Taboo

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Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Rickel, Boyer.
Taboo.
University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.
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Brown Boys

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I find it impossible to remember the first dark-skinned boy, the one that led to another that led to another, from the mid-1970s to the early eighties. As well to begin with Pablo in spring of 1975.

Three angels, I thought instantly upon entering Jekyll and Hyde's that night, spotting the three lovely dark boys grouped opposite the door. I'd arrived early this evening, a quarter to nine. I wanted a good seat for the drag show at ten o'clock. I positioned myself on a barstool with care, one foot on the floor, the other on the chrome footrest.

I was startled to see one of the boys at my side. When he spoke, he drew each word out slightly, with just a trace of accent: "You want to join us?" His gaze was riveting, his irises black and twice framed—by the whites of his eyes and the identical black arcs of his lashes, above and below.

"Sure," I said to the air, hurrying to catch the quick-footed messenger.

"I'm Miguel," he said as I drew up beside him, "and thees"—his accent more noticeable, his voice rising for emphasis—"my friends, Pablo"—gesturing with a sweep of his arm like a waiter indicating an available chair—"and Geraldo." The tallest, his back to us, half-twisted to nod.

I extended my hand to Pablo, as much to touch him as to observe custom. His skin was astonishingly smooth, his expression so sweet, so open, my mouth dried instantly, cottony with desire.
And then a quick, inexplicable drama played out. Geraldo whirled from his stool, stomping out of the bar. Miguel rattled something sharply in Spanish to Pablo, and back and forth the two boys talked in bursts, with laughter and Ooh la's and one low whistle from Miguel following the only word I could catch: "Geraldo."

I tried to read their expressions. I grinned stupidly from face to face as the two youths carried on in a world apart.

I would become only too familiar with this dilemma in the next few years, experiencing it to one degree or another almost every time I met someone sexually desirable in a bar. Nearly always he was Hispanic, often as not a Mexican national; and young, at the juncture of genders, for whom "girlish" and "boyish" were equally applicable—and with whom conversation was equal parts earnest nods and smiles and disjointed English phrases. In the smoke and vague light of gay bars, my eyes zeroed in on them unfailingly. I didn't know why and didn't much care. One's erotic attractions were obviously instinctive. What amazed me was how often the youths I desired returned my gaze.

New to gay bars at twenty-three, raised by my parents, both classical musicians, to an Old World level of decorum, I turned absurdly formal in this uninhibited realm. I trembled each time I approached Jekyll's door. I usually couldn't speak till I'd downed three or four beers.

I was new not only to the bars but to knowledge of my own homosexuality. From junior high through college, I'd had one steady girlfriend after another. With some I'd discussed marriage. My attraction to men I'd suppressed, sealed since adolescence in masturbation fantasies I could dip into at will—fantasies that vanished from consciousness as soon as I'd come. Only in the last months of college did my sexual feelings for men begin to surface, and then only tentatively, in my waking daily life.

Everything broke open one drunken night at a college graduation party. A young man I'd known casually—we had been waiters
in the same dining hall—flirted openly with me. Feeling adventurous and flattered, I returned his attention. We danced off and on in a dense swirl of bodies. That in the celebration we pressed against one another, a man and a man, seemed to matter to nobody. When the party ended, he invited me to his dorm room.

The experience was immediately transforming. Though awkward, too teetzy, with too little patience, and literally shaking with fear, I felt a profound and undeniable rightness in the sexual kinship of our bodies. So this explained the ghostly guilt that lurked inside me, the sense that I held some part of myself in reserve, involuntarily, whenever a relationship with a woman grew serious.

After several terrible moments of attending Miguel and Pablo’s conversation, I stepped toward the bar, motioning for a bartender in hopes of breaking the spell of my panic.

Miguel tugged at my arm. “Let’s find seats.” He nodded toward the small sunken amphitheater where the drag shows were held. “Don’t mind Geraldo,” he added. “She’s in love.” I ordered beers for myself and my new acquaintances.

The top two tiers of seats were already jammed. We managed to squeeze in on the bottom, thigh to thigh, Pablo in the middle. Miguel and I did the talking at first, leaning across Pablo, who pushed back into the knees of those in the row above to make room. When I told Miguel I taught writing as a graduate student at the University of Arizona, he joked that I could do their homework for classes at the junior college. He and his two friends had come from the small town of Madera in northern Mexico to study English—and to get away from their families. Miguel, whose English was best, had arrived several weeks early to find an apartment and figure things out about summer school.

“My sisters need a little watching,” Miguel said, patting Pablo on the shoulder.
Having literally no gay friends, having rarely conversed with any gay man for more than a few minutes in a bar, a few minutes in bed, and the car ride between, I found this use of sisters, even the casual substitution of she for he, oddly charming.

"I love those girls," Miguel said, turning toward the stage. The mistress of ceremonies, Lady Lazarus, and another figure had just slipped from the restrooms to a changing-screen at the back of the stage.

"You've been here before?"

"Nearly every night for two weeks. This girl." Miguel pulled back to look at Pablo. "I was good till she came to town. Now it's go! go! go!"

Pablo said something to Miguel in Spanish, poking him in the ribs, then slid his arm around my waist. I pressed my leg a little more into his.

"He wants to know what lies I'm telling," Miguel said.

"Yes. I not know to speak ... l ..."

"We ... all ... ehstudent;" Miguel mocked.

"You're doing great," I said, resting a hand on Pablo's knee.

The show was about to begin. The lights dropped, and a crackly recorded trumpet fanfare announced Lady Lazarus. In a floor-length green satin gown, a diamond rhinestone tiara at an angle atop her wig of red ringlets, she swept into a shaft of light. A bartender on a high ladder directed by hand the stage's only spot.

"Who says we're not proud to be queens?" Lady Lazarus rasped, straightening her tiara to a roar of applause and hoots from the audience. "Now tame down, all you hunks, or I'll just have to call the Man to put you in your place."

A mixture of boos and chants of "The Man! The Man!"

Onto stage strutted someone not much over five feet tall in full police regalia—Dandy Dan, a well-known local leather dyke.

"Bring 'em all on!" cooed Lady Lazarus, gliding from the
stage as three of the bar's male bartenders lined up behind Dandy Dan, each in a different male drag—biker, lumberjack, and phone repairman.

Two floodlights at the corners of the stage flicked on, from the speakers the Village People began to sing, and the four performers marched resolutely in place, lip-synching the lyrics to "Macho Man."

Pablo, when the lights dropped, proved not the least shy. He began rubbing the small of my back. I slid a hand along his inner thigh. Grinning blindly in the direction of the stage, I felt him shift his weight. Then he leaned to kiss my neck, moving quickly to my lips.

How many times in recent months had I seen two men necking like this in a gay bar and thought it crude.

"Bitsy! Bitsy! Bitsy!" the audience chanted.

Our seats shook to the rhythm. A tiny Hispanic queen in a red sequined cocktail dress was now onstage. I could see her, but I couldn't follow what was going on—not at this moment, not through the remainder of the performance. I was numb with exhilaration.

Following the show, we danced straight through to last call, pumping our arms and hips to the rhythm of the music, our shirts drenched with sweat. I'd never felt so loose, so thrillingly light-headed. Miguel, a dancer capable of dramatic spins, joined us occasionally. The few times we took breaks to down quick beers, I shouted inanities over the incessant disco beat—"Do you like it here in Tucson?"—to which Pablo nodded.

My ears buzzed almost painfully when the music finally stopped. As the Jekyll's staff ushered everybody out, the sudden wash of light, filling the building, shrunk rather than expanded the dimensions of the bar. We filed into the parking lot. I was grateful for the darkness. When I asked Pablo if he'd follow in his car to my
apartment, he turned to Miguel, who made a clucking sound with his tongue. “You be good to my sister!” he commanded.

Pablo walked to the bedside and switched off the floor lamp. I wrapped my arms around him from behind. But he was all business. In a single motion he shucked his jeans and underwear to the floor. Yanking the sheet and bedspread back, he tumbled onto the bed, drawing just the sheet corner across his waist in a triangle, concealing his erection.

I thumped to the mattress edge, tugging at my jeans and socks. I lowered myself, skin to skin, over his outstretched form. I kissed my way slowly down, from forehead to crotch.

Pablo lay all the while inert. But when I took him into my mouth, he held my head, guiding the motion; and coming, rolled onto his side, facing away.

I ran my hand along his back. He lay so still, if I hadn’t known better, I’d have guessed he was sleeping. Turning him onto his stomach, using spit as lubricant, I worked my way into him as gently as I could. His sudden intake of breath, his tense body, made it clear he was in pain, but I didn’t stop.

I’d had sex with very few men. The first several times, the newness of what was happening made me so delirious—from the shock of beard stubble when we kissed, to the thrill of grasping a hard cock other than my own—I’d experienced the lovemaking in a near-unconscious daze. I’d grown more self-possessed during my first year of graduate school, bringing home, two or three times, young Hispanics from Jekyll’s. As my confidence increased, I fell easily into the same general lovemaking pattern my girlfriends and I had found satisfying for years. A pattern so set it took the form of a story, a script, one I’d masturbated to as a boy while reading the pornographic magazines I found in the trash of the men’s dorms near my house.
Though the settings varied, the plots of the magazine stories were essentially the same. Following the opening paragraphs in which the couple is brought together, the guy would take over, from the first kiss to removal of the girl's clothes and his, sometimes undertaken with tenderness, sometimes abandon. Even when the girl seduced the guy, he invariably took charge, exploring her body, exciting them both to the inevitable, often mutual, climax. The rhythms of their lovemaking were under his control. A girl's occasional reciprocal move, such as suddenly going down on the guy, might be exciting, but it was only temporary. In this story, the man, who frequently narrated directly—I—was the author.

After making love to Pablo, I quickly fell asleep. At some point before dawn, I felt him crawl from bed—to use the bathroom, I supposed. By the time I realized he had dressed, he was out the door.

All the next day I was sick with anxiety. I couldn't eat or concentrate on anything. I alternated between imagining the whole thing smashed, a joke on me, a fumbling clod whom no exquisite boy like Pablo could ever take seriously, and fantasizing about our future, an absurd story in which I would learn to speak Spanish and Pablo would become a university student. We would move in together; Pablo would get to know my friends, my parents; someday we would travel—to Mexico, to visit Pablo's family, and to Europe, to England and Germany, home of my ancestors; my writing would be influenced by our opposite natures, the complications of our cultures.

I slipped into Jekyll's around nine. I paced the bar full-circle, searching every face in the amphitheater. No Pablo, no Miguel, no Geraldo. I downed a beer, and then another, eyeing the entrance. I imagined Pablo dancing with somebody else at another disco. I acknowledged the stupidity of my tidy little narrative of our future, hating myself for being, in what I considered my advanced age, at the mercy of such adolescent intensities.
Miguel walked in alone. He explained quickly that Pablo had been called home to Mexico on a family matter. Geraldo had decided to go along. "Pablo asked me to take good care of you," he added, wrapping an arm around my waist. Then, "You kept my sister out late!"

"Why did he sneak out like that?"

"A girl can't get her beauty rest in somebody else's bed," he proclaimed.

A few drinks along, I couldn't resist engaging in a series of quick, playful kisses, eyes open and giggling. Miguel provided running commentary on every turn in the drag show: "Ooh, look at that, I just love a girl in a tight leather skirt. But honey, if I had that kind of ass..."

After the show, though our touching and conversation grew increasingly sexual, I wasn't in a mood to dance. The night with Pablo, now Miguel's attentions—I needed to leave the bar, to be alone. Miguel suggested we go to a movie the following night.

When I arrived at the apartment Miguel shared with Pablo and Geraldo, he greeted me with a quick peck on the cheek. He poured me a scotch, then led me down a hall to his bedroom, directing me to sit on the corner of the bed. From here, opposite the open bathroom door, I could watch him apply makeup at the built-in vanity. He painted a precise black line across the skin above one eyelash in a single motion. Not satisfied, he wiped it off with cream and applied the line again.

His hands danced with a practiced grace. "Where'd you learn to use makeup?"

"Some things a girl just knows," he said. But as the minutes passed and he showed no sign of nearing an end, I mentioned we'd miss the movie.
"Pour yourself another scotch," Miguel replied.

Finishing a little after eight, Miguel fixed himself a drink and slipped a Grace Jones tape on the stereo. He drew me down beside him on the couch. But when I tried to give him a kiss, at first he turned away. "Now you be a good boy—till later." Then he pulled me toward him, protesting only mildly when I ran my hand inside his shirt. The give-and-take was familiar to me, like the sexual wrestling I'd enjoyed with girlfriends in adolescence. We kissed for a while, sliding in stages to a horizontal position, my fingers fumbling, finally, with his belt buckle. Suddenly Miguel pushed me back and, sitting up straight, pretended to pat his hair into place. "Time for Jekyll's," he announced.

Our lovemaking later that night mirrored my night with Pablo, Miguel turning oddly lifeless after coming himself. This I was not accustomed to. My girlfriends seemed to enjoy sex as much as I did.

That I should take charge, responsible for his pleasure as well as my own, directing the activities in bed as I did those in public places—opening doors, buying drinks: these behaviors I took for granted. "What a fine little man," my favorite aunt would say to me as a boy when I helped her to a chair before holiday dinners. Every time the comment released a surge of pleasure through my body.

I had always assumed with dates a proprietary air, creating around their bodies a field of control I actually visualized. It seemed not only to work but to be expected. In high school I was brought up short only once that I can remember. My date and I had been necking on her doorstep for several minutes, rubbing against each other's crotches while we embraced. When I turned to leave, she made an observation the truth of which struck me ill with guilt: "Whenever you're ready to stop, you pat me on the back, exactly three times, just like you do your dog."

One college girlfriend and I had toyed, as a political state-
ment, with reversing roles in public. But when she'd open doors for me, help me off with my winter coat, order our meals, it was just theater.

On weekend nights I'd meet Miguel at Jekyll's; Pablo would cruise for somebody new or rejoin the man he'd found a night or week before; Geraldo usually remained at a distance with his boyfriend, Mark, a muscular, tall, sandy-haired mechanic who wore cowboy boots and tooled leather belts—a man, Miguel confided, whom Geraldo and Pablo had quarreled over the night I met them all in Jekyll's. And during these weeks, which spanned most of the summer, Miguel refused to meet my friends. Twice he failed to show up for dinners. "Who wants to meet straight people?" he said.

Not once did we go together to a movie or restaurant or concert. If he agreed to go somewhere other than the bar, he'd delay when I came to pick him up, or arrive late if he was to drive, or simply not show up at all.

Each time my anger dissolved in his presence—the dazzling eyes, quick humor, and, when in the bar, the kissing. My body would flood with desire. He'd call me his husband, a term that always startled me. What pleasure we took in sex we seemed to take alone, though both were necessary to accomplish it.

I had no idea why this was happening. Miguel was all that I could hope for, his androgynous beauty, his obvious intelligence, his foreign otherness that I would someday, somehow, come to know—as he would come to know mine.

As a new graduate student in a small writing program, I had quickly made two friends, a young poet on the faculty and his wife, an artist. Steve's unnerving humor punctured my natural reserve. "Does your mother enjoy sex?" he asked on one of our first evenings out
together. After he and Gail taught me to play pinochle, my life changed dramatically. We started playing cards together nearly every weekday night at their dining table. Something beyond shared interests, something fundamental in our habits of mind and heart, brought us into a sudden familial relation to one another. We loved discussing our daily lives and telling our personal stories—about friends, parents, movies we saw or books we read, local politics, dreams we had the night before, and on and on. Their warmth and good humor made an immediate home for me in Tucson. A day without at least a few hours with them was an empty day for me, a lost opportunity.

On weekends before heading to Jekyll's, often I'd have an early drink with these new friends. We'd meet at a slightly grungy bar near campus, The Shanty. A mix of artists, junkies, cowboys, and street people gathered there. (I loved how the hunky bouncer, seated just inside the door, read Tarzan novels by the light of a cigarette machine.) Around nine o'clock, I'd say good night, and Steve and Gail would wish me luck. Sometimes we even visited Jekyll's together. They enjoyed the drag shows, and we had a great time dancing, in pairs or as a threesome. On the occasions I had a date, though, I discouraged them from coming. A noisy gay bar was not a place for them to meet my boyfriends. Too much sexual energy in the air, I told myself.

As the end of summer approached and Miguel prepared for a trip home to Madera, his increasing boredom grew obvious. We were spending more nights together now. I had a three-week break between summer school and the fall semester; Steve and Gail were away on vacation. But Miguel's mood often turned sour at the bar. I experienced a terrible wave of panic the few times he said he wasn't feeling well enough for us to go home together.

I still believed we could break through to some kind of inti-
macy, which increasingly meant an engagement with the nonerotic sides of our lives. I had given up thinking sex was where two men might discover, might develop, some deeper connection. I longed for the kinds of conversations I had with friends. I longed for the intensity I observed between Steve and Gail. If I brought up matters of family or religion or politics, Miguel would tease me for being too serious. Mostly we talked—gossiped—about the various bar characters we came to know. When I proposed we take a weekend trip together—drive the hundred miles north to Phoenix, where we could rent a hotel room, visit the gay bars by night and my parents by day—a snort of derisive laughter erupted from him.

One night a few days before his trip, Miguel seemed to have regained his spirits. A little giddy, his voice rising and falling with exaggerated drama, he introduced me to William, his “stepsister.” A youth about Miguel’s height, he had unusually fine, nearly white hair and pale blue eyes. He wore a baggy white polo shirt tucked into very short, tight, ragged Levi’s cutoffs, with no underwear: when he perched on a barstool, the head of his penis poked out one side, his scrotum the other.

“You two boys get to know each other while I go make myself beautiful,” Miguel said, bouncing off to the bathroom.

I ordered beers. We drank in nervous silence, staring at the bartender as he mixed drinks, made change, wiped the counter. “So how did you get to know Miguel?” I asked finally.

“We met at the apartment pool. And once we took a trip to San Diego. There’s incredible discos there, and a bathhouse with a great orgy room.”

I didn’t know what to say next.

Miguel came up from behind, placing a hand simultaneously on William’s shoulder and mine. “You never told me about San Diego,” I said.

He drew back in mock surprise. “Well, don’t get all worked up.” He kissed me on the temple. “I loved the bathhouse. And the
things I saw in the orgy room! But we both came back with crabs," he laughed.

On he raved about San Diego, about how hot the music was in the discos, about all the beautiful men and how he wanted to move there. As he talked, he grew increasingly animated, gesturing with his hands, touching me, and then William, and then me again, flirting with both of us at once.

Miguel led us onto the dance floor. Early August, most students out of town, we had the floor nearly to ourselves. I reserved most of my eye contact for Miguel. Occasionally I ventured toward William, who liked to dance close.

After a few songs, I slipped away to the bathroom. I watched William and Miguel for a while upon returning. By now they'd pulled off their shirts—two perfectly matched, beautiful young men, one dark, one light.

I unbuttoned my shirt, tugging the tails from my jeans. We danced like this, our chests glistening with sweat, my shirt flapping as I spun, till the DJ dropped the lights all the way down and played the night's only slow song. Collapsing toward one another, we embraced in a circle.

William reached into the top drawer of Miguel's dresser. "I want to see that new movie you got," he said.

Miguel arranged pillows across the headboard while William set up the VCR atop a table at the foot of the bed.

Propped against the pillows, legs outstretched, I sat in the middle as the movie began. It was a silent, amateurish, gay pornographic short. Titled "The Server," it had obviously been shot with a hand-held camera. There were four characters, three blonds and the dark-haired server, who carried a circular tray with drinks. The blonds, in jeans and sport shirts, sat around a patio table next to a kidney-shaped swimming pool. The server wore only a bikini swim-
suit. After placing the drinks on the table, the server put his hand on the shoulder of the man closest to him; the man ran his hand up the server's leg, drawing down the swimsuit, out of which popped the server's erect penis. The other couple had started necking and pulling at each other's clothes.

By now William was kissing my neck; Miguel had a hand on my thigh. I could hardly breathe from the pressure of my pounding heart.

We tugged and humped and stumbled over each other's bodies, my attentions generally directed toward Miguel, Miguel's toward William, and William doing his best to expend some energy on both Miguel and me. But I couldn't stay interested with the sudden changes.

The screen was now all flesh, the four men naked, entwined somehow in a single pumping mass near the edge of the pool. Despite the jumpy camera, it seemed as if everything progressed smoothly there.

I slipped out the bedroom door to put my clothes on in the hall, departing without a word.

Miguel was scheduled to leave for Mexico in two days. The next time I saw him, I'd just finished the first week of fall classes. He sat with Geraldo and Mark in the amphitheater of Jekyll's. He nodded, then turned his shoulder to resume conversation. His bland expression, the deliberate turn away, made it clear I had not been invited over. I took a seat at the bar, a little numb. I scanned the crowd mechanically. My eyes stopped at a dark-skinned youth with black curls so shiny they almost looked wet. He wore a tight yellow muscle shirt, which revealed the lift of his pectorals and two tiny nipple peaks.

In two years' time I could joke with friends that my address book looked like the Mexican version of one of those pamphlets on what
to name the new baby boy: Alfonso, Antonio, Alfredo, Carlos, Fernando, Ignacio, José, Juan, Miguel, Pablo, Pedro, Poncho, Renaldo, Ricardo, Xavier. . . . I'd made a few acquaintances in the bar, Anglos like myself who dated mostly younger Hispanics. We'd had boyfriends in common; it was inevitable we would get to know each other. Sometimes we even flirted with each other's dates. We formed a sort of fraternity, gossiping and making fun of our failures.

One of these acquaintances, Blair, had a wry sense of humor I especially enjoyed. With wavy blond hair and a slight build like mine, he had a subtle speech affectation that made him sound vaguely foreign. At Jekyll's one evening he suggested we become fuck-buddies.

"Fuck-buddies?"

"I had a pal in Houston," he said, "and when we didn't have boyfriends, we'd screw each other, just to take the edge off." I thought he was joking.

A few weeks later, Blair brought the matter up again. He coaxed, flattering me a little. He seemed sophisticated about sex. I'd probably learn something.

In the glow of a corner lamp, Blair's studio apartment reminded me of my own—half of a duplex, a shabby 1930s bungalow with creaky, pitted fir floors and rattly, double-hung windows. I knew without looking that the bathroom sink would be streaked a yellow-brown, the color of chain-smokers' fingers, from a dripping faucet.

I flicked on an overhead light to get a better look around; Blair quickly switched it off, pulling me onto the bed. There was an awkward moment as we each made a move to do a tongue-first inventory of the other's body. I gave in, enjoying this reversal in the ritual. But when I tried to angle myself to go down on Blair, he pushed me back by the shoulders. This made me incredibly dizzy. I was drunker than I thought. Then he urged me over onto my stomach.
Whatever sensations getting screwed might have had for me I could hardly register, though at one point a terrible spasm of pain shot through me. Instead I had to concentrate entirely on not convulsing in a torrent all over the pillow. When Blair rolled away, I ran to the bathroom, vomiting into the toilet.

I returned to the bed feeling terrific, with a great bodily sense of relief and lightness—and horny for my turn. Blair was apparently asleep. I tried to rouse him gently, massaging the muscles at his neck. "Get away. Just let me sleep."

I pulled on my clothes. My asshole stung. I felt sick, empty. I felt humiliated.

"Sounds more like a 'fuck you, buddy,'" Barbara said, not looking at me. She was examining the ends of her long, wavy hair. "What are you doing with a white boy, anyway?" She threw the hair back over her shoulder.

Though I'd known her just a week, already I was confiding the most minute details of my sexual life. Barbara had entered the writing program I'd recently completed. Steve had introduced us at a poetry reading. This night we were drinking in The Shanty.

A Polish-American Jew from New York, Barbara combined the street smarts of her working-class neighborhood in Queens with a warmth and ebullience that were immediately winning. And few failed to notice her terrific figure: whether on the way to the disco or the Circle K, she preferred dressing in the miniskirts, net stockings, and low-cut tight blouses of her teenhood. Men trailed in her wake wherever she went, especially bars.

Gay bars, it turned out, she liked best, because of their charged sexual atmosphere. In fact, she loved much about the gay scene, its music and fashion and gender-bending and humor. "I'm a real fagelah hagelah," she said once with a wink—then, impatient with my puzzled look, "Jewish fag hag! Don'tcha get it?"
Barbara teased me endlessly. She found my young Mexican lovers fascinating. She’d needle till she’d gotten every detail about a recent encounter, a particular specialty of hers—everybody seemed to open up to Barbara. When things went badly, she’d exploit some comic angle in the affair, urging me on to the next one. All mixed in was our talk about writing. She could as easily discuss the pros and cons of various lubricants as the sonnets of Robert Lowell.

We started visiting Jekyll’s together regularly. Following drag shows, we’d flirt on the dance floor with the guys we found most attractive. Much to my annoyance, she was always better at striking up conversations than I was. Some even invited her home. Once after she’d left me to cruise on my own—I hated approaching anybody with her watching—Pablo walked in. I hadn’t seen him in over two years. He and Miguel had made good on their plan to move to San Diego.

The years had wrought astonishing changes in Pablo. His shoulders and upper arms, his chest and neck—his entire upper body—had filled out, firm and muscular. His eyes alone retained their softness. Looking out from the sculptural set of his body, the eyes gave the impression that his former, more boyish self lay trapped beneath the new layers of flesh.

When he embraced me, the embrace was tight and sustained, and he continued to hold me by the waist as we stumbled across our first few sentences. His English was still surprisingly broken. But he didn’t want to talk much, especially about his life in San Diego with Miguel. We drank at the bar, mostly in silence, watching the dancers on the disco floor. He had a motel room, he said finally, but would like to spend the night at my apartment. I was intrigued by this new Pablo who was no longer a boy.

Pablo’s manner in bed was as transformed as his body. He wrapped his arms around me with obvious desire. He ran his hands down my torso, caressing my hips. He took me briefly into his mouth, then rolled me onto my stomach.
When he pulled away after coming, I tried to draw him to me. He shook his head, curling tight as a fist into the covers. I couldn't get him to continue our lovemaking or even speak to me.

Jumping from the bed, I swept his clothes up in a heap. I threw everything out the apartment door and shoved him into the night.

Then I sat in bed and wept, pulling the bedsheet around me. I knew my anger, my pain, was out of all proportion to what had happened. I knew I should call Barbara, or Steve and Gail. There should be nothing I couldn't tell them, nothing they wouldn't try to help me through. But what I felt was too raw. Something deep within me, at the level of my sense of maleness, was becoming terribly confused, though I couldn't possibly have put it into those terms at the time. I only knew that I couldn't discuss such a feeling with anybody.

3

"Got a light?" The new arrival had walked through the door without breaking stride, negotiating the tables and chairs to a stool at my side as if he could see in the dark.

This sweltering July afternoon, I was drinking in the small back bar of The Stonewall, a bar catering less to students than to working men in their late twenties and thirties. A large fan swept side to side from atop a floor stand in the corner. Every few minutes the door would open, producing a blinding rectangle of yellow. Most newcomers stumbled in, silhouettes groping for a chair-back or steadying table.

I handed the man a matchbook from the counter.

Lighting up, he inhaled deeply, exhaling with obvious relief.

"I'm Luis," he said. "Thanks."

He slapped a hand on my thigh. "So tell me all about yourself."
I crossed my arms, part intrigued, part taken aback. "What's to know," I said.

"Maybe all's too much to ask. I'll go first. Sometimes I need a cigarette bad. I'm Luis, but you can call me Margarita." The r's he rolled just slightly. I didn't know how seriously to take that last remark.

His voice was low and gruff. But nothing in his tone, nothing in his forward manner, seemed threatening. And I liked his looks, the disproportion between his wide shoulders and tiny hips; the crinkles around his eyes, his high cheekbones; the thick black hair that fell in waves at his shoulders. I liked especially his crooked, bladey nose.

"Boyer." I offered my hand. Luis's was rough.

"Soft," he said of mine, holding it a moment. He continued to smoke with relish, tilting his head back to exhale, watching each tunnel of smoke swirl to invisibility. "I'll bet you're in business, or a teacher."

"Not exactly. I work at a motel. A dive in South Tucson. I try to keep the hookers out. I'm a desk clerk." I'd been supporting myself this way for several months, my fifth job since graduate school. A three-to-eleven shift, perfect for morning writing, with time left over at night for a drink if I wanted.

"But I did teach once. I'm a writer, a poet." I'm not sure I'd said that last part so soon to a stranger in a bar.

"Well, Mr. Poet, you hear of García Lorca?"

I laughed, uncrossing my arms. "Of course . . . At five in the afternoon . . ."—this was all I could remember.

"A boy brought the white sheet," Luis answered. He gave my leg a squeeze. "Let me buy you a beer."

Over the next hour we took turns buying drinks as we talked. Luis lived with friends a mile south of the city, not far from the motel where I worked. His friends employed him as a manager for several properties. He was not Hispanic, he said with playful bravado,
or Mexican, or Mexican American. He was Mesquite, which meant half-Apache, half-Mexican, from south Texas. He’d moved to Tucson seven years ago, after a stint in the Navy. They’d booted him for being gay—a fact he’d told them to avoid serving in Vietnam.

The more we talked, the more suggestive our touching became. Luis asked if we could go to my apartment, which was between the bar and his place.

Age twenty-seven, I had grown bone-weary of the patterns I’d fallen into over the past several years. I found it harder to share Barbara’s comic perspective. Every few months I’d vow to all my straight friends that I’d given up: no more bars, no more lovers. I’d confess that something in me made it impossible—my controlling nature, my unreasonable expectations. No doubt I was a loner. I’d not made a single enduring friendship in the bars, let alone found a partner.

But always, within a very few weeks, I’d end up missing the company of other gay men. Living in a wholly straight world, whether socializing or at work, I’d begin to feel like an imposter. All my friends were real, themselves; I was just an actor. I’d end up not just horny but craving some form of human connection I had no idea how to achieve—and I’d visit the bars.

In our first week together, I discovered that Luis’s friends did in fact call him Margarita—after his favorite drink. His living arrangement reminded me of the Cartwright ranch on TV’s Bonanza. Around a large central house with high, beamed ceilings and flagstone floors, seven smaller structures circled like planets. Built in the twenties, all were painted brown and had Santa Fe-style vegas poking out their front walls. Though two were rented, the rest were occupied by youths whose numbers swelled and shrunk like weekly tides.

The young men, teenagers mostly, could live at The Hacienda, as everybody called the property, for as long as they liked, provid-
ing they worked. All were gay and all had stories about how the owner and resident overlord, Peter, had helped them. He'd hired a lawyer for one boy whose parents disowned him when he got busted for selling marijuana. Another had hitched to L.A. after his father beat him, having discovered he was gay; Peter wired bus fare back to Tucson when the kid got picked up as a vagrant. At any given time, as many as a dozen such boys lived at The Hacienda. There seemed to be some sort of network that directed them to Peter.

Luis, hardly a boy at thirty-three, revered Peter for a past favor he refused to reveal. He loved him as well for his generosity in taking in so many lost souls. He'd become Peter's business manager, overseeing not only restoration of The Hacienda but Peter's other properties in town. The only other more-or-less permanent characters were Harry, the Hacienda cook, gray-haired and raw-faced (looking much older than the fifty-eight he'd admit to), who drank vodka in a juice glass from breakfast till bedtime, whipping up enormous meals for all the Hacienda inhabitants; and Barry, Peter's lover, in his thirties, pudgy and quarrelsome, like an overgrown baby, who'd been with Peter since he was seventeen.

Peter ruled The Hacienda absolutely, barking orders with obvious delight. Ruddy, his fair skin roughened by exposure to the sun, he was short and compact, in his early fifties. Nobody crossed him—except his favorite, Luis—without serious consequences. And he had a voice, a laugh, that boomed, dominating every conversation. Always intense, he loved to poke fun. Me he instantly dubbed "the Professor."

"So, Professor," he said, as we sat to breakfast following my first night over, "you gonna write poems about my Margarita?"

I shifted in my seat, forcing a laugh. I'd not felt ill at ease in quite this way since high school and the questions I sometimes got from the fathers of dates.
"Be good, Boss," Luis said in a low voice. Standing behind Peter, he placed his hands on the older man's shoulders and kissed the bald spot on his crown.

For the first several weeks, I was convinced that this time things would work out. That Luis was older seemed an important change. And how gratifying to experience some continuity between our public selves and the ones behind bedroom doors. The affection and humor we shared when among Luis's friends charged our sex lives; Luis was a spirited, inventive sexual partner, full of surprises. His manner, his character, was as dynamic as I'd ever experienced. By turns gruff and coy and assertive and tender, he seemed not to "play" himself but to be, wholly, unself-consciously, whoever emerged from the emotions of his current moment. I found myself always slightly off balance in the most pleasant way. We had intense late-night talks about everything, family, sex toys, movie stars, politics, art.

A blending of our social worlds also seemed possible. He appeared, only slightly late, only slightly drunk, for a dinner with Barbara. Not surprisingly, he and Barbara hit it off immediately, talking excitedly throughout the evening. During those first weeks, I even dared to imagine what it would be like for us to live together.

I assumed my mild discomfort when at The Hacienda would wear off once I got to know everybody better. The swirl of boys in and out, their almost universal disconnection from families and society in general, was painful for me to witness. One morning, on my way to the kitchen from Luis's room to get water, I discovered three new boys sprawled in their underwear on the great U-shaped arrangement of couches in the living room. I could never be sure: were the older men sleeping with these boys? Few hung around for long; most seemed dulled by one form of abuse or another. Their lives had been unlike anything I'd known, with one notable excep-
tion, my being gay. But this had caused only slight disruption in my family and none in my friendships.

Luis's world was so alien that I tried to come to know it as I might an uncaptioned foreign film: by trusting that the story's shape would eventually make itself known, if I remained alert.

Peter made me most uncomfortable of all. Unlike the boys, I owed him nothing. Yet the force of his character intimidated me. I hardly spoke in his presence, especially when he was in a joking mood. Luis was usually able to cover, taking up Peter's challenge whenever he turned his attention to me. They both seemed to enjoy these verbal contests, even if Luis did sometimes push too far. Comments about Barry, an easy target, could touch a nerve. Barry avoided the group, often retreating to the room he shared with Peter.

My silence quickly became one of Peter's favorite subjects. "The Professor is feeling deep tonight," he said once as we drank at a restaurant bar, waiting for our table. "A boilermaker for your thoughts." He pushed his own untouched whiskey and beer-back over to me.

"His thoughts aren't all that goes deep," Luis parried, drawing me toward him by the neck.

Sexual innuendo was the quickest way out of difficult moments with Peter. To get along, I'd pretend to flirt. Peter would nuzzle my ear or rub up against my crotch. He'd needle Luis. "Better watch out, Margarita, I think I'm in love with your fiancée."

Peter frequently used language of this sort—of marriage, husband and wife; of who was top, who bottom—when referring to me and Luis. A few years before, such language half amused me; increasingly I sensed too little irony in its use by the gay men I hung out with. The inherent put-down of the one who was bottom gnawed at me. We were all men. It shouldn't matter whether we took pleasure in being top, bottom, or sideways.

Luis was an expert at such banter. He brushed off my sugges-
tion that such terms might have sexist implications. "Lighten up," he said repeatedly, "I'll make you a good wife."

I came to dread mornings at The Hacienda when we'd all gather for breakfast, as well as weekend nights in the bars. I came to dread the public gestures of control and dependence, so carefully monitored by everyone in our group, including me: who opened doors for whom, who sat on whose lap, who embraced whom from behind at the kitchen sink or on the dance floor. The more I thought of myself as a gay man the past few years, the deeper my discomfort whenever I undertook these rituals I'd practiced in my young adulthood with girlfriends. I recognized something dehumanizing in the equations—an obvious projection of sexism onto the relations among gay men. Surely being gay meant not recreating straight attitudes and behavior.

Still I couldn't rise above it all. I'd experience an inner sinking whenever Peter made gestures placing me in the "girl's" position, whenever he made a show of opening a door for me or paying for my meal.

Luis seemed to do little better when out with my friends. At The Shanty or a party at Steve and Gail's, he became someone I only partly recognized. Polite, almost courtly, he was drained of his characteristic exuberance, cautious of any but the most incidental forms of touching. We were comfortable together—we were ourselves—only when alone. Privacy freed us of whatever made us not fit inside our own skins in public settings.

Over a four-month period, Luis grew querulous as I declined more and more often to spend nights at The Hacienda. When I suggested we try living together in my apartment, that this might enable us to work things out, he countered that I should move in with him and become part of his family. One evening, in a narrow, dark bar generally considered a hangout for older gay men—that is, men in their thirties and forties—I rose to excuse myself as The Hacienda group discussed where to go for dinner.
Luis shoved himself back from the table. “Motherfucker-motherfuckermother . . .,” he motored under his breath, hauling me out of the bar.

I didn’t resist. I had a pretty good idea of what he was about to say: I could go fuck myself if his friends weren’t good enough. What the hell was wrong with me?

I stood frozen at first. What was wrong with me? Unable to speak, I tried to embrace him. He shoved me back, whirling to slam through the bar door.

The next day I sent him a dozen long-stem red roses with an invitation to dinner. By the time he arrived at my apartment, I’d downed several beers. He’d been drinking too. We embraced, pulling at each other’s clothes, making love with an almost angry intensity. Then Luis dressed and drove away for the last time.

4

Shortly after the affair with Luis, I made a new friend, my first gay friend. That is, I began my first serious, nonsexual relationship with another gay man. Barbara introduced me to him. He was a writer, a new graduate student, on the lookout for a cheap place to live. As luck would have it, the apartment adjoining mine was available.

In long talks on the patio we shared, we narrated our lives, the way people often do when striking up new friendships. Patrick’s stories I found fascinating—and refreshing. Having known he was gay from an early age, from at least the time of his first childhood lover, he seemed to have an utterly open-eyed understanding of his own sexuality. One image in particular has lodged in my memory from those conversations nearly twenty years ago: Patrick and that first boyfriend entwined on a grassy hill beside a river, a sailboat passing by, the people on board waving, the boys waving back.

Shaping my stories aloud, having a gay listener, a skilled story-maker, helped me to consider implications I’d not been able
to articulate alone or with straight friends. I now had to face the obvi­
ous. I couldn’t ignore the racist overtones to my obsession with
these boys. Clearly the young men I’d been dating the past five
years made convenient stand-ins for the girls of my youth. I’d sim­
ply transferred the behaviors and expectations, many betraying
sexist attitudes, from my earlier life to my relations with my first
gay lovers. My instinctive attractions had been little more than an
unconscious attempt to recreate the familiar.

I confess I am as uncomfortable today at forty-seven as I was
in my late twenties with such explanations, not only because they
expose in me attitudes I abhor. They reduce so terribly the complex­
ity, the richness, of my felt experience; they reduce so terribly the
mystery and vitality of those mutual attractions.

Nevertheless, the more I observed the romantic relations of
other gay men from this perspective, the more I could see the prob­
lem as basic to our struggles to attain authentic gay identities. Over
and over, I could hear the same unspoken question behind the ten­sions I witnessed between lovers, especially couples of my genera­
tion or older: who gets to be the man? Both can’t be male, nor can
both share equally in the making of the relationship if the model,
unconscious or otherwise, is heterosexual and sexist.

On my own I had sensed for some time that I was attempting
to live somebody else’s story. Now that I had some knowledge of
the story’s sources, I still had no idea how to begin a new one. Fol­
lowing the breakup with Luis, all I could think to do was practice
crude denial. I’d simply deny what still felt like instinctive desires—
ignore my attraction to younger Hispanics. I’d force myself to look
elsewhere, just to see where it might lead.

I gained an increment of self-awareness almost immediately. I
could be in nearly any public setting—shopping at a mall or super­
market, walking on the university campus to a poetry reading,
standing in a movie theater lobby—when I’d discover my eyes fo­
cused on a dark young man. Already I had stared the extra instant
that, if the youth were also gay, would signal my interest. I’ve never known a gay man who didn’t learn to identify other gay men in just this way, a practice that develops with no formal training necessary. And straight men hardly ever notice.

My resolve to break old patterns didn’t help at first. No matter that, when visiting gay bars, I’d walk through the door focused on meeting a different kind of man. Within minutes my gaze would settle automatically on a dark-skinned youth.

Each time this happened I’d lower my eyes, wondering how anything so deeply embedded could ever be overcome. Then I’d command myself to search for an older face, lighter in color, more like my own. If I discovered someone who looked intriguing, I’d study his face, his posture, the line of his shoulders, waist, hips. Was there anything intrinsically undesirable in these features?

Sometimes my look was returned. My insides churning, I’d do my best to strike up a conversation. If we were able to talk comfortably, if I sensed a mutual interest, if we went so far as to dance a little, agreeing to meet again, I’d struggle to imagine no particular future with this one. Since the story I’d grown up with had failed me, I’d enter the next day, and then the next, maintaining as best I could a faith in a need for no story, maintaining an openness to whatever might come.

The going was often rough. At first I found the discomfort of letting go of expectation nearly unbearable—the hope of a settled, domestic relationship, and the heterosexual scripts: who gets to be the man? I blundered many times, making assumptions, pushing a new romantic interest to define in narrow ways what I vowed I no longer wanted defined: who we were to one another, and where we might be headed. Guys looking for a little good sex couldn’t believe their bad luck in stumbling on such a serious trick.

Several times when all the external pieces seemed in place—our personalities, ages, range of interests—I’d will myself into a sexual relationship though I felt no desire for the man. Desire would
come later, I'd rationalize; our erotic life would grow from every­
thing else we shared. Lasting a month or more, at best such affairs
produced a kinship at the level of fuck-buddies. Like choosing your
brother for a lover.

More important, suspending such personal story-making was
profoundly alien to my nature. To have a story is to have a meaning;
a writer is a meaning-maker. How could I not search for meaning in
each unfolding moment?

Much to my surprise, I did get better at it over the ensuing
months. I practiced with friends, especially Patrick, repeating like a
mantra, We have no future, we have no future, and it doesn't matter,
about some potential boyfriend. I found in time that not having
or assuming a story also produced an oddly pleasant sensation, a
sensation analogous to the tension I experience in the first stages
of working on a new poem: underlying the broad wash of uncer­
tainty—this will never amount to anything—an energizing sense of
limitless potential—this could be the breakthrough to a new kind of
understanding.

During the three years leading to my thirtieth birthday, in ad­
dition to several brief affairs, I entered into two more extended rela­
tionships, both with men about my age. What seemed to give these
relationships greater vitality was our self-confessed uncertainty—
and the subsequent care we took in coming to know one another.
The dynamics of our sexual selves we worked out slowly, if some­
what awkwardly, neither of us attempting to define himself or the
other through the complications, the mysteries and pleasures, of
making love. We were able to acknowledge we didn't understand
exactly what was going on. Who gets to be the man? grew increas­
ingly irrelevant, replaced by who am I really, now that I'm with you?
Both men had experienced the grip of sexual obsessions analogous
to my own. Given all the strangeness and inner turmoil of our twen­
ties, we felt we'd survived a second adolescence: in place of disrup­
tive hormones, unconscious attitudes had been released into our blood—and we were working them out of our systems.

I've struggled almost two decades with the process of suspending my need for a defining narrative. Fifteen years I've shared the struggle with the same man, twelve under the same roof. When I first met him, I discovered that he, as if by instinct, distrusted any hint of a narrative imposed on his life—particularly by me. Who could know his intentions and inner thoughts? He remains one of the most intensely private people I've ever met.

In our early years, while seeing other men, we came to know one another in fits and starts. He'd sometimes disappear for days at a time. Was he out of town, or simply refusing to answer the phone, to come to the door when I knocked? Usually I'd tie these disappearances to things I'd said when we were with friends. "We were thinking we might like to . . ." or "We found the movie to be somewhat. . . ." Surely I'd seen him bristle at my choice of pronoun. I could never be sure. Occasionally he announced his return by leaving flowers from his garden, anemones or sweet peas, in a jar on my doorstep.

One of his closest friends had a story for him, a common enough story, which she confided one night in a bar: he's a loner, she said; if I hoped in any way to be his partner, I must understand I would never live with him. It took me days to absorb the sting of that pronouncement. I tried to imagine how we might share a life while occupying separate houses. Soon after accepting that this might be possible, I sat in shock on my living room couch: we should unhook ourselves from the too-settled patterns of our lives, he said; we should try living together.

Ironically, the weddings of several close friends during these years helped reinforce my thinking about how to go forward. At
each wedding ceremony, I found myself moved to tears by the familial and religious benedictions offered the couple, the new husband and wife. Expectation for the roles they would fulfill, and their place in the community order, embraced them, embraced us all like a warming ether.

I participated in that expectation, though surely no such public benedictions would ever accompany my life commitment to another man, should I choose to make one. Yet at some point while celebrating with the wedding party, I experienced an overwhelming relief, relief that this was so. With that wave of glad emotion I could breathe deeply again. I realized I'd felt, till that moment, constrained, as if reduced to very short breaths. Having come this far, how much easier to know, if not to accomplish, the task of fashioning, with another, freshly, on a daily basis, a narrative. How much easier to resist shaping that narrative on the old stories, so that we might share an authoring of our identities. Surely this is what two people must do if they would live in a state of intimacy.