baker.

* 

He put Kelis’s “Bossy” on the playlist because it wasn't a love song, but he loved it and someone that he loved would have to love it, too.

* 

On day 169 after begging Lourdes to be her assistant despite his lack of experience, he woke up at 1 a.m., made oatmeal and ate it completely plain. He put on a white smock over a baby blue polo with a red crab on the heart, snapped a picture with his head cocked, his left eye winking, and walked the eleven blocks down Coventry St. to Button Loaf Bakery and the terrifyingly tall German-Ecuadorian owner.

On his first day, Lourdes only let him watch. Even though the bakery was warm and smelled like rye and wood, he certainly hadn’t woken up at one in the morning just to watch, but Dolores, in her dramatic accent that seemed most likely put on, said “there are two parts to baking: watching and not watching.”

The triple consonants tch sounded like a mousetrap.
He thought that this rule did not apply to much else in life. Not for him anyway. There was never a time not to watch. Love was so small at first that even when you were watching, you might miss it.

So first he watched her. And he watched her watch the bread coming together: she sifted the flour through a huge old hand crank, mixed in the rye, splashed it with water and yeast, drifted flour over the shiny stainless steel counter, and spritzed in the lemon, the secret ingredient. She kneaded. Her stubby fingers disappeared around the shape of the bread. She did it slowly, unhurried. Each loaf fit between her hands like an appointment. She lined them up on a long wooden paddle and threw more flour on the counter. Flour filled the air and settled on him like sea spray.

Lourdes did not explain what she was doing. She didn’t say anything. She worked efficiently and nothing but her hands moved, not a hair on her head and she didn’t even blink as the flour dusted her face. He stood there with his hands gripping the counter, wanting to touch the bread or maybe her, but afraid of doing anything but watching.

Finally Lourdes turned away from him and the counter, she slid the loaves into the double-stacked matching stainless steel ovens and closed the door without a sound. She kissed the metal and swiveled around to him.

“Now! You stop the watching,” she said.

They went outside, leaned against the front door, and Lourdes smoked a Camel light. A generic brightness broke through the oak tree limbs in the cemetery across Mayfield Street.

“You must do one thing that is bad for you everyday.” She told him. “This is mine. Simple and not too bad. It keeps me out of trouble.”

He tried to think of the bad thing that he did every day. Two weeks ago he lied to his friend, Sylvia, about going to the movies. He said he was feeling sick, a cliché lie, and a small one. He spent the evening preparing: the playlist, scrolling through the photos, ten sets of ten crunches. He didn’t lie everyday, though. He ate kale and broccoli. He bought fair trade coffee and called his grandfather twice a week and his great aunt at least once a year. He went to the Westside market on Sundays to support local farmers and didn’t own a car. He never did drugs.

“I must be heading for some big bad,” he said to Dolores.

And she laughed. It sounded like Christmas lights on a tree planted in the sidewalk.

*  

Back inside the cloud of flour enclosed them again as Lourdes rolled out pastry dough that she made the day before. She treated the dough as if it were hot even though it had been refrigerated overnight.

Lourdes was silent again. She shaved a brick of dark chocolate with a very sharp cleaver and melted it with butter. She added coconut milk, eggs and tumeric to make her flavor of the week tart: chocolate curried coconut with fresh mango.

After adding dashes of cayenne to the mix, Lourdes turned away from the bubbling soup, quickly threw open the lid of the oven and chaperoned the bread out and onto a rack. No timer had gone off and she hadn’t looked at a clock.
“How did you know it was done?” he asked her.

Lourdes turned back and stirred the chocolate, “When I had completely forgotten it was there. Now, it’s your turn to sell it, pretty boy.”

*        

He spiral-filled round baskets with the ovals of lemon rye bread and hung them from hooks on the walls. The front end of the shop was smaller than the kitchen in his studio apartment, but this benefited Button Loaf because whenever there were more than two people waiting for bread, a line formed out the door.

Selling the bread and the tarts was easy. Lourdes only made two things at a time: one kind of bread, one kind of sweet.

“I’m too lazy to mix more than two types of dough a day.”

He smiled at the first customer. 7 o’clock like that. An old lady with three canvas bags dangling from the crook of her elbow. She put a single loaf of bread in each bag and she gave him a twenty.

“Keep the change, sonny,” and she laughed on her way out the door.

He had not been preparing for this: sonny.

*        

He walked home at 2:30 in the afternoon with one loaf of lemon rye under his left arm and one chocolate curried coconut tart in his right palm. This is why he had become a baker (at least started to learn how to be a baker). What wasn’t he prepared for with bread and sweets all around him?

He passed a young woman with grey hair and tiny wire-rimmed glasses: a grey fox, nose like a beak, and a small brown paper bag in the shape of a dozen sticks of incense. She was coming out of Passport to Peru.

He smiled so big and lifted the tart slightly closer to his mouth as if to eat it or offer it or at least put it in a more comfortable holding position, but she did not look at him.

When he got home, he added Donna Summer’s greatest hits to his playlist and he toasted four slices of the lemon rye and smothered them in peanut butter. He watched a VHS tape of his grade school friend’s bar mitzvah. She wore a lime green suit and danced with him and then danced with Tyler, a boy with a very large head of curly black hair, whom he had had a huge crush on or at least wanted to lick his eyeballs because they were as golden as an egg yolk.

He ate both peanut butter sandwiches and hoped that Lourdes would make something different tomorrow.

*        

There were river songs on the playlist: Tina Turner’s “Proud Mary”.

*        

On day 173, a newly minted pic of the back of his head saved on his camera, he met Sylvia on the Westside at the Grubby Dawn for a coffee and a walk around Fairview Park at least 20 times until it was actually late enough to go to the only decent gay nightclub in town, Bubbles. Sylvia
was both his beautiful and fat friend. He was glad that she was both because otherwise he would have to have two friends. Everyone always had one beautiful friend and one fat one. Sylvia wore heels everywhere and sang karaoke on Tuesday nights at The Flats.

“I can’t believe you get up that early,” she said.

“I guess you would too if you had kids.”

“I’d only have kids if you had kids, just so we could switch off the day care situation,” she said. Sylvia perched her strawberry-lacquered lips over her chocolate soy chai with a shot of espresso and swallowed.

“Also, I quit my job,” he said.

Sylvia choked on her chocolate soy chai with a shot of espresso and it burned the back of her tongue and the top of her throat. She was finally able to spit out the brown liquid that suspiciously looked like a mocha all over his gray polo with the lime green snail on the heart.

The stain would not do. So he just took off the shirt and strolled around the park in the surprising heat until it was time to go to the club and then he danced with his shirt off next to Sylvia and the drag queen with hot pink boots up to her crotch. Sylvia spilled an olive from a martini on the dance floor.

“Why did you quit?” she asked.

He just body rolled away, sort of into a corner really, since it didn’t seem like anyone was about to dance with him. He didn’t want to tell her the truth, but the truth was this: he brought home bread everyday hoping he would pass the right person to give it to and/or share it with, but he mostly passed children running home from school with back packs the size and color of candy. Where did they put their books these days?

So he didn’t give the loaf of pistachio raisin or fennel sourdough to anyone and he ended up just eating it along with the spearmint meringue-topped apricot tart or the mini-Aztec devil’s fudge cake.

He was getting fat.

*

That Friday, he only ate an arugula grapefruit salad at an all vegan restaurant named Root. He did not order for two and skipped lunch the next day.

*

On day 195, he took a picture of his foot in an old Nike and then ran all the way down Mayfield, through the cemetery and out onto the super ghetto end of Euclid. He huffed to a halt next to a garage with an antique-y twisted sign that read TwinWood.

“You’re here already!” a voiced barked from inside the garage.

He was breathing too heavy to jump and Gemini stuck their head out of the side door.

“Oh, good you’re sweaty,” they said. “It’s better when your hands are warm.”

Gemini ran a carpentry apprenticeship program out of their garage. They were picket fence-white and wore their black hair sharply cropped to their head. They had lips the size of a boat and fingers long enough to be limbs of the dead trees that they worked with.
After Dolores had cried like his own mother when he quit the bakery, he decided to take up woodworking because it looked really sexy or at least people doing it looked sexy and he wanted to make something permanent and useful.

Inside, the garage was as clean as a boutique and only seemed to house oddly shaped wooden boxes. He tried to catch his breath as Gemini lifted lids, swung open doors, and pulled down panels. Gleaming circular saws popped out of boxes, routers dropped out of cabinets, and planers flipped out from under tables.

“Wood is plurality,” Gemini said, “like myself. We start with a tree, but with a cut, a nail, and a sanding we could have a coffee table or a paddle. Obviously some uses are better than others, but wood is about possibility.”

They flipped a switch and a saw bit into an oak log. Golden dust flew into the air like flour. Not much had changed.

*

People noticed him as he ran to work empty handed and returned from work with furniture held high above his head. Muscles collected between joints and his hands hardened and were always dirty. His apartment cluttered with tiny furniture because that was all he could run with across the city. A hickory stool sat under his kitchen table with bowed in legs. A black walnut, peapod-shaped coffee table the length of his spine and as high as his ankles rested in front of his four-seater leather couch. A foldout, ash drying rack squeezed between his water heater and dryer.

He felt much more prepared, but was no longer sure what he was prepared for.

He added Stravinsky to his playlist.

*

On day 237, the day of a picture of him squeezed on the hickory stool next to his dining room table, his knees up to his armpits, he was at TwinWood routing grooves into a bonbon shaped box made of pine. Gemini was behind him justifying a new log of birch that they had bought from an old woman with a very gray beard from Iceland who contracted out female lumberjacks to harvest the trees sustainably and fashionably.

The router jabbed a hole directly through the knuckle of his right ring finger. Blood lashed onto his brown polo with the teal cockatoo over the breast. Gemini turned and immediately scooped up the wounded hand and closed their lips around the blood and shredded cartilage.

“Pine is too soft,” they mumbled. “It’s always too soft.”

He called 911 himself, his eyes open as far as he could get them, his teeth grinding together.

“I lost my finger,” he told the very cool, Southern drawl at the other end of the line.

*

He woke up with a bad case of anvil-hand in front of a Dr. Stacy who had very curly blond hair and jade chunks in her ears.

“Hi, my name is Ron,” she said, “and I’ll start with the bad news first because that is really the only news I have. We couldn’t salvage the finger.”
He smiled or frowned, he couldn’t tell which. He hadn’t been prepared for this, but it seemed right, as if Dr. Stacy had tucked him in.

“I loved pine,” he said.

“There’s what you do for love,” Ron said, “and what love does to you.”

Then she actually tucked him in and left the room.

He untucked his left arm, ate an orange jello, and fell asleep again.

* 

On day 238 he woke up in the hospital with a visitor by the bed. It was himself. He had seen the perfectly tweezed eyebrows, receding hairline, and slivery scar along the underside of his chin everyday of his life. He looked down at his right ring finger and that of the visitor. One gone and bandaged, the other completely intact. He stroked the whole one with the gauze of the other.

“They told me I could take you home now,” he said and then he helped dress him, crooked his elbow, and steered him out of the tiny room and back to his own apartment.

* 

On day 239 he woke up next to himself, both of them completely naked.

“Let me see it,” he said.

He lifted up the whole finger and he kissed it.

“I want you to hear something,” he said as he slid over to his laptop perched on the black walnut peapod coffee table and turned on his speakers.

The playlist started with “Total Eclipse of the Heart” and he slipped back into bed.

__________

Alex Vikmanis had a circuitous journey to becoming a writer including a degree in biomedical engineering and a stint in the Peace Corps. He finally got his MFA from California College of the Arts in San Francisco and has been published in Plaid Review, Litro Magazine, and theNewerYork, as well as projects like The Super Pop-Up Shop and 2x2. He’s also a contributor for Kqedpop.com and BelleSF.
CHELSEA STATION
EDITED BY JAMESON CURRIER

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stories by

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

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“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.”
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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.”
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“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
Review by Eric-Andrews Katz

Anna Madrigal has become one of the most cherished characters of literature. The beloved former owner of 28 Barbary Lane infamy is more than a landlady to those who lived in her boarding house; she is a living Earth Mother figure. The same way her character has become one to all those who have enjoyed any or all of the Tales of the City series, The Days of Anna Madrigal is the final installation following the eight previous novels that started as a series of articles in a San Francisco Paper. And from the very beginning of the book it reads exactly like that; a final installment wrapping up of a series readers have come to love.

There are two main story lines present between these pages and, in true Maupin style, the myriad of characters interweave in and out of both of them. The secondary is the getting ready, the getting to, and the celebration of the Burning Man Festival in the Nevada desert. Michael "Mouse" Tolliver's younger partner Ben is very excited about the trip. Mouse, being conscious of his own age, is less enthusiastic about camping in the desert for the festival. Shawna Hawkins (Brian's daughter) is looking forward also with a private agenda of her own. Jake, the transsexual gardener and caretaker of Anna Madrigal is anxious to go but determined to bring Anna with them showing the 92-year-old the wonders of Burning Man.

The second story line is more intriguing as it deals with revelations of Anna Madrigal's past. The free loving landlady was (back then) Andy, the son of Mother Mucca, the no nonsense madam of the Blue Moon Lodge brothel in Nevada. It is here that Andy falls into the throngs of first love and self-discovery. By making the physical journey back to Winnemucca, Anna hopes to revisit her youth, and exorcise the ghosts of her past finally putting them to rest. Most of all she is trying to make amends with not only those left behind, but with her own conscious as well.

All the characters that we’ve come to love have reappeared in one way or another--at least in passing mention if nothing else. “Mouse” has mellowed with age and is enjoying his gardening lifestyle with Ben, the younger man with whom he’s settled down. Brian, the eternal playboy, is back and married to Wren “the fattest model in the world” (mentioned in previous adventures of the series), and living a calmer, greener life in a RV park. DeDe Halcyon-Day and D’or are mentioned at being present for Burning Man (although they don’t appear in the book) and have brought Mary Ann [Singleton] along with them. Mary Ann’s appearance is brief and seems a bit out of place for the character, but was necessary for concluding the series. Even Mona Ramsey is mentioned in passing.

Secondary characters mentioned in previous books have come to the forefront in the final installment as well. Wren has lost weight and is developed into a full-fledged character. She
easily becomes alive and we see why she is a fit for Brian. Mother Mucca (Anna/Andy’s mother) is shown differently, from the rough-edged, heart-of-gold madam readers met six books ago, and presented harsher, and more as a parental disciplinarian. The prostitute Margaret, who works at The Blue Moon Lodge and read Winnie, the Pooh to Andy as a boy, is definitely brought out into a fuller character. She becomes a mother figure for the confused boy and gives him guidance and the strength Andy needs to find out who he truly is.

The book is enjoyable but it is very clear from the beginning that the author intends to end the series here. While the crossing of characters in storylines has usually been done brilliantly in previous books, this one seems to be a little forced. The tone is a lot calmer than the quick-paced adventures of the first six, (the latter two tended to be on the slower paced side) but all the characters have appropriately grown staying true to their natures--except one that seemed to be thrown in just to avoid future questions. Even in the dramatic parts, there is one section (No spoilers here!) that will have loyal readers holding their breath on the edge of tears, but it also appears to have missed the mark. The storyline would seem to have a harder punch if the ‘happily ever after’ approach wasn’t taken. The ending is wrapped up with a pretty bow with no wondering about what happens to any of the characters next. It’s definitely conclusive, but not overly satisfying.

Eric Andrews-Katz (WriteOn530@gmail.com) lives in Seattle with his husband Alan. Eric’s first story “Mr. Grimm’s Faery Tale”—a 2008 Spectrum Short Fiction Award nominee—was published in So Fey: Queer Fairy Fiction. Other works have appeared in: The Best Date Ever, Charmed Lives: Gay Spirit in Storytelling, Gay City Vols: 2, 3 & 4 (co-editor of Vol 4), The Advocate, Chelsea Station, and a contributing writer for the Seattle Gay News. Eric is also the author of the novels The Jesus Injection (the first Agent Buck 98 adventure) and its sequel Balls & Chain.
Chen Chen is a University Fellow in poetry at Syracuse University, where he also serves as Poetry Editor for Salt Hill. His work has appeared/is forthcoming in Connotation Press, PANK, Foothill, NightBlock, CURA: A Literary Magazine of Art & Action, Nepantla: A Journal for Queer Poets of Color (in collaboration with Lambda Literary), among other journals. He has received fellowships from Kundiman, Tent: Creative Writing, and the Saltonstall Foundation.
Tell Me a Story of Deep Delight

Thank you, my parents, for being poor, for taking me to the library with the rocking horse. You didn’t have to feed it coins, & my small body could push forth whole Sunday hours, riding.

Thank you for letting me pick out my own books, walk them on my own two feet to the counter. Do you remember? I could peer up & watch the librarian roll her wand of changing dates in its pad of red ink. Red is lucky—thank you for telling me that. Thank you for the way you made the days pass, lucky.

& thank you for asking me to read to you, for saying, What happens next? Tell me.

Thank you, my mother & father, for losing me among the stacks, for the day I borrow the anatomy book to the bathroom, & see the men’s bodies, their fruit on fire. I look & look & look! I’m riding my horse into a red tree, a tree blazing with apples—

—Chen Chen
The Third Buddha
a novel by
Jameson Currier

“Complex.”
Library Journal

“Courageous.”
Next magazine

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

Chris Klein

I wish I could have saved him. I wish I could have talked to him, and maybe he would still be here today. Unfortunately, he isn’t. The sad truth is, in the brief time period I knew him, I cared more about him than most. Jeremy was hated so much by the people around him for being himself, that he paid the ultimate price.

The hardest part about being an LGBT youth is the fear that someone cannot accept me for who I am. LGBT youth have to face acceptance not only from the people around them, but also from a harder, more judgmental source: themselves.

In November 2011, I joined the social networking site “The Trevor Project,” a group dedicated to supporting LGBT youth. There, I met other teens that were in similar predicaments as my
own, some were happily accepted in their communities, and others lived in conservative communities and struggled against not just the fear, but the knowledge of rejection.

In March 2012, I received an email from Jeremy, a 15 year old from the Midwest. It was around 2 AM, I was barely awake, and was browsing the site at this point. The message had been sent to all 130 of Jeremy’s friends on the site. The message explained that due to his homosexuality and resulting rejection from his friends, community, and family, he came to the horrible conclusion to take his own life. Barely conscious, I sent a brief message asking him to postpone his fatal decision, explaining that although the skies may appear gloomy now, the clouds do part. I waited until the message was sent, and then finally fell asleep.

The next day when I logged onto the site, the first thing I noticed was a message from Jeremy. I thought, “Good, he changed his mind,” and clicked on the message. But it wasn’t Jeremy, it was his sister. She explained that sometime in the last 24 hours, her brother took his life. Next to his body was a note, asking that a message be sent to anyone that had replied to his initial message, thanking them for their support.

It wasn’t for a few weeks that I was able to truly comprehend Jeremy’s death. Someone had taken his own life because he was hated so much for being himself. A group of people who hated Jeremy simply because he was gay ended up killing him, not with guns or knives but with words.

How did these events change my life? In one word: awareness. The words we speak can be more deadly and hurtful than any physical torture we can conceptualize. The sad thing is, Jeremy’s story is not original. While suicide is an extreme consequence, it is not unheard of, especially for LGBT youth, who are four times more likely to attempt it. Jeremy’s death was the incentive for me to try to prevent this from happening again. On my swim team, I am the person to call someone out for using derogatory language. I do the same with my friends, and cautiously monitor my own language to set an example.

I truly wish I could have done more to save Jeremy. But with his death comes my own awakening to the world around me. Day by day, society is becoming more tolerant. However, we should not be satisfied with tolerance; we should be striving for acceptance. While my ability to help the cause is limited by my environment, I fully intend to actively join the movement toward acceptance while in college. As a prospective social science student, it is a dream of mine to pioneer laws to protect the rights of all citizens, heterosexual and homosexual, such as those pertaining to hate crimes and bullying. It is often said that a legacy is more important than the actual life of an individual. I am Jeremy’s legacy.

Christopher (Chris) Klein is the first bisexual Queer Foundation Scholar. His essay, “I Wish I Could Have Saved Him,” was the co-winner of the 2014 Queer Foundation essay contest and is reprinted by permission of the author and the Queer Foundation Effective Writing and Scholarships Program. Chris attended North Rockland High School in Thiells, New York. He will attend Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, majoring in government and possibly music. He also hopes to earn a law degree and, eventually, to pursue a career in politics. Chris is described by his academic advisor, his English teacher, and friends as a young man dedicated to challenging stereotypes of racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. As an editor of the high school’s newspaper, he often wrote op-ed pieces that forced his peers out of their comfort zone. In his spare time Chris enjoys listening to classical music, playing the clarinet, swimming, and golf.
Naturally the first thing I did after dragging my shit up four stories to my walk-up was turn on Grindr. Reward myself. Out of habit. Gave me something to do as I unpacked. It’s just how you meet people these days - there’s no shame in it. The place I came from, you’d be lucky if the first hundred guys were within a hundred miles of you. Now they were feet away. Literally. All of them. Kids in a candy store. Both Charlie and the chocolate factory. Bushwick was an overflowing cornucopia of homosexuality and I a pilgrim sitting down to feast after a lifetime of persecution. You’d be amazed how much you can glean from a Grindr profile. The pithy (or, more often, unmusically dirty) headline, the about section with what you’re looking for or what you care about or just the lyrics to a song you sometimes listen to. They can take you half the way there. The real meat is the linked Instagrams and Tumblrs. The whole big gay world with access to their whole lives. The tension between wanting to be known and hiding in the shadows.
That was the primary conflict of the homosexual’s life. It still plays itself out, just smaller stakes. “Oh no, my co-worker saw my half-naked selfie!” All these gays dream of being famous, great artists, it’s how they compensate for the disappointment, not being able to hand their mothers a screaming ball of flesh. They think some randy on Grindr is going to get them there. Or else they just like to boast about lives they fool themselves into thinking fabulous. He was no exception.

It wasn’t love at first sight. There was no absurd West Side Story bullshit. No moment. One day unemployed I wandered deep into Bed-Stuy amid the brownstones and blossoming trees and there he was. His Grindr thumbnail before me. His eyes, the beautiful lines of his face. I think he was shirtless. A Ramones poster on his bedroom wall. I wanna be your boyfriend. I starred him so I could stay with him wherever he wandered. Others came later: the full-length shirtless torso I noticed while sneaking peeks in a bar and literally ran home to jerk off to, the horizontal lying in bed selfie the only time I saw him smile, reclining on a beaten up fainting couch smoking and dreaming, on a rooftop in Brooklyn somewhere on the Fourth of July fireworks over the Hudson. I should have saved screenshots but I didn’t have the foresight. The glow of a fading sun over his shoulder. Clearly his friends were photographers. They probably flocked to him. No one is that gorgeous. Except him. He was a pretty boy. There was no denying it. A pretty boy among pretty boys, whom I loved. Of course I found all different types of men attractive, but pretty boys held a riveting fascination for me. They were one of the perks of being gay, one of the wonders of the world. Pure beauty. David is a pretty boy. And you don’t think Michelangelo was riveted by him? Obsessed with every cobblestone he traversed, pursuing him down obscure Florentine alleyways? Homosexuals—yes, like Michelangelo—are the only ones who can appreciate such rare creatures. Women can’t help it—it’s hardwired into their biology. They need a big, hairy, muscle-bound ape who can protect them from saber-toothed tigers and feed their babies and fertilize their dwindling stock of eggs. But homosexuals, free from the constraints of evolution, are free to appreciate the beauty of these boys, at least those of use with properly cultivated taste. It’s an appreciation I often find hard to disguise—or avert my eyes. I worked for a short time as an intern, for a fading gay trying to scrape together a New York living off get rich quick schemes. It was truly the lowest form of unpaid labor, failing to reclaim junk from expired storage bins. He was a queen of ’80s Chelsea with a pate of gray. We sat in Starbucks discussing his latest huckster scheme when he caught me staring. “I’m sorry, I just have to ask, are you gay?” he broke out in an overly dramatized whisper, storage bins gladly discarded. “Yeah.” “What’s your type?” he pursued, hoping desperately in his heart of hearts I would say “daddies” but knowing this wasn’t the case. I didn’t how to answer. I was young and green and as far as I was concerned a dick was a dick. I had yet to be fully initiated into gay life, with its categorizations tribes. “My roommate accuses me of liking pretty boys.” “OM f-ing G that’s what you were just staring at. I’m into them too and I’m so lucky cause younger guys are totally into me. I’ve got this twenty-six year old I’m texting bee-tee-dubs. No big deal.” Little did he know the pretty boy who caught my eye in Astor Place was nothing compared to my Grindr boy. Somehow I always got the impression he was uncomfortable with his pretty boy status (though many a queer would have gone to the crossroads for those very looks). He wanted to be masc. He had a big fat tattoo right on his arm. Not a sleeve—it sat up on his shoulder. It was hard to tell what it was, even after obsessive scrutinization of his Instagram and Facebook (which I discovered through an astounding feat of graph search stalking). It looked like a broken heart, like the sick rose offered the Beast by the beautiful enchantress, which bloomed until his twenty-first year but had since begun to wilt and bleed behind a cylinder of glass. It was melancholy. Befitting a pouty-lipped pretty boy poet. He liked tattoos, he talked about them constantly. For
several months his Grindr headline read, “Big tats.” I imagined he made guys send him pics of their ink instead of their dicks. His Insta was full of surreptitious pics of hot tatted up guys on the train. #subwaycrush. They moved him the way he moved me.

Honestly his body was pretty unimportant. Not irrelevant, but unimportant. I was in love with the old man he would become. He was a poet. I felt like a silly girl. Butterflies and summer days. But there was no point in being a Romantic. My people never got songs of innocence. We skipped right to infant sorrow and the poison tree. Little boy lost. We were Melancholics. Even the naive unbroken amongst us pick it up, it seeps into their brain streams by osmosis and trickles through the black keyhole in the souls. He was no exception. His poetry was all melancholy laced with drug-fueled binges and anilingus. Clubs and bars and booze and boys. Long interminable winters of angst-filled butt fucking punctuated by fleeting tank top summers. The blatantness, the unabashedness of sex that can only come from beautiful people. They have no idea what it is to cover up the ugliness of an unattractive body, to watch a lover remove your shirt and recoil in disgust at his own drunken desperation. Trying to escape my envy of his poetry and the body that bequeathed it, allowed him to listen to Miles Davis and lie on a fainting couch in a garret and smoke cigarettes and dream up verses about all the beautiful boys he had fucked. A poet has to take every chance he can get. Otherwise no one will see a damn thing until the collected poems, five years after death. He read radicals: Jean Genet and Frank O’Hara and other people you aren’t allowed to see in school. Books kept from being classics by people who lacked independence of thought. He would Instagram a line or two—he still reads physical books! I swoon!—and post them in sepia-toned filters. Walden. 1977. How many people bothered to stop read amid the shirtless selfies? I lingered in radical little Bushwick bookstores waiting for my clothes to dry but never saw him. The chance encounter that would set our inevitable romance ablaze never materialized. Tyger Tyger was his favorite poem. This one I knew, had cut my teeth on. Freshman year. Though I detested poetry, held it inferior to the ‘great novels.’ Hadn’t come to see it as the purest distillation of human genius—alongside, perhaps, music in the hands of Mozart or Beethoven. When the stars threw down their spears, and watered heaven with their tears, did he smile his work to see? Blake was the pinnacle, the last supper of any would-be poet. Even in his radical queerness, even in verse about cum-covered condoms, he was wise enough not to discard this crazy-eyed prophet, artist enough to disregard the jibes of fallow hipster poets, false beatniks, who asked askance, “R u a poetry what do you call it, connaisseur?” He was a visual artist too—like Blake!—and filled his tumblr with vintage gay porn stars Photoshopped into the poet’s illustrations of the Inferno. It was genius. A gallery downtown was doing a show. He was making things happen—what every Patti Smith wannabe in this city dreams he could do.

An idea from some far off fantastical dream. No epiphany, just smoldering inspiration that one morning on the subway platform I was aware of. I almost cried. It arrived so complete, so perfect in its elegance I never once questioned its genius. Us together years later lying in bed him stroking my shoulder gently me concealing this secret simmering. A vision of Hell tattooed on my shoulder: Dante and Virgil passing through the gates, the wide river before them, flaming hills and tortured souls, Dante exclaiming at the inscription overhead. I would always be willing to go down, to start at the bottom, to endure whatever suffering was my lot before I could enjoy my Beatrice and the divinity of his love. I didn’t want to be one of those art school kids who got some stupid symbol or thudding saying inked into their skin just to be edgy and fit in. I wanted inspiration, a fully formed idea that arrived demanding to alter my pigment. This was it. No more would I sheepishly stand aside when drunkenly in bars others revealed their torsos or rolled up
their sleeves. Six months and $725 later it was done. It was beautiful, even if it did cost a whole month’s rent and set my eyes watering in pain. It was worth it. The reward would be boundless and infinite. I would have given up more, hurt myself much worse. I yearned for tank top weather to arrive, when I would be casually sitting in the backyard of everyone’s favorite homosexual Williamsburg watering hole and he would see me and smile and we would strike up a fiery intellectual conversation full of double entendre and we would kiss and fuck and cuddle and Instagram pictures of each other shirtless being goofy so that everyone would know. But the moment never came. I received plenty of compliments. Every day, every place I went. People loved the tattoo, they were astounded by it. On the fucking train. Bearded weirdos came up to me reciting Allen Ginsberg. I took to wearing long-sleeved shirts around heterosexuals just so they would leave me alone.

And then, one night, an Instagram from God. He was at my favorite bar. Not seven blocks from my apartment. I didn’t even need the #BarWorth to guide me in the right direction; I recognized the arrangement of bottles on the shelf behind his selfie. But the #drinkingalone made my heart swoon. This was my chance! The perfect, innocent encounter I had dreamed up and schemed up over many lonely months, the moment I had waited my entire New York life for. I suffocated through the thick August air down the sidewalks of Bushwick. There he was at the bar looking beautiful. So. Fucking. Beautiful. And alone. A boy like that isn’t used to being alone, even one with poetry inside him. He was sandwiched between some fat queen and an aging hipstress trying hard with her eyes to dismiss the Disclosure track playing as something her stupid Minnesota high school friends now refer to with exclamation points on Facebook. I needed that seat. I had to sit on his right. Outside, ducking back and forth across the window, pretending to be shy waiting for a friend I didn’t want to enter without. He was already drunk. He would leave soon. And I would have wasted my one shot at a life people want to read about. Fucking leave you fatish generic Midwestern bitch. No one thinks you’re cool because you have a vintage jean jacket and round f-ing sunglasses. Finally she got up to leave with her girlfriends—a girl like that is nowhere near cool enough to drink alone. I rushed in, saddled up to the empty stool. He glanced up when my body moved into his peripheral but his attention returned to his half empty can.

“Narragansett and a shot of whiskey.”

I feel his dick in my hand, the perfect symmetry of his penis, the one American boy allowed to keep his fucking beautiful uncut cock. He appreciates me, my talent, my depth of vision. My genius would happily burn alone in a tower if all it did was guide him safely in to shore every night. And the books that would be written about us. The myth. Decades of culture and mayhem and art flash before me unspooling from this moment, the navel of my existence, my gateway.

“Awesome tattoo.”

“Thanks.”

“Is that the Inferno? William Blake?”

“Yeah.”

“Fucking love him.”

“Yeah me too.”
In the bar hipsters come and go. Talking of Oscar Wilde and the Ramones. O hail Michelangelo. Each of us curls his lips around his can of beer and rubs his muzzle in the bubbly fumes. But he is tired and drunk. He flings a few bills from his back pocket down onto the bar. “See you around.”

Curran Boomer is a Hudson Valley native who now lives in Brooklyn after a brief stint at the University of Chicago. He works in digital marketing and spends his free time drinking in local bars and making unfulfilled resolutions to explore New York City.
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Before allowing me to sign the lease that August of 1982, Mr. Haldeman sat back and insisted on telling me about John, the fellow who lived above the two-bedroom apartment I’d be renting. John was terminally ill with little time remaining. Mr. Haldeman insisted I know of John’s situation from the start.

“You may have to look out for him. John has no one,” Haldeman explained. He adopted the old codger after buying the building from the original owner. “I couldn’t ask him to leave, actually no reason he should. John does what he can to keep an eye on the place.”

I nodded my understanding and assured him that John’s misfortune was not a barrier to my signing a lease.

“John answered the phone when you called, so you’ve almost met him anyway,” Mr. Haldeman said before asking me if I’d go upstairs and introduce myself to him. From the sounds on the
other side of the door, my knock must have startled John. Not many people had knocked at his
door lately. Fumbling noises tumbled down the hall, jiggling sounds from the chain and the
deadbolt preceded my first look at John’s tired face.

“Hi, I’m Frank. I’m moving in below you. Mr. Haldeman said to come up.” John gripped the
doorframe tightly with both hands to anchor himself, looking down at the floor as if to convince
himself it was there. His labored breath came in long, loud bursts. He wavered a bit, clutching
my forearm for support; within a moment I’d entered this man’s private turmoil. John seemed at
ease with the small comfort of my arm as we wobbled down the hallway toward his living room.

The furniture in the room was sparse and shabby. John stopped in front of the sole chair. By
pegging one leg into the floor and rotating himself around with the traction from the other, he
plopped himself into his chair. Hollowed dents in just the right places absorbed the thud created
by his landing. Old blankets covered the threadbare spots. I wondered how John’s experiences
had worn him out.

“I’m gonna beat this thing,” John barked. I sat expressionless not knowing if I should encourage
him or conjure up some self-help strategy on death and dying. “Haldeman said you weren’t
well,” I managed to say timidly, feeling queasy that I’d invaded his sanctuary without an
invitation. I felt nervous for another reason. Although I’d made my living for some years by
interviewing people at a mental health clinic and had grown accustomed to others unfolding their
souls so I could voyeur into the crevices, I had no official capacity with John.

“Haldeman worries too much about me. What’s he think I’m gonna do, just up and die?” John
groused, almost out of breath by the time he reached his last word.

Looking around, I examined a long trail of original oil paintings that lined his living room walls
and continued down the hallway that led to the back of his apartment. The first canvas bumped
the second until all had adjusted with just enough room to fit themselves into the available space-
village scenes, landscapes, all colorful, each with a distinctive style but remarkably similar in
their perspective.

“All mine. I picked each scene and had a local artist in whatever country I happened to be in at
the time paint what I wanted to remember.” John explained, scraping phlegm from the back of
his throat so he could continue. “Mostly the Sudan. I worked on irrigation projects over there.
Don’t miss the climate, but the people were something. Cultured. More manners in one of them
than in a whole pack of us,” John said, punctuating his words with pats on the frayed arms of his
chair. I imagined that in healthier days John’s pats were poundings made with his fist.

“You picked each scene?” I asked. His swift candidness unsettled me, yet I wanted to grab onto
what I could handle of his thoughts. “I stood right behind the artist as he painted.”

I saw what he saw. Actually, I saw it first, but now I don’t have him between me and the
painting.” He exhaled slowly, settling himself into a state of peacefulness.

I could feel his need to go on reminiscing. My other errands could wait. This man was dying and
his moment was now. I would have felt rude, even irreverent, leaving just then. Besides, I had
my own need to remain and listen, compelled by the wisdom of this frail man.

He stared for a long time at several of the paintings and swept his gaze up and down the length of
canvasses. He waved his boney finger toward the paintings at the far end of the hallway, those he
could not see clearly from his chair, darkened by the day’s waning light. “I can go the whole way
“See the one with the tents?” John pointed as I walked down the hallway to stand directly in front of the painting. “I’d go visiting in those tents in the middle of a barren desert.

An invitation from one of the nomads was a true honor. We’d sit on soft cushions drinking thick, syrupy coffee made in copper urns with long handles for holding over open fires. You’d learn to like the taste,” John recalled. He looked as if he had just that moment remembered the exact time when he finally learned to savor the exotic concoction. I wished we each had demitasse to sip as John mused on.

“They treated you well. They had manners. They’d join you in the first two cups, but when they offered you the third cup, well, that was their way of saying it was time for you to go. Your feelings weren’t hurt and they didn’t feel awkward. Then, when the third cup was offered, you’d say ‘No thanks, I must be going now.’” With a smooth wave of his arm toward the tent painting, John smiled like the sage who had just shared his biggest secret with a cross-legged admirer stooped before him.

He remained silent for a few moments and then turned toward me and spoke in a steady, low voice, “You know, life has offered me many cups of coffee, but when I’m offered that third cup, I hope the heck I have enough sense to know it’s time to go.”

*   *   *

As Thanksgiving approached that November 1982, I’d been presented with information that made me wonder if I, like John, would soon be leaving.

When the phone rang, it was Bill Miller, a former Romeo from almost a decade earlier.

We met one night in the mid-1970s in the Neptune, a Harrisburg, Pennsylvania gay bar. Inside the bar, located practically at the foot of the state capital building, the lights were so low I thought it was a time warp back to the McCarthy Era. Maybe Roy Cohn was hunched over a martini in a dark corner, a scared ‘fraidy cat of a closeted weasel who didn’t think he was ‘homosexual’ because he was the top. I wasn’t too far off. Cohn did have local interests in the capital city, as did a full range of cock sucking Republicans and cross-dressers with wives and kids in the nearby suburbs. I’d met Bill in that bar. He made deliveries in a Mary MacIntosh Laundry truck around the city and had stopped in for a drink after a long day. During our maiden romp later that evening, he’d bed-burned off a scab clinging to his left knee, leaving a small bloodstain on my sheet. Bill won me over when he returned two days later with a fresh haircut, wearing a starched white shirt with crisp black pants, his shoes shiny as mirrors in sunlight.

He clutched a set of sheets and pillowcases wrapped up with cloth ribbon that ended in a smart bow. After we’d carried on as horny, young men, living together for a while, Equity card in hand, he made his way to New York City to sing and dance.

In the years between the 70s and now the early 80s, I’d never really stopped coming to his balcony to serenade him out. Twice I’d run into him on the NYC subway, unplanned. There I sat. The subway door parted and there he was. Once, I was padding down a bath house hallway in pursuit of what a sailor buddy called a “hot Kronsit” when around the corner came Bill. He’d been on the same guy’s scent from a different pathway. We jumped back, laughed, and then
hastily proceeded to track him down, the three of us emerging sleepy-eyed a couple of hours later from my cubicle. One year on the city’s Pride day, we’d cross up our communications but there he was at the very end of Christopher Street at Pier 45, tall and handsome as ever. I still have the handmade Christmas cards he’d send each holiday, made in a Midtown art shop where he worked. He befriended Minette, the legendary NYC drag queen. I have one of her letters to me in a tattered vanity box.

That night in 1982 when I met up with Bill in that same dimly-lit bar at his urgent summons that an old boyfriend can command, the lights were just as low. As I approached him in exactly the same spot in the back of the bar where I’d first caught his eye, I saw a familiar sad look, as if he was about to cry, the look that always made me melt, ready to grant any wish or console any hurt. We moved to a private corner claiming a table with two chairs he’d moved next to one another as we sat down. He looked straight ahead, not into my eyes. He put his arm around my shoulders, gave me a familiar loving squeeze, his mouth coming close to my ear, moist like the kisses he laid there before. I could hear his heart beating. Mine too.

“I’m sick,” he said, almost hyperventilating. He unbuttoned the first two buttons on his pressed shirt and pulled down the material. “These lumps, feel them, they’re KS, Kaposi’s sarcoma, gay cancer. I have AIDS. And let’s face it, so do you,” his voice trailed off. We hugged each other as best could in a public space, even if it was a gay bar, shaking, crying, and making our way out the front door melded to each other. In the back alley, we held onto each other silently, rapid breaths hurling between us as our chests mounted and lowered.

“We better get moving. The cops will catch us. We don’t need that now,” Bill said.

“My place,” I said.

“I’ll follow you there,” he said.

“No, come with me,” I insisted, afraid he’d drive off too exhausted from his disclosure.

In bed, the apartment completely dark, we said nothing. I caressed his body. His clutching hugs told me he was scared to death. I made sure to circle the purple lumps on his chest, asking if they hurt. They did some days but not just then.

Our pillow talk was about disease.

“I wasn’t sure what they were at first,” Bill said. “One night playing volleyball this guy spiked a good one right at me. The ball slammed by chest. This one, here, burst open, bled all over.” Days later a biopsy confirmed he had KS.

Bill lived until 1988, the year my first KS lesion appeared on my left forearm. Like John who lived upstairs, I’d often wondered if I’d have enough sense to know when it’s time to go.

I don’t.
“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

“The Temperamentals” 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.

“It 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*