

## *UNDETECTABLE*

### **NEWARK 1990**

This section of my story has remained blank for a long time, a stretch of white space, testimonial to my suspicion about the verisimilitude of memory or my hesitancy about the aesthetic value of narrative, skeptical as I am about the efficacy of anecdote to capture the visceral sensation of shock. In retrospect, I understand such reticence to border on a certain coyness born of what that old queen Harold Bloom called the anxiety of influence, even if my monograph could not possibly rise to the occasion of memoirists like Doty, Monette, and Verghese. Still, I must aspire, be it folly or no. I am alone with language and experience; I will be 65 soon, jobless, middle class in a mostly cloudy red state where the gay gene pool is a puddle at best, where my friends are occasional, my family manipulative, my mortgage an albatross. I have two yellow Labradors and a Maine Coon with matts on his hind side and a hunger strike underway. The blankness of this section of my confession has mirrored the vacuity of my existence. How now to fill in the blanks?

I'm not sure whether or not I visited the library in Midtown before returning to north Newark that spring day in 1990—wildly bright in the afternoon, nimbus clouds floating over a true blue sky. I know I went running in the park around four. I am telling you what happened as best as I can recall. Branch Brook Park spread its long patchwork

down the hill from our flat—the park an intermittent green space—long and narrow in places, wider in others with gardens and baseball fields. Busy roads intersected sections of lawn. I wore blue shorts and a white t-shirt—my uniform for running—thick cotton soon sopped with sweat down my spine. The five to six mile workout was, if memory serves, usually stop-and-go because of boulevards I had to cross. I'm a slow runner, steady, dogged, unhappy with a body I fight to transform from amorphous mass to semblance of definition—sufficient, I have always hoped, to pass the gay buff test.

“The body is the temple of the soul,” I remember hearing from some handsome black sports announcer in Oakland during the Berkeley days, and though my “soul,” I now understood, was in fact itself a panoptic penitentiary restraining my bodily freedoms—tied, though happily as I was to the love of my life—I wanted nevertheless to make that body worth admiring—by myself, by others—a distinction which the mirror-mirror-on-the-wall left without a difference, the I being an other. That temple turned prison by Foucault's insight was destined to occupy my consciousness for longer than I could imagine that day, that afternoon, in the sharp, clear, windswept air of an overcrowded eastern seaboard suburb, my body occupied by a foreigner unknown to self or other.

In short, I wanted to get into shape, and aerobic exercise—whether painful or meditative or both—served I knew as the best way to ward off obesity while at the same allowing me to ingest large quantities of Brooklyn's Haagen Dazs ice cream. Running brought me outside as well, and the outside, whether in city or the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, has always served as a kind of remedy to my malaise of fear and shrinking, that low-grade dissatisfaction with undetectable progress toward fame, completion,

orgasm, happiness, publication. Hence the huffing and puffing across sidewalks, dirt paths, lawns, pounding pavement, overcoming that initial nausea and inertia and falling into some semblance of stride, encouraged by the day's gusty perfection—seventy degrees, fresh between fronts, pine boughs bowing to Boreas, Jack in the Box wrappers tumbling down roads with the randomness of the lottery called life.

There is no such thing as luck, I have read in a book called *Barracuda*, just courage and hard work. I have wanted to believe that statement, but have never in moments of rejection or missed opportunities been able to internalize a dismissal of fate, destined to search endlessly for explanations, I suppose, to ameliorate the consequences of my own procrastination or insufficiencies. These the internal mazes of a neurotic brain, which sought that afternoon somehow to quiet the monkey's chatter in the canopy above a banyan trunk while legs and lungs concentrated on the more immediate challenge of reaching the top of a rise, my body becoming not so much the temple as an escape hatch from the elaborate mews of the mind.

I can only guess with retrospective imprecision the channels that needed to be turned down or switched off that day: a persistent misgiving about my future compatibility with a high-strung Brazilian man whose intensity was simultaneously compelling and off-putting; the usual self-beratement about my dawdling over finishing the thesis, which really required at this point some serious close reading more than further contextualization within the arcane contexts of Renaissance faculty psychology. Was I working in the New York Public Library for research or was I just finding an excuse to shack up with Gilberto and get the hell out of Buffalo, where I was pursuing my doctorate? In short I was bucking headwinds—the entire impracticality and

distractedness of my current trajectory and local habitation in the bowels of Newark's North Ward. Where was I and how did I get there? These the preoccupations that were mitigated if not allayed by the current demands of breathing, hoofing up a hill to the stretching place, a bench inside the caged bullpen of a baseball diamond where, as habit would have it, I stretched hamstrings and calves before heading out to the field to lie prone on the grass in corpse pose—*shavasana*—as the yoga people call it.

I had started running and quit smoking during law school years before in San Francisco, where the long rectangular Golden Gate Park offered me the drudgery of my initial unjoy of running, bored and vomit-prone beside the garish rhododendrons in the foggy Richmond District. Back then during my detour into law school, monotonous exercise had the desired effect of allowing me to sit still and concentrate on larceny by trick and manslaughter until I hit the hay at 10 on Lake Street while I was struggling to stay above water in Torts and Crimes during the days before I gave up my meager practice and shuffled off to Buffalo to start a new life—ironically (given the San Francisco's gay repute) as a gay man studying literature. Even now I am able through such immaterial reminiscence to circumambulate the reportage needed to simply relate the facts of that unforgettable yet inscrutable afternoon, that relief I felt coming to a halt at the baseball diamond after a long run in the sun, heading to the bench, which I had warmed for so many years in school, to lean over a straightened leg, feeling the intense sore distension of the muscles that move from gluteus maximus (recently under considerable wear and tear) down the legs toward knee and ankle joints. Using the back of the green bench, I lifted my legs and leaned over my knees, loosening my always tight hip joints (preventing me in the 60s from sitting on the floor of the Fillmore with any

comfort and in the 70s from assuming the lotus position during Marin County encounter groups).

At last, wiping my brow with the front of my T and taking a swig of water from a dribbling fountain, I found my way out to left field, where the grass, newly mowed, spread like a soft carpet under frigate clouds that floated across the sky—a regatta of white masts before my out-stretched arms. What a day, what a sky, what a memory—I exclaimed to myself—an inner trigger recalling thick towels on the pier at Lake Tahoe, summers in August, freckle-faced and nose peeling—those days of mountain sun in the Sierras, drying off from a cold swim, shy with my paperback or comic book, alone with Lucky, our German Shepherd mix who was my best and only friend. The sky evoked granite boulders of the lake I loved more than any place in the world. On my back, I looked up, remembering.

An endorphinic interlude those minutes on the empty field between sit-ups and stretches, conjuring images of a cold, clear lake, a summer sun warm when clouds stopped teasing, feeling—in spite of the complications of my career shift at 35, my improbable but deeply tangible love affair with Gilberto— feeling my body ache for the West, for the laconic nonchalance of California, feeling in the abeyance of these longings, a certain contentment with being there then in of all fucking places New Jersey—indulging in a Wavy Gravy Ram Dass moment of dare I use the word “happiness” for fear of some jinx, feeling fitted to a time and place, feeling tired and sore and relaxed and relieved by aerobic exercise and its perspective. Maybe I pulled a few strands of grass and threw them in the air, maybe I rolled over into a child’s pose, circled my shoulders or rolled my neck, rising finally from the presence of that anatomical

chapel that now reeked of damp sweat, walking finally a few blocks to the stairs of our house, a two-story row home hardly 20 feet from the almost identical structure beside it. Stairs led up to the front door that opened on to a hallway, where a steep flight toward our second story flat ascended an angular darkness to the front door, opened with a key secured in the hidden pocket of those nylon running shorts, the ones with the inner lining that leaves little to the imagination should arousal emerge.

To my surprise, the living room was not empty. The beige wall-to-wall carpet, the amulet hung on the door frame to ward off the residue of domestic turmoil from previous tenants, the futon loveseat diminutive in the corner of a room empty of other furniture beside a table for the television, the spaciousness of the unlived-in living room did not on this weekday afternoon hunch in the semi-darkness of its usual somber disuse in spite of its newness—its recent paint job, its clean carpet. Today, to my surprise, the room was alive with light and noise, TV tuned loudly to *The Golden Girls*—a rerun no doubt—with its laugh track and suburban set. These were the shows—*Cheers* and *Seinfeld*—that gave Gilberto an education in Americana—its language, its humor, its foibles, its *All in the Family* ridiculous bigotries. These shows gave him vocabulary and distracted him from what must have been the unnerving anxieties of being alone in Newark, a queer Brazilian trying to survive—an immigrant in a country whose ideological creed on the Statue of Liberty masked the deep homo-xenophobia of second-generation Germans and Cubans who wanted walls across our borders to keep “illegals” at bay, collective amnesia having empowered them to exercise the same animus their ancestors had ironically faced only a generation earlier.

I was pleased if startled to find Gil there, on the carpet watching television at 5 in the afternoon. I thought he was at work. He was on the swing shift that week.

“Hey,” I said, closing the door. “What are you doing here?” He didn’t turn down the television; he didn’t take his eyes off the screen.

“*Oi*,” he said, looking up at me, nervously, Gilberto with his beautiful thick Angelina Jolie lips, his seductive brown green eyes the color of an eddy in a mountain river.

“Did you get off work?” I asked coming further into the room, standing before him in my t-shirt, colorless where sweat drenched the whiteness. “What a great day,” I told him. “So sunny, incredibly clear.”

He had raised himself up now, was cross-legged on the carpet. “I had to meet with the priest who wrote a letter for the green card.”

“Did your application come through?” I asked. He had taken the test, been to the immigration lawyer, filled out the paper work, received the medical exam. We were waiting to hear about approval of his permanent residence status, anticipatory, hoping the papers would come through, since the lawyer had the “inside track” with her contacts at the INS.

I don’t know exactly what happened next. That’s why I have hesitated to write. I just have to make it up—maybe because it’s been so long since that afternoon, maybe because I’ve blocked it out. I’m not sure why such a momentous moment should require fabrication to recreate—why memory fails to set the scene, know the dialogue, reveal details of the conversation. I know the TV was on, I know he did not get up from his cross-legged seat on the rug; I stood near the door while he remained seated half looking

at the screen as he spoke, camera cuts of the sitcom distracting our words. I could tell he was angry, somehow belligerent or skeptical about what he had to tell me.

“I can’t stay in this stupid country,” he said, staring at Bea Arthur and Betty White in their Miami living room. “I can’t get the green card.”

“Why?” I asked, more solicitous now, more puzzled, sympathetic. “What happened?” I asked, realizing intuitively that his fixation on the screen, his failure to make eye contact, was sending me a serious message, through paradoxical distancing—the isolation that shame brings to us all.

“The test,” he said. “The blood test. They say I have it.” I don’t think he mentioned any acronyms at that point, but he didn’t have to. I can only remember my heart, like a rubber ball pushed down underwater in a pool and then released, like a diver thrust deep into the cold grips of a mountain lake, I can only bring back this sudden thump against my chest, this moment of strange disjunction, of danger and distress, this moment of pure fear, heart pounding, flushness, the moment of turning around and pacing—a moment of pure self-preservation flashing in hope across my untested self. Maybe I don’t have it was all I was thinking, maybe I would get lucky. Only the thumping is indisputably attestable, that and the afternoon slant light angling in from a jog’s memory, that and the laugh track of *The Golden Girls*.

## **BUFFALO 1992**

I will call him Larry, Larry who worked at the Red Lobster. Larry's story stands out among the 20 plus people who showed up at First Presbyterian, the big grey church in Buffalo, where my HIV support group met in the early 90s. We had genders; we had users; we had ex-cons, we had black guys from the Eastside; we had unwed mothers and homeless teens; we had the out and proud and closet dads on the big down low E. Lynn Harris characters. Talkers and shy boys. Everyone was scared or pissed, everyone was looking a very expensive death in the cavernous face, even those still asymptomatic as well as those already skeletal. The group leader was a middle-aged social worker who rarely pulled the plug on those who'd come to talk to someone, those who wanted to know where the cure was, what drugs to take, what Ayurvedic, homeopathic, herbal formula would stave off their swollen nodes and the grey film that lined their tongues—the thrush onset which came before the shrivel.

Our group leader wanted everyone to say something—when we had converted, who knew, what support we had and of course how we *felt* about our condition—as if a statement of feeling were the same as feeling itself, as if a statement of sadness could replace the reality of tears. Tears ultimately the place most of us had to go to get clear—tears in public. Not at night in the blue light of the window—not in bed-biting the pillow and cursing some projected personification of the great dealer in the sky, whose roulette wheel seemed rigged against you. No, tears before your peers, in one of those big ante-rooms to the churches where picnics were planned and laymen, the unordained bake-salers gathered to make god into a coffee clutch. In one of those rooms with old couches and plastic chairs, some legs folded leaning against the wall, head between knees. Other

loud and obnoxious in their insecurity. Tears in the well-lit church annexes of the world where the end was approaching like a tunnel without an exit.

I don't think I ever could bring myself to tears in those groups—choked up yes, glassy eyed and mumbly yes, speechless, flat, cold, sorry, mad. I'm not sure Larry ever cried either during those check-ins once a week—on Wednesdays at 7. Larry was an amalgamation of all of us maybe—30, married with children, gay, middle class, alcoholic, suburban, closeted, heavy smoking—not six feet, not over 180, dark haired, with the look of New Jersey—an Irishman or Italian, more likely a mix. With humor, he unwound his story while all of us stared and listened to the sheer quintessentialness of it—the condensation of its Western New Yorkness. Amazingly, he was in good health and had a smile that basked in the pure bravado of his misery, the panache with which he faced the insurmountability of his predicament.

Larry grew up in the suburbs of Buffalo, in Tonawanda, in an upper middle class home, in a white high school where he buried his insatiable desire for dick. He had to escape detection—what with his Catholic brothers and his bingo parents, what with errors at second base, his C- in chemistry and Algebra 2, what with the yearbooks and the proms—then in the early 60s with the V-neck sweaters and the white-sox loafers. He had to hide; he married out of high school, went to work at restaurants. Got stoned, drank rum and coke, had two babies, ended up at rest stops and eventually at one of the bars downtown—late before closing at 2, drunk as he sucked cock in pickups and parks. No one knew; hell, he didn't even know what he was doing other than following the unavoidable press of his prick. He just knew he had to keep flipping steaks on the grill on Sunday when the family ate watermelon and zucchini parmesan, played ping pong and

drank Coors until it got dark, or those dense summer clouds, grey and swollen, dumped rain on the crickets beside the Erie Canal. “I couldn’t come out,” he told us; “they would kill me if I did; maybe *I* would kill me if I did,” he threw in reflectively. Larry, loquacious as a bartender, vivacious without bravado, almost like something out of Eugene O’Neill. He started at Wendy’s, worked at Chicken Wings spots, tended bar at the Hyatt. He totaled his Charger; overdosed on Valium, lost all his money snorting lines.

He was fired when his boss came into the restroom and found him jacking off a bus boy in a stall. His wife didn’t know; they thought he drank too much, thought he was an addictive personality—thought he was kind of a wild man. Queer never came to mind. They never saw him put his hand on the delivery man’s crotch and get slugged in the face; they never saw him check into the Super 8 with that gym bunny who wanted to fuck, wanted to get fucked, had forgotten his condoms, had too many inches for Larry to take in without pain—plowed and high as he was. After all the AA and NA meetings, after the sobriety, and then the DUIs (all four), after the bailouts by the parents. The stomach pumping and the kids on his lap on the Ferris wheel. Larry, so inimitable, affable, so cheerfully desperate.

We leaned up against the bike rack on break while he smoked his Marlboro and I told him about ditching the Bay Area, about going to grad school, about my Brazilian lover whom I abandoned after he gave me HIV. Larry, kind of pudgy, round-faced, not bad looking, Larry with his dark almost wavy hair cut short, Larry waiting tables at the Red Lobster—divorced, disowned, and sero-converted. He’d just found out. He didn’t know what the fuck to do; he had no health insurance; he smoked a pack a day but he was on the wagon. He was sober, clean, and clear. He was gay, he told me, but the lifestyle

for him was impossible. “I have to come to terms with who I am,” he said to the group. “I know that. And now with HIV, shit, I don’t know what’s going to happen. If they find out, they’ll fire me. They won’t let me near my kids.”

## **BONER PARK, 1995**

Mary Karr, in her recent book about writing memoir—that French word meaning memorandum with a second syllable that wails in English, sounding phonologically its inner confession of angst—recommends that the writer not discuss the size of the genitalia of one’s lovers, even apparently for a kiss-and-tell geisha. I find this guidance quite handcuffing in my particular case, since the transmission of HIV occurs most frequently—other than in cases of dirty needles and bad blood transfusions—through the insertion of a *membrum virile* into the cavity of another’s body, and the length and circumference of that implement may play a major role in the disruption of the blood-veined viscera within the aperture into which the lignum enters—often quite turgidly, given the time of day, the age of the inserter, and the use of certain erectile dysfunction remedials, including most popularly, Sildenafil, the generic Pfizer success called Viagra, a pill not really available until 1998, but found recently to cure jet lag in hamsters.

I have read, with considerable post-colonial skepticism, that epidemiological historians have hypothesized a prototypical African bushman in the 1930s eating a monkey infected with a form of SIV (simian immune-deficiency virus) that had somehow spontaneously mutated its RNA and thereby through zoonotic transmission become the host of the new and improved human HIV. It could have been an open sore in his hands that mixed with the monkey blood in the process of evisceration. So conversion in the heart of darkness, for decades remaining confined to the tribal outback, this new virus unable to live in the air and often unable to move past the dermal tissues of the subject, traveled very little over the next decades, until David Carr arrived at the Royal Infirmary at Manchester in 1959, with inflamed gums, skin lesions, severe fever, and weight loss.

In hindsight, medical historians claimed the unmarried, 25-year-old seaman Mr. Carr, no relation to Mary presumably, carried the virus, until this patient zero story was debunked by Dr. Ho in 1995. Carr died of pneumonia as it happened.

The rest is not only history, but a record of death and a promise of sickness unto that death. There is no question that Gilberto's pre-cum, emitted from the tip of his uncut, 7 inch erect penis, was able to transmit the virus into the mucosal lining of my tight and squeamish rectum. There is no question that my friend MM, now seventy and living in a 300 square foot studio in a Section 8 over 55 housing complex in Sonoma, has swallowed over 3000 loads in his scrumptious tenure as a fellatist slash massage artist, the self-professed king of happy endings. Suffice it to say he has never converted, mouth sores or no mouth sores. This is not to say that the NIH or The Body or other HIV orgs have ruled out the possibility of transmission through either passive or active suckage, but we need to be particularly clear that the answer to Bersani's question ("Is the Rectum a Grave?") was at this point in 1995, pre-cocktail, generally affirmative, especially for those who refused the use of prophylaxis, either because they wanted to be "breded," under the common parlance, or because they insisted that bare-backing was the only authentically sensual form of intercourse, or perhaps because they just wanted to get fucked in all senses of that term. Maybe they were like me; maybe they were in love.

I raise these issues to explain the circumstances of my sexual practice that first year on the campus Oval in 1995, walking down the brick and mortar sidewalk into the raised medallion where "lux et veritas" (not to be confused with "lust et veritas") was inscribed below the torch engraving of the great University of Montana, mindful as I am that the light must shine on the darkest truths and caves of my confessional, namely that

my new partner Joseph and I did not engage in anality. I was too anxious to go there at that point, given my fear about transmission, in spite of what science has now shown to be over-cautiousness. A gash in my paper-thin Irish skin, a nose-bleed from a sneeze in the freeze of frigid Missoula, another outbreak of apthous ulcers, or herpes simplex, even a hang nail, chapped hand, or fish hook prick would immediately transport me into transmission mode back then, thinking of lawsuits by soccer players, thinking of Joseph's children counting on their Daddy's affection, worrying about spots drying in the sink, emptying trash cans full of band aids, repeatedly washing my hands with antiseptic soap, buying a dishwasher, washing clothes on the hot cycle, me hysteric over dried blood spots on dirty sheets or cuts while shaving, about bleeding gums after a vigorous floss, about nose peeling and constipatory bowel movements, hyper vigilant not only about contagion but how these minor ailments coupled with the occasional stuffiness of a upper respiratory infection or eczema or a long nap or athlete's foot or dandruff or absent mindedness came as mighty forebodings of a dreaded OI (opportunistic infection) designation—PCP pneumonia, KS (Kaposi's sarcoma), Toxoplasmosis, fatigue, or neuropathy, the specter of a downturn toward a non-existent hospice ever lurking on the horizon, or at least in the distant hills, Missoula being hemmed in a bit by ranges where mountain lions crept over crevices to pounce on unsuspecting nine-year-olds chasing butterflies down the fire road, where bears protected their cubs from raucous mountain bikers decked out in primary-colored spandex. Yes, I was alarmed, anxious, petrified not only of the chance of transmitting my prolific retrovirus to Joseph but also scared to death of transporting myself to the great Incinerator in the Sky, whose account book had

calculated eons in the Middle Passage of Purgatory if I somehow redeemed myself from the Hell that could only resemble, in my imagination, a Super Wal-Mart.

Our intimacy, thus restricted by my penchant for fastidiousness, involved primarily a worship of Joseph's formidable column which rose in the morning, often in response to a reluctant need to urinate. It would stand in all its Ionic splendor like a Jeffersonian pillar above the tanned and shaved pubis of my illustriously blonde lover, the sheets removed for our mutual admiration. Our goal was invariably to coax an eruption from this often over-scaled mountain, using fists, fingers, spit, and eventually some form of lubrication often purchased at Adult Fantasy, the "bookstore" beside the Union Club, where from the alley behind the outlet, homely history professors and haberdashers would surreptitiously enter, glancing up and down the dirt driveway before ducking into the back of store to enter one of its dimly-lit booths, a bench padded with red oil cloth allowing the stealth and often unhappily married entrant to either watch a short film starring the young, hung, and hairless humping one another in cornfields, or if the opportunity arose, actually the DL patrons might have the good fortune to touch and mouth the real thing, it having emerged from the so-called glory hole in the adjacent booth. I, too squeamish for this kind of entertainment, would buy my oil-less liquid in the sales section of the establishment, averting my eyes from contraptions, masks, and plastic encased dildonic devices, paying cash and quickly clinking out the front door. So Joseph and I would sometimes have recourse to the slippery slope of lube to help him blow a load, as the lingo would have it. I beside him was usually just holding on for dear life, trying often unsuccessfully not to reach climax too soon. So our sex was safe, though I often wonder if that caution was not the reason for our eventual separation after Joseph

moved to L.A. a few years later, and I following him down there for a fellowship at USC, soon found out he was tugging an endowed Mexican somewhere off North Figueroa.

This rather florid digression into the vagaries of transmission phobia all a means whereby to mask, albeit temporarily, a confession I must make, namely that during 1994-1995, my first year as an Assistant Professor of English at UM, is in fact an undetectable blur, especially in comparison to my more vivid status earlier as an Act Up, Fight Back, Fight AIDS t-shirt wearer back East. Yes, during those first years at UM in the HIV closet, I did dine as a fellow homo at the Chair's dark and cluttered home, he a nipple-ringed foodie, who was reputed to stream his amorphous torso over the net to like-minded bears. More power to him. Harold openly introduced me to his taciturn partner, a rough and ready biker dude from Two Dot or somewhere east of the Divide, and to other local members of the family. One Henry, a tall Francophile whose first lover had died of AIDS and who now lived alone on the North side with his mini-pincers. On a canoe trip down the Missouri sometime later, from Virgil to the take-out north, Henry insisted on hanging out around the campsite wearing nothing but flip-flops and setting up a small folding table with canopy so he could play board games while his formidable thing hung languidly between his ample thighs. He was a tall, bearded man, son of a Methodist minister, whose PhD from Yale in Comparative Literature licensed him to pontificate on virtually every subject from Gore Vidal to Vidal Sassoon. He was nicknamed Cardinal Spellman. Others included the gracious and good-humored Mikey, a poetry MFA who wrote compellingly about trout, shot "Bambi" during deer season, and bemoaned the loss of all his friends in San Francisco during the bad Plague Years. There were others—a smarmy, soft-spoken man who had grown to love porn in the Peace Corps and taught an

extension course in gay studies breaking ground in our blue oasis town surrounded by a sea of red faces, many of whom had voted to quarantine positives and prosecute more vigorously the sexual deviancy code, which made it a felony in the Treasure (trail) state to touch someone of the same sex with intimate intention.

Helena lesbians were in the process of challenging our sodomy statute in the courts, which under the direction of the more “liberal” Justice Nelson, eventually would be stricken down on right to privacy grounds. The L word to this day in our little big state (4th largest with a population of around a million) stands as much for liberal as lesbian, and I admit to some hesitation as indicated by the quotation marks in ascribing it to any living or dead Montanan for fear of retribution from some stockpiler in Libby or other bastion of camo-wearing evangelicals for whom the Second Amendment gives them the right to amass grenades and Uzis in order to defend their space from sodomites and the blue helicopters of the UN, poised at any minute to raid their compound. Jesus God.

That first year on my tenure track also brought acquisition. For 115,000, I bought the Hilda Avenue home in the university area, an asbestos sided one-story operation, which was built like a bunker and was only a block from Bonner (aka Boner) Park, where I could walk the headstrong puppy, Toberino, who had flunked out of dog training at the Fairgrounds twice in spite of the trainer’s, Marielle Lemal’s, best effort in modeling for Toby after her obedient Rottweiler, who was able to jump through hoops, literally. Eventually my dog would learn his manners but it cost a ton of liver treats. So we acquired house and dog and Joseph built a lovely pergola and a six-foot cedar fence around the property, the Fort-Apache effect a little much for the single-story maple-lined

affair it surrounded. Joseph and I set up house and spent considerable time in bed when I was not grading papers on Hamlet's Oedipus Complex.

Joe spent a lot of time at Am Vets (pronounced "Ahm Vey" in the French style), the gay bar in the basement across from the Badlander, a low-ceilinged establishment that was a Veterans watering hole by day, a queer glory hole by night. AmVets hopped on the weekends, attracting lesbians and gay men of all ages—drag queens and disc jockeys, students and teachers alike—down to the dungeon for pool or Madonna on the jukebox. My quirky Joseph preferred to spend time there on week days, hanging out with the denizens on bar stools, slouched men nursing their rum and cokes, hunched over like silhouettes in a Hopper painting, fixtures who leered at twinkles heading past them toward the head. Joe had an affinity for these presumably sorry souls; he liked to elicit their stories, to make them feel better. Gerontophilia? He would later play for a similar crowd at a grand piano with stools around in some Silver Lake dive bar. His calling was scotch and smoke; he relished in standing on the edge of dereliction, commiserating with these middle-aged overweight and unloved men, who found their community in another Seven and Seven or a handful of stale peanuts. For Joe this noir scenario exuded a certain reverse chic. I couldn't much stop him. He had a job at the local health food store as a stocker; I tried to get him to apply to graduate school in music, but he couldn't bring himself to face it, the music that is. He hated Missoula—too small, too insular, too distant from L.A.

## **DEEP BAY 1996**

Daunting, the task. Titillating, the revelation—the erotics of knowing, detecting, discovering the real story—what happened in my bedroom with my gay bowel syndrome, with the slow pathogenesis of a rapidly multiplying infectious agent searching for cells under my skin to facilitate its replication. The virulent invisibility of living with this slow killer, unlike Marburg or Ebola, the acronymic HIVe which creeps in its petty pace, paradoxically rapid in reproduction, inexorably seeping through my system, rotting the host from inside, merciless in its march, its latent reservoir of sub-microscopic colonies whose half life is 30 or 40 months for each particle. Mirroring this latent chemistry of HIV are its social pathogens: the stigma of orientation, the stigma of disease, the stigma of passivity. The stigma of getting fucked, and enjoying it. All of it hidden, even from myself at that point in my untenured caution. And all the name dropping memoirs, the Ashes, Sean Strubbs, Hemphills, Ed Whites, all the Brad Gooches and the Feinbergs—the countless heart-wrenching stories of sickness unto death—all of this foundational archive which I was reading that year, only highlighted my inconsequence, my longing to pass as healthy and undetectable.

No names to drop. Me, hiding my syndrome behind a queer veneer. I joined the Gay Men’s Task Force (GMTF), became the faculty advisor for the student Lambda organization, marched in the PRIDE parades, and helped to found the Western Montana Gay and Lesbian Community Center. There was a Missoula AIDS Council, but my application for the board was rejected by the straight middle-aged women in Subarus that ran the joint with a fierce proprietary altruism, the Council office hidden in a basement somewhere off Higgins Avenue, the main drag in our town. None of these meeting-laden

activities—none of the marches down Last Chance Gulch in the Treasure State’s great capital, the rallying cries from Diane Sands and Urvashi Vaid, not all the retreats and drag shows, the forums and Judith Butler assignments, all the lectures on Cesario and Duke Orsino’s flirtation, the citation of the two Antonios in Shakespeare, all my involvement our “community’s” attempt to drag Montana kicking and screaming into the twentieth century even on the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> could mask my masking of my identity within my identity—waving a rainbow flag, celebrating my diversity, forming the Outfield Alliance to support gay faculty and staff, and avoiding like the plague—literally—any mention of my dirty little secret, the real plague.

Yes, Dr. Seagraves knew, my internist at the clinic whose wife gave all his income to anti-abortion organizations with its fetus billboards; yes, a few others knew—I think. I really don’t know for sure. I don’t know anything for sure anymore, that first year a blur, a moment when my mantra was “give it a rest” on the HIV front, expedient as it was to pass. I had a partner; I had a job; I had a dog and a fenced yard. My t-cell count was bouncing around between 550 and 400—I was still refusing the drugs, Crixivan not yet on the market. I was doing my gay part in class and the streets. There may have been a moment or two of disclosure—in the Task Force meeting with George—the therapist from Helena with the long legs and lovely package—and Jesse—the Blackfeet man with smiling eyes and a soft spot for his grandmother. We in the planning stages of a Ryan-White funded retreat for gay men up on Flathead Lake at Deep Bay. We in a circle led by our fearless leader, Devon, the brown debonair man from Stanford whose fiefdom comprised websites and safer-sex weekends for gay men in the state, his mandate to build healthier lives for the tortured—literally again—men of our rural last worst place—many

of whom were married or mauled in high school, their heads stuck in toilets—their souls condemned in church—disowned and flown from ranches in Manhattan, Montana, to studio apartments in Billings or Butte, where they waited tables at the 4 Bs or tended bar at the Joker’s Wild, searching for men at rest stops or on levees late at night, stuck with porn if they could find and hide it, many disowned or damned, many drunk or obese or both, many skinny, smoking, nervous, acned, addicted, suicidal, shy, campy, bar fly basket cases whom Devon reached out to with his retreats—the large percentage of whom would never receive notice of the Gay Men’s Task Force because they didn’t even consider themselves gay; they were just MSM before that acronym even became part of our vernacular. They were just guys who got off on guys whenever and wherever they could, who would never come to Deep Bay to sit in a circle and talk about their family, or get in a group and draw a map of their life, who would never, after pizza and Pepsi and condom demonstrations, after talks on STDs and hard oatmeal cookies, after guided meditations and flannel sleeping bags rolled out beside the young, horny, and pimped, after all of that to hear a 40 something professor at the university in a break-out group disclose—after warnings of confidentiality and admissions of fear—that he would lose his job or be quarantined if detected, that yes he was positive.

There in the big-windowed log cabin overlooking the grand inland, freshwater lake, overlooking the Swan Range to the east that rose from the mercury sheen of the water’s vast expanse, there at the paid-for weekend with macaroni and Mountain Dew—the motley queer crew of 30 men of all ages and all stages of fucked-upness there to build camaraderie, learn to love themselves somehow against all American odds of conformity and ostracism, on that cold autumn weekend, on the porch, most smoking in their

sweatshirts, most unwilling to go near the water, just looking out the picture window in the big open space of the living room, looking out the frosted window at another Montana winter coming to swallow them up, to push them further into their messy and smelly unmade beds with their frozen pizzas and *Will and Grace* reruns, with *The Golden Girls* and if they could afford it, a trip to the mall in Spokane, these boys from Big Sandy and Big Timber, hapless and sick of horseshit, living now in town with a television and pack of Marlboro Lights, living with diabetic mothers in Lazy Boys and brothers who had beat the shit out of them, living with Jesus and family values.

Devon, the Stanford graduate as he never failed to remind us, with his tripod of butcher paper and lavender magic marker, planning with us—his Myrmidons—this upcoming retreat—we the ostensible board of directors—heading over south of Helena to some log cabin to map the Task Force’s plans for the Deep Bay weekend. I can remember the sauna there, and we the guys naked and where was Joe but home or down at AmVets or doing his own thing somewhere, me on this retreat near Boulder or Basin, me in the sauna with George coming on to me, and fuck I was partnered and fuck I was positive, and fuck how could I possibly have sex with anyone at that point, and fuck I was an assistant professor at the university and fuck I was stuck and hidden and lying to the world. But yes the smell of the hot wood and sweat of the dimly lit slats, and G’s long wonderful legs there—his warm smile and his caring therapeutic aura. He knew; he must have known; I must have told him. Tell me I told him; tell me I later came out as positive in the circle that evening on the west side of Flathead in the big rented cabin on Deep Bay where we drew our life maps and told our stories on the carpeted floor as the sun set on the cold fresh water of that huge inland body where I dreamed of drowning my self-

recriminations, tell me I told those boys that I was positive, that I was living with HIV, that I was scared of dying.

## WEST L.A. 1996

I speak now of the regimen, of the cocktail that has saved my life, of HAART that has no heart, of Dr. Gottlieb on Wilshire Boulevard on the tenth floor, the infectious specialist in infectious diseases who in his 10-by-10 office treated 300 impatient patients in 1996, those who have seen the writing on the wall and come to him to participate in the triumph of big pharma, having surrendered—abandoning the uncertainties of naturopathy—to the clear evidence that these new drugs could arrest the multiplication of the viral RNA, could keep you alive longer than you thought possible only two years ago. I had called Doctor G from Montana, told him what *Project Inform* informed me, that I had to give the 3000 dollar a month pills a shot, that I wanted to try it, that I could take Crixivan three times a day on an empty stomach, that I would swallow my Zerit (aka d4t, aka stavudine), with my booster. I would swallow anything he told me to put in my mouth, my insurance would pick up most of the cost. I would ingest near death to stay alive, weather the side effects just to get better, live longer, cruise through the millennium.

To get to him, I had to enter a multistory parking lot on Wilshire somewhere, had to take a ticket and drive in circles up ramps into dark, low-ceilinged floors of cars, had to remember where I put my wheels, find the stairs that emptied on to the street or a shopping mall. I was disoriented that summer afternoon in Los Angeles, having been dropped by the philandering Joseph upon my arrival, but I soon managed to elevate myself to the crowded waiting room of Dr. Gottlieb, who for all his renown, practiced out of a nondescript set of offices with a number of other doctors on the tenth floor of some unremarkable high rise, he unremarkable too, except for his red curly hair, mild obesity,

his blue shirt and white coat, the stool he sat on, the quick check he made of my lungs and chest, the matter of fact stethoscoping and the prescription of which we spoke, the regimen, the blood test scheduled a month out.

First Merck's Crixivan (indinavir), only the 8<sup>th</sup> FDA approved HIV drug, just on the market in March, 1996, was taken three times a day on an empty stomach because its properties wore off rapidly after 8 hours, allowing the virus to mutate in response. The side effects were mostly nausea—gastrointestinal—stomach aches that came about 20 minutes after ingestion. There was the dreaded Crix stomach, the lipodystrophy associated with the drug as well, the stomach being the center of the six-pack obsession of most gay men who are not bears or otters, the fright of all gym rats like myself. I would have to fight hard to keep my stomach flat enough to make tricks, though there were few tricks to make during those days of drugs and disclosure. Me and Abdul, me and the Japanese man which never materialized beyond a kiss on the bed, me and Hale Bopp's Comet.

The second drug was Zerit (d4T or stavudine) a nucleoside analog reverse transcriptase inhibitor (NRTI), a carcinogen in high doses, discovered in the 1960s actually and reintroduced in the 90s, a kind of antiretroviral that prevented RNA from clinging to DNA generally and more specifically useful in small doses for HIV and Hepatitis B. Still used in India and other third-world countries, the patent done in 2008, like Crixivan (retired because of its compliance issues), Zerit has gone the way of all flesh in America primarily because of its ties to lipodystrophy, for reasons as yet not entirely known or understandable by laymen like myself. Zerit causes permanent damage: neuropathy—numbness and tingling in the feet, sharp stabbing pain in the legs or hands.

Zerit causes lipoatrophy, facial wasting, localized loss of fat accumulation in the cheeks, causing pronounced smile lines, nasolabial folds, and deep eye sockets, creating a skeletal-like appearance of age and early onset emaciation. We know that genetically white males are more susceptible to this billboard poster of the positive soul. What is at work with the drug interactions is an interruption of lipogenesis with use of the drug. Stavudine causes an abnormal apoptosis of adipocytes in the affected areas of the face, killing off lipid cells and creating craters through an apparently accelerated autophagy. Zerit has been signaled out for my AIDS face—the sunken expression that tells the queer and straight community that I have the plague, that I am anathema, that I am detectable even if undetectable.

It didn't take long for my long face to get longer, for the Ichabod Crane syndrome to kick in even as my t-cell count soared into the 500s. The drugs worked and I am still here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scarred of course by the sink holes in my aging aspect, but alive and well. I have avoided traveling to Seattle to get Sculptra (poly L lactic acid) injections to puff up my cheeks, to return myself to Mickey Rooney cheerfulness. The injections require some three treatments over three months and then I would have to re-up once and a while. There are other alternatives: Radiasse is now in 2015 approved by the FDA and available for HIV positives making less than 40,000 a year under Medicare, polymethylmetacrylate (PMMA) is a permanent fix, approved only outside of the U.S. and free for positive Brazilians. I was thinking of getting Nu Filled with Sculptra just so I could write a poem or two, but I am wary. I have sensitive skin; I can't wear jewelry; I get rashes; I might flare up and get red or develop weird bumps on my face, though I am already depressed, already tied to my laptop, already destined to be Aschenbach on the

beaches of Puerto Vallarta, staring at boys in Speedos, trying to avoid the porn sidebars on gay dating sites where the only men who hit me up are “stocky” and avid consumers of football games on weekends. Will Scuptra make me feel better about myself?

## MISSOULA, 2015

I watch *Back on Board* at the documentary film festival about the famous Olympian, now struggling to survive. The adopted Greg Louganis, who dances at the age of 2, who is beat up at school. He dives. He is a natural, his body perfect, his smile gentle. The pain of judgment, the press of denial, turns him inward, concentrates him, encloses and encases. He is coached, falls in love with coaches; his father hates him because he's queer—lithe and naked in a Speedo, jumping off boards and winning medals. At school they hate Greg's success, the footballers; they hate the fag with the dark skin. He tunes them out; he performs in the air, his body is drama. He is alone, introverted, intense. They ignore him—the schools the friends the press—and he ignores himself—the handsome Russian crush he meets at a meet, the intimacy in bed with himself.

Later in an interview, the Larry King suspenders ask “why did you have unsafe sex?” Greg does not retort, “why do you fuck girls?” Greg does not offend; he is a good boy, a persistent one, determined, unfazed by the press. He does not tell Larry to go to hell; we want him to, but he springs forward. He wins Olympic medals and the flags wave and we cry in the summer; we cry in the films watching him twist, watching his ribcage watching his definition, watching his penis pierce the blue fabric, watching the drips spill down his shoulders like tongues, tongues that hug, lust, long, tear, tongues of ghosts, like inspiring angels his limber legs folded. And the Koreas and Los Angeleses, all the tears and platforms and lovers that rip him off, only to find out in 1986 on his way to death from AIDS, to discover he will not live to see 30, to realize he will be dead soon,

and then to keep going, to spill blood in the water, to come back from the gash to perform perfection. To be detected by a world that would like nothing better than to shun him.

What is this will, where does it come from, where? What is this homo-hate that fires his solace through unforgiving somersaults, he undaunted by the world's refusals, by empty Wheaties boxes, by unendorsements, by rejection. Always the politeness in the face of hate, the forgiveness of ostracism, the acceptance of bigotry. Blood in the water and the history of sport made from the dais of a death sentence, with its bombs bursting in air, its foreclosures and debt to look forward to. The old athlete in dilapidated Malibu, preserved mentor with health shakes and pills and a felt pen and pictures, signing and posing and performing still. Who is this simple man with the discipline of a saint, with the innocence of a boy, the skin of the Pacific, the stamina of an epic?

## **SAN ONOFRE 1997**

Less than a year after my marriage to Zerit, I began to look like Saint Onuphrius, the gaunt ascetic who wandered the deserts of Syria when Paphnutius the anchorite on his travels ran into the wild man shortly before his death in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Onuphrius, or Onofre or by some accounts Humphrey, had studied law and philosophy in Thebes before becoming a hermit, wearing nothing but leaves to cover his dangling organs of increase. An angel left a host for him outside his cave every Sunday, for he didn't have much else to eat. Paphnutius wrote about him in his diaries, and San Onofre was later canonized as a saint of the wilderness or yerma, often confused with the medieval wildman. Onofre became one of our desert fathers and his name attached to a state park on the coast of California between San Clemente, where Tricky Dick Nixon had his home, and Camp Pendleton, the army base on the coast north of San Diego. San Onofre Beach became my refuge during that year in hectic Los Angeles, my drugs delivered by mail order pharmacy, my 6-by-12 cell in Mount Washington Spartan and creepy, my dog Toby in need of some stick fetching, my horny self looking to cruise the cliffs, which never happened because I would not expose my Golden to circle jerks.

Highway 5 runs down the spine of skinny California, itself suffering from some coastal wasting as it hits Los Angeles and darts in, carving east toward the Mexico border. California represents a kind tall man bending at the waist, and is shaped like an anchorite hunched over his staff before the high desert of Nevada, the otherwise sybaritic state ironically retaining the gestalt of an ascetic. Highway 5 brought me down to L.A., which itself was originally just a set of dunes interrupted by occasional chaparral when Henry Dana in *Two Years Before the Mast* landed on the coast in the 19<sup>th</sup> century well

before the Chinese man told Whitney he was hauling wood (Hollywood) in the late 1800s, well after Cabrillo claimed the territory for Spain, ignoring the Tongva Indians. After ensconsing my jilted and now drugged self in the winding streets of Mt. Washington, I would on selected days abandon my post in the corner of the business building at USC and find Five again, heading south to the cliffs that overlooked the ocean at the state park known as San Onofre, ignoring the warnings that the nuclear power plant north of the park rendered the ocean radiated, ignoring the helicopters that emerged apocalyptically from behind the cliffs as the army played its war games and startled us in our leaf-sized speedos leaning on towels reading *The Sea of Tranquility* or *Beneto Cereno*, Melville being a major closet case, tortured by his love of the high-brow Hawthorne. Stuck in stop-and-go traffic somewhere near Irvine or Laguna Beach or Anaheim or wherever, I was in the slow lane listening to Matchbox 20's "3 AM."

So it took an hour at least maybe an hour and a half to get there, so maybe it was an all day kind of adventure, but San Onofre is one of the memory bites that has stuck with me, one of the places where I found some solace from the snobs in English at USC and the snooty tall queers who guarded their dusty, disheveled gay archives at the One center in WEHO, where I tried to look cool on Santa Monica Boulevard, standing at the stacks of the still extant bookstore, while men beside me glanced at Mapplethorpien schlongs on the table, thinking dick, dick, dick—as we all did—though I thought more bod, bod, bod since I was a bit of a bitter beauty in the gym, never able to get that buff, but always on the cusp.

There are miles of deserted beach at Onofre, a vast hazy horizon of cresting waves and back beach, berm, and bar, an endless meander into stretches of driftwood and

brown seaweed bulbs, of broken shells and sand crab holes bubbling as the tide recedes, small wet sand cliffs a foot or two high waiting for the kid in me to stride and crumble as me and my dog Toby with the feathered tail and the telltale smile wandered down the waters, feeling the break engulf our feet, in the 80-degree heat, heels indented on shore as waves receded, my head full of sun down, my eyes scanning, scanning for some guy like me, someone who body surfed and romped and loved dogs and Dickens and getting under the covers to cuddle, my eyes scanning for an end to my constant angst, there on the empty beach with the California cliffs rising hundreds of feet from the shore, caverns where further south down the beach, men would secret themselves in cliff hollows to stand in circles and lower their trunks, though I—shriveled from body surfing—was never big enough or courageous enough to walk my dog back there, in spite of glances from the hairy bellied men, some already nude who disappeared behind the light brown sandstone cliffs, themselves geologically fragile, often on the cusp of crumble. Those long driftwood logs where I'd sit and wait for a man to sweep me away like Lina Wertmuller in the famous film, wait like a little boy with his shovel and pail for a playmate, me the misfit, 40-year-old college boy with his jams and his retriever, trying to look romantic as I ventured south on the sands further into my introverted world. I don't think I ever met anyone there, during those fall days as I plopped in a spot far enough away from the crowds, surfers, and crying babies, to have the space that tortured and comforted me simultaneously. Those two to three foot waves crashing or curling, me catching a few and riding them to shore, watching the wet-suited handsome ones on their boards, looking for someone to join me, Toby, his snout on the towel, waiting for me to get out, dripping, to chase him into the sudsy salt water, my eyes stinging with delight,

crushing a shaken towel into my shrinking face, a face indented like California, rosy cheeks withered and growing undetectable, revived now by ocean love. We of the water, we of the sand, of hot grains and buried feet, we of wet stomachs and the burned shoulders, we of the sea.

## **THE WORLD, DECEMBER 1**

World AIDS day, December 1, 2013, and none of the major networks or news services in the United States even mention it, though 35 million people in 2013 are HIV positive, (about the size of the largest city in the world—Tokyo), 2.1 million people converting every year. Only 1.5 million died of AIDS in 2013, a 40% decline from the turn of the millennium, and the good news is that the amount of people on anti-retrovirals has doubled in the last 10 years from 7 to 15 million. Still the United States and Russia account for almost 90% of the new cases in the developed world, and fewer than half of the men who have sex with men (MSM) even know their status, a planet now harboring 7.5 billion people. These MSMers are guys who spell discreet “discrete” and fuck in the dark at bookstores. These our soldiers in Camp Pendleton, our miners in the Amazon, our merchant marines; these our closeted Washington insiders and their escorts, our Rest Stop barebackers on Highway 90 near Hardin. The stigma, mental health issues, disparity in race and gender and class around HIV infection, the difference between poor and rich nations—these factors have created an epidemic in which materialism is a matter of life and death, where capitalism not socialism should be the dirty word, where ethics go untaught in favor of insulating yourself with borders and insurance and all the things money can buy to isolate, insulate, and ignore, to keep guilt at bay with loneliness of privacy, make humanity undetectable.

