

SPEAKING SEX TO POWER:

The Politics of Queer Sex

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SPEAKING SEX TO POWER: The Politics of Queer Sex

Patrick Califia



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my son, Blake.

Like all parents I pray that the world
will become a safer and kinder place,
for the sake of his happiness
and my peace of mind.



“Scylla, I’d Like You to Meet My Friend, Charybdis”: An Introduction

[2002]

The essays that appear here were published between 1994 and the present. Some of them, therefore, were written from a female perspective, though I was privately struggling with aspects of that role. The editors of Cleis Press and I had to decide whether to leave these pieces in their original voice or somehow try to edit everything to create an artificial sort of consistency. Putting this book together was a trying education in the limitations of identity politics. I don’t know any other author who has, after a career spanning more than two decades, publicly changed their gender identity from female to male. I ought to be used to operating without any role models by now, but I often wish there were someone I could go to and ask, “How can I make this work?” and get a pat on the head and a “There, there, it will all be okay. Don’t give up yet.”

Instead, I have to hope that this sort of affirmation will come from readers who are flexible, nimble, and curious enough to put up with incongruity. When a writer’s life is in upheaval, some aspects of their work are bound to be contradictory or confusing. I feel blessed by the people who buy my books. They form a sort of loosely organized community, network, or perhaps even a family that is not based on gender identity or sexual orientation. Membership requires a certain irreverent attitude toward the platitudes that govern most people’s daily lives as well as an irrepressible desire to question, rebel, and generate new answers to questions that most people don’t

want to have voiced aloud. We are sort of like Deadheads, only we are more likely to wear black than tie-dye, and our favorite bumper sticker is “Mean People *Rock*,” not a rainbow chorus line of truckin’ teddy bears. (Don’t get me wrong, I love those skulls and roses.)

Even though I am currently calling myself Patrick Califia, a transgendered, bisexual person, I chose to leave the older, female gendered essays alone. I didn’t begin to take testosterone until my late forties. I’m envious of FTMs who found a way to transition shortly after their 18th birthdays, but I wouldn’t give away the life I had being a wildwoman. I don’t think it’s possible (or desirable) to erase the years I spent in the leatherdyke community and the sensibilities I acquired there. Fortunately for me, transsexual identity has undergone a metamorphosis, making it possible to be more honest about one’s individual experience of gender, and create a label that is more accurate than the old chestnut of “a man trapped in a woman’s body.”

The current fashion in gay academia and social psychology is to interpret gender identity not as a natural or inevitable outpouring of one’s “true” essence or core, but as a performance that can be understood only in the context of the shifting network of social interactions that imbue every aspect of our lives with a communally shared meaning. Under this theoretical paradigm, fluidity is understood as being more natural than a fixed or eternal verity. The social scientist’s dusty and cumbersome microscope has been thrown away and replaced by a kaleidoscope. People’s values, needs, labels, self-perception, and roles shift according to many internal and external factors. These changes are not motivated by falsity; rather, they are an adaptive response to new information and changing circumstances—social and psychological evolution.

Having seen several fashions in queer, feminist, and social-science verbiage come and go, I have no idea whether this tolerance for ambiguity and flux, even in something that would seem to be genetically or biologically fixed, will endure. What

I do know is that the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are far more complex than we can easily imagine or describe. People's ability to understand their own emotional and physical experiences and sensations is limited by what is safe to ask or know, what systems of interpretation they have received for screening that raw material, and whether they find it possible to connect with anyone who thinks differently about these matters.

It would be simplistic to say that we can only be what mainstream culture allows us to be. Many stigmatized subcultures and lone-wolf outlaws who eschew membership in any coherent group obviously exist. But it would be very difficult, perhaps impossible, to escape entirely from already established modes of being in the world. A wolf who has never been socialized by other wolves is incapable of bonding with a pack or mating with another wolf. Despite its genetic makeup, this inability to participate in the ecological niche and hierarchy-challenging and -reinforcing sniffing, licking, and howling of its biological peers could be seen as invalidating its wolfhood. There is no word for what it has, in its isolation and deprivation, become. I fear being trapped in such a pristine dead-end, where no other canid cares to read my p-mail.

Humans are, if anything, even more social than wolves or chimpanzees, though we are more capable of expressing our ambivalence about one another. (Hell may be, as Sartre said, other people, but the frustrating and deplorable impositions of the Other are the fertile generative matrix of art and science as well.) If we had no one to pass on the meaning of their genitals, no one to show us where the path toward social acceptance diverges from the royal road to infamy, we might as well be neutered. It may be the plasticity of our nature, and the immense responsibility we all bear toward one another in creating a joint reality, that relegates so much of our internal processes to the unconscious. Freedom for some people means not having to be aware of making decisions of such great import for our children, mates, friends, and passing

strangers on the street. So we all participate in something ~~that seems unquestionable, established not by human will but dictated by hormones, genes, and instinct.~~ I am talking of course about the system that divides us into black-and-white, polarized, binary categories and does not acknowledge any shades of gray, much less lavender, pink, or turquoise.

I wish it were that easy to declare my allegiance to one gender paradigm and to climb up on only one soapbox in the orator's park of sexuality. If I could not be content as a woman or as a dyke (which is not exactly the same thing, in our world, as being a woman), why for God's sake could I not be content to fill my closet with men's suits and ties and shoes, and go back out into the world as a man, and only a man? There are days when it seems to me that I am tortured by my own perversity and willfulness, that if I had the right sort of subtle knife, I could sever the carping parts of my soul that will not shut up and could quit setting off the security alarms of normal people. It feels to me as if no one else has to suffer stomach-churning angst about turning over their driver's license to a cop, who will become belligerent because my whiskers, square jaw, and low voice do not prepare him for the check mark in the F box. Does anyone else want to cry when they go from a shop in which they are addressed as Sir into a bank where the lady behind them in line tries to attract their attention by calling them Ma'am? Is there another FTM in the Western world who has refused to give away his dominatrix shoes, even though his feet have gotten one full size bigger and they no longer fit?

Probably. The point I am trying to make is not that I am stranded on some Golgotha of psychic hermaphroditism, but rather I am acknowledging the social pressure to suddenly become male and repudiate my life history as a woman, or to shut up about the dangerous and distant place where masculinity threatened to lead me, and retreat into the skin and haircut of a butch dyke. That maligned role is, by comparison to someone who does not completely pass as male and has never been the sort of woman who is fully accepted as

such, as safe as the White House. There are lots of folks in the same sort of boat that I'm in—intersexed people, transfolk who have decided not to take hormones or get surgery, people who are midway in transition, those who have tried to transition and now wish to return to their former identities, people who are trying desperately to conform to gender stereotypes but for no fault of their own seldom succeed. From time to time we manage to hail one another across the stormy seas of gender ambiguity or refusal. We are casualties and conscientious objectors in the war between the sexes, and people on both sides of the trenches find us upsetting and repugnant—sometimes because they fear they are one of us.

Does the fact that I am taking testosterone now and asking everyone to refer to me as “he” invalidate the years of my life from age 17 until 45 when I was out of the closet, first as a dyke, and then as a bisexual woman? I don't know. Most people are pretty sure that the answer is “yes.” Furthermore, I am to be hissed at as a deceiver, a traitor. Everything I have ever said or published about feminism or lesbianism must now be tossed on the bonfire. Every woman-identified woman I ever had sex with must move the memory of that liaison into a dubious category, and purge herself of possible heterosexual contamination. Well, it's no less than what I expected. The world is not ready for a man, even a transsexual one, to have intimate knowledge of, fondness for, or opinions about lesbian culture and politics. *But I still know what I know.* I have not forgotten any of the things that I did or felt. And even though I never felt completely at ease in the women's community, I did my best to be a good citizen of the Lesbian Nation.

Was I a sex radical because I was a man in an Amazon's armor, an undercover operative of the patriarchy who poisoned the well of Woman's Country by flaunting all the power-based prerogatives that the oppressor takes for granted? Did I bring pornography, sadomasochism, and group sex into innocent Sapphic bedrooms because (even if unconsciously) I had no

empathy for or understanding of how the revolution against male dominance must proceed?

Hmmmm. Well, as my seventh-grade teacher once told me, and forever after regretted, there is no such thing as a stupid question. I have wondered about this myself. There are days when I feel as if I have piled up twenty-plus years of my goddamned hard work, pissed gasoline all over it, and then set it on fire. It's a depressing image. But when I wrote those things and did those things, I did them with a sincere and fervent desire to be true to myself and my desire for other women, and to create more options for others like me, to make more safe space where unpopular truths could be told and new ways of living could be created. If there was any misogyny in me, it was the same vestiges of sexism that taint everyone who grows up in this culture. I was not deliberately playing the part of the Trickster or a Trojan Horse. And I will neither set aside my leatherdyke legacy nor deny it. This makes me as unpopular in the FTM community as it does among lesbian separatists and cultural feminists.

Part of my issue with the campaign to erase me from lesbian herstory is that I don't think the changes I have experienced over the course of my life can be reduced to the simple explanation, "I thought I was a woman, but I was wrong, and now I am being my true self, which is a man." I know that many female-to-male transsexuals *do* feel this way. For them, there is no such thing as a sex change or gender reassignment. They refer to the medical processes that masculinize their bodies as gender *confirmation*. I don't want to argue with this point of view or supplant it, but merely to set my own narrative next to it. Perhaps someday I will feel fully male, and this will be the way I justify calling myself a man, period. I have no way of knowing.

I caused a scandal in 1977 by talking about fags and dykes having sex with one another. Now that I am usually seen as a guy on the street, and even have a job working for a mental health agency providing services for gay and bisexual men, I too go back over the past and wonder if it should be reinterpreted.

Was I interested in having sex with gay men because, despite my physiology, I was one? That is not how I understood it at the time. I was aware of my gender ambivalence, my desire to be one of them, to play leather-fag sex games and impress them with my prowess wielding fists and whips. But I knew that gay men did not see me as a boy or a man; true, we might bond with one another over a shared fetish, but given how strongly men respond to visual cues, my secondary sex characteristics prevented any of them from picking up on the male aspects of my self-image and desire. (Still, it remains difficult for me to be specific about exactly what the differences are between male and female eroticism.)

Not every gay or bisexual man fits the stereotype of the matter-of-fact urban guy who rarely turns down an opportunity to get some ass. But there is a gay attitude that sex is good and a lot of sex is better and it's no big deal exactly how you like it or why, it's only important to solve the practical problem of hooking up with guys who share your idea of spasmodic Nirvana. Those warm and open arms of affection, acceptance, and humor about the vagaries of lust dragged me down out of the tree of panic and shame that I had climbed and clung to like a freaked-out cat, chased up there by the demons of fundamentalist Christianity. Letting go of all that angst and withering guilt is like being carried away from a burning building over the shoulder of a burly and good-hearted fireman who makes light of the risks he takes to save other people's lives. Like camp, promiscuity is the pink badge of queer courage, our defiant way of whistling past all the graveyards that, for us, dot the heterosexual landscape. And we do know where the bodies (and live naked dicks) are buried. Every cocksucker is well aware that the same man who puts on a badge to arrest him probably just gets his blowjobs at a different truck stop.

Finding a place for myself in the community of MSMs (men who have sex with men) is every bit as much of a minefield as figuring out what to do with the artifacts of my lesbian past.

While I was never very good at fitting in on the playground, occasionally I would spin such an entrancing story that everyone in the entire school would be playing a part in some grand adventure that I controlled. This is a solid beginning for a career as a shaman (or a DJ). I sometimes feel caught in amber between the women who are mad at me for not being one of them and the men who aren't ready to open the clubhouse door and let me in. But there are exceptions, all kinds of guys who, for one reason or another, don't care if another guy was born male or not, and are able to connect with FTMs if they have mutual interests and the right chemistry. I don't think anybody needs an official statement of acceptance and welcome from an entire community in order to have a happy life. All it takes is a couple of very good friends and at least one reliable and entertaining trick. A lover or a leather title are extra gravy on the biscuits.

Even if there was no rapport at all between genetic men and FTMs, transmen do enough coaching, flirting, congratulating, and comforting one another to make a pretty strong base of operations. Validation exchanged by gay and bisexual FTMs who understand one another's struggles and can celebrate the roadblocks that mark transition has been invaluable to me. After all, identity is not just a matter of who you believe yourself to be, it is also affected by how others perceive you, unless you simply wish to be a legend in your own living room. Without agreement from, at the very least, a small group of peers, expressing or revealing a private conviction of one's identity is at best futile and at worst dangerous. Most people never have to think about how to obtain affirmation from others for their self-perception of their gender, sexual orientation, or other important demographic characteristics. But when there is something about you that breaks the usual frame of any given role, well, what ought to be a simple matter of personal taste or preference instead becomes a political controversy.

Because identity, to be lived fully, has a public sphere, the size and safety of which is controlled by other people's

opinions, the welcoming and nonjudgmental tone of most queer FTM get-togethers is often literally a life-saver. What I have found there is a different script for becoming a man. It's not the traditional one of being physically and psychologically battered till you toughen up, learn to hide your emotions, and take on the towering responsibilities that our society assigns to husbands and fathers. There's something very touching about watching a group of FTMs, gay and straight, being gentle and respectful with one another, recognizing maleness even in people who have not used medical interventions to masculinize their bodies. This new approach to male socialization has made that identity more accessible to me and many others. It's so much less intimidating than a military boarding school, a soccer team, or NASCAR racing.

But I can't restrict my personal and public life to the FTM community. I still have to deal with the outside world whose standards for what makes a man are not my own. So there are still days when saying I am a man creates as many qualms as it does twinges of elation. I don't engage strangers on the bus or in line for a Big Gulp at 7-Eleven in conversations about this. The more often other people think I am a guy, the easier it is for me to pass through the world—as long as I do not encounter fag bashers. (Female or male, I will never look straight. I can't be that laconic or sparing in my gestures.) If I am supposed to be nothing but a man, I feel that I've been set up to fail. I don't have a childhood or adolescence of male socialization. I don't have the same sense of entitlement or skill set. I never need to scratch my balls or adjust my package in public, and I doubt I could learn how to spit if I paid for lessons. I am no good at any of the boy-to-man rites of passage I grew up with. I can't catch fish, it would make me throw up to shoot a deer, and I doubt I would ever come out on top in a barroom brawl. I do not change my own oil or make saddles and bridles, and I would die if I had to work in the primeval darkness of a coal mine or teeter in a hardhat and steel-toed boots upon the exposed I-beams of a new skyscraper. I change

my underwear twice a day whether I need to or not, and I will never be caught without Advil, some chocolate, and a tampon on my person—even if I now look like the last person one should ask for assistance if Aunt Flo pays you a surprise visit in the middle of girls' night out at the club. And, most importantly, I don't have the sort of dick you need to get any good out of a glory hole.

I've started rolling my eyes when other FTMs tell me that they don't want genital surgery and wouldn't get it even if they could afford it. Some of them probably really mean that, and I apologize to those guys for my skepticism. However, I do suspect that many of us say this because we are trying to cope with the fact that "bottom surgery" is beyond our means financially and even the best surgical methods currently in use are seriously lacking. The bottom line, so to speak, in our culture is: Men have penises. I wanted a penis when I was three years old and, goddammit, I still want to know where the hell it is. Not everybody who uses a strap-on is expressing a sublimated desire to be driving a biological cock, but I certainly was. I can get off using the parts that I have, but it creates an uncomfortable level of cognitive dissonance. I don't know why I feel that I was meant to penetrate my partner, be able to feel them around me while we fuck, and cum inside them, but that's my gender trauma in a nutshell. I was deeply relieved to have my chest surgery, but in some ways it only sharpened my unrequited desire to complete this transformation and shape-shift into a completely male body.

How do I deal with this? Well, I remind myself that everybody has something about their body that they don't like. I have talked a lot about sex with genetically male gay men, and I know that their willies often misbehave. Mister Happy perks up in inappropriate situations or lies dormant when he ought to be on duty. Men with average-size cocks are afraid they are too small, some men have cocks that *are* smaller than average, the guys with big dicks are afraid nobody will want to fuck them, and having eight inches or more is no guarantee that

you won't need a prescription for Viagra. Would I want to be a bioboy who was HIV-positive? How about being a boy who wished he had been born a girl? A traumatized Gulf War veteran who has to sleep alone because he lashes out at random in his sleep? So many things can go awry with our fragile and unpredictable bodies.

And yet, the flesh is the primal fountain of all of our enjoyments, even the most esoteric: muscle and bone, anus and mouth, nerves and blood, fingers and toes, organs and tendons, brain and skin, semen and sight. Even in the ascetic tradition of Christianity, the dying savior/scapegoat promises his followers, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." The ultimate reward of the perfect spiritual life is for the spirit to be reunited with an incorruptible and immortal body, presumably with an enhanced capacity for cognition, perception—and sensation. The first request of the resurrected Christ is that his disciples touch him. He takes bread and honey and eats it in front of them, not only to prove that he is real, but perhaps to remind them that an affirmation of our creator's love is present in the things we must do in order to live. Pleasure is a blessing; delight is our sacred birthright. There is honey with the bread, like the feral lilies in a field of wheat. Another word for love is bliss, and this ecstasy is ubiquitous and never-ending, if only we can stop trying to possess it solely in a beloved Other. As Julian of Norwich said after her vision of Christ cradling the world like a walnut in his hand, precious and beloved by him in its littleness, "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

Compassion for myself has been at least as healing as daily application of testosterone gel to my fuzzy belly, chest, and face. I know that I deserve to have pleasure in my life even if my body puzzles and thwarts me. I try to figure out when it is safe to be touched and when it is not. I endeavor not to push away people who are attracted to me. Rather than wallow in the grandiose assumption that there must be something

wrong with them since there is obviously a lot wrong with me, I can sometimes open my eyes a crack and catch a glimpse of their goodness and bravery. I let my pain soften my heart so that I sometimes almost grasp the truth of how we all suffer in one way or another and yet also receive enjoyment from the material world. I allow the truth of someone else's pleasure to soak into me, to ease my bitterness, to reassure me that even if I feel physically incomplete, I am able to provide my partner with just about any sort of gratification that he or she might crave. I am grateful for the people who get turned on by me and what I can do. And I remember that we never know what the future holds, that someday I might win the lottery or stem cell research might come through for trans people and that I'll be housed in the right puppet suit of living meat. Or that maybe I'll get to be a tiger in my next life, hopefully not an endangered one.

When I add up the plus and minus columns of embarking on a process of medical sex reassignment, I find that most of the items in the minus column have to do with two things that are beyond my control—fear about the future, and anxiety about other people's reactions and their power to make my life more difficult. Since I've spent a good part of this introduction bitching about the trying parts of being fairly early along in the transition process, it is important to also mention that on an individual level, the physical changes that testosterone and surgery have created are very welcome indeed. The compliments and support I've gotten from other men, especially from other FTMs, have been hugely helpful. It's hard to track the subtle day-to-day reshaping of the body, face, and aura. Every time someone says, "Hmm, your jaw is really square now, and your shoulders are bigger," or "Ooh, look, you have whiskers," or "You smell like a guy," I get silly with joy. I like being physically stronger, having more energy, hearing my voice come out at a deeper pitch, and being able to feel a little tuft of hair under my lower lip. Transition is not perfect, but I am in a much better place with my body and my life than I was three years ago. This

has given me much of the fortitude that any tranny needs both to cope with the aforementioned trials and tribulations and to wait patiently until the elusive, sought-after identity solidifies. Is the house cat not content to keep watch all day over her mouse hole, longing for the moment when she will shed the fetters of domestication and unsheathe her claws?

So here it is, my book and my life, full of contradictions and questions. Since I am only partway through my transition, it seems entirely appropriate to be giving my readers a book that documents those shifts. If you are expecting a text about transgenderism per se, you may be disappointed. (Can I shamelessly plug my book *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* here? Apparently I can.) If there is any paradigmatic straitjacket I would like to leave behind, it is the dictum that lesbians will only speak to lesbian topics, sadomasochists will not discuss anything other than BDSM, and trannies will appear only to educate people about gender issues. Those restrictions have more to do with other people's comfort level than with the scope of our own interests or our abilities. While it's important for sexual minorities to document their own lives, thereby increasing the visibility of their respective communities, it is also important for a greater spectrum of voices to be given space in debates about everything from laws against terrorism to whether people should be fined for not fixing their dogs.

If you can take a few steps along this Celtic cow path of my opinions, I promise to entertain you along the way. I can't promise not to rant, from time to time, but if you hated being harangued about politics, you never would have picked up this book in the first place. Welcome to the second collection of my essays, which appears thanks to the determination and radical politics of Felice, Frédérique, and Don of Cleis Press, whom I refer to by their first names because they are so much more than publishers or editors. (When I am past my deadline, I sometimes see them as dogcatchers or bounty hunters, but let's not stop the love.)

Cleis Press is a business, and as such has to pay attention to the bottom line, but I know of few other publishers today who are doing as much to promote queer culture and foment social change. It's always a pleasure to work with people who live their principles. Cleis enables writers to do their best work, even if it's controversial, even if it falls between the cracks of marketing categories, despite the current dispirited Republican economy. Without its commitment to diversity and new ideas, I would find it much more difficult to think and write about the issues that are important to me. I hope Cleis will continue to enjoy your support for the many ways in which it enriches the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, intersexed, and questioning people, as well as our loved ones, families, and allies.

Patrick Califia
San Francisco
July 2002

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I. The Engagement Party



Disengaged: An Introduction

[2002]

I got my master's degree in marriage and family counseling from the University of San Francisco. Going to a Jesuit college was very weird, but I had only applied to two schools, and this was the one that accepted me. (Thanks a lot, University of Washington.) My classes were full of Celtic-looking, parchment-white people with apple-red cheeks and untamable, brassy Irish hair. I had a lot of nuns sitting very close to me, holding my hand, and telling me I had a rich inner life. I am still trying to figure out if that was their idea of making a pass at me. Probably not. They were good, innocent women, devoted to public service, so kind that they did not even reproach me for violating some of the principal tenets of their religion.

You could identify which floor you were on in the building where most of our classes took place because each landing held a statue of the Virgin Mary in a different color dress. I think the ascending order was white, blue, pink, and green. Toward the end of my ordeal in this interminable program, I grew heartily sick of the Blessed Mother's meek, expressionless face, always down-turned. I would have done anything to make her look up and smile—or even weep outright. Poor subjugated archetype of the Divine Feminine, she had certainly been recast in an impotent mode in these kitschy, oversized Vaticanian knick-knacks. 7.7.7

I was the only out queer in my program, and some of the other gay students would take me aside and ask me if I would please

shut up about being gay because it was just drawing attention to the rest of us. They all apparently wanted to work for Catholic Charities when they graduated. Despite the religious sponsorship of the school, I had only one homophobic professor, a Jesuit who sneered at the sweet and nervous priest who had come out as gay in our sexuality class. (He had visibly perspired as he tap-danced around questions about his vow of celibacy "I begin each day intending to be celibate," he said delicately.) Our older professor's devotion was to God the Father as the personification of male intelligence—utter rationality. To him, I think, sex was sinful because it would be a distraction that might cloud the objectivity that he saw as his channel to his creator, the ultimate philosopher and scientist.

The class was titled Abnormal Psychology, so you can imagine how often I bit my tongue in *that* hour-and-a-half of lithium-flavored claptrap. Our priest-professor rarely called on his female students, and never bothered to learn their names. But I succeeded in getting an A out of him, and once got him to accept a ride in my truck back to the Jesuit dorms. (He was scheduled to receive back surgery, and walking caused him more pain than even he could hide.) I said nothing about his inner life, however, and did not attempt to hold his hand. He was a withholding top if I ever met one, not the kind of Daddy who would step out of the confessional and make sure you did your penance properly. Too bad, really. He was tall and handsome and carried himself with a sinister authority that would have made it unnecessary for him to buy any of his own drinks at a leather bar.

Of course, since this degree program was ostensibly preparing us to be marriage, family, and child counselors, we spent a lot of time discussing common family problems and how to come to the aid of parents and children in conflict. We watched videotapes in which Salvatore Minuchin came into the treatment room, which for some reason always looked like a school cafeteria, and took his jacket off in order to join with the father of the family who was sitting there in

shirtsleeves, the very portrait of working-class obduracy. We did family sculptures à la Virginia Satir, like dysfunctional ballet dancers frozen in birth order. And we laboriously drew genograms of the three (usually gin-soaked, incest-riddled, and Irish) generations that had begotten us. "Family" meant one father, one mother, and one or more children, dwelling in their own home apart from other relatives or friends. When I mentioned alternative family structures like extended families in which several generations share a single home, Mormon and Muslim polygamy, Tibetan women who marry an entire set of brothers, or even the Biblical institution of concubinage, I got a lot of blank stares. In comparison to these historical oddities, my introduction of the notion of gay parents went over like a breeze.

The underlying assumption in all of this theory was that the middle-class, heterosexual, white family was a good thing, and if you could just tweak the system of that family, Mom and Dad would get along fine with each other, and the kids would grow up healthy and go on to become good parents themselves. Although there was a nod or two toward doing this recalibration in a culturally sensitive or, better still, bilingual fashion, hardly anyone examined the question whether the family, as we know it, is a sustainable institution. Despite the alarming statistics on the incidence of divorces and child abuse, it would seem that most of us are so firmly committed to the ideal vision of having a safe place where we will always be welcomed, loved, and cared for that we can't look very hard at how most families actually work out.

I, on the other hand, was not sure if the family: (a) could be saved, or (b) should be dumped into the dustbin of history, along with shelters made out of mastodon bones, monotheism, human sacrifice, outhouses, poison arrows, unreliable and possibly toxic herbal abortifacients, galleys powered by slaves on rowing benches, the mercury treatment for syphilis, any dish made chiefly of lentils, gas lighting, and female genital mutilation.

I wasn't even sure I could accept postindustrial Western notions of what it meant to be an adult as opposed to a child. This may seem like a no-brainer—until you read a little history and anthropology. If the average life expectancy is 45, nobody is going to wait until they are 22 to get married and reproduce. In preindustrial cultures, children play by helping adults hunt, prepare food, make shelter, and do all the other tasks of daily life. Full adult status is usually granted at puberty or even earlier. The common factor in human cultures throughout history and all over the world would seem to be that we tend to clump together in social groups that make and enforce rules about gender, sexuality, religion, work, food, and many other aspects of daily life—though the content of those rules varies enormously.

One day in a class on family systems therapy I just lost control of myself and gave an impassioned speech about the Shadow aspect of the family. I talked about how there is something scary about being forced to live with people merely because you are related to them, especially when there is little compatibility between children and parents. I asked whether we cling to a saccharine and fake image of the family as a defense against the psychic injuries we all receive during infancy and childhood. I postulated that we try to escape from the status of being an unloved or mistreated child by having children of our own who make us feel powerful. In order to gain this illusory sense of freedom from infantile abandonment or frustration, we often duplicate the same attitudes and behavior that traumatized us as children. I asked whether, in view of how common incest and other forms of child abuse are, it is not in fact normative behavior, almost a given.

It was not a welcome rant. No one cried, "Hip, hip, hurray" and tossed their schoolboy cap into the air. My fellow students averted their eyes, doing everything to avoid me other than covering their ears, and the teacher simply stood by the blackboard, waiting for me to stop talking. Nobody made a comment, and the class picked up right where it had left off.

It was a Stepford moment, a break in the social fabric that left me standing on a rather cold cliff, alone and outside with my unwanted treasure of well-reasoned but hurtful insight.

People who are not happy with the alienation that's so common in Western urban centers often want to turn the clock back to a simpler and, they believe, happier time. I'm not sure that the extended rural family was such a great alternative to what we've got now. People immigrated to the cities in large numbers partly because their livelihood had been destroyed by industrialization, but some of them were also seeking a way to escape the social control of small towns and big intrusive networks of blood relatives. But in my imagination, at least, a family in which there are more than two adults to take care of the children seems like a much saner proposition. A child who has conflict with their parents could, theoretically at least, draw closer to other adults (perhaps even live with them) and create some healthy distance while preserving family ties.

It has become more and more difficult for married couples to remain embedded in the matrix of their hometowns. In an economy that's driven by profit rather than human welfare, many of us are forced to follow economic opportunity around the map, landing anywhere, like a drunkard's dart. Distance from parents, grandparents, and other kin often promises a greater degree of freedom and privacy. While that's certainly a positive goal, our culture drastically underestimates the resources that are needed to supervise even one child. Having had the experience of raising a two-year-old with a lot of health challenges, I would estimate that the ratio of six adults per one child is a much more realistic job description. Overwhelmed parents are set up to resent and mistreat their offspring. That doesn't justify abuse, but if we are truly committed to the well-being of children, we need to stop assuming that the physical capacity to reproduce automatically qualifies people to look after a little one.

My negative judgments about the nuclear family formed a skewed background for my examination of the sudden

popularity of gay marriage as the top item on the queer political agenda. Various aspects of this proposition are examined in “The Engagement Party” section of the book, including my own experience with trying to sustain a committed relationship that embraces parenting. While I supported the abstract notion that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry and have full parental rights, for most of my life this was not much of a priority. From time to time, my lovers would suggest becoming domestic partners, but even that was too much for me. I’m an introvert. I enjoy everything about living with a lover other than the fact that they bring all of their stuff over and keep it in my house, and also spend a lot of time there. I’ve had more people share my bed than I can count, but every time I try to go to sleep with someone on the other side of the blankets, there’s something about it that just strikes me as being really weird. After the sex is over and we’re all cleaned up and nicely tired, why don’t they want to go happily to their own comfy and private bed? I just don’t get it.

As for children, forget about it! Growing up Mormon, I found that every woman I knew got pregnant at age 16 (18 if they were “nice girls” or lucky enough to somehow get an illegal abortion) and continued to pop out babies approximately once a year until they entered menopause or their husbands had a hunting accident. These mothers were enslaved by housework and childcare. They had no time to do anything creative of their own, rarely had a quiet moment in which they could sit down and read a book. It looked to me like one of the inner circles of Hell—a sticky, noisy, and irritable place imbued with the stench of dirty diapers and sour formula. Feh.

The idea of being pregnant myself was horrifying. Since I had no access to birth control, and found the notion of abortion traumatic as a teenager, I put a great big cast-iron padlock on my chastity belt and resolutely rejected any sort of sexual activity that might result in conception. A baby would be an anchor around my neck, keeping me imprisoned in the Victorian farce of post-Brigham Young Utah. Death would be a

welcome alternative. I was expected to baby-sit as a community service and as preparation for my feminine destiny. Having come from a small Mormon family of six children, I had already been the adjunct parent for my younger siblings while my father worked six days a week and my mother ran junior Sunday school, Primary, or the Relief Society, depending on where God had told the bishop to put her. I condescended to attend other people's children only if they paid me, because I had the beginnings of a book habit that in later life would sometimes involve spending about as much on print as I did on rent every month. Books, like learning, are sacred in Mormon communities, but I had so many of them that my mother viewed them with the disdain she normally reserved for unmade beds or my father's can of chewing tobacco. "If you had holes in all of your socks, you'd rather buy a book to read so you could just ignore them, wouldn't you?" she often said, in the same tone of voice that she would use for a clerk who offered her the wrong change. I never answered her; she already knew the answer was "Yes." Even today, my sock drawer is a bad neighborhood. Don't go there. (This is an old joke, but it's an old problem.)

The articles that follow describe how and why I reached a point in my life where I wanted to marry someone and raise a child with him. Of course, I could not do this the easy way. It was my female-to-male transsexual partner, Matt, who stopped taking male hormones so that he could give birth to our son, Blake. But these stories end at about the same time I began to get a five o'clock shadow (okay, so it took three days to produce it, so what?). There are some more recent details I want to add to flesh out this bizarre yet happy change of plans.

One of the problems I faced when I would run errands with Matt and Blake in our San Francisco neighborhood was, of course, my gender presentation. Even when I had not shaved for three days, grocery store clerks and people at the drugstore would strain their own credulity to be able to see me as Blake's mother. The fact that I was butch and menopausally

older than Matt, who has enough piercings to brand him as a member of Generation Whatever, was simply overlooked. The baby's existence wiped out any evidence that I was past child-bearing age, and hardly looked the part of a mommy. Later on, as testosterone continued to work the magic of the Horned God, people would make up other stories to explain our relationship. Rather than try to impose the truth on them, I would usually just listen, partly to save time, partly to protect Blake's safety, but largely because it cracked me up. My favorite was a guy at a dry cleaning place who commiserated with Matt about what a jerk his ex-wife must have been to leave him alone with such a little baby, and congratulated him for having a father who would take him in until he could meet a woman who would treat him right. This thirty-second novel was delivered with great sincerity, without Matt or me saying a word.

Everywhere we went, people waved to Blake, talked to him, asked us questions about him, and told us about their own kids. I had entered a new world of friendliness and mutual concern. Heterosexuals sure are nice to each other. But even when we were identified as two men parenting a child together, we didn't get heckled. Maybe that was because Blake was obviously a high-energy and fractious child who needed a lot of patient and consistent care to get through an excursion into the outside world. I never realized before (duh) how deeply heterosexual life is colored by the chore and delight of raising children. It gave me a new perspective on antigay prejudice. I began to see some of this as distance rather than dislike, a separation based on a lack of common experience or shared priorities. The gay activists who want protection for their parental rights are on to something. It's not necessarily just about mainstreaming or papering over the more shocking aspects of queer sexuality.

By being kind to our child in public and saying matter-of-factly to anyone who asked, "We are his dads, he is our son, he lives with us," we changed a lot of people's perceptions of what it means to be gay. Whether this is right or wrong, because we

were parents, we were seen as adults, with a mission in life that a straight person could recognize. We were not prosperous aliens who could afford to spend all of our time buying antiques or attending orgies. (Yes, I know, the stereotypes stink.) We were two oddballs who had a charming child who demanded and rejoiced in adult attention.

It was healing for me to encounter other fathers, straight men, who told us tender stories about taking sick babies to the hospital, teaching their children to read, and helping them to get dressed. We met married couples who loved each other and provided a good home to their children. My vision of the family as a pastel-colored torture chamber was turned into something more positive that I hope is a little closer to the truth. I saw that it is possible for people who have had pretty rotten childhoods to have healthy relationships and to shower their kids with unconditional love. My encounters with gentle and patient fathers made me feel pretty sad about the hostile and damaging relationship I had with my own father, yet it eased my heart. One of the fears I had about gender transition was that I would become a rageful, impatient, cold, and unpredictable person—in short, the person my dad had been when I was a child. But when other fathers struck up conversations with us because we were accompanied by Blake, I got clear evidence that fathers can help, entertain, understand, and above all else love their sons and daughters.

Of course, one of the underexamined yet inevitable consequences of same-sex marriage is queer divorce. Gay legal advocates are taking on a growing number of cases in which same-sex partners separate, and one member of the couple attempts to deny the other any contact with the children they have helped to conceive, adopt, or support. This is the first time I've dared to approach writing about my own divorce.

It's hard to find a way to talk about a relationship that has gone wrong without castigating yourself or trashing the other person. In truth, I don't know if any couple could have survived the extremely demanding task of dealing with a baby

who had such severe reflux that he could literally scream for twenty hours at a stretch. The stomach acid that kept geysering up his esophagus caused him so much pain that Blake hardly ever slept, especially not in a horizontal position. We got top-notch medical care for our baby, but the medications only took the edge off his suffering. We spent a year and a half taking turns holding Blake in an upright position, doing everything we could think of to bring him some relief. We rocked him, we sang to him, we tried dark rooms, we turned on crib toys that made colored patterns of light on the ceiling. We played videos (oh, how I hate the Teletubbies, all except for LaLa when she does her secret special dance). We went for drives. We put his car seat on the dryer to see if its vibrations would soothe him. We held him up to the mirror, we prayed, we changed his medication, we bought very expensive formula, we altered his feeding schedule, we called our doctors again and again. And sometimes we put him in his crib and shut the door, knowing he was safe there even if he was not very happy, so that we could sleep for a few blessed hours.

When Blake was able to eat solid food, his digestion improved, though he still had reflux. Then he began having chronic problems with respiratory infections, sinus infections, and blockage of his ears. Our pediatrician told us that we should get him evaluated by a specialist. We found out that Blake was having intermittent hearing loss, so we needed to treat that (possibly with surgery) and also get him some speech therapy.

At about that time, Matt lost his high-paying job as a computer geek, so he took Blake out of daycare, which the baby hated anyway, and followed his long-standing dream of moving to Australia. I could have gone with them to Melbourne, if I had been willing to uproot myself from San Francisco, a city where I've lived practically my entire adult life, but the relationship was in such bad shape that I could not imagine how Matt and I could live amicably with one another. I didn't want them to leave, but I had no way to make them stay, and so I let them go. Or tried to, anyway. I was frequently in contact with them. I

knew that Matt would make sure that Blake was getting the care that he needed. But I missed my son more than I could stand. I don't know if being taken away from me was bad for him. I hope not. But I do know that it was bad for me. I had no way of knowing if the separation was a permanent or temporary one, so I tried to take things one day at a time and prayed that eventually this intense story would have a happy ending.

Sometimes I think we are put on earth, with all its chaos and evil, to meet the challenge of learning as much as we can about the power of love. It would be hard to imagine a more challenging crucible in which to forge such an understanding. Blake taught me more about love than I believe I have learned from any adult. And one of the ways I know I love my son is the fact that I made myself witness the brutal spectacle of his birth. The very earliest labor contractions caused his heart rate to take such a sharp dive that the attending physician quickly decided the baby would have to be delivered by cesarean section. I was in the emergency room when this drastic surgery was done and Blake drew his first breath. Despite the sheltering sterile blue drapes, the sight of my beloved Matt on an operating table was the most terrifying thing I have ever seen, far more frightening than any injury of my own. The nurses cleaned Blake up a bit, swaddled him, and put him in my arms. He was, of course, already serenading us with his signature scream. I began talking to him in the sing-song voice that I had used to converse with him before he was born. He immediately stopped crying and stared at me. *I know that he recognized me.* I could not tell you what color his eyes were, only that they were as deep as the night sky, and he pulled my soul out of me with the raw power of his stare, which seemed to contain everything profound that cannot be put into words.

I felt as if he was weighing my soul, the way the ancient Egyptians believed Osiris would weigh the hearts of the dead, on a scale, against the weight of a feather. He saw every flaw in me, every shortcoming I had that might disappoint him, and he told me that he needed me to be a better person, because

he could not make it without me. It was a humbling moment, and also a profound transformation. I could never go back and be a person who was not a father. He would need me for the rest of his life, and the only right thing to do would be to place his welfare above my own. I knew that I was not strong enough or wise enough to assume this responsibility. I don't know if anybody is. But I was also pledged to him, as if he were my sovereign lord, and owed him my loyalty unto death.

I know now why parents will run into burning buildings or jump into the ocean to save their children. When the nurses came to take him away from me so they could clear his lungs, weigh him, and do all the rest of their medical folderol, I left Matt without even a backward glance to go with the baby. I knew without being told that my lover was relieved and understood that this was the right thing for me to do, even though he was paralyzed from the chest down by a spinal block, and had an abdominal incision that was being sutured. What a strange act of love that was, to leave my mate behind to attend to the life that we had invited to share our home.

Love for a child may be the most all-encompassing emotion that I have ever experienced. You cannot break up with your child or divorce him. When adult lovers have left me (or, more typically, been sent away), I usually experience more relief than sorrow. But the love I feel for Blake is not susceptible to alteration, no matter what he might do in the future or whom he might become. I could not escape from it if I tried. And in truth I do not want to, because the weight and scent of his little body in my arms has made me his happy possession. I wish I could love a goddess or a lover the way that I love Blake. It is love combined with faith and constancy, and he is the only person I have ever been able to hold in my heart with steady and dogged adoration.

When my mother used to tell me that she loved me no matter what, I did not believe her, because it was accompanied by so much disapproval. Now I feel more empathy with how she must have suffered, bonded to, and linked with a child

who caused her so much fear and, well, there is no other term for it: repugnance. Nothing in her background prepared her for a child who would not be her mirror. It remains to be seen whether I can hold out a more affirming love to Blake, one that is not tinged with shame or disapproval. Given my own history, I know there is no predicting what road your child will take. They go off on their own adventures, without regard to a father's values or aspirations. I pray that he will not take himself into some of the dangerous places where I felt I had to go, but if he does, at least I will, I hope, be able to understand what drives him and can mend as much harm as he will allow. Young people possess a remarkable ingenuity in contriving new ways to place themselves at risk. It's entirely possible that there's something ahead that I have not been prepared for by even my most scandalous excesses. So I guess I had better start working on my intense dislike of surprises.

When I mull over the last three years, I can't think of anything that I could have done better, yet I know that what I was able to do was not enough. Being in early transition had made my gender ~~dys~~phoria very painful. I didn't have any negative feelings about Matt's being pregnant, but I wasn't, in hindsight, able to offer him a certain quality of tenderness that would have made him feel special and protected in this vulnerable state. I could bring him chicken sandwiches from Wendy's three times a day or go to Chinatown for a certain brand of candied ginger, but it made me queasy to feel the baby kicking inside of him. As I became more and more worried about Matt and the prospect of delivering the baby at a hospital where we might not be treated very well, he was turning all of his attention inward, toward his child. My emotional priority continued to be my relationship with Matt, while he could not help but put Blake first in his heart. I think some version of this must happen to every couple who has children, but I was never able to really accept the fact that I had been replaced.

The true worth of our character is not determined by whether

we have the ability to experience transcendent moments of insight or union with divinity. Rather, it is determined by whether we can remember the things that we are told during those moments and live them out during the long stretches of ordinary time when we are cut off from such inspiration. The moment that Blake arrived, it felt to me as if I had become spiritually deaf. There was no ecstatic, uplifting flight in my life, only drudgery. Because of my chronic pain disability, fibromyalgia, Matt wound up having to shoulder too much of the responsibility for Blake's direct care. The time that we spent dealing with the baby's medical issues had a negative impact on my income, and so we were always coming up short with our bills. Matt fell into a deep postpartum depression that I believe continues to affect him, but we could not agree about whether this was a problem or what could be done about it. From his perspective, the fact that he had given me a son ought to have been compensation for the destruction of our sexual intimacy. I replied that if I had known gaining a child would mean losing my romantic and erotic connection with my partner, I would never have agreed to do such a thing.

I developed a surprising and sometimes uncomfortable empathy for my own father and for straight men in general, even though I was not in a heterosexual relationship. I knew that things were not good. I knew my partner resented me and was not happy with our life. I could not come up with any other resources to make things better. So I just put my head down and did the best that I could. I worked a sixty-hour week. I came home exhausted, as did Matt, and did as much around the house as I could and spent as much time with Blake as I could manage. But twenty-four hours did not stretch to cover everything that needed to be dealt with each and every day. And I could not help but wonder why I was doing this to myself. Was this how my father felt, trapped in an unhappy marriage, trying to support six children and a wife on a coal miner's salary, deprived of just about everything that had made him happy when he was young and single? And yet he

was determined to continue on the treadmill even if it broke him in half. No wonder he lost his ~~temper~~ so often. Like my father, I refused to leave, even though the situation was clearly untenable, even though I was being blamed for the general atmosphere of unhappiness and tension and felt that my own needs for companionship or passion were being neglected, and even though I had forfeited any possibility of fun or intimacy. We had a kid. Leaving was not an option.

It was shocking to find such old-fashioned values governing my behavior. Perhaps it was just exhaustion blinding me to any alternatives—or, big surprise, sheer stubbornness. But I suspect it's just a hard fact of human nature. No matter how subversive or rebellious we are, we can only construct our selves out of the building blocks we were given in the first few years after our birth. Matt and I had a very unconventional family, but in many ways I became a completely conventional parent. Under stress, I reverted to type and simply did what I had been taught was the right thing for a good father and husband to do. I could have been the star of a country-and-western song.

I made a lot of other mistakes, though I did not become emotionally or physically abusive. (Being a little grouchy once in a while is not, I hope, a cardinal sin.) I usually kept my sense of humor, even in the emergency rooms that would come to be our home away from home. I never lost a constant sense of concern for Blake or an appreciation for his spunk and authenticity, no matter how inconvenient his agenda might be for the adults who were packing him around. So maybe I did a little better than my own father did. I would like to think so. I also have more respect for my dad because, for all his scary acting out, he treated his own children immeasurably better than he had been treated himself. (Someday that story has to be written. For now, I'll just say that I found out that this is not an easy change to make.)

A few people encouraged me to seek legal advice and make custody of Blake an issue in the courts. While I know that same-sex parents deserve the same options that heterosexual

parents possess to defend visitation rights in legal battles, I was not willing to go into a courtroom and ask a judge to determine which of us would be the better parent, or mandate shared custody, or forbid Matt to make a new life someplace else. I love him. I want him to be happy, even if he chooses not to be with me. It would be unethical for me to stand in his way if he really needs to make a change, even if it is not one that has my approval. I'm convinced that becoming a parent was an experience central to Matt's life mission, and so I had accommodated and welcomed that. Everyone has an inalienable right to leave a relationship that is not making them happy. Matt is not my enemy. He's hovered near the top of my shit list for the last few months, but I can't demonize him. What we did, we did together, for better or for worse. It seemed to me that there was too great a chance that a family court would send our child to foster care rather than place him with either one or both of us. While Blake and I had a strong relationship, he is of course more attached to his biological parent, and of all the possible options, remaining with Matt seemed to me like the choice that was best for Blake.

Gay parents have too few legal rights. Winning these rights on paper is not going to be enough. Family courts and the entire child welfare system have to be educated to understand our unique needs and problems. They must value us as people and as family members if we are going to be safe under their jurisdiction. Despite all of the noise that's made about child pornography and sexual abuse, America has yet to put its money where its tabloid headlines are. The system that is supposed to protect children and sort out family conflict is ponderous, arbitrary, and underfunded. Overworked social workers cannot devote their full energies to investigating complaints of child endangerment or neglect when they have so few real solutions to offer. The public blandly assumes that abused children are taken away from the perpetrators and sent someplace safe; this "someplace" does not exist. Most of the time, a social policy that emphasizes "keeping families

together” is used to rationalize leaving vulnerable children with inadequate or dangerous caretakers who fail to receive the counseling, education, jobs, or housing that would really help those who are willing to change. Meanwhile, emotionally stable gay or transgendered people who have a great deal to offer a child are discriminated against as foster or adoptive parents, and even if they have a baby the old-fashioned way, they are vulnerable to the state’s interference in their own homes.

A discussion of gay families would be incomplete if it did not include an examination of our relationships with our own blood roots. As an ex of mine put it, “You try soaking, you try scrubbing them out, and you still have—family of origin issues!” I wish I could reduce my mother’s effect on me to the status of a grass stain on a pair of 501s. I certainly wound up immersing myself in substances a good deal more noxious than laundry detergent in a vain effort to eradicate her introject, the images and memories of her that had become one of the voices of my own psyche. My mother’s death was on a separate order of loss from my friends who were mowed down by AIDS and a host of other deaths from drug overdoses and suicide. As tragic as those were, there is something about losing your mother that makes you achingly aware of your own mortality. Every failure in a mother’s care is a harbinger of a larger and irrevocable loss: the ultimate abandonment that is her death. We want Mother to be perfect not only because we begin life in helpless need of her constant vigilance and care, but also because we long for a reprieve from the inevitable end to her attention, be it loving or abrasive. The only really good mother, on an archetypal level, would perhaps be an immortal one.

Yet death is also a doorway into a new life. Every ending, according to a well-worn homily of psychotherapy, is also a beginning, and vice versa. As difficult as it was to witness my mother’s prolonged suffering and try to come to terms with her departure, I did expect that my mourning would be mingled with a sense of freedom, because my epic battles with her moralism had cast a shadow over my life that I often felt

powerless to overcome. What I was not prepared for was an atavistic impulse to metaphorically plant seeds in the freshly overturned soil of her grave, to somehow bring new life out of the failure and decay of her flesh. Blake did not come into being simply because my partner wanted a child. He was also the product of my grief. My mother's departure from the map of my familial landscape left an empty place that I could only fill with a descendant of my own. Passing on some of my genetic material was much less important to me than feeling that I had taken part in creating a new generation, that someone would come after me, someone would perhaps witness my own death and carry a memory of me within their heart. Knowing that I could be a father rather than a mother to a child also made parenting seem like an opportunity to learn and grow rather than a trap.

I had underestimated the power that such instincts have over even those of us who have refused to uphold heterosexual customs that link the elderly to obedient sons or daughters who will bury them and the still younger grandchildren, nieces, and nephews who will inherit whatever legacy remains. I was not the only one affected by this urge. One of my sisters was pregnant at the time my mother died and had a daughter a few months after her funeral. It is as if the white roses we scattered on Carol's coffin took human form in a little boy and a little girl, who unfortunately will never know the strong-willed and dogmatic woman who left her thumbprints all over the unformed clay of their parents' personalities. Or perhaps Blake's cousin, little Carol, is the rose, while Blake is made up chiefly of the thorns.

It may not be readily apparent why "Common People, Uncommon Queers," a piece about growing up queer and working-class that is also my critique of *Out* magazine, belongs in a section about family matters. But family considerations were inseparable from the strong motivation I felt to write this piece, even if it meant losing a big chunk of my income. Nothing in America is unaffected by the class system. There

are a few lucky affluent and privileged people who take their comfort for granted. The majority—the folks who generate the goods and services that keep the middle and upper classes comfortable—struggle to make ends meet on the scant rewards they receive for all their hard work. “Common People, Uncommon Queers” was the last article I wrote for *Out*. The magazine had taken some heat for featuring ads for very expensive consumer goods and deliberately adopting policies that trimmed a large number of people from its subscription list. *Out* had chosen to omit any coverage of gay news as such, focusing instead on entertainment, the arts, and other aspects of white, gay male culture (peppered with occasional references to lesbians, people of color, and other types not likely to be spotted at the right gyms and circuit parties).

To put it bluntly, *Out* had become the flagship of capitalist co-optation, a vehicle for promoting a vision of gay liberation that had less to do with revolution than it had to do with Fine Dining and shopping at the Very Best Stores. When I leafed through this magazine that was paying my rent, I got the feeling that its ideal reader might think it was a shocking act of radicalism even to vote. This was liberation for the purpose of acquiring an expensive wardrobe, a corner office, and the same license to exploit working-class people that prosperous hets take for granted.

The owner of *Out* had been quoted in an interview as waving off objections to this, saying his magazine was not a publication for “poor people.” This pissed me off so much that I felt I could not continue to write for *Out* without making some sort of response. The column I was allowed to print turned out to be a heavily censored and thus rather oblique swipe at my employer, since I was not allowed to mention him by name or even quote the interview. Not long after that, I got e-mail from managing editor Tom Beers informing me that my services would no longer be required. “We need writers who share our vision of what *Out* can become,” he said. By which I assume he meant writers who would generate a little flyweight

text to sandwich unobtrusively in between full-color ads, most of which also appear in *Vanity Fair*. Excuse me, but if I want a catalogue, I can pick one up at Sears.

My father put food on the table by doing a job that literally endangered his life. I can't tell you how many times he came home scratched and bruised by cave-ins or malfunctioning heavy machinery. He never worked a job where someone did not get killed, and it was often someone who had worked with him. My grandparents were farmers. When my mother left my dad, the only work she could find as a former housewife with a high school diploma and no job history was cleaning motels and working in a sewing factory. My hatred of smug investment bankers, trust fund babies, and the people they have drinks with has been labeled reverse snobbery, as if there is something unfair about noticing that certain groups of people tend to be greedy, mean, and morally flabby. It's not as if this echelon of society has very many tender feelings toward people like me, other than being amazed, when we appear at fund-raisers that they also attend, that we do not have holes in our clothing and are able to recognize bad grammar or bad wine. (Oh, and let's not forget how often they condescend to cruise us. This always makes me want to retort, "Sorry, baby, I like rough trade too, and you are not that.") What do *they* have to be proud of? Their membership in the lucky sperm club? People with cushy lives are just not accustomed to having their clueless and luxurious lives held up to public scrutiny. The world pampers the people who least need it, the ones who can already count on a glut of ego gratification, secretarial assistance, hair product, long lunches, tennis lessons, and air kisses. It embarrasses them and makes them angry to be reminded that they pay more for a pair of shoes than people in some countries make in a year—working in a factory that made the damn shoes. Well, they *should* be embarrassed, snubbed, and put in their place.

I don't know if I will ever forgive my father for some of the awful things he did, but he has a lot more credit in my personal piggy bank than the bosses and leisure-loving parasites of

this world. I don't care how much money A-gays give to gay rights organizations or AIDS charities. Philanthropy does not redeem them, and it's no substitute for social justice. The supposed leaders of our society couldn't survive a day standing in line to apply for SSI, much less summon the ingenuity it takes to keep body and soul together on such a paltry subsidy. I want them to know what it's like to live in a country where you can die of AIDS without receiving so much as an aspirin or a dose of antibiotics or even a drink of clean water. If only for one month, I'd like them to have to live on minimum wage and government cheese. Until you've spent a winter night sleeping in a doorway, you don't really know how most of the human race subsists.

There's enough wealth to go around—enough money, medicine, grain, and clothing. People are not hungry because there is nothing for them to eat. Poverty—famine!—exists *as a matter of policy*. And I am not one of the people who made that callous decision. How could I ever live with myself if I tried to pass for one of them, or just kissed their asses and became the mascot angry working-class queer? For the sake of the blood and sweat that my father shed to feed and clothe and shelter me, I had to stick as sharp a pin as possible in this pompous balloon filled with the hot air of Ivy League contempt. There is such a thing as righteous, appropriate shame (and its name is Enron, Mister President).

Someday, working people will learn that their most important ties are to one another. Class is a bond that can transcend the divisions of race, language, religion, and country of origin. There are more of us in the working class than there are of them in the privileged class. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a few is an intolerable injustice that cannot be permitted to endure forever. The breakup of the Soviet Union has been heralded in the West as humiliating proof that the first massive political effort to create a humane alternative to capitalism was a dismal failure. Since I'm not a leftist, I won't argue with the people who have documented Stalin's

mass murders or the misery meted out by his authoritarian successors. But I do know that the social problems that made Marxism so attractive to idealistic people all over the world have not gone away.

As multinational corporations become powerful enough to constitute a sort of hidden world government, beyond the reach of democracy or reform, radical politics have reorganized to oppose them and hold them accountable. If your only source of “investigative journalism” was the gay press, which has never gotten brave enough or smart enough to call for any real alternative to our lame two-party system, you’d never know any of this was happening. The gay activists who were slammed by the legal system for taking part in street action against the World Trade Organization in Seattle or got arrested in subsequent protests received about as much support from the media in their own community as they got from the *New York Times*. It’s alarming to see such shoddy work. Most gay publications have become utterly predictable, so lightweight that they float to the ceiling much like Andrew Sullivan’s ankles in the presence of a big dick sans its rubber raincoat. (Or so rumor would have it.)

The recent sweeping powers granted to the government by antiterrorist legislation have made it genuinely dangerous to challenge the status quo. Constitutional protection for dissent has been hamstrung. But I don’t think that’s why gay politics are so watered down today that you couldn’t use the resulting solution to clean a window. Swept up in the same jingoistic fever that has every car, pickup truck, store front, and living room window in America sporting a flag, gay people who ought to know better are giving a standing ovation to the politicians who are nuking our civil rights.

Perhaps straight people have some thin excuse for being so shocked by the massive loss of life on September 11, 2001, that they are prepared to undo every principle that motivated the revolution of 1776, if it means we can go get the bastards who turned the World Trade Center into rubble.

But queers have watched the government ignore more than twenty years of a deadly epidemic. Queers should not have any illusions about America's being a good or innocent place that somehow deserves to be exempt from the rage of fanatics and extremists. We have watched the federal authorities sabotage life-saving measures like needle exchange, sexually explicit AIDS prevention materials, free condoms for high school students, and medical marijuana. Why can't more of us use the critical skills that we ought to have learned when these wrongheaded policies were implemented to understand that the lives lost on September 11 should be attributed to our deeply stupid foreign policy in the Middle East, rather than an evil conspiracy against "freedom"? You can't really conspire against something that doesn't exist.

Americans were happy enough to put weapons in the hands of Muslim extremists when they were fighting the Soviets. Did we think they were just kidding when they talked about turning Afghanistan into a theocracy dedicated to a petty and vindictive patriarchal father god who apparently hates women, music, buggery, alcohol, movies, and anything else that might relieve the tedium of living in a mountainous desert pockmarked with bomb craters and unexploded land mines? Are we always going to be contented with the last thing that somebody read to us off a cue card? Suddenly the evening news can't say enough about how badly women were treated under the Taliban in Afghanistan—something that was easy to ignore when fundamentalist Afghan soldiers were our *allies*. Precious little is said on American television about the men accused of having sex with other men who have been executed in Afghanistan by being buried under a brick wall toppled by a bulldozer. And even less is mentioned about the hundreds and hundreds of people who have been incarcerated by the U.S. government and held with no right to due process, basically for having Arab surnames. Nothing is more vindictive than a so-called "intelligence agency" that's been caught with its pants around its ankles and its head up

its bum. If we hadn't torn down the abandoned army barracks that were used as concentration camps for Japanese Americans during World War II, we could keep all the suspected terrorists there. I love my country, but I do wish we would stop doing things that guarantee no end of raw material for doleful PBS documentaries, ten years after the fact, when there's no appropriate way to make amends.

Within a family, people are not surprised when the action of one member affects everyone else. But it seems beyond our comprehension to grasp the fact that the same technology that makes it possible for us to communicate in seconds with someone on the other side of the world, or visit every continent within a matter of hours, has bound us together in a web of mutual risk and need. If we do not become our brothers' and our sisters' keepers, we must be prepared to have them turn on us for the thoughtless things we have done to injure them. What any of us put into the air, the water, or the economy has consequences for everyone else, and none of us can completely escape from those consequences, even if the only impairment we suffer is a blunting of our humanity. A light that does not burn must be kindled so that we can see one another clearly, without any more destruction. We must learn to be as tender toward the strangers we have never met as we are to the person who shares our bed and the children we nourish.

The Engagement Party

[1999]

I'm terrible at this dating thing. The only time I've ever picked somebody up in a bar, I made the mistake of prematurely locking a collar around his neck, only to discover I had left my big butch bunch of keys at home. (They did not go with the little black dress I had on at the time.) Rather than admit to this faux pas, I dragged him home, determined to put on the performance of my life. Things worked out okay; he was an Englishman who deplored the brutality of all the nice, soft leather floggers I had hanging on the wall and insisted instead on the "civilized" and "tidy" pain of a caning.

In person, most people are disappointed by me. If they haven't read my stuff, there's nothing particularly striking about me, other than my fine sense of sarcasm. If they have read it, they have usually developed a mental image of the ideal dominant I ought to be. "Oh," wistful readers frequently say, "I thought you would be taller." No, when it comes to courtship and seduction, my forte is the printed page. Let me get between somebody's ears, and chances are I can get them between the sheets.

While researching a piece on the transgender community's response to HIV, I interviewed an old flame of mine, who was an outreach worker for an epidemiological study on risk behavior among trannies. I knew Matt Rice before he had a guy's name and started hormones. He was every bit as strop-py as I remembered. I sent off a brief e-mail confessing that his tendency to take no prisoners reminded me of why I'd

first found him so very attractive. Since our last encounter consisted of a torturously long flirtation followed by a brief affair aborted at the insistence of the nonmonogamous girlfriend who wasn't, Matt's reply was a polite version of, "Good. Suffer, bitch."

It was spring. I'd gotten spiritually fat, sexually complacent, and clinically depressed about the impending death of my mother. I needed a challenge. So I plotted a Pattonesque campaign. Long-stemmed roses? Paltry! I splurged on an artful arrangement of live orchids. Let the beautiful boy hear the girls in the office chirping over *that*. Get peer pressure on my side. It sometimes took me two hours to compose a mere paragraph of e-mail. Somehow, certainly not because I deserved it, I got a second chance. Matt turned up at a community forum that the Stop AIDS Project had invited me to attend as a panelist. Afterward, he walked me to my car, and what should appear but a chain link fence, perfect for gently backing him into so that I could kiss his eyelids. I got invited home to meet his dogs, and we haven't gotten much sleep since.

This relationship is my mother's parting gift to me. We were locked in a struggle, usually unvoiced, about my sexuality. Now that she is gone, I can see more clearly how decades of battling her shame and anger in arguments with her and my own heart and mind made it impossible for me to ever commit to a long-term relationship. In my emotionally incestuous family, she was my primary partner. She was unconscious by the time Matt came to join me at her deathbed. Everyone else in my family loved him, especially my sisters, who think I am unbelievably lucky to have a handsome young man in my life who likes fabric stores, cooking, and kids. This enthusiasm makes me angry, given the way they've ignored or looked askance at my woman-identified lovers. At some point, I will have to tell them he's a tranny. And at some point, I'll have to talk about my own gender issues with them. But I think we all need to be a little further along in our grieving process before I could

hope for an open-minded hearing. And so I lean a bit on the presumption of heterosexuality and enjoy the rest I'm getting, even if it makes me feel a bit guilty.

Matt identifies as a gay man. He's worked hard to create a niche for himself in that world. He was a bartender at the Lone Star, a bear bar, and all his significant relationships were with other guys. They tend to see his hooking up with me as a form of backsliding into a lesbian identity. It's been hard for gay men to welcome the sudden influx of gay or bisexual FTMs. After fighting hard for the right to relate sexually to other men's cocks and defending themselves from a culture that sees homosexual men as emasculated, most gay men can't expand their definition of "manhood" to include people who weren't born male. And it's hard to tell which reaction is more upsetting—a bioboy who is completely turned off by a proposition from a tranny boy, or one who is intrigued by such a "freaky" idea. (Of course, there are a handful of uncreepy genetic men who often take a considerable amount of crap from their peers because they socialize and have sex with FTMs.)

Matt and I have a daddy/boy relationship, but it doesn't look that way from the outside. The dykes in my life who are happy for me don't see Matt as a man, for the most part. They see him as another sort of butch. Men have always been a part of my sexual expression, and my longest-running fuck-buddy relationship is with a gay man, but I've only recently identified as bisexual. I'm tired of juggling all these contradictions and trying to protect my loved ones from aspects of myself they find upsetting. It reminds me too much of the conflicts I had with my mother. She's gone now, and I don't want to do that anymore.

Since everybody Matt and I knew was throwing their dress up in the air at the specter of heterosexuality, we got blatant and sent out 300 invitations to a backyard barbecue and engagement party, white-trash food items welcome. Just about everybody we invited came. There was Matt's coterie of gayboys from the Lone Star, including an ex-lover from Australia who exuded broken-hearted vibes while picking up heavy things to help

us get ready, and a self-jilting fuck buddy who turned up with a Hello Kitty T-shirt that exposed his perfectly flat, triathlete tummy, short leather chaps, and a new boyfriend. "He's doing that just to hurt me," Matt said bitterly, burning a batch of chicken. There were my leatherdyke friends, including an ex-lover or two, and a gay male couple I play with frequently, along with a sweet straight man I fuck once in a while. A bunch of straight people from the software company where Matt works also came, including his boss. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," he told me, indicating his leather pants and the big chain around his neck. (She was civil but didn't stay long.) I had my own heterosexual caucus: a small group of older women from the pagan community, most of whom got fiercely cruised by mommy-hungry baby dykes, to their delight. A bevy of tranny boys showed up and flirted with the fags, while the dykes flirted with them. There was a sprinkling of transsexual women to keep up the glamour quotient. Then there were the pansexually perverse, postmodern bisexuals who cruised everybody and were probably the only people there who really "got" the queerness of our party.

Too bad there was no way to keep tabs on how many people got laid, and how and with whom, after the party. The air was certainly full of the tantalizing erotic scent of cross-pollination. Computer geek girls were thinking about getting a pair of leather pants and bravely waving my riding crops around. Drag queens were sitting on straight boys' laps. Big burly bearded bears were wondering uneasily who, among the other bearded folks, had balls in more than the metaphysical sense of the word. Lesbians were offering their favors to people identified with male pronouns. "I'm the only straight woman here," my friend Martha announced, waving a corn dog. "No, you're not, honey," replied a body-builder from Los Angeles, offering the Velveeta dip. And so it went all afternoon and evening.

It was also interesting to see who treated this like a "real" engagement party. We hadn't expected gifts, but we got some, mostly from the straight people who attended, who were, I

suspect, relieved about having etiquette to fall back on at such a weird event. We also got gifts from gay male couples, some of whom took us aside to give us congratulations and welcome us into the fold of settled-down grownups. The paradigm of marriage has migrated into queer communities. While it's nice to get support for being together, we don't want this relationship to follow anybody else's rules. We are together because, and for as long as, we make each other happy. We are *undomesticated* partners.

After it was all over, we were relieved to be alone. Our relationship is a sanctuary where we validate our complex identities and cleanse one another from the poison of other people's expectations. Matt keeps me sane by responding to the parts of me that are male without pressuring me to take hormones or forgetting that I sometimes like to be a giddy girl who gets chased around the house. He is kind, patient, gentle, strong, funny, dirty-minded, responsible, and well-read. I hope I get to spend the rest of my life with him. It will certainly take that long to teach him to hang up his wet towel.

It was hard for me to cope with the sensation of not belonging to any of the camps that were represented at our engagement party. I no longer feel like a lesbian, exactly, but my autobiography still contains more than two decades of dyke drama and courage. When I go to the grocery store, the cashier might take me for a crib-robbing middle-aged woman with a bad haircut, but my lover is hardly your typical guy. Reading keys and hankies, admiring buns and crotches, I've got the sensibilities of a dirty old leatherman, but it takes more than skill with a whip to get your membership card stamped by that Old Guard. My issues overlap with FTM issues, but I have yet to permanently alter my body. While a lot of my sexual behavior is bisexual, I haven't participated in the founding of that community, and it doesn't feel like home.

The only consolation for this sense of alienation is the fact that there's no place where I *don't* belong. Having shed most of the strictures of identity politics, I can take what I like from

the entire spectrum of sexual minority cultures. Bonding with people simply because they shared membership in a particular oppressed class never worked for me anyway. I'd rather take folks on a case-by-case basis. Creating a chosen family based only on fucking the same people, the same way, didn't work any better than a family based on blood. Maybe a network of shared values, skepticism, and mutual desire will be less dysfunctional.

Our engagement party was the talk of the town for weeks and weeks. Wish I could see the looks on everybody's faces when they get the invitation to the baby shower. And no, I'm not the one who is trying to get pregnant.

Gay Marriage

[1999]

It's not all beer and skittles (or lattes and biscotti), being gay in California. This state has an "anything goes" reputation, but the sad fact is, we have also hosted some of the nastiest homophobic ballot measures in the country. On November 7, 1978, the Briggs Initiative was defeated by a mere 58 percent of the voters. Senator John Briggs' Proposition 6 would have expelled gay and lesbian teachers and forbidden teaching homosexuality in a positive light. In 1986, we had to deal with Proposition 64, Lyndon La Rouché's measure to quarantine people with AIDS. Southern California U.S. Representative William Dannemeyer sponsored Proposition 102, which would have required mandatory reporting of HIV-positive people to state authorities; that was defeated in 1988. On September 29, 1991, Governor Pete Wilson vetoed Assembly Bill 101, which would have banned employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

So far, we've successfully beaten back most of these repressive proposals, but things don't look good for the most recent attack on our community. The Knight initiative, also known as the "Definition of Marriage" measure, will appear on March 2000 ballots. If approved by voters, it will add language to the state's Family Code that will ensure that only marriage between a man and a woman is valid and recognized in California. A recent Field Poll found that only 20 percent of those surveyed had heard anything about the proposal, but 55 percent said they would vote for it anyway.

The sponsor of this small-minded proposition is state Senator Pete Knight (R-Palmdale). Knight has tried to get a version of this bill passed by the state legislature five times, but in the past withdrew it after amendments were affixed that offered gay and lesbian couples domestic partner benefits. Despite the fact that he has an openly gay son who lives in Baltimore and a gay brother who died of AIDS, Knight has a long record as an extremist right-wing politician. In 1993, shortly after being elected, he circulated a leaflet to other members of the Republican caucus that was so racist and anti-immigrant that the *Los Angeles Times* editorialized against it. Only then did Knight apologize. He has sponsored bills to eliminate state commissions that protect the civil rights of women and Native Americans. He also opposes adoption by all unmarried couples, and supports eliminating gay men and lesbians from the armed forces.

The bulk of the money behind the Knight Initiative is expected to come from Howard Ahamson, the heir to the Home Savings and Loan fortune. Ahamson has been a heavy funder of California ballot measures Proposition 174 (a school vouchers program intended to circumvent desegregated public school classrooms), Proposition 226 (an anti-union measure), Proposition 227 (ending bilingual education in California), and Proposition 209 (anti-affirmative action). He is one of the founders of the Chalcedon Institute, which advocates the death penalty for adultery, abortion, and homosexuality. He is also a founder of the Chalcedon Institute's legal arm, the Rutherford Institute, which funded Paula Jones' sexual harassment lawsuit against President Clinton. He's served on the board of directors of both organizations, and thrown his fortune behind them.

California activists expect a media campaign every bit as dirty as the one recently waged against gay marriage in Hawaii. Some of the most hateful commercials that have ever aired on television were put together by the Christian Coalition, Roman Catholic Church, and Mormon Church to outlaw gay marriage. These commercials employed scare tactics like associating gay sex with bestiality.

Fortunately, Californians for Fairness is organizing to defeat the Knight initiative, chaired by campaign manager Mike Marshall. And in San Francisco, Mayor Willie Brown asked his deputy director of legislative affairs, Michael Colbruno, to continue an annual tradition of gay marriages at city hall. This ceremony was begun under the auspices of then-Supervisor Carole Migden. Mayor Brown and all the supervisors except Amos Brown took turns marrying the 191 pairs of domestic partners assembled on the grand staircase under the recently renovated City Hall rotunda. Colbruno says hundreds more couples wanted to participate in the ceremony, but the numbers had to be capped for lack of space.

He was ecstatic about the way press coverage of the event has changed since 1997. "The first year, we had reporters everywhere, and their attitude was that it was a freak show. But now things are changing, becoming much more respectful. The more people see us, the more they realize, your relationship is just like my relationship." *Marie-Claire* will feature coverage of the ceremony, and Colbruno says he had no trouble getting major corporations to donate prizes for a wedding raffle after the ceremony.

I was at City Hall on March 25, having received a notice about the ceremony because Matt and I are domestic partners. Unfortunately, we didn't respond in time to be part of the photo-op. We were also pretty clear that City Hall wasn't ready for black leather and kilts or a wedding procession under crossed swords. But we did want to witness it. It was hard to move through the crowd, especially since I walk with a cane. I had to clear my throat several times before a young dyke standing in front of me got the message that perhaps she should take her attaché case off a chair so that I could sit in it. That was the only sour note in the proceedings—other than the threatened collapse of the huge rainbow-layered wedding cake, which was narrowly prevented by alert bystanders.

People were dizzy with romantic bliss, kissing each other, crying, hugging, throwing flowers. Matt and I kept pointing

out cute couples to one another. There was a pair of gray-haired, quietly dignified dykes who wore home-made patchwork quilted vests in contrasting colors. A roly-poly couple of clean-shaven guys in purple-and-white-striped rugby shirts. Two handsome African-American men in matching tuxedos. Our housesitter in a '50s butch coat-and-tie with her femme girlfriend in an antique frock. Two boys carrying Tinky-Winky dolls, of course. And a pair of lesbians hoisting a huge lavender glitter heart that said, "Alice and Christmas celebrate love." A few Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence were also wandering about, raising the fashion bar for everybody. Friends and family members had joined the happy couples en masse, and there were so many Polaroid cameras going off, the smell of developer was as thick as incense during Easter mass.

There was something childlike about this event, in the best sense of that word. It was full of a sturdy hope and joy. These couples who were pledging fealty to one another seemed oddly innocent to me, lifted for a little while out of the frustrations and drudgery of ordinary life that can so easily kill desire and blight romance. Squeezed between families that often reject us, churches that condemn us, governments that do not protect us, and fellow citizens who despise or attack us, gay men and lesbians are hard-pressed. This rare moment of official acknowledgment and recognition was incredibly precious. I caught myself thinking again and again, How could anybody who was here continue to hate us? We're so cute, so funny, so sweet, so full of love.

Mayor Brown said, of the ceremony, "I want to put a human face on gay and lesbian relationships for the citizens of California before they are bombarded with antigay ads for the Knight initiative. As we did in 1996, when the national debate on same-sex marriage was launched, San Francisco will again be in the forefront of educating the public about these loving committed relationships."

In the past, I've had some pretty nasty things to say about gay marriage. If memory serves, this included an interview

where I said I would never attend such a ceremony—a position I guess I'll have to revise if I expect people to RSVP when they are invited to my own wedding. I still have a lot of reservations about the entire concept, but it's hard to let cynicism hold sway when you are crazy in love and would like to stay that way for the rest of your life. What troubles me is all the assumptions that get piled on top of gay marriage, a train of traditional values that have been hitched to it. Chief among these is monogamy, which has never worked for me. Matt and I operate on the principle that sex is good, and more sex is better. We operate as a tag team, pimping for one another. I love him, I want him to have what he wants, and if what he wants is some extramarital dick, I think he should have it.

I worry that same-sex couples will be in too big a hurry to adopt the assumptions and the form of heterosexual marriage as a role model. This institution is not working out all that well for straight people—more than half of their marriages end in divorce. Do we have to leave everything that we learned as sexual outlaws behind when we form committed relationships with one another? I have observed many ugly extralegal breakups. Dishes get broken. Clothes get cut up. There are car crashes, drunk public squabbles, and hard feelings that last for decades. I am pretty sure we are not ready for the corollary of gay marriage—gay divorce. Nobody has even begun to talk about how issues like alimony, child custody battles, community property, and child support will affect same-sex couples. Then there are the tax implications. We are not used to thinking of our relationships with one another as legal contracts. Mass weddings like the one at the March on Washington in 1987 are lovely public relations ploys, but are we prepared to cope with the public relations disasters of gay men and lesbians dragging each other through the courts to determine who will wind up with the house and the kids?

I'm also leery of the argument that gay relationships should be legalized so that both partners have access to health insurance, pension payments, and other benefits. Since when

do you have to be coupled in order to deserve health care or assistance when you are elderly or disabled? The argument that gay marriage is necessary to halt the spread of HIV seems equally dubious to me. As an advice columnist, I got far too many letters from men who were infected by partners they thought were being monogamous. Commitment is no substitute for condoms.

Unfortunately, the movement to support gay marriage has also been linked to a strategy that is sometimes called mainstreaming or assimilationism. Proponents of this philosophy believe that gay men and lesbians can win their civil rights and equality by showing Middle America that we want the same things they do—a good job, a stable relationship, kids, a new car, and other happy shiny consumer goods. I spoke with Laurie McBride about the Knight initiative. McBride is the liaison to the lesbian and gay community for the Speaker of the California Assembly, Antonio Villaraigosa. She says, “The most revolutionary work we can do right now as lesbians and gay men is to publicly affirm our families. We’ve defined ourselves as individuals who need protection but America still does not see us as part of their family. We are the Other, distinct, separate, lurking in the shadows and waiting to have sex whenever we can, bouncing from mattress to mattress. The real political challenge is to strengthen our gay families.”

But the television commercials for the Knight initiative will not show the March 25 ceremony for domestic partners. There won’t be any ordinary-looking same-sex couples holding hands, crying tears of joy while somebody’s mother takes their picture. It will show leathersmen and S/M dykes at gay marches; drag queens—especially the “blasphemous” Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence; the North American Man-Boy Love Association; and anonymous public sex. When I pointed this out to McBride, she said, “The majority of lesbians and gay men have not even come to those debates. They are family members, part of the mainstream. Before we can have those debates, we need California and America to see us as family members.”

If that's true, we are doomed, because the right wing is way ahead of us. So far, the strategy for advocating gay marriage is to try to disassociate the same-sex couples who want to get married from troubling issues like S/M, transgenderism, radical queer street protests, gay youth and cross-generational sex, and cruising. It didn't work in Hawaii or Alaska, and I don't think it's going to work in California.¹ We don't seem to be able, as gay people, to hold on to some paradoxical truths about ourselves. Such as: In some ways, we are like everybody else. We fall in love. We want our lives to be happy and comfortable. But in other ways, we are not like straight people. The "queer family" is a diverse community that includes some sexual behavior and gender identities that look weird and scare hell out of heterosexuals. But that doesn't mean they are wrong. Everybody has a right to be left alone to work out their own life. Everybody has a right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Gay activism in this country has rarely included a sex-education component. I think that's because most Americans, gay or straight, buy into fear and shame about pleasure. Most gay men and lesbians move the sexual taboos they were taught as children just far enough over to accommodate some of their own desire. Sadly, battling homophobia doesn't seem to encourage most of us to look at the bigger picture of sexual repression. Our efforts to improve our status are hampered, not just by hatred of gays, but by the abysmal state of heterosexuality. We are trying to win our freedom from people who can't deal with protecting their own children from AIDS or teen pregnancy, people who seem helpless to stem a rising tide of violence against women and children. Thanks to heterosexual men, more Viagra is being sold than aspirin. And if Pfizer could come up with a drug that would work that well for straight girls, pharmacies would be leveled in the resulting stampede. No wonder straight people see exciting racy images of frolicking gay perverts and get so steamed up and self-righteous. Being at the top of the sexual hierarchy and legally

validated is one of the few perks that heterosexuals get, and I'm not surprised they are so reluctant to share.

It's interesting that 66 percent of Protestants and 60 percent of Catholics surveyed supported the Knight measure, while 63 percent of voters who gave no religious affiliation said they would oppose it. Religious organizations that claim to be pro-family repeatedly divide biological families by persecuting their gay and lesbian children. While claiming to support long-term committed relationships, they deny same-sex couples access to that institution. Let's expose that hypocrisy. If we weren't such a deeply divided "gay family," we could defend our right to same-sex marriage without splitting and stigmatizing some of our own. It is vital for us to start looking at our own sexual discomfort and prejudice, so that we can become better human-rights advocates. We have to stop running away from the right wing's smear campaigns and countering them with a more positive message that supports equal treatment for all consenting adult sexual behavior. We don't have to give up the moral high ground to do this.

NOTES

1. Unfortunately, as I predicted, the Knight measure, Proposition 22, did indeed pass with 61 percent of voters in favor.

A Place at the Table

[2000]

Don't think those pictures of leathersmen and cross-dressers and nipple-clamps are what gay life is all about. They're not...

—Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table*
(New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1993, p. 20)

Our mornings follow a set routine that any parent with a high-needs baby would recognize. We somehow stagger out of bed, sleep deprived and anxious. Our eight-month-old son has reflux, and has only slept through the night once. He usually wakes up every two or three hours, frightened and hurting. We have become expert at consoling the inconsolable child. While Matt shovels food and medication into the baby, I try to assess how much my fibromyalgia is going to hurt me today, and eat some breakfast. Somehow we coordinate showers, getting dressed, and packing Blake up for his stint at daycare. Matt heads out with the baby in tow, and I am off to work as well, either in my therapy office in the Mission District or the home office downstairs.

Since the baby arrived, there are precious few moments when Matt and I can meet each other alone. The occasions when lust can break through the fence are even more rare. We are oddly shy with each other during these adults-only interludes, as if becoming parents has made us strange to one another. The house is sticky. Piles of clean laundry that we can't find time to

put away topple over and get mixed up with the dirty clothes. Yet we continue to be loving and kind with each other and with Blake. Matt especially is a monument of patience. I am often struck dumb by his profound and consistently deep love for our son.

Matt and I are doing something that most people take for granted. We are two people in love who live together and raise a child. We plan to be together for the rest of our lives. But our family is not like other families, and so we are always afraid that some malicious person or powerful institution will take action against us and disrupt our lives. That's because we are both transgendered men, and my boyfriend is the mother of my child.

It happened like this. I met Matt nearly ten years ago, as "one of the jack-booted dyke thugs of ACT-UP Chicago," before he transitioned. I was living with someone in what was supposed to be an open relationship. But my primary partner could not tolerate the threat of our torrid affair, so I broke things off. We connected again three years ago, after Matt had been on testosterone for several years, had chest surgery and a beard, and become a bartender at the Lone Star, San Francisco's notorious bear bar. I had been single for more than a year, and was dealing with my mother's impending death from breast cancer.

I chased Matt shamelessly, alternating sincere and humble apologies for my bad behavior in the past with X-rated e-mail. Our relationship was a scandal. We were generally perceived as a fag/dyke couple rather than two gay/bi men, which was how we saw ourselves. When I had to go to Utah to care for my mother in the last month of her life, Matt was tender and helpful. He came out for her funeral, and was promptly fired from his bartending job.

I started talking to Matt about maybe transitioning too. I was having early symptoms of menopause, and I simply could not put estrogen in my body on purpose. As a child, I frequently told people I was going to be a boy when I grew up. Puberty

made me even more uncomfortable with my female body and identity. I investigated sex reassignment in my twenties, but was discouraged by the poor quality of genital surgery and terrified of the isolation. I wasn't sure I could separate the effect that sexism and misogyny had on my self-image from gender dysphoria. So I tried to be a different kind of woman, a sexually adventurous gender-fucking dyke who enjoyed every possible male prerogative. But it just wasn't enough. At 45, I was terrified of changing my gender, afraid that it would mean I would no longer be able to make a living, since my income was based on being a lesbian therapist and journalist. But I did not know what else to try, and the cognitive dissonance had worn me out.

Matt started talking to me about wanting to raise a child. He had been unable to take testosterone for a couple of years because of side effects like blinding migraines. He didn't think he could adopt a child, so he wanted to have one of his own. I had always believed there was not room for a child in my life. But when my mother passed away, I realized I had also been afraid of her disapproval. A staunch right-wing Mormon, my mother never accepted my queerness, and she would have moved heaven and earth to prevent me from raising a kid. It seemed to me that it was part of Matt's spiritual path to be a parent. Witnessing my mother's death had opened my heart. I needed to be part of creating a new life.

We did not want to do anything that might harm the baby, so we got the best medical advice that we could. We went to see a lot of doctors, who all told us that what we wanted to do was unusual, but biologically possible. So we started auditioning our betesticked friends for the role of sperm donor. That turned out to be quite a soap opera. Guys who thought nothing about throwing away their sperm daily, in Kleenexes or on the floor of a sex club, got very precious with us about their sacrosanct bodily fluids. Time after time we went through the same scenario. The guy we asked to be a donor would say, "I don't want to be a father. I don't want the responsibility." We

would say, "That's okay. We don't want you to be a caretaker. And we'll be using multiple donors so nobody will know exactly whose gametes got lucky." Then the guy would freak out and say, "But how can I tell if the baby is mine?"

Luckily, we found three men who loved us but didn't long for children. A year and a half later, here we are with a son who shrieks with delight at the sight of the tortoiseshell cat, viciously bites Cheerios in half and then lets them slip out of his mouth on a waterfall of drool, and opens the kitchen cabinets to drag out the very largest pots, so that he can drum on them with a wooden spoon. Our birth families and straight neighbors have been pretty sweet to us. The only people who've gotten upset are a handful of straight, homophobic FTMs online who started calling Matt by his girl name, because real men don't get pregnant. One of these bigots even said it would be better for our baby to be born dead than be raised by two people who are "confused about their gender." Our large and loving chosen family, made up of gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, transgendered people, and straight allies, buffers us from this kind of hostility. We are also hearing from more and more FTMs who have had or want to have children. As Blake's dads, we have created a village to help us to raise him.

I started taking testosterone a couple of months before Blake was born. While he learns how to grab things, click his tongue, hold his own bottle, and walk while somebody holds his hands, I am going through my own metamorphosis. My hips are smaller, my muscle mass is growing, and every day it seems like there's more hair on my face and body. My voice is deeper, and my sex drive has given me newfound empathy with the guys who solicit hookers for blowjobs. When I think that I can continue with this process—get chest surgery and pass as male—I feel happier than at any other point in my life. And when I think that something will stop me, I become very depressed. Most of my dyke and fag friends have been enthusiastic about my change, and so far my therapy practice has not been shut down nor have the writing assignments dried up.

I don't mistake the small island of acceptance that we enjoy in ultraliberal San Francisco for real freedom or tolerance. Our family configuration is bound to be controversial even among lesbians and gay men, especially those who believe mainstreaming is the best strategy for securing our civil rights. But at least among some queer activists, those who are prepared to live in a genuinely diverse society free from gender tyranny or proscribed pleasures, we can enjoy a place at the table.

When the Playroom Becomes a Nursery: S/M-Fetish People Who Choose to Parent

[2000]

I have been telling people since I was 5 years old that I would never have children. As a grown-up gay activist, I've been caustic about same-sex couples who want to raise kids. Of course I don't support homophobic policies that forbid lesbians and gay men from being foster parents, adopting children, or using the artificial-reproduction technology that is the last resort of infertile straight people. Every time I hear that a gay person has lost custody of his or her children, it makes me sad and angry. But I am critical of any attempt to justify equal rights for homosexuals by arguing that we are "just like everyone else," that is, all we want is to get married, have children, plug ourselves into capitalism, and oh by the way also serve in the military in our spare time. On a personal level, I never thought I would have the time or patience for child-rearing. I have about as much maternal instinct as a Marine Corps drill instructor.

If I have learned anything about limits, it is that one should be extremely cautious about making bold public statements about them. For example, I once declared that anyone who played with electrical devices was just going too far, and such play had a mechanical aesthetic that left me as cold and unresponsive as a drowned earthworm. Within six months, I acquired more electrical toys than anybody except the KGB. Now, at the unfrisky age of 45, I find myself walking the floor at 2 A.M. waiting for a bottle of formula to heat up; changin

the plastic liner in the Diaper Genie; running to the pharmacy late at night for teething ointment; and keeping vaccination appointments in the office of my Chinese pediatrician, which is decorated with pastel baby quilts. Sex of any sort is a foggy memory, much less attractive than eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.

Granted, I was right about being unfit for motherhood. I think of myself as a dad, not a mum. But this experience has taught me volumes about the blithe assumptions we all tend to make about our own futures. You just never know what life will hand you. Who knew that my mother would die of breast cancer just when I was getting involved with a person as special as Matt, my female-to-male (FTM) transsexual boyfriend? Who knew that losing my mother would open my heart up to the possibility of creating a new life with Matt, and nurturing that little person? When Matt talked about having children, it was clear to me that this was part of his spiritual path, something he needed to do to fulfill the purpose of his lifetime. I went along for the ride partly because it challenged me to overcome my own emotional blocks. The possibility of loving a child made me feel more hopeful about the rest of my life, that no matter how old I might get there was always the possibility of new things happening, important changes and growth taking place.

Of course there was an explosion of scandal. Oddly enough, it did not come from any of the straight people we knew. Matt's parents and my family were both excited and happy to learn that a baby was on the way. His co-workers were also sweet and supportive. It was other genderqueers who started trashing us. I am not able, either physically or psychologically, to have children. Matt had been off testosterone, due to side effects, for long enough to be able to reproduce. He decided it would be okay for him to use his uterus before throwing it away via a hysterectomy. While most FTMs were supportive, and we began hearing from other FTMs who had children or wanted to begin families, a handful of straight, antigay, S/M-phobic

transmen launched an attack on both of us via the Internet.

This was a pretty ugly business, but it solidified our intentions. We knew that none of the horrible things being said about us were true. We were not jeopardizing the health of the baby; we'd checked with several medical experts, and all of them had given us a green light to proceed. We knew that we were capable of keeping a healthy boundary between our adult sexuality and our son's sensibilities. We didn't see anything wrong with two differently gendered people raising a child, as long as we made it clear that our son could make his own choices about what kind of person he wanted to be. We knew that we really loved each other, and could provide for our son both financially and emotionally. But of course when these people online said it would be better for our child to be born dead, or threatened to report us to the authorities and have our son removed from our home, we were hurt, angry, and terrified.

The state does seem to have a vested interest in preventing anyone who is sexually different from raising a child. Over the years, I've heard many stories about custody battles involving polyamorous people, pagans, transsexuals, sex workers, and members of the BDSM-fetish community, not just lesbians and gay men. The people who go through these battles usually do it alone, and they usually lose. But that story can change when there is enough publicity to generate community support.

In early 1995, members of the BDSM-fetish community in the United States and Canada were appalled to learn that a couple in the scene had had their children taken away. The Canadian fetish magazine *Boudoir Noir* established a defense fund for the unlucky pair, known as the Houghtons. As we had for the Spanner defendants, the community banded together and raised enough money to allow Steve and Selina Houghton to hire a decent defense attorney. Selina ultimately pled guilty to a disorderly conduct charge, and her husband to one count of endangering the welfare of a minor, a Class E misdemeanor. They were also ordered to continue to receive

family counseling. (They had faced five charges, including two assault charges.) Neither offense was specified, which the Houghtons insisted on to facilitate regaining custody of their children. Although they did not receive jail sentences, their privacy and home life had been badly damaged by the intrusive actions of police. When the Houghtons got their kids back, they moved suddenly, disappearing from the scene, probably to protect themselves from further persecution.

This tragedy occurred because the pair had made a videotape of a scene they did at a dungeon party in a bordering state. A family member and a friend who babysat for the children apparently unlocked the box where the tape was kept, revealed its contents to at least one of the Houghtons' children, told them that their father was abusing their mother, and sent a copy of the videotape to the police. No minors were featured in the videotape, and S/M activities did not take place in the Houghtons' home. Nevertheless, the videotaped evidence of kinky sex was enough to bring down the wrath of Child Protection Services, who removed the 7- and 12-year-old and kept them in foster homes for more than a year. This was in spite of testimony by one of the law guardians, who told the court the children would be better served by returning them to their parents.

This has to be one of the more frightening things that could happen to a mother or father. I know I would rather be sent to jail myself than see my child taken away and sent to live with a stranger. And yet many people in the BDSM scene are raising children. I was curious to know how other parents coped with anxiety about state interference with the custody of their children, and the more common dilemmas involved in parenting. Getting interviews was like trying to undo a pair of handcuffs with the wrong key. Even with the protection of a pseudonym, very few of the thirty or so people I approached were willing to be quoted in this article. I had better luck with people whose children were already grown. It seems that the desire to have a normal life, to enjoy the domestic pleasures

that most vanilla heterosexuals can take for granted, is one of the most controversial and perilous things a pervy person can attempt to fulfill.

The first and most reassuring thing I discovered was that none of the people I interviewed had run into a situation with social workers, school teachers, or healthcare practitioners in which their BDSM lifestyle threatened custody of their children. Sexual preferences became an issue for only one couple, and that was because they brought it up themselves during a nasty divorce. But the chilling effect of simply knowing that losing one's privacy and one's offspring is possible touched many more people. This is where much of the real harm of oppression is done. The anxiety about how we might be injured by other people's prejudice or ignorance takes a lot out of us, and makes us constrict our lives in ways that may not be necessary. We want to keep ourselves and our children safe.

This fear fed whatever self-doubt or guilt the people I interviewed might have had about their S/M sexuality. Jesse James, a 50-year-old transgendered person who has been involved in the BDSM community in the Pacific Northwest for almost nineteen years, says of raising a now 20-year-old son, "Sometimes in my heart—especially at the beginning—I listened too well to the voices of others (my mother, my blood family, some gay friends) who said I was 'too weird' to be a parent, that I would 'screw the kid up.' These voices disheartened me and I let them hurt me."

The universal solution to this fear was to create very strong boundaries between the child and any knowledge of the parents' BDSM-fetish activities. Catherine A. Liszt is a well-known author in the scene, a 45-year-old bisexual polyamorous switch who has two sons, ages 23 and 17. She says, "When they were young, we kept it very much behind closed doors—kept our toys and literature in a box with a padlock, and did nothing but the lightest play when they were in the house. Since I share custody of them with my ex-husband, there were enough times

when they were gone that it was easy to wait for such a time to schedule play. When they reached their late teens, we began being less guarded. By the time I came out to Miles [her oldest son] when he turned 18, it was pretty anticlimactic.”

James echoes that strategy. “Sex (of whatever kind) in our house occurred between consenting adults out of the eyeshot and (as much as possible) earshot of children. If children were in the house, it occurred behind closed doors. *Everyone* in the house was taught to respect a closed door. You knock, and ask for permission to enter. My son’s closed door was equally respected.”

Not surprisingly, my interviewees put a high priority on providing good sex education for their children, without pushing for conformity to their values or sexual choices. Andrea and David are a heterosexual pagan couple who also identify as allies of the queer community. Andrea has two daughters, one born in 1977 before she got involved in the BDSM-fetish community, and one born in 1998. She says of her first child, “I was always open about biological aspects of sex. We infrequently talked about other aspects of sex, usually in response to her questions. These questions started at about age 8. I always addressed adult sexuality as a form of play, so BDSM was one way to play. I was honest, open, accepting, tolerant, and supportive of my daughter’s choices. I didn’t push my sexuality onto her. She chose to not become sexually active until she went away to college. After that, I and her stepdad David gave advice whenever she asked. We mailed her safe sex supplies too. She hasn’t grown up to show any interest in S/M sex, not that we know of.”

Lydia Chichester is a 58-year-old “straight to bi” woman who is currently “somewhat involved” with the leather community. She had no community involvement “when my second husband and myself were doing BDSM stuff in the early ’80s.” She had two daughters with her first husband (who she later found out is also into S/M) “because my biological clock went off.” She raised these children for several years in the Bay Area

as a single parent. She says education about sex began “when they were very little and as appropriate to their ages. Nudity was accepted in both small and large gatherings with no sex involved.” When her daughters became sexually active, she “was more adamant about birth control” than taking other precautions because “it was before we knew about AIDS.”

Chichester says that she managed to keep about 99 percent of her play activities private. But this was difficult given adolescent curiosity. “By the time I was with my second husband, the kids were in their early teens and very interested in the new husband and what went on behind the closed doors. Luckily they went off to Grandma’s when my partner and I would be most boisterous, but there were times that it was obvious the next day that we’d been partying. We were fairly open about the bondage, and I suppose they saw some ropes around the bed.”

She enjoys a good relationship with her daughters today, who both “seem to be into playing at bondage. They don’t tell me details. But I think they both take it as a potential part of sexuality and play, depending on the preferences of whoever they are with.” She adds, “I’m glad that we are pretty open about sexuality among ourselves.” She advises new parents in the scene to “keep your S/M stuff private and make pretty sure to do your activities when the kids are asleep; you shouldn’t have any trouble with the authorities.”

It’s interesting to think about how we might feel about being parents if we lived in a society where S/M was not stigmatized. Any ethical person who is taking on the awesome responsibility of sheltering a growing life ought to, as James recommended, “take a good hard ferocious moral inventory of yourself about once a week.” But the people I interviewed were prone to more self-doubt than the average parent, more inclined to feel that they had to protect their children from an adult sexuality that might be toxic or unhealthy. Yet when I think about the skills and values I’ve learned as a player in the realm of dominant/submissive sex, it actually seems to me that

I've acquired some valuable attitudes or behaviors that might make me a better parent.

One of the smartest things I ever heard about S/M was uttered by a gay man, Steven Brown, who used to pair up with me to do educational lectures about the scene. He once said, throwing up his hands in despair about the suspicious grilling we were getting, "I do this *because I am a loving person*. I love and respect the people I play with. And that includes being able to embrace parts of them that are supposed to be unlovable." This foundation of acceptance and empathy seems to me to be potentially quite useful to a parent, who must be able to see things from the child's point of view, and deal with a lot of behavior that is extremely trying.

As a top, I've learned how to communicate in terms that will make sense to the other person. I've learned patience. I have a deep love for the vagaries of human nature and respect for the wisdom of the body. I am able to create a positive experience within a framework of limitations handed to me by another person. Of course, some idiot will probably assume that by making this list I am saying that I am going to somehow top my child. That would be asinine. I've learned how to keep my intense sexual experiences from spilling over into parts of my life where that kind of role-playing would not be appropriate. That is, if anything is, the First Principle of participating in these kinds of erotic fantasies. In order to be a responsible, safe player, you have to know when to be your scene-self, and when to be your mundane self.

I can still remember how crushed I was when I read *Story of O* and *Return to the Château* and came to the ending, where Sir Stephen loses interest in O and tells her she can kill herself. I can also remember being furious with the way *Nine and a Half Weeks* (the book, not the movie) ends. The submissive woman has a public breakdown. She begins to cry hysterically, and is abandoned by her master, so that strangers have to obtain help for her. One of the cruelest stereotypes of S/M people is that we don't love each other, that there is something about our

sexual style that makes our relationships mutually destructive and predisposes us to suicide. We are supposed to be content with existing as two-dimensional caricatures of vanilla people's erotic paranoia, emerging from our warrens only after dark, always clad in body-hugging fetish gear, having no real lives outside of public dungeon clubs and "violent" pornography. What's really sad is the fact that a number of us buy into this insane picture of how a "real sadomasochist" is supposed to behave. It's a good way to wind up burned out, disillusioned, and in exile from the realm of pervery.

It takes courage to insist on our right to lead full lives, in dignity and security—to have career plans that may not revolve around kinky sex, have ongoing relationships that are stable and mutually fulfilling, participate in the political process, acquire educations, and form families based on both blood and affection. This doesn't have to be about assimilation, and it won't be, as long as we are also out of the closet about being affiliated with a sexual minority. Rather, it's a form of civil disobedience—refusing to be punished, limited, or ghettoized. Sometimes the larger society may try to prevent us from gaining access to the things that other people can take for granted. But if we don't put our fear aside, there's no real need for cops or social workers to come after us. We'll have repressed and suppressed ourselves.

When my son sees me, he breaks into a huge giggling grin. He can't wait to be picked up and swung in circles. He knows that I will never let him go hungry or wet, or leave him alone when he is ill. He loves me. And I love him more than I can say. I can't contain all the gratitude and sweetness I feel in my heart for this little boy, or for my partner, who made it possible for us to have the precious experience of taking care of this baby. I now have to work even harder to make the world a better place. How sad it would be if I had missed this experience of being struck speechless by love, by his vulnerability and trust, by admiration for his stubbornness, quick wit, and determination to learn.

When the nurse in the operating room handed my son to me for the first time, she also handed me a lot of power over a helpless and dependent being. His need for me is larger and more real than anything I've experienced in a scene. But the experience of handling in an ethical way the power that submissive adults have given me, always trying to act in their best interests, reassures me that I will find a way to be the strong yet always benevolent caretaker that my son imagines and assumes that I am.

[1999]

The most poignant thing my mother ever said to me was that our family was middle-class. I had heard something in school about Marxism and class struggle, which were presented as laughable but dangerous delusions. So I rushed home to ask my mother where we fit in the big socioeconomic picture. It was a topic about as popular as sex. She grudgingly told me we were middle-class, and for years and years I believed her.

After all, I didn't know anyone who had a whole lot more than we did. We lived in a Utah valley divided up by five factious small towns that held their own Fourth of July rodeos and bitterly resented having to share the same elementary school and high school. Mormonism dominated the religious landscape, though there were rumors of Roman Catholics in faraway Salt Lake City. The principal crop was alfalfa. My grandfather, who was a kind and gentle soul, once took pity on the widely ignored agricultural agent. The local farmers viewed him with suspicion because he was a college boy and so obviously unable to perform work of any practical value. Just to please this anxious young man, Grandpa planted half an acre in the soybeans he was always pushing. People from miles around would park by the side of the road to point at the soybeans and laugh themselves sick. Sometimes they brought picnics along. The other cash crop in this valley besides alfalfa was mink, which tells you just how bad the winters were. When the wind shifted you'd get a face full of musk and old cat food that would put a skunk to shame.

My dad had gotten out of the coal mines and copper mines, but still worked underground, digging tunnels for highways or reservoirs. He came home dirty and exhausted, sometimes with horrifying stories of cave-ins and equipment failures that maimed or killed guys on his crew. I did know people who survived on less than the money he brought home, people who could be called white trash, though I never heard that term growing up. One of these families (two little girls with a single mom) lived in a shack with a dirt floor. Whenever my mother saw them in public, she would sniff, "Soap is not that expensive." The other poor family was headed by an alcoholic father who claimed an injured back prevented him from working, and an energetic woman he'd married in England during the war. She embarrassed the entire valley by selling stacks of firewood, fishing worms, and garden produce. She was also known to accept welfare payments, which was a sin that ranked third behind murder and adultery. My father wouldn't even accept unemployment benefits.

The fact that my family was working-class did not gel for me until my twenties, when I had abandoned the strictures of Zion for the urban queer community of San Francisco. I had a much older girlfriend with a trust fund and a wealth of leftist politics. It seemed to me that having money had ruined her life. The thought of having to get a job gave her crying jags and chronic insomnia. But she was trapped in an emotionally abusive relationship with her carping, critical parents. Money was the only nice thing they gave her, so of course she did not want to give it up.

She saw deprivation and hardships in my history that I had been unaware of as a child. I thought everybody's father was sometimes unemployed for six months or longer, and it was normal to live on potatoes from the garden and eggs from Grandma's chickens. I thought everybody had to can their own fruit and jam, bake their own bread, and mix the milk from the store with powdered milk to stretch it. So I never felt economically disadvantaged. I also didn't know I was

supposed to be ashamed of my background until the person who supposedly loved me taught me that fact by rolling her eyes over my accent, agonizing about whether my table manners were good enough for me to be invited to dinner with her academic colleagues, and constantly claiming special treatment because of her more sensitive and refined nature.

It didn't take me very long to figure out that the difference in our class backgrounds was sexy to my girlfriend, along with the fact that I was younger and more sexually aggressive. I really loved her and wanted to give her what she wanted, especially in bed, so I played up to her fantasies about me as a piece of rough trade. While I relished the power this gave me, I also came to understand that she saw me as less human, crude, not as intelligent, certainly not a peer. When I catered to her guilt about being privileged, and kicked her ass for it, I was also bolstering some nauseating stereotypes. I liked being told I was tough, but I didn't like having to do every single dirty job in our relationship because my blue-collar background supposedly made calling the cops on our noisy neighbors, unclogging the toilet, or getting rid of a dead cat in the basement less disgusting or less frightening for me. I was a stud, but I was also a draft animal.

There's less and less public discussion of the way class interacts with queerness. In 1996, the Simmons Market Research Bureau conducted a study in conjunction with Mulryan/Nash that found that 21 percent of gay people were in households with income over \$100,000, and 22 percent had graduate degrees. This study was not representative, since it was based on a sample taken from the mailing lists of political groups, mail-order firms, and credit-card companies. But it was a boon to gay publishers and organizations, which used these stats to successfully pursue corporate advertising, sponsorship, and grants. When I open a gay glossy magazine and see the same ads that appear in *Vanity Fair*, I admit that some positive messages are being sent to the reader: "Powerful corporations take us seriously," or "We can have the same good things in life that straight people have."

But there are other messages as well, like “This community is about earning and consuming, not about social change,” or “If you are not upwardly mobile, you don’t belong here.” I understand that you can’t sell a magazine in this culture without making some sort of accommodation to capitalism. Celebrities on the cover boost sales. But the American gay press has largely been reduced to offering the same stupid sort of escapism that’s pimped out by *Cosmo* or Martha Stewart’s *Living*, depending on the fantasy du jour. I understand why magazine owners succumb to the siren song of alcohol distilleries and pharmaceutical giants, but is this what readers really want? Is which cruise to take, which drink to make, or which jacket to wear really the biggest concern facing most lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people?

Besides, this \$100,000 picture of who we are as a community is bullshit. University of Massachusetts economist M. V. Lee Badgett used figures from six different random samples that also asked questions related to sexual orientation, as well as the 1990 U.S. Census, to draw a more representative picture of lavender economics. When the data were adjusted for variables such as education, location, occupation, experience, and race, Badgett found that gay men who worked full-time earned as much as 27 percent *less* than similar straight men. No income disparity between lesbians and straight women was found, but all women’s earnings lag behind that of men.

The Christian right has fastened on bogus stats about high discretionary income to argue that gay people do not need protection from discrimination. In a recent issue of *In These Times*, Urvashi Vaid and Jay Weiser call for us to abandon “the myth of gay affluence” on the ground that it is counterproductive to a campaign for equal rights. I’d like to take this one step further and suggest that we abandon the assumption that the best interests of well-to-do gays and working-class queers are identical. Regardless of sexual orientation, the primary focus of the upper classes is to maintain and, if possible, increase their wealth. It’s very

nice when moneyed gay men like David Geffen make large donations to AIDS charities, but such philanthropy is the exception among his gay Hollywood peers, not the rule. Yes, there were lots of middle-class boys in ACT-UP, but that's because their economic privilege could not buy them any immunity to AIDS. Now that you *can* buy some life-extending treatment, most of those men have disappeared back into middle management.

This split agenda between gay haves and have-nots is being played out in a San Francisco Bay Area controversy over a proposed temporary shelter for queer youth. The owner of a large building at the head of Castro and Market Streets has offered to donate its use to the city for the next two years. These are *our kids*, folks. But is there room for them in one of America's hallmark gay neighborhoods? Not if local gay property owners have anything to say about it. An August 5 community meeting to discuss the proposed shelter made it clear that more prosperous queers simply don't want destitute people, of any sexual orientation or age, cluttering up their lovely parks and sidewalks. Many harsh things were said about keeping drug dealers and disreputable types out of the Castro. I'm sure *none* of those homeowners and business people do crystal or designer drugs; I'm sure none of them has ever ogled a hustler. Property owner Gustavo Serina, one of the more outspoken opponents of the shelter, says, "If some people accuse me of NIMBYism [not-in-my-back-yard], so be it." Well, okay!

Lately I see the ridiculous notion that we can trust the A-gays to work quietly behind the scenes with the real movers and shakers in our society to make things better for the rest of us becoming more and more popular. Thanks, but I'd rather not trust my future to a group of people so infused with hypocrisy and lacking in compassion. Affluent queers will push for just enough social change to cover their own asses, which will do the rest of us about as much good as any other charity fuck. Real activism is a much more time-consuming, arduous, risky, and (dare I say it?) democratic process.

The first model for political organizing that I encountered was the trade union movement, and it's still a model that makes the most sense to me. As the head of our household, his body was the only thing that my father had to put on the market. When he gets together with his old mining buddies, they tease him because he's the only one of them who still has all of his fingers. He worked under abominable conditions, but I grew up hearing stories about the days when it was much, much worse. I learned that you can never trust bosses; you have to be willing to risk everything; and you can't do it alone.

Who can be bothered to study such dreary stuff? Let's flip to the next soft-focus fashion spread. Gay liberation as a populist movement is pretty much dead in America. I know it's rude of me to complain about this tragedy. The funeral didn't cost us a thing. It was paid for by the corporate sponsorship of Tanqueray, Crixivan, Prada boots, and Banana Republic sweaters. Why should I or any other gay journalist bite the hand that feeds us?

The Pink Ribbon Blues

[1998]

*Thy two breasts are like two young roes
that are twins, which feed among the lilies.*

—*The Song of Solomon, 4:5*

I saw my mother on July 4th, in a hospice bed. It was twilight. I was exhausted from four days of packing and two days of driving in desert heat, but vindicated: I'd made it here before she died. "Mother," I said, "it's Pat. I told you I would see you again, and I'm here at last." She squeezed my hand and gave me a delighted smile of recognition. In the weeks that would follow, she would travel further and further away from us, planning a big parade that would usher in the new era of her work in heaven, greeting departed dear ones, arguing with angels. But she always recognized me, her oldest daughter and in some ways her oldest son as well. Death sometimes grants us these small and entirely accidental kindnesses.

It was shocking to see how much she had changed in the few months since my last visit. She had been refusing most solid foods, existing on pudding, candy, and V-8 juice, so her weight was below 100 pounds. Her skin had a slightly yellow cast, and it seemed thinner, more tightly stretched around her bones, which had sprung forward. She was all cheekbones, wrists, knees, ankles, and hips, so that I had the disconcerting impression that I was speaking to a skeleton. And then there was that smell—the painkillers, human waste, bloody dressings,

and the odor of a deteriorating body. She was cold to the touch, but felt as if she had a fever, so the air conditioning was on high. I had an excuse for shivering.

My mother and I bear an uncanny resemblance to one another. When I was a teenager, I bitterly resented the adults who cheerfully pointed this out. I felt as if they were condemning me to be her, to live a duplicate of her life. I wanted no part of my mother's tense marriage to a man who could not control his anger, her burdensome and embarrassing religion, her life of domestic service to six quarrelsome children. In the middle of my life, I made some peace with the fact that we share the same plain, intelligent face and short, sturdy body—probably because my life in no way resembled my mother's. But sitting in her hospice room, it was as if I had returned to adolescence. I did not think I could stand to see what old age and disease would probably do to me. It was my body in that bed, my body that suffered unbelievable pain and yet stubbornly continued to function.

This particular verse of the pink ribbon blues began in January 1997. My mother called to tell me that she had finally gone to see a doctor about the excruciating pain that was making it almost impossible for her to walk or drive. (She had, of course, not missed a single day of work.) There was a shadow on her X-ray, she said. She was going in for more tests. As I listened to her matter-of-fact voice, it felt as if that shadow fell across my own face. I knew she had cancer. She was going to die. That same week, one of my sisters told me that ten years ago, my mother had found a lump in her breast. She decided to ignore it, and she thought it went away. Instead, it was growing and metastasizing. Now it was in her bones and her central nervous system. No treatment was possible.

So I held my mother's hand in a room that stank of death and was decorated relentlessly with potted plants, quilts, family photographs, crocheted snowflakes, grandchildren's drawings, all the froufrou cutiepie stuff that gives me claustrophobic hives when I have to go back to Utah. The Mormon church is

always encouraging its women to be creative, and the results are what you might expect if you crossed Martha Stewart's grating energy with the aesthetic sense that brought us the Smurfs. As I held her hand, an intimacy that she would never have permitted if she was her old brisk self, I tried to quiet my own rage at her, and my guilt. I hoped that underneath those unbecoming passions I could find a quieter place where there would be enough compassion and courage to accompany her as far as I could toward her death. I longed to be a bridge for her, to somehow throw an easy path below her feet that would protect her from fear and make her leave-taking a happy or at least painless one.

I loved my mother and yet I did not know how I could love her. This was the woman who tried to call the police when she found marijuana in my sock drawer. We were living in South Carolina, and I would not have been treated gently by the criminal justice system there. (My father did a rare turn as my hero by grabbing her and sitting on her until she calmed down, saying over and over again, "Carol, I don't think it's any worse than drinking a beer." As if she would not have gladly sent me to jail for *that*.) This was the woman who tried to have me locked up in a mental institution and given electroshock therapy when she found out I was a lesbian. The woman who refused to let me write to my younger brothers and sisters or speak to them on the phone, who annually sent me handwritten, eloquent, and shaming letters urging me to abjure sin and return to the church, who let me know in a hundred ways that I was the chief disappointment, even tragedy, of her life.

And yet she had also sewn practically everything I wore until I left home. I still slept under quilts she made. She never forgot my birthday, and I always had a present from her to open on Christmas day, even if her gifts were sometimes...well, let's just say they were often things I could not use or wear. She wrote to me every week, keeping me in touch with family news. She put a photograph of me on her piano and froze out neighbors

who thought my shaved head was peculiar. She tried so hard to find some way, any way, to maintain a connection with me, even if that meant not discussing politics. Biting back *that* topic hurt her as much as an impacted wisdom tooth. She met my lovers and was polite to them. She apologized for not wanting to read my books. And just a few days before she died, she told me she was proud of me and asked for my forgiveness for the things she had done that hurt me. (Of course, there had to be a follow-up to that. The first paragraph of her will urged all of her apostate children to use the occasion of her death to reconsider their relationship with Heavenly Father and beg for his forgiveness. After having spent forty-eight hours cleaning out her trailer so that it could be sold, I found this less than amusing.)

The only way I could feel my love for her was to accept all these contradictions, to know I was her favorite and also the one who made her angriest, to embrace her narrow-mindedness along with her big heart. To know I could never do the things that would have made her happy, but to do whatever I could to ease her pain during these final days. I also had to make myself understand why she decided to ignore the first signs of breast cancer, and shorten her own life.

At first I wanted to blame it on her religion, the prudery that Mormonism inculcates in its believers. But it's not that simple. There's her own unique personality. My mother was the opposite of touchy-feely. She could hardly bear to touch her own children. I couldn't imagine her tolerating the intimacy of a doctor's examination, let alone the violation of surgery. And there's her background to consider. She was raised on a farm. There was plenty to eat, but her family was cash-poor. Where she grew up, doctors and hospitals were hostile and distant entities that you avoided until misfortune made you too feeble to fight them off, and then they killed you. Surgery and chemotherapy would have injured my mother's pride and dignity. And who's to say if either one would have prolonged her life? I was grieving for her and the pain that tortured her,

but I was also just plain afraid of being abandoned. I knew that she was homesick for God, and I was jealous of him, because she loved him more than me. Real people had always let down my mother, with her all-encompassing devotion to the gospel. My mother's faith in heaven was so absolute that I doubt she would understand why anybody would want to prolong their span of mortal years.

To be fair, I also had to think about how many of my lesbian-feminist friends and lovers I had dragged in to doctor's offices to get Pap smears and breast exams. Cervical cancer is easily treated if it's diagnosed early enough, but many of the dykes I know would rather die than put their feet up in those cold metal stirrups. No self-respecting butch wants a homophobic doctor or technician to feel her up or squash her tits for a mammogram. Feminism still hasn't made much of a difference in the way doctors perceive and behave toward female bodies, especially lesbian bodies. My mother wasn't backward or ignorant, she just wanted as much self-respect and privacy as any other woman would want, whether she's got a copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* or thinks it ought to be banned from the public library.

Fortunately, I did not have to go through this major life transition by myself. Two of my sisters were there with me. One of them had been largely responsible for my mother's care for more than a year for the simple reason that she was the only one of my mother's children who remained in Utah. Even my heterosexual church-going siblings found my mother's high standards put too much pressure on their marriages, which rarely won her approval. My sister is wearing out her third Gentile husband and speaks bitterness about "the goddamned Mormons," and always offers me a cup of forbidden coffee so that I don't walk around Provo with a blinding caffeine-deprived headache. My baby sister, the perfect Latter-Day Saint, had come from the East Coast, pregnant with her fifth child.

Originally, my brothers and sisters seemed to expect that I would simply move back to Utah and take care of Mother. The

assumption was that since I was a lesbian and had no family of my own, this would be easy for me to do. Everyone was quite shocked when I explained that would not be possible. I could not abandon my private practice as a therapist for an indefinite amount of time. Nor was my body strong enough to lift and turn mother. (I have fibromyalgia.) I found it ironic that it was the black sheep of the family who was expected to perform the ultimate act of filial devotion. And, in fact, that's the way it worked out. My divorcée sister and I wound up doing the lion's share of care, with me shuttling back and forth between Utah and California as often as possible.

Again and again, I experienced this weird duality of being the outsider and yet also the family leader, partly because I was the oldest, and partly because I knew more about caring for the dying than my siblings. My brothers and sisters are not quite as repulsed by gay people as my mother was, but I don't think any of them would be comfortable knowing that it was the hours I spent with gay men in the last stages of AIDS that gave me the skills to make Mother more comfortable. None of them had any idea how much death I've seen in my 44 years. Grieving for my mother triggered grief for the entire roster of my beloved dead. But nobody in Utah could anticipate or empathize with that. And I did not know how to explain it to them.

That is not to say that there was not enormous love and support for me there. My sisters were unbelievably kind to me, and I was repeatedly grateful for their clarity about what we were facing. They did not waste time with denial or self-pity. Their priority was always our mother, and how to ease her passage. We demanded daily meetings with the hospice staff about her pain medication, and we were vigilant with the aides who came to change her bed, bandages, and the disposable brief she had to wear once she became incontinent. No one was going to touch our mother with a hand that was not gentle. The three of us were formidable in our united will; even I would not have wanted to say no to us.

Still, now that it's over, I can't help but wonder if we did

everything we could have done. I found myself crying one day because I was afraid I had not given my mother water often enough, not moistened the little pink sponge on the stick and held it between her lips as frequently as I should have. I worry still that we did not manage to crank the pain medication up high enough, even though we divided the day up into three shifts so that we could hit a button on the morphine pump every twenty minutes for an extra dose. (I was on the night shift, because I had no children to go home and feed, no husband who expected a hot dinner.)

By the time my mother took her last breath and finally let go, we were all exhausted and sick at heart. Death was a mercy, but it only partially mitigates the suffering of the survivors. I went through the viewing, the funeral, and the interment in a haze, waking up only enough to feel anger when some stranger I was related to by blood clouted me on my sore shoulder and told me with a big fake scared grin that my mother was in a better place. All I knew was that the place she had been in was terrible. Every fiber of my being rejected that sort of death. Yes, the treatments for cancer are barbaric and imperfect, but the untreated disease itself makes surgery and chemotherapy look like a picnic. I am not homesick for heaven; I will fight to stay on this green earth for as long as possible.

But I was homesick for San Francisco and for the chosen family that had made it possible for me to complete this ordeal. Someday perhaps my relatives will open their hearts enough to understand that it was my other family, my lesbiantrans family, that supported and helped them across a great geographic and ideological gulf. My chosen family did this in the most Christian spirit possible, doing good to them that despise you just as Jesus instructed, because they are loving and kind people who can find charity in their hearts even for their enemies.

While the grandchildren were strewing long-stemmed white roses on the coffin, before it was lowered into the ground, and I was hoping it wasn't traumatizing the poor kids, somebody

came up to me and said, "You know, you look just like your mother." And I said, "Isn't that wonderful?" Because I was happy to be a part of her that would survive and continue on. I am, after all, exactly the person that my mother raised me to be.

When she turned 18, people did not send their daughters to college, much less art school. Marrying my handsome, reckless, and sacrilegious father was the only act of rebellion she could conjure. Two decades later, she rebelled again and left him, because he mistreated her children. The only jobs she could get were cleaning motels and working in a sewing factory. She went to night school, learned how to type, and got a job at Brigham Young University. She eventually became a high-ranking administrator there. And she never went on a date with another man or had any interest in remarrying. I noticed that her best friends were all women, usually older ladies whose husbands had died. "Why should I let some old man take a nap on my sofa and tell me what to watch on my own television?" one of them asked me once, and my mother laughed, even though I could tell she'd heard the joke before. She always said that she felt that she was still married to my father. (Mormon marriages are supposed to be for time and all eternity.) I'm not saying that she was a repressed lesbian; but she certainly wasn't a conventional heterosexual woman. I think a secret part of her was always pleased by my bad behavior. My life has been made up of adventures she could not permit herself to have.

And so I wear my mother's face, and my own leather jacket, and finally I am at peace with that, because I understand that they go together. But it will take many more years for me to be at peace with her absence. Our battles are over. I will never face her scathing disapproval again. Why should that, more than anything, make me cry?

II.

Like Cats and Dogs

Move Along, Now, Move Along: An Introduction

[2002]

The articles in “Like Cats and Dogs” address the interplay between the body, identity, and community. The most abstract flights of political theory have their roots in our physicality: how we perceive our bodies, how others see them, the meanings assigned to our parts and pleasures. For example, gender is one of the most important physical attributes that define our individual and social identities. Despite the existence of sex chromosomes, secondary sex characteristics, genitalia, and internal reproductive organs, to label another’s gender involves much more than simply taking note of these aspects of the body. In fact, we usually believe we know other people’s gender without having any information at all about their sex chromosomes, genitals, internal organs, and perhaps even their secondary sex characteristics as well, if the person is very young or covered up. It’s possible that the socially conditioned behaviors that signal gender are even more crucial than physical traits. Gender identity is a complex synthesis of nature, nurture, and individual creativity.

Despite the mutable nature of gender expression in our own and other cultures, gender norms are taken very seriously by most people. And any variation from those norms, no matter how arbitrary they might be, is seen as problematic—either a sin that requires repentance, or a psychological problem in need of treatment. Many of the things that our culture labels as pathologies could also be viewed as natural variations in the

genetic and cultural inheritance of our species. When we try to make everything "normal," that is, uniform, the end result is not greater health or human happiness. The unusual, the forbidden, the unexpected will always be with us. The choice is between accepting a social landscape that has been leveled, an artificial and high-maintenance terrain devoid of color and texture, or being able to participate in a rich and variegated world where the differences between ourselves and other people are inspiring and interesting—or, at worst, neutral.

Disability is included along with gender identity here because frustration with some aspect of our own flesh is an inescapable part of the human condition. Visible disabilities often neutralize, in other people's eyes, certain aspects of the disabled person's gender, especially those that have to do with sexual performance and attractiveness. Speech about the intimate experience of being crippled or in pain is not welcomed by most people. After all, the smaller indignities of limited mobility or cognitive dysfunction are frightening reminders that we are living in containers with a pretty short shelf life. Most people deal with their fear of death in part by striving to be as healthy as possible. Most devotees of the gym as well as those who do not have the energy to follow strict regimens of diet or exercise are in denial about the inevitability of physical breakdowns, some of which are beyond repair. Yet the belief that one can hold off anything from cancer to chronic fatigue by sheer force of will is well-nigh universal. And so the fear of death is walled up within us, where it has nothing to do but scream. We party on against the background music of that yammering terror, so set on ignoring it that even our skulls grin.

The compassion that we do not allow ourselves to feel for people who are visibly touched by their mortality is also denied to ourselves. And we need it, whether we are temporarily enjoying an able-bodied status or not. As prosperous Westerners who have the dubious benefits of vaccinations, surgeries, MRIs and CAT scans, antibiotics, and a bewildering

pharmacology of other drugs, we have mistaken privilege for virtue. (Again.) As with any fear, the terror of being physically or mentally impaired or dead cannot be avoided forever. It is better to face it and walk through it with whatever vitality you possess at the moment than it is to be hauled by the scruff of the neck to your doom when you have no choice in the matter. When we allow ourselves to actually see how tough and yet fragile we are, what emerges is a poignant sense of what is truly precious. Priorities sort themselves out rapidly. Beside wheelchair or grave, we come to understand what a gift each breath can become. Made wealthy by such knowledge, we find that generosity becomes a new option.

Gender is another verity, much like the illusion that if we are good we will live forever without pain. Until very recently, transgendered people were not perceived as a sexual minority. Instead, transsexuals were patients, people suffering from an incurable delusional mental disorder that could only be cured if they could be made into facsimiles of men and women. Hormones and surgery were prescribed to those judged to be able to “pass” after sex reassignment. Candidates for a “sex change” were also vetted for psychological stability, to ensure they would not turn around after these irreversible physical changes and sue their physicians and shrinks. Homosexuality was not part of this plan to create pretty women and hearty, hairy men who would get up from the operating table and erase all memories of their previous lives. If transsexuals were freaks who had to be made over as quickly as possible, gay transsexuals were abominations. And this is the attitude we got from the people who said they were trying to help us!

Today, more and more people are living as conscious gender resisters. And many transpeople who are quite capable of “passing” choose to forgo that privilege in order to be activists. Instead of accepting our status as freaks who could be transformed into normal people by the grace of medical science, we are demanding the right to self-definition, to share stories about our lives that may not fit the format that the

person holding a prescription pad wants to hear. We want the same rights that all healthcare consumers have, to control what sort of care we receive and even to improve it. And many of us understand that whether we pass or not, we will not be safe until all transgendered people's civil rights are legally protected and the larger society becomes more accepting of us.

Just as disabled people bear the burden of able-bodied people's fear of and denial about death, transgendered people are hated and feared largely because we remind other people of traumatic experiences with gender socialization that they would rather forget. Our society has a lot to answer for in regard to our treatment of children. Differently gendered children and youth are disproportionately singled out for emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. But all babies, toddlers, and older children are subjected to a relentless system of ridicule, physical punishment, and prohibition that seems incomprehensible to them. Nothing terrifies parents quite as much as having a child who is not readily identifiable as a masculine boy or a feminine girl. Some parents are even willing to allow their children to be institutionalized if they fail to conform to gender stereotypes. The butchest straight man, the most glamorous and contented wife, both carry within their psyches moments when they were humiliated, frightened, or hurt because they did or wanted something forbidden to their sex.

Gay men and lesbians are engaged in a struggle to overturn prejudice against homosexuality. Equality for gay people cannot become a reality without some alteration of the boundaries of who men and women are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do. But challenging social sex-roles is not delineated as a goal by most of the people who are currently supposedly leaders of the gay rights movement. This may be because those who are drawn to same-sex partners are also participants in a binary gender system. Like heterosexuality, homosexuality is based on the assumptions that men and women are two separate and different categories of people,

and that it is possible to easily identify other people's gender. And not every homosexual is publicly read or labeled as such merely because of gender nonconformity. Gay men who pass as "normal" men and lesbians who look like every other "lady" on the street are not usually motivated to examine the issue of gender expression. An already shaky alliance between gay and bisexual men and women has been enormously stressed and complicated by tacking a "T" onto LGB. (And, as one of the articles in this section points out, it's not as if dykes and fags liked each other all that much to begin with.)

Perhaps the only thing that makes it possible for this caravan of sex and gender outlaws to trundle on toward a frontier of greater freedom is a concomitant drive to examine identity politics and possibly even do away with it. It is more and more common for people who want to work for social change to try to build coalitions or to eschew loyalty to any particular group and instead seek out comrades who share their values and agendas. This approach to radicalism will probably reveal some flaws or shortcomings along the way, but for now it is a great relief to be able to hope that empathy and education can heal some of the schisms that have hampered us in the past. Being outnumbered, we naturally wanted to gather together in as large a mass as possible, and responding as one is often a very effective tactic. But smaller groups of like-minded people can also be quite powerful. We need to remember that the labels we are sometimes very attached to were originally foisted on us by people who hate us. Part of the work that we need to do is an examination of all of these categories, so that we can determine when they serve us and when they divide us or distort our self-perception.

Unfortunately, the same hostile social forces that have tagged us as queers also mete out punishment along those lines of schism. If it's more dangerous to be a gay man who is into S/M, for example, than it is to be a gay man who does not cruise in the leather bars, it's pretty difficult for those who are not getting arrested on the street or beaten up by passersby to risk

sharing in this harsh treatment by confronting or questioning it. When the chips are down, sometimes the only people who come through for us are people who are vulnerable to exactly the same kind of abuse. These are usually people who cannot hide their difference. People under attack have little motivation or reason to trust outsiders, and so identity politics will always survive, out of such ugly necessities. Some acts of persecution are so heinous that even the people who are being subjected to them find it nearly impossible to fight back unless they literally have nothing to lose. This is activism under the gun, a nonconsensual way to develop a political consciousness. It remains to be seen whether the heir of identity politics can form a chain of alliances strong enough to withstand such selective and divisive hostility.

Identity politics is also appealing because we tend to see coming out as a one-time event, a dramatic quest that uncovers our true and unchangeable nature, which we must manifest if we are to have an authentic life, even if that core or essential identity is stigmatized. This can make it difficult to see any connection between ourselves and people who have come out into other communities. "Layers of the Onion, Spokes of the Wheel" presents a different model of developing an identity in the context of personal growth, community building, and political action. Rather than being a one-time event, coming out for some of us is a perpetual process of taking inventory of one's experience and needs, evaluating the possibilities for change, and adjusting or revamping the understanding of oneself and the public image in order to express, as best as one can, who is living inside the body that functions as a container for all of our selves.

As gay people become more visible and the taboo against homosexuality eases somewhat, the nature of heterosexuality has changed as well. Straight people are more queer than they used to be. Opposite-sex couples are more likely to strive for an egalitarian relationship, and their sexuality is more likely to be about intimacy, bonding, and pleasure than about

reproduction or reification of male dominance. More and more straight people are eschewing marriage or forming nontraditional relationships based on polyamory or some other open-ended structure. Sexual variations like cross-dressing or S/M that were once falsely associated with gayness are being seen more accurately as primarily heterosexual activities. To the extent that straight men are becoming more willing to think of themselves as nurturing fathers, considerate lovers, and boosters for their girlfriends' and wives' aspirations, they become more and more like the good-natured and fun-loving fags that some wise straight women have always preferred as companions and even mates. (Except, of course, for the fact that a girl is more likely to score with a New Man who is also heterosexually inclined.)

Coming out as an important and valuable phase of life is, like more flexible gender roles and the valorization of sexual pleasure, a gift that queer people offer the rest of the world. What is coming out if not differentiation, an individual struggle to understand yourself and then express that self autonomously, even if that means departing from the scripts that others have written for your life? You can come out as homosexual. You can come out as transsexual. You can also come out as an artist, as someone who espouses a different religion than your parents or pursues a career they did not select for you, as someone whose priority is to make the world a better place to live in rather than piling up material goods. There are hundreds of ways to come out that can gratify the desire to achieve a higher state of being. We have numerous opportunities to join with others to celebrate metamorphosis in all of its hues.

One of the transformations I have been able to celebrate since most of the articles in this section were written is finally having chest surgery. Being in between genders was a very uncomfortable place to live. I was fortunate indeed to have loving friends and respectful colleagues who scrupulously maintained their use of male pronouns throughout the

years when I often did not pass as male to strangers. Taking testosterone was helpful on many levels. As my shoulders got bigger, my jaw got more square, facial hair began to come in, and my butt got a little smaller, I experienced an incredible amount of relief. This was something I had wanted and needed and pushed aside for more than forty years. When I thought I might have to stop taking testosterone for any reason, I got very depressed. So it was clear to me that I was on the right path. But T, as testosterone is referred to in tranny talk, also made me increasingly aware of my need to look more like the person I felt myself to be.

I went through a lot of changes about this, grieving for my breasts. My poor body had already taken so much abuse, I felt protective of her/him, even while I sweated and gritted my teeth with desire to be free from that weight on my chest. I also mourned one of my favorite personas, a beautiful woman who loved to pounce on quivering boys of all genders and smother them with her perfumed cleavage. The times in my life when I have grown my hair out, worn dresses and makeup, and allowed myself permission to be as feminine as I wanted to be were as important and necessary as being on T is now. If I had not had the experience of constructing a plausible and successful feminine persona, I would not have been able to transition. I would always have wondered if being transsexual was not the result simply of not being a pretty girl.

There are things that the she-in-me taught me about being seductive, flirting, moving through the world while taking delight in it, having fun, dressing up and staging a scene, being witty, making a comfortable home, and many other things that nourish and inspire me. Before I could have my top surgery, I needed to make a safe home in my heart for her. She is my anima, my connection to the divine feminine, and to many vital parts of myself. Because I love and honor her, I was able to let go of some of the fear that I am transitioning because I am a closeted misogynist. It's as if my breasts had told me they loved me, they understood my dilemma, and they gave me

permission to live without them. I retain all of the good things that they represented to me.

It will probably be a long time before I feel comfortable in a dress again, but I don't rule out the possibility of being a big old drag queen (literally) once in a while. A coffee cup that hung in my kitchen during the '70s defined "butch" as "one red jockstrap, six black ones, and, once a year, a flawless cocktail dress." I think that sums up my take on skirts and high heels, wigs and lipstick. One of my favorite things to see at FTM conferences is boys in skirts and eyeliner. It also takes my breath away when butch bears turn up at the Lone Star in Utilikilts or the plaid Celtic ancestor of that garment, if only because it makes them so accessible.

It seems that you cannot adjust the amount of masculinity in your own makeup without also adjusting your attitudes about and responses to femininity. Just as FTMs are often accused of copping out or betraying feminism to garner male privilege, femme dykes are often made invisible or discounted within their own community. While many lesbian femmes would not welcome an FTM into their beds or their lives, the exceptions to that rule have been wonderfully exciting and healing for me. I'm grateful that some femmes are attracted to both butches and FTMs, and some prefer transmen exclusively. "Shelter from the Storm" chronicles my growing appreciation of femmes and takes a look at the assumption that femininity equals conformity. Today, I see femme style as yet another mode of gender dissension. Like any way of being in the world, femininity has its own power and value when it is chosen freely for its aesthetic or political meaning.

One of the difficult choices transgendered people face when they want surgery is the possibility that they'll come out of it looking better and feeling less. Before taking T, I was ambivalent about having anybody touch my tits. After the first ninety days of it, my nipples became the most sensitive and sexually useful part of my body. I was very reluctant to give up an erogenous zone, and so I chose a surgeon who was willing

to pretty much leave my nipples alone, even if that meant they would be larger than the average man's. (Nipples are usually removed entirely, trimmed down, and then grafted back onto the chest in a more male placement, higher up and farther apart.) I'm very happy with the appearance of my chest, even if the scars and the prominent nipples make my torso undeniably transsexual. I can wear a button-down shirt without drawing attention to myself, so strangers leave me alone, and when I undress it's for people who know I am trans and think that's a turn-on.

Being a transgendered person who embarks upon transition is a jump off a cliff; you have no idea who you will be when you are done. All you know is that you can't stay where you are. You, too, dear reader, whether you are transgendered or not, you cannot stay where you are. If no other force remakes us, time moves us along like an intractable policeman. I hope that from this introduction you've gotten more preparation for what will follow than *I* got when my boyfriend stuck that first needle full of testosterone in my, um, hip.

Breasts of Burden

[1999]

Deathless are those who have fed at the breast of the Mother of the Universe.

—*Tantric aphorism, Barbara G. Walker, The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988, p.303)*

She looks down at me from the top of my dresser: a small brass replica of a 3,500-year-old faience statue from ancient Crete. It depicts an imperious woman in a flounced skirt of seven tiers, holding aloft two serpents. Her womb is protected with a padded apron bearing a diamond net-pattern. She is wearing a tight-fitting, short-sleeved jacket that reveals her breasts. The look on her face is anything but flirtatious. She is fierce, not coy; issuing a warning, not a proposition. There is something frightening about her exposed nipples—they are symbols of her power. This image, created by a culture that obviously had a very different view of women's bodies than my own, has been so compelling to me that I had that bare-breasted goddess tattooed on my left arm. When I found out that this statue had been discovered with another much like it, I had *that* goddess tattooed on my other arm. I live between the two of them, protected and scrutinized. It is my job to live up to the two of them, in fact.

In my home, virtually every flat surface that does not hold books has been turned into an altar. We converse about rituals, altars, and deities here in Northern California in the same easy,

familiar way people in New York and Los Angeles talk about tax law, couture, and their limo drivers. My partner fortunately has an even higher tolerance for clutter (sacred or mundane) than I do, and does not complain about eating most of his meals with his knees wedged under a TV tray. The cats have learned that if they value their dignity, there are some tables upon which they will not jump. My grandmother had her Hummel figurines; I have Bast, Isis, Maat, the Venus of Willendorf, the Green Man, and a host of other ceramic archetypes. This has nothing whatsoever to do with Getting Older.

What I'm thinking about now is being much younger—the horror of my puberty, in fact. Virtually overnight my strong, quick, competent body became an alien source of misery. My face, which I'd never thought much about before, broke out, and I was supposed to know how to put makeup on it. My mother started talking to me about watching my weight, and I was put on my first diet—in the middle of adolescent hunger pangs that had me eating the corners off my textbook pages. I'd always taken a pair of pants to school with me to put on under my dress at recess so that the teachers would leave me alone if I wanted to climb trees or playground equipment. Pantyhose was no replacement. Instead of running races, catching balls, or wrestling, I was supposed to be thinking about how I looked. Uncomfortable devices like girdles and sanitary pads came into my life. I didn't even smell the same to myself! It was infuriating and traumatic.

Worst of all were Those Goddamned Breasts, euphemistically referred to by my mother as “developing,” and cheerfully by my friends as “boobs.” From the age of 13, my tits could make Dolly Parton do a double-take. They are such a distinguishing feature that a flat-chested and politically backward straight girl I made the mistake of fucking a couple times once told me she thought I was a lesbian because “tit men are so obnoxious.” Because, don't you know, even lesbianism is All About the Boys. Wouldn't have anything to do with my relationship with *other* women's breasts, uh-uh.

Being a butch dyke and living in this body has not been easy. The Little Goddess of the Serpents has been a great comfort to me, reminding me that during part of human history, women were revered and safe enough to bare their breasts. They received homage for this act rather than jeers. Lacking the context of goddess-worshipping ancient Crete, I've done my brazen best. To my lovers' distress, this means I sometimes dress up in slinky black things that feature mondo cleavage, and go out to torture the world. When you're doing this on purpose, it's kind of fun to watch people's heads drop. They talk to me as if I had a microphone wedged between my nipples. I've noticed that gay men and straight men seem about equally fascinated with a bodacious bosom. There's a simultaneous desire to regress, suckle, and be unconditionally nurtured, mingled perhaps with a horrified anticipation of being smothered and squashed between enormous hillocks of perfumed feminine flesh. How do femmes do this full-time and keep a sense of humor?

During early lesbian-feminist history, expanding the definition of female beauty and validating physical pleasure for women was part of the agenda (as long as you didn't jack off while looking at pictures of topless girls or long to apply tit clamps to their areolae). This was partly a reaction against the larger culture's obsession with feminine stereotypes of thin, busty beauties. But it was also a reaction against an older lesbian culture that validated sultry femmes but dictated that butches should conceal their curves. If you wanted to be really butch, you didn't undress during sex or let your partner touch you at all. This era of lesbian history is movingly depicted in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*.

But the ethos of body shame did not die out like tail fins with the demise of the '50s. While lesbian-feminism touted the image of dykes as ultra-women, more feminist than any other sort of female, there has always been a parallel, competing discourse in which we are *not*-women. Most of my female lovers have applied varying degrees of pressure for me to be as

masculine as possible because that's what turned them on. For a significant number of them, doing me undid any sense they had of me as a big scary top. Our society simply doesn't recognize any female equivalent for makin' some fag blow you. You can tie your girl up with a hundred feet of clothesline and sit on her face, and still, when you get off, the female orgasm is almost always read as giving it up, going under, an act of submission. The only really butch thing to do is to put your body in a deep freeze and weld your boxer shorts about your hips. It's ironic, I think, that so much of the lesbian sexuality I've participated in depends on one partner coming as close as possible to being a man without ever actually crossing that line.

I've ducked out of this cross fire by fucking around as much as possible with other butches, FTMs, tops, and the occasional bioboy. But you can't get away from it. I was recently trying to explain my attraction to masculine female-bodied people at a party and mentioned I wanted to make a movie called *Butch Cleavage*. The response I got was overwhelming derision. One of the femmes said vindictively, "Right, because butches are just bitches in pants." A girlboy with a flattop I'd been cruising for weeks said sadly, "Great. Like we need even more humiliation."

There are lots of lesbians who probably can't relate to the experiences I'm describing. My take on lesbian sexual culture has been colored by coming out in 1971 in Salt Lake City, in a bar dyke community that was so conservative about sex that owning a copy of *The Well of Loneliness* was enough to get you a bad reputation (because that was pornography). Going down on somebody was a scandal, a filthy thing that decent "gay girls" did not do. Maybe I've missed out on a whole world of freedom and acceptance by being a sexual outlaw, doing both sides of the butch-femme dance, and using S/M dynamics to organize my sex life. But I doubt it. Whenever I've circulated in lesbian communities that are ostensibly free of "power imbalances," all I see is women who can't talk openly about the erotic polarities that govern their sexual choices.

Almost a year ago, my mother died of breast cancer. One of the things that contributed to her death was a pervasive shame about her body, masquerading as modesty, which prevented her from telling a doctor about the lump she found in her breast. She died in part because she wanted to protect herself from the same sort of intrusive attention that makes me resort to tight sport bras, flattening tank tops, and a big leather jacket. But I don't think my mother ever regretted being a woman. I don't think she experienced the despair and repulsion I felt when I realized that, no matter how much I felt like a boy, I was not going to grow up to be a man.

Nowadays there are a lot of people in my life who refused to accept the dictates of their sex chromosomes. Most of them are much younger than I am. Two decades ago, they would have been socialized as stone butches and lived uneasy, angry, and ambivalent lives as dykes. When I considered sex reassignment in my twenties, I couldn't get past the image of a double mastectomy as damage, mutilation, more trauma for a part of my body that had already suffered so much ridicule and unwanted attention. I feel protective of my breasts. They haven't done anything wrong, and it isn't their fault I never wanted them.

But a mastectomy might have saved my mother's life. Then there's Matt and Jac and Marcel, Mike and O'Rion and Billy, and a bunch of other guys who tell me they feel nothing but happiness and relief now that they've had chest surgery. They talk about being able to run freely, move through the world in a way I have not moved since I was 12. They are excited about buying men's shirts that will actually fit right. They can go to the beach or a swimming pool without getting hassled. I envy their ability to be so sure that living as men will make them happier people.

Every day I have to force myself to listen to this little kid in me who says, despite all the evidence to the contrary and all the scorn adults heaped upon him, "I am not a girl." I don't particularly want to be in touch with all that ancient pain.

But I think I owe that persecuted kid some adult love and protection. I still don't know what, if anything, I will do about these feelings.

This would be easier to figure out in a society that equally valued men's and women's bodies, and did not foster hatred of homosexuals. When a group you have been affiliated with is under siege, it is very difficult to leave it. Being a female-to-male transsexual can seem like giving in to misogyny or lesbian-baiting, looking for an easy way out. Believe me, it only looks easy from the outside. My own truth is that I love women, love the female body, and will always respect lesbians for their feistiness and courage.

None of this changes my relationship to the Little Goddess of the Serpents, she of the perky and intimidating breasts who is not afraid to brandish the most dangerous phallic symbol, her hissing totem snakes. I want the same thing I wanted when I first laid eyes on her: to live in a world where the body is sacred, where each of us is allowed to create and celebrate our own identities. I am as she made me.

One of the oldest goddesses in the historical record is Inanna of Mesopotamia, who was referred to, among other honorifics, as "She who makes a woman into a man, she who makes a man into a woman." The power to alter such fundamental categories was evidence of her divine power. Inanna was served by at least half a dozen different types of transgendered priests, and one of her festivals apparently included a public celebration in which men and women exchanged garments. The memory of a liminal third-gender status has been lost, not only in countries dominated by Christian ideology, but also in many circles dedicated to the modern revival of goddess worship. Images of the divine feminine tend to appear alone, in Dianic rites, surrounded only by other women, or the goddess is represented with a male consort, often one with horns and an erect phallus. But it is equally valid to see her as a fag hag and a tranny chaser, attended by men who have sex with other men and people who are, in modern terms, transgendered or intersexed.

Randy Conners has, in several articles and books, described the combination of male and female in one person as a signal that the worshipper is approaching a holy place where the ordinary rules do not apply. By connecting realms that are normally mutually exclusive, a spiritual functionary who has assumed aspects of the opposite sex represents a gateway between the realm of matter and spirit, between the visible and invisible worlds. Like the goddess herself, a cross-dressed or transsexual priest or shaman is also demonstrating their own power to do something that is usually thought to be impossible. Such a power is associated with the ability to cure illness, perform divination, lift curses or remove hostile influences, and obtain hidden information from both the past and the future. Theological anthropologist Mircea Eliades mentions cross-dressing and transgenderism (though he does not use this term) among shamans in so many preindustrial cultures that it begins to seem unusual when it is not described. In some parts of the world, people believe that shamans are qualified to act as ritual performers because magical substances like quartz crystals have been incorporated into their bodies, or they have acquired the ability to become animals as well as human beings, and violate natural law by flying or handling fire without harm.

Some anthropologists have theorized that “primitive” priests or shamans are simply people who have been allowed to occupy their special but ambiguous roles because they suffer from schizophrenia or other disorders that would otherwise isolate them and render them of no use to their communities. In other words, people who used to be considered holy are now treated as lunatics, perverts, or freaks. But even from this utterly secular viewpoint, it seems to me that there are obvious advantages to listening to the perspective of outsiders. Who else is better qualified to see where the system is not working or to be able to suggest a third alternative to stalemates? Any society is going to suffer from points of stress and places where the rules do not work. Any human plan to deal with our needs

and the vicissitudes of life is going to have shortcomings. The more stable a society aims to be, the more it needs some way to accommodate or release accumulated tension, resentment, and rebellion.

Today, when people are allowed or encouraged to deliberately break some of the most galling prohibitions, these contrary acts are transformed into entertainment or mere excess due to intoxication. A citizen of one of Inanna's cities would be perfectly at home during Mardi Gras or Carnival, where being drunk is the status quo, beautiful transvestites strut in elaborate and flamboyant costumes, and women flaunt their bare breasts from balconies or floats, protected from molestation by their distance from the crowds.

But that displaced, ancient person might catch a whiff of lost significance, the shadows of a meaning gone missing. The sacred cannot be utterly gainsaid. Beauty remains an object of worship. But I think we have made a poor bargain, exchanging the prolonged and sacrosanct hunger of a vision quest for the bulimia of supermodels.

Like Cats and Dogs: Why Fags and Dykes Can't Stand Each Other

[1998]

*Men and women, women and men.
It will never work.*

—Erica Jong

I was the editor of erotic titles for Liberation Publications Inc. (LPI), creating the revenue that made *The Advocate* possible, in 1991, when Richard Rouillard became the editor in chief and declared in his fierce and unstoppable fashion that we were about to become “the *lesbian and* gay news magazine.” This decision was not popular with the male staff of LPI, but “Richie” gave them all a drop-dead glare rife with Hollywood fag hauteur and a challenge to tell him the name of one, just one, queer organization of any merit whatsoever that had not already included lesbians in its name. The only other female editor was S. Bryn Austin who, ironically enough, would later sue LPI for sex discrimination. Nobody asked us what we thought about it. But our co-workers did hand us the hate mail to read, as if to say, “See what you got us into? We told you so!”

I couldn't believe how many men wrote in to cancel their subscriptions. Usually they appended lengthy explanations about why they did not want to have anything to do with (I'm quoting from memory here) “ugly, brawling, man-hating bull dykes in dungarees and crew cuts.” It took me back exactly twenty years, when I went to my first fag bar and had to walk

past giggling groups of gay boys making piercing comments about fish. That would be the Radio City Lounge in Salt Lake City, Utah. I thought they had very little to be so snotty about, standing around drinking in a place wallpapered with red velvet. Still, the hostility was thick enough to make my hands shake when I finally got the beer I ordered from a bartender who did not seem to hear or see me.

It also took me back to a San Francisco Gay Pride parade in the late '70s that drew an unusually large lesbian attendance because Anita Bryant was grabbing headlines, and we wanted to show a strong and united front. My lover and I got reactions ranging from, "It's about time we saw you here, ladies," to "Ick, pussy bumpers," this last from a chicly dressed and coiffed coterie that circled widely around us, clutching one another for support, undone by their own wit.

I think *The Advocate* got a grand total of two letters in support of Rouillard's change. One was written by a straight woman.

I can't pretend that dykes like faggots any better. Ever since the late '70s, when I began doing community organizing for leatherdykes, I've been a voice for gender coalition in the S/M community and elsewhere. My network of friends and social partners has always included gay and bisexual men and transgendered people as well as dykes and bi women. A significant chunk of the erotic fiction I've written has a gay male focus, and I wrote an advice column for *The Advocate's* classified ad pages for more than a decade. This hasn't made me very popular with many of my lesbian peers, who think that men are inherently more violent, misogynist, stupid, money grubbing, promiscuous, dirty, kinky, and diseased than women. The fags think "cunt" is the ultimate insult; the dykes hiss "prick" with equal venom.

So what the hell are we doing in the same lobster trap, anyway? This question comes to the forefront now because the queer anti-AIDS movement that has held us together is falling apart. The three-drug cocktail that has given some PWAs a new lease on life is kicking the shit out of two generations

of activists who were already staggering from burnout. When AIDS was perceived as a lethal emergency, the gay movement rapidly became virtually a single-issue campaign. A surprising number of gay and bisexual women set aside some of their own issues to work on the health crisis (or, if they were young enough, AIDS was the issue that radicalized them, rather than feminism, antiwar work, or a broader-based form of gay liberation). This was always a fragile coalition, as anybody who ever went to an ACT-UP meeting can attest.

Nurse practitioner and freelance writer Risa Denenberg, who was a member of ACT-UP from 1988 until 1994, came to anti-AIDS work with a background in the civil rights movement, antiwar activism, feminism, and the women's health movement. "I think what's hard about gay men is what's hard about working with men in general," she says. "Men and women are different. Men know how to look after themselves and are very autonomous and self-centered. They are raised to be that way. And women exist within relationship. But without women in the movement, it would never have moved beyond gay men's issues." Despite her frustration with what she sees as biological differences between gay men and lesbians as well as differences in socialization, Denenberg feels "we don't have a choice" about continuing to work together. "I know where there is injustice and a movement there will be lesbians," she says. "But I don't think that any group that wants political change has any chance of success working without other groups."

So what are the real differences between lesbians and gay men, and are they insurmountable? The stereotype is that gay men are über-consumers, slaves to fashion, and fascistic image whores. In the popular imagination, this emphasis on strict standards for masculine beauty is opposed by a lesbian aesthetic that is antifashion and downwardly mobile, springing from a feminism that urges women to escape from the predatory power of the male gaze. On one side of the gender line, we have steroid-honed gymbots; on the other, Fat Dykes from Hell who are doing their best to wipe out anorexia in our

time. And I do mean before dinner time. Gay male culture is associated with big cities, where male couples with disposable income to burn gentrify neighborhoods that become pink-triangle turf. Gay men are not sure exactly where lesbians live. Perhaps in the suburbs. Or the country. After all, gay men need contact with a bustling erotic-industrial complex of health spas, dance bars, sex clubs, and coffee shops. How else could they count on a daily opportunity to hook up with Mr. Right Away? But lesbians are supposed to go about in pairs, bonded for life, like Canada geese in flannel shirts. If you had a girlfriend like that, girlfriend, you might be able to go rural too.

I'm not sure how true these stereotypes are. Certainly there are plenty of poor gay men, and some middle- and even upper-class lesbians. An Amazon with a platinum credit card flashes it for the same frippery that her gay bro does. And speaking as a not-small person who's bled from every pore to get a date in Manhattan and Los Angeles, I can tell you "body fascism" knows no gender. But the gay press feeds these preconceived notions because these days we are basing our claims for equal rights on the claim that we are a valuable marketplace that ought to be liberated, so that it can be exploited like any other natural resource forced to bare its throat to capitalism. Most of our gay-community leaders have abandoned any attempt to critique the system; it seems that all most of us want these days is a good job, a mortgage, and a private voting booth where we can secretly support the Republican party.

The real differences between gay male and lesbian culture are harder to describe because they are more complex. In any attempt to generalize about this, lots of room has to be made for exceptions. So does it really do us any good to conclude that gay men, on average, make more money than most lesbians? Or to say that feminism has had a much greater impact on lesbian culture than on the values of most gay men? We could safely add to these things the fact that women as a class have been conditioned to be fearful of men, sex, and violence, which tends to make lesbians more conservative

than gay men. Because gay men often have more sexual partners than the average lesbian and more direct experience with police harassment, they are more likely to respond to a politic based on opposing the state's attempts to regulate or repress sexual expression. Civil libertarianism is to gay men what feminism is to lesbians. Politically active lesbians over 35 are used to thinking of their political agenda as overlapping a good deal with that of straight women: equal pay for equal work, antiviolence campaigns, reproductive rights, et cetera. Gay men are more used to thinking of themselves as lone wolves; coalition is a more difficult concept for them. The typical lesbian activist is likely to have spent more time thinking about racism and class issues than the typical gay male activist, who thinks a "sliding scale" is an exercise performed on the piano and doesn't understand why abortion is necessary in a world where so many people (like him and his lover) want to adopt children.

Eric Rofes, who along with Sara Miles edited *Opposite Sex: Gay Men on Lesbians, Lesbians on Gay Men* (NYU Press), believes there's something underneath demographic differences that promotes intergender hostility. Rofes calls it "the ick factor—a visceral response ranging from dislike to disgust when [gay men are] confronted with lesbian sex and bodies." The existence of the factor highlights the fact that homosexual men and women are not simply people who love or desire members of their own sex. They are also people who often violently reject the possibility of intimacy with the opposite sex—which can rely on a powerful gender fundamentalism.

A major unspoken truth is that in an era when lesbians enjoy positions of unprecedented power in our national organizations and media, many gay men resent what they see as the ham-fisted enforcement of gender parity. Larry Kramer says: "I guess what I resent now is how everything seems to be rammed down everybody's throat in an attempt to compromise and please each other. I've always thought that having to have gender parity on the board of an organization

was not necessarily useful if it meant you could not use the best people. Quite often you don't have an equal number of smart whatevers who are willing to participate."

Some lesbians are asking if our presence in the gay movement is tolerated for the sake of political correctness and because we seem like a fig leaf—"good girls" to the rescue when "bad boys" come under attack for sexual license. This can blow up in our faces. Academic Ann Pellegrini decries how "stereotyped images of lesbians get pitted against stereotyped images of gay men. Sanitized and celibate, what these 'positive' images of lesbianism affirm is the wish that gay men be more like lesbians and disappear even, or especially, when in public." Some lesbians *would* in fact have gay men transform. Writing for 2002, a now-defunct Seattle queer paper, lesbian activist Starla C. Muir lectures her brothers: "I am angry at you, not a mindless virus. I'm tired of pretending I'm angry at the disease.... I'm in no mood to listen to you cry on my shoulder about paying the piper because you wouldn't control your pecker." Nowhere are our mutual misconceptions more poignantly displayed than in the desire to make gay men more "like lesbians" in order to stem the AIDS epidemic. The epidemic of HIV transmission continues. About 2 percent of gay men still HIV-seroconvert annually, and epidemiological models show that at this rate, 30 percent of young gay men will be HIV-positive by the time they're thirty years old. In his 1997 best-seller, *Sexual Ecology*, Gabriel Rotello calls for gay men to adopt a model of serial monogamy and to learn how to have intimacy in relationships. He writes, "We need to encourage a new gay ideal that validates and supports relationships rather than one that validates and honors sexual adventurism, sexual consumerism, and risk-taking. Some might complain that this implies aping a heterosexual model, the very model that many gay men argue they came out of the closet to escape.... In fact, one could just as accurately say that the values I'm talking about are found in the lesbian world more than among heterosexuals.... Far more than gay men, lesbians tend to be monogamous, if not for life

then at least for the duration of the relationship.” Kramer likewise insists, “I still can’t understand why women are not more critical of what this faction of Sex Panic! is espousing, which involves unsafe sex and unbridled promiscuity.”

Both men seem oblivious to the bitter controversies that have raged within the lesbian community about the politics and economics of sexual conduct and expression. It comes as a surprise to them that lesbians might be ambivalent about monogamy or that it might result from forces like sexual scarcity or the claustrophobic tyranny that small groups of people are able to impose on one another.

A lot of activist dykes have been pissed off by gay male assertions of lesbian propriety. Attorney Kate Kendell, executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, was one of the mildest voices in this firestorm. She notes, “I love that queer—particularly the gay male—community celebrates lust with abandon. I don’t care how many other adults any adult has sex with; what I do care about is that there be a consciousness of what that means. I want the men I love to have sex any way they want *and* I want them to live forever. It is becoming clear I won’t get both.” Slightly more rude is Lisa Duggan’s retort: “We don’t want to domesticate you; that’s why we’re lesbians!” Most caustic of all is AIDS activist Jeanne Bergman, who condemns Kramer, saying that “after years of spitting on [lesbians], he’s now rehabilitating us as good role models for those bad boys at the Bijou.... Kramer can suck my dick.”

Rotello seems unfazed by this outburst of anger from pro-pleasure feminists. “When I go around speaking about the aspects of AIDS that I mostly speak about, I find lesbians are among my most receptive audience. I think that lesbians are very concerned about the longevity of the AIDS epidemic and the reasons for it. It may well be that women in our society have been trained from childhood to think about the often negative consequences of sex. And men have been trained to have a sense of entitlement around sex and not think of the

consequences very much.”

Larry Kramer has not been so imperturbable, and facile overtures of comradeship seem to end for him the minute that lesbians step out of the role of wise but emotionally distant, monogamous older sisters. In response to negative reviews of Rotello's book, he sent quite the bitter e-mail to former *Out* editor in chief Sarah Pettit on November 30, 1997. It said, in part: “I am beginning to wonder if there is any pertinent reason why gay men and lesbians should be bracketed in the same movement. This issue over the definition of homosexuality that gay men are fighting out right now without any support or relevance from the lesbian population is a perfect example of how different [our] needs are. I wonder, if like the straight population, where women's rights are separated from men's rights in many fields, if gay rights should be split and we should each go our different ways, coming together when necessary of course, but not unless.”

Kramer emphasizes that his call for dethroning sex from what he believes is its central place in gay men's lives is “about a vision of the future for all gay people. I simply cannot believe that you as a lesbian want that future's definition [to] be confined to your right to orgiastic lesbian sex in public places.” (Somehow, gentle reader, I don't think you will be surprised if I tell you that my reaction to this is, why the hell not? Although I do want a hell of a lot more than that.)

Kramer reiterated his point of view in a telephone interview with me, adding, “What would be wrong if we had a movement that had three parts to it, both a united part and one for the women and one for the men?” He said: “I think there are certain issues that men and women feel very differently and very strongly about. It sounds so awful when you say that maybe there are separate places for us that are just as important as a coalition place for us. And I don't know why it's so awful to say that women can have, should have their own magazines and men to have their own magazines.... I don't know that we serve each other best by being so chained to each other.” But

since some gay men disagree with Kramer's ideas while some lesbians support them, it is irrational of Kramer to write off one lesbian's take on his HIV-prevention ideas as the rantings of someone whose gender means she "didn't understand the issue" and that "it should have been passed over to a man to be allowed to deal with it," as he puts it now.

Rotello and Michelangelo Signorile both part company with Kramer when it comes to his call for a movement of separate-but-equal publications and political groups for gay men. Rotello says, "To me, if you have the kind of division that Larry wants, you would not get the kind of result that Larry wants. In fact you'd probably get almost the opposite result."

Signorile, author of *Life Outside*, adds that "I never really thought about or even entertained the idea of splitting up. I've always seen us as culturally very different, obviously, and I think we almost like to gloss over that a lot. And except for core groups of activists, most gay men have not really worked on issues relating specifically to lesbians and don't know anything, and I really mean that in the most absolute way, about lesbian culture and sexuality. Gay men need to learn about sexism, and to me that has always just been part of the work." Signorile feels that "gay men in general are not as politicized as lesbians are and have been—men are hard to motivate politically at all. AIDS got people going because they were dying."

Rotello and Signorile are probably right when they claim grassroots lesbian support for a campaign to end or at least decry gay male promiscuity, unsafe sex, drugs, and the cult of masculine beauty. This parallels the support that sex-radical women have given to Sex Panic! (Note, however, that gay men are not dividing over or even discussing lesbian health or legal issues. Can they even imagine what they are?) A really effective coalition is based on a shared agenda for social change. Like all dysfunctional families, our movement is splintered, but the splits do not mirror the gender divide. "It may be time for gay people to go their separate ways politically," Eric Rofes says. "The split that some of us are working in earnest to prevent is

not between lesbians and gay men. It's between queers of any gender who embrace a narrow, assimilationist gay-rights model and those of us who embrace a liberationist-based model. It's between the status queer and the status quo."

Memoirs of a Cranky Crip

[1999]

I have not written much about the topic of disability since 1991, when I was a columnist for *On Our Backs*, a magazine that broke quite a bit of new ground by publishing erotic lesbian fiction and sexy dyke pinups. (Its title was a takeoff on the grim feminist news rag *off our backs*, which took a relentlessly antiporn and anti-S/M position all through the Sex Wars.)

As the primary caregiver for my lover, a woman who had chronic fatigue immune disorder syndrome (CFIDS), disability was a topic pretty close to my heart. I had fallen in love with a spunky, smart butch bottom in her twenties. But then her young life was shattered by a mysterious illness that caused spiking fevers, night sweats, skin rashes, poor immunity, intense joint and muscle pain, exhaustion, depression, and cognitive problems. At the height of her illness, she could not get out of bed without help, and on those few occasions when we ventured out of the house, she would frequently forget why we were sitting at a restaurant table or where the truck was parked.

Of course we tried to get medical help for her, but this proved to be almost impossible. Even doctors who had placed themselves on referral lists for CFIDS patients turned out to be skeptical about the reality of this disease, simply because the microorganism that probably causes it has not yet been pinpointed and named. Doctors pathologized me as an enabler, when I was struggling to support two people on a freelance writer's income and also attend graduate school and care for

the person I loved. They labeled her, as we found out when we read medical records submitted for a social security benefits hearing, as merely "depressed" and "obese." At the same time, they demanded exorbitant fees for nutritional supplements and experimental antiviral treatments or bodywork that proved to be useless. Friends counseled me to abandon her, and scoffed at the notion that she was really sick. Of course, we had some support from a few people (most of whom were also dealing with illness or injury), and a small disability check from her last job. With that meager assistance, we struggled to maintain our emotional balance, affection for one another, and any fragments of romance or desire we could salvage from the wreckage of her damaged health.

Debbie Sundahl, the erratic and temperamental editor of *On Our Backs*, called me the day after I submitted my column, and told me that she would not publish it because it was not sexy. Granted, it was a pretty sober look at the reality of disabled lesbians' lives and the able-bodied prejudice that kept them from participating fully in lesbian communities and relationships. But my assignment was to examine various aspects of lesbian sexuality, not churn out a monthly porn column. I told her she could run the column or forget about getting any more work from me; that was her choice. I felt as if, once again, the outside world was trying to erase me and my partner from its consciousness because it could not endure the sight of our struggle.

Censorship like this has a potent effect on writers. After the hurricane of bad reviews that greeted the publication of my first book, *Sapphisty*, I did not publish another book for eight years. I don't think that's an accident. Now I find myself filled with trepidation at the thought of writing about my own disability, fibromyalgia (FM), a chronic pain condition of unknown origin that affects the joints and muscles and weakens the immune system. (Incidentally, the same "friends" who were convinced that my lover was not really ill believe that she somehow "gave" me fibro.) My work and my person are

controversial. Will any admission of vulnerability spur further attacks? Certainly the news that my mobility and my enjoyment have been curtailed will make my enemies glad. Unfortunately, my own community hasn't behaved a whole lot better.

I've been a living, breathing archetype of leatherdykehood and sex radicalism for more than two decades. To many if not most people in the leather community, my value as a symbol exceeds the worth of my actual self. The year I began walking with a cane, public response was, well, outrageous. Some people I had known for years no longer recognized me in public. That cripple could not possibly be Pat Califia, apparently. People were so determined not to see a gimp at a leather event that they would crash into me, and blunder on without apologizing. A nationally known whipmaker and party host told me on every possible occasion how very ugly and unattractive my cane was, perhaps thinking that enough negative reinforcement would make it go away. I've even had people so overwhelmed by cognitive dissonance because of my disability that they've literally tried to take the cane away from me. (Never fear, I am slower than I used to be, but they are toast.) Nobody has said, it's great that you are still able to get around, it's amazing that you struggle to continue to participate in the public life of the leather community. I am supposed to pretend to be healthy so that they won't have to feel uncomfortable.

To hell with that. It's more important to take care of myself. A couple of years ago, I hit a low point with this disease. It is unbelievably frustrating to suffer continually without knowing why, with the knowledge that the very people who are supposed to make you feel better don't give your agony any credence. I was depressed, enraged, and isolated. I was also in serious danger of becoming homeless because of financial problems caused by being sick. I decided that if I was going to be living with a chronic illness, I had to put more emphasis on the word *living*.

When I made a list of the other women I knew who had this disease, I saw that most of them were living on SSI or welfare,

and all of them were unable to get around without wheelchairs or scooters. I could walk, albeit haltingly, and I could earn money. I decided I had to focus on being grateful for these blessings. I'm impatient with our society's expectation that sick people become angelic spiritual messengers for the able-bodied, as if simply feeling shitty or anticipating death isn't a big enough job. But my spirituality did become a source of comfort for me. The healing that I have received doesn't come from doctors, it comes in the form of enough strength to go on, one day at a time, and it comes from my creator, who is an infinite source of love and wisdom.

It also became very important to make pleasure and fun more of a priority. So I can't go to a play party any more and flog and fuck six people until they are nothing but a host of little wet spots on the floor. That doesn't mean I can't show one other person a good time; maybe two if I have a little help. On a very bad day, I may be reduced to petting my cat or coloring a black velvet poster for my recreation. (Yes, I said "black velvet poster." I said it with White Trash Pride.) Above all else, I will not give up hope, because the essence of evil is despair. If I need more help than I did in my thirties, that is my prerogative as a top, and builds the character of my assistants. If people don't believe that a cane is a proper accessory for a leather jacket, or even, perhaps someday, an electric scooter, well, they will just have to change their minds. I can remember a time when leather jackets and *lesbians* didn't go together, so there.

Yes, I get scared. The thought of getting worse terrifies me. So does the thought of encountering the ignorance and hostility of able-bodied people, both gay and straight. The disapproval of other queers hurts the most, of course. You would think that the AIDS epidemic would have had a trickle-down effect, softening our attitudes about other illnesses and physical problems. This is a mean idea, but I sometimes think that we were only able to be nice to people with AIDS when it was clear that they were dying. As tragic as it was to lose people to HIV, we were more comfortable with burying them than we would

have been with continuing to feed, medicate, emotionally support them, wheel them around, and look at their less-than-perfect bodies. Now that media hype has convinced too many of us that AIDS is a chronic illness, no longer an emergency or a crisis, our willingness to volunteer time or give money to fight the epidemic has waned dramatically. And I'm amazed by the renewed emphasis on working out at the gym, taking testosterone, and presenting a body that at least looks healthy to the merciless scrutiny of other gay men. Instead of learning more compassion, many of us have simply become more determined to cling to unreasonable standards of physical perfection, as if looking good was a viral barrier.

Fibro is not a terminal illness, though people with FM, CFIDS, and other similar, mysterious immune disorders may be more likely to die of cancer than other folks. When able-bodied people deny the reality of my condition or thoughtlessly exclude people with limited mobility from their activities, I try to remember that anxiety motivates them as much as pigheaded, callous stupidity. In the postindustrial West, people expect to live to be 100, full of physical vigor, mental acuity, and prosperity. We are deeply offended by accidents or illness that permanently change our lives. We aren't simply hurt or sick; we feel victimized by great injustice. Everybody wants to pretend that nothing this terrible could ever happen to them. So they ignore the people who are "damaged goods" and blame them for their misfortunes. The disabled person must have done something wrong—they ate unhealthy food, had the wrong attitude, went into a bad neighborhood, slept with the wrong person, didn't get enough acupuncture or see the right specialist. People who are well don't want to think about how suddenly their own lives could change. But destiny doesn't care; she remains utterly arbitrary, for all our superstitious attempts to placate her.

That's one of the reasons why we still have such a poor safety net in America. Most of us want to pretend everything will always be okay, instead of making realistic plans for coping

with catastrophe. The concept of universal healthcare is about as popular as pestilence, as if offering services would somehow impair everyone's independence and well-being. The state of healthcare in this country ought to be a scandal. AIDS was and remains the perfect platform for drawing attention to this issue; but we picket pharmaceutical companies instead of forcing Congress to put our tax money into public health and trim the Pentagon's \$260 billion budget.

There's a lot of talk these days about gay families, a flurry of activism devoted to winning the right to marry for same-sex couples, much media coverage of lesbian mothers and gay dads. Why, in this era of lavender-tinted "family values," do so many queer people who are sick or dying have to return to the control of their families of origin in order to receive a modicum of care? If we really want to be a family or a community, that includes taking responsibility for helping those of us who are stricken by physical or mental ailments—not out of pity or resentment, but with compassion and respect. In a competitive capitalist society full of "isms," showing kindness is the most radical act of all.

Sexual Politics, FTMs, and Dykes: Who Will Leap Out of Bed First?

[2000]

"In spite of the overlap and kinship between some areas of lesbian and transsexual experience, many lesbians are antagonistic toward transsexuals, treating male-to-female transsexuals as menacing intruders and female-to-male transsexuals as treasonous deserters.... Instead of another destructive round of border patrols, surveillance, and expulsion... Lesbians should instead relax, wait, and support the individuals involved as they sort out their own identities and decide where they fit socially.... Lesbian communities have suffered enough from the assumption that we should all be the same."

—Gayle Rubin,
"Of Catamites and Kings:
Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries," in
The Persistent Desire: A Femme–Butch Reader,
ed. by Joan Nestle
(Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992, pp. 474–75, 477)

"I feel like all the butches I love are leaving my community and turning into men."

—A femme friend,
upon hearing I had started taking testosterone

"You're a woman!" Theresa shouted.... "No I'm not," I yelled back at her. "I'm a he–she. That's different."

—Leslie Feinberg, Stone Butch Blues
(Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1993, p. 147)

As female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) become more visible, they affect several sexual minorities—the transgender community, which until recently was dominated by male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals; the gay men's community, to the extent that FTMs identify as gay or bisexual men; and the dyke community. This article will examine only the latter development.

FTMs claim the right to live in a gender other than the sex they were assigned at birth. Masculine, female-bodied people used to have only one choice: to live as butches. This new fork in the road has caused many of us to rethink some basic questions, like what (or who) is a lesbian? (And out of that question, an investigation of the nature of FTM experience also arises.)

The simplest answer would be: A lesbian is a genetic female who has sex with other genetic females. But this is not always true. A pair of heterosexual women who are paid to have sex with each other in a pornographic movie would not be recognized as sisters by most lesbians. It's possible to be a lesbian and never have sex with another woman. Many Roman Catholic nuns fit this description. Adrienne Rich and Lillian Faderman are just two of the prominent lesbian-feminist scholars who have argued that certain forms of nonsexual female affiliation ought to be recognized as lesbian while forms of lesbian sexuality that they view as unacceptable, such as butch/femme role-playing or S/M, ought not to qualify.

Despite this caviling, your average dyke has read enough lesbian history to be familiar with the concept of the "passing woman," a female-bodied person who dresses and lives as a man. Such a person may sometimes seek intimate relationships with women. Gay academics tend to categorize these pairs as a form of lesbianism, often doing considerable violence to the identity of the "passing woman," who may actually perceive himself as male. Despite the middle-class embarrassment of college-educated lesbian-feminists, bar culture remains one of the bastions of lesbian life, and by the standards of that world, these couples that appear to be heterosexual are in fact

butch/femme lesbians. In some lesbian communities, only butches are seen as being “the lesbians.” Femmes are assumed to be attracted to masculinity, and about equally attracted to butches or men. A femme who leaves the lesbian life to marry a man does not surprise anybody.

As far as medical doctors are concerned, the female-to-male transsexual is a gender dysphoric person who has always felt like a man trapped in a woman’s body. A true transsexual does not cross-dress for purposes of sexual gratification, but to be perceived and treated as a man. The psychiatrists who specialize in treating gender dysphoria usually believe that the only appropriate treatment for this disorder is to administer testosterone and, eventually, surgery—a hysterectomy, a mastectomy, and plastic surgery to create a phallus. FTMs are assumed by mental health professionals and medical people to be heterosexual—that is, masculine-appearing men who will seek out “normal” relationships with women post-transition.

But in the year 2000, there’s a whole continuum of experience and identities that can qualify for the label “FTM.” In addition to the classic “primary transsexuals” you can find in John Money’s case histories, there are guys who identify as bisexual or gay; there are FTMs who are proud to be big nelly queens; there are FTMs who don’t want to take any hormones or have surgery; there are a few FTMs who have performed cross-dressed as women; there are FTMs who don’t identify as men or women; and there are FTMs who believe they are lesbian as well as transgendered.

The labels we use to clarify our sexual preferences were only invented a couple of hundred years ago. These categories are bound to change over time. Other cultures do not necessarily understand sex or love in the same terms that we do. This new millennium seems to be an especially rich time of sexual hybridization, cross-pollination, and blooming. The last time such an explosion in the taxonomy of desire occurred, Victorian sexologists were gluing Latin- and Greek-based tags

on their perverse patients. This time around, it's the deviants themselves who are dishing out the discourse.

These social changes are taking place in a certain ideological context that shapes how most of us view the coming-out process and our "essential" identities. The most popular view of the etiology of sexual orientation in the gay community is that it's a matter of biology, not learning or conditioning—nature, not nurture. Coming out is understood as the process by which one comes to understand one's own core or "real" identity and shares that information with others. The idea that the same person might choose to live as or label herself or himself in a couple of different ways, depending on what's available on the cultural smorgasbord, causes some profound indigestion. Most gay men and lesbians are simply not prepared to argue that homosexuality is a morally valid choice. (And, to be fair, many FTMs are also committed to the idea that transsexuality has a genetic cause, and deeply invested in a belief that they are "real men," so much so that sex *reassignment* is now referred to as sex *confirmation*.)

At the campfires of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and elsewhere, cultural feminism has been boiled down to a simple-minded assumption that the good, progressive, peace-loving people are women and the bad, repressive, violent people are men. In the past, this has meant that butch/femme couples had to emphasize their mutual status as women. The butch's job description requires her to be as masculine as possible, and do as many of the things men do as possible, without actually crossing the line between Women's Country and the city dump where men presumably squat in squalor. The growing number of FTMs in relationships with lesbian femmes (who do not necessarily define as bisexual women) has blurred that line. Can you be a butch and take testosterone? Have facial hair? Pass as a man? Get chest surgery? Get genital surgery? FTMs who want to claim a male identity and distinguish themselves from butches are made as uncomfortable by these questions as are lesbians who find themselves attracted to FTMs.

The temptation to engage in mutual rejection and polarization is enormous. Most of us prefer to have simple, binary categories that we can use to sort good behavior from bad, friends from enemies, women from men. The problem is that these mass excommunications don't really work. They merely make it more difficult to talk about what is going on, and increase the suffering of people who are coming out or looking for intimacy in the forbidden zone. A large number of FTMs and gay women remain in a gray area, struggling with the issues without support from either camp.

Another possibility was heralded by Gayle Rubin in the quote that heads this article. Perhaps the bitter experience of the divisive Lesbian Sex Wars will make dykes more responsive to her plea for tolerance and patience. I have some hope that individual dykes will respect this common-sense strategy, and perhaps in a few places an attitude of mutual respect and curiosity will prevail.

In recent articles and stage performances, Alix Dobkin has taken it upon herself to try to create a moral panic about the defection of an entire generation of young butches to the FTM camp. This is not going to happen, if only because most butches are not gender dysphoric enough to be motivated to face the ordeal of sex reassignment. Many if not most butch lesbians are quite happy to be women; most of their problems come from the larger society's prescription of femininity for all persons born with female genitalia. Perhaps a handful of people who would be happier as FTMs will be persuaded to remain lesbian-identified by Dobkin and her ilk. Dobkin has no idea what sort of damage she does, particularly to younger genderqueers, by labeling them as traitors to feminism and threatening them with exile from their community if they so much as talk to an FTM about what it is like to take testosterone or get chest surgery.

Nobody asks to be confronted with a profound feeling of discomfort about his or her body. It is something that many of us have lived with since childhood. It is depressing enough

to grow up among straight people who are perpetually bashing you, both physically and emotionally, for not being girly enough. While many FTMs have never identified as lesbians, some have, because that community seemed like a far safer place to be than the straight world where our parents, employers, and other people on the bus feel entitled to dish out abuse about a deeply felt difference that we could not jettison even if we wanted to. Believe me, many of us have tried. We drown these feelings with alcohol and other drugs, political fanaticism, and dissociation. When it becomes clear that in fact the lesbian community is very nearly as rigid about gender as your typical high school gym class, sometimes it seems that it would be better to die than to live as a freak.

Dobkin's bullying and black-and-white thinking about gender will hardly increase the general quotient of happiness. Does she really want a lesbian community full of "women" who are perpetually accused of being "male-identified," who are sexually frustrated, full of self-hate, and scared to death that their secret will be uncovered despite all their attempts to pass as proper lesbians? When certain Christian sects insist that homosexuals must "simply" abstain from acting on their same-sex desires in order to obtain salvation and remain a part of the spiritual body, most gay people see that as inhumane and ludicrous. The idea that you must find a way to choke down your gender dysphoria and continue to say you are a lesbian, no matter what, is equally barbaric. Feminism is not a cure for transsexuality. Besides, labeling FTMs as forbidden fruit will only make them more attractive; human beings are rarely deterred from sexual exploration by puritanical prohibitions. We just learn how to be sneakier about what we are doing. Anti-FTM sentiment in the dyke community has created a closet every bit as barbed and destructive as the one that is mandated by queer-bashers and bigots like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. It breaks my heart to meet anxious trannyboys who shuttle from FTM conferences back to their hometowns where they play on the dyke softball team or tend bar, precious

affiliations they would lose if anybody knew they had gone to an event where they got to use a male name and pronouns. They aren't doing anything wrong, and they should not have to keep this secret any more than an incest survivor or a battered spouse should have to protect his or her perpetrator.

Cultural feminism has distorted and impoverished the great diversity of experience that the larger society thinks of as lesbianism. There is a reason why terms like *bulldagger*, *he-she*, *stone butch* still pepper our vocabulary. The public-relations tactic of billing dykes as über-women so that we could tag along with the straight girls who were burning their bras has outlived its usefulness. The label *lesbian* includes many genders other than the simple one of people born with xx chromosomes who grow up to self-identity as female. Historically, being a lesbian has involved accepting the fact that one is not a woman, as that role is defined in most of the world, as well as celebrating the state of womanhood.

But I think it is too easy to blame the anger that colors the dyke/FTM divide on lesbians. Separatists no longer speak for the majority of young queer women. How could they, when terms like *bi dykes* are part of the common parlance on college campuses? Lesbians should be given credit for at least participating in a discourse about whether transgendered people should be considered allies or enemies.

Even if that debate has sometimes degenerated into acrimony, it beats the hell out of the wall of silence and indifference that the gay men's community has turned toward gay/bisexual FTMs. Bioboys remain for the most part clueless that such a thing as FTMs exist, and when they find out about us, their response tends to be contemptuous and dismissive. The handful of gay or bisexual genetic men who feel camaraderie with or attraction for FTMs are often made the butt of scathing comments by their less open-minded peers. It's rather discouraging to think that it would actually represent a sort of progress for gender-clueless gay men to get as vociferous and venomous as Dobkin.

FTMs have not been the merely passive objects of gender-essentialist dyke diatribes and neglectful faggots immobilized by the “ick factor.” There are many different points of view about what it means to be an FTM within our own community, and several different attitudes about what our relationship, if any, ought to be with same-sex eroticism and gay-rights politics. There are female-to-male transsexuals who don’t even identify as such. They believe they were born male and underplay the significance of sex chromosomes or the huge outlay of medical resources it takes to create a male image that will carry them through the world. Many of these guys identify as heterosexual, and they may be deep-dyed homophobes. Some of them are not even interested in being out of the closet as transgendered people or doing any sort of activism; they want to excise their inconvenient histories and live as ordinary men. Some FTMs have never been involved in the lesbian community, and see no connection between that world and their own life experience. FTMs who identify as gay men may be uncomfortable with continuing to think about their lives in feminist terms—if they were ever feminists in the first place.

This is not intended, of course, to say that all straight FTMs hate gay people or are even apolitical about transgender issues, or that rejecting feminism is part and parcel of coming out as FTM. But when I have gone to community forums about FTMs and lesbians, only one sort of FTM is under discussion—someone who once identified as a butch, who now identifies as male, and still has sex with women who are part of the lesbian community. The real picture is much more complicated, which is probably why individual connections between people from various sexual minority communities are such a powerful source of education and affinity. Working through these issues on a person-to-person basis is more time-consuming than forming an opinion based on sweeping generalizations. But it also increases the chances of people’s forming more accurate notions of one another’s experiences, beliefs, needs, and agendas, and opens up more space for compassion and tolerance.

I don't think that one policy can be created to cover all the situations in which dykes and FTMs might interact. It would be much simpler if there was some fixed point of no return, past which an FTM became a man just like any other and was no longer part of the Sapphic landscape. (Even though this is exactly what a lot of FTMs would like, as well.) Several psychological and material realities make such a clear parting of the ways difficult to achieve. The term *gender dysphoria* does not describe only one form of distress about the body one has and the body one feels that one should inhabit. The condition ranges from a relatively mild form of discomfort that can be alleviated by keeping one's clothing on during sex or avoiding direct contact with one's genitals, to a desire for chest surgery with no desire for genital modification, all the way up to a burning desire to have not only a male chest but male genitals as well. The intensity or nature of gender dysphoria can vary throughout any given individual's life, or even from one sex partner to another.

Sometimes it can be brought down to a manageable level by wearing pants instead of dresses, or by creating an entirely male fantasy persona for sex play. For some intersexed or female-born people who are gender dysphoric, it can be important to lay claim to identity as a woman no matter how often strangers refer to them as "sir," while for others that is a galling experience. The assumption of a successful *feminine* appearance is an effective coping mechanism for some of us. Even if you feel no ambivalence about using hormones or surgery to transition, it may not be possible to create a safe place in your life to change your social gender, or to raise the funds that it takes to pay for surgery. And if what you really want is to have been born male, it can be a struggle to be content with the result of surgery. Genetic men do not have scars from nipple grafts or hysterectomies. Changing legal documents from female to male often requires proof of "complete" sex reassignment surgery (that is, construction of some sort of phallus), and in some states, no amount of surgery will

expunge an "F" from your birth certificate. FTMs who want to be able to legally marry their female partners often run into a public perception that the relationship is lesbian rather than heterosexual.

There are transgendered intersexed or female-born people who think of themselves as a different kind of woman, as being both male and female or neither, as well as those whose self-perception fits the more traditional transsexual story of feeling like a man trapped in a woman's body. This plethora of gender dysphorias mirrors a similar cacophony of lesbianisms. The politically correct version of female homosexuality requires a childhood full of crushes on other girls, adolescent tomboyism, an early adult move into an urban lesbian community, and lifelong dedication to sex and romance with other women, as well as a devotion to the forms of art, music, literature, sports, fashion, and cuisine that are approved for lesbian-feminist consumption. But in fact there are women (and other people) who move in and out of the lesbian community over the course of their lifetimes, or who can relate to or make use of part of this package, but not all of it. Sometimes they want the sexual part of the modern notion of "lesbian identity," but not the cultural or political parts, or vice versa. It can be possible to feel that "being a lesbian" works for one part of your life, or with one partner, but becomes unwieldy or dishonest at other points.

It would be premature to claim that it is now unnecessary for anybody to go back into the closet in order to survive. People who try to hide the things that make them different are not necessarily traitors or cowards, just people trying to make sense out of their lives as best they can, in a world where perfect social options or even identities may not exist. When it comes to sexual orientation, pleasure preferences, and gender, there is no "one size fits all."

Of course, there are FTMs who desire the ire of their local lesbian communities. It makes me cringe when FTMs say nasty things about dykes. This is a poor tactic to put distance

between who you currently understand yourself to be and how you used to present yourself, or between your sense of yourself as male and a legal and psychiatric system that may insist that you are still female. I think it makes more sense to continue to support struggles for gay rights rather than downgrade dykes. On the other hand, in order to be read as male, you need to know how to present those cues, rather than butch lesbian signals, to other people. There is a subtle but still very real difference between these masculinities. Dykes often take the right to bitch about other women for granted; it's an in-group sort of venting or even self-deprecation—more of a coping mechanism than genuine misogyny. When you start to identify more as an FTM or a man than as a dyke, it can be hard to remember that when you express that sort of frustration, it comes across in an entirely different way. I am still working on removing certain words from my vocabulary. I have to be much more conscious about what I say when I am angry.

Also, I think lesbians have a right to ask why FTMs who pass fully as male want to be given the right to participate in all-women events. It's legitimate to ask if this is simple opportunism. Yes, it can be difficult to clarify one's identity; sometimes simply saying you are a man or a woman is not entirely accurate. But there's also such a thing as opportunism. Since the FTM community is much smaller than the lesbian community, and many of us maintain friendship ties or erotic connections there, it can be painful and frightening to have to give up these resources. It seems unethical to me to try to hold on to those goodies by giving everybody a different story about how you identify. It's okay to be a psychic hermaphrodite or undecided, but it's not okay to tell gay bioguys that you are a fag, to tell dykes that you are just a different kind of butch, and to tell straight women that you are a heterosexual guy. For me personally, it no longer makes sense to show up at women-only parties or other occasions. I don't feel comfortable there, and I don't want to make anyone else feel unsafe (especially someone who is clear about her female or lesbian identity).

Women and men both need space and time when they can simply be with one another. But I also think there is a lot of value in cross-pollination, and I am encouraged by the growing popularity of more inclusive events, like the Femme Conferences that happened in San Francisco a couple of years ago, that welcome anyone who is interested in the topic of femme aesthetics and beingness.

One of the biggest gifts that queers have to offer the whole world is the concept of coming out, which implies self-discovery, disclosure, and a search for others like oneself. Coming out requires being honest with oneself and others about who we need to be and whom we need to be with. Sometimes you have to try on an identity before you can be sure whether it's a good fit or not. Everyone, not just lesbians, needs to learn how to support and celebrate this way of being in the world even if it means that the result may be unpredictable. Coming out is not an entrance exam or a hazing ritual. Nor is it necessarily a one-time event. Anyone who has been through the painful soul-searching and fear of isolation that comes up during this process ought to be able to support another person who is running that gauntlet. Not everybody who questions their gender winds up transitioning. But as it stands now, a "woman" who simply says out loud that she is going through this is sometimes forced into the FTM community because it is the only safe place to look for answers. People ought not to be exiled for being in the midst of this uninvited dilemma.

If we put lesbianism on one end of a continuum that represents all gender-rebellious people who were not born with xy chromosomes, and FTMs at the other end of that continuum, it would be clear that people at either extreme are very different. But there are a hell of a lot of people in the middle of that dichotomy, and they may move from one point to another throughout their lives. Relationships between FTMs and women who identify as lesbians are becoming more and more common, and the participants in many of those partnerships do not see themselves as being part of a

heterosexual couple. Eventually we will probably have to come up with a term other than *lesbian* (or *FTM*, for that matter) to more accurately capture the dynamic that is at work here. All I know is, for every guy who cruises me, there are ten dykes who want my phone number, and I refuse to see those women as turncoats. This attraction makes perfect sense to me. There is an area of overlap, shared experience, and then there is a profound difference as well. This is a perfect recipe for erotic fascination and hot sex. Femmes who have been with FTMs are sometimes cut down, by both dykes and FTMs, for wanting to enjoy a certain kind of sex without being penalized for it, but don't we all want to stop being harassed for being different? Blame should not be placed on those of us who pass as straight, but on the system that allocates safety and privilege to only one group of people, gender-normative heterosexuals.

Until we sort ourselves out into better categories, the struggle to understand this sweeping social change is being fought out mostly on an individual level, without much support or interest from sexual minorities that are more populous or longer-established. Arm-waving and name-calling is not going to stop the trend toward investigation of testosterone or surgery by both FTMs and butches or genderqueers who want a greater level of emotional and physical congruity so that they can get on with their lives. I have frequently had lesbian friends tell me that they feel as if I were dead, and so they are grieving for me. Yet I am where I always was, with all the same feelings and even the same phone number. I have changed the way I look, true, but that doesn't mean that anyone else has to imitate me, even if they have the same qualms as I did about the gender that was assigned to me at birth. If we were able to respect one another's right to craft our own solutions to gender issues, and be kind to one another rather than critical, fearful, or obstructionist, we could maintain bonds with one another that would be to our mutual benefit.

The idea that dykes and FTMs might become allies or neighbors on the sexual fringe instead of enemies is a novel

one. It's so difficult, when your own identity is under siege, to cross the lines of ignorance or stigma and befriend someone who does not look like you or tell the same life story. But isn't that what we are asking straight people to do when we demand greater protection for our civil rights and a larger territory within which to develop our culture and our vision of the future? If we cannot find a way to cleave together, after all we have been through, I doubt that we can find the eloquence or righteous rage that we would need to shift the oppressive burden of compulsory heterosexuality.

If we are successful, queer activism and sex radicalism will drag even the institution of heterosexuality back into the forge, to be melted down and reshaped into something that is less about reproduction and reification of social sex-role stereotypes than it is about pleasure, romantic love, and individual growth. In fact, these changes are already under way. Hatred of gay, bisexual, and transgendered people is not just fueled by a distorted sense of who we are or why we live openly as such. Such moral panics are also driven by terror about an even more threatening social change than the creation of visible sexual minority communities. As queers of all sorts color outside the lines of gender and sexuality, we alter the definition of words like *man*, *woman*, *family*, and *marriage* for the larger society as well. To the extent that some heterosexual, gender-congruent people can recognize the advantages that such a process has for them as well as for us, they become potential allies. Integrating those ostensibly normal people into a movement advocating for more freedom of desire and gender expression will be even more perplexing and rewarding than shouting across the fault line between FTMs and dykes.

He's a Man for All That: Queer FTMs

[2000]

Something fabulous happened to me today. I passed. Granted, it was at a gas station in suburban Walnut Creek, California, not at Starbucks in the Castro, where the true critics and connoisseurs of masculinity convene. But getting called “sir” five times by two different straight guys left me giddy. The first time it happened I was afraid to talk, waiting for the inevitable moment of awkward discovery and self-correction. But it never came. So I made a little small talk, paid for my gas, got a Coke, and left with a grin on my face that probably seemed wacky, given the price of high-octane these days. Note to self: *Straight men don't skip.*

I've been taking testosterone for about six months now, a 200 mg shot in my butt every two weeks. Sometimes it seems like the only person who sees anything different about my body is me. My jaw has gotten more square, my body fat is shifting around, my hips are a little more narrow, the center of my eyebrows is filling in, my tits are smaller, and my libido just keeps on getting more and more aggressive. A few friends are honoring my request to use male pronouns, and I appreciate their courtesy, but it's discouraging when the very same doctor who signs my prescription for testosterone asks me if I have a cold when I answer the phone. Luckily, I have an understanding boyfriend who has been through transition himself. The last time we smooched he claimed he could feel stubble on my face and said, “It's too homosexual, bear,” meaning it was almost homosexual enough.

There's a fast-growing community of FTMs who identify as gay or bisexual men. But ever since Christine Jorgensen's sex change hit the tabloids in 1952, if you tell someone you are transsexual, they will nearly always assume you are talking about an MTF (male-to-female), a transsexual woman. Yet today the number of biological females seeking sex reassignment is roughly equal to the number of biological males who want prescriptions for estrogen and sex-change surgery.

Lou Sullivan was one of the first gay FTMs to come out as a transgendered activist. Sullivan was born in 1951 and began cross-dressing and living as a man when he was 22. But when the blond and boyish Sullivan applied to a gender clinic that "treated" transsexuals, he was rejected because he did not lie about his sexual interest in other men. During most of the '60s, '70s, and '80s, gender reassignment programs affiliated with universities and medical schools would only accept transsexuals who said they were heterosexual. In 1979, at age 28, Sullivan obtained testosterone from a private physician. His chest and genital surgery were both done the same way, at a time when it was not easy to find a competent surgeon to handle these procedures outside of a gender dysphoria treatment program.

In 1986, Sullivan began holding support group meetings for female-to-male cross-dressers and transsexuals. In the early '80s he compiled a guide to help FTMs pass as their gender of preference. And in 1987, he began publishing an FTM newsletter. The group and publication that Sullivan founded continue in operation today, with his open-door policy of tolerance for diversity in gender expression and sexual orientation. Sadly, this gentle and brave man died of AIDS in 1991. He quipped, "I took a certain pleasure in informing the gender clinic that even though their program told me I could not live as a gay man, it looks like I'm going to die like one."

Michael Hernandez is one of the second generation of gay FTMs who benefited from Sullivan's work in creating a social and political space for others like himself. "You couldn't pick

me out of a crowd or tell what I'm into by looking at me," he says, "but you might be pleasantly surprised by what you find. I have a full beard, am covered in hair, except for my head, have talented hands, a wicked grin, an impish sense of humor, and pride in who I am. Yes, I do get hard-ons and can ejaculate if you hit just the right spot. No, I haven't had a dick surgically constructed. What I do have looks like a microphallus and works just fine. There are too many other things that I could do with the \$100,000. What I have was grown by better living through chemistry—testosterone. If you are looking for more than a mouthful, you have the wrong fella, but we could go for a wild ride with a strap-on." He adds cheerfully, "I do fuck on the first date, but don't assume that you will be the one doing the fucking."

Of his coming out process, he says, "I did not know that it was possible to be anything other than the gender assigned at birth. While attending a leather conference I heard someone discussing being transgendered and taking testosterone. The very foundation of my butch lesbian identity dropped away. I felt as if someone had grabbed me by the ankles and held me out the 20th floor window of some office building. Over the next twenty-four hours I stewed about this new revelation. Two out of three of my butch dyke friends who had been present at that workshop revealed that they too were having gender issues. When I returned home from the conference, I met with them. The process of gathering began. Therapy and ultimately taking testosterone followed."

Prior to this shift in his identity, Hernandez says he had "no sexual interest in men whatsoever although I have always had a strong attraction to masculinity. As a dyke I dated femmes and the occasional butch. After starting testosterone, the attraction to masculinity expanded to embrace non-trans and transmen. Mysexual orientation was easier to call *queer* than anything else." Today, he says, "While I will not rule out a sexual relationship with a woman, I am far more comfortable as a fag."

In order to create some space for himself in the gay/bisexual

men's community, he says, with an impish grin, "The first thing that I had to do is get off the computer and actually leave the house. Cruising men was completely different than cruising women. I was not familiar with the two-second window of opportunity that seems to exist by way of making eye contact. If you wait too long, your dream date for the night has moved on to the next bear."

Today, Hernandez seems very comfortable with his life as a gay man. But it has not been easy to get to this place, and he acknowledges that it can still be very challenging. "A good sense of humor, the willingness to be vulnerable and discuss the topic of my gender variance with my potential play partner, patience, and realizing that rejection of an advance had nothing to do with me are incredibly beneficial." He has also benefited from finding a niche for himself within a rather specialized "fetish market." He comments, "It doesn't hurt that I have an overabundance of body hair and small but talented hands for those aficionados of bears and butt play. The handball/fisting scene has provided incredibly wonderful space in that. It's all about hands, assholes, and the ability to reach some mystical places. Cock has very little to do with it."

With great affection, Hernandez recounts the story of a bi-gay male who was one of his earliest play partners and mentors in this journey. "Hal Heller was the first gay man whom I approached as a play/sex partner. After three coffee dates we decided to play and that we did for several years. Our scenes were typically peppered with laughter, lots of switching, and lots of laughter. I felt fully accepted as his peer. This meant having to overcome some of how he viewed the world and how my particular incarnation sort of shook up those definitions that are taken for granted by non-transfolk. We gradually moved from a sexual to a nonsexual place into an incredibly wonderful friendship. Never was there a moment when I doubted his unconditional acceptance of me as a fellow queer man. Hal was one of those people who could make you feel that dreams really could come true, if you had the courage to

do more than just fantasize. His death [from AIDS in 1999] has made it abundantly clear that we know not how much time we have in this life, so you'd better make the best of today."

If he could change anything about the gay/bisexual men's community, Hernandez says, "It would be ideal to have a situation where transmen were welcome without having to jump through the typical hoops that we do to be accepted. A space where either disclosure was not needed or when it did occur to have a response along the lines of, 'Oh, right, I saw Loren Cameron's book. You guys are hot.' Of course, porn stories and some decent porn films featuring FTMs would help out in that department. Some men [involved with FTMs] have maintained a low profile, to avoid being ridiculed, ostracized, or having their identity as a gay man questioned by their peers. It's sad when desire cannot be fully and openly explored and discussed."

His advice for FTMs who are new to the gay male community places a priority on asking for what you want and not taking rejection personally. "Men reject each other for a variety of reasons ranging from age (e.g., being too old or too young), race, health status, availability or lack thereof, timing, or just plain simple differences regarding sexual practices/activities. Your potential partner is probably going through a little crisis based on assumptions that he's made about people who weren't born male. In other words, he's probably freaking out about being straight and remembering that awful date with Mary Lou in the back seat of Daddy's car. Be patient. It may not happen tonight and it may not happen tomorrow, but if his dick was hard when he first approached you, the odds are in your favor that he will be back. Dealing with rejection graciously, smiling, and a willingness to continue the conversation on an informative nonsexual level increases your odds as well. But don't feel that you have to continue with the conversation if the guy is being rude or disrespectful."

For gay men who might be intrigued by the possibility of connecting sexually with an FTM, Hernandez advises,

“Ask, don’t assume. No two transmen are alike. Everyone has different identities, different ways of viewing the world, different wants, needs and kinks. Some of us are into being fucked (and don’t assume which hole that will be) and some aren’t. You will always get an ‘A’ for effort. If you are trying to understand and are asking honest questions, more than likely that cute little trannyboy whom you are interested in will be forgiving regarding your phrasing of the questions that you are burning to know. But do try to avoid asking, ‘Have you had *the* surgery?’ There are a variety of surgeries. If you want to know if he has a surgically constructed dick, then ask that question.”

He reluctantly acknowledges that fear of HIV/AIDS was one of the things he “had to come to grips with as well as the sense of loss as friends became progressively more ill and died. I never had that nagging concern when I slept with women. I know that’s naïve as well as inherently unfair and frankly, I’m embarrassed to admit it. But it’s the absolute truth.”

Hernandez is not alone. Along with other gay/bisexual men, FTMs have to deal with the unpleasant reality of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. In 1997, the San Francisco Department of Public Health sponsored a study of HIV prevalence and risk behavior in the transgender community. The Transgender Community Health Project (TCHP) was headed by epidemiologist Kristen Clements, working in cooperation with a community board that included many individuals and organizations in the transgender community. Both MTF and FTM respondents were interviewed, but the data on those 123 FTMs has not received very much media coverage.

HIV seroprevalence was low among FTM study participants (less than 2 percent), and current risk behaviors were infrequent. But 28 percent reported a history of unsafe receptive anal sex, and those who reported injection drug use (18 percent) had a very high rate of sharing syringes—91 percent.

One of the TCHP research associates was Matt Rice, a bisexual FTM who has served as an outreach worker for 18th

Street Services and also worked for five years as a bartender at the Lone Star. Caustic and handsome, Rice was a popular bartender, and he's had more than one serious relationship with bio-gay men. But he tells a story that illustrates the tension between the biofags who welcomed him and those who did not. One night at the bar, an inebriated gentleman gave Rice's lover, Michael, his business card and said, "Call me if you ever want to get some real dick." Michael, bless his righteous heart, set the card on fire and threw it at his clueless suitor.

Rice says that low self-esteem can contribute to a decision to not have protected sex. "A man who wants to have sex with an FTM has already overcome so much. The fear is, if I put this other obstacle in his way, he won't want to have sex with me. You might be willing to trade safety for love. And if sex is the only place where you're getting validation for your gay male identity, what do you care about a condom?" There are practical obstacles as well. "What kind of barriers are FTMs who have metoidioplasty going to use? Condoms are too big, finger cots are too small, and dental dams are no good for penetration and are seen as something women use."

The StopAIDSProject (SAP) of San Francisco has responded to these harsh facts of FTM life by sponsoring a workshop series for trannyfags. The Trannyfags Workshop Series is the brainchild of Willy Wilkinson, a transgender-identified person who put it together with input from a community advisory group and strong support from Q Action deputy program director Darlene Weide and other SAP staff. The four free workshops will cover body image, sexual fantasies, getting laid with guys in San Francisco, and transition and how that can affect the sex we want. They are "for FTMs and all gender variant folks on the FTM spectrum who have sex with men regardless of physical status."

Wilkinson says, "There are so many complicated psychosocial issues around HIV prevention for everyone. And for FTMs who are having sex with men there are complicated issues around disclosure of transgendered status, self-esteem,

passing, validation for their new gender and sexual identity. For instance, in the qualitative research study out of the AIDS office that I worked on there were some FTMs who said they would be more willing to engage in unsafe sexual behavior if it meant an opportunity to have a gay experience and not have a gender identity question. People in the FTM community are of various physical statuses. So for people who have fully transitioned with hormones and surgery it's one thing and for people who have not done hormones or surgery it's another thing, in terms of being recognized as sexual men. It's just hard for guys in the FTM community to be recognized as men and as gay men by the gay male community."

Like Rice, Wilkinson identifies self-esteem as a key issue in being able to play safe. "I don't want to say this in a way that sounds like I'm pathologizing people, but there's a sense of fatalism some FTMs feel as guys who are new to the gay male identity. 'Oh, I'm a gay man now, I'm in San Francisco, I'm going to get AIDS.'" At the community advisory group meeting, he says, it became clear that "Visibility is a huge issue because if you talk about TG experience, all we ever see is MTFs. Whether it's the crap on talk shows or HIV prevention services in S.F." The lack of FTM images in safer-sex educational material or sexually explicit media contributes to this problem. Wilkinson sees this workshop series as one way to address some of these crucial problems, and hopes they will become an ongoing event and part of more comprehensive health services for gay/bi FTMs.

Tranny Talk

Being read: being outed as transgendered or cross-dressing by a person who will not accept you as a member of your preferred gender.

Binding: wrapping the torso or wearing confining clothing that will compress the breasts; done before chest surgery to create a male silhouette.

Bottom surgery: alteration of the genitalia.

Chest surgery: a breast reduction or radical mastectomy with nipple grafts, done to create a male torso. Also known as top surgery.

Cross-dressing: creating a public image that will allow you to pass as your gender of preference. May nor may not generate sexual excitement.

FTM: a female-to-male transsexual. There are also several synonyms: FtoM or M2M (in other words, though born female, we've always really been male), or transmen.

Gender dysphoria: a persistent and very uncomfortable sense of discomfort with the gender identity that one was assigned at birth and the physical markers of that gender.

Loho: taking a very small dose of testosterone.

Metoidioplasty: genital surgery that lengthens the clitoris, which has already been enlarged by testosterone. Testicular implants are usually done as well.

No-ho no-op: a person who identifies as transgendered but chooses not to take hormones or have surgery.

Packing: wearing an artificial dick that's large enough and stiff enough to penetrate one's partner. Also called strap-on play.

Passing: being accepted as a member of your gender of preference.

Phalloplasty: expensive and extensive genital surgery that involves the creation of a phallus. Testicular implants are usually done as well. The slang term *frankendick* reflects many FTMs' dissatisfaction with this procedure.

Stuffing: wearing a penile prosthesis to produce a believable basket. This prosthetic is usually not functional for fucking.

Trannyboy: a term for genderqueer female-bodied people who also identify with some aspects of the FTM experience; can also be spelled “boi”; does not necessarily indicate a desire to transition.

Trannyfag: an FTM who identifies as a gay or bisexual man.

Transgendered: an umbrella term for anyone who is differently gendered.

Transitioning: all the steps that one takes to be able to live in the gender of preference. Usually refers to taking hormones and cosmetic surgery. Also known as sex reassignment or a sex change (archaic). Sometimes called sex confirmation surgery by people who want to emphasize that the gender of preference should take precedence over sex chromosomes.

Transsexual: a person whose preferred gender identity does not conform to their sex chromosomes, genitals, secondary sex characteristics, or the gender that was assigned them at birth.

Transvestism: a sexual fetish for the clothing of the “opposite” sex.

Trannyfags Unzipped

[2000]

Once every two weeks, I get out a bottle of testosterone, a syringe, and two needles. I clean the top of the bottle with rubbing alcohol and use the larger of the two needles to draw out my oily dose of the hormone. Then I switch to the smaller needle. My partner uses another alcohol pad to clean off the upper outer quadrant of my butt, and throws that needle deep into the muscle. The whole process takes less than ten minutes, but it took me four and a half decades to get here.

A year's worth of effects seen dramatic to me, but I don't always pass as male in public. Every time I shave, however, there's a little more hair on my face. Someday I'll be able to grow a beard like a proper bear. My shoulders are bigger, my butt is more narrow and flat, and I have bigger muscles in my arms and legs. The savings account that will pay for chest surgery grows too slowly, but eventually I'll have \$7,000 to make my shirts fit right.

The emotional and psychological changes created by testosterone are more subtle. Is my internal landscape shifting because I am finally doing something about my gender dysphoria, or is it T? My libido is outrageous. I have always supported decriminalization of prostitution and public sex, but now my understanding of these things is, shall we say, somewhat more visceral. I can jack off twice a day and still want a quick blowjob after lunch. My appreciation for hard-core porn and other eye candy has intensified. When somebody fuckable

crosses my line of sight, they appear in sharp focus and bright colors, while everything else recedes into a dim background. I find it more difficult to cry. I don't have any problems with "roid rage"; so far, my temper seems to have cooled quite a bit. But the potential for physical confrontation does not spook me as much as it used to.

Gay/bisexual female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) are just starting to become more visible. This can be pretty jarring for gay men who base their common identity on having a dick. (While a few FTMs have genital surgery, most do not because it is so expensive, and the medical technology leaves a lot to be desired.) Transgendered queer men have enjoyed the most acceptance from groups that have questioned stereotypical body image or expanded their sexual expression beyond cock sucking and ass fucking with a biophallus. I'm talking, of course, about bears, the leather or S/M community, and fisters.

I feel blessed by the queer biomen who are willing to explore sex with me. My good fortune is probably due to the fact that an experienced top is hard to find, and many of the trips I like to run (bondage, dirty talk, tit torture, shaving, flagellation, dildo play, and handballing) are not dick-dependent. I tend to score better with guys who have done a lot of tricking. A genetic man with a rich history of man-to-man sex is less likely to be threatened by an encounter with somebody who was not born male. His queer identity is pretty unshakeable. By self-definition, whatever makes his dick get hard or his butthole twitch is homo-sexual.

Even when I have facial hair and a flat chest, there will be many xy gay men who will not want to accord me the courtesy of male pronouns. There's a lot of fear and loathing of female anatomy among Kinsey 6 fags. This kind of separatism hurts my feelings, but it is a little funny that the elegant architecture of the flesh between my legs has this much power to spook big bad daddies, even if I keep my 50ls firmly buttoned. Even if I never get to suck cock at a sex club or sink

into another willing furry butt, this gender transition would still be necessary. It is about my relationship to myself, which has to take priority over others' perceptions or opinions.

It's hard to explain what gender dysphoria feels like to somebody who has never experienced it. Most of us are too busy trying to fit into those "masculine" or "feminine," male/female categories to step back and ask why this system is so harsh and rigid. Gender dysphoria feels like something that was hard-wired, something I was born with. It appeared long before I heard about transsexuality, homosexuality, or any sort of adult sexuality. I never understood why my parents kept referring to me as a girl, and I frequently told them that I was going to be a man when I grew up. After being punished repeatedly for this, I learned to keep my mouth shut. I spent a lot of years trying to make myself feel better by being a different kind of woman. But when I hit menopause and my doctor told me I should start taking estrogen, I couldn't do it. I could not deliberately put female hormones into my body. I had run out of options. I had to try T, had to see if making the male part of me more visible would ease the adversarial relationship I had with my biology.

Luckily, I live with someone who understands this struggle all too well. My lover and domestic partner is another FTM. He has been on hormones for several years and had chest surgery a while back. Matt has done a lot of public speaking about being a gay transman, and runs an Internet mailing list for trannyfags and their friends. He is determined to fulfill his own notion of what it means to be a man, and refuses to conform to other people's standards. We are raising a son who is Matt's biological child, conceived during a time in his life when he was not taking T.

We've encountered hostility about being parents, partly because our culture insists that children be indoctrinated into conventional gender expression and heterosexuality. Our son will probably grow up to be a butch straight guy, but he will know that he has choices. Some of Matt's friends who

had accepted him as male had an especially hard time with validating that identity when he was pregnant. Matt's caustic reply to this was, "Oh, right, like you never told anyone you wanted to have his babies." Still, pregnancy was a pretty difficult experience for him, a major sacrifice he was willing to make because he wanted to be a parent so badly. Before I got involved with Matt, I assumed I would never raise a child, so this experience is a constant revelation to me, proof that life can always surprise me. The bond that I feel with our son is stronger than any other love I've experienced.

In some ways, my life is very domestic. I live with someone I love. I want to spend the rest of my life with him. We don't get out much because we are in baby world. But because we are transgendered men, we're a scandal. That is what the fight for sexual freedom is all about: the right to be left alone to enjoy the pleasures of an ordinary life.

Fifteen Reasons for Rejecting My Dick *(and My Responses)*

1. *It's artificial.*

This from somebody who can't get it up without a bottle of poppers and a tape in the VCR. Sure, you're Organic Boy himself.

2. *It takes too long to put it on.*

You go douche, I'll fool with the Velcro. We'll see who wins that race.

3. *It's too hard.*

'Cause a Viagra hard-on is so pliable and lifelike. Uh-huh. Sorry, I'll go get that two-week-old zucchini out of the fridge. That oughta be floppy enough for ya.

4. *It's too small.*

Look in the drawer, stupid. I have things in there that will reach your prostate even if it's hiding in Hawaii.

5. *It's too big.*

Actually, no one has ever said this.

6. *You won't be able to feel it.*

No, it'll only give me goose bumps from my toes to my tonsils. If you can believe that your favorite porn star really did shoot for eight straight minutes in his latest video, honey, trust me: There won't be any credibility problem when I get off.

7. *It isn't real.*

Yeah, sex is all about what's "real." Because that guy on the cover of your bear magazine really is a truck driver, and all the men who pose in *Playgirl* are tops. And when you close your eyes, you are thinking only of the very special person you are with and what he is doing in the moment to pour all his love into your tender flesh.

8. *You can't cum inside of me.*

Okay, you win. Here's cab fare and my therapist's phone number. See you on the cover of *Poz*.

9. *Where's the romance?*

It's extremely unlikely I would fall in love with anybody who couldn't take eight inches. Consider this your audition for True Love.

10. *I have a latex allergy.*

Can you say, "Avanti"? Or "silicone"? Or "fingers"?

11. *What will the other boys think?*

How are the other boys going to find out? I don't plan to take any ads out in the local gay rag.

12. *It just doesn't turn me on.*

Which is why your dick is pointing at your eyebrows, hmm? Precum never lies, Jack. You had to elbow six other people out of the way to talk to me, you knew perfectly well I was a tranny, and I bet you last bought somebody else a drink in 1986. We swapped so much spit on the way to my house that I could tell you your blood type. Whatever!

13. *I'm afraid it will hurt.*

ForPlay R Us. I own stock in Liquid Silk, Sex Grease, and Probe. If you want it to hurt, you're going to have to ask very very nicely, and make it worth my while.

14. *Can we just fist fuck?*

Will you marry me?

15. *I don't like to get fucked. I'd rather fuck you instead.*

I'm a top, but I'm not stupid.

Demanding Dignity: HIV and the Transgender Community

[1999]

I met Veronika Cauley on a rainy San Francisco afternoon at the Lyon-Martin women's clinic. Lyon-Martin is located on Market Street between Skid Row and the prosperous Castro district. Cauley had just gotten out of "Laughter and Tears," a support group for women living with HIV. She was wearing a brightly colored but conservatively cut women's business suit. A big, beautiful black woman in her mid-forties with a melodious voice, she looked like a middle-manager or a social worker, professionally feminine. We settled down for our visit in one of Lyon-Martin's small counseling rooms and tried to make ourselves comfortable on the well-worn, donated furniture.

The first thing Cauley wanted to do was define her terms. She prefers the label *transgendered* or *TG* because it is "inclusive of anyone with a nontraditional gender presentation." Rosalynne Blumenstein, coordinator of the Gender Identity Project (GIP) at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in New York, would later tell me that she also prefers this term. "It potentially includes everybody who isn't a heterosexual, masculine man with xy chromosomes or feminine woman with xx chromosomes. Some butch dykes or femmy gay men identify as transgender. So do men and women who cross-dress as the 'opposite' sex because it's sexually pleasurable, but have no intention of changing their mundane workaday identities (transvestites, drag queens, drag kings); people who are unhappy with the sex they were assigned at birth who've

used hormones and surgery to complete sex reassignment (transsexuals; trannies; male-to-female, or MTF; female-to-male, or FTM); transsexuals who have taken hormones and perhaps had some chest surgery, but not genital surgery (pre-ops); transsexuals who live in an identity other than the one they were assigned at birth but don't do hormones or surgery (non-op); and people who either were born intersexed (hermaphrodites) or wish to live as both or neither gender (Third Gender, gender-fuck, Two-Spirit, androgynous). Some transgender people see themselves as gay, but many don't. Some people identify with a larger 'gender community'; others wish to keep their cross-dressing or sex reassignment a secret."

Cauley is not the only male-to-female transsexual (MTF) in her support group. "I'm accepted as a woman even by other women," she says, despite not having been able to afford any gender confirmation surgery, or even electrolysis. I don't have any trouble reading or accepting Cauley as a woman either, and this isn't just the magic of estrogen. It's also her open-hearted, friendly manner and plain speaking combined with great empathy, sensitivity, and courage. She knows who she is, and her ease and confidence in her own identity communicates itself in a hundred subtle ways to others. The fact that I happen to think big girls are really sexy probably comes into this as well, I do confess.

This combination of cheerfulness and common sense makes Cauley a powerful advocate for her community. She's worked as the volunteer client services manager at the AIDS Emergency Fund, and done volunteer trainings at Shanti. She currently serves on Mayor Willie Brown's HIV/AIDS Planning Council, sits on the board of the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center, and is the Commissioner of Veteran's Affairs for the City and County of San Francisco. You just can't get around the girl!

Next we spoke about an epidemiological survey recently conducted among transgendered people in San Francisco that found that 63 percent of African-American MTFs were HIV-positive. This statistic has caused a great deal of alarm among

the handful of people trying to provide HIV prevention education and AIDS services to the transgendered community. Cauley feels that increased visibility of MTFs is a vital first step toward addressing this crisis. "In all of the drug ads for people with HIV, you never see a transgender," she says. "Never. We have no face. We are the invisible thing."

Despite being "thinged" her whole life, Cauley retains a sense of hope, a sense of humor, and a sense of purpose in her life. She mirrors the courage and the sharp wit I've frequently encountered in the transgendered community. When your very existence challenges something that other people take for granted, you can't help but become a social critic and an activist, if you want to survive. My lover is an FTM, and I have struggled with gender dysphoria my whole life. I can identify with the joy that Cauley described when she got out of the Navy and decided to "stop trying to be a man for my family." A Vietnam-era veteran, Cauley had served stateside as a medical corpsman and narrowly escaped being kicked out of the service in a gay witch hunt. "I related to men as a woman," she explains. "There was nothing homosexual about my relationships with men. It was confusing for a lot of them. It was definitely confusing for me."

At the age of 26, she located a gender identity clinic in San Diego and started taking estrogen, which promoted breast development and a more feminine body shape. She grew out her hair, got a new wardrobe, and told her lover to start using a female name and pronouns. The memory of those days still makes her laugh. "As I experienced the freedom of my femaleness for the first time, I reminded myself of Marlo Thomas in *That Girl*, as she twirled around downtown. I'd twirl around on the street not knowing my makeup was on wrong and not caring. It was probably the most free time in my life."

Most nontranssexuals, perhaps because of the repressed pain of their own gender conditioning, don't wish us well on our journeys toward self-discovery and happiness. Transgendered people are one of the most hated and misunderstood sexual

minorities in our culture. Sexologists do not know why an estimated one in 50,000 genetic males and females have a deep, persistent conviction that their gender identities do not match their bodies. Gender dysphoria usually manifests in early childhood, as it did for Cauley. She says, "I can't remember a time when I didn't want to be a woman. When I was a child I used to pray to wake up and be right, 'right' being a girl." Gender dysphoria like this may have a biological origin. It is a frightening and baffling conflict that can lead a person to seek out medical treatment, employing hormones and surgery, which make it possible for the male-to-female to live as a woman, and for the female-to-male to live as a man.

Sex reassignment has been done for four decades, but most insurance companies still consider it to be experimental or elective, and will not cover it. Some transsexuals manage to hold down a regular job despite the stress of having to perform in a gender role that feels at best awkward, and at worst suffocating. But it's rare to find an employer who will retain someone who is changing sexes. Having been made to feel like outcasts, and faced with the necessity of somehow raising money to pay for expensive hormone treatment and surgery, many MTFs wind up in the sex industry. When meeting daily survival needs like food and shelter is uncertain, preventing HIV becomes a low priority.

These desperate conditions were confirmed by the Transgender Community Health Project (TCHP) study, led by epidemiologist Kristen Clements. TCHP hired transgendered outreach workers to collect data. Clements says she instigated the study when she was serving on the HIV Prevention Planning Council in San Francisco. "As an epidemiologist it offended me that there was no information we could really use to work with transgendered people, nothing to base any kind of decisions on about this population." The TCHP sample of 392 MTFs was ethnically diverse—27 percent African American, 27 percent Latina, 27 percent white, 13 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, and 6 percent Native

American. TCHP researchers found that the median monthly income for MTFs was \$744. Thirty-two percent of the MTFs interviewed had worked in the sex industry in the last six months; 29 percent collected SSI or SDI. More than half of the sample had only a high school education or less. Almost two-thirds reported a history of incarceration. Almost half did not have stable housing. Fifty-two percent had no health insurance. About one-third of MTF study participants had injected drugs (other than hormones), and of this group, 63 percent had shared syringes. This population was also susceptible to high rates of victimization: 93 percent reported some type of abuse or discrimination, 59 percent reported being the victim of rape, and 37 percent had experienced recent physical abuse, usually by a boyfriend, husband, domestic partner, or sex partner. Thirty-five percent of the MTF respondents of all ethnic groups were seropositive. Clements terms these figures “frightening, higher than the figures for any other group studied to date.”

Although only 2 percent of the female-to-male (FTM) sample of 123 were HIV-positive, the incidence of risk behaviors was high, particularly among IV drug users and FTMs who identify as gay or bisexual. Most of the FTM data were gathered by research assistant Matt Rice, himself a transgendered man. He says, “Given the incidence of risk behaviors, I am afraid we will see a much higher seropositivity rate for FTMs in the coming years. And there are *no* AIDS prevention programs geared specifically toward my community.”

Cauley says high rates of seropositivity among MTFs are due to “low self-esteem, drugs, prostitution. With drugs, especially speed or crack, you will do anything with anybody. I know. I’ve been there.” She became a prostitute soon after going on female hormones. “It started with cab drivers and paying the fare with a little head,” she explains. She also held a variety of other jobs—nursing, modeling, hairdressing, and doing makeup for a theater company. Ten years later, while living in New York, “I was introduced to crack and I became a low crack

addict. I worked as a stripper at a sex club on 42nd Street, the Show Palace. I was a high-class hooker." Eventually she wound up living in a van near the Hudson River with a group of other addicts. After getting arrested and narrowly escaping a jail sentence, Cauley decided to go home to Evansville, Indiana, to be with her mother and stepfather. That year, 1989, she found out she was HIV-positive. Doctors at a Veterans' Administration (VA) hospital told her she had five years to live.

How could this tragedy have been prevented for Cauley, and for other transgendered women? Health education is being done, for the most part, by transgendered people who have persuaded AIDS agencies to devote a portion of their resources to differently gendered people. One such street-level activist is Miss Major, who was running a drop-in center for transgendered people at the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center (TARC). (She has since moved on to other projects.) The Tenderloin is a poor neighborhood in San Francisco with a high proportion of immigrant residents. This is also a neighborhood known for drug traffic and street prostitution, including transvestites and transsexual women.

In order to get to TARC, I had to dodge a lot of dog poop, broken bottles, empty crack containers, small groups of intoxicated men, and distraught people talking loudly to themselves. But once I passed through the front door of Major's domain, I was surrounded by an atmosphere of quiet acceptance and genuine concern. There are big couches, pretty posters on the wall, a stereo and a tiny television, a small library of books, and other amenities. It's early in the day for many clients to show up, but a few tranny girls were there sorting through their belongings or playing cards.

Major, an African American who jokes that she identifies as "a gay man with tits," explains why she created this sanctuary. "Some agencies give you a token for the Laundromat, but people stand there and point at you. Kids tell you you're a man. People have a beacon for us. We have to get a nerve together to run to the corner store to get a fucking soda. We can't open

a front door to let a breeze in to our places because people say there's a freak there, a man who thinks he's a woman. And if you are in a shelter, the crap doubles."

Major is 55 and has raised nine children, many of them "trick babies" born to other prostitutes. In 1992, she lost a long-term lover to AIDS, and she has taken care of countless friends who died of HIV. These losses, she says, inspired her to provide "safer-sex messages, condoms and lube, and dental dams and all the information. For the girls who do drugs I have information on how to do drugs safely, to not shoot up inside sores. If I have to I show them how to do it. I let them know where the needle exchange places are. If they can't deal with it because of attitude from the people there, I go with them." But she is up against formidable obstacles. "My TS girls who are prostitutes are not concerned about HIV because it's just what happens. If I can make an extra \$100 letting a guy fuck me without a condom, I can pay rent for three more days and get a hot meal instead of a sandwich from 7-Eleven." When the TCHP results were presented at Glide Memorial Church, an anonymous transgendered sex worker pointed out that racism is also a risk factor. "Everybody on the street knows that black girls get chosen last," she said. "And if you tell the trick he has to use a condom he disappears. The woman of color is supposed to put up with whatever she can get."

It's very hard to take good care of yourself when you are an outlaw. In New York, Javid Sayed, the coordinator for gay, bisexual, and transgender projects for the Asian and Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS (APICHA), explains that police crackdowns break up transgendered sex workers' networks and gathering places, making it harder for outreach workers to find them.

Jason Farrell, the director of Prevention Health Project (PHP), also decried Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's attempt to shut down the sex industry. He says, "People are just fearful to be seen out on the street, which actually perpetuates the spread of HIV because things are done more secretly

and people are even more afraid to access services.” Jennie Casciano, peer education program coordinator for the New York Peer AIDS Education Coalition, which works with street youth, points out that moral panics give bashers permission to act out. Casciano says anti-TS street violence in New York is “completely out of control,” and adds that in the last two years, three of her agency’s transgendered outreach workers have been murdered.

Arlene Hoffman is a peer educator at both PHP and GIP. Hoffman is a transsexual woman who began attending high school in North Carolina as a female when she was just 15. “I found doctors who don’t care, you pay them and they give you a hormone shot. It’s a business. I had no choice but to deal with it. It was that or not survive, and a lot of transpeople like myself did not survive. I’ve never been ashamed of being transgender but I’ve always felt misunderstood. I got into social work because I wanted to understand society, why people like myself were so ostracized, even from our own families. I wanted to be a part of something that would change and make it better.” She became HIV-positive in the early ’80s while in a monogamous relationship with a man who did not know that he was infected. “At that time, safer sex was not something that was common,” she said. “I didn’t use condoms. I wasn’t a prostitute.” He died in 1992, and she has been celibate since then, “but if I were dating now, I would be able to demand protection.”

Today, she is especially concerned about transgender youth. “There was no one to tell Arlene how to survive in this world. I would like to help young transgender people find a road if they want education and a home and family life and friends, let them know there are places they can come where people care about them, and they can have a future.”

In a soft Southern drawl, she tries to explain why it is difficult for so many of her clients to think about HIV prevention. “Pretend you’re homeless, and it’s ten o’clock at night. You’re in Times Square. Maybe it’s raining or snowing. You’re hungry

and you have no place to stay and really don't want to go to a shelter. Some man finds you attractive on the street and he offers you money or says, 'Hey, come spend the night with me. I'll buy you dinner.' You're thinking, 'I don't have any place to go. I don't want to sleep in the bus station or a doorway. I'm a human being, I want to be inside, warm and dry, I want to be with somebody who puts his arms around me.' That's very tempting when you have absolutely nothing."

Casciano also focuses on transgender youth. The New York Peer AIDS Education Coalition (NYPAEC), where she works, was founded in 1990 by Edith Springer. Springer and her colleagues found that HIV rates were rising drastically among gay, bisexual, and transgender homeless youth in the Times Square area. Rather than put the focus on AIDS alone, they took a more realistic approach to the priorities of their client base. They put up signs saying, "We give out food and money and condoms," and started doing just that, in the basement of a church. In 1995, NYPAEC incorporated. Casciano says she was attracted to NYPAEC because "It was working with youth and it was peer education and working with sexuality issues. Those are three things I'd never really found together before. It was a dream come true."

She believes peer education works better than other approaches because "peer educators are not at a different level, so there's no power dynamic. The information is more easily accepted and integrated by the client." And harm reduction, as opposed to abstinence models or risk reduction, is NYPAEC's approach because "Harm reduction talks about meeting people's needs as an individual. Talking to a young woman about sexual health, you might talk about how important it is to shower after sex. Well, when you are talking to a young homeless woman, the issues are different. If you don't have a shower and you don't have a bed, all those issues change. You have to take into account where the person is at before you give them information. Or they will feel you are looking down on them. They can't use the information, so

they probably won't come back."

Casciano pinpoints homophobia as a barrier to HIV/AIDS education in this group. "Some transgender people are saying, 'I'm not gay, so I'm not at risk.'" She supports the transgender community's need to "break away from the gay, lesbian, and bi community and do things for itself. That's very empowering. But we need to continue to address HIV/AIDS. The youth who are most at risk are the ones who don't associate with the gay community at all."

Given the amount of hostility they expect to encounter from outsiders, the transgendered people who are most at risk for HIV/AIDS simply don't trust anyone who is not also TG. When Major is able to persuade a client to make a change that could save her life, Major says, it is because "the girls" know that she herself is also transgendered, is a former prostitute, and understands their circumstances. She criticizes many AIDS service organizations (ASOs) that claim to provide services to transgendered people without actually doing so. "Right now, 'tran\$gender' is spelled with invisible dollar signs. If they want the state or federal money, they will talk the talk but they can't walk the walk. There should not be a program offering a service to any community that does not have a person from that community there to administer it." She neatly and bitterly sums up the position of her sisters: "We're at the bottom of the totem pole. Don't be at the bottom of the gender hierarchy and then have HIV or AIDS. People think, 'Yeah, that's good. They *should* have it, and that bitch should die.'"

Because ASOs have not channeled a significant proportion of their resources into doing education about HIV specifically for the transgendered community, certain dangerous myths about the disease are prevalent there. For example, Matt Rice frequently encountered postoperative transgendered women who believed their surgically constructed vaginas were "internal condoms that were resistant to HIV." TCHP workers did their best to correct such misconceptions. They offered study respondents free HIV testing and counseling in addition

to interviewing them about their risk factors. Rice says that his job was made harder by the lack of educational material that shows transgendered bodies or speaks honestly about the kind of sex that transgendered people are having. The TCHP team created its own safer-sex brochure that included information about how to safely inject hormones.

This brochure was based on an earlier pamphlet put out by the Gender Identity Project at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center of New York (GIP). Director Rosalyne Blumenstein told me that when they put together a safer-sex kit, they wanted to acknowledge the fact that many transgendered sex workers still have penises and are penetrating their clients. "So we have information on how to put a condom on a phallic woman. Many transgendered women didn't see literature pertaining to who they were, so they would feel shame about their genitalia." Rice added a drawing of an FTM to the TCHP brochure, and insisted on including information about vaginal protection, since some FTMs "are using the parts they already have."

The information in these brochures is a prime example of why it is necessary for transgendered people themselves to be involved in doing AIDS prevention work. According to the medical model of transsexuality, someone who is gender dysphoric enough to be labeled a true transsexual will be so uncomfortable with their genitalia that they would avoid any sexual activity that might trigger a reminder that the person's body does not match up to their self-image. This model is also heterocentric, and assumes that transsexuals aspire to imitate the social sex roles and sexual equipment of "normal" (that is, genetic) men and women. There's no room within that paradigm for a woman who makes a living by penetrating men, much less a tranny girl who enjoys using her six-inch clit and might not want to have a vaginoplasty. An FTM who wanted to get fucked anally, let alone vaginally, would, according to the medical model, not qualify as a "real transsexual." These outmoded definitions have often been used to deny

non-normative transgendered people access to hormones or surgery. When they are also used to make whole groups of people and their sexuality utterly invisible, transpeople themselves have to step forward and somehow muster the resources to create a more realistic picture of the diversity of transgendered experience, so that well-meaning efforts to reduce HIV infection rates will not miss the target.

Among almost all of the doctors and mental health workers who specialize in “treating” gender dysphoria, it has never been a priority to support erotic pleasure as a significant aspect of a happy life for their transgendered clients. Differently gendered people certainly have their share of issues with body image, finding partners, and creating styles of lovemaking that are affirming rather than traumatic, but the gender specialists are actually a lot more uncomfortable with trans sexuality than MTFs and FTMs.

Of course, this discourse is in its infancy. Transgendered people have often internalized medical concepts about gender identity disorder and sometimes use them as a way to reassure themselves that they do indeed “qualify,” that their identities are valid. This creates a less than ideal atmosphere even within the trans community to speak openly about intimacy, sensuality, and erotic gratification. HIV is a powerful motivation for making it safe to be honest about what we do to get ourselves or our partners off, right here, right now, rather than dwell in a fantasy realm about what life will look like after The Surgery. As more transgendered people become therapists and physicians, perhaps they can help to provide a container for a more compassionate and accurate dialogue about our bodies, ourselves.

Fortunately, there are non-TG professionals who have updated themselves and become genuine allies of the trans community. One of the experts who contributed to the GIP brochure was Edward S. Cheslow, M.D., who has been working with transgendered people and people with AIDS since the epidemic began. Cheslow says that “working with someone

going through gender transition is, at least for me, a joyous part of medicine. It's very similar to feelings that obstetricians have about facilitating birth. In comparison to the feelings of failure that generally came at that time in treating HIV, it was a welcome relief."

However, most physicians do not share his transpositive views. Cheslow criticizes his colleagues for arrogance and irresponsibility in this arena. "As far as educating medical professionals, it's very difficult to get people to think about gender at all. Transsexuality needs to be depathologized," he says. He is especially incensed about the "criminal" dearth of information as to how protease inhibitors interact with hormones. "There's precious little that the drug companies really care about other than their product liabilities," he says sadly. "Estradiol [a female hormone] does lower Viracept levels, so that would not be the first choice for someone going through transition." Another major obstacle for the physician is simple poverty. "This population is always on the brink of not surviving," he says, and calls this kind of medicine "frontier HIV care."

Blumenstein, who transitioned when she was 16, confirms this frightening picture of shoddy treatment for transgendered people living with AIDS. "Before we got involved in this work, people of transgender experience would not seek treatment for HIV. Or if they were receiving treatment they were usually made to feel so dehumanized that they would not stick with the treatment. The hospital would be in an uproar about where to put them or what bathroom they should use, so a large percentage would just leave the hospital. But people are coming out, people are being a little more visible. Most of our work is about educating people on how to love themselves. And that's the best HIV prevention you could do."

This attitude was something that Veronika Cauley seems to have overcome with sheer force of personality andchutzpah. When she found out that she was HIV-positive in 1989, she had gone to the VA hospital with hepatitis and a high temperature.

She had to commute from the hospital clinic in Evansville to another hospital in Maryland, Illinois, then to an HIV specialty clinic in St. Louis. "It would take me almost a week to be seen and come back," she said. "It was a big ordeal. The people were nice, but they were kind of freaked out by me. They had never been around a TG before and certainly not one as flippant and outgoing as myself." The memory makes her chuckle, but I am silently impressed by her determination to be treated well, and to get the help she needed to go on living. One of the reasons why Cauley worked to be appointed to the Veterans' Affairs Commission was to update HIV treatments in VA hospitals so that all veterans receive state-of-the-art care. She says proudly, "It's one of the best VAs in the nation, very progressive because it's here in San Francisco."

Until recently, Cauley was taking Viracept, Viramune, and ddC. She is still taking diazepam for anxiety, as well as her female hormones. But she quit taking protease inhibitors because of severe lipodystrophy and diarrhea. She says she is trying to follow a more holistic approach to her illness by getting lots of exercise and vitamins. Her T cells are at 645 and her viral load is at 345. She feels good, and says that if her viral load goes up, she may have to start a new combination therapy. In the meantime, she is checking out acupuncture and alternative medicine through the Immune Enhancement Project.

In 1992, Cauley lost both her youngest brother and her fiancé to AIDS. The man she married in 1996, Melvin Cauley, is also HIV-positive, and is currently incarcerated. But Cauley seems far too busy to grieve. She is hard at work advocating for her husband, who is bipolar and needs psychiatric treatment. She refuses to abandon him to the criminal justice system even though their relationship has been stormy. She's also excited about getting nonprofit status for her new agency, Transgender AIDS Advocacy Advancement Peer Project (TAAAPP). Cauley wants a single place for transgendered people to go for a full spectrum of services—housing, job training, and drug counseling. She says, "I have hope for the future. I have hope

that they will find a cure. I have hope that transgenders will no longer be a devalued segment of society. Because I think it's the diversity of the entire world that makes it a better place. People who have prejudice, they just need to get over it."

When racial prejudice is combined with transphobia, health educators are faced with an especially challenging battle to improve conditions within their own communities. Javid Syed is the coordinator for gay, bisexual, and transgender projects at The Asian and Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS (APICHA) and a member of the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association of New York. Along with the Audre Lorde Project and other groups, APICHA produced a transgender people of color conference. Until recently, epidemiologists' forms didn't recognize API people as a group; they got lumped in with the "other" category. APICHA was part of an "Other No More" campaign that pushed New York State and the city to start collecting data and targeting resources for this previously unacknowledged community. Syed says the agency has a commitment to work as an ally with "Native American folks who were not being targeted by data collection as well as resource allocation."

Syed has about ten peer educators, mostly bilingual, who do outreach. His job responsibilities also include community organizing, planning workshops, and literature development. When it comes to locating clients, Syed says, "Unfortunately, or fortunately I guess, there are huge amounts of really specific locations we can go to to locate transgender people in need of our services, because they are economically marginalized and cluster in sex worker establishments." Syed sees a powerful link between "globalization or colonization" and "the various kinds of economic, racial, postcolonial ways in which API people have been sexualized, feminized, and allowed certain kinds of venues to work or allowed certain kinds of identities to emerge."

There's a concept in some API communities that queerness is an alienated product of Westernization, so one of the

things APICHA does is “connect Asian transgender current expressions with the historical existence of nonheterosexual transgender folks in Asian countries. There are third-gender roles in a lot of traditional cultures.” Also, Syed feels it’s important to look at the racist stereotype that traditional cultures mistreat queer people. He describes attending a party thrown by a Laotian transsexual woman. “Her mother was there, her aunts and uncles were there. Transgender folks in a lot of Asian communities are valued by their families for a variety of reasons, including the fact that they are often the biggest money-makers. They are often not alienated from family and live a coherent queer life in the context of community and family. It isn’t always utopian, but it isn’t always homophobic.”

In this community, “We can’t talk about HIV/AIDS in isolation. Nobody would come. So one of the workshops we did was makeup tips for transgender women, and then we could talk about the ways in which politics and aesthetics are linked, how if you are considered more beautiful you can make more money, how that’s linked to self-esteem, how does that impact your survival and your feeling of where this work is taking you, and the risk of HIV/AIDS.” APICHA has also been successful with workshops that address the issue of amnesty and immigration and HIV. “A lot of the anti-immigrant backlash has made it even more difficult for us to provide any services,” he says sadly.

Syed highlights the link between epidemiology and services. Without such research, there is no way to document the needs of a community, so there’s no funding. He believes this fact-finding needs to originate from a grassroots level. “I’m actually not really hopeful that those large-scale research projects will ever be able to assess the needs of some communities. Especially not an API community that has 17 different languages.”

If it’s possible to rank oppression, the transgender people who are treated the worst in our society are probably transgender inmates. Scott Cozza and Judy Greenspan are

lobbying the medical facility at Vacaville prison to provide better care for transgender inmates. Cozza worked in the Vacaville prison in the early '90s and was appalled to see the majority of transgender inmates housed with the HIV-positive prisoners. "It's a setup for them to have sex," Cozza explains. "It's just human nature. A lot of the ladies who live down there are very attractive. I found some of them attractive. And there's a lot of heterosexual men living there in prison for over a year, not having sex." Condoms were, as a matter of prison policy, not available. Greenspan says that throughout the United States, only six correctional facilities allow condom distribution. Four are county jails; only two are state prisons. None allow needle exchange or distribution of bleach, but drug use is rampant, usually facilitated by corrupt guards. Cozza was supposed to set up a harm reduction program to reduce HIV infection among inmates, but came into conflict with the punishment philosophy of the administration, and was edged out of his job.

Greenspan explains that prison administrators see transgender people, mostly MTF, as deviant males. They are routinely denied hormones and prevented from "cross-dressing." Medical treatment for prisoners with HIV is abysmal, worse for prisoners who are perceived to be "sex perverts." This group of people tends to spend more time in prison, because parole boards do not consider them good candidates for early release. Cozza expresses a lot of discouragement about changing this situation because "I don't see the strong advocacy like ten years ago with ACT-UP." And Greenspan says flatly that it would take a "revolution" to make prison livable for transgender inmates and those with HIV. Prison has become "a big industry, it's very profitable to have this big source of cheap forced labor."

It's easy to feel helpless when confronted with the enormity of the problem of HIV in the transgendered community. Nontransgender people can assist in developing that empowerment by breaking through their transphobia,

questioning the way they perform their own gender identities, volunteering, donating or helping to raise money, and recognizing the courage and beauty of transgendered people. Clements describes her own process of becoming such an ally. "I have a great deal of respect for the individuals who in order to express themselves and be who they are go through this difficulty that they have to experience in life. I guess I was a little surprised when I saw my own [transgendered] interviewers experiencing discrimination. It gave me a lot of respect for the population, because of what they endure daily."

Blumenstein adds, "If you are dealing with an invisible community, you can do whatever you want with them. But if somebody says, 'This is not okay,' then people say, 'I can't just shit on this population, because there's somebody watching.'"

It's time we all started watching.

Shelter from the Storm

[2002]

“FTMs are stealing all the femmes!”

*—An indignant butch, speaking at a community forum
on transgender issues and the lesbian community*

I’ve been taking testosterone for about two and a half years. I had chest surgery almost a year ago. I’m still having to shave every other day or so because my facial hair refuses to flourish like lush tropical foliage. Instead, it resembles a drought-decimated lawn. Nevertheless, I get called “sir” by people who have no interest at all (as far as I know) in licking my boots. I have bigger muscles, a bigger clit, a deeper voice, and the fuzzy belly of a daddy bear. All of these things were changes that I expected when I decided to see if taking male hormones would make me feel more comfortable in my body.

But there were several changes I did not expect. Some of these emotional and psychological changes are even more far-reaching than being able to pick up bigger suitcases or getting patted on the back in the hardware store. For example, I am now able to understand the lyrics to heavy metal music. When I throw a crumpled-up piece of paper at the trash can, it goes in. Televised sports no longer bore me. There are no other cooks before me at the barbecue grill. A warning light goes on in my sixth chakra when it’s time to change the oil in the car. I stopped asking for directions a year ago. By three o’clock in the afternoon, I smell like old socks.

Actually, I'm just kidding about all of that. The most surprising thing that testosterone has brought into my life is a fresh, compelling, and sometimes overwhelming appreciation of femmes. I notice them before I notice anybody else in a crowd. There they are, looking fabulous, and here I am, wanting to do something dirty about it. Excuse me, miss, do you come here often? Have any interest in coming at all?

Maybe this surprised me because I unconsciously bought into the idea that if you are a transman, you must on some level have negative feelings about the female form. Instead, I seem to have been set free of any inhibition, hesitation, or insecurity that I used to feel about savoring the sight of or approaching beautiful women. Victoria's Secret commercials put me in a trance. Cleavage and miniskirts can fascinate me so deeply that I walk into telephone poles. Lipstick and high-heeled shoes make me perspire and breathe funny. I'll probably always be drawn to people who mirror my own identity, but alongside that Big Fag streak in my libido is a happy highway, down which I have run full-tilt, going girl crazy.

To say this is a touchy subject is to understate the obvious. If you are a real masochist, you do not volunteer to serve as the demonstration model for Bullwhipping 101. No, no, no. You organize a community forum about butches and FTMs. Your motives may be quite noble, and the majority of the people who come may be able to deal with their similarities and differences in an amicable fashion. But you can guarantee that there will be at least one FTM who will have to say something misogynist or antidyke that will set everybody off. At least one butch dyke will be pissed off because FTMs are stealing all the femmes (as if they had nothing to say about that). One or more femmes will have angst because all of the butches are taking testosterone and turning into men.

I'm well aware that there are femmes who would never have sex with an FTM for political reasons or issues of personal taste. I would never question their right to make that decision, just as I see no point in arguing with butches who believe

they have nothing in common with FTMs, no matter how reluctant they are to take their shirts off in bed and no matter how many dildo harnesses they've worn out. I avoid debates with heterosexual FTMs (or M2Ms, as they often like to call themselves) who are offended by any hint that their identities have anything to do with lesbianism, even though most people perceive a relationship between an FTM and a genetic girl as a lesbian relationship. One's heterosexual privilege endures only as long as one's transgendered status is unknown.

But I also know there are femmes who define themselves as women who have eroticized masculinity, whether it manifests in a butch, an FTM, or a bioboy. Some of these women think of themselves as dykes, some call themselves bisexual or queer. While I can appreciate the external appearance of a dolled-up straight babe, I am more interested in women who are not Kinsey 1s and 2s because we have a community in common, a position as outsiders, an insight into how the system of sex and gender privilege operates.

I also think that queer-identified femmes have a sharper sense of style, a more individual way of moving through the world and constructing their own images. The assumption that a femme is mimicking a heterosexual role is wrong-headed. It's quite a challenge to manifest a public queer identity as a feminine female, but they manage this task quite well, if you are paying attention. (Hint No. 1: Look for the short fingernails.) Femmes are fierce and radical in addition to being soft-skinned and nice smelling. Their skirts usually have pockets, and sometimes they are carrying sharp objects in their artful little evening bags. While they might gladly pretend to be submissive, that is by no means a foregone conclusion. The patriarchy has much to fear from them, for they are no man's pawn. It's all about Power to the Pussy.

Why am I all of a sudden longing to peel a busty beauty out of her latex catsuit or insinuate my fingers underneath a pair of black satin panties? Polarization is one of the qualities that I've always used to build sexual tension. I think there is a

difference between the kind of sex or intimacy that is based on sameness and the eroticization of difference, opposition, resistance, the mystery of the unknown. The more masculine my body has become, the more comfortable I feel putting my skin against Her, the one with long hair or seamed stockings. I am intrigued and drawn to femmes because their lives and desires are so very different from my own. And perhaps I feel an enhanced ability to be who they want or give them satisfaction. I am not so afraid that a femme would come into my life and be too much for me to handle. I am more grounded now, more settled in myself and thus more able to deal with other people's needs. Especially if they are willing to sit on my lap, wiggle around a little, and call me a dirty old man.

Being trans has not allowed me the luxury of simply blending into the scenery. My difference is still visible. As time goes on, my ability to "pass" may increase, but I don't think I will ever have a simple and straightforward male identity. I am not likely to be strutting naked around the steam room at the gym anytime soon. My body has taken so much criticism and judgment, from both other people and myself, that I often feel as if I am carrying an injury that I want to protect. Femmes represent a potential haven or refuge to me, a sanctuary from the uglier tactics of the Gender Police.

The phenomenon of the stone butch makes me incredibly sad. I think that female-born people with masculine attributes deserve to have as much pleasure in their lives as anybody else. We have our own kind of beauty, and we certainly need human contact and affectionate touch like any other primate. A loving femme understands this about her butch or FTM lover, but she also has an intuitive grasp of the physical boundaries that can sometimes intrude. If I don't want to take my shirt off, she's not going to harass me about that. If I need to be touched through my clothes, that's okay with her. If I need to take my pleasure indirectly, without having her touch me, she doesn't complain. And if I do want to be more vulnerable with her, she doesn't shame me.

By taking pleasure from me, a femme confirms that I am not deficient. I think this is an area where butch and FTM experience overlaps. Both of us want to know that we can love our women better than those guys with xy chromosomes and phalluses of flesh. In some ways, a femme *is* my dick, because when she gets off around me, she makes what I have seem valuable to us both.

Femmes feel like natural allies to me because I know that they have their own body image issues. Girls always feel bad about some aspect of their physical appearance. Women are always being made to feel too tall, too buxom, too fat, not voluptuous enough, too old, etc., etc., etc. Add to that the fact that many people assume anybody in a skirt is a straight girl, and you can see why many femmes feel alienated from the lesbian community and despair of ever feeling that they belong.

Aye, there's the rub. While being with me might be a very good time for a femme, might be exactly the kind of sex she is looking for, it can be pretty damn hard to hang on to a queer identity when we go out to dinner and get treated like boyfriend and girlfriend. The fact that we are sexual outlaws becomes a secret, unless I forget to pitch my voice low or start talking with my hands. She's often not very happy about this, and I'm not very happy about the fact that when we go out together, gay people avoid us, especially the men I would like to bend over and fuck. I want my bed to be a playground of delirious delight for her, and I don't want that joy to vanish during Gay Pride month.

I also know that dealing with a gender-dysphoric partner is not exactly a stroll in the park on a sunny day, unless we are talking about a park full of muggers and panhandlers and dog poop. If I had enough money to get the kind of surgery that I'd like, I *would* be strolling naked through the locker room, and glory holes would not make me bitter. I wouldn't need a Valium to use the men's room at the airport. And any ambivalence she has about being with a M-A-N would become a brick wall rather than a speed bump.

One of the things that a girl can count on in a lesbian relationship is a feeling of kinship about her own body, its cycles and its occasional malaise. I think being with someone who has had their tits off and rejoices at not having to bleed every month can make a female partner wonder if she is safe with or valued by her FTM lover, no matter how much chocolate and Advil he offers. If a femme has even a modicum of top energy, it can be a pain in the ass to suddenly be told that she can't put her hands or her tongue someplace where it was okay for her to be the night before. If you have no ill will toward the gender you were assigned at birth, it can be annoying or depressing to listen to the whining of those who wish they had different bodies or genitalia. If you add the ire of Alix Dobkin to all of this, well, it's no surprise that many FTMs lose their girlfriends along with most of their estrogen at some point in transition.

What seems to be needed is some new language and some new social categories. The term "trans-sensual" has been proposed as a descriptor for femmes who dote on FTMs. That's a good beginning. The proposal that we recognize transpeople and their partners as a new sort of sexual minority won't be popular with transsexuals who wish to transition and then blend into the larger society. But the awkward truth is that many of us will never be able to pass 100 percent of the time. More and more of us are choosing to eschew the closet so that we can do activism on behalf of the gender community.

I know that some of the women who are reading this essay will be furious that it appeared in a lesbian magazine, just as some FTMs will think that I have regressed and sold out my new identity by publishing it here. Both of those camps assume that an FTM who is turned on to foxy ladies is just a normal white-bread dude who probably owns too many baseball caps and never buys his own underwear. Butch dykes have many good reasons to feel competitive with men, and I know I could be perceived as just one more prick (despite my lack of one) who is poaching the Sapphic Fort Knox of lovelies.

What's the difference between me and a straight man? Well, for one thing, real men usually don't need hysterectomies. They have no idea what it feels like to have a vagina, and they learned to eat pussy (if they will go "down there" at all) from watching porno movies. If there's a wet spot on the sheets when we're done, I didn't make it, but you won't have to sleep on it anyway. I'm a gentleman who treats women well because I used to be perceived as one, and I know how hard it is to be an autonomous woman in a man's world. I don't need to get past your gag reflex in order to come, and you don't have to worry about whether it's a "safe day" or not when I go looking for your G-spot.

I also know that it's a lot easier to achieve political correctness than it is to find good sex, let alone true love: We all fear the exposure of being seen as we really are by someone we deeply care about, and yet we also hunger for the reassurance of being known, accepted, and understood. We want to know where we belong, to be adored and needed, to be soothed, defended, and challenged to be the best that we can be. The older I get, the less I care about how people label themselves and the more I care instead about how they label others. The true measure of a man (or woman) is not between their legs. It is in the heart, which either has the courage to try to connect in an authentic way with others, or shrinks from that glorious ordeal.

Layers of the Onion, Spokes of the Wheel

[2000]

Coming out is such a hard process that it's no wonder most lesbians and gay men can only manage it once in a lifetime. Coming out begins when we recognize, in a stigmatized Other, something of ourselves. Something disturbing we feel we must bring forward—at first into our own consciousness, then to a community of like-minded people where we hope to find welcome, and finally to outsiders. Coming out transmutes what is loathsome or unimaginable into something valuable and nourishing—garbage into gold, sickness into bread. This is an inherently terrifying experience because it means disobeying the voices of social disapproval (and often self-hatred as well) to risk becoming a more honest, but not necessarily happier or safer or more beloved, person.

Coming out ought to be a normal developmental process of differentiation. But we do it in the context of our culture's sex-negative pathology. It resembles or encompasses other stages of adult life that vanilla, gender-congruent, heterosexual people are able to take more for granted—achieving autonomy from the family of origin, undergoing sexual initiation, learning courtship skills and other social skills, forming a relationship, consolidating ties to a friendship network and a community, and (sometimes) clarifying political, moral, and spiritual values that impel us to take action.

Although coming out does not necessarily involve all three stages (coming out to self, a subculture, and society at large),

the individual who cannot move through the entire process usually is not fully able to separate from the judgments and distorted thinking of the surrounding culture and develop his or her own self-validating, stable identity as a member of a sexual minority. One of the most crucial tasks of coming out is to defeat the shaming voices of self-obliteration and reject the temptation to live for others' gratification and approval rather than our own. By coming out to ourselves, we free up the energy we spent keeping a part of ourselves hidden. By coming out to our kindred spirits, we acquire allies and rewards for integration and openness. We strengthen our little corner of the world, the walled gardens where some of our secrets may be told. By coming out to outsiders, we serve the health of the entire social body. We shut down or at least contest the omnipotence of the institutions that foster stigma; we replace ignorance and invisibility with the faces and lives of real people. We widen and clear the path for others to come out as well.

None of this is meant to imply that the power to come out lies only with the individual. The dangers that greet sexual nonconformity are quite real and at times life-threatening. There are few situations more painful than needing to come out when it is too unsafe to manage it and survive the process. This is a loneliness like no other; it generates a level of stress that can also be life-threatening. Those of us who have come to any sort of sexual sanctuary, however narrow or beleaguered, must never forget those who are prevented from joining us, and we must never stop trying to extend them practical as well as psychic aid. The work of coming out is rescue work. It is a prayer for the freedom of everyone who cannot escape—political prisoners, hostages to fundamentalism.

We cannot complete the last phase of coming-out—witnessing to outsiders—unless we are very strong (or desperate). If our private lives have been revealed without our consent, we must gather whatever dignity and courage we can scrape together and put the best face on things we can muster.

Whether willingly or no, stage three of coming out involves service to the body politic. It is at its core an attempt to ease human suffering. And so it has inherent spiritual value. To the extent that the first phase of coming out can be seen as the individual becoming more and more willing to mirror the self as a gift of our creator, to understand and love the self we were given by that creator, it too is a spiritual quest. And the attempt to foster kinship, love, and mutual care in the face of hatred and violence is also, I believe, an activity that brings us closer to the divine. Perhaps awareness of this aspect of our lives as queer people, the compassion we must learn to apply to our own wounds and the wounds of others, can help us to resist burnout as activists and breakdown as perpetual outsiders. We do not need to believe in deities or heaven and hell in order to recognize the healing power of bearing witness when evil is done, and encouraging the growth of kindness and justice.

The notion of heaven is, at any rate, only useful when people ask themselves what they could do to create a heaven on this planet, during this lifetime. The notion of God is only helpful when we worry over the problem of what constitutes goodness and attempt to make our best qualities manifest in every mundane interaction with other living creatures. I do not know how many more thousands of years the savior archetype will have to persist in our myths, legends, and catechisms before we realize that the only effective saviors we could possibly have are one another. Cruelty and evil are human problems, not defects of God, and we have it within our own power to banish them. No supernatural intercession is necessary. When people who suffer refuse to do so in silence, and instead make a public spectacle of their persecution, it is one more push against the stubborn resistance our species displays toward growing a collective conscience that will no longer tolerate such things as genocide, poverty, and discrimination. By coming out we establish the edges of a nation that as yet has no territorial boundaries, as cartographers understand such things. Still, those boundaries must be defended, often with our lives.

But there is another side of this: our grim combat with those who hate us. There is a powerful temptation to split and view everything bad as associated with The Enemy, everything good as within our camp. But that is distorted thinking, at best, and self-righteousness at worst. We cannot hope to grow as a community if we punish other people for speaking their sexual truth. Coming out is made more difficult because of the shortcomings of our own community. Some of these defects are not our fault; we may be so marginalized that we have few resources left to comfort one another. But we are responsible for doing better than our opposition, even if the only victory we want to achieve is on the battlefield of public relations.

We tend to avoid these responsibilities because they seem tedious rather than a source of power. Since we really *are* under attack, it is easy to get into martyr mode, which encourages a lazy attitude toward our own clutter and mistakes. Or we can become scavengers, unable to stop attacking, even if we are simply ganging up on someone who is weaker than ourselves. Storming the Bastille is a lot more scary than rooting out dissent within the ranks of the revolutionaries. I think, for activists, the paradigm of the farmer or the mason is much more useful than the paradigm of the warrior. If we thought of our work as cultivating the things that we will need to survive in the future or building a shelter to house our dreams rather than as a war in which we must annihilate the opposition, we might be less combative with one another.

We might also be able to come up with gentler and more effective ways to disarm the fear and hatred that can hamper or kill us. When you become aware of how much injustice there is in the world, the enormity of all the suffering that we inflict upon one another, it is very difficult indeed to have the patience to slow down and do the hard work of connecting, one at a time, with individual people who need to be educated or at least made aware that they will face resistance if they try to hurt or defame us. And yet this is the only way to guarantee that whatever social policies we manage to change or civil-

rights laws we get passed will be implemented or obeyed. We must somehow, at the same time that we plant our feet and show our teeth, create intimate opportunities for unqueer people to see the goodness in us. Persuading your neighbor to accept a casserole or serving quietly on a PTA committee creates as much social change as a riot or a politician's signature on a bill. This is the blessing and the curse of being queer: Our ordinary lives are amazing accomplishments, models for radical transformation and liberation. When we give and receive love under such adverse circumstances, especially when this exchange of affection and loyalty is made with people who are different from ourselves, we become like leaven in bread, like compost in the ground.

What does all this have to do with my own coming-out story? I've told this tale so many times that I fear it must lack all interest for me and the reader. Yet perhaps it's never been told in quite this way, with the power of 44 years of self-reflection and hindsight to color it. Be patient with me, if you can, as I try to connect this skein of theory to the fabric of my life. When I try to sum up what I know about coming out, I find myself thinking about several key shifts in my identity—coming out as a lesbian; coming out into S/M; coming out as a grateful addict in recovery, a pagan, a disabled person with a chronic illness that affects my immune system and causes persistent severe pain; coming out as bisexual; and coming out as transgendered. I've given these in roughly chronological order. Some people would no doubt believe that some of these items don't count as "real" coming-outs, or that it isn't possible for one person to hold all of these different identities in the same being. I have only my own experience to go on here, and that experience is that each of these transitions had a profound effect on my sexuality and was accompanied by a dramatic shift in who w s willing to be in my chosen family. Each was a wall of fire I had to walk toward and through; each involved confronting stigma and my own self-loathing. And from each I have drawn a great deal of solace on both physical and extraphysical planes.

What I remember about coming out as a lesbian in 1971, at the age of 17, in Salt Lake City, Utah, is how very harsh the times and that place were. I was part of a generation of young people who protested the war in Vietnam, experimented heavily with drugs, worked for social change and justice, and tried to free sex and love from the strictures of the heterosexual nuclear family. Certainly there was joy in that work, but it was more often either boring or frightening. It was only a decade after all of our marching and protesting that we found out how badly we had frightened the authorities and how powerful we were. At the time, we were mostly aware of our fights with each other, burnout, the hostility we encountered from the media and from older people who were not politically involved, the violence that met our calls for peace and eventually seduced some of us into taking up violent means ourselves.

Friends of mine got killed in Vietnam. Other friends went to Canada, went underground, went to prison. Hippies were universally hated, frequently the target of abuse just as queers are today. I was a hippie, but hippies didn't necessarily like queers or feminists. There was one dyke bar in town, and it was working-class, hostile to antiwar work and the women's movement. Its patrons had been working in men's jobs or finding other ways to survive long before feminism came along, and were proud of the fact that they had done this without the benefit of any help from straight girls who had spent most of their adult lives frittering their time away at college. I knew maybe three other dykes who were feminists, and they all had such serious personal problems of their own that they weren't much help to a kid who was trying to come out into a community that did not necessarily want my underaged, long-haired, dope-smoking, bra-burning self.

Older dykes would not sleep with me because they thought it was "cradle-robbing." It was assumed to be a terrible thing to be the first one to have sex with a young woman, to "make her be that way." Bringing someone out was akin to cursing them. I felt like Joshua at the walls of Jericho, only there was no

magic trumpet to bring down the stony barriers that already-established lesbians had erected around their enclave. I could not carry a tune in a bucket, but I tried to join a lesbian choral group because it did not require ID like the bar. I was told I could not come back because I did not look like a lesbian. Girls with long hair were not supposed to dress like male hippies. I had no sense of femme style and refused to make myself over as a bar butch.

If I had not accidentally run into another 18-year-old who also needed someone to bring her out, I would probably have had to wait years to connect with an out-of-town trick who did not know I had been placed off limits. Nevertheless, I spoke about being gay at college classes, I came out to straight friends, and I took an enormous amount of crap in the dorm rooms at school for being the only visible gay woman at the University of Utah. Jocks used to threaten to beat their girlfriends if they were ever seen talking to me, and do even worse to me.

Coming out was very lonely. I had very few friends. Most of the adult lesbians I knew were alcoholics, chronically unemployed, prone to violence, self-hating, apolitical, closeted, cliquish. Lesbians often hated each other then, and made no secret of it. If you found a lover, you stopped going to the bar because you could not trust other lesbians; it was commonly believed they would try to break up your relationship. My first woman lover went into the military, where she turned in other lesbians so that she would not be exposed. One of my dyke friends got a job as a supervisor in a cabinet-making company and refused to hire lesbians because, she said, they were unreliable employees who were disliked by the other workers. All of her friends were straight men who tolerated her presence at some of their social gatherings but subjected her to a lot of rough teasing. Yet she preferred that to being with her own kind.

The only thing that seemed worse to me than the apolitical, frightened, and mean lesbian community I came out in was the strangulation of pretending to be straight. I came out only because I could not go back; there was no place for me to stand

in the het world. I was driven out of the life that my parents had assumed would be mine. Being queer was a nightmare, but you could wake up from a bad dream. There was no escaping the ugliness of heterosexuality. The way that men treated women literally made me see red. Women were a dirty joke—not particularly bright, irrational, infuriating creatures who drove men mad with desire while stubbornly and selfishly refusing to gratify it. Women were routinely talked down to, sexually harassed, excluded from decision-making, and given all the menial chores that men found distasteful. The Mormon version of female virtue was restricted to making babies, cooking and cleaning, and deferring to the spiritual leadership of a husband. In the tenor of such times, it was outrageous for women to demand equal pay for equal work since they weren't supposed to be working outside of their homes in the first place. True, most women seemed as invested in this system as their male counterparts, and did not express any of the agony that I felt about being squeezed into the mold of femininity. But did they really have a choice? It seemed obvious to me that women simpered, acquiesced, and catered to the male ego only because this lopsided system was backed up with the threat of ridicule, rape, and worse forms of violence.

Moving to San Francisco improved things somewhat. There was more public lesbian space there—six bars instead of one. But it did not alleviate the loathing with which my family viewed me. Nor was San Francisco in the early '70s any sort of gay utopia. We had no gay-rights law, queer-bashing was a frequent event, and everyone had lost at least one job or been denied a place to live. It was a relief to be surrounded by other lesbian feminists, but only to a point. Bar dykes and feminists had contempt for one another in San Francisco as well as Salt Lake City. Feminism rapidly became a way to reconstitute sexual prudery. I had never been a successful member of the bar scene, but now it seemed to me that bar dykes were actually more accepting of and knowledgeable about the range of erotic behavior that constituted lesbianism. The right

to sexual self-determination extended to abortion, but not to using a sex toy or getting a spanking.

There was one unifying ideological tenet. In the bars or in the women's movement, separatism was pretty much mandatory, if you didn't want to get your ass kicked or be shunned. Initially, I liked the idea of women being able to focus on one another, without the distraction of smoothing over some guy's fragile ego. Men were not helpful teachers, so if we wanted to learn skills that had traditionally been within the male purview, it seemed much easier to figure that out with other women. But separatism deteriorated into a rationalization for witch hunts in the lesbian community rather than a way for women to bond with one another and become more powerful activists. The lesbian community of that decade did terrible things to bi women, transgendered people, butch/femme lesbians, bar dykes, dykes who were not antiporn, bisexual and lesbian sex workers, fag hags, and dykes who were perceived as being perverts rather than über-feminists. We were so guilty about being queer that only a rigid adherence to a puritanical party line could redeem us from the hateful stereotypes of mental illness and sexual debauchery.

What did I gain by living as a lesbian? I came a little closer to making my insides match my outsides, and that was no small blessing. The first time I met other dykes I recognized a part of myself in them, and knew I would have to let it out so that I could see who I was. For a time, being a lesbian quieted my gender dysphoria because it made it possible for me to be a different kind of woman. That was an enormous relief. For a long time, I hoped that by being strong, being sexually adventurous, and sharpening my feminist consciousness, I could achieve a better fit between my body and the rest of me. Lesbianism was a platform from which I could develop a different sort of feminism, one that included a demand for sexual freedom and had room for women of all different erotic proclivities. I had a little good sex and discovered that I was not a cold person, I could love other people. It was as a

lesbian that I began to find my voice as a writer, because in the early days of the women's movement, we valued every woman's experience. There was a powerful ethic around making it possible for every woman to speak out, to testify, to have her say. But there were always these other big pieces of my internal reality that lesbianism could not accommodate.

The first big piece of cognitive dissonance I had to deal with, in my second coming out, was S/M. I date my coming out as a leatherdyke from two different decisions. One was a decision to write down one of my sexual fantasies, the short story that eventually became "Jessie." At the time I wrote the rough draft of that story, I had never tied anybody up or done anything else kinky. I was terribly blocked as a writer. I kept beginning stories and poems that I would destroy. I have no idea if they were any good or not. My self-loathing was so intense, my inner critic so strong, that I could not evaluate my own work. So I decided to write this one piece, under the condition that I never had to publish it or show it to another person. I just wanted to tell the truth about one thing. And I was badly in need of connecting with my own sexuality, since I was in the middle of what would be a five-year relationship with a woman who insisted we be monogamous, but refused to have sex with me.

So I wrote about dominance and submission, the things I fantasized about when I masturbated that upset me so much I became nauseous. Lightning did not strike. As I read and reread my own words, I thought some of them were beautiful. I dared show this story to a few other people. Some of them hated it. Some of them were titillated. Nobody had ever seen anything like it before. The story began to circulate in photocopies of photocopies, lesbian *samizdat*. I found the strength to defend my story when I was told it was unspeakable or wildly improbable.

In October of 1976, I attended a lesbian health conference in Los Angeles and went to a workshop there about S/M. In order to go to a workshop, you had to sign a registration sheet. I was harassed by dykes who were monitoring this space to see

who dared sign up for that filthy workshop. On my way to the workshop, I had to walk through a gauntlet of women who were booing and hissing, calling names, demanding that the workshop be canceled, threatening to storm the room and kick us all out of the conference. The body language and self-calming techniques I had learned when I had to deal with antigay harassment on the street came in very handy, but how odd it was to be using those defenses against the antagonism of other dykes. Their hatred felt like my mother's hatred. I am so glad I did not let it stop me.

When I got home from that workshop, I knew that I was not the only one. Not only were there other lesbians who fantasized about sadomasochism, there were women who had done these things with each other. I decided to come out again. If there were other leatherdykes in San Francisco, they had to be able to find me, so I had to make myself visible. This meant that I often did not get service at lesbian bars, or I was asked to leave women-only clubs and restaurants. I was called names, threatened, spit at. I got hate mail and crank calls. But I also found my tribe. And because I had already experienced my first coming-out, I knew we were not going to be an ideal, happy family. I could be more patient with our dysfunctions, and see them as the result of being scared, marginalized, kicked around.

Being a leatherdyke took me another step closer to dealing with my gender issues. I could experiment with extreme femme and extreme butch drag, take on a male persona during sex play. I gave up separatism because I needed to take support from any place where it was available. Gay men already had a thriving leather culture, and I wanted to learn from them. I also wanted to have sex with them. It still wasn't okay (as far as lesbian feminism was concerned) to be bisexual, to be transgendered, but I could bring those folks into my life and make alliances with them. I could defend them in print. There was even more good sex, and people who loved me and received my love despite the fact that it was dangerous for us

to show ourselves to one another. I faced my sexual shadow, and she bowed to me and then danced beautifully in profile against the hungry screen of my consciousness. My writer's voice was unlocked.

I don't know how I would have gotten through any of those changes without drugs and alcohol. I came out of high school with poor social skills, partly because I was such a weird kid that people were put off by me, and partly because my mother's religious fanaticism and my dad's alcoholism isolated our family. Drugs were a way for me to make friends, connect with other people, have a role at social occasions, begin conversations, get people into bed. When I was depressed or frightened, they helped me to make it through the night. I also occasionally got a glimpse of some larger love beyond the pangs of longing I felt for my fellow creatures, a love that was like an ocean of bliss. I felt as if that was the place where I had come from, the place where I would return, but I had no idea what that meant about how I should live my life. When I came out as gay and rejected the Mormon religion that had been forced on me as a child, I became alienated from spirituality as well as religion. I always had an altar on top of my dresser, and I was constantly reading about goddess worship, but I didn't reach out to others in the Wiccan community. It would have been the one thing too many, and women-only Wiccan circles were rabidly antiporn and anti-S/M in those days.

Coming out as a clean-and-sober person and as a spiritual being happened simultaneously for me, in 1991. Like any other coming-out, cleaning up was a matter of "choosing" the lesser of two evils, at least in the beginning. I had briefly experimented with heroin in the company of a lover who was a long-term junkie. Smack felt like the experience I had been looking for my whole life. It was like being bathed in a cold sea of uncaring euphoria. I liked it better than sex. When I thought about that, and when I saw what it had done to my lover, I got scared enough to decide it was time to make another big

change. Once again, I lost friends and sex partners. People told me I wasn't an addict, I didn't have to do this, why didn't I just abstain from heroin and do everything else? The problem was, using other drugs just made me homesick for heroin, and they no longer got me high enough. What I discovered in recovery was that being an addict is linked to being dishonest, and if you want to stay sober, you have to give up your secrets. The secret I chose to give up first was my paganism, my love for the goddess, and my belief in Her love and goodness. I went looking for other people I could celebrate and worship with. The only thing that upsets people more than my being a sadomasochist is the fact that I'm a goddess-worshipper.

Twelve-step adherents and pagans are not perfect people (and usually they are not the same people). But by this time I had stopped longing for a utopian subculture where I would fit in perfectly and find people who would never give me the willies or make me roll my eyes. All I wanted was to get relief from the constant craving to escape reality with a chemical infusion. I wanted to stick around for the rest of my life. And if I was going to live that long, I needed to know why I was here, who had put me here, and what I was supposed to be doing.

I'm really grateful that spirituality came into my life before I developed fibromyalgia. I've always loathed saccharine homilies that link disease with spiritual growth. When people paint verbal cherub's wings on somebody with a terminal illness, it makes me want to gag. You shouldn't have to get cancer or AIDS to be able to think about the greater meaning of your life. Stereotyping the ill as being closer to the angels is just one more way to ignore the grittier aspects of our reality, a way that the (temporarily) well or able-bodied put distance between themselves and us. But the truth is that many people don't face such questions until we are in pain, or know that our lives are coming to a close. Being disabled certainly gives you a reason to look beyond your suffering body for a source of contentment and meaning. I know there are crips who force themselves to go on just because they are so pissed off

about being sick or hurt. I can't run on anger alone. Maybe I'm too old, or maybe it's just the ulcers.

Another leatherdyke once told me, at a play party that I attended with my broken leg in a cast, "I see you finally got what you deserve." As far as I know, this woman wasn't my enemy. But she seemed to take it for granted that because I was a top, the universe would of course turn around and zap me, even though my "hurting" people was all about making them happy. How, then, could I hope for a compassionate reception outside of the leather community? It's still hard for me to talk about being disabled, in either venue.

For the first two years I walked with a cane, I frequently encountered women who would tell me how unattractive it was. That's petered out, at least in San Francisco, but I still encounter enough other unpleasant bullshit. I get challenged, verbally or physically, by leatherdykes who think that my disabled status disqualifies me as a top. Or I am simply erased as a sexual being. In large public events, people frequently crash into me. They literally don't want to see anybody in leather who is also walking with a cane, or in a wheelchair. And, of course, both perverts and nonperverts are poorly educated about autoimmune conditions and prefer to see them as psychosomatic. This is all about well people being afraid that something mysterious will strike them down and put them in pain. And, Goddess forgive me, I have terrible days when I sorta wish they could have that experience, if only briefly, to teach them a little more empathy. Most of the physical help I've gotten coping with my illness has come from other disabled people, who can ill afford it, and I think that's pretty shameful.

At San Francisco Sex Information, after a moving lecture about the limitations that a deteriorating central nervous system had placed on her sexuality, a disabled woman was asked if there were compensations for being disabled. She was understandably outraged. "Well, the back of my neck has gotten really sensitive," she said bitterly, "but that hardly makes up for everything else." People are in such a hurry to dismiss,

downplay, and overlook physical challenges that I hesitate to dredge up some of the positive aspects of living with hampered mobility, chronic pain, and cognitive problems. Certainly I have had to learn patience with myself and with others. I've had to become more assertive, to cope with medical people and with ignorant noncrips. When I become resentful or despondent, I've learned to focus on my gratitude. There are many things in my life that exist outside of my pain and give me joy. I'm especially grateful for the fact that I am able to continue to work, since many people with this illness cannot. Clear-seeing has become very important, since I need to know more than ever what I can and cannot do, and divine others' intentions toward me.

The fact that my body has become a source of at least as much misery as pleasure has paradoxically made it easier for me to stop calling myself a lesbian and use the term *bisexual* instead. I just don't have the energy any more to hold up facades. Back in 1971, I initially told people I was bisexual, but discovered this meant that straight people saw me as a heterosexual who occasionally dabbled in not-very-serious sex with "other girls," while gay people saw me as a dyke who hadn't come all the way out of the closet yet. Nobody trusted me, and nobody would dance with me. In 1980, when *Sapphistry* was about to be published and my first article about lesbian S/M appeared in *The Advocate*, I said in that article that if I had a choice between being marooned on a desert island with a vanilla dyke or a leatherboy, I would take the boy. I got an extremely irate phone call from Barbara Grier, owner of Naiad, the company that was going to publish *Sapphistry*, informing me that they did not publish books by bisexual women, and if that was what I was, she would yank the book. Already in the midst of a firestorm about being public as a sadomasochist, I acquiesced, and delayed this coming out by another twenty years. I became "a lesbian who sometimes has sex with men."

I still think this is a valid category, and remain unconvinced that the most important thing you can know about someone's

sexuality is the preferred gender of their partner. But today I'd rather not argue about it. I need to keep things as simple as possible. Bisexual people are still being excluded from the gay community's cultural and political life. And I find myself being personally affected by that exclusion. It hurts me and makes me angry in a way that it would not, I think, if I were not on some level affiliated with bisexuals. I would rather stand with a group of people who don't expect me to turn myself into a pretzel to explain what makes my dick get hard. This doesn't mean I think it's wrong or passé to be a Kinsey 6. But I do think a quest for purity of any sort is almost always morally dangerous.

Being more open about having sex with men has brought my own gender dysphoria to the fore. When I put my body up against a male body, what I notice is how hard it is for me to feel connected to my own flesh. Even more important has been the experience of loving someone who is a female-to-male transsexual (FTM), my domestic partner, Matt Rice. I knew Matt before he transitioned, and it has been such a positive change for him. By taking testosterone and getting chest surgery, he not only allowed himself to become and live as a man, he became a much better person—kinder, more patient, happier, sexier, sweeter. (He still won't suffer fools gladly.) The fact that Matt has managed his transition with this degree of success gives me hope that I might be able to find a less distressing place for myself. I expect, like any other coming-out, this will have its shitty aspects. But I think it will also create a greater sense of freedom and comfort.

It's hard to write about coming out as a transgendered person because I don't know, as I type this, how that will get expressed in my public life. I haven't begun taking hormones yet, much less had any surgery. I'm still in the place of talking to my therapist, talking to friends, reaching out to people in the FTM community, getting more information about what it means to transition. Perhaps I am one of those people who can never fully identify as male or female. If so, being read

publicly as a guy might be as unsatisfying for me as being perceived as female.

What I *do* know is that I can't continue the way that I have been for the first forty-four years of my life. I'm tired of being unhappy with my body. Tired of pushing people away from my breasts and cunt, feeling angry about the fact that my self-perceptions don't match what other people see, worn out by the laborious process I have to go through if I'm going to perform sexually as a woman. My body feels like the biggest and most inconvenient piece of drag anybody ever had to lug around. While living as a man would certainly involve being cut off from some aspects of my history, my experience, and my self, living the way I am now cuts me off from equally valid personas and desires. I am afraid to change, very afraid, and yet I think I do not really have a choice.

One day in therapy I was trying to tell my therapist why this had all come to a head for me. Suddenly I could not speak because internal events were too intense to express for a little while. It was as if a tunnel of light had opened up from my chest that ran back into my past and connected me with the self I was as a child. That little person was so angry about being told he was a girl. He was all alone, and only a child, yet he fought the adults who mislabeled him and punished him for saying out loud what he knew to be true about himself. To him, the idea of being forced to become a girl was like being cut in half.

Was I, even at that tender age, simply responding to the suffocating prospect of being relentlessly shoved down into the second-class status of a woman? How can I separate out sexism from gender dysphoria? I'm not sure anybody can. All I can tell you is, I've done all the things I was told that girls couldn't and shouldn't do. I've been a female sexual outlaw for a really long time, and it hasn't fixed things for me. It hasn't made me feel at home in my own body. The child who cried every night about not being a boy needs to be heard, and it is my job to be a strong lesbian mother and parent that child with unconditional love.

Why do I feel this way? I don't know. It feels crazy. My body is pretty girly. The obvious explanation is that I am, like everyone else in this sexist culture, a misogynist. But I love female bodies. I love breasts and cunts. I just happen to intensely dislike mine, most of the time. Yes, I grew up in a culture that was intensely sex-negative. No, that's not all that is going on here. I can't think of one more thing I could do to liberate myself from the voices of erotic shame, and I still find myself thinking, *My body should look more male*. I feel more like a guy than a woman. Ironically, even though most of my lesbian partners have encouraged me to be as masculine as possible and reacted with dismay or outrage when I femmed it up, very few of my lesbian friends or exes will support me if I do transition. I think this has to do with their fear of their own latent bisexuality.

One of the ways I have to talk with my gods is to use divining tools to ask them what they want me to do. When I draw a rune to ask Freya why this is happening, I get the same rune over and over: Gyfu, the Gift. For most of human history, people who have walked between genders were revered, since it was thought that they might be able to intercede between heaven and earth as well, to unite other polarities to the benefit of their people. Our society has no such sacred caste. But I believe my goddess wants me to do this, made me this way for a reason. Perhaps it is my spiritual vocation in this life to experience virtually every aspect of sexual oppression and speak out about the suffering it causes. Or maybe I'm just reaching for grand explanations because I don't want to be perceived as delusional. I'm a therapist, and I know what therapists have to say about people like me.

When I first came out as a lesbian in 1971, identity politics were so pervasive that this modality didn't even have a name; it was simply the sea in which every queer sank or swam. One of the key assumptions of identity politics is that we can reveal in one grand social drama of coming-out the absolute inner core of truth that makes up one's "real self." Coming out is seen as a

process like peeling away the layers of an onion or the petals of an artichoke. Identity politics also assumes that your political allies will have to be people who share your identity, because nobody else could understand your oppression or really be committed to fighting it; that people who share some aspects of your sexuality but not others are either afraid to come out or traitors to the cause; that it's not possible for someone to change the way they label themselves without being dishonest or cowardly.

Now I see queer politics quite differently. I know from personal experience that I can't trust somebody just because their gender identity or their sexual preferences resemble my own. I know we can make allies who are indignant about injustice even if it does not impinge directly upon their own lives. I see coming out as a lifelong process that proceeds as I become ready to understand and accept aspects of myself that bear lessons I need to learn at different points in my life. Each new coming-out does not re-create me as a whole new person; I think some people view it this way, but this is crazy-making and too compartmentalized for me. It's more like being able to see each and every spoke of the wheel that makes up my being, or like opening up and furnishing another new room of my soul.

I wonder what coming-out would be like if we were not forced into these defensive positions of tribal loyalty and us-them thinking. What if we could say to a friend who was embarking on a new coming-out, "I love you, and so I must also love this new aspect of yourself. Because I care about you I want to know more about it. Let's both learn from this." Instead, what usually happens is a great deal of indignation, betrayal, and rejection. I think this is because a person who is coming out threatens the identities of former acquaintances, partners, and co-workers. If someone else's identity can be fluid or change radically, it threatens the boundaries around our own sense of self. And if someone can flout group norms enough to apply for membership in another group, we often feel so devalued that we hurry to excommunicate that person.

This speaks to our own discomfort with the group rules. The message is: I have put up with this crap for the sake of group membership, and if you won't continue to do the same thing, you have to be punished.

We seem to have forgotten that the coming-out process is brought into being by stigma. Without sexual oppression, coming-out would be an entirely different process. In its present form, coming-out is reactive. While it is brave and good to say "No" to the Judeo-Christian "Thou Shalt Nots," we have allowed our imaginations to be drawn and quartered by puritans. I believe that most of the divisions between human sexual preferences and gender identities are artificial. We will never know how diverse or complex our needs in these realms might be until we are free of the threat of the thrown rock, prison cell, lost job, name-calling, shunning, and forced psychiatric "treatment."

I do not think human beings were meant to live in hostile, fragmented enemy camps, forever divided by suspicion and prejudice. If coming-out has not taught us enough compassion to see past these divisions, and at least catch a vague glimpse of a more unified world, what is the use of coming out at all? I have told this story, not to say that anybody else should follow me or imitate me, but to encourage everyone to keep an open mind and an open heart when change occurs. The person who needs tolerance and compassion during a major transformation may be your best friend, your lover, or your very self. Bright blessings to you on the difficult and amazing path of life.

III.

Destroying the Village in Order to Save It

What Comes Between You and Your Body?

An Introduction

[2002]

The state has enormous power to interfere in what ought to be our privately controlled lives. To outline various aspects of these threats to individual liberty, the articles in this section document and critique some disastrous policies and laws, both local and national, governing recreational drugs, prostitution, S/M, sexually explicit speech and images, sexual orientation, gender identity, and the AIDS pandemic. Many of these acts of the state are based upon values taken from puritanical Christianity. Unfortunately, there are people who would like the long arm of the law—and its correlation with Old Testament morality—to stretch even further. The right wing in America is inspired by a fundamentalist brand of Christianity that will never reconcile itself to the separation between church and state. If the Bible and the Constitution disagree, right wingers think it incumbent upon our lawmakers to initiate a drive to amend the latter.

Zealous members of the Christian right are fueled by a firm conviction that they have a sacred obligation to prevent or punish behavior and beliefs that they identify as sinful. While they are sometimes willing to appropriate the language of psychology or even feminist rhetoric about protecting women to justify this agenda, at bottom their argument is a theological one—authoritarian, monotheistic, and immune to reason. Their list of sins is cobbled together from selected passages of the Bible. A divinely engendered savior supposedly gave them

a mandate to hold everyone, whether Christian or not, to an identical and repressive code of behavior. I sometimes wonder if any of these people have actually read the New Testament. The self-described Son of Man (not God) who broke bread with prostitutes and tax collectors, healed the child of a Roman soldier, saved an adulterous woman from being stoned to death, broke Sabbath taboos, allowed a prostitute to bathe his feet with costly perfume, eschewed familial obligations to his mother, healed the severed ear of a disciple who would later deny him, condemned rich men and the hypocritical but pious religious leaders of his day, encouraged people to focus on treating one another well rather than on accumulating material possessions, and braided a whip that he used to chase money-changers from the temple—well, that radically tolerant revolutionary has disappeared from view.

If the ultraconservative agenda can be put in a nutshell, this is it: The right wing wants to come between you and your body. The state can already claim ownership of your body when it needs you to fight a war or wants to punish you for committing a crime. But the Christian right wing is intent upon weaving a more onerous web of social control. Conservatives want to prevent your eyes from seeing libidinous images or taking in any facts or fiction that they deem wrong. If disobedient thoughts and titillating pictures can be eliminated, it becomes much easier to impose uniformity and conformity on both minors and adults. Birth control, abortion, and any form of nonreproductive sex, even piercing and tattooing, are all on their hit list. And if they are able to win a victory over those rebellious acts, they will move on to enforcing a gender-based hierarchy that will segregate women from men, consolidate male dominance, prevent women from being productive or creative in any way other than giving birth, and subject those who can't pass as heterosexual to a killing regimen of cure-by-conversion. People who violate social sex roles will also suffer from interdiction.

Bible-thumpers are the people who raised me (although,

in my case, they were thumping several other allegedly holy books as well). I know their spiel by heart. And I despise it now as much as I despised it when I was 13 years old and could not wait to smoke my first joint and have somebody, anybody besides myself, stroke my naked body. I knew that the pleasures I longed to sample were a little risky, but I also knew that the dangers of getting high or having sex had been artificially inflated. Marijuana was not, in and of itself, nearly as bad as getting arrested. Illegal drugs were dubious commodities, largely because they were illegal. Who knew if that baggie full of herb was real pot, consisted of some other green vegetable matter, or came from a plant that while it grew in Mexican fields had been sprayed by American planes pissing Paraquat? Sex did not have to take place in a context in which birth control was utterly unavailable. Boys had been taught that the sex they were entitled to get (and guilty for wanting) meant getting their dicks into as much pussy as possible while disregarding the possibility of giving or catching a disease or knocking somebody up. They didn't have to be such a bunch of dry fucks with a double standard. Despite this daunting gauntlet of regulation, irresponsibility, and misinformation, I walked away from a world where everybody went to church at least three times a week—because I knew that what lurked under that sugary surface of niceness was more foul than being an impoverished, queer hippie.

During the last few years of my life as a woman, I went back to Provo, Utah, to spend some time with my mother, who had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. She mentioned that she was unable to go to the beauty salon, but a really nice girl there sometimes came to the trailer park to give her a trim and a perm. (I will call this person April to protect her privacy.) You must understand that it was very difficult, once I left home and embarked upon a godless life of sexual perversion, to find anything at all that I could do or talk about with my mother that would not start a fight. This time, though, a little light went on in my head, and I told my mother I was tired of the

limp, coarse look of my long hair, which had suffered stoically for several years in which I repeatedly bleached it platinum blonde. My mother excitedly suggested that I might benefit from getting a little trim and a perm of my own. I agreed, but only after we had gotten ten minutes or so of conversation out of the topic. She looked up April's number on the list he gave her phone and made me an appointment. I have never seen her more animated. The perm made me look like a retired shop teacher in a Farrah Fawcett wig, but my mom thought it looked great, and I was grateful for every minute of amicable companionship we spent fluffing it up and anticipating the day when the tight curls would "settle down." Her joy and pride were a small price to pay for a few months of my looking like a truck-stop "ho."

The point I want to make with this anecdote, however, concerns the time I spent alone with April, a pretty fat girl who recently graduated from high school who giggled a lot and stayed late at the salon to accommodate me. By way of letting me know she was not just anybody, April told me that she and her friends were a wild bunch of girls who did far-out things like drive all the way to Salt Lake City to sample Greek food at an annual event hosted by, of all things, a Greek Orthodox church. We had an awkward moment when I tried to persuade her that the green, grape-leaf wrapping of the dolma was edible. But then I got my bearings and declared that anybody who worked as hard as she did must need to just jump the fence and let it all hang out once in a while. There we were buddies.

As my hair was wrenched and twisted close to my scalp in one cruel curler after another, and my poor head was drenched with chemicals that made my eyes water, April got a little more intimate with me and started talking about her life, which revolved around her family. I won't go into all of the details because I felt as if I were a priest or a therapist, and such revelations should remain confidential. But I will say that this young woman whose facade was that of a bouncy, pink-collared

gal who paid her tithing¹ and loved Jesus and Ronald Reagan, not necessarily in that order, had suffered family problems that were truly shocking. Not only had she been forced to suffer through many traumatic events, she was also unable to get any help or support for this agony because making any of it public was unthinkable. If I had been a regular customer instead of a crazy person who'd left Utah to go live in San Francisco, or if the salon had been full of other hairdressers and customers, her story would have stayed behind the wall of Mormon propriety that's been dubbed the Zion Curtain.² I gave her what comfort and support I could, but I left bearing the depressing knowledge that her life was probably going to continue to be more painful and demanding than any person should have to bear. To her church and family, she was little more than a beast of burden.

April has millions of soul mates. Scratch a fundamentalist and you find a seething cauldron of ills. Let me list just some of the consequences of the repression fostered by a literal reading of Jehovah's supposed Last Word: domestic violence, child molestation, alcoholism, incest, untreated mental illness, teen pregnancy, illegal or secret abortions, drug addiction and overdoses, shotgun weddings, shame, self-hatred, illegitimate children, suicide, silence, bodily ignorance, sexual dysfunction, rage, alienation and disassociation, fear, eating disorders, depression, self-mutilation, rape, and death. When human beings are forced to live according to a code that is both unrealistic and mean-spirited, their chances for health or happiness are ruined. Keeping secrets becomes the norm, not righteousness. A member of one of these sects is not only supposed to refrain from virtually every kind of self-soothing or pleasurable behavior—you are also required to look happy while being squeezed to death by the fear of hellfire and damnation. With such a toll of human misery, who needs Armageddon? The same people who say they want to keep everyone from going to hell have created hell on earth. The Harper Valley PTA is as scandalous as a bowl of cold mush

compared to the unpublished tabloid headlines of the Bible Belt that holds in the rapacious and indiscriminating gut of Smalltown, USA.

The only state in the union that has created the position of a "porn czar"³ obviously cares a great deal about maintaining a squeaky-clean image. As the host of the 2002 Winter Olympics, Utah got a closer look than the mass media usually bestows upon it. Out of the closet came the worst-kept secret of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS). That would be polygamy, which was made a part of his follower's lives by church founder Joseph Smith. His career as a charismatic and controversial religious leader began in 1820, when he was just 14, and had his first revelation, which informed him that none of the faiths currently competing for his soul in a local religious revival were true, and he should join none of them. The 588-page *Book of Mormon*, a scripture Smith claimed to have translated from golden plates given to him by an angel, together with practices like polygamy, communal living, baptism by proxy for the dead, secret temple ceremonies, sacred underwear, and other peculiarities, rendered the brand-new church odious to its neighbors, and so Smith's converts were chased out of New York to Missouri and then Illinois. After hearing about a desolate place out west that scouts joked about as a worthless desert, Smith assembled the faithful and informed them they were going to settle in this arid wilderness and make it blossom like a rose. He and a few companions were jailed and then assassinated by a mob before this huge endeavor could succeed.⁴

Behind the Rocky Mountains, from 1847 on, the Mormons were left alone for a while to practice their newfangled and (said some) plagiarized Masonic rituals. But the fever to make the United States a coast-to-coast country took hold among the gentiles back east. Despite some opposition from Smith's successor, Brigham Young, Deseret was finally connected to the rest of North America by a railroad. Stung by the hard-bargaining and autocratic attitude of Young, who considered

Deseret to be an independent nation, the federal government looked for ways to annex this pesky Mormon province, which had been ceded to the United States in 1850, after the Mexican War. Americans were already in an uproar at the notion of one man with a bevy of brides. Former church members and yellow journalists published one risqué exposé after another, popularizing an image of protesting teenage virgins being forced to wed 50-year-old, lecherous Mormon elders. The fact that a man could not take another wife without the consent of the women he had previously married was not given much weight. The stereotype of Mormon women as sex slaves is undercut by Young's even-handed treatment of them as governor of Deseret. He encouraged Mormon women to take up the professions of law, medicine, and business. Mormon women were given the vote long before their American sisters.⁵

The weird church's enthusiasm for missionary work was also threatening to more long-standing Christianities. Immigrants kept flocking to Deseret, swelling the population of an area that was depicted as a danger to its much larger neighbor. In 1857, news that church leader Parley Pratt had been murdered in Arkansas unfortunately coincided with the arrival of a California-bound wagon train of gentile settlers who were mostly from Arkansas. They were massacred, and debate continues about whether these men, women, and children were slaughtered by native Americans—or by Mormon vigilantes who perhaps acted on secret instructions from Brigham Young. The tragedy is still a blot upon LDS history, discussed by grown-ups in hushed tones, out of the hearing of children.

Polygamy was eventually made illegal and federal troops were sent to the Utah territory. Men who practiced polygamy were arrested. The Saints were paralyzed, with most of their leaders in hiding or in jail. The then-current church president, Wilford Woodruff, had a providential revelation that officially banned polygamy in 1890. The U.S. Supreme

Court authorized confiscation of virtually all church property. Thus hamstrung, Deseret was cut up into much smaller pieces, and the major portion renamed Utah. Statehood was granted (or imposed, depending on your feelings about Manifest Destiny) in 1896.

Of all of Joseph Smith's revelations, polygamy had been the hardest one for his Victorian followers to accept. This was a romantic era in which a single standard of chastity was the ideal for men as well as women. Once they had made the wrenching emotional and social changes that were necessary to imitate Abraham and other Biblical patriarchs, some Mormon men found it impossible to simply "set aside" all of their wives but one. After all, more than a thousand of them had gone to prison for refusing to abandon their belief in polygamy as a form of marriage mandated by God. Women who had sacrificed their most cherished notions of propriety to prove their faith suddenly found themselves outcast and alone. There were also children to consider, children who were accustomed to being part of a large, extended family, whom the law now termed illegitimate. As Richard Goldstein put it, "They did not go Gentile into that monogamous night."⁶ Mormon marriages performed in the temple are supposed to endure for "time and all eternity," which rendered these divorces even more painful for everyone involved. And so the church was splintered, and a significant minority continued to practice polygamy, more or less in secret.

Once the federal government of the United States succeeded in annexing the Mormon territory, prosecutions of polygamy died down. From 1890 until the present day, only a handful of polygamists have been convicted of any crime. A 1906 proclamation by then-president Joseph F. Smith declared that anyone who practiced polygamy should be excommunicated, but historians report that he continued to perform plural marriages in secret. As of 1933, the LDS church once more affirmed its official opposition to polygamy when then-president Heber C. Kimball initiated a drive to seek out

expel polygamists. Media coverage of a raid in the '50s on polygamists in Short Creek featured upsetting images of crying and protesting young children being pulled from their mothers' arms—not something that would make family-oriented LDS very happy, even if they perceived these actions of law enforcement as apostates. By 1953, both church and state in Utah had once more begun to turn a blind eye to the practice. Today, it's estimated that there are 40,000 to 50,000 polygamists in Utah, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, and California.⁷

It wasn't until 1998 that this "keep it hushed up" attitude changed. A case landed in the authorities' laps that was just as appalling to sweep under the rug. David Ortell Kingston was given a prison sentence of up to ten years for incest and unlawful sexual conduct with his 16-year-old niece, whom he had made his 15th wife. His brother John Daniel Kingston was given a twenty-eight-week sentence for beating the girl when she unsuccessfully tried to flee that marriage.⁸ The tide of public opinion began to turn against polygamists. Instead of polygamists' being perceived as quaint, anachronistic, and eccentric religionists, the very word *polygamy* began to be associated with child abuse, incest, and welfare fraud.

This bad publicity was bolstered by a new wave of testimony from women who had escaped from dysfunctional polygamous marriages and the dictatorial, insular cults that sanctified and required them. One of the first such survivor-activists was Vicki Prunty, a former plural wife who had to live in a battered women's shelter with five of her six children when she left her husband and "sister wives." Prunty enlisted state Senator Brett Howell in a crackdown on polygamy. The idea was to eliminate this potentially embarrassing phenomenon before reporters started looking for something sexy to slip into the evening news and coverage of the Olympics. There was, shall we say, not a lot of support for kicking this particular skunk. In 1935, the Utah legislature had passed a law that made it a felony to cohabit with "more than one person of the opposite

sex.” Rather than try to enforce this broad and vague bit of governmental nonsense, Howell tried to offer a bill that would raise the marriageable age, for girls, from 14 to 16. His hope was to create a legal pretext for breaking up polygamous clans that usually married off girls when they were young teenagers. (By the way, the official “excuse” for this low age of consent was the fear that an older age limit would encourage pregnant teenagers to get an abortion rather than get married. Isn’t *that* a great idea?)

An attempt to do this a year earlier had failed, yet Prunty became a very effective lobbyist. She founded Tapestry Against Polygamy, an organization that would help women who wanted to leave such marriages. When the bill came up for debate, she filled the galleries of the legislature with teenage girls in wedding gowns. The legislature grudgingly amended Howell’s bill. The earliest age a girl could marry in Utah now became 15, and she would require a judge’s permission.

But polygamists decided to mount some opposition to the crackdown. Mary Batchelor, who had once shared a husband with Prunty, worked with Anne Wilde and Marianne Watson to produce *Voices in Harmony*, a sort of *Chicken Soup for Plural Marriage*. Batchelor described the campaign against polygamy as “a modified ethnic cleansing”—in other words, as genocide. Undaunted, Prunty got state Senator Ron Allen to sponsor a bill that would have made it a third-degree felony for a person to allow a minor child to enter into an unlawful marriage. It would also have made it illegal for anyone to “solemnize” a polygamous marriage, or “encourage” or “promote” having multiple wives.

When that bill came up for a hearing at the state legislature’s judiciary committee, the polygamists hit back hard, going public to defend their notion of a family. Spokespeople for polygamy were careful to distance themselves from child brides and even advocated raising the legal age for marriage to 18. Owen Allred, 87, the leader of the Apostolic United Brethren who has 8 wives, 23 children, and 206 grandchildren, stood

up to say, “The man who wants several women to be his sexual partners can have children by them, and the state will support those children. He remains free of any legal accusation—until he marries more than one wife. Marry them, and he becomes a criminal. It is the marriage that becomes the crime.” Mary Batchelor pleaded with the committee to amend the bill “so that it couldn’t be construed to make the teaching of our religious beliefs to our children a crime.”⁹

After that hearing, it became clear that eliminating polygamy by the year 2002 was an unreachable goal. There were just too gosh-darned many of ‘em. A daunted committee reduced the penalty for performing an illegal marriage to a misdemeanor. And the state decided to settle for a showcase trial. If at least one polygamist got fried to a crisp, that would, it was probably hoped, at least create the proper impression for all those Olympics-bound gentiles in down jackets, toting video cameras and paranoia about being importuned by Mormon missionaries. Governor Mike Leavitt had gotten into political hot water early in this controversy by publicly questioning whether laws against polygamy were constitutional. Now his brother, Juab County Prosecutor David Leavitt, could rehabilitate his relationship with women’s groups who were demanding that the state take action against polygamists.¹⁰

The scapegoat selected for this very public burnt offering was Tom Green. (His wives, incidentally, were not prosecuted, although technically they were guilty of the same offense. But feminist groups would have strung the governor up by his narrow necktie if he’d allowed such a thing to happen.) Green had been unwise enough to go on television talk shows to describe life with his five wives. He was eventually convicted for bigamy and criminal nonsupport of his thirty children. What will happen to his case on appeal, since the Utah Supreme Court is all-Mormon, with a vested interest in preventing him from getting to the U.S. Supreme Court, is anybody’s guess. He faced separate charges for marrying one of his wives, Linda Kunz, a few months before she turned 14, which at the time

was the cutoff point for a legal wedding in Utah.¹¹ District Judge Donald Eyre spent all of thirty minutes to find Green guilty of child rape for impregnating her. This had taken place in Mexico, which would seem to take the act out of Utah jurisdiction. But during the hour-long trial, the prosecution argued that the conspiracy to commit this illegal act had taken place in Utah. The judge also rejected arguments that the statute of limitations had run out. "We don't feel like this was a crime," Kunz said after the verdict. Her husband could be sentenced to life in prison when he comes before the judge again in August 2002.¹²

The Utah chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union weighed in on Green's behalf. Public opinion in Utah ranks the ACLU just slightly above Satanism and the Environmental Protection Agency, so one could guess that Green might have been ambivalent about accepting their help. In addition to arguing that the state law against cohabitation violated Green's freedom of religion and expression, the civil liberties attorneys argued that a ban on polygamy also violated his right to privacy. (You may remember this argument from several legal cases waged on behalf of the civil rights of gay men and lesbians, especially in campaigns to get sodomy laws repealed.) Defense attorneys also had a beef with the broad and vague nature of the antipolygamy statute, which makes it illegal for a married man to cohabit with someone else. This could potentially criminalize a wide range of living arrangements that have nothing to do with polygamy and are perfectly legal in the rest of the Western world.

Critics of the prosecution of Tom Green have suggested that he was singled out because he is an "independent." He is just one man who tries to live according to his own religious principles with his family members. He has not set himself up as the leader and prophet of a church, with the power to order members to marry and demand the payment of tithing. To those who felt that Green had brought this on himself by appearing on the *Jerry Springer Show* and other

television programs, these critics ask why much more visible polygamists like Owen Allred or Jim Harmston were not put in the docket. Allred is the president of his own priesthood and reigns over a theocracy of two incorporated polygamist cities, Pinesdale, Montana, and Rocky Ridge in Juab County, Utah. His organization is estimated to have amassed millions of dollars. Harmston is several decimal places behind him, but he also receives donations, presents himself as the only true living prophet of God, and performs temple ceremonies for his followers. Both men have made frequent television appearances defending polygamy as an integral part of their "fundamentalist Mormon" religions. And both groups have been described as racist, anti-Semitic, and militantly antigovernment.¹³

Green is small potatoes when placed up against this pair of patriarchs. His family is of modest means. The nonsupport he is charged with stems from a family crisis when their house and all their belongings burned down and a 3-year-old son lost his life. Green and his wives applied for welfare until they could get back on their feet. It seems rather twisted for the state first to claim that Green cannot be the husband of more than one woman, then to demand that he assume the legal obligations of a husband with regard to his additional wives. He had, incidentally, already made arrangements through an attorney to voluntarily repay the state for these benefits.¹⁴ It seems unlikely that he will be able to support his family at all if he is jailed, or pay the \$78,000 fine that is part of the sentence given him by Judge Guy Burningham.¹⁵

One of Green's wives, Shirley Beagley, herself the child of a father with several wives, had this to say to the man who prosecuted her husband: "Mr. Leavitt says I am brainwashed into my lifestyle. Well, I say, 'Father, forgive him for he knows not what he speaks.' He doesn't even know me or how I feel. Mr. Leavitt has caused me and my family more pain and suffering in the last year than Tom would ever dream of in the fourteen years we have been married. Tom is a good man

and I will stand by his side till death do us part. My marriage covenants mean everything to me and no one can or should want to change that. I fought to get Tom and I will fight to keep him.”¹⁶ It would probably not comfort or amuse her to know that the prosecutor and his brother, the governor, are the descendants of polygamists.¹⁷

This case has made a lot of people very angry. The Greens’ attorney, John Bucher, has said that he will work for free on his client’s appeal. It’s likely that Bucher will make much of the astonishing fact that he was not allowed to argue that the anticonhabitation law interfered with his client’s freedom of religion. Green attempted to stay on the right side of the law by divorcing the latest wife when he took a new one. At the time of his arrest, he was not legally married to any of the women he considered his wives. So the court had to do back flips and talk out of both sides of its mouth to say that at least one of these divorces was invalid in order to charge him with bigamy. As one journalist put it, “Mormons have long complained about the state persecution of Mormons in the 19th century. This allows them to portray Mormons as resolute and principled martyrs suffering at the hands of evil false religions. It is now clear however that it is the Mormon church itself which is so eagerly guilty of performing this role.”¹⁸

While there is truth in this harsh summation, it is also true that not every devout member of the mainstream LDS church has forgotten that their persecuted ancestors were hounded out of three states by mobs that beat, raped, and murdered them in part because they were polygamists. Non-Mormon journalists covering the Green trial have not dug very deeply into the intricacies of Mormon folklore and day-to-day beliefs about “The Gospel” that are passed on verbally rather than being cited in a book. As someone who was raised Mormon, it is my impression that many LDS don’t believe today that polygamy is wrong, and continue to believe that it is a higher form of marriage. They justify Woodruff’s repeal of the practice by saying that in the short run it was more important

for Utah to become a state than it was for the church to continue to practice polygamy in the here-and-now. Don't forget that Mormon marriages are performed in secret, in the temple, where only an elite who have passed scrutiny by their bishop and obtained a written recommendation can attend. I have no documentation to prove this, but I was told that plural marriages continue to be performed in the temple. Spinsters unable to find a husband are, I was told, allowed to request marriage to a deceased church leader, so that they will not be denied the spiritual benefits of marriage or kept from progressing to the highest level of the heaven that awaits them after death. There's no doubt among the faithful that in the Celestial Kingdom, polygamy will be the norm.

This is part of the reason why most Mormons don't get too exercised about wiping it out. Given the fact that 16-year-old girls I went to high school with were assumed to be plenty old enough to get married to the boys who had destroyed their virtue, I can't give too much credence to the idea that the average Utahn is outraged by Green (or any other polygamist cult member, for that matter) taking a child-bride. If you are old enough to reproduce, and you engage in premarital sex, you are old enough to be punished for that sin. Of course, only teenage girls are vulnerable to being caught out and publicly branded as fornicators. Fundamentalists are always eager to guarantee that biology is destiny, at least for women.

I'd like to think that future prosecutions will follow the policy outlined by Utah Attorney General Mark S. Hurtleff, who wants to reduce bigamy from a third-degree felony to a misdemeanor and concentrate on going after those who are guilty of child abuse. He believes, and I agree, that making plural marriage a felony simply discourages women and girls who are victims of beatings, rape, or incest at the hands of men who are supposed to be their loved ones and spiritual leaders, from coming forward.¹⁹ But even the mainstream LDS church does not want women to complain too much about how men treat them, or get uppity notions about having their

own spiritual convictions. Women are not allowed to hold the priesthood in Mormonism, and scripture plainly tells them that they are to be directed in all things by their fathers or husbands. A small but intellectually lively movement within the church that advocated for the ordination of women and a less sexist leadership was squashed in 1993 when six of these dissenting intellectuals were either excommunicated or disfellowshipped (one step away from being kicked out entirely).²⁰ A church that is run largely by rich white men in their eighties and nineties is impervious to feminism, much less pleas for tolerance for gay Mormons.

The prophet and his council of the twelve will continue to speak out against child abuse and perhaps even domestic violence, but they will never be willing to accept the social changes that are necessary to stop these things from happening.²¹ The enormous scandal over Roman Catholic priests who have forced their sexual attentions upon children and teenagers has perhaps led to the slow but very important growth of similar reports in other religious denominations. In New River, West Virginia, Mormon stake president Blair Meldrum did not report a man who confessed to him that he was sexually abusing his 5-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son. Meldrum is quoted as saying he had counseled "James Doe Jr." and believed he had repented and reformed. This took place in 1989. Five years later, the man was arrested after he videotaped himself molesting the same children. He is serving a 185-year prison term. The daughter, now 15, and her mother are suing the LDS church, charging that authorities failed to protect her from years of abuse. More than forty plaintiffs have come forward alleging similar failures by Mormon authorities to report child abuse in their midst. Last year, a Texas jury awarded \$4 million to a boy who was molested by his Mormon babysitter after church leaders had received complaints about him. Attorneys for these defendants say the lay clergy of the Mormon church is poorly trained to deal with these issues, especially if accusations are made against popular, well-liked

church members. South Carolina attorney Michael G. Sullivan, who represents the Doe plaintiffs, says simply, "Victims are ignored." As in the Catholic church, Mormon leaders are arguing that it should not be required to abide by child abuse reporting laws when a holder of its priesthood learns about such things from a member's private confession. It is church policy to settle these cases out of court, and so there is no way to track how many lawsuits have been filed or what sort of settlements have been made. Timothy Kosnoff, an attorney who is suing the LDS church on behalf of a boy in Oregon, says he has talked to many families with molested children who decided against suing their church. "It's the true church, and that would be like suing God, and you can't do that."²²

Obedience and conformity hold a dear place in the hearts of those who are Mormons in good standing. To many LDS, those who practice polygamy today are not guilty of a sex crime or immorality as much as they are guilty of the crime of rebellion. The real problem is that the splinter sects that still allow men to take more than one wife deny the authority of the current church president and his underlings. I would not be surprised, though, if the hounding of polygamists did not end with Green's trial, now that the Olympics are over. His conviction raises too many troubling issues that are potentially explosive and divisive. It is both enraging and amusing to know that the same people who cannot abide premarital sex, homosexuality, or transgendered people are untroubled by the unconventional social arrangements that flourish right under their noses. Polygamy is to Utah what high-class call girls are to Washington, D.C. It seems that hypocrisy and selective enforcement of the law are inevitable under our current system, which seems hard-pressed to protect the innocent and helpless, because the real purpose of laws and cops and churches is to keep the powerful in place above the rest of us.

I'm being hard on the Mormons because I have first-hand knowledge of that specific group of "God-botherers." But the influence of sex-negative monotheism doesn't stop at the

Utah border. American culture is so heavily flavored by these values that they are virtually inescapable. Notions of right and wrong derived from narrow-minded interpretations of the Bible are firmly ensconced in our legal code. Earlier this year, police in Johnston, Rhode Island, went into an X-rated video store and arrested seven men for allegedly masturbating themselves or one another while watching a porn film. These unlucky patrons of the Amazing Express were charged with misdemeanors. Their names and addresses were publicized. Four days after his arrest, one of the men, Stuart E. Denton, was found dead in a backyard shed of his home. He had hanged himself. He was 55, and the chairman of the town's zoning and planning commission. Johnston Police Chief Richard Tamburini said the suicide was "a very unwelcome and very tragic turn of events." He added, however, that the police had received several complaints about the store, and termed it "a public facility." In justifying the undercover operation, he said, "We didn't go in with battering rams and knock down doors." In the end, he implied, Denton's death was a foregone conclusion. "These kind of situations never come to a soft landing," he told a local reporter.²³

Denton had not even been convicted of a crime, just accused of one, and some local residents were pissed off about the moralistic press coverage that had come down so heavily upon these unlucky men. About a dozen protesters, carrying signs reading "Capital punishment for a misdemeanor," gathered in front of the Johnston City Hall on January 30, 2002, but their grief and indignation didn't strike a responsive chord with Mayor William R. Macera. "As far as an apology goes," he was quoted as saying, the suspects "should apologize to the residents of Johnston for engaging in that alleged behavior."²⁴ Macera is no stranger to scandal himself. In October 2000, he was found in a car at the Central Landfill with one of his campaign workers, and police reportedly said the car reeked of marijuana. But for some reason, he was never charged with a crime. Perhaps that's why he has not apologized for what

ooks very much like his own dalliance with public sex.²⁵

Denton wasn't stoned to death à la Leviticus, but he is dead nonetheless. So is a man who killed himself after being arrested during a three-day sting operation in two parks in Little Rock, Arkansas. Twenty-four men in all were cited for public sexual indecency, loitering for sex, and other related misdemeanors. Their names and addresses were all published by the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.²⁶ The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) had met with the newspaper's deputy managing editor Frank Fellone a year before this suicide. Local GLAAD contact David Ivers, "We predicted that the *Democrat-Gazette* was not only going to ruin careers but drive someone to kill himself. Now it has happened." The newspaper did not print the names of people charged with other criminal misdemeanors, such as the victims of a major heterosexual prostitution bust. In that case, the paper even blurred a photo of one of the arrested men to protect his identity.²⁷ After the elderly man's suicide, the newspaper refused to meet with five organizations that demanded both accountability and a change in editorial policy, and furthermore printed nothing about his death. The poignant fact that he had left a suicide note to his male partner of thirty-one years, saying, "My name and everything is in the paper this morning.... Goodbye. I love you" might have softened too many of their subscribers' hearts. The dead man's lawyer, Gary Sullivan, said that prior to the newspaper's exposé, his client had given no indication of considering suicide, and added, "I have to believe that the [newspaper] is responsible for [his] death." A representative of the local Metropolitan Community Church noted that a similar suicide had taken place a few years earlier. The paper's executive editor, Griffin Smith, Jr., retorted tersely, "We have a duty to report the news. We would be remiss if we withheld from our readers public information of this nature.... We believe our policy is logical, consistent, proper, and in the interest of our readers. We do not contemplate any change."²⁸

Coincidentally, this January 30, 1998, story about the park

busts ran just one day after the paper covered a lawsuit filed by "seven Arkansas homosexuals" challenging the state's sodomy law. That law, by the way, only made same-sex activity illegal, to the tune of as much as one year in jail and a \$1,000 fine. U.S. Representative Vic Snyder (D-Arkansas) had, while serving in the state legislature, introduced bills to repeal that law three times, only to be rejected. Pulaski County prosecuting attorney Larry Jegley, one of the defendants, said his office would let Attorney General Winston Bryant's office handle the case. "It's a law I've never even heard of the police enforcing," he said.²⁹ (In other words, we don't need to bother to repeal it.)

That ingenuous statement was soon given the lie by a series of police operations that seem, to an outside observer, like calculated attempts to associate being gay with public sex and thus bolster the perception that sodomy laws were necessary to curb that menace. Police continued to sweep Little Rock's two most attractive parks, and of course, one of the men who was arrested was charged with sodomy, a class-A misdemeanor. Police spokesman Terry Hastings said, "Usually you don't see that going on. You get a lot of asking, but not the actual performance or the act itself in public." That's all well and good, but this summation raises obvious questions about all the other park arrests, and also reinforces gay activists' claims that men were being busted simply because the police assumed they were gay or observed them making or responding to a proposition. How is that a threat to public safety? Again, the man's name and address were publicized.³⁰

Interestingly enough, the cops reported that they had seen one man perform oral sex upon another, but only the cocksucker was charged with sodomy. Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund ("a New York homosexual legal aid group," according to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*) said this arrest contradicted Bryant's defense to the lawsuit, which claimed the law was rarely, if ever, enforced. "If a heterosexual couple had been engaged in the same activity in a car in lovers' lane, they could not be charged under Arkansas sodomy law,"

she fumed. Jegley retorted, "People shouldn't be having sex in public places; that's the bottom line," while Assistant Attorney General Tim Gauger said, "The only time it [the sodomy law] has been enforced has been in a nonconsensual situation...or when people engage in the activity in public."³¹

Unlike Arkansas, New England is assumed to be one of the most gay-friendly parts of this country, largely because of Vermont's creation in the year 2000 of "civil unions" for same-sex couples.³² But growing acceptance of monogamous gay couples does not equal a similar level of comfortableness with less domestic forms of homosexual desire. After all, it was not until 1998 that the Rhode Island House of Representatives voted to repeal its 102-year-old "crimes against nature" law. Until then, oral and anal sex could be punished with a 7-to-20-year prison sentence.³³ Vermont had repealed a similar law a year earlier, while Connecticut got progressive about sodomy as early as 1971. (Maine, if anybody wants the complete list, decriminalized sodomy in 1976.) It's ironic, in my opinion, that Denton, the suicide, was accused of a crime for committing acts that were not illegal—unless they were committed in the wrong time and place. Arkansas' sodomy law was struck down by a lower court in 2001 for being in violation of the state constitution. That decision was, of course, appealed.³⁴ In July 2002, it was repealed by the state Supreme Court for violating the state constitutional guarantees of a right to privacy and equal protection.³⁵ One could therefore argue that the anonymous martyr from Arkansas was in the same position as Denton in Rhode Island. These two men are joined in death by an anonymous man in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, who lost his job, his wife, and his home after a local newspaper reported his arrest for alleged homosexual behavior.³⁶

It's important to understand that antidiscrimination laws, domestic partnerships, and repeal of sodomy laws reduce but do not eliminate police harassment of men who are seeking sex with other men. The Providence, Rhode Island, police department has been sued by both the Gay and Lesbian

Advocates and Defenders of Boston (GLAD) and the Rhode Island Alliance for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights (RIALGCR), with the help of the ACLU of Rhode Island. GLAD and RIALGCR wanted access to arrest records, because they had received so many complaints from gay men who had been falsely accused of public sex during police sweeps of Blackstone and Paterson parks. GLAD attorney Mary Bonauto expressed concern about "this recurring pattern of the police going into particular parks and doing these mass arrests of people simply because they appear to be gay." Undercover officers had reportedly offered some of their targets money for sex; in one case, the vice cop allegedly waved cash at a man for half an hour. When this lawsuit was filed, the police department in Providence was already the subject of a state Supreme Court case for withholding records about civilian complaints of police brutality. Those records had been kept from reviewers for sixteen years, a statewide record for stonewalling of this nature.³⁷ Police departments don't usually hide clean and unblemished reputations, do they?

AIDS has made public sex even more upsetting to the general public than it was before HIV appeared in the '80s. Everyone assumes, of course, that guys who have sex in a park or an adult bookstore are: (a) HIV-positive, and (b) not taking any precautions against infecting someone else. An inflammatory image of children being menaced in bathrooms by horny, out-of-control fags has been created by sensationalized media coverage of this issue.³⁸ There is also an illogical assumption that "public sex" means gay sex; heterosexual couples who court or consummate in public are rarely considered newsworthy. Television coverage of this issue has, if anything, been even more irresponsible than print media. In a quest for higher ratings and undeserved self-righteousness, news "reporters" have used hidden cameras to expose activity that the participants thought was private, and even set up these unwary men for arrests that are filmed in even more detail than the sex. None of this yellow-journalism footage has featured a child in

the vicinity of sex in restrooms or parks, yet slogans like, “You’ll think twice about allowing your child to use a public restroom” abound in teasers for the broadcast stories. This, too, is the stuff of which broken closet doors and suicide are made.³⁹

Politicians, vice cops, and homophobic journalists all claim that the outrageousness of public sex justifies any harmful consequences that may befall those who are caught doing it (or trying to do it, or looking as if they may be the sort of person you can safely assume is interested in doing it). The good citizens of Utah who wink at polygamy as well as the Roman Catholics who are reluctant to implement a “zero tolerance” policy to kick out priests who molest children would no doubt agree. But the lurid free-for-all that sexually repressed heterosexuals envisage bears little relationship to the way that so-called public sex actually works.

Actually, several different kinds of activity fall under the rubric of public sex. First (and most common) are sex acts that take place in bathhouses, swing clubs, gay sex clubs, adult bookstores and theaters, the back rooms of some gay bars, and private parties. These institutions attract patrons, customers, and guests who acknowledge by their admission payment that they are not offended by the purpose of the gathering, which is to facilitate self-pleasuring or hooking up with others for mutual sensual fun. Cruising (which is called “flirting” when straight people do it) may be nonverbal, as in moving your hand toward someone who will either allow and facilitate the contact or reject it, or may be done out loud. Sex may take place in smaller cubicles or rooms, or it may be done out in the open in a common area. The preferred arrangement may be taking a solo flight to orgasm, pairing up, or group activity. This type of public sex is most often targeted when the participants are all men, although heterosexual and bisexual parties as well as women-only events are attracting more hostility from the police. S/M sex parties are also becoming more and more visible, and vulnerable to getting busted or losing their venues via zoning laws that explicitly forbid BDSM.

Note the presence of four walls and a front door at all of these celebrations. Minors are turned away. Attendance is limited by a guest list, a ticket-seller, a bouncer, or the nature of the activity itself. The cops in Johnston claimed they did not have to bust down any walls to find the men they arrested, but they actually did everything except physically destroying the premises where that sex was taking place. *They not only had to walk into the adult bookstore, they had to buy tickets to obtain access to a second space, the theater that showed pornographic movies.* As local newspaper columnist Amy Pagnozzi sardonically commented:

[T]hey posed as customers, cozying up to hapless patrons. Legally, I'm off base for saying this. But morally? I consider that entrapment.

A guy who walks into a theater where men in the audience are obviously engaged in mutual sex acts and plunks himself down by his lonesome knows full well that someone might sidle up to offer a helping hand, to which he can say, "No thanks."...

It's all about context and who's invading whose space. Getting flashed unsolicited on the subway gives me hives, while the same sight at a gay space provokes my curiosity....

[I]sn't forewarned forearmed if a place is clearly marked adult, its lobby adorned with triple Xs, and all minors strictly barred?... [F]or some gays and bisexuals of a certain age, home may be where the heart is, but your erotic life takes place anywhere but.⁴⁰

What's being targeted here is not sex that takes place where members of the general public, including impressionable children, might be offended or frightened. Instead, the authorities and their allies in the media and right-wing grassroots campaigns for fundamentalist morality are pursuing a range of behavior they think no one should do, in public or in private—oral, anal, and manual stimulation done by one man for another, lesbian sex, bondage and discipline,

dominant/submissive role-playing, sex between people who are not married, group sex, sex that other people can see, sex that is talked about, use of sex toys and other erotic equipment, sex accompanied by erotic entertainment, etc.

This sort of sex is made public, not by the people who are engaged in it, but by the people who disapprove of it. It is their narrow-mindedness, voyeurism, and obsession with regulating and punishing others' pleasure-seeking behavior that strikes me as being out of control, dangerous, and possibly symptomatic of a less than well-balanced personality. An inability to mind one's own business is perhaps the foremost crime against a civil society that respects diversity and individual choice in matters of intimacy and genital conjugation. So is a conviction that one has a direct pipeline to the divine that authorizes such flagrant disregard for other people's *privacy*. After all, privacy is not always the same as invisibility. There are all kinds of behaviors that other people indulge in which the people around them are genuinely oblivious to or choose to ignore.

The second kind of public sex comes closer to a stereotype that is, I think, generated by projection. It represents, not gay desire, but straight people's fears about what heterosexual men might do if they were free from the constraints of religion and marriage—and what women might do if being called a slut didn't make them vulnerable to shame, harassment, violence, and shunning. The “real thing” takes place in parks, rest stops, public restrooms, and any other location that can be adapted or subverted to facilitate propositioning partners you can take home or actually have sex with on the spot.

This is most often done by men who are soliciting paid sex from prostitutes. Residents of neighborhoods where this takes place often organize to demand stepped-up enforcement of antiprostitution laws. While I certainly sympathize with the desire to live on a clean, quiet street without being hassled by johns or having to step around used condoms, crack pipes, and syringes, I also note that few of these “quality of life” problems exist in the vicinity of massage parlors—which

are often closed down as "fronts for prostitution." Police crackdowns simply move sex workers who find tricks on the street from one neighborhood to another. When we make it illegal to conduct an exchange of money for pleasure behind closed doors, and refuse to fund substance abuse programs or vocational rehabilitation that would help many women, transgendered people, and youth who do not want to make a living this way to quit the sex industry, do we really have any right to be surprised when the oldest profession winds up being conducted a few feet away from our porches and lawns or the front of our apartment buildings? I think not.

As Laud Humphreys documented many decades ago in *Tearoom Trade*, and as several of the contributors to William L. Leap's anthology *Public Sex/Gay Space* confirm, when gay men utilize public places for sexual purposes, they also take certain precautions to keep that activity from drawing unwanted attention. This is why you have never walked in on a homosexual orgy during your Fourth of July picnic near the bandshell, or had your zipper rubbed outside a department store bathroom. Some of these precautions include, but are not limited to: entering such spaces when it is unlikely that they will be used for their original purpose (that is, going after dark, or occupying an out-of-the-way structure), the use of lookouts who notify others that an inappropriate spectator is nearby, negotiating for sex in plain view and then retiring to a more hidden location like a restroom stall or a thick section of shrubbery to seal the deal, visiting locales only after getting word from others with similar interests that sexual connections can be made there, or restricting the action to sex acts that are easy to interrupt and conceal.

Much ink has been spilled about the inconceivable depravity that must be present in a bunch of guys who invented the glory hole. But the original purpose of the glory hole was to protect the privacy of both participants and spectators. When such an opening is made between bathroom stalls or in the wall of booths in a dirty bookstore, the identity of the owners of both

the phallus and the orifice are concealed, and spectators are not apprised of it, since a door can be closed between oneself and nonparticipants. And, in fact, when men are arrested for acts termed lewd or indecent by the law, some courts have agreed that such spaces are as private as a hotel room or bedroom and should not be vulnerable to legal surveillance. Is it not ironic that hidden surveillance cameras have to be installed in bathrooms, and lawmakers have to force sexually oriented businesses to remove the doors from their video booths, before the cops can obtain convictions for public sex in these locations?⁴¹ How is anyone else in an adult shop, let alone in the rest of town, harmed if someone wants to watch an X-rated video in a private booth and masturbate? The same question needs to be asked if the booth has more than one occupant. If these institutions need any attention from public officials, it should be to make sure condoms and Kleenexes are available—not a crowbar to rip the door off.

On the face of things, it may seem that anyone might walk into a park or other outdoor location and get embarrassed by the goings-on. There are no doors between the trees or on a nude beach. Occasionally, such things do happen. But why does this create more public outrage than the heterosexual couples who are kissing in airports, and obviously having fully clothed, stand-up sex? For men to be arrested even in these open-air situations, the cops usually have to take unusual measures to be able to find out where the illicit sex is taking place, and gain access to it. This has been done by reading gay guides that list cruisy places or visiting websites that publicize them. Undercover cops can be quite skilled at making themselves look as if they belong there, thus slipping in under the radar of any lookout. Even so, the great majority of the time, the men who are arrested are not apprehended while actually having sex. They get arrested for propositioning a cop, or for being propositioned by one, or for looking gay, or for simply being there. This is why anyone who has the sense to fight such an accusation is virtually guaranteed exoneration.

And that's just what the Rhode Island man found out who was arrested with Denton and who chose to fight his case. Edward V. Sherman pleaded not guilty to a charge of disorderly conduct. The judge entered a plea of not guilty to charges of disorderly conduct and loitering for indecent purposes for Paul R. Lichtenberger, who said he was waiting for his attorney before deciding what to do. Joseph T. McGrath and Alan M. Reisch had their loitering charges dismissed on the recommendation of Assistant Town Solicitor John Verdecchia because neither of them had been in trouble before with the local police. Verdecchia indicated he planned to make the same offer to Lichtenberger when his case came up. McGrath and Reisch were also charged with disorderly conduct, to which they pleaded no contest and had to pay \$93.50 in court costs for dismissal. If they are able to avoid conflict with the law for one year, they can apply to have their records expunged. Greg Renshaw pleaded no contest to disorderly conduct as well. The case of Christopher Scott, a math teacher who had been suspended with pay pending the outcome of his trial, was continued.⁴²

District Court Judge Stephen Erickson eventually ruled in Scott's case that masturbation does not constitute disorderly conduct. Erickson said that to meet the criteria for that offense, the act would have to take place "in the view of others under circumstances in which his or her conduct is likely to cause affront, distress or alarm to those other persons." He pointed to the admission charge and the segregation of the theater behind a second door as proof of the shop owner's intention to prevent such offense. Verdecchia plans to appeal this decision to the state Supreme Court. In court, he said he was concerned that a dismissal could result in "every sexual establishment in Rhode Island [being] a sexual demilitarized zone."⁴³ Gosh, we can't have that. He seems impervious to the obvious analogy here, which is that what Scott was accused of doing (by a vice cop who admits the light was dim) is substantially no different than jacking off in his own bedroom.

These police sweeps are attempts to punish men who are out

after dark, not home with their wives, and either looking like fags or just hanging out with them. The aim is to eradicate an identity, as well as terrorize “sex deviants.” As Steve Weinstein has ably documented, such sweeps are also major sources of revenue. He enumerates the arrests of hundreds of men in Washington, D.C.; Fresno, California; San Antonio, Texas; and elsewhere. In Detroit, undercover cops arrested nearly 800 men in a four-month period. Sean Kosofsky, policy director for the Triangle Foundation in Michigan, claims the busts were a cynical fund-raising scheme. “Bag a Fag,” he says, had a goal of \$2 million. Weinstein’s research indicates that these arrests are increasing.⁴⁴

A third kind of “public sex” exists, whose nonconsensual nature is used to frighten people about the other types, described above, which involve consenting adults. Men who expose their genitals in public or peep in windows are lumped in with park cruisers and bathhouse regulars. Yet most exhibitionists and voyeurs are heterosexual. These acts are certainly obnoxious, but such sexual compulsions are cured neither by jail sentences and fines, nor by registration as a sex offender. With little justification, this intrusive conduct is viewed as a precursor to rape and child molestation. Punishment, not treatment, is the public policy in America, whether we are talking about sex crimes or possession of illegal drugs. And we are brought back where we started, to the heavy-handed and disproportionate influence of right-wing, fundamentalist Christians (and other monotheists) on the way we understand sex, wrongdoing, and retribution in America. If only because the exhibitionist or the voyeur makes nonconsensual use of a subject who is typically annoyed, frightened, or enraged, these sexual disorders have little to do with the mores and norms of gay men who engage in rest-stop cruising or frequent sex clubs. Their goal is to meet people with similar interests, not to get a thrill out of violating someone else’s boundaries.

In a recent article about how private sex parties for gay men have flourished in New York City despite ex-Mayor Rudolph

Giuliani's vendetta against sexually oriented businesses, *Village Voice* writer Steve Weinstein crow's, "After years of AIDS anxiety and government repression, gay public sex is bigger and better than ever.... The AIDS crisis sounded a retreat from this rolling orgy, but you can't keep a good dick down.... Along with the availability has come a new attitude, relatively free of the hang-ups about homosex that an older generation had to struggle with.... Whatever its dangers and disappointments, public sex is here to stay—at least until the next health crisis or tabloid-inspired crackdown.... [I]n the garden of gay delights, an old seed has newly sprouted. Public sex is back!"⁴⁵ The popularity and long-standing nature of the swingers' scene, which has allowed many heterosexual men and women to explore group sex, public sex, and nonmonogamy, would seem to reinforce Weinstein's enthusiasm. When sex parties and public sex venues are made available to lesbian and bisexual women, they usually prove to be a welcome alternative to dyke bars and bed death.

Hedonism can be leavened with compassion and social responsibility. Public sex is good for you, or at least it has made me a much more knowledgeable, kind, and skilled sexual actor. I've learned to enjoy and eroticize a wider range of body types; come to appreciate the fact that even if sex acts are repetitive, the people who are doing them are unique; and lost some of my conditioning to be afraid of a frank expression of sexual desire. The fear of rejection keeps many of us from approaching someone who attracts us, or from entering a space where people who are interested in and available for sex congregate. Oddly enough, if you experience sufficient rejection, it loses its power to humiliate or derail you. One of the advantages of entering a group of men or women looking to connect is that another opportunity can easily replace the one that was lost. Eye contact between strangers has taken on many new levels of possibility. I not only remain more in touch with my own fluctuating libido as I pass through the world, I am also more alert to the tendrils of erotic questions

and answers that tentatively float about me. Awareness of public sex has also changed the way that I “read” the places I traverse. Queer and perverse sensuality can pervade any nook or cranny, especially after dark. I find that reassuring.

Yet if we are really going to understand the complexity of public sex, we must acknowledge that it is not motivated solely by lust. Pagnozzi explains, of Stuart Denton and his contemporaries, “We’re talking about a generation whose very being was defined by shame, with few public places to call its own, for whom coming together isn’t so easy.”⁴⁶ In a press release about the Arkansas suicide, GLAAD Publications Manager Don Romesburg noted, “The *Democrat-Gazette* has made no indication that they understand that societal forces of homophobia lead deeply closeted men to seek out such furtive sexual encounters.”⁴⁷ Romesburg added in another press release, “The newspaper must understand that printing the names will not stop men from seeking out anonymous sex with other men. That will not occur until society, including the media, stops making it so painful and difficult for people to come out of the closet, and until laws in employment and other areas protect lesbians and gay men from discrimination based on their sexual orientation.”⁴⁸

Is sex in the park merely an artifact of gay oppression? If so, why does it continue to be an option in cities like San Francisco and New York, where antidiscrimination laws have been passed and where large, above-ground gay communities continue to thrive? It does so in part, I think, because these social changes that seem so threatening and bizarre to fundamentalists are, for queer people, like bare bones thrown to starving dogs. We can chew on them for a while, but they aren’t going to stop us from feeling hungry. The hatred toward gay people that was well-nigh universal in the ’50s and pervasive in much of the ’60s and ’70s has abated somewhat, but an antidiscrimination ordinance is small comfort to a young man whose family would disown him if he told them he was homosexual, and it won’t feed an underaged, throw-

away genderqueer kid who just took a bus from Toledo to Port Authority Bus Terminal.

Walking into a gay bar or a sex club is a statement that many men are neither ready nor able to make. Because of color, class, size, age, or ambivalence about their own sexual orientation, a lot of men don't go to these places for socializing or to hunt for sex. Some of this group of people gravitate instead toward more marginal, ambiguous places like a park or an adult bookstore, where they might be able to tell themselves, if not an undercover cop, that they were "just passing through." In such settings, I've seen expressed a wide range of desires and motivations for being there. While the majority *are* looking for flesh-to-flesh contact, some seem content to merely watch and simply be in a place where there is a sexually charged, men-only atmosphere.

Not every guy who gets his dick sucked or performs that service is gay or even bisexual. The three categories we have for delineating sexual orientation do not begin to address the complexity of how people perceive their own fantasies, needs, and sexual behavior. Public sex attracts everyone from the man who gets in a mood once in a while to see some gay porn and get a hand job to the men with a history of having many male sex partners who are out of the closet to themselves and others as being gay. I don't think anybody could give you a complete list of all the many folks who exist between those two extremes.

While public sex is a mainstay for men who want sex with other men in rural or small-town America, it is also a permanent fixture in more liberal areas, simply because it can be efficient, fun, and at least a little risky. There's an old argument at work here. Is AIDS the result of the depraved indifference and excesses of self-destructive and immoral gay men, or is it the result of antigay sentiment that set us up to act out sexually, kept us from getting adequate education about how to prevent transmission of HIV, and delayed the development of effective treatments, much less a vaccine? Do gay men have group sex

and public sex because they are creatures of Satan who give themselves over to all manner of vice, or do they do so because they have been driven underground by homophobes who relentlessly shut down above-ground gay meeting places and leave no other way for us to connect with one another? These are false dichotomies, slogans for opposing camps to yell at one another as they battle over laws and budgets.

The fact that some of us are mean or stupid shouldn't be used as an excuse to demonize everyone who partakes in any sexual variation. Promiscuity can have its unattractive aspects. There are nasty queens high on attitude and steroids who wreak havoc with the self-esteem of any gay or bisexual man who doesn't live at the gym. There are times when well-meaning people still don't take precautions. There are HIV-positive people who deliberately infect their negative partners. There are gay people who act like libertines while suffering from the cruelest forms of self-hatred and antipathy toward their brothers and sisters in Rainbow Land. Homophobia is an overarching force that strives to restrict the extent to which gay people can publicly express their identities and sexualities, form communities, and press for social justice. And, whether there was such a thing as homophobia or not, some of us would still want to be sex pigs while others would want to be monogamous for life (and others would go back and forth between those two extremes, or find a happy medium).

I wish our leaders and opinion-makers would exercise greater caution in taking the position that any unattractive feature of gay culture is only a reaction to oppression. Our enemies can always point to examples of free-spirited naughtiness that contradict that gay-positive but sanitized picture of who we are. They can then argue that to give us more freedom would simply mean even more bad behavior. (And, if you are going to identify gayness with badness, I guess that's actually quite true.) When they are ambushed this way, more conservative parts of our community are angry and embarrassed about the benighted, perverse, and ungrateful queers who won't

“grow up” or conform to standards or rules resembling a heterosexual code of sexual conduct. Minority group members often fall into the trap of blaming fractious elements within their own community for the prejudice and discrimination meted out by the majority. It’s hard to defend our right to be less than perfect, or even simply different from one another, and to keep putting the responsibility for inequality on the shoulders of those who are more powerful than we are. If life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness really are the inalienable rights spoken of in the Declaration of Independence, these rights ought to be everyone’s prerogative; no one should have to prove they are worthy before they are treated with equality, dignity, and justice.

The gay activists who would argue that we are just like everyone else do not speak to their counterparts who argue that we are not like straight people and that assimilation is no victory. But both things are true. To varying degrees, gay people share the emotions, aspirations, and values of heterosexuals, while we also have our own traditions, mores, needs, social forms, humor, history, and heroes. In a world where most people have bought into fundamentalist notions of good and evil as mutually exclusive and polarized entities, even if they are not active practitioners of any organized religion, we are not only involved in a struggle for our civil rights. We are engaged in a paradigmatic battle, and if we succeed, the Maginot Line between gay and straight, sin and virtue, male and female, love and lust, and public and private will turn into ashes and blow away. Our commonality will, I hope, provide a safe place where we can all stand together and somehow learn to love the fact that we are also strangers to one another. This is nothing more than the paradox that any pair of lovers faces, the notion that love and desire spring from both empathy and the eternal strangeness of the beloved, enacted upon the much larger stage of human affairs.

I think that the fundamentalist feels more fear than love of the divine. The thicket of rules in which right-wing Christians

attempt to restrain themselves and outline a path toward salvation throws up a blinder between themselves and the one they claim to serve. Part of the mystery, bliss, and terrifying truth of love is the way it forces us to remain tender and yearning in the presence of a power greater than ourselves—whether that be the essence of a mortal beloved, the shapely ass of an unbearably luscious stranger, or the possibility that we were put here for a reason by a being whose nature encompasses and surpasses our own.

NOTES

1. Devout Mormons are expected to give 10 percent of their income to the church. This is in addition to labor donated to the church welfare program, volunteer work in church programs or the temple, and a monthly donation on Fast Sunday, when everyone is also supposed to forgo one or two meals and contribute an amount equal to what one would have spent on food, to be distributed to impoverished church members.
2. Mormons believe they are a chosen people, just like the Biblical Israelites, and so they often refer to Utah as Zion. For those readers under 30, I will add that this is a pun on the so called Iron Curtain that once cut the Soviet Union off from its former World War II allies.
3. Paula Houston's real title is Obscenity and Pornography Complaints Ombudsman. To be fair, she has drawn the wrath of Utah legislators by reminding them that mere nudity in fine art cannot be banned. But she is also a fierce advocate of obscenity prosecutions on a state and local level. See Jay Evensen, "Opponents of 'Porn Czar' are Ignoring Huge Threat," Salt Lake City, *Deseret News*, March 17, 2002.
4. Lawrence Wright, "Lives of the Saints," *New Yorker*, Jan. 21, 2002, 40–57.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Richard Goldstein, "Love That Dare Not: Why We Should Support the Right to Marry Plurally," *Village Voice*, posted May 26, 2001, on www.villagevoice.com
7. Wright, *op. cit.*
8. Paul Reed, "Utah Seeks to Clean House of Polygamy," posted Dec. 12, 2000, on www.law.about.com
9. Wright, *op. cit.*
10. Polygamy page.com, "Polygamy on Trial," www.btinternet.com/~familyman/ontrial.htm
11. Jeff Jacoby, "Just Another Nontraditional Family?," *Boston Globe*, May 17, 2001. Downloaded from www.bigeye.com/jj051701.htm
12. Associated Press, "Utah Polygamist Found Guilty of Child Rape," June 24, 2002. Downloaded from www.azcentral.com/news/articles/0624news_crime_polygamy_dc.html

13. John R. Llewellyn, "Tom Green and Wives," posted April 15, 2000, on www.utahbooks.com
14. *Ibid.*
15. Polygamy page.com, *op. cit.*
16. Llewellyn, *op. cit.* Beagley's family was part of a group in which husbands were selected for girls. She married Tom at the age of 16 in defiance of their wishes. She had been with him for fourteen years at the time this was written and had seven of his children.
17. Polygamy page.com, *op. cit.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. Lawrence Wright, *op. cit.*
21. Associated Press, "Head of Mormons Condemns Child Sexual Abuse in His Church," April 8, 2002. Downloaded from www.boston.com/globe/spotlight/sexabuse/related/040802_mormons.htm
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23. Deborah Petersen Swift, "Suicide Prompts Protests About Police Raid," *Hartford (Conn.) Courant*, Feb. 1, 2002.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Jonathan D. Rockoff and W. Zachary Malinowski, "Johston Officials Defend 'Sex Act' Arrests of 7 Men," *Providence (R.I.) Journal*, Jan. 27, 2002.
26. Matthew Waite, "Police Beat: 24 Men are Cited in 3 day Park Sting," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, Jan. 30, 1998, B2. Downloaded from library.ardemgaz.com/LibrarySearch.asp
27. Don Romesburg, "Suicide in Little Rock," Feb. 10, 1998. Downloaded from gaytoday.badpuppy.com/garchiv/events/021098ev.htm
28. Don Romesburg, "Arkansas Paper Covers Up Suicide," Feb. 23, 1998. Downloaded from gaytoday.badpuppy.com/garchiv/events/022398ev.htm. See also "Suicide in Little Rock," Feb. 6, 1998, www.glaad.org/org/publications/alerts/?record=1395
29. Seth Blomeley, "Seven Sue to Void State Sodomy Law," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, Jan. 29, 1998, B2. Downloaded from library.ardemgaz.com/LibrarySearch.asp
30. Erin Schulte, "Sodomy Arrest Angers Those Challenging Law," *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, Sept. 15, 1998. Downloaded from library.ardemgaz.com/LibrarySearch.asp
31. *Ibid.*
32. "Only in Vermont," *Advocate*, March 5, 2002. Downloaded from www.advocate.com/html/stories/858/858_freer.asp
33. "Rhode Island House Passes Sodomy Repeal," *Planet Out*, May 11, 1998. Downloaded from www.aol.planetout.com/news/article.html?1998/05/11/3
34. "'Crime' and Punishment in America: State-by-State Breakdown of Sodomy Laws," www.aclu.org/issues/gay/sodomy/html
35. "Another Lambda Legal Victory Arkansas Supreme Court Decision Strikes Down State's Sodomy Law," Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund news release, July 9, 2002, downloaded from www.lambdalegal.org/cgi-bin/iowa/documents/record?record=1083

36. Steve Weinstein, "Entrapped!," *Pride.02*, 2002, 98 100, 103–104.
37. NewsPlanet Staff, "Providence Won't Reveal Stings," Sept. 22, 1997, downloaded from aol.planetout.com/news/article.html?1997/09/2/3
38. NewsPlanet Staff, "T Rooms on TV Protest Arrests," Nov. 12, 1998, downloaded from aol.planetout.com/news/article.html?1998/11/12/4
39. *Ibid.*
40. Amy Pagnozzi, "Sexual Intolerance Is the Shame in Suicide," *Hartford (Conn.) Courant*, Jan. 29, 2002.
41. See Steve Arney, "Ordinance Restricts Adult Entertainment," Bloomington, Ill., *Pantagraph*, April 9, 2002. "X-rated video booths no longer will be private places in Bloomington's adult oriented stores.... Medusa's Adult World owner Al Tannahill said...that half of the customers who watch movies in Medusa's won't if the doors are removed." See also Steve Arney, "City Looks to Update Adult Store Rules," Bloomington, Ill., *Pantagraph*, Jan. 24, 2002.
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43. Bob Jagolinzer, "Sex Act in Video Business No Crime," *Providence (R.I.) Journal*, May 9, 2002.
44. Steve Weinstein, *op. cit.*
45. Steve Weinstein, "It's Back!," *Village Voice*, June 26 July 2, 2002, downloaded from www.villagevoice.com/issues/0226/weinstein.php. These quotes are taken from widely separated points in this thoughtful article, which examines drug use, barebacking, objectification, racism, and other problematic aspects of public sex, as well as celebrating public sex.
46. Pagnozzi, *op. cit.*
47. Romesburg, "Arkansas Paper Covers Up Suicide," *op. cit.*
48. Romesburg, "Suicide in Little Rock," *op. cit.*

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Destroying the Village in Order to Save It (Again)

[1999]

*Hey, white boy,
What you doin' uptown?*

—Lou Reed, “Waitin’ for My Man”

We use a language of disaster to understand addiction. We talk about the war on drugs, the epidemic of heroin use, the tragedy of alcoholism. Being a heavy drug user certainly has its dramatic moments—it’s the “jails, institutions, or death” thing so often intoned at Narcotics Anonymous as the inevitable outcome of active drug use. But it has always seemed to me that heroin was the perfect drug for civil servants, because so many of the people who use it are fanatically wedded to the jobs that guarantee a regular, albeit low, dosing schedule. Only in a puritanical country like America could anybody be surprised that many, many human beings choose to ingest intensely pleasurable substances. The consequences of getting high range from mild discomfort to the catastrophe of an overdose or a prison sentence. But in America, we have no sense of proportion or logic when it comes to drug policy. Alcohol is the only legal psychoactive substance. We can’t seem to distinguish between pot and crack cocaine, and complete abstinence is the only morally acceptable outcome once somebody demonstrates an inability to hide a habit.

I’m thinking about addiction a lot because I just passed the seven-year anniversary of my own “sobriety.” I have trouble with

the term “clean and sober” because the only way I can refrain from getting high is to keep the dirty and dangerous parts of my life intact. Sobriety is not about being self-righteous or guilt-ridden for me. It’s about staying alive so that I can continue to be a radical pervert troublemaker. I have a lot of respect for people who are consumed and redeemed by all twelve steps; I’m still nibbling on the first three. I hardly ever go to meetings, and I’ve never had a sponsor. This may be because I had a pretty high bottom. From the outside, everything in my life looked fine. I had a good job and a nice place to live with a full refrigerator.

But you can’t calculate by such externals how much somebody is suffering. I used to say I never met a drug I didn’t like, with the exception of cocaine. But then, I never shot cocaine, and the needle and its attendant rituals was at least 50 percent of the thrill. When I was an equal-opportunity doper, it was pretty easy for me to think of myself as a recreational drug user. But I had the misfortune to run face-first into heroin, which took me over with a force that was stronger than sex, if you can imagine that. It was the drug that I had been looking for all along, a perfect fit, the thing that I needed to feel normal. It took away all my fear and empathy, and replaced them with rushes of intense bliss that were better than an orgasm. I’ve never loved another person as much as I loved smack. However, we can probably all attest to the sad truth that many of the things and people we love are not good for us at all.

Heroin dominated my dreams and every waking moment of my life, whether I was sticking a needle in my arm or not. Simple abstinence was not enough. By talking to other people who had kicked and using a recovery program I can’t name without violating its principles, I found the strength to get past my obsession. “The program” gets criticized a lot by people who think going to a meeting every day is every bit as bad as scoring. But if you’ve ever been an addict, you know that tending your habit is much more time-consuming and unpleasant than any amount of thumping AA’s Big Book or

N.A.'s Blue Book. May your Higher Power, (*fill in the blank*), bless Bill W. and his heirs and assigns, say I.

Too many of the queer people I love have been scarred by addiction. Some of us can't seem to find the help we would need to go on living. Two years ago, my friend Thor used a syringe full of smack to kill herself. Thor was an HIV-positive, butch leatherdyke who talked about her gender issues with female-to-male transsexual (FTM) friends but could never decide to try testosterone. From what I can figure, she had battled a deep and bitter depression her whole life. The new treatments for HIV infection were not appealing to her, probably for the same reason she claimed to have deliberately infected herself with AIDS. Even Planet Earth was on probation with her. She was not happy about being here. Her death continues to affect a wide circle of people who hide their grief by getting angry with her for relapsing; arguing about whether she "belonged" to the dykes or to the FTMs; raging (unfairly, I think) about the cowardice of suicide.

Anger is powerful; grief is paralyzing. But healing doesn't happen until people can feel both sides of the coin of loss. And it's only then, perhaps, that we can ask ourselves the hard questions. Like, why is it that so many of us can't stand ourselves or our lives unless we self-medicate? Don't pretend you don't know who I'm talking about. If it's not you, it's a friend or a lover. There are no six degrees of separation here. Drug treatment experts estimate that addiction to drugs and alcohol affects one-quarter to one-third of lesbians and gay men. (Critics, however, say the studies that produced these figures disproportionately sampled bar patrons.)

Mental-health professionals attribute substance abuse among gay people to homophobia and our fear, self-hatred, shame, and misdirected anger. We all know how that works. You get fired from a job, and you know you won't be able to prove it's discrimination. You go out really wanting to connect with somebody, but all you find is scorn and indifference. You get worn down by nasty looks from strangers on the bus,

contemptuous bank tellers, insulting groups of teenagers. Even your own parents are hateful to you. Oh, bartender! Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man!

The desire to escape from those negative and painful states is basically a healthy one. People use drugs and alcohol because they want to take care of themselves; they want to feel better. And the vast majority of the time, that strategy works just fine. An exceptionally fun evening balances out a shitty week, and gives you the strength to carry on. For a few of us, the stoned weekend stretches into a lifetime focused on using, even though it stopped making us feel good a long time ago. Experts in medicine and psychology are a long way from understanding why some of us get taken down by a chemical siren. I do know that it's not about being stupid, crazy, or morally flawed. Some of the most creative and intelligent people I know can't stop picking up. This ranges from a friend who has to smoke a joint every night to go to sleep and another one in the morning to help him face the world to a buddy who thinks that because she kicked cocaine it's okay to drink herself into blackouts every weekend. We have seen the enemy, and it is us—Cleopatra, Queen of Denial.

The queer community is pleasure-positive for the most part. We've given up a lot to pursue our own notions of a good time. So we are a relatively safe haven for experimentation with a wide range of mood- and mind-altering techniques and substances. But we don't seem to have figured out the difference between recreation and compulsion. Some of us have bought into the larger culture's religiously based assumption that any quest for transcendence is bound to take you straight to purgatory. If you snort poppers, you *will* get Kaposi's sarcoma; if you go to a beer bust, you *will* wrap your car around a telephone pole on the way home. Excess in either direction—sobriety or getting soused—are the most visible choices. The concept of harm reduction is applied on the streets, where outreach workers try to provide whatever help they can to a population that would laugh and disappear if the only thing they were offered was

abstinence-based treatment. That same idea, of moderating or minimizing the harmful effects of inherently risky behavior, is not widespread among queer people who are able to maintain a higher standard of living.

Given *homo sapiens*' penchant for ingesting things that will make "happy hour" last a lot longer than an hour, there's one conceptual schism in the gay community that seems quite weird to me. That's our image of transmission of HIV. Gay men at risk of contracting AIDS are almost always depicted as putting themselves in harm's way through sexual transmission. The gay and bisexual men who get it sharing needles are rarely acknowledged. Injection drug-users (IDUs) are another category entirely, as if there were no queer people sticking needles in their arms, as if other ways to get high have nothing to do with exposure to disease. Most of us stereotype junkies in exactly the same fashion that straight people stereotype "fags with AIDS." They're not nice people. We'd know them on sight. They exist somewhere else, in a bad neighborhood far away from our lovely renovated Victorians and sex clubs. Will Blanche never learn?

A working definition of addiction might be, "continuing to party when it's not very much fun anymore." This is especially dangerous when there's high seroprevalence of HIV or other sexually transmitted or blood-borne diseases. Some methods of drug ingestion are vectors for disease transmission; getting high is correlated with unsafe sex. The standard line of reasoning is that intoxicated people expose themselves to HIV because they have impaired judgment, but Walt Odets, author of *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS*, says it's not that simple. "[O]ften people are not having unprotected sex because they have been drinking, but rather they have been drinking in order to have unprotected sex.... [U]nprotected sex is often important and compelling, and... the disinhibition provided by substances is often necessary to act out the desire." Odets also points out that "People are also using substances in order to have *protected* sex, either because they have long-standing anxiety or conflict about sex

or...because as a society we have failed to validate the human importance of sex, especially gay sex.”¹

The need to take a more realistic and complex look at the many roles that psychoactive substances play in people’s lives seems urgent, given the following statistics. Nearly one-third of the more than 570,000 AIDS cases reported in the United States have been caused directly or indirectly by injection drug use. Almost half of all new HIV infections can be traced to dirty needles. This potentially puts the user’s sexual partners, using buddies, and children at risk as well. Elsewhere, the AIDS profile among needle-users is even more grim. In Malaysia, Vietnam, and other countries, three-quarters of recorded HIV cases are among drug addicts. Two out of five new HIV infections in Russia in the past two years have also been among IDUs. In America, we haven’t even come close to catching up with the virus as it speeds through this population.

Harm reduction evolved as a way for outreach workers to do at least some good among drug users who were, for the most part, on the street and not prepared to quit. This means setting up a hierarchy of risks to which drug-using populations are exposed, and focusing on the most serious threats to public health. In this country, that has meant providing sterile needles, teaching clean injection technique, removing contaminated needles from circulation, handing out bleach and condoms, and offering referrals to other social services. I suspect harm reduction also evolved to prevent burnout among health workers, who are trying to advocate for a rather hopeless population confronting a system that sees them as criminals or sick animals. The limitations of harm reduction are not the sole result of the recalcitrance of addicts. The street user who wants help will find that social services are difficult to access and inadequate. The number of treatment slots available is ridiculously small; waiting lists are astronomical. In New York City alone, there are an estimated 250,000 intravenous heroin addicts. About 33,000 methadone slots are funded; they are filled. So are 6,000 places in residential programs.²

Michael Clatts is the principal investigator at the National Development Research Institutes (NDRI), a nonprofit research and service organization targeted to ameliorating the health risks associated with drug abuse and other high-risk behaviors. He is an epidemiologist who directs a number of federally funded studies there. Clatts says that harm reduction "is not professed to be a sufficient response" to the epidemic of harmful drug use. "In the harm reduction model, we prioritize preventing the spread of HIV infection. Because if people are dead there is no down-the-road treatment." However, "Short of taking an honest look at the available treatment paradigms, doing something about poverty, housing, and economic opportunity," harm reduction may well be the best we can do for people in trouble. "We absolutely need a larger political solution. Outreach workers cannot address substance abuse on their own. We are seeing a microcosm of trends that we've known about for 40 years in which poor health outcomes are disproportionately associated with poverty. And that overlays on ethnic communities, gender and sexuality. We should not be surprised that we are finding HIV where we are finding it."

A broad-based approach that alleviates the human suffering that causes a large proportion of drug abuse seems unlikely in a country in which the most simple public-health harm reduction measures are controversial. Is there any more obvious concept in HIV prevention than taking dirty syringes out of circulation and giving people enough clean needles that they don't share injection equipment? On March 31, 1998, the Congressional ban on federal funding for needle exchange programs (NEPs) was lifted. AIDS advocacy groups were informed that the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Donna Shalala, was going to authorize federal funding. But at the last minute, she received word that President Clinton would not approve this.

Clinton claimed he was afraid a Congressional backlash would outlaw such programs entirely. But his administration has failed utterly to educate the general public or Congress about the dire public health emergency that makes NEPs

necessary, or the mountains of scientific research that indicates they reduce the incidence of blood-borne diseases without increasing drug use. NEPs have been endorsed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a National Institutes of Health panel, and the President's Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. The World AIDS Congress has urged that needle-exchange programs be increased worldwide. Clinton was afraid to do the right thing because he didn't want a lot of bad publicity. Funny, that.

In the name of "zero tolerance," politicians will only fund drug treatment programs if the goal is 100 percent abstinence. Addicts who enter treatment are usually expected to quit cold, with no transitional medication to ease the pain of withdrawal. Both outpatient and inpatient treatment is based on twelve-step programs. Therapeutic communities subject residents to a barrage of confrontation that is supposed to tear down the addictive personality, so that it can be replaced by something more healthy. Clatts points out that there is virtually no research on the efficacy of twelve-step. "With the existing treatment models, less than half of the people that go through those systems remain drug free within two years of leaving treatment. If you were running a business this way you'd be out of business."

One of the problems is that entering treatment is often made a prerequisite for the addict's receiving other social services, like housing, or custody of children. But the original twelve-step program, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), was constructed for people who had hit bottom and were, of their own accord, reaching out for help. Court-mandated attendance at AA and its descendants runs contrary to the original spirit of the program. Clatts says, "The real problem is that we are taking away an individual's rights and their capacity for self-determination. And as a therapeutic process that usually doesn't work."

He describes his work with sexual-minority street youth. "They are more likely to be involved in sex work and in

drug use than their heterosexual counterparts. "The street economy is as homophobic as any other economy, and gay kids are excluded from that economy," he says. Clatts says these young people "come to the street having been exposed to a great deal of homophobia, having encountered a great deal of discrimination regarding their sexual status and feel[ing] a lot of guilt about that. Once on the street they are further victimized sexually. And the way they manage their feelings about that victimization is through drugs. So then we throw them into treatment and they go cold. And all of the feelings that they've been medicating come welling up. The first thing we see in these kids in treatment programs is exceptional risk for suicide. And what does this kid do with those feelings? Runs back to the street. Few street kids enter treatment anyway because they don't know how or they don't trust it. The majority who do are gone within 72 hours because they panic. So what didn't we do right here? We didn't assess their readiness for treatment. We should never have taken those drugs away until we were prepared to put something protective in their place."

Experiments in England and Europe with maintaining opiate addicts on legalized doses of narcotics have, for the most part, shown a sharp reduction in crime and a vast improvement in the addicts' lives. Such experiments will probably never be attempted here because the public has been taught to froth at the mouth at the mention of heroin, despite the general reliance on alcohol, prescription downers, and antidepressants to get through the work week. This simple-minded approach to addiction is promulgated by the same public officials who are terrified that they might lose votes if they actually created a realistic drug policy. It's a vicious cycle, and most street addicts don't cast ballots.

The only alternative to abstinence that Americans will tolerate is methadone, and that just barely. Most American methadone clinics fail to provide a high enough level of the medication to be effective. It's difficult to be accepted for such

a program, easy to get kicked out of it, and tough to endure the frowned-upon concept of indefinite maintenance.³ In September, 1999, the White House announced it would expand the availability of methadone treatment for heroin addiction. Top drug official General Barry McCaffrey released a plan that will allow doctors to give methadone to addicts who visit their offices. About 115,000 Americans are on methadone, which is currently administered only at special clinics under stringent conditions. Eight states (New Hampshire, Vermont, West Virginia, Mississippi, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Idaho) don't permit methadone clinics at all. New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani had questioned the effectiveness of this treatment, saying it was swapping one addiction for another, and announced a controversial plan to get methadone patients at city-run clinics off the medication. And yet a recent study by the National Academy of Sciences called methadone "more likely to work than any other therapy."

I have friends who can't stay off junk any other way. They've tried twelve-step and residential treatment, and repeatedly flunked them. These are people who genuinely wanted to clean up, and kept trying, no matter how often they failed, to do the things that "experts" kept telling them ought to help. Methadone is a safety net for people like this. As long as my friends can get methadone, they are able to hold a job, pay their bills, and have a normal life. Their greatest fear is that they'll be cut off from the medication that has gotten them off the street. When I asked one of them what she would do if she lost her slot at the methadone clinic, she said in all seriousness, "I would probably have to kill myself."

I've accompanied them to their methadone appointments, and the atmosphere inside these places is about as grim as a Times Square porn shop, back when such things existed. The clientele is diverse—punks, sex workers, young and middle-aged couples, a lot of mothers with babies, a few white folks mixed in with a lot of people of color. The only common denominator is poverty. The staff for the most part are former

addicts on methadone themselves, but they don't have much compassion for their fellow sufferers. They hand out cups full of methadone and faux Tang with the surly looks that are usually reserved for the dog shit you just stepped in. It's common for people to get a short dose of their meds, or for the methadone to be diluted to cover theft. Security guards routinely bully anybody who sits down, and an indifferent staff regularly screws up paperwork.

The only person who pays for these errors is the client who is trying to get clean. Nobody is on their side, nobody advocates for them, and they are often too dispirited to protest even obvious injustice because they know, from prior experience, that it will do no good. In or out of treatment, addicts are seen as incorrigible liars, thieves, whores—not as human beings. If you complain or even ask a question, your slot in treatment can disappear with no warning, and the person who replaces you will simply be grateful you fucked up.

Giuliani's notion of "weaning" people from methadone is a heartless publicity stunt. Some scientists have theorized that regularly taking drugs like heroin or cocaine permanently alters the body and brain chemistry in such a way that it's literally impossible for some people to simply abstain from taking a compensatory chemical of some kind. Methadone treatment certainly has its shortcomings, mostly unpleasant side-effects of the medication. We could probably come up with something better. But the NDRI's Clatts believes that alternative treatment modalities are never going to be researched or funded here because Middle America wants treatment paradigms to be punitive. We aren't even trying to come up with a medication like methadone that could block the effects of other problematic substances like alcohol or cocaine.

The same form of treatment is prescribed for everyone, regardless of the drug of choice. Different sorts of people are attracted to different drugs, and the drugs themselves have radically different effects on their devotees. But the concept of tailoring treatment approaches to specific groups of users

hasn't caught on. For example, needle exchange programs were designed with heroin users in mind. A cap is usually set on the number of clean needles you can get at each visit. Even in Canada, where NEPs get government funding, health officials were not prepared for a boom in shooting up cocaine, which typically involves dozens of injections in a single session. Cokeheads who wanted to use sterile syringes couldn't pry enough of them out of their local NEP. This is, I believe, the real reason why a Montreal study showed a higher rate of HIV infection among clients of NEPs than other addicts. If you don't let people have as many sterile needles as they are going to use, NEP won't work. Duh! NEPs have also been slow to respond to the needs of the transgender community, where a different type of needle is sometimes shared for intramuscular injection of hormones.

The expectation that someone will be able to quit cold and stay clean the first time around has repeatedly been proven to be unworkable for most users. Relapses are, instead, something that treatment workers know they can count on. But if a client goes out and uses, they are usually kicked out of the program, and they often find the door barred at other agencies as well. It would make more sense to assume that relapse *will* take place. The message should be, "If you relapse, come back to us as soon as possible. Let's talk about it, figure out what happened, and see how we can prevent it from happening again." Addicts are already familiar with shame and excommunication. Those experiences do not modify their behavior.

Daniel Zingale is the executive director of AIDS Action, a national advocacy organization of more than 3,000 AIDS service organizations and the people they serve. Zingale says, "What we need is treatment on request. So that literally anyone seeking substance abuse treatment would find access to those programs." He finds it hopeful that in mid-October, the federal government allotted over \$200 million new dollars for substance abuse treatment. "The obstacle [to treatment on request] is that a disproportionate amount of money in

the so-called war on drugs goes to interdiction." And that has not changed. Nor will it, unless we become as angry about the war on drugs as we are about gay-bashing. The much-touted, expensive, and useless War on Drugs is also a hate crime.

NOTES

1. Walt Odets, *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS*, Duke University Press, 1995, 219.
2. Robert Newman, M.D., President, Beth Israel Medical Center, in a lecture delivered at the International Congress of Toxicology, June 6-7, 1998, Florence, Italy, "Prescribing Methadone, Pursuing Abstinence."
3. *Ibid.*

The Pimping of Hillary Clinton: Antiporn Feminists vs. Sex Workers—Again

[2000]

In early 2000, the United Nations' (UN) Convention on Transnational Organized Crime in Vienna ran into a snag while drafting an international organized crime treaty. In its current form, the treaty would outlaw trafficking (i.e., illegal smuggling) of people across national borders for prostitution. An attempt to make a distinction between forced prostitution and the situation of other sex workers has created a hullabaloo that has drawn cultural feminists into coalition with right-wing American politicians and cast aspersions on First Lady and New York senatorial candidate Hillary Clinton.¹

Clinton is the honorary head of the President's Interagency Council on Women (ICW). Council members include Anita Botti and Theresa Loar, who are involved in creating the UN treaty. Stephen Warnath is legal counsel to the ICW and one of the lead negotiators for the United States in framing this document. Botti, Loar, and Warnath's position on prostitution seems to be that international law enforcement efforts should be concentrated on stopping traffickers who buy and sell women or manipulate them into the sex industry with deceit rather than trying to stop prostitution, *per se*.² The latter goal has proved elusive, and leads police to put prostitutes in jail without necessarily holding coercive procurers responsible for misleading, kidnapping, intimidating, and assaulting their victims. So far, Hillary Clinton has refused to condemn this position, which has pissed off both liberal loyalists from her husband's administration and

Republican politicians who'd like to see her head on a plate.

The controversy began when Equality Now president Jessica Neuwirth formed a small feminist coalition to oppose this "weakened" definition of prostitution. Among this elite are Planned Parenthood President Gloria Feldt, Patricia Ireland of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the founder of *Ms.* magazine, Gloria Steinem. In early January, these worthies sent a letter of protest to the White House. It said, in part, "The position taken by the administration suggests that you do not consider prostitution of others to be a form of sexual exploitation. The definition would not only fail to protect a substantial number of trafficking victims. It would also shield many traffickers in the global sex trade from prosecution."³ The proposed focus on forced prostitution would fail to "cover some of the most common methods of sex trafficking which prey on and profit from the economic desperation of women, girls and their families by securing their 'consent' to sale in prostitution." Marie-Jose Ragab, former international director of NOW, also spoke out against the ICW, referring to their position as "this hideously anti-woman proposal."⁴

This letter was followed by another one signed by Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship Ministries, and four colleagues, accusing the Clinton administration of taking the position that "voluntary" prostitution "is a legitimate career option for women."⁵

Clinton spokeswoman Melanne Verveer responded, "It should be clear that we condemn prostitution and want to hold the perpetrators accountable. It is not our intention to undermine the definition of prostitution in any way." A senior State Department official added that the treaty does not undermine existing laws against prostitution or an earlier treaty that outlaws prostitution.⁶ This 1949 treaty requires punishment of any person who "exploits the prostitution of another person, even with the consent of that person."⁷ For some reason, this official omitted the salient fact that the United States has never ratified that 1949 treaty.⁸

Equality Now did send a follow-up letter saying its members are not attacking Hillary Clinton.⁹ Nevertheless, their public criticism of the ICW feeds into a misogynist subtext about the First Lady. Although it's rarely been said explicitly in print, the fact that she did not leave her philandering husband has embarrassed and upset many of her fans and supporters. A strong woman is not supposed to put up with adultery. As Blanche McCrary Boyd noted in an article in *Ms.*, "A lot of women have complained that Hillary harmed all women by not leaving her husband after his affair and his serious lies were revealed."¹⁰ There is also some skepticism about the possibility that she may have genuinely forgiven him. Some believe she is using Bill because he is in a position of power—a position he might not have been able to reach without her political savvy and connections. The notion that a woman politician would stay married for reasons other than romance is not popular. A thirst for power is not compatible with the femininity that a woman in the public eye has to maintain.

So there is a current of popular opinion that perceives her as an ally of irresponsible male sexuality and the less-desirable appurtenances of masculinity in general. Conservatives have attacked the Clinton administration on moral grounds ever since the president advocated dropping the ban on gays in the military. "[I]n recent years, the gap between identifying obscenity and prosecuting it has become a canyon. U.S. Attorneys now in office, all of whom were appointed by President Clinton, refuse to prosecute obscenity," said one such critic.¹¹ One of Vice President Al Gore's biggest problems is distancing himself from his prurient mentor without disowning him. And so we have a renewed focus on his wife, Tipper Gore's, most cherished cause: censoring references to sex, drugs, and violence in music and other forms of popular entertainment.

To her credit, Hillary has not kowtowed to this attempt to shame her. She was quick to take a public stand in opposition to New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's attempt to ban a controversial art exhibit in a Brooklyn museum. Unfortunately,

the rest of the Clinton administration has a shoddy record on First Amendment issues. Despite what the Republicans like to claim, the Justice Department has been allowed to carry on with the same antiporn campaigns that were begun soon after then-President Reagan's Meese Commission outlined a strategy for a new battle against obscenity. President Clinton has backed a series of popular but unconstitutional bills intended to censor the Internet and attack child pornography. The latter bills have been especially ludicrous, including attempts to broaden the definition of child pornography so much that material featuring adults who merely appeared to be underage would be illegal, as would computer-generated images.¹²

A campaign against porn or prostitution is a fail-safe way to defuse accusations that the Clintons are soft on crime and gung-ho on immorality. The public relations machine is in full gear. For the last year, American newspapers have frequently featured horrific accounts of women and children victimized by unscrupulous criminals who make false promises of legitimate jobs, smuggle them into other countries, confiscate their passports, and force them to engage in prostitution to pay off the cost of being kidnapped and abused. Scary statistics are being tossed around to document the supposed rise in sex industry trafficking. A CIA report says 2 million women and children are sent across national borders into some form of prostitution each year. The State Department says about 50,000 of these people could be in the United States. A UN report puts the total figure at 4 million. Or is it 30 million people, as Pino Arlacchi, director general of the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, alleges have been trafficked within and from Southeast Asia alone?¹³ (This figure includes sweatshop workers as well as prostitutes.) There's no way to tell because all of these figures are estimates—estimates compiled by agencies that have an investment in beefing up their funding. Forced prostitution, whether it involves illegal immigration or not, is clearly a problem, but we don't really know the scope of it. Big

numbers are a scare tactic, often used to justify drastic action that may not be necessary or wise.

There is rarely any attempt to put the voluntary and forced illegal immigration of sex workers into a larger economic context. When people cannot make a living in their own countries, they are of course willing to go elsewhere. Forced prostitution is a terrible social evil that requires our attention. But why is Equality Now more concerned about this than it is about other forms of forced labor, child labor, underpaid labor, or labor under unsafe conditions? The feminists who signed Neuwirth's letter have had precious little to say about the terrible conditions of women workers in factories in Mexico and Southeast Asia, or about child labor, which often occurs in the child's own country. They are also naïve about the consequences of unleashing law enforcement. They trumpet about cracking down on procurers and blithely ignore the fact that criminalization of prostitution always falls most heavily on the shoulders of the ethnic minority women, sexual minority youth, and transgendered people who make up the lowest echelons of the sex industry.

Work is a human right. Survival is a human right. It should never be illegal to work to put food on the table and a roof over your head and your children's heads. Antiprostitution laws are part of the crazy double bind that we impose upon poor people and those with a spoiled identity. "You're going to be oppressed and persecuted," we tell them, "but don't do anything illegal. We can discriminate against you as much as we want, but don't you dare sell drugs or take money for a blowjob." It's as crazy-making as jailing starving people for stealing food, or for squatting in a vacant building. These are not the acts of a just or compassionate society.

The same "feminists" who are willing to use obscenity laws, moral panics, customs officials, and vice squads to get rid of sexually explicit material they find objectionable are also supporting laws and policies that scapegoat prostitutes for the ugly consequences of sexism and runaway international

corporate capitalism. Many pro-pleasure feminists do not realize how influential antiporn feminists have become in the area of international prostitution policy. Key players in this area include Janice G. Raymond, who authored *The Transsexual Empire*. This gender-essentialist nightmare of a book continues to haunt transgendered activists who try to gain access to the lesbian community or work in coalition with feminists. Raymond is now a professor of women's studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and codirector of the human-rights group Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW). Her work focuses on sex trafficking in the United States. A second project traces female immigration patterns and the links to sex-oriented operations. This research is funded by the U.S. Justice Dept. and the Ford Foundation (respectively).¹⁴

Raymond links prostitution, sex tourism, and mail-order bride businesses and says they are powered in part by organized crime, drug syndicates, and the Internet. She focuses on the negative aspects of prostitution without suggesting political changes that would give disenfranchised people real economic alternatives. Instead of improving working conditions in the sex trade, she believes sex trade should be eliminated. She says, "There is an enormous rate of infection and injury. This is violent sex. This is not your romantic relationship." (As if violence is never a part of "romantic" relationships.) Raymond is clearly in favor of ending all forms of sex work. She says, "Globalization means ease of communication. The Internet is breaking down the few boundaries there were for restriction of the sex industry.... We have to begin. The notion that somehow all of this is inevitable is not a very humane position to take." And she asks, "Is marriage a commodity to be marketed, as we are seeing with prostitution? Do we really want to affirm that sex is a commodity?"¹⁵ In her capacity as a social scientist, Raymond's opinion about the international sex trade is frequently sought by policymakers.

Remember Laura Lederer, who edited *Take Back the Night*, the bible of the antiporn movement? She is now director of the

smuggler-monitoring Protection Project at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. In February, she told Congress that sex industry traffickers operate with impunity in India, Thailand, Brazil, and former Soviet Republics like Ukraine and Moldova. Her agenda, like that of her colleagues, is to eliminate prostitution entirely, whether it involves violence against women or not. Lederer uses accounts of real abuses to manipulate policymakers into crackdowns that simply make the lives of poor women and sexual-minority hustlers more difficult.¹⁶

Right-wing feminists' position on prostitution has not changed significantly since Kathleen Barry issued her antiwhore screed, *Female Sexual Slavery*, in 1979. Barry attacks prostitution by lumping it in with forced marriage, dowry deaths, incest, and many other forms of sexual and economic abuse to create the über-category of female sexual slavery. She then uses these horrors to justify a call for abolishing prostitution via stepped-up law enforcement. She is unable to make a meaningful distinction between various types of sex work, because including people who willingly became prostitutes or enjoy the benefits they obtain from the work would undermine her grim stereotypes.¹⁷ A stripper or dominatrix who has no customer contact or a highly paid escort offends her every bit as much as the woman who turns thirty tricks a day, six days a week, and never gets to leave the brothel without an armed guard. Nor can Barry afford to humanize the johns. They are portrayed as misogynists, batterers, rapists, and murderers. But in the real world, the majority of men who pay for sex are harmless and well-meaning guys who just want some companionship and physical release. They may be too busy, impatient, old, disabled, shy, kinky, or unattractive to seek out the gratification that courting a nonprofessional may or may not produce. Some of them have wives or girlfriends who are unwilling or unable to satisfy them sexually, but they are unwilling to leave these relationships. They are hardly a menace to society or to women in general. They can be a nuisance, just as street hookers can be, but a society that won't

allow quiet, well-managed “massage parlors” to remain open has no business complaining when people take their cash or their booties onto the street.

Barry does not analyze the effects of antiprostitution laws. She doesn't seem to care what happens to women, young queers, or other marginal people who face police harassment, incarceration, increased violence, and a sharp drop in income. Although her stated agenda is to further the liberation of women, Barry somehow turns prostitutes into the arch-enemies of feminism. By participating in such a corrupt, patriarchal institution, she implies, prostitutes are nothing more than obstacles to winning equal treatment for women. Although she acknowledges the role that female poverty plays in making women vulnerable to pimps and procurers, she never outlines a political campaign for eliminating that poverty.

It is hard to imagine how draconian a moral panic would have to be to really wipe out the exchange of sex for money. Prostitution survives when all other economic forms break down. Only the harshest police state could suppress it. Even then, it's doubtful that an entire force of cops could be mustered who would be impervious to the temptation of cash bribes, free drugs, and sexual favors. The lure of easy money draws crooked cops as well as hookers and pimps, and a collusion between them is what keeps the underground sex trade alive. Even if we could visualize a world free of prostitution, it would not necessarily be a world where poverty, lack of education, lack of political power, drug addiction, and lack of other employment options had been addressed for racial minorities, women, and queer people.

We now have a national version of an antitrafficking bill that also fails to address these crucial concerns. In October, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 371-1 to renew the 1994 Violence Against Women Act. This has become a sweeping anticrime bill that targets traffickers of women and children in the global sex trade as well as domestic abuse. The legislation was backed by Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah)

and sponsored by Senator Paul Wellstone (D-Minnesota) and Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kansas). On October 11, the Senate unanimously passed the final version of the bill, and President Clinton is expected to sign it into law. Over the next five years, \$3.3 billion will be spent to expand shelters for battered women and children and prosecute wife beaters. Grants will be made to extend services to battered women in college residences, those trapped in violent dating relationships, and victims of stalking or sexual assault. States will be required to enforce protection orders obtained in other states, and will be prohibited from notifying a batterer without the victim's consent when she moves to a new location. The Senate defeated an attempt by Senator Fred Thompson (R-Tennessee) to kill "Aimee's Law," a provision that will force states to pay costs if a criminal is released from prison and goes on to commit a crime in another state.¹⁸

The bill allocates \$95 million to combat trafficking. Punishment for traffickers includes life imprisonment. Assistance will be made available to victims who want to sue their captors. Immigration laws were amended to allow relief from rapid deportation so that human smuggling cases can be prosecuted. Former hostages and victims of terror will be assisted in collecting compensation from nations that sponsor such acts.

Ironically, one of the women who testified in favor of this legislation, "Inez," demonstrates some of its practical and ideological flaws. Lured from Veracruz, Mexico, with the promise of a good job, she found herself forced into prostitution in Houston to repay the smuggling debt. She was made to work six days a week, fourteen hours a day. Girls as young as 14 were incarcerated in the brothels. Prostitutes who became pregnant were forced to get abortions, and the cost of the abortion was added to their debt. Inez was arrested when the police, the FBI, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service raided the brothel. She had to spend several months in detention before she was finally released to a woman's domestic violence shelter

where she could receive gynecological care and counseling.¹⁹

Although her testimony helped put the smugglers in jail, it is probable that she will eventually be deported, since she does not qualify for permanent political asylum. At home, she will face the same economic problems that made her leave in the first place. If it's known that she testified against organized crime figures, her life might be in danger. In April 2000, "Maria" testified in front of a Senate subcommittee about the smuggling network that had lured her, also from Veracruz, into forced prostitution. When the brothel where she worked six days a week, twelve hours a day was raided in Miami, she was jailed until the Immigrant Advocacy Center convinced authorities that she and other captive prostitutes needed help, not punishment.²⁰ None of the people who claim to care about forced prostitution really care about women like Inez. They are simply making use of her (and other illegal immigrant prostitutes) for election-year publicity. Under the Victims of Trafficking and Violent Crime Protection Act, passed in 2000, at least some of the sex workers who are illegal immigrants and get swept up in prostitution busts are supposed to be able to qualify for special visas that would let them remain in the United States, but as of February 2001, that law had not been tested, and no such visas were known to have been granted.²¹

Very few Americans know that at least one country in the world has a sane prostitution policy. Individual sex work was decriminalized long ago in Holland. Prostitutes advertise their wares in the windows of store fronts in the red light district. Bordellos once were tolerated, but were officially illegal. Now they too have been decriminalized, and registered prostitutes (there are about 6,000 of them) can qualify for the same benefits that are promised all Dutch workers. Both brothels and prostitutes will also pay taxes. And prostitutes now have a legal right to refuse a customer. This move comes partly as a result of hard lobbying and public education by the Red Thread, Holland's trade union movement for prostitutes.

Parliament member Bob Schijndel says he voted in favor of the bill because it will make it harder for criminals to use brothels as fronts for the drug and weapons trade.²²

Except for a few counties in Nevada, prostitution and related activities like solicitation or pimping are illegal in the United States. Many prostitute activists have pleaded for years that decriminalization or some form of legalization would eliminate many of the nuisances attendant upon street hooking. But even in ultraliberal San Francisco, there's little hope of trying out that social experiment. The city's Board of Supervisors Task Force on Prostitution recommended decriminalization in August 1996. Since then, many hearings have been held that document both police abuse of prostitutes and the violence some johns mete out to them. Public officials say they will prosecute violence against sex workers, but as long as the work is illegal, prostitutes will hesitate to file complaints, and some customers will continue to believe that they can assault a hooker with impunity.²³

In San Francisco, we do have our own local version of Kathy Barry: Norma Hotaling. Hotaling runs the Sage Project, a nonprofit group that gets funding from the city to run classes for men arrested on suspicion of soliciting a prostitute. Hotaling is a former prostitute who has nothing good to say about the industry. Her "school for johns" tries to discourage men from paying for sex by horrifying them with stories about junkie hookers, AIDS, and prostitutes who loathe their customers.²⁴ Perhaps the fact that thousands of johns are now being arrested, in addition to the prostitutes who used to be the sole target of police, is progress. But the school for johns together with other innovative law enforcement efforts—such as confiscating cars or declaring certain areas of the city to be off-limits to those convicted of prostitution offenses—certainly don't address poverty, drug addiction, urban loneliness, violence, or unwillingness on the part of most customers to use a condom.

San Francisco has a policy to divert many first-time offenders into programs that offer education, counseling, public service,

or drug treatment as an alternative to jail time. When these programs were unveiled they were saluted as a humanitarian and reasonable reform. Diversion is available to prostitutes as well as those suspected of other petty, nonviolent crimes. But it was recently revealed that the vice squad had apparently turned the diversion process into a shakedown, with a city agency mediating between whores who had been arrested and the vice squad, to see how big a check they could leverage out of them to keep their records clean. Most street-level prostitutes don't know that a good lawyer can get nearly every charge for solicitation dropped, owing to shoddy police procedure. Instead, they get scared and pay up. These checks were made out to the vice squad, which reportedly kept poor records of these funds. When *San Francisco Weekly* reporter Renata Huang revealed this scam, there was a brief flurry of public condemnation, but the threatened audit of the vice squad has never taken place. There's every reason to believe, in fact, that this extortion is still going on.²⁵

Why do most Americans have such a hard time seeing the prostitute as a human being? Perhaps women are afraid of or detest prostitutes because there's an unspoken fear that, if times get bad enough, selling sex may be the only way to survive. There's also good, old-fashioned hypocrisy. The sex industry upholds some of the most treasured institutions in our society. Without prostitution, marriage as we know it would be unlivable for many men. Who wants to deal with that uncomfortable truth? Unfortunately, it will take the combined outrage of many men and women—or at least, many feminists—to break through the moralism that isolates sex workers and makes them vulnerable to exploitation. It wouldn't hurt to have the support of trade unionists as well. The heart of this issue is not sex or morality, it is economics. No one should have to engage in prostitution to survive. Regardless of how they entered the sex trade, all prostitutes deserve the same dignity, protections, and benefits that workers all over the world are desperate to gain.

NOTES

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Why the Police in Attleboro Need to Be Paddled

[2000]

On July 8, 2000, at about 10:30 P.M., some fun-loving, kinky people found their worst nightmares coming true. Attleboro, Massachusetts, police detectives Timothy Cook and John Otrando busted up a small private S/M play party and arrested two people, host Benjamin Davis, 23, and guest Stefany L. Reed, 38. The cops also confiscated a number of people's bags of equipment, a list of e-mail addresses of partygoers, Davis's laptop computer and Palm Pilot, and whatever else they thought might be useful in putting together a case—or at least fun to look at back at headquarters. Ironically, the Foster Building where the party was held is located kitty-corner to the Attleboro Police Department.¹

Davis, a New Hampshire computer consultant, has been charged with thirteen separate offenses, including operating a business without a license, keeping a house of prostitution (because he asked for a \$25 donation at the door), possession of an item of "self-abuse" (yes, dildos and vibrators are illegal in Massachusetts), assault and battery of a police officer (that will teach him to ask to see the search warrant), accessory before the fact of an assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, and eight counts of possession of a dangerous weapon. (Double-edged knives, some whips, and handcuffs are illegal there.)²

Reed, a vice president of sales at a New York company that sells cosmetics on the Internet, faces one count of assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, to wit, a large kitchen spoon

or spatula with which she was allegedly spanking another woman. The police claim this anonymous bottom had been beaten until it was welted and bloody. Reed's attorney, Bruce Gladstone, says it's all a case of mistaken identity. His client never hit anybody, and the cops are framing a poor, traumatized woman who was only a spectator to the kinky proceedings.³

Davis and Reed were each released, pending trial, on \$1,000 bail, after pleading not guilty to all charges. Photos of both defendants have been published in local newspapers. Some if not most of the news coverage has been sensationalistic. But a surprising number of reporters also cite local residents, attorneys, and civil-liberties organizations who feel that this case is a travesty. (An anonymous man who attended the Bottom Line, an alcohol treatment program downstairs from the party, told a reporter, "When I found out, I was like, 'Why wasn't I invited?'")⁴

The mayor of that old mill town, Judith H. Robbins, says, "I think the very fact that this was run by, and patronized by, out-of-town people shows that people do not want this kind of business in their communities. It's no coincidence that none of them are local." She also said, "I think my Police Department acted in a professional manner. It's certainly not something they expected to find on that site."⁵ Thus validated and upheld, Otrando told reporters that other arrests could follow, but so far no one else has been busted, perhaps because of the storm of mocking publicity that pokes fun at both puritanical small-town cops and big-city perverts.⁶

Davis appeared in District Court on July 26 with his attorney, family members, and some members of the newly formed Paddleboro Defense League (PDL). Judge John B. Leonard scheduled a September 12 hearing on discovery motions. Reed's status conference was postponed until August because she had hired a new attorney, Richard M. Egbert.⁷

This case resonates with similar charges brought against the Spanner defendants in England. A group of gay men who had videotaped their S/M parties were charged under assault

laws, which meant that some of the submissives were charged with conspiring to assault themselves. After an international fund-raising effort, the Spanner men's appeal was rejected by the European Court of Human Rights, which upheld the right of member nations to criminalize S/M, supposedly to protect public health and safety.⁸

Another similar case is much closer to home. Massachusetts is the very same state where Kenneth Appleby got an eight-to-ten-year prison term in 1980 for striking his lover on the shoulder with a riding crop. The state Supreme Court denied his appeal. Granted, his partner appeared as a witness against him, so Appleby was hardly a poster child for "safe—sane—consensual" S/M. Nevertheless, the case law of *Commonwealth vs. Appleby* set a precedent that consent cannot be used as a defense to an assault charge even if the "assault" is a charade of corporal punishment performed at the bottom's request and specifically for his or her entertainment and pleasure. Just to put things in context, adultery, anal sex, and oral sex are still illegal in this state, and the same statute that bans items for "self-abuse" also criminalizes abortion and birth control.⁹

The two cops responsible for hanging scarlet letters on Davis and Reed have cited the Appleby case to justify the arrests. And Bristol County District Attorney's Office spokesman Gerald FitzGerald says, "If the attorneys have an issue with the constitutionality of the law, they can file a motion to dismiss and it will be heard."¹⁰ John Ward, Appleby's attorney, resurfaced to tell the press that paddling your partner during sex is no different than whacking an opponent unconscious in the boxing ring. He says, "I think the only reason the police are interested is because this case is about sex."¹¹

It's not clear exactly how the cops found out about the party or what they were doing in the old factory where Davis rented a few fourth-floor rooms for his whip fest. They say they were looking for stolen musical equipment, and had been given permission to look around by the building's owner, William Boots. Boots has adeptly dodged the press, so his version of

the story has yet to appear in print. One of Reed's attorneys, Bruce Gladstone, says it was physically impossible for the cops to see what they claim to have seen from the door, implying they must have had inside information about what was going on there. Partygoers also claim that the police never showed anyone a search warrant. An anonymous source in one news article suggested somebody in the S/M community might have snitched on Davis. This has generated some finger-pointing and paranoia among local pervs, which doesn't help fund-raising efforts for the defense. The same anonymous source was quoted as saying darkly, "A cop doesn't just walk around with that kind of information [i.e., the 1980 Appleby case] in his head."¹²

As a matter of fact, this is exactly the kind of information that police officers who are interested in vice cases seek out. Most of the time, cops get on the vice squad by volunteering to serve there. A vice prosecution is often fueled by the right-wing moralism of the arresting officers—when it's not a punishment for failing to fork over a bribe.

For example, when sodomy was decriminalized in California and it became legal to run a gay bar, vice cops did not stop harassing gay men and lesbians. They simply switched to a new legal pretext—the solicitation laws. They began arresting gay men who made social overtures to each other in bars as well as in public-sex settings. And they kept it up until enough faggots refused to be blackmailed. It took only a handful of cases in which gay men refused to quietly plead guilty to lesser charges and register as sex offenders before this bullshit stopped. Cops will pick on any group they perceive as perverts as long as they can terrorize and intimidate these minorities.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to equate bondage-and-discipline sex with violence. This has always been the key association that S/M activists have tried to break apart. A cop who feels he (or she) has a moral mission to purge society of deviant elements is quite capable of collecting helpful information by reading the same magazines and books that sexual minority members read. The S/M press reports (as it

should) on the legal status of these activities. Whatever we know, the cops can find out as well. And, like anybody else, they remember and gossip about scandalous cases.

The police and district attorneys also know that the mere fact of being arrested and subjected to a trial is a punishing experience. Cynical arrests for drug offenses, prostitution, and illicit sex are made all the time, even when it will be difficult to win a conviction. That's why it is so important for people who have been arrested for breaking these kinds of laws to ask for an attorney, refuse to give a statement to the police, and plead not guilty. Ten years ago, people in the same fix that Davis and Reed are in would have been advised by their attorneys to count themselves lucky to merely avoid jail sentences. It takes a great deal of courage, even now, with a leather community that is more and more aboveground, to stand up to the judicial system.

The Massachusetts chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, and the Lambda Legal Defense Fund have issued supportive statements that question the validity of the Attleboro arrests. The National Coalition for Sexual Freedom has offered help publicizing the case and assistance with research. Local groups like the Boston Dungeon Society and the New England Leather Association banded together to form the PDL, which raised \$10,000 as a retainer for Davis's attorney, David Duncan. Additional monies were, of course, needed to cover the full expense of mounting a defense.¹³

A year after the Attleboro defendants were arrested, District Court Judge Francis T. Crimmins Jr. threw out practically all of the evidence against them. Defense attorneys had argued that since the police entered the party without a warrant, it was illegal for them to search the premises, and they also said Reed and Davis were questioned without being read their rights.¹⁴ All charges against Reed were eventually dropped. Davis was tried and acquitted of the charge of running a house of prostitution, and the assault charge (his attempt to prevent

the police from entering the party) was continued for six months, meaning that if he did not run afoul of the law again, it too would be dropped.¹⁵

Mayor Robbins had apparently simmered down a bit by the time this case ground its way through the judicial system. She told a reporter that she didn't condemn the partygoers for what they were doing but objected to where they were doing it, referring to the party space as "a location that anybody can walk into." District Attorney Paul F. Walsh remains adamant, however, that "There are some things adults cannot consent to and assault and battery is one of them." Assistant District Attorney Roger Ferris adds, "This conduct is not welcomed in Attleboro or anywhere else in Bristol County, and will be prosecuted vigorously."¹⁶ So let's hope that a similar case does not land on these guys' desks again.¹⁷

This might seem like a happy ending. It's certainly better than having either Reed or Davis spend time in jail or pay fines. But, as Reed said in an interview, "It made me thousands of dollars poorer. It robbed me of time. It caused me stress. It's cost me in ways that I have yet to know." Under a cloud of scandal, she left her job at an Internet company shortly after the arrest, and feels certain that the publicity this case received caused her to be passed over for another position at a beauty-products company. In her version of the bust, Detective Cook did not identify himself as a police officer when he entered the room. "Detective Cook was in a rage," she says. "I was really scared. No one understood what was happening." She was there in a latex dress merely to enjoy the company of others who were similarly dressed, she says, and denies paddling anyone. (She's even passed a polygraph to verify that fact.)¹⁸

Her "crime," then, was wearing fetish clothing in a setting where other people were also garbed in latex and leather. No information was available about how much it cost the town of Attleboro to try to punish her for this offense, but it can't have been cheap. So the town of Attleboro is thousands of dollars poorer as well.

Lest you think this is an isolated case that can be attributed to the Puritanism of a small town, on the other side of the country yet another S/M party was raided by the vice squad on October 29, 1999. Six people, five women and one man, were arrested at San Diego's Club X and cited for the misdemeanors of lewd behavior or nudity in a public place. This was shocking news since the club had enjoyed a good relationship with the police. The party was part of Leatherfest X, an event that's been held annually in San Diego for several years with no repercussions.¹⁹

Under the coordination of Madoc Pope, Club X and the local and national leather community promptly began to publicize the case and raise money for a legal defense. The first defendant to be tried was called Cricket, and in January 2000, the jury completely rejected the prosecution's case. In a 12-0 vote, the jury found her not guilty of the lewd acts charge and further commented that they felt the prosecutor's case was "weak" and the whole thing "was a waste of time." In February 2000, Deputy City Attorney Tristan Higgins-Goodell informed defense attorney Andy Zmurkiewicz that his office would no longer pursue its case against the remaining five individuals cited during the bust. While jubilant at this good news, Pope commented of the San Diego Six, "Defending themselves from these false charges has proven extremely traumatic.... It has been emotionally draining to have to go through such a process even when you know in your heart that you will eventually win in the end."²⁰

BDSM activists have to start thinking about the specific legal reforms the S/M community needs to prevent this kind of thing from happening again and again. We can no longer rely on the vanilla majority's ignorance about us or our own secrecy to protect us when we gather together. The Sadean closet door has been blown off its cast-iron hinges. We are going to have to take the same route that the gay community took decades ago and start demanding that police departments be educated about consensual S/M. Our public events and businesses that provide entertainment to our community are going to have

to be knowledgeable about local ordinances and create, if possible, better working relationships with all of the official apparatus that is used to control sexual conduct—vice cops, zoning boards, fire department inspectors, etc.

The decriminalization of S/M will require overhaul of many statutes, including laws against obscenity, prostitution, public sex, sodomy, and assault, as well as zoning regulations. We should be included in civil-rights laws that protect gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, and transgendered people against discrimination. It will not be easy to figure out how such protection should be worded, or how to make supporting our community palatable to politicians. S/M activists need to educate themselves about the entire range of state regulation of pleasure in America and abroad, and develop model legislation that makes a clear distinction between a sassy, sexy spanking and the sort of violence that we need good cops to stop.

Perhaps that will only happen when there are people on the police force who know the difference between touching their toes to receive six of the best and the drunk husband who gives his poor wife a black eye because he never learned how to manage his anger. Soliciting new recruits for the police force in leather bars and fetish clubs may seem outlandish, but it's a valid goal both for activists and for progressive cops who don't want to waste their time on bogus vice busts that don't pan out in court. Nothing improves community relations more than having community members on the job. BDSM people would certainly wear the uniform well. There would be no shoddy-looking boots or tarnished badges in the BDSM contingent, unless a SAM slipped in under the wire. If only that was our biggest problem!²¹

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Boy-Lovers, Crush Videos, and That Heinous First Amendment

[2000]

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

—The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)—or, more specifically, its affiliate in Massachusetts (ACLUM)—has been getting some bad press lately for its involvement in a case that pits the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) against the parents of a boy who was murdered in the commission of a sex crime. Editorials condemning this decision are springing up like mushrooms. One that appeared in the Portland, Maine, *Press Herald* said the ACLUM decision to defend NAMBLA “trespassed over the bounds of decency.” Furthermore:

Perhaps people do have the right to promote such heinous acts as sex between men and boys. That does not mean, however, that other Americans have to support such speech in any way, shape or form. The ACLU, in its misplaced zeal, has linked itself to a very slimy cause. Its backers should be concerned that some of that slime might now become attached to them.¹

This threat has, of course, to do with the fact that NAMBLA has been a very unpopular organization ever since it was founded on December 2, 1978, in the Boston area by David Thorstad, Tom Reeves, and a group of about thirty people, most of whom were radical gay activists.² Despite FBI harassment, police entrapment of their leaders, rejection from other gay organizations and gay media, dwindling membership, and calumny all around, NAMBLA continues to agitate for the repeal of age-of-consent laws and the civil rights of young people. Its publications contain some of the most intelligent discussions to be found anywhere on the complex topics of what constitutes informed consent, the development of the sexuality of young people, the meaning and effects of erotic material, the history of homosexuality, and the nature of equal relationships. But very few people who are not boy-lovers bother to read any NAMBLA literature before condemning it as worthless smut. This self-righteousness is at least partly a mask for fear, because simply possessing NAMBLA literature is often enough to make you look like a criminal in the eyes of the media or the cops.

Gay organizations in several European countries and in England have lobbied for decades to bring down the age of consent or at least make it equal to the age at which heterosexual activity becomes legal. But NAMBLA has always refused to specify an age (however low) at which it believes sexual activity is appropriate for children or teens, and between those young people and adults. This has made its members *personae* beyond *non grata*, leading to events like the 1994 debacle when U.S. Senator Jesse Helms (R-North Carolina) caused the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) to lose its status as a consultant to the United Nations after he learned that NAMBLA was one of its subscribing organizations. ILGA expelled NAMBLA and declared pedophilia was inconsistent with its aims, but to no avail; the U.S. government demanded an assurance that none of the member organizations condoned such behavior. Of course, ILGA was unable to provide such a

blanket guarantee, and the UN sacked the only organization representing the interests of lesbians and gay men worldwide, rather than jeopardize the good will of a right-wing American politician who also opposes paying our UN dues.³

The latest controversy centers on a \$200 million lawsuit filed in mid-May with the stated intention of destroying NAMBLA. It was filed by the family of Jeffrey Curley, who was abducted by his neighbors Charles Jaynes, 25, and Salvatore Sicari, 24, on October 1, 1997, when he was ten years old. The men got him into their car with the promise of a new bicycle, then tried to involve him in sexual activity. When he resisted, they smothered him with a gasoline-soaked rag. His body was molested and found days later in concrete in a container in a Maine river. Both Sicari and Jaynes are serving life sentences for kidnapping and murder. Sicari has no possibility of parole, and Jaynes will only become eligible for parole after serving twenty-three years. The Curleys won a \$328 million judgment against them in a wrongful death lawsuit on August 23. Their lawyer, Lawrence Frisoli, says that victory will bolster his clients' case against NAMBLA.⁴

Frisoli accuses the organization of teaching sexual predators how to find youthful victims, approach them, gain their trust, and avoid law enforcement. The first thing he wants is the membership list, so that he can publicize the identity of NAMBLA's leaders and the rank and file. Citing two 1960s U.S. Supreme Court cases that allowed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to keep its membership lists confidential, ACLU has so far been successful in persuading the court to allow it to accept service of legal documents on behalf of its client. ACLU believes that revealing the identities of NAMBLA members would interfere with their constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of assembly.⁵

A statement by the ACLUM outlines the critical issues in this case.

...[W]e believe NAMBLA has been sued for its advocacy, not of crimes, but for a change in the laws and in society's attitudes about sexual relationships between adults and minors.... Regardless of whether people agree with or abhor NAMBLA's views, holding the organization responsible for the crimes committed by others who read their material would gravely endanger our important First Amendment freedoms. We join with all others in deploring the heinous crimes committed against Jeffrey Curley.... Under the First Amendment, there are no illegal ideas. Those who commit illegal acts can be punished for wrongful conduct. But the expression of even offensive ideas is protected by the Constitution.⁶

Since the group's website is no longer available, it's impossible to check out the content for yourself. (The lawsuit originally included the provider who carried the group's website. When that company dropped the site, it was removed from the suit.) But, as ACLUM states, "There was nothing in those NAMBLA publications or Web site which advocated or incited the commission of any illegal acts, including murder or rape."⁷ NAMBLA's magazine does not contain any erotic material, in fact. It is all polemics, not pornography.

The parent organization of ACLUM has chimed in with their own position statement, which says in part:

In the United States Supreme Court over the past few years, the American Civil Liberties Union has taken the side of a fundamentalist Christian church, a Santerian church, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. In celebrated cases, the ACLU has stood up for everyone from Oliver North to the National Socialist Party. In spite of all that, the ACLU has never advocated Christianity, ritual animal sacrifice, trading arms for hostages or genocide. In representing NAMBLA today, our Massachusetts affiliate does not advocate sexual relationships between adults and children.

What the ACLU does advocate is robust freedom of speech for everyone. The lawsuit involved here, were it to succeed, would strike at the heart of freedom of speech.... [T]he lawsuit says the crime is the responsibility not of those who committed the murder, but of someone who posted vile material on the Internet....

It is easy to defend freedom of speech when the message is something many people find at least reasonable. But the defense of freedom of speech is most critical when the message is one most people find repulsive. That was true when the Nazis marched in Skokie [Illinois]. It remains true today.⁸

Ironically, Jeffrey Curley's father, Robert, was defended by ACLUM when he wanted to be exempted from a four-hour diversity training that was mandatory for employees of the city of Cambridge. (Curley is a fireman.) His ACLUM attorney, Harvey Silverglate, told a local paper, "That is the flip side to free speech, freedom of conscience. Robert Curley can't be forced to mouth beliefs he doesn't hold."⁹

It seems very clear that legal precedent is on the side of NAMBLA. If the usual rules of constitutional law are followed, the Curleys' lawsuit will fail. But the expensive and emotionally trying process of mounting a defense against this legal challenge will probably spell the end of this organization, which, if nothing else, has kept a controversial issue in the discourse of sexual politics for more than two decades. The Curleys and Frisoli are perfectly aware of the punitive potential of the legal system. They did not file their lawsuit against Sicari and Jaynes expecting to receive \$328 million; it was about publicizing their cause and punishing wrongdoers.

Given the current social climate, in which known or suspected sex offenders have been assaulted by mobs when their residences are made known, such an "outing" would put known NAMBLA members (which include a handful of women) in grave danger. This danger can be inferred from the treatment meted out to others who are perceived by the

public to be a menace to children. Since Megan's Law (named after a New Jersey rape and murder victim, 7-year-old Megan Kanka, whose assailant was a twice-convicted sex-offender) was passed in 1996, states have been required to make information about the identity and whereabouts of sex offenders available to concerned members of the public. California was the first state to comply with this requirement, and did so by producing CD-ROMs of personal information about 64,000 registered rapists, child molesters, and sex offenders (including gay men convicted of consensual public sex). Some estimates show that the database was up to 40 percent inaccurate. These inaccuracies included names of dead or incarcerated offenders.¹⁰

There have been numerous incidents of neighbors picketing the residences of men who thought they had paid the penalty for their crimes, threatening them, and even assaulting them. A California offender's car was torched.¹¹ In one New Jersey case, two men broke into a house and beat up a man whom they mistook for a sex offender.¹² An even more frightening incident in New Jersey involved a mob of 250 people who severely beat an innocent bystander they had mistaken for a child molester.¹³ In England, after a tabloid began printing the names of people who were merely suspected of being sex offenders, mobs of vigilantes have gotten out of control several times, often attacking people who only share a surname with an alleged pedophile. In a recent attack on a doctor, outraged citizens apparently confused the word "pediatrician" with "pedophile." Dr. Yvette Cloete, who is innocent of any sexual involvement with minors, was forced to flee her vandalized home.¹⁴

Most people will not be moved by the plight of NAMBLA's officers as they scramble to keep the names of their members confidential and defend themselves against the charge that they are culpable for the death and violation of this child. The parents of a murdered child have sympathy on their side. Of course they want to go after anyone who might be responsible for this terrible crime, and prevent anything like this from

happening to other families. It is very difficult to draw a line here between ideas and action, between speech and criminal conduct. When a bomb has gone off, any peace-loving person is infuriated not only with the person who made the bomb, but also with the source of the information and materials that allowed it to be created. *But the plans for a bomb are not the same thing as the weapon itself, and cannot receive the same treatment under the law.*

Our entire legal system, if not our entire way of life, is founded on the assumption that we are ruled by laws, not by lynch mobs or vigilantes, no matter how popular their ideology might be. Any legal decision in the area of civil rights has to be evaluated not only for its effect upon the defendants and plaintiffs, but also for the way it can be used as a logical argument in related cases. If any part of this lawsuit should succeed, it would become a precedent for further legal action against groups that espouse unpopular opinions or ask questions that make people angry. Right-wing Christian organizations and other law-and-order conservatives are always looking for new tactics to use in their determination to turn the clock back to 1950. Liberals and leftists are also pretty quick to seize upon any opportunity to quash the activities of people that they believe are wrong and dangerous. One of the most difficult things about the Bill of Rights is that it cuts both ways. If the Nazis can't march down Main Street, neither can a Gay Freedom Day parade.

Next to cross-generational sex, the most taboo form of erotic relationship or pleasure-seeking behavior is S/M. What if producers and publishers of S/M porn could be sued for allegedly contributing to a sensationalistic bondage sex murder? What if local or national S/M organizations were forced to reveal their membership lists so that individuals on them could be sued? Should dominatrices have to give up their client lists to police on the grounds that these people might be dangerous, since they are clearly sexual perverts? Any group of people who advocated any political position could be crucified

for the illegal actions of people who choose to damage themselves or others. Manufacturers of sex toys could be sued if any of their merchandise was used in the commission of a crime. The National Rifle Association could be sued by the parents of the dead students in Columbine, Colorado. I suppose outraged authors whose work was censored by Canadian customs could even sue both antiporn activist and legal fantasist—uh, theorist—Catharine MacKinnon, who practically wrote the laws on which such seizures are based, and the members of women's organizations that gave her a platform, for lost sales and other damages.

Elsewhere, I've written about the dangers of our vague and broad child pornography laws, which have resulted in parents and grandparents being charged for trying to develop nude snapshots of their children or grandchildren,¹⁵ as well as ludicrous laws against computer-generated porn that doesn't even use live models.¹⁶ People have been convicted of child pornography offenses for producing, distributing, or possessing material in which the minors did not even appear unclothed, much less involved in any sexual activity.¹⁷ Artists who run afoul of these laws can expect an expensive and protracted legal battle that usually damages their professional and personal reputation even if they are eventually acquitted.¹⁸ These laws have normalized the concept that material that is not obscene *per se* can be banned if there is a great enough belief in, or perception of, a threat of social harm. They have also criminalized the very state of being a pedophile, because it is the erotic response of the person who holds such matter, rather than the content of the matter, that determines whether or not it is contraband.

This is illustrated in the frightening case of Brian Dalton, who was convicted of child pornography offenses for material that appeared in his private journal. His mother had discovered the graphic tales, which apparently included some S/M activities, and handed the diary over to the police. Dalton, 22, pleaded guilty in July 2001 to pandering obscenity

involving a minor and is serving a ten-year sentence. With the help of the ACLU, he is trying to withdraw his guilty plea on the ground that his first attorney was ineffectual, so that he can challenge the constitutionality of Ohio's child pornography law. He is the first person in the United States to be convicted of merely writing about sex with minors, as opposed to taking photographs or making drawings.¹⁹

Setting aside the question of when it ought to be legal for someone to give their consent to sex, I think we could all agree that we hate and are afraid of people who might hurt or exploit children or teenagers. The temptation to try to exile or eliminate anyone who has an erotic response to young people is very great, even though the advertising industry and mass entertainment are constantly encouraging us to find youth (and only youth) alluring and sexy. But once you start banning material essentially because of the intentions or state of mind of the people who are creating or collecting it, what sort of action does that allow the state to take, and where will it end?

It will end, of course, with artists and other people who do not consider themselves to be criminal being accused of breaking these vague and draconian laws. In March 2001, photographer Nan Goldin's show at the Saatchi Gallery in London was visited by police who threatened to prosecute her and another artist, Tierney Gearon, for photographing naked children. In England the crime of exploiting children is punishable by jail or a fine. Top prosecutors and Scotland Yard eventually decided to drop the charges. Gearon, who had photographed her own children, said, "I am so glad this has all been resolved. If they had asked me to take the pictures down, I really would have doubted my moral judgment as a human being. Someone put a seed out there that my work was pornographic or obscene—I felt they had poisoned my work."²⁰

Things like this happen here as well as in stuffy old England. Marian Rubin was naïve enough to think it would be cute to take nude pictures of her granddaughters, ages 3 and 8. When she went to pick them up at Moto-Photos, the police

were waiting for her. Two computers were seized from the 65-year-old woman's home, but police found nothing illegal on them. Nevertheless, the Essex County prosecutor placed her in a pretrial intervention program that calls for a year of probation. She was suspended from her job as a social worker in the Belleville Public Schools, a position she had held for thirty-two years, and it was not clear that she would be allowed to return to work. Her legal fees were in excess of \$25,000. "I was stunned," she said of her arrest. "I love these little girls more than anything else in the whole world. People in the legal profession think this is a wonderful, wonderful outcome. But I'm going to be paying for this for the rest of my life."²¹

Among the "evidence" against Rubin was a nude photograph of her pregnant daughter-in-law and the fact that she had taken a class in nude photography with artist Lucien Clergue in 1983. Police Chief Thomas Russo said, of the photos of her grandchildren, "The photos that I viewed I wouldn't classify as pornography. I thought they were provocative. I wouldn't pose my grandchildren like that."²²

Do we, as a society, truly want to make it dangerous for doting grandparents to think their grandchildren are cute when they play in the bathtub or dance without their clothes on? As always with censorship cases, the key question is, who gets to make that call? Who gets to make the distinction between the wide range of appreciative responses to the beauty of a young person, for example? Is the loving grandma who pats a naked baby on the tush as guilty as the man who gets an erection when he sees little girls in the playground on the swingset? There are many shades of gray in between these two extremes. Where do we decide the law should intervene? Who gets to determine when a feeling or thought is so dangerous that the state should be empowered to incarcerate the person who entertained these subjective states, and wipe out any material associated with them? Do you trust cops, lawyers, or politicians to make decisions that are this subtle and complex? Or is it in fact not wiser to simply draw a line between word and deed,

and restrict our prosecutorial zeal to wrongful behavior?

Few people realize that we now have a new federal obscenity law that applies to an obscure branch of fetish porn the same reasoning that lies behind broad and vague child pornography laws. So-called “crush videos” usually depict a woman stepping on an insect, snail, or worm. Occasionally, baby mice or rats, and (rarely) larger animals, have also been featured. Jeff Vilencia, a 39-year-old Southern Californian, has produced dozens of these, including such titles as *Smush*; *They Crush Crickets, Don't They?*; and the fifty-six episodes of *Squish Playhouse*. He says, “My ultimate fantasy is to be one inch tall and trapped inside a really vicious woman’s kitchen.” He estimates that his fetish is shared by perhaps a couple of thousand men in the entire world—very specific masochists and foot fetishists who usually identify with the creature that’s being tortured and killed.²³

Vilencia says he has quit making such material, but he used to have about 400 customers in his database. His videos sold for \$50 each, mostly via the Internet. He has yet to be charged with animal cruelty or any other offense, but fellow crush video producer Gary Lynn Thomason was not so lucky. His case, *People v. Chaffin and Thomason*, made national headlines and triggered passage of a federal law that bans the sale of any “visual or auditory depictions” of cruelty to animals across state lines.

Thomason was set up by a woman who called herself Minnie. She sent him an e-mail and told him she was interested in starring in one of his videos. She professed enthusiasm for stepping on mice in her boyfriend’s garage. They eventually met, and she suggested they videotape this activity. (Thomason had, by the way, only filmed the death of invertebrates prior to this.) Minnie dropped out of sight for a while, so Thomason made a video that featured the death of mice, rats, and pinkies beneath the heels of another female model. When he sent Minnie e-mail about this feature, she arranged to bring her “friend” Lupe over to his house, so that the two of them could

step on rats for his video camera.

They were interrupted before any action could take place (other than taping the rats' tails down). Eight plainclothes police officers broke down the door and charged into Thomason's apartment with their guns drawn. Minnie and Lupe were both wearing wires. Lupe's real name is Maria Mendez-Lopez, and she is a Long Beach, California, police officer. Minnie is Susan Creede, an investigator with the Ventura County District Attorney's office. Creede had been working on infiltrating the "crush community" online for almost a year. After they received a complaint from the Humane Society in Washington, D.C., about a Ventura crush video enterprise called Steponit (which turned out to be defunct), the DA's office there went looking for other perverts of the same ilk. They spent an estimated \$150,000 on this project.

Thomason was charged with three felony counts of cruelty to animals (rats, mice, and pinkies, which are most often sold in pet stores to be fed to pet snakes). The cops used his computer to track down one of his models, Diane Aileen Chaffin, and she was arrested as well.

Vilencia had gotten press coverage when the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in England got upset about his videos being imported to its shores. Since he had already been outed as a crush fetishist, he got a lot of calls from various media people who wanted him to comment on the Thomason case. "Why is it okay to kill animals for food, clothing, or sport," he asked, "but not for sexual gratification?" You could argue that none of these activities are acceptable, but few people outside of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) are that pure. (Vilencia is, by the way, a vegetarian.)

Rutgers University law and philosophy professor Gary L. Francione teaches a course on animal rights. As a result of litigating animal cruelty cases since 1983, he has come to believe that animal cruelty laws are worthless, elitist, even racist. He reasonably asks why cock fighting, which is done

primarily by Latinos, is illegal while the Pennsylvania annual pigeon shoot is not. Why are dogs pets and pigs food? Why do we ban dog fighting and condone rodeos? “Courts recognize that torturing animals is OK,” he says, “as long as it is for a necessary purpose. But I would equate the word *necessary* with *culturally acceptable*.”

Chaffin’s public defender, Sharon Lee, sought unsuccessfully to make the court buy a similar argument. She also pointed out that California’s Health and Safety Code actually states that people have an obligation to exterminate rodents, and the Food and Agricultural Code explicitly classifies them as pests.

But Deputy District Attorney Carol Rash got permission to play a portion of the video that Chaffin appeared in. At the preliminary hearing, Los Angeles County Municipal Court Judge R. Bruce Minto was appalled, and ended the showing after a couple of minutes. He refused to reduce Chaffin’s charges to misdemeanors “because of the maliciousness apparently involved.”²⁴

HR 1887 was pushed by the Ventura County District Attorney’s office, in concert with the Doris Day Animal League, with helpful testimony from a tearful Loretta “Hot Lips” Swit and an indignant, doddering Mickey Rooney.²⁵ Their claims that the law was necessary to suppress a “multi-million dollar industry” are hardly credible—the usual hyperbole one encounters during a moral panic. (Representative Elton Gallegly [R-California] claimed there were more than 2,000 crush video titles available on the Internet, “some selling for as much as \$300 a piece [sic].”)²⁶ Gallegly is the only nonlawyer to ever sit on the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee. This worthy wound up being HR 1887’s sponsor. Michael Bradbury, District Attorney of Ventura County, claimed, “It’s just a matter of time before someone is willing to pay \$1 million to have a kid crushed.” And lawmakers apparently believed him, or at least did not dare vote against such an inflammatory and popular bill. Conviction for breaking this new porn law will result in a hefty

fine and a five-year prison sentence.

Witnesses who testified on the bill's behalf before a subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee argued that studies have shown that rapists and child molesters committed acts of cruelty against animals, as did aggressive criminals. They cited studies of battered women who said their partners had threatened to kill or actually did kill their pets. They also got to see a crush video, courtesy of Ventura County Deputy District Attorney Tom Connors. This one featured the gruesome death of a guinea pig. The implication was that, if they were allowed to continue to view crush videos, this tiny group of fetishists would demand the execution of progressively larger animals.

Only Representative Robert C. Scott (D-Virginia) tried to slow down the train. "I think we can all acknowledge this is sick," he said, "but the selling of depictions of illegal activity is not illegal." He also raised the fact that the U.S. Supreme Court had struck down an animal cruelty ordinance that targeted animal sacrifice performed by followers of Santeria. Connors came back with, guess what?, child pornography laws. He argued that the protection of an animal was a compelling state interest, just like the protection of children.²⁷ The need to protect children from crush videos was also frequently cited as another reason that the bill was needed.²⁸

To help it pass constitutional muster, supporters amended the bill to exempt material that has serious religious, political, scientific, educational, journalistic, historical, or artistic value. The House passed HR 1887 by a vote of 372 to 42; the Senate was unanimously in favor. One legislator who dared cast a "nay" vote was castigated in the press and his vote called "beyond human decency."²⁹ President Clinton signed it into law on December 9, 1999. It took just six short months to jam this bill through the system. Journalist Jason Vest, covering this travesty for the *Village Voice*, quotes "animal-lover" professional dominant and D.C. resident "Mistress 2K" as commenting, "No one was better suited, really, as they know all about crushing

small, helpless beings.” A significant proportion of her masochistic clientele are, of course, Washington politicians, so she knows the beast of which she speaks.³⁰

A similar bill (which also criminalizes possession of material depicting cruelty to animals) was proposed in California. Assembly member Tom Calderon’s press release about a hearing for the bill trumpeted, “‘Snuff’ films are the actual footage of the murder of a human being. ‘Crush’ videos graphically depict women in high heels stepping on, torturing and killing a variety of small animals.”³¹ Despite this lurid introduction and a pitiful claim that “it’s almost impossible to prosecute”³² crush videos despite the fact that cruelty to animals is already illegal, AB 1853 bogged down in the Appropriations Committee. Members of both parties had expressed misgivings about its constitutionality, probably because of the possession clause. One legislative analyst pointed out that it would be legal to film chickens being slaughtered if your purpose was to show that it was an inhumane process, but might be illegal to do so if it was presented as amusing entertainment, with music and prerecorded laughter.

Thomason, by the way, did not go to prison, but he did have to spend a year doing community service, and he now has three felony convictions on his record. He’s currently appealing his conviction. Chaffin pleaded no contest and avoided a trial, and was also sentenced to perform community service.³³ Her attorney, Antonio J. Bestard, said he got more hate mail as a result of defending Chaffin than he got for defending a client who sodomized and killed his own mother.³⁴ In Suffolk County, New York, Thomas Capriola faces a \$1,000 fine and a possible jail sentence of up to one year for producing crush videos and marketing them through his Crush Goddess website. Capriola was reportedly tracked down and turned in by an indignant administrator of adult websites who could not stomach his content.³⁵

This wave of negative publicity and legislative fervor has had the desired effect. My lengthy and detailed Internet search for

crush videos netted only pictures of women sitting or stepping on stuffed animals and ripe melons. The "real thing" may still be available, but it's been driven even further underground than it was when a district attorney's office had to spend \$150,000 to find two people they could prosecute for catering to this fetish.

Once again, a group of people who are generally considered to be indefensible are being exploited to push back the penumbra of protection offered by the First Amendment. Given the cruel treatment that people routinely dish out to animals they consider vermin or pests, the hypocrisy in this case seems very plain. A friend of mine who volunteered for the humane society used to come home in tears because people would bring their dogs in to be euthanized for the most trivial reasons—for example, because they had fleas. There would be no feral cats if human beings did not abandon pregnant animals or neglect their responsibility to spay or neuter their feline companions. Does a rat really care whether it is crushed and swallowed by a python in a glass terrarium or done in on camera by a big, expensive shoe? All of the legislators who voted for HR 1887 would not think twice about having an exterminator spray their house to kill cockroaches and termites, or flinch at setting out mousetraps or rat poison. And the president who signed it sure does like his cheeseburgers. Cruelty is socially acceptable only so long as it can be divorced from any hint of erotic pleasure.

Whether it's morally acceptable or mentally healthy to eroticize crush videos is a topic that should be left to experts in matters spiritual and psychiatric. But we know very little about why any sexual preference develops, whether it be "normal" or "deviant," and we aren't making much of an effort to find out more. We have few resources, little help, and scant hope to offer those whose pleasures exceed the tolerance of the majority. Changing the object of a human being's desire is a perilous and far from straightforward undertaking, even by professionals who are experienced in

the treatment of sex offenders. But we do know how to lock people up, and that gratifies most of us so much that we don't wish to consider any alternatives. Indeed, this compulsion—to expose, upbraid, exile and incarcerate those whose erotic natures are repugnant or violent—corresponds rather neatly with the sexual response cycle itself. Righteous indignation is a form of self-excitement, and we all know how satisfying some of us find it to punish the wrongdoer. With the shadow held at bay behind iron bars, the rest of us can sleep more soundly, until the next time—until our anxiety about our own worth or rightness reaches the point where we must find another scapegoat for our self-hatred and shortcomings. Sex humbles, makes fools and sometimes criminals, of us all, and the jailer is affected by the act of imprisonment just as much as the victim of such bondage.

There are certain things many of us simply don't want to look at or think about. Cruelty toward animals is even more common than cruelty toward children in this sad world. Outlawing crush videos will do nothing to eliminate the most common forms of animal maltreatment. If anything, the deaths that are documented in crush videos have more meaning than the millions of gallons of pig, sheep, and cattle blood that daily soils the floors of slaughterhouses nationwide. By using the death of an insect or rodent for sexual purposes, crush fetishists briefly highlighted an area of human behavior that engenders enormous (and severely repressed) guilt. They were punished with all the rage of a child, weeping at the death of Bambi's mother, then connecting for the first time the lamb chop dinner with death. It's hard to imagine what our lives would look like if we did not take for granted our right to kill animals. If the rest of us are going to eat lunch at McDonald's, crush fetishists have to be put in their place, insulted, belittled, and, well, squashed.

Aside from these psychological and spiritual concerns, more pragmatic consequences loom. The criminalization of one type of admittedly nauseating and extremely offensive fetish

porn raises several problematic possibilities for both law and public policy. If the material is shocking enough, it seems that lawmakers and even the courts require very little substantial social-science data to prove a claim of compelling state interest to prevent harm. There will probably be no attempt to ban heterosexual vanilla porn, despite the fact that most sex crimes are committed by fairly unimaginative straight men upon heterosexual female victims. But the pornography of minority sexualities, especially those that scare the majority, can now be more easily targeted. In the majority of cases, fetish porn does not entail any sort of cruelty or violence, and serves mostly as an aide to masturbation for people who tend to be isolated and secretive about their preferences. "Crush videos are quite literally for the downtrodden," joked one observer.³⁶

The First Amendment is very simple. Yet it has generated the largest and most bewildering and contradictory body of interpretive case law of any provision of the Bill of Rights. This is perhaps because we refuse to take it at face value, and instead we keep on looking for ways to allow the state to mediate morality and quash both dissent and deviance.

NOTES

1. Editorial, "A Terrible Cause: The ACLU Is Wrong to Defend Advocates of Man Boy Sex," *Portland (Maine) Press Herald*, Sept. 6, 2000.
2. Personal conversation with David Thorstad, Nov. 9, 2000.
3. "U.N. Boots Gay Group; Pedophilia Link Cited," *San Francisco Sunday Examiner/Chronicle*, Sept. 18, 1994, A 9.
4. PlanetOut News Staff, "Mass. ACLU to Defend NAMBLA," Sept. 1, 2000, posted online at <http://beta.planetout.com/news>
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. "ACLU Statement on Defending Free Speech of Unpopular Organizations," Aug. 31, 2000, posted online at www.aclu.org/news
9. PlanetOut News Staff, *op. cit.*
10. "Megan's Law Database Makes Debut," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 28, 1997, A 6.
11. Amy Glassman, David Brock, and John Snyder, "Megan's Law Accomplishes Nothing Other than the Promotion of Vigilantism," *Brown University Herald*, Feb. 5, 1998, posted online at www.theherald.org

12. "Two Jailed in Beating of Sex Offender," *San Francisco Examiner*, Jan. 11, 1995, A 8.
13. Glassman, et al., *op. cit.*
14. "Confused Vigilantes Attack British Doctor," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Aug. 31, 2000, A16.
15. Andrew Jacobs, "Grandmother, Nude Photos and Charges," *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 2000. In a similar case, Eljat Feuer, who took nude photos of his daughter for a photography class, spent \$80,000 to defend himself. Although the case was eventually dropped, one can hardly say he escaped unscathed.
16. Pat Califia, "No Minor Issues: Age of Consent, Child Pornography, and Cross-generational Relationships," *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000).
17. For information about the case of Stephen A. Knox, who was sent to prison for ordering material that featured underage girls in leotards, swimsuits, and cheerleader uniforms, see Califia, *op. cit.*, 65-69.
18. "Photographer Cleared by High Court," Associated Press, Feb. 5, 2002, AOL News online. John C. Bean, who was taking classes at an art museum, made the mistake of taking a photograph of a 15-year-old girl with her breasts exposed. The girl's mother had given permission to take the photograph, and she and her boyfriend accompanied her to the modeling session. But the mother later filed a complaint against Bean for reasons I have been unable to discover. He was given a sentence of six months' probation and told to register as a sex offender. The Massachusetts Supreme Court overturned this conviction, saying he had "no lascivious intent," and that the pictures were "neither obscene nor pornographic."
19. Liz Sidoti, "Social Worker Testifies in Ohio Case," Associated Press, Oct. 31, 2001, AOL News online. Dalton was convicted of violating child pornography laws in 1998, and a key prosecutorial argument (that writing down his fantasies was likely to encourage him to live them out) was bolstered by the testimony of social worker Robin Aurnou. Aurnou had diagnosed Dalton as a pedophile when he underwent treatment after the 1998 conviction.
20. Bill Hoffmann, "Fotog Off Hook Over Kid Pics," *New York Post*, March 16, 2001.
21. Debra Galant, "Anger and Pain Over Nude Photos," *New York Times*, July 30, 2000.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Martin Lasden, "Forbidden Footage," *California Lawyer*, Sept. 2000, 44-49, 84-86. Most of the information and quotes that follow are taken from this article.
24. The account that precedes this point in the article, with quotes, is taken from Lasden, *op. cit.*
25. Rooney testified, in part, "Put a stop, won't you, to crush videos. What are we going to hand our children? This is what we're going to hand down, these videos, crush videos? God forbid." See "Ban Sought on Animal 'Crush Videos,'" Aug. 24, 1999, www.apbnews.com/newscenter/breakingnews/1999/08/24
26. "New Federal Law to Stamp Out 'Crush Videos,'" Jan. 2000, news item from United Animal Nations' Animal Watch, www.uan.org/programs/animalwatch
27. Transcript of the Sept. 30, 1999, hearing on HR 1349, pp. 23-27, available at http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/judiciary/hju63862.000/hju63862_0.htm; see also "Bill Cracks Down on Animal Torture Videos," Oct. 1, 1999, www.apbonline.com/newscenter/breakingnews/1999/10/01

28. Elton Gallegly, "Children Need protection from Crush Videos," commentary by the congressman, which appears at www.house.gov/gallegly
29. Jeff Barry, "Get Real: Barr Defends 'Crush' Videos," <http://atlanta.creativeafing.com/200-09-09/getreal.html>
30. Jason Vest, "Pulp Legislation," *Village Voice*, Dec. 17, 1999, www.villagevoice.com/issues/9948/vest.shtml
31. "Calderon Legislation to Ban Crush Videos and Snuff Films Will Be Heard in Public Safety Committee on March 14," press release from Tom Calderon's office, March 13, 2000, available online at <http://democrats.assembly.ca.gov/members/a58/press/p582000001.htm>
32. *Ibid.* Prosecution was said to be difficult because the face of the woman in the film was often not shown, and the statute of limitations had sometimes expired by the time a film came to the attention of prosecutors. Of course, the proposed new law would do nothing to either make crush video actresses more identifiable or alter the statute of limitations.
33. "Woman Pleads in 'Crush Video' Case," Nov. 9, 1999, www.kcbs2.com/news/stories/news-19991109-070322.html
34. Lasden, *op. cit.*
35. "The News," Aug. 24, 2000, www.chickpages.com/veggiefarm/famousveg/mr.html
36. A. S. Hamray, "A Better Mousetrap," *Hermenaut*, www.hermenaut.com/a99.shtml

An Ounce of Prevention (Is Worth a Pound of Protease Inhibitors)

[1998]

In mid-August 1998, when I walked out of my mailbox rental office and opened the current issue of San Francisco's *Bay Area Reporter* (BAR), I got quite a shock. The inch and three-quarters red headline on the front page blared, "No obits." I actually got dizzy. Tears came to my eyes. I had to sit down on a nearby stoop and read the article immediately. For the first time in seventeen years, after weeks in which as many as thirty-one obituaries had been printed in the *BAR*, no one had sent one in. Reporter Timothy Rodrigues was quick to explain that this did not mean no one had died of AIDS that week. He added cautiously, "It seems a new reality may be taking hold, and the community may be on the verge of a new era of the epidemic."¹

In *Dry Bones Breathe*, Eric Rofes calls this the "post-AIDS" era. Rofes argues that after two decades, gay men can no longer sustain the emotional toll of viewing AIDS as a crisis or an emergency, and because of the new combination therapies and protease inhibitors, it is no longer necessary to do so. I am not so sure, perhaps because I still have too many friends who are ill or seroconverting. In 1998, the news that someone has become HIV-positive is, to me, even more shocking than it was ten years ago. We know what causes AIDS and how to prevent it. Why are people still getting sick? With an epidemic raging in South Africa and Southeast Asia, where people will get little or no treatment, I find it difficult to view AIDS only through the lens

of middle-class, urban, white gay male experience. A phrase like "post-AIDS," no matter how carefully contextualized, tends to feed false hope and denial even in that relatively privileged minority. No matter what treatment comes along, it can never be good to have a lifelong viral infection assaulting your immune system.

Ron Stall, Associate Director at the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies at the University of California at San Francisco, would prefer the phrase "post-crisis...because we are not in a post-AIDS era by any stretch of the imagination. We've documented on three different continents substantial, and I'm talking on the order of 50 percent, increases in unprotected anal intercourse in gay men. Combined with this we've also detected all over North America increases in rectal gonorrhea rates. And it has now been shown beyond any question of a doubt that it is possible to transmit triple combination-resistant HIV. You can now infect people with forms of HIV that are not treatable. If sexual transmission of triple combination-resistant virus becomes widespread, we're back to 1987 again."

So perhaps the new AIDS therapies have made prevention of HIV infection more important than ever. Yet Dan Wohlfeiler, education director at the Stop AIDS Project in San Francisco, says, "I think it's easy for the community to turn its back on prevention. Stop AIDS has made that mistake once before. We shut down in 1987 because we thought the war was over. Infection rates were dropping and safer sex had become a well-established standard. We came back in 1990 and we are now in it for the long run. It's really important to recognize that the community would much rather deal with treatment. The community would rather talk about seroprevalence among Thai prostitutes than they would about their own risk behavior. And somebody's gotta be in the community being the prevention gadfly, saying you know what, it ain't over. A bunch of us are still getting infected. And even with all the new treatments getting infected is still a heartbreak."

We may focus on treatment rather than prevention because the latter is even more complex than a triple-combination dosing regimen. It means dealing with aspects of people's lives that remain controversial, even in queer communities. Richard Elovitch, Director of HIV Prevention at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), explains, "Society in general and the gay community are so conflicted about prevention because in order to do prevention you have to deal with drugs and talking about sexual desire. You have to deal with talking about homosexuality. If prevention means helping gay men to feel better about themselves and some senator interprets that as promoting homosexuality, then that's what we're doing. And that means prevention is always going to be political."

One of the political issues at stake is the power that pharmaceutical companies now have to shape our perceptions of the epidemic. Stall says that, although the data are contradictory, some studies show that there may be a connection between treatment optimism and willingness to have high-risk sex. Enough evidence exists that he urges us to "take a very careful look at how protease inhibitors and combination therapies are being marketed to the gay community." Elovitch adds, "The pharmaceutical companies want these drugs to look as normal to take and as easy to take as Claritin." He's angry about the fact that "we are not seeing prevention ads" anywhere near "the scale of pharmaceutical company advertising." He is especially concerned about the notion that because of the new therapies, HIV has become a chronic, easy-to-manage infection. "If an HIV-negative man doesn't believe there is any difference between being infected and non-infected, then clearly prevention makes no sense."

Our impatience with the notion of "AIDS as crisis" has more to do with burnout than it has to do with throwing ticker-tape parades for protease inhibitors. Still, we have to figure out how to energize each other so that those of us who are uninfected will strive to remain that way, and those who are infected will dam the rising tide of new cases. If everyone has acquired

immunity to the slogans "Be here for the cure" and "Use a condom every time," how do we shape prevention efforts?

Richard Elovitch says, "Some gay academics and gay journalists suggest they are the only ones who are thinking about prevention. But in 1998, our prevention looks nothing like it did in the '80s or even early '90s. There are prevention programs across the country that recognize the need to move away from use-a-condom-every-time slogans and one-way messages out to the community toward an array of services and initiatives that reflect the lived realities of gay men in 1998."

Elovitch says his agency has taken a harm reduction approach since 1993. "Risk elimination only works if you are able and interested in entirely giving up a practice. But if you are able to give up that activity or practice it means you don't value it. We use a harm reduction model that allows us to hold what is pleasurable and what the risk is. And we believe that's a much more realistic strategy, to help men to be able to talk about their sexual practice and then talk about what their decision-making looks like."

This strategy is being implemented in projects like "Beyond 2000," also known as B2K. "The idea is to recruit and involve 2,000 gay men regardless of what their HIV status is to help uninfected men stay uninfected until the millennium." Through oral history projects and discussion groups, B2K seeks to create a new sort of community, develop a language for gay men to talk about desire, and promote all aspects of gay health. Elovitch says, "Traditionally in prevention we've thought about sex in terms of the medical model. We addressed prevention to the individual to make up his mind to do this, use a condom, disclose your HIV status. When the reality is that you have to think about sex and risk-taking in terms of relationship."

Stall feels that AIDS service organizations (ASOs) can "help gay men maintain safety over the long haul" by promoting "self-knowledge" about "the times that we've been able to be safe in our sexual lives and compare those to the times we've had

slip-ups. And to learn about ourselves so when we are in those kinds of situations we know we should be particularly careful.” He also suggests that “we need to reinvent surveillance” so that we can “focus our prevention attentions more rapidly. We already know some subpopulations are at extreme risk—low-income men, low-educated men, substance abusing gay men, gay men of color.” He pinpoints a lack of funding as a problem, but also asks, “Where are the community-based agencies for gay men who use needles? We know that’s always been a hugely disproportionate piece of the epidemic. There’s nobody advocating for those people. Until recently you had the same circumstances with transgenders, another group that’s highly vulnerable.”

Wohlfeiler suggests that the days when AIDS prevention can be monopolized by ASOs are over. “We have to realize that most people are never going to set foot in an AIDS agency. They will set foot in bars, cafes, schools, employment agencies, they will watch TV and be on the Internet. All those places have a role to play in AIDS prevention. And it’s our job to help mobilize them and remind them that this is still a fight worth fighting.”

The harm reduction approach to HIV education is not without its critics. A recent editorial in the *New York Post* called for a zero-tolerance policy for agencies that deal with injection drug users (IDUs), and an article pointing out the paucity of research on harm reduction’s effectiveness has appeared in *LGNY*. Wohlfeiler feels that “harm reduction has a lot to offer but it was latched onto too quickly by some of us in the field. It’s much more effective, say, among drug users in San Francisco when you have low prevalence of maybe 14 percent to 15 percent. It’s clear that if you can’t get people to stop using drugs, you should get them to do the next best thing, which is to not share needles. But with gay men where there’s high risk, especially with multiple partners, harm reduction does not carry that much value.”

Tom Coates, director of the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies, also sounds a troubling cautionary note. He points out

that "epidemiologists in Australia estimate that about half of their new infections are failures of negotiated safety. We find in our research that people are not very good at disclosing their HIV status. Risk management is not a risk-free strategy."²

Criticism of harm reduction HIV education is usually based on an assumption that any new infection is unacceptable. Rofes calls this attitude "utopian" and "inappropriate for use with communicable diseases that require long-term, sustained approaches and achievable goals." Instead, he says, "A realistic aim might be that each successive cohort of gay men in a particular location show a specific decline in levels of infection."³

Wohlfeiler concurs, although he acknowledges that it's not very "inspirational...nobody's going to get excited by a message that says let's reduce it to 1 percent even though it's unlikely that we could ever do enough AIDS education at such a level that it would be lower than 1 percent, especially in areas like San Francisco where you've got this huge, revved-up epidemic that's still chugging along with 33 percent of us being infected."

Stall says, "I understand Eric's point but I am not willing emotionally to let go of the zero percent goal in my work. I know I will never reach my goal. But at least I will have done everything in my power to keep the new infection rate from being 5 percent a year. If we settle for an acceptable incidence rate of new infections of about 2 percent a year, are we in fact going to end up with new infection rates at 4 percent a year? If so, somewhere between one-third and one-half of every generation of gay men will be HIV-positive by the time they are 30. We don't have a lot of wiggle room around where we draw our lines in the sand."

I can't see lines in the sand. I can only see faces like that of my sassy friend Kyle, who tested positive a few days after his 21st birthday. He worked at that other gay magazine and endeared himself to me by wearing his plaid "power skirt" whenever he felt the older employees had gotten too complacent. Kyle was probably infected by survival sex and the drugs he took to kill the pain of being a throwaway queer street kid. When

we found out he was positive, I pierced his nipple because he'd always wanted to get it done and he was afraid that a professional body-mod shop would turn him down. (And weren't people clustered around my office door for *that* little scene?) He knew about AIDS when he was a teenage hustler, but that wasn't going to get him a meal at Burger King or a fix. All the ballyhooed new treatments didn't work for him, either; he didn't have another birthday.

The epidemic has many faces we rarely see in the gay USA. According to the United Nations' AIDS office, 30 million people are now living with HIV worldwide.⁴ Stall notes that high-prevalence countries in Africa now stretch from Lake Victoria to the Cape of Good Hope, and one-third of the women seeking prenatal care in some of these countries are HIV-positive. When debating risk management versus "use a condom every time," how quickly we forget that in much of the world where HIV is out of control, people have little access to prevention *or* treatment.

Treatment Action Group (TAG) policy director and recent MacArthur Fellow Mark Harrington warns that irregular access to the new treatments may be speeding up the creation of drug-resistant HIV in the Third World. In the end, mismanagement of AIDS in Africa, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and China may have a much greater impact on all of us than the way it's managed by urban American gay men. We will pay a high price for our lack of awareness about healthcare and economics in developing nations.

And this is not the last epidemic. Microbes evolve like every other life form. As bad as HIV disease is, it's always possible for something similar or worse to enter the ecology. The same technology that makes it easier to travel or communicate worldwide also joins us in a common web of epidemiology. We can use AIDS to set up a system that can meet future global health challenges—or fail to do so. The next virus might not take ten years after infection to kill most of its hosts.

NOTES

1. Timothy Rodrigues, "No Obits," *BAR*, Aug. 13, 1998, 28:33, 1 and 17.
2. "Negotiated safety" was a popular recommendation among Australian health workers. Couples were advised to use condoms for six months and then get tested for HIV. If both were negative, they would have unprotected sex with each other but take precautions with strangers. A "slip" into sex without a condom was to be revealed immediately, at which point the couple would begin to use condoms for six months again, and then get retested. On the street, this complicated form of negotiated safety rapidly deteriorated in the idea that if you were negative and the man you wanted to have sex with said he was negative too, it was okay to dispense with condoms.
3. Eric Rofes, *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post AIDS Identities and Cultures* (New York and London: Harrington Park Press/Haworth Press, 1998), 129–30.
4. "Is AIDS Forever?," *Newsweek*, July 6, 1998, 60.

What Happened to the Cure?

[2001]

In the mid-'70s, my friends were a bunch of homomasculine hos who took their pay in cum rather than cash. They were on a first-name basis with the receptionist at the city VD clinic, where the burn, bump, sore, or drip of the week would get a cursory examination from a bored doctor. A big shot of antibiotics or a jar full of pills would be prescribed, and they'd be off to the tubs (which smelled of the same antiseptic as the clinic) to comfort themselves. When I questioned the wisdom of this, I got slapped down. "I've got the clap in my *dick*," one friend explained to me patiently. "It shouldn't be a problem if I just go out and get *fucked*."

In that time, which appears reckless and naïve in hindsight, gay men (and everybody else, for that matter) had a casual attitude about sexually transmitted diseases. The assumption was that everything you might catch from your latest trick could be treated and cured, easily and instantaneously. A friend I'll call Joey came down with herpes. When his doctor told him there was no treatment, it was probably going to keep coming back, and he'd have to abstain from sex during outbreaks, he didn't believe it. He got two other medical opinions before he realized this was the cold Victorian truth, at which point he lapsed into a deep depression and dropped out of sight. I heard later that he'd moved back to his hometown. Robert had to endure more than one lengthy, painful treatment for anal warts. When I suggested that he ask his studs to use condoms,

he made such a face, I would have cracked from side to side if I'd been a mirror. "If I have to bag my meat I might as well be straight," he said. "If they really wanted to make this go away, they could. They just hate fags." While it's true that morality influences the priorities of medical researchers and public health departments, even then it struck me as odd that he believed using a rubber would feel worse than getting acid poured up his tush or having his rectum cauterized.

Even cautious, "I've only had sex with 200 people" me was completely unprepared for the novelty of a sexually transmitted disease that killed you dead. We stubbornly resisted the obvious. First, nobody wanted to believe AIDS was caused by a germ. People ignored the recent scares about Legionnaires' disease (1976) and toxic shock syndrome (1980) and said dumb things like, "There can't be a whole new disease that medical science doesn't know anything about. It's just not possible." Once the Institut Pasteur doctors publicized their isolation of the cause of AIDS, which they called lymphadenopathy-associated virus, nobody wanted to believe that it could be sexually transmitted. And when we really got it, that HIV (as the retrovirus came to be called in 1986) came into our bodies along with cum or blood, where it sabotaged our immune systems and let death in—we were enraged and frightened. We had never been afraid of polio, cholera, typhus, yellow fever, or smallpox—the epidemics that were taken for granted during our parents' and grandparents' lifetimes.

The first form of AIDS activism was, of course, a demand for a cure. In hindsight, some observers have criticized this strategy. Eric Rofes, author of *Dry Bones Breathe*, says, "I was always wary of demands for a cure. This seemed like a very privileged mindset, given the many maladies affecting the world for which we do not have a cure. I think only a group with a powerful sense of entitlement, privileged middle-class white gay men, would have framed their activism surrounding a cure as a demand."

But what else do you cry out for when people are dying?

African-American men who are tired of the side-effects of high blood pressure medication wish they would find a cure for that potentially fatal disease. Insulin-dependent diabetics don't relish the threat of blindness or amputation, and would prefer a complete reversal of their condition. Women who've been told their breast cancer is "in remission" would like a more powerful treatment that could promise them a normal life span.

An aggravating sense of entitlement among some white, middle-class gay men is a reality. But according to my memory of AIDS activism in the late '80s, those direct-action groups included more women and people of color than any earlier form of gay activism. Nor could their agenda be reduced to a single slogan. As ACT-UP veteran and writer Sarah Schulman recalls, "Creating an activist spirit is dependent on being able to have victories. The demand for Socialism Now cannot be one, but small things on that path can be one. The old ACT-UP method of breaking down demands to particular treatments, prices, and distribution, or particular policy or services that are winnable, is how people get motivated toward the counterculture of activism. Generic demands don't work."

It's true, however, that the overarching goal of the early phases of AIDS activism was to force an indifferent medical and political system to pour its resources into coming up with a cure for AIDS. We wanted a cleansing or an exorcism: complete elimination of the retrovirus. We wanted our freedom back—a pill or a shot that would get rid of this unwanted guest that created so much grief, stigma, and pain. This desire reached its archetypal expression in December 1992, when the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and similar organizations in Seattle, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., wallpapered the gay community with posters, magazine ads, billboards, PSAs, and buttons that said, "Be Here for the Cure."

These posters seem rather campy now, along with the bracelets that Macy's and Bloomingdale's used to sell that said "Until There's a Cure," or the ritual of leaving a blue light on outside your house until a cure was found. I wondered then

if this was a wise thing to promise people. How long could anybody wait for a cure that might never come? Maybe it's just easier to be cynical when you are HIV-negative. Old-time AIDS activist and proud member of the Lazarus Club¹ Paul Miller says, "I know that I was personally motivated and touched by that campaign. There needs to be an element of hope for HIV-positive people."

Twenty years after a Centers for Disease Control drug technician first noticed a spike of cases of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP), it seems inevitable that the position of "the cure" on our agenda, and indeed our understanding of what that phrase means, has changed a great deal.

I believe the concept of an AIDS cure became tarnished for many of us shortly after AZT came into widespread use. Approved by the FDA in 1987, AZT was heralded by a few experts with the same high hopes that would later be pinned on HAART²—elimination of the virus. When it became clear that AZT was of limited use, since the virus developed resistance to it within a year of treatment, our despair went very deep. HIV-positive performance artist Ron Athey remembers, "There were so many headline-grabbing bogus cures in the '80s and early '90s—oral alpha interferon, blood boiling—that I found it emotionally safer to deal with the fact that there was never going to be a cure."

His pessimism echoes my own. I am exhausted by the up-and-down roller-coaster of my HIV-positive friends' pharmaceutical regimens. I can't help but keep track of who is running out of choices and share their fear. I empathize with side effects that limit my loved ones' mobility or radically alter their appearance. I can't stop myself from rejoicing if an ingenious doctor devises a new combo that will keep someone safe for a few more months. But a large part of me thinks, "What's the use? These drugs are useless in the long run, either because the virus becomes resistant to them or the side effects become dangerous and intolerable. We're just postponing the inevitable."

It seems that the combination therapies have obviated agitation for a cure even among people who are still perky about protease inhibitors. There's a lot of premature cant about AIDS becoming a chronic, manageable illness. Writer and activist Tony Valenzuela sums it up: "'AIDS activism' as we knew it in the U.S. before protease inhibitors is dead." Schulman traces the circular thinking that links these changes. "I think that infection is considered by many to be inevitable," she explains, "and so treatment has replaced prevention. In a sense you could say we've come full circle so that cure is now redefined as some form of treatment."

The idea that there would surely be a cure, and soon, was vital to many gay men's determination to use condoms or take other safer-sex precautions. It was an unpleasant and cumbersome but necessary response to a crisis. This marketing ploy is in danger of joining billboards featuring Burma-Shave doggerel and "Coke—it's the real thing" on the scrap heap of popular culture. The happy chimera of healing has been replaced by some very ugly hostility toward the newly infected. When I spoke with AIDS activists, health educators, HIV-positive people, artists and writers, and queer academics for this article, I was amazed at how many expressed blame and shame toward anyone who seroconverted in the last ten years. "I have to be honest that I am burned out on AIDS," a queer erotic art photographer who requested anonymity said bitterly. "There was a period of time when we didn't know what was happening, how it was transmitted. But now, there is little excuse. AIDS is preventable. With the popularity of barebacking, I am beginning to feel...er...used. I won't attend benefits for ASOs [AIDS service organizations] anymore." A gay male cancer survivor who also wanted to remain anonymous called AIDS "overfunded" and spoke bitterly about the low priority given to hepatitis C, cancer, and heart disease by gay men who continue to smoke, overeat, take cum, use steroids, and get high.

Many people I interviewed took this one step further and

actually blamed HIV-positive people themselves for killing the possibility of a cure. "The disease mutates quickly, and without a stable virus, you cannot really make a vaccine," said the cancer survivor. "Unsafe sex has pretty much wiped out that option for many. So all those boys who think barebacking if both are positive isn't going to do any more harm than has already been done are just fooling themselves and creating totally new drug-resistant strains of the virus." Long-time gay activist and founding member of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Jack Fertig, who is HIV-positive, says if a "superstrain" of HIV becomes a public health threat, "The entire argument will be different because this time we knew better. If we go back asking for funds and dedication, the radical right will be well armed with ads of 'bug chasers' and 'giving the gift,' and when they say we brought this upon ourselves, what will we be able to say?"

This is displacement, I think. We've all rented a room in the glass hotel of high-risk sex, and when you check out of there, you lose the right to cast the first stone. Laurie Garrett, *Newsday's* science and medical writer, is appropriately scathing about the "use a condom every time or burn in hell" mentality. "How many 'ex-smokers' ever stop lusting after cigarettes?" she demands. "How many bikers wear their motorcycle helmets only when they fear getting a traffic violation? How many young women, despite fears of pregnancy, get wasted and have sex with a virtual stranger without using any form of contraceptive? Public health measures are very, very hard to maintain on a personal level over the long haul. Latex sex for life? I don't think many gay activists who accepted the condom barrier in the early 1980s imagined that they were buying into a lifestyle change that they would be adhering to 20 years later, much less for the rest of their lives. I know smokers who have been treated for lung cancer and still smoke. My God, that's an easy one compared to sex."

Ironically, the dream of a quick and easy cure for AIDS is a victim of the successful activism that won more research and thus a better understanding of how HIV affects the immune

system. Dr. Deborah Brown, a queer-family-practice physician in San Francisco who treats many HIV-infected people, says, "There are no viral illnesses we've successfully found a cure for yet that I know of. All the biggies that we've controlled or wiped out—smallpox, measles, polio—have been prevented by vaccines. We've only had medications to kill bacteria since the 1930s, and those are relatively simple single cells which hang out, unprotected, in our bodies waiting to get zapped. HIV actually gets inside immune system cells. We're not yet at a place of understanding this well enough to stop it." There's no longer a consensus that activism can move research forward at a faster pace. One gay man asked me incredulously, "Will taking to the streets with signs jog some scientist's brain?" Gay pornographer, cultural critic, and man-about-town-and-AOL-chat-rooms Simon Shepherd says ruefully, "HIV research is a gruelingly slow, incremental process. It's hard to maintain a white-hot anger around, say, the difficulties of finding drugs that cross the blood-brain barrier."

I had to laugh ruefully when Vikki Sinnott, a Melbourne, Australia, therapist who has been a volunteer in the HIV field since the epidemic's inception, described how her image of the virus has changed and impacted her paradigm for a cure. "We used to think HIV laid dormant for as long as ten years until it became active and had an impact on the immune system. Now we understand its ongoing work and effect on the body. There isn't the down time where, even simplistically, I can imagine a cure getting in and affecting a 'sleeping' virus. Instead, I have the image of HIV as an active, alert, intelligent bug that's constantly searching for new ways to operate and grow. This imagery demands a cure to be equally as 'intelligent.'"

AIDS treatment and prevention experts are digging new trenches, preparing themselves for the kind of time-consuming effort Brown thinks is necessary to discover a cure. "Plowing vast amounts of money into basic bench-level immunology research and virology research, much of which would not look like it has anything to do with AIDS," is the only

viable approach, she says. But "AIDS activists, breast cancer activists, leukemia activists, multiple sclerosis activists, basically everybody working toward curing any disease involving cancer, a viral infection, or an autoimmune phenomenon will benefit from advances in basic immunology."

In the absence of hope for a cure in our lifetime, many "AIDS professionals" have instead put prevention at the head of their agenda. Some even felt that the hope for a cure was counterproductive, and had harmed prevention efforts. "If anything, thought of a cure makes people more lax about practicing safer sex," judges gay author Mike Ford. Darlene Weide of the Stop AIDS Project says simply, "I'm not waiting for the magic bullet when there are real steps that we can take today."

Many health workers and educators who are HIV-positive spoke of prevention work as being "healing" in and of itself. They say that feeling helpless in the face of the pandemic or trying to ignore it put them in a worse position than actually being infected. By facing their terror of being overwhelmed by human suffering and walking through those flames, they were able to focus on some task that they could shoulder. These jobs or volunteer positions obviously don't get rid of AIDS, but doing them does eliminate denial, guilt, and political paralysis. Shutting down emotionally to try to block out images of sick people or stories about the ravages of HIV in undeveloped nations is as much a result of the virus as are opportunistic infections. This defensive blindness and blunting of empathy affects everyone, regardless of serostatus. To some extent, every sexually active person in the world is "living with AIDS," given how much its presence has altered our options for obtaining intimacy and pleasure. Working in a hospice, facilitating a community forum about barebacking or crystal, organizing a campaign to get gay bars to put out free condoms, and similar efforts are the psychological and social equivalent of the AIDS cocktail. Rather than curing HIV, their goal is to heal the character defects and cultural

lapses that made the epidemic possible in the first place.

Despite the efforts of a new generation of AIDS activists, one that can call out the polysyllabic names of protease inhibitors with panache, it's not clear how we are going to restructure prevention campaigns that will foster behavior change over at-risk people's life spans. While we're figuring this out, it seems very important that we not indulge in the self-righteousness of the past. One view on how to do this comes from Alex Garner, who has been HIV-positive for four and a half years and is a former prevention educator for young gay men and men of color. "I firmly believe people labored under the misguided belief that if we could stop the transmission of this disease that it would be a cure," Garner says. "People seemed to confuse the concepts of a cure with prevention and came to believe that if we could just get everyone to practice safer sex and stop using drugs then the disease would end. This created a way of thinking in prevention which made people out who didn't practice the prescribed behavior as villains to the epidemic, society and the country."

Most prevention campaigns are based on the assumption that sexual behavior is learned, so dangerous behavior can be unlearned. We've never determined the extent to which human sexual behavior may be as hardwired as that of other mammals. There may be a reproductive imperative to penetrate and ejaculate that is a part of male sexuality regardless of sexual orientation. We're not the hapless hostages of our instincts or genes, of course, but it seems to me that the social constructionist theory of sexual preference does not cover all the bases. Many of us have desires that were not instilled in us by our parents or their social milieu. To prevent HIV infection, we may need to study the origins of and influences upon our pleasure-seeking drives in at least as much detail as we are looking at T-cells. Unfortunately, the American government is only interested in preventing or eliminating premarital, extramarital, recreational, and homosexual sex, and doesn't care why lonely hearts and loins point themselves longingly in so many different directions.³

President Bush wants a 33 percent increase in the federal budget for programs encouraging abstinence in the schools. Despite studies to the contrary, conservatives in Congress argue that sex education that includes information about contraception only encourages teenagers to be sexually active.⁴ The ultimate form of AIDS prevention would, of course, be a vaccine. The current federal administration is not likely to funnel much money toward such research. Kirk Read, who has been active on behalf of sex workers' rights, feels wary of the values behind focusing exclusively on a vaccine. "So much stigma remains attached to infection that discussion of a vaccine is still rooted in 'protecting the innocent,'" he says sadly. Miller, like many HIV-positive people, feels very strongly that a vaccine is not enough. "There are definitely concerns that a vaccine will be developed and people who are already HIV-positive will be left to fend for themselves," he explains. The estimated 33 million people who have been infected with HIV worldwide would no doubt second this, although some hope that an AIDS vaccine might improve the immune system of those who have already been exposed to the virus.

AIDS activists have not only become discouraged by the complexities of immunology and the malicious mysteries of retroviruses. We are also weighed down by the broader picture we have obtained of how health issues in general are neglected worldwide. "With global capitalism, there cannot be a cure for AIDS," Schulman says flatly. "At this point, AIDS prevention/cure is much like 'reproductive freedom,' something that requires a different social structure to be fully realized." This point of view is echoed by Garrett, who believes, "Right now 'cure' is not a priority for HIV-positive residents of the wealthy world, though it remains the top issue among HIV-positive people of the poor world. We have reached a point where the needs of the very few in this global pandemic have superceded the needs of the vast majority, purely based on wealth distribution. It's a sorry state of affairs, but it's not all that different from the trend for dozens of other illnesses, including malaria and tuberculosis."

One thing that has not changed since the founding of ACT-UP is the mistrust of pharmaceutical corporations and government health agencies. Several interviewees felt that drug companies are making too much money from AIDS treatment to have any interest in finding a cure. As Garrett pithily puts it, "If I had evidence of direct efforts to block development of an HIV cure, I would have long since published it in *Newsday*. I do think, however, that the \$20,000-per-year-for-life model of HIV 'treatment' offers significantly greater profit potential than would a short course 'cure.'" Only a few people believed a cure would be found because it would, in and of itself, be enormously profitable. The more common belief was that moralism would outweigh the profit motive. "I'm guessing a large part of the population feel like AIDS should be kept around, so that sex still has some dire consequences," says Fergus Poole, a young HIV-negative gay man who has taken AIDS for granted as part of the landscape ever since he came out.

Prevention is important. A vaccine would be a wonderful addition to the prevention arsenal. Improvements in AIDS treatment will certainly extend or save lives. But they cannot free HIVers and PWAs (persons with AIDS) from the constant awareness of being seriously ill and in jeopardy. Charles, an Australian PWA who is Sinnott's husband, told me, "As a person with HIV who has recently experienced PCP, I know that this ain't no chronic, manageable illness." Doug Harrison, an HIV-positive engineer, says, "I feel people are having second thoughts [about AIDS as a chronic, manageable illness] due to the issue of possible reinfection and drug side effects affecting the quality of life. 'Manageable' has turned out to be an elusive goal to many people with HIV." Miller adds, "What one person may see as manageable another may view as a living hell."

Everyone living in the large shadow cast by this epidemic is looking for a different sort of cure. Some of us want a physical purge of all infection, whether that's accomplished by Western medicine or some alternative form of therapy. Some of us are yearning for spiritual renewal, for an emotional cleansing, or

for a cure for our fear of mortality. Some of us would be content to simply live longer lives. Many have no interest in changing the values about sex and relationships that existed before AIDS. Others see the epidemic as mandating a transformation in sexual ethics and the taking up of stewardship of one another's health. Some hope that AIDS will be a means by which the larger society can be cured of its insanity about sexual desire, pleasure in general, skin color, and money. It seems fair to ask if a cure for shame or self-hatred is as important as less toxic medications. If we could vaccinate ourselves against indifference, apathy, prejudice, or denial, much of the harm done by HIV disease could be reduced and made more bearable.

But lofty political hopes and spiritual speculation are difficult to sustain when I have to visit the hospital and hold hands with one more person who is breathing through a tube, who may not even know I am there. Our bodies, our precious lives, still cry out to be saved. Garrett says her definition of a cure remains the same as it was when she first heard of the epidemic—"A cure would constitute complete elimination of all vestiges of HIV, as well as its potentially activatable genetic material, from the body of an infected individual without killing said individual or causing him/her undue harm in the process of treatment." When asked if it was still worthwhile to hold out for this goal, she replied, "Somebody should."

NOTES

1. Miller is referring to long term survivors of HIV infection who were on the brink of death when a new "cocktail" of medications became available that dramatically reduced their viral load and returned them to a semblance of health.
2. This abbreviation stands for highly active antiretroviral therapy.
3. The 1996 Welfare Reform Act made millions of dollars available to states that were willing to implement "abstinence only" sex education programs in the schools. Such programs emphasize celibacy and sobriety as the only way to prevent pregnancy or STDs, omit information about birth control and abortion, mislead students about the effectiveness of condoms, and either ignore or stereotype gay people and people with AIDS. See Glen Martin, "Study Blasts Abstinence Only Sex Education," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 29, 1997.
4. Laura Meckler, "Bush: More for Abstinence Programs," Associated Press, Jan. 31, 2002, AOL News online.

The Nonoxynol-9 Scandal: How “AIDS Prevention” Put Women and Gay Men at Risk

[2001]

Last fall, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that nonoxynol-9 (N-9), a chemical that is added to many sexual lubricants and condoms because it kills HIV, actually puts the users of these products at a greater risk of contracting AIDS.¹ The mega-analysis that prompted this announcement was conducted under the aegis of the Joint United Nations Program on AIDS (UNAIDS). The majority of trial subjects were African sex workers and prostitutes in Thailand. Results were reported at the XIII International AIDS Conference held in Durban, South Africa, over July 9–14, 2000. The mega-analysis found that women who used nonoxynol-9 became infected with HIV at approximately a *50 percent higher rate* than the women who used a placebo gel.² The ethics of these studies are controversial, to say the least. The research designs, of course, had no provision for treatment of infected respondents, so coming out on the losing end of these trials was, to put it bluntly, a death sentence.

Despite widespread anecdotal and scientific evidence that N-9 caused vaginal irritation and even lesions, plus a lack of any data regarding its efficacy during anal intercourse, this spermicidal detergent has been widely recommended in the United States and to varying degrees elsewhere as a backup in case of condom breakage.³ This is because it had been shown to kill the virus thought to cause AIDS, as well as chlamydia and other organisms that cause sexually transmitted diseases—

but solely in a test tube.⁴ Nonoxynol-9 has been going into women's vaginas and the rectums of women and gay/bisexual men (as well as the orifices of transgendered people) since 1982, and possibly earlier.⁵ Now it turns out that using N-9 causes so much tissue damage that it makes it easier for HIV to enter the bloodstream.

How the hell did this happen?

At least part of the responsibility rests with activists who gathered to protest governmental policies on HIV and AIDS during the 1980s. One of the slogans of that era was "Drugs Into Bodies." The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other agencies were pressured to create a pipeline for faster approval of medications that might halt the progression of AIDS or treat the opportunistic infections that accompany it. There was general agreement that it didn't matter whether the drugs proved to be toxic or ineffective. We already knew that AIDS was fatal, and being able to try any sort of treatment was better than no treatment at all. Nonoxynol-9 was already widely used as a spermicide. It was already known to kill chlamydia and gonococcus (the bacteria that causes gonorrhea) in vitro. So the manufacturers of lubricants and condoms began adding it to their products, hoping it might provide a sort of chemical backup in case of condom breakage. The use of nonoxynol-9 for this purpose, however, never received approval from the FDA or any other public-health agency.⁶ Few consumers of sexual lubricants know that the FDA does not regulate these products at all. There was no consensus about how high a concentration of N-9 would be safe or effective, nor was there monitoring of content or packaging to inform consumers about exactly how much of the chemical was present.

This gap in scientific knowledge can only be attributed to a sex-negative attitude that has hamstrung HIV prevention efforts since the epidemic's inception. The only prevention message that politicians (and many doctors) can promulgate without controversy is abstinence—don't have high-risk sex, don't use drugs. The fact that such messages had already been

proven useless to halt the spread of gonorrhea or syphilis, and other STDs as well, is widely ignored. The official unstated position seems to be that people who do bad things like man-to-man sex, prostitution, or injecting narcotics *should* be punished, and ought to be grateful if they receive any help at all. Sexually explicit prevention materials and harm-reduction information that does not preach sobriety are repeatedly made the target of moral panics, and in this country cannot be produced with federal funds.

It is virtually impossible to get any of the “experts” in charge of AIDS policy to deal with the simple and obvious fact that pleasure is a very powerful motivating force. If people have a choice between doing something dangerous that is pleasurable or self-denial, they will usually do what feels good, even if it might shorten their lives. This is especially true for marginalized groups of people who are desperately searching for any way to cope with the depressing effects of stigma and discrimination. There has been virtually no brainstorming about ways to prevent HIV infection while allowing the people most at risk to continue to have access to pleasurable, life-affirming, or just plain escapist stimulation.

It wasn't until the '90s that the scientific literature began to be peppered with a handful of studies on nonoxynol-9 as a microbicide. There was not exactly a chorus of affirmation for such prophylaxis. A 1990 study of popular brands of condoms available in Denmark found that they did not contain a high enough concentration of nonoxynol-9 to inactivate HIV. The researchers concluded that this weakness would be even more pronounced during anal sex.⁷ A 1991 review of the literature on the safety and efficacy of nonoxynol-9 for the prevention of STDs concluded that users needed to be advised of the contraindications for continued use of the chemical for anal intercourse, “a practice that has not been studied and cannot be recommended.”⁸ A 1992 column in *The Advocate* noted that many manufacturers of sexual lubricants were using low (and perhaps ineffective) concentrations of the chemical because

"[t]he higher the concentration of nonoxynol-9, the greater the chance of having skin irritation or genital ulcers."⁹

Gay medical anthropologist and sexologist Clark Taylor, Ed.D., says he was one of the first people to suggest use of nonoxynol-9 as an AIDS preventative, but only if adequate studies were going to be conducted. It wasn't until last year, however, that somebody actually put this chemical into the rectums of research subjects to see what it did to these delicate tissues. An earlier study found that rectal application of nonoxynol-9 speeded up infection and death from herpes in mice. Lead investigator Dr. David M. Phillips and his team (which included Taylor) collected rectal lavage specimens from human volunteers of both sexes fifteen minutes after the application of nonoxynol-9. They used over-the-counter sexual lubricants to provide the dose of N-9. Light and electron microscope examination of these specimens showed the presence of sheets of epithelium. In other words, nonoxynol-9 literally strips the lining off the walls of the rectum. "It is reasonable to assume that the loss of the protective epithelium would render a person more at risk for infection by HIV and other sexually transmitted pathogens," says Phillips. "We therefore caution against the use of N-9-containing products during rectal intercourse."¹⁰

In a recent interview, Taylor outlined the history of nonoxynol-9 and discussed some of the obstacles to developing an effective microbicide. He dates its use back to the '50s, and says that by the '60s it was the chemical most often used for contraception and possible prevention of STDs. A hearing in 1979 was held to establish federal guidelines for labeling, and the FDA permitted spermicides containing nonoxynol-9 and octoxynol-8 to make claims of possible disease prevention. Trials by Trimensa (which was owned by David Goodstein, then-owner of *The Advocate*, and gay health educator and researcher Bruce Voeller of the Mariposa Foundation, among others) were held in 1978 to see if its new N-9-infused lubricant, ForPlay, would stop gonorrhea if used rectally. But

the FDA refused certification, saying that nonoxynol-9 was a contraceptive, and if it wasn't being used for that purpose, it couldn't be tested; the FDA certainly wasn't going to approve it for anal sex.

By 1983 or 1984, Voeller had persuaded the Centers for Disease Control to publish a suggestion that nonoxynol-9 might help prevent HIV, and researchers in the *Journal of Contraception* chimed in with similar statements. So condom manufacturers began adding N-9 to their lubricated rubbers. But to this day, the FDA has neither a classification for topical microbicides to be used to prevent STDs during sex nor production standards for such an item. This is every bit as political a decision as governmental attempts to regulate or limit abortion. It's sad to note that this moralistic regulatory lapse has not received nearly as much attention, despite the serious health consequences of undiagnosed and untreated STDs. Taylor adds that researchers who want to investigate microbicides are still in a bind. The fact is that many women worldwide will only use a microbicide if it does *not* prevent conception. But, at least in this country, the only data the FDA are interested in must demonstrate spermicidal power. It's just a happy coincidence that most chemicals that kill sperm will also kill microbes, at least in vitro.

Taylor feels that much of this foot-dragging is based on an assumption that only gay and bisexual men are having anal sex. He cites a study that showed that seven times more heterosexual women were having anal sex than gay and bisexual men. He believes as many as 25 to 30 percent of American women regularly have anal sex, and says that figure may be much higher in other countries, where it is used to prevent pregnancy. He also criticizes the sexual ignorance of many epidemiologists and other researchers in this field. For example, the high rates of HIV infection found when N-9 is studied in some African countries may actually be due, he believes, to a preference for "dry sex." In some of these cultures, people use astringents and caustic herbs before intercourse. The resulting abrasions

promote transmission of some STDs, especially those that are blood-borne. These practices will obviously affect attitudes toward and use of a wet lubricant containing nonoxynol-9. Unpublished reports indicate that research subjects in those regions may have mixed the lubricant with dirt, leaves, or other abrasive substances before using it. Researchers almost never inform themselves about local sexual norms and practices that could affect how respondents use the products they are given, or whether the respondents will truthfully report either compliance or noncompliance with the study's protocols. Why study sex if you are going to avert your eyes from the behavior and the context in which it occurs? Because the study is being done in the hopes of increasing the profits of some pharmaceutical company, that's why. Researchers are also under pressure from public health officials in poor countries who want quick, easy, and cheap solutions.

How many men and women have been infected with HIV more easily because they followed expert guidelines and used nonoxynol-9? We'll never know. While the intentions of health educators were good, the N-9 debacle ought to highlight the necessity of insisting on careful research before any medication or other substance goes into a human body, even if its purpose is to stave off a life-threatening infection. To take the proper social, sexual, economic, and cultural factors into consideration, such studies must be designed and implemented with the cooperation of the people who are going to be studied. Consultation at the grassroots level should become standard practice among both epidemiologists and other AIDS researchers. This is also necessary for ethical reasons, to ensure that human research subjects have enough information and empowerment to give (or withhold) informed consent. It's a simple matter of quality control, of improving this important research so that it is sound enough to serve as a strong foundation for public policy.

Other than gay/bisexual men, the group of people most injured by the premature promotion of nonoxynol-9 as a

microbicide is sex workers, especially women in Africa and Thailand who make a living from commercial sex. The bad news about nonoxynol-9 was available long before Durban. A 1992 study in Nairobi found that sex workers who used a vaginal sponge containing high doses (one gram) of nonoxynol-9 had a higher rate of HIV infection than the women who used inert suppositories.¹¹ Results of this study were discounted by experts who attributed the results to the high dosage of nonoxynol-9. Another 1992 study, however, found that although nonoxynol-9 killed chlamydia, it was so toxic to monkey cervical cells in vitro that “the effects of prolonged use of nonoxynol-9 in vivo should be examined further.”¹²

Nevertheless, scientists kept putting N-9 on the cervixes of human females in what looks like a wrong-headed determination to somehow come up with different results. A 1993 study, this time of “high-risk women” (i.e., HIV-negative women with multiple sex partners—sex workers again?) in Cameroon, claimed to produce “the first epidemiological evidence that nonoxynol-9 spermicides can reduce the incidence of HIV infection.” However, these researchers also found an absence of any protective effect from using condoms, which throws their methodology open to serious question. Investigators acknowledged that this may have been a result of “how condom use was classified in this study. The implications of this categorization for spermicide analysis are unclear.”¹³ In other words, “We messed up our data, so we don’t really know nuthin’ new.”

Priscilla Alexander of the North American Task Force on Prostitution gave an exasperated account of the misogynist and racist nightmare of N-9 research.¹⁴ She worked for the World Health Organization (WHO) from 1989 to 1993. The AIDS conference in Montreal in 1989 featured a presentation about a trial of N-9 in Nairobi sex workers that showed that use of a contraceptive sponge containing a high concentration of nonoxynol-9 actually increased the women’s risk of contracting HIV. A subsequent study of dosing strength

to come up with low-dose formulations. Meanwhile, I was saying, forget it. If you get it weak enough that it doesn't cause abrasions, it won't kill anything. The way N-9 works as a spermicide is it breaks the cell wall of the sperm. And that's what an abrasion is, a break in the cell wall. Nonoxynol-9 can take off your nail polish, for godsake."

She wonders if being fired by WHO had anything to do with her refusal, in 1993, to support yet another study of N-9, once again using African sex workers as research subjects. This was especially frustrating since she and other prostitutes' rights activists had been lobbying against such research for four years. One of the problems, she pointed out, is that it's not clear that the women in these trials are always able to give informed consent. There are African countries where prostitutes must register and attend a clinic for a regular medical evaluation. If they don't do this, they can be arrested. The N-9 studies are usually connected to these clinics, which probably gives the women the impression that their participation is required.¹⁵ "In any country where prostitutes were medically educated and politically organized, they would not participate in such a study," she says firmly. "Researchers knew that sex workers were angry about these studies. We told them over and over again not to do these studies, and they went ahead and did them anyway. It's racism, because it's black African women who are expendable and prostitutes who are expendable and Thai women who are also, you know, expendable." Nevertheless, when UNAIDS was formed, the organization went forward with more N-9 studies on human subjects in Third World countries.

Reading many of the published studies on N-9 reveals that they are imbued with a callous attitude toward female research subjects. Women's complaints about nonoxynol-9 causing vaginal or rectal irritation, and condom lubricant containing N-9 causing unpleasant reactions during oral sex, have largely

These complaints were documented in a study of commercial sex workers in British Columbia, Canada, which took the rare approach of asking how women who were already experienced with N-9 felt about how it affected their bodies. These investigators found that more than half of the women had stopped using latex condoms lubricated with nonoxynol-9 for all the reasons summarized above.¹⁶ A 1993 study of thirty-five women found that those who used nonoxynol-9 once or twice a day had rates of vaginal epithelial disruption two and a half times greater than that of placebo users.¹⁷ And in 1996, researchers obtained histological and colposcopic evidence that nonoxynol-9 induces an inflammatory response in the vaginal mucosa, and suggested that use of high doses of the chemical might potentiate HIV infection.¹⁸ Yet nonoxynol-9 remains on the market in condoms and in sexual lubricants, and harmful studies on its efficacy continue to be funded.

This includes a joint venture between Trimensa Pharmaceuticals and Taylor Wright Pharmacals under the direction of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality. This study is being publicized on the Adult Industry Medical Health Care Foundation (AIM-HCF) website. When I spoke with Ted McIlvenna, M.Div., Ph.D., he condemned the Durban study as "genocide." Yet sex workers are being invited via the AIM-HCF website to cooperate in a microbicide study. He felt that this research was ethically acceptable because the microbicide being tested is nonoxynol-15 with a buffer made from *avenasativa*, an oat extract. However, he acknowledged that nonoxynol-9 and its close chemical relatives are all very strong, "and unfortunately there are limits to how often you can use it." He said that his own product, Erogel, cannot be used more than three times a day without causing irritation or ulceration of the vagina. And he does not recommend it for rectal use at all. He spoke passionately about the need for a vaginal gel that

will allow women to protect themselves, "because men can't be trusted, they'll stick it in the mashed potatoes."

It remains to be seen whether the claim is true that this formulation of nonoxynol-15 is safer than its cousin. Neither the CDC warning against use of N-9 nor statements about limiting frequency of use appear on the AIM-HCF website. Instead, use of nonoxynol-9 is described as having "had a very good safety record for more than 45 years" and being "recommended for vaginal intercourse as a layer of AIDS prevention" that should be used "every time a person has intercourse." Granted, readers are warned not to use this product if it causes irritation, but this hardly conveys the extent of the risk involved.¹⁹

Women are not the only ones who get burned by N-9. There has also been at least one recorded instance in the medical literature of a man having an adverse reaction due to nonoxynol-9 on the skin of his penis. This 32-year-old man was diagnosed with contact dermatitis because of exposure to nonoxynol-9 in a condom.²⁰ Some researchers responded to this case report by asking if this man's dermatitis could have been an allergic response to latex. As use of latex barriers for HIV prevention has increased dramatically, so has the incidence of allergic reactions to gloves, condoms, and other latex products that come into contact with skin. Unfortunately, one study concluded that the presence of nonoxynol-9 in latex condoms may increase the release of natural rubber latex protein, which enhances the risk of developing an allergy. The authors of this study pointed out that their data highlight the need to develop nonlatex condoms.²¹

Latex allergies can be serious enough to produce anaphylactic shock and death. There are mechanical problems with latex condoms and other barriers as well, since this substance is relatively easy to puncture or tear; cannot be used with oil-based lubricants, which are often preferred for anal sex and are much easier to obtain than water-based lubricants manufactured specifically for sex; and deteriorate rapidly if

exposed to extreme temperatures. But there has hardly been a mad rush to develop more inert (or sturdier) viral barriers. The plastic Avanti condom came on the market decades after prophylactic use was mandated to halt the spread of HIV during vaginal, anal, and oral sex. Can any reasonable adult believe it's not possible to make a condom that won't break? (Alexander, by the way, says she has anecdotal evidence that condoms containing nonoxynol-9 break more easily than condoms without it, and asks why this has never been formally studied.)

At-risk populations are urged to always take safer-sex precautions and simultaneously condemned for new HIV infections, but much more could be done to provide conscientious members of these populations with less cumbersome and more efficient viral barriers. Once again, a squeamishness about pleasure is putting sexually active people's lives at risk. Any AIDS preventive measure that could be interpreted as endorsing or facilitating erotic enjoyment is unlikely to be deployed. Pharmaceutical companies have decided it is better for some of us to die than it would be for them to tarnish their corporate reputations by being associated with sodomy, just as politicians allow drug users to become infected with HIV and hepatitis by squelching needle-exchange programs, out of fear of being labeled soft on crime. Lost votes are more important than lost lives.

Given this squeamishness, it is no surprise that research on microbicides is hampered by the seeming ignorance of most doctors, epidemiologists, and their colleagues about the way sex happens between gay men or between sex workers and their clients. This leads to ridiculous reports like a 1996 study of sex workers in Kenya whose purpose was to determine whether a once-daily vaginal application of a gel containing nonoxynol-9 would be safe. The study found that a single daily dose of 52.5 mg of the chemical in a bioadhesive gel did not cause epithelial toxicity, but no one asked the sex workers how many times they had vaginal intercourse during

a typical working day.²² Researchers who are not concerned about the potentially irritating effects of nonoxynol-9 on the rectum do not take into account just how many times a gay or bisexual man might allow himself to be penetrated during a typical night of cruising for casual sex. The popularity of crystal and other recreational drugs raises the ante far above the imaginations of most doctors. The idea that a single application of any microbicide currently in use could provide sufficient protection for an entire day of street hustling or a single night's run of casual sex in T-rooms or gay bathhouses is ludicrous.

More than sixty products are considered to be potentially useful as microbicides for vaginal or anal use. Half of these are already in human trials or on the verge of them. Some might block HIV but still allow conception. This is important in countries where women are expected to produce sons if they are going to maintain their social standing, or are forbidden to use birth control for religious reasons. Others could potentially neutralize HIV in a positive woman's vaginal secretions, enabling her to protect her partner from exposure as well as herself from reinfection. Experts estimate that no more than \$75 to \$100 million a year for the next five years would be enough to get one or more of these chemicals on the market. But the actual expenditure on development of microbicides is more like \$35 million annually, worldwide. Some \$25 million of that comes from the United States (just 1 percent of the federal AIDS research budget). The developers are often small, university-based research groups, and they can't afford to test these substances without government subsidization.²³

You might expect the same pharmaceutical giants who have made obscene profits from selling protease inhibitors and other antiretroviral medications to be jumping on the microbicide bandwagon. But this is not seen as a sufficiently profitable project. Why do research on *preventing* HIV infection when the average triple-combination treatment regimen brings in thousands of dollars a year, every year, for the rest of the life of each person with AIDS? (Assuming that the PWA lives in

an industrialized nation, of course.) Why bother to treat or even prevent HIV infection in countries whose citizens have such low annual incomes that they often can't afford simple medications like antibiotics? Vaccine research is underfunded for the same reason. This is the identical "profit at any price" mentality that allowed tobacco company executives to market their carcinogenic products for decades without a qualm, the same amorality that causes automobile manufacturers who are aware of a faulty part to calculate the relative cost of lawsuits for death and injury versus a recall and replacement of that part.

Yet the development of microbicides remains a pressing need, especially for the prevention of HIV infection in women. Sex workers often cannot impose condom use on clients. There's no guarantee that a client who agrees to use a condom won't deliberately break or puncture it, or allow it to slip off. A 1987 study of female prostitutes in the United States found that husbands or boyfriends were much less likely to use condoms during vaginal intercourse than clients (16 percent versus 78 percent). Only 4 percent of prostitutes reported using a condom with every episode of vaginal sex during the past five years. None of them were HIV-positive, compared to 11 percent of those with unprotected vaginal exposure.²⁴ Using condoms consistently prevents HIV infection and most other STDs. But women who insist on condoms may be battered or forced into high-risk sex. Researchers who looked at the social context within which women engaged in sex work at a truck stop in South Africa found that the pressing need for survival took precedence over potential risk of being infected with HIV. They did find a few instances in which sex workers were able to insist on condom use, but this meant decreased earnings, loss of clients, and physical abuse. *Violence and the threat of it was identified as the most important factor mitigating against consistent condom use.* Yet these "experts" recommended that the women be taught better negotiation and communication skills to enable them to "persuade" their clients to use condoms!²⁵ This highlights the shameful paucity of HIV prevention education

aimed at straight men. It is absurd to tell women to use condoms when they are not the ones who have to wear them.

Priscilla Alexander says, "Nobody tells [straight] men they have to wear condoms. All the stuff on using condoms is aimed at women or gay men. Even women's work groups on the HIV prevention planning groups will say they want more money to tell women to wear condoms. They don't say, Put some money into telling men. And everywhere in the world, the big problem is that men say they don't like them."

She doubts that loss of sensation is the only reason that the number of heterosexual men who consistently use condoms is so low. "It's also a kind of aggression. Prostitutes know that a certain percentage of clients deliberately break the condom. So there's a kind of hostile game going on. There are all sorts of issues in prostitution around men taking risks that nobody seems to be interested in studying."²⁶ Most AIDS researchers are heterosexual men. It would be fascinating (if the consequences for women were not so tragic) to speculate about the psychological mechanisms that allow this group of supposedly intelligent and objective scientists to remain in denial about the role straight men play in perpetuating epidemics of AIDS, hepatitis, and other STDs and blood-borne diseases. The danger and responsibility have been projected onto women (especially sex workers) and gay/bisexual men. Straight men continue to feel entitled to have unprotected sex, perhaps in part because they know that it is much easier for a woman to contract HIV from a male partner than vice versa. This is straight male privilege in its most obnoxious form. It's fine for women to put dangerous chemicals in their vaginas or rectums in a vain attempt to protect themselves from AIDS, and men who have sex with other men should give up anal sex altogether, but the idea of even one heterosexual man giving up the right to ejaculate without interference from a latex or plastic barrier is unthinkable.

The only real scandal about barebacking is a scandal about heterosexual male irresponsibility. Don't hold your breath

for any major daily newspaper to rush into print an exposé of “male seeking female” personal ads that take unprotected sex for granted. There will be no concerned anchorpersons on the evening news decrying the self-destructive lust that drives sexually compulsive straight men to stick their bare dicks in as many naked holes as possible, and bitch-slap any chick who tries to interpose a rubber between herself and dubious semen. No investigative journalist will follow your average joe around with a hidden camera to get footage of him doing the wild thing skin-to-skin with his secretary, the odd hooker or two, and the wife who imagines he’s monogamous. Even gay male AIDS activists who have spoken out to condemn bathhouses, the promiscuity of men who have sex with men, and the deadly fetish of deliberately infecting oneself with HIV have been remarkably tender toward the apparent inability of straight men to allow the consequences of sexual license to limit the demands they place on the women who service their little rascals.

Ironically, it is only the sort of activism that got nonoxynol-9 on the market in the first place that seems likely to force new and better approaches to combating the AIDS epidemic. Pharmaceutical companies, public-health agencies, and the scientific establishment cannot be trusted to protect the interests of the people most at risk of HIV infection. The fact that new, albeit problematic and expensive, medications can extend the lives of some people with AIDS has been both a blessing and a curse. It takes so much energy to maintain the proper dosing schedule that many former activists find they have little left over to give to volunteer work or political organizing. The air of crisis, the threat of imminent death that fueled ACT-UP and Queer Nation, no longer exists. Yet people continue to be infected with HIV at frightening rates, and people continue to die of AIDS. The countries that have been hit hardest by this disease have the fewest resources to combat it, and very little power to compel more prosperous nations to render adequate aid.

It has become clear that AIDS is a worldwide problem. If a

new generation of activism is to be successful, it must take a global approach. It has also become clear that it is probably not possible to halt the spread of HIV without restructuring the world economy and making drastic changes in public-health policies. Inequitable patterns of distribution of wealth, education, food, clean water, shelter, medication, and preventive health measures must be altered. AIDS is not a unique emergency. It is of a piece with tuberculosis, malnutrition, illiteracy, civil war and ethnic hatred, the second-rate status of women, and metastasizing corporate capitalism. No wonder there are so few of us who have the vision or the energy and optimism to shoulder such a daunting task.

But the only other choice is to accept all the death and human suffering caused by AIDS, to accept the shortened life spans, the orphaned children, the pain of sick people who receive no palliative medication, the loss of so much human intelligence, creativity, love, and labor that it cannot be calculated or comprehended. Much of this loss and this agony will take place where Western eyes cannot bear witness. But it is nonetheless real, and diminishes us. Will we face this terrifying and discouraging task, or will we continue to hide behind the wall of white-skin privilege and our relative wealth? It really ought to be no choice at all.

NOTES

1. "Notice to Readers: CDC Statement on Study Results of Product Containing Nonoxynol-9," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Aug. 11, 2000, 49:31, 717-18.
2. L. van Damme, "Advances in Topical Microbicides," presented at the XIII International AIDS Conference, July 9-14, 2000, Durban, South Africa.
3. Larry Waites, M.D., M.P.H., "AIDSLine," *Advocate*, Sept. 8, 1992, 62.
4. M. Malkovsky, A. Newell, and A. G. Dalglish, "Inactivation of HIV by Nonoxynol-9," *Lancet* 1(8586):645, March 19, 1988. See also C. A. Rietmeijer, J. W. Krebs, P. M. Feorino, and F. N. Judson, "Condoms as Physical and Chemical Barriers Against HIV," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 259(12):1851-53, March 25, 1988.
5. January 4, 2001, personal conversation with Mikal Shively, a former marketing manager for *The Advocate* who consulted with David Goodstein about putting nonoxynol-9 in ForPlay lubricant. Goodstein was involved in its manufacture. Shively says it is his recollection that many lubricants contained nonoxynol-9 prior to this time, primarily because it was hoped it would protect the user against chlamydia and syphilis.

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IV.

An Insistent and Indelicate Muse

19

20

An Insistent and Indelicate Muse: An Introduction

[2002]

The truth is often rude.

—Mikal Shively, *queer sage*

Asking why someone would write about sex is rather like asking why anyone would eat at a five-star French restaurant. The inherent pleasure of the activity in question seems rather obvious to me. As a pornographer, I am in the same position as the restaurant critic. I get to do something I love while being paid for it. Why would I ever *stop* writing about sex?

Of course, this is a simplistic description of my vocation. It omits the deadbeat publishers who try to bowdlerize writing that scares them; checks that never quite stretch to cover all the bills; the disapproval of family, fellow pagans who are stuck in the cultural feminism of the '70s, and other nonfriends; the lack of serious critical attention (because everyone "knows" pornography requires no serious literary talent); the angst of putting something so personal out for public perusal; watching my dot-com friends buy new cars and houses while I agonize about when I can afford to change the oil in my ten-year-old Honda Civic and dodge calls from the landlord; and the mind-numbing challenge of finishing a collection of sexually explicit fiction despite chronic pain, yet another hacking chest cold, or a dry spell in which I haven't had a new trick to inspire me for the last six months, thank you very much, Aphrodite.

Some of these obstacles exist for any writer, no matter how

staid. Creative work is badly paid and underrated. The rodeo announcer's cautionary opening statement, "Mama, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys," might more aptly be rephrased as "Mama, don't let your babies grow up to be artists." Anybody who can look at the hump on a Brahma bull's back, not to mention those very pointy horns, and still persist in the delusion that the creature is meant to be ridden gets no sympathy from me. But then, I have never felt the rope-burn of desire to sport one of those silver-and-turquoise trophy belt buckles as big as a dinner plate. (My western genes do, however, predispose me to own a lot of multicolored, pointy-toed boots, and I prefer a big saddle when I go for a ride. Alas, I digress.)

I *have* experienced the jones to write while stuck at a desk in Chevron Oil's word-processing pool, watching precious irreplaceable hours of my life tick away like the sand in the Wicked Witch of the West's hourglass, while I sent out form letters about credit cards. It hurt. A lot. I write because I must. I am motivated by a strong desire to avoid the pain caused by not writing. Any parallels between being an artist and a junkie are too obvious to be mentioned here.

If it weren't for pornography, I wonder if I'd ever have become a writer. In my early twenties, I was unable to keep (or publish) anything I'd written. The minute a poem or short story came out of the typewriter I loathed it so much that I destroyed it. The only way I got myself past this self-immolation was to make myself write something that was so forbidden and exciting that I wouldn't be able to stop myself. I also told myself I never had to show it to anybody else. (This trick still works.) I'd never tied anybody up or spanked anyone, but my sexual fantasies were all about bondage and discipline. I found them scary and shameful, but could not relinquish the pleasure they gave me. So I had to find a way to own or integrate this part of myself. The result was "Jessie," which later wound up being excerpted in *Coming to Power* and published *in toto* in *Macho Sluts*. At the time, it was the only piece of lesbian S/M porn—or lesbian porn of any sort,

for that matter—that most of us had seen, so it circulated in photocopies of photocopies. For all I know it still travels in this *samizdat* format, encouraging more budding perverts to wear black velvet suits and put candles up their booties.

Because there was no tradition of sex writing by and for lesbians, I had to use my imagination a lot. There were no clichés for me to fall back on. I did not know anyone who actually engaged in the acts I described, so I had to devote more time than porn writers usually do to filling out my characters. The challenge was to make the sex believable, to use the female characters in such a convincing way that the reader would be led step by step into a world where women actually said such things and got what they were begging for. Of course, I was also leading myself into that world. It was a case of life imitating art.

I kept writing leatherdyke smut because I had to create the audience that would appreciate my work (and let me live out some of my fantasies in the real world). That is one thing that I believe makes my fiction unique: the fact that it built the very community that it celebrates. The message of *Macho Shuts* was “You don’t have to just think about these things. There are other women who want them too. Come and find us.”

It will be interesting to see what happens to my fiction as a result of this gender transition I am making from female to male. I’m well aware that I’ve gotten away with breaking a lot of the rules because I was perceived as a woman and a dyke. Defending free speech and public sex and writing hard-core tales were unheard-of occupations for a lesbian in 1977. I worry that some of the things I have to say will be dismissed or seen as not particularly interesting if they come from a person who is living in a male identity. Right now I am struggling to figure out my relationship to the body of work I created before I started taking testosterone and using male pronouns. It’s very hard for me to do readings because my voice has changed. (Literally.) I understand how important it is for many lesbians to be in women-only space. I don’t want

to ruin this safe place for women who need it. Yet I feel that I'll probably continue to write lesbian porn, if only because there's something rebellious and dangerous about two women looking for their hot zones together. But will lesbians still be willing to buy my work?

Transgendered people are already turning up more often in my fiction. I keep asking myself, "Who will read this stuff? For that matter, who will publish it?" These worries slow me down. I'm 46, and I have a painful autoimmune disease. I don't know if I have it in me to once more build a community by writing about it as if it already existed. At least I don't have to start from scratch this time. Many leatherdykes have gone before me and come out as FTMs. There's a strong international FTM movement, but a lot of transmen are freaked out by S/M, and homophobic to boot. Do the rest of you care enough about gender issues to be interested in the sexual adventures of trannies? Does that turn you on?

Despite the fact that I sometimes feel as if I am building a bridge out over the thin air of the Grand Canyon, I can't imagine being able to stop writing about romance and all the other packages that sex comes in. The work itself is reinforcing, because as I write, I too am entertained, aroused, and educated. The things that hurt me lose their sharp edges and become more like a finished jigsaw puzzle than a Colt .45 with one bullet in the chamber. The act of creation is almost always an act of faith. It's impossible to know, while you are making something new, exactly what it will be when it is finished or what will happen to it when it leaves your hands. The future is none of my business, partly because if I focus on the consequences, I will never have the tunnel vision and warped concentration of energy it takes to spin words into sentences. Although I don't see anything wrong with writers and other artists being good businesspeople when it comes to attracting an audience for their work and acquiring the material means to continue it, I also think that the postcreation marketing stuff is the least important part of

the entire process. It's sad when a great painter, for example, is not appreciated until after their death. The probability that there are other great painters whose work will never be seen at all is even more tragic. *But the work was still valuable*, no matter how obscure. Each image was still a vocation and an obligation that the painters had to fulfill, just as the lion must fulfill its mandate to hunt, and the tides must follow the moon, rumpled like the bedcovers of a restless sleeper.

Here are some of the other things I've learned in my career as a pornographer.

By the time I put the manuscript of *Macho Shuts* together, I had discovered and read quite a bit of heterosexual and gay male S/M porn, and I found that a lot of it was unrealistic. When I read about sex acts that I knew were life-threatening or just physically impossible to perform, it bumped me out of the narrative-induced trance and made me feel uneasy and icky instead of aroused. Much of my fiction is written as much to entertain me as it is to grab a reader by their short hairs. I wanted images of S/M play that was edgy but doable. This seemed to me to be much more subversive than the mass-marketed pulp paperback stuff that was far-fetched or all about people being maimed or killed. Bad, mass-market fetish porn implies that its subject matter could never be translated into the reader's daily life or relationship. I wanted to depict people who got off on extreme things but who still had jobs, apartments, bills to pay, and lovers to argue with and fuck.

Even though I write about male/female sex whenever the urge strikes me, on the whole my work is about the perfection and grace of queer sex. When Dr. David Reuben said in the first edition of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)* that one vagina plus another vagina equaled zero, he was just saying what most heterosexuals believed in 1969, albeit in a crude and piggy way. Straight people didn't just hate dykes and fags then, they thought we were ridiculous, a dirty joke, struggling to make two identical bodies fit together in a way that would never work. Our

determination (or compulsion) to succeed at this impossible task simply confirmed our mentally ill status. Queer sex (especially lesbian sex) wasn't just seen as being wrong, illegal, or sinful; it was seen as being on some level *impossible*. (Unless, of course, two hot chicks were making out while a straight guy watched, in which case it was just very effective foreplay for a heterosexual ménage à trois.)

My earliest ideas about sexuality came from a crazy fundamentalist Christian religion that sanctions only about 5 percent of the many possibilities people have for experiencing pleasure with one another. I was terrified to be gay. But when I actually experienced putting my body up against the body of a woman, all I felt was flesh on flesh. I was troubled by my ambivalence about having a female body, but I could not feel any wrong being done. Skin to skin, mouth to mouth, with our hands and our lips we crafted a sensuality that exceeded anything I'd known in my few shabby heterosexual trysts. Even though there is a large body of same-sex porn available now, it is still important for us to keep writing about this, the fact that when two men or two women desire one another, something morally good, spiritually rewarding, and physically gratifying transpires. We are not zeroes. We are like the mathematical constant π . We could go on to infinity without repeating ourselves.

While I may tell myself that the trash I'm typing is for my eyes only to get the rough draft out, an appreciative reader is just about the only anodyne for the painful and repetitive revision process that makes fiction inkworthy. This is a roundabout way of saying that I've often written about sex to seduce somebody. In fact, the dedications of most of my books are to people who no longer share my bed or my good graces. I once had a lover ask me to promise to never dedicate a book to her, as she feared this would jinx our relationship. If we define sex as stimulation that leads to orgasm, I could claim to have had sex with thousands of people via the pages of my books. (And all of it safe sex, at that!) When I create some especially fiendish

scene, one that might make readers inhale suddenly and sharply, or get goosebumps, there's a certain kind of pleasure to be had from topping all those strangers.

My sexually explicit fiction documents the vagaries of my personal life, but it's about everybody else's love life too. Porn is one way to write sexual history—the slang, fashion, community institutions, music, controversies, mores, the signifiers and significance of sexual expression at various points in time and in several different sexual-minority communities. Some authors would find that a horrifying prospect. They strive to create an archetypal erotic story that will be timeless. So they avoid, as much as possible, descriptors that would nail down a story's location and time. Sometimes they also strive to eliminate descriptive details of their characters' appearance or personalities. Their goal is to create an erotic Everyman or Anywoman, Piers Plowman at the Last Chance Lap Dance Saloon. *The Story of the Eye*; Harriet Marwood, *Governess*; and *Spanking the Maid* are amazing achievements in this genre. When writers with less skill attempt this feat, it blows up in their faces, because it's pretty easy to blunder and wind up with a story that is colorless and boring, and looks like a lazy, half-hearted effort at realizing a fantasy.

But it's almost impossible to separate action from context. In time, these works too will provide readers with historical data as well as arousal, although they won't be as rich as *Fanny Hill* or *My Secret Life*. These two books are good examples of the strategy I prefer, because I believe it makes the work more potent—diving into a wealth of detail, creating a complete picture of where the sex is taking place. I think this plunges the reader more deeply into a vicarious experience. But every technique has its weakness. The writer who wants to convey an accurate sense of the times they live in risks seeming quaint or unintentionally humorous to the next generation. (I know who among you have laughed at the author's photo in *Macho Sluts*.)

Clothes, language, religions, governments, and table manners come and go. But a new generation of readers

can overlook a few anachronisms if they find something in a narrative that reflects their inner life. That's why I believe it is so important in fiction, whether it's erotic or not, to focus on the emotions, beliefs, and needs of the characters. Human nature has not changed all that much in 7,000 years of recorded history. The epic tale of Gilgamesh and Enkiddu is still comprehensible to the modern reader, even if we miss some of the religious references. Beowulf and the myths of Egypt still fascinate us, because we want to know what is going to happen to all those people next, even if we think their clothes are weird. If a writer is able to accurately portray how a character feels, the work stands a better chance of holding up under Father Time's big pink eraser.

If anything renders a piece of fiction quickly obsolete, it is an absence of desire. Libidinal energies are stirred by so many of our feelings and actions that to leave out Eros is to water down the narrative. To include it is to come closer to an accurate rendition of humanity, whether the author's point is to convey a sense of desire's frustration or fulfillment. I write porn in part to balance out all the Western fiction that makes sex, the longing for it, and its aftermath invisible. I've never understood why so many writers willingly extirpate sex from their narratives. How can we understand any character in a play, short story, or novel without knowing something about their pleasure-seeking behavior? Jane Austen should always be read alongside contemporary explicit depictions of sex. The understanding of one can only enrich our understanding of the other. But it's long overdue for literature to meld with pornography, because what we write not only depicts how things were or are, it also opens up doorways to the future, to other ways of both being with each other and being in the world.

I believe that many of the painful accompaniments of sexuality that make it a risky endeavor are the result of the deep split between our "real lives" and the out-of-control (and out-of-character) things we do when under the influence of lust. My aim is not to eliminate the bliss of being in free fall,

in thrall to touch, yielding fearlessly to the deepest prompting of our clits, vaginas, cocks, assholes, nipples, mouths, skin, and hands and heedless of the consequences. We need ecstasy. It is a healing experience. But when the glory of being out-of-control is punished by damage to our reputations, health, or relationships, we become less likely to seek it out. Rather than acting as barriers to one another in the quest for the freedom of transcendence, or as enforcers of the penalties dictated by the monotheistic People of the Book, we could become facilitators, safety nets, caretakers of one another's quests for altered states. The body is not the enemy of the spirit. It is a gate into that realm, a fast horse that will take us there if we know how to ride it. I envision a culture in which we make sex and the other intense physical sensations that can propel us into elation as safe as possible by coming together to create containers that make it easier for people to enter these states while protecting them as much as possible from anything that would taint, disrupt, or cut short the headlong rush of inspiration and joy. This is the vocation of a new sort of priest, a servant of the sacred but no slave to religion, and there are already many people both training for this and training others in the discipline of helping people on and off the trampoline of intoxication.

This path, and the path of the writer of literotica, to use Ian Philips's phrase, requires keeping a fearless open mind about what at first may appear to be alien or absurd. One of the things I love most about describing passion is the chance to imagine or empathize with how it affects people who are very different from myself. There was such a need for sexy lesbian entertainment that I put most of my energy into this kind of work. But I live in the whole world, not a gay ghetto, and I wanted to get inside the heads of straight men, straight women, gay men, people who were violent, people who were victimized, people who lived in different worlds. It really pleases me when I hear from heterosexual readers or genetic gay men who have responded to my stories that were about people like them. I also like what happens when sexual minorities begin

to read one another's scripts for reaching orgasm. We all have enough in common to motivate us, hopefully, to be kind to one another, and enough differences to keep us seeming exotic and attractive.

Most subcultures rely on staying underground to survive. We often want to keep our secrets because we are afraid that other people will distort or misuse the very personal experiences that make our lives meaningful and happy. Any work that celebrates a stigmatized way of being in the world cuts two ways. It is both celebratory and revealing, sometimes dangerously so. I've often been asked how I feel about straight men reading my lesbian porn, and that would be hard to answer without taking it case-by-case. I've only gotten one letter from a straight guy who was so utterly clueless that he interpreted my work to mean women like abuse. I'm pretty sure he held that opinion before he ever ran into my byline. Gay culture is no longer the secret property of the "friends of Dorothy." It's out there for anyone to scrutinize. Many straight men don't like lesbian porn written by and for lesbians. Why should they? There's no role for them in those scenarios. On the other hand, just as there are dykes who love boys-only videos, there are some heterosexuals who like to go someplace else when they are fantasizing. *We have straight allies.* There are people who are not gay who like us and enjoy participating in certain aspects of our lives. Heterosexual men also read lesbian-identified porn to educate themselves about female sexuality. If just one straight girl got a decent bit of head because her boyfriend read one of my books, I'm happy. I think that if we keep quiet about our fetishes and rituals, we make ourselves seem less substantial or real, even to each other. Whatever safety we might be able to buy by eschewing representation of our excitement or orgasms isn't worth the damage it does by rendering us mute and blind.

Oddly enough, a lot of the smut I write isn't necessarily intended to stimulate a mad bout of jilling or jacking off. I like to use the cover of eroticism to entice the reader and make

them emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to new ideas or discomfiting information. I hold out the reward of dirty talking in exchange for the reader's stretching their conceptual muscles. People are reluctant to think about many of the issues surrounding sex and gender. Or there's a knee-jerk reaction that reflects what "everybody knows" to be true. Some of the topics I've chosen to tackle this way are barebacking, relapse from safer-sex precautions, AIDS and lesbians, rape, drug laws, queer youth, police brutality, domestic violence, censorship, addiction, racism, and class differences. The bittersweet presence of sex in these narratives hopefully motivates the reader to hold on to the ambiguity or conflict that is often more accurate or truthful than coming down on one side of an issue or the other. The lesson to think, question, and humanize rather than blame, judge, or jump to conclusions lingers far longer than it would have after a lecture.

Most of the political or ethical criticism in my work is aimed at the larger society, because that is the locus of the hatred and discrimination we live with every day. As sexual-minority communities become larger and stronger, I think it's important to also question the mores or policies that they develop to socialize new members, regulate the conduct of insiders, and handle relationships with outsiders. This is pretty hard to do, since oppressed minorities already take a lot of grief. But very few people become saints just because they are persecuted. I'm uncomfortable with anything that's chiseled into stone and handed down from the mountaintop by a superior being. I want to live in a world where women are taken seriously, pleasure is not stigmatized, there's good sex education and equal access to healthcare, and my people are valued instead of being persecuted. A lot of that is beyond my control, not in the power of anyone who owns a leather jacket to give or take away. But we can also be pretty nasty to one another, in our marginalized subcultures, and I like to remind fellow outlaws that we are accountable for this bad behavior. I would like to live in a world in which everyone who's a minority would not

be looking for somebody who is further down in the hierarchy so that they can stomp on their head.

In an odd way, the nonfiction that I write facilitates the sexually explicit fiction. As I've said earlier in this piece, part of my task as an activist and artist has been to create and expand a community that would appreciate me as a tribal story teller. One of the things that makes mass-market pulp pornography offensive is the social context that it assumes—one of male dominance, female subjugation, and hierarchies of race and class that add the humiliation of being sexually objectified to the odious experience of being denied equality. Since the late '70s, new forms of seductive speech have evolved, keeping pace with subcultures that needed this subversive depiction of pleasures, bodies, and genders. A story like "The Birthday Party" can't stand entirely on its own. For it to be fully understood, the reader has to be cognizant of sexual minorities within which gay men and lesbians were interacting erotically with one another, playing with the meanings of power and pain, maleness and femaleness.

Without all those layers of meaning that are imparted by the people it was written for and about, it wouldn't be too hard to see it as a rationalization for treating women badly because they are inherently masochistic and formed by nature to sexually service men. I hope I don't need to say that this was not my point at all. This story, which has been given a horrified thumbs-down by more Customs officers than you can point a pistol at, is actually a romance. We all know the pain of unrequited love, holes that ache to be filled by someone we can never have, an erection that leaps in vain toward someone who will never notice or welcome it. But in "The Surprise Story," two sorts of people whose identities require them to have no erotic commerce with one another crash through those fences and collide with earth-shuddering force. When a dyke and a fag want each other in the worst possible way, what is it but a reenactment of the Montagues and the Capulets? I always thought Juliet should have tied Romeo to her bed, didn't you?

This is the reason why we have a generation of queer intellectuals who also write porn. Carol Queen, Tristan Taormino, Dorothy Allison, Jewelle Gomez, Ian Philips, Kirk Read, Mike Ford, M. Christian, and a host of other talented and brainy pervy authors are making social change happen under the sheets and on the streets. The patriarchs of ancient Athens are rolling in their graves, as well they should. There is no difference now between prostitutes and pundits, pornographers and political orators. The derisive injunction “Stop thinking with your little head” has always puzzled me, because in my experience, when the big head listens to the little head, and vice versa, you not only have more interesting sex, you have bigger and better ideas about social change. The dedication that goes into building a better vibrator can also build a better world. The intelligentsia of smut and queer liberation are indebted to their equally thoughtful and perverse audience. We’re all in this together, so pass the lube and plan your costume for the next demo.

This is why my essays and short stories are founded on respect for my readers. They often challenge me to try something new, and I trust them to keep up with me in turn. This often annoys editors, who tell me I should cut all the “big words.” I refuse. You can get a dictionary for a dollar in a used book store. Furthermore, I assume that most people can tell the difference between a book of fantasy and a how-to manual. I can empathize with the motives of writers who want their fiction to depict a real-life version of S/M that sticks to all the rules that real players use to make transgression possible. But when I am confronted with such scenarios, I am quickly bored, and can only revive my interest by trying to imagine what forbidden thoughts lurk below the surface of these well-intentioned, leathered-up but palatable representatives of our tribe. Where could the relationship or the action go that would surprise the hell out of the reader and these model perverts? The most appropriate realm for genuine danger is between the pages of a book. This presupposes a certain level

of intelligence and maturity that censors can't believe the average person possesses. (Protection is not the same thing as respect.) Even though I write about pain and suffering (which are two different things), I hope my work is infused with a sense of compassion as well. Sadomasochists are able to express love for aspects of their partners' being that are usually objects of repulsion or scorn. We represent the capacity to seize hope, love, and dignity under adverse circumstances. By celebrating what is beautiful and righteous about forbidden forms of intimacy, I try to provide comfort as well as a sense of connection to others, both mortal and divine. There's so much loneliness, depression, fear, and loss in the world. This is the spiritual dimension of sex writing for me: to create fellowship and community so that we can take care of one another, to praise the material or physical manifestations of our creator, and to delineate the value of tragedy as well as ecstasy.

I have lost so many of the people with whom I began this journey of sexual exploration—lost them to AIDS, drugs, car crashes, murder, suicide, old age, cancer. I continue to write about topics they would find amusing, because I have been left behind to bear witness. Every controversy I foment, every pair of knickers I tie in a knot, are my memorial to the beloved dead. The project of ending sexual repression and hatred of people who are bisexual, homosexual, or transgendered is still necessary. If I cannot heal the grief I feel, I can at least make it a little lighter by making myself useful.

I hope what follows in this section—pieces about scarification, the edge play of Ron Athey's performance art, stewardship of our history, rough sex, cybersex, the psychological aspects of bondage, and my take on masculinity—will be useful to you as well.

Shiny Sharp Things

[1996]

A Cautionary Tale

“What are these?” the doctor asked, tracing the thick white lines that ran over my shoulders. His question took me aback because doctors are usually so stunned by the tattoo on my back (a Japanese drawing of a woman writhing on a beach, enjoying the sexual attentions of giant octopi) that they don’t even notice my scars. It took a great effort to resist the impulse to rip his arm out of its socket and beat him over the head with it. I hate being touched by doctors. He was the mean old fart my HMO had selected as my “primary healthcare provider,” and the only reason I had forced myself to go to his office was a vicious case of the flu.

For a split second, I seriously considered telling him the truth: I captured the sexual attention of a lioness, and got both of my shoulders ripped open by her claws in the process of enjoying one of the most vicious and satisfying fucks of my life. These scars are the mark of Sekhmet. I have given the emissary of the goddess my ass, and lived to tell the tale.

Then I felt the anger thick in my throat and my fists, and I knew there was no way I was going to share such an important part of my life with this pinch-faced totalitarian heterosexual quack who was clenching his hemorrhoid-infested asshole with rage over the places my body had been. “That’s really none of your business,” I replied. “It has nothing to do with having the flu.”

He gave me one of those looks that I have gotten a thousand times from straight men. It said, "You are a dirty, twisted, disgusting, perverted queer. You are sick. You don't deserve to live, and if it was up to me, you wouldn't be alive."

And people wonder why dykes are man-haters. It's a simple matter of self-preservation. I don't think I received even a cursory examination from him, just a scribbled prescription for some antibiotics. He gave it to me at arm's length, obviously expecting me to be chased out of his office by his dank disapproval. I decided to stay and harass him a little. "My throat really hurts," I said. I sat on the examination table, took off my gown, and refused to put my shirt back on. He could not take his eyes off me. The pornographic static in his mind was almost audible.

"Well, I'm not giving *you* any pain medication," he snapped, staring at my scars, my tattoos, my breasts.

"I don't want any pain medication," I said, "but I would like some cough syrup. Something with an expectorant."

"Buy something over the counter," he said.

On the way out, I managed (without expectorant) to spit in all four corners of the waiting room. At the threshold, I shook the dust from his office from my feet. On Monday, I called the HMO and got a new doctor, an African-American woman. She assumed I had once been the target of a terrible crime and treated me with a great deal of misplaced gentleness and compassion. I'm not sure that that didn't make me feel even worse than the balding white guy with his homophobic hard-on. He at least was accurate in his hatred. We really were enemies. But she was so accustomed to thinking of women as victims that it did not occur to her that my scars might be something more like warrior marks than forensic evidence of domestic violence.

I am telling you this story because it is one of the things that you might think about before you pick up a knife. When you cut your own skin or somebody else's, there is no way for you to know if the mark you make will disappear in six months and

fade into the background (only to be resurrected by a flogger, so that its red lines glow once more against a bruised back) or will live as a constantly visible scar. Inevitably, people will see that mark who might not like it: doctors, lawyers, cops, your family, psychiatrists, a vanilla lover, the driver of the car in the next lane, a grocery store clerk, hot tubbers and swimmers, the people in your AA meeting.

A scar can be a beautiful gift, a permanent mark that releases negative energy and permanently changes someone's relationship to their body for the better. It can also be a source of continual aggravation, embarrassment, and resentment. And it binds the two of you together, as long as it lives, because there is no way that somebody can look at a scar without thinking of the person who made it. It is not pleasant to know that someone is out there who feels a few seconds of hatred for you every time they pass a mirror. Once made, a cut cannot be undone. Slice wisely, or not at all.

Like many of the extreme activities that are a part of my sexuality, cutting is difficult to explain to outsiders. Sometimes it's even hard to rationalize to other sadomasochists. I have become reluctant to give workshops on cutting technique because I am not convinced that I can tell other women what they really need to know about blades and their scarlet tracks. Yes, it is important to know where you can cut and where you cannot; how to make a pattern; how to estimate the longevity of your work; how to give it the best chance to heal cleanly. But I am not sure I can pass on the deeper part of it, the part that is spiritual and psychological. This article is a baby step in that direction.

“That Lesbian Thing”

In San Francisco's leather community, cutting is so identified with women that a gay man I know who likes playing with blades frequently has other men dismiss his blood fetish as “that lesbian thing.” While I generally resent worldviews that divide things up according to gender, it

does seem as if sharp objects and blood have very different meanings for men and women.

Bleeding is something that I have in common with most other women. Not all women, but some of us, share both an instinctive understanding of its significance and a love for the sensation of skin parting, blood flowing, the way it smells when you put your face in it and the odd itching, puckering sensation of it drying on our hands and cheeks. Talking about this around men makes me wary. Not because it will detract from the power of the ritual—men don't have the ability to disrupt the magic that women do with each other. No, I am reluctant to talk about or do blood sports with men because I don't think they get it. Blood doesn't mean the same thing to a man that it means to me. We might share the same fears that all human beings have of being wounded, losing the fuel that keeps our hearts pumping. But I also see blood as food and a blessing. Because I bleed once a month and I don't die, I know that even when I do die, it won't be the end of me. I will come back here, in a different form, or go someplace else to do another kind of work. And I do not have the same ambivalence that men have about being entombed/enwombed. I am clear in my intention, when I fuck another woman, to get as much of myself back into her body as I possibly can.

But, for reasons I don't really understand, it seems to be part of my path in life to talk to and about men. I have been placed in situations of unusual intimacy with men who love other men, and I have learned things from those encounters that women were not doing or saying to each other, at least not at that point in time. Men have come to me for advice or commentary upon their lives, and sometimes listened to what I have to say. I am always leery of being used or misunderstood by men, because even the most humble, sensitive, woman-loving man on the planet still contains an unbelievable amount of arrogance, privilege, and potential harm for women. Despite that, it seems to be my spiritual and sexual vocation to be a dyke who has allies who are not dykes. So I have decided

to write some of this down, despite the fact that I am trying to describe experiences that we don't have a vocabulary to express, despite the fact that I am not sure these disclosures will be comprehensible to other people, let alone have value for them. It is private material that I hardly ever examine even with fellow vampires. We watch that scene in *Dune* where the Baron Harkonnen loses his heart plug, and we rub ourselves, goose bumps all over like junkies who have just fixed, but we hardly ever talk about it.

In the realm of magic, blood is the most powerful product of the human body. It is a potent symbol of both life and death, healing and pain. When people bleed, they let things go, but blood is also a binding substance, a pledge as well as a purge. It seals oaths and cements connections between people. Lady Macbeth was right: Once you get somebody's blood on your hands, you can't wash it off again. The person who holds the blade and cuts someone else is also being marked, perhaps even more deeply and permanently than the one who bleeds. Obviously, the person who is being carved has to feel an immense amount of trust for the hand that cradles the blade. But the cutter must also trust. You are saying to the person you decorate, "I trust your constancy. I trust that you have told me the truth, and this is something you really want, not just for your life today, but for the person you will be in ten years, twenty, thirty. I trust that you will wear this with pride and affection, and never cloud my memory with shame or anger because I was the one who gave you these scars to wear."

That is a lot to ask of anyone, that much loyalty and foreknowledge.

Caveat Amazonem

It wouldn't be possible to do ritual cutting without a tool or weapon that holds a sharp edge. Men have a culturally granted prerogative to own and use weapons and tools. A woman who owns weapons, wears them, and uses them responsibly is a huge challenge to heteropatriarchy. I have a rage to be, to

know, to do. So I have lots of tools and weapons. If you asked me to give up any of these things, I would be hard-pressed to decide what I could part with. But I have to admit, as much as it would hurt me, that I would let somebody take away my sewing machine and even my electric drill before I would let somebody take away my Walther PPKS or the thirteen knives that share their souls with me.

This is not hyperbole. My knives are not inanimate objects. In "primitive" societies, metalsmiths are shamans, magicians, and priests. Think about how steel is made. You start with something that is taken from a secret place deep in the body of our mother. The knife is made from the same clay that forms our flesh. When the ore is smelted, it isn't simply purified, it is infused with the fire of life. When a piece of metal is poured into a mold, folded over and hammered, or simply honed, it is awakened. It sings, and if you hold a knife up to your ear, you will hear the music in it, a constant high note of warning. I think it is the note at the heart of the world. A good knife will be as loyal to you as a well-trained soldier is to a superior officer. It will warn you when you are in trouble, and it will not desert you to serve another. But to win this loyalty, you have to oil, sharpen, admire, and use a knife. You can't let it get dirty or lonely. Magical objects that are neglected go bad faster than dogs kept locked in the basement. I will occasionally let other people look at my knives, but I prefer to keep handling by other people down to a minimum. I expect my knives to be monogamous.

This devotion to edged weapons seems more like a genetic characteristic to me than my sexual orientation. As a child, I constantly pestered my parents to give me a pocketknife. Until they gave in and let me have a knife, I sharpened sticks on the sidewalk and carried those around with me. I just never felt right unless I had a sharp object on my person at all times. Some of the biggest fights I went through as a child and a teenager were about protecting my right to own and carry a weapon. I heard the same things over and over again: "That's

not ladylike,” “Nice little girls shouldn’t carry dangerous things like that around,” “Stop acting like a boy.”

Amazons had bows and arrows and swords and knives. They were in control of their own lives. They had honor. They had land and horses, and protected their own nations. Today, women are dispersed among the nations of men. But some of us retain a tribal identity. We group together because we have an instinctive awareness that community equals territory. Until you have common ground you can stand on, occupy, and defend, you have no space to create a culture or a private life that is consistent with your own needs. Whether it’s a dyke bar, a lesbian conference, a play party, or a contingent marching in a Gay Pride event, S/M dykes create territory as a part of creating our community. And we are able to do that in part because we are physically willing and able to rebuff intruders and protect each other.

Some women will be frightened to hear me say this. They don’t want to have realistic conversations about violence. But we have to, especially if we are feminists, because social control is always based upon a threat that if you don’t do what the oppressor wants you to do, he will rape, maim, or kill you. Violence is society’s ace in the hole. While I think it’s good and important for women who have been victimized to speak out and make others confront the unpleasant fact that we are treated with violence, I don’t think it’s enough. The rapists and child abusers, batterers and queer bashers don’t care if we testify and show the world our bruises, broken bones, and dead bodies. They want us that way, hurt or terminated. Take Back the Night marches and rape crisis lines are very important, but they will not put a stop to the violence. As women speak out about physical abuse, some men will become less violent because they cannot bear to take part in something that is so dehumanizing and cruel. But other men will not stop until they have to stop. And that means women have to learn how to defend themselves and effectively repel physical aggression.

Frankly, I think there’s a pretty cheap and quick way to stop

rape, domestic violence, and child abuse. Take the guns away from men, take the knives and Mace and crossbows away from men, and give them to women. That's just about the only kind of gun control that I am willing to support. Of course, many women are afraid to talk this talk, let alone walk this walk. Men know a lot more about violence than we do. Many of us are afraid that if we engage in physical defense, let alone retaliation, men will escalate their violence and make our lives even more terrifying. But I don't think we really have a choice. Patriarchal power is at a low point right now, but male dominance isn't offering to go gently into that good night. Every woman should decide if she wants to die on her feet or live on her knees.

There's a lot of mythology about violence. Most people's images of fighting and death come from movies and television. Campaigns against violence in the media make me roll my eyes because I don't think there's enough *realistic* violence on the big and little screens. If people knew what real stab wounds or gunshot wounds looked like, if they saw the crude and unpredictable things that happen during real brawls and riots, I believe violence would lose some of its fascination. In the real world, when human beings assault or try to kill one another, it's not choreographed. Nobody falls beautifully. It's ugly and stupid. It's messy and it smells bad.

So when I suggest that it might be productive for women to consider a warrior path, I also want to urge us to avoid simplistic definitions of what a warrior is or how a warrior is supposed to behave. I don't like to fight. I'm not particularly good at it. It's something I will do only if I am trapped and have no choice. The first duty of a warrior is to win or, if you can't win, survive to fight another day. Use your intelligence and all of your skills to avoid confrontation. That takes at least as much courage as just punching somebody in the nose. If I have any psychic ability, I sincerely hope it will help me to spot trouble coming at me a mile away so that I can arrange to be someplace else when the shit hits the fan. If weapons have to

come out, on some level, the contest has been lost already. As warriors, we have to pick our targets carefully, if only to avoid getting sent to jail. Too many dykes think that being a warrior means fighting with other women. After all, we are a lot closer to each other and easier to tangle with than our real enemies. We also should not have unreasonably high expectations of ourselves. When woman-haters come after us, they come in groups, because they are too damned scared and threatened to make it a fair fight. Physical combat doesn't prove who is right or wrong, and it doesn't necessarily even prove who is stronger or faster. Dumb luck is also a big factor.

I'm raising all these issues about violence because you should think about this stuff before you wear a knife in public. Responses will vary enormously. Some people won't notice, most people will notice and avoid you, but a few assholes will take it as a challenge. Also be aware of local and state ordinances. If a cop stops you and doesn't like your hardware, you will have very few options. Most of the time, they will simply take your blade away and add it to their own collection. But if a cop (of any gender) wants to be a real prick, you can find yourself busted on misdemeanor or felony weapon-possession charges, and that's an enormous hassle. I am not telling you that you have to obey the law. But before you become an outlaw, understand what the potential consequences are, and be sure you are able to deal with them. Also know what you can and can't get away with. Some people are able to walk down the sidewalk with sabers at their sides, and nobody turns a hair. Other people get popped if they have a pair of nail scissors in their purse.

The risk is worth it to me because the energy that comes from a knife on my belt makes me serene and complete. My knives are extensions of my fingers, my love and anger. They are works of art. They are serious and graceful, useful and yet also a luxury. When I polish, oil, sharpen a blade, I calm my troubled soul. When I put a knife on my belt, I feel centered and able to walk out into the world into enemy territory. When another woman wants to dance beneath me and trusts me to

use a sharp edge to titillate her, I feel absolutely loved and safe. I know I can trust myself even when I have a knife in my hand, to tell the difference between whom I love and whom I hate, to know how much pressure to apply, what the difference is between removing a few dead skin cells and raising gooseflesh or bringing blood up to the air.

A famous hippie mistress named White Feather used to begin her classes on whipping by reminding the audience that cat-o'-nine-tails with heavy barbs or lead weights on the ends were once used in executions. "This is a weapon," she would say, holding up the sensuous, S/M version of that deadly "toy." "Respect it. If you can't trust yourself with a weapon, you can't trust yourself to whip somebody."

That is doubly, triply true of sharp, shiny things. If your hand shakes, if your vision fogs, if your purpose falters, put it down. Let it rest until another time when you have more clarity. Carpenters say, in reference to wood, "Measure twice, cut once." If your subject is living and breathing, it behooves you to measure three or four or a hundred times. Whatever it takes to make sure it's right.

Suggestions for a Cutting Ritual

Like any act, drawing blood can have many different meanings. Before you decide where or what you will cut, it's important to clarify both parties' intentions. Is the purpose to ornament and decorate the body? Purge some traumatic experience? Sever a connection that is no longer wanted? Call a new experience into the person's life? Reconnect with her ethnic heritage? Cement a bond between her and someone else, mortal or divine? Offer an apology or a sacrifice? Commemorate an important event?

This discussion will often create ideas for the appropriate pattern for the cutting and also the placement. If the person doing the cutting is an artist, of course they can design something freehand. Not having a talent for drawing, I rely on tracing designs that exist already, sometimes altering them

to make them unique for the person who wants the cutting. I have several books of artwork from different cultures, Celtic, Egyptian, Meso-American, Polynesian, and so on. I also have books of symbols, animals, and mythological creatures. When someone comes to me for a cutting, I ask them about their ethnic heritage and what sort of artwork seems most aesthetically pleasing to them. I have them leaf through the books.

One of the things I am especially fond of doing is carving a protective animal figure on someone's back. I like the idea that the woman will now have a strong totem figure looking out for her and protecting her. The back is a good area for cutting since it is large and flat. I've also done cuttings on the thigh and upper arm. I avoid cutting on the stomach, around joints, or anywhere there are visible blood vessels. Because I am not comfortable with giving someone a permanent mark that they will be unable to hide, I am not willing to scar someone's hands, feet, or face. Light cutting on the chest can be safe on men, but women's breasts tend to pull the design while it is healing, making some lines much broader than they were in the original drawing.

As I've said earlier in this piece, blood tends to seal things. If you cut somebody, don't be surprised if they remain in your life for a really long time. If you cut your initials or even a symbol that is heavily identified with you into someone's body, you practically guarantee that you will always be linked to that person in some fashion. Because it is so hard to know what the future will bring, at this point in my life I am not willing to mark someone as my property with a cutting. I might celebrate a contract or some other S/M relationship by giving the bottom a cutting, but it has to be a symbol they have selected that has a lot of meaning for them, and it should be something they will be happy to see even if we no longer have a contract or a relationship.

If somebody pays you for a cutting, the blood does not bind. This is a commercial transaction, so no bond is forged. The person who pays for a cutting is not making any sort of

commitment to you. That doesn't mean that other kinds of magic can't be done with a professional cutter. But, like anything, it has to be consensual and it should be negotiated in advance. Some of the people who do cuttings on a commercial basis will not know what the hell you are talking about if you say you want to get a cutting to seal up a hole in your energy field or make a vow to your tutelary deity.

By the way, if you have made a mistake, and you are blood-bonded to someone who really should not be that connected to you, there are ways to sever or weaken that tie. I suggest that you first do a fearless and searching moral inventory of your conduct in that relationship, and freely admit to any wrongdoing. If possible, make amends for those errors. It's important to make amends only if you can do it in a way that will not cause the other person more harm. And do not expect to be forgiven or receive any gratitude. This is something you do just because it's right, to make peace with yourself. Then set up a ceremony in which you can cut a cord that symbolizes the connection you need to sever. You can also draw some of your own blood to wash away the original blood bond.

Now you know why I advise you to avoid getting into this situation in the first place. It's a bitch to get out of. So let's assume from now on that you are doing a cutting for all the right reasons, and the relationship between cutter and cuttee will be ever-harmonious. I'm offering a lot of warnings and cautions because I want to encourage responsible play. But most of the time, there are no ill effects from a cutting. It's a positive experience. The person who carves the design has fun making it, the person who gets the design loves it and has a good time showing it off later. Everybody feels brave and happy.

You can increase your chances for a positive outcome by picking the right image. The person who is going to be cut will usually recognize the proper picture. It will just feel right to her, as if it has always been a part of her body. Once the design is selected, I will trace it using a tattoo pencil. Sometimes it's necessary to put the design on a photocopier first to enlarge

or shrink it. Tracing can be done on a light box or by taping the design and a piece of tracing paper to a window. I do this when I am alert and my hands are steady. A botched pattern guarantees a sloppy cutting. After the pattern is made, the person who is going to wear it gets to look at it and approve it. If they want any changes, this is the time to do it.

The person who is going to be cut should be placed in a comfortable position in a quiet, safe, clean place. Gather all of your paraphernalia together so that you won't need to interrupt the process or leave them alone. You'll need your design, some presterilized scalpels, Mennen speedstick deodorant, rubbing alcohol pads, clean towels, and latex gloves (be sure they fit nice and snug), a sharps container for discarding bloodied objects, and a small garbage can with a clean plastic liner. Sometimes it's helpful to have a third person there so that the person being cut can squeeze her hand if she has trouble dealing with the pain. It's also nice to have a witness for significant events.

We might get started by constructing an altar with objects that have powerful significance to us. I am not much of a one for drawing circles since I believe the whole world is a sacred place. But I will probably ring a bell, to indicate that the ritual has begun, and say our names and explain what we have come here to do. I will also invite any friendly energies or beings within range of my call to join us. If a specific goddess is involved in this person's life, invoke her. Explain what it is that you are trying to accomplish. Don't feel that you have to read somebody else's spell for this to work. IMHO, goddesses love poetry, but they also appreciate plain talk since there is so very little of it in the world.

You have to take precautions during a cutting to avoid transmitting any blood-borne diseases like hepatitis or AIDS. The cutter should put on rubber gloves. These will protect any breaks in your skin from the other person's blood. A scalpel will easily cut through gloves, so be sure you have gained enough comfort in them that you are not clumsy. Make sure the gloves

fit snugly, but not so tight they cut off your circulation.

I clean the area where I am going to cut with alcohol pads (or, if the person is allergic to rubbing alcohol, with some other disinfectant). We wait for the alcohol or whatever to dry since wet skin will mess up the pattern. Then the area gets coated with a layer of Mennen speedstick deodorant. The pattern is laid down, and smoothed out. This is a tricky bit of timing since you can wind up with a pattern that is too faint (if you don't leave it down long enough) or too blurry (if you leave it down too long). Lift a corner to check for reproduction quality before removing the whole pattern, because it's almost impossible to line it up accurately for a second shot. If you don't like the way it looks, erase the guiding marks with rubbing alcohol, make another pattern, and try again.

Remember: You should always assume that any cut is a permanent mark. Take the time and trouble to make it look decent. If the cutter or cuttee is so impatient that you can't be bothered to make a second pattern, or a third, your sense of purpose here is not clear, and you should put off the cutting until you have better focus.

The person who is getting cut needs to be as steady as the person creating the design. Like the tattoo-parlor sign says, "If you move, it's your tattoo." One of the benefits a cuttee can take from this ritual is the memory of being able to go through an ordeal of pain and fear in a calm, accepting state of being. The person doing the cutting can help the one who is being decorated by giving them advance notice of what's happening. I will touch them with my hand and say, "I am going to gently touch the scalpel to your skin. Please hold still." I let them take a few deep breaths and tell me when to begin. I tell them where I am going to cut. If it's a long cut, I warn them so that they can pace themselves and absorb the sensation without being startled. Sometimes I will take breaks so that they can gather themselves together and enjoy what is happening. I don't rush a cutting unless someone is very frightened, hates pain, but still wants the cutting a lot. Then I keep the design

simple. We can also do the cutting in more than one session. Beginners should never try to hurry.

It is difficult to describe just how to cut. In the beginning, you must use a light touch. Be aware that it sometimes takes a few seconds for blood to show from a very clean and narrow wound like a scalpel cut. So don't assume just because you don't see blood at once that you haven't broken skin. Spread the skin on either side of the line, and wait to be sure before cutting again with more pressure. I use a No. 11 or No. 15 blade on a disposable, presterilized scalpel. These are surgical instruments that can quite easily cut to the bone. Practice on oranges, pieces of chicken, paper, leather, and your own skin before you cut somebody else. Make sure you can control the direction of the blade. When in doubt, slow down and go lightly. You do not want to penetrate more than the first couple of layers of skin.

Curved lines are tricky. It is also hard to make sure that lines meet exactly in the corners of designs. Think about the effect that gravity will have on your work. Begin cutting from the bottom of the design. If you start at the top, blood flowing down will obscure your pattern. If a cutting is large or elaborate, you may have to periodically take breaks to scrape away some of the blood so that you can see the pattern. If the edge of the scalpel becomes fouled with blood, don't try to clean it. You may cut yourself. Just discard it and open a new one. Use towels under the person to keep blood from marring the floor or furniture. After the cutting, these should be thrown away. Used scalpels should be disposed in a sharps container.

When you are done, clean the cutting with more alcohol or some other disinfectant. Cuttings heal best when they are left in open air. If the area is going to be exposed to the outside world or if it might get dirty or abraded, cover it with a large, clean gauze pad. Wait until the blood has clotted before bandaging the cutting. Then you will have less of a problem with the bandage sticking to the design, and causing some pain when it is removed. Be sure to thank everyone present

and ring a bell or break the circle to officially end the ritual. If the person who was cut feels a little shocky, keep her warm and let her lie down with her feet elevated. A glass of juice or some protein might be a good idea, to get her blood sugar up to normal levels.

Some people worry that a cutting won't be permanent enough. They want to increase its visibility by making the cutting very deep, or by putting tattoo ink into the wounds, or perhaps by covering the area with rubbing alcohol and briefly lighting it on fire. These techniques are all hazardous, and should not be attempted by someone who has not had professional training. Some piercing studios and tattoo parlors are beginning to offer scarification. That's one way to find an experienced cutter. But the best way is to know people in the leather or body-modification community who have cuttings, and ask them to recommend someone. That way you get to see what their work looks like after it heals.

A light cutting made on someone who does not keloid may disappear within a few months. Some people have a tendency to form thicker scar tissue than normal (keloids). This is especially true with folks who are of African or Mediterranean heritage. Someone who keloids will usually know because vaccination scars, surgery, or accidental cuts will have left very visible marks behind. It's possible to use the tendency to keloid to create attractive patterns, but this should not be attempted without some degree of experience. Somebody who scars heavily should be prepared to wear a permanent design.

Cuttings hardly ever become infected if the skin is cleaned beforehand and sterile implements and gloves are used. A slight infection can be treated with topical antibiotic cream. Anything more serious than that needs medical attention, but I have never heard of a decorative cutting that was properly done requiring a doctor's care.

Accidents like jogged elbows sometimes happen, so I feel safer when I do a cutting if I have some sutures or at least some butterfly bandages close at hand. The probability of creating a

wound that is deep enough to need help to close is very small. But it makes me feel safer if I take responsible precautions. Before you do a cutting, both parties should probably talk about whether or not they have health insurance, who their doctor is, and how they would want to handle it if they had an emergency in connection with the cutting.

Despite its dramatic appearance, cutting is considerably less dangerous than getting pregnant or crossing the street, so I don't want to scare anybody off. But taking precautions is a powerful ritual in and of itself. As long as I've had fire extinguishers in my house, I've never had a fire in the kitchen or anywhere else. The presence of a butterfly bandage or a suture may avert the necessity of actually using them.

Spontaneous Cutting

The foregoing is a description of a ritual that takes considerable advance thought and planning. I want to acknowledge the fact that sometimes cutting happens on the spur of the moment. I don't recommend it, especially for novices, but the fact that it's out on the edge does not mean it is inherently unsafe. When I am playing with a heavy masochist and we have had a nice, long scene with intense psychic connection between us, we sometimes arrive at a plateau where I feel completely at peace and full of bliss. These kinds of scenes tend to irritate the people who think "S/M" means "stand and model," because actually they are raucous and rowdy and involve a lot of laughing and cussing.

Outside the dungeon, I spend a lot of time in a defensive state. Being able to feel complete love and self-acceptance is a rare and valuable experience for me. It seems appropriate to commemorate these extraordinary states of freedom and grace by creating a monument. If I know the person I am playing with likes to be cut, I may get out my knife and ask them if they want to bleed. Depending on the nature of our relationship with each other, I may ask them if a particular design is okay, or they may trust me to make something appropriate happen

as a surprise. Once again, animal motifs frequently come to me at these moments, butterflies and snakes especially, both being symbols of rebirth, regeneration, and wisdom.

It's important to remember that a knife weighs more than a scalpel. This can affect the depth of your cuts, so be sure to compensate. Because of its size and shape, a knife blade will not be as precise as a scalpel. You won't be able to get the same delicacy of line or detail. When you break out a new scalpel, you know how sharp it is. Know how sharp your knife is. Most knives cannot be sterilized, but they can be cleaned with rubbing alcohol. This will not, however, kill the viruses that cause hepatitis. You should know that the person you are cutting is healthy before you break her skin, or use a knife that belongs to her and that she has reserved for use on her own body. Clean the blade afterward with rubbing alcohol since that will kill some germs. If you want to make knife play safer, dedicate a single blade to each person you cut. Don't use their knife on anyone else.

Spontaneous cutting in S/M play does not necessarily take the form of a pattern. This is harder to describe since I don't have any fancy talk about aesthetics or totems to create a bridge for someone who has not done this to understand it. Let me start by saying that I never do anything that is not negotiated and consensual. But sometimes negotiation takes three weeks, and sometimes it takes three seconds. Some of the women I play with are tough, intense people. They are not going to go under just because somebody shows up and dangles a pair of handcuffs under their noses. They are wearing a lot of body armor and they are often stuck inside very high defenses. Before they can relax, get in touch with their emotions, and be sexual, they need to have those defenses shattered. They are also cautious creatures with a horror of half-hearted lovemaking. If you are going to have them, you must want them badly enough to go and get them, take them, and convince them that you mean it.

A knife is one way to do that. I say this hoping to the Goddess

that nobody who reads this will make any stupid mistakes as a result of reading these words. Don't think that just because you've sat through a workshop on edge play (or given one), you are qualified to go after somebody with a deadly weapon. The heavier you play, the more careful you have to be. When the risk increases, so does the responsibility—of both top and bottom. Before you pick up any toy, you should think about what kinds of mistakes you could make with it and how you would fix those mistakes. May I point out that you can burn your house down with a plumber's candle, and a broken rope can also mean a broken neck? Even equipment that does not look sinister can be very harmful if it's used improperly.

Personally, I'm not willing to make 100-percent-safety my life's goal. It's impossible to eliminate all risk without eliminating all fun and novelty. You'd have to be crazy to think that an earthquake or a platoon of Marines could not shatter the most rigid and insular, predictable life. I would rather keep myself flexible, alert, open to what's new, always processing as much of the available data as I can, and be prepared to alter my beliefs or my behavior to position myself in the world as advantageously as possible. Sometimes I need a little danger to wake myself up and keep myself in training. Besides, I just don't get turned on to women who are not on some level dangerous, whether that's because of their physical size and strength, their volatile dispositions, or their ferocious intelligence.

So some of my scenes begin with a bare blade against bare skin. And if the other person pushes against me or says, "Fuck you, you won't do it," I cut them. Briefly, lightly, but enough to shock them into a state of vulnerability that will allow us to play. But you have to be prepared to keep going from that point. You have to have a follow-up that matches your beginning in drama and sincerity of purpose.

If I need to tell you to make sure the bottom doesn't take your knife away from you in a scene like this, you deserve to have the tables turned on your silly ass.

Self-Mutilators (Not So) Anonymous

For a few months, I was friendly with a gay man who had finally started consciously doing S/M after years of acting out sadistically in ways that I thought were emotionally unsafe. He had just acquired his first bottom, a rather immature and selfish young man, and was having a lot of trouble adjusting to his demands. Sadists often don't make very good masters, and his "boy" definitely wanted a daddy. Sometimes I feel sorry for men. It can't be pleasant to have a boyfriend who likes to be fisted if you are already having anxiety about the size of your dick. I am used to purchasing penetrative accessories per a new partner's specifications. I know that my dick is (or could be) bigger than anybody else's on the planet if that's what the occasion demands. This guy was unable to have a conversation with me that did not include his reminding me that he had a penis and I did not. He was determined to cling to the symbolic system that made him feel bad about having a little peepee, I guess because men with small cocks are still further up the hierarchy than women. This stupidity tempered my pity. He was fond of putting himself in other double binds as well. For example, he insisted on taking Prozac, even though he was to all appearances even more depressed with that medication in his system than he was without it. And while he bitterly resented the fact that his boyfriend was a militant bottom, he was not about to look for a top for himself or switch roles with him.

One of the things he did when he got frustrated with the dynamics in his relationship was to cut himself. And one day he asked me, "How can I tell the difference between self-mutilation and erotic cutting?" His boyfriend had apparently gotten freaked out because my friend had started cutting himself after an unsatisfactory scene. The word "self-mutilation" had been thrown at this activity, which was sort of like putting out fire with gasoline. The "boy" had a high investment in his hairless and smooth-skinned body and

adamantly refused any activity that would puncture or mar his flawless, youthful surface.

I told my friend that sadists frequently hurt themselves, that I sometime cut myself, and that in my opinion this was normal behavior for us. Sadists can have an erotic response to our own as well as others' pain. We often became sadists because we couldn't find anybody who is trustworthy or severe enough to hurt us. I know that my first and best-loved victim is myself; I am the only real top I will ever have. Whom am I going to find who is any better? And sometimes when I am in a great deal of emotional turmoil or psychic pain, I can use physical pain to mend myself. A physical pain is concrete and unifying. My splintered selves and their warring hearts merge once more, hauled back together by the shocking communal experience of my skin opening and my blood running. I come back into my body and feel enough release or ease to be able to stay with my flesh. As time passes and my body heals, so does my spirit.

I first learned this when I was 17 years old, a very young dyke who thought it was my fault that the woman I loved was unable to love me. I thought it was because I was not strong enough, athletic enough, butch enough, smart enough, beautiful enough, sexually experienced enough. In fact it was because she had been sent to college to get away from a hometown scandal about having an affair with her high school physical education teacher, and she had decided she did not want to be a lesbian. But I could not understand that then. I only knew that the goddess I adored shunned me and avoided me, lied to me and laughed at me. I drank and took speed and acid and smoked dope, as much as I could get my hands on, but I still felt like I was bleeding to death inside.

I wanted to die in my mind, in the thinking part of my body. But the literal heart, arms, legs, head, and cunt of me did not want to die. Caught between agony and stubborn reflexes that kept me breathing, digesting food, waking up, and sleeping, I vented by opening my body up and letting some of the pain go. I used a sharp pin to scratch the skin on the back of my hands.

At the time, I barely felt it. I was numb, couldn't see colors, couldn't taste my food, saw everything in the weird tunnel vision of severe depression. So I bloodied my hands and laughed at the people who asked me what had happened to me. Eventually I started to fall asleep in class, on the bus, in the cafeteria. My body simply switched itself off, so I had to drop out of school and learn how to be a dyke, stay alive, and recover.

For years, I thought this was a dirty secret, evidence that I was a flawed and unstable person. Now I think the people who should be ashamed are the people who would rather have let me kill myself than help me to become a happy adult queer. The experiences I've had in the realm of S/M have taught me that everybody needs to have their own definition of sanity and insanity, and furthermore, insanity is not necessarily a negative state.

In pre-Christian times, people did not sit on a hard wooden bench, half-asleep, and passively wait to have some guy in a black dress shove a cracker into their mouths when they wanted some enlightenment. They were more likely to seek out an individual source of inspiration, via a quest that would require them to put their own bodies and minds on the line and test the limits of their endurance and understanding.

There is a whole other reality beyond our flesh. But in this world, the flesh is our only way to gather information and to experience what is within and outside of ourselves. So we have to use the flesh to get to that other place. These practices have become taboo. The Bishop of Rome will tell you these ancient sacred disciplines are blasphemous, and Pope Freud will tell you they are sick, which renders them every bit as inaccessible. Before you can learn about these things, you have to conquer your fear of burning in hell or getting locked up in a rubber room.

As Galileo whispered when they placed him under house arrest for daring to say the earth moved around the sun, "But it still moves." Bondage, flagellation, blood sports, breath control: These things can have utility beyond their effectiveness

in the realm of pornography and the libido. You don't have to pay any tithing or listen to lectures about transference to get it, either. I'm not saying you have to do S/M from a spiritual perspective to make it healthy or valid. Sex is good in and of itself; it doesn't need to have a higher purpose. I'm just saying that some techniques that are commonly thought of as sexual perversions can also be used to get a mouthful of universal truth that tastes a lot better than the aforementioned wafer.

I am still in the process of figuring some of this out. I can't begin to claim to have all the answers. But I could tell my friend that I had some rules about when I could cut myself and when I could not. These were my personal boundaries for trying to make sure I could have intense experiences when I needed them, and still take good care of myself. It is okay for me to cut myself when I am feeling emotional pain. But that cannot be the only thing I do about my unhappiness. If I need therapy, medication or meditation, argument, nutrition, more sleep, more sex, I have to go get those things. And I cannot take less care with my own body than I would take with somebody else's. I have to take the time to find something, a pattern, that I like, that I want to wear, and copy it and cut it carefully so that when it heals I have something that empowers me to look at rather than random marks of self-hatred. I will not cut myself if I am hungry, angry, lonely, or tired. If I really need to be cut, it can wait until I've had a meal, calmed down, talked to a friend, or gotten some sleep.

I'm not sure any of this was helpful to my friend. In fact, he probably wouldn't have been interested in cutting himself if he had not, on some level, been convinced it was sick behavior. Otherwise, it would have lost its power to intimidate his bottom and keep him at arm's length. As far as I know, he continues to be in a double bind about this behavior. He bolsters a sinister image of being a dangerous top on the verge of losing control, but the price he pays is feeding his own fears about being a bad person. It also reinforces any negative attitudes he might have about his own masochism.

The foregoing probably makes it sound like cutting yourself is a dubious activity that must be hedged about with precautions. But there's a big difference between cutting to relieve my own or someone else's internal distress and letting the blood flow in a joyous mood of lustful celebration. As I write this, I can feel my own self-censor rear its ugly head. Talking about blood as an aphrodisiac is much more forbidden than describing how to do an ornamental carving. But if you, the reader, are with me so far, you probably won't throw this book across the room if I confess that when I see or smell blood, my sex wakes up and wants in. When I fuck someone with her own blood, I come in a state of awe and panic. It's just so pretty, such a poignant reminder of mortality. It makes me cry and shake and understand why I am alive.

Like many other pagans, I draw my own blood in some contexts that have little or nothing to do with sex or emotional healing. My favorite holiday is Samhain, when the veil between the worlds grows thin. I perform rituals to get rid of last year's mistakes and draw the things I need to me in the new year. On this holiday, I mourn for the people I've lost. I draw my own blood to feed my ghosts and give them enough substance to speak to me, if they so choose. I also use my blood to mark sacred objects like a set of runes, to give them part of my essence and consecrate them to my use.

Are You a Good Witch, or Are You a Bad Witch?

I know that many, if not most, of the people who read this will assume that everything I've talked about here is pathological. In a society where women don't even have the right to refuse to have children, it would be too much to expect that everyone would immediately grasp the concept that we should also have the right to alter the way we look, just because we own our own bodies.

There may also be a few silly people who aren't really interested in blood sports who will immediately go out and buy a box of scalpels because they will see this and think I am preaching

cutting as the hot new frontier of the most avant-garde kind of sexual magic. I have a hard time imagining how much of a phony and a poseur you would have to be to get yourself cut if it was nothing more than a fashion statement or an attempt to join the “in” crowd. But if this is you, take my advice: Buy a latex dress instead, or get a tasteful temporary tattoo. You won’t like blood sports. They won’t be good for you.

One of the central “points” of S/M and spirituality is that these things don’t mean anything, they don’t work, they won’t change you or make you important or happy, if you walk into a leather shop or an occult bookstore and buy it off the rack. There’s no salvation in retail, honey. Some things you just got to make yourself from scratch. With S/M and spirituality, what’s important is that you have examined your own conscience and your own soul and decided: This is my path. That doesn’t mean you can’t have some help or some company along the way, but the ultimate responsibility rests with you, along with the task of creating your own glory and meaning and power. It has to be personal to be authentic. Nobody’s selling tickets to Leather Nirvana.

This is just a somewhat awkward attempt by one person to share some uncomfortable truths about how I create transcendence and kinship in my own life. I don’t really care whether you use some of the same methods that I use to connect with other people or channel erotic energy and self-love. But I do know that the rituals of organized religion and the value system of consumer capitalism are hopelessly corrupt and antithetical to life. If you are trying to get out of that box and wake up your inner ears and eyes to the mad secrets of the universe, we’re going in the same direction, with or without scars and weapons.

Robert Graves was probably the first author I encountered who had anything to say about goddess worship that didn’t make it sound like a quaint ancient phenomenon that was as extinct as the dinosaurs. I’m very grateful to him for that, but his attitude toward real women often seems suspect and

sexist to me. If I understand him properly, he seems to be promulgating an image of the goddess as muse and a source of inspiration for poets (who are, of course, male). Rather than striving to be poets themselves, women, Graves seems to believe, should instead make themselves into living avatars of the feminine archetype. A mute and passive goddess who exists only for purposes of contemplation and adoration just doesn't interest me much. And I can't believe She would choose to speak only through the voices of male admirers.

The goddesses who interest me are aggressive as well as beautiful. They are patrons of the martial arts as well as healing, and they are more likely to go hunting than they are to rock the cradle or bless a harvest. Remember, She reveals Herself as lover and destroyer, as mother and murderer. Both grass and wildfire, mule deer and cougar, are Her children, and She has provided a way for all of them to feed themselves, even if it is at one another's peril. She who makes all complete encompasses all polarities, resolves all contradictions. When I feel close to Her I begin to understand that darkness and light are not inimical to one another. The darkness does not extinguish but rather engenders the light. And without each other, light and dark would die of loneliness. To acknowledge pain as pleasure's twin sister and lover is not to pick a left-handed or evil path. We become evil (or stupid, which is the same thing) when we imagine that we can discard whatever we find too complex or unpleasant about Her world and gorge ourselves upon what is easy and soothing.

Blood comes forth to herald new life, as well as to herald the transition into another life that we think of as death. Both of these states are equally holy, equally terrifying, vital, and beyond our control. At the most fundamental level, freedom consists of the willingness to go into situations where some of your blood may be spilled. Did you think you were going to live forever?

The Winking Eye of Ron Athey

[1999]

...an eye: the scaffold's eye.

Solitary, solar, bristling with lashes,

it gazed from the lunette of a guillotine.

—Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*

My attention was drawn to Ron Athey's new show, *The Solar Anus*, by my friend George, who called in a tizzy. "Girl," he said to me, "Miss Ron Athey needs an intervention. She is getting up on stage in a corset, showing people movies of herself getting her buttocks tattooed, and fucking herself with ten-inch platform heels. Somebody needs to take her aside and say, 'Wouldn't you rather just have a nice pair of Manolo Blahnik pumps, dear?'" George is a gay man of a certain age, the scion of an aristocratic and wealthy Southern family. He is a fine person to consult about a recipe for salmon mousse, getting something monogrammed, or picking out a signature scent. But when it comes to anything painted, written, or sung in the last hundred years, his Inner Critic works overtime.

Athey has been dissed by bigger critics. In case you've been in a bomb shelter for the last ten years, he's a performance artist whose shows are based on his boyhood training as a Pentecostal minister, a ten-year stint as a heroin junkie, his grief and rage about being an HIV-positive gay man, and sadomasochistic acts like extreme bondage, flogging, cutting, and piercing. In 1994, a scandal erupted about one of his performance pieces, *4 Scenes*

in a Harsh Life. California Representative Robert Dornan made Athey the whipping boy in his campaign against the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In one of the bits performed at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, dubbed *The Human Printing Press*, black drag artist Darryl Carlton (aka Divinity Fudge) is bent over, his back is cut, and several impressions of the bloody design are made with thick, absorbent paper towels that are then hung on clotheslines. (In other words, the blood does not drip.) Hysterical press coverage made it sound like a terrified audience was being soaked in HIV-infected blood. The fact that Carlton was African American never made it into print, but it's safe to say that the audience was mostly if not entirely white, and having the blood of a black man waving on flags overhead probably pushed every racist button they had.

Athey says, "At that time I had a lot of naïveté about the art world. I never thought of trying to get funding or a grant. I was just happy to be doing the work. And I didn't even understand that art institutions received funding. So the fact that 5 percent or 10 percent of their funding came from the NEA, I could not have imagined would be enough leverage for the right wing to use me as a tool. I would not have been surprised if it had been done on an indecency level, but the fact that it was done on a tax money level was what was really shocking to me. I was in no way in the same league as Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, John Fleck, and Tim Miller. I had never participated in the same way they had in the art world."

Athey acknowledges that this scandal was "pretty much the end of my career in America," and feels fortunate that when the brouhaha erupted, he had already been booked to perform *4 Scenes* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. For the last five years, Athey and his troupe have toured (among other places) England, France, Italy, Spain, Croatia, Mexico, and Brazil. He has tried to resign himself to the fact that his latest long piece, *Deliverance*, which was meant to be a trilogy along with *Martyrs & Saints* and *4 Scenes*, will never be shown in America because the funding simply doesn't exist. "If

Deliverance was done on a \$25,000 budget I would probably still lose money. And after performing in Europe for five years, I'm not willing to spend my own money and compromise and scale it down, do the fifty-cent show for America," he says bitterly.

Fortunately, his work is getting a second look here, largely due to the release of *Hallelujah!*, a documentary by Catherine Gund Saalfeld. Saalfeld is the daughter of Agnes Gund, chairman of the board of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Athey was in San Francisco for the February 1999 debut of the movie, and did a single performance of a new ritual dance, *The Solar Anus*. Although he was due to leave for England the next morning, Athey took the time to chat with me about his life and work, despite his misgivings about the gay press. (*The Advocate* ran a piece called "When Art Gets Scary" about the Walker Art Center debacle, without questioning the wire service version of events. Even after the scandal had subsided somewhat, he says a representative of the magazine told his publicist, "We don't cover Ron Athey.") It didn't hurt to have a personal connection. My partner did one of the duct-tape mummifications for an Athey show in Chicago.

Athey's trilogy is about (among other things) self-destruction, disease, healing, death, and mysticism. The work is a series of harsh tableaux, railing against religious fanaticism, AIDS, medical brutality, and human suffering in general. *The Solar Anus* was inspired by a Georges Bataille essay of the same name, published in 1929. Athey says, "It's about how beautiful this 18-year-old girl's asshole is. It could only be compared to the blinding sun, yet the anus is the night. And that aesthetic seemed to be what my work has been about, anyway. Taking things that are supposed to be secret or hideous or taboo and presenting it like opera." The fact that new therapies are prolonging the lives of some people with AIDS has shaken up Athey's work. Of the new solo piece, he quips, "It's not about the asshole in jeopardy. It's about the asshole in a state of glory."

On February 9, me and my boys took ourselves to 180 Sixth Street, not the nicest part of San Francisco, where a bare-bones

room without chairs or a proper stage would host Athey's latest creation. Somehow it seemed appropriate to have to dodge staggering winos and whispered offers of "rock, anybody want a rock?" to get there. I knew about a dozen of the fifty or so people who showed up—Fakir Musafar, his partner Cleo Dubois, a gaggle of professional piercers who used to work at the Gauntlet before it went belly-up, a sprinkling of writers and musicians. Most of the audience were in their twenties, decorated with goatees, hair extensions, facial piercings, and Gothic black-work tattoos. A T-shirt that said, "I'm not playing with myself, I'm just adjusting my jewelry," made me laugh. One of the gay boys behind me complained to his friends, "Do you have to have a labrette to get somebody to talk to you here?" (For those of you who don't hang out at the Gauntlet or Cold Steel, a labrette is a piercing in the skin between the lower lip and chin.)

I take a perverse sort of pleasure in keeping my own tattoos hidden in a crowd like this. I'm a tribal elder, goddammit, and I am way past the point where I have to roll up my sleeves to prove that I belong. It was pretty cold, and I was feeling some anxiety about Athey putting big things in himself, given the way my own sphincters were puckering to shut out the chill. But eventually the door stayed shut long enough for the room to fill up with the animal steam of our little human herd, and Ron got up on the makeshift stage to announce that the show would start in about five minutes.

The performance began with a video of Athey on all fours, getting a tattoo pattern put on the most sensitive part of his ass, all around the crinkled, slightly reddened central orifice. The punk girl who was applying the design, a solar disk, worked with relentless speed, perhaps in fear that the mouth she tortured would speak, but he never moved. Being hurt just seemed to make him more grounded, more serene. When I saw his asshole relax under the myriad tiny, stinging blows of the tattoo gun, I felt as if the compliant and knowledgeable orifices of all the gay men I tricked with in my twenties had

been restored to me. This was the butch equivalent of snappin' pussy. I was no longer anxious about Athey hurting himself onstage. I was more worried about the entire front row being sucked head-first into a relentless ride through his well-burnished Tunnel of Love. And I thought about pain—how feeling it is an inevitable part of living, but how we rarely get to control when it happens, or how much of it washes over us. A Polynesian tattooing chant performed to help a young man endure the slow application of a full-body tattoo, done with a hammer and soot on a wooden comb, says, "Short the pain, long the ornament." When you have decided why you will hurt, and for what purpose, and for how long, you are no longer a passive victim; you become a hero completing an ordeal.

Once the tattoo gun fell silent, the camera focused on Athey's freshly ornamented, flaring asshole, which began to emit a blaze of light. The light grew until it was as intense as looking into the sun. Everyone in the audience laughed. But I felt as if I were standing on holy ground, looking into the eye of Shiva, who will destroy the world and make it whole again. How many times have I seen amazing things out of the supposedly blind holes in my body? How many times have I been undone and reborn by entering another?

Sometime during the movie, Athey had walked through the audience and stood at the foot of the stage. The slightly chunky body of *Hallelujah!* has been taken to the gym. Athey's torso was slim, his legs were visibly muscular. He wasn't wearing a corset, but the tattoos around his waist, back, and chest gave the impression of containing him, as if he were an exotic flower growing out of a snug malevolent latex vase. He bowed to the blazing corona on the screen, then levered himself up onto the stage with the grace of a gymnast. He put on a pair of black nylons, which were held up with garters just below his knees, making them oddly masculine as well as feminine. Then he put on a pair of glittering matte-black platform shoes with dangerous heels, and strapped black dildos to the back of each shoe. They arched like the necks of predatory birds, or

obscene spurs. Athey took a gold crown, a three-dimensional replica of his solar tattoo, and settled it upon his head. Then he mounted a chair, made out of pipes, with side mirrors, and put his shapely, athletic rump to the audience. All of his movements were slow, feline, and fearless.

He had a cane with a carved dog's head for a handle. (The dog even had a little collar.) He used the cane to slowly extract something from his asshole. It turned out to be a long double strand of pearls. In the light of the video projection, they shone as if they were made out of mercury. There was a little more laughter, but it sounded nervous now. This act was somehow touching and romantic, the trick of a Victorian whore, Athey offering us something that came from a deep and intimate place inside himself. A treasure produced at no slight risk to himself. He was also, on a metaphorical level, making a room full of people watch him shit. As a spectator, what should I choose to focus on, the beauty that is revealed here, or the foul use that was being made of my time and attention? No wonder everyone thought it was safer to fall silent.

He turned, sat, and put a small stainless-steel surgical tray in his lap. It held tiny hooks connected to rubber surgical tubing. Athey pierced his eyebrows and cheeks, then wound the surgical tubing around cleats in the crown to hold the hooks in place. The tension of the lines between hooks and crown dramatically altered the shape of his face. When he was finished, his countenance was transformed into something feral and foreign, a high-cheeked Javanese goddess. The whites of his eyes were emphasized until it seemed he must be in a trance, or his eyes must have turned into crystals. His royalty now secure, he assumed a series of difficult poses in the chair, almost standing on his head, and applied oil to the dildos on the back of his heels. Trembling all over, he endured their assault upon his vulnerable flesh. The penetration was oddly asexual. The waves of shivering made it seem as if he could not bear his exposure, his hunger, and the appetite of the goose-necked beings that plunged into him.

When we had all borne witness to that sacrifice, he righted himself and sprayed his face and body with cooling water, the same way a tattooist will spray an inflamed, punctured section of skin to remove excess ink and prepare it for more laceration. Then he carefully dried himself, especially his ass, like a cat rubbing herself against a familiar hand, being pretty and taking her comfort for granted. Reseated on his throne, he opened a jar, dabbed a large brush in it, and blew a gold cloud of dust into the audience. It spread and settled on our faces like a blessing. Then he anointed his face, until he wore a sparkling, impassive mask. The epiphany complete, Athey the sun god, Orpheus, and bugger dismounted, bowed, and left the stage to faint applause.

I think many of the people there were disappointed. They had come to see a bloody and horrendous spectacle. A friend, with tears in his eyes, commented on how much Athey has had to go through to love his body. I replied that a performance of pleasure is of course more difficult for people to tolerate than a ritual of agony. I added that I thought Athey was this generation's Oscar Wilde—a witty yet baleful artist driven into exile because of revulsion about his sexuality, because the same experiences that fueled his art were (and are) held to be unspeakable in polite society. Like Wilde, Athey raises questions about the nature of indecency. Our society seems not to mind overmuch if queers commit suicide, get murdered by bashers, or die of AIDS. Athey's work is thought to be vile because he does not keep these experiences of violence, self-destruction, and disease private. People with AIDS are expected to hide their fear and mortality. When Athey refuses to contain it on the most literal level, by letting blood escape from his body, it's no wonder homophobes and prudes behave as if they have been infected. They unconsciously recognize that they are partaking of a sacrament of shared forbidden experience. But because they cling to their privilege and refuse to enter into communion with the people who understand in their own bodies what Athey's art is about, they feel unbearably

contaminated rather than understood or confirmed. The rest of us are led into the brambles of remembrance and loss, through grief and rage, and into a more quiet, if more raw, quiescent state.

Athey compares his work to "Greek tragedy.... People have come to bear witness to something real." This is the whole point to performance art. Representation has become a seductive and deadly narcotic. People use streams of images and data that supposedly represent "the real world" to avoid themselves and one another. Under the guise of being entertained or informed, we become more alienated and isolated from each other as well as from the possibility of taking independent action instead of swallowing a stream of predigested pap. There probably was a point in human history when visual arts held up a mirror to our Western souls. (Or did they, given the centuries of Roman Catholic stranglehold on art that produced hundreds of utterly predictable Madonnas with Child, Pietàs, and Saint Sebastians?) Our senses have been cluttered by fake blood on television, special effects explosions in movies, Internet chat-room romance. We are fortunate indeed to have artists who use their bodies to make their point. When you confront such a spectacle, you are no innocent bystander. You are culpable, a co-conspirator. Athey demands that we break through our denial about the vulnerability of the mind and body, see the horror and joy that is the gift of this incarnation. Odd, isn't it, that his bitterest enemies are fundamentalist Christians whose entire religion is based on a blood rite of human sacrifice?

Saving Our Skins: The Leather Archive and Museum

[2000]

The garage of my rented house is full of file cabinets, boxes of documents, and shelves crowded with books and magazines about S/M. More than one lover has grumbled at all the clutter and hinted that if we threw all this tat away (or moved it into a storage locker), there would be room downstairs for a lovely dungeon. But I can't part with any of this material because it represents my history as a political pervert. There are fifteen years of mailings from organizations all over the country, magazines and catalogs for businesses or groups that are no longer in business, posters for leather bars that have closed, letters from dear friends who died a decade ago, and press coverage both vitriolic and supportive.

When I came out into S/M in 1987, the first thing I did was look around for the people who had gone before me, so that they could show me the way. I was sure I could not possibly be the first girl who had ever thought of spanking another girl for fun, but where was the evidence? When I finally met other leatherdykes, we pooled the scraps of information we had been able to find—an early article about “Masochist's Lib” by Terry Kolb; another that actually focused on lesbians and S/M, “Cathexis” by Barbara Lipschutz. We turned each other on to obscure out-of-print paperbacks that described woman-to-woman mistress-and-slave role-playing—Marc Behm's dark historical fantasy *Queen of the Night*, Alec Waugh's satirical *A Spy in the Family*. Even the drawing of Nancy Drew in bondage from

the 1930 edition of *The Mystery of Lilac Inn* made the rounds. When we couldn't find lesbian S/M fiction, we read gay male classics like William Carney's *The Real Thing* and extreme heterosexual S/M fiction like Alexander Trocchi's *Thongs*.

This material had to be scavenged from used bookstores, porn shops, and rare book dealers. It certainly couldn't be found in chain bookstores or the open shelves of the public library. When I started writing about S/M politics and culture, I quickly learned that I had better cultivate and index my own nonfiction sources as well, because the material that I needed to cite wasn't being preserved by the mainstream institutions that we think of as guardians of history. From the beginning of my kinky identity, I have longed for a place like the Kinsey Institute where we could preserve the precious record of our individual and communal lives.

So it was with great glee that I read about the grand opening of the Leather Archives and Museum (LA&M), which has made a down payment on its own building in Chicago. (The archive was actually founded in 1991 by Chuck Renslow, the entrepreneur behind the International Mister Leather contest.) A grand opening ceremony is scheduled for February 17–20, 2000. Since the archive's scope is international, Executive Director Joseph Bean was happy to give *Skin Two* an interview, to spread the word about LA&M's services.

While Bean, 52 and "glad for every day of it," hesitates to describe himself as Old Guard, he's been a player since 1963, and says "I claim the right to at least pass judgment on the Old-Guard claims of others." He's been writing about S/M since 1989, when he penned "The Leathersex Fairy" column for the *San Francisco Sentinel*. Bean held tenure as editor of the flagship gay leatherman's magazine *Drummer* for several years in the late '80s and early '90s, and since then has continued to publish freelance work and edit various kink-oriented publications, including *International Leatherman*.

He says he left publishing in 1997 because "I feared that the LA&M would not survive without someone on site." That

required him to move from San Francisco to Chicago, and now “My job was and is everything from window washing to fund raising, lecturing to filing, etc.”

Although the bulk of Bean’s life has been spent in the gay men’s S/M community, he says he realized early on that “there was a sex-to-sex and orientation-to-orientation problem to be solved. Hets and gays and women had to be able to get along and work side by side if we were ever going to be ‘left alone,’ which was my highest idea at that time of what we could hope for.” This vision of a unified community was initially fueled by meeting Cynthia Slater, a bisexual woman who founded the Society of Janus in San Francisco and brought many different kinds of kinky people together in her political work, before she died of AIDS in 1989.

Bean says that there are several reasons why it’s important for the LA&M to have its own building. First of all, this gives the collection a permanent home. It also may facilitate obtaining funding for various projects. Without the museum, he feels, “We are not yet a mature community.” He hopes LA&M will soon “go from being a beggar or a charity to being a resource and a center for pride.” Without such a resource, Bean fears, we will always be “represented to the world by the not always accurate descriptions provided by whatever kinky person a journalist (or other researcher) happens to find. Newcomers to the scene will be able to get real information about where our institutions came from, what problems have already been solved, what enemies have been avoided or conquered and how.” There will also be “books and articles and television programs that will have been both possible and correct because there was an LA&M to refer to.”

While the LA&M collection initially focused on Chicago and the gay men’s leather scene, Bean says material now comes in regularly from France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy. Eastern Europe and the United Kingdom are not as well represented, nor is Canada, Japan, or Australia. (Bean admits they have only three or four issues of *Skin Two*, and only one

of *Marquis*.) "More European books and magazines would be very welcome," he adds. LA&M is especially seeking material documenting lesbian participation in the BDSM world. There's also a need for more representation of transgendered people who define themselves as power-exchange perverts of one sort or another.

Bean says one of the strongest areas of the collection is the magazine library, which contains more than 325 carded titles, and dozens of other titles in sets too small to be represented properly by card filing. "It's here that we are making the most rapid progress toward really encompassing and representing the leather world," he notes with great satisfaction. Many if not most of these periodicals are not catalogued by any other research facility. They are invaluable as a record of which bars or organizations existed in any given year, what events took place, controversies that rocked the community, legal battles, the names of prominent community members or artists, and lifestyle information like fashion and notions of proper play techniques and etiquette.

LA&M would especially like to receive club materials, with the understanding that confidential items like membership rosters may be withheld or placed under restricted access. Club histories, constitutions and bylaws, legislation, meeting minutes, event notices, newsletters, club colors, and other ephemera are all appropriate donations. Pins and souvenirs from leather/SM/fetish gatherings are valuable additions to the collection. So are photographs, hopefully with names, dates, and places noted so that they can be put in a historical context. The archive already has many boxes of photographs that are unaccompanied by any identifying information. "So we can only say that they show S/M activity in the United States in the mid-to-late 20th century," Bean says sadly. "Journals and diaries can be very sensitive," he explains, "but they are vitally important. It is a matter of policy that these items are *not* put in the general access collection unless we are instructed to do so by the donor."

LA&M has already been accessed by media and researchers, NBC News, *20/20*, and David Wolper Productions. Other television organizations as well as print journalists have used the archive for background information or to fact-check stories. Several scholars have used LA&M to develop papers or doctoral theses, including Rob Bienvenu, who authored *The Development of Sodomasochism as a Cultural Style in the 20th-Century United States*. Doctoral candidate Will Damon is conducting a study of heterosexual men involved in S/M, and has worked with the archive from the inception of his research.

Sadly, LA&M is hampered by some legal considerations when it attempts to carry out its international mission statement. The archive has a traveling exhibit that Bean has been escorting around the country. A Canadian customs official warned Bean that it would be impossible to bring the exhibit, which has no sexually explicit images, across the border into Toronto and Ottawa. There was also a serious threat that the person who accompanied the exhibit would be barred from the country. This official said legal difficulties were as much about promoting nonstandard sexuality as they were about any actual obscenity, even though Canada's laws in that regard are among the toughest in the world. So Bean had to make his trip to Toronto and Ottawa with nothing but a bundle of newsletters. Currently there is a plan to set up a separate leather archive in Canada that can remain permanently in that country.

Bean says that he is "thrilled" when his job allows him to hear community legends like the fact that the Chicago Knight Club spun off from the Second City Motorcycle Club over the price of better beer, or another splinter group that called itself the Satyrs because that epithet was used against them in the original club. "I completely believe in the value of museums. Without a resource to turn to where the history of a given population is properly collected and preserved, the people in the subculture are defined (and inescapably define themselves) by the false and stereotypical characterizations of outsiders."

He realizes that he is in a race against time. "The leather

community as we know it all around the Western world has its roots in the immediate post-World War II era. The men and women responsible for the ideas and forms that were created then—the networks of players and the clubs, the balance of the commercial/professional scene and the sexual-rebel scene, all of it—are old or gone already, their younger partners and friends are no longer young. The vast majority of the artifacts of leather/SM in this country is already lost in garbage cans and landfills, and much of it still is being lost that way. Time is paradoxically both the reason for the existence of the LA&M and the great enemy of its purpose.”

When asked what he would change about the scene, given just one wish, he replied, “I would make every leather man and leather woman in the world develop the habit of dating everything they touch and including the year in the date. That would be a big help. Somewhat more seriously, I would love to see the scene become tolerant and accommodating of its various factions, perhaps even as much as most of us wish the world would be tolerant of us. The great problems in the progress of our community could all be solved if we could spend no energy on resisting and fighting one another, gay and het, male and female, transgendered and bio-original, young and old, goth and traditional.”

For more information about the Leather Archive and Museum, visit the web site www.leatherarchives.org or write to it at 6418 N. Greenview Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60626.

Snips and Snails and Puppy Dog Tails

[2000]

Who, or what, then, is serious?

Discounting that which everyone does, and which is nothing, there are these three routes: Leather and Rough, which are open to all, or nearly all, and the remaining one which is The Real Thing.

A person may, of course, go more than one route. Purists, for instance, are frequently Rough. Indeed, I have seldom encountered one that did not like to make it that way. But they are all like puppies, like bear cubs, like youths at play: they are merely rough. Their principal advantage to us is that we can relax around them, and they are excellent at arranging things.

—William Carney, *The Real Thing*
(New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968, p. 29)

Never confuse sensitivity with kindness.

—Herself

William Carney's novel *The Real Thing*, published in 1968, is a pre-Stonewall peek at a scene for sexual outlaws who would have guffawed at the term "leather community." This one-sided instructional correspondence between a self-schooled, accomplished sadist and his novice nephew is the *Urban Aborigines* of its decade. (That book is an ethnography of the leathermen's community in the late '70s, poetically written up by Geoff Mains, who died shortly after publication of his second book, a novel.) When I happened upon *The Real*

Thing in the late '70s, thanks to the bibliographic fetish of a slightly older masochist, I was relieved to encounter a literate voice of experience that mirrored my own. Carney's narrator has little use for women, although he does offer grudging praise of female stamina and tolerance for pain. But he spoke with a passion and dedication about the antisocial art of erotic domination and torture that I found riveting. In the anonymous narrator's obsession with etiquette, rules, grades, ranks, divisions, and classifications of "the Way," I saw a reflection of my own need to bring a little order or at least some formality into a troubled and chaotic world. I also recognized our mutual need to feel important, despite our real-world status as objects of ridicule, horror, and pathology. It's a classic defense mechanism—turning stigma into superiority, marginalization into elitism.

Thankfully, the public expression of sadomasochism has changed a great deal since 1968. I've tried to turn a couple of younger twisted literati on to Carney's masterpiece, but most of them find it boring or too upsetting to be instructional. The worldview of his hero is that of a genuine outcaste who is more than a bit sociopathic. (The eponymous "real thing" gives new meaning to the phrase "like lambs to the slaughter.") Although this voice is rich with irony and sharp observations about human nature, it's a point of view that is too bleak for most modern "leather people," who cherish a vision of safe, sane, and consensual S/M: a mutually pleasurable power exchange between equals.

Since I am one of the activists who brought sadomasochism a little closer to the light of day and tried to make it more understandable by emphasizing consent, safety, and fantasy role-playing between equals, it's ironic, I think, that today I find so much truth about my sexuality in *The Real Thing*. This is a world where tops and bottoms are not on the same side, where degradation is genuine, the infliction of pain is not prettied up by talk about intense sensation, and the topman pays a heavy emotional price for his royal status. Carney's

leathermen don't care about education or activism. Their realm is hidden, to preclude the need for public relations.

Perverts, even radical perverts, have a hard time hanging on to their own history. But I think it's important to remember that there was a time when a penchant for restraint, pain, or submission could only be gratified by locating an underground whose gates were remote and well-guarded by the Cerberus of cops, newspaper exposés, and Freudian psychoanalysts. There was another option as well, primarily open to men who sought the not-so-loving attentions of other men—cruising for rough sex with straight trade. Even in 1999, you know exactly what I'm talking about, because it's still a staple of pornography—blue-collar workers, soldiers and sailors, cops, bikers, body-builders, cowboys. Any straight guy with a mean attitude, a leather belt, and a burning desire to get his dick sucked and punish the fag who did it will fit the bill, actually. Being rough is a perfect excuse for a straight man to get queer nookie for ten minutes. From Phil Andros to Jack Fritscher and beyond, it's a tried-and-true scenario that makes even smooth-shaved circuit party gym bunnies who don't like S/M clutch their cocks and give it up.

The nearly universal appeal that fantasies about rough trade have held for gay men also speaks to their determination to survive in a homophobic milieu. The pre-Kinsey powers that be said that homosexuality was as rare as it was pernicious; but gay men knew in their hearts and loins just how many ostensibly straight men took their pleasure in subway bathrooms and freeway rest stops. Getting off on straight trade is one way to thumb your nose at gay-haters, by fetishizing them and getting illicit pleasure from them. This makes it difficult to ferret out the meaning of such encounters. From the outside, it may look as if the straight boy is using or abusing his subservient and maybe even self-hating gay victim. But if the cocksucker is savoring every moment of the encounter and suffused with a delight the putative "top" would find repulsive and upsetting to mete out, who exactly is being exploited?

Sex with rough trade—and, by extension, a great deal of casual anonymous vanilla sex—is also a way to insulate oneself from the rejection that gay men routinely mete out to one another, as if any hint of a desire for intimacy with another man or approval from him had to be ruthlessly stamped out. By eroticizing “the Man,” or masculinity in general, one becomes more immune to the rudeness or unavailability of one particular man. Perversely, a straight-appearing sex object may offer more ego insulation than a butch queer, because the script is predetermined. There will be no romantic sequel. Of course the straight man rejects you. He can’t hurt you because you expect nothing else. Besides, he is a fool about the real nature of what has happened, a pawn, a hick who has just been gulled out of his zipper and conned out of his spunk.

Historically, rough sex was part of a cultural matrix that created the possibility of masculinity for gay men. The stereotype of masculine behavior, especially in the sexual realm, is that of aggression, selfishness, and brutality. If you put two “real men” together, what else can you have but rough sex squared, even if one of them is an avowed homosexual? It’s no accident that many physical attributes linked to male secondary sexual characteristics are part of the rhapsodic semiotics of rough sex: beards that rub skin raw, like sandpaper, so that the ephebe experiencing that abrasive contact is remade and shaped into a new being; calluses, especially on the hands, a mark of harsh treatment of the self that foreshadows an expectation that one’s victim will be worked even harder; a penchant for quick penetration devoid of the irksome foreplay that is mandated by the presence of either romance or a woman, and hard, fast fucking, a pace made necessary by the supposed distaste of a “straight” topman for the fag; the physical strength to back up a threat, particularly a threat of rape or ravishment.

But here’s what takes this paradigm beyond the aping of the polarized male/female dyad. Rough sex is an affirmation of butch identity for *both* male partners. You have to be tough enough to dish it out, and tough enough to take it. Thus we

have the Tom of Finland icons whose huge nipples and bubble butts denote them as queers and bottoms, but nonetheless manly men. S/M fiction from the early '60s is full of jibes about "sweater queens," too feminine to handle the butch-on-butch dynamic. Eventually even orifices, which would seem to be inextricably linked to girliness, could aspire to virile status. This hardihood was manifested by an ability to tolerate extreme penetration. The guy whose asshole, in porn at least, swallowed ten-inch poles without lubrication, or stretched enough to accommodate a quart of Crisco and a fist, was "taking it like a man." *Like a real man, baby. Yeah!* (Said in an utterly unself-conscious basso profundo while incongruously lighthearted adult video Muzak clutters up the background.) As Ian Philips has pointed out in his delicious lewd lampoon "Man Oh Man," which appears in his Lambda Literary Award-winning short story collection, *See Dick Deconstruct*, the hybrid of masculinity and open hole is an uneasy one. It seems it must be constantly reinforced with the modifier of man/male/boy. So personal ads abound with *boy* pussy, *man* holes, *male* cunt, etc. Even boots, mustaches, and furry chests must have their precarious homomascularity reinforced with odd-sounding xy specifiers.

It's not surprising that these harsh and convoluted coping mechanisms have been transformed by activism into something more humane and direct. As we teeter on the edge of the millennium, a gay boy who wants to come out into leather will probably take the careful, well-considered route of reading modern authorities like Guy Baldwin or Race Bannon, joining a club, and cruising at leather bars. He will most likely receive his initiation from a master who is literate, considerate, and a long-term subscriber to *Dungeonmaster*. Let me be clear: I would not turn the clock back. I would not willingly return to a time when that boy would be more likely to figure out his sexual needs by falling to his knees in dark alleys, dangerous bars, or dirty strip joints, knowing he had a 50-50 chance of receiving a real beating or losing his life because he wanted to pleasure and serve another man. I don't want to give up the leather shops full

of a thousand expensive and well-made gadgets for seasoning scenes, or turn my back on bookshelves full of a dozen "how-to" manuals on safety and technique for newcomers.

But for me, S/M has always been an inherently risky business. Even if a scene has been tamed and dumbed down to the point where no actual physical risk exists, it still has an emotional and psychological risk. The most dangerous thing that can happen to someone who follows this Way is the acquisition of self-knowledge. A broken nose will heal, but you can't gainsay an erection that points straight at something unspeakable. That sort of insight is hard to erase—especially for a sadist. One of the ways the modern S/M community tries to expiate its collective guilt is by focusing on the well-being and gratification of the bottom. We have not put nearly as much emphasis on making sure tops get what they are looking for in a scene, much less in an S/M relationship. I think that as a group we are still afraid to ask what it is that sadists and their friends and relations are looking for, what makes them tick. Carney is not one bit squeamish about this.

I'm very fond of the concept of choice as the basis for sexual preference. This point of view is unpopular in an era in which every claim for gay rights is based on pseudoscientific sulking about how we can't help being queer; we're just born that way. Thanks, but I don't want to receive my civil rights as a charity fuck bequeathed on me by my genetic superiors. When it comes to sadism, I believe that I have chosen to deploy my talents in this area between the boundaries set by the bottom's consent...and my hunger. If I am kind, considerate, or obliging, it is because that is how my whimsy takes me. There's also a certain amount of self-preservation here. I have no interest in being incarcerated. Genuine violence doesn't interest me much, because it's a simple matter of employing the laws of physics. The use of force does not require much intelligence. Although it can have a certain raw beauty, there is not much sensuality to it. I am a sort of ringmaster of sexualized travail, and I want my circus to have a few more clowns and

trapezes and flaming hoops than the Punch-and-Judy dumb show of simple brutality. Human suffering is so much more tasty when it is dressed up in the victim's need, expiation, and transcendence. It acquires a complex aesthetic, a fine-tuned stomach-shivering delight, the illusion that I am a connoisseur rather than a thug. Or, I should say, *merely* a thug.

But not every bottom wants to be hooded and shackled by someone like me. Many, if not most, prefer a top who has been trained like a captive hawk to the fist. Indeed, some bottoms can barely tolerate the knowledge that there is another person in the room with them and their precious fantasies. The pleasure they seek is a narcissistic one—assisted masturbation, egocentric ecstasy without the lonely bits. I used to say I would only do this kind of scene for money, and now there's not enough money in the world to pay me to waste my time. As sadists age, I think we become less afraid of saying no. We have given up on the hope of being loved or admired. What we want is authenticity, a chance to reveal even a portion of ourselves to someone who will not flinch or rat on us. Since every bottom's primal fear is that no one will ever really want to do such sweet and terrible things to them, I wonder why so very few of them are ready to look up from their own tumescence for a split second and catch a glimpse of me relishing their predicament. Do bottoms not desire to be out of control? Then why spurn my authority? Despite all their prating about trust, I've learned that this does not equal "allowing" me to use my own judgment about what's best for them. I'm too old for paint-by-numbers scenes. Be my willing canvas, adore the vulnerability of waiting to be spattered by my tools, or get the hell out. Here's your cabfare, honey.

Perhaps Carney and Gilles Deleuze, in the brilliant essay "Coldness and Cruelty" that accompanies the 1989 Zone Books edition of *Venus in Furs*, are correct when they say that sadists and masochists do not share a common agenda, and are doomed to be at perpetual odds with one another. In that case, one could abandon the search for one's counterpart

and simply play the game out as one more dangerous liaison. Carney's isolated, superior, and misanthropic topman would never stoop to explaining himself or justifying himself to a bottom man. He believes that an element of mystery, the air of being a different order of being, is essential to the proper conduct of The Work. Like it or not, modern perverts behave as if that were still true. I think we are still enslaved by certain basic dynamics that make the fantasy of rough sex so reliable: The top will have genuine power in the real world, and this is the source of his sexual allure and control. He will be a different sort of person than his victim. His desire to use, hurt, overpower, or destroy will be authentic and dangerous. There will be a real possibility that things could get out of hand.

No matter how much education is done about S/M safety and technique, I believe that there will always be a broad, less-organized category of experiences called rough sex that are a sort of precursor to or underpinning of S/M, a first cousin of leathersex. There are a lot more people having rough sex than there are individuals taking on the stigmatized identities that compose the leather family's taxonomy. (And not all of them are fags and straight boys.) These experiences are not carefully thought out or planned. The only negotiation may be a slap or a fierce thrust and a hand over the throat, accompanied by the whispered sneer, "You like it this way, don't you?" Consent is expressed by the failure of the bottom to escape. The victim's refusal to scream his or her head off is the equivalent of a safeword. Rough sex is clandestine, rushed, made more thrilling by the fear of detection. This is in sharp contrast to the days of planning and cleanup that even a moderately complex S/M scene requires. Any pain is provided by the simple expedient of a blow or a bite. Specialized S/M equipment would be countererotic. If restraint is enforced by mechanical means, the equipment has to be stuff that you would expect to be near at hand—an MP's handcuffs, a rancher's lariat, a biker's bandanna or bootstrap, the sheer muscle of a convict. Because it has no pretensions of being

healthy or politically correct, rough sex can proceed in a more fluid fashion, without the yawnsome interruptions for polemics that pepper de Sade and John Norman until they become well-nigh inedible.

Carney's protagonist dismisses Rough as a sort of leather daycare center for learning-disabled perverts, or a primeval swamp out of which something really interesting might evolve. It is the first pen to contain the herd, and serves to divide the completely clueless from those who might have some spark of potential. But those who have aspirations to more serious Work proceed rapidly into a smaller holding area. In his disdain, the narrator overlooks or willfully ignores a split in leather aesthetics that has existed pretty much from the '50s on. This division was most neatly articulated by the late Louie Weingarden of Stompers Gallery, a habitu   of the Mineshaft who explained this as "military spit-and-polish leather" versus "dirty biker" leather. The pedant/sadist Carney so vividly brings to life is definitely in the former camp. So, I think, is most of the modern leather community. We imagine that the existence of bureaucracy, codes, rules, procedures, precedents, and ranks will tame the wild heart of the experience we seek and make it possible for us to have our cake and eat it too. We invite Dionysos into the temple of Apollo as if we could tame and contain him there without diminishing our enjoyment of the intoxication he offers.

Thus we have bizarre occurrences like people being thrown out of leather bars or play parties for being too exuberant and noisy—having, in effect, too much fun. I have frequently been found guilty of the strange crime of doing S/M at an S/M event. But it's not really funny—the consternation evoked more than once by a bullwhip being wielded in the leather section of a Gay Pride march makes it clear that there is a deep schism in our community about such things, a conflict we may never resolve. Despite all the public education I have done on behalf of my community, I wonder sometimes if there is not something about S/M that can never be made palatable to

the lockstep tyrants of hegemonic vanillaism. I also wonder if, when we put on our best shiny leather apologetics and polish the buckles of our public relations finery, we are not changing our community into a place where I, for one, do not belong.

Modern tops and bottoms both expect to be able to juggle with the fire of sadomasochism without ever being burned. More than once I've listened to some traumatized player who could not digest the fact that they went further than they thought they could or wanted something they thought they should not desire. A little more experience with the unpredictability and intensity of rough sex might do these folks some good. S/M is not a sitcom. If the script gets followed to the letter, you are not really playing. You're holding a funeral for Eros, squeezing a modicum of clammy pleasure out of his corpse. Inspiration is a fanged and feral state. The entire realm of extreme sex attracts us because we know we are sickly and overcivilized. We've been poisoned by images, drowned in brand names, racked by nine-to-five jobs. Still, it's safe there. It's boring and predictable and false, but safe as houses. (Well, until there's an earthquake, anyway.)

If you go knocking on the door of tough love, you ought not to piss and whine if its claws are sharp and its breath is a little fetid. Predators are like that. They can't help it and won't. As your elder and better, I sincerely advise you to stay at home and watch televised pictures of tigers hunting and copulating. Do not willingly go among them and offer your own flesh for their consumption or instruction. To do such a thing would be quite mad.

Why Cybersex Is a Dry F**k (Ahem, Less Than Ideal)

[2000]

I hardly ever use the Internet to cruise, flirt, or get off.

Some of you will pity me for making this statement, as if I had sustained permanent brain damage. Yes, I know how to navigate in a chat room or create different screen names so that I can pretend to be a Japanese cross-dresser with a pierced and tattooed tongue eight inches long. Or a hirsute gainer bear with pacifier-sized nipples who is too huge to fit on a scale or get through the door, subsisting on the kindness of strangers bearing sizzling double-pepperoni pizzas and weeping frosty six-packs of cream soda. Or a vanilla lesbian, for that matter.

Which brings me neatly to my first qualm about cybersex. Most people already have too many illusions about themselves ("Of course I want an open relationship!") and find it way too easy to lie about sex ("Herpes? What's that?"). Online, I never know who is really behind the medium or the message. Is the shy college student who says she is holding her legs and labia open, dying for her first burning Sapphic kiss, really a balding aluminum siding salesman stuck in his hotel room? Is the lady cop who wants to wear her own handcuffs really a hacker who dropped out of high school and collects previously worn crotchless panties?

It's worse than the classified ads, where "I enjoy quiet evenings at home in front of the fireplace and long walks on the beach, and want a long-term relationship" means "I am

a sociopath who will sleep with your best friend, steal your checks and forge your signature, and smash up your car while talking long-distance on your cell phone to my ex-lover, who still lives with me."

By telling you what you want to hear, an online correspondent can create the illusion of instant intimacy. Love is never this easy or painless. An electronic soul mate does not have to get my soft-boiled eggs exactly right, and has never seen me in ratty long johns and a bleach-scarred sweatshirt, watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and cutting out quilt blocks. There are no financial pressures, yeast infections, PMS, dirty catboxes, videos that were not put back in the right boxes, in-laws, or leaking faucets in cybersex. You never have to make your bed, much less lie in it.

Lovemaking mediated by a modem is physically more challenging than fisting one lass at the same time you are showing a second your imitation of a nectar-sipping hummingbird and suspending a third upside down. I need more than one hand to jack off. I need devices. I need artificial lubricant. My desk already looks like the lost city of Troy, before anal-retentive British archeologists came along to tidy things up. Among the newspaper clippings, stapler, galleys, Post-Its, receipts, tear sheets, and bills, there is no convenient place to put a vibrator, a dildo, a butt plug, a decent selection of tit clamps, Sex Grease, an emery board, a paper cup full of ice cubes, three feet of rope, an ultraviolet wand, a photo of Nina Hartley's ass, and a tube of Ben-Gay. Typing at the same time I am wanking would require as many arms as a statue of Kali. And how many of us can really come sitting down? Have you ever tried to get technical support to tell you what to do after you've spilled poppers all over your keyboard? Once a CD-ROM drive has encountered Crisco, it's never really the same.

Touching oneself is all well and good. I read *Liberating Masturbation*. I have been in Betty Dodson's living room and actually touched the still-warm handle of her vibrator. I have

burned out three Panabratators and gone prospecting in vain with every single device that promises to locate the G-spot. But I like being touched by other people and getting my hands on them. A dirty conversation on the Internet usually just makes me feel lonely and depressed.

I am especially shocked when I encounter people who believe that online experience equals paying your dues in the real world. I don't owe any respect to a so-called mistress or master who has wasted five years of her or his life just talking about kicking ass. Imagine how disastrous it would be for a bottom to negotiate a face-to-face scene based on their cyberlimits! When you "play" by the light of a screensaver, you don't get any pubic hair caught between your teeth. Zits do not intrude when creamy buttocks are upturned. Bad breath, charley horses, and carpal tunnel do not hinder one's joy. The riding crop doesn't bite like a bear trap, and the two-gallon, soapy enema creates no cramping. Every bondage slave's elbows touch behind her back, and straight men know how to eat pussy.

The renaissance of online pervery can reinforce the fearful assumption that all of these kinky things are just too weird for real people to actually do in their own bedrooms, bathrooms, and Laundromats. The Internet is a powerful tool for sexual minorities. It is great for circulating news, getting petitions signed, and putting stupid politicians in the pillory. But we still need to form local communities where people can meet in person and do grassroots activism or build a tangible alternative culture. Despite the foregoing rant, I have to admit I have met devoted lovers who found one another on the Internet. There are some amazing relationships that never would have happened without the ability to speak to another person miles and miles away from your home. But this highlights our minority status as much as it underscores the power of e-mail. We obviously shouldn't reject any method that might bring more human connection into our lives, but I wonder how many nascent activists turn to DSL-speed

flirting instead of working to develop real-time events and communities.

We should be able to do both, but there are only twenty-four hours in a day. I've built a career on hot talk and bawdy words. But there is no substitute for warm bodies. Nor is there a substitute for actual kisses on soft lips, and all that follows when fortune favors the brave.

“Why Is It So Much Fun to Do This?”

Some Psychological Aspects of Bondage

[2000]

“I want you to tie me up.” How often have I heard this request—from kneeling submissives or smart-assed masochists itching for a brawl, from tops who want to switch for one evening or bottoms who feel they’d be much happier if they could live out their lives in a master’s cage? It’s been said with sadness, guilt, surprise, arousal, fear, laughter, triumph, impatience, and anger. My response is likely to be, “Of course I will. But not just yet.” This is more than a sadistic ploy to build excitement by delaying gratification. There are so many different reasons to be physically restrained. I need a little more information before I can decide what equipment to use, how to talk to this person (or why to keep silence), and what their ideal emotional and sexual destination might be.

It’s also, to be honest, an IQ test. It’s usually not a good idea for me to play with a bottom who cannot engage in introspection or tell me about their inner workings. A bottom who is silent, either because of stoicism or ignorance, will cause me to flounder. Half of the pleasure I take from a scene comes from being filled with my own energy, competence, and power. The other half comes from vicariously experiencing my partner’s hesitation, delight, confusion, and breakthrough to the realm of unselfconsciousness and freedom.

I’ve been a top, daddy, master, and sadist for two decades and a bit. In all that time, my own understanding of what we are about in our dungeons and play parties has only gotten more

complex. This article can only describe a little bit of what I've observed in my own sessions. I'm sure other players could contribute additional shades of significance. And, of course, there will be readers who are mind-boggled and put off by all this nomenclature. They will slap themselves on the forehead and exclaim, "Stop talking and just do it!"

I'm always tempted to act on an invitation like that. Isn't that permission to do exactly as I like, for my own selfish reasons, and sweep the bottom into a realm where all the rules are made by me, and all the benefit is mine as well? This may sound like some kind of "ultimate scene" for a pain pig or a would-be slave. But I have yet to meet a submissive, masochist, or any other type of bottom who is really capable of abandoning themselves (or enjoying the outer limits of my erotic preferences) that much.

I do like hurting people quite a lot. My favorite S/M activity is flagellation. I almost always employ some kind of bondage in these sessions, for two reasons: to keep the target where I want it, and to give them something they can tug on, lean into, and struggle with. Contact with rope or chain helps them to go under and eroticize the pain. It also prevents them from bolting prematurely and embarrassing both of us. I call this sort of bondage "pragmatic" because physical restraint itself is not the focus of such scenes.

Bondage can also serve as ornamentation, a badge of slave status, or a costume in and of itself. This is another favorite of mine, although the habit of buying each new sub their own collar gets a little expensive. And what do you do with the damn thing once the relationship is over? I don't feel right about throwing them away, so I keep them in a special place, to remind me of my own shortcomings. Alas, these sad mementos have yet to teach me much caution or humility. This is "bondage as performance," put on specifically to be seen by other people (or to be kept hidden as a dark and sexy secret). In either case, the presence of an audience is key to this dynamic.

Next comes the form of bondage that I believe is the most

common, which is sensual bondage that is meant to facilitate sexual contact. This can range from mummification, if it is done to place the bottom in a long-standing masterful embrace, to using sewing thread to bind someone spread-eagle by thumbs and big toes, with the understanding that if the thread breaks, you will stop touching them. Bondage has several important functions in these very enjoyable scenes, which have the potential to create a deep bond between both partners. It allows the bottom to give up responsibility, blame, or guilt. It grants permission to be both vulnerable and insatiable. If a fantasy about nonconsensual sex is being enacted, it allows the bottom to enter into the fantasy fully, since there is genuine helplessness. It is also an excellent setting for the bottom to express a need to be taken care of and dependent.

Sensual bondage draws a clear line between the top and bottom, making it obvious who is who and what their job is. Permission is granted to the top as well, to explore his own dominance and indulge in his need to control and manipulate the Other. Someone who has allowed you to tie them up is obviously a slut, fair game for just about any sort of sexual use your evil mind can conjure up. The possibilities for “mean fun” in this setting are breathtaking.

Since I define myself primarily as a sadist, I’m also fond of forms of bondage that can serve as fierce punishment. In this case, I will use thin cord or even cake string, and cinch it tightly enough to feel as if it is cutting or burning the body. Care must be taken, of course, to avoid damaging nerves, joints, or connective tissue. Perfectly comfortable bondage can also be transformed into suffering if, for example, a thirsty prisoner is not able to reach a glass of water, or a cocksucker is not able to get his mouth around his heart’s desire. Asymmetrical bondage is one easy method to put a challenging amount of stress upon the human body. Insofar as being controlled or exposed is experienced as humiliation by the bottom, this emotional response can be exploited and increased until they are undone and completely malleable.

Perhaps the sort of bondage that inculcates fear should come under the same heading as sadistic bondage, but it's such a popular fetish in and of itself that I think it deserves its own paragraph. The people who engage in bondage or dominant/submissive sex could be divided into those who need absolute trust and a feeling of safety in order to play, and those who need to be scared witless in order to get into their role and get off. A top who is good at this sort of thing runs the risk of convincing the bottom that they really are a villain. It's best not to create this sort of experience for your victim unless you are able to tolerate the bottom's ambivalence about your character.

The ability to calibrate the precise amount of anxiety or terror one wishes to engender is extremely important. Safety limits must be observed during head games like this as well as more robust physical indignities. It's a real challenge to the master's creativity to be just bad enough to get the bottom where he wants to be, without causing a heart attack or a nervous breakdown.

Taken to its logical extreme, fear bondage becomes a fetish for breath control or strangulation. In my twenties, I lost a dear friend to this obsession. He had been hanging himself for years, and was a genius at constructing bondage that would release the pressure on his throat when he passed out. But he used a new collar that was the wrong size one night, and left the people who loved him behind forever. Some experts will tell you that there is no such thing as safe breath control. I partly agree (but can't honestly see much harm in briefly covering someone's mouth and nose with a gloved hand, or gently compressing the throat for a few seconds).

I will counter the voices of prohibition with the hard fact that if this really is a bottom's central guiding image of sadomasochistic bliss, there's no deterring them from continuing to practice it. For some of us, Thanatos is a siren. So I urge my friends who are bent this way to never engage in breath control when they are alone. Having a spotter does make erotic asphyxiation a little safer. But it is no guarantee

that you won't suffer brain damage from a lack of oxygen, or damage your body in other ways. If you can figure out some other route to gratification, please do so.

Bondage can be used to deprive the bottom of things other than a deep breath. It is often used to control sensory input. By denying the use of hearing, sight, or other tools for apprehending and interacting with the material world, the top literally "takes over" the bound person. The objective may be either sensory deprivation, which forces the bottom to confront the chatter of their own mental processes, or replacement of mundane stimuli by sounds, tastes, tactile impressions, or images that the top has orchestrated. The restrained and shuttered person may have a transcendental experience during sensory deprivation, or be bored to tears. That depends as much on their own ability to get centered and invite tranquility into the empty room of their skulls, as it does upon the top's skill with blindfold, ear plugs, gags, and plaster.

There are a handful of other reasons to make physical restraint a part of your sessions. Bondage can serve as a focal point for the bottom, a reminder that they need to stay in the present moment and not drift off. Bondage can also be employed as a metaphor for other things that burden, restrict, or trouble us. The intent in such a scene is to dramatize how much the bottom suffers from these (usually self-imposed) obligations, and create an ordeal that will disperse the weight. There is also depersonalizing bondage, which is intended to temporarily transform the bottom into an object like a sex toy or furniture, or an animal—usually a dog or a horse. Pigs are also popular. Some of Michael Manning's illustrations capture this technique with piquant perfection.

I've also occasionally encountered people who want to use bondage devices in a scene, but for reasons other than limiting mobility or perception. The kick may come from handling the fetishized artifacts of police officers, military personnel, medical professionals, institutions, etc. Especially when medical gear is involved, the bottom may wish to experience

the "sick role" or to mime disability. This is a subtle distinction that I hope will not make the reader too impatient. Can you see the difference between being hobbled so that you are forced to take very short steps as you go about the master's business, or wearing a leg brace because you want to reenact a significant encounter with a person who was lamed by polio and to emulate that person? Some devotees want to permanently alter their bodies, i.e., through voluntary amputation. (This is a controversial parallel, but one that is so interesting, I did not want to omit it as a topic for discussion.)

Let's not leave out the folks who engage in physical restraint without using any equipment at all. One party is restrained by the other party's strength alone. Such scenes are usually scripted as contests, erotic combat, or "wrestling for the top." There are many of us who got our first hint that we were a little different because of our response to being pinned or subduing someone else. The other guy was probably just getting some exercise and having a rough bit of fun; we were enthralled, tingling, and erect.

Finally, let's acknowledge the homoerotic significance of incarceration and restraint. Men who have no choice about being constantly in the company of other men are generally understood to be likely to engage in same-sex intimacy. In a culture that identifies being anally penetrated or sucking cock as abhorrent and effeminate acts, it's assumed that some sort of bondage is necessary to compel a "real man" into receptivity. There is a sense in which the discourse of male homosexuality is also a discourse of the cellblock.

This is additionally true because, as a sexual minority, gay and bisexual men are literally imprisoned within a homophobic society. Antigay attitudes can be as intractable as iron bars, even if sodomy has been decriminalized. One way to trick or cheat the oppressor is to derive surreptitious pleasure from mistreatment or tokens of authority. Consenting sadomasochism is seen as repugnant, while violence to the spirit and physical abuse are so common that they have been

institutionalized and become invisible: business as usual. If the lack of criminal prosecution is any index of illegality, rape is a crime unless you are already in prison. Sadomasochism is alert, however, to the secret pleasure that powerful people take in the terrible things they do or sanction, and exposes that secret by identifying authority figures as queer and perverse performers in dominant/submissive rituals.

The person who longs to be a prisoner or captive is usually not satisfied with handcuffs or a collar and leash. The entire environment needs to become a holder or container. Often, a bottom into this sort of scene wants it to go on for an entire weekend, or longer. It is virtually impossible for one top to do an adequate job as a long-term guard or jailer. A ratio of three tops to one "inmate" would still require eight-hour shifts of duty. Boredom is inevitable for both parties. While this may add to the realism, it is not my cup of tea. Such scenes are often supposed to begin with an arrest or kidnapping. Five out of the six masters I know who tried to pull this off were reported by alarmed bystanders and had their party rudely interrupted by police officers itching to be heroes. A smooth takedown requires a good script and a lot of luck. I wonder what a top might be justified in expecting from the prisoner that could possibly compensate for so much effort. (I'm sure a few of you will think of something.)

Knowing how many of us have been condemned and hounded by religion, I hesitate to introduce that theme into this article. But just as we eroticize fag-bashing, arrest, rape, and other scary stories and invest them with the happy ending of our own orgasms, thus drawing the sting from them, we also dare to make sacrilegious use of sacerdotal icons and vestments. The bondage table can be dressed as an altar, with either a monotheistic or a pagan motif, and in these screenplays of worship or blasphemy the bottom can become a penitent or an offering, perhaps even a savior being forced to undergo some crucial ordeal. Bondage is present as a symbol of fate itself, or the shackles of earthly temptation, or perhaps

the weightiness of the flesh. Hanging from a cross or tree is a rite more ancient than Odin, and there are deeply mystical overtones to being held between earth and sky, seeking revelation or release. The top is then a hierophant or even the representative of some divine archetype. I urge great caution with such scenes, for if you call something, it may answer.

I hope this detailed exploration of some of the many meanings and methods of bondage will help you to negotiate more clearly, thus increasing your chances of getting the sort of action that you are panting for. And perhaps it will be helpful to people who are not in our scene, who need a paint-by-numbers explanation of why we amass coils of cotton rope, crosses, hoists, climbing rope, leather thongs, chain, clips, slings, masks, padlocks, hoods, gags, body bags, straitjackets, helmets, leather cuffs, handcuffs, leg irons, Ace bandages, scold's bridles, casting plaster, mouth pears, blow-up latex body suits, horses, stocks, cages, parachutes, cock rings, ear plugs, and blindfolds. If luggage did not exist, we power-exchange perverts would have invented it. How else would we lug about the raw material of our libidinal devotions?

Masculinities

[2001]

“Why are blonde jokes so short?”

“So men can remember them.”

“Why do sperm have such a short way to swim?”

*“Because if they had to stop to ask directions,
they’d never make it.”*

—Anonymous Internet humor

I’m home recuperating from chest surgery. It has taken me four years of therapy, fifty-five doses of testosterone, innumerable conversations with friends, a lot of soul-searching, and two months working for a gay men’s mental health service to get to this point. In the end, what it came down to was that I could not progress in my exploration of masculinity and male identity without the help of a plastic surgeon. Despite a deeper voice, a redistribution of body fat, and a fuzzy face, in order to pass I had to wear a ridiculously bulky jacket and limit my social interactions to gender-naïve people. It had gotten harder, not easier, to assert my preference for male pronouns. Even when there was polite compliance, I felt as if the other person’s eyes were flicking from my chest up to my face, and inside they were silently saying, “Yeah, right.”

I still don’t quite know what to call myself. It is hard to claim the word “man,” easier to simply define as FTM (female-to-male) or transgendered. I had accumulated forty-five years of history operating in the world as a woman, albeit a very

different sort of woman, before I transitioned. Those habits of thought, self-image, movement, and expression are hard to break, no matter how deep my dissatisfaction. I am more than a little jealous of “primary transsexuals” who can honestly say they feel like men who were born into the wrong bodies, that they are correcting an error of nature. My gender dysphoria has had more to do with feeling that there is something wrong when other people perceived or treated me as if I were a girl. Not wanting to be female, but not having much enthusiasm for the only other option our society offers.

My therapist keeps reminding me that it's possible to be both male and female, or to create an individual synthesis of gender expression that is a path between these dichotomies. I don't know if this is where I will be for the rest of my life, or if getting more facial hair will tip the balance and send me with more determination into the territory of manhood. (It feels silly to even say these words.) But something has changed, with the new shape of my torso. I was afraid I would feel mutilated or injured, and I don't. I feel relief. I feel lightness of being and hope and optimism. It feels right to have smaller nipples, a chest that tells grocery store clerks and people behind the counter at the post office to call me sir instead of ma'am.

I know that some of my reluctance to embrace manliness wholeheartedly comes from a twisted relationship with my father, who seemed determined to beat any resistance to femininity out of me. Through physical ordeals that were scripted as games or sports, he offered me one chance after another to prove to him that I wasn't a girl. Boxing. Football. Shooting. Wrestling. Hiking. Hunting and fishing. Of course, none of these contests were fair. All I had to do to lose was to show pain, lose my temper, or give up—let alone cry. My father's idea of what it meant to be a man was based on the insane standards of a Wild West show or a World War II action movie. He embodied a crazy amount of physical courage, strength, and stamina; a spooky skill in woodcraft; knowledge about wildlife; and an appetite for alcohol and women that

made him a small-town legend. He was an intelligent and unscrupulous sadist who nevertheless possessed great charm, charisma, and sentimental tenderness. I always knew that my father was quite capable of killing another man. This was supposed to make me feel safe, since one of the tasks of a real man is to protect his wife and children, but it seemed to me that what I mostly needed was to be protected from him, and nobody was equal to that chore.

When I was equivocating about whether to keep taking testosterone or not, asking myself whether I liked it just because it gave me an excuse to stick a needle full of a drug into my body, I tripped over an amazingly deep well of shame about maleness, as well as antipathy toward it. The jokes at the start of this essay come from that place. Everybody, even men, know that men are at best stupid, wrong, and backward; at worst, evil. The good people, the people who will transform the world and make it a safer, better place, are women. The hero of today is not Superman. She is a 16-year-old cat/woman-of-color on a motorcycle, or an 18-year-old blonde martial artist who patrols graveyards with a sharp wooden stake in one hand. I love *Dark Angel* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Amazons are still necessary. The archetype of the female warrior offers something reparative to 21st-century souls. But if I am no longer a dyke, no longer an Amazon, what/who am I? Are men good for anything at all?

I've asked as many straight women as I know about this, figuring that since they sleep with men and even live with them, they ought to know what valuable qualities they possess. It seems to be an embarrassing question. A couple of times, my het girlfriends have admitted that they like cocks or that boyfriends are useful for picking up heavy things and changing the oil in the car. One woman mentioned that her male lover was the only person who would watch *Beavis and Butthead* with her, and laugh as hard as she did. Another said that watching her boyfriend move around the apartment was like watching her big dog run through the park. There was

something unselfconscious about his physicality that made her love him.

Where are the footholds I could use to scale the wall into the castle of manliness? I like penetration, and I think I'm pretty good at it, but my dick is not a biological organ; there's no way to skirt that deficit. I'm disabled, so I hardly ever pick up heavy things, and what I know about cars could be written on the inside of a matchbook cover in twenty-point type. Physical grace is a rare and valuable experience. Most of the time I live in my head, or in a book, or in somebody else's head. My macho is in my intellect; my sharpest weapon is my tongue; my biggest muscle is my brain. I get inside other people's sexual places by understanding them, by being willing to see and accept aspects of their fantasies or needs that are usually repressed. In a world where women are supposed to feel and men are supposed to act, I stand in the middle and comprehend what both of them are doing, and why. But I remain a stranger in each of these territories.

When I crave a seamless male image, what I'm mostly longing for is consistency and invisibility, the social convenience of passing without being questioned or challenged. It's dangerous to confuse other people about your gender. There's a lot of transphobic rage on the street, looking for a target. Why "normal" people should be so angry about someone else's deviance is an interesting question, but it's not one I want to confront every time I go out to buy a sandwich or walk through a museum. I have been an outsider all my life, and sometimes I get weak and long for the simpleminded pleasure of belonging, just being one more horned beast in the herd.

Maybe the problem is that I am trying to find a different rationale for living or a different code of virtue for men and women, when in fact we all ought to be judged according to a single standard. Things like compassion, honesty, the ability to nurture, independence, self-care, vulnerability, friendship, desire, creativity, assertiveness, or industry are worthwhile qualities for both men and women to possess. It's

no longer acceptable for men to claim exemption from either housework or the emotional reciprocity it takes to maintain intimacy because of their willingness to compete, fight, or die in dangerous occupations or emergencies. Still, I keep thinking there must be something unique about being a man, something fit to be celebrated in ritual and mythology, the stuff of a spiritual mystery teaching. Or is this desire the root of the oppression of women—the need to cordon off certain activities or experiences and say, “Only we can do this and women may not,” because we must have a source of pride and uniqueness to have meaningful lives?

Perhaps transition will be an ironic experience for me, and I will discover that I remain the same person, having changed only my physical appearance. Now, *that's* a depressing thought! I wonder if I can talk about what I like about being a man and disliked about being a woman without being attacked for being sexist? Can I make a few generalizations with the understanding that there will always be individual exceptions? I'm not trying to say one gender is better than the other or ought to have power over the other. I have no idea if the experience of genetic men resembles mine. But taking testosterone has given me some clues about the differences between the sexes.

It's harder to track psychological or emotional changes caused by one's taking testosterone than it is to notice the physical differences. But I think the former actually outweigh the latter. It isn't that testosterone has made me a different person. I always had a high sex drive, liked porn and casual sex, couldn't imagine giving up masturbation, was able to express my anger, and showed a pretty high level of autonomy and assertiveness. But all of these things have gotten much more intense since I began hormone treatments. During the first six months on T, every appetite I had was painfully sharp. A friend of mine expressed it this way: “When I had to eat, I had to eat right fucking now. If I was horny, I had to come immediately. If I needed to shit, I couldn't wait. If I was pissed off, the words

came right out of my mouth. If I was bored, I had to leave." My body and all the physical sensations that spring from it have acquired a piquancy and an immediacy that is both entertaining and occasionally inconvenient. Moving through the world is even more fun, involves more stimulation than it used to; life is more in the here-and-now, more about bodies and objects, less about thoughts and feelings.

This is especially true of sexuality. I always liked visual erotic material, but it can take me over now in a way that it didn't before. This applies to dirty magazines, X-rated videos, billboards that feature girls with cleavage, and any person on the street who seems attractive. Before taking T, I never bought into the bullshit about women's sexuality being "whole-body" rather than genital; I knew where my orgasm came from. Now I feel a much stronger, localized concentration of reaction and need. I can absolutely understand why men can (and must!) pay \$40 for a blowjob on the way home from work, or get caught jacking off in public toilets. There's something about having genitals that visibly change when you get aroused that makes the sexual experience more palpable. It makes the fact that I desire something or someone seem much more real.

Casual sex has changed. When I want to get off, my priority is to find somebody who will do that as efficiently as possible, and while I certainly would rather have a pleasant interaction with that person, I don't think a lot about how they were doing before they got down on their knees, and I don't care very much how they feel after they get up and leave. It's hard to keep their needs in mind; it's easier to just assume that if they wanted anything, it was their responsibility to try to get it. I always preferred to take sexual initiative, and that has become even more ego-congruent. Part of what I like about men is their willingness to put it out there, so to speak—to take responsibility for running the fuck. While this can be a rather obnoxious quality, it's also true that if sex is going to happen, somebody has to be the one to say, "Let's do it."

It's easier to make decisions. I don't get so caught up in

agonizing about what I should do. I just want to make a choice so that I can move on and get something done. What I do matters less than the fact that I'm able to get busy, feel that I'm making progress. My hand-eye coordination has improved. (I'm not kidding. I never used to be able to catch things that were thrown at me, and parallel parking was a nightmare. Now I think nothing of doing these tasks.) Working with other people has also, for some weird reason, gotten better. I don't fret about hierarchies or teamwork. It just seems to happen, to fall into place. Of course, that may be because I am mostly doing things with groups of men, and we don't have to engage in that endless crap about reaching consensus, or punish each other if somebody dares to excel. Men seem able to form teams or squads more easily than women. There's less bullshit about leadership or taking orders.

As bitterly as I've hated my father, I also spent much of my childhood admiring his physical adeptness and longing for his approval and love. (Isn't this a song that every man sings into his beer?) There was a good person in there. If he hadn't been troubled by a mother who made him feel guilty for being smart and healthy (unlike his brother, who had Down's syndrome), a bad marriage to a religious fanatic, a life-threatening job that crushed his body and soul, and clinical depression, we would have had a very different relationship. Despite the terrifying responsibility of trying to provide for a wife and six kids on a coal miner's salary, he was capable of memorable acts of care and enchantment. He pulled every one of my baby teeth, and was so quick about it, so good at making me laugh, that I can't remember feeling any pain at all. Whether he was giving me nasty-tasting cold medicine or putting ointment in my eyes, he was gentle and sweet to me when I was sick. He was always bringing home amazing things from underground—rocks that glowed when you put them under a blacklight, fossilized ferns and dinosaur footprints, quartz crystals and agates, plain egg-shaped rocks that contained glittering wonders when they were cracked in half. My love of wildlife and my ability

to navigate and survive outdoors are not small gifts, and they are things that my mother certainly would never have tried to instill in me.

Being a fag or a third-gender person is a way for me to try to salvage the good that I saw in my father, the virtues that I see in ordinary men, without being damaged by the ugliness, the unbridled rage, the hatred of homosexuals, the racism, the arrogance that made me wary of my dad. I loved him because he couldn't shoot our sick old dog, but I hated him because he could clobber me every day and never think twice about how it felt to me or whether it was fair. He was not able to be consistent. He was able to shoulder the crushing responsibility of being a breadwinner and a man's man, but he couldn't engage in enough introspection to calculate the cost of that, couldn't be flexible enough to look for other solutions to life's big problems. Still, even in his capacity for violence, I am able to see something worthwhile. I'm not a pacifist. I can't believe that there will ever be a time when human beings won't need hunters or soldiers. What we need to find (or regain) is a sense of grief or loss when animal or human life is taken, and a profound humility about whether we are worthy to effect such a profound change, even if our intentions are to serve life and protect the people we love.

There are altars to goddesses all over my house. A few statues and posters of Shiva, Ganesha, Cernunnos, and Pan have crept in as well. I have a silver picture of Sulis, a Celtic god of healing springs, that I wear around my neck. I'm glad there are pagan gods who are phallic because they represent pleasure or wisdom or the ability to unite with the female principle, not because they are domineering or murderous. Gods who represent the wild world, who guard as well the feral part of human beings. Divine heroes like Gilgamesh and Enkidu, men who loved each other.

It seems so much more difficult for men to approach one another in a spirit of equality and desire than it is for women to bond erotically and romantically. But I think that is where

most of the transformation of manhood and masculinity is taking shape. Few insults can carry as much scorn as the word “cocksucker.” When I hear somebody spit out this slur, I am struck not just by the antigay hatred behind it, but also by the self-hatred. Men are going to despise themselves, their bodies, and their genitals until they learn how to express their maleness in an honorable and respectful way. Despite our imperfections, our limitations, how do we become worthy of self-care, and mutual affiliations? This question has far-reaching spiritual and political implications. I expect it may take the whole second half of my life to figure out even a partial answer. But I believe someday I will hear the word “cocksucker,” and know that it’s said with awe, with admiration, to designate a holy person, a state of priesthood, a healer, a hero.

Second Chances: An Afterword

[2002]

As this book goes into production, my former partner has come back to the United States and (forgive me if I feel this is even more important) brought my son, Blake, with him. Although Matt and I are no longer lovers, we are trying to craft an amicable and courteous relationship that will allow us to coparent our child. For now, the easiest way to do this is to live together, which in the expensive housing market of San Francisco means we are elbow-to-elbow, sharing an apartment that would make even two honeymooners claustrophobic.

Matt's return coincided with my being forced out of a large house that I had rented for many years. A new owner had decided he would rather live there himself than have a tenant whose tribute was so far below market value. We pooled our money, and Matt found an apartment that costs twice as much as the house we once shared. At least there's an office where I can continue to see therapy clients. For a miracle, in this city of steep hills, there are no stairs into the flat. It's all on one level, unlike my emotions.

It's a strange way to live. I am still sorting out all the feelings that I have about being rescued by someone who has hurt me and made me very angry. How do I reconcile my image of Matt as a selfish and untrustworthy person with the man who spent days online looking for an accessible dwelling, ignored his own rheumatoid arthritis while he packed and lifted innumerable boxes full of my papers and other foofaraw, took on the lion's

share of caring for Blake, and cleaned our new apartment until it shone?

I would rather be hateful to him. Even though I was as fed up with the shortcomings of our relationship as he was, I want him to be the villain, and the thought of being forgiven for my own transgressions enrages me. I want vengeance that burns with a pure white flame, not this awkward creation of a workable and tiring daily routine. My therapist asked me what I would expect this relationship to look like if I were a divorced heterosexual man, and I said I thought we would be living apart, and I would see my child on evenings, weekends, and some holidays. But I'm not a heterosexual man, this is not a legal divorce, and I don't have the material resources or the physical energy to live alone right now.

I fear becoming one more disabled person who is one-down in their relationship because they are too dependent on their more able-bodied partner to engage in conflict that might jeopardize their living arrangements. Matt's kindness toward me is as confusing as the moments when I am reminded of what it feels like to be plunged into the deep freeze of his silent but pointed indifference or sliced to shreds by the sour edge of his tongue. His acts of gentleness and his helpfulness and even tenderness far outnumber the insults or arguments, but I have never been very good at adding up or holding onto the things that make me grateful.

We share a bed, something that we told each other we both disliked but would put up with for now. Whatever comfort we take in the mere physical presence of another person sleeping beside us is difficult to express, lest we conjure up painful echoes of a time when we could touch each other with more ease. In private and in public we behave, I think, like an old married couple. We finish each other's sentences. We anticipate one another's needs. We roll our eyes at jokes we've heard before. Anyone who saw us would probably assume we have reconciled. We are not sure what to call our relationship or what it will look like in the future. But we are a family, and

I know that I am lucky to have both Matt and Blake in my life. Even gay people, however, expect a family to be based on two adults who are lovers. When I introduce myself as Matt's former boyfriend, an uncomfortable silence always follows, full of unspoken questions.

Still, I do not want to disappear inside a facade of harmony and togetherness. The things that Matt cannot or will not give me remain important to me. I want love and romance. There is nothing I can do about the moments when I look at him or hear his voice and am abruptly forced to remember, in my heart and in my body, why I desired him in the beginning. He remains the Great and Terrible Beauty, and I am like some straight-A student in thick glasses pursuing the jock who is the class president and prom king. He will outlive me, most probably. And I hate the nasty part of myself that notes the very faint signs of age in his face and rejoices. Because the truth is that no matter how old either of us become, I will always see in him an erotic archetype of the handsome and graceful youth, lusty for life and yet still innocent, poised on the brink of being tarnished by the compromises and disappointments of adulthood.

I will not talk about how I feel when I know that another man is embracing him. How can I, when there is someone new in my life, an old friend whom I see through new eyes? She is a sexy novelty to this big bear of a sadistic daddy. I've had boys, and I hope to have one again, but she is a high femme who fills me with the desire to tighten the laces of her corset, make her walk around in the highest of high heels, and bend her over my bed and to my will. The intensity of this passion amuses and challenges me. I still do not know if I dare to let my body go where my fantasies are clearly leading me. The things that I want to do to her seemed acceptable to me when my partners shared my gender identity. Is it okay for me to be that heterosexual? To be a dominant male? Will anybody recognize my queerness (and hers) when we stalk one another, flirt and date, play and live together?

Within this interweaving of adult disappointment, betrayal, fear, constancy, affection, resignation, and devotion, there is the most important relationship of all, and that is the connection between me and Blake. The performance anxiety I have felt before walking into a dungeon to assume the powers and prerogatives of a top or the sick stomach I get when I have to read my work or lecture are nothing compared to the terror I have of failing my son. Shortly after he came back into my life, Blake caught a virus that clogged up his lungs and gave him a nasty sore throat with a dangerously high fever. I had to take him to the doctor by myself because Matt was in the first week of work at a new job. It's physically difficult for me to lift Blake in and out of his stroller and car seat, much less manage a diaper bag and my own never-tiny sack of neurotic shit that I lug around in a vain attempt to carry everything I might remotely need in the dangerous wasteland that lies outside my own front door.

He began to cry when he realized we were going to the doctor's office. (He is old enough, nearly three, to remember shots.) The fail-safe pacifying device, a full bottle of cold milk, was of no help on this trip; his throat was too sore for him to drink. I wrestled him into the pediatrician's examination room and tried to think of anything that would amuse him—I sang nursery rhymes, showed him books and tongue depressors, and promised him that we would leave as soon as we could. The only response I got was a thin fussy cry that frightened me because it lacked the usual vigor of Blake's displeasure. I told him the doctor was going to help him to feel better, and he didn't believe me, and I didn't believe myself. I had to carry him to the cold metal scales to get weighed and then back to the examination room, where I had to hold him on my lap and restrain him while various instruments were poked under his arms and in his ears, eyes, and mouth. He just lost it, the poor little guy, and by the time the doctor was done he was a twisting furious snotty mess in my lap, striking out at me and anything else within range. I vainly tried to wrap myself around him

from all directions, so that he would not fall and give himself a concussion or hurt his hands and feet.

In that moment, I absolutely hated him (and myself). I thought, *There is no way I can do this. I have to get away right now.* All I could think about was another time when all of us came down with a stomach bug that utterly incapacitated Matt and made Blake so dehydrated that I had to take him to the hospital. While Matt napped on the bathroom floor, I stayed with Blake for three days, giving him tiny sips of Pedialyte every ten minutes (between my own visits to the potty) and praying he wouldn't dislodge the IV that was slowly leaking moisture into his parched body. If my baby had to be hospitalized again, I didn't know if I could bear it. Letting him be taken away for the IV to be inserted was like handing my child over to torturers, even though I knew it was necessary to save his life. I still feel guilty about letting that be done to him.

The sunny examination room with the colorful baby quilt on the wall looked like Pollyanna's circle of hell. My system was flooded with adrenaline, in full fight-or-flight mode.

Instead of doing either one, I strapped Blake into his stroller, dumped the milk into the sink, rinsed out his bottle and gave him plain water instead, and found an ancient stash of M&Ms hidden at the bottom of my fanny pack. I spoke softly and gently to him, and gave him an M&M to hold. The fact that he was too sick to even eat his most beloved treat broke my heart. I took him to the car, both of us bawling our eyes out, and eased him into his car seat and then home. There, his fever got so high he just lay on the bed or the couch or wherever we put him, limp as a wet sock. He didn't have the energy to cry and barely responded to his favorite games and videos. It took three weeks of antibiotics to get him over this virus. Neither Matt nor I slept much because we couldn't leave him unwatched. That would have been the equivalent of leaving him unloved. Other than offering him bottles full of Gatorade and children's Tylenol, we couldn't do much to ease his suffering, but at least he always knew he was not alone.

How did I do that? I don't know. I didn't know that person was there inside of me, the adult who calmed down, took charge, and behaved appropriately. I didn't know I could persist, as a compassionate adult caretaker, under such heavy fire. But my heart opened like the door to a sanctuary, and something in me said, "This is *my* child." My tantrum and panic was cooled by a sweet breeze from another place, one where I believed in my own strength and forbearance.

Loving Blake has changed the way that I see myself, my parents, and the rest of humanity. He is so very clear about what he needs and wants that I am dumbfounded by the people who neglect or ignore their children. When he is pleased with me I feel smug and clever, and in danger of spoiling him rotten. (But what is the use of having children if you do not spoil them?) I marvel at how my parents managed to raise six of these angelic monsters at the same time. My frustration at their shortcomings has deepened even as my understanding for the reasons behind their mistakes is sharpened. I know, now, just how hard it is to be patient and giving to a child, day after day, and all the adult pleasures that one gives up to teach, entertain, feed, clothe, and otherwise provide for that offspring. No wonder my parents thought they were entitled to my respect and obedience in return for all that work. No wonder they had trouble seeing me as an adult. How could they, with the memory of a time when I couldn't feed myself or write my own name?

Being a parent has put me in between gay and straight communities. I'm lucky to have many friends who love children, or have at least gotten brave enough to spend time with Blake. But there are many more gay men and lesbians who are hostile to children and don't want to make room for them in their carefully ordered worlds. Children are just too noisy and sticky, and they bump into things and fall down far too often. I can empathize a little more now with straight people whose lives are constructed around a biological family. (There are also any number of queer people who think that

we are not the sort of exemplary homosexuals who should be entrusted with a child. Which is why we chose the do-it-yourself approach.) When Matt and I take Blake on an outing together, the straight world quickly divides itself into the people who hate us and the people who take us in stride. It's nice to be around the latter group, but I'm also aware that many of them have invented some reason to think we are not queer. Whether I enlighten them or not depends mostly on how safe I think Blake will be if an unwelcome disclosure is made.

So, am I willing to go back into the closet to protect my child? To be honest with you, if I thought I could, I might. Even though I know that would only create its own set of problems, there's a part of me that sees him as so fragile that I am obligated to do anything to shield him, even if that meant cutting my own psyche in half. But I want him to grow up in a world where sex and gender variation is valued rather than treated as a sin or a crime, and part of that work is to be who I am, for as long as the system permits me to be out and outspoken.

I simply can't convey the power of my love for Blake. Would you understand if I told you that I let him leave crayons on my desk and play Reader Rabbit on my computer? I'd rather stay home, watch him take a bath and quack indignantly when he dumps the rubber duckie out of a cup than go to the gay film festival. When he says a new word I get goose bumps. It really matters to me whether we go to McDonald's or Burger King because Blake likes the french fries at McDonald's the best. I eat their crappy Happy Meals because he is a vegetarian but loves the toys. I've logged more time in the last year writing on the sidewalk with pastel chalk than I have at the keyboard of my iBook. Yesterday, he followed me into the laundry room after I refused to play the same movie for the tenth time, and he said, hands on his hips, "I don't like you." (Well, it sounded more like, "I own ike ooh.") I was mush for the rest of the day. He could do no wrong. A complete sentence! Toss hats in air and prance about!

What a confession. Patrick Califia, stuck in the kitchen trying to guess whether the cussed child will eat macaroni and cheese, spaghetti, or chicken soup for dinner tonight, in a T-shirt and sweatpants smeared with the remnants of lunch and breakfast. Building his muscles by emptying the Diaper Genie and pushing a forty-pound, giggling toddler in a swing. Picking pretzels, broken crayons, and bits of cold cereal out of the carpet. Shopping for toys that make noises and light up when you push a button, and rubber goldfish that squirt water out of their tiny mouths. Drawing pictures of apples, bears, cats, ducks, elephants, and so forth so that the other adult at the table can finish his cold International House of Pancakes breakfast. Applying sunblock to a child who suddenly seems to have more limbs than an octopus. Handing fistfuls of popcorn into the back seat while keeping one hand on the wheel and singing, "Where is Thumbkin?" Averting his face when dumping out a 120-proof juice cup that was retrieved during an archeological dig under the couch. Oh dear and alas. To what an untidy, demoralizing, and messy end he has come. He needs a nap more than he ever needed a new whip.

I know that some will see this as a fall from grace, a retreat from the Shadow, a betrayal of both my leathers and my legacy of twisted queer smut. To that I say, Oh, give it a rest. A new kind of love has landed in my life, and surprised and delighted me. If you think some of the other things I've done have been risky or scary, honey, you ain't seen nuthin' yet. *I have no idea what this kid will do next.* But I'd gladly trade five minutes of him curling up on my lap in his pajamas, thoughtfully chewing on the protruding eyes of his plastic frog, for any pleasure another adult could offer me. This is a perfect example of loving without expectation, as close to giving another being unconditional positive regard as I will ever come. I pray that Blake will have a long, happy, and healthy life, but the good that has come from loving him is a blessing separate from all that.

On days when I hurt so bad I don't know how I am going to get out of bed, I have a reason to go on. Blake needs breakfast, and I need to keep on working. My hope for his future is good strong ground to stand (and type) upon. What I do seems more necessary than ever. My friend and fellow author, kinky gay man and therapist Guy Baldwin, says, "Ignore love at your peril. For you never know when it will come again." Losing Blake would break my heart beyond repair. But that is how I know I dare not ignore this love. It draws upon me and replenishes me, without end.

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