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CHELSEA STATION

ISSUE 2

EDITED BY JAMESON CURRIER



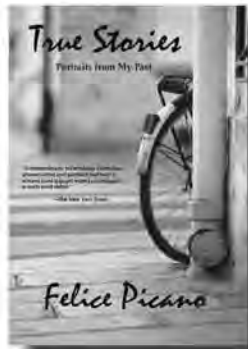
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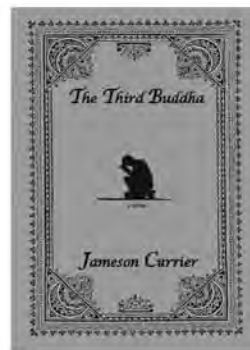
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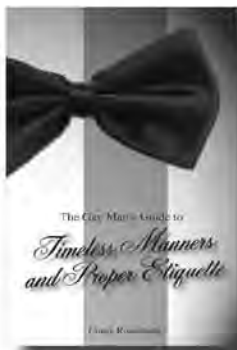
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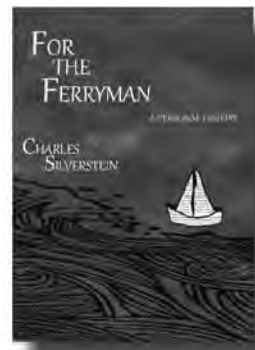
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Contents

<i>More Than This</i> by Stephen Mead	4
<i>Letter from Utah</i> by Lee Houck	9
<i>The Weight of Wisdom</i> by Tom Cardamone	19
<i>Watching Glee with My Mother</i> by Scott Wiggerman	25
<i>From Kissing</i> by Michael Graves	26
<i>In Conversation</i> : David Pratt and Michael Graves	33
<i>My Movie</i> by David Pratt	38
<i>Green Gotham</i> by Matthew Hittinger	46
<i>East Tenth Street, 1999</i> by Nicholas Boggs	47
<i>Homomonument, Amsterdam</i> by Jeff Mann	53
<i>In Conversation</i> : Charles Silverstein and Perry Brass	54
<i>iso</i> by Eric Nguyen	60
<i>Like a Cat Mysteriously Moving</i> by Raymond Luczak	62
<i>Youth</i> by Trumbull Rogers	63
<i>A Mere Matter of Marching</i> by Jeffrey Luscombe	65
<i>Coffee in Camelot</i> by Robert Siek	77
<i>Natural Selection</i> by Lewis DeSimone	78
<i>The God-Shaped Hole</i> by Michael T. Luongo	86
<i>The Cake is a Lie</i> by Jonathan Harper	91
<i>The Kiss</i> by Daniel M. Jaffe	98
<i>Gay and Jewish: A Reading List</i> by Wayne Hoffman	100
<i>Talking with Edmund White</i> by Eric Andrews-Katz	102
<i>Sacred Monsters</i> reviewed by Eric Andrews-Katz	105
<i>Quarantine</i> reviewed by Charles Green	106
<i>Two Literary Festivals, One City</i> by Eric Andrews-Katz	107
<i>A Study in Lavender</i> reviewed by Anthony R. Cardno	110
<i>Beatitude</i> reviewed by Anthony R. Cardno	111
<i>A Fast Life</i> reviewed by Richard Johns	112
<i>Brothers in Arms</i> by Jarrett Neal	114
<i>In a Galaxy Far, Far Away</i> by Jon Marans	121
About the Poets	126

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Our History

Charles Silverstein and Perry Brass

In Conversation

Psychologist Charles Silverstein is well known as the co-author of the landmark *The Joy of Gay Sex* (with collaborators Edmund White and Felice Picano), but his most important contribution to the gay community was his historic 1973 presentation before the “Nomenclature Committee” of the American Psychiatric Association which led to the removal of homosexuality as a mental illness from its diagnostic manual. He also established two gay and lesbian counseling centers in New York, and was the founding editor of *The Journal of Homosexuality*. Silverstein’s most recent book, *For the Ferryman: A Personal History*, recounts many of his career triumphs as well as offering a mesmerizing and heart-rending account of his long term relationship with poet William Borys.

On January 5, 2012, Silverstein appeared at Barnes and Noble bookstore at 82nd Street and Broadway in Manhattan, with Perry Brass, activist and author of *The Manly Art of Seduction* to talk about Silverstein’s recent memoir, *For the Ferryman*, published by Chelsea Station Editions.

Perry Brass: I’m very pleased that Charles asked me to do this. I really enjoyed *For the Ferryman*. I felt the book was really four books in one and I would like to talk to Charles about the four books, though I don’t know if we will have all that time. Basically, the four books are—first, a really engaging account of Charles’s childhood in a working class Jewish Brooklyn family, a world that has completely disappeared, and his account of it was really funny and it reminded me of Woody Allen’s *Radio Days*. The second book is the account of the early liberation period of the gay movement, which was centered around the Gay Activist Alliance and Charles’s pivotal role in changing American psychiatry’s negative attitude toward homosexuality, which had been basically by punishing it. The third book is his amazing twenty year relationship with William Borys. And the fourth book is an AIDS narrative and dealing with the trauma

of the AIDS crisis, a situation which many people are just now coming to grips with after having lived through the siege—a war-like situation—and are just desirable to let go of it, but only now we are able to look back on it and see different aspects of it. So I’d like to be able to ask questions about all four books, if I don’t get to a question, I hope you in the audience will ask it or speak with Charles later.

I am going to skip ahead and go directly to what I think is one of the most engaging sections of the book and that is the American Psychiatric Association’s change in 1973 that declassified homosexuality as a mental illness. Can you talk to us about the attitude of therapists towards gay and lesbian patients prior to that time?

Charles Silverstein: The attitude was typified as the “cause of cure” school of psychiatry and that was the belief that if only we knew what causes this abnormality then we could find a proper cure. The problem with that approach is that before you try to cure someone’s abnormal behavior, you need to produce evidence that there is anything abnormal about it—and they skipped that step. And they skipped it for many years, and tortured people with various kinds of treatment. And by the way this is still going on. There is a battle going on right now about the sexual disorders section in the new diagnostic handbook and I question whether there will be any improvements. Just editorial wise, the committee in charge of that section wants to diagnose everyone as suffering from some kind of sexual disorder, and those of us who are pretty liberal think this is a travesty.

Brass: You have a great quote in your book about the road to the APA decision, “The emotional reaction of the psychiatrists to our activities put the power of social change into the hands of gay liberationists.” So what do think was that emotional reaction?

Silverstein: They were outraged.



photo by Jameson Currier

Perry Brass and Charles Silverstein at Barnes and Noble, January 2012

Brass: Pissed off?

Silverstein: Pissed off is hardly the word for it. I remember at some professional cocktail party I attended, none of them would talk to me. Which didn't upset me too much. But they wouldn't come near me. They not only resented what I was doing, they were frightened that if they were observed talking to me other colleagues might think it was because they were homosexuals as well. And they didn't want to be tainted. This even happened at an APA convention. I happened to be talking to a friend and he walked away and another friend came by and said, "I saw you talking to so-and-so," and he said, "Is he gay?" I said, "Why would you think he was gay?" And he said, "because he was talking to you." And I said, "Then Jerry, anyone watching the two of us will think that you are gay." He just turned around and walked away.

Brass: I love that you talk so openly about the relationship between certain forms of therapy, especially aversion therapy and social engineering. This therapy as a process was and can be used to enforce social norms like heterosexuality but you also make a wonderful case about how oppressors often hide under the mantle of being humanitarians or altruists, like the therapists who got paid by self-hating homosexuals to convert them and felt so gratified that they could do the gay community such a favor by changing them. We still see this kind of altruism going on with therapists in the ex-gay movement. Do you see a relationship about that period before the APA change and today?

Silverstein: One of my favorite quotes is from Henry David Thoreau. "If I knew for a certainty that a man were coming to my house with the conscious design of

doing me good, I should run for my life.” The amount of damage that has been done by the psychological and psychiatry professions to help people change—I see it every day at my practice. Patients who were kids in school and called faggots, beaten up, rejected not only in school but by their own parents and members of the family. I think aversion therapy is a form of torture. I think that psychiatrists of that period enjoyed setting up a sado-masochist relationship between them and their patients.

Brass: There are some really wonderful accounts of this that Charles has in his book. Some shocking accounts. Like what the Germans were doing at the time...

Silverstein: The Germans were using cerebral ablation, going in and cutting out parts of the brain.

Brass: Using therapy that would make you nauseated.

Silverstein: Yes, that was part of aversion therapy. There is a theory connected to it called classical conditioning, but the point is that all of this is just torture. And what was so fascinating... I was in the audience when there was a press conference when the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder, and I thought how wonderful this is, finally a group of hands got raised at a committee meeting and did something that should have been done fifty years before. And all it took was a raise of hands. And then people objected to the fact that a bunch of guys got around a raised their hands about something, because, well, that was not the way science progresses. Well how do you think it got on the list in the first place? A bunch of guys got around the table and raised their hands.

Brass: I love your quote about guilt versus shame. Charles said, “Guilt makes one feel bad, but shame worthless.” I think that is one of those ‘one picture is worth a thousand words, but eight words can be worth a thousand pictures moments.’ Can you talk about guilt versus shame in your own life?

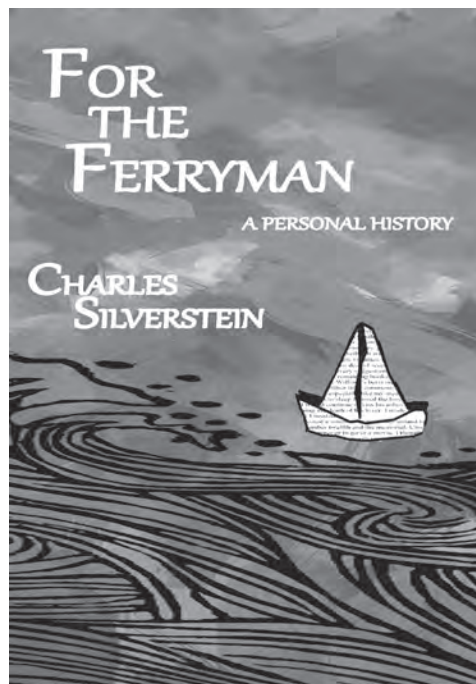
Silverstein: Very clearly for all my own young life there was the shame of my sexual desire. The important difference between guilt and shame—I feel guilty because I did something, but I could try to make up for doing something else—but for shame, it is like there is a toxin in the body and no matter what you do, no matter how you behave, that toxin is always there. And so in dealing with patients and their feelings, it is much harder to work with people when they suffer from shame than there is with people who are feeling guilty.

Brass: Can you talk about the switch that John Bancroft, who was an English proponent of aversion therapy, made when he became the head of the Kinsey Institute, and then a friend of gay rights. The Kinsey Institute was amazingly far ahead of its time and in the book you talk about the fact that John Bancroft started out so far on one side of acknowledging the rights of gay and lesbians to be themselves and then went all the way to the other side. You were part of that switch and can you tell us how it came about?

Silverstein: Bancroft is a British psychiatrist and he wrote a book on aversion therapy and he was one of the leading proponents of it. It just so happened that he came out with a new book and the editor of Behavior Therapy journal asked me to review it. It was not a positive review.

Brass: This is a great part of the book and really worth reading.

Silverstein: How should we put it? I nailed his ass to the wall. And he was furious. Really, really furious. I saw some the letters he sent to the editor of the journal, but somewhere along the line, he didn’t confide in me how, he changed his mind completely, and has become a great friend of the gay community and, as a matter of fact, right now he is doing some really great work that I admire. And by the way I have never met him. And if did I think I might stand a few feet away because I think he’s still mad



at me at my review of his book.

Brass: I want to ask you now about William Bory. You began your discussion about meeting William at the GAA Firehouse with a great quote, “I felt like a shard of metal being uncontrollably drawn to a powerful magnet.” So can you tell us some stuff about this magnet?

Silverstein: Everybody has their types. Perry, I don’t know what your type is, but I am sure you know what it is.

Brass: He was it, I gather?

Silverstein: It sounds so corny, but it was love at first sight.

Brass: I believe in that.

Silverstein: And I loved him more the day he died. The twenty years between the two were a problem.

Brass: It sounds it.

Silverstein: People often fell in love with him. And it wasn’t only a physical thing, because William was a Renaissance man with an extraordinary knowledge of history and culture.

Brass: You also said he collaborated on some things with you. He edited work for you, he was a sounding board for you during his more lucid moments.

Silverstein: He had a sense of language that was extraordinary. I don’t mean English. I mean the nature of language and how it was constructed. For instance, he knew we were going to Egypt. We made a number of trips there. He taught himself how to read Egyptian hieroglyphics. He just knew it. And when we got to the Cairo Museum, he saw this tablet. It was just a table to me. But he got all excited and said this is a letter from Ramses the Great to—and here he is reading this thing—it’s funny. Do you remember the commercial where all the people are listening in—well, all the people around us were starting to listen in because someone knew what

he was talking about—and he got offended and walked out of the museum because they had violated his sense of privacy.

We were lying in bed one night and I was reading some boring professional paper, and he decided he was going to teach himself modern Greek because he already knew ancient Greek, and so he stole the book from the library, and he sat in bed and opened the book to page one and I would see his finger moving. And in a couple of minutes it was moving faster. And then it’s going faster. And I said, “William, how did you do that?” And it was one of his typical answers, “It obvious.” He understood language in that sense. When we went to Italy, he learned

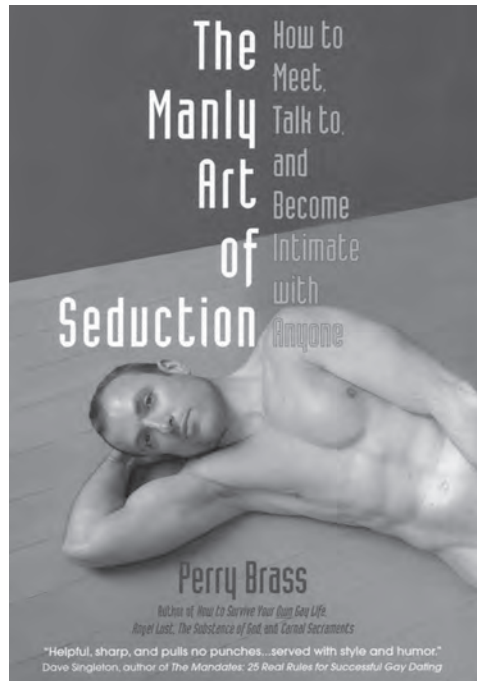
Italian. When we went to Portugal, within a week he understood the language and in two weeks he was speaking it. How I admired him. Sometimes he could be pretty angry at me at my inability and insecurity in writing the language.

Brass: You talk about that, how he could go into tirades. That leads into the next question. Through this incredible roller coaster of a relationship, and Charles goes into great detail and depth on this in the book, what do you think held you to William through the maelstrom of his many problems—he had drug related problems, obviously emotional

problems and social problems. What was it that held you to him that you did simply walk away from him?

Silverstein: I think there are probably a number of different answers to that, and one of which is, I don’t know. The others are sense of loyalty, the fact that I still loved him, occasionally wanted to kill him. Maybe the fear of being alone. Maybe the kind of discussions we would have when he was not so sick. All of those things.

Brass: I loved that in the book you were open about your feelings about so many things. The thing that really got to me about Charles’s book is that on one hand, there are moments that are outrageously funny and on another hand, there are moments that he really quite exposes himself. Even though I will be publishing my sixteenth



book I don't expose myself quite so openly. And there was one thing about when you were talking about your feelings about AIDS deniers and AIDS charlatans, which is extremely controversial.

Silverstein: I cannot imagine anything controversial. I remember what I wrote—I don't think I used the word bastards—but I should have—but these bastards crawled out of the mud and were opportunists and took advantage of people who were going to die and made money off them.

Brass: And he does name some names. I was quite amazed and delighted. This book took you a long time to write, did you ever think you just couldn't do it? And give up on it?

Silverstein: This is actually the eleventh version of the book.

Brass: What kept you going at it? A desire to keep William's name and his life alive? Or something else--to keep you going.

Silverstein: Why does a person do this? Certainly not to make money. A little narcissism... A little bit grandiosity... The belief that I have a story to tell.

Brass: It's quite a story. Looking back on the AIDS period, this worst of times, which felt like going through a war, what lesson do you think that we should keep in our heads from this period? Are there some lessons that are really important not to lose?

Silverstein: I think there are some segments of the gay male community that are rather selfish. The most important decisions of life they make are about fashion--what are the right socks to wear? One of the things that happened during the AIDS period is that we found that there is a different segment of the gay community--people who with love and compassion went out of their way to help other people, who became caregivers.

Brass: Acted heroically...

Silverstein: They acted very heroically. I obviously don't know of the lives of all the people in the audience—but one of the things that happens when caring for someone who is dying—it's not just cooking and cleaning up—sometimes you have to clean his body. Some times this body is too frail and has to be picked up, sometimes have to be put into a bathtub and washed. And there forms a new kind of intimacy and one begins to appreciate more what life is about than whether your blue sweater was bought this year or last. And I think this is a very healthy thing.

Brass: I think we will open up questions from the audience now.

Audience Member #1: Charles, in your relationship with William, did you ever feel that you could help him? You are a therapist and he sounded like he needed it.

Silverstein: No, I didn't think that I could help him, but I preferred that he would go into therapy himself. I think it is a mistake to try to be someone's spouse and therapist at the same time.

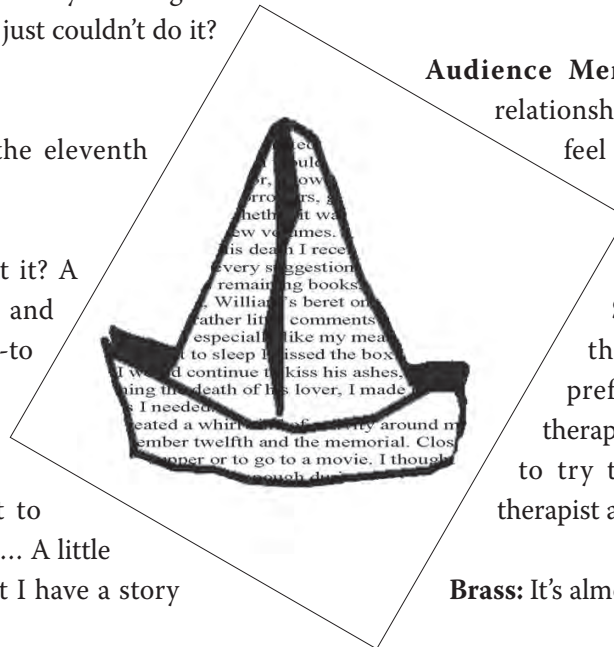
Brass: It's almost impossible.

Silverstein: I think there are a lot of people who try and it always ends in disaster. They are different roles.

Audience Member #2: What was it that brought those men to raise their hands to free homosexuality from being classified as a mental disorder?

Silverstein: They would have you believe that diagnosis was about science. Sometimes it is also about politics, it is about economics, and it is about social morality. Those of us that opposed the group who wanted to keep homosexuality as a disorder organized politically and it was our political actions that made it unconscionable to continue to do that. We made their lives hell.

Audience Member #2: Tell us how?



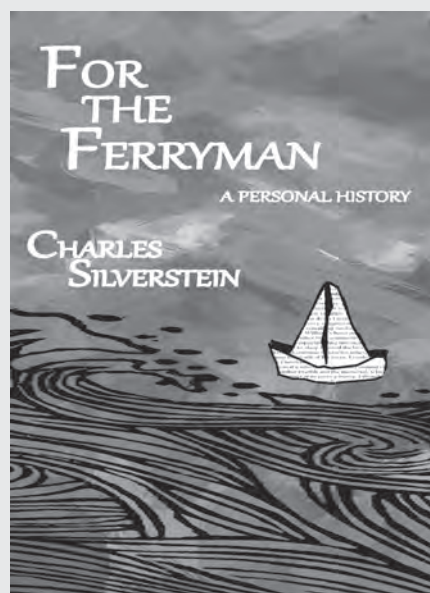
Silverstein: I talk about this a bit in the book and the theories of gay liberation, and one of the things to do is to know is how to deal with the self-righteousness that goes on in any professional organization. And the self-righteousness leads to disaster on their part. That sounds very vague right now. We did it politically. We formed our allies and most of our allies by the way were not gay, they were straight. The gay ones were still too terrified. But there were a number of heterosexual psychiatrists who knew that there was nothing wrong with being gay. They knew about other gay psychiatrists, and they worked with them.

Audience Member #3: About that historic moment, if I were to go back and look at the newspapers and television during the months of this decision, did this get announced to the general public, was this a major event at the time?

Silverstein: Absolutely. It was front page.

Audience Member #3: At other panels, and in the Christopher Isherwood biographical movie, there is a woman in California who is often credited with making the change happen. Is she someone you were working with?

Silverstein: I knew Evelyn Hooker. She had nothing to do with it. She wouldn't be offended by my saying that. Her seminal paper was published in 1958. It was a study that showed that gay and straight people could not be picked out based on their Rorschach responses. And there were phases of the gay liberation movement and she was in the much earlier phase. She was always someone who we pointed to as one of those people who provided us with evidence for our position. But she had no role in that. The modern gay movement starts after the Vietnam War. Before the Vietnam War it was the homophile movement. After the Vietnam War it was the gay movement. They were very different. Before the Vietnam War it was a movement that wanted to cooperate. After the Vietnam War, because we had experience fighting, and I don't mean fighting in Vietnam, I mean fighting against it, because of that, we were much more outrageous and upfront. And our attitude was—you are going to change, not us.



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

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

—Edmund White, author of *City Boy* and *Sacred Monsters*

For the Ferryman

A Personal History

Charles Silverstein

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