Body Blows

Miller, Tim, Miller, Tim

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Miller, Tim and Tim Miller.
Body Blows: Six Performances.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/8472.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8472

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=184078
I am currently moving my butt all over the United States (from Salt Lake City to Durham, North Carolina!) doing my solo performance *Glory Box*. The show deals with the situation Alistair, my Australian partner of seven years, and I are facing in a country that gives lesbian and gay couples none of the “special heterosexual rights” afforded all straight married folks. These 1,049 marriage rights, according to the Federal General Accounting Office, include various property rights, health care access, inheritance privileges, and tax benefits. For binational gay couples like us, the BIGGIE of the rights that gay people are uniformly denied is the immigration right that all our straight pals get with their vast buffet spread of heterosexual privilege. Alistair and I face the likelihood that we will soon be forced to leave the United States when his student visa runs out and seek immigration asylum in Canada or the United Kingdom. As you can imagine, this gives a particular urgency to *Glory Box* and my national arts-activism shenanigans!
For almost seven years we have been dealing with the septic tank of homophobic American laws that determine how we can make a life together. This is quite a challenge on top of negotiating the garden-variety difficulties that any two men have trying to relate to each other. In 1997 Alistair’s application for a student visa was refused at the American consulate in Australia. Suddenly our lives were thrown into complete chaos. Alistair had to drop out of his MFA program in creative writing. His return plane ticket was no longer valid. We were kept apart for many months at great emotional and monetary expense. It was clear to me that my government had finally declared total war on the most intimate part of my private life as a gay American.

I do have to say that the worst of my experiences as a poster boy during the culture wars doesn’t hold a candle to the horrors of trying to live in the United States as a gay citizen in a binational relationship with Alistair. This experience of being threatened with exile has been so much worse than the attacks on my performance work during the NEA controversy ten years ago. Even in the darkest period of George Bush the First, I never thought that I, an American theater artist, not only would have my grants taken away but could eventually be forced to leave my country.

Since I have tried to stay true to my crazy notion that I should always perform about what is most truly on the front burner in my life, I wrote much of Glory Box during that period when Alistair and I were separated by the U.S. government. Naturally I am trying to get into the performance—into the telling—the steak tartare of feelings that this existential binational relationship is bringing up. Alistair and I have had to fling ourselves around the globe trying to get papers in order so that our love for each other could find a place to grow. You can forget luxuries like wall-to-wall carpeting and a room with a view. We have just wanted to be in the same time zone!

This sometimes overwhelming international dilemma has tapped me back into that faith I had as a tortured gay teenager—
that if I wrote about the hard stuff in my life, it just might make
the situation better. Maybe the writing cure could now help me
once again to get a lock on a very chaotic situation, the nagging
fear that at some point soon Alistair will be forced to leave my
country. I have never really lost this trust that the act of writing
down my story somehow could alchemically affect how the story
might end.

As I travel all over the Unites States and perform *Glory Box*,
I am trying to make my case to the nation that this violence and
injustice against lesbian and gay couples must stop. The jury is
still out. I spend about twenty-five to thirty weeks a year on the
road performing and trying to argue this case in theaters and
newspapers, on TV and the radio. When I go into a community
to do the show, it’s an opportunity to be a ruckus-raising agent
for change and a lightning rod for the local brew of activists and
citizens around issues of gay marriage and immigration.

This is something that solo performance, the ever lean-and-
mean culture tool, is especially good at. I assume before I get on
the plane that I am parachuting into a community where there is
precious little awareness about the gross injustice facing lesbian
and gay binational couples. I assume the local press has probably
never written about the subject. I assume that the local binational
couples (and there are always several, even in tiny communities)
are feeling isolated and freaked out by the Kafkaesque injustice of
U.S. law that threatens to destroy every one of these thousands
of lesbian and gay families.

This is a job for performance art!

What I have discovered is that I can parachute into Cedar
Rapids or Austin and point my bright, sweeping klieg light on this
injustice. I hit the ground running, ready to raise awareness, anger,
and action through the performances. The work starts long before
I get off the plane though. I work closely with the Lesbian and
Gay Immigration Rights Task Force (LGIRTF), a national orga-
nization, to help connect me with local binational gay couples or
other folks who have been active on the issue. There are four ways I hope *Glory Box* can energize and activate the communities in which I perform the show: I want to get people involved in the fight against human rights violations against gay people by getting them to join (or start) a local chapter of LGIRT and raise money; to lobby specific Congresspeople to become sponsors of the Permanent Partners Immigration Reform Bill, which would make U.S. law consistent with almost every other Western country in providing immigration rights for those in committed lesbian and gay relationships; to get virtually every person in the audience to sign a petition in support of the bill, which develops a database of people who have spent a night of their lives thinking about this issue as they watch the performance; and to maximize awareness in the community by having the show serve as a media catalyst for newspaper, TV, and radio stories. I use the crucial tenderized moment at the end of *Glory Box*, which is a very raw and emotional piece, to challenge the audience to do something so that this violence against lesbian and gay lives can stop. It is absolutely crucial for those many hundreds of people in any given city who see the show to get activated around the issue.

The road to performance art hell is paved with good liberal intentions. I am well aware that all my grassroots organizing, performance art agitating, and mass media opining will probably not make the United States join the civilized world any time soon. Most likely Alistair and I ultimately will be forced to leave this troubled country. There is a deeper human goal to all this work, though, beyond the practical, nuts and bolts activism. I am hoping the show can start to do some kinds of emotional and psychic chiropractic adjustments! I am asking the straight folks in the audience to do some heavy lifting and acknowledge their heterosexual privilege and begin to extend their empathy to lesbian and gay relationships. I am also using the show—as well as the urgency of Alistair’s and my situation—to ask lesbian and gay people to wake up to the fact that we are second-class citizens in our country. I
want the audiences, straight and gay, to begin challenging the millions of signs, signals, and laws our culture delivers that tells us same-sex relationships are worthless. This is a touchy, unjust, ticking bomb that needs to be defused if we are going to secure a more equitable future!

With that futurity hovering just beyond our grasp, I also need to admit that we are clearly going to have to engage beyond the stage in order to defuse that bomb. In addition to the script of Glory Box, I need to give you an example of a different kind of performance I did recently. It’s not a performance whose text is in this book. In fact, it wasn’t scripted and it’s very much an in-progress kind of thing. It’s a performance that any of us can do on a social stage at courthouses, city halls, or county clerks’ offices. It doesn’t take any rehearsal. On Valentine’s Day 2001 Alistair and I tried to get a marriage license. There are those who might think that celebrating Valentine’s Day by being refused a marriage license is not the most romantic way to mark the holiday. I suppose I can understand that sentiment, but personally I can’t imagine a more real, emotional, and tender way to escape from the Hallmark card platitudes of February 14. I wanted to mark Valentine’s Day with my partner of seven years by protesting how gay folks’ relationships are treated so disrespectfully in our country. I hope some day Alistair and I won’t need to spend our V-Day putting ourselves in the position where our relationship is refused validation by a governmental official behind bulletproof glass, but that’s life in America in the twenty-first century!

Since more straight folks choose to get engaged or married on Valentine’s Day than on any other day of the year, Marriage Equality California staged rallies all over the state to advocate for equal civil marriage rights for gay couples. Gathering outside the aforementioned courthouses, we wanted to draw attention to the injustice lesbian and gay partners face in our country by being denied those pesky 1,049 special heterosexual privileges of marriage.
Alistair and I went to the February 14 demonstration at the marriage license office at the Beverly Hills Courthouse. As gay couples and supporters huddled for support in the shadow of governmental buildings that do not respect our humanity, rally speakers spoke passionately against the injustice of not allowing gay and lesbian couples the right to marry. Then—the big moment—the couples who were planning to request a marriage license prepared to challenge the laws of the state.

Alistair and I joined many couples who were going to attempt to apply for a marriage license. First things first, we filled out the form. Immediately the sexism and homophobia of the document leapt out at us and we quickly crossed out the word “bride” and “corrected” the form so there were two grooms! We took turns writing down in our blocky letters our fathers’ names and what our mothers were called before they were married. This was so moving—this ritual of calling up the parents, putting our names and our love on the line.

Sticking close to the nice lesbian couple in front of us—I always look to dykes for moral support—we went through the metal detectors, approached the glassed-in processing windows, and gave our form to the official. It was refused, of course. She read from a form (they were prepared) and told us that in the state of California a marriage can only be between a man and a woman (who knew?!?!). The woman behind the glass, who was very sweet and seemed a little ashamed of her job this particular day, advised us to take it up with our elected officials. Always ready to climb on my soapbox, I said to her, “I know this is not your fault, but I want you to know that because we don’t have the same rights as straight Californians, my partner and I will be forced to leave the country next year.” She shrugged and tried to melt under the counter. We walked out the double doors clutching our rejected marriage license application.

I have never felt a more tangible denial of my equality than when I was told I couldn’t get a license while straight couples
breezed by around me. It was almost a ritual *performance* of how I am denied the human rights of relationship in my country, a surreal *rehearsal* of second-class citizen status. How clear things became having a bureaucrat explain to me that my relationship of seven years was worth nothing, while to my right a straight couple who seemed to have just met at a singles bar in Marina Del Rey got the seal of approval.

Well, that’s how we spent our Valentine’s Day. By the time we got home later that afternoon, we were too beat to go have the romantic dinner in West Hollywood. To stand there in front of the courthouse filling out the marriage license form with my husband Alistair had been very powerful for me but I was definitely ready for an early night. As we drove home down Venice Boulevard, a vision started to take form in my mind’s eye. I could see a time when filling out this marriage license form wouldn’t just be a para-theatrical activist gesture, doomed to rejection. There was a sweetness to imagine that some day in the future we might actually live in a country where gay people’s love would also be valued. I will leave you now as Alistair and I are driving home. Conjuring that future hovering beyond our grasp is going to require many such hopeful and quixotic acts from all of us, a thousand such fierce gestures—a thousand such *performances*—that dare to tell the truth that our love is worthy and our hearts are strong.

I have a big story to shout right now on stage doing *Glory Box* or in front of courthouses. It fills my memory. It’s a story of how I met a man from another land and how I want to be with him, but America doesn’t allow such things. I need to tell this story or I will go crazy. When I tell this story I can howl out the rage I feel both at our backward government and at my own shortcomings as a man and a lover. I can draw the attention to this stark injustice. Telling this story becomes a completely necessary act of saying what has happened as a means of negotiating, even securing, a more empowered relationship with an uncertain future.
My journeys with *Glory Box* have been a real confirmation to me of the potential power of performance and theater to really get a loud alarm bell ringing. As I travel the country and abroad doing the show, I have been reassured that what we do at these performance spaces and theaters can have a huge impact, a clear ripple effect, on both our inner selves and on our social identities.

(The set is a backdrop with a huge collage of maps from all over the world. Most of these maps come from Tim’s childhood subscription to National Geographic. To the right is a big, old hope chest, aglow in light. Tim enters and runs all around the stage. The followspot ballyhoos—Tim is pleased to have just learned this term during a technical rehearsal in the Midwest. It means the spot waves all around like Las Vegas or something—finally the spot hits Tim.)

Okay, Okay. I got to show you something.

I want to show you something very important. If I wait one more second my brain will explode all over you nice people in the front row and make a big mess. I want to show you my box.

I want to show you my glory box.

My partner Alistair is from Australia—this will loom large in the show. Alistair told me that in Australia what we here in the States call a HOPE CHEST, the thing that teenage girls put shit in to prepare themselves for the eventual servitude of marriage, in Australia, they call a GLORY BOX. Now, clearly, I am not a teenage girl (though I do share with that demographic an unwholesome obsession with *Dawson’s Creek!*), nonetheless I have decided that I need a glory box too. I’m going to keep in it all kinds of good things my culture gave me as a young gay boy to prepare me for my queer life ahead—the gay-positive role mod-
els, the encouragement of gay relationships, the after-school programs . . . HMMM. Well, since I actually didn’t get any of those positive things, instead I’ll put in the glory box the things I did get. I’m going to put in that glory box the hundreds of times I was called a sissy or faggot as a kid growing up on the streets of this country. I’m going to put in that glory box the thousands of signals I received from my culture that told me my relationships with other men aren’t worth shit and would never be acknowledged. I’m going to put in that glory box the zillion feelings related to the fact that since my relationship with Alistair is not acknowledged by my fucked-up country we may be forced to leave our home in the United States to go to a civilized country that does value gay people’s love, like Great Britain, South Africa, Australia, Germany, or Canada.

Oops, I’m getting ahead of myself. I have found, over many years of performing, that you should never put the overbearing political rant in the first forty-five seconds of the show. It’s much better to wait for at least one good joke and perhaps some cheerful nudity!

(Tim lounges odalisque-like on the hope chest.)

I recently moved my mom’s hope chest into my house. It is a big old cedar thing, heavy as a bank safe, smell as pungent as the day it was bought. When I was a kid, I was endlessly fascinated with this hope chest. Even the words themselves were a mystery. HOPE CHEST. I took these words literally. I was sure that they referred to an actual part of the body. If I looked in an anatomical reference book, I would see that HOPE CHEST was behind the sternum and to the left of the heart. We all know it’s there. I imagined that this was the place inside us, a place where we could put the things we hoped for.

I floated this notion out to my mom one afternoon after kindergarten as she was doing the ironing while watching Art Linkletter’s House Party on TV. “Mom?” My voice is small,
unformed, a tender flower on the side of a deserted road. Go with me on this, okay?

“Yes, dear.”

“Is a hope chest a place inside me? A place where I put things I hope for?”

My mom was preoccupied with her ironing and didn’t want to entertain the queries of her young queer son, but she did her best. She said, “Why, no, dear. A hope chest is something that was given to me when I was a girl. It’s there at the end of your dad’s and my bed. It was a special chest for me to put the things that I would need when I was married.”

This was not the answer I had hoped for. This seemed to say that the hope chest was for practical things, like dishes and linens. “What kind of things?”

“Oh, you know, practical things, like dishes and linens. That glass bowl there on the table was in the chest for years before your dad and I were married.”

This was sounding worse by the minute. I gave her one last chance.

“Didn’t you ever put things you hoped for in there?”

“Hmm. Well . . . yes . . . I always hoped that I would have a good little boy like you, and here you are.” I didn’t buy her mom-shtick one bit. “Maybe the little girl that you will one day marry already has a hope chest and she’s putting things in it to prepare for your marriage! Isn’t that a lovely thought?”

“Eew. I hate girls! I’ll never get married.”

“You do not hate girls and you will too get married. Now, darling, mother’s busy. Why don’t you go and have a graham cracker?”

Clearly, I wasn’t going to get a straight answer from my mom. So I went into my parents’ bedroom, heavily curtained against the hot Southern California sun. I sat on my mom’s hope chest at the foot of the bed, my little legs only reaching halfway down to the floor as they knocked against the cool front. The
wood was cool against my legs. The weight of my body made my thighs squish out flat against the wood, making my upper leg look big, fatty piggy big leg (I had a bit of a complex about my thighs when I was five). It looked like a frog’s leg. Or a girl’s! Which my brother told me was worse. I tensed the small muscles in my legs to make them look more butch. They bounced up and down against the cedar, preparing me for a future life of going to the gym and performing repetitive physical action as a means of covering up negative feelings about my body. That gets old, though, doesn’t it?

So I slipped down to the mashed, no-longer-deep-polyester-shag carpet and I opened the lid of the chest. I had looked in the hope chest many times before. This was one of my favorite rituals, almost as good as turning on the gas jet in the fireplace and waiting a good twenty seconds before throwing a match in and feeling the volcano blast of the natural gas singe the hairs on my arms and eyebrows.

I breathed the universe of the hope chest into my small nose. The tart smell of the cedar wood was delicious, dangerous, narcotic. I knew everything that was in there already; I’d cataloged it as carefully as if I were the youngest employee of the Smithsonian. The smart fake-chinchilla bolero jacket my mom had bought for her trip to Mexico City in 1957, the red leather high heels from that same vacation, the carefully wrapped-up front pages of the Los Angeles Times from the few days after Kennedy was shot, just the year before. On the front page the day after JFK’s funeral there’s John-John, who is almost exactly my age, saluting crisply. He’s wearing a sort of sailor-influenced ensemble, which was an outfit that I coveted until I was nine years old.

Peeking to make sure my mom was not headed this way . . .

(Tim stands in the hope chest, takes off his clothes.)

. . . I took off my clothes, my Beany and Cecil T-shirt and Hawaii-inspired mom-sewn baggy jam surfer shorts that she had made
from a ninety-nine-cent pattern from JCPenney. I carefully slipped one foot into the chest and the other soon followed.

(Tim sits in the box, hoping that the theater got one without splinters and big enough to fit his naked butt into!)

I rubbed that chinchilla over my body, trying to wake up my hope chest. In case you’re wondering, at the age of five my body was much smaller and I had no pubic hair. Then I lay down in the box, wrapped in chinchilla, and closed the lid of the hope chest over me. Now I knew five-year-olds like me were not supposed to climb inside boxes and close the lids. I had heard the horror story about the twins down the block who had gotten trapped in an old refrigerator and suffocated. Climbing into a hope chest and closing the lid on top of you seemed much different. This wasn’t a terrible thing you would read about in Reader’s Digest Drama in Real Life, this was more like something my favorite breakfast cereal character, Count Chocula, would do on a rainy afternoon while his mom was ironing his vampire capes.

My mom walked into the bedroom to hang up my father’s shirts. I knew this would be an ideal moment to frighten her, one of my main pleasures at the age of five. I could jump out with a flourish and a scary growl, her naked five-year-old son wrapped in chinchilla fur, and make her toss the shirts in a fright.

“Beware the wrath of COUNT CHOCULA!”

But I didn’t. I silently crossed my arms over my chest, my own hope chest inside me. I felt safe in there. I felt full of hope.

(A pause. Tim uncrosses his arms, eyes the audience, gets out of the hope chest and back into his clothes.)

Alistair and I were moving my mom’s hope chest recently into the house where we live in Venice Beach. Alistair was helping me load it into the hatchback of my tiny, jade-green Geo Metro.
My back straining against the weight of my mom’s chest, so to speak, I said, “Damn, this thing weighs a ton! Did your mom have a hope chest?”

Alistair, who is of a thoughtful nature, walked away from the car, leaving me holding the weight of my mother’s chest and pondered. “Hmmm. No, she didn’t have a hope chest, but she did have a glory box. I think that’s the same thing.” Then he tossed me the rope.

“A what?!” I started to tie the chest down.

“A glory box.”

“You’ve got to be kidding, right?”

“What?”

“You really call them GLORY BOXES?”

“Well, of course. What’s so strange about that?”

“It just sounds so nasty. So below the belt. It makes me want to fuck your glory box.”

Alistair looked around to see if anyone had heard. “Don’t be vulgar!” Alistair snapped the rope on my fingers.

Now that’s more like it! Glory box! This changes everything. A glory box transforms a bland Southern California maiden into a resplendent Australian Joan of Arc astride her glory box! I’ve decided that I need a glory box right now in my life—because Alistair and I are going through a hard time trying to stay together in a country that doesn’t want us—and I’m going to gather the things I need and put them into my glory box and make our future happen!

(Bright headlights slash the space, pinning Tim against the map backdrop. We’re in the operating-room starkness of a customs-immigration checkpoint.)

In the future. I am now in the future, okay? Got it, smart audience? Here in the future I’m waiting outside of Immigration and Passport Control at Los Angeles International Airport. I’m waiting for Alistair to get through U.S. Customs.
“What if they don’t let Alistair into the country?”
I’m being mugged by this thought.
“What if they don’t let Alistair into the country?”
I have quickly breezed through the U.S. citizens’ gate after getting off the plane from Sydney and I’m waiting now for Alis-tair to get through the slow-moving foreign nationals line. I spot his lanky handsome self and give a wave.

The two swoops of light brown hair that fringe either side of his forehead are a curtain, a theatrical gesture always halfway in the process of going up on the second act. Alistair has moved through his life with the graceful surprise of a tender young man who couldn’t completely believe that he had actually managed to escape from his family, twelve years of Roman Catholic boys’ school, and remote Western Australia to make a life with me in California.

His sweet vulnerability has opened up a place in me that I thought I had put in cold storage long ago. This young man has taken a big chance in his life and let his love for me pull him from one end of the world to the other.

The faith and tenderness I have seen in his face each time he has looked up at me from a sleepy morning pillow in London or New York or Sydney almost overwhelms me.

How can this man trust me so? How can he be so crazy to link his life with mine? Doesn’t he know what damaged goods I am? Someone should tell him! Doesn’t he know how fucked-up I am? Doesn’t he know how scarred I am by what happened to me when I was nine years old?

(Following a gesture of Tim’s arm, a stab of diagonal warm light bisects the stage.)

It was a day of judgmental Twinkies being smashed in my face. I was nine years old. I was walking down Russell Street with my friend Scott—he was a second cousin of President Richard Nixon and we lived in Whittier, the president’s hometown. So you can
see, Republicans have been fucking with me for as long as I can remember. We walked, free-associating as young boys will do. We walked by a house that was widely regarded as the most tasteful in our neighborhood, much respected for its impressive series of ceramic elves decorating the winding walkway to the front door!

Scott said to me, “When I grow up, I’m going to marry that cute girl in our class Gail Gardener and we’re gonna live in that house with the ceramic elves.” Then Scott looked at me as if he thought he deserved a ninety-nine and a happy face on a spelling test.

This was a new subject and I sensed that it meant trouble. I bought some time and walked silently along, my *Lost in Space* lunch box clanking against my leg. *My Lost in Space* lunch box filled with my favorite lunch. A sandwich, made with Wonder Bread of course, and layers of delicious Jif smooth peanut butter and Welch’s grape jelly with a generous crunchy handful of Fritos corn chips in between. (MMM, all that delicious sugar, oil, and salt! Everything a young American needs to grow strong.) Next to my Will Robinson, played by the adorable tow-headed Billy Mumy, thermos was a special treat: a Twinkie in its crisp, confident plastic wrapper.

I knew I was making a mistake before I even opened my mouth. “But, Scott, when I grow up, I want to marry you and live in the house with the ceramic elves!” He looked at me as if I had suggested that we tap dance together to the moon.

“What! Boys can’t get married to each other. Everybody knows that.”

“Why not?”

“They just can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

Clearly, logic wasn’t working so Scott pushed me hard with both hands, knocking me into the deep dusty ivy of my Congregationalist minister’s front yard. We all knew rats lurked and
prospered in the dark gnarly labyrinth of the ancient ivy. I drowned in the dirty green.

Scott jumped on me, looking around to see if anyone had heard me ask him to marry him. “Take it back! Say you don’t want to marry me and live in the house with the elves!”

“I won’t take it back!”

“Take it back, or I’ll give you an Indian burn.” He pinched my side hard and then grabbed my wrist with both hands and twisted in opposite directions. I screamed.

“Do you take it back?”

“I won’t take it back!”

He Indian-burned my other wrist. I probably could have fought him off, but part of me had longed for some kind of closeness with Scott ever since kindergarten. Being tortured by him would have to do. You’ve all been there. My lunch box had fallen open near my head, revealing the Twinkie in all its cellophane splendor. Scott got a horrible idea and grabbed the Twinkie in his little fist.

“Take it back or I’m going to jam this Twinkie in your throat and kill you!”

“I won’t take it back!” The strength of my high-pitched voice surprised me. “When I grow up, I’m going to marry you and live in the house with the ceramic elves!”

A look of shock and frustration passed like bad weather across Scott’s face. Scott shoved the Twinkie into my mouth and held his small dirty palm over my lips. I exploded with cellophane and Twinkie goo. Now, I knew that even more than climbing into boxes with lids, kids weren’t supposed to suck on cellophane. I took the warnings on the dry-cleaning bags seriously. I knew I’d reached my Twinkie limit and I would have to take it back. Fortunately, my oldest brother had just taught me the week before a special trick. Whenever anyone is tormenting you and wanting you to be untrue to yourself and take something back, all you have to do is cross your fingers and put them behind your back. This
erases it. In case you thought this stopped working in childhood, it didn’t. It still works in adult life, especially around relationship issues! I quickly crossed my fingers behind my back.

“Alright! I take it back.” Scott got off of me. He looked so strange. He kicked me, grabbed his math book and banal Bonanza lunch box, and stormed off to school and the rest of his life filled with petty disappointments and three wives who would fear him. (Don’t ask me how, I just know!)

I lay there on my back, pinned to the earth. Surrounded by primordial ivy dust and Twinkie. I pulled my crossed fingers from underneath my back and held them up to the sky. The crossing of those fingers negated my “I take it back,” my one triumph over his small tyranny. I held them up to the hot California sun, and as I repeated the words they gathered steam inside me. “I will never take it back. I will never take it back. I will never take it . . .”

(Tim crosses back to the customs-immigration area.)

. . . back at Customs, Alistair is just a few people back in the line behind what promised, hopefully, to be a friendly female Customs and Immigration officer. (We thought we might have better luck with a woman officer. You gotta have a system!) Since meeting in London in 1994, Alistair and I have flung ourselves all over the world to try to find a way to make a life together. In spite of a Sears catalog of differences between us—nationality, age, accent, music (his Trip Hop CDs versus my Broadway musical soundtracks, that almost did us in!)—we consistently found ourselves pulled closer and closer on the ever shaky earth. That meeting in London was followed by a rendezvous in Glasgow, Scotland (city of Alistair’s father’s birth), an assignation in New York, and finally a home together in LA. This particular journey to Sydney had been purely to extend his student visa so that we could gain a little breathing time. So this little piece of paper that will give us six months more of our life together is costing us about twelve thousand dollars. I’m sending the bill to the White House!
Alistair and I have been flying through a day and a night and a day from Sydney. At this point we both have bags under our eyes bigger than our carry-on luggage crammed under the seat in front of us.

As soon as we got on the plane, Alistair and I had done what we could to make ourselves COZY! The pursuit and attainment of coziness is a crucial ideological underpinning of our relationship. As we walked onto the 747 we each grabbed eight blankets and eleven pillows—more than our share, but we suffer in so many other ways! Then we pulled up the armrest, upholstered our seats with the pillows, put a blanket over our laps, “cozed” and cuddled close, kissed a little, and acted like we were normal people! What nerve! I don’t know if you’ve noticed that when two dykes or two fags act like normal people and show their affection in public, that intimacy sort of crackles through the cabin. It’s almost as if the captain had made a special announcement over the PA system of the airplane.

“Attention. This is Captain Straight Whiteman. Welcome to Flight 222, nonstop service from Sydney to Los Angeles. Would everyone please gawk at the Australian and American flaunting their disgusting love in row 41?”

The entire men’s soccer team from Knoxville, Tennessee, wheels around and stares. In spite of the stares of the Men of Tennessee, it does feel like international air travel is one of the few homophobia-demilitarized zones available to us. There are those federal laws against making nasty jokes plus everyone is scared the plane might fall out of the sky so it keeps them on good behavior.

The 747 whooshed endlessly over Micronesia while they showed the seventh of eleven movies on the flight, the one I was most looking forward to, Free Willy 2. I had my headset on as I waited for that thrilling phallic moment when the whale jumps over the wall. It’s a liberation narrative, let’s face it. I looked over and saw that Alistair wasn’t watching Free Willy 2 and in fact he was looking a little green about the gills.
“How ya doin’?” I asked him.

“I’m okay. I’m just pretty scared of how this immigration stuff is all going to go off.”

The large pink tuxedoed killer whale had finally made his presence felt.

“What’ll we do if something goes wrong and they don’t let me in?” Alistair says. “Our whole life is in LA. I can’t just go back to Australia. What if they don’t let me in like in ninety-seven when they wouldn’t give me my visa and we were apart for so long while I was stuck in Australia?”

Now, I have to admit that I wanted to get back to *Free Willy 2*. But let’s be fair to me for a moment, shall we? Alistair and I had been processing this anxiety for weeks! I’m not proud of it, but I said a little dismissively, “We’ll-Be-Fine!” with that annoying American Optimism that makes Americans seem like pampered, retarded children to the rest of the fucked-over world. I repeated the words, kissing Alistair in time with each word. “We’ll-Be-Fine!” But now I’m on a roll. “Fuck *Free Willy 2!* It’s so unfair. We’re not doing anything wrong. This double standard totally sucks. . . .”

*(As Tim winds up into a big rant, the stage turns deep, capillary-busting red.)*

“Just because we’re two gay men, we can’t do what all our straight friends can do—get married and get a green card. The INS just rolls out the red carpet for the fabulous heterosexuals exercising their goddamned privilege. I am so pissed that the fucking U.S. government does not recognize our relationship. Do you know, Alistair, I was on the Internet last night, on the Lambda Legal Freedom to Marry Web site. Do you know there are 1,049 rights, ‘special heterosexual rights’ that our straight friends get the instant they get married that you and I will never have even if we are together the rest of our lives? I get so mad! I believe right now that for heterosexual people to get married while gay people can’t
is a completely immoral act. As immoral an act as going to a restaurant that doesn’t serve black people, joining a country club that won’t allow Jews. I feel so oppressed by THE TYRANNY of heterosexual hegemony and the complete denial of my civil right of marriage! ARARRGHH!

In case you were wondering, this was the overbearing political speech I had referred to at the top of the show . . .

(Whew! Lights restore back to normal.)

. . . and Alistair had heard my stump speech too many times before. “Tim, it’s just me here. Let’s not start. I need to get some sleep. Okay?”

“Okay.” I indulged a quick sulk at my rant being interrupted, only a 3.4 on the Sulk-O-Meter. Then I tried another approach. I slipped a hand under the blanket that covered Alistair’s lap and began to creep my way finger by finger below that more thrilling equator of the waistband of his baggy Dolce & Gabbana pants.

I felt the rise and fall of my lover’s belly, the skin warm and reassuringly full of breath as I let my palm rest there. The stomach could be such a battlefield for men: SUCK IT! BUST IT! CUT IT! CRUNCH IT! Alistair and I had recently begun a campaign to claim the flesh in each other’s perfectly reasonable stomachs as a new site of sexiness. It just seemed ridiculous that after years of sleeping together, spooning in bed, we would touch each other’s bellies and we were still sucking them in! Let’s vow never to do that again! Come on! “Belly Liberation Now! You have nothing to lose but your Ab-Busters!” (This is a digression, I know, friends tell me I should cut it, but I think it’s important!)

Circling a caress around his navel, I made a Munchkin-Land yellow brick road spiral outward, heading further south. I dove down all the way to the South Pole and carefully cradled Alistair’s soft cock in my hand. I think the soft penis is highly underrated. That moment of vulnerability in the penis touches me somewhere quiet, reminds me how fragile and susceptible men’s bodies really
are. There’s something so cheerful, so accessible, so avuncular about a man’s soft dick. Now I know there are certain academic discourses about the cock as sword, phallus as weapon, etc. But that kind of rhetoric crashes against the sweet reality of the recumbent, melancholic, almost Chekhovian, soft dick. You can quote me on that. A soft penis is much more like a panicked Clark Kent searching madly for a phone booth to do his makeover. I gently stroked and coaxed Alistair’s soft dick to see if this was indeed a job for Superman. Alistair raised one brow and shifted his hips out of my orbit. Once again I was not going to become a member of the Mile High Club; for this trip was not for pleasure.

I had another sulk, a 7.8. To console myself, I went back to muttering about the tyranny of heterosexist hegemony and the complete denial of my civil right of marriage. This made me feel better.

Ya know, I talk a lot about this marriage stuff these days. I’m going to keep talking about it as long as lesbian and gay folks’ relationships are under attack in America, but the truth is the one time a man asked me to marry him, all I could say was no.

(Tim moves close to the audience to confess and conspire.)

It was my ex-boyfriend John in 1982. We had broken up the year before when I was twenty-two. A few months after we had broken up John began to have some health problems: skin trouble, night sweats, blood not clotting, all the scary symptoms of what very soon we would immediately recognize as the early signs of AIDS. Almost a year after we had split, John slipped a letter under the door of my crummy apartment on Avenue B and Fourth Street in New York and asked me to marry him. It might seem strange to you that he would ask someone he had broken up with months before to marry him, but John needed to get a clear answer of whether I would ever be his man.

I said no. I wasn’t ready to hitch my Manhattan egotroph grubbing star to anybody at that time in my life. John had his
answer and knew he should give up on me. But some part of me also gave up on myself. At the age of twenty-three I was terrified that I would never be able to commit my love to another man. Sure, the next year I met my boyfriend Doug and we would be together for thirteen years. We would be as much one another’s husbands as I could ever imagine being, but we never actually wed. I don’t know why. I know it’s too late now. Just like it was too late for John and me. John, who has been dead these many years. So I am left with this one proposal in my life—a young man on the Lower East Side asked me to wed and all I could say was NO. Why would it be so hard for me to say those words I DO? Almost as hard as I LOVE YOU.

I mean, I feel practically married to my partner Alistair. For seven years we have loved and tamed each other well, but we struggled in the early years of our relationship to be able to say the words I LOVE YOU to each other. It was very hard for us. Well, that’s not quite true. Actually, I had struggled for years to say “I love you.” I am not an easy date. If you take one message away from the show take this one—WASPS TAKE WORK!

Why was it so hard for this WASP to wrap my lips around those three little Anglo-Saxon words? Maybe because it’s much easier to just wrap my lips around Alistair’s juicy Aussie dick? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but when you say “I love you” when your mouth is full of hot Aussie cock, the words just come out all garbled. You might as well be asking for a cheeseburger. Plus, I don’t think you should say the words I LOVE YOU unless you’re sure that you will mean them for a minimum of thirty-six to forty-eight months. They need to have a longer shelf life than a quart of milk! And what if you say them to someone and they don’t say them back? That’s happened to me. It’s horrible! I don’t want to toss the jewels to someone unless I’m pretty sure I’m gonna get them back, maybe with a little compound interest! For this reason, I kept those words locked away for the first two years of our relationship and didn’t say them to Alistair, even though I did love
him, and even though he had come from the other side of the world to be with me.

There came a point when this state of affairs was ridiculous, even for a fucked-up person like me. I had to acknowledge that I had a disability. I had the speech impediment peculiar to the male of our species—this tremendous difficulty in translating powerful feelings within into tangible spoken language. I would do whatever it took to work through this and learn how to say “I love you.” I’m a systems kind of guy, so I thought I could use my theater voice exercises to teach myself how to say “I love you.” I LOVE YOU! I began practicing saying the words I LOVE YOU to my favorite photograph of Alistair. It’s the one from Halloween 1995 and Alistair is wearing my dad’s sailor suit from World War II (don’t ask!). I looked at Alistair long and lean in the Navy uniform my dad had worn in the South Pacific and I said, “I love you!” Like an actor practicing his lines.

I knew I had to ease into saying the words real-time. I’d whisper the words when Alistair was nearby, but when he couldn’t actually hear me. He would be washing dishes or listening to music on his Walkman and I would nonchalantly come by to put away some towels and I would whisper out of the corner of my mouth, “I love you.”

Alistair began to worry that I was going mad with all this mysterious mumbling. He confronted me and I was forced to let him in on what I was doing. He thought it was a little weird, but it was okay if I needed to practice as long as he knew when the sessions were.

This began the most fruitful period of I LOVE YOU practice. We would begin designating I LOVE YOU rehearsal sessions. Now I wish I could say that I’m making up this part of the show to make it a better story or something . . . BUT I’M NOT! Alistair and I would be lying in bed reading (Alistair is the only person I know who actually reads Foucault for before-bed pleasure reading), and I would lean over and ask if we could practice
now. He would set his book, *Discipline and Punish*, down and I would whisper in his ear, “I Love You.” You know what, over time I became less afraid of the tartness, of the bite of those scary words. Maybe this old dog can still learn some new tricks. If I can say “I love you” maybe I can also find the way my lips can say some other things, like “Will you marry me?” or “I do.” Not that we really want to support a corrupt, irredeemable, bourgeois institution or that I would be allowed to marry Alistair even if I could say the words! But, unless I can say them, I’ll never know, will I?

Will . . . You . . . MMMMMM . . . MMMMMMM . . . MMMM

*(That delicious “MMM” pulls Tim back to the center stage Customs and Immigration area.)*

Meanwhile, back in Customs in the future, I am waiting for Alistair, who is stuck in a line that hasn’t moved in a week. I decide to use the time productively by having an anxiety attack. “OH, GOD, WHERE’S MY PASSPORT? I’VE LOST IT! I’M DOOMED!!” I don’t even know why I’m worrying, I’ve already made it through Customs and don’t even need my passport. There it is, right where I left it in my back pocket. But how can I be sure it’s my passport? Maybe someone has switched it on me? I pull out my passport to make one hundred percent sure that it’s mine. I open the document up and look at the picture. It’s me. WHEW. It’s a good photo. Winsome smile. Good hair day. I’d gone to some lengths to get this good photo, the five separate photo shoots. The trip to West Hollywood to the b/w studio with the flattering “Golden Era of MGM musicals” backlighting. Anyone would say this is a good passport photo, but if this is such a good passport photo why do my brown eyes look so sad? I look into my eyes and I see a hurt there, a trail of clumsy love and dead friends stretching far behind me. I know if I had a visa stuck in my passport for every time I had said no to love or shoved overboard some feeling that scared the shit out of me, if all those visas
were in my passport it would be as thick as the Manhattan phone book.

I close the passport and stroke the smooth plastic of the cover with the American eagle on the cover. What an unhappy creature that eagle is! If you have a passport, when you get home tonight take it out and look at it. This eagle looks right out of the Third Reich with its butch “oh, this is my good side” profile, clutching those razor-sharp Ninja arrows, one to pierce the heart of each of our deepest aspirations. And in the other talon is a limp olive branch. I know, I paid attention in civics class, but this is clearly just an afterthought that some spin doctor threw in to soften the image. This is a VERY unhappy bird! I look at my U.S. passport in my hand and at Alistair waiting in line and I think to myself, “Wait, this is crazy. Why can’t I just toss my passport to Alistair there in line? Share it with him. Just like I share my life and my bed with him. Why can’t I share my nation with him? Invite him to share my citizenship with me?” Never forget, this is what every straight person can do and no gay person can—get married, get a green card, and share their country with someone they love. If we could do this we’d already be home. Alistair would already have a green card or have become a citizen long ago. We would have gone through the quick line, gone home, dropped off our bags, gone to the beach, had a Jody Maroni Sausage Kingdom chicken chorizo sandwich, gone home, and had quick sex before sleeping off the jet lag for sixteen hours!

But since I can’t share my country, share my citizenship with my love, I see my partner of many years looking scared to death stuck in a U.S. Customs line with his Australian passport clutched over his heart. His Australian passport with a kangaroo and an emu on the cover. Let’s compare these two passports, shall we? These are HAPPY animals, CHEERFUL animals! That emu and the kangaroo seem like they are planning a BBQ down under. They’re preparing the tasty Vegemite canapés. They’ll give everyone one of those fifty-gallon-drum cans of Foster’s lager. They
want all their guests to get laid, but our cranky American eagle just doesn’t want anyone to have a good time.

Was it only two nights before that we were still in Australia, laying together in an airless hotel room in Sydney, hot as hell, summer in February down under, in King’s Cross Hotel? We had had pre-international-travel comfort sex and had both just come. Our bodies were still dewed with sweat, making our skin stick together with a tiny wet sound. Forcing myself to wait the required ninety seconds post-orgasm that I know a sensitive guy like me needs to wait before a new non-intimacy related activity can be introduced, eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine . . . (I can hold out the whole time. I took a workshop.) . . . ninety! I let my arm dangle off the edge of the bed, retrieving my map of the world from the floor, then spread it out before us like a vast, laminated, open-all-night midtown Manhattan delicatessen menu.

“God, the world is a big fuckin’ place,” I whispered with a whistle as my eyes darted over the colorful map from the Bering Strait to the Himalayas. I covered my eyes, pretending that I was preparing myself for Double Jeopardy, “World Geography for a Thousand.” “The capital of the Sudan . . . What is Khartoum? The capital of Slovakia . . . What is Bratislava? What if you could live anywhere, where would it be? Belgium? A little boring, but they have that cute pissing boy everywhere. Ecuador? My brother lived on a volcano there for a year doing his Ph.D. Kathmandu? I know someone with a café there. Where would you want to live?”

Alistair looked as if I had just asked him the stupiddest question that anyone could have asked him. He said, “How can you ask me such a stupid thing? You know we need to live in the States for your work. Even though the U.S. doesn’t want us here, even though the U.S. treats its gay people like shit. Even though my countries, Australia or the U.K., actually respect gay people and would give us immigration rights. We need to be in the States because of you. I don’t care where we live as long as we’re together.”
Oops. Having been called on my usual shit, I tried to buy some time by looking intelligent and tracing the outline of Madagascar with my left index finger. Don’t try this, it never works. I’ve always loved maps. A lot of these maps here on my impressive set are maps I’ve had since I was a kid and got my first subscription to *National Geographic*. “Lands of the Bible.” Here’s a New York map from the day when I first set foot in Manhattan as a teenager. Staten Island didn’t exist then. I loved board games with maps too. Candyland, the Game of Life, but I especially liked war games with maps. I guess it was one of the only places where my sissy self got to march to the approved martial parade: Stratego with its vaguely Napoleonic, Eurocentric map. Risk. What a fucked-up game! Risk taught generation after generation of young Americans how to fight the Cold War. How to mass your troops on the Soviet border for the final conflict. Monopoly—the sickest game ever created by late capitalism. What did Monopoly teach ten-year-olds but how to exploit the poor? How to charge as much rent as possible? I LOVED THESE GAMES! Some part of me, and not a small part either, believed that if I could learn how to play these games, if I could get blue or red Stratego pieces around the bombs, array my painted blue Risk squares cleverly along the border of the Ukraine, and most important, get the crucial two red hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place, then no one could fuck with me. I would never end up becoming a casualty of commerce or war. I think this is why I have often run my cavalry roughshod over the feelings of people I love. As I had just done, in fact, with my incredibly stupid question to Alistair the night before we were trying to get him back into the United States.

“I’m sorry, that was so stupid. I get freaked out too.” I kissed his eyes as a way of apologizing.

“I get so scared,” he whispered, turning his face away from the barrage of kisses. “What if it’s like in ninety-seven when the U.S. wouldn’t let me in? That almost destroyed us. Our whole life is in LA. What would we do then?”
“I promise you, it’ll be okay,” I said, into Alistair’s ear. “Why wouldn’t they let you in? We’re not doing anything wrong. We have the visa. We have the affidavit of support. I got a feeling this is gonna be fine. Trust me.”

We kissed as we rolled over the map, our bodies crushing South America over Central Europe. South became East. North became West. The love and desire inside us melted these uncompromising boundaries. These noisy paper tectonics, courtesy of the National Geographic Society, crackled loud in our ears as we got ready to make love one more time, my hands on Alistair’s skin. My hands charting his boundaries . . . My hands . . . my hands . . .

(Tim is caught in a follow spot as the stage goes dark and walks slowly into audience.)

My hands . . . my hands . . .
My hands have been slapped a lot in my life.

(Tim takes an audience member’s hand in his and regards their palm.)

Most people think you learn about someone by reading the palm of the hand, but I think we can learn just as much from the back of our hands. You just need to be able to see the echo, the imprint of the times that that person’s hand has been slapped.

My hand got slapped when I reached my hand into the cookie jar for just one more.

My hand got slapped when my first boyfriend was queer-bashed when I was eighteen. They yelled at him “Die Faggot Die” as they stabbed him nine times in the neck with an ice pick outside of a gay bar in Garden Grove, California.

My hand got slapped when certain right-wing congressmen said that no lesbian or gay artists should be able to raise their voices in America.

My hand got slapped very hard in fifth grade when I cut holes in the pockets of my pants. Neat Virgo holes here in my faggy
maroon cords. I did this for a good reason, so I could put my fifth-grade fingers through those holes and touch my fifth-grade dick and balls during English lessons, subject-verb agreement. Now, this didn’t hurt my command of the English language. I speak English very well. I have written a book. I’m a professor. My mom discovered my shame when she was hanging the washing up in the backyard to dry on the clothesline. She discovered the holes when she pulled the pockets inside out to dry better in the sun. She slapped my hands and said to me, “Don’t fiddle! Don’t fiddle! Don’t fiddle!”

FIDDLE? I am always getting caught, caught red-handed.

*(Tim heads back on stage, which floods with bright-as-noon Montana sunlight.)*

We’re here in Montana. Bozeman, Montana. It’s 1997 Lesbian and Gay Pride Weekend in the state of Montana. BIG SKY PRIDE! I am here to perform for Montana Pride. Montana is a big state, about the size of western Europe, so people have to drive for twelve hours to get to Pride in Bozeman. There are about eight or nine hundred lesbians and gay men from around the state here. There are also about eight or nine hundred other people here to celebrate Gay Pride. The Montana militia has sent a bunch of folks. This was their fifteen minutes of fame what with the FBI stand-off that summer. The KKK has representatives from twelve counties in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. The White Aryan Nation has sent two busloads from Coeur d’Alene. We’re all one big happy family here in America and we’re all together to enjoy Montana Lesbian and Gay Pride. There are more pickup trucks with gun racks in the back than I have ever seen in my entire life. Unfortunately not one of them belongs to a butch dyke. I personally believe that lesbians are the only people who should be allowed to possess firearms in America. This is my version of gun control. It’s been tense here, bomb threats, Montana State Police with telescopic rifles on the roofs of buildings on Main Street as
we marched. This is one of those gigs I do in America, like in Chattanooga, where the police warn me for my safety to never stand in front of windows while the protesters wave their Confederate flags as the audience arrives for the show.

I am walking to a lesbian and gay wedding in Bozeman, Montana. I have done my performance the night before and now I’m going to take part in the last event of Pride weekend.

I am walking across a street in Bozeman on the way to the wedding and I can feel Alistair’s hand in mine, his long cool fingers woven with mine. We’ve been through a lot in the last years. We’re doing pretty good in 1997. We’ve gotten so much closer. Dealt with shit, I say “I love you” now without any rehearsal required. Everything is pretty good except for one thing. Alistair is not here with me. No Yellowstone vacation for us. Alistair is on the other side of the world being told by my government that he is not welcome here. He does not get to be in Montana holding the hand of his lover, boyfriend, husband, partner, I don’t care what you call us. The U.S. consulate won’t let him into the States, has rejected his student visa, his return ticket is no good now, and he has had to drop out of university because he’s missed the beginning of the term and our lives are falling apart thanks to the U.S. government and I am walking across a street in Bozeman, Montana.

Two men in a pickup with a gun rack in the back window pull up and stop next to me. I know what’s coming. I don’t have to call the psychic friends network. What’s coming is so predictable. What’s coming are “F”s.”

Fucking.
Faggot.
Fruit.
Fairy.
Freak.

They’re predictable, but they’re scary too, like an angry dog straining at its leash. I know that those F’s were usually followed
by something more concrete—a rock, a bottle, maybe even a piece of concrete. Sure enough, a half-empty or, depending on your worldview, half-full bottle of Colt 45 Malt Liquor leaves the passenger-side window as it’s flung at me. This was not an individual serving, this was a Sunday morning family-size bottle of Colt 45. It flew through the air, its geometry perfect. I could admire it for a moment even under these circumstances as it made a graceful arc and hit me direct on my right hand. My red, red hand—redder now from the hot blood dripping down my fingers. The bottle bounced and shattered at my feet. It’s not too bad, five or six stitches tops, I just hope the guns stay in the gun rack.

I would like to say that at this moment I became homo superhero. I would tear off my clothes and instead of my vulnerable naked flesh, there would be an ugly superhero unitard costume. I would jump on the cab of their truck, kick the windshield in, and drag these two assholes across the broken glass. But I didn’t do any of those things. I’m not strong enough, or dumb enough to do that. I wish I could be like my friend Mark in Iowa City. When someone yells “FAGGOT!” at him on the street, he has a commitment to immediately dropping his pants and underwear, turning his back to them, spreading his butt cheeks and shouting, “Yeah, I am a big faggot. Why don’t you come here and lick my pussy!” I just can’t do that. I guess I just don’t have that spirit of Iowa in me. I just bowed my head and walked quicker, a deer frozen in the oncoming headlights. Well, the light changed and the men in the truck lost interest in me. They threw one or two more F’s and then went on their way. I rubbed the blood, and the growing green and purple and red on my hand, my hand which just a moment before had been holding Alistair’s. His hand slips into mine and the world goes mad. It’s almost like they could see Alistair’s hand in mine. It’s not enough that our country has tried to destroy our relationship, these men in the truck still want to stick our hands in the frying pan, hold our hands to the flame as I cross a beautiful street in Montana made ugly by these men’s hate.
Well, I wasn’t much in the mood for going to a wedding now, but what else could I do? So off I went.

My hand aching for the absence of Alistair’s hand in mine.

My head aching from the harsh ricochet of those F’s.

My heart aching for these dozen lesbian and gay couples getting ready to bind their lives in an old school gymnasium in Bozeman, Montana.

*(One last time Tim returns to Customs and Immigration.
Uh oh.)*

Alistair is next in line at Customs. He makes a shy smile and winks as he finally approaches the immigration officer and hands her his passport. She runs it through the scanner without even looking at him, and then looks through its pages.

“Business or pleasure, Mr. McCartney?”

“I’m a student,” Al replies, shifting from foot to foot. “I’m here for study. I’m here to do an MFA in creative writing at Antioch University in Los Angeles.”

The immigration officer suddenly looks down at her computer screen.

*(Stage goes dark, leaving Tim in a follow spot. Two headlights pointed at the audience begin to glow.)*

It’s not a big look, but it’s enough for me to know something bad is about to happen. She gestures to the armed immigration officer standing nearby, then looks directly at Alistair and says, “There’s an irregularity in your request for a student visa. We have reason to believe that you have developed significant ties to an American citizen and that you will be a high risk for not leaving the U.S. at the end of your studies. Therefore, you are being denied entry to the U.S. and will be returned to Australia on the next plane. Please pick up your belongings and go along with this officer.”
I can’t breathe. I’m suddenly in a country that has no air for us. I tell myself I have to do whatever it takes to get one more breath. If I can just get one breath in, then another, then another.

Alistair says, “There must be a mistake in your records. I have a visa.”

“There’s no mistake, Mr. McCartney. Please go along with this officer.”

I have no trouble breathing now. Great hyperventilating gasps rip into me. I drop my bag to the ground, cross the red line, and walk toward the immigration cop who is grabbing my boyfriend by the arm.

“Is there a problem here? Mr. McCartney is my . . . friend. I’m also his sponsor for his student visa.”

“Please step back,” the big cop says. “Now, sir.”

“You don’t understand, we’re together.”

Big Cop is getting angry. Pulling himself up he shouts, “Look, buddy, back off now or you’re going to find yourself in big trouble.”

I feel every moment I have been pushed around by cops, every time I have had a bottle thrown at me, every time I had felt my love for another man be shit on by my country.

I grab Alistair and pull him toward me. We hold each other very close. We’re just having a bad dream. This isn’t happening. We’re still in Australia. We had too much Lebanese food the night before our trip and we’re having a nightmare. We’ll realize that it was just a crummy night’s sleep and we’ll start the day with a good cup of coffee and head off to the airport. But we do not wake up, and this is definitely not a dream.

“I love you, baby.” I have no trouble saying the words now. “I love you too so much.”

Wanting to impress his supervisor, Little Cop runs up and pulls us apart. He has a choke hold on Alistair and is dragging
him away, pulling him toward a strange door covered in smoked glass. Big Cop has got me.

Alistair twists his face back over his shoulder as he is dragged toward the door. “Tim, do something! Don’t let them send me back!” Alistair’s shoulder bag is tugged down by Little Cop and spills open. His laptop clatters and breaks. There goes the novel. His notebook full of the love poems I sent him in London. A photo of us on vacation in Palm Springs. The intimacies of our life together are stripped naked, spread there on the concrete, exposed like film in the harsh light of this moment.

(The shock lights pointed at the audience begin to glow brighter and brighter.)

They are pulling Alistair into a room with opaque doors. Big Cop drags me to the floor and pulls me toward the exit. “You assholes, he’s my lover, my partner, my husband. You can’t do this. I’m a fucking American citizen. I have rights! You can’t do this.”

The doors shut on Alistair. They have me down on the pavement and are dragging me away. The woman officer at her computer terminal regards this scene with annoyance. She glares at the U.S. citizens who have already made it through the lines, their mouths agape with the shame that comes when you watch injustice and do nothing. But all she says . . . “Next.”

Next. Next. Next . . .

(The audience is blinded by the light. Tim picks very specific people and points at them with each “Next.”)

I have one more thing in that hope chest. In that glory box. There’s a compass inside.

(The shock lights fade on the audience. They’re off the hook for now as a sweet quiet pulse of music comes up and one warm light illuminates Tim and the glory box.)
I hope that this compass will help me and Alistair avoid a future like that at some airport in America. But I have an even better compass inside me too. Right here in my hope chest. It’s right where I knew it was. I was right when I was five. There is this place inside us. It’s right here, behind my sternum and to the left of my heart. It’s the compass that led me to love another man. It led me to love a man from another country. It led me around the world to find him. It led me up a stairway in London. Along a green river in Scotland. Across a street in New York. And by the sea in Venice Beach.

I want to use this compass to find my way to a place where Alistair and I can live. Where we can let our love grow deep. Where we can let our roots intertwine. Where we can learn, fight, grow, change, fuck up, make up, grow up just like other people.

I will use my compass to find a place where when two men kiss, the cop on the beat or the airplane captain in the cockpit will nod, smile, see us as the tin-canned newlyweds we are.

I want to use this compass to find my way to a place where our hands won’t be pulled apart. Bed won’t be torn in two. House won’t be blown up. Bodies won’t be flung to different hemispheres.

I want to use this compass to find my way to a place, to a field where two men or two women can come together and pledge their lives, their hopes, their fears, their failures, their myths, their memories, their bodies, and their goods in the sight of the gods, the goddesses, the state, the little children, and even my mom who I know will fly in special from Ventura, California. I don’t want to have to leave my country to find this place. I don’t want to be forced to leave my pathetic, frustrating, hate-filled, when-will-we-grow-up, annoying and ever beloved country. I may even want to use this compass to find that house with the ceramic elves. If I want to.

I’m going to use this compass to find my way home. To find my way . . . to him.

(A very slow fade to black.)
LIVING OUT
Gay and Lesbian Autobiographies

Joan Larkin and David Bergman
GENERAL EDITORS

The Other Mother: A Lesbian’s Fight for Her Daughter
Nancy Abrams

An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin
Gad Beck

Surviving Madness: A Therapist’s Own Story
Betty Berzon

You’re Not from Around Here, Are You?
A Lesbian in Small-Town America
Louise Blum

Two Novels: Development and Two Selves
Bryher

The Hurry-Up Song: A Memoir of Losing My Brother
Clifford Chase

In My Father’s Arms: A True Story of Incest
Walter A. de Milly III

Martin Duberman

Widescreen Dreams: Growing Up Gay at the Movies
Patrick E. Horrigan

Eminent Maricones: Arenas, Lorca, Puig, and Me
Jaime Manrique

Body Blows: Six Performances
Tim Miller

Taboo
Boyer Rickel

Secret Places: My Life in New York and New Guinea
Tobias Schneebaum

Outbound: Finding a Man, Sailing an Ocean
William Storandt