

Who's



Daddy?

Yer



*Gay Writers Celebrate
Their Mentors and
Forerunners*

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that bodies, performing bodies especially, carry these paternal sparks across time and generations. Hopefully, these young artists will all outlive me by thirty years, and in the same ways as I carry a bit of Ginsberg or Wilde or Whitman in me, they carry some of my performances, teaching, politics, and joy forward.

There is such an exquisite conversation that goes on between this complex present that we occupy as it swaps notes with the past and the future, with the dead and the not yet born. Those jumper cables are truly electrical and singing as all those tongues and beds and words and performances that preceded us keep pulling us forward to the future.

Caliban

Dave King

Gay-boy friendship, pre-gay: what curious magnetism draws us to each other, even before we've acknowledged the sex? Recalling the little coterie that orbited my friend D in those years, I think of dancing in our dorm rooms. I think of learning the lyrics to *No, No, Nanette* and performing "I Want to Be Happy" impromptu on the staircase, long after lights out. My God, I remember a slew of dull winter evenings when other boys gathered to hear me read aloud from *Auntie Mame* and *The Wind in the Willows*, no one doing the obvious math, no one looking too deeply at his own soul. Then we'd return to the world and be mainstream again, some of us kissing or even fucking a hippie girlfriend, each of us donning the oddly tailored mantle of early-'70s masculinity. For the world then was one of communes and righteous politics, guitar feedback, both types of Deep Throat, Warren Beatty, H. R. Haldeman, and TM. How did a Y-chromosome fit into all that? And how did a Y-chromosome jibe with nostalgia fashions and unisex hair—so very neutering on pubescent boys—or with the supple sexless buzz of the drugs? In a few years we'd be seniors, and when our birthdays rolled past we'd rooster up and register for the draft. Already I'd spent years imagining the war, which I saw as a ghoulishly heightened Boy Scout Jamboree, set in a rainforest and calibrated to expose my failings:

my cowardice and lack of patriotism; also my little girl's throwing arm. The wandering eye I still believed I could keep secret.

Perhaps we all had such worries, we eight or so blithely accepting friends gathered for winter story hour. In the end, though, it was not Vietnam that took out a quarter of our number; a decade later came the virus. And in the valley of the shadow of childhood? No one was yet gay, and friendship was largely a matter of instinct. Each of us hid himself behind screen concealments; all of us trusted the scrim the others put up.

My friend D commanded a room. Outspoken and boisterous, he had a terrific laugh and strong opinions and an air of being fully himself, even at fourteen. And *flair—flair!*—which came down to a personal dress code, an iron will, and a cool walk I attempted to emulate. We looked nothing alike, but we had the same first name, and I was a competent if crude mimic. So is it really any wonder people saw us as one person?

I don't recall how we met. He'd entered our prep school the year before I did, and by the time I arrived he was part of the stew. For a while during my first term, we weren't yet friends, and I wandered the campus draped in the bleak identity I'd packed up and brought from home. Really, it was like some dry husk I stumbled around in, even as I attended classes or dragged my fat butt to the soccer field, even as I tried out for drama and band. Who knows how this husk appeared from the outside, but inside stood a boy who'd grown up shy and indifferently nurtured, who lacked the imagination to do other than succeed in school, who'd already mastered the fine art of being forgettable. Whose blandness and docility must have been convincing, as they went unquestioned, yet who nevertheless roiled with unexpressed . . . unexpressed *what?* Desire, certainly; that was central. And a decent sense of humor, which I was wary of revealing. But also bitterness and contempt and fury, a blunt sense of power and victimhood and need. Also ambition—inchoate and deeply buried—arrogance—buried deeper—and (does it even need stating?) a big chip on the shoulder. People described me as *nice*.

Had D also a secret soul: some measure of grief, those same longings? At fourteen, all I saw was charisma. I saw that walk, which took possession of the world. I saw confidence and insouciance, which bent the

universe to his will. His social ease: how he could enter a gathering. How he took on those foreign bodies: teachers, other students. How he'd launch into banter with any stranger at a concert, at a political demonstration or in a shop or on a bus or any of the places we went, me invariably tagging along. And how in conversation he'd tap lightly on a person's jacket to draw them in or emphasize a point. I'd been raised to keep to myself, but D courted intimacy and reaped bonhomie in return. It was a trick as magical as a sleight of hand.

I watched him reorder the planet to his priorities. He was the first person I liked who would carelessly skip class, and he made doing so irresistible. Small rebellion, of course, but I was an immature fourteen. Hour after hour we'd lie on his bed, listening to his records and drawing in pen and ink. Then D might decide he needed a cigarette, and out we'd head to where he wouldn't be caught smoking. The nearby riverbank or the little town, which had a restaurant and a candy store and a couple of junk shops. Picking up a brooch made with iridescent butterfly wings, D would hold it to his chest, then abruptly to mine, then he'd warble a line from a Nina Simone album. Outside the shop, he'd pin the brooch to my jacket, smoothing the corduroy over my tummy, and declare that I could *not* seriously defend *Jesus Christ Superstar* as art. And yes, looking back, I see how my sense of him was never objective, nor even correct. For what I felt then was no reasonably considered judgment, but the ardor of a boy who'd fallen under a spell.

For all I saw to adore in D, I can't say what he saw in me. Perhaps he wanted a sidekick, or maybe it really was the pre-gay gravitational pull. Maybe friendship itself is like crime: merely motive plus opportunity; and perhaps D was the maguffin. In any case, at some point he decided I was funny, for what's vividest in my memories is the project of making him laugh. Before long, he was promoting me as a wit, and it was as though he'd dubbed me a duke or some other nobility, for in my whole short life I'd been called *studious* and *well behaved* and even *gentle*, but no one had detected any interesting traits. Then D dowsed out the well-spring of personality, and the reaction was like a three-year drunk.

Of course, I was *not* a wit, not in any actual sense. I was a bottled-up sophomore who whispered snarky remarks. I could make fun of people's names and dirty up the lyrics to popular songs, and I could do puns and limericks and one or two funny voices. I could make faces when people's

backs were turned, and as my shyness diminished, I developed a gift for tart and childish imitation. Of course I could do bitchy.

Is it fair to compare this to coming out? I wouldn't get really laid until after high school, by which point I'd regained a tiny measure of gravitas; but the forsaking of inhibition began with the lovely follow spot of a friend's attention. Before sex or sexual identity, D midwived a version of me, pressing me to be born as *someone*. And so I was, emerging id-first and desperate—*desperate!*—to amuse.

No doubt a wiser boy would have resisted the challenge, but I hoisted my paltry arsenal and deployed what I had. A performance driven by fumbled uncensoring, for this wasn't maturity or insight; it was the Terrible Twos. In class and out, I gave vent to the contrary, the ornery, the arbitrary, the petulant, the flip, the arch, the high-handed, the irresponsible, the feckless and the critical; and if my aim was a penthouse aerie in Outrageous City, memory suggests that I crashed down more often at an abandoned barn near Obnoxious.

This is not a story of holy wildness (no Weather Underground, no heroin) but rather of bratty prep exhibitionism, in which pranks and petty larceny and juvenile meanness were the sum of the social rebellion. I can't feel much grief for the pranks or the larceny, the exam-time fire drills, liquor runs or filched property. Nor for the portrait of a benefactor held for ransom, nor for the breaking nor the entering. (An incident with a pitchfork is a somewhat different matter.) But I regret the meanness. I don't now see myself as an unkind person, but in courting D's laughter I preyed on weakness, and I couldn't stop. Whoever I could ridicule, I did—not cleverly, as we told each other, but mercilessly and without restraint. For I was so vulnerable to ridicule myself! It must have seemed that to lower my small rapier—even slightly—would mean losing my battle with forgettability.

If this had been prison instead of boarding school, I'd have been his punk; if there'd been sex, his ravenous piggy bottom. But our only jail was a fading New England prurience, so I became Mrs. Danvers to his teen Rebecca, guarding our closeness and our inseparability, winnowing our cohort, constructing a world in which we two were under siege. Beyond the campus lay true and genuine risk, but insulated as I was, I laid siege to the school and the world of adults. Indeed, I was fighting maturity itself, that looming agglomeration of *actual* battles, *actual* achievement, *actual* accountability, *actual* . . . sex.

I suppose it cost me an Ivy League education, and I'll pause here to salute the nice admissions officer who offered a glimpse of the conduct report submitted by my guidance counselor. I had to look up the word "vindictive" after leaving his office, but hitchhiking back from New Haven, I was picked up by a certified Beat who got me high and gave me a record album when he dropped me at my exit. And it could be I learned then what undergraduate school might have taught me: you reap what you sow.

To give Prospero his due, D's affection was genuine and his attention generous. If he egged me on, it was youthful appreciation, and that laugh of his could have shivered any wall. But he was not my oppressor, and attention will always be my weakness, though I control my hunger for it now. And in time, we grew up—I, of course, lagging behind. We'd almost finished high school when I sensed I no longer had to perform. When whatever I'd needed to prove I had proven; when I knew D trusted, even before I believed it myself, that there was more in the orchard than quips and barbs; that given the chance, sweeter fruit might be borne. We spent the summer together, then drifted apart.

Some folks do come out seamlessly, balancing *before* with an adjusted out identity. I think D was like this, for he was always—remains—absolutely himself (though again, my opinion's tinged by bedazzlement). But for me, that was not the way. Rooted deeply in caution, I had to take that dry husk to the woodshed and burn it. I had to lay waste to concealment, then scatter the ashes, for there was much to incinerate before I got to desire; the niceness and good behavior went up in the blaze. All the gentleness: *poof!* Then it was all or nothing; at least, it was for me. A battle royal, a jubilee, religious conversion, a Broadway show. A magic carpet ride, an oratorio, a marzipan feast.

Gay-boy friendships, no longer pre-gay. Wouldn't it be lovely if all of us declared together! A whole generation, holding commencement: sheepskins distributed, square hats wafting skyward, photos snapped, and loved ones shaking hands.

Instead, we'd run into each other unexpectedly, we old friends from school. The boy who always was quite a musician, the two who taught children's theater; the dancer, the orchid grower and the singer/waiter and the painter. And the costume designer; what a career *he'd* have had if he'd lived! Here we all were, in New York in its wild days, but for a

moment our old selves rose ghostlike around us. Two, three, maybe four years later, on a street in the village, dressed for cruising: a sudden encounter. Or at a restaurant among new companions or at a film.

Or dining by candlelight across from another man. And though there now should have been no question, sometimes those old scrim would totter back up, false and threadbare as a production outdated. The warm surprise of the greetings, the little shocks of familiarity and change. How quickly the war had ended, releasing us into lives we could choose for ourselves! A little gossip upon first spotting each other, the obligatory *you look great*. But longing, as those banalities went down, to move past the fibs of our shared adolescence, to state what—one more remark, a waiter hovering, the friend at the table following quietly along—what now seemed so obvious. Needing also to affirm something vital: I'm the same me, but grown up, maybe kinder. Definitely kinder. More honest now and happier, too! Blushing, *blushing!* And with this, the offer of a seat, a drink. The introduction of the patient friend. This person who, um, loves me—*loves me!* As I am. And with whom I'm in love, too. This is my boyfriend; well, there you go.

My First Poetic Mentor Was a Welshman Named Leslie

Timothy Liu

Leslie Norris was my first mentor. Fresh off of my mission, I came to BYU with a passion for poetry without actually having read much of it, only Sylvia Plath's posthumous volume *Ariel* and a handful of poems I'd encountered as a high school senior—Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Constantly Risking Absurdity" and ballads like "Sir Patrick Spence." I'd heard that Professor Norris was the official Poet-in-Residence, a non-Mormon transplanted from Wales, so one morning, I stopped by his office with three poems and asked him what he thought. After thumbing through them, he said, "Actually, these are not very good. But that doesn't matter. I've heard about you, and I believe you are a serious poet. That makes you one in ten thousand! Never forget that. Just remember that you are a poet whether you write good poems or bad poems." I was crushed by his response, rode my bike home in tears. I returned the next day with a new sheaf of poems and asked, "What about these?" After a brief interval that seemed an eternity, he said: "Something has happened to you. These are much better!"

These initial meetings took place in the fall of 1986. In the three short years that followed, I took every course and workshop that Professor Norris taught, from the English romantics to the modernists to workshops of every level, even sitting in on his graduate workshop in