“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

WHERE THE RAINBOW ENDS

a novel by

Jameson Currier

“Defiant and elegaic.”
The Village Voice

“Courageous.”
Edge

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Dancing on the Moon

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## Chelsea Station

Edited by Jameson Currier

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*Chelsea Station*, a new literary journal devoted to gay writing, is published online at www.chelseastationmagazine.com.
To A Stranger

Edward Carpenter

Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) was a British poet, philosopher, anthologist, and early LGBT activist. He influenced a generation of writers, notably E.M. Forster.
O faithful eyes, day after day as I see and know you—unswerving faithful and beautiful—going about your ordinary work unnoticed,
    I have noticed—I do not forget you
    I know the truth the tenderness the courage, I know the longings hidden quiet there.
    Go right on. Have good faith yet—keep that your unseen treasure untainted.
    Many shall bless you. To many yet, though no work be spoken, your face shall shine as a lamp.
    It shall be remembered, and that which you have Desired—in silence—shall come abundantly to you.
Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was illustrious for preaching the importance of style in life and art, and of attacking Victorian narrow-mindedness. “London Models” was originally published in English Illustrated Magazine, January 1889.
Professional models are a purely modern invention. To the Greeks, for instance, they were quite unknown. Mr. Mahaffy, it is true, tells us that Pericles used to present peacocks to the great ladies of Athenian society in order to induce them to sit to his friend Phidias, and we know that Polygnotus introduced into his picture of the Trojan women the face of Elpinice, the celebrated sister of the great Conservative leader of the day, but these grandes dames clearly do not come under our category. As for the old masters, they undoubtedly made constant studies from their pupils and apprentices, and even their religious pictures are full of the portraits of their friends and relations, but they do not seem to have had the inestimable advantage of the existence of a class of people whose sole profession is to pose. In fact the model, in our sense of the word, is the direct creation of Academic Schools.

Every country now has its own models, except America. In New York, and even in Boston, a good model is so great a rarity that most of the artists are reduced to painting Niagara and millionaires. In Europe, however, it is different. Here we have plenty of models, and of every nationality. The Italian models are the best. The natural grace of their attitudes, as well as the wonderful picturesqueness of their colouring, makes them facile—often too facile—subjects for the painter's brush. The French models, though not so beautiful as the Italian, possess a quickness of intellectual sympathy, a capacity, in fact, of understanding the artist, which is quite remarkable. They have also a great command over the varieties of facial expression, are peculiarly dramatic, and can chatter the argot of the atelier as cleverly as the critic of the Gil Blas. The English models form a class entirely by themselves. They are not so picturesque as the Italian, nor so clever as the French, and they have absolutely no tradition, so to speak, of their order. Now and then some old veteran knocks at the studio door, and proposes to sit as Ajax defying the lightning, or as King Lear upon the blasted heath. One of them some time ago called on a popular painter who, happening at the moment to require his services, engaged him, and told him to begin by kneeling down in the attitude of prayer. 'Shall I be Biblical or Shakespearean, sir?' asked the veteran. 'Well—Shakespearean,' answered the artist, wondering by what subtle nuance of expression the model would convey the difference. 'All right, sir,' said the professor of posing, and he solemnly knelt down and began to wink with his left eye! This class, however, is dying out. As a rule the model, nowadays, is a pretty girl, from about twelve to twenty-five years of age, who knows nothing about art, cares less, and is merely anxious to earn seven or eight shillings a day without much trouble. English models rarely look at a picture, and never venture on any æsthetic theories. In fact, they realise very completely Mr. Whistler's idea of the function of an art critic, for they pass no criticisms at all. They accept all schools of art with the grand catholicity of the auctioneer, and sit to a fantastic young impressionist as readily as to a learned and laborious academician. They are neither for the Whistlerites nor against them; the quarrel between the school of facts and the school of effects touches them not; idealistic and naturalistic are words that convey no meaning to their ears; they merely desire that the studio shall be warm, and the lunch hot, for all charming artists give their models lunch.

As to what they are asked to do they are equally indifferent. On Monday they will don the rags of a beggar-girl for Mr. Pumper, whose pathetic pictures of modern life draw such tears from the public, and on Tuesday they will pose in a peplum for Mr. Phoebus, who thinks that all really artistic subjects are necessarily B.C. They career gaily through all centuries and through all costumes, and, like actors, are interesting only when they are not themselves. They are extremely good-natured, and very accommodating. 'What do you sit for?' said a young artist to a model who had sent him in her card (all models, by the way, have cards and a small black bag). 'Oh, for anything you like, sir,' said the girl, 'landscape if necessary!'

Intellectually, it must be acknowledged, they are Philistines, but physically they are perfect—at least some are. Though none of them can talk Greek, many can look Greek, which to a nineteenth-century painter is naturally of great importance. If they are allowed, they chatter a great deal, but they never say anything. Their observations are the only banalities heard in Bohemia. However, though they cannot appreciate the artist as artist, they are quite ready to appreciate the artist as a man. They are very sensitive to kindness, respect and generosity. A beautiful model who had sat for two years to one of our most distinguished English painters, got engaged to a street vendor of penny ices.

On her marriage the painter sent her a pretty wedding present, and received in return a nice letter
of thanks with the following remarkable postscript: ‘Never eat the green ices!’

When they are tired a wise artist gives them a rest. Then they sit in a chair and read penny dreadfuls, till they are roused from the tragedy of literature to take their place again in the tragedy of art. A few of them smoke cigarettes. This, however, is regarded by the other models as showing a want of seriousness, and is not generally approved of. They are engaged by the day and by the half-day. The tariff is a shilling an hour, to which great artists usually add an omnibus fare. The two best things about them are their extraordinary prettiness, and their extreme respectability. As a class they are very well behaved, particularly those who sit for the figure, a fact which is curious or natural according to the view one takes of human nature. They usually marry well, and sometimes they marry the artist. For an artist to marry his model is as fatal as for a *gourmet* to marry his cook: the one gets no sittings, and the other gets no dinners.

On the whole the English female models are very naïve, very natural, and very good-humoured. The virtues which the artist values most in them are prettiness and punctuality. Every sensible model consequently keeps a diary of her engagements, and dresses neatly. The bad season is, of course, the summer, when the artists are out of town. However, of late years some artists have engaged their models to follow them, and the wife of one of our most charming painters has often had three or four models under her charge in the country, so that the work of her husband and his friends should not be interrupted. In France the models migrate *en masse* to the little seaport villages or forest hamlets where the painters congregate. The English models, however, wait patiently in London, as a rule, till the artists come back. Nearly all of them live with their parents, and help to support the house. They have every qualification for being immortalised in art except that of beautiful hands. The hands of the English model are nearly always coarse and red.

As for the male models, there is the veteran whom we have mentioned above. He has all the traditions of the grand style, and is rapidly disappearing with the school he represents. An old man who talks about Fuseli is, of course, unendurable, and, besides, patriarchs have ceased to be fashionable subjects. Then there is the true Academy model. He is usually a man of thirty, rarely good-looking, but a perfect miracle of muscles. In fact he is the apotheosis of anatomy, and is so conscious of his own splendour that he tells you of his tibia and his thorax, as if no one else had anything of the kind. Then come the Oriental models. The supply of these is limited, but there are always about a dozen in London. They are very much sought after as they can remain immobile for hours, and generally possess lovely costumes. However, they have a very poor opinion of English art, which they regard as something between a vulgar personality and a commonplace photograph. Next we have the Italian youth who has come over specially to be a model, or takes to it when his organ is out of repair. He is often quite charming with his large melancholy eyes, his crisp hair, and his slim brown figure. He is true he eats garlic, but then he can stand like a faun and couch like a leopard, so he is forgiven. He is always full of pretty compliments, and has been known to have kind words of encouragement for even our greatest artists. As for the English lad of the same age, he never sits at all. Apparently he does not regard the career of a model as a serious profession. In any case he is rarely, if ever, to be got hold of. English boys, too, are difficult to find. Sometimes an ex-model who has a son will curl his hair, and wash his face, and bring him the round of the studios, all soap and shininess. The young school don’t like him, but the older school do, and when he appears on the walls of the Royal Academy he is called *The Infant Samuel*. Occasionally also an artist catches a couple of *gamins* in the gutter and asks them to come to his studio. The first time they always appear, but after that they don’t keep their appointments. They dislike sitting still, and have a strong and perhaps natural objection to looking pathetic. Besides, they are always under the impression that the artist is laughing at them. It is a sad fact, but there is no doubt that the poor are completely unconscious of their own picturesqueness. Those of them who can be induced to sit do so with the idea that the artist is merely a benevolent philanthropist who has chosen an eccentric method of distributing alms to the undeserving. Perhaps the School Board will teach the London *gamin* his own artistic value, and then they will be better models than they are now. One remarkable privilege belongs to the Academy model, that of extorting a sovereign for hours, and generally possess lovely costumes. However, they have a very poor opinion of English art, which they regard as something between a vulgar personality and a commonplace photograph. Next we have the Italian youth who has come over specially to be a model, or takes to it when his organ is out of repair. He is often quite charming with his large melancholy eyes, his crisp hair, and his slim brown figure. He is true he eats garlic, but then he can stand like a faun and couch like a leopard, so he is forgiven. He is always full of pretty compliments, and has been known to have kind words of encouragement for even our greatest artists. As for the English lad of the same age, he never sits at all. Apparently he does not regard the career of a model as a serious profession. In any case he is rarely, if ever, to be got hold of. English boys, too, are difficult to find. Sometimes an ex-model who has a son will curl his hair, and wash his face, and bring him the round of the studios, all soap and shininess. 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One remarkable privilege belongs to the Academy model, that of extorting a sovereign from any newly elected Associate or R.A. They wait at Burlington House till the announcement is made, and then race to the hapless artist’s house. The one who arrives first receives the money. They have of late been much troubled at the long distances they have had to run, and they look with disfavour on the election
of artists who live at Hampstead or at Bedford Park, for it is considered a point of honour not to employ the underground railway, omnibuses, or any artificial means of locomotion. The race is to the swift.

Besides the professional posers of the studio there are posers of the Row, the posers at afternoon teas, the posers in politics and the circus posers. All four classes are delightful, but only the last class is ever really decorative. Acrobats and gymnasts can give the young painter infinite suggestions, for they bring into their art an element of swiftness of motion and of constant change that the studio model necessarily lacks. What is interesting in these ‘slaves of the ring’ is that with them Beauty is an unconscious result not a conscious aim, the result in fact of the mathematical calculation of curves and distances, of absolute precision of eye, of the scientific knowledge of the equilibrium of forces, and of perfect physical training. A good acrobat is always graceful, though grace is never his object; he is graceful because he does what he has to do in the best way in which it can be done—graceful because he is natural. If an ancient Greek were to come to life now, which considering the probable severity of his criticisms would be rather trying to our conceit, he would be found far oftener at the circus than at the theatre. A good circus is an oasis of Hellenism in a world that reads too much to be wise, and thinks too much to be beautiful. If it were not for the running-ground at Eton, the towing-path at Oxford, the Thames swimming-baths, and the yearly circuses, humanity would forget the plastic perfection of its own form, and degenerate into a race of short-sighted professors and spectacled précieuses. Not that the circus proprietors are, as a rule, conscious of their high mission. Do they not bore us with the haute école, and weary us with Shakespearean clowns? Still, at least, they give us acrobats, and the acrobat is an artist. The mere fact that he never speaks to the audience shows how well he appreciates the great truth that the aim of art is not to reveal personality but to please. The clown may be blatant, but the acrobat is always beautiful. He is an interesting combination of the spirit of Greek sculpture with the spangles of the modern costumier. He has even had his niche in the novels of our age, and if Manette Salomon be the unmasking of the model, Les Frères Zemganno is the apotheosis of the acrobat.

As regards the influence of the ordinary model on our English school of painting, it cannot be said that it is altogether good. It is, of course, an advantage for the young artist sitting in his studio to be able to isolate ‘a little corner of life,’ as the French say, from disturbing surroundings, and to study it under certain effects of light and shade. But this very isolation leads often to mere mannerism in the painter, and robs him of that broad acceptance of the general facts of life which is the very essence of art. Model-painting, in a word, while it may be the condition of art, is not by any means its aim.

It is simply practice, not perfection. Its use trains the eye and the hand of the painter, its abuse produces in his work an effect of mere posing and prettiness. It is the secret of much of the artificiality of modern art, this constant posing of pretty people, and when art becomes artificial it becomes monotonous. Outside the little world of the studio, with its draperies and its bric-à-brac, lies the world of life with its infinite, its Shakespearean variety. We must, however, distinguish between the two kinds of models, those who sit for the figure and those who sit for the costume. The study of the first is always excellent, but the costume-model is becoming rather wearisome in modern pictures. It is really of very little use to dress up a London girl in Greek draperies and to paint her as a goddess. The robe may be the robe of Athens, but the face is usually the face of Brompton. Now and then, it is true, one comes across a model whose face is an exquisite anachronism, and who looks lovely and natural in the dress of any century but her own. This, however, is rather rare. As a rule models are absolutely de notre siècle, and should be painted as such. Unfortunately they are not, and, as a consequence, we are shown every year a series of scenes from fancy dress balls which are called historical pictures, but are little more than mediocre representations of modern people masquerading. In France they are wiser. The French painter uses the model simply for study; for the finished picture he goes direct to life.

However, we must not blame the sitters for the shortcomings of the artists. The English models are a well-behaved and hard-working class, and if they are more interested in artists than in art, a large section of the public is in the same condition, and most of our modern exhibitions seem to justify its choice.
P.H. Davies is a 35-year-old writer, poet, and blogger. He specializes in writing about gay issues such as same-sex marriage, gay identity, gay childhood and adolescence, homophobic bullying, gay mental health issues, as well as poetry, psychology, and pop culture. Originally from Lancashire, he graduated in 2000 with a BA (Hons) in English Literature, before moving to Oxford in 2001. He has also completed a graduate degree in psychology and a diploma in marketing. He entered into a civil partnership with his husband in 2011. P.H. Davies has been writing since he was sixteen and has self-published four collections of poetry; A Marriage of Sorts (2007) and The Loss House (2008) which are now available in one collected volume, Early Poems (2010), as well as his third collection Suburbanite (2012) and the free e-book A Life of Plath (2012) about the poet, Sylvia Plath. He has also written a novel, Veneer (2007), and last year launched his new e-book series which includes The Unseen, Sète, and his latest title Blood. He has been blogging since 2005 and has contributed articles and reviews to the music magazine Wears the Trousers and Oxford City Guide, and was also Senior Arts Editor for Oxford Magazine.
Here lies the body of the only saint we know, fragments of bone but in marble resurrected as though blood and flesh adorned him anew.

His sculpted form is naked, head upon helmet of the Praetorian Guard, wrapped by his tunic, or a lover’s bed sheet brazenly betwixt thighs.

He is perfected; by his parted, seductive lips, the straight, broad nose, those sloping eyelids of the Milanese, his curls once ebony or flax.

An unbound hand clutches his hairless breast of unblemished marble skin, echoed by great, noble feet that are untied and washed to white.

Three golden shafts penetrate; upon the arm honed for the sword, another in his taut navel, yet a third located in the middle of the thigh.

Thus he lies, not quite dead, as the feathered ends still tremble, though in a repose as one sated with the sticky promises of near death.

Oh sweet boy, cast outside of holiest Rome—found in the basilica past the Aurelian walls. To him, men such as we, make our pilgrimage.

Strange ecstatician, we know also the nature of your persecution, for the relic of the arrow is a reminder of Diocletian’s disgust and desire.
Andrew Warburton was born in Bristol, United Kingdom, has lived in London, Washington D.C. and Missouri, and now resides in Boston, Massachusetts, where he writes blogs for A Suit That Fits and Chimaera Labs. His creative non-fiction essay “Being In Missouri,” about his time studying Lacanian psychoanalysis with Professor Ellie Ragland, appeared in Chroma, the UK queer literary journal, while his short stories have appeared in a handful of anthologies. He also writes a “Sage Advice” blog series about Salem’s magical community for the website Salem Uncommon (pseudonymously as “Edward Dutton”).
Me: xanthos is the name of the colour?

VioletLove, 2010: yeah, it’s either the color ‘yellow’, or the word for ‘blond’. Way back when I was in school in Greece, my hair was bleached by the sun and the maid at the school called me Xanthouli. Blondie.

It wasn’t the fact that he had blond hair that gave our encounter its “yellow” aura (his hair was so short, I couldn’t tell the color of it), but the way his face was so perfectly formed, so pale and lily-like—the kind of perfection I usually associate with an alien sort of “yellow.” He was, in fact, so uncannily perfect, I wondered if he’d photoshopped his face. (Would he go to such lengths, I thought, when a product like “Touche Eclat,” on sale online if not in mid-Missouri, could achieve the same illusion of youth while retaining the look of livingness?). Even that word “Xanthos” was said only after the yellow aura had subsided, so when it came it was unsurprising, like the belated sound of thunder. After looking up the word on the University of Missouri databases, I discovered it was the name of the capital of ancient Lycia, situated now in a part of Turkey I did once pass through on my way to Cappadocia with my then-boyfriend Shaun. The river that flows by the ancient site is said to have a sort of pale yellow color due to the sand that rises from its alluvial base.

It seems obvious now why the word “Xanthos” had occurred, so randomly, to an archaeologist such as VioletLove, it being the name of an important site. But the fact that he’d told me he’d gone to school in Athens, which is separated from Lycia by land and sea, led me to believe that it wasn’t anything to do with his studies that inspired him to educate me about the word. “Educate,” here, seems the proper term, since his discussions of Ancient Greek had begun to take on a professorial tone, perhaps due to the fact that he was forty-five and I was twenty-seven; in fact, I was beginning to wonder if he wasn’t getting off, quietly, on precisely this sort of “education.” No, I believe the word had occurred to him in association with a story that was far more personal than his academic interests: the story of how, as a student in Athens, the sun had bleached his hair, and how the maid had laughed and called him “Xanthouli,” meaning “blondie.” I’m not sure what the story meant and I never asked him what the bleaching of his hair signified, nor how he felt inside when the maid called him that, but the way he told it was so charmingly natural, the details he gave seemed, somehow, enough. It reminded me of my own summers in Greece: the blond hair I have in the photographs my mother took of me playing in the sand, the absence of my father, and the sweet old Greek man who called me “Andreas” and who one day decided to bring me sardines finely boned to express how much he appreciated my love of his fish, how I never complained about the bones.

I had just read wearily of how Sir Charles Fellows had deposited fragments of four Xanthian sarcophagi at the British Museum when I came across a picture in the British Museum Quarterly of June, 1939, of a Xanthian bust that immediately grabbed my attention—for one reason only: the face of the man carved in the marble bore a striking resemblance to the image on VioletLove’s profile. This occurrence, perhaps the most startling in a series of synchronicities initiated by my and VioletLove’s introduction—the first being the fact that we shared a passion for vampires and were both in the middle of Elizabeth Kostova’s The Historian—impelled me to ask him out for coffee.

“Sure,” he said, in that characteristically American way, which always makes it sound as if the person speaking thinks they’re doing you a favor (something we would only say in the U.K. if we wanted to sound deliberately blasé).

I don’t normally like to be so acutely aware of my body when meeting someone for the first time, but some desire on this occasion suggested I transform myself into something more beautiful than I really am. Perhaps it was the stirring I felt inside when his body appeared on my monitor screen, the authority I detected in his speaking tone, which even instant messenger conveyed, or the fact that his thoughts always seemed to descend—without pretension—from an elevated plane, as if, being in his forties and having dealt with all his “shit,” he was now entitled to exposit on life, to talk about nothing but culture if he wished, because his voice demanded respect.

That evening, then, before meeting VioletLove, I purchased some ceramic hair straighteners, went back to my apartment and straightened my hair all over. After running some soft wax through it and spiking it up at the front and on the top, I pulled on my skinny jeans and looked at myself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror. I swear, for an instant, I appeared to be looking at an image of myself in a glossy magazine. My jeans were tight and twisting around my legs, accentuating my normally insubstantial calves and thighs. My hair was sleek and spiky on the top, each
strand having fallen perfectly into place like the words of a beautiful poem. I looked like a completely different person!

* * *

Meeting strangers off the Internet is not something I do very often. Rigorously preparing—in a cosmetic way—to meet strangers off the Internet, even less so. In all honesty, I’ve never found meeting—or having sex with—strangers that easy. I might even go so far as to say I have a kind of psychological block to physical intimacy with anyone I’ve known for less than a year. I wouldn’t want to limit that statement to sex either, because I often feel blocked from any kind of intimacy with people. When I do connect with another human being, it can feel like a special event, as if it’s been given to me by an external power. By this, I mean, not that the other person has given me this moment—because, essentially, they are as powerless as I am—but that it seems to come from something like a “god.”

The other day, for example, I was attending the memorial of a girl called Mary, who died of a cocaine overdose a year ago, and because I’d arrived a little bit late, my friend Abby, looking beautiful in black, had to walk the length of the room, past the entire gathering, to greet me. Her chestnut hair pinned behind her head like something from an old-fashioned movie, her eyes glinting with kindness and love, and her hand, so tiny, stretched out toward me—this, I think, was the actress in her—it’s no surprise, looking back, that after she took my hand, a smile spread across my face, a smile that became like a bright yellow beam, a pure expression of my insides—and that even after this smile had appeared, how it kept on going, out and out, till my face must have looked so open and wide, like a sunflower.

That night in bed, watching the light that flickered from the candles on the floor, I remembered how embraced I had felt at that moment and suddenly, inexplicably, I was consumed by fear—fear of the intimacy Abby had shown, fear of my inability to return it, fear of the future moments we might share. I got out of bed and knelt down by the candles on the floor, dragging the duvet with me so my bare shins were all that was exposed to the cold. I could just make out in the light of the flames a book of reflections I’d placed there during the day. Opening it at random, I repeated the following words. *We can trust that all we need on this journey shall come to us. We will not get all we need for the entire journey today. We shall receive today’s supplies today, and tomorrow’s supplies tomorrow. We were never intended to carry supplies for the entire journey. The burden would be too heavy, and the way is intended to be light.* I got back into bed, feeling much lighter, accepting now the precariousness of my situation, which suddenly felt not so precarious after all.

* * *

I met VioletLove in Kaldi’s, a studenty coffee-shop on the corner of 9th and Cherry in Columbia, Missouri. I was feeling a bit self-conscious due to my newly model-like appearance so I went straight to the bathroom to check my hair and give myself a boost by saying some affirmations in the mirror. Unfortunately for me—and my sexual aspirations—my hair had fallen down (either I hadn’t put enough wax in it or the wax I was using was hopelessly weak and I’d have to buy some hairspray), making me look a bit clownish. When I say “clownish,” I mean exactly that: the unnatural straightness of my hair, which was supposed to give it a feathery texture that would make it stick out around my head, seemed to have made the whole lot sink so that it resembled a kind of medieval cap.

“Oh shit,” I said, unprepared, as yet, to see the funny side of the situation, especially since I was sure I’d spotted VioletLove sitting in the corner grading papers when I’d walked across the room toward the bathroom. Thinking I might as well get the awkwardness over with as quickly as possible, I flicked up my hair as best I could and went out.

It was indeed VioletLove sitting alone in the corner of the room. He was almost as beautiful as he’d appeared on my screen, but he was warmer in the flesh—and sexier. Comparing a profile picture on a gay website to its real life counterpart is always an illuminating exercise. The image on the screen may be starkly beautiful, but it never matches the reality (I, personally, often prefer photos of myself caught at funny angles to photos that are more clearly representative); and however much I imagine the different ways that this man or that man might look in real life, I’ve never met anyone who actually looks like their picture. I wonder if there is some kind of existential or psychoanalytic basis for our choosing pictures that don’t resemble us, something to do with our inability to see ourselves as others see us or the fact that our self-image is based upon “mis-recognition.” I’d hate to
think it was due to the fact that gay men are more narcissistic than other people but it’s something I can’t help wondering after experiencing first hand the lack of correlation between the way some men like to be perceived and how they are in the flesh.

In the case of VioletLove, he seemed to have emphasized his natural good looks to such a degree that paradoxically he’d failed to do justice to them. The man to whom I introduced myself was not the ethereal beauty I’d been drawn to on gay.com, nor was there any trace of yellow aura about him (any perfection that existed was of a distinctly human quality). Here was a man, in his early to mid-forties, with an attractive touch of grey in his hair, a few ragged lines around his eyes, and a wide, expressive mouth that was altogether wonderful. In a manner that was peculiarly relevant to some of the discussions we’d engaged in online—and the fact that VioletLove was from New Orleans—the wide divergence of the man from his image—which, I repeat, is actually quite typical—in this case reminded me of the change Anne Rice’s vampires undergo when they gorge themselves on human blood. Waxy pale beings in their “natural” state, Lestat and his companions become flushed and warm when they drink from beings in their “natural” state, Lestat and his companions become flushed and warm when they drink from.

For some reason, I wanted to know what a significant quantity of my blood tasted like – I liked the idea of the iron in it and its thick consistency—so sometimes I would put my mouth to the wound and drink it.

You might think, because of this, that the idea of a living, breathing vampire wasn’t so difficult for me to get my head around, that that part of me which craved my blood might also crave this fantastic idea, but what happened in reality when the truth finally dawned is that my chest became tight, so very tight; my vision began to change, all speckled with light, as if stars exploded in front of my face; and then and there I thought I might die.

“Are you okay?” said VioletLove, putting down his cup and holding out his hands as if he thought he could help me, the monster, by touching me.

Immediately I brushed away his arms and crossed my own in front of my chest. “I’m fine…” I wheezed. “I just need…to go…to the bathroom.”

I jumped up and hurried to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. I’m having some kind of panic attack, I thought. It didn’t occur to me at the time but what I was experiencing was very similar to a bad trip I once had after eating magic mushrooms in Amsterdam with my then-boyfriend Shaun. Then, like now, a shadowy figure had been out to get me, but then, unlike now, Shaun was there to hide with me. Now I had no one to keep me in control. I would have to reason with myself. I must admit, however, that the realness of this situation scared me, and it would take some effort to work out what was true and what was simply my head fucking with me.

First things first, then, I thought—before I go back out there—I must search my mind for everything I know about VioletLove, everything from our online discussions and emails that might give me some perspective on the situation, besides that awful
The first thought about VioletLove that came to my mind as I paced back and forth in Kaldi's restroom was that he worked as the Curator of Ancient Art for the University of Missouri Museum of Art and Archaeology. This was the thought that had combined so eerily with the word "Xanthos" to make me suspicious of him in the first place.

Thinking back over our online conversations, my suspicions began to grow. Not only was VioletLove a Curator of ancient art, he was a voracious reader of vampire novels and had once attended Anne Rice's famous Vampire Ball at St. Elizabeth's Orphanage in New Orleans. When he'd told me this, I'd asked him if the great lady had appeared out of a coffin, thinking it would make him laugh (although, in truth, Mrs. Rice has been known to appear out of a coffin), but he had acted all tight-lipped, keying only 'No' and turning the conversation around to the two latest vampire novels he'd read, both of which were published by Alyson (the gay press) and were concerned with queer vampires, one from ancient times, I think, and the other from modern day New York. One of the books was easy to remember as it had such a terrible title: *Vampire Thrall*. The other, I couldn't recall, although I had a vague idea it was named after a man.

I pulled out my iPhone and googled 'Vampire thrall'. The first entry was a link to the book on amazon.com, which I tapped impatiently and waited for the page to load. The book was about a Roman soldier who falls in love and is rejected by Jesus Christ, after which he becomes a vampire and decides to take revenge on the Messiah's rejection by preying on monks throughout the world. This all sounded deliciously lurid and I was making a mental note to order it at the library when my eyes fell upon another link allowing customers to purchase the book alongside a volume called *Desmond*. That was the book VioletLove had mentioned with such vociferousness! Quickly, I tapped the link and scrolled down to the product description. I don't know what I was looking for but I had a feeling it would help. Eyes racing across the screen, I stopped suddenly when I came to the author's biography: "Ulysses Dietz is the Curator of Decorative Art at the Newark Museum, the largest museum in New Jersey."

That's weird, I thought. First VioletLove, now Dietz—both Curators of art, both interested in reading this stuff and apparently writing it, too. The coincidence seemed too strange.

VioletLove had spoken to me of his desire to write a novel about a vampire from Ancient Egypt. He said that in it the existence of Jesus would be disproved by the discovery of an Indian manuscript documenting the story of the crucifixion and resurrection long before the birth of Christ. The manuscript itself would be stored for centuries in the library at Alexandria, where it was placed by Cleopatra, before being sent to Rome and discovered there. I had read his description with disbelief, writing back nothing except 'lol' because the idea sounded so bad.

As I pondered the interesting parallel between the author of *Desmond* and VioletLove himself, my thoughts turned naturally to Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*, which he and I had happened to be reading when we met online a few weeks ago. In that novel, Count Dracula appears to have risen from the dead to prey on librarians and scholars throughout the world. The similarity with my situation seemed uncanny: was the same happening here, in the United States of America, with Curators rather than librarians?

Suddenly I remembered something I'd read on the Columbia Daily Tribune website after googling VioletLove's real name. He was being interviewed about an exhibition he'd curated for the Museum of Art and Archaeology about death and burial practices over the last four thousand years. The ease with which he'd described human sacrifice in pre-Columbian Mexico had astounded me. Referring to some obsidian daggers he'd curated, he told the reporter the following: "The way they used them was to slit open the abdomen and reach under the sternum and pull out the heart while it was still beating. What they usually did was burn the heart as a sacrifice to the god."

What had interested me about this quote was not simply the fact that he'd said it—although it did reveal something bloodthirsty about him—but the way my mind took it and became hopelessly hooked on it, even reproducing it that night in a dream.

The dream began with me lying naked on a great stone at the top of a huge temple. There were treetops all around me—an immense forest—and people were singing as they shuffled forward over carpets of flowers. A priest was standing over me wearing nothing but a loincloth, the linen white against his black flesh. His eyes bulged, mad and red, as he lifted a knife in the air over his head. I tried to rise but attendants held
me down. My body, said the priest, must be extended for the cut. As he said this, the people’s singing intensified. Scents arose from the flowers being crushed. The priest’s address was simple and true, filling me with awe for my approaching death: *May he savor the fragrance, the sweetness, of death. May he desire death by the obsidian knife. May he savor the scent and the sweetness of darkness.*

With these words, the knife came down, swooping like a vulture from an empty sky—down, down beneath my ribs—then up, up, right up inside me, blood erupting against my face. The agony was indescribable, the bubbling of blood—the sensation of being ripped from the inside out. The last thing I saw before I woke up was the hand of the priest disappearing in me, my heart still beating on the hand that emerged.

The next morning, I woke up sweating and moaning. There was an IM from VioletLove. He’d left something for me, he said, behind the Museum of Art. It was hidden in an alcove, obscured by a rose bush. I dressed and went there immediately.

All I found was a single red tulip. A tulip that was mine for Valentine’s, he typed. I can see it now, fully open by the window. I can see it now while I type.

* * *

With all these thoughts flooding my head, I opened the bathroom door and walked towards the exit. I could just make out VioletLove in the corner of the room, his face now hidden behind a magazine. It was a magazine I happened to know well, specializing in local culture. The image on the cover was of a bust of a woman, which I recognized immediately as of the Harlem Renaissance, its sensual features set in tan-colored clay. When I’d first sat down next to him (before freaking out about his identity), VioletLove had taken much pleasure in holding up the image in front of my face and saying how much he loved it, how proud he was to have curated it recently for the University of Missouri Museum. I, too, had been quite impressed with it (one could almost take it for something much older, something one might imagine—rather fancifully—being discovered in the ruins of an Ethiopian palace) and had even, for a moment, been unable to take my eyes off it, marveling at how the skin appeared to look both rough and smooth. Suddenly, however, déjà vu had overwhelmed me. It was as if, in a dream, I had seen this skin before but some psychical mechanism had erased it from my memory; seeing it now, as if for the second time, I wanted desperately to be in its presence, to let its exotic beauty overwhelm me. But checking these thoughts, I left the coffee-shop immediately.

As I made my way home through the cool February air, I felt incredibly free, not only free of VioletLove’s clutches but of all the future events our meeting may have occasioned. Walking now on a sidewalk that shone with the remnants of last night’s frost, white light falling softly from the sky, it was as if the universe had decided to enlighten me, filling my eyes with a light and a beauty that were all I would ever need.

When I got home, I set fire to some incense sticks and watched as they turned into small stacks of ash; for a while, I thought about VioletLove’s face at the moment he must have realized I wasn’t coming back, the horror that must have filled him when he discovered that his presence had clearly so appalled me I couldn’t bring myself to say goodbye. Then, because I hadn’t meditated for quite some time, I pulled out my mat and sat down cross-legged, ready to become aware of my breath.

My experience of meditating on the breath has led me to some strange realizations recently. Sometimes I notice, after my mind has wandered, that the thoughts and images it has just been dwelling on are unlike anything I’ve witnessed or heard. Always vivid and seemingly complete, the moment my mind returns to the breath, I forget what their contents were. All I’m left with is the fact that my mind, for moments at least, has played host to images utterly foreign to anything I’ve actually experienced and which are now impossible to recall. Whether my mind is capable of tapping a vast collective unconscious or simply falling asleep (it doesn’t feel like sleep), it’s always an incredibly pleasurable sensation to return from the oddness of these elusive thoughts to a conscious awareness of the breath.

It was during one of these experiences now that I happened to hear a knock at my apartment door. Whether it was to do with the fact that this time a noise had interrupted my thoughts or simply that my vision on this occasion was less oblique than the ones before, what became clear as my awareness dawned is that a series of thoughts had come trailing with it, each of them perfectly vivid and still, like screens inscribed with words.

To say I possessed no experience or content that would allow these thoughts to arise in my mind (as
I seem to suggest above) is not entirely true; I had, indeed, been exposed to things that could have suggested these thoughts before—even as recently as that day; in this sense, then, the thoughts themselves weren’t nearly as “foreign” as they’d appeared before and were more in the likeness of a “dream.” Having said all this, it wasn’t so much their content that disturbed me now as the fact that my mind had registered them as real; to argue that I had imagined these thoughts, when imagination one might say always co-exists with knowledge of its unreality, would not be completely true. My mind, in this case, had registered the content as if it had come from an external realm, in no sense immanent to itself.

The following—which I recorded, to the best of my ability, that night—approximates what it was I was thinking at that moment (to say nothing of the strangeness I feel, on reflection, as I transcribe words that seem just as much not mine as they are mine):

Between the columns of the tomb, gold-skinned Nereids are frozen in stone, their robes blown by an eternal wind. He appears between them at the tomb’s door and slithers lizard-like over the podium’s edge, ignoring the intricate depictions of war. The moon shines brightly on the entire city; the acropolis shimmers with a silver light; and as he goes up, far into the sky, seabirds, disturbed, begin caving and clapping, flying back towards the broken cliffs along the shore. Scared by the sight of this figure in the sky, I lie myself down at the side of the road and pray to the beautiful daughters of Poseidon for a safe passage home: “Send your waves, Nymphs, to carry me over Xanthos!” But already he is gathering me in the cradle of his arms, throwing me up against his chest, while a strange sensation fills my loins, as of a rushing intensity. I seem to explode against him then, even as he holds me tightly in his arms, and it’s only after my convulsion has slowed that he takes me and bites me and my blood begins to flow. The pain, when it comes, is tingling and warm; he pulls away and my blood is in his hair; then, suddenly leaning toward me again, he tears at my throat; I see the blood gush against his mouth. For a moment, between swallows, as he comes up for air, his eyes fill with love, a primal sort of love, the kind that is inseparable from a mindless sort of hatred, a love that destroys because it asks for too much.

VioletLove has changed his name to Renatus.
‘Born again,’ it means, in Latin, he says. Born again, he is, so many times. His picture confirms it: he looks much younger, his face triangular, turning up to the light.

But it is a deceptive light. His eyes—which are exquisite—betray the hate in his heart. I join him there on the moonlit road and writhe with the agony of my wounding.

I’d hardly had time to take all this in when the rapping sounded at my apartment door, shocking me out of my sleepy remembering.

“Coming,” I murmured, as I clambered up—though too quickly, it seems, for my body to cope, because I lost my sight as soon as I stood up. The vision still played like a tape in my head, and in the time I’d taken to meditate there, the room had filled with a hazy light. I’d just reached the door and was about to turn the lock when a thought suddenly occurred to me that made my blood run cold. “Who is it?” I called.

“It’s me.”

Oh my god, it’s VioletLove! What am I going to do? Instinctively dropping my head into my hands, I wondered if I could just ignore him. I wanted to say something like, “Oh, piss off!” but of course, what I said was: “What are you doing here?”

“Punk-bitch!”

I was stunned. For a moment, in fact, comprehension failed altogether.

Then, as the meaning slowly dawned, shame seemed to eat at my very soul. For a moment, I spluttered, not knowing what to do, those two little words ringing in my head. The way he’d conjoined those two ugly nouns—the masculine ‘punk’ and the feminine ‘bitch’—spitting them at me with abject disdain, made me see myself in an entirely different light. Although he’d intended to humiliate me, to shatter my ego and make me feel like shit, the motivation he had for doing this to me was itself a sign that announced his desire; the reason he wanted to obliterate me was because I caused—and frustrated—that desire. Repeating to myself the two vulgar words, I marveled at the immediacy of my bodily response, the punchy sound of the p and b causing desire to spread, tingling, through my flesh; first it felt like a sharpening in the

Chelsea Station
groin, followed by a drug-like tightening in the head and then an all-round bodily excitement – testament to the power of language, I thought, that two ugly words (we’re not talking poetry) could transform, like this, my bodily response into something magnetic and strong. It wasn’t that all the fear had gone, but it was sharper now—erotic and alive—all because of those words.

I unlocked the door and let it swing open.

VioletLove was standing, legs apart, frustrated desire etched in his face. Scowling, he put his hands on my chest and pushed me into the room. “I’m going to show you what I do to punk-bitches like you,” he said—before kissing me ferociously.

His chest rose and fell beneath his sweat-damp shirt as we fell backwards onto the couch. Between kisses, he pulled his T-shirt over his head and pressed my face into his hard chest, making me kiss his nipples and his damp hair, which tasted salty and sharp.

Before I could think to stop or slow down, he tugged at my belt and the buttons of my fly. Quickly he pulled down my pants and let his fall inelegantly to the floor. Both of us in our underwear now, his hands moved roughly over my stomach and chest. Uncertainty rose inside me then—clouding, for a moment, my desire—and in any other situation I might have said something or pushed him away, but he was already yanking at his straining briefs. No longer undecided, I pulled off my shorts and kicked them on the floor. He hesitated for a moment and looked at me quizically, as if asking for protection without wanting to use words. At that moment, though, I didn’t care—all I wanted was him inside me—so I gripped his forearms and pushed my ass into his crotch: “Do it.” What he did next, nobody has ever done to me.

It didn’t last long. When he cried out, convulsing, I couldn’t help thinking of the vampire in my vision—the way he’d lifted me up, sunk his fangs into my neck and my blood had stained his hair.

So profuse—and so wet—was the sweat on VioletLove’s chest, I thought it could almost be blood.

* * *

When I was fifteen or sixteen years old I used to stay up all night, drinking and cutting, burning bits of tissue caked with blood and sometimes thinking about terrible things like how it would feel to be murdered. There’s a song by Tom Waits I used to listen to—I think it was called “A Little Rain”—which ends with a girl being killed by a vagabond in the back of a van; another, by Nick Cave, was about a lonely woman called Mary Bellows who books into a hotel on her way to see the ocean and is found dead the next day, her body strapped to the bed; yet another, by Bauhaus, was about a teenage runaway sleeping out at night who apparently freezes to death while hallucinating that the sky has “gone out.” What all these songs had in common was the fact that they were about broken people, trying to bring some happiness to their lives by going in search of beauty—the ocean, the road, a vampire—and finding only death. For some reason I’m reminded of a time, long ago, when my Sociology teacher Ms. Heyhoe, who sensed I was gay and miserable, I think, stopped the class to look at me a while and tell me pointedly that “things change,” that I wouldn’t be attending this school forever, this normative hell in the Gloucestershire countryside. While Ms. Heyhoe was right to say this and it was kind of her to consider how I must have been feeling, what she didn’t realize was that the knife of normativity had penetrated deeper in me than a change of location could ever hope to fix; my body itself had long been carved by the hostile pleasure of other people’s imperatives (“look at how you walk,” “listen to your voice”), which, by studying it for signs of difference, effectively marked its various parts—voice, legs, hips, walk—as legibly straying from a norm. My body, in fact, was made to support the weight of that norm, to define its tattered edge—unwillingly, of course, and violently done, and enough that I can sympathize with the victims of this world who lend their flesh to the repetition of an inscription for which hetero-masculinity is to blame. And however much things did improve when I was able to make those markings my own, when I realized they had a power that was uniquely their own—that “gay” (like “punk-bitch”) was an ambiguous term, “blessing” as much as “curse”—I can’t deny those wounds existed, covered now perhaps, but for a long time bleeding internally.

* * *

I didn’t see VioletLove again. Not in person or online. Funnily enough, his profile disappeared, though it may have been replaced by one called “Renatus.” The tulip which he gave me is wilting now, its blood-red deepening to a purple bruise. Soon I’ll throw it out and attempt to consign my memory of VioletLove to a part of my mind I won’t choose to visit often, just as I no longer choose to search the internet for novels
about vampires or human sacrifices. In fact, this week I was accepted to the Ph.D program in English at a prestigious New York university, and if all goes to plan, I’ll be moving there in August to study under a well-known queer theorist. Just the fact that I can write these words (even if something happens that means I can’t go) is enough to make me think that everything’s been worth it, that I did, in fact, experience everything—from my alcoholic childhood to my vampiric adventures with VioletLove—so I’d be able to study under Professor Lieberman.

While entertaining myself with stories about VioletLove has undoubtedly kept me sane, I do think it’s time for a change. If only Professor Lieberman wasn’t practically married, things would be pretty much perfect right now; in all the pictures I’ve seen of him, his skin seems to radiate that yellow aura, which I can’t help associating with perfection.

“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*
“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
Shaun Levin is a South African writer based in London. He is the author of *Seven Sweet Things*, *Snapshots of The Boy* and three other books. He is the founding editor of the literary journal *Chroma*, and the director of the independent publishing house Treehouse Press. He teaches creative writing, and has recently launched the innovative writing tools, Writing Maps. His short stories appear in *Between Men*, *Boyfriends from Hell*, *Modern South African Stories*, *Love*, *Christopher Street*, and *With: New Gay Fiction*, amongst other anthologies. See more at www.shaunlevin.com and www.writingmaps.com.

Jameson Currier is the author of nine works of fiction and is the publisher and editor of Chelsea Station magazine.
As an admirer of Shaun Levin's fiction, I am always pleased when I find his writing online or in an anthology. Shaun lives in London where he also runs the independent press Treehouse Press. His newest endeavor, Writing Maps, is an innovative writing tool which has enthusiastically embraced by students, teachers, and writers. I recently had the opportunity to reach out to Shaun to ask him more about his new projects.

Jameson Currier: Writing Maps is a big success. How did the idea come about?

Shaun Levin: They kind of evolved organically out of my own writing practice, my creative writing teaching and various fascinations I have, particularly with artists’ maps and creative forms of mapping. After many years of teaching creative writing and running a lot of workshops in public spaces around the city, I felt I wanted to gather everything together into a creative writing book, but the world doesn’t need another creative writing manual, so I started to think of ways to collate all these hundreds of creative writing prompts and activities I’d used over the years and one thing led to another and Writing Maps were born!

Currier: How are the maps produced? Who are the artists and where do you find them?

Levin: It’s pretty much a collaborative process. I send the writing prompts to the illustrator--and each Writing Map has a different illustrator--then they come up with an initial design, and from then onwards we work on it together. Sometimes a map can take a few weeks to create and other times several months. I’ve found all the illustrators on PeoplePerHour, which has let me tap into a huge resource of amazing artistic talent.

Currier: How are the maps used in the writing process?

Levin: Each Writing Map is a collection of creative writing prompts that can be used to write fiction or non-fiction. Most prompts will give you ideas for complete stories, or they can be used to help expand a bigger work, or just for daily writing practice. They can be used in a group setting or alone at your desk, and because they’re easy to carry around, people use them in cafes or on their commute, or wherever they go to write, for a boost of inspiration.

Currier: How are the maps used by writers? By others who are not writers? Can they be used outside of London?

Levin: You really don’t have to be a writer to use the maps. The prompts are great for oral storytelling, too. I know a therapist who encourages her clients to use the maps to explore their own personal stories. Writing Maps are very much for everyone everywhere and aren’t linked to London in particular. Having said that, some of the Writing Maps have been inspired by London--a city I’ve lived in for almost twenty years and which is a constant source of stories and new places to write in.

Currier: Tell me about Treehouse Press. When did you start it and why?

Levin: Andra Simons and I started Treehouse Press in 2009, along with the designer Raffaele Teo, whom I’d worked with while editing Chroma. Andra and I had books we wanted to publish and which we knew might take a while to find a publisher, so we figured: Let’s do it ourselves. We started with our own books, The Joshua Tales and Snapshots of The Boy, and then we went on to publish other writers. Check out Lou Dellaguzzo’s The Hex Artist; he’s one of the most exciting queer writers around today. His work is astounding.

Currier: Any new books coming from Treehouse?

Levin: There’s an essay anthology of queer writers writing about queer bookshops that’s been in the making for quite a while now. I hope it’ll come together before too long! I’ve got about 15 pieces so far--I just need the time and space to focus on the collection a bit more.

Currier: You juggle a lot of work: teaching, writing, publishing. How do you find the time to do everything?

Levin: I’m not sure I do find the time! Things get done eventually, though some things take longer.
than others. I go through phases of focus. The biggest challenge is to keep writing at the center of attention. I finished a novel last year, so I’m taking a breather before immersing myself in the next big project, which will be based around the life of the British painter David Bomberg. At the moment I’m working on short stories that have been unfinished for way too long, and also a couple of essays. I’m trying to do less teaching this year, but I need to pay the rent, and I really enjoy teaching.

**Currier:** What do you like best about teaching?

**Levin:** I love the calm of the workshop space. One of my students said this week that he really liked having a quiet two hours in his week where writing was all that mattered. The bonus of working freelance is not having to grade people’s work or follow a syllabus or have to answer to anyone. Writing is the focus of my teaching. I try to bring people to a regular writing practice and introduce them to different ways of putting words together, different perspectives to write from – basically, to get them to see the vast range of choices you have when you put words on a page.

**Currier:** Where did you grow up? When did you move to London and why?

**Levin:** I grew up in South Africa until I was about fifteen and then my family moved to Israel, where I spent the next fifteen years. When I was in my early 30s I moved to London and have been here for close to twenty years. My reasons for moving were a combination of running away from and running to. I wanted to get away from Israeli politics and the general hopelessness I was feeling about the chances for peace and co-existence in that part of the world. I also wanted to live in English again, to be surrounded by the language I was writing in, and because I’d just started to publish (in *The Evergreen Chronicles* and *Harrington Gay Men’s Fiction Quarterly*) I somehow felt London was the place to be. America felt too far away, although that’s where many of the writers I love come from!

**Currier:** What UK gay writers would you recommend?

**Levin:** I love La JohnJoseph’s work. We published a brilliant story of his in *Chroma* almost ten years ago, so I’ve been waiting a long time for his first novel, *Everything Must Go.* Sina Sparrow is a comic artist whose work I like very much. And there’s Eric Karl Anderson who’s an American based in London; he’s always doing interesting stuff.
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Homosexuality and its relation to space and gay male identity are imperative to the works of Alan Hollinghurst. Not only is Hollinghurst interested in exploring gay relationships, but also how the physical space in which these relationships take place affects discursive practices, texts, codes of behaviour and social engagement. Emma Liggins has witnessed this link between identity and space, arguing that Hollinghurst ‘anchor[s] gay identity in consumerism and casual sex, suggesting that it cannot be sustained away from the metropolitan centre.’

Certainly, the city has played a key role in the emergence of ‘queer’ identities. Dianne Chisholm suggests that ‘queers of all sorts owe their emergence to the industrial metropolis, where they were hailed as a new ‘city type.’ From the late 1970s, young men laid claim to the streets of Soho, which became an expanding commercial centre for homosexuality. Urban migration, for the gay man, led to an expansion of self and sexual identity, often through the experiences of casual sex and consumerism. However, the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s demonstrated the dangers of sexual socialisation within a restricted group. This, in turn, has arguably led to gay men seeking locations outside of the city, to escape from the large-scale casual sex of homosexual commercial centres. This essay will contend that though Liggins is correct in asserting that the metropolitan centre plays and has played an important role in creating and sustaining male homosexual identity, a more recent shift has seen places outside of the city also work to establish and maintain homosexual identity. Alan Hollinghurst’s works, The Swimming-Pool Library (1988) and The Spell (1998) will be used to study the city as a homosexual place, the dangers of the city and, lastly, life outside of the metropolis and how it might be sustained. Taking Liggins’s argument, this work will highlight and explore shifts in homosexual identity, arguing that the role of the city is not as significant as once appeared.

It is undeniable that the city is an important centre for homosexual activity. The Swimming-Pool Library, Hollinghurst’s first novel, is based entirely in London and narrated by the wealthy city-boy, Will Beckwith. Will thrives in the city, embarking regularly on ‘the sex-sharp little circuits of discos and pubs and cottages’(5). His particular haunt is ‘The Corry’, a men’s leisure club which functions as a meeting place, sports centre, social venue, and a place to meet men. For Will, ‘The Corry’ is a sanctuary from the outside, predominantly heterosexual world:

> It was a place I loved, a gloomy and functional underworld full of life, purpose and sexuality. Boys, from the age of seventeen, could go there to work on their bodies in the stagnant, aphrodisiac air of the weights room. (9)

The ‘underworld’ of The Corry provides a space in which Will and other men can come to enjoy each other’s company and sexuality in a safe environment, free from ostracism or discrimination. There is an element of secrecy about the place which appears to give it an additional allure to Will; its ‘gloomy’ air elicits a sense of the unknown in which anything might happen. Indeed, the club is witness to ‘polyandrous happenings which could not survive into the world of jackets and ties, cycle-clips and duffel-coats’ (16). This place of secrecy and sexuality continues in the pool, which seems ‘remote from the rest of the world’ (12). It is reached down a ‘spiral staircase’ (11), adding to its seclusion with ‘dingy’ (11) lighting, a covering of semi-darkness which is suggestive of the clandestine affairs which take place. There is an overture of sexuality yet also masculinity; one can smell the stagnant, sweaty air of the weights room. In this environment, straight men may experience homosexuality, as masculinity and sexuality converge in the naked environment of the showers. This space is only accessible in the city, as only here can it

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4 Alan Hollinghurst, The Swimming-Pool Library (London: Vintage, 1988). All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.
attract such a wealth and diversity of men, those from seventeen into their eighties. In the city, ‘The Corry’ provides a location for the gay scene which functions as a thriving centre of consumerism, socialisation, friendship and casual sex.

Yet the fact that ‘The Corry’ is described as an ‘underworld’, ‘remote’ from high culture suggests that even in the metropolis, gay identity is forced to remain a subculture. Socialising on the gay scene is limited to those venues which are outside of heterosexual social boundaries, indeed it is likely that heterosexuals would not even know of their existence. Though ‘The Corry’ and homosexual identity are sustainable in the metropolitan centre, it is arguable that even in the city where gay identity supposedly thrives, it must still be relegated to certain locations. This is in part due to The Sexual Offences Act 1967 which ruled that homosexual acts could only take place in private, evident in Will’s friend James being arrested for attempting to seduce an undercover policeman. Though this would be acceptable in a gay bar or club, such activity could lead to arrest if witnessed by the wrong people. This ‘underworld’ thus demonstrates the need for gay men to move away from the metropolis in which they cannot fully merge into society, something that Liggins fails to consider.

The Spell also uses specific locations within the city to highlight the gay social scene. Alex, a thirty-something civil servant, meets Danny, a twenty-three year old ‘Culture Studies’ graduate, at Danny’s father’s house in Dorset. Though an ex of Justin, Danny’s father’s new partner, Alex falls for Danny and becomes immersed in the world of clubs, drugs and parties. Danny takes Alex to ‘Chateau’, a gay club in which Danny is well known, his ‘exemption and desirability’ illustrated through gaining them access and bypassing the queue. This exclusivity reflects that of ‘The Corry’ in The Swimming-Pool Library. Though too bustling and busy to be an ‘underworld’, Danny and Alex receive exclusive access similar to the privileged secrecy of ‘The Corry’. This furthers the idea of homosexuality in the city being a subculture, a world only accessible to those who know of it. Like ‘The Corry’, this determines that ‘Chateau’ attracts many men:

...crowds of men were moving in blurred inexhaustible union with [the music] All around the floor, and trailing away into other unguessed spaces, there was an endless jostling parade of half-naked men, faces glowing with happiness and lust.’ (81)

There is a tangible sense of community in the club, as men ‘blur’ into one another, becoming one in a single ‘union’. This is further highlighted by their singular purpose of socialising and having fun, but also suggests that many of them are unified in their taking of drugs and in their sexuality. Alex longs to be part of this. Often depicted as an outsider, Alex is delighted to find that he ‘danced like everyone else now, but better, more remarkably.’ (85) Though already a part of this community due to his sexuality, the ecstasy tablet which he takes enables him to become part of this youthful party scene, alongside Danny. Here, homosexuality is what is desirable, leading to Alex’s repeated proclamations of gay love, ‘like he was coming out all over again.’ (104)

Like ‘The Corry’, ‘Chateau’ must be located in the metropolis to attract such vast numbers of men, and to give them somewhere to form their communities. According to Tim Edwards, these spaces are unique because only certain spaces allow for homosexuality. He reasons that ‘same-sex relationships are only legitimised in certain areas – the home and the workplace are implicitly heterosexual.’ Liggins would surely agree with Edwards, viewing the city as the only space in which homosexual identity can be sustained. However, the home of a homosexual man cannot be considered heterosexual, and thus Edwards is outdated in viewing the ‘home’ as that of a typically heterosexual couple or family. The workplace may typically instil heterosexual ideology, yet it is a place often distanced from any form of sexuality, and therefore cannot be attributed to either. ‘The Corry’

6 This gay club culture is present even in earlier homosexual texts, see for example Andrew Holleran’s Dancer from the Dance (1978).
Chelsea Station

and ‘Chateau’ function as examples of certain areas which legitimise same-sex relationships, yet I intend to show in the remainder of this essay how such areas are developing outside of the city.

Despite the appeal of the metropolis, the city can be a particularly dangerous place, especially for gay men. The Swimming-Pool Library suggests these dangers from the start. Will recalls the summer of 1983 as ‘the last summer of its kind there was ever to be’ (3) and, though subtly, Hollinghurst implies a sense of danger by describing Will’s feeling of ‘a faint flicker of calamity, like flames around a photograph, something seen out of the corner of the eye.’ (3) Hollinghurst thus establishes a feeling of impending threat, though with the events and often fairly comic happenings of the novel one would be forgiven for soon forgetting these early warnings. The ‘last summer’ refers to the months before the first serious AIDS epidemic, and the then largely unfamiliar threat of the disease. Richard Dellamora has viewed the text as ‘posteschatological’, looking back on the events from 1983 in the year 1988, after the worst epidemic had happened. This technique allows Hollinghurst to demonstrate the extent of carefree, casual sex taking place during this period which, knowing what we do now, can be quite disturbing for a reader examining this book with AIDS in mind. The city was, as earlier stated, home to large numbers of the gay community, and thus the spread of AIDS here was bound to be great. George Letissier has noted the Bratus Porn Cinema in the novel as a symbol for the spread of AIDS:

There are many instances of this close association between lust and the subterranean, or the subaqueous in The Swimming-Pool Library [...] the Bratus Porn Cinema – a place of polyandrous happenings – is situated in a squalid, jolly sous-sol.

Letissier links lust with the underground, squalid basement of the cinema; the idea of gay centres being based in secretive, reticent locations. However, Letissier builds on previously discussed notions to argue that the relationship between lust and the subterranean provides the perfect milieu for the spread of AIDS. Thus, places such as ‘The Corry’ and ‘Chateau’, while providing space for the gay community, were actually also providing an environment for the spread of AIDS.

The Bratus Porn Cinema is where Hollinghurst’s most fervent warning about AIDS arises. Will’s description of the nature programme the attendant is watching while waiting for the audience contains sharp overtones of gay sex and the spread of disease: ‘I felt a thrill at the violent intrusion as well as dismay at the something of something so strange and intricate’ (48-9). This ‘violent intrusion’ implies not only the ‘thrill’ of a passionate invasion of another man in a male body, but also the spread of disease, which is often described with such war-like imagery. ‘Something so strange and intricate’ is perhaps a direct reference to the disease itself, suggestive of its intricate qualities and ways of destroying the body in breaking down its immunities and increasing susceptibility. Joseph Bristow’s reading of this scene is particularly disturbing, analysing the ‘implication that such [gay porn] films in the late 1970s/early 1980s may well have led to the deaths of countless porn stars.’ This, as we watch the male actors ‘jacking off in the shower’ and ‘having sex for the pleasure of it’, (52) we are arguably viewing their death sentence. Will seems little aware of this, caught up in his own sexual exploits. His attitude represents that of the majority of homosexuals; knowing little about AIDS and its dangers, he does not consider the disease until his own retrospective reflections. However, Bristow’s point makes the reality of the gay porn industry overwhelmingly clear. The underground scene of gay sex demonstrates the vast dangers of the city. The spread of AIDS in the 1980s rendered gay venues no longer safe and thriving communities, but potential death traps in which infection appeared almost inevitable.

There are further dangers of the city evident in The Spell. Danny introduces Alex to drugs, obtaining

him ecstasy tablets which he takes at ‘Chateau’. These do not lead to any particular dangers at this point, however there is the implication that their effects make the user susceptible to the perils of the metropolis. AIDS is not the threat it was in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, as *The Spell* is set after the worst epidemic. However, there are other dangers of the city which make gay men especially vulnerable. Danny becomes a victim of crime through the act of sex, demonstrative of how even those who are a regular part of the gay scene can be subject to danger. He leaves ‘The Drop’ club with two Latin American men, Luis and Edgar, and takes them back to his flat. It is not until afterwards that he realises he has been robbed:

And then he knew that that was what had happened. Luis had bitten through the chain, and swallowed it [...] It made Danny shiver again, and then wonder if it could possibly be true. (151)

Danny finds it hard to believe that these men could be capable of stealing from him. Moreover, as a regular of this scene, he cannot comprehend his own failure in being the victim of such a crime. The severity of the offence makes Danny doubt his own theory, and it makes him aware for the first time of the dangers of the city gay scene. The loss of the chain, given to him by Alex, is symbolic of the failure of their relationship; what is sentimental to Alex does not hold the same regard for Danny, who is more interested in socialising and partying. This emphasises their age-gap and different interests, which ultimately leads to their separation. Again, this highlights the dangers of casual sex. Yet this time it is not the spread of disease which is perilous, but the vulnerability and exposure of engaging in sex with strangers. By letting these men into his home, Danny gives them access to his personal and private environment, thus creating an unspoken trust which they irrevocably violate. This same sense of trust comes into play with AIDS. By having sex with someone, there is trust that partners will inform each other of any sexual diseases they may have. Though many may not know that they carry AIDS, by infecting someone with this disease the same trust is broken.

This sense of mistrust and propensity to susceptibility can be viewed as a critique of modernity. David Alderson delineates how these texts show ‘Hollinghurst’s apparent disenchantment with modernity’¹¹, and this certainly seems the case. Hollinghurst’s indications towards AIDS in *The Swimming-Pool Library* do not overtly criticise, but rather are portrayed as sad, reminiscent reflections on a past now no longer obtainable. Instead of looking back in hostile hindsight, he accepts what has foregone and rather mourns the past. In *The Spell*, he refuses to critique Danny’s ignorance but highlights his immaturity, revealing him as a rather pitiless character.

Hollinghurst does not praise the modern gay era of corruption and disease, but recognises its appeal for some men in its parties, drugs and socialising. It appears that there is now a split in the modern man’s homosexual identity; while some long for this social scene, some gay men feel shut out from homosexuality built on promiscuity and clubbing (the Alex of the latter parts of *The Spell*, for example). Alan Sinfield has furthered this argument by contending that identity is ‘an exclusion as well as inclusion’¹², and I would further this still by suggesting that there are different identities within one singular, encompassing identity. Thus, though for some gay identity is centred in the metropolis in areas such as ‘The Corry’, ‘Chateau’ and the Bratus Porn Cinema, for other men homosexual identity lies away from promiscuity, clubbing, casual sex and corruption. This shift has led gay men to turn away from the city into more secluded areas in which they can establish new constructs of homosexual identity.

Hollinghurst demonstrates the need to move away from the sexual abandon of the metropolitan centre in *The Spell*.¹³ At least half of the narrative is

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¹³ Hollinghurst also uses a country landscape for the initial setting of his 2011 novel, *The Stranger’s Child*. The shift towards the countryside from his earlier city-based novels shows his characters moving from the metropolis,
based in the Dorset village of Litton Gambril, where Danny's father, Robin, and his partner, Justin live. Robin and Justin are easily accepted into village life without any sense of prejudice or intolerance, indeed their Dorset home appears 'completely hidden' (25) to the locals, blending in seamlessly with village life. However, for Emma Liggins, 'the text questions whether the scene produces a restrictive gay image'14. Liggins perhaps views Robin and Justin's homosexual image as restrictive due to the fact that their cottage is 'hidden'. However, it is apparent that their home is not hidden on the thresholds of implicitly heterosexual territory, but rather secluded in the countryside like the rest of the village. The 'rutted lane[s]' and 'high seaward slopes' (24) ensure that the area is concealed within the nature that surrounds it, providing the perfect escape from the city. Robin and Justin's image is not stigmatised as homosexual. Instead, their house and their identities have become part of this village community, underlining how they are no longer restricted to the social clubs of the gay scene which was overwhelmingly the case in the city space of The Swimming-Pool Library. Their involvement in village life is evident in their invitation, alongside Danny and Alex, to Mike and Margery Hall's home, a straight couple with whom Robin and Justin have become well acquainted. Robin is not afraid to reveal his sexuality, referring to his partner as "My darling Justin" (231), demonstrating how comfortable he is with his sexual identity, even in an implicitly heterosexual home. Robin and Justin do not hide their sexuality in Litton Gambril but rather embrace it. This world is not full of promiscuity and drugs, but that does not mean homosexual identity cannot be expressed. It seems, thus, that homosexual identity can be successfully sustained away from the metropolitan centre.

Homosexual identities are further maintained away from the city when Danny brings his friends to the cottage for his twenty-third birthday party. There is a mixture of young and old, gay and straight, men and women, highlighting the diversity which is not so common in gay clubs in the city. The party illustrates how consumerism and casual sex, gay identity and customs can be maintained outside of the metropolis. The cottage takes on a 'relentless club atmosphere' (124), yet there is no sense of danger present in 'Chateau' or 'The Drop'. This is aptly captured by Robin finding George in the kitchen, chopping cocaine:

George was sitting chopping coke on the back of a dark shiny cookery-book. For a second, Robin worried more about the marks the razor would make on the cover than the substance the razor was so finely fanning and gathering and trailing into lines. (125)

Robin has more concern for his home and its appearance than about Danny and his friends taking cocaine. He recognises 'himself' (125) in these young men taking drugs, and there is the sense that this is a cycle repeating itself, 'a ritual Danny had some experience of too' (125). Yet this time the drugs do not appear dangerous; there is no suspicious drug dealer in a porn shop and no expectation of 'be[ing] jumped by the drug-squad' (80-1). The events of the club continue to repeat themselves in Robin's sexual encounter with Lars, Danny's friend. Robin faces a 'torture of excitement' with Lars's 'slow and luscious' kiss (135), demonstrative of how the party scene can be witness to unexpected sexual scenes. All of this happens however not in the city, but in the small Dorset village of Litton Gambril. Danny and his friends have brought the gay city scene to the country, indicating how even this vibrant social community does not necessarily require the metropolis.

The ending of The Spell can be read as Hollinghurst’s comment on future homosexual identities and relations. Danny realises that his differences with Alex cannot be reconciled and so he decides that they should separate. Robin and Justin work out their problems and find themselves happy once more, and Alex meets Nick, an older man with an interest in church architecture. It is critical to note how the novel does not end in London, but rather in Dorset, and with two established, middle-aged couples who are concerned with love and monogamy. The final image presents the two couples as united in this aim. We watch Robin ‘drop an arm round Nick’s shoulder’ in friendship, and both sets of men

a direct concurrence with the argument of this essay.

14 Liggins, p.166.
display ‘the humorous good conscience of a successful couple’ (256). This scene is Hollinghurst’s critique of gay stereotypes partying, having casual sex and doing drugs in the city. Being far removed from the metropolis, the ending of The Spell suggests that not only can homosexual identity be sustained away from the city, but that perhaps homosexual lives are now more successfully lived outside of this environment, away from the uncontrollable spread of AIDS, and the dangers of criminal and violent behaviour. Indeed, despite the characters’ individual mistakes in The Spell, Hollinghurst’s text can be used to advocate gay identity as anchored in monogamous, safe and trusting relationships, rather than casual sex and consumerism.

To conclude, this essay has proved how gay identity can be sustained away from the metropolitan centre in the works of Alan Hollinghurst. Indeed, in studying these works, it becomes evident that older gay men are turning to monogamous relationships rather than consumerism and casual sex. Liggins’s view thus appears outdated, and fails to note this shift in homosexual identity away from the metropolis towards more rural locations in which to establish a home and perhaps even families. This can be viewed as Alan Sinfield’s image of the ‘post-gay’ man, a position which demands a new re-focussing of sexuality. Sinfield argues that we do not need to limit our sexualities, and that homosexual men should not be defined by their sexuality.15 This, I believe, is what Hollinghurst’s final scene in The Spell represents. These men are no longer defined by their sexuality but by their shared beliefs, symbolic of the new era of the post-gay. The move away from the city is a part of this larger, new identity, which is continually being formulated and developed. The post-gay man will work to redefine notions of what it is to be homosexual, moving away from the troubles of AIDS and the enforced privatisation of homosexuality evident in The Swimming-Pool Library, towards notions of inclusion, public displays of love and monogamous relationships in The Spell.

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the bottom of
the pool
beyond
those pale Lolitas and—
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and there—the
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religion
on Sunday!)
Left
to loll
on its owner’s
provocative crotch,
one particular draw-
string has recently
captured my eye.
Just think, dear
author, of
loosening
with your teeth
the limp
ribbon
of a boy
who’s wrapped
in a skintight
Speedo! Alas, it’s
a public pool.
Take a walk. Dive
in. Be cool.
Zachery Taylor is a student at the University of Chicago. His essay, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall,” was the co-winner of the 2013 Queer Foundation essay contest and is reprinted by permission of the author and the Queer Foundation Effective Writing and Scholarships Program.
My room wasn't complete without a mirror, a DVD version of *Funny Girl*, and some dumbbells—the perfect mixture of masculine and effeminate, and a mirror to verify. I hoped, considering this is a math and science boarding school, that my roommate would just ignore my morning ritual and go on with his test-cramming, keyboard smashing, or whatever he needs to do to get by at the Oklahoma School of Science and Math. *Moi*, however...I'd been staring at the mirror all morning. I’d gone through “too girly,” “too frail,” “too fat,” and “too butch” in less than ten minutes, and my wardrobe truly wasn’t that extensive. Nothing was average enough. I was moving in to a new residential school for juniors and seniors that day, and I didn’t want people thinking I was too gay, too straight, too skinny, or too fat.

Being an openly gay teenager in the rural south was just begging for controversy; and the first remarks I received were something like, "So you’re gay...Are you one of those girly homos, or one of those manly queers?” Even by those who were accepting, I was commonly asked, "Are you the girl or the guy in the relationship?” It seemed as though my life equated that of Sacha Baron Cohen’s character in “Bruno” or something. This constant influx of interrogations was the start of a thought cycle that I struggled with for the next year. I’d begun to seriously consider changing who I was to defy this stereotypical image of a fashionable, effeminate “twink” to subscribe to my community’s masculine hegemony. I couldn’t stand the idea of being too fat, too skinny, or—the worst—skinny-fat. By the time I moved in to my boarding school, I’d lost thirty pounds, gained a bit of muscle mass, and refrained from dressing in red skinny jeans because I wanted nothing more than to portray the opposite of what was expected of me.

So, here I am. Earrings, a beard, skinny jeans, an average amount of body fat and muscle, and a plethora of colored jeans in my drawers—and I don’t care what anyone thinks of it. While I hadn’t developed a severe case of body dysmorphia or life-threatening eating disorder, my acquaintance with one of my current best friends saved me from the pit into which I’d thrown my self-esteem. Upon coming to this new school, I met another one of my kind; I met a closeted theatre kid whose dream was to leave Oklahoma and start a life anew. Months of reading through JCREW catalogs, thrifting, and sleeping in each other’s rooms passed by, and he was one of my best friends. Not even my low self-esteem could ruin this friendship.

This friend had a mirror, too. Mirrors aren’t just made for girls—I used to think that when I was a child. I used to think that the witch from “Snow White” made mirrors to distribute to other girls who were just as self-conscious as the witch was. I imagine this friend asking the mirror, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall...Who is the skinniest of them all?” and poking at his meek layers of body fat until he was miserable. And y’know what? That’s basically what he did in the mornings.

A few select people at our school spread a rumor around that entailed what they believed to be our relationship status, and it included our sexual roles. Supposedly, I was the “man,” and he was the “woman.” This rumor hung over us almost all the time we spent together until I walked in on him purging after a meal. The difference between my friend and me happened to be that while I was afraid of society undermining my masculinity, he was afraid of society overrating his. So, in order to keep up these images that people around us had developed for us, we pushed our limits. I abandoned my love for show tunes and glitter, only going to watch drag shows with my obscure, secret friends. My friend quit baseball, took up aerobics, and repressed his hunger to achieve his make-believe goal of negative fifty percent body fat. I was trying to build an image of bear masculinity, whereas he wanted to become the smallest twink alive.

To this day, I never understood why it took us a whole year to fix this stupid problem. All of junior year was spent either bashing our own body images or working out in order to fix them (and by “working out,” I mean Richard Simmons meets P90X style). While we should’ve been waking up early to intently study for finals, we were waking up early to pick out the least girly or least manly outfits for finals week.

So, by summer, I’d decided to pierce my ears. No longer would I worry about looking too gay. I know who I am, and I refuse to be discouraged by societal pressures that want me to stick to their hegemonic masculinity. I’m not interested in the limits of homosexuality, or the limits of how homosexual I can act in public. I’m interested in proving to myself that my body image doesn’t have to answer to some higher authority called the heteronorm. Female body image issues dominate the media and teenage health forums, but my ex-bulimic, ex-starving, ex-insecure friend and I are prime examples of what the media neglects to gossip about. Body image issues in gay teens like the two of us are prevalent, especially in
regions where we’re told that we must fit either one of two body types. I refuse to be a bear. I refuse to be a twink. I refuse to find a perfect intermediate. I’m going to wear what I feel like wearing, I’m going to eat what I feel like eating, and I’m going to say what I feel like saying—I feel like saying that mine or any of my fellow LGBT youth’s happiness does not have to depend on the state of being skinny, muscular, effeminate, or masculine. I’m going to be as queer as I feel like being.

And when I came back to school early this year, my friend and I made sure to kick the hell out of his mirror.

“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
"An engaging allegorical pursuit of the mirage that is beauty’s transcendence."
-Kirkus
John Kiely lives in Eugene, Oregon with his partner Bill and their cat Paul. He has published half a dozen short stories. “His Voice” is his first published poem.
Waiting at the bus station I noticed him, stocky build, a construction worker, except that his clothes were brand new: dark blue work pants, a dark blue jacket with a hood. I only saw his face—round, slightly sunburnt; Probably a blond. Definitely my type.

He was on the phone laughing. And for a moment I heard the voice on the other end. It was my father.

That could not be. My father’s been dead many years.

I never thought my father’s voice especially distinctive. (My friends said he had a brogue but I never heard it.) But when he was happy or excited, having a beer with his friends at the bar or even at home telling a joke to company, there was an up in his voice, a lilt. It was that lilt I heard on the phone.

I turned away to look at the others on line. Then, when I was getting on the bus, there he was, taking up a seat and a half. On impulse I took the half-seat. No words were spoken, no acknowledgement of each other.

As we rode along, I imagined him safe and secure with his family and friends, protected on all sides by ramparts. (Of course, one day they would be breached by strangers or sickness or certainly death.)

For me, lust turned to nostalgia, a yearning for my parents and for friends now thousands of miles away. I even longed for the children I would never have.

My stop. I stepped out into the darkness. A cold wind blew at my back, skimming off all my desires, off into the dark blue night.
The Painters

Jeff Mann

I wonder what they say about us behind our backs. What my spouse John and I say about them in their absence is what a good job they’re doing, how friendly they are, and how much nicer it would be if they worked naked. Both of them are good-looking, well-built young guys, both Southwest Virginia natives like me. It’s a small erotic thrill to have them in our house, painting our living room, bedroom, and home office. As if a cock-tease pastry chef has come to visit, displaying Napoleons, cream puffs, and éclairs you can pay to see but not to eat. One of them, Jim, is a younger version of myself, with dark beard, bald head, stocky physique, and tattoos flowing out of his T-shirt sleeves. (Turns out we even have the same tattoo artist.) The other’s Mike, a lean, pale, clean-shaven, very buff boy, whose cargo shorts are ripped to expose a hairy right thigh, whose cargo shorts barely fit him, hanging precariously off his round butt, hanging low to expose a strip of underwear, sky blue.

*   *   *

Today Mike’s chewing a toothpick. I want to think that’s evidence of an oral fixation, but I’m probably projecting. For that bubble butt, the usual fruit metaphors occur—peach, apricot, nectarine, those fragrant pink edibles that splash the mouth with juice, whose raison d’être is the tentative lap of tongue, the slow sink of teeth—or receptacles that need filling—wineglasses, quaichs, the knuckle-deep (or is it pecker-deep?) hole in moist mountain earth where one nestles three kernels of corn. His cargo shorts teeter, slowly slip down, are all too frequently tugged back up. It’s the suspense of icicles edging eaves in the first gusts of spring. John and I both are fascinated. In middle age, men long together become, sad to admit, less lovers, more cruise buddies. Today Mike’s on his hands and knees, working in the living room, butt in the air. I come up with excuses to leave this laptop and check on his progress. Distracting sound of sandpaper on spackle. Beauty’s abrasive, skinning the daily of its gloss. John and I are trying to concentrate at separate (I accidentally wrote “desperate”) desks. How can a handsome man be both a downpour in drought and sandpaper on skin?

*   *   *

They’re painting late today, trying to finish up the bedroom. What I want to say is, “Why don’t y’all stay for hummus, mint juleps, chiles rellenos?” What I want to say is, “I bet you boys are pretty sweaty. How about we all hit the shower stall? It’s big enough for four.” I’ve spent my life not saying what I want to say, not making love to men I desire. Thus this fiction.

*   *   *

Speaking to a straight man? I’m good at it. (The stereotypically gay topics have always bored me anyway.) Tattoos, food, pickup trucks, who grew up where. Celtic, tribal; sausage balls, Cajun alfredo sauce, red velvet cake; F150s, Toyota Tacomas; Hinton, Lexington, Catawba. When I speak to them, they must stand relatively still. They must stand relatively close. Close enough to touch. (Not quite close enough to smell; after hours of work, their pits must be spicypine.) When I speak to them, they must look at me and not the brush, the drop cloth, the roller, the walls, which, over a matter of days, beneath their hands, have taken on hues of brown, gray-blue, greige, the boring ubiquitous tan of these walls disappearing beneath something “deeper and more vibrant,” to use HGTV lingo. I must, painfully polite, look at their faces and not their biceps, crotches, points of their nipples visible beneath the moist fabrics of T-shirts, their bellies—Jim’s like mine, furry and slightly curved with good food and beer; Mike’s white, hairless, flat—bellies exposed when they stretch up to roll the ceiling, flex stiff joints, or simply, lazily, scratch a navel. While they’re here, the world glistens again, with that shattered-quartz late-spring sunlit radiance that heralds the beginning of a rich beer buzz. While they’re here, in me there’s something eager, bestial, reined in. Cat chittering at birds outside the window. Angler fish waiting in the ocean floor’s darkness, waving its glowing lantern, jaws dripping teeth like grotto stalactites.

*   *   *

“Hey, guys, could you turn up the air-conditioning? It’s really hot in here.” Jim and Mike are sweltering in the home office, applying a kind of greige. (Who knew that was a word?) John and I look at one another and grin. Surely the world is more satisfying if you’re not this highly sexed. Or maybe not. How high would we have to crank the heat before they stripped to the waist? I’m guessing Jim’s got a light coat of hair black as his beard across his big soft chest. Mike’s pecs are pale as November flurry or serviceberry petals, his nipples are apple buds, he’s so muscled it’s as if he’s smuggling round chunks of semiprecious stones beneath his skin.

*   *   *
When you’re this settled, any chaos is heady for a while. Pine pollen dusts the carpets. Peony petals scatter the mantelpiece. The hard gusts of a thunderstorm fill the study and rifle the papers. Rain spatters the windowpanes. Wind nudges the back door open; the silver tabby escapes, crazy for the smell of grass, dirt, prey.

* * *

We’re both happier, John and I. More frequent smiles, easier conversation. As if youth were bacterial, air-borne, contagious. This is what painters are meant to do: add color. Like the wisteria twining the back deck. We cut it back, having heard that old growth only blooms when it’s disturbed. Cut it back to sticks, what looked dead, irrecoverable. But here are new leaves, fresh flowers in which I bury my face—perfumed racemes, evanescent, generous, sky blue.

“Jameson Currier’s fifth novel, *The Forever Marathon*, is a compelling, brutally honest examination of two days in the life of a long term relationship between two men, who seem to have stayed together more out of habit than their desire for each other.”
—Christopher Verleger, *Edge*

What would you do if you realized you’d spent half your life with the same man and you weren’t sure if you loved him any longer? Enter Adam and Jesse, both 49. I found myself trying to predict the outcome throughout the book. The ending is honest and true to the characters, something that is not always the case in happily ever-after land.”
—Scott A. Drake, *Philadelphia Gay News*

“Currier has accomplished something truly remarkable: He has presented two highly unlikeable, self-absorbed, clichéd characters, and woven them into an interesting story that keeps the reader turning pages. This is a funny, exasperating, touching read.”
—Alan Chin, *Examiner.com*

“The opposite of love is not hate but rather indifference. Thanks to the talent of Jameson Currier, readers are never at risk for feeling indifferent to the couple at the heart of his *The Forever Marathon*. Adoration mingled with aversion at this pair’s antics ensures every page will be read with enthusiasm. We should all be grateful that Currier has not shied away from presenting an honest depiction of gay men in their late forties.”
—Steve Berman, editor of the *Best Gay Stories* annual series
“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
from *The Polari Bible*

In the beginning

by the Manchester House of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

The Polari Bible is a version of the King James Bible, with key words translated into Polari, a constantly developing form of language based on British slang and Romance languages which has enjoyed camp use by performers and gay men in Britain. The Polari Bible was produced in 2003 and 2004 by the Manchester House of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. The Web site containing the text of the Polari Bible has disappeared, but has been preserved at The Polari Bible.
1 In the beginning Gloria created the heaven and the earth.

2 And the earth was nanti form, and void; and munge was upon the eke of the deep. And the fairy of Gloria trolled upon the eke of the aquas.

3 And Gloria cackled, Let there be sparkle: and there was sparkle.

4 And Gloria vardad the sparkle, that it was bona: and Gloria medzered the sparkle from the munge.

5 And Gloria screeched the sparkle journo, and the munge she screeched nochy. And the bijou nochy and the morning were the first journo.

6 And Gloria cackled, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the aquas, and let it divide the aquas from the aquas.

7 And Gloria made the firmament, and medzered the aquas which were under the firmament from the aquas which were above the firmament: and it was so.

8 And Gloria screeched the firmament Heaven. And the bijou nochy and the morning were the second journo.

9 And Gloria cackled, Let the aquas under the heaven be gathered together unto una place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.

10 And Gloria screeched the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the aquas screeched she Seas: and Gloria vardad that it was bona.

11 And Gloria cackled, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding maria, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose maria is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so.

12 And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding maria after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose maria was in itself, after his kind: and Gloria vardad that it was bona.

13 And the bijou nochy and the morning were the third journo.

14 And Gloria cackled, Let there be sparkles in the firmament of the heaven to divide the journo from the nochy; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:

15 And let them be for sparkles in the firmament of the heaven to parker sparkle upon the earth: and it was so.

16 And Gloria made dewey dowry sparkles; the dowrier sparkle to rule the journo, and the nanti dowrier sparkle to rule the nochy: she made the twinkling fakements also.

17 And Gloria set them in the firmament of the heaven to parker sparkle upon the earth,

18 And to rule over the journo and over the nochy, and to divide the sparkle from the munge: and Gloria vardad that it was bona.

19 And the bijou nochy and the morning were the quarter journo.
20 And Gloria cackled, Let the aquas bring forth dowrily the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.

21 And Gloria created dowry whales, and every living creature that trolleth, which the aquas brought forth dowrily, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and Gloria vardad that it was bona.

22 And Gloria fabed them, cackling, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the aquas in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.

23 And the bijou nochy and the morning were the fifth journo.

24 And Gloria cackled, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping fakement, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.

25 And Gloria made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every fakement that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and Gloria vardad that it was bona.

26 And Gloria cackled, Let us make homie in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping fakement that creepeth upon the earth.

27 So Gloria created homie in her own image, in the image of Gloria created she her; ome and palone created she them.

28 And Gloria fabed them, and Gloria cackled unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living fakement that trolleth upon the earth.

29 And Gloria cackled, varda, I have parkered you every herb bearing maria, which is upon the eke of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding maria; to you it shall be for carnish.

30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every fakement that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have parkered every green herb for carnish: and it was so.

31 And Gloria vardad every fakement that she had made, and, varda, it was dowry bona. And the bijou nochy and the morning were the seyth journo.
“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
Review

Queerly Beloved

David Swatling

David Swatling produced arts & culture documentaries for Radio Netherlands and is three-time winner of the NLGJA Excellence in Journalism Award. His debut novel Calvin's Head, a psychological thriller set in Amsterdam, is due out in September. He writes about arts and LGBTQ issues at davidswatling.wordpress.com.
Many years ago in Amsterdam, I knew a sweet gay couple I’ll call Tim and Daniel. When Tim made the decision to transition and become Tanya, they broke up. Although Daniel still loved Tanya, the change was too extreme for him to deal with. However, they remained close friends. Then Daniel became Dani, and the two women got back together. Had Tanya and Dani become a lesbian couple? I couldn’t wrap my head around the concept. It would make a fascinating story, I thought, albeit one too complex for me to tell.

Diane and Jacob Anderson-Minshall take the ubiquitous phrase “It’s Complicated” to a new level in their highly engaging memoir. “Let me tell you about a woman I once loved,” begins Diane. The woman was Suzy, and together they would become the perfect lesbian couple, sharing everything for fifteen years. Well, not quite everything. Jacob (Suzy) takes over and reveals the secret that could have shattered their happily-ever-after lives. How their relationship survived his female-to-male transition is a thought-provoking love story.

The book moves forward in the alternating voices of Diane and Jacob, a format that works like a conversation. It gives the narrative a depth of intimacy not often found in even the most personal memoirs. In the chapter “What Happens in Vegas,” Diane recounts the desperate measures she was willing to take in order to conceive a child, an episode as wickedly funny as it is shocking. Jacob then explains Diane never told him about any of this until she wrote about it for the book. The grace with which he forgives her indiscretion is both gallant and touching.

In one powerful section, Jacob makes his own chilling confession: “I’m a murderer. I consciously, deliberately caused a person’s life to end.” And once gone, he wonders if Suzy ever really existed at all? There are no easy answers to the difficult questions faced by this couple. Can Diane maintain her credibility as publisher of a popular lesbian magazine if she is perceived as straight? Must Jacob reform his feminist beliefs as a FTM guy? They tackle these and other issues with equal doses of seriousness and humor, wryly observant of all the attendant ironies, ambiguities, and contradictions. But it is unflinching honesty—with each other and the reader—that shines brightest. Ultimately, *Queerly Beloved* is a testament to their shared strength and passion.
Everything Old is New Again

Wayne Courtois

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.
A newlywed home: much to do. And yet, nothing new. “I love you,” and “Me too,” like we used to.
Poking our thumbs east and west: “He’s my husband.” No disenfranchised jest.

We’re serious. Got skin in the game. A five-syllable hyphenated name.

Things we’ve hoarded, the dust and the riches, gather round to gawk.

“Hey, bitches,” they say, “lookit you. On the right side of history. Who knew?”

Nearby, at the rollercoaster, the wrong-side-of-history folk watch from below the steady tow

Of our two-by-two cars up the hill. Then we’re gone, plunging down, screaming, hearts lunging in our throats. Oh, wrong-siders, it’s not just you. We’re strangers here too.

Now we steer a hot-air balloon, up, up, into the blinding afternoon.

Below, the wrong-siders stare with bated breath. The pitch of our basket augurs death....

We didn’t know history’s right side was wild and rocky like the sky.

But look, we’re landing softly, without much fuss. It was only ourselves we had to adjust.

Perhaps, when it all shifts again, we’ll put our shoulders to it, too,

Resisting change, rude push of the future, like a wound resisting sutures.

But the wrong-siders don’t listen. They watch the moonlight glisten on the sea, as our tall ship teeters toward the horizon line. Well, fine. They still think the earth is flat.

We’ll slip over the edge, they’ll sigh with relief. And that will be that.
Louie Clay (né Louie Crew) is an American professor emeritus of English at Rutgers University and the author of numerous essays and four collections of poetry. He is best known for his long and increasingly successful campaign for the acceptance of gay and lesbian people by Christians in general, and the Episcopal Church in particular. In 1974, while teaching at Fort Valley State University in Georgia, Crew founded InegrityUSA, a gay-acceptance group within the Episcopal church.
Our marriage [February 2, 1974], like our courtship, has been conventional. It was love at first sight when we met at the elevator just outside the sixth-floor tearoom of the Atlanta YMCA [September 2, 1973]. Ernest was a fashion coordinator for a local department store, I a state college professor from one hundred miles way, deep in the peach and pecan orchards. One of us black, the other white; both native Southerners. We commuted every weekend for five months. Our friends were not surprised when we decided to marry.

We would have wasted our time to send an announcement to the local papers. Besides, the bank employees spread the word just as effectively when we took out a joint account. Our wedding itself was private, just the two of us and the Holy Spirit. Parents, although loving, would not have welcomed the occasion; our priest would not have officiated even had he been granted the Episcopal authority which was expressly denied. Two apartment neighbors, historians, sent a bottle of champagne; a psychologist friend dropped in earlier to propose a toast; others sent welcoming tokens.

We unloaded the heavier gear from the car before beginning the ceremony. Then we carried each other across the threshold into the dining room, where the table was set with two wine glasses from Woolworth’s, one lone and lighted red candle instead of our customary two green ones, a vase with one early narcissus, and an open Book of Common Prayer [1928]. We read the service nervously, its fearsome bidding and pledges. The words woman and wife translated readily as spouse, man, husband, Person. All took only about ten minutes.

One could be too quick to sentimentalize a few details, such as our bed, a two-hundred-year-old four-poster built by the slave ancestors of one of us for the free ancestors of the other. Perhaps we were fulfilling their dream? Or Dr. King’s dream...? We find day-to-day living too difficult for us to negotiate other people’s dreams: we work at living our own dream, a dream no different from the dream of many other couples, a dream of a home with much love to bridge our separateness.

* * *

On August 22, 2013, a town clerk made legal what God had made holy when Ernest and I married 40 years ago in tiny Fort Valley, Georgia; and I have taken my husband’s last name.

* * *

Here are pictures of us. One in 1974, ten months after our marriage, another on our 38th anniversary, February 2, 2010, and our wedding photo from 2013.
Felice Picano is the author of more than twenty-five books of poetry, fiction, memoirs, nonfiction, and plays. His work has been translated into many languages and several of his titles have been national and international bestsellers. He is considered a founder of modern gay literature along with the other members of the Violet Quill. Picano also began and operated the SeaHorse Press and Gay Presses of New York for fifteen years. His first novel was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Since then he’s been nominated for and/or won dozens of literary awards. Recent work includes *True Stories Too, Twelve O’Clock Stories, 20th Century Un-limited, True Stories, Tales: From a Distant Planet,* and *Art & Sex in Greenwich Village.* Picano teaches at Antioch University, Los Angeles.
In 2012 I attended the opening night of *Vito*, Jeffrey Schwarz's years-in-the-making documentary about Vito Russo, when it premiered at the glamorous Orpheum Theatre during the thirtieth Outfest Los Angeles, a celebratory two-week-long GLBT film festival.

It's a good movie and a good documentary until... Well, let me explain. I appear briefly as one of a dozen talking heads and, watching the movie, I was enjoying it while dreading my appearance on screen, which when it occurred was so brief I could easily relax again.

But more important, I'd been given a hint of what was to come in the film, and what was to eventually unsettle me into writing this essay. Because I was unsettled and unsure of what to make of it, I was also worried that I might be blowing it out of proportion. But if I am not doing that, then I think something important has happened to gay culture vis-à-vis mainstream culture, and without judging this unsuspected transformation, I do believe it needs to be addressed.

The reason I was in the film was that I'd known Vito Russo for a long time and Jeffrey Schwarz had asked to interview me on camera. I first met Vito in 1971, inside the Gay Activists Alliance's Firehouse on Greene Street in lower Manhattan in that area not yet named SoHo, a place that hadn't been “gentrified to the tits,” as Vito would later say. Somehow Vito and I found each other dancing there one hot, shirtless summer night, and then we went outside together to a neighboring flight of tenement stairs to smoke (cigarettes and grass) and get to know each other.

Both of us used the Firehouse to meet guys as well as to dance and express gay liberation, but once outside that wasn't what kept us talking, especially since we weren't really each other's type. Vito had seen me around and asked if I were a member of the Gay Activist Alliance, the host organization for the dances and other meetings at the Firehouse. I said no, explaining that I'd been involved with the first gay political group to emerge from the Stonewall Riots, several years before. I had also recently stopped attending that group when one meeting became completely crazed over whether to adopt a resolution voicing support for the people of Vietnam against the oppressive U.S. government. To me that was an indication of how uselessly sidetracked and jejune that organization had become.

Vito countered, saying GAA was doing far more and was more concentrated on gay issues, but despite his efforts I never officially joined, even though I was present at some meetings and even at some of their zaps. I especially enjoyed the gay wedding held at the anti-gay Manhattan County Clerk's office. I remember that the reason I had given Vito to excuse myself from joining GAA was that I was a writer and hoping to become a gay reporter—which did happen—and that I wanted to remain editorially objective. Years later, that “objectivity” became a curse when I was covering ACT-UP's very in-your-face demonstrations for independent New York papers and I was present and watching my friends and colleagues being clubbed to the ground by New York's Finest.

After that first meeting with Vito, I would often see him around the city. We were mostly unemployed and young and we would stop and schmooze with each other. We shared a background of growing up inside New York City and now living within a community full of gay people who'd arrived to the city—arrived from Abilene, Texas, and Columbus, Ohio, and Long Meadow, Massachusetts. That became another bond, as we watched and commented on others' naiveté and ineptitude at dealing with life in the Big Bad Town we knew so much better (and so much more cynically). As a result, we found each other quickly on many occasions and hugged, kissed, and caught up whenever we could do so. Eventually I became one of that group of friends Vito liked to call “sweetie.” Vito divided his life into “sweeties” and the rest, and believe me, it was better to be a sweetie.

No one in the documentary mentioned this but, as a young man, Vito didn't actually walk like other people. He either busily “hustled” down the street and through a crowd when he was in a hurry, shoulders first as weapon, or when happier, or freer, bopped along with a sort of bouncy stride. He was always visible a block away coming at you. Whenever I saw him approach, hustling or bopping, I stopped for him, and sometimes stopped him cold, and his huge Howdy Doody smile would appear as he reached me. If he were in a hurry, I would be pulled along in his wake, forced to follow along at his speed and in his direction and listening to whatever was on his mind delivered in a rapid, mile-a-minute speech.

It was only after I got to know Vito better that I learned he was an avid movie fan. Not an art film fan, but a movie fan: a big distinction in the 1970s, that last era of serious American filmmaking. I watched him carefully look at my face as he told me that. And how he relaxed when I said that I liked both movies
and cinema. After all, even though I’d subscribed to *Sight & Sound* since 1960, I’d pretty much seen movies as Vito had seen them, as a kid, in big, old, glitzy theatres, with Second Empire interior décor or huge koi-filled fountains and massive minarets à la the Alhambra. We bonded over this shared experience, too. I did understand Vito’s hesitancy in admitting this to me. By 1975, I was a published novelist, with a first book nominated for the first ever PEN/Hemingway Award. Even so, I’d eagerly sit on Vito’s bed in his tiny apartment or in his rented room in someone else’s apartment, listening to Vito read his printed “movie stories” in *Motion Picture*, *Silver Screen*, or *Screen Romances* magazines, magazines my older sister and her friends had read when I was growing up.

Vito’s shyness about being an avid movie fan and fan-writer quickly vanished once he saw that I didn’t disapprove of what he wrote about. He often told me of his trips to Hollywood to interview stars and his immense knowledge of films could just flow out of him for hours at a time.

When videocassettes came out and we could afford them, we’d share favorite movies and drop them off to each other’s apartments. Favorite scenes from favorite movies and boyhood lusts over certain male stars of the 1950s and 1960s were crucial to our developing friendship. I don’t believe Vito ever really trusted any gay man who wouldn’t admit to having jerked off to memories of Randolph Scott in *Pittsburgh* or Alan Ladd as *Shane* or John Ireland and Monty Cliff in *Red River* or Stephen Boyd in *Ben-Hur*. And he once seriously threatened to have my gay card revoked because I’d never seen *The Wizard of Oz*. He fixed that immediately. Two days later, I saw it first with Vito, on a VHS cassette, in his apartment.

That was also the period when many of the secondary characters in the Astaire-Rogers and other 1930s movies were beginning to be recognized as more than merely eccentric sidekicks—actors such as Edward Everett Horton provided wonderful portraits of openly or not-so-openly gay men. During his last days at St. Vincent’s Hospital in Greenwich Village, Vito told me that our friendship had solidified for him at one of the Gay Pride marches in Manhattan when he overheard me quoting a line from *The Gay Divorcee* to someone coming on to me in the street: “You’re beginning to fascinate me, and I resent that in a man!”

When I heard from others—was it Karla Jay?—that Vito was doing a sort of collage show-and-tell of the many film clips and photos he’d collected illustrating the hidden history of homosexuality in movies, I knew I had to see it. It didn’t disappoint, and after he’d taken it around, first to local colleges and university film clubs sprouting up everywhere, and then to San Francisco’s Castro Theatre, I was one of the people who began nudging Vito to write it up as a book.

To do that right would cost time and money for research and travel. Several of us tried connecting Vito with literary agents and editors we knew who would come through with a big enough cash advance to allow that, but not one of them seemed to get Vito’s concept, simple as it seemed to us. Always close to being broke, Vito was forced to continue working for the slowly diminishing gay magazines and newspapers and movie mags, earning money and doing the research and travel on his own time and dime.

A real shame, I always thought: and there were times he despaired. “No one wants this book,” he’d argue. To which we would weakly reply, “We want it. The gay community needs it.”

For a decade and more, the book was a giant, all-consuming albatross around Vito’s neck. And, at the same time, it was his continual delight. At a demonstration or a club opening, he would edge over to where me and my pals were packed in, shouting “What do we want? Gay rights? When do we want them? Now!” and he would gleefully report into my ear that he’d just received in the mail stills from some 1920s Swedish lesbian schoolgirl romance that was perfect for the book.

Once Vito had done all the footwork for his book, to be called like his shows *The Celluloid Closet*, he had a huge amount of material and it was time to write it. And he went away to do so, far from the distractions of Manhattan, gay friends, and politics. But nothing happened. Well, that’s not right. Jeffrey Sevcik happened to Vito. Tall, blond, blue-eyed, easygoing, laid-back, quiet, shy, very California, handsome Jeffrey was Vito’s ideal and soon they would try to become lovers and partners. This would take a lot of compromising since each was attached to his own city, Vito to his beloved Manhattan, and Jeffrey to San Francisco, three thousand miles away.

But once he was with Jeffrey, Vito wrote the book and found someone to publish it. We were all thrilled, though I was a little surprised when Michael Denneny, a friend and one of the founders of *Christopher Street* magazine, contacted me at Fire Island Pines where we both had summer shares, and asked me to interview
Vito for a cover article on the *Celluloid Closet*. My history with that magazine up until then was, let’s just say, star-crossed. They had only published one piece of mine, a short story, which had also been included in an anthology of fiction from the magazine.

Vito stayed at Denny’s summer house during the week of the interview. Only after several afternoons together did it come out that Vito had rejected previous choices of interviewers and I’d been settled on at the end of a long list. “Because I completely trust you, sweetie,” Vito explained. *Great!* But I also warned him that I didn’t have a final edit on the published piece. CS did a great job with the interview, with an excerpt from the book. And they put Vito’s face on the cover. All well and good.

The book was successful, Vito was launched; finally he had money and could lead a real life. Then AIDS came along, then Jeffrey got sick and died, then Vito got sick and became an AIDS and ACT-UP activist.

Now, if we are to believe the documentary, that’s all that Vito was for the end of his life. Up until then, he’d been a well-rounded, complex, loving and hating, often contradictory individual... and after that a dedicated, selfless person, devoted to the cause. The entire last fifteen minutes of the film shows only that in his life. Gone are the cityscapes and friends talking, gone his funny cable-TV-show clips, the films and the people he loved. Instead we see Vito at the podium exhorting ACT-UPpers. We see Vito at a demonstration giving courage to protestors who might be faltering. We see Vito at the podium exhorting ACT-UPpers. We see Vito at a demonstration giving courage to protestors who might be faltering. We see an ill Vito, taped in shadowed light. We see Vito on the balcony of Larry Kramer’s Fifth Avenue flat being cheered by Gay Pride marchers. We hear of his last days, his last party —Vito “borrowed” my telephone book so it could be attended by a number of my friends from the Pines A-list that he didn’t know—male beauties who both Clovis and Vito wanted to meet.

It was a warm, late February night and we were able to sit out on Clovis’s West Village eighteenth-story penthouse terrace, facing south toward the Twin Towers and Lady Liberty in New York Harbor. At one point Vito said to me, “Aren’t you so glad we get to be here?!”

In other words, he was still the movie fan, still the boy from uptown sneaking onto the IRT Line to get downtown for the action. Not a word about AIDS or ACT-UP that entire night. Just good food, liquor, hot men, film talk, and great company. That’s the Vito I recall and that I’d like you to remember.

HBO came into the life of the film *Vito* at some late point. I and a few others I talked to after that screening who had been interviewed early on for it believe the film changed its shape and structure somewhere along the way. Possibly under the influence of that company; possibly it was all the director’s idea. But I have to ask: are my gay friends doomed to become cable TV’s historical fodder? Will the distortions continue unchecked, gathering steam, and becoming accepted, just because gay kids “need” and straight film execs want gay heroes for a few years? Who knows?

What I do know is that the ending of the movie is now what I have to call a typical Hollywood film-school-script third act: in other words a “Hollywood Ending.” In light of who Vito Russo was, it’s ironic, isn’t it?
George Bixby is a dealer in rare and first editions as Ampersand Books. He was the publisher of Albondocani Press from 1968-1991, publishing fine press (handset letterpress on handmade papers) limited, signed editions by well-known authors. He was the associate editor, columnist, and book reviewer for American Book Collector, 1980-1987. He is the co-author of Thom Gunn: A Bibliography (London, 1979; reprinted U.S. 2014). He has published poetry in Mouth of the Dragon and fiction in Harrington Gay Men’s Literary Quarterly and Chelsea Station no. 3. He is currently working on a novel.
The young man stood before the door, hesitating. There was no identification on the door to indicate who lived behind it, anymore than there had been any names on the bells on the street. It was an old, shabbily maintained building on a narrow street and the front door was without a lock. Thumb-tacked on the door the young man now stood before was a commercially printed **DO NOT DISTURB** card; boldly written in ink block letters below this warming was the further admonishment:

**DO NOT KNOCK**
**THIS MEANS EVERYONE**

and the word “everyone” was double underlined.

A nervous tremor rippled through the young man as he knocked on the door, disobeying the warning of the sign. His knock was met with silence at first, and then there came the faint rustling sounds of someone stirring about behind the door. Another short silence followed and then a husky voice inquired in an aggressive, argumentative tone, “Yes? What do you want?”

The young man spoke his name.

A prolonged silence followed and he wondered if the person on the other side of the door had heard him, and then there was the sound of bolts being shot and locks being unlocked. The door swung partway open to reveal an aged woman with a disapproving mouth and fierce, piercing eyes standing before him, blocking the entrance. She was tall and thin, her gray hair slightly untidy, her skin a maze of small dry wrinkles; she wore a long satin housecoat with a large floral design and felt house slippers. The young man found it difficult to recognize in her the woman he knew so well from photographs of fifty years earlier.

“So, you came,” she said sourly. “I should have expected it. Well, come in, as long as you’re here,” and she stepped back into the room and held the door open for him.

He entered the room and wordlessly handed her the bouquet of flowers he had purchased at the corner florist.

“How thoughtful,” she remarked sarcastically, as she accepted them. “Didn’t anyone tell you that I have emphysema and can’t breathe in the same room with flowers?”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.” She reopened the door and tossed the bouquet onto the hall floor. “Take them with you when you go,” she told him as she reshot the door. “If they’re still there,” she added.

She now noticed the trembling that had seized the young man. “Are you unwell?” she asked with a hint of concern in her voice, fearing the possibility of an unpleasant scene ahead of her.

“No,” he stammered, his voice wavering.

“Well, then sit down,” she commanded.

He sat in the only chair in the room. It was a small room dominated by her bed on which she now collapsed, lightly gasping for breath. Books filled the shelves lining the walls and were stacked everywhere on the floor. A long table held a typewriter and was heaped with more books and neatly ordered piles of paper. It was a clear, bright April afternoon, yet the windows were closed tight, the worn shades completely pulled down, steam hissed in the radiators, and the room was stifling. One small lamp was the only illumination other than what daylight managed to seep in around the edges of the window shades.

“So now you’re here and see the famous old lady. What is it you want from me?” Then she saw the book he was carrying and recognized the photograph of herself on the cover. The photo taken half a century earlier by a now renowned photographer and now reproduced whenever she was referred to in the press. “I hope you didn’t bring that book along with the intention of asking me to sign it. Because I won’t, you know. I never sign books for anyone now. You know that, don’t you?” There was a confrontational tone to her voice in everything that she said, an insolence, anger, as if she was in constant search of an argument.

“Yes, I know you don’t sign books,” the young man managed to find the voice to say. “But I love this book so much I carry it everywhere I go.”

“Good God, man! What kind of worship is this? It’s not the Bible, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”


“I’ll be twenty-three next month.”

“A baby. An innocent. I don’t know why I ever agreed to see you. You know I haven’t seen anyone for more than thirty years now.” The young man nodded. He knew of her reputation as a recluse, yet he had recently felt the need to write her a letter praising her work, analyzing what it meant to him personally, and
asking for permission to visit her. To his great surprise and delight, he had received an answer inviting him to come. “So then why do you think I agreed to see you now?” she asked. She glared at the young man as if expecting him to answer her; he returned her stare and waited for her to continue. After a moment, she said, “I don’t know myself why I let you come. I don’t know why I responded to your letter any differently then to all the others.

“I receive letters every day of my life from strangers asking to visit me, to interview me – interview!” She spat out the word with contempt. “I throw them out without answering them. So then some of them come here and knock on the door. They don’t know how to take no for an answer. If I don’t answer their letter they think I’ll want to talk to them if they present themselves in person. They think they’re someone special and I’ll want to talk to them. Doesn’t anyone understand the meaning of no anymore? Apparently not. What do they teach in schools now?”

“Only the other day another one of them turned up on the doorstep. Some simpering, little girl begging to see me. ‘Go away’ I told her. But did she? No. ‘Go away,’ I said but she didn’t know what a simple thing like ‘Go away’ means. She claims to have read my books and loved them, but if she doesn’t understand a simple request like ‘Go away’ how could she ever understand a thing in my books. I had to call the police to get rid of her. She lay down in the hall outside my door and refused to leave. And yet there you sit, invited here by me. Why?” she challenged him. She stared at the young man, awaiting an answer. He said nothing. “Why?” she repeated. “I’m at a loss to understand it myself.” After a moment she answered herself, “I must be going mad.”

She observed the young man continuing to tremble. “Do you need to use the bathroom?” she asked. The young man felt jolted by her question, as if a small shock had shot through him, but replied flatly, striving to control his shaky voice, “No, thank you,” without betraying the emotions that were tearing him up inside, the nervous terror he felt in the presence of this icon, this idol in his life. He wished fervently that he could control his nerves, stop his trembling as if he was suffering from a chill.

“I suppose I should offer you something,” she observed wryly. “I can make you a cup of tea,” she offered. “Do you want me to make you a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you. It’s not necessary.”

“Of course, it’s not necessary,” she exploded. “You don’t have to tell me that. I made the offer out of politeness. Politeness! God, there’s a word that needs redefining in the dictionaries. Do you know what politeness is? Of course, you don’t. You’re too young to know anything yet. You think you know what it means, don’t you, but you really know nothing. Politeness is weakness. That’s right—weakness.” She paused, waiting for what she had said to register, to show some effect on him.

He sat in the chair staring at her with a fixed, nervous smile, saying nothing, afraid to speak, afraid of this woman, afraid of his own voice.

“God!” she burst forth. “You sit there simpering at me as if I was a monkey performing tricks in a zoo. Well, I’m not, you know. I’m just another person. Don’t worship me! I’m only human. Human!” she spat. “That’s another word they need to redefine. There is nothing human about humans.”

They sat in silence, studying each other for several moments while she seemed to regain her breath, then she continued. “You’re still young. If you live a healthy life you have years ahead of you. Years full of pain and sorrows. I don’t envy you. I’ve lived through it and it was no party. I learned the truth about life and love when I was forty-eight. Some people never learn it. They blithely go through life to their dying day believing in a lie. Because life is a lie. And so are people. Never trust anyone. That is the real truth of life. Never trust anyone. And never depend on anyone for anything. Don’t give yourself to anyone or you’re lost. You’re alone in this world, without help, and you’ll leave this world alone, so stand alone. And never fall in love. Do you have a lover? You look like you do. Do you?”

“Yes.”

“And you think he’s faithful to you and will stand by you for the rest of your life, I suppose.”

He was surprised that she had correctly assumed his lover was a man, but at the same time impressed by her perception. “I hope so,” he responded.

“Hope! What kind of spineless answer is that? Do you know what hope is? Hope is the stuff of fairy tales and bluebird wishes. Wake up! young man, wake up! Stop dreaming! Life is not hope. Life is cold, hard truths. Hope is for dreamers. I trust you are not living in a dream. I trust you will eventually grow up. Don’t go through your whole life blind to what’s going on around you. And never trust your lover! He’ll lie and cheat on you whenever he gets the chance. And despise you for letting him get away with it. Men are far worse than women. All men really want in life is a hole to stick their penis into. It could just as easily be
a knothole or a donut for all they care.

“I loved someone once. The only time I ever truly loved anyone. My greatest weakness. My downfall. It was the only time I ever let myself fall into the trap of love. And what did it get me? A lifetime of misery. But it also taught me the truth about life and about love. So it wasn’t a total loss. Everyone thinks I’m a lesbian because my one great love was a woman. But I always liked men too. I loved her, but she cared nothing for me. Nothing! I gave her everything. I put my whole being into her hands. And did she care? No, she cared only for herself. She was only interested in what she could get from me. That’s all anyone ever wants, really. Don’t ever believe in the goodness of people. That’s the biggest fairy tale ever perpetuated on the human race. No one does anything without a selfish reason. Trust in it. If there isn’t some kind of gain to be had for themselves, you can be sure they won’t be doing it. And lovers are the worst offenders. Never trust them. They have the most to gain and the least to lose. Give them the opportunity and they’ll be the first to knife you in the back when you’re down. They’ll promise you anything, but don’t believe it. When you really need them you can be sure they won’t be there for you. Promises are just another form of lies.

“You think you love this man, your lover.” The young man nodded assent. “I doubt it,” she continued. “Very few people know what love is. Love is a curse—a debilitating curse you never recover from. Your first great love will always be with you. You can never be free of it. And mine was a deceitful woman. True love is a disease, a horrible, cancerous, debilitating disease for which there is no cure. You never get over it. It remains with you, eating away at your insides to your dying day. That’s what true love is. Not some puppy infatuation for a month or year. That’s lust and it wears away. Most people don’t know the difference. Pray to God you never know the agony of true love.”

She stared intently and long at his face, as if trying to read his thoughts, before she spoke again.

“You don’t believe me. I can see it in your eyes. You think I’m a senile old woman who doesn’t know what she’s saying, don’t you?” The young man made a sound of protest but she silenced him. “No, you don’t have to protest. Don’t give me your polite lies. I’m too old and too wise for that. Why do you think I shut myself up in this room almost forty years ago? Because I learned the truth about life and love. Truth, do you hear me? Truth! And the truth is too painful to bear. That’s why I shut out the world forty years ago. Try to understand what I am telling you. It’s a valuable lesson you may never otherwise know.

“You’ve read my books and you think they are full of wisdom. They are not. They are full of lies. I don’t say they aren’t good books, because they are. They are some of the best books written in their time. But they are lies because they were all written when I was young, before I had any knowledge of truth. Why do you think I haven’t written anything in forty years? Because no one would be able to bear the truth as I know it to be, that’s why. Lies that appear to be truths, that’s what people want. That’s what my books are, and they’re damn good too. The best of the best. But they’re not the truth.”

She paused to catch her breath, gasping slightly from her exertion, her pent up fury, before she continued in a calmer voice. “Well, I didn’t stop writing forty years ago, the way everyone thinks. I write every day of my life. What do you think all that is?” and she waved her hand in the direction of the table holding the typewriter and the neat stacks of paper. “Manuscripts. Forty years of them. But no one will ever read them. When I know I am dying I intend to destroy them all.” She saw the look of shocked surprise on the young man’s face and was pleased with the effect her revelation had on him. “You’re shocked. You didn’t know I was still writing. A writer never stops writing. Don’t you know that? It’s an addiction that can’t be controlled. And now you’re wondering how you can prevent me from destroying my manuscripts. Well, you can’t. Your only thought is a selfish one. Admit it. You love my books and want more. Like a greedy child wanting candy. Or Oliver Twist begging for seconds. Am I right?” The young man nodded. “Well, you can’t have more,” she said with smugness, the venom gone from her voice and replaced by the satisfaction of denying someone something they wanted. “And even if you could,” she continued, “you wouldn’t want to read what is in those pages. No one wants a knowledge of truth. Truth is impossible for most people to live with. Real truth, that is. People only want lies that smell like truth.

“When I learned the truth about life and love, the real truth, that knowledge nearly killed me. But I’m strong. I’d have to be to survive this long. I’m nearly ninety now and can’t live much longer. But I’ll tell you what the real truth is and then you can leave me and forget all about it because you don’t want to hear it either. No one does. That’s the curse of the real knowledge of truth. Even greater than the curse of
love. Maybe one day you’ll grow up and remember what I am telling you. And realize what an invaluable lesson I am imparting to you. By then I’ll be long dead. But possibly—just possibly, but probably not—you’ll recognize what I know and that I am imparting to you the greatest insight this life holds—the truth.

“The truth about humanity is inhumanity. Inhumanity. There is no humanity, no sympathy, no friends, and no lovers. There is only you. You and the pain of living. Don’t expect help. There won’t be any. And if you haven’t the strength to stand on your own without the dependence of others you’re lost. Because no one else will be there to help you unless there’s something in it for them. That’s the real truth of life. It nearly killed me, but I survived. I had to shut myself up in this room and see no one, go nowhere, become a recluse to save my sanity. Because once you have acknowledged the truth about life you can never stand the deceit of others again. That’s the curse of the knowledge. Or maybe it’s not a curse. Maybe it’s a freedom from lies.

“Now I’ve told you and you can go. I’m tired and I have to rest. I don’t know why I agreed to see you. You don’t believe a thing I’ve told you. Don’t deny it, your eyes betray you.”

She arose from the bed and moved to the door and opened it. The flowers were still lying on the hall floor. “Take your flowers with you,” she sourly told the young man as he exited into the hall. He attempted to say something, to thank her for seeing him, to say goodbye, but the words failed him and only some indistinct sounds were uttered. She ignored his proffered hand and cut him short. “Don’t” she said testily. “Please, no more lies. You’ve understood nothing. I’ve wasted my time.”

The young man retrieved the flowers from the hall floor and began to descend the stairs. His trembling, which had for a time subsided, began anew. She watched him go. He did not look back. As his head disappeared from her view, she called after him, “God help you!” and shut the door with a firm bang. From above him, the young man heard the sound of locks and bolts being secured.

When the young man reached the corner of her street he tossed the bouquet into a street trash basket. He paused, waiting for the light to change. The light changed to green, and after a moment of hesitation, the book by the famous author that he had for a such a long time carried everywhere with him as if it were an outline to life, some master plan, followed the flowers into the street basket as he moved forward to cross the street.
“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
Matthew Terrell writes about and photographs the queer Atlanta community. Terrell's subjects often include the her-story of drag, gay sexual politics, and the history of gay visual arts. His Huffington Post blog series about Southern Drag is sponsored by a grant from Idea Capital. Terrell has recently been an artist in residence at Atlantic Center for the Arts and The Studios of Key West; both were wonderfully life-affirming experiences.
Start off by being 16

Be 16
be terribly bright
also incredibly fearful
Be 16
be sadly hopeful
wonderfully naïve

Be able to see everything
understand nothing

Look at yourself in the mirror
see neither a boy
nor a man
See a thing
a weirdo
a sissy—
a flawed factory second too
late to be sent back for repairs

Cry a lot
but only at night when you are alone
looking up at the glow-in-the-dark stars
you put on your ceiling when you were 12
Wish you were 12 again
realize the difference between 12 and 16
is now you have words now
for what you’ve always felt

Tell your best friend
feel un-special when
she says she always kind of knew
laugh through tears as you both
dip french fries into a chocolate shake
Hope life will always end as well as it does tonight
inside her parent’s beat-up minivan
watching errant cars
trickle by at 11:45 at night

Decide not to date until college
people will be better there
you hope
Focus on getting into a good college—
preferably one far away

Decide to educate yourself on your situation
read that book your English teacher gave you
Paul Monette
misunderstand it

Decide becoming a man will mean
being strong
holding in your emotions
having control

Turn 17
want to be so true to yourself
you feel honesty pushing against your eyes
trying desperately to escape

Be a man
write an email to your parents
chicken out
delete it
The next night, blurt it out at dinner
ruin dinner
Listen to your mom say nothing
your dad say even less

Later
watch your mom throw the
mashed potatoes in the trash
she never does that
The next night make yourself a sandwich for dinner
wish mom would have made
latkes from the leftover mashed potatoes
eat your sandwich alone in your room
your big headphones on
listening to Mariah Carey

Turn 18
go to college—
far away
love it
love everything about it way too much
be loud
be proud
try too hard to represent
wear rainbows
sporty plenty of hairdons
make yourself way more
obvious than you already are

Deep down, fear that others see through it
they see you, vulnerable,
baby fat still in your cheeks—
no amount of glitter will distract others
But still love every moment of silliness
newfound freedom
haphazard fun
that is your new world

Turn 19
want more
want a boyfriend
find one who is perfect for you
he's that one you see out
of the corner of your eye—
but never meet
Obsess
stalk him online
find a way to meet him
finally meet him
Kiss like you saw in the pornos you watched at 17
alone
shades down
volume down
under your glow-in-the-dark stars
Give him tongue and mouth and work his face over
he hates that
Slowly learn to kiss from him
learn not to kiss him
entice him to kiss you

Think this is it

Imagine your first apartment together
be jealous of how naturally cool he is
charm his jealousy of your academic success
But stay with it
get deeper into this new world
only kiss when you are both drunk
Convince yourself it’s over and
you don’t even know it

Want desperately to make it work
Stop using condoms—you think that’s what he wants
be wrong about that

Be a man
end it
abruptly

Hope to god you never see him out
of the corner of your eye again

Turn 20
want nothing more than to
fall asleep next to someone
chest-to-back in typical Hollywood style
Think about your ex
cry
hate yourself for even thinking
about him in the first place

Get jaded

Convince yourself love is an invention
to sell movies
and chocolates
and tandem bicycles
Quit studying
Quit trying
still get good grades

Convince yourself the game is rigged —
see happiness
and French fries dipped into milkshakes
and Le CreuSET kitchenware as distractions
They blind us
numb us to the fact that we all
lost the game before we even started

See every smiling couple
as more people
who don’t know they’re already dead

Go home every night
lie in your bed that does not
comprehend to be a man
is to know what pain is
It’s that heavy feeling deep in your bones,
to be a man is to understand
you can’t control it
No hugs from your best friend
or potato latkes from your mom
will stop the immutable aching
that always manages to find you

Turn more and more birthdays,
eventually forget what number you are

You will fall in love and you will
have your heart broken
You will decorate your apartment
with midcentury furniture
and you will stupidly spill
wine all over your couch
You will be happy and you will be sad—
often at the same time
You will learn to live life to the fullest
and, yes,
you will eventually die

Slowly learn to be a man
is not to ignore
or suppress
or fight the pain that
inevitably comes with life

Learn to be a man is to not relish in sadness or defeat
but to enjoy the distractions
of love
and tandem bicycles
and happiness
and French fries dipped into milkshakes
Learn there are no winners or losers—
but people who are at peace with the world
and those who want to fight it

Become a man, slowly, every day
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*.
Reylan is a Blood Shade—please don’t call him a Vampire—very much in the tradition of Lestat de Lioncourt: wealthy, handsome, cultured, and arrogant. However, there the resemblance ends. Unlike Lestat, Reylan was born a Blood Shade, not “turned;” he also has no ties to Old Europe, or to North America; instead he hunts in modern-day Sydney, Australia. He is also much more obviously gay than Lestat, with a much more explicit sex life, and feeds almost exclusively off the men he finds in the gay bars of Oxford Street. And Blood Shades are not the only creatures of the night in Baines’s novel, *The Beast Without*. After picking up a buff young morsel one evening, Reylan encounters another supernatural denizen: Jorgas, a young out-of-control werewolf, who attacks Reylan’s human companion, and nearly kills Reylan. He soon learns of a series of murders, similarly executed; but it is only after Ross, Reylan’s vampiric protege, is mauled, that Reylan’s vendetta against Jorgas suddenly becomes personal. Much against his better judgment, Reylan allies himself with the Arcadian Trust, an order of scholars and other supernaturals, in an effort to hunt down Jorgas and bring him to justice.

As difficult as it is to present a fresh take on either vampires or werewolves, Baines does manage to incorporate some new wrinkles: Blood Shades and werewolves are not created by others of their kind, but rather are hereditary; analogous to the mutants of Marvel Comics, their conditions manifest during young adulthood. Many of the typical “defenses” against Blood Shades (i.e., garlic, religious symbols) are myths propagated by the Blood Shades themselves in order to better hide behind an illusion of impossibility. (Ditto for silver bullets against werewolves.) Baines also makes the homoeroticism inherent in the vampire genre much more explicit, not only in that Reylan has sex, but in details such as how Blood Shades are created (they’re “born that way”) and a conversation Reylan and Ross have about the gender of their victims, comparing it to sexual orientation/preference. Baines also includes witches (“Shapers”) and Cloud Walkers (a rare class of invisible humans) in his supernatural taxonomy.

For all the presumed non-belief in Blood Shades, werewolves, etc., by baseline humans, the supernatural denizens are taken pretty much in stride by the mundane characters of the novel. Admittedly, most of these humans have connections to the Arcadian Trust, so presumably they are aware enough within this milieu to realize that Blood Shades do actually exist outside eastern European folklore. The Trust provides memorable characters such as Giorgios and Sophia, the “young” Blood Shade librarians; and Patricia Bakker, a defrocked nun who leads the Trust. Bakker in particular serves as a female, human mirror to Reylan: haughty, educated, and devoted entirely to the Trust, she is every bit his equal (insofar as any human could be).

But the heart of the novel, so to speak, remains the burgeoning bond between Reylan and Jorgas. The constantly shifting nature of their relationship over the course of the novel is what propels the narrative, and engages the reader. Early on, Reylan tastes Jorgas’s blood and their relationship soon grows increasingly more complex with each of their meetings. Initially motivated by revenge, Reylan agrees to hunt down Jorgas and deliver him to the Arcadian Trust (assuming he doesn’t end up killing Jorgas outright), but as he learns more about him—and the Trust—he soon finds himself unsure of where his true feelings lie, and of whom he should trust. Moreover, when two predators are involved, it further complicates the question of who exactly is hunting whom.
Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) was a British poet, philosopher, anthologist, and early LGBT activist. He influenced a generation of writers, notably E.M. Forster.
Sun burning down on back and loins, penetrating the
skin, bathing their flanks in sweat,
Where they lie naked on the warm ground, and the
ferns arch over them,
Out in the woods, and the sweet scent of fir-needles
Blends with the fragrant nearness of their bodies;

In-armed together, murmuring, talking,
Drunk with wine of Eros’ lips,
Hourlong, while the great wind rushes in the branches,
And the blue above lies deep beyond the fern-fronds
    and fir-tips;

Till, with the midday sun, fierce scorching, smiting,
Up from their woodland lair they leap, and smite,
And strike with wands, and wrestle, and bruise each other,
In savage play and amorous despite.
Jameson Currier is the editor and publisher of *Chelsea Station*. 
I must confess now that I was a rather serious child. I was serious about minding my parents, serious about looking both ways before crossing the street, serious about mittens and mufflers and galoshes and raincoats in inclement weather. I was serious about keeping my hair combed, my fingernails cleaned, my clothes off the floor and my bed made every morning. I was also a serious student, my head stuck in an encyclopedia or locked in my room reading Dr. Doolittle or Treasure Island, turning in perfect penmanship papers and math homework without eraser smudges.

From the moment I learned about Broadway musicals, however, my world changed. The summer I was eight years old my father took our family to see The Unsinkable Molly Brown at the outdoor amphitheater in Atlanta. The production was one of those rickety semi-professional touring summer stock let’s-throw-together-a-moneymaker shows which starred an actress whose biggest credits to date included cameo appearances on Gunsmoke, The Flying Nun, and Gilligan’s Island. Still, it was the most inspirational thing I had ever seen; it was as if I had personally discovered the face of Jesus on the side of a potato. There it was, right in front of me, the miracle of the live theater experience for the first time: rich, glorious sounds of an orchestra spilling out of a hole in the ground, grown men and women dressed in strange costumes with raccoon-lined eyes and clown-red cheeks acting out a story communicated by overly enunciated words and dramatic hand gestures, so effervescently that it prompted applause from everyone watching. Applause. Imagine that!

When I got home that night it was like I had been infused with a silliness drug, as if someone had slipped LSD into my glass of vitamin-enriched chocolate milk. I couldn’t shake the images and sounds off of me for days—I pranced around the house, goose-stepping down the stairs and slapping my knees with the palm of my hand singing, “Belly up to the bar, boys! Belly up!” Show tunes were ringing inside my ears. Molly Brown was only a start, of course. That season they were also doing The Music Man, My Fair Lady, and How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying. I never imagined that, well, people could go through life singing and dancing (and get paid for doing it, too).

By the end of the summer the musical comedy desire had welled up in me so much that I was practicing choreography as I brushed my teeth. “I believe in youuuuuuuuuuuuu,” I sang to the skinny little image of myself in the mirror. “Eeeeeeeyyyyyeeeee bhee-leeve innnnn yooooouuuuuu.” It wasn’t that music had never moved me before—I had been cognizant even by then of the power of Judy Garland to realign my DNA structure even though I couldn’t give a name to what it was that was happening. Whenever I heard “Over the Rainbow” I was frozen into place, unable to do anything but listen, and, well, worship. But suddenly, with Molly Brown, I had been bequeathed with the knowledge that there was a whole new live medium I had never known existed before—one with a heritage and a structure and an endless supply of Original Cast Albums, as if some pious pilgrim had said to his boyfriend while stepping off the Mayflower, “Let’s invent a new art form that will drive little sissy boys crazy.”

The image of those early days of becoming, well, serious about Broadway musicals and show tunes was so vivid and gratifying to me that several times a day I imagined myself sweeping onto a Broadway stage and throwing kisses to a grateful and admiring audience. “Thank you,” I’d say, as though nothing were out of the ordinary about an eight year-old having just performed every role of Camelot by himself to himself in the privacy of his bedroom mirror. “Thank you sooooooo much.” In retrospect, however, I can’t help but see this new-found obsession as a product of my remoteness. My life growing up in suburbia had been normal and serious and, well, just a bit too solitary. My mother was busy with her house chores, cooking and cleaning for four children in a too-small-but-with-more-stairs-than-you-can-want split level home; my father was off-site making an income designing airplanes that could drop atomic bombs; my brother and sisters were either too old or too young or wanted nothing to do with me. I had been a too serious sibling, really, and then, well, I became a silly one. And most of the neighborhood kids were on little league baseball teams or mini-football squads or out riding bikes and playing Frisbee with their dogs, all of which I had no talent for—especially trying to learn to catch a Frisbee with my teeth. Left to my own devices, it’s only reasonable that I emerged as Mr. Wanna-Make-It-Big-In-Show-Biz.
On one of the shelves of my bedroom bookshelf, I kept all of the programs and playbills and ticket stubs of the shows that I had seen, that my father or mother had, at first, willingly, and then later, suspiciously, taken me to thus far, from the church production of Annie Get Your Gun to the junior college presentation of You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown. I treated these souvenirs like reference tools. Didn't the composer who wrote Hello, Dolly! also write Mame? Wasn't the woman who did Once Upon A Mattress related to the man who did Carousel? Didn't Ethel Merman have a loud voice? Why did I know the lyrics of “People” before I ever heard the song? And why did I listen to that cast album over and over again? On my bottom bookshelf I stored the cast albums I had acquired, shows like Sweet Charity and Bye, Bye Birdie and the television version of Mary Martin's Peter Pan; a few I had appropriated from the back of my mother's closet, those standard mainstream all-stars such as the soundtracks to the movie versions of West Side Story, Gypsy, and King and I. They were all neatly alphabetized and stacked upright so that the records inside wouldn't warp.

Many of the albums were soon scratchy from overuse, however; I spent hours and hours memorizing the lyrics of every new album I got, moving the needle back across the record in search of a previous groove. There was one album, a musical called Wish You Were Here, which I always kept out of order, however, the album cover sitting on top of my record player. The cover featured a black and white picture of a shirtless man carrying a yellow bathing-suit clad woman in his arms. I spent more hours studying that picture than I ever did trying to learn those inane Harold Rome lyrics, trying to imagine the width and bulk of the man's arms and shoulders or how much hair was growing on his chest—that chest beneath that silly woman who dangled where I wanted to be dangling. The man wasn’t exactly a title holder in the brawn department, though to a young boy what he did exhibit was a wide berth of photographed skin. Something moved inside me when I saw that man in the photograph, the same sort of feeling, really, that I had felt when I had watched, mesmerized, the old Steve Reeves Hercules movies on television.

This obsession with bodybuilders didn’t really begin to haunt me till years later, however, somewhere around that inexplicable age of thirteen, the same year I kept lifting my arms up over my head wondering when I was going to begin sprouting hair beneath my underarms. Everyone I knew was going through puberty before I was. Girls were even going through puberty before I was. My dog was going through puberty before I was. Every day I would run home and lock myself in my bedroom and examine my armpit for hair follicles. In the gym class that I had been forced to take that year there were boys who already had dark, coarse hair on their chest and arms and legs and underneath their arms. I had nothing but the fine silky brushings I had always had on my forearms. When I stood in the mirror and flexed my biceps nothing in my arm moved or hardened. I had neither muscle tone nor bulky fat nor even shape in those days—only the skin and bones of a worried what’s-to-become-of-me youth.

On the days when I wasn’t so eager to examine my armpits I would ride my bike to the twenty-four hour convenience store which had opened about two miles away and order one of those icy fruit-flavored slurpy drinks. When I had finished and my lips were framed by an orange- or red-colored mustache, I would stand in front of the magazine counter and look through the racks. There were copies of those general interest magazines such as Look and Life and Time and Saturday Evening Post on the racks, ladies monthlies like McCall's and Glamour and Woman's Day and Vogue were given a whole shelf, and the sports and hobby magazines like Car and Driver, Motor Trend, and Popular Electronics had a whole case on the other side of the aisle. But my gaze was always searching with burning-eyed neck jerks to where two specific magazines were located within that last rack—Muscle Builder and After Dark. I pretended, with all my stagey rehearsed nonchalance, not to want to look at them by feigning interest in a whole slew of other magazines. I would stand there and flip through Sports Illustrated, for instance, unable to read the articles or even look at the pictures because all I wanted to do was to look at one of those two other magazines instead. When I had spent enough diversionary time not to be studied by the salesclerk, I picked up a copy of Muscle Builder first, holding the spine gingerly between my palms as if I were Superboy and the pages were to ignite from my overheated stare.

Muscle Builder was full of workout routines...
photographed with bodybuilders such as Lou Ferrigno, Franco Columbo, Larry Scott, Dave Draper, and pre-Hollywood Arnold Schwarzenegger—huge, thick-shouldered men with ridges of abdominals and striations across their chests and massive sets of muscles called deltoids and triceps—all of whom looked like they would be the winner of a national tractor pull contest. They made the guy in *Wish You Were Here* look like a leprechaun who had wandered out from behind a four-leaf clover by mistake. I would stand there and look aghast at the sizes of these powerfully-built men, many photographed in skimpy swimsuits in poses where their muscles popped obscenely to the surface of their skin. The pictures never failed to arouse me—me, a tiny, scrawny thirteen year-old yearning for hair under his arms—and I would stand there, shifting back and forth on the heels of my feet, feeling myself growing erect, a sensation I had not yet adapted to, furtively looking about to see if anyone understood what was happening to me but not wanting them to know about it, of course, my throat drying out and my heart beating in my ears, frustrated because I didn't understand anything except that I shouldn't tell anyone what I was feeling.

I could seldom muster up the courage to buy a *Muscle Builder*, especially if a guy was working the check-out counter, but, oddly, I never had a problem taking the newest issue of *After Dark* to the register. To me, *After Dark* was just like one of those hobby magazines, except, of course, it was all about my hobby.

The true irony about *After Dark*, however, was that it tried to pass itself off as a legitimate entertainment monthly magazine, something like *People* before *People* was invented. Only there were no stories about aging soap stars recovering from alcohol abuse or movie stars supporting charity causes; instead, there were articles about Broadway revivals and choreographers and ballet dancers all throughout *After Dark*, all accompanied by glossy studio photos of young male dancers without their shirts on, or young sports jocks breaking into show business without their shirts on, or up-and-coming male models without their shirts on, or recently unemployed television actors looking for stage work without their shirts on. These young men were not nearly as beefy as those in *Muscle Builder*, of course; those older men were professionals, but these guys were just as fit. And *After Dark* treated their subjects more like gods who had landed on earth than those sweaty gym idols. Those men in those photographs were styled and posed and airbrushed and lighted with every kind of gel and make-up and super hair-dryer and micro-strobe technique imaginable. I have no idea how this magazine ever found its way to my small hometown in north Georgia, but *After Dark*, I believe, even to this day, awakened my sexual desire for other men with its soft core erotica. I didn't want to be a skimpily clad dancer in those pages. I wanted to be the big, beefy bodybuilder with that skimpily clad dancer. It's as if those two magazines were the culmination of my fantasy world come true.

Not a day went by without my fretting over these magazines once they had found their way into my consciousness. I soon had such a collection of magazines to compliment my musical theater library (including a few discreetly-hidden-in-my-closet muscle magazines that I had found the courage to buy). About that time my older brother abandoned his basement lair and I took to working out with the set of weights he had left behind. I borrowed my sister's portable Swinger phonograph with the flip-down turntable and took it downstairs, exercising to show tunes in the chilly, damp space of our basement, a room that smelled like carpet which had been flooded on too many times. I huffed and puffed and tried to blow the walls of that basement apart with my new super-exercised strength, but more than once I would abandon those dumbbells in favor of, well, just dancing and lip-synching to my favorite songs, always trying to end my routine by stretching my legs into an impossible split. The door to the basement stairs was always opening and closing, and I suspected my mother and father and siblings were peering down from their worried perches, wondering what all that noise was about—what could I possibly be doing that could make the foundation of the house literally, well, vibrate in that kind of manner?
About that time, too, I discovered in my father’s
workroom of tools and hardware—the dusty, sunless
location-of-the-power-drill closet that was adjacent to
my new personal-and-very-own-private rehearsal studio
and gym—a flimsy, dark yellow paperback book on one
of his shelves wedged between old copies of National
Geographic, titled The Parents’ Guide to Sex. It was the
scariest book I had ever seen up to then, and just the
kind of book for parents to leave in a well-hidden-but
not-too-well-hidden spot so that the child-in-question
will discover it on his own. It had been written decades
before, but inside were sketches of male and female
genitalia and reproductive systems. In the back of the
book were horrid black and white pictures of men and
women with swollen lips and running sores and scabs
and rashes on their bodies—all illustrating
a chapter entitled Venereal Diseases. The pictures were both repugnant and
magnetizing, but what worried me more
was a chapter in the middle of the book
on homosexuality. The book was very
specific on the distinguishing characters
of homosexuality in young boys,
describing the potential he-will-grow-
up-to-be-a-nasty-man-and-a-pervert
as exhibiting a “desire to dress up like
little girls” and “moving around in a way
identified as feminine.” Homosexual
boys, the author informed the reader,
had sloped, rounded shoulders (OK,
whew, not me), hairless chests (Uh, oh, maybe me),
soft, delicate skin (Uh, oh, maybe me again), and a
peculiar swinging motion of the hips when he walks
(Whew! Not me at all; I only swing my hips when I
dance). What I needed was someone to tell me what
to do with those feelings for other men, which were,
needless to say, crowding out everything in my brain
except the lyrics for all those show tunes.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise, then, when I admit
that I wasn’t much of a jock in high school, even with
all the playing (and dancing) I did with dumbbells. In
tenth grade, I mustered enough courage to audition for
the school production of Oliver!, believing, well, just
knowing, really, that I was perfect for the title role of
Dickens’s orphan circa nineteenth century London. I
wasn’t cast in the lead, of course, even though I knew
every note and lyric and word of dialogue by heart and
had demonstrated so at my boisterous and too-cocky
audition for Mrs. Prentice, the elderly drama club
sponsor-cum-choral teacher who always smelled of
alcohol and rose-infused perfume. Mrs. Prentice didn’t
much care for my over-the-top rendition and when it
came right down to it, I couldn’t sing the boy-soprano
part, either; I had developed underarm hair by then
(thank goodness for something) and my voice had
changed an octave lower. No boy in my school could
sing the part, or so Mrs. Prentice announced one
afternoon, and she cast an eleventh grade girl as
Oliver—a girl, mind you, creating a wave of raised
eyebrows throughout the drama club and the first time
I ever heard the word lesssz-beee-innnnssss whispered
in public. It wasn’t like we were doing Peter Pan and
expected to cast a girl as a boy.

Mrs. Prentice did cast me as Mr. Brownlow, Oliver’s
grandfather, a grand faux pas if you ask me, since the
fake gray that had been sprayed in my
hair for the part failed to age my pageboy
coiffure—it had turned it silver and I
still looked younger than the girl playing
Oliver. My stage debut was nonetheless
memorable, however. I knew nothing
about vocal projection and breathing
from the diaphragm and all that stage-
actory stuff, nor was Mrs. Prentice smart
or sober enough to impart that sort of
wisdom to her assemblage of wanna-be
theatricals. By the day of the first
performance I was so nervous and sore
from shouting my grand total of three
lines that I had developed laryngitis. I
spent my off-stage time coating my throat with a cold
spray. Mrs. Prentice, helping me into the jacket of the
costume my mother had sewn which looked more like
a revised Confederate soldier’s uniform rather than an
English gentleman’s topcoat, and which Mrs. Prentice
had complimented me on only days before when I had
shown it to her, said, just before pushing me on to the
stage, “No one will ever believe you are supposed to be
in this play. But, hell, at least, you sound old.”

The next year I didn’t fare much better as Pontious
Pilate in Jesus Christ, Superstar, though I had studied
voice in the year since my stage debacle and I could carry
a tune, even project it across the footlights. Superstar
was Mrs. Prentice’s concession to the students that the
drama club should be more au courant, though there
was a backlash against the production from a group of
Baptist parents about a singing and dancing Son of Our
Lord during His Last Days on Earth. I had wanted to
be Jesus Christ, but when they made the student who
was cast in that role wear a fake beard, I was relieved to
have been overlooked. My costume was a white dress shirt and white bell-bottom pants and since our version was an abbreviated one, I was only onstage once, to sing “Pilate’s Dream.”

By my senior year I had gained some weight and muscle tone from my on-going basement exercises when I was cast as Rolf in *The Sound of Music*. I was determined, of course, to make Rolf a star cameo turn. A dance instructor was brought in to teach me how to waltz with the girl who had been cast as Liesl for the big “You Are Sixteen” gazebo number, but the cul de resistance occurred when Mrs. Prentice rewrote the finale cemetery scene for me so that Rolf wouldn’t be the bad guy and blow the whistle on the von Trapps. Instead, he sang a “Sixteen” reprise (with new lyrics written by *moi*) and then, with a slight tremor of his hand, triggered off another Nazi spotting the von Trapps.

That was the same year that I bought my first pornographic magazine. I had just gotten my driver’s license and had become a great adventurer on my own, planning trips to downtown Atlanta to usher for matinee performances of the touring Broadway productions that played at the Fox Theater, a former movie palace near the Georgia Tech campus. I bought that very first illicit magazine at a convenience store that was attached to a gas station on my way home from a performance of the musical *Grease*. When I went to pay for the gas I had just self-pumped, I noticed a rack of magazines near the check-out counter—plastic wrapped editions of *Hustler, Playboy, Penthouse*, and a magazine I had never seen before—*Playgirl*. I reached directly for the *Playgirl* and, without even acknowledging it, slapped a ten dollar bill boldly down on the counter and in my best good-ole-boy Southern accent said to the guy behind the register, “My sister is too embarrassed to buy this. Can you believe it? She wants it for a bridal shower.” There was not an iota of a reaction from the guy over my purpose, and my bold, brazen action went unremarked. (I suppose the salesclerk was as bored with his job as he looked to be—even the junk food at this particular store looked like it hadn’t been moved in more than a decade.) The salesclerk gave me my change and I walked swiftly back to the car, the magazine placed on the seat beside me, its contents driving me so crazy that I finally had to pull off to the side of a road once I had crossed the Chattahoochee. I tore the plastic cover off that magazine as quickly as I could, flipping eagerly through the pages to look at the pictures of the nude men, studying how many men were featured, which ones were hairy and which were not, who had the best body, and who had the most unbelievable equipment.

That magazine set a yearning into place that would take me a few more years to fully comprehend, but I know now, in retrospect, that that may have been my first confusing of sex with love. It wasn’t just that I wanted to know this man’s skin and hair and cock and butt and smells and sounds and tastes. I wanted to be with him, wanted him to need me and want me as much as I wanted him. I wanted to belong to him as much as I wanted him to belong to me, to know that when he scratched his neck to understand whether it was an itch or a reflex, to know when he woke at night if he was restless or worried or had eaten too much, to know when he kissed me or held my cock that he knew my name and understood what I wanted to feel while he was with me. I wanted to be with a man when he got up out of bed in the morning, with the same man when he went out looking for lunch or dinner, with him again when he wanted to watch a movie or even better yet, when he had tickets to see a big, brassy, never-see-before Broadway musical. At that age I’d never imagined anything except romantic sex, had never fantasized about any kind of a guy except a seriously-involved-with-me-and-only-me one. It never occurred to me that sex could be, well, meaningless, functional or simply recreational. What I wanted, of course, was someone to love. And I wanted to feel as if I should sing about it in a Broadway musical.

Though it would be years before I would be able to articulate my desire for men to anyone other than myself, I had no such qualms of my love of the theater. In college, this appreciation grew and the people who became my friends were theater people—performers, designers, actors, singers, dancers, and choreographers. My life wasn’t so much a slow, unfolding drama of acceptance and coming out as it was a long learning curve—a soaring arc of light that hoped to find a home somewhere on a stage, waiting for the right moment to belt out a show tune and bring down the house.
A Strange and Separate People

a new play by

Jon Marans

978-0-9832851-5-1
$16

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

—Richard Labonté, Bookmarks

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

“The Intellectual, emotional and sexual.”

—The New York Times
Paul Hostovsky is the author of five books of poetry and six poetry chapbooks. His Selected Poems was published in 2014. He has been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, The Writer’s Almanac, and has won a Pushcart Prize and two Best of the Net awards. He makes his living in Boston as an interpreter for the Deaf. Visit him at www.paulhostovsky.com.
My mother’s Whitman
which is my Whitman now
sits on my shelf
reclines actually
horizontally
displaying its spine
above the spines
of ten or twenty
younger slenderer poets
and it’s almost
sexual the way
he’s in them
unquestionably
his influence
all over them

the way my mother
who never remarried
after my father died
never dated never
kissed another man or
woman on the mouth
for twenty long years
then died herself
still beautiful in
her early sixties
is in my voice
and in my hunger
and in my reticence
which is her reticence.
"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
Edward M. Cohen is the author of the novel $250,000 and several nonfiction books. He has published over thirty-five stories in the quarterlies and in the anthologies *Mentsh, A Gay and Gray Anthology, Child of my Child, The Mammoth Book of New Gay Erotica*, and *Found Tribe*. 
Once, Harold took a pile of my eight by ten glossies; all stuffed into envelopes, stamped and addressed, a personal note to each producer, and he threatened to throw them down the incinerator. That’s what he thought of my dreams of stardom.

“Please Harold, give me back my pictures.”

“How do I know what you are up to all day? You could be picking up boys off the street instead of going to auditions! Is it because I am so old?”

All of this at top volume in the hallway, waving my envelopes over the chute, which was why, I informed him, there were always snickers behind us in the elevator. This was 1955 and people were easily shocked. My parents, for instance, still thought “gay” meant happy.

Once, he had tried to strangle me because he had planned Brie and pears for dessert and I had said, “Let’s go out for cones tonight, Harold. I’m restless.” All of a sudden, he had come rushing at me, screaming, “What you really want is to cruise the straight guys on the corner! Isn’t that the truth?”

That was only because he loved me so much, Harold’s best friend, Patrick, explained, reaching across the table to pat my hand. Harold was parking the car or he wouldn’t have dared to touch me and the pat couldn’t have been other than fatherly. After all, Patrick was in the midst of planning a huge fiftieth birthday bash for himself, which made him even older than Harold. Still, I drew my hand away.

“How do you know he loves me so much?”

“All he’s done for the last two months is talk about how smart you are, how talented you are, how sexy you are, how he’s ‘Papa Bear’ and you’re ‘Baby Bear!’ I think that’s adorable.”

“I think it’s disgusting that he told you that.”

“What else can he do but pour out his heart to Auntie Patrick while waiting for you to finish your Voice and Diction exercises or whatever the hell you’re up to every night that drives him so out of his skull?”

“He wants me to move in with him but I think that would be disaster.”

“Harold,’ I says, ‘you’ve got to let this new boy out of bed and introduce him to your friends!’” He reached for my hand again but what was I supposed to do? A scene in a gay Chinese restaurant was the last thing I needed.

“First of all, my parents would have a fit. Moving in with a man as old as my father? A French teacher, yet. ‘No thanks, Harold,’ I told him.”

“Thanks but no thanks!” Patrick howled, as though he’d said the wittiest thing in the world. Actually, that was one of my mother’s favorite expressions.

He was laughing so hard, throwing his head back, rocking his chair, that all the other men in the dimly lit room turned to stare but, thank goodness, he let go of my hand because there was Harold, fuming in the doorway.

“Oh Harold! I adore this Baby Bear of yours!”

“I found a parking spot. Now, we just have to take a cab from the restaurant to get to the car.”

“Sit down and take a load off your feet,” Patrick sang; another expression of Mom’s.

Harold ordered a martini. Patrick ordered a Spritzer. I ordered a Coke.

“Benjy, dear,” Harold instructed. “Now that I’m introducing you into le beau monde, you’re not to drink Cokes anymore.”

I switched to club soda as talk turned to the party. Patrick told me about a chic men’s shop run by two queens who would dress me so I could really make a splash because so many show biz types were coming. And right around the corner, there was a gay barber who would style my hair and maybe I should get a manicure, also.

“A manicure? My father would have a heart attack!”

“Only, you’d better call now to make an appointment. On Saturdays, the place is the hottest cruising spot in town. Ask for Tony. Tell him to give you a ‘Tab Hunter.’ It’s the latest thing.”

“An appointment to get a haircut?” I gasped.

There was a whole gay underworld with its special code of behavior, which Harold and Patrick knew about and I did not; restaurants and bars and shops and beaches and particular benches in Central Park and special corners in Greenwich Village and doctors and drug stores and drag clubs and bath houses and even entire foreign countries. The restaurants looked like this one from the street, with heavily curtained windows so passers-by could not see through. But, once inside, you were on a different planet, elegantly decorated, with stylish men at every table and a secret language spoken at the bar. And every now and then, Harold said, some movie star symbol of American masculinity made an entrance because he so desperately needed to let down his hair and breathe a sigh of relief with his brothers.

“And sisters!” Patrick howled.

Here, you could relax and camp it up and not
be afraid you were going to give yourself away. You could talk the way you liked to talk and tell jokes you thought were truly funny and not have to laugh at ones that weren’t. You could shake off a week, a month, a lifetime of lying and prepare for more of the same to come. You could smile at a stranger with no fear of being beaten up or even hold hands with your lover under the table, so long as you kept an eye out for the New York City Vice Squad.

Which was why private parties were safer, Patrick said, and he had hired a cocktail pianist so there might be dancing—which we only got away with in bars because of pay-offs to the cops or connections to the Mafia. Even so, if you were unlucky enough to ask a plainclothesman to dance or, heaven forbid, to invite him home, you would end up in jail and the place might be raided or the owner would lose his liquor license for, at least, thirty days.

Patrick poured tea all around while we waited for the drinks. I reached for a packet of sugar but Harold stopped me.

“It’s gauche to put sugar in Chinese tea, Benjy. That’s the way it’s supposed to taste.”

Then, he leaned across the table to continue hissing dangers. The bar owners were in constant fear because they could be shut down by the police or fire or health departments for a hundred phony reasons. Every now and then, the Mayor would go on a publicity campaign and all the bars would be closed and there would be street sweeps along Central Park West. Unmarked cars would storm out of the night and everyone in the park or on the benches would be herded into paddy wagons.

“Let’s drop this depressing topic and talk about the party!” cried Patrick.

“All I am saying,” declared Harold, “is that it’s a treacherous world out there. Cops. Blackmailers. Lechers. Every casting agent will be after this boy’s ass so he’d better be careful! Careful! Careful!”

Patrick prattled on that some celebrities had already R.S.V.P’d, including Arnold Saint Subber’s secretary. Saint Subber had produced *Kiss Me, Kate* on Broadway and maybe, said Patrick, if I clued him in about my acting talents, he would pull some strings. A slew of Fire Islanders were yachting in for the evening so Harold claimed informal dress would be “de rigueur” because these boys were not going to show up in suits and ties.

“I’ll have to take Benjy to Bloomingdales’ and get him a pair of Bermuda shorts,” he mulled.

“And thick athletic socks to make his legs look chunky,” giggled Patrick.

* * *

The following week, I gave serious thought to what I would wear; a madras shirt, chinos, and desert boots, casual enough for the Fire Islanders, collegiate and serious for Saint Subber’s secretary. I was tied up all week with rehearsals so, the one time I did appear for dinner, Harold started to bubble with the water while he was cooking rice; coming at me, shouting furiously, dish towel flapping.

“Sometimes in the middle of class, I am so haunted by visions of you in bed with some talent scout that I have to appoint a monitor and rush to the Teachers’ Lounge for a smoke. That’s how much grief this relationship causes me!”

“Harold, put down that pot!”

“You don’t even know the danger you’re in, getting eyed by all the cops because, if they catch you cruising while you’re making rounds, they can haul you off to the precinct house and set you up as a decoy for whichever powerful producer they’re after at the moment!”

“The only danger I am in right now is that you’ll pour boiling water all over my body!”

Then, he burst into tears because he loved my body, he said, and he confessed that he had rushed out and bought a new kind of rice because, he had figured, I would be less likely to dump him if the novelty of his cooking kept me amused. I reached to reassure him and he prodded me toward the bedroom, our legs so intertwined that we bumped into walls and could not fit through the doorway. Harold wept as he grasped for my clothing, blubbering that I was so young and innocent, he worried that something would happen to me. The only thing he wanted was to protect me.

So, as usual, during sex, I became a butterball and this bundle of fears was transformed into a volcano. It had been this way from our very first night; Harold on top, pounding away, and me, curling into submission. But it all balanced out when we came together and he whimpered, “Don’t ever dump me, Baby Bear. Say you’ll never dump me!” and I lied in response, “I’ll never dump you, Papa Bear. Never. Never. Never!”

* The Saturday of the party got off to a bad start when Harold called, insisting we both wear Bermuda shorts so the other guests would know we were a
couple. I guessed right away he was headed for one of his jealous fits so I told him I had my outfit selected and hanging in the closet.

He had been dreaming all week, he said, about spending the afternoon in bed, dressing and undressing me in his purchases, as if I were a life sized Ken doll. My name had been circling his brain like a chant. "Benjy! Benjy! Benjy!" He had been calling my home every day, an absurd practice since he knew I was out making rounds, and, when my mother answered, he had been hanging up. He was afraid she thought he was crazy and maybe, he thought, she was right.

There were others he might have phoned, older friends who had experienced similar obsessions with young boys, but it was Benjy, only Benjy he wished to contact. How he loved to say my name! It felt so good on his tongue! I was so wise for my age and perceptive and witty. Maybe I could think of a joke to pull him out of his terrors. Or better yet, come over at once for sex.

I did not answer but I understood something I had never learned from all the movies I had wept through, all the romantic parts I had played. As much as Harold controlled me in bed, I controlled him out of it and, in a treacherous world like ours, the power struggle was enthralling.

"Actually, I have some lines to learn," I said. "Then, I'd like to nap, shower and pick you up when it's time to go to the party. That way, I'll look my best."

"We are not going," Harold announced. "I don't feel well."

"We have to go, Harold. Patrick is your best friend."

"He's not my friend. He's your friend. He hasn't stopped talking about you since I stupidly let him meet you. What on earth happened while I was parking the car? Did you weep into his waiting arms?"

"If I did maybe it was because I can't communicate with you!"

"A peculiar problem for an actor. Maybe I'm ruining your talent."

"Maybe you are."

"Patrick thinks you're talented. He thinks you've got that special something. He's dying to introduce you to Saint Subber's secretary."

"What's wrong with that? I'm dying to meet him."

"He's just trying to get you in the sack."

"Who? Patrick or the secretary?"

"Both, so far as I know. At once. And you'd go, too, you little whore!"

"Harold, you're disgusting."

"Also a lush and overweight and too old for Bermuda shorts because of varicose veins!"

He hung up and, tit for tat, I took the receiver off the hook so, when he called back to apologize, the line would be busy.

* * *

The party turned out every bit as glamorous as had been predicted. It was in Patrick's duplex on the East Side and Harold drove us there; he in Bermudas, me in my Ivy League outfit so anyone could tell at a glance that we were breaking up.

Johnny Ray, the famous singer, was enthroned on a staircase, surrounded by admirers and the pianist played “Cry” and “Walkin' My Baby Back Home” and everybody sang along except Johnny, of course. The Fire Islanders wore white ducks and shoes without socks--a new fashion--and there were guys in jeans and guys in grey flannel suits and one city official wore a tux because he was on his way to a dinner for the Mayor.

But Harold glowered at all from a corner, refusing to sing or mingle or take me into the next room to dance. I was so afraid he would make a scene that I clung to him on the sidelines though Patrick kept sending me signals as he talked to Saint Subber's secretary. Finally, when Harold headed for the bar, Patrick skated toward me.

"You can't spend the entire evening in this miserable corner. Saint Subber's secretary wants to meet you. I've told him how talented you were and he asked me where I'd seen you act and I suddenly realized I never had! So, now, you have to invite me!"

We both burst into nervous giggles, leaning close, pressing foreheads, my hands on his hips so that our groins bobbed.

"Listen," he beamed. "It's tradition for the birthday boy to dance with every guest."

"I'd love to, Patrick, but you know how crazy Harold is."

"Oh, poor Baby Bear..."

"And if he thought I'd found me another Papa...."

"Speak of the devil!" Patrick squealed.

I followed his glance to Harold at my elbow, a crimson flush creeping up from under his collar, onto his chin, flooding his cheeks, seeping into the whites of his eyes.

"Harold!" I gasped as he bolted down his drink.
so that liquor splattered his shirt and he shot for the
door.

I could have stayed. I could have danced. I could
have met Saint Subber’s secretary. But I stupidly
followed, stuttering some baloney story about
cheering up Patrick because fifty was such a depressing
birthday.

“You little whore, what do you take me for?”
Harold bellowed in the hallway. “I’d love to Patrick,
but you know how crazy Harold is! You think I didn’t
hear that?”

“You are crazy! You are! Patrick knows how crazy
you are and I meant it as a joke!”

He was pressing for the elevator, pounding on
the door, cursing the tenants who were holding it up,
while I babbled lies which were drowned out by his
shouts. When he could not stand the wait any longer,
he searched for another exit and, finally finding one,
plunged down the circling stairway as I blindly trailed
him.

“Some joke! Harold is in love with this little boy
who makes his best friend laugh because he’s so
crazy. And why on earth should Harold be crazy? Just
because he sits around waiting every night for his
boyfriend to show? Just because he calls his boyfriend
even when he knows he isn’t home?”

He was hollering so that Saint Subber’s secretary,
eleven flights up, could have heard and, when we hit
the elegant lobby, the doorman stared, open mouthed,
not only because of the noise but because astonishing
tears streamed down Harold’s cheeks.

“Just because, and I’ve never told you this before,
I’ve taken to sneaking into a building across the street
from your windows and going up on the roof to spy?
If that isn’t crazy, what is?”

We reached the car at the curb and Harold
stumbled against it, his entire body shivering with
sobs so that the car shook with him. I was amazed
at the extent of his pain and wanted to reach for him
but was afraid he would explode like a hand grenade
at my touch. He fumbled for his keys, slid in behind
the wheel, and I jumped around to the passenger seat,
pleading with him not to drive.

In the cocoon of the car, the windows shut, the
sounds of the street muffled, we were surrounded by
silence, except for his sobs.

I felt awful. I hadn’t meant to hurt Harold. He loved
me more than anyone ever had and, in the beginning,
at least, I had liked it. But now that I had tasted the
exotic canapés at the party, I had liked them too. And
the smell of success when I had laughed with Patrick.
And the hint of adventure in our bobbing hips. There
were too many new things in this treacherous life to
like.

“Please don’t cry, Harold. I’m not worth it.”
“Oh, shut up.”

“You’re right about me. You really are. I’m just a
little whore.”

But it had been the wrong thing to say. He shot
up erect, turned the ignition key and stepped on the
gas without looking my way. He was drunk. He was
weeping. He was in no shape to drive.

“Harold, stop!” I screamed as he ripped through
traffic, racing lights, honking for other drivers to get
out of his way, switching lanes and leaning out the
window to curse.

“I was trying to keep things calm when I kidded
about you being crazy! I didn’t want to make a scene
and spoil the party for Patrick! Now, please slow down
before you crash the car and kill us both!”

“I plan to kill us both! I plan to! That’s the only way
this is going to end.”

I was pleased that he was responding, but not by
what he was saying, nor by the fact that he was reaching
for the tissues on the dashboard with one hand and
gesturing with another so the car was steering by itself
and he kept a foot on the gas, even as he swerved
around jay-walkers. When, finally, he screeched to
a stop at a red light, I opened the door and jumped
out in a panic, zig zagging around fenders until I hit
the sidewalk, shouting over my shoulder that I would
grab a cab back to the party, dance with Patrick, sleep
with Saint Subber’s secretary and be finished with
his craziness once and for all! I did not figure that he
would desert the car in the middle of traffic and come
scrambling after, weeping and cursing, while horns
honked and drivers howled and that, overweight and
middle-aged as he was, huffing and puffing, he would
be able to catch me in the middle of the block.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m going home!” I gasped, making an elaborate
display of reaching for the keys in my pocket. By this
time, I was in tears also because I was so frightened
and the two of us shouted and took swings at one
another and wept.

He twisted my wrist so that I dropped the keys and
he dove after them on the sidewalk. In the distance, I
heard a police siren heading toward us and pictured
myself spending the night in jail with all the cruisers
from Central Park West.
“Give me my keys!” I screamed, pounding away at his back as he was doubled over before me. But he had them clutched in his fist and I was convinced I would never get them back, never get home, never be able to explain to the cops or my parents. And, if the news got out, my career would be ruined. I kept pummeling but because he was so hefty, or maybe so drunk, he seemed oblivious to pain. He had no trouble, straightening up and, once erect, he started to laugh at my swirling arms. That made me even angrier so I threw the weight of my body into a punch and smacked his nose so hard I could hear the bone crunch.

Whack!

There was one moment suspended in time when we both were too amazed to react. But the feel of that sock was another pleasing new taste and Harold’s hands shot to his face so he dropped my keys at last.

“You’ve made my nose bleed!” he whined and I knew it was true because I could feel the ooze on my fingers but I crouched and grabbed for the keys and ran, sucking my hand where it hurt.

The blocks sped by in a blur but I did not slow down even when breathing grew hard and my legs began to ache. When I was convinced he was no longer behind me, it was my turn to laugh at that frozen moment after I had socked him and I did not stop running as the sound of that whack and the crunch of his bone reverberated in air and the memory of his, “You’ve made my nose bleed!” made me even giddier; as did his look of astonishment and the sight of his tears and the taste of his blood on my fist.
In the 1970’s, J.R. Greenwell was a premiere headliner for many years at the Sweet Gum Head in Atlanta, GA, and performed as a female illusionist across the country. He later earned a Masters of Education at the University of Louisville, and now devotes his time as a queer writer creating plays and prose at his home in central Kentucky. He is the author of a memoir, *Teased Hair and the Quest for Tiaras*, and a collection of short fiction, *Who the Hell is Rachel Wells?* For more information on J.R. Greenwell visit his Web site at [www.jrgreenwellma79.com](http://www.jrgreenwellma79.com).
Jeremy Scott Blaustein begins *The Home for Wayward Ladies* with a quote from Liza Minnelli regarding her mother’s rewriting and infusing humor into her memories, and in doing so, he sets the tone for what I found to be a jocose adventure of three young men at a time in their lives when dreams are realized through rose-colored glasses. However, for these close friends, the lenses soon have more cracks than an old concrete sidewalk. I was so fortunate in my early adult years to have bonded with a small group of like-minded individuals, and reading this book brought back images of those dramatic situations and awkward interactions of my past, those moments that have been kindly embellished with each recollection. And like Blaustein’s characters, with the intervention of fate, I somehow found a way to maneuver through the obstacles impairing my vision into the future.

The “Ladyfriends” became more than just a theater family at Mackinaw University, and upon graduation, Nick, Eli, and Hunter set their sights on Manhattan to make it big on Broadway. The aspiring actor, director, and choreographer vowed to stay united for life, but soon the rigors of being discovered in the big city put their loyalties and love for each other to the test. Like a great gourmet dish, the story is well seasoned with a little *Sex and the City* with a dash of *Glee* stirred in, and the recipe pleased my Gleek pallet. Through all the ups and downs, the author crafts humor into each situation with his quick wit and in-your-face snarky exchanges that kept me laughing. I will admit that the overabundance of theater and film one liners at first caught me off guard as I am not as adept in that area of expertise as Mr. Blaustein, but I soon expected and enjoyed the off-the-cuff snide references woven into each conversation.

I found myself enamored with Tilly, Nick’s eccentric Jewish mother, and Lorna, the stoic owner of the diner in Pocono. But if one character is a scene stealer, it would be Robin, an aging, over-the-hill actor and drunken old queen way past his prime who, despite his garish clothing and as owner of the gaudily decorated Harmonia Gardens, possesses a razor-sharp tongue and a never ending need for liquor. Robin, jaded by time and circumstances, also has the ability to eloquently share the wisdom that comes with living a long and weathered life as demonstrated by one of his quotes: “I implore you boys not to waste the time you’re given. It’s a gift. When you’re young, you think that love will last forever. When you’re old, you realize that forever could not possibly be long enough.” Blaustein not only deserves applause for his characters’ terse and sarcastic dialogue, he should also be praised for the deep, touching, and profound words of guidance and reflection that are sprinkled throughout the script, words from the angels (those people, like Robin, that unexpectedly appear in our lives when we need them).

Was the plot simple? Were the characters predictable? Perhaps, but like a good old fashioned Hollywood movie, I finished the last chapter with a smile on my face, sweet tears in my eyes, and I let out a quiet sigh and said, “That was nice. Really, really nice.” Definitely a thumbs up and a five out of five. I can’t wait to see the production!
Lewis DeSimone is the author of *The Heart’s History* and *Chemistry*. He is currently working on his next novel. He can be reached through [www.lewisdesimone.com](http://www.lewisdesimone.com) or @LewisDeSimone on twitter.
Now and Yesterday
Stephen Greco

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Despite the work that happily continues to flow from several of our literary forebears—Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, and Felice Picano among them—the world of gay fiction remains dominated by stories of the young. Sadly, the reason may not simply be the commercial appeal of youth, but the fact that so many of the old guard—the people who lived through Stonewall and would now be in their 60s or 70s—are no longer here to tell their stories. Robert Ferro, David Feinberg, George Whitmore, John Preston—the list of the prematurely lost goes on, along with countless unknown others whose lives were cut short before they even managed to make a name for themselves.

It is this history of loss that serves as the backdrop for Stephen Greco’s new novel, Now and Yesterday. The story focuses on Peter, a 59-year-old advertising executive who has been searching for love since the death of his partner in 1989. In the intervening years, Peter has exchanged his idealism for practicality and financial security. He gave up poetry for advertising and is now an established and well-known success. But as we follow him through these pages, over the course of a year or so, we gradually realize the cost of that success in more personal terms.

Peter’s narrative is paralleled by the story of Will, a 28-year-old who is new to the city and dreaming of a career in magazines. The two cross paths at a party that Will has been hired to bartend. Before long, they become friends and Peter eventually finds himself infatuated with Will. Although he has dated younger men in the past, he hesitates to make a move on Will, and spends the bulk of the novel wondering whether Will returns his feelings.

Will, who came of age after the worst of the AIDS years, represents a very different worldview than Peter’s. His generation is relatively unaware of both the struggles that preceded Stonewall and the heady liberation that followed it. They live in a world where equality is within grasp, if not already established. And yet, in Peter’s view at least, it’s a flatter world, where Grindr has replaced interpersonal connection.

Greco takes an unusual angle on the meaning of this generational shift in the gay community. Peter and his friend Jonathan, a filmmaker, wonder what has been lost, not just through AIDS but through assimilation. In the past, one generation would take the next under its wing, teach them about the world and open professional opportunities for them. But with the premature erasure of so much of an entire generation through AIDS, the next one was essentially orphaned, and the tradition of mentoring that dates back to ancient Greece was broken.

It’s a fascinating and melancholy perspective, which permeates the novel and gives it much of its weight. There’s little suspense in Now and Yesterday: from the earliest chapters, we know the book will end with a death and the fruition of a relationship. What’s unique is the path the story takes to get there.

Even more interesting are the ideas this novel generates along the way. There’s a refreshing wisdom in Greco’s tale, an elucidation of epiphanies that come only with age and experience. In his interior monologues, Peter demonstrates a level of self-awareness almost unheard of in novels about twenty- or thirtysomething protagonists.

Greco skillfully balances the inner and the outer life throughout the book, as images and events inspire deep insights from Peter. A simple description of spring becomes an occasion for reflection on the passage of time and the way perceptions change with age:

“If life was sweet once more at this time of year, the sweetness itself was somehow weightier than when Peter was twenty. Perhaps this was always true of an individual, year after year; but it was beginning to register more clearly for Peter, now that there were fewer springs to detonate for him than had already detonated. Back in his twenties, Peter felt each spring as a little dose of a scintillating possibility—new pleasures to come, new poems to read. Now, that part of spring’s eternity felt largely expired, enshrined in the memory of decades of scintillation and poetry, and yet—something was still there, germinating, pushing up from under the weight of memory itself. And though this feeling was scary and undescribed in lines about ‘daisies pied and violets blue,’ it was also thrilling.”
Such passages are tellingly absent when the narrative strays into Will’s point of view. Where Peter gives us density of experience, Will is all unexplored potential: he may know where he wants to go in life, but has little idea of how to get there. The scenes told from his perspective are characterized by action but little reflection. As a result, the reader knows very little of his inner life and remains somewhat unconvinced that he has the qualities Peter so clearly admires. While he does demonstrate flashes of creativity and intelligence, the reader’s most lasting impression of Will is the beauty of his body. He thus seems to represent little more than youthful idealism, and Peter’s pursuit of him comes to suggest less an emotional opening than a kind of regression.

While on the surface a romance, *Now and Yesterday* is primarily about the challenges and delights of aging. Peter must confront the compromises he has made for the sake of his career and why he has channeled so much of his energy in this direction. His principles are put to the test when his agency begins working with a Glenn Beck–like character on a campaign to spread his conservative gospel in a more palatable, perhaps more subversive, way. Meanwhile, Jonathan, who is suffering from prostate cancer, makes a documentary about a long-closeted artist named Connor Frankel. These two subplots create a fascinating parallel to the romantic trajectory of the book and an opportunity for unexpected insights into competing definitions of personal integrity.

*Now and Yesterday* presents a lively portrait of a particular slice of New York life. Populated with A-gays and characters from the media elite, it’s a world that thrives on appearances, thus offering a strong contrast to the very substantive issues that Greco brings to the fore. Peter’s Brooklyn Heights apartment becomes a potent symbol of his ambivalent relationship to that culture. A focal point of the action, it’s the same home he moved into with his first lover, Harold, in 1975—across the river from the hubbub of Manhattan. And despite his wealth, he’s still renting, still not fully committed to a place—just as, despite a deep-seated loneliness, he has been unable to commit his heart to another lover since Harold’s death. It’s no coincidence that the publisher chose to illustrate Peter’s front door on the book’s cover. The door, like the book, invite the reader to enter an intriguing and enlightening world.
“Every essay is gripping, exciting, fun to read, and, yes, entertaining. No wonder Picano is such a popular writer. *True Stories* is a masterpiece. Buy it and enjoy it.”
—James D. Anderson, Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University, *ALA Newsletter, GLBT Reviews*

“Telling truths is something that popular, prolific author and memoirist Felice Picano does extremely well. This is most evident in *True Stories: Portraits from My Past*, his latest collection of expanded personal essays and life reflections. Picano’s memory is impeccable, and his ear for dialogue just as distinctive and richly realized. Appealing and wonderfully anecdotal, the essays shared here harken back to a cloudless era when fun was freewheeling and the consequences of that fun were overcast at best. With this collection, Picano pays tribute to the many unsung heroes of his past who have long since fallen, forever etched both in memory and the occasional bout of inexplicable laughter and tears.”
—Jim Piechota, *Bay Area Reporter*
Jameson Currier is the author of ten works of fiction and an occasional poem. In his spare time he is the editor and publisher of *Chelsea Station* magazine.
I always envied the way
you could dance so freely,
the way you could move so effortlessly
from one man to another
without looking back.
I studied you for years, you know,
without being able to master those steps myself.
I was surprised you kept coming back to me
as though haunted by a mirror’s reflection.
You found too much of yourself in me for comfort, I know,
and I needed to learn too much from you too quickly.
I loved you from afar, at first,
before I even knew what boyhood idols could be found.
On my own I looked for you in others I met,
till you proved you had no intention of leaving me alone.
Lovers come and go, I’ve learned,
but our friendship only grows stronger with age.
Had I known the night you first took me dancing in 1975
and I stood in the corner barely nineteen years old
shaking, scared, and wondering who I was,
that nineteen years later I would be marching at your side,
I would have never doubted myself,
I would have never doubted my pride.