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*
Chelsea Station
Edited by Jameson Currier

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September 30: “When I Heard at the Close of the Day,” poetry by Walt Whitman
Walter “Walt” Whitman was an American poet, essayist, and journalist.
I Hear America Singing

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear;
Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong;
The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work;
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat—the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck;
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench—the hatter singing as he stands;
The wood-cutter’s song—the ploughboy’s, on his way in the morning, or at the noon intermission, or at sundown;
The delicious singing of the mother—or of the young wife at work—or of the girl sewing or washing—
Each singing what belongs to her, and to none else;
The day what belongs to the day—
At night, the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs.

—Walt Whitman
The Most Concerning Issue in the Queer Community

Andrew Gregory

In my most humble, honest, and respectful opinion the most pressing issue within the queer community is the way that minorities are treated socially and politically. Within the community trans people, and Queer People of Color are left without role models, without support, and without adult leaders to turn to. This lack of representation in leadership results in diminished political voice. Due to this the media perceives that the most pressing issue on the “gay agenda” is same sex marriage. That leaves homeless queer youth, trans safety/rights, and academic support in the closet.

On a personal level being a part of the queer community, and the native community, I have experienced the suppression, tokenization, and sexualization of my identity. As a berdache person, cultural traditions, spirituality, and sexuality are all one. But within most queer
communities the majority population is still white, and their perception of my identity, nine times out of ten, is boiled down to whether or not I’m sexually active with another male. My spirituality, and identity as a two spirit person which literally means someone with the spirit of a man and a woman, is snuffed out. Experiences like this force Queer People of Color out of groups, out of “safe spaces.”

When queer people of color try to engage with the larger queer community we face the over sexualization of, and casual racism towards, people of color in dominantly white spaces. I have sat in a GSA where I was the only non white person, and let me tell you I squirmed. Being tokenized and asked to speak for all queer native people, and then how quickly the conversation can turn to a sickening chatter of how poc are objects.

While the fetishization of People of Color is not an issue exclusive to the Queer community, it is a barrier that is particularly harmful in a movement so linked to gender and sexuality. The racism tied up in the lust for People of Color and their bodies becomes written off as simple sexual fantasy. I have listened to the stories of gay boys brag about how they have dated “half the rainbow.” They have searched for other queer men of various racial backgrounds, just for the sex. As if “doing it” with them was something that had been conquered, a mission achieved, another poc targeted to be colonization.

The casual racism within our own community is poisonous and dangerously leisure. We are breaking down and harming our own people and furthermore denying their identity and even so objectifying them, not seeing us as people. This is one of the largest issues in the queer community because it turns our community into an elite group of only white queers. We are a group made up of various minority groups, we need to be acknowledged and accepted by each other. If we fail to do so we are never going to successfully fight for our rights, our freedom, and our lives in this world.

Andrew (Drew) Gregory was born in Montana, but he has spent roughly the last ten years of his life in metropolitan Seattle, Washington. He attended and graduated from Highline Big Picture High School, First Peoples Center, in Burien, Washington. The first Two Spirit QF Scholar, Andrew traces his paternal ancestry to the Blackfeet, Lakota, and Cherokee peoples. Andrew is described by his principal as “among the top 1% to ever attend our school”—an opinion shared by his English teacher and advisor. From his freshman year, he also proved to be the school’s most effective student leader. He founded the Native Student Alliance (NSA) and worked closely with faculty and administrators in the development of a Native American curriculum for the entire school district of more than 17,000 students. He also helped create “a monthly district-wide Native Family meeting” that convinced the district’s superintendent to improve district resources for Native American students and their families. Andrew also founded “The Closet Crashers,” the district’s GSA. Among other activities of The Closet Crashers undertaken under his leadership were an annual Drag Days, a Day of Silence, and the establishment of an after-school LGBTQ youth support group at a local community center. In addition he receives considerable praise both as a poet and as a photographer. Andrew will attend Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where he will major in photography and Native American Studies. His essay, “The Most Concerning Issue in the Queer Community,” was the co-winner of the 2014 Queer Foundation essay contest and is reprinted by permission of the author and the Queer Foundation Effective Writing and Scholarships Program.
Two years ago, Jeff Mann's *Purgatory* saw print; a historical romance, set against the dying days of the American Civil War, it told the story of how two men met and fell in love. And were there ever two such star-crossed lovers: Private Ian Campbell, infantryman, short, compact, dark, erudite; and Private Drew Conrad, cavalryman, tall, muscular, blond, and illiterate.

Not to mention that Private Campbell fights for the Confederate States of America, while Private Conrad fights for the Union.

Campbell's company is retreating from Union soldiers when they manage to capture Conrad. The company's leader, Campbell's Uncle Erastes, systematically tortures Conrad, as do other members of the company; Campbell nurses Conrad, ostensibly to keep him alive and prolong his suffering. But Campbell, already an appreciator of male beauty, falls for Conrad, and the latter soon begins to trust the former; eventually Campbell even begins to contemplate the unthinkable—helping his prisoner escape and leaving with him. Before they can enact their escape, however, their plans are discovered; but a timely Union attack allows both men their opportunity.

Now, Mann continues the story of Privates Campbell and Conrad, as they flee to Campbell's family farm in West Virginia. *Salvation* opens almost as soon as *Purgatory* ends. Both men are in deadly danger: both are wounded, and deserters; hence, they must evade both Rebel and Union forces, as well as unaffiliated Raiders practicing banditry. Moreover, they must keep their growing love a secret, lest even the kindness of the strangers they meet be turned against them: being found out as either a deserter, “enemy” soldier, or sodomite is a capital offense.

Mann's research into the time period, especially the conditions endured by the soldiers, is evident from the very first page of *Purgatory*, for he pulls no punches: war is presented in all of its dirty, brutal “glory.” Soldiers not only battle each other, they battle hunger, illness, disease, lice, and hardship. Moreover, he presents the brutality of men during wartime not to be gratuitous, but to show war honestly: he also uses it as a foil for the truly good people that Campbell and Conrad
meet on their travels, and naturally (these *are* novels written by Jeff Mann, after all) the cruelty that both men have enacted and/or endured find its way into their sexplay.

By the time this story takes place (March-April 1865), many of the characters have invested four years into the conflict: emotions run high, ranging from anger, hatred, revenge, patriotism, and yes, even exhaustion. To Mann's credit, he does not present his characters one-dimensionally: the story is told from Campbell's point of view, but Southerns/Northerners are not presented in a purely good/evil dichotomy; each character is allowed to be his/her own complex, conflicted self—and even to change over the course of the novel(s). Characters' motivations and experiences cannot be assumed upon first meeting them; Miss Tessa, a freed slave who shelters both men on their journey to West Virginia, best expresses this sentiment:

“It's all just so mixed up. Rebels who hates Negroes and wants to use 'em cruelly...Rebels who treats us kind and fights to keep invaders off their land...Yanks who loves Mr. Lincoln and the Union and believes in 'mancipation...Yanks who just wants to fight and crush and who don't care 'bout us black folks one way or th'other...” (*Salvation*, pp. 158-9).

Both Campbell and Conrad acknowledge that after four years of battle, neither side can claim the moral high ground, each having committed atrocities to the other—atrocities that they have participated in.

Any reader interested in the story of Campbell and Conrad should buy both *Purgatory* and *Salvation*, and read both, in order; reading the entire story, and seeing the hell that both men suffer, only makes their arrival into heaven all the sweeter.

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Keith Glaeske is a medievalist and collector of speculative fiction currently living in Washington, DC. His articles about medieval literature have been published in *Medieval Perspectives, Traditio*, and *Ériu.*
Sex, Love, and Intellectual Property
Andrew L. Huerta

She was the woman in his story. Her light grey hair, wide brimmed hat, bright yellow blouse, royal blue cotton pants, and her grabber tool. When I realized it was her, I stopped in the middle of the road. Mrs. Brickman was the elderly woman holding the grabber tool. It was a long, white aluminum tool with dark grey jaws that clicked together at the bottom. The device was engineered to tightly grab onto small items without Mrs. Brickman having to bend over or reach down into the gravel of her front yard. With her grabber tool, Mrs. Brickman was methodically, one-by-one, clearing away the long yellow seed pods that fell from her mesquite tree. With a black bucket at her side, I watched her as she stood in one position and picked up one seed pod after the other. Individually she carefully placed them into her plastic bucket and used the tool to reach back down for another. Without bending or turning, she meticulously worked her way through a small section of the yard. As I stood there watching her, I noticed a completely clean
section of the gravel. It appeared as if she had cleared away a fourth of the seed pods that covered the ground underneath the tree. I had no idea how long it had taken her to clear away this section, but I was amazed at how patiently she went about her work.

Mrs. Brickman was a neighbor. She lived about a block away from my condo. I had only met her once, over five years ago, at a neighborhood watch meeting. A few of the houses in our neighborhood had been robbed and we all came together, one time, to see what we could do. Back then Mrs. Brickman was quiet, sweet, and very old. But now she was even older; probably in her early 90’s. And she seemed to be the kind of woman who wanted to stay active and keep her mind as sharp as possible.

I had never seen her out in her front yard before, clearing away the yellow seed pods with her long grabber tool. That’s why seeing her today, during my morning walk, had come as such a shock. Tom had used her, or carefully described this image of her, in one of his short stories. A story he had written over five years ago, and one that stood out in his collection. A collection of short stories that now needs to find a publisher but lays dormant on my dining room table in a large, manila envelope.

Tom Horne worked for the University of Arizona when I met him ten years ago. He was cerebral, introverted, and a hell of a lot of fun. He looked like the actor Edward Norton. Actually, he looked like Ed Norton in the film *American History X*. Not as young, and thin, and in shape, but pretty damn close. We met at an outreach event that was sponsored by Tom’s job. Tom was an admissions counselor at U of A and the event included high school students from South Tucson. At the time, I was a new employee in U of A’s College of Medicine and I had my own browsing table at the event. I spoke to students and parents about careers in the health professions and about our health related majors at U of A. Tom was essentially in charge of the event and I noticed him looking at me the moment I set up my table. He never introduced himself to me. I just remember him coming over and asking me how everything was going. We talked for less than a minute and before he left, he put his hand on my right shoulder, squeezed it slightly, and walked away. I had to leave my table, unattended, and find the closest bathroom. I wiped my face down with cold water. I was anxious and excited, and I had never experienced anything like that before. When he put his hand on me, I saw our future together. I knew it wouldn’t be a long term relationship. It would be shallow and sexual. And I knew we’d never buy his and his matching BMW’s and settle down in the suburbs of southern Arizona. All I knew was that I wanted to move forward with whatever was going to happen between us. And then see where I was in life.

After seeing each other again at various U of A events, Tom asked me out. We went to a house party for one of his friend’s birthdays, but left early. We ended up at the gay bar on 4th Ave. It was still early in the evening and we were the only couple sitting together at the outside bar on the back patio. Tom was talkative but cautious. I could tell that he wanted to touch me, or reach out and hold my hand, but he kept leaning back in his chair and sitting on his right hand. At the time I was just starting my doctoral work in U of A’s College of Education. I was a part-time student at night and worked full-time during the day in the College of Medicine. Tom, on the other hand, had just finished his MFA in Creative Writing. He had taught at the University while working on his degree but now worked full-time as an admissions counselor. He liked working with students and kept an early work schedule so that he could write well into the evenings.
“So are you working on anything right now? A novel or play? I’m not sure what you write.” We both ordered beer and I turned my chair toward him.

“I’m not working on anything right now. After three years in the MFA program, I’m taking a short break from writing.”

We sat in silence for a few seconds.

“You know, when I met you.” Tom let out a short laugh. “I couldn’t figure out if you were gay or not.”

“Well…it’s hard to be obviously gay at a work event.”

“Yeah.” He let out another odd little laugh. “I don’t think it was until the third or fourth time I saw you that I decided that you might actually be gay, and possibly interested in me.”

“That first time I met you, I knew you were gay.”

“But you…you’re a hard person to read. I mean you…you’re what I’d call stoic.”

“Stoic?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been called a lot of things. But I’ve never been called stoic.”

“I don’t mean it as an insult.”

“And I’m not taking it as one.”

“You’re very in charge of your own little world.”

“Well…I wouldn’t call my world little, but I do like things done in a certain way. Especially when it comes to work. And you’ve really only seen me in work mode.”

“That’s why I wanted to ask you out. To get to know you better.”

“Well…what about you? You, on the other hand, you seem…I don’t know. I’d like to think of one word to describe you, but it’s just not coming.”

“So use more than one word.”

“You seem like you’re very in tune with your own observations. You know what you see, and you like to name it, or even label it.”

“I’m a writer. I love language.”

“Yeah, but I’m an educator and I love language too, but I don’t like labels.”

“So what? You want to look deeper?”

“I want to look at more than just what’s on the surface.”

We sat in silence again. Tom looked into my eyes and didn’t break away.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

“Okay. Let’s go,” I replied.

That night we went to my place. I live in a small two bedroom condo close to the university. It’s the kind of place where I should have a roommate, but I don’t. Tom took off my clothes and I
took off his. We moved slowly at first but then began to kiss each other deeper and deeper. He moved forward and I responded. But the moment I felt myself begin to relax; the moment I began to let go and allow myself to move closer to him, he pulled away.

He made some feeble excuse, grabbed his clothes, and left my bedroom. I could hear him in the hallway, pulling on his clothes, but I just lay there in shock. When I heard the front door close behind him, I knew I was exactly where I expected to be the moment I met him. Alone. Alone, lonely, and frustrated.

Tom sent me a gutless email a few days later. I remember the title of the email was “Living Rooms”. Tom said that he wasn’t ready for where we were going that night and that we should begin a relationship by getting to know each other and staying in the living room. I, on the other hand, had no problem with where we were headed, or what we were doing. If anything I wanted to get the sex out of the way to see if the relationship had a future, or if I was just wasting my time.

Our work lives brought us together a couple more times within the next few months. And before I knew it, Tom was talking and flirting with me as if nothing had ever happened. I, on the other hand, wanted to have sex. So I asked him out to dinner. I made some smart ass comment about how we would eat a nice meal, and that the evening would only end up in the living room. But that was not the case. We did have a nice meal, at one of my favorite restaurants, and by the end of the evening we were back in my bedroom. Tom was naked in my bed, and I was on top of him. I told him there was no way he was running away from me that night.

The sex was average at first. Somewhat mechanical, very routine, and when we were done Tom always left in a rush, or hurried me out of his apartment. And for me, that was okay. I was having sex with a man I really wanted to have sex with, and it was nice. But before we knew it, we were really getting to know each other; both on an intellectual level and a physical level. So by the time I met Tom’s two best friends, and we were all hanging out together and having fun, sex with Tom had become fantastic.

We were members of a small group of friends. That’s how things operated for me and Tom. There were Tom’s two best friends, who we saw often, and eventually we added my best friend and a few other friends from the gay bars. But we were always together, with friends, in a small group. Being social is what came easy to Tom. Being liked by others is also what became important to Tom. He often did not like being alone with me; having a one-on-one conversation for him was rather boring. Possibly not enough stimulation or attention. While we did have amazing sex and I began to feel an incredible level of intimacy with him, it was always short lived. Our time together, alone, was always finite. It always came to a quick ending. So we never went away together. We never slept past 8:00 am if we spent the night at each other’s place; and we never talked about our feelings or a future together.

That’s why that one party came as such a shock to me. We were celebrating one of our friend’s birthdays at a pool party. Tom and I had been drinking a lot of beer and ended up together, alone, in the Jacuzzi. If I had thought about it, I should have known that this conversation was coming. But I never allowed myself to think about a future with Tom.

“You know it’s been two years.” Tom put down his beer and stood facing me in the middle of the Jacuzzi.

“Two years since that first night and the “Living Rooms” email?”
“Yeah, I guess.”
“After that night, I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”
“Well, two years and you haven’t been able to get rid of me.”
“I never wanted to get rid of you in the first place.”
“You’ve always been really patient with me. I like that about you.”
“I’m a teacher. If I see a challenge, I always figure out a way to overcome it.”
“As a writer, I guess I always want to deconstruct it.”
“Or label it. Call it what it is.”
“Yeah, I guess.”
“Why didn’t you just move on, after that night, and leave me alone? I mean…two years ago? I always knew you didn’t want to go where we were headed.”
“I wanted to get to know you.”
“So do you think you know me now?”
“I know that I love you.”

And there we were. With those words. The words I’d wanted to hear. Tom was the first man in my openly gay life to tell me that he loved me. My first reaction was one of anger. What the fuck did he want from me? I knew he wanted me to open up to him even more, let down my guard, so that he could pull away from me again. I was dumbfounded, and I let my homosexual-self get the best of me. I stopped listening to my intuition and just let myself go.

“I love you too.”

We stopped and looked around. We were alone in the Jacuzzi at our friend’s apartment complex, and although we wanted to grab a hold of each other, we didn’t. We just picked up our beers again and moved to a couple of lounge chairs close by. Tom told me he loved me two or three more times and talked about our future together. He said he wanted to keep working at the university, eventually buy a house and raise a few kids. I just sat there and listened. I knew once I joined into the conversation it would all change. That it would not become real and he would pull away and break my heart. So I listened for as long as I could and then said, “I think it’s time that you let me read some of your stories.”

“Yeah,” he said. His eyes lost focus and he looked away.

“I know your Master’s thesis is in the library, and I can read it any time I want to. But I’d really like to read your copy or anything else you want to share with me.”

“Yeah?”

“Is that okay? Do you want me to read your work?”

“Yes. I…I do. It’s just that I’ve been working on this one story, and I don’t know if I’m ready to share it.”

“Well…I’d still like to read what you wrote in grad school. I know your thesis is a collection of about ten stories, so I’d really like to read that.”
“How do you know about my thesis?”

“I did look at it in the library one day. But I didn’t read it. I wanted to wait and see if you’d give me a copy.”

“Yeah. I have my copy. I’ll give it to you tonight, when we get home. Or maybe share with you the one story I’ve been working on. It’s not in my thesis.”

That night, when we got back to his place, we had sex all over his apartment. I remember starting off on the coffee table and ending up in the shower. At that moment in time, he was mine, and I felt that I truly belonged to him. Every time I looked into his eyes, I told him that I loved him. I held him as close as I possibly could, and he let me. By the end of the evening the word love kept flowing out of me and I could not control myself. I knew that I should stop. I knew that I should pace myself, slow my feelings down a bit, but I also felt as if I had won. I had waited. I had listened to that little voice inside of me. That voice that said to wait for him to tell you he loves you first. Wait for him to fall in love with you and then, then you can allow yourself to tell him. Tell him what you’ve felt the moment you first met him. Tell him that you love him and that you’d do anything to be with him.

As I left Tom’s apartment that next morning, he asked me to wait as he printed out a fresh copy of the story he’d been working on. Shared with me the story that he’d just completed and was now just beginning to circulate for publication. The story he called *A Methodical Cleaning*.

As I sat and read Tom’s short story, I wondered if I would come to understand him better. If we’d grow closer now that I was reading his work and had a better understanding of what he did and who he was. I didn’t know if the story would provide insight into Tom’s psyche, or how he thought about life. But I knew a great part of him was in that story, and that I wanted to understand the story and him as much as possible.

*A Methodical Cleaning* was the story of a woman who was at the end of her life. The main character, Helen, would clean her front yard with her long grabber tool. She’d use the tool to pick up the yellow seed pods that fell from her mesquite tree. Then one-by-one she’d place the pods in her black bucket. As she did so, Helen made plans for her funeral. She also planned for what would happen to all of her possessions when she was gone. Helen was not suicidal, and she was not dying of any disease. She was not a tragic figure in any sense, but a strong character who knew what she wanted and focused on her own peace of mind. Helen was a woman who knew that her life was coming to an end, and that she wanted to put everything in order before she actually left this world. So Helen spent most of the story figuring out who in her life would take care of her estate after she was gone. She worked her way through the important people in her life and ended up leaving everything to her young niece. Her niece, who was the only member of her family who was smart enough to carry out her final plans. Caring enough to respect her final wishes.

I found Tom’s writing to be plain and beautiful. While Helen was a simple character, I found the metaphor of her cleaning her front yard awe inspiring. That Helen would slowly work her way through her yard as she made plans for the final details of her long life. When I had finished the story, I read it again, and I knew that I had become even closer to Tom. That idea scared me, but I pushed through those feelings and called him and told him that I loved him.

I asked Tom for the rest of his stories but he kept putting me off. We were always on our way to spend time with friends, or we were off to yet other work event, and he never shared another
Eventually, Tom stopped saying that he loved me and we stopped having sex. While I tried to coax him into saying those words, after I had said them to him so many times, but they never came again. After visualizing a future of fighting and more and more frustration, I told Tom that we should stop seeing each other. He had no problem with that. I had gathered a few of his things in a small pile and placed my copy of his short story at the bottom. The pile sat on my coffee table in front of him as he agreed to end our relationship. Then, after a moment of silence, he picked up his stuff and he was gone.

Six months later, I found out that Tom had married an older man. They had met, fallen in love, and gotten married in Vermont, where gay marriage had just been legalized. It was awful and painful, and I kept wondering why it hadn’t been me. My main frustration with my relationship with Tom was that I should have known better. Every ounce of my being, at that time, told me not to fall in love with him. Not to move too quickly and open myself up to someone new. And to listen to that little voice in my head that told me that he would eventually break my heart. And I was right. If I had listened to my intuition, which I often do in my life, I would not have gone through that experience. I would not have been left wondering why he could not commit himself to me, and why I wasn’t the one traveling to Vermont to marry a man who loved me. I was also left wondering if Tom really loved me and if two men could really love each other enough to make a lasting commitment.

After three more years I received a phone call that yet again changed my life. Tom’s best friend, who I hadn’t spoken to in forever, called me to tell me that Tom had been killed by a drunk driver. Tom was driving home from a university event, by himself, was rear-ended by a drunk driver. His car was pushed into oncoming traffic, and he was hit by another car head-on. He lived for 24 hours after the accident but died due to severe head trauma. Tom was 37 years old.

For me, I thought that was the end of my story with Tom Horne. While I grieved silently for a relationship that had ended over five years ago, I woke up one morning to see Tom’s best friend standing at my front door. In his hands was a copy of Tom’s last will and testament along with a large manila envelope filled with Tom’s short stories. While Tom had left all of his possessions and his life insurance money to his husband, he left his stories, his intellectual property to me. Inside the manila envelope were eleven short stories: the ten stories that made up Tom’s Master’s thesis and his final short story, *A Methodical Cleaning*.

For Tom, I was one of the people in his life who would take care of the things that mattered to him, even after he left this world. For me, I can’t even begin to explain why Tom wouldn’t leave these stories to his husband. But then again, I don’t know his husband. And I can’t even imagine when Tom wrote his will or why he thought of me as someone he could trust with his short stories. All I do know now is that Tom loved me and that he trusted me enough to continue his quest. I am now the one who will find a place to publish his collection and keep his stories alive. From my time with Tom, I have come to follow several of the literary magazines that he loved, and I know where he would have wanted to publish his work. As I read more and more of his stories, I know that they are a big part of his life and that they are something that he wanted to continue to share.

At this point, I’ve already begun to circulate his story, *A Methodical Cleaning*. I know it’ll take some time, but I’ll keep trying to publish his work. Publish some of his individual short stories, and then publish the entire collection as a book. I see this as my challenge now, and it’s a challenge that I know I can overcome. And when I do publish his story, *A Methodical Cleaning*,
I'll walk over and share it with my neighbor, Mrs. Brickman. Share with her his story of an older woman who used a grabber tool to help plan the final details of her long life. And share with her my story of a young man who was a writer and found inspiration in our neighborhood. I know Tom would’ve liked that.

Andrew L. Huerta lives in Tucson, Arizona where he has spent the past 15 years in higher education teaching/advising students who are the first in their families to attend college. After completing his MA in Creative Writing and PhD in Education, he is now in the process of completing his first two works of fiction: a collection of short stories entitled *A Different Man*, and a novel entitled *Raggedy Anthony*. His short stories have appeared in such publications as *The Round Up Writer’s Zine: Pride Edition*, *Creating Iris*, and *The Storyteller*. For more information please visit: [www.andrewlhuer.ta.com](http://www.andrewlhuer.ta.com).
**Review by Eric Andrews-Katz**

I sat down to start reading *Carsick* with a little hesitation. John Waters (aka The Prince of Puke or The King of Trash Cinema) is much better known for his directing movies than as author of books. Once committed, I started giggling quite easily. Then I chuckled and guffawed. Soon my ruckus laughter could be heard down the hallway; that’s with my office door shut. I hadn’t had this kind of reaction—from reading a book—in a very long time. I was only on page 29.

The idea for *Carsick* came to The Lord of Shock-Schlock Film as a result of his love for Hitchhiking. “I still hitchhike in Provincetown to Longnook….and usually ask someone to go on a thumbing date with me.” The author relates in the Prologue. And proceeds to tell of experiences with Philip Hoare, Kembra Pfahler, Dolin de Land, Henny Garfunkel, and even one incident when he and Patricia Hearst set up by the side of the road and stuck their thumbs out on unsuspecting drivers. So the idea of writing a book based on the First-Hand experiences of hitchhiking “from my Baltimore house to the door of my San Francisco apartment building” was only second nature.

The rules were simple. John Waters would not exploit his own celebrity. Not denying recognition was acceptable, but leaving it up to fate would be preferred. Armed with a faux-alligator bag stuffed with clothes, a GPS locator (he’s not a stupid man!), a Blackberry (again for emergency usage), a stack of “Thank You for Picking Me Up” cards, markers (for new signage), and several hand-drawn, cardboard signs including ones that read: “End of 70 West” and “I’m Not a Psycho.” Starting off in the early morning he leaves his home, sticks out his thumb letting adventure unfold as it may! What happens next are three very different versions of highly entertaining cross-country travels.

The first is written as pure fantasy: “The Best That Could Happen.” In this section Mr. Waters’ ride is such a delight, it’s as if a fairy godfather was looking over his shoulder the entire way. All his rides are fantastical and pure characters, all recognizing the God of Degenerate Cinema and celebrating his fame. The list includes: drug dealers who hand him cash to finance his next film, a Demolition Derby rider with a kinky fetish that lets John come along on a crunch mission, a Grandmother on the run, and several of the most polite Officers of the Law that seemed to leap off the pages of a Tom of Finland calendar.

The second part is entitled “The Worst That Could Happen” and is just that. From starting in the pouring rain to John’s first pick up being a former alcoholic the journey is pure hysterical nightmare. He gets a ride from two sets of devoted fans. The first only quotes lines from his films. The second fan base is loyal to the infamous true-life, serial killer Gertrude Baniszewski
and they are *not* happy with some of John’s publicized mockery on the notorious case. Other people met along the pathway to Hell are heavy chain smokers, an all-naturalist who takes going organic to an extreme, and a set of extremely ignorant Police Officers in Middle America.

The last section “The Real Thing” is almost a let down when compared to its predecessors. It is amusing and interesting but, due to the reality of every-day-Americans, lacks the hysterical extremities of the two chapters beforehand. It does show how even in Middle America, people are still willing to help strangers (and admit it, do you get stranger than John Waters?) who appear down on their luck. In more chapters than not, people assume John is homeless and offer him money not believing that he is indeed a film director. But even in this section the every-day people seem to be characters as well. He meets the “Here We Go Magic” bus tour, an open-minded wife of a Southern minister, two Manson-esque (in appearance) hippies traveling in another van, and The Corvette Kid; a very young, heterosexual Republican male who seems overly anxious to help Mr. Waters out with his journey across the country.

The book is highly entertaining—there’s no doubt of that! It’s a fun read and very enjoyable. It’s easy to visualize Mr. Waters alongside the Interstate with a faux alligator bag, his thumb sticking way out, and a cardboard sign that says, “I’m not Psycho.” And while even The Real Thing (100% true or not) has moments that make the readers’ eyebrows rise with a “really?”, it is the words of Susan, Mr. Waters’ assistant, that summarizes the question everyone mentally thinks: “…If it was [your] unknown ass, [You’d] still be hitchhiking in West Virginia.”

Recognized or not the stories that evolved from the adventure are all worthwhile and absolutely hilarious.

Eric Andrews-Katz ([WriteOn530@gmail.com](mailto:WriteOn530@gmail.com)) lives in Seattle with his husband Alan. Eric’s first story “*Mr. Grimm’s Faery Tale*”—a 2008 Spectrum Short Fiction Award nominee—was published in *So Fey: Queer Fairy Fiction*. Other works have appeared in: *The Best Date Ever, Charmed Lives: Gay Spirit in Storytelling, Gay City Vols: 2, 3 & 4* (co-editor of Vol 4), *The Advocate, Chelsea Station*, and a contributing writer for the *Seattle Gay News*. Eric is also the author of the novels *The Jesus Injection* (the first Agent Buck 98 adventure) and its sequel *Balls & Chain*. 

Stephen Zerance is a recent MFA graduate of American University. He has previously appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *Prairie Schooner, Assaracus, Bloom, Knockout, Gertrude, Chelsea Station, Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide, Glitterwolf Magazine*, and *Toe Good Poetry*. His poetry has been featured on websites such as Lambda Literary Association and Split This Rock. He resides in Baltimore, Maryland.
kicked a chair at the ex,
lost the keys, burned
the sweater, broke
the glass, the dirty dishes
stack higher. No returned
phone calls, messages, door
never buzzed, only happy
when it buzzes and buzzes.

If you won the lottery, things
would change. Things
would be different. You’d stop
biting your nails. You’d bite
just one. Maybe. Eliminate
crow’s feet. Scrub the dirt
out of pores. Clean. If
you won, you’d
flee the neighborhood

for another. Begin
the next procession,
the next trial. You’d walk
it until you cycle back, until
you didn’t fuck up. Until
the next man you loved
stays. If you won

the lottery, everything
would be different. Nothing
would change.
The door bell would ring
as it does, you’d answer
the door to what? Make
it up. Make it scary.

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

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

“From the torrid depths of the Manhattan gay club scene, Cardamone snatches the precious jewel of wisdom that Blake prophesied could only be found in excess. You’ll find no political correctness, smugness or marriage activism in Cardamone’s gay universe: this is the visceral underbelly of gay life, and his language makes it shimmer like paradise.”
—Trebor Healey, author of *A Horse Named Sorrow and Faun*

“Exhilarating! Pacific Rimming is an eloquent, gorgeous reminder of why, when it comes to the mystery of desire, we persist in doing all the abject, crazy, beautiful things we do.”
—Paul Russell, author of *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*
“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
In the stadium, the lit clock made circles around itself; the rim was all neon, blonde neon, and Leo, the base umpire, calculated with this being the top of the Eighth, they were still in for a snafu. The odds demanded it. The light went around the dial again, as he waited for the pitch. The smell of the grass was strong. They had lucked out—the thunder storm broke early, leaving the town of Carleton Park fresh and initially wet but not enough to dampen the game, which came, as usual, at 7:15. Today the yards and the field had dried out under an August sun which, because of the storm, didn’t reach eighty-five degrees until four, and now at nine o’clock, it was down to seventy-eight. Another changing sign on the field, under the flying red horse of Mobilpower, said so.
Stationed between First and Second, but of course further back enough to be out of the way, he bent down to watch the pitch, knew that he looked good, from his shoulders to his tight butt, because his boyfriend Royce, having come to some of the games last year, always said so.

“You’re better to cruise than the players,” Royce had told him.

The Devils, the visitors, were trailing 4-1, but they now had two on base, with two out. Leo could see the concentration go into the back of the Carleton Park pitcher—pin-striped white and green—twenty-two-year-old Smitty, who was a left-hander from Florida. He was eyeing the next batter, who just happened to be the designated hitter. There was something about this strong, well-built man (small for the team) which reminded Leo of his boyfriend—he could have sworn he had seen Royce last night, when he had been going back to the Carleton Hilton, just a flash by in the car driven by someone else—

All of a sudden the designated hitter was pounding a grounder to the second baseman, who caught the ball and threw it to First, who gloved it, but full wide of the bag. Leo, still dizzied by his recollection of Royce’s driveby, just stood there, somewhat stunned, feeling uncertain about the call. Well, no call at all, he decided. But obviously everyone in Carleton Park thought the designated Devil was out. Like a prong of lightning, chaos hit the field. The two red Devils who were on base continued to run them, while the Carleton Park Invaders broke formation and headed toward the dugout.

A thunderous boo filled the field while everyone, Leo included, stood at a standstill.

Rootman, the Carleton Park team manager, was instantly coming toward Leo, like a locomotive in a green cap. His face was swarthy and intent. “That man was out. Why didn’t you call it?”

The bill of his cap was nearly touching Leo’s forehead. The “s” in “was” sprayed Leo in the eye. Leo heard himself shouting because the booing was getting even worse. “There was no need to call it. It was way wide of the bag.”

“Open your eyes, Ump,” someone yelled. “You’re missing a good game!”

“If you had another eye, you’d be a Cyclops!”

“Then why didn’t you call it safe?” Rootman asked.

“It was obvious,” Leo answered. “There was no attempt to tag, and your first baseman—Kelly—was two miles away from the base when he caught it from second.”

Why did he have to defend himself? He knew he was right. He felt the blood draw up from inside him, excited, irresistible, reliable.

One of the Devils who had been running the bases was already in. The second runner had reached Third. A small contingent from Leavenworth near the garden stand was shaking a collection of red-hell hot pom-poms, riling the Carleton Park mob like a mad bull.

“Fuck”—and this time the spit hit both Leo’s eyes—“Don’t you get it? A thumb over the shoulder for ‘out,’ hands across you for ‘safe’?”

Meanwhile, Herringbone Fred, also known in the league as “Black Fred,” was running up from home plate. He was Leo’s loyal partner umpire.

“Let’s take it cool now, here,” Fred said, staring at Rootman. Rootman was a muscular sixty if he was a day, and he was six, three, if he was an inch. He was a creased man—creases in his lightly
anguished face, creases in his pants and green short-sleeved sport shirt. And it was common knowledge that he had already been through one heart attack already. There were details scattered around that he had a son who was Heisman material but who had turned out gay.

While the clock continued to turn in blonde circles, and the temperature registered a rise in two degrees, when it had been seventy-eight just minutes ago, some belated firecrackers went off—Leo saw the sparks—and now “Open your eyes! Open your eyes!” went into a litany.

“Tell your buddy here,” Rootman said, “that Civic Stadium isn’t a Lighthouse for the Blind!”

“Go ahead and say so”—and Leo remembered he had used a similar phrase with Royce—“go ahead and say so. There is no out, period.”

Rootman tossed his cap—a green blur—to the ground.

“All right,” Leo heard himself saying, “you’re out of the game, Sir.”

And when the fans saw Rootman leave the field, fury took over. The game programs for that night came sailing out on to the field. Green-T-shirted ushers were suddenly in evidence in the stand. Some smashing was heard behind the concessions, and a couple of hunkering, long-bearded assholes in green feed caps were being escorted out. Even a few women were hooting at the ushers.

As the Carleton Park Invaders resumed their formation, Leo could hear someone shouting, “Fuck the fairy ump!”

Black Fred stayed on for a private check-in. His mask was on his head. For some reason, Leo thought of the frogs you put in vases so that the flowers stand up straight. “Hey, Man,” Fred told him, “next time something like that happens, you call it anyway. Better safe than sorry!” And even though the booing had finally died down, he added, “Better safe than smashed!”

By the end of the game, the Carleton Park Invaders had lost.

* * *

Next morning, Leo borrowed Fred’s Honda and drove up to Salem—just for the day. It was his home when he wasn’t umpiring. He’d be back for the game in plenty of time that evening. Things had to get settled between him and Royce.

For some time, he had known that Royce had been slipping from him. He himself had not been able to get back to the house—since they were traveling all over—but he knew Royce had moved out on him. Notices had been forwarded on to him that the mortgage installments had not been paid. Before the season had begun, Leo had authorized Royce’s signature on his checking account, so their home would be covered, but Royce had obviously bailed. Now Benjamin Franklin Trust had set an appointment to meet up with both of them, but Leo most emphatically doubted his lover—former lover, he supposed—would be there.

Nevertheless, Royce was waiting for him at Benjamin Franklin when Leo came into the air-conditioned lobby with an armload of payment notices. The place was a done-over Carnegie Free Library, very plush now. The stained glass windows had been retained. The loan officer they got, Leo knew, was easy-hearted. He felt grateful, because when she drew up the account on her screen, he saw they were within days of foreclosure. Leo knew she read Tolstoy on the weekends. Thank God for that.
Helen was heavily jeweled and in her forties. “The bank’s going to want a reason,” she said cheerfully. “Illness, death, extenuating circumstances. I know there’s been a lot of death in your family. Also injury—your brother. What an article on him!”

“No, I don’t have any excuses,” Leo said magnanimously. “But I’m willing to cover the late payments.”

Already he had his checkbook out.

“I’m his excuse,” Royce said. “I just flaked out. He’s been gone, and couldn’t pay. I was supposed to send the checks.”

Helen was making notes. “Who’s going to be paying after this?”

“I am,” Leo said quickly.

Royce smiled for a moment and then went back to his frown. Almost a grimace.

Helen—marvelous blonde silver hair—gave out a wistful sound that seemed very hip. “So there’s not to be any co-signing on this mortgage? If I understand right, it just remains in one name?”

“Yes.”

Helen smiled knowingly at them. “It’s very hard these days to figure out what people’s domestic arrangements are, without getting too nosey. Nevertheless, the bank needs to know where its next check is coming from. Who its next check is coming from.” She considered, in a friendly way. “Or is it ‘whom’?”

The light through the stained glass windows got denser suddenly. But dots of red also accentuated the floor. Getting a detail of the damage, Leo wrote out a check for $2,000. More than his monthly salary. Five hundred dollars more.

Helen went to get a paper initialed by a manager.

“Those penalties,” Royce said in her absence. “I’ll pay for them.”

“I know that, too,” Leo said rather irritably. “But it isn’t necessary.”

Helen returned and had Leo sign about six forms. The house was retrieved. Next payment, September 1. Although Leo would be umpiring in Port Townsend then, he’d cover it by phone, and made arrangements now to do so.

Both of them shook hands with Helen. “I see you’re going to be in Angels in America,” she said to Royce, using her locally famous photographic memory. “Congratulations on pushing that envelope. We need it here. And so,” she said, by way of goodbye and smiling while taking them both in, “between the two of you we have Angels in America and Angels in the Outfield.” Leo laughed not because he thought it was particularly funny, but because he wished the whole world could be like Helen.

In the next moment, they were in the parking lot. Leo was about to shake hands to get away, while Royce got a call saying that if his ass wasn’t ready to take this next assignment on his new tow-truck job, he could consider his days with Tony’s Tow over. The answer came quickly that he would be right there, but obviously he was having second thoughts.

“Right.”
“In fact, I’ll put it right through the mail slot of our—your—house.”
Leo was surprised at himself. He actually was going to accept the money. “So how long have you been gone from the house?”
“Since July 15. I just decided I needed to launch out on my own.”
At first Leo thought he said “lunch.” Launch? Royce had never used a word like that before.
“Where are you now?”
“At Brightman Apartments. Just a few blocks from here.”
“What happened to you?” Leo asked. “Have you taken up with someone else?”
“Not exactly,” Royce said.
“What do you mean, ‘not exactly’?”
“I got involved in theatre.”
“Theatre?”
“You remember I ushered for Angels in America in Portland the year we met?”
Leo nodded.
“Well, they’re doing it here in Salem. It’s a bold step for the community here, like Helen said, but they’re doing it. And I tried out for the part and I got it. Between the tow truck and the rehearsals, this house just fell through the cracks. And I decided to move out.”
It was a lame excuse. It was another man all right.
The asphalt was now silvery with heat. “Were you in Carleton Park yesterday?” Leo asked.
Royce was startled. “Yes. Duncan has a friend at the University who directed a production there. He agreed to have dinner and give us some pointers.”
“Duncan?”
“Yeah. He’s in the play, too.”
“What’s his part?” Leo asked.
“Joe the Mormon.”
“And yours?”
“Prior.”
Impossible! He couldn’t imagine Royce memorizing two lines. And here he was the centerpiece.
“When does the play start?”
“Next week.” Royce looked at his watch. “Look, Leo, I’m sorry. You know what a ditz I am. Especially about money. If you can’t get out of this mess, I’ll pay you back, month by month.”
Leo just stood there, heard the fans bawling at him from the stands in his mind. Saw Rootman throw his hat down. He didn’t want this to end; he was just getting into it, just like with his hated one-on-one of the night before.
“Well, I have to go.” Royce’s blond hair was in a bowl cut, almost like the Beatles’ in the early years. Instantly Leo felt that hair touching his cheek, as Royce came over and lightly kissed him. “You’ve been very sweet to me,” Royce said. “You deserve better than what I came up with. I won’t let you down, but I just have to go.” With his face so close to his, Leo thought back to the time last night when Rootman had not been just within spitting distance—it had been spraying range. There was something almost erotic about it. Now he could see the small pock marks along Royce’s strong jaw line—very subtle, Leo had only noticed them when they had been making love—the few remaining signs of an adolescence struggle with acne, which had cost his parents thousands in dermatological bills. It was the first thing they had brought up when he had been ungrateful and petulant enough to tell them he was gay.

Royce now pointed to the truck parked in the bank lot. “You can reach me through Tony’s Tow anytime.”

“Well, at least give me back the key to the house.”

Sweating in his jumper, tanned Royce fished in his pockets and drew out the mahogany door key. He looked reluctant, handing it over, but then was gone.

Leo started walking toward his car, but heard no rumble in back of him. Looking around, he saw Royce standing beside the locked tow truck, scratching his head. Royce looked at him with the eyes of a rabbit, before it’s about to dart under a car. “The keys are inside.” He struck his head. “What did I tell you?”

“Do you have an extra set?”

“Yes. Duncan has them.”

“So you are living together.”

“No. They’re just in his custody, as he calls it—as my ‘top’ boyfriend, to use his words. I kept losing them so often, he had a set made for himself.” Royce took out his cell phone and tried Duncan. He’d be there right away. “Runs his own print shop,” Royce said. “So he can do that.” He looked at his watch. “The boss is going to shit when he finds out how late I’ve shown up for this call out on Lancaster.”

They just stood there, looking out over the warming pavement. Several sprinklers at the mall across the street had started up. The red and pink roses and grass were like jewels over there.

“You don’t have to stand here with me, if you don’t want to,” Royce said. “This is my fuck-up, and I’ll be out of here soon.”

Leo stayed silent a little longer. “This is so goddamned not O.K.”

“What’s not?”

“You walking out like this,” Leo said, staring at him with deliberateness.

“Yeah? I just got tired, Leo, of being in your care all the time. Having you fight my battles for me.”

“So what do you do?” Leo asked, on a surge of that reliable blood again. “Hook up with someone who takes charges of your keys, like you were in nursery school or jail.” He remained there, frozen. He felt so tightly bound, he didn’t know what else to say.

At this point, Duncan pulled into the bank lot in a red Honda Accord.

The man who got out definitely did look the part of Joe in *Angels in America*. He was on a large scale, not exactly a Marlboro man, but six foot three at least, without an ounce of fat. He wore a tight yellow polo shirt, chest stretching the cloth, finishing the impression Leo had caught of the muscular arm in the car. He might have been thirty-five, meaning that if he was serious about Royce, he was definitely courting a child bride.

“Duncan, this is Leo.”

Duncan just nodded vaguely in Leo’s direction, and, with ink-soaked hands, took the duplicate set of keys from his pocket, and opened the tow truck.

“You don’t know how many times per week this happens,” Duncan said, looking at Royce paternally and then back at Leo as though he would understand. He stood there with perfect posture, almost in military position.

“Maybe I do,” Leo answered slyly, and instantly regretted it.

Duncan took him in for the first time. His eyes narrowed into a mischievous glint. “Well, maybe so.” He then turned to Royce, who had already hauled himself up into the driver’s seat of Tony’s Tow. He was not happy with this discussion about him.

“Did you ever get the payments square on this house?”

“Yes,” Royce answered. “Leo and I just talked about that. Leo’s going to handle it, now that he’s here.”

“Well, it seems to me”—Duncan was directing his glance to Leo—“Royce ought to help you. If he’s fucked things up.”

This kind of humoring directive threw Leo off. In the large, wide tow truck, Royce looked something like a baby in a high chair.

“I can handle it fine,” Leo told him and felt suddenly like giving him a push.

Royce furiously started the engine—“It’s none of your fucking business”—and, before throwing the truck in reverse, demanded Duncan give him the duplicate set of keys. Leo felt grateful no one else was in the lot, because afterwards Royce backed out without looking. Gigantic and statue-like, Duncan stood beside his car, hands on his hips, as though he were a colossus observing the departure of a ship in a harbor. Leo could feel he was attracted somehow, the way one is attracted to standing bears.

“This wasn’t necessary,” Leo said.

“Oh, yes it is,” Duncan answered, heading back to his Honda, which was nearly the twin of Fred’s. “That boy needs to learn some responsibility.”

Leo actually had his hands up, ready for fists. “I can handle my house my own way.”

Duncan gave him a disdainful look, then cut him off by getting back into his car.

*   *   *

Charlie’s (his brother’s) Auto was up in the northern part of the city. It was three by the time he got there. He had to be back on the road by five. When he opened the door to the little office, there Rootman was, Manager Rootman of the Carleton Park Invaders, talking with Leo’s brother.
Charlie was a little schizy in social situations. It was Iraq, working its magic. Charlie had been in the medical corps and had sent men out into the dunes to die. Charlie had gotten chummy with Rootman through the Vet’s Memorial Hall down in Carleton Park. Rootman, a survivor of Vietnam—and you could tell—hung out at that place a lot, and Charlie went there just to escape Salem and cavort. Leo understood that Rootman used to lament with Charlie over his gay son.

“Rootman here tells me you’re a faggot,” Charlie said.

“No I did not!” Rootman insisted.

“That’s what you were implying anyway,” Charlie retorted. “And I told him”—he was eating a banana from a late lunch. “So what the fuck else is new?”

Shocked they had been talking about him rather than the son, Leo went straight up to the man who was dressed, wholly out of character, in a red pin-striped shirt and tan slacks. Rootman was definitely a little drunk. Probably had a few with Charlie, who, to ease the PTSD, sometimes brought a six-pack in to finish a job.

“Hey, calm down, Leo,” Rootman said. “I didn’t imply anything of a kind.”

“Right,” Charlie laughed, and literally backed himself into some customer’s open trunk. He was fixing the tension rod so the lid would close. Charlie looked sallow and huge-shouldered—he would have dwarfed Rootman and matched Duncan any day—and it was a relief to have his spectacled King Kong face disappear.

“I can’t be talking to you anyway,” Leo said. “Not until you’re back on tonight. And even then it’s just on the field.”

“You don’t have to be reciting the rule book to me,” Rootman said, and wavered a bit as he stood there. Then he smiled. “You’ve got to be good to me. I’ve got a daughter who’s going to do summer graduation this weekend. Down at Oregon State. Her mother and I just took her out to lunch at the Ram’s Head today.”

“With plenty of help from the bar” came the muffled sound from the trunk.

“Charlie, I have to go,” Leo told him. He was aware of the two other cars on hoists—a Lexus and a sport Celica. They reminded him of two people strung up, hung. The smell of oil mixed with the smell of beer. “I can’t hang around if a team manager is here.” Interestingly enough, he was still standing within confrontation distance of the man.

“Hey, come on”—from the trunk again. “Why be anti-social? He didn’t say you were all that gay.”

“I didn’t say you were that at all,” Rootman protested.

“Then why”—Charlie came out of the trunk, with the tension bar a success—“did you make a point of coming in talking about the ump who likes a bat up his ass?”

“I didn’t say that,” Rootman insisted.

Leo just stood there with his fists doubled. He felt as if he were completely covered over by spider webs.

Rootman blinked. “Man, I couldn’t have said that. How could I? I have a son whose career may be ruined because he’s gay.”
“So you’re trying to jerk my chain,” Leo said to Charlie.
Charlie smiled. “O.K., O.K., it was me who said it.”
“I need to leave,” Leo repeated.
“Hey,” Rootman said, trying to call Leo back. “Maybe after the season is over, you could talk to me. About my son.”
“I would be willing,” Leo answered.

* * *

That night, it was well into the bottom of the Ninth, with two out for the Carleton Park Invaders, when Leo, all dressed and padded, felt himself getting ready to fight again. That is, he squatted there, as plate umpire, feeling on tilt. He congratulated himself that he actually did have a thick skin after all. He considered all the hundreds and probably thousands of butts he’d seen from this position—like this one coming from The Carleton Park Invaders’ catcher, round and full and inviting a bite the way a great green apple invites a bite—and he’d just watched and never done anything else. A brilliant evening star was climbing above the field, and it was as if he could feel the gravitational pull of his family. His father, dismissed and shamed as an ex-policeman, had fought in barrooms until he had found this cult where they had all agreed ultimately to combat the modern world by taking koolaid spiked with cyanide in Brazil. When growing up, Leo, on his way out the door, would be constantly confronted by his father, who would say, “Be a man” from the breakfast table. And his mother would follow up with, “Yeah. Be a man, but don’t get hurt.” Nevertheless, she had found herself in the Martian scheme, too.

He wasn’t any better at battle than she was, really.

“This isn’t you,” his friends would tell him. “You’re a painter, not an umpire.”

As a matter of fact, using oils, he would catch tonight’s moment as carmine red blurs of light, beneath the dial and the three towers of white flood lamps, eight bulbs to a pole. Before going to Umpire School in Florida, Leo, with the death of his parents, had come into some money, which had allowed him to go to Cascade Community College. Slowly through a series of art workshops, his paintings had emerged as wet, splashy, and promising, capturing the Oregon landscape in tones of browns and green, with fallen oaks and pines crossing back trails in the Cascades, accentuated by delicate-looking frogs and clusters of wild pink rhododendrons. The instructor said he had talent, but he was also drawn to something else. The thrill of battle. He knew his ass was on the line right now. He knew that if there had been a scout in the stadium last night, that might have meant his job. Also Fred almost never criticized him, meaning that last night Leo was getting close to the edge. No surprise—he still considered himself a rookie umpire, twenty-six years old and in his second year. He was late to the profession and still doubtful about being here anyway. But he kept on. The tension drew him in.

Connolly, the Ranger catcher, was at bat. The score was Two-Two, with two men on, and there could be no more outs. Leo felt he could resist all the cat-calls up until now, but if he flubbed on this one, they would have his ass. All right. Let them have his ass. The day still hadn’t played itself out.

Speedstick James, the relief pitcher for the Devils, fired the ball down at nearly 100 miles per hour. Connolly swung straight through and missed. A beautiful miss, as though coming from a Grecian discus. “Strike One!”
Speedstick threw again, and the ball went, beautifully, into Redskin Randy’s mitt. A straight shot that even the crowd didn’t question, even though Connolly didn’t swing. “Strike Two!” Leo called, and at that moment, looked over and saw Royce seated near the Player Tunnel. Duncan distinctly was not with him.

And then the third pitch, which went screaming into Randy’s mitt, but, in Leo’s estimation, grazed the ground, before getting there. Remembering last night, Leo raised his right arm and closed his fist, but with Royce’s face framed just below, he allowed the ball to be live. Connolly was obviously on the same wavelength, because he hurled his discus body toward First while Hector Villa hoofed his way to Second. Meanwhile, like last night, the Invaders were breaking formation and coming in, while Randy rolled the ball across the luminous grass out to the mound. Chaos hit once more, as the whole game became suspended midair. No one knew where to go. Fred came running toward him, but fortunately said, “You thought the ball was live, Man? Is that it? I’ll back you. It look like it was in the dirt to me, too.”

“Yes,” Leo said, feeling dizzy. “Rule book says, the ball is live, even if the man has three strikes.”

He had to repeat this to Rootman, who was twice the locomotive he was last night. He looked like a model for an anatomy drawing, with the veins out all over his neck and forehead. He seemed to be ashamed of asking for help this afternoon.

“You say that ball hit the dirt? No one saw the ball hit the dirt.”

“You weren’t plate umpire, either,” Leo said, now feeling the full force of this afternoon.

“I’ll have your job for this,” Rootman said.

“Then it will be both our jobs,” Fred said, “because that’s the way I saw it, too. Your men stay on base. This inning isn’t over.”

“And you’re out of the game again,” Leo said. “For making threats.”

He exchanged a glance with Fred, who nodded and was much more with him than last night.

“You should have said ‘No catch,’” Rootman told him, as he turned away. Obviously, the cowering look served to inflame the crowd even more. “You should have said ‘No catch’!” he repeated over his shoulder. Seeing him ejected again, the people put out a boo such as Leo had never heard before, and with it the faint refrain, “Homo ump. Homo ump,” which sounded like “Homo up.”

It was five minutes later when Speedstick was hurling another ball straight down the middle, but this time the designated hitter connected with it instantaneously, and the white dot, comet-like, went sailing straight over the neon clock. From the little band of Red Devil fans came “Thunderstruck!” by AC/DC on a amazingly loud ghetto blaster—which, traditionally, Carleton Park played throughout the stadium for every home run. They lost by 5-3. No song could have riled the crowd more, and Leo felt, at last, he liked the melee.

*   *   *

Later, he went to the motel room Royce had booked for the night. He and Fred were due to leave for Vancouver, B.C., at five in morning, so he would have to be back soon at the Hilton room the Clubie had gotten for him and Fred.
They sat on the bed, and he held Royce against him. There was a kind of tawdry light over the orange bedspread. Nevertheless, the lamp was beautiful on Royce’s hair.

“I heard what they called you,” Royce said. “Somebody knows about you. It’s just a matter of time now.”

He had a habit of speaking into Leo’s ear just at the moment they were hugging.

“I’ve known that,” Leo answered, whispering back. “Especially now, that I’ve thrown Rootman out twice.”

“What will happen then?”

“They’ll use my last two controversial calls as reason to give me the ax.”

“But that won’t be the real reason?”

“No,” Leo answered. “You know that.”

Royce was bared at the shoulders and chest, too.

“Fred will go on, he’ll continue. He’s got the looks. They want Hollywood style, now.”

Royce gave him a glance, and then hugged him. Now they were skin to skin. “If they’re going to fire you anyway, why not quit now? You can take up nursing again, or do your painting, and we could live back at the house.”

“What about Duncan?”

“Fuck Father Duncan.”

“Well, I’m not ready to go yet,” Leo said. “I have to live this out until it’s finished.”

They made love in the shabby room, and then, giving Royce the keys back to the house, he returned to Fred and made ready for tomorrow.

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

It’ll be some time before you read this letter, if you ever do read it. I thought it would be better if I tried to put down, in words, my thoughts about what being gay, for me, has felt like, and what it might mean for you to have a gay uncle.

There are ideas out there that some people choose to be gay. I do not ever remember making this choice, just as you might not remember choosing to like pirates, *Star Wars*, or fruit snacks. (All of these, at your current age of eight, you enjoy.) I can tell you some moments that, when I reflect upon them, seem to me to be signals that I was different from other boys my age.

In the small town that your mother and I grew up in, there were some prescribed ideas about what boys would do, what activities they would be involved in, and how best to fit in. (For
example, your Uncle Matthew, who is a year older than me, was involved in wrestling.) I, from an early age, enjoyed drawing—I would spend hours drawing dinosaurs, dragons, and Jafar from Aladdin. (I think it had to do more with Jafar’s wardrobe than his temperament in the Disney version of the story.) Boys were expected to play football, basketball, and baseball. I did only two of these sports, basketball and baseball, and elected not to participate in football. I believe I was the only boy—maybe there were one or two others—who decided that I didn’t want to be involved in football.

This was when the real pain of puberty and middle school began.

When you’re young, as you will indefinitely experience, it (at least to some people’s minds) is best to fit into a crowd: girls are to look a certain way, and boys are to act a certain part. I did not participate in the acting of football. I did not find it worthwhile to appear tough, and so I suffered the consequences. To make matters worse I was the only boy on the Speech team. Instead of lifting weights and practicing tackling, I practiced elocution and poise which, it seems, have served me well in the longterm.

In middle school there are odd rituals of mockery and exclusion. In whatever way, I felt threatening to a group of boys: I hung out with girls, I got high grades, and I was well-liked by teachers. I spent a majority of my time preparing for speech meets and practicing my saxophone. I did not act the part of the other middle school boys.

A guy I will call Ted decided this wasn’t acceptable. Ted, being the local sheriff’s son, wrangled a posse of boys and launched a coordinated effort of humiliation and teasing against me. They hurled words such as faggot, queer, and gay toward me, and I, being rather naive, didn’t quite know what they meant. Their sounds were hard and hit me in the gut; the mere way Ted and his friends used these words let me know that, whatever they meant, I did not want to be these words.

This seems to be a common story of young gay people. We are currently launching a campaign against bullying in this country, and I am skeptical that it will bring any good. There are numerous schools of thought on the matter—one stating that bullying and the learning of how to handle it are a part of coming of age, whatever that means; another believes that there should be zero tolerance for any type of jest, humor, or fun-and-games allowed in school; another believes that it is the sole duty of teachers to enforce order in the classroom and hallways, though this still leaves the matter subjective to each teacher.

By the time you read this letter I imagine you will have undergone a fair amount of teasing and bullying, maybe even mocking others yourself. For better or worse— I think worse—it seems that bullying is a gauntlet most, if not all, of us have experienced in an educational setting. I hope you have had the courage to stand up for yourself and your friends, though it is not easy.

When I was in middle school I watched a show called Queer Eye for the Straight Guy that involved a cadre of gay men, each with a speciality, such as cooking, decorating, fashion, culture, and hair styling, that would advise straight men about how to look, appear, and dress better. Essentially it brought the idea of metrosexuality to the forefront of American consciousness, paving a way for straight men to look gayer without being a source of mockery.

I loved this show. As a child growing up on the prairie of North Dakota it was the only exposure to gay culture I had. It eventually led to me getting a job in high school at J.C. Penney’s, and it
eventually caused the comments from friends that they never saw me in T-shirts or sweatshirts, unless I was exercising.

But Queer Eye for the Straight Guy was not the only show I was watching during this time. Will and Grace was a popular sitcom on NBC with two gay male characters, Will and Jack. Will was a successful lawyer in New York City who lived off-and-on with his friend Grace. Jack was a thespian-type, doing a number of odd jobs that included working at Banana Republic, offering acting classes, and performing musical numbers at local clubs.

In both of these shows I could not find myself. I didn’t think of myself as flamboyant as Carson from Queer Eye for the Straight Guy or Jack from Will and Grace, and I prayed I wasn’t as high-strung as Will from Will and Grace. I did not find a role model, someone to emulate, in learning how to be gay, and I do not know if I ever will.

Growing up in a straight world you have undoubtedly heard stories of happily-ever-afters, about the leading man getting the blonde bombshell, and about boys taking girls to prom. I hope you have also had the great chance of living in a state that allows same-sex marriage, and have known girls who have taken their girlfriends to prom.

In high school there was one “out” guy named Levi. (I use Levi’s real name because I want to honor him for his strength.) Levi was stereotypically flamboyant: he wore tight jeans, make-up, glitter, and spoke at a relatively high pitch. Levi’s life was not easy. Our sophomore year of high school a petition circulated to have Levi change in the girls’ locker room for gym class. Levi liked boys, and it was argued that he would try to make a pass on a number of boys, especially the football players. I remember the petition circulating in the locker room; I remember seeing friends of mine sign it—either mindlessly or intentionally—and I remember when it came to me. I swallowed what felt like a small coal and I passed the petition on, not signing my name.

The girls were great. They rallied around Levi, calling the boys stupid and immature, and they even welcomed Levi into their locker room, saying they’d be honored to have him change with them. Of course this couldn’t happen, and when word reached the principal, the petition was pulled and Levi kept changing in the boys’ locker room, relegated to sneers and humiliation.

Levi eventually moved.

I tried dating girls in high school. My first girlfriend was in my sophomore year. She was on the high school dance team and could lift her leg higher than my head. She was shy, sweet, and blushed easily, which I thought was cute. I tried to understand what other boys felt when they were with their girlfriends. I asked my male friends questions about how to act, what to do, how to feel. None of it came flooding to me.

After kissing my girlfriend once, I broke up with her.

Junior year of high school came and I attempted to date another girl, this one lasted a little longer, but the way I asked her to go-out with me was anything but graceful. She and I were both in the play version of The Hobbit, with me being the lead character, Bilbo Baggins. At our last performance I bought her a bouquet of flowers and asked her out behind a garbage can. (Rule No. 1, Logan: Never ask anyone out behind a garbage can.) She said yes and I didn’t know what to do. So she gave me a hug and a kiss on the lips. I still didn’t feel the rush of emotion that my other friends felt when they were with their girlfriends.
At a cast party that night we watched one of the Saw movies, a scary movie that involves a twisted man who develops elaborate ways of torturing and killing people. During the movie my girlfriend and I would cuddle, hold hands, and occasionally she would jump into my lap. All I wanted was to be her friend. I did not want to be her boyfriend. I did not want to be any girl’s boyfriend.

In college I made new friends: lesbians, gay men, transgendered men and women, and people from around the country and the world. I was exposed to different subjects in college like Norwegian, and asked different questions from the ones in high school: What did it mean to be gay? What was the difference between 1st and 2nd-wave feminism? Why study Nietzsche or binomial theorems? What does pot feel like? How do you know if sex is good? My world grew larger and so did my sense of self.

In my junior year, while singing karaoke at a bar, I decided to say it, to name what I was. My friend Leslie, whom I had met as a prospective student, and I went to the bar to order gin and tonics. Through a blur of liquor-laced words and a haze of cigarette smoke I said it: “Leslie, I like boys.” She squealed, snapped her head back, and told me that she did too—and then she proceeded to kiss me, perhaps the most “action” I have ever received from a woman.

I began to tell other friends and, eventually, professors that I was gay. No one seemed shocked or moved; no one seemed to treat me differently. I still couldn’t accept it myself. One night, after coming home drunk, my friend Emily and I tried to have a conversation:

Don’t touch me!
Taylor, what’s wrong?
Stop it. Just stop it. You don’t know me. Why does everyone think they know me?
Taylor, you’ve had a lot to drink and I think you’re just upset. What’s wrong?
[Silence.]
Taylor, what’s wrong?
What’s wrong is I’m gay. It’s my first time saying that phrase and I feel my throat go dry as if my body is telling me it’s not natural, as if it’s not okay to say that word. I’m not happy, Emily, not that type of gay. I’m talking the type of gay that’s damnable.
Silence.
Taylor, it’s okay. You’re not the first person I know who’s gay. God still loves you...
No. Don’t go there. God does not love me. The Bible says I’m an abomination. People look at you funny when they know you’re gay. People think it’s okay to make fun of you and people think you’re some type of shtick. I’m not a shtick, Emily! I’m Taylor. Plain, simple, gay, Taylor.

I couldn’t handle it. The politics of being gay in college were too much for me: I did not see myself reflected in the gay culture where I went to school, and I was not strong enough to claim myself as a gay man. I was elected student body president, was out to a number of friends but not the student body, and I still regret not being proud of being gay at that point in my life.

I do need to say a word about your mother and father. I came out to your mother, sheepishly, on the telephone. She had a moment of silence and then told me she knew for a number of years, ever since I was obsessed with watching Mary Poppins every day and having her draw Jafar.
By the time you read this I do not doubt that you will have had numerous fights with your parents, have probably said words you would like to take back, and probably want both your mom and dad to accept you for who you are. Remember: your parents are being just that—parents. (I will still take you out for ice cream when they say you can’t have any.)

In the world as it currently is, Logan, in the year 2014, there are a few states in which I can get married. The one I currently live in, Washington, is just such a state, and Minnesota, where I just moved from, is another. North Dakota, where you live, does not allow me to get married.

In 2013 the Supreme Court struck down the rule in the military known as Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, a restriction that was placed upon military servicemen and servicewomen that pushed them to keep their sexuality hidden. We have yet to create a national law that allows all people to marry regardless of sexual identity.

So what is this letter really trying to say? It’s trying to say this: I love you, I love you, I love you. You probably don’t think it’s very cool to have an uncle who is so willing to say that phrase three times, but ever since you have been a baby, up until your current age, the age of eight, I have asked you this question: How much do I love you? And you have replied, “To the moon and back, Uncle Taylor!” The truth is I love you more than that.

Right now, at the writing of this letter, you don’t know what it means to be gay. You do know that boys aren’t “supposed” to wear dresses, although I did when I was little. You know that one of my favorite things is to give you a hug. And I know one of your favorite things is to wrestle around with me. I have a suspicion that you don’t think I’m any different from your Uncle Matthew, Uncle Christopher, or Uncle Steve (even though I know you think I’m the coolest uncle ever). In time, though, you will know that I am different. You’ll know that I didn’t seriously date women, that I hated myself for a good, long while growing up, that your grandparents struggled with my being gay, and that, through it all, I loved you just the same. You’ll know that boys get made fun of for being gay, and girls get called dykes. You, I hope, will know that that is not okay.

You see, Logan, the world is filled with love and it is better to stand with, alongside, and behind love, than to stand against it. Love carries the day. Love always wins. With love, all things are possible.

Love,
Uncle Taylor

Taylor Brorby is a writer living in the North Cascade Mountains. He writes for The Huffington Post and The EcoTheo Review. He is currently at work on a commissioned book and his first vespers service.
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2012
ALA Rainbow Book
I was in my first weeks of law school in Philadelphia when the planes hit the World Trade Center in September, 2001. I was already knee-deep in reading and study groups, struggling not only with the lessons and the law but with whether my choice to pursue them was a mistake. I had realized very quickly that I no longer had the enthusiasm for more schooling, burned out from finally getting a dual bachelor’s degree in history and American studies only a few months before, and I had a professor who had singled me out for abuse within my first days of classes. “Mr. Breed-gees,” he purposely mispronounced my name, “I doubt you have the depth of understanding to be a criminal attorney. I suspect if you last the entire semester, you should consider one of the corporate fields. Something less ambitious and career defining.”
The truth was that I was longing to be anywhere but in a library reading and studying and arguing case points. Instead of Philadelphia, I should have volunteered for one of those adventurous foreign jobs, like building a hut in Kenya or helping flood victims in China, something more absorbing and engaging and “hands-on,” but I was also not yet ready to admit that my law school decision might have been a big mistake, even though it was clear to others that it already was. At issue was also the respect I wanted of my parents—they had encouraged me in this path and I did not want to disappoint them by giving up on it so soon.

Within minutes of the impact of the plane on the South Tower, my father had called me on my cell phone. He had been unable to reach my older brother, Philip, who worked as a broker at the World Trade Center, and there were news reports that a fire had started in the upper floors of the building. I was seated in a classroom at the time, nursing a cardboard cup of coffee as the professor was beginning a lecture on “criminal structures,” when I felt the vibration of my cell phone and saw my father’s phone number tick across the screen. My heart tumbled; I knew something was wrong. My first impression was that it had everything to do with my mother—why else would he be calling me so early in the morning? I let the call go into voice mail, saw the little envelope appear on the screen indicating a message had been left, and fidgeted and sweated and worried as I listened to the lecture and attempted to take notes. About the same time, I noticed another student across the room checking his cell phone, then a student who worked as a part-time secretary in the administrative office burst in through the door, saying, “The Trade Towers have been hit!”

I knew instinctively that this was a moment I would always remember as the girl lifted her hands to her face to show her horror. Where were you when the news broke? How did you hear about it? What were you doing? What was your reaction?

The professor, a former district attorney and a Second Circuit court judge, briefly cross-examined the student-secretary in a hushed, calm manner—Trade Center? New York? Wall Street?—and then quickly dismissed the class. I knew now in my gut that my father’s phone call had nothing to do with my mother—why else would he be calling me so early in the morning? I let the call go into voice mail, saw the little envelope appear on the screen indicating a message had been left, and fidgeted and sweated and worried as I listened to the lecture and attempted to take notes. About the same time, I noticed another student across the room checking his cell phone, then a student who worked as a part-time secretary in the administrative office burst in through the door, saying, “The Trade Towers have been hit!”

I was not estranged from my brother, but we were also not close; our lives had very little orbits around each other. Philip was thirteen when I was born, entering his teens and an older, adult world, and I often fantasized when I was growing up that I was an only child, only to be startled by a comment from one of my parents about something Philip had said to them and the realization that somewhere out in the strange world beyond St. Louis, I had an older brother who lived and studied and worked and loved and had life issues. He was not out and open about his homosexuality with my parents, or at least I was not aware of it until I turned twelve and I caught my mother crying on the stairs one morning, her head bowed towards her lap. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, “You brother is just giving us some problems, Teddy. We’ll be alright. Your father will talk to him about it.”

Later, I overheard snippets of my parents’ conversation with each other and felt a deep shame about my brother’s sexuality, even though I understood little of what it was about. I had read about “gay men” and the “growing rate of AIDS infections” in the books and magazines in our neighborhood library and felt a deep fear not only for my brother but also for myself. What if I was the same sort of man as he was? Weren’t we related, after all, made up of the same genetic framework? If he were gay, what did that mean about me?
My brother was not a sissy, or at least I have no memory of clues to that. He did not lisp or flap his hands when he spoke or play with dolls. To my knowledge he never dressed up in my mother’s clothes or tried her make-up on while she wasn’t looking. He did not fit the stereotypical image of a gay man that I held in my mind from having watched TV sitcoms and re-runs as a boy. Philip was incredibly bright—in high school he had aced chemistry and physics and was president of the Math Club, though he was also not a geek. He played trumpet in the school band, which made him popular with both jocks and girls, and was co-captain of the tennis team, a sport which demanded little practice so he could do other things. My parents were always quick to let me know that something I was doing—or choosing—was also something that Philip had enjoyed doing—or not doing. He had organized paper drives for fundraisers for new gym equipment, sold doughnuts door-to-door to raise money for new band uniforms, and once he had gotten his driver’s license, volunteered with a library cart at a nursing home not far from school.

I had stumbled my way through high school. I had done poorly in geometry and worse in economics, though I had enjoyed World History and Civilization. I was slow learning to use a keyboard on the computer and was too uncoordinated to do gymnastics. I hated going to church or Bible camp or practicing trombone, which I gave up my sophomore year because I thought I could play football. I made the team as a receiver and played the first two games—until I kept dropping the ball too often and sat on the bench for the rest of the season and never tried out for the team the following years. After school, I held various jobs at the nearby mall—a cashier at a fast food restaurant, a clerk at a vitamin store, and a waiter at a small café. But it always seemed that my ambitions were small when compared to my brother’s achievements.

But more than that I resented my brother’s intrusions into the simple organization of our lives—we had to miss the broadcast of *The Breakfast Club* to meet him at the airport, dine as a family at the Red Lobster instead of shooting pool with my friend Brian in his basement, drive together to the nursing home to visit my grandmother instead of sitting with Craig in his bedroom listening to music. By then I was a self-absorbed teenager, wanting only to go in my own direction or that of my friends. That my brother only appeared during the holidays was often a relief—he showed up alone, smoked cigarettes in the driveway, and drank bottles of wine he sneaked into in a knapsack—and his interaction with the family was awkward and strained. My mother was desperate to know details of his life, though she did not wish to hear of Philip’s dates or boyfriends or anything to do with his being gay or having sex with other men. She asked him about seeing plays and Broadway musicals, the exotic trips he had taken, while my father tried to pin him down on investment advice, which he was always reluctant to give. Once Philip made a casual remark about dating an older man and I saw my mother’s face fluster and redden and she excused herself from the room, but later I heard her tell Philip that “We haven’t told anyone about it outside of the family. We thought it should be kept private.” Whenever I heard a classmate call another one a “fag” or “homo” in jest or ridicule I felt a deep burning shame because I could not step forth to defend my brother either. But the true fact of it was I studied my brother on those visits home—I watched the way he held his fork and chewed his food and swallowed, admired the way his hair was cut and styled, memorized the words and phrases he used to describe something he liked as *fab-u-lous* or *marv-e-lous*, and the way he cleared his throat and laughed at something he found ironic or funny. His characteristics were eerily similar to mine, but he had seemed to sail through his teenaged years without all the strife I was experiencing. After he left to return to his own world, I would spend hours in his bedroom snooping through the stuff he had left behind when he first left home for college and which my mother had never cleared away or discarded—his old sweaters and jackets, the weathered...
...science fiction paperbacks, the messages written in the corners of the photos of his yearbook from his friends—“Philip, I would never had made it through calculus without you sitting in back of me. You are a true friend and I will really miss you and hope we stay in touch, Love, Marci.” and “That was a great time we had together on the band trip to Chicago. You rock! Steve.”

I avoided “coming out” to myself and my parents in the same way my brother had done for so many years, to avoid seeing and hearing their disappointment. But being like my brother did not make us any closer. I was twenty-three years old on the day the Towers fell. I had only slept with two men. There was not much to tell about myself, except that I had a deep fear of who I would find when I started to look.

When I stepped out of the classroom and called my father back, I heard the strain in his voice immediately. “Teddy, you’ve heard?” he asked.

“I don’t know all the details,” I answered. “Did you hear from Philip?”

“No,” he answered. “Your mother wants you to get to New York as soon as possible.” My mother was always complaining that Philip and I were not close enough, as if by bringing us together in the same physical space she might be able to accept more readily the secretive details of his life. She had encouraged me to visit him in New York during the summer months before I began law school, but when I had asked Philip about staying with him, he had given me some excuse about being in Africa for a vacation and I dropped pursuing the idea, though a week before the terrorist attack he had sent me an e-mail that he was planning to be in Philadelphia for a business conference and did I want to get together for dinner and we had set a tentative date.

But I was angered by the realization that Philip was not recognizing the possibility that I was also gay—that he seemed so uninterested in my life—or my life when it only intersected with his. The Prodigal Son and Good Samaritan wasn’t a decent brother to his own brother.

“Why?” I asked my dad. “What’s going on?”

There was a pause in my father’s voice as I heard him say something to my mother. They were watching a television news program, most likely on the small set with the worst reception in the den of our house.

“Do you remember what floor Pup said he worked on?” my father asked me. Pup had always been my brother’s nickname; since a boy he had demonstrated a handsome, masculine, playfully personality—the kind of guy ready to go out to play tag football or wake up early to head to the creek to fish. “Pup” seemed to fit him perfectly. My parents had visited Pup in New York two years before and they had gone to see Philip’s office and dine at Windows on the World, the restaurant on the top floors of the North Tower. I had heard a lot of details of that visit from them because I had not been on the trip—going instead with some college friends down to New Orleans on a Thanksgiving break.

“No,” I answered, because it was not something I would have remembered. “Why?”

“Your mother wants you to check on Philip.”

“I’ll keep calling him till he answers.”

“No, she wants you to go to New York. She’s—”

“Is it safe?” I interrupted.
“She wants to know he’s okay.”

“Dad, that’s not possible. I have classes.”

I heard him sigh and admit to himself that bad news would be arriving. “Tad, your mother doesn’t want me to leave her to go to New York. We need you to get to New York to make sure Pup is okay.” “Tad” was the nickname I had been given since I was a baby because I was the “tadpole” of the family, and as hard as I tried to leave it behind, my Dad would yank it out every now and then to remind me.

“I’m sure he’ll call,” I said with a tone of irritation. “Did you try his cell phone?”

“He’s not answering.”

“Did you try his apartment? Maybe he’s at home.”

“No,” my father answered tersely. “He’s not there. Get up to New York as soon as you can.”

“Where am I going to stay when I get there?” I asked my father, a bit too snidely. He knew of Philip’s eluding my visit.

“At Pup’s.”

“How? I don’t have a key.”

“Your mother thinks she has the number of one of his neighbors. Get enough cash to pay a locksmith or call the police. Just till we know he’s okay and then you can get back to school.”

“Dad, this is crazy. You want me to rush to Manhattan to make sure Philip is okay just to turn around and come back to Philadelphia?”

“Tad, your mother is in tears…”

That did it, of course. The spasm of guilt, nine hundred miles away. When I hung up, I tried Philip’s cell phone but the call did not go through. It simply vanished into cyberspace and I turned furious. Once again, my errant and absent brother was making a huge change and impact in my own plans. For all I knew—and my father knew—Manhattan could be annihilated before I reached it. It was a seriously crazy idea.

I walked over to my dormitory, where a group of students were huddled around a television set, and I watched the South Tower collapse into a column of gray and black smoke. I knew in my gut that that was the end of my brother and I stepped awkwardly into a hallway and heard my cell phone ring. I knew it was my father calling again, though I could not get the courage to answer his call. I was moving through my own stages of shock.

I used an ATM machine to withdraw as much cash from my account as I could—a couple of hundred dollars that was left from a student loan—and in the parking lot behind the dormitory, I flagged down a guy to see if he could give me a ride to wherever he was headed. His name was Will and he was going to Princeton where his father taught classes and we listened in silence to the news updates on the radio until he dropped me off at the train station off Highway One. I learned that there were no trains running, though there were a lot of people driving in and out of the parking lot, asking questions of each other and callers on their cell phones. It was as if I had stepped into one of my brother’s sci-fi paperback plots where everything was out of sync. I was ready to give up, call up my Dad and admit defeat. I was now stuck in the middle of nowhere. Then, a woman who was waiting said that her husband had made it across the Hudson on a ferry.
and was stranded in Hoboken. Another woman offered to drive this lady there because her own husband had made it to a PATH station where all the trains had stopped. I asked them both if I could hitch a ride—mentioning that my brother worked in the South Tower and had not been heard from that morning. Both women were in their early thirties, impeccably dressed and seemed to radiate high incomes and a suburban stylishness and I could tell they were both wary of a stubbly young man with jeans and a T-shirt and long wild hair. I tried to give them as many details on my brother as I could in the space of our two-minute negotiation by looking them squarely in the eye and wiping the nervous sweat from the sides of my face. Something changed in both women as I told them I was trying to locate my brother, a flicker of compassion, trust, assistance, courage, and their acceptance of me seemed to give more credence to my insane mission.

There was a surreal comedy to the beginning of this adventure—it was a strangely beautiful day—the sky a brilliant blue ceiling above us. The leaves on the trees were a thick, translucent green from the bright sunlight, the grass which grew on the banks of the highway was still lush from summer, but a crisp dryness hovered in the air, a hint of a chill, of the immense change of fall arriving.

It felt like a slow trip through a foreign country, studying every highway sign as if it needed to be translated and considered a possible route. Two hours passed on the highway, each minute seeming like an extra hour. The husband of the woman driving worked as a lawyer and had been on his way into court when his train was delayed and then canceled. The other woman, with a stranded husband in Hoboken, was from Austria and spoke with a light German accent. Her husband worked for American Express, located in the Winter Garden building across the street from the World Trade Center.

The women thought my idea of getting into New York was crazy. The news reports on the car radio suggested travelers remain at home. Manhattan was sealed off to incoming traffic. Every building in lower Manhattan was being evacuated. This was not something small, but huge and worrisome. The reporters on the scene sounded confused and overwhelmed by background noise.

The traffic was heavier when we finally reached the exit for Hoboken. One street had been turned into a one-way route for emergency vehicles; an alternate route was hindered by delays. The woman with the stranded husband was relaying directions from her spouse to the driver. When we encountered another delay, I asked the woman to see if her husband was within walking distance.

"Too far," she answered.

"But how far?"

"Forty-five minutes, an hour, maybe?" she told me, after asking her husband.

"I’m going to walk it," I told the women.

"No, you can’t," they both protested. "It’s too far."

"This traffic may never move," I answered. "I can make it there faster on foot."

I opened the car door and thanked both women—Jessie and Aria—and suggested that they park on the other side of the street and wait for their husbands to make their way to them. They nodded, seemed to consider the suggestion, but Jessie said she wanted to press on a little farther.
On the sidewalk, on my own, I made better time. My eyes were tired from the bright sun and I wanted something cold to drink because I was feeling dehydrated, but I didn’t want to stop. I wanted to reach the waterfront as quickly as possible and try to get across to Manhattan before it was impossible. The noise from the traffic—honking and sirens—increased as I made my way closer to the piers. As I came around a corner to cross another highway, I could see the evacuation ahead. Rivers of people—men and women—were flooding into the street; emergency vehicles were parked end to end with flashing lights atop them.

As I moved into the crowd, I began to ask where the boats were docking. Some men and women were covered with a white powder—their suits and briefcases and hair and eyelashes dusted with ashes. Many were crying or sitting on the ground, their eyes glazed over with shock. I made it to a ramp where a ferry was unloading passengers, squeezing through the police and medical teams, where I finally got a view of the Hudson River—the waterfront full of small boats making the crossing, many with flashing lights and sirens and announcements being shouted over public address systems. And I also saw, for the first time, the smoking gray funnels that had once been the World Trade Center.

I waited until the ferry was emptied of passengers, then asked a guy my age who was working on the deck if the boat was going back across for more passengers.

He nodded to me, but I was suddenly lost to a group of firefighters who were boarding the boat, and I followed them on board as if I belonged with them.

No one questioned me once I was on board, and I sat near the prow, trying to remain inconspicuous. The crossing was swift and determined. I sat at the edge of the group of firefighters—it seemed that they had come up from somewhere in South Jersey—and they were all speaking on cell phones or walkie-talkies, yelling to each other things such as “Joey said the Marriott collapsed,” and “Sy says there’s debris as far as Chinatown,” and “Trust me, this was no accident. This was premeditated. An act of terror.”

My cell phone rang, and I opened it to see that it was my Dad calling again, but I turned the ringer off, aware that I had caught the attention of several firefighters. I did not have any belief that I was throwing my own life in peril by attempting to make my way into New York. I was only doing what my parents had asked of me and channeling my anger and confusion towards my brother.

At the docking in Manhattan, I followed the firefighters off the boat, surprised that no one was questioning an arriving student with a backpack, though I knew that I could keep myself inconspicuous as long as I looked as if I belonged with them. There was more bedlam on this side of the Hudson—impromptu triage sites, more policeman and medical teams, and another line of emergency vehicles waiting at the curb. Two army helicopters passed by overhead in a deafening roar that made everyone stop and watch them fly by. But I was shocked by the look of horror and desperation and frustration on the faces of those men and women waiting to take the ferry across to New Jersey and now I could detect a strange scent in the air—burning metal and wire, it seemed—and a thin layer of white ash on the ground, as if it had snowed only moments before.

I began walking northward along the West Side Highway. A park had been built near the water and I followed the trail uptown, as others were doing, around the pockets of other men and women trying to evacuate the island or return to their uptown homes.
I walked until I reached a large sports complex that had been built within giant airplane-sized hangers which a man who was passing by told me stretched up to Twenty-third Street. I crossed the highway and began walking west through Chelsea, stopping at a deli that was open and buying a bottle of water and a sandwich, which I ate as I continued to walk crosstown. There was a nervous pace to everyone out on the sidewalks—pedestrians darting from one side of the street to the next, cell phones pinned to their ears—but the city also seemed suspiciously empty and haunted.

My father had been calling Philip’s apartment regularly, the calls disconnected or unable to go through, and when they were connected, they were quickly dumped into voice mail. My father had given me the name and phone number of one of Philip’s neighbors, who I was to try when I got to his building.

It was close to three in the afternoon when I reached Philip’s building. I buzzed Eric in apartment Four-R from the lobby, and heard a staticky voice on the intercom speaker as the door buzzed and I pushed it open. I waited for what seemed to be an interminable amount of time for the elevator to arrive and when I stepped out onto the fourth floor minutes later, a short, stocky man with a ring of white hair around a balding scalp gave me a wave with a hand.

He was standing half in and half out of the doorway of an apartment and when he saw me his eyes widened and he said, “Teddy? I spoke to your mother earlier…”

He stepped out of the doorway and met me mid-hallway and shook my hand and said, “I don’t know if this key will work. It belonged to the guy who lived in the apartment before your brother moved in. Years ago. We were good friends. Still are. But I don’t think Pup ever had the lock changed.”

It was odd to hear a stranger call my brother by his family nickname. He held the key up to me as if I were to examine it. I nodded and followed the man down the hallway to where my brother’s apartment was located. “Let’s knock, first, just to see if he’s here,” Eric said. He was trying to be cheery, but I could see the nervous strain on his face that my presence had created, and I knew my own expression was beginning to form a scowl.

There was no answer to the knocking, and Eric slipped the key into the lock and it opened the door. He held the door for me as I stepped inside. I heard him remove the key from the lock. He reached it out to me and said, “Here. You hold onto this for a while.”

I took the key and we awkwardly looked into the apartment, keeping the door open, as if Philip might arrive at any moment behind us and ask, “What’s up?” The main room was clean and tidy, as if it had been straightened up just for the purpose of our discovering it. I had always thought my brother had good taste and it showed. There was a small dark brown leather couch and a matching chair and ottoman. A series of vintage European travel posters hung on a wall. Remote controls for the stereo and television equipment were evenly lined up on a glass-topped coffee table. Only the magazines at the side of the chair looked disorderly, as if they had been dropped there after reading.

“Did you eat?” Eric asked me after a moment to break the silence. “Are you hungry? Could I get you something?”

Before I had a chance to answer, the phone in the apartment rang and we listened to the four rings before it stopped. I waited to hear an answering machine click into place, but the apartment fell into silence. Philip’s phone service must have also included a remote call-answering feature.
“I should let my parents know I’m here,” I said and lifted my cell phone out of my pocket to dial. When my father answered I told him I was at Philip’s apartment but he was not at home. My father told me that a triage site had been situated outside a hospital in Greenwich Village and that a hotline had been set up to report the missing. I wrote the information on the back of a takeout menu that I found in Philip’s kitchen. When I hung up Philip’s neighbor asked, “Do you need company? Do you want me to stick around? I can help—”

I mentioned the hotline and the triage site and that I should contact both. When I tried the hotline number all I got was a busy signal. Eric had wandered back into the main room and had turned on the television set and was watching a newscast. He turned the volume down low when I came into the room but we were both startled to hear Philip’s phone ring again and we looked at it until it went silent.

“You can’t watch this forever or it will drive you mad,” Eric said, nodding to the news broadcast. “We can walk to St. Vincent’s. That’s where they are taking victims.”

“Victims?” I answered. It sounded so fatal and final to me and I had only just arrived. I wasn’t ready yet for bad news. “Is it far?”

“No, not really. Only a few blocks.”

I nodded my head and said, “Okay.”

“Let me lock up my apartment first,” he said. “And I have a spare key I can give you for the downstairs door so you can come and go as you need to.”

A few minutes later we were standing in the hallway waiting for the elevator. Eric had a camera strap draped across his chest and a large camera in one hand. A belt around his waist carried a photography bag. He had been wearing a large T-shirt and baggy shorts when he first met me and now with a baseball cap on his head and his dusty white sneakers he looked like a tourist who had wandered into the building by mistake.

“I’ve been conflicted all day,” he said, giving me a sheepish look with his arched eyebrows.

“Conflicted?” I echoed back to him. I found it an odd choice of words to keep a conversation going.

“I used to be a news photographer a long time ago—when I was about your age—I traveled a lot—tail end of the Vietnam conflict, Cambodia, Thailand, Japan. But it was hard work and you always had to be on call and I just fell into the conclusion that I wanted something easier and I was tired of being alone doing it. This morning when I saw the footage of the impact of the plane, my gut instinct was to grab my camera and run downtown and start snapping at whatever I saw. But I haven’t done that in years. And I was intimidated by my own desire to do it and the horror that it was happening where I lived—not where I was covering as a journalist.”

I nodded as if I understood all that he had said and, as we stepped into the elevator, he described some of the other events he wished he had covered, including the demonstrations at the Presidential conventions in 1988, which led to a string of expletives against Ronald Reagan for never having mentioned the word “AIDS.” When we reached the lobby of the building, Eric introduced me to a friend of Philip’s who was arriving home—a handsome man about my brother’s age—who hugged me and said, “This is horrible, truly horrible,” before he stepped in the elevator and disappeared. It was then that the dread began to consume me. On the walk down to the Village, Eric continued talking about his photography career, as if to dispel my anxieties.
and make our mission more entertaining for me, but it was hard not to regard the others out on the sidewalk, darting uptown, talking on cell phones and searching the sky. Eric shifted to talking about his partner Sean, whom he had been with for twenty-four years, slightly longer than I had been alive, and how they had met one night at a gay bathhouse not far from his apartment. “We messed around in the showers and decided we weren’t through with each other, so I brought him back to my place and he never left. Of course, that kind of sex stopped years ago, but we’re still both open to any sort of adventure that might come our way.”

It was odd to hear an older man talk openly about gay sex and his relationship and I flushed out of embarrassment; I knew so few who were out and open—or adventurous—at any age.

At St. Vincent’s there was a line of parked ambulances and a crowd of watchers behind a set of wooden barricades that had blocked off the street. I edged my way through the crowd, leaving Eric as he began to snap photographs of a distraught woman who held a picture of a man whom I took to be her husband. When I reached the front of the crowd I stepped up to a policewoman and said, “My brother. My brother is missing. How can I find out if he’s been brought here?”

She looked at me with a pair of large, brown teary eyes and said, “You have to stay behind the barricades, sir. We’re addressing the situation. You have to be patient.”

Jameson Currier is the author of ten works of fiction and the editor and publisher of *Chelsea Station Magazine*.

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The Third Buddha

* a novel

Jameson Currier
**A Gathering Storm**

JAMESON CURRIER

*Coming this fall from Chelsea Station Editions*

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

*Coming this fall from Chelsea Station Editions*
Harry George Alexander Bircham, an amoral man cast from a Wildean mold, and used to getting his way, will do anything to keep the affections and attentions of Charles Holland, a fellow student at Oxford—even commit murder. *I Knew Him* by Erastes is the story of their summer ‘vac’ from Oxford, where Bircham and Holland, originally intending to visit Paris, instead return to Holland’s ancestral home in Somerset. When they arrive, Holland receives a rude shock: his mother Margaret, widowed by the Great War, is about to marry the older brother (Claude) of her presumed deceased husband (Charles senior). Holland detests his uncle, and opposes the match. Bircham eventually learns that Holland has also been visited by his father, who has been missing for several years; Holland vacillates between overwhelming rage and depression. Initially aloof to this family drama, but eventually motivated by jealousy and desire—especially the desire to protect his lover—Bircham begins causing “accidents” (some fatal) to occur.

The astute reader will recognize at once that Erastes’ thriller shares many aspects with *Hamlet*. The first clue is the title itself, and several characters’ names: Holland’s uncle Claude (i.e., Claudius); Gilbert and Richardson, who share a quadangle with Bircham and Holland at Oxford, suggest Hamlet’s friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; there’s even a character named Polonius. The novel and play also share several plot points: the uncle who marries his deceased brother’s wife is the most obvious, and the reappearance of the “dead” father in the novel parallels the ghost from the original play, but noticeably absent from the novel is an Ophelia character, since Bircham (as Holland’s lover) naturally fills that role in addition to that of Horatio.

However, this story is not merely a retelling of Shakespeare’s play, cast in dinner jackets and evening clothes and set between the two World Wars. First of all, the main actor is not Holland (i.e., Hamlet) but rather Bircham: and since Bircham tells this story, he gets all the best lines. Nor is Bircham motivated by revenge, but rather by desire and jealousy. Moreover, he lacks the indecision and passivity of Hamlet: once he decides on a course of action, he only considers long enough how best to implement it. Nor is he conflicted by the questionable ethics or morality of his actions; the story is essentially one long soliloquy, but he does not concern himself with the greater existential questions posed by Shakespeare. Indeed, Bircham sees Fate as a force that he can bend or nudge, not something he must bow to.

Of course, another obvious difference between Erastes’ novel and *Hamlet* is the much more overt homosexuality in Bircham’s telling. It is interesting to note that Bircham could expect similar consequences for his relationship with Holland as he could for any of the crimes he
commits, for all that the novel is set in the Roaring Twenties, a time of relaxing morals (an example of this is a mention of the Deceased Brother’s Widow’s Marriage Act of 1921, which allows Margaret and Claude to marry; prior to the passage of this law, their planned marriage would have been prohibited, as it was considered incestuous).

So, if you can appreciate *Downton Abbey*, but with an arch, queer twist, then have your butler pour you a sherry and build up the fire in the drawing room; be sure to give him strict instructions that you are *not* to be disturbed under any circumstances.

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Keith Glaeske is a medievalist and collector of speculative fiction currently living in Washington, DC. His articles about medieval literature have been published in *Medieval Perspectives*, *Traditio*, and *Ériu*. 
Juan Pablo Duboué was born in Mendoza, Argentina. Currently pursuing his Masters in Contemporary English Literature, he works as a teacher, translator and interpreter. Apart from writing, Juan Pablo enjoys dancing ballet, singing and musical theatre performing.
Window

I find myself missing those days
when all we needed were
notebooks and pens
to write down how we felt.
I find myself hoping to get
even a quarter of what you gave
I cannot help it,
I’m obsessed
with the way that you
used to stare
as I pirouetted;
attempted a grand jete.
I find myself comparing
all my lovers to you
-no baritone voice
-no freckled skin
-no hazel eyes.
I find myself reacting violently
against
these so called ‘suitors’.
The thought of you
invading,
progressing,
duplicating…
I find myself divided
between the memory of you,
the ever charming,
ethereal you.
And the Present you,
the always raging,
‘moodi-est’ you.
I find myself looking
through the window:
I’m sure I will find colour
at some point
if I stare long enough.

—Juan Pablo Duboué
“A brilliant debut novel by Canadian writer Jeffrey Luscombe that explores the inner and outer life of a ‘latent homosexual,’ Joshua Moore. Luscombe revitalizes the over-romanticized ‘coming out’ novel by subjecting it to a cold shower of literary realism.”
—Dick Smart, Lambda Literary

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

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

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

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

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

Praise for Part the Hawser, Limn the Sea

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

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

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

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

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
Dear Mother,
I got a message from Gary last evening on Facebook saying "Tom, I need to talk to you." Do you remember Gary from Mount Eden Center? We used to hang out a lot in elementary school and then he and his family moved away to New Hampshire and we sort of lost contact. I messaged him back, asked how he and the Doll's were doing and if everything was okay. "Not really," he responded, "I came out to them a few days ago and they were so angry that they didn't want me to meet any of my friends. Needless to say, they took away my cell phone and won't let me do anything before I talk to a therapist. They're like...this is just a phase Gary. Don't be silly. Talk to the therapist and things will be fine. But I know myself, and this is not a phase, Tom. I just wanted to reach out to you because I learned from Facebook that you have a boy friend and was
wondering if you have any words of advice." I told him what I had to say, and he said it
comforted him. It made me happy.

The conversation got me thinking about sixth grade when you came up to me one day and said,
"I learned from Mrs Ringer today that Johnny is a fairy. Fairies can sometimes do bad things.
You shouldn't mix with him too much from now on, okay?" "Okay," I said, not knowing what I
was agreeing to or what bad things fairies can do. A year later, on a Tuesday evening, while you
were drinking cognac with Aunt Marla, I overheard her say, "You've got to be careful about him,
dear. I saw him on the roof from my window the other day. And he was wearing his sister's
velvet frock and clapping. You don't want him to be one of those now, do you?" I ran away from
home that night, and cried under the stars, and stayed at A. Weissman's place till sunrise. And
when I turned 16, you asked me that afternoon, "Any good girls in school, baby? I told Marla
yesterday that you're all ready to date the prettiest of them all."

That remark set off some kind of a compressed spring in my system. Even though I had never
dated women in the past, I thought that I could ease into it. I imagined every other man doing it,
so why couldn't I? Perhaps, if I truly loved and valued someone, I could just as easily be in a
happy, committed relationship with that person, irrespective of gender. And if I got more
emotionally invested, and the relationship became more serious, one day I would realize that
loving boys was, perhaps, a short-lived whim, a tiny speckle of my imagination and more like a
go-to cushion of satisfaction because I didn't know any better or otherwise.

And then I met someone unexpectedly on a Saturday evening at a diner in the suburbs of New
Haven. She was with a boy, I remember; perhaps a cousin or a negligent lover, with dark
drooping eyes and pompadour haircut. And I was with you and Irene Goodman, cater-cornered
from her, drinking lemon tea and eating raspberry scones. While waiting in line to use the
restroom, she and I randomly started chatting about fiction books. It was Gore Vidal's Myra
Breckinridge for me and Claude Simon's The Acacia for her. The conversation lasted about a
minute and a half before we heard someone flush the toilet followed by a grating whoosh of the
hand dryer. As I peered into her cornflower blue eyes, moistened by periodic blinking, she said,
"Wanna hang out sometime?" "That'd be cool," I said, warily. "Well, here's my number," she
added, as she pulled out an olive-inked felt pen and a small piece of recycled paper from her
magenta twill pant pockets and scribbled it down. "Text me whenever you want to," she said and
went inside the restroom. While walking out she smiled awkwardly, lifted her right hand as if to
wave at the wall and said in a hushed, muffled voice, "Have a wonderful night."

We reconnected, a few days later. I texted her saying, "Hi Liana, this is Tom. We met at Barry's
in Maltby Lakes. You asked me to text you, remember? How's it going?" She replied within a
few hours saying, "Hi Tom. Have been waiting for your text all this while. Things are going
well. How've you been?" And that is how the slew of text communication began. The idea was
simple, I told myself: Try your utmost to focus on her and don't think about boys. If your mind
does, however, start to wander away, rewind your thoughts like bits of plastic tape spinning
around spools of old audio cassettes and reset your focus. Tell yourself that you can do this and
keep moving forward.

For the next few weeks, bleeps and buzzes and short acoustic rings from my cellular phone
suctioned me up to the rim of excitement. My phone would beep in the middle of art lectures, at
the end of synthetic chemistry lab courses, and infrequently, in the beginning of ballet lessons
and I would reply to each text carefully within a few minutes. By the end of third week, terms of
endearment sprouted up. "Good morning babe" she would say; or "Have a wonderful day, honeybear." And on our fourth week of cellular courting, she wrote, "Babe, I've been thinking about running away to Santa Monica with you. I'm miserable here without the ocean."

The novelty of the possibility of dating a girl, and the possibility of reinstating, what society calls, a normal and natural attraction adequately seasoned the enthusiasm in my responses back to her. Under the circumstances, I got the attention I needed, started to somehow feel a strong emotional connection, sensed a mutual romantic interest, and felt a genuine element of happiness while interacting with her. Text messages began to interweave emotions and expectations and myriad responsibilities shortly, leaving me suffused with boluses of endorphins. I felt like I was living in a glass cage in a mystical state of quasi-euphoria—in that same over-the-top ecstasy that consumes a runner towards the last few miles of a marathon or while slicing through layers of crisp, tangerine air on the backseat of a roller coaster. The emotions that developed were real and raw, but I didn't know what they were. Was it love? I asked myself. Was it just a playful obsession? Or perhaps, a childish crush? Whatever it was, it felt authentic and undiluted in its strength to a point where I second-guessed loving boys for the first time in my life. It felt liberating to think that I could be like the other guys in school who affectionately talked about girlfriend responsibilities, and more importantly that I could bring her home to a family event without you and Daddy feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed or being shamed by other people.

I sometimes wish that you had met her. You would've loved her like your own daughter, given how similar your tastes and interests are. At other times, however, I am glad that the meeting never happened, because when she would eventually find out about my being gay, you would, understandably, chide me for toying with her emotions, and tell me that I should've known myself better and made up my mind about identity preferences. In your world, everything is black or white, but it isn't so in mine. I still think about her, though. Her welfare, her happiness, her career goals of rural obstetrics. Her russet curls and refined smiles, as delicate and light as large soap bubbles. Her adventurous eyes, like rings of topaz, infused with gelatin and an origami of tender muscles, and the tattoo on her breast in ancient calligraphy that read Liberate The Rebel. She loved volleyball, white wine and garlands of seashells, but most of all she loved Nature as a priest and a father. Her mother, she said, was Marilyn Monroe. And the guest list on her fridge magnet read Georgia O'Keeffe, Sally Bowles, and Indira Gandhi.

The night we became a couple was a humid, September Wednesday when pellets of mist were foaming in the air. We were at the Turtle Pond in Central Park, staring at the Grunwald monument, talking intermittently about Nixon and Bill Clinton, and the injustices of racial profiling when she said, "Can I ask you a question, T?" "Sure, go ahead. What's up?" I replied, seventy eight percent certain what the question was going to be. "We've been chatting for about six weeks now, and I like you a lot, and I think you like me too. So, I was wondering...do you want to be in an exclusive relationship with me?" I said yes. Flatly—without feeling any emotion. I don't know why I didn't feel any emotion that very instant, because via text, the connection seemed strong. It came out involuntarily, like a knee jerk response at the crux of the situation, which of course made her giggle and chuckle and cry with happiness. As for me, I became breathless with apprehension, nervousness, and a battery of misgivings; it felt like I was drowning at the intersection of lies and deceit. But I folded myself back together, drew a deep breath, and engaged in a full-bodied hug, feeling her breasts squash against my chest. And then she rested her head on the bony groove of my right shoulder and caressed my neck in gentle swirls, as tips of my body hair bristled underneath the weight of her fuchsia painted nails. A
minute later, as my lips lay quivering like a lightning-struck tuning fork, she kissed me—warm, and deep, and tangibly heavy as I pulled my tongue back in the shape of a c, touching the flesh of my burnt upper palate. I felt strips of her tongue push through gaps of my teeth, beads of spittle leaping onto the floor of my mouth. And we sat still for a few long seconds—transfixed with emotions and odors of nervousness, before we resumed staring at the monument, discussing politics, and the injustices of racial profiling. Her nipples were hard and visibly aroused, popping like buttons through her peach-colored blouse, but for me, there was only a feeling of fearful empty hollowness—not a single trace of an erection.

You probably wonder why, then, did I say Yes when I knew it wasn't going to work, perhaps raising your expectations of my having a normal life? Why did I say Yes when I knew I had feelings for boys and ultimately wouldn't be interested? I wish I had a simple answer to that, but I don't. Emotions are complicated, and I couldn't parse out a crush from love; an obsession from real, grounded sentimentality. More importantly, I just couldn't bring myself to say No on her face, which was so perfectly lit up with a soft romance when she asked me the question. I've always had trouble saying No to things I knew would make someone infinitely happy. And the proposition of a relationship was no exception for me. Did I do the right thing, in retrospect? Absolutely not, and there are no legitimate excuses to prove otherwise. But I tell myself, people often say "You never know unless you try." So I tried, half-expecting the outcome. But I tried nonetheless.

Few days into our relationship, the reality of a serious commitment severely jolted me into a state of fear. There were expectations, and obligations, and timetables were created. And e-cards, wake-up messages, and voice mails of missing me and loving me gripped me full-throttle. I became hesitant and second-guessed myself every minute of every day. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to say Liana, this isn't working. I couldn't bring myself to rupture her heart with splinters of my identity confusions when trust and affection were beginning to build. I couldn't look into her eyes and tell her that I had to leave; that she should find another man, that she should be freed. However, my self-loathing and bitterness never went away. I wore costumes and masks of the affable phantom; rehearsing my lines and readying my acts as reluctance gave way to miscommunications which eventually tipped the relationship along a downward spiral. Life became a gimmick—a constant game of hide-and-seek with charades, facades and situational alibis. The hardest of all was during the holidays, when we drove back to her parent's home in the belly of the woods, and sat on the patio overlooking the lake, and talked about how happy and fortunate their daughter was to have found me. "It's nothing short of a miracle!" her mother said, "I knew God would answer my prayers." Despite my refusal of sex, my discomfort with public display of affection and despite the rockiness of my emotions, she loved me and thinking about all the sacrifices she made over the year makes me choke up. In my defense, however, I tried as hard as I could to be in love with a woman and to have a heterosexual relationship. What didn't occur naturally, I doctored it up—paying attention to Hollywood, texts from favorite novels and even conversations with chums. But there was no love in the empty vessel that was me, only friendliness and wan obsession. And on a Friday night, one year from the Turtle Pond, while going through pictures of Sister's engagement party on my phone together, a text notification popped up on top of the screen. The 917 number was saved to my address book as Jackson S. It said, "Last night was hot, man. I want you to fuck me again. As hard as you can. Free tomorrow by any chance? I'll be home by 7." She looked up, let go of my phone, and said, "I knew it, Tom. I knew it."
I tried three more times, thinking that the first relationship probably didn't work out because she wasn't the right person for me, but all of them ended badly. One found me stumbling out of a gay sex club in Fort Lauderdale at 1 am on a Tuesday, drunk out of my mind in a leather jockstrap, when I was supposed to have been sleeping at Aunt Lori’s condominium after helping her move. In the morning when she said, "I love you" and I said "I love you too" she became the color of a ripe strawberry and yelled "Get the fuck out of my life, you fucking faggot liar." The second, while attempting to check her email on my computer, found innumerable bookmarked links to gay pornographic sites. She sought refuge in an asylum nearby shortly after, suffering from chronic depression from being with a fourth guy who happened to be gay. And the third one, after soulful thinking and a few weeks of mindful meditation, came out to me as a femme lesbian. In that circumstance, we were both relieved. It was a win-win situation. Love for boys is not a choice or an addiction, it is the normal for people like me. It is the instinctive natural. Boys are what raise eyebrows, make the heart flutter, and cause erections. It is not an alternative, or a cop-out mechanism that Benny and his wife drilled into your brain, to make you believe that mine was the easier way of life. Being gay is hard; exhausting, tiring and emotionally taxing. But what I want you to realize is that sexuality, for me and for many people like me, is not an open tab. It is not a flexible on-off switch as they make you believe in your neighborhood of cultists. It is not "doing whatever makes me happy"; rather, it is the platform of emerging happiness.

Many people out there continue to believe that the minority status that paints my identity can be fixed by the callings of Jesus, and the Krishna and a handful of either deities. Success stories of "gay conversions" spread like wildfire in the religious circles that lend credibility to the family spheres, providing hope that perhaps the right camp, the right proselyte can make the miracle transformation. As for me, I have tried your normal, I have tried heterosexuality, I have tried from the bottom of my soul to love women and have a wife, but the mechanics of us gay men don't necessarily work that way. And I write to you, to say, that because of the false hopefulness that organizations promise, that religious leaders vow to create, hundreds and thousands of little boys and mature adults are wriggling and squirming under the burden of handicap; with fractured identities and unhappiness.

In the past few years, several advances have been made, at least on paper, for gay men and women in my neck of the world. Social liberation, they call it. Or perhaps, emancipation of another minority class. To truly liberate a class, there needs to be an attitudinal shift; revocation of prejudice, termination of targeted biases and re-morphing of the existing image. We are only at a point where ripples are being generated on the skin of the social curtain. It takes time, they all say. Give it a generation. But the burden of identity discrimination even through the span of a generation can take its toll on innumerable queers as we are guarded within a cage of apparent cowardice, defectives and other personality follies. Why not think of an attitudinal shift as a sort of community service? A service that can help battle scars of self-loathing, thoughts of suicide and covert misery. That can prevent closeted husbands from renting hotel rooms and fucking boys and juggling sexual diseases between the barometer of the "straight-acting life" and true identity undertakings. Coming out, as I have realized, is contagious in the sense, it provides support to people on the edge. It provides validation to countless men and women living in a nebulous cloud, not knowing what life is like when the ball is dropped.

I overheard a professor's husband say the other day, "Those queens just want too much attention. They're obnoxious in general, and now they've started completely stream-rolling over everyone's civil and religious liberties." This is what breaks humanity into little pieces -that present...
attitudinal stronghold of bitterness and resentment against a supposed "lifestyle choice." People often say, forget about the petty differences and look at the bigger picture and be united for more important causes. But it is hard, when you are made to feel like an outsider, pushed aside and isolated and made to live like an island beside the mainland, and asked to make the extra effort to meld into the mainstream. Acceptance, I realize, is easier said than done. In my rally to advocate for people of my kind, I sincerely wish that the lubrication of social upheaval begins at home, sooner rather than later, and eventually spreads from node to node of community and state lines to remolding of nations and continents alike. And yes, Johnny may be a fairy, and his kids may never have anyone to call Mother, but they will be loved, in their own little ways, with their own little dolls and fairies.

Hope you are well.

Love,

T.

__________

Tanmoy Das Lala is an LCGT activist, a cardiology researcher, a Master’s student in Healthcare Informatics and Policy, a feminist, and a bibliophile. He loves to write in his free time, and play the piano. He started the Queer Book Club at Book Culture in the Upper West Side of New York City.
Navarre

Anthony R. Cardno

Navarre the guinea pig is my enemy.

He sits in his cage across the room, pin-sized brown eyes and a tuft of brown hair the only parts of him visible above the hard red plastic bottom of his cage. He senses that we’re the only two home. His owner, Randy, is out shopping for dinner and a video. Navarre knows if he runs out of water I won’t replace it until I hear Randy’s car pull up, so he’s sitting in one corner, conserving energy, staring at me. I’m trying hard not to notice, hoping he’ll just go to sleep. But every time I look up from my book, there he is, watching me like he has nothing better to look at.

Which, of course, he doesn’t. My fault, I suppose. Two sides of his cage touch white-coated plywood. Our landlords didn’t want to be bothered peeling down the bluebird-burdened wallpaper the last tenant left behind, so they nailed up uneven, knotty plywood sheets on every wall and the ceiling, then slopped white paint on it. The plywood doesn’t even go all the way up to the ceiling in one place, which is how we can identify the old wallpaper underneath.
Randy is not too concerned with the walls, but I insisted that we put Navarre’s cage in the worst corner, hoping it would cover the splotchiness. I’ve had better ideas.

We signed a year lease to get this apartment, the only place in our price range when Randy and I decided to move in together: a small studio in a converted garage on the corner of a farm. It has a kitchen and small bathroom off of one main room. Randy immediately fell in love with the coziness, the closeness of it; I wanted someplace that at least afforded us a bedroom space separate from the living room. If I couldn’t have that, than at least Navarre’s cage would be as far from our bed as possible. From that distance, I was willing to try to peacefully co-exist.

Most of the first night I was able to ignore his noises. Until he started chomping on the bars while Randy and I were making love—staccato bursts of “chung-chung-chung” broken by brief pauses. Even Randy’s breath in my ear couldn’t drown out the noise. I raised my head slightly to look over Randy’s bony left shoulder, and the pig was watching me. I lost any interest in sex, as quickly as if I’d just jumped into a barrel of midwinter snow melt. Randy was not disconcerted to say the least, and slightly annoyed at my lack of response to his continued thrusts. He finally got out of bed to settle Navarre down.

“I’m sorry.” I snuggled up behind him now instead of under. I kissed his shoulder blades, readjusted the covers on us. “You know how I am when I get distracted. I’ll try to tune him out next time.”

“It’s all right, Greg.” Randy tried to be consoling around a yawn. “Long day. We’re both edgy. Go to sleep.” Yawn. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.” I whispered, believing every syllable, adding silently, “but not your pig.”

I closed my eyes and wandered into a pleasant dream of a Christmas future: Randy and I, the two of us still together after twenty monogamous years. My hair has gone a distinguished silver, Randy’s has migrated south. And there, across the room is Navarre, his coat gone from brown to dun to gray, the paint on his bars chipped completely off, his water bottle still dripping, his odor wafting across the room. “Open the last present.” Randy points at a box three feet tall by three feet wide by three feet long. I rush the box, sending bits of metallic red wrapping and yellow ribbon everywhere—a piece (probably toxic) even settles between the bars of Navarre’s cage and he stares at it. The box opens to reveal a huge cage, with three Navarres of my very own. On cue, they start chewing on their cage bars, clamoring for me and only me. And Navarre joins in . . . .

I woke up from the sound of four guinea pigs eating metal to the sounds of one trying to get some attention: pitifully squeaking with a high-pitched “ree-ree-ree,” biting the bars, flipping his food bowl. It was three a.m..

This has gone on every night for a month. Three quarters unconscious halfway between midnight and dawn, I sometimes can’t remember what life was like before Navarre.

* * *

I was at “Open Mike Night” at The Covered Cannon, showing support for a friend of mine who was half of a lesbian acoustic-folk duo with dreams of being the next Indigo Girls. I noticed Randy early in the night; as tall as he is, with prematurely salt-and-pepper hair at odds with his
thin boyish face, it’s hard not to notice him. I was drawn to him immediately. He stood out from
the group he was with. Halfway through the night, one of his companions got up to recite some
poetry—something that seemed to me like disjointed segments of an epic work-in-progress
involving fairies and trolls. I couldn’t keep track of it all.

Randy and I connected after the Open Mike session ended. He made his way over to compliment
my friend on her performance and casually introduced himself at the same time. My friend
conveniently slipped away with a subtle “Greg, I’ll call you tomorrow.”

We found some common ground for small talk. He wheedled his way out of a “prior
commitment” to join me at my place for more drinks. It was certainly not undying love at first
sight, but the next morning we exchanged phone numbers before he walked out the door.

Initially, our dates consisted of dinner or a movie or drinks at The Covered Cannon, or all three.
A trip back to my studio apartment always ended of the night. I lived alone, while Randy shared
his apartment with three other guys, two to a bedroom. Privacy was definitely at a premium. The
few times we did go to his place, his bedroom was “in use” and Randy would end up playing
some complex fantasy-based board game called Talisman while I stood in the kitchen looking
on, nursing a beer. To me, the game made Risk look like Chinese Checkers. We quickly decided
that my place was less distracting and more intimate. Away from his housemates, Randy could
be a real charmer, a master of small talk and sweet nothings.

I never did get to see the inside of his bedroom, which meant I never got to meet the pet he
would regularly mention. The poor thing always seemed to be locked in the bedroom with
Randy’s rather ‘active’ roommate.

Despite this, I was convinced Randy had a Lhasa Apso or Westie Terrier or some other small
dog, which he infrequently referred to as “the little furball.” It wasn’t until we’d been dating
almost five months that I got my first hint Navarre wasn’t a canine. Randy called one evening to
say he’d be a little late for dinner because he’d just finished cleaning Navarre’s cage. “You know
how these small woodland animals can be,” he’d laughed. So now I was thinking small
woodland animal, furball: rabbit. Rabbits are cool. I had a rabbit hutch in the backyard when I
was a kid.

I was very disappointed three months later to discover, when he was shoved in my face, that
Navarre was smaller, hairier, and noisier. It was the day we moved into the apartment, a Sunday.
I tried all week to get comfortable with Navarre. The following Saturday, I bought and installed
ceiling length retractable plastic blinds, the spoken purpose of which was both to spare our
guests the sight of Randy’s garish bedcovers and to create the illusion of a separate space for
sleeping and necking. Most nights I convince Randy to leave the blinds down, and Navarre is out
of sight if not out of hearing.

* * *

The third side of Navarre’s home, where his water bottle hangs by a thin piece of wire, is inches
from the brown pressed-wood faux-paneling of Randy’s bookcase. The bookcase holds not so
many books as videos and role-playing games and Randy’s copy of Talisman which he has
badgered me to play for most of our relationship. The Monday night after we moved in together I
acquiesced, beat the hell out of Randy and his friends in record time, and vowed never to play again. Some of Randy’s friends want a rematch, but I think he’s happier than he lets on that I’m sticking to my word. With me out of the game, Randy’s the big hero on the board. And for some strange reason, Navarre is virtually inanimate when the guys are losing to Randy. He became almost spastic when Randy was losing to me.

When Randy and his friends play, I usually take a book and hide out in the kitchen. We’ve yet to figure out how the kitchen was spared the hasty, uninventive makeover that the rest of the apartment suffered, but we’re thankful. Even if it is beige with sienna bonsai trees, it’s better than the poorly-applied shades (three by my count) of off-white in the main room.

A guinea pig (Cavius porcellus) seems to me a mundane pet for a man like Randy, who is obsessed with the worlds of JRR Tolkien, Robert Jordan, David Eddings, and CS Lewis. He’ll grudgingly read some Bram Stoker or Mary Shelley, the sole point at which our literary sets intersect. When I’m not reading those two Gothic authors, I’m more likely reading Tobias, Geoffrey or Larry Wolff; Virginia Woolf; Edmund White—and anything that’s not fantasy. I get absorbed in the details of real life; he escapes.

“I like to escape,” he tells me. “I’m sure White’s a powerful author, but what can he tell me about growing up gay that I don’t already know? Jordan brings me someplace I’ve never been and never will be.”

I try to dispute his logic by pointing out that he doesn’t know what it’s like to grow up straight or come from a broken home like Tobias and Geoffrey Wolff; I even suggest he read Mercedes Lackey—I hear she at least uses gay characters in a fantasy setting. But he starts cooing to the pig and the argument is over.

Early in our relationship, Randy and I made a deal. For every realistic, small-budget, independent film I subjected him to, I would sit through a studio-produced, high-budget fantasy flick of his choosing. One of the few decent choices he has ever made was Ladyhawke, in which Rutger Hauer plays an angst-ridden warrior cursed to turn into a wolf at night, while his love, played by Michelle Pfeiffer, is doomed to be a hawk by day. Hauer’s character is named Navarre, although our Navarre is far from heroic and would probably be wolf-food in the wild. Ladyhawke is one of the few fantasy films I’ve watched to the end, mostly for the comic relief provided by the terminally cute Matthew Broderick. After we moved in together, the movie night trade-off continued, although I find it harder and harder to stomach his choices.

With three sides of his prison blocked, Navarre the guinea pig has his own share of angst. His cage is on an old corner table, so he has a fine view of me across the plush cream rug. I like to be comfortable when I read, and I refuse to retreat to the kitchen chairs just because some foot-long hairball is giving me the evil eye. I delight in knowing that, as uncomfortable as his stare makes me, at least I can walk on that rug in my bare feet and let the plush tickle my soles. Thanks to me, Navarre has no freedom.

One day shortly after we moved in, and after I’d beaten the six-sided dice off of the role-players, I came home to find Navarre scampering joyously across the room, making that high-pitched “ree-ree-ree” noise that sounds remotely like a full-sized pig with his balls permanently in a vise.

“Randy!” I screeched. “How the hell did it get out and not break in half? That’s a three-foot fall!” As I lunged for him, Navarre smartly swerved left into the bathroom, leaving a small black pellet or two in front of my nose.
“Greg, please.” Randy’s voice impatiently preceded him from the kitchen. “He needs some exercise.”

“Not on my rug!” I swore. “Does that shit stain?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Randy was in the bathroom, where Navarre was nibbling on one of my dirty socks. “I’ll get a paper towel and pick it up.” He placed Navarre backside-first into the cage—if you put them in head-first, they try to jump and crush their facial bones, which is exactly what I promised to do if he was ever out of the cage again in my presence. I still say there’s a black smudge on the rug; Randy says it’s my imagination.

The smell is certainly not my imagination; even Randy will admit that without prodding. If Randy’s in one of his “clean the cage every day” swings, it’s not so bad—just the musk of the pig himself and the sweetness of cedar, which a person can grow accustomed to as easily as the smell of a propane heater and a boyfriend’s cologne.

However, when Randy’s not in the mood to be Mrs. Clean, things quickly get rank. The smell of pig, cedar-chip bedding, urine and droppings can be quite potent, especially when it’s wet—and it all gets wet easily. Navarre’s bottle is the type that drips whenever it’s touched or otherwise vibrated. And our apartment is perfectly situated for maximum vibration.

Our front door is six feet, eight inches from a major, if rural, town road. There’s a cow farm to our left, a horse farm to our right. We barely notice the trucks rattling by all day long. You learn to ignore the everyday exterior noises. But when it snows, the town plows come by every forty-five minutes, and you can feel the vibration. It starts when they’re a quarter-mile up the street and builds to our front door, then fades again to the bend in the road a quarter-mile in the other direction. It thrums through our walls and makes my reading lamp shake; it sets the water bottle dribbling like mad. Navarre ends up wearing or walking in more water than he drinks.

Not that it’s all the trucks’ fault. Navarre is not particularly adept at slurping up all the water he pulls down. I’ve often seen three a.m. on a weeknight thanks to the distinct sound of tooth enamel scrapping on metal tubing. Randy sleeps through snowplows while I jolt awake every time Navarre gets thirsty.

* * *

I reach the end of a chapter in my book and look up, expecting the pig’s eyes to meet mine; I see nothing. I unhurriedly slip a bookmark in place, and then step stealthily to the cage. He’s asleep, breathing smoothly and unaware of how close I am. I find myself wondering how long it would take to skin and deep fry guinea pig nuggets (“tiny bite-sized pieces” a voice from an old commercial shrills in my head); the ancient Incas bred the pigs for food and probably had some good recipes. If there is such a thing as racial memory, it would explain why Navarre scurries to the other edge of the cage whenever I approach. I lift the top of the cage, which for once doesn’t squeak, and begin to reach in to see just how close I can get before he wakes up, when an idea comes to me. I start banging on the bars, hard, loud and fast. Navarre jumps awake, as wide-eyed as he could possibly get, shaking and “ree-ree-reeing.” I drop the lid and laugh, low and deep. Our lease is not up for another eleven months; I have to do what little I can do to keep myself interested in still living here until then. And the sex, while good, is not going to be enough.
The sound of tires on gravel draws Navarre’s attention off of me and toward the front door. I casually disconnect the water bottle from the cage, with the usual effect. Navarre begins to hop around on his stubby legs in agitation, the pitch of his cries jumping to an extreme high. I enjoy the fact that he thinks he’ll never see the water bottle again—he doesn’t mistrust Randy this way. I’ll be at the sink when Randy comes in, and he’ll be overjoyed to see me taking such good care of ungrateful little Navarre.

Anthony R. Cardno's short stories have appeared in Willard & Maple, Sybil, Space Battles: Full Throttle Space Tales Volume 6, Beyond The Sun, OOMPH: A Little Super Goes A Long Way and Tales of the Shadowmen Volume 10: Esprit de Corps. In addition to being a corporate trainer, Anthony is a proofreader for Lightspeed magazine, writes book reviews, and interviews authors, singers, and other creative types on www.anthonycardno.com, where you can find some of his other short stories. In his spare time, Anthony enjoys making silly cover song videos on Youtube. You can find him on Twitter @talekyn.
Mantou
W. Scott

The sound of a cascading roll-up door shattered the stillness of the night. Its metal frame hit the concrete floor with a determined clink that reverberated throughout the deserted train station. It jolted Ah Li out of his slumber, and almost out of the aluminum bench on which he had dozed off.

11:05PM.

He was not sure how long he had slept, but the right half of his body was so numb he could barely sit up. Wiping the drool off his mouth, he felt the imprint of his canvas schoolbag on the right side of his face. The noise of the door came from the other end of the station, where an old, hunchbacked woman was closing down her snack booth. Ah Li had chosen the bench because he
had a clear view of a row of steaming buns, next to a pot of simmering tea-marinated eggs, on
the booth’s front counter. They were the visual condiment to his dinner: a cold, hard fan tuan—a
rice ball stuffed with pickled daikon. The old lady turned off the lights, secured the lock, and
disappeared into the darkness that now engulfed the station. Only a sprinkle of dim lightbulbs
illuminated the signs that lined the platforms. Under the yellow light, the blue “Taipei Station”
signs looked like a row of ghostly green eyes that drifted into the infinite night sky.

Ah Li shuddered a bit, even though the mid-summer humidity had covered him in a film of
sweat. For the first time since he left home this morning, he felt alone.

*   *   *

The village was completely silent when he woke up at four. A thick layer of mist blanketed
everything, including sounds, it seemed, for the chickens and pigs were unusually quiet. Ah Li
collected a handful of tepid eggs and fed the hens; they simply stared at him without the
 customary whining. The adjacent roosters also looked up, their combs wiggling, but none
crowed. The piglets behind the chicken pens lay peacefully on top and around their mother, their
little bellies rising and falling in a rhythmic interval. The sow awoke long enough to give Ah Li a
casual wave of her left ear—“good luck,” Ah Li imagined her saying—before falling back to
sleep. He surveyed the vegetable patch and fruit trees before heading back into the kitchen.

Mother had been busy. Ah Li’s junior high uniform was re-ironed, wrapped in a piece of
recycled wax paper, and secured by a straw rope that she made for this trip. Next to it on the
 table was an orange-size rice ball, wrapped in a plastic bag full of droplets from its steam, and
two pairs of yams and guavas. On top of his schoolbag was a bunch of yellow pencils, sharpened
to the same length, that his mother had bartered from a nicknack store in town. And finally,
pinned to the strap of the bag were three blossoms freshly picked from his father’s magnolia tree.
Their long, ivory petals looked delicate against an emerald green leave that was intentionally left
on the stem. Ah Li inhaled and held his breath. The fragrance filled his body. His father was now
with him.

When Ah Li headed toward the front gate, his mother did not come out to say goodbye. She was
too nervous, Ah Li knew, and she might cry. It was a relief that no one was seeing him off,
though. He had been arming himself up for the long, unknown journey, and the last thing he
wanted to see before leaving would be crying relatives. Ah Li took the usual, twenty-minute path
to reach his middle school and from there, he turned onto the dirt road that cut through a vast
field of rice paddies and extended into the next town. A few glimmers of light floated in the
expansive, misty darkness. At first, everything was so quiet that all Ah Li could hear was his
own breathing and the pebbles crackling under his steps. Gradually, frogs started to croak, birds
chirped and, an hour into his walk, roosters joined in to break the dawn. By the time Ah Li took a
seat in the back of the 5:30 bus at the town’s only bus stop, the streets were teeming with
farmers, produce vendors, and school children ready to start their day.

The bus ride was a sweaty blur. All windows were rolled down, but the balmy wind swept
through the bus like a rush of gel, sticking everyone’s shirt to their backs. Between struggling to
stay conscious in the dizzying heat and cranking his neck to see the time on a fellow passenger’s
watch, two hours passed. The bus put him at the station exactly five minutes before the
northbound train was set to embark on a five-hour crawl to Taipei.

*   *   *
Ah Li stood up from the bench and walked into the nearby men’s restroom. A fluorescent tube flickered in the back corner. Whiffs of chlorine filled the white-tiled room. He carefully hanged his schoolbag on the edge of a door and took out a worn towel. The faucet released a gentle stream of lukewarm water, its sound echoing in the empty space like a soft whisper. Ah Li stuck his head into the sink and let the water wash over his entire face. He took off the tank top that he had been wearing all day and rinsed off the accumulation of sweat, dust, and fumes. The sensation of gliding the wet towel down his chest, stomach, and back calmed him somewhat. He then unbuckled his khaki shorts and pulled them, along with his cotton briefs, down to his knees. In one quick and precise motion, he wiped clean his crotch with the towel, as he had done countless times after his seven-hour work in the rice fields and orchards since he was ten. And the expected refresh brought Ah Li a sense of relief that he had been craving all day.

Putting his clothes back on, Ah Li exited the restroom and located a different bench in an inconspicuous corner. This would be his bed for the night. Since he decided eight months ago to take the Taipei Teacher’s College entrance exam, in addition to the regular high-school exams in the nearby city, his neighbors had worked collectively to cobble together money for his trip. But they were unable to sell enough fruits, vegetables, and livestock to pay for a hotel stay. To thank their generosity, Ah Li’s mother insisted on killing a pig and two chickens from their farm and made one hundred dumplings. She delivered them door to door, with Ah Li in tow. Ah Li was grateful; these neighbors practically helped raise him and his younger sister since his father was taken away by a couple of Kuomintang officials on a sweltering summer night ten years ago. No one in the Nationalist Party ever offered an explanation of the arrest. Now the whole village’s hope for sending their first boy to a government-sponsored junior college rested on Ah Li’s shoulders. He must do well tomorrow.

As he lay down and wrapped his arms around his schoolbag, he heard some noise coming from the restrooms. He quickly sat up and saw a short, rotund figure exit the men’s side. But he was almost certain that he was the only one in the bathroom just now. He held his breath and listened again. Other than some cars outside, he could hear nothing else. He must be hallucinating because of the heat and travel, Ah Li thought to himself. Brushing aside the momentary concern, he repositioned his body on the narrow bench and closed his eyes. Exhaustion swiftly dragged him deep into unconsciousness.

*   *   *

The warmth of a hand on his body pulled Ah Li out of haphazard dreams. A man towered over him. Strangely, Ah Li was not alarmed. In fact, the big palm that gently but firmly stayed in contact with his bare arm, even as he struggled to get up, felt rather comforting.

“You’re still here. Why are you sleeping here?” The man’s baritone was slightly raspy.

Slowly, a face came into focus: it was pale, even in the dim light, and round, framed by a thin head of wiry hair. Underneath the bushy eyebrows was a pair of oddly bright eyes. Ah Li could not tell the man’s age, as half of the face was in the shadow.

“Ran away from home, ah? This place is not safe for a young boy like you, you know,” the man said with a faint smile.

His accent indicated that he was from Mainland China. His breath smelled of a hint of tobacco and alcohol. And there was another scent that seemed to come from the man’s body. A bit sour, slightly sweet, and somewhat musky. Ah Li couldn’t quite put his finger on it.
“I’m here for the exam,” Ah Li said softly, “didn’t run away.”

“Ah, the entrance exams tomorrow. How come you aren’t staying with a relative or at a hotel?”

“No relatives here.”

“Well, this bench won’t do,” the man declared.

“Come stay at my place tonight. I’m only fifteen minutes away from here.”

Ah Li was surprised. He had been repeatedly warned, by people in his village, that he must stay away from scheming city folks when he came to Taipei. They are ruthless and will take advantage of you whenever they can, they admonished. But here was a stranger, and a Mainlander no less, who readily offered his home for Ah Li to stay for the night. Maybe not all immigrants from China were as vicious as those who took his father away. And the idea of getting free lodging and sleeping on a real bed was very appealing at the moment. The bench was torture even for Ah Li, who grew up sharing a tatami bed with his mother and sister.

“I’m okay here for...” before Ah Li could finish, the man had started to head toward the exit.

“C’mon,” he waved.

*   *   *

12:05PM.

The giant clock on the station’s façade looked like a watchful eye in the sky. Traffic lights dotted the deserted streets, blinking in syncopation. Occasionally, a car whisked by, stirring up the heavy, humid air. A few shadowy figures paced around some gated mansions near the Presidential Building; they paused long enough to watch Ah Li and the man walk pass the parameters that they were guarding. Ah Li stayed a few steps behind the man, whose strides were adroit and swift despite his rotund torso and short legs. He cut through city blocks and small alleys with familiarity and precision. Ah Li had to speed up a few times to catch up, when the man turned a corner and almost disappeared into the night. In no time, it seemed, they arrived at a one-story house. “Yuan Residence,” the door plate read.

Behind the red gate was a small yard full of pots of banyan and bamboo trees that neatly lined the brick walls. Upon entering through the screened front door, a wave of doughy aroma hit Ah Li. White steams were coming out of the only lit room in the back of the house. Mr. Yuan turned on the lights in the living room. He appeared to be in his 50s and had a round, hairless face with rosy cheeks and lips. His stocky body, clad in a white cotton t-shirt, was flanked by two thick arms. His skin looked puffy and pasty, a stark contrast to Ah Li’s taut and tanned skin. Now fully visible under the light, Mr. Yuan’s eyes seemed even brighter. For some reason, the way they were fixed on Ah Li reminded him of those big dogs that guarded his neighbor’s yard, especially when they were waiting for their food. Ah Li averted his eyes. The living room was small and sparsely furnished. The most noticeable decorations were a few framed commendations and photos that looked official.

“What are you doing standing there? I don’t bite.” The man flashed his yellow teeth.

“Hungry?”

Ah Li shook his head. The doughy scent had seeped into his pores, causing his empty stomach to growl violently.
“Come with me. C’mon.” The man disappeared into the back room.

*   *   *

It was a kitchen, but an unusual one. Along the wall on the right were stacks of bamboo steamers. A long wooden table covered in white flour took up the other side of the room, next to a stove topped by a big wok, on top of which a stack of steamers were spewing white puffs. A round table sat in the middle of the room; there was a flat bamboo tray loosely covered by a piece of cloth. Peeking through the covering was a couple of snowy white buns. Mr. Yuan was a mantou maker. That was the smell from his body, Ah Li realized.

Mr. Yuan took out a bun and handed it to Ah Li, along with a bowl of hot soy milk.

“Eat. This should calm your belly.”

Ah Li hesitated. The mantou looked absolutely delicious at this moment. Its perfectly curved top had a luscious sheen. The aroma was dizzying. But Ah Li was calculating in his head if he should eat it now. Saving it for tomorrow would mean that he could have it for breakfast without using the little money he had in his pocket. And judging by the size of this bun, he could even stretch it into two meals.

“Eat. What’s the use of being shy? Eat!” Mr. Yuan offered, as Ah Li stood there with the mantou in one hand and the bowl in the other.

“There is more for you when you finish.” Mr. Yuan transferred another steamer full of piping hot buns onto the tray on the table. His face was glistening.

Upon hearing that this might not be the only one he could have, Ah Li sunk his teeth into the fluffy white bun. Steam gushed. Maybe he was simply too hungry, having had only the rice ball and a yam all day. But the taste of this mantou made his head spin. The outer layer was soft and the inner part was chewy. Its warmth filled Ah Li’s mouth with expansive gratification. He had to resist the urge to swallow it whole and made himself savor each bite, accompanied by a satisfying gulp of the silky soy milk. Ah Li had only had mantou once when he visited the neighboring town for a produce trade. But people in his village were abhorred when he told them that he liked it: “How can you like the food of those foreign pigs?” Ah Li understood their protest: a staple in Northern Chinese foods, mantou and other wheat flour-based buns were said to have been brought over by mainlanders, many of whom were young soldiers that retreated to Taiwan with the Kuomintan in 1948. His village was ransacked by a group of those soldiers, led by a couple of Nationalist officials accusing the villagers of harboring “radicals” who plotted to overturn the government. Over a dozen men, including Ah Li’s father, had been imprisoned without a trial since then.

“Where did you go, boy?” Ah Li found Mr. Yuan staring at him. “What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing.” Ah Li felt a bit embarrassed, as if he was caught having negative thoughts toward his gracious host.

“Worrying about tomorrow?” Mr. Yuan removed more steamers from the stove. He almost disappeared behind a wall of white mist.

Ah Li shook his head. Exams never worried him much.

“Where is home?”
“A small town near Taichung.”
“Ah, you’re from the countryside. Brothers and sisters?”
“A younger sister.”
“The only son. Like me. What does your family do?”
“Farming.”
Mr. Yuan laughed: “You don’t like to talk, do you?”
Ah Li blushed. Farming did not require much talking. And he was busy devouring the mantou. Realizing that he might be rude, he searched for something to say.
“You sell mantou for a living?”
“Yes, clever boy,” Mr. Yuan responded with another hearty laugh.
“Have been for, oh, almost ten years now. Got sick of the military shit. Did you see those commendations in the living room? You risk your life and that’s what you get. Useless pieces of paper. And this.”
Mr. Yuan held up his left hand. His middle and ring fingers were missing.
“All that bullshit about taking back our homeland. Even I know it’s a pipe dream, and I have folks back home in Shandong. You know we walked almost a week to get to the ship to come here? By that time, we looked like a bunch of crippled beggars. We were running for our lives, not defending our so-called motherland.”

* * *

Mr. Yuan slammed a large dough onto the long table. The moist ball of flour immediately sprang back into shape upon impact. Its elasticity went on full display under Mr. Yuan’s dexterous handling: it folded, twisted, and rolled at the command of Mr. Yuan’s fingers, palms, and knuckles. In a blink, it morphed from a gooey mound into a doughy log, which was then cut into a dozen uniform sections. Mr. Yuan attached some paper to the bottom of each piece and placed it into the steamer. He threw in some more firewood to fuel the crackling fire. A flash of bright redlicked the tip of his hand.

“Rice wine?” He pulled out a nondescript bottle from under the table and sat down next to Ah Li. An Li nodded without thinking. Mr. Yuan filled a glass as tall as Ah Li’s palm.

“Can you hold your liquor?” Ah Li nodded again.

“Alright. Gan bei!” Mr. Yuan downed the wine in one gulp.

Almost simultaneously, Ah Li followed suit. He had had to toast relatives at family banquets since he was a kid and the men in the family would not allow him to substitute hard liquor with juice. To make him a real man of the family, they insisted. But this rice wine must be homemade, as it was harsher and more pungent than the store-bought variety. It burned Ah Li’s mouth, throat, and all the way down to his gut. He gasped for air, as Mr. Yuan filled both glasses again.

“Are you an athlete? You are so lean and fit.”

“I work in the rice paddies everyday.”
“So you get a lot of sun. Look at your skin. So dark.”

Mr. Yuan reached over and placed his right hand on Ah Li’s bare shoulder. It took Ah Li by surprise, but he did not recoil. He noticed how meaty and warm Mr. Yuan’s palm was. And the contact was gentle, even though those fingers could obviously exert great force. Ah Li let the hand stay on him.

“I was a fit, young man, too, you know. I was so strong I carried five battle buddies out of danger in a matter of minutes. Bullets were flying all around. They were all taller and bigger than me. But I got them all out.”

He flexed and curled up his left arm.

“Look at this. I’ve still got it. What girl wouldn’t want this? Right? Feel it. Go ahead.” Mr. Yuan curled up his right arm as well and leaned toward Ah Li. He obliged. It was muscular, with a layer of fatty skin on it. A hint of musky odor wafted toward Ah Li’s face.

“Solid, huh?” He took another gulp and urged Ah Li to do the same.

Ah Li absentmindedly nodded. He was staring at Mr. Yuan’s left hand.

“How... um,” Ah Li stuttered. “What happened to your hand?”

“This?” Mr. Yuan extended his remaining fingers. It reminded Ah Li of the torn comb of one of his roosters, the result of a vicious cockfight.

“Lost them to the damn Communists. They ambushed us one night and we got into a hand-to-hand combat. I killed a bunch of them bastards.”

Mr. Yuan’s eyes were red. His fists clenched.

“They stabbed my good buddy, Shiao Luo. I grabbed his attacker’s knife and drove my knife into his throat. Straight through.” Mr. Yuan made a swift motion toward Ah Li’s chest. Ah Li froze. Just as swiftly, Mr. Yuan’s face softened.

“And Shiao Luo... Ay, Shiao Luo.”

Ashen mist filled his eyes. His body drooped over the table like an unleavened dough. He seemed to age tenfold in an instant. And he was drifting away to a place of grave pain—the kind of pain caused by losing a loved one, Ah Li thought.

“So, got a girlfriend back home?” Mr. Yuan returned, all of a sudden, with a smile.

Ah Li shook his head.

“How? Ever made out with a girl?”

“Never been with anyone,” Ah Li admitted.

“Really? A handsome boy like you? How’s that possible?”

Ah Li blushed. He was not used to hearing compliments on his looks. In fact, he had always believed that no one really cared for his appearance.

“Nobody is interested,” he said quietly.

Mr. Yuan looked at him, eyebrows raised. “Are you kidding?” He barked.
“You are gorgeous.”

Ah Li’s face was burning. Mr. Yuan’s adoration was unexpected and flattering, and it embarrassed Ah Li. He could feel the heat rushing to his head. The alcohol was certainly doing its trick. The room started to spin. He leaned back to counterbalance the whirl, only to nearly fall off the wooden bench on which they both sat.

“Careful!” Mr. Yuan caught Ah Li with both hands and propped him back up on the bench.

Ah Li began to giggle, which turned into uncontrollable laughs. He was not sure what was funny, but he felt a sense of elation for the first time in a very long time. On the eve of the most important exam of his life, alone in a stranger’s house in a strange city, he was drunk and did not really care. And for the first time in his life, someone—a complete stranger, a man of his father’s age—complimented him. The attention, something he rarely received, felt odd, but good.

Mr. Yuan watched Ah Li in amusement, his face was brightly red as well. “I didn’t put anything into your mantou or drinks, young man. Just so you know,” he said.

“I don’t know why I’m laughing,” Ah Li confessed.

“Well, there is nothing wrong with a little laughter once in a while, is there?”

Mr. Yuan took another shot of liquor.

“Especially in this completely messed-up world....”

“Well, how about a shower to make you even happier? I’m sure you need it.”

*   *   *

Indeed, the water cleansed Ah Li a lot more than his small towel could do at the station’s restroom. Cold streams cascaded down his back and soothed his burning skin. He closed his eyes, head still spinning, and lingered in a euphoric coolness. A towel appeared by the now-ajar bathroom door; Ah Li thought he closed it when he came in. He put on the clean pair of shorts he had brought but exited the bathroom without his tank top, which smelled of sweat and fumes. In the living room, Mr. Yuan had put down a large cushion on the floor, covered it with a straw mat, and placed another blanket on top of it.

“Here you are, for tonight.”

Mr. Yuan then pointed to the only bedroom in the house. “But, if you want to sleep on a real bed, I don’t mind sharing.”

“No, no, this is just fine,” Ah Li responded without thinking.

Mr. Yuan paused, his eyes locked with Ah Li’s. He was about to say something else, but stopped himself. He turned away and moved toward his bedroom.

“Alright then. Go to sleep. It’s late.” The lights went off.

“Thank... thank you,” Ah Li said in the dark.

As soon as his head hit the pillow, Ah Li plunged into a deep sleep.

*   *   *

A crushing weight on top of Ah Li jerked him awake. He could not see anything at first. All he could hear was some throaty grunting near his chest; each grunt released a pungent, rotten smell.
It took him a second to figure out that it was a heavy and doughy body weighing down on him. Two thick arms wrapped around his rib cage so tightly that he could barely breathe. He then noticed that the body was stark naked. And something hot and scratchy was pressed against his crotch. Ah Li struggled to free himself to no avail; the body pinned him down on the mat like a fallen boulder. Suddenly, he realized that his shorts had been removed. This frightened him. Ah Li unleashed a deep yell, kicked the body with his muscular legs, and smashed the dark face with the kind of force he used for chopping firewood. The man wailed and rolled over. Ah Li jumped up and searched for his shorts, and schoolbag. Groping in the dark, he knocked over something that sounded like a vase and managed to find a switch on the wall. A desk lamp came on.

Mr. Yuan lay on the floor in a fetal position. His bare torso, convulsing, was covered in sweat and patches of white flour.

“I just… just wanted to…,” he whimpered.

*   *   *

Ah Li found his shorts and threw them on, along with the rest of his clothes. He checked his hidden pocket; the cash was still there. He located his socks and shoes by the front door and hastily put them on as well. He was about to leave when he paused, turned around, and ran into the kitchen. With one hand holding a plastic bag that he randomly grabbed, he shoveled as many mantous into the bag as he could.

*   *   *

Back in the living room, Mr. Yuan was still on the floor. His arms draped over his shoulders, his blubbery body quivering, as he sobbed. Ah Li stepped around the body, pushed through the doors, and left them open.

*   *   *

Taipei at dusk was a cacophony of car horns, bicycle bells, and police whistles. Viewed from the footbridge, the swarm of people hurrying home looked like ants scampering in and out of the train station. Hovering above them were buildings cast in a mélange of golden brown and red by the setting sun.

7:00PM.

Ah Li leaned against the guard rails, half of his feet dangling over the ledge. For almost an hour, he stood there, motionless. He could not recall exactly how he returned here after the exams concluded for the day. In fact, he remembered little of what had happened since he escaped this morning. Some street vendors directed him to the exam site. A mass of teenagers, all clad in drab uniform, quietly and mechanically plowed through test after test. Ah Li finished all of them early enough to review his answers a couple of times, despite the feeling of his temples ballooning by the hour. He napped through the lunch break and ate nothing. After the bell rang to announce the end of the first day, Ah Li waded through a sea of sluggish students and wandered around the city. He ended up on the footbridge by the train station, one of the first he and Mr. Yuan crossed last night.

The unopened bag of buns dangled from his schoolbag’s strap, next to the single magnolia blossom that survived the morning struggle. Ah Li had tried not to look at them all day until now, and somehow he could not bring himself to throw them away. Squeezed into a small bag in
haste, the buns looked contorted and wet. Steam had long pooled at the bottom. In the sunlight, the droplets glistened like golden beads.

He had difficulty making sense of what happened at Mr. Yuan’s, not so much because he remembered only fragmented moments, but more because of how he felt. That was his first physical contact with anybody in his life. He did not like that Mr. Yuan forced himself on him. But oddly, he was not upset. What transpired was a shock, for sure, and the whole incident bewildered him. But he was most confused about feeling a tinge of excitement deep down, the way his heart tightened when he recalled the evening. The way Mr. Yuan’s large palms cradled his shoulders. It was a sense of comfort and support that he had never experienced.

*   *   *

Ah Li tore open the bag and blindly picked out a bun. It was a double-layer mantou, with a swirl of brown sugar-infused center and a snowy white exterior. Ah Li took a small bite; it was soft and chewy, albeit cold and soggy. It melted into a silky mush on his tongue. He held it there.

The sun disappeared behind the buildings. Street lights came on, slowly dotting the city with orange sparkles. The thick, humid air wrapped Ah Li in a warm embrace. He climbed down the footbridge and began to retrace his footsteps from last night, hopefully back to Mr. Yuan’s house.

___________

W. Scott teaches art history by day, and daydreams by night. His writings in both English and Chinese have appeared in art and culture magazines and journals since 1995. When he is not busy crisscrossing the Pacific, he calls California home.
"An engaging allegorical pursuit of the mirage that is beauty’s transcendence."
-Kirkus
“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
The reviewer Amos Lassen recently introduced me--via Facebook--to a writer called Jacob Campbell, who lives in Louisiana and writes confessional “fiction” about his time as a minor seminarian, and later, as an out-gay resident of the French Quarter.

The relationship between Campbell and myself has been rewarding from an artistic perspective (we both write about similar themes) and it’s also exposed me to incredible works of queer fiction: Campbell’s own. First among these has to be his novel *Amen’s Boy*, which is similar in many ways to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, only queer and just as powerful.

Despite being labeled as a “fictionalized memoir” about sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, *Amen’s Boy* isn’t simply a book about abuse. If it were merely a novelization of current events, it could hardly deserve to be called “literature”; and *Amen’s Boy* is a highly “literary” novel, as I’ll explain.

The abuse described in the novel--mainly perpetrated by priests against boys or by teenagers against younger boys--plays a major role in the adolescent narrator’s psycho-sexual and spiritual evolution. But it never comes to define the novel as simply a “text about abuse.”

Rather than understanding *Amen’s Boy* through the lens of current events--which many of its readers, on Amazon and elsewhere, seem to want to do--encouraged by the publisher and, perhaps, their own experiences--I think it’s important to respect the book’s integrity and read it for what it is: a literary narrative that draws on elements of mysticism, modernism, and coming-of-age, gay literature.

One aspect of the book’s “literariness” that transcends the documentary genre is the powerful voice of the boy-narrator, Thaddeus Merton (“Tad,” or “Tadpole,” for short), who experiences everything through the lens of a kind of transcendent, Joycean aestheticism. Thaddeus’ abuse is explored, at first, from a child’s point of view--not capable of deep reflection--and in a way that focuses on rich, sensory and instinctual experiences. It’s only later in the novel that a series of epiphanies and self-revelations reveals the true nature of what has happened to him.

Whereas Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* seems conditioned in his Catholicism--and Joyce’s rejection of his church is conclusive at the end of the novel--Thaddeus seems to live his faith profoundly and Campbell never opts for black or white answers. This is reflected in the ending of the novel, which could represent a spiritual redemption for Thaddeus--the rejuvenation of his vocation--or a psychotic breakdown.
By allowing spirituality to remain a possibility for Thaddeus, and by refusing to “overcome” religiosity in favor of pure aestheticism, as Joyce does for Stephen, Campbell creates a novel that lends itself just as much to spiritual autobiography as it does to modernism.

At times, Thaddeus’ first-person narrative transforms into a highly-wrought, mystical text--akin to the writings of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross rather than a gay novel. And perhaps this is the most post-modern thing about the novel: the difficulty one experiences trying to explain it in terms of generic conventions and its refusal to give up exactly what its ending means.

The author shows us how an adolescent can find a damaging comfort in the “secret closeness” of an abusive priest–in this case, a sad, balding character called Fr. Terry. The insidious, soothing intimacy Thaddeus shares with Fr. Terry is experienced as a grateful escape from the brutality he suffers at home–at the hands of his sadistic brother and his weak parents.

This is true not only of the abusive relationship with the priest but of Thaddeus’ entire relationship with his church, which includes his duties as an altar server, and his conversations with Fr. Terry in the Sacrament of Reconciliation–which the priest uses, shamefully, to groom the boy for both sex and the priesthood.

This paradoxical blending of heavenly and hellish themes culminates in the author’s haunting portrayal of “Mettray,” a minor seminary where Thaddeus pursues his vocation to the priesthood.

Named after the penal colony in which Jean Genet was incarcerated for 3 years in the 1920s, the Mettray of Amen’s Boy becomes Thaddeus’ home for an equivalent 3 years. Its name evokes the irony that a child can experience “home” as both a heaven and a hell.

Similar to Proust’s “Combray,” Mettray is Campbell’s greatest achievement, if only because the descriptions of the seminary ground Amen’s Boy with such a vivid sense of place one often feels transported while reading, returning with a sense of sadness about the horrors that occur there and, confusingly, with a longing for the joys.

When Amen’s Boy is over, the aura of Mettray remains. You may even wish to return there—despite the fact that horrible things occurred. For nothing is black and white at Mettray: the soul-crushing brutality one experiences there exists side by side with the possibility of redemption.

Edward Dutton is the author of Norceuil’s Garden: Queer Fiction and Erotica. His work has been published in Chroma, Best Gay Romance 2009, and Best Gay Bondage Erotica.
Talking in Late September

He's just discovered yoga, so we're talking poses, dog and tree, how his aging body stretches.

Forty years ago his frame was lithe as he leaned on hallway locker doors, brushing red-brown hair off his freckled forehead. That was our first time talking, with school ties loosened, I was sweating.

It was a late September afternoon, and more than shooting shit for me. I knew it wasn't supposed to be, boy on boy. Today is also late September, but his hair is mostly gray and it's morning when stiffness plagues my knees.

I'm just off the train, and we're two cups of coffee into talk at the breakfast place by the bike path in the college town where he's taught for years. He explains Shavasana, his still too active mind finding rest at yoga's end. The waitress pours a third refill as I speak of my mother's stroke, her wordlessness. Our eyes meet, and for a moment our tongues are still.

We both love words. Our two tongues that have never touched, have together shaped and shared so many words. A first reader for one's life story is a precious thing—four decades of pages shared, discussed, critiqued. I switch to decaf as our conversation turns to slowing down, we're ready to retire, we talk of when and how. He gestures with his hand—

I see the air between his pale, still freckled fingers. He's sitting profile, so open space outlines the soft curved "L" from folds of chin down length of neck. His Adam's apple bobs when he sips. Once I wanted to be the space around his body. Now I've no desire to crowd in close—we read our lives to each other in all that openness around and between our old bodies.

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

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

“An intensely personal collection centered on the survivor of a fascinating, chaotic time. Picano’s writing is most moving when he’s reflecting on AIDS and HIV, a theme that connects each story and has affected so many people in his life.”
—Kirkus Reviews
A few years ago, my friend Pete and I took his daughter, Whitney, to a show at the Bluebird Theatre here in Denver. We went to see L7. Whit was kinda goth, as I knew the crowd would probably be and I wanted to dress appropriately for the concert—in black. Eschewing a black eyeliner, which made me look like a raccoon the one and only time I tried it, I donned my Doc Martens and black jeans but the only black T-shirt I had clean was a souvenir from the Stonewall Inn in NYC. I didn’t think too much about it.

We had a great time at the show. Whitney, then all of eighteen, went down into the mosh pit where she sweated and jammed and tried to get out of the way of everyone’s elbows while Pete and I, aging gracefully but drinking liberally, sat at the bar in the back. Whit caught the eye of
the drummer, who shoved people aside at the end of the set just to hand Whit her drumsticks. Nice. The house lights came up, and we joined the general crush for the door.

As we exited the auditorium, Pete and Whit and I got separated. I passed a mean-looking guy, unshaven, clad in denim and leather, leaning up against the wall. He looked directly at my chest and read my T-shirt. His brow furrowed, then his eyes got angry. I saw then that he was stone cold sober and mean as hell. I also saw him mouth the word “faggot,” or maybe he said it under his breath. It was loud in there and hard to tell. How did he know what Stonewall was? Had he read about it? Had it been pointed out to him by some equally disgusted friend on a visit to the city? *That’s where all the faggots hang out.*

No matter how he knew, he purposefully propelled himself off the wall and hurried after me. I tried to lose him in the crowd, but he actually pushed a couple of people out of the way to get closer to me. I looked around but still couldn’t see Pete or Whit anywhere, and as the crowd bottlenecked at the door, he gained ground on me. He was about three layers of people away. “Hey *faggot!*” somebody yelled behind me. I didn’t have to look back. I knew who it was.

The crowd pushed me out the door and immediately began thinning out. The light at Colfax was green and many of them rushed across the street for their cars. We had parked in the lot in back, meaning I had to walk down the alley. I just got around the corner, looking for Pete and Whit, who still hadn’t appeared, when I felt his hand on my shoulder, spinning me around. “Hey, fa-”

From there on, things got fuzzy. He took on the aspect of a few bullies I’d known in grade school. And junior high school. And high school. I remembered one holding my arms and another pummeling my gut. I remembered loud, wet slaps on the back in the gym showers. I remembered the way my blood used to dry on the inside of my nose because I started out the day getting a beatdown at the bus stop. I remembered shame and humiliation and guilt and regret and the words—“queer,” “fairy,” “pansy-ass,” and, of course, “faggot.”

But before this guy had a chance to finish his word, I took him by the collar and shoved him with all my strength up against the wall. I heard his head hit the brick, and I saw the fear in his eyes. I knew that fear well, and seeing it on a tormentor’s face for a change was, I’m nearly ashamed to say, a marvel. An entrance into a world that I’d been on the other side of my entire life. I don’t remember what I said, but I screamed it in his face and banged him against the wall until I saw blood on the brick. I kicked him hard in the shin with my steel-toed boot and left his punk ass bleeding in the alley. My legs shaking, I turned my back on him and walked to the parking lot at the rear of the building where Pete and Whit were waiting by the car. Then I climbed in the back seat and cried like a fucking baby.

Do I regret it? Sometimes. When the world is right and good and I can look back from the safety of my home with my dogs by my side; when my moral battery has been sufficiently recharged and I can allow myself to philosophize from higher ground. But when I look at what recently happened to two gay men just walking down the street in Philly, when I think of the slight, spare Matthew Shepard, when I think of thousands of queer men and women who endure hatred and physical abuse on a daily basis, when I remember the bullies whose faces haunted my entire childhood, I don’t regret it. I’m glad I did it.

Does that make me the same as they are? Maybe. Does that drag me down to their level? Perhaps. But I have the ability to rise back up again, stretch out a hand, and shake that of my oppressor. Would he do the same for me? Doubtful. And the more I think about it, the more I
come to the conclusion that medieval conquerors put the heads of their enemies on pikes for a damn good reason. Is this slippery ground? Sure. But that doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be explored. Everyone has to make his own decision, but sometimes turning the other cheek only provokes another slap.

I have a friend who believes rights aren’t won. They’re taken. And they’re taken by a combination of good cop/bad cop steps. Black men and women would never have gotten as far as they have with just Martin Luther King, Jr. or just Eldridge Cleaver. You need both someone soft-spoken to advance the agenda and a hard-ass motherfucker to show you mean business. I don’t know if I agree with that, but I see his point.

And if that ever happens to me again, I fully intend to go down swinging.

Edit: Jerry L. Wheeler's first collection of short fiction, *Strawberries and Other Erotic Fruits* was released by Lethe Press in March 2012 and was a Lambda Literary Award finalist in 2013. His first novel, *The Dead Book*, is forthcoming from Lethe Press in 2015. Be sure to catch his book reviews on the web at Out in Print: Queer Book Reviews ([outinprintblog.wordpress.com](http://outinprintblog.wordpress.com)). If you’re in the market for his professional editing services, please check out Write and Shine at his website, [www.jerrywheeleronline.com](http://www.jerrywheeleronline.com).
CHELSEA STATION
EDITED BY JAMESON CURRIER

CHELSEA STATION is a new magazine devoted to gay writing. We accept for consideration original and unpublished fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, memoir, humor, narrative travelogue, interviews, and reviews (books, theater, television, and film) relating to gay literature and gay men.

Please query about reprints or promotional excerpts.

Submissions and queries should be sent to info@chelseastationeditions.com.

Manuscripts should be emailed as Word attachments. Please include your name, address, and e-mail contact information on the first page of your document. Please also include a brief bio of 100 words. Please query before sending any artwork.

Please do not send more than one prose work or more than four poems for consideration. Please let us know if you are making simultaneous submissions of your work to other journals.

Due to the volume of submissions, we are unable to respond with rejection notices. If you do not hear from us within three months of your submission, we are unable to use your submission, though you are always able to submit additional material for us to consider.

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"A delightfully spooky, often kooky, gay vision quest. Currier’s Avery Dalyrymple is larger-than-life and intricately flawed, and the fact that he just can’t seem to get out of his own way makes him primed for misadventure and gay mayhem. One of Currier’s strengths has always been the ability to soak his narrative in a rich, authentic ambiance and *The Wolf at the Door* is no exception, with sentences that resonate with the decadent rhythms of the French Quarter and paragraphs that positively drip with Southern gothic moodiness. Genre fans will find plenty to appreciate in Currier’s otherworldly version of *It’s a Wonderful Life* fused with all the ensemble wit of *Tales of the City* and the regional gothic texture of Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire*. Savor this one like a bowlful of spicy jambalaya and a snifter of fine aged bourbon on a hot, humid night.”

—Vince Liaguno, *Dark Scribe Magazine*

Praise for *The Wolf at the Door*

“It’s not easy to classify Currier’s novel. The New Orleans setting leads naturally to spirited spookiness, with supernatural proceedings and ghostly manifestations, including that of a gorgeous young man, the late partner of Mack, who is dying of HIV in an upstairs apartment—adding a touch of realistic melancholy to the tale. And the story is also infused with erotic passages. So let’s just classify the novel as really good—a masterful blend of genres that comes together like succulent literary gumbo. Currier’s crew of querulous aging queens, offbeat beautiful boys and assorted oddball friends constitute an endearing found family of queers, while the author’s historical flashbacks conjure the Big Easy’s atmospheric past.”

—Richard Labonté, *Bookmarks*

“Currier is a master storyteller of speculative fiction, and this novel is unique in that it takes a group of unbelievers (whom I can identify with) and gradually forces them to accept the reality of what they are experiencing. Very creative story, told with a dry wit by a group of highly diverse, realistic, flawed individuals who become links to the past and instrumental in helping some tortured souls find their rest. Outstanding for those who appreciate this genre of fiction. Five ghostly stars out of five.”

—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*

“Refreshingly light and witty.... The chatty first person narrative is augmented by historically accurate journals, diaries, and slave narratives. The bright, hopeful tone of the prose and Currier’s love for his imperfect characters makes this a charming read.”

—Craig Gidney, Lambda Literary

“Stirring a gumbo pot of characters and subplots, Currier keeps his unlikely mix of ingredients at a perfect simmer as they meld into a singularly delectable story with a sense of place so rich, readers may be enticed to head to Louisiana and experience the novel’s setting firsthand.”

—Jim Gladstone, *Passport*

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
“In his introduction, James Currier writes of forming the desire a number of years ago to move beyond his reputation as an AIDS writer. In reinventing himself, he remained concerned as ever with issues relevant to the lives of contemporary gay men. Setting down a list of topics to address, he included—substance abuse, gay marriage, serving in the military, domestic abuse in gay relationships, hate crimes, homophobia, and living outside of urban areas—all represented here. At the same time, Currier began a study of classic ghost stories, a genre that had fascinated him since boyhood. (Favorites mentioned are the works of M. R. James, Henry James, E. F. Benson, Edith Wharton, and Ambrose Bierce.) The best of the resulting collection draws upon the past in observing the present, and in doing so never fails to disturb and entertain.”

—Joyce Meggett, ALA GLBTRT Newsletter

Praise for *The Haunted Heart and Other Tales*

“I am completely amazed by the range of ghost stories in this collection. These are awesome ghost stories, and the literary connections to gay life are deep and complex.”
—Chad Helder, *Unspeakable Horror* and *The Pop-Up Book of Death*

“Currier’s characters are sumptuous, his plots are freshly twisted and his prose magnificent. A perfectly chilling collection of tales from one of the modern masters of the genre. Powerful stuff, indeed.”
—Jerry Wheeler, *Out in Print*

“Currier’s writing is flawless and his knack for conveying emotion, with both the spoken words and thoughts of his characters, is unparalleled. Fans of the author have come to expect that his work isn’t exactly light or escapist, which makes it all the more affecting.”
—Chris Verleger, *Edge*

“I found each of these stories just as satisfying and unique as a full length novel, so much so that, as I often do with longer stories, I thought about each story for days after I finished reading it. Give it five twisted stars out of five.”
—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*

“Jameson Currier’s *The Haunted Heart and Other Tales* expands upon the usual ghost story tropes by imbuing them with deep metaphorical resonance to the queer experience. Infused with flawed, three-dimensional characters, this first-rate collection strikes all the right chords in just the right places. Equal parts unnerving and heartrending, these chilling tales are testament to Currier’s literary prowess and the profound humanity at the core of his writing. Gay, straight, twisted like a pretzel...his writing is simply not to be missed by any reader with a taste for good fiction.”
—Vince Liaguno, *Dark Scribe Magazine*
Conjuring Shadows
Craig Laurance Gidney

Silhouette
On the face of the moon
Am I.
A dark shadow in the light.
A silhouette am I
On the face of the moon
Lacking color
Or vivid brightness
But defined all the clearer
Because I am dark,
Black on the face of the moon.
A shadow am I
Growing in the light,
Not understood as is the day,
But more easily seen
Because I am a shadow in the light.
— “Shadow,” by Richard Bruce Nugent (1925)

Mrs. Alberta Dufrense’s collection of Harlem Renaissance era art is small but impressive. She has a William Johnson piece, a sketch by Jacob Lawrence, and a maquette by Augusta Savage. Lesser known artists are included, along with a smattering of first edition volumes (Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, Hurston’s *Of Mules and Men*) and a file cabinet of correspondence. The collection is housed in the library of her Washington, DC home, which is situated in the newly revitalized Logan Circle area. Mrs. Dufrense has lent out pieces of her collection to various traveling exhibits and museums in addition to providing (by appointment only) access to curious visitors and scholars. But there is one piece she has that never leaves her collection. In fact, it is not even properly a part of collection, as she has sequestered it in her bedroom.

“Empress” rests on her bed’s headboard. At first glance, it appears to be some kind of Art Deco vase. It’s a smooth black oblong, about the size of an infant. The surface is scored with double lines, like seams. The sculpture rests on “feet” and elongated “arms,” as if it is kneeling in a supplicant’s pose. The front of the piece has three faint indentations—eyes, a mouth—that suggest a face. “Empress” suggests form, even as it blurs the distinction between the abstract and the representational.

The material that “Empress” is made of is as intriguing as the piece itself. Neither clay or stone or metal, it seems to have properties of all qualities. The glaze is a kind of *living* blackness that shimmers. Even when there is no light—as Mrs. Dufrense graciously demonstrated when she turned the light off in her bedroom—the piece pulsates. The form stands out in low light. The supplicant’s shape seems to absorb whatever light there is, and radiate it out. It is does not shine; there is no spectrum. Only a void.

The feel of the piece is warm and smooth. Even soft, like the fur of some animal. And—

“Can you feel it?” asks Mrs. Dufrense. “There’s a pulse there. A *heartbeat*.”

Not much is known about the artist, Courtney Vaughan (1898-1961). He was raised in North Carolina. Attended Howard University, where he was mentored by Augusta Savage, and socialized with Langston Hughes and Zora Hurston. Most of his work is representational, reflecting the Great Migration, and while technically proficient, is not particularly of note. The only thing that survives of his papers is a widely anthologized piece of short fiction that captures the zeitgeist of 1920s Harlem and the life of black homosexuals in that era.
Midnight in Darkytown. All the decent folks are asleep, safe in God’s loving arms. But we others, the prodigal sons, we never sleep. We roam the neon night, restless with sin. There is an alley, a normal alley haunted by laundry floating on lines like ghosts. Cats prowl in garbage, risking all nine of their lives. We’re bigger cats in zootsuits, who sneak in hidden nooks and corners, smoking catnip and tobacco. Silken cresses, konked hair, swishing tails. All of us converge around a door in the alley. The basement of an apartment building with a door the color of wine. One by one, we go to the door. We knock. An viewhole opens. A password is whispered, the door opens. Light and music spill out, only to be shut again. What is behind the door?

Down the marble steps, we enter the Temple. The floor is black and white, like a chessboard. Rugs with geometric designs interrupt the tiles. Potted palms sway in fan-stirred air. The wallpaper has hieroglyphics on it, men and women with the heads of beasts. Column lintels are encrusted with blue and green stones. An oud rests against one wall; a stuffed peacock, tail in a full fan, glares from another. A bar with illicit hard liquor beckons while on a dais a trio of upright bass, cocktail drum, and trumpet plays. The smell of incense curls around the floor, and good, clean tobacco. But this elaborate set up is not why we are here, not most of us, anyway.

We are here for this: Men, in darker hues, who dance the dance of the Prodigal. The kiss, the caress, the flirt. The thing that can never be seen in the world of Above. Masks are removed, mannerisms relaxed. In the Temple, we are free to worship the flesh, away from judging eyes. Here, we are free from euphemism, conjecture, scandal and gossip. We whisper our secrets. Deals and rendezvous are made in shadowed corners. We are safe here. We temple cats weave and purr in the subterranean basement, attuned to the rhythms of night, jazz, and, yes, the sacred.

An hour passes, two. Spirits are imbibed, as are kisses. Gradually, silence descends. We pause, and glance at the stage. The musicians have stopped playing. The bass lies on its side like a woman laying down. And a woman emerges from the shadows. A giantess, her hips and breasts shaped like the bass. And she’s strung with a sheer white gown that floats on her ebony body. It’s belted at the waist with a golden snake of a belt. Her muscled arms are bare. Her hair is hidden by an elaborate white headdress made of horn, shells, and feathers that glows. We gasp and sigh in wonder—she is the goddess-empress of this domain. She steps up to the lip of the stage. In her nacre heels with silver straps and her headdress, she stands nearly eight feet tall.

“Greetings, my children,” she says, extending her arms out in a gesture of welcome that holds all of as to her. We thrill at the sound of her voice—that rich, deep contralto. And we are her children. We gather closer, eager for what is to come.

The bassist comes and stands his instrument up, and begins to pluck notes from it. The Goddess-Empress begins to recite poetry in a foreign tongue. Both sounds bounce off the walls of the Temple. It’s a wild, mad journey through sound. This, indeed, is our church, and she shout-sings the words like gospel hymns. Shouts of “praise be!” rises from the audience. One cat in a charcoal gray suit swoons. And claps and stomps his feet in some religious mania. The poem ends with yell that echoes through the Temple. The trumpeter takes up his golden horn and sends out a moan, and she recites another poem, this one in English. Her cadence and phrasing is
beautiful. Do a few cheeks glisten with tears? Perhaps. She smiles at us, her faithful congregation. The music plays on. But before she leaves the stage to mingle with the masses, she blows a kiss out to us.

The kiss, that collection of darkness and breath, flows through us. Each of us feels the moist tingle of lips on our throats, the atoms of the Goddess-Empress’s breath. It is warm. It’s a mother’s kiss; more. It’s both sacred and profane—much like our midnight love. And that is the color of the kiss, the breath—midnight. It’s a tangible thing, this expelled breath. It roams the Temple. It soars in the ceiling, bouncing from the draperies that depend from the rafters, a bird of shadow. It circles the pillars, an asp of shade. It prowls the checkered floor, pantherlike.

We return to our various coteries after having been blessed by her Kiss. Drinks flow. Cigarette smoke rises. Music swells. And kisses begin to fall like rain—

A ferocious pounding on the door interrupts the sway of things. The music stops, as does the chatter. The doorman opens the viewhole. There’s an aggressive exchange between the outside and the doorman.

“It’s the police, ya’ll!”

We tense, ready to flee. But it is hopeless. Where is there to go? We only know of the one entrance. The doorman looks to the Goddess-Empress.

“Let them in,” she says.

The door is unlocked, and in they flow, boys in blue, clubs and guns drawn. One of them, a tall brute of a fellow with mustache like a comb says in a booming voice: “Police! You are all under arrest, for unlawful and immoral congregation, according to the Decency code…” We listen to him rattle off boilerplate legalese. We cease to coalesce; the wreckage of destroyed careers and families looms in front of us.

When the lead officer finishes his speech, the Goddess-Empress proudly parts the masses that throng around her. She towers over him, in her ivory gown and baroque headdress.

“Officer,” she says in her dark honey voice, “I am sure that we can come to an arrangement.”

The officer steps back suddenly, almost as if she’d attacked him. Another steps forward, and cracks her across the cheek. The Goddess-Empress stumbles. Her headdress teeters, then crashes to the floor. And she is revealed. She is bald, and beneath the garish makeup are the features of a man. Blood drips on her creamy white gown. One of the cops laughs. Another murmurs, “freak.”

The Goddess-Empress raises her noble head, gestures and—

The Kiss, that substance made of breath and darkness rises. It is a sphere of black. It rises until it hangs over us all, police and criminals. Our eyes are transfixed. The Kiss eats our vision. Someone yells, “What the hell is that thing?” A gunshot is fired, right into the heart of the sphere. The bullet is absorbed with barely the hint of a ripple. The Kiss roams over the crowd. Those beneath its shadow begin to paw each other. We begin to kiss each other. The police are absorbed into us as they are touched by the Kiss’s shadow, and they, too, begin to kiss. Clothes and uniforms fly off. Flesh touches flesh. Fingers, lips and other things find each other.

We become temple cats, all of us.
The Goddess-Empress calmly restores her headdress to its rightful place. She weaves between the couples, and dims the Temple’s lights.

Some rituals are meant for darkness. (1926)

While Vaughn’s piece is undoubtedly a piece of florid fantasia, there are oblique references to events, places and even persons in Harlem Renaissance in New York. For instance, there was a underground speakeasy in Harlem, a known hang out for gay black men, called Timbuktu. Rather than a fixed location, this was a party that drifted from apartment to basement to abandoned hall, protected by passwords—known in the parlance of then as ‘charms’—to avoid the unwelcome attention of the police. Timbuktu managed to avoid the Prohibition and Decency raids for quite a while, but there is a record of at least one such unfortunate event that ruined many reputations.

The Goddess-Empress character closely—but not completely—resembles a personage that frequented both the art world and black gay scene, known as Madame Isis. She is mentioned here and there: a statuesque and theatrical woman who skirted around the edges of these milieus. Reports, cobbled together from letters and interviews claim that she was a wealthy patron of the arts. Other denizens believe that she was a kind of a literal madame, with her specialty clientele being men “in the life.” Some thought that she was just a meddlesome fag hag, while others believed that she had sapphic inclinations herself and lived vicarious through the lives of her ubiquitous coterie. Vaughn’s tale is not the only one casts her as a transgendered person. Wilder rumors have her connected to the mob, and some claim that she was some kind of conjure-woman, trained in the arts of obeah. All accounts claim that she was a giantess.

No image of her survives.

Craig Laurance Gidney writes both contemporary, young adult and genre fiction. Gidney’s first collection, Sea, Swallow Me and Other Stories was a finalist for the 2009 Lambda Literary Award in the Science Fiction/Fantasy and Horror category. Bereft, a YA novel, appeared in 2013. Skin Deep Magic (Rebel Satori Press) is his third book. Gidney lives and writes in his native Washington, DC.
"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
“J.R. Greenwell does a lovely job of relaying the comic as well as tragicomic aspects of the over-the-top dramatic world of drag queens, and he nails it exactly.”
—Felice Picano, author of True Stories

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

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

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

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

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

Praise for *Dirty One*

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

—Jerry Wheeler, *Out in Print*

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

—Richard Labonté, *Bookmarks*

“A nostalgic saga of pre-teen drama. It’s like a Wham video with a polymorphous perverse underbelly and a Flock of Seagulls hairdo.”

—Sam Baltrusis, *Boston Spirit*

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
I hate my body.

My biceps are puny as plums. My chest swells to the size of an anthill. It doesn’t fill out even the tightest T-shirt. Instead of the half-moons of muscle that I crave, my calves are sapling-thin, just bone wrapped with skin. I’m black, so my ass is supposed to be a buoyant, high-shelf force of nature. In my twenties and thirties it was, kind of. But now that I have reached my mid-forties the shelf has descended a few pegs and it’s ringed with stretch marks.

I avoid mirrors. I don’t look at my reflection when I walk by windows. Selfies are against my religion.
Therapists and self-help gurus tell you to love yourself, to love your body, or at least accept it. They warn about the perils of comparing yourself to others. But it’s hard not to, especially right now, because on my computer screen, opened up in Photoshop, is a jpeg of a guy from a reality show. His dark curly hair and dark beard flow, almost seamlessly, into the jungle of tangled strands that carpets his large, sculpted pecs and his inhumanly flat stomach (so flat it is almost concave) that is hacked up into six distinct sectors. One arm rests behind his head, exposing the tender flesh of his underarm. His other hand teases the waist band of his sparse, leopard skin bikini briefs as if he is hankering or threatening or promising to remove them. His eyes are half-closed and his unsmiling mouth falls half-open. It seems to say, to whisper, *I know you want to fuck me, but you’re not worthy*.

I’m a web guy for Tapestry, a web site for gay men. Our editorial mission is to produce slick, carefully-curated, engaging content that empowers our audience to make informed choices in the realms of lifestyle, fashion, travel, and entertainment; choices that will enhance the user’s economic power, style, and self-esteem so that he can represent the gay community productively and confidently.

But regardless of the altruistic editorial mission; regardless of the hours-long meetings that leave the editors weary and on edge; regardless of the critical deadlines, the furious copyediting, and the exalted position the owners think the site holds in the universe of gay media (or in the universe, period), Tapestry is, ultimately, all about one thing and one thing only: hot shirtless men.

That’s why this guy is on my screen. I have to crop the image so it can be inserted into a story. This picture went up today on another web site and the editors want to put it on ours to boost traffic. His name is Valero Martinelli, but since becoming a breakout star on the breakout reality series *Bluegrass State*, he has shortened it to just Valero. The show, shot in the tiny town of Lemon Pepper, Kentucky, population 6,500, documents the antics of a cadre of twenty-somethings whose sole purpose seems to be to offend, insult, and scandalize the small town’s residents. Brawling in the streets. Arrests. Interracial couplings. Valero exploded onto the radar of popular culture midway through season one when he sauntered down Lemon Pepper’s main drag in nothing but a neon orange thong and $350 Gucci flip-flops.

During that same season, he made a tepid, passing statement in support of marriage equality. His comment in its entirety was *Sure, whatever, doesn’t really bother me; I think I had a cousin who was gay*. The gay media lit up like a solar flare. VALERO SUPPORTS MARRIAGE EQUALITY, REALITY STAR COMES OUT IN SUPPORT OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE, and TV’S HOTTEST HUNK SUPPORTS US! were a few of the headlines lasered onto the homepages of gay sites across the web. Valero had been anointed a gay icon. A gorgeous body is apparently the only criteria necessary to claim that status, regardless of how one actually feels about the gays: during the 2012 presidential election, Tapestry’s editors made me build a slideshow of shirtless pictures of Paul Ryan.

“Timothy, how’s that pic coming? Is it ready?”

The voice of Chad, our online editor, leaps at me over the cubicle wall while he sits in his office. I know he hasn’t bothered to stand or even look up from his computer.

“Almost,” I answer.
Moments later I hear Chad conversing with the fashion editor, Brandon, and I can’t help wondering why it seems all twenty and thirty-something gay guys in New York are named Chad or Brandon or Darren or Evan.

“Like, I got a resume today,” Brandon says, “for the junior editor position?” He gives a snort of disgust. “The cover letter says the guy has thirty years experience. That means he’s, like, in his fifties. Maybe even sixty.” I can’t see them over the cubicle wall, but I imagine that Brandon—from the perch of his young, blue-eyed, peroxide-blond supremacy—just shuddered. “What should I do?”

I hear the tearing of paper and I know that Chad has snatched the offending resume with the viciousness of a starving man snatching a chicken bone and ripped it to pieces. “No way we’re hiring someone with thirty years experience.”

“I know, right?” Brandon says. “And if he’s that old, he’s, like, probably uptight.”

“He wouldn’t fit in here. He wouldn’t get us.”

Chad says this with a pretense of sympathy, as if rejecting the fifty-year-old is for the man’s own pitiful sake. I have a moment of fright: I’m not that far from fifty. And I’m black. And my body looks nothing like the one on my screen. I’m an anomaly at Tapestry.

Chad suddenly materializes at my cubicle and sears me with a dirty look. “Is the Valero pic ready?”

Tattoos engulf Chad’s arms and hands. They creep up both sides of his neck like climbing vines, overrunning his olive-complexion skin. I know from the superabundance of pictures that he has plastered on social media that his entire body is engraved with tattoos. He takes a day off from work about every other month to get a new one. I once heard him say that was all he lived for. Tapestry has witnessed his ink accumulate like credit card debt.

What a shame, I think. Because, except for the ink, he’s beautiful. He’s a muscle-bound 5’10 with melon-fat arms and a chest so robust, it stretches the fabric of his tight v-neck T-shirt to the breaking point. His powerhouse legs and curvy bubble of an ass are barely contained by jeans so snug, they might as well be leggings. His waist is trim. His midsection has just enough extra to keep him from being too perfect. I covet his physique and savor a vindictive satisfaction that he has ruined it with all this ridiculous ink. I doubt he has considered what these tattoos will look like when he is seventy or eighty, when the taut muscle loosens and the flesh surrenders its elasticity; when the skin slackens to a leathery rind turning the tattoos into sagging, crinkly cartoons.

“I need that pic, like, now,” Chad says in his best Anna Wintour and storms back to his office. “We do have deadlines around here, you know.”

This is Tapestry, where a shirtless pic of a C-list celebrity qualifies as breaking news.

* * *

It’s Friday. Right after work, I go to The Tool Shed on Christopher Street in the West Village. A few guys stand outside the bar, top shirt buttons undone, ties loosened. Two smoke cigarettes, two others boldly pass a joint back and forth. All four exhale slowly, in long, sumptuous streams, as if their languid exhalations will exorcise the demons of the work week.
Inside I find not so much a crowd, more like a muddle. More guys with wayward ties; one man looking staid and financial in his Brooks Brothers-style suit; someone in the uniform shirt of one of those electronic stores. Satchels and backpacks and briefcases stuffed with laptops and contracts sit guarded in the protective proximity of peoples’ feet. Booze is guzzled more liberally, though no less eagerly, than it is Monday to Thursday. Later in the evening a go-go boy will shake and shimmy and stockpile dollar tips in the waistband of his thong while standing on the raised platform now being used as a seat by a guy sporting a Mohawk and fiddling endlessly with his phone. Two bartenders—tank-topped and muscular—sparkle while mixing drinks and performing their primary function: flirting with the patrons. A shirtless bar back with dreadlocks down to his ankles and piercings in both nipples, in both eyebrows, and in his nose and lips, roams the bar collecting discarded glasses.

The Tool Shed is a dive—dark, raw, unrefined—but not grungy. Its floors and walls and restroom do not gleam, but neither do they disgust. It’s your typical bar with loud music, loud patrons, and loud attitudes. However, The Tool Shed is atypical in one key aspect: its patrons are split almost evenly between blacks and whites. An “interracial” bar, but rarely do the races intermingle. Mostly it’s blacks talking with blacks while whites stand on the sidelines pining to be invited into that exclusive and elusive world of the Gay Black Male. Sometimes that invitation comes, often it doesn’t. Even so, if you’re a white man who prefers black men (or vice versa), The Tool Shed is one of the few bars that caters specifically—if unofficially—to that predilection.

I get a rum-and-coke, then sit on a stool against the wall not far from the pool table. A game is in progress. I recognize one of the players as someone I met here a few months ago. A handsome white, thirty-ish guy with blond hair and a sunset-red beard. We talked for a bit the night we met and seemed to enjoy each other’s company—until our conversation revealed that I do the unthinkable: I live in Queens. Staunch Manhattanites revel in their superiority to the peasants who reside in the other four boroughs (although they generously make exceptions for the gentrified areas of Brooklyn). In this way they are like fundamentalist Christians who think anyone who believes outside of their realm is a sinner. Unlike fundamentalists, staunch Manhattanites do not believe sinners should be saved or even paid attention to.


“Why? You have to catch the last bus to Queens?” he said, and with a nastiness designed to stick.

Now my eyes leave the pool game and land on a bald, goateed white man standing directly across from me. I smile. He smiles. He looks away. I look away. I look back. He looks back. He smiles. I smile. I look away. We engage in several more iterations of this ritual mating dance before he walks over.

“Hi. I’m Ernie.”

“Timothy.”

He’s forty-seven. A musician. Lives in Jersey City. Teaches music in the public schools. About 6’2 and slim. Where there was once hair is now just an outline, an opaque memento of what once was. Ernie’s thick goatee is speckled with gray. His dark bushy eyebrows are set low, right above his brown eyes, creeping down, just slightly, onto his eyelids. With those low-set brows
knitted together in consternation, Ernie looks a little mean. Until he smiles, and then his eyes open up and his cheeks plump out and his lips seem to turn a little redder.

We talk for a bit before exchanging phone numbers and email addresses. Before parting, we give each other a nice hug and a nicer kiss.

* * *

I get the subway at Christopher Street and transfer at Times Square. A man with no hands stands on the platform. His arms end where his wrists should start. A rusty tin can for donations sits on the ground in front of him. He holds a cardboard poster between his thick ruddy stumps. I don’t know what it says because I can’t bear to look. I’ve seen him several times and I always speed by, keeping my gaze locked straight ahead. I don’t allow it to stray. I’ll be struck with pity and inconsolable guilt if it does. Right by the handless man is a group of silly twenty-somethings, sporting hip hair sculpted with gel and streaked with highlights. The females are slim and pretty in midriff-baring tops and Daisy Dukes; the males glowing and adorable in Capri pants and tank tops. They laugh and tease and joke with one another while the handless man stands mute and stationary, just inches from them, holding his poster between his stumps.

* * *

Ernie and I talk and text morning, noon, and night, over the course of the ensuing week, our conversations a cherished contrast from the drivel I overhear daily at Tapestry: Lady Gaga’s “awesome” new video; the hot guy on The Bachelor; the latest “totally cool” dance bars; techno music; the newly-discovered pic of Hugh Jackman shirtless on a beach. Ernie can talk about the arts, politics, the books on his nightstand. We both love jazz and classical music. He composes music. I tell him I write poetry and he’s intrigued. Not many guys are intrigued by poetry.

“I’m trying fiction, too,” I say on the phone one night. “I’ve written a couple of short stories. Nothing published. I can see myself writing a novel eventually. But right now, poetry is my thing.”

“Can’t wait to read it. You know what? I love your voice.”

“Why?” I say.

“It’s deep and distinctive. Resonant and clear. The way you speak is confident and authoritative and so articulate. You don’t have an accent. It’s like you’re from nowhere. And everywhere. Your voice is beautiful. Did you ever consider broadcasting?”

“No.”

But I’ve been asked that before. And I’ve been told many times that my voice is beautiful. I once had a customer service job that involved talking to people over the phone and I know it was my voice that calmed and reassured even the most irate. I want to tell Ernie that I love his voice, too. The smooth and easy tranquility of it. Its lush and slightly melancholic purr. But I don’t, afraid he’ll think I’m only complimenting him on his voice because he complimented me on mine. Instead I say, “You know what I like about you?”

“Tell me.”

“I like that you call me and you text me and you email me. Without me always having to do it first. We share the responsibility of communicating. It’s not just me reaching out. You reach, too. A lot of guys don’t. Most guys don’t.”
“I always will,” Ernie says. “I promise.”

This makes me nervous. It’s too soon for promises. We haven’t even had our first date. I don’t know his favorite color or if he’s a cat person or a dog person or when his birthday is or if he likes his family. At forty-six I know better than to be beguiled by the promises of a man I’ve known for a week. Nevertheless, his promise sends me soaring on the winds of hope.

* * *

We agree to meet for our first date Saturday afternoon. On my way, in the subway at Times Square, I see a poster of that reality show guy—Valero—in an advertisement touting the upcoming season of his show. He’s fully-clothed, but his biceps and pecs practically burst from the Photoshopped confines of his form-fitting shirt. The contours of his abs are visible through the sheer material.

An old man stands in front of the poster. He looks ninety. Stooped. Folds of loose, sallow skin wilting off his crumbling bones. His face is pale, his eyes watery. I know that he was once young, that he hasn’t always been this way. I wonder what he looked like then. Was he handsome or cute? Just so-so? Maybe he’s always been ugly. I hope not. To be old and ugly is the natural course of things. To be young and ugly is a travesty, unnatural, unforgivable.

People walk by. Some do a double-take at Valero. No one sees the old man.

* * *

We meet at Jupiter Diner on Christopher Street, not far from The Tool Shed. We talk for hours. I confide that I hate my body.

“From the time I was a little kid,” I say, “people felt the need to remind me how skinny I was. I had an aunt who told my mother she was sure I had worms. My high school drama teacher joked that my waist was slimmer than a girl’s thigh. In gym, the coach pointed me out to the rest of the class as an example of the kind of body you don’t want. Now I work for a company that idolizes the perfect body above all else. I mean, I go to the gym three, four, five times a week. I take supplements. I’ve done personal training. But I’m still skinny. People tell me, *just eat more*, as if that’ll solve everything. But it doesn’t: there’s this thing called DNA and mine has determined that I’ll never have a go-go boy’s body. Sometimes I feel like I should apologize for not having better genes.”

I didn’t mean to rant. I hope I haven’t turned Ernie off, made him want to flee Jupiter Diner and the self-hating skinny black guy.

“Your genes are fine,” Ernie says. “I can tell you have a cute body. Even though I haven’t seen you with your clothes off—yet.”

He winks. I’m embarrassed. And pleased. And a little aroused. But then Ernie starts to fidget with his coffee cup. He looks around the room, distracted, but not in an inattentive or rude way. His distraction looks like struggle. His bushy eyebrows crease, then uncrease, then crease again in contemplation. Finally the struggle seems to resolve to a decision.

“I need to tell you something, Timothy.”

I’ve heard this declaration from guys before, this prelude to some serious news that should probably have been shared much sooner, before hopes were flown skyward. I steel myself, knowing one of three popular confessions is likely:
I have a boyfriend/partner/husband. If this is what he tells me, I'll walk out of this diner without a word, without paying my share of the bill. I’ll go home and go to bed and cry for hours or days or weeks or months over this man I’ve known for one week. I know I will, I’ve done it before.

I’m moving to a faraway state soon. I’ll be disappointed because he should have told me sooner, but I’ll enjoy dating him while it lasts and try not to get attached. That attempt will fail—miserably—and, like the first scenario, I’ll end up in bed and in tears.

I'm HIV-positive. This is, by a wide margin, the most popular and least frightening confession of the three. I’m negative, but have had boyfriends, one night stands, and fuck buddies who I knew were positive. It doesn’t bother me. I once met a guy on a Saturday night at The Tool Shed and we left together. We had just stepped into my apartment, when he blurted, “There’s something you should know. I’m positive.” I replied, “Ok. You have HIV and I have condoms. Make yourself at home. You want red wine, white wine, or seltzer?”

And now, in the half moment between the announcement of the confession and the confession itself, sweat swims in my underarms.

“I used to be heavy,” Ernie says. “Really heavy. Five years ago I lost 160 pounds. Talk about hating your body.”

He tells me about the humiliation he endured as the fat kid in school. The pranks. The torture. The diets that didn’t work or that he couldn’t stick to. Reaching adulthood and being passed up for jobs and how certain he is that, at least sometimes, it was because of his obesity. He almost cries recalling a harrowing night at the symphony when he had to leave because he couldn’t fit in the seat.

“The people around me,” he says, “some were amused, some were annoyed. How dare he be fat. How dare we have to look at something so ugly and fat. The next month I borrowed money from my parents and had the surgery.”

“And look at you now,” I say.

“Yeah.” He smiles. “Look at me now.”

I am incredulous. Judging by his slim frame, you’d never know he’d once been atrociously overweight. But, selfishly, I am a hundred times more relieved than I am incredulous. He doesn’t have a boyfriend or husband. He’s not moving a thousand miles away. His confession is not an obstacle that will bedevil our path forward or annihilate it altogether. My hopes can remain aloft.

*     *     *

My place the next day. Ernie’s coming over. I’m fixing a simple dinner: baked chicken, fresh asparagus, shrimp. I would normally include rice or pasta, but Ernie has renounced carbs. “I might as well eat poison,” he told me.

I gut the shrimp and try to slow my mind from racing ahead; try to temper my hopes and coax them down from their moon-high altitude. This always happens when I meet a guy I really like: I get too far ahead of myself too fast. So fast I can’t ease the momentum. So fast that, when disappointment inevitably arrives, I’m caught unprepared, unprotected. But, wisely or stupidly, I always try again. I hope Ernie is different. I think he will be. I always think that.
He’s here and we’re both elated. We hug as if it’s been weeks since we last saw each other, instead of twenty-three hours and twenty-six minutes; as if our presence in each other’s arms is a relief.

“Wine?” I say.

“Of course.”

“Red, white, or white zinfandel?”

“Hmm. Zinfandel.”

I pour the wine, turn on the CD player which I’ve already loaded with jazz and classical, set to play randomly. The very first selection is Dinah Washington singing “Make the Man Love Me.” I’m mortified that Ernie will think I’m trying to send him a message.

He takes a sip of wine, then places his glass on the coffee table with the import of a judge laying down a gavel. “I want to read your poetry.”

“Now? This very minute?”

“This very minute.”

So we go into my bedroom and sit at the computer, or rather, he sits and I kneel beside him, our arms spiraling each other’s shoulders. I watch his eyebrows crease in consternation and then uncrease when he reaches the end of a poem and a smile delights his face. As he scrolls through the verses of poem after poem, I think, distinctly, This is a man I might like to live with one day. Mel Tormé’s rendition of “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” floats in from the living room, his velvety fog of a voice cooing in intimate elegance.

“Your writing voice is just like your speaking voice,” Ernie says. “Authoritative. Articulate.”

We squeeze each other’s shoulders, which rapidly evolves to caressing of necks, kissing of cheeks, communion of lips. I had thought we’d have dessert after dinner, not before, but I don’t fight this. Ernie is aggressive, which I like. He maneuvers me onto the bed. We kiss some more, then undress.

I’m horrified at what I see.

I expected a slender body, and it is, but with blobs of excess skin budding around his pecs and bubbling his midsection. It streams from his buttocks, droops down his back. The excess skin is wrinkly, loose, completely void of elasticity or tautness. I touch it. It’s gelatinous and squishy. The way it pours off his body reminds me of thick, lumpy dough being poured slowly from a bowl.

I didn’t expect a ripped body or six-pack abs or a high-definition chest. But I didn’t expect this either.

Half-rough, half-gentle, Ernie propels me onto my back and kisses me. His hunger heightens each second, but my arousal has withered. To reignite it, I shut my eyes, tight, tight, and think about how wonderful he is; how sweet and smart and cute; how he loves books and jazz and my poetry. Tighter. Tighter. As if the strain might reconfigure my sight, redesign my visual perception so that I’ll like what I see when I reopen my eyes.

I reopen them.
I see his body.
I can’t do this.

I stop him, take his face in both my hands. I look into his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Flustered, jarred, breathless, he looks at me as if he doesn’t understand: I’ve interrupted treasure and he can’t make sense of why. And then he gets it. His eyes don’t shift. His face and body remain still. But a stricken, heartsick air creeps up and envelopes him. I feel it. If it had a temperature, it would freeze me.

He gathers up his clothes—slowly, dazed—and goes into the bathroom. I hear him crying behind the closed door. The sound is tender, just like the tender and sensitive man whom I have hurt. I sit on my bed and wait.

When he emerges, we don’t speak. We both head straight through the living room and to the front door as if—because—there is no other option. The possibilities so ferociously alive just forty minutes ago have been butchered. Our wine glasses, still full, sit on the coffee table. The apartment is flush with the smell of baking chicken. It must be done by now. The music has changed again: a live recording of Leontyne Price singing “Visse D’arte” in her dusky, opulent soprano.

Ernie leaves. He doesn’t say goodbye. I don’t either.

I stand at the door for minutes, staring at it. The sound of his crying smashes through my head. I’ll never forget it. I go into the kitchen and shut the oven off, but don’t bother to take the chicken out. It’ll dry out and be inedible. A waste of food, of money. I don’t care. I go into the living room, turn the music off, drain both glasses of wine, one right after the other, like a poisoned person gulping an antidote. I sit on my couch. I put my head in my hands.

Joe Okonkwo recently received his MFA in Creative Writing from the City College of New York. His short fiction has appeared in Penumbra, Promethean, Best Gay Love Stories 2009 and online at KeepThisBagAwayFromChildren.com. His poetry has been published in Anthology magazine. He is currently working on securing a publisher for his novel, Jazz Moon, a story set against the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance and glittering Jazz Age Paris.
Chelsea Station is a new magazine devoted to gay writing. We accept for consideration original and unpublished fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, memoir, humor, narrative travelogue, interviews, and reviews (books, theater, television, and film) relating to gay literature and gay men.

Please query about reprints or promotional excerpts.

Submissions and queries should be sent to info@chelseastationeditions.com.

Manuscripts should be emailed as Word attachments. Please include your name, address, and e-mail contact information on the first page of your document. Please also include a brief bio of 100 words. Please query before sending any artwork.

Please do not send more than one prose work or more than four poems for consideration. Please let us know if you are making simultaneous submissions of your work to other journals.

Due to the volume of submissions, we are unable to respond with rejection notices. If you do not hear from us within three months of your submission, we are unable to use your submission, though you are always able to submit additional material for us to consider.

We also welcome recommendations for material and writers for consideration.

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

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

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

stories by

Jameson Currier

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

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

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

“What Comes Around

a novel by

Jameson Currier

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There is a lot to cheer about in *Pride*, a new movie directed by Matthew Warchus.

Set during 1984 and 1985, the story revolves around a group of London gay activists who pledged their support to the striking miners in Wales because of their mutual dislike of Margaret Thatcher. The superb ensemble cast features a number of familiar actors (Bill Nighy, Imelda Staunton, Paddy Considine, Dominic West) and a wealth of rising stars (Ben Schnetzer, George MacKay, *Sherlock*’s Andrew Scott, and *Looking*’s Russell Tovey, in a cameo role).

Stephen Beresford’s excellent script uses the London gay pride marches of 1984 and 1985 to frame the narrative, and while *Pride* was inspired by a true story, it expertly weaves together an expansive variety of real and fictitious characters.

Within the activists there are Mark Ashton (Ben Schnetzer), who decides to break away from the limitations of gay politics and support the striking Welsh miners; Joe (George MacKay), a young man trying to escape his closeted suburban life; Steph, a brash lesbian amongst the gay boys (Faye Marsay); Jeff, a handsome looker (Freddie Fox); a bookshop owner named Gethin (Andrew Scott); and Jonathan, Gethin’s longtime partner (Dominic West). After much internal bickering amongst the activists they set up LGSM—Lesbians and Gays Support The Miners—to raise money to show their solidarity with the miners and offer them financial support during their strike—though funds are not raised fast, furiously, or even easy.

And even the miners are resistant to receiving aid from gay activists. It’s not until a mistaken phone message offers an unexpected break and sends the activists to a small Welsh town that they get to meet with Dai (Paddy Considine), a striking miner who is surprisingly open-minded to the idea of receiving aid from the gay activists. After some reluctance and a few personal setbacks, many of Dai’s colleagues are also won over, including Cliff (Bill Nighy), Hefina (Imelda Staunton), and Sian (Jessica Gunning), though the mining union and others in the town remain defiant and resistant.

It’s a story of a clash of two cultures, two different lifestyles that results in a display of an uneasy brotherhood, both externally and internally. While the narrative is fueled by challenges and antagonists, the success of *Pride* is that its lead characters persevere and respond with charm, humanity, intelligence, and humor. *Pride* is full of uplifting moments, from a spontaneous lesbian kiss to an emotional rendition of the union song “Bread & Roses” to the final scene at the 1985 gay pride parade in London.

Among the stellar performances are Nighy’s turn as Cliff, the shy, reserved miner, and West’s flamboyant spin as a campy actor. Schnetzer’s role as the lead activist and Gunning’s
portrayal of the galvanized housewife hit all the right moments to lead both the characters and the audience through the narrative. Paddy Considine’s Dai and Imelda Staunton are perfect as the moral compasses. Faye Marsay shines in the comic role of a solo lesbian activist and Andrew Scott’s layered turn as the bookstore owner is wonderful.

If you enjoyed *Billy Elliot*, *Kinky Boots*, and *Norma Rae*, chances are you will love this film too. It pulls at the same empowering and sentimental strings. *Pride* is exhuberant, a feel-good movie for the gay millennia. It is stirring and heartbreaking and one of the most satisfying movie experiences of the year. But one of the most gratifying things about this movie is something that might be completely overlooked. At the heart of the activists meetings is the London bookstore Gay’s the Word and this unobtrusive centerpiece eloquently illuminates the historical importance LGBT bookstores played in the founding and shaping of our community—as places where we found ourselves, found others like ourselves, and a safe place to share our experiences.

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Jameson Currier is the editor and publisher of *Chelsea Station Magazine*.
Stephen Zerance is a recent MFA graduate of American University. He has previously appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *Prairie Schooner, Assaracus, Bloom, Knockout, Gertrude, Chelsea Station, Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide, Glitterwolf Magazine*, and *Toe Good Poetry*. His poetry has been featured on websites such as Lambda Literary Association and Split This Rock. He resides in Baltimore, Maryland.
Gray

Almost clipped by a bus
waiting at the intersection of Read
And Eager Street, broad daylight.
He rounds the corner, stands
beside me barely shaven,
trucker jacket, jeans, Marlboro
balancing on his lip.

He leans towards me, scent
of watery beer.
I’m afraid he’s going to touch me.
I’ve seen him before
working this block, hopping
into cars.

He starts talking.
‘Getting older is wretched.
Today the wind blows
what little hair I have left.’
He pulls at a strand
from his face as string.

I let out a laugh
because I have nothing to say.
He tells me,
‘I just turned forty-seven.’
I tell him he looks nothing of it,
nervous—because he looks like me.
‘Yeah, you’re going gray on your sides.’
He shrugs. Walks away,
pays me no more attention
as he changes in the green and red light.

—Stephen Zerance
Walter “Walt” Whitman was an American poet, essayist, and journalist.
When I Heard at the Close of the Day

When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been receiv’d with plaudits in the capitol, still it was not a happy night for me that follow’d,

And else when I carous’d, or when my plans were accomplish’d, still I was not happy,

But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health, refresh’d, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,

When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the morning light,

When I wander’d alone over the beach, and undressing bathed, laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,

And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I was happy,

O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food nourish’d me more, and the beautiful day pass’d well,

And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening came my friend,

And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores,

I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me,

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,

In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,

And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy.

—Walt Whitman
“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.

“Intellectual, emotional and sexual.”

—*The New York Times*
A contemporary story of betrayal and new beginnings, *A Strange and Separate People* by Jon Marans is an emotionally rich new play about a young Manhattan couple who find their world shaken when a gay doctor’s passion for his new religious beliefs challenges theirs and questions the meaning of love. This special edition includes Marans’ script along with a foreword by the playwright, theatrical production photos, special selected material, and afterwords by LGBT activists Jayson Littman and Chaim Levin.

“This engrossing three-character drama addresses the struggle for many to accept their homosexuality while adhering to their religious beliefs, in this case those of Orthodox Judaism... the play explores intriguing questions and yields affecting observations as it considers the courage required to make waves in any environment, from the synagogue to the New York State Legislature.”
—David Rooney, *The New York Times*

“A brilliant and insightful play about the intersection of God’s law and man’s love. “A Strange and Separate People” is rich in drama and Jewish tradition. The title comes from comments supposedly made by the late Queen Mother, who said she liked the Jews ‘very much, but they were a separate people and a strange people’ — perhaps in more ways than she ever expected.”
—Curt Schleier, *The Forward*