Creep: A Life, A Theory, An Apology

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A Theory

“All of us who survived those common years had to be a little strange.”
— Audre Lorde

If I move now from the particulars of my childhood and youth to something called “theory,” I do so only because theory — plotting out, thematizing, making schematic, and abstracting a set of experiences into some general impressions of a way of being in the world — has been one way I have tried to survive myself. Making something abstract is a way to understand it, and understanding brings, if not control, at least coping. The impulse to theorize caters to the desire to organize the mess. It’s a powerful form of pattern recognition. It’s our need for truth. So here I theorize my creepiness, pulling from my personal narrative more particular moments that deserve critical attention, an interpretive gaze that might help me understand better the genealogy of how I have either come to understand myself as creepy, how others have at times identified me as a creep, or both.

Ultimately, I’m not sure what truth I can make out of creepiness, but in working my experiences through a word — a word with significant resonances in our culture at the moment — we might learn something about how the larger culture normalizes and stigmatizes certain ways of moving in the world. What are those resonances? Creepiness isn’t an official psychological category, but, as we’ve noted, it’s widely deployed in a variety of ways to mark the emotionally messy, a certain covertness of desire, a lingering inappropriateness of interest. It’s that which doesn’t belong but somehow sticks around. Think for instance of the classic song of self-identified creepiness, Radiohead’s “Creep.”
The lyrics gesture simultaneously to the individual creep’s self-absorption — “I want a perfect body, I want a perfect soul, I wish I was special” — and to his overwrought attachment to an object of desire — “You’re so fucking special […] whatever you want.” At the same time, the creep also has self-consciousness; this creep asks, “What the hell am I doing here?,” and he can only respond by admitting, “I don’t belong here.”

Speaking personally, I’ve spent way too much time listening to this song and tearing up over some boy who just wouldn’t love me. I say that, thinking I’m pathetic, knowing that I enjoyed the emotional self-flagellation, relishing masochistically the identification with the creep, the one who wants control, the perfect soul, but who is still cast aside, who doesn’t belong. Maybe some of us have to fetishize our outsider status. If you can’t beat them, after all… But the popularity of the song, and its ability to resurface throughout the years in multiple covers and in various media, suggests that many of us identify with both that outsideness as well as the sense that, at times, we have perhaps lingered just a little bit too long, making ourselves unwelcome, our outsideness uncomfortable not just for ourselves but for others as well.

Adam Kotsko is amongst the few theorists and commentators who tackles the fascination of the creep head on. The author previously of a provocatively titled book, *Why We Love Sociopaths*, Kotsko undertakes in his more recent volume, *Creepiness*, an examination of the figure of the creep throughout a variety of movie and televisual examples, ranging from Jim Carrey’s obsessed and menacing *Cable Guy*, to the strange rictus face of the Burger King, who weirdly appears in a guy’s bed as he’s contemplating a meal choice, to the high and tortured drama of *Mad

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Men’s Don Draper, and the overall creeping of advertising into all aspects of American life. The variety of creeps is astonishing, to say the least, but Kotsko returns frequently to the figure of the “creepy uncle” as a particularly potent “cultural trope,” one that many of us readily recognize. Why? For Kotsko, the “creepy uncle” is creepy in that he occupies a liminal space, his position not quite defined in traditional family structures. As Kotsko puts it, “It is the uncle’s displaced and enigmatic role as ‘family but not really family’ that opens up the space for other creepy tropes to attach to the figure of the uncle in a way that is not really possible for a more clearly defined role like that of the father.” That creepy uncle is part of the family, surely, but not part of the central group, so his intentions are potentially suspect, his interest in the family questionable. At the very least, he represents alternative models or possibilities of adulthood for children in the central family, perhaps alternatives that diverge from the primary family’s investment in its children. Sometimes the uncle’s interest in a family’s children is coded as sexual as a way to mark it as dangerous or unwanted. Indeed, Kotsko’s approach is pretty Freudian, and he identifies creepiness as emerging through “unmanageable” and “unruly desires” that threaten the “patriarchal nuclear families where any sexual indulgence outside the boundaries of heterosexual marriage was considered destructive and shameful.” To be sure, Kotsko’s aim is not so much to defend those patriarchal nuclear families, or what he also calls the “traditional American family,” but rather to trace how creepiness emerges structurally in relation to the power of the family as a primary unit and source of cultural and personal meaning.

Creeps aren’t always just uncles, even if they are often situated adjacently to primary family units. One of Kotsko’s favorite examples is Steve Urkel from the sitcom Family Matters. Steve, a

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3 Ibid., 12.
4 Ibid., 20.
gangly and bespectacled teen nerd, is always barging in on a traditional family trying to cope with its day-to-day suburban existence: “He is invasive, constantly dropping in on his neighbors unannounced. His desire is both enigmatic and excessive.” He’s particularly fascinated by the family’s teen daughter, though it’s clear she’s completely uninterested. In fact, the entire family isn’t much interested in this kid, who is clearly trying to glom onto this more “normal” family as a way to compensate for the deficiencies in his own. In this way, for Kotsko at least, part of Urkel’s creepiness lies in his calling attention to the fact that not all families are, indeed, normal and traditional, and that the structures that give legitimacy to us are not only capable of breaking down but are perhaps extremely fragile.

Even more curiously, though, Urkel isn’t a minor character in *Family Matters*, and in many ways, he becomes the real star and focus of the show. His creepiness fascinates in part not just because it speaks to underlying anxieties about the fragility of family structures but also because it gestures to alternative possibilities for relationality. There are other ways of getting along and forming family, however strange, and if your family is somehow deficient, you can try to form your own. Ultimately, as Kotsko puts it, “[h]ere creepiness is not something to be shunned or hidden, but a source of profound power and liberation.” Herein lies Kotsko’s most interesting theorizing about creepiness, which almost raises the specter of the creep to the level of critical insight. For Kotsko, “[c]reepiness points toward the ultimate breakdown of the social order at the same time as it accounts for its origin and its present hold on its members. Creepiness is thus the past, present, and future of human society: its eternal precondition, its eternal motor, and its eternal obstacle.” That’s a sentence somewhat creepy in its own excess, its “eternal” overstatement of the case. But I take the force of his comment: we use the label

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5 Ibid., 25.
6 Ibid., 48.
7 Ibid., 121.
of creepiness both to discipline others and to maintain norms of relationality, while the specter of the creep constantly points out the excesses of desire itself, and the always present possibilities for other ways of vectoring our desires into different forms of sociality. Urkel, that is, creeps us out a bit because he shows us that there are other ways to make family. Thus, his creepiness is inevitably somewhat sexual in that the traditional family revolves around — is indeed based on — sexual and intimate ties. As such, as Kotsko puts it, creepiness is fascinating “because it is fundamentally about our struggle with desire and sexuality.”

Sexuality that exceeds the norms of the family gestures to alternatives that potentially threaten that family, or provide at least tempting alternatives to it — making the figure of the creep not just someone who threatens from outside the family but also potentially from within it: “We are susceptible to being creeped out […] because we are always in danger of being creeped out by ourselves, or more precisely, by those parts of ourselves that seem to exceed and elude us.” Creepy uncles were once members of their own nuclear families, after all.

If all of this sounds vaguely Freudian, well, it is. Kotsko relies at times on psychoanalytic models, which makes sense given his focus on the creep in relation to traditional family structures. Indeed, Freud’s concept related to creepiness, the “uncanny,” is actually rooted in a discussion of what lies in and outside the home — the “unheimlich.” In scholarly fashion, Freud’s meditation on the uncanny begins with an attempt to differentiate his views from previous commentators, particularly one E. Jentsch, but he also drawn on various literary sources, especially the work of E.T.A. Hoffman and his mechanical doll in the story...

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8 Ibid., 14.
9 Ibid.
of “The Sand Man,” which Jentsch himself had made much of in describing the experience of the uncanny. And indeed, the term the “uncanny valley” has come to describe the uneasy and creepy sensations people experience when encountering robots that seem a bit too life-like. But while acknowledging the usefulness of Jentsch’s thoughts, Freud’s interests lie slightly elsewhere, and he undertakes an analysis of the different possible origins of the word “unheimlich,” which he notes is “obviously the opposite of heimlich, heimisch, meaning ‘familiar’; ‘native,’ ‘belonging to the home.’”11 Of course, the analyst most concerned with traumatic family romances and early childhood fears of castration would be drawn to understanding the origin of the feeling of the uncanny, the unheimlich, as grounded in an unsettling experience of home. And indeed, it’s not long before Freud is theorizing that the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.”12 Ah, repression; what phenomenon of psyche can’t be explained by (or blamed on) repression? Freud explains:

There is a humorous saying: “Love is home-sickness”; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, still in the dream, “this place is familiar to me, I have been there before,” we may interpret the place as being his mother’s genitals or her body. In this case, too, the unheimlich is what was once heimisch, home-like, familiar; the prefix “un” is the token of repression.13

Reading this I’m struck both by the power of the interpretive matrix here, something akin to an algorithm that generates patterns out of varied data inputs, and by Freud’s fairly consistent fascination, creepy in its own way, with children and their relationship to adult genitalia.

11 Ibid., 124.
12 Ibid., 148.
13 Ibid., 153.
Of course, Freud has to admit that not everything repressed returns with the sensation of the uncanny, and he broadens out his theorization to include two types of uncanniness: “An uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complex have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.”

This second kind of uncanniness occurs when, say, you were just thinking of someone and then—poof!—there they are, as though your thoughts have called them forth. It’s the experience of the world as magical, full of coincidences not rationally explained. Such a sense of magic, Freud asserts, used to dominate our thinking before the rise of reason, science, and rational thought began chipping away at the edifices of superstition and religion. But vestiges of such magical thinking remain, just like the psychic leftovers of infantile sexual complexes, and they emerge at times to make the world around us strange and creepy.

Beyond the superstitious, I’m unsure how far down Freud’s various rabbit holes (oops, an unconscious reference to my mother’s genitalia?) I want to go, but I am moved by his insight that the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.” And Freud’s interest in rooting such estrangement in the home—the Heim—seems right to me. For many of us creeps, something happens in the home, or close to it, that estranges us from ourselves, and from others. We become other, discovering our own fundamental weirdness, catching glimpses of it initially in how strangely family and potential friends react to us. I think of the things that my own family and neighbors reacted to, sometimes trying to correct—a bit of effeminacy here, a shyness there, or my crossed-eyes, my overly large head. Such outward signs seemed to speak of something potentially amiss internally, some deep-down flaw

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14 Ibid., 157.
that made me not quite recognizable as a normal child, or even sometimes as fully human.

I might differ with Freud on the nature of repression, which may or may not be a coping function for dealing with infantile sexuality. Repression sometimes comes in blunter forms: my mother batting my hand away from sweeping my hair out of my eyes “like a girl”; a father wondering if I’m his child; other adults not letting their children play with the weird-looking kid; the constant taunts from other children who ruthlessly (if ultimately accurately) identified me as a faggot. How could such forces of repression — generally understood at the time as normal childhood teasing or adult attempts to correct undesirable behavior — not estrange me from myself, making me all the more inward-facing, introverted, self-doubting? Or worse, self-hating? Surely, there was a lot of material to work with, large-headed and crossed-eyed as I was (and remain). Even now I want to make excuses for those who abused me because I so long ago, at such an early age, began internalizing their sense that I was a creepy little kid who was, justly, the object of childhood scorn and adult skepticism.

My uncanniness — to others and to myself — did indeed start at home. I was un-homed, as it were, in many ways. I cannot deny that I’ve come a long way, baby, having built a successful career and a fairly stable life with my husband. But my sense of being an outsider remains. I struggle with the notion of home, of feeling at home. My professional life has not exactly been itinerant, but I’m only just now, approaching 50, allowing myself the possibility of staying in one place for more than a decade. I’ve otherwise moved around a lot, and I feel I’m perpetually looking for another job, another teaching position in another part of the country that might feel more like home. I’ve tried out several places after fleeing the south: first Colorado, then the Midwest, now California, but I’ve also spent huge chunks of time in the northeast, wondering if, perhaps, I might feel at home there. I don’t know quite where I’ll wind up at times, and my recurring
paranoid fantasy is of *homelessness*, of being found one day dead on the streets of some other city, having lost everything, abandoned by everyone, abandoning myself finally and materially to the homelessness I’ve always felt deep down.

Such thoughts have prompted me to consider what alternative kinds of family life might have been possible for me to imagine at an earlier age. Like Steve Urkel, how might I have tried to construct another kind of home for myself, at least in my mind? Or is such imagination of alternative family even possible for a child? Is imagining another home only possible in adulthood? I recently got a sense of such imaginative possibilities when visiting with extended family, when I was reminded that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the most significant potential creep in my young life was my uncle, my mother’s brother.

Hot and humid, unsurprisingly, when I land at the Gulfport International Airport in June 2014 to visit my mother. Every summer I spend about two weeks with her. She’s 70, still works, remains in decent health, perhaps too ornery and spirited to slow down, though I can tell she wants to. But her Cajun blood runs warm, and since my father passed about a decade ago from Parkinson’s disease, in the awful aftermath of Katrina, she’s found new energies and interests in her life after caretaking. I’m happy for her. She’s a bit alone at times in her small retirement home on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, having fled the City That Care Forgot some years ago, but close enough to my sister and her family not to feel lonely.

Still, I know she misses her siblings. Coming from a family of eight, there are only three of them left. And southern Mississippi just isn’t “home.” So I’m not surprised that she asked this summer to drive a bit over three hundred miles, clear across Louisiana, to visit her remaining (older) sister and (younger) brother in far west Louisiana, near Lake Charles. Cajun country.
My aunt, uncle, and cousins live, if not exactly in the bayous, pretty damn close to them. They’ve made their homes in trailers, some of them building houses, in the sticky wet heat, many of them working on the oil rigs in the Gulf and in neighboring Texas, all of them trying to get together as often as they can for family time, large gatherings of generally good cheer, drinking, and gossip.

My cousins prepared us just such a get-together to celebrate our visit. Smoked meats and barbecued chicken, Andouille sausage, boiled crawfish and boudin, the white sausage Cajuns love. We arrived one evening and ate our way through the next day, as twenty, thirty people stopped by for food and fellowship.

I was glad to see my cousins. I hadn’t known many of them as a child; visits with my mother’s large family were infrequent. In their early twenties, my mother and her brother Glen had moved away from Cajun country to try out life in the “big city,” New Orleans — where they both stayed and made their lives and where my mother had me and my sisters. In early adulthood, they had relied on each other and a change of venue to remake their lives. Both black sheep — he gay, she a little too loud for a woman — both wanting to get away from an alcoholic and, at times, abusive father. Brighter lights beckoned.

As children, my sister and I saw a lot of my uncle, but my mother’s other siblings and their children were hundreds of miles away, so my sisters and I got to know them only intermittently. It was only in the aftermath of Katrina that I connected with some of them in very moving ways. I’d flown down to stay with my mother and father, soon to pass, as they evacuated from the Mississippi Gulf Coast to Lake Charles. In those weeks, especially after my father’s death (his body just couldn’t stand the strain of the evacuation, having lived with Parkinson’s for well over a decade — more on this later), I got to know this part of my family — their strength, their generosity, their care for one another. Good people. They were kind to my mother in her
time of loss, sheltering her and grieving with her. I remain in their debt.

This visit, nearly a decade later, was a chance to reconnect, but also to grieve anew, as one of my aunts had just passed about seven months previously. Aunt Put, we called her. Like my mother, a feisty character, larger than life. She’d been the postmistress in her community, and she hated the word postmistress. She was the postmaster. I felt for my cousin’s loss, even as I felt estranged still, this particular aunt disproving of homosexuality.

So, this gathering both celebrated our reunion and marked the transitions of time through which we all try to make our lives. That marking took a particular form as my mother, uncle, aunt, and their families sat around my cousin’s kitchen island, sifting through hundreds and hundreds of photographs that my aunt had taken and collected. There may have been a thousand pictures — boxes of them. My cousins wanted to label them, calling on my mother’s generation to identify people they didn’t know. So, in between bouts of eating slow-cooked and spicy food, everyone sifted through the photographs, some eighty years old, scrutinizing the past and remembering lives lived and lost. Some faces and scenes remained opaque to memory. But many others evoked fondness and commiseration, and a couple of them a sense of the damage wrought by people on each other — even people who love one another. Several were pictures of family members in uniform, from World War II or the Korean War. Some were on oil rigs. Many were from family reunions. We organized the pictures primarily by closest association with my aunts and uncles. Eight large plastic baggies slowly accumulated the networks of relations, sorting memories through family ties, blood connections, and miscellaneous friendships.

At one point, a few of my relatives turned to me with a baggie full of photos of my uncle Glen, the one who had moved with my mother to New Orleans early in their adulthoods. With the baggie was a deathbook, the bound volume that guests at a wake
sign so the family can have a memento of who mourned with them. My uncle, the one I’d known the best through sheer proximity to us in New Orleans, had died of multiple myeloma cancer when I was a sophomore in high school. My cousin, whose house hosted the gathering, whose mother had passed a half-year ago, and who was organizing the event, said that I should take the book and whatever pictures I wanted. Others around the table agreed, shaking their heads somberly. This seemed right. I had known him, after all, in ways I hadn’t known anyone else in my mother’s family.

He was also, like I am, gay.

In the moments after this gifting, I felt a welter of emotions. Part of me was extraordinarily touched by the gesture. It was such a thoughtful recognition of my past relationship with my uncle. Another part of me, though, felt that this handing off to me of his deathbook and photos was a simultaneous acknowledgment and disavowal of our shared queerness. The identity was recognized, but the gift also seemed to say, “This is your thing. It really belongs to you, not us.” Perhaps the fact that only one — only one — of my cousins asked me about Mack, my husband and partner of nearly two decades, prompted me to feel that my queerness, along with Glen’s, was being both evoked and dismissed at the same time. We were family, but also somehow not.

Indeed, Glen had left rural Louisiana, not finding it possible to make a life there as a gay man. I, in my own turn, had left Louisiana behind as well. We had both become “outsiders” to our families of origin, our shared extended family not exactly throwing us out, as is the case with many other queers, but still not fully comfortable with us either. We had both been raised to understand our queerness as a problem, even damning to our eternal souls. At best, socially shameful and creepy; at worst, an ungodly disgrace. And while my relatives might indulge a familial sense that we are “their” queers, we are still queers. At the reunion, I walked into a room where distant cousins were
talking about the “freaks” they’d seen on a trip to San Francisco; everyone quickly shut up — embarrassed, surely, and not wanting to offend, but also annoyed that I’d interrupted their bonding. To be sure, at this point in my life, late 40s, comfortable with myself and largely at ease in my queer flesh, I have fewer and fewer family-oriented resentments. But I also know that I had to leave; like my uncle, I needed — and need still — a different set of relations.

At the same time, these people are my relations, my family, however uncanny — unheimlich — we might seem to one another. And this moment has provoked me to think about the genealogies that exist, both overtly and covertly, in any family. For while I may have strayed from both my immediate and extended families in many ways, the gifting of Glen’s memorabilia makes visible to me alternative genealogies, different trajectories of affiliation, divergent paths of contact and influence — paths that even my family, so clearly ill at ease with queerness, could acknowledge.

Those genealogies orient us queerly to other ways of being — within and without — a sense of “family.” What’s perhaps most moving, most poignant for me, is that I knew my uncle for such a short period of time; he passed away right as I was entering adolescence. Yet his influence on my life has been profound. And however phantasmic my relatives’ understanding of that relationship — queer uncle, queer nephew: they must somehow be “related” — my uncle’s life and then his death, even thirty years later, is about lost trajectories, an only ever-guessed lost futurity that, in ways known and unknowable to me, I have spent most of my life trying to construct.

As kids, my sister and I thought nothing of Uncle Glen coming over to visit with his partner, Michael. They were just Glen and Michael, bringing beignets to eat on Sunday mornings. Other times, we’d visit them at their home in the French Quarter, an amazing shotgun where they had dinner parties, a bedroom
ceiling draped with sheets and white Christmas lights like a fairyland, a back garden for drinking wine, a stereo tinkling out Tomita’s synthesized classics. Aesthetic culture was important to them, I connected with my uncle through classical music and reading, mostly fantasy, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. When I was eight, Uncle Glen took me to see Fantasia, and that experience alone probably did more to shape my future interest in the fantastical, the power of the imagination, fine music, and animation—interests that abide with me, sustain me, and, in so many ways, direct my ongoing investments, personally and professionally.

One Halloween they brought a stunning black costume for me, headpiece and all, literally a set of drapes that wrapped around my body, inlaid with little bits of mirror. I wanted to be Darth Vader but looked instead like an evil drag queen, glorious in my gowns. My parents wouldn’t let me wear it—too over the top, too creepy. But to this day, I thrill to my uncle and his partner’s boldness, their audacity, their sheer queer fabulousness. I loved them, both of them. For Glen’s funeral, I would compose and play an elegy on the organ.

But childhood ends, and it ended for me abruptly with the hurt look on my uncle’s face when I told a homophobic story I’d heard in school one day in late October. I was a ninth grader at the local Catholic boys’ school, where my mother later hoped I’d one day return to teach, buying a home down the road from their house, just like some of her sibling’s children did to stay close to their parents. The health teacher had told us about a friend of his who worked in the emergency room of a local hospital, about the faggots who would come in at night, having stuck things up their asses. Once, as the teacher’s friend probed a guy’s rectum, he saw a light looking back at him, a flashlight that the queer had stuck up his rear to pleasure himself. We boys laughed, squirming in our hard seats with titillated horror. I shared the story, and my uncle flew into a rage as he sewed our Halloween costumes that year. Already dying of cancer (he’d be
dead within a half year), he rightly shouted that he didn’t need to know about other people’s problems, having enough of his own. My mother took me aside later and said, “Don’t you know he’s one of them?” I knew immediately what she was talking about. I’d had no idea, consciously.

Part of me wants to feel shame about this story, to feel that I hurt a fellow traveler, my own uncle. But, at thirteen, I was starting to figure out how to pleasure myself but hadn’t yet connected the varieties of pleasure to particular identities. The story about the flashlight seemed, well, funny. A guy sticking a flashlight up his ass. That’s funny to a thirteen-year-old boy. Not sexual, or at least it wasn’t to me at the time. But the teacher (may he rot in hell, I still tell myself) was old enough to link the practice with an identity. I see now that he was training us. You do shit like this and you’re an object of scorn, deserving humiliating laughter at best, or even disciplining violence.

Isn’t the telling of this story to a room full of thirteen-year-old boys what’s really creepy here?

I lost something that day—an innocence, surely, and began feeling the workings of social power in my own body, vectoring through the joke and rebounding on me in self-doubt and anxiety. I had offended, but my uncle was already himself, in his sexuality, offensive. I just hadn’t known it. Now I did, and I realized that I might be an offender as well, if I didn’t watch out.

And here, one strain of this narrative ends. Later that same school year, in just a few months, my uncle was dead—shortly after Mardi Gras. I remember my mother going to pick him up in the French Quarter on Mardi Gras night, because he had been abandoned by friends who wanted to go partying. He was just too weak. As she brought him home and led him to bed; he stopped by my room where I was just starting to listen to Aaron Copland’s “Appalachian Spring.” He asked if he could listen for a moment. It was our last meaningful exchange.
Or perhaps not. The dead often stay with us. And while it took me well over another decade to come out, I thought of my uncle all the time. I still do. But mostly what I think about is how my life might have been different had he survived. What would my adolescence have been like with him in it? Would it have been easier to come out, or harder? Would I have felt the need to distance myself from him in order to protect myself? Or might I have come out much earlier?

Although he was taken out of my life so early, my uncle haunted me — in good and bad ways — for a long time. For my family, he became the cautionary tale. Look what happens to those poor queers, dead so young. He was only 41. And some even speculated — and do so to this day — that his cancer might have been a mistaken diagnosis for AIDS. You don’t want to be like him. Such words resonated with the hostility of the health teacher, and I sometimes vowed to myself not to be like my uncle. And yet his fabulous home in the French Quarter, his love of music and costuming, his delight in food, his boldness in bringing over his lover — all were also part of my life, gesturing, pointing, orienting me toward paths beyond the cautionary, the safe routes. As such, they formed part of an alternative genealogy, one that lay alongside, however hidden at times, the genealogical imperative that I satisfy certain familial demands and obligations — that I buy a home near my family, get married, get to work, and take care of my parents as they once took care of me.

I will never know what my uncle’s presence might have made possible or imaginable had he survived. But I am nonetheless left with those foreclosed-upon possibilities, those unknowable trajectories. Indeed, what seems important to me now is marking both the place in my life that my uncle occupied while he was alive and marking what his absence throughout my adolescence actually did. I could’ve had a gay guide — a gay “dad” in my uncle. In this light, what my uncle’s survival might have meant for me was a local modeling of a working-class queer man making queerness livable — if not in fact absolutely fabulous. What’s at
stake here is proximity. And what his death meant for me was a foreclosing of possibilities, at least possibilities for imagining a queer life in New Orleans.

That foreclosing meant that I stayed in an intensely homophobic environment. I knew no other adult who was gay or lesbian — for the remainder of my time in Louisiana, where I stayed until I was twenty-five. No one. Not one teacher, not one supervisor, certainly not a member of any church I attended. Looking back, I can’t blame them; what a toxic place and time to be queer. And while I met some other young men, just a handful, like Mike W., they were often like me grappling with the damaging effects of homophobia on their own lives, so they couldn’t help me any more than they could help themselves. We tried at times, as I’ve recounted. But it wasn’t enough.

And it certainly wasn’t enough to prevent me from wondering, in my early 20s, if my own homoerotic feelings might have stemmed from my uncle — not genetically, but because he may have sexually abused me as a child. I slowly began to build this narrative of his own creepiness, how he was very likely a sexual predator, and that everything wrong with my life I could lay at his feet. I fetishized particular memories to piece this story together. Once, I must have been may be 4 or 5, my uncle visiting us, my mother cooking in the kitchen, me cavorting around in my briefs, my uncle dropped an ice cube down the back of my tighty-whities. I remember screaming with outraged delight, but in my 20s, such a memory became a piece in a larger puzzle of predation and abuse. I couldn’t remember anything else, but isn’t the failure to remember itself a clue to possible abuse? I’d been reading Freud and thought I knew all about repression.

When, shortly before I got married to a woman, I broke down from the stress of it all and sobbed in my parents’ kitchen. My mother didn’t know what was going on, but my father said, in words I think I can recall perfectly: “I think I know what’s wrong. You’re a homosexual.” I stopped crying and actually
laughed. My reply haunts me to this day: “Well you’re partly right. I think Uncle Glen abused me.” I spilled out my concocted story, and my parents seemed all too eager to corroborate. There was that time, Glen having taken me to see Fantasia so my parents could go out for the evening themselves. Again, I must have been barely 5 or 6. I vaguely recall the film, not much else. After the movie, I’d apparently asked to call home and begged my parents to come get me. They didn’t, still enjoying some time alone. And that must have been when it occurred, one of the instances of “abuse.” Surely my pleas to go home signaled a distress that my parents couldn’t read, trusting Glen as they did. If they’d only known what a real creep he was…

But what was there to know? Looking back on all of this, I feel like a real creep myself, for I was all too willing to blame my uncle for my desires and, what’s worse, understand them as the product of a sexual abuse that never occurred. Then I consider that what’s truly creepy is the extent to which my surrounding culture — everything in it from church to school to family to peers — had made such a perverse interpretation of my feelings not just a likely story but one I (and others) bent over backwards to concoct, despite all real evidence to the contrary. It’s appalling. And as I write this, I’m scratching an itch on my arm until it bleeds. I have never been a cutter, but this little act of self-harm is my empathy for those who do cut. I’m punishing myself for the awfulness inflicted on me, for the awfulness I in turn thought of others, like my uncle. I’m revealing the scar deep down.

If Freud is right and the uncanny is in part about the repetition of the repressed, then my uncle figures as the return of that which much of the culture in south Louisiana during my childhood attempted to repress — not him per se but everything he stood for: the possibility of a queer life, somewhat sustainable, even pleasurable at times, striving to be free from bigotry, hatred, and abuse. But more radically, my uncle is creepy, not
because he represents the return of a repressed fear of castration, but because he suggests the fundamental instability of the primacy of the family unit. He offered the possibility of an alternative genealogy — and that’s what had to be repressed. I needed to get married, I needed my homoerotic desires to be explained away, I needed to follow the straight and narrow path. And I tried for a while, though my wife, goddess bless her, was, if not gay like me, at least queer enough that she needed to follow her own different path. I thank the universe we decided against children and that, when the time was right, we split amicably.

So, since Glen died and some imaginative possibilities were cut off for me, the genealogy had to go in another direction. While part of me may have been piecing together a story that made him the villain, another part of me knew that other narratives of queerness were out there. I’d at least seen enough of his life to sense this. And I knew, studying literature as I did in college and graduate school, that books contained those narratives. Indeed, I took from Uncle Glen an interest in the aesthetic. As opposed to my father, who wanted me to put down that copy of *Prince Caspian*, Glen encouraged my love of reading. For one birthday, me just on the cusp of adolescence, he gave me both a bookcase and a subscription to *National Geographic*. I remember my jaw literally dropping when he and his lover brought in he bookcase. He knew me. He recognized the budding nerd in me. And with the gift of the magazine, I think he recognized that I too would one day have to leave, need to journey out, go explore other ways of being, and I think the *NatGeos* were his way of telling me it would be okay, there would be amazing and wonderful places to discover.

Of course, I turned to the arts in the years after his death. It was a way to reject my father for rejecting me. Books, classical music, silly attempts at various art projects, then the piano and composing music. My mother had always wanted a piano, so, when finally financially secure enough to spend some money, my parents bought what we called a “wall unit,” a solid instru-
ment that could discreetly be used to display knick-knacks. A set of complimentary lessons came with the purchase, and my mother, who had learned a little piano as a child, started taking them. She was just too busy, though, to keep up with them, so she asked the teacher if I could take them over; I'd already started teaching myself from the music books she brought home. I'm not bragging when I say that I took to the instrument right away, and within two years was learning how to play the famous Rachmaninoff C# minor prelude.

_Dumm… Dummm… DUMMMMMM…._

The ominous octaves attracted me like no other sounds at the time, and I know I drove my parents a bit bonkers by practicing this piece so often. The teacher saw some talent and insisted that I continue the lessons, giving my parents a ridiculous discount for teaching me. When I could I'd save up money from babysitting and pay for my own lessons. I'd bike over interstate overpasses to get to the music studio. I loved the instrument, and still do. I immediately started writing music, page after page of penciled scribbles. I started to play in church, at first abominably and only persevered through the patience of some good Baptist folks who encouraged me. I wanted to be a musician, much to my parents' chagrin. I remember my mother telling me, on multiple occasions, that music was a great hobby, but not a career. _This isn't work_. But I played increasingly for money, first as a church musician, then accompanying singers at weddings. I made good pocket cash throughout my 20s. Still, I never seriously pursued music as a career. Part of me must have believed my parents deep down, but I never let music far out of my life. I play with friends to this day. And I count such music-making part of my legacy from my uncle.

At the time, though, my creepy uncle's legacy of the arts had to compete with other pressures to channel any innate aesthetic penchant I had into other, more legitimate forms of expression. And while one might be un-homed within your home, that
home and its surrounding supporting communities are often invested in keeping you still contained within it. Classical music, an inheritance as it were from my uncle, allowed me to differentiate myself from others, especially my neglectful father, my vicious schoolmates. But church music, especially the hymns of the Baptist hymnal, shaped my sense of self in subtler and lasting ways. As a Baptist in the largely Catholic culture of New Orleans, attending Catholic schools, I encountered yet another differentiating layer between myself and others, but the hymns we sang on Sundays helped provide solace throughout the week. I’d whisper their propaganda to myself, turning my eyes upon Jesus, looking full in his wonderful face, while kids shouted faggot in my own.

Such hymns provided more than just mantras to survive the day. The Baptist hymnal taught me about poetry and love. We started going to our neighbor’s Baptist church after my youngest sister was born. Dad had been present for her birth and was so moved by the experience that he insisted we find a church. Mother had been Catholic, but that was out, the Church having denied my mother the sacraments when she married my churchless father. So, we asked chain-smoking elderly Ms. Margie where she went to church, and Highland Baptist became a part of my life, in some ways one of the central parts of it, for the next decade.

I was 11, 12. Just entering puberty. I was ripe for understanding everything happening to me and my body — and the strange desires and fixations creeping up on me — through the language of the hymnal, those sweet and twisted poems that saw desire as only rightly directed toward our lord and savior. Indeed, if you have any experience of protestant hymnody, you know that the language of hymns is often intimate, even borderline erotic, full of discourses drawn from lovers’ words.
Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.\(^{15}\)

Such words catch me by surprise even nearly forty years after I first heard them. As I write this, I’m sitting in a Japanese coffee shop in Irvine, California, and the tinkling piano music playing in the background is largely ambient, but a couple of strains penetrate into consciousness. I hear the tune of this old hymn, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus,” and I’m caught anew, snagged on sounds that I haven’t heard in decades but that I recognize as part of my soul, having sucked them in so long ago. It’s not unusual at all to hear hymns in such places; many Asian-American communities here are quite religious.

But what’s perhaps a little more unusual is how the language of these hymns spoke simultaneously to someone like me about how Christ could help me overcome my sinful queer urges by, in some ways, becoming the object of them. One of my favorite hymns was “In the Garden,” a homoerotic love song that I would frequently request at church.

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses…

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known!

\(^{15}\) According to Wikipedia, the hymn “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus,” whose chorus I can recite (and sing) in toto to this day, was written by Helen Howard Lemmel and first published in 1918. It’s a standard in many hymnals, and I saw many copies in hymnals throughout my youth and young adulthood. You can find numerous versions readily available online.
He speaks and the sound of His voice,
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody that he gave to me,
Within my heart is ringing…\textsuperscript{16}

I look back on this, hearing its strains in my ear, and can’t help but think if there’s anything gayer. All my adolescent queer body wanted to do was to “tarry,” whatever the fuck that meant. But the hymns also poisoned as they taught about love; after all, what earthly love, especially something as debased as homosexuality, could compare to the soul-transporting bliss of Christ, whose chaste love could provide a joy “none other has ever known”?

More devastatingly, some of the hymns seemed to whisper the potential of death to make everything better. As a young man, a teenager, speaking softly to myself throughout the day the words to “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus,” I couldn’t help but hear a potential solution to my cursed state.

\begin{verbatim}
O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There’s light for a look at the Savior,
And life more abundant and free.

Through death into life everlasting
He passed, and we follow Him there;
O’er us sin no more hath dominion
For more than conquerors we are!
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{16} This classic hymn was written in 1912 by C. Austin Miles. Again, numerous versions are readily available online. It’s been covered by many famous folks, and was sung religiously (pun intended) throughout my childhood, teenage, and young adult church-going days in the South.
His Word shall not fail you, He promised;
Believe Him and all will be well;
Then go to a world that is dying,
His perfect salvation to tell!

I so wanted to be a “conqu’ror” — what teen boy at the time wouldn’t? Overcoming oneself while being saved from the fires of eternal damnation, or at least the burning of fleshly desire — such a potent poetry seemed designed specifically for me to hear.

And so, I learned to apologize for my creepiness very early on. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior during one Southern Baptist revival, and then we headed to Biloxi for vacation. All along the hour and a half journey I vowed to myself to keep my soul clean, but as we pulled into the Holiday Inn I was already frustrated with my sister, sinning in my heart. I knew I was fucked. I probably still have the little book that the preacher used to tutor my unsaved soul: I remember the pictures of the lost, little cartoon figures, headed over the bridge into hell. Perhaps I should’ve sped the journey, I used to think.

I didn’t realize at the time the extent to which these voices, sung in collective unison and harmony every Sunday throughout my adolescence, were crafting my strongest sense of how I understood myself. But when I look back on the feeble attempts at poetry I tried at the time, I can see how these verses modeled both my own poetry making and my sense of the world.

I see a would-be lover
Passing by my side
And wonder where the joy would be
In letting passion ride.
I see the handsome face
Returns my deep desire;
I want to reach and touch and stroke
And satisfy the fire

Instead I turn my face
And look the other way
And wonder why I keep on going
When I would rather stay.

I see the would-be lovers
Passing by my side
And wonder where the joy could be
In making passion hide.

The imitation of form is apparent enough; the uptake of self-mortification and the longing to turn away from bodily desire more devastating. What I recall most about writing such poetry is doing it so alone, late at night, after everyone in the house had gone to bed. I’m 17, 18, staying up late to stare out the window while counting iambs, groping for rhymes, confessing my need to confess, even fetishizing my loneliness and pain before heading to bed to rub off some spunk into my briefs.

“Desire”

In bed I lay awake at night,
Obsessed with my obscene desire,
And try to find a way to drown
A soul that burns as though on fire.

And through the day the fight goes on
As I am tempted all the time;
Yet still I fight the fire that flames
And hide the secret that is mine.
I must admit that, even now, I like the alliteration here: the “fs” a fumbling toward understanding — and repressing — my own creeping desires. Indeed, repression is everywhere in these poems:

“Carnality”

_The sin of my carnality_
_Is stabbing like a knife,_
_And my own hand controls the blade_
_Which brings upon my strife._

_If only I would yield to God_
_And let Him reign within_
_I know the blade would go away_
_And peace would then begin._

_To say the words and to have faith_
_Are very different though;_
_It’s one thing to say, “God, come in!” —_
_Another to let go._

_And yet until that time that I_
_Surrender to His rule,_
_My blade will keep on stabbing me_
_While I control the tool._

Control the tool, indeed. What a phallic metaphor that, at the time, I’m sure I had no consciousness of.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, I became a huge fan of the work of Christina Rossetti, the Victorian poet par excellence of self-abnegation and self-denial, who wrote hundreds of verses about love denied while turning her own eyes to Jesus, or at least to a better life beyond death, or perhaps just to the cessation of desire in death.
Somewhere or other there must surely be
The face not seen, the voice not heard,
The heart that not yet — never yet — ah me!
Made answer to my word.

Somewhere or other, may be near or far;
Past land and sea, clean out of sight;
Beyond the wandering moon, beyond the star
That tracks her night by night.

Somewhere or other, may be far or near;
With just a wall, a hedge, between;
With just the last leaves of the dying year
Fallen on a turf grown green.¹⁷

I read this old poem now and think how resonant it is with the singer in Radiohead’s “Creep,” Rossetti’s speaker herself on the verge of wondering if she, too, really belongs here. I turned such verses into music, composing little art songs that my adult friend Larry would sing in his rich baritone, voicing all the longing — of desire and my want to be released from it — that I couldn’t articulate in my own words. I used art to theorize my desire.

But I was also steadily composing some other verse — and there is a lot of it, fumbling poetry that I’ve carted around for decades — that speaks to slightly other desires and needs, a wanting to acknowledge something taken from me, something denied.

¹⁷ While many (if not most) of Rossetti’s poems are readily available online, the standard edition, one I owned as a young man, is the following: R.W. Crump (ed.), The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979). I actually met Professor Crump, a serious scholar and lovely woman, just briefly while I was at LSU in the 1980s. She was even kind enough to write a short, glowing comment about an article I published about Rossetti’s work and the sacred sensuality of its metaphors.
“A Need”

There are children
Who cannot say “Good-bye”
For they have no place
From which to leave
And farewells need a place.

There are children
Who cannot say “Hello”
For they have no place
At which to arrive
And greetings always need a place.

There are children
Who can only sit in silence
Saying nothing
For they have no place
To go or leave
And never learned the words
Of need and place.

I’d forgotten about this poem until I found it recently, buried in a box, and I have no recollection of the particular circumstances of composing it. But I must have been 20 or so, just beginning to recognize that I could occupy a different standpoint in relation to myself and the abuse I’d suffered, even if I had to externalize that standpoint and articulate it through a nameless, abstract “child.” At the same time, the poem speaks to me from across nearly decades about something I knew deep in my heart, something about my own creepiness: I loved the people — at church, in my family, in my neighborhood — who, if they only knew me, the real me deep down, would’ve wanted nothing more to do with me.
What are the persistent voices, the ones that linger, that even now I can hear when I sit silently, or, having just woken up, don't feel quite defended against yet, the armor of daily tasks and preoccupations smothering the sounds of the past, muting the whispers that continue to tell the tale of my utter strange-ness, my need to be outcast, thrown aside, at best neglected if not in fact forsaken? I often go through my day having imagi-nary conversations, processing in my mind various attacks and parries. I'm constantly hearing the voices of others criticizing, mocking, demanding justifications, and I rehearse responses, defenses, and counter-thrusts — mostly for exchanges that will never take place. I have to defend my desires, even just to myself, and feel puffed up with a kind of righteous indignation, a sense that I too prick when I bleed and deserve to be recognized as fully human. At other times, though, I'm so overwhelmed with remembered pain that my throat starts to close, as though my body has finally recognized the futility of living, of finding any sustaining happiness or contentment in a world that has already passed judgment, that won't acknowledge the legitimacy of my want, my need, my humanity.

Trying to open my throat to articulate the raw fact of my be-ing in the world, however much it might not want me to be in it, prompted me to turn to narrative, storytelling, writing of all kinds in search of the words that I could use to shape my sense of self. Judith Butler reminds us in *Giving an Account of Oneself* that we are born into languages that predate us, that are already wildly circulating with meanings and meaningfulness. We can at best use this language given us, trying to take from it what we need.18 These given words are the ones we try to make our own.

So, from early on, besides learning about music, I read a ton and figured that, if I wasn't going to be a musician, I could be an English teacher. So, I majored in English, and began to profes-

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sionalize my once furtive reading habits. And it was in reading that I learned more about queerness than nearly anywhere else. Music only got me so far. I remember once listening, perhaps at 15 or 16, to Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony, reading the liner notes and learning that part of the pathos of the work (it’s called the “Pathetique”) may very well have stemmed from the composer’s homosexuality and an unfortunate love affair. I was shocked, even somewhat appalled, but also partly taken with the idea that music could express, if not articulate, such dilemmas. Writing, though, could speak to them even more directly and explicitly, and I sought out books that grappled with sexual difference.

I can’t recall all the things I read, and it would be tedious for you, as a reader, to wade through such an accounting. But I learned from Walt Whitman how a writer could reach out and touch someone across great distances to talk about

Hours continuing long, sore and heavy-hearted […].
Hours when I am forgotten, (O weeks and months passing, but I believe I am never to forget!)
Sullen and suffering hours! (I am ashamed—but it is useless—I am what I am;)
Hours of my torment—I wonder if other men ever have the like, out of the like feelings
Is there even one other like me—distracted—his friend, his lover, lost to him?).

How I thrilled to this poem, this cry of anguish, and the blasphemy of self-declaration—“I am what I am”—the very words god uses to describe himself. How dare the queer poet use the

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19 Again, as with Rossetti, so many versions of Whitman’s work are readily available online. I first found “Hours continuing long…” from a second-hand bookstore copy: *Whitman: Selections from Leaves of Grass* (The Laurel Poetry Series), edited by Richard Wilbur and introduced by Leslie A. Fiedler. My battered little copy was a second printing from 1960, which I still have to this day.
a theory
divine formula to justify his sin, to place it at the core of his being. Isn’t this loneliness proof of his error, the fundamental flaw in being a faggot? Such verse spoke to me about my condition but also seemed to confirm simultaneously both its necessary abjection and its defiant stance. My own sense of pain and loss was turning, at times, to anger.

I took an independent study on the works of D.H. Lawrence. I’d wanted to study Evelyn Waugh since the television adaptation of Brideshead Revisited had made a huge impact on me when I saw it at 16 years of age, broadcast on PBS. Charles and Sebastian’s youthful love affair seemed idyllic, even troubled as it was by family intrigue and alcoholism. Here were two boys clearly having a romance. And the scene of them getting caught sunbathing, Sebastian’s sister smiling knowingly when stumbling upon them, has stayed with me for decades; Anthony Andrews and Jeremy Irons’s young naked dimpled butts burned in my brain. No faculty member wanted to read Waugh with me, but one consented to Lawrence. And while I didn’t love the work, I remember my absolute interest in the lesbian drama late in The Rainbow as well as the famous wrestling scene in its sequel, Women in Love. I sought out the Ken Russell film (with screenplay by Larry Kramer, which meant nothing to me at the time but could’ve been a signpost toward a different kind of life) and played several times the tape of Alan Bates and Oliver Reed grappling with one another in front of that fireplace.²⁰ I too wanted a friend I could undress with, touch, get close to like that. But I also felt like a creep watching this again and again, doing something furtive, hiding the tape, not wanting others to know what I was doing. I felt similar thrilling creepiness reading William Maxwell’s largely forgotten classic The Folded Leaf, about two boys rooming together in school, one clearly having a crush on the other. There’s a deliciously painful scene of the two sharing a bed in the depth of winter, sleeping back to back, the

crushing boy sliding his foot across the bed to rest it against the foot of the other boy as he falls asleep. How I longed for a friend whose foot I could use to send me into peaceful slumber.

Such furtive reading only increased, and I remember the intense interest I had when Merchant Ivory filmed E.M. Forester’s posthumously published *Maurice*. Faith, my older female friend, was remarkably patient about all of my interests in alternative sexualities, and while our church friends, Larry and Jeanie, wouldn’t go see the film with us, Faith and I went to see it by ourselves, even buying and reading the book together. She must have known of my incipient queerness. What twenty-year-old straight kid is that interested in art films about faggots? She didn’t make me feel creepy about my interest, though, and for that I remain grateful to this day, well over half a life away.

Lucky for me that the queer is a figure I could find readily enough in a lot of literature, even if that figuration often focused on the queer as lurking creep. Moving on from *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*, I turned from fantasy to science fiction and remember encountering the perverse Baron Harkonen in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, which I read at 15 or 16, and the David Lynch film adaptation which had just come out. Although a monster who, in the book, drugs his boys to keep them from resisting his advances, and who, in the film, fondles them before killing them, he was one of the few representations of powerful queerness I could find. Part of me was horrified. Another part of me fucking loved it. I felt myself the creepy Baron, the big fat man dripping with open sores, preying on the innocent. Ok, even if I wasn’t the Baron (I was as thin as a rail), I feared that he was my future self, the monstrous predator that I could become. But at the same time, I relished the power he had. If he couldn’t find others to share his fantasies, he could force them to comply. Indeed, the complexities and perverse attractions of the creepy queer are abundant in literature, and I sought them out, if not as models for myself, then perhaps as both cautionary tales and sources of furtive power.
Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was a particular favorite. I loved all of Wilde’s work and tried to write about him, often badly, being too much of a fanboy. Dorian Gray, like Wilde’s life itself, seemed to offer a powerful moral lesson: herein lies the path of debasement, doom, and destruction, self and otherwise. You wouldn’t just destroy yourself, but you’d take others with you, wife, children, friends. Basil Hallward, the character who’d painted the infamous portrait that bears the record of Dorian’s sins, his experiments in living solely for pleasure, confronts Dorian and asks, “Why is your friendship so fatal to young men?” We don’t know much about how or why it is so fatal, but I could read into that question all of the perversities my heart feared and desired. Dorian was more than a creep. He was dangerous, and part of the danger was generated out of the homoeroticism that surrounded him, and that clung to the book itself as the product of a gay man sent to prison and dying in exile and disgrace for being queer. But Wilde had dared to present Dorian as an attractive and compelling figure, even if he’s ultimately one whose charms and power lured other people to their doom. What joys they may have experienced beforehand, though — those I wanted to know.

But Dorian is also a creep, and the word appears sprinkled throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, if not directly as an identifier for the ageless one himself but as a way for Wilde to cultivate a foreshadowing sense of doom and evil, with creeping mists and shadows, the paint of the portrait itself at times seeming to creep slowly into the demonic. Since discovering Baron Harkonen and Dorian I’ve long been fascinated by literary creeps, such as Patricia Highsmith’s murderous Tom Ripley, who, unlike the various movie versions of him, is actually a successful and self-satisfied killer, taking his revenge on those who

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21 I have so many versions of this book and of Wilde’s works in general. I used the Project Gutenberg version for quotations and for my search for the word “creep,” “The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde,” http://www.gutenberg.org/files/174/174-h/174-h.htm.
have crossed him, especially on the noxious Dickie Greenleaf, who couldn’t love him enough. And then there’s Dennis Cooper, who has made a literary career of writing about gay serial killers in works like *Frisk*, older men preying on younger, wanting to open their bodies to see what’s on the inside, but also all the more to possess and control them — perhaps ultimately punishing those who elicit in them strong feelings, desires, and attractions that can never fully be satisfied in the real world. I feel just creepy admitting that I’ve enjoyed all of this work. And to be sure, Cooper’s novels are complex fantasies, and I don’t imagine he, as author, actually wants to enact what he describes. With that said, I know I have been drawn to them because, at moments, I have fantasized myself, if not killing an object of affection, at least turning my self-punishing impulses outward. Dear Matt, my undergrad film committee crush, suffered much in my tortured brain. I may not have been able to attract his attention in this world, but in the feverish rooms of my brain I jerked off many a night to images of tying him to my bed, face down, shaving his ass, and then sodomizing him with various glass bottles and stiff fruits. I would have left no permanent damage. I’m not a psychopath. But I won’t lie: my late adolescent cock hardened into sadistic resolve. His body needed to feel my humiliation.

I feel I am hardly alone with such fantasies. The larger literary culture, at least, seems bent on making something of a fetish of experiences of suffering, with recent novels seeming to delight in their characters being put through their torturous paces. Hanya Yanagihara’s 2015 novel, *A Little Life*, is certainly a book that asks us to hold our gaze on creepiness. A controversial and

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22 Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk* have all been made into films, as partially suggested above, and each book and film is worth seeking out to read and watch. The film version of *Frisk* may be the most challenging to find, and it’s not terribly good, though I might call it goodly terrible.

23 I don’t quote from this book, but feel compelled nonetheless to cite it, as it’s worth seeking out and reading, despite its substantial girth: Hanya Yanagihara, *A Little Life: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2015).
widely discussed novel, the mammoth book is perhaps most notable for its extended scenes—amounting to hundreds of pages—of tortured recounting of a young man, Jude, variously abused by his foster caretakers, including brothers in a religious order, a sadistic doctor, and a narcissistic boyfriend. Ostensibly about the communities of friendship that emerge to care for one another in the face of such damage, *A Little Life* has a hard time turning away from depictions of utter human cruelty, implicating readers in the voyeuristic act of looking at suffering born out of depravity. The length of the book becomes extravagant in its melodramatic and gothic rendering of its primary character’s suffering as well as the incredible creepiness of those who inflict it. As critic Daniel Mendelsohn put it,

> But the wounds inflicted on Jude by the pedophile priests in the orphanage where he grew up, by the truckers and drifters to whom he is pimped out by the priest he runs away with, by the counselors and the young inmates at the youth facility where he ends up after the wicked priest is apprehended, by the evil doctor in whose torture chamber he ends up after escaping from the unhappy youth facility, are nothing compared to those inflicted by Yanagihara herself.\(^24\)

Mendelsohn even refers to the experience of reading the novel as watching a striptease, witnessing a creepily exploitative disrobing of someone’s tortured life. And yet, for all of the finely detailed rendering of pain and the attention to the interior struggles of its characters, *A Little Life* spends next to no energy, even in 800 pages, considering the socio-cultural structures or values that enable, allow, or perhaps even condone such suffering. The Catholic Church, educational systems, welfare organizations— we’re led to believe that such institutions just serve as vectors of cruelty, and we are never told why.

The bare existence of cruelty is, in its own way, haunting, perhaps even undeniable. People are cruel. But I want someone to blame, some accounting that explains how I was preyed upon, perhaps as a way to understanding my own cruelty, my own creepiness. Yanagihara’s is one way to approach intense creepiness, implicating the reader in his or her own creepy gaze. Reading the novel is akin to looking at that Diesel ad of a young man pressing down on the head of an older man about to lick his shoe. Such work reminds us of the creepiness in all of us, but I want something more. Acknowledgment of a pervasive interior predisposition or possibility doesn’t seem sufficient, a bit to reifying of a Freudian trope into a universal truth. It’s a start, but what might a prolonged gaze on creepiness allow us to see? Can we connect the dots between creepiness deeply felt and the contours of a life taking shape in a particular place or time, in a particular body?

J.R. Ackerley (1896–1967) was well aware of the damage wrought by homophobia, but instead of lamenting his queer fate in a homophobic world, he seemed instead hell-bent on delighting in his perversity, even his creepiness. He was a good-looking man and successful editor, who for twenty-four years worked as literary editor of the BBC’s The Listener. He was friends with many of the major writers of his day, including E.M. Forster, and he published four books that, since his death, have only grown in popularity, all four recently reissued as part of the New York Review Book series. He was also something of a creep.

Literary scholar Piers Gray calls Ackerley one of his “marginal men,” along with Ivor Gurney and Edward Thomas, men who stand in the relationship of “stranger” to the larger culture, allowing them some purchase as insider outsiders to comment on it. In Ackerley’s case, homosexuality provided the basis for his estranging marginality—a marginality that Ackerley bravely, for the time, explored in his often exquisite prose. As Gray puts
it, “His anarchic revisions of existence freed the imagination, let it at liberty to ponder our varied enslavements. His art was obsessed by this irony. He thus was ensnared by his illusions of freedom; the tragic desire to let language tell it all. What else is it there for? What other purpose can it or we have?”

And telling it all seems to be at the heart of Ackerley’s project. His posthumously published memoir, *My Father and Myself* (1968) is one of the earliest and most important full-length books in the 20th century to speak frankly, openly, and relatively unapologetically about homosexuality. Sex outside the norm marks the book from its opening sentence, which famously declares, “I was born in 1896 and my parents were married in 1919.” We are immediately put in the land of sexual impropriety. Something is queer here, with more to come, rest assured.

In elegant prose, Ackerley carefully describes his relationship with his father, a complex businessman, who, we discover, is head of two different families—something Ackerley and his siblings don’t really discover until after his death. Ackerley’s achievement here lies in offering an often moving account of a relationship that is simultaneously distant and loving, one not characterized by any kind of recognizable intimacy but nonetheless oddly accepting, father and son tolerant of one another’s foibles. In one passage, the author describes his father attempting to talk about sex to the young Ackerley, who would sometimes bring home boys he fancied; his father, seizing a moment,

took occasion to add—getting it all off his chest in one and providing for the future as well as the present—that in the matter of sex there was nothing he had not done, no experience he had not tasted, no scrape he had not got into and

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out of, so that if we should ever be in want of help or advice we need never be ashamed to come to him and could always count on his understanding and sympathy.27

Ackerley confesses to not appreciating the import of the speech at the time, but it becomes increasingly clear to readers that Ackerley’s interest in describing his father’s sexual exploits, as fascinating as they are in their own right, is at least as equally invested in creating an opportunity for discussing his own. Perhaps Ackerley wagers that, in light of his father’s shenanigans, a mid-century reader will be less likely to cast aspersions on his own.

And there’s a lot to discuss. Ackerley is quite the slut, from his school days on. He offers lots of throwaway comments about his extra-curricular exploits, at one point describing himself as “predatory” on the prowl for boys to fuck.28 The predation continues into his adulthood, with a lot of sex found through standing drinks or covering costs for needy young men. Ackerley slyly tells us that, “[t]hough I can’t remember my state of mind at this period, I expect that much of all this seemed fun. It certainly afforded pleasure and amusement, it was physically exciting, and in England it had the additional thrill of risk.”

On one hand, the bravery of persisting in sexual “deviancy” given the criminalization of homosexuality at the time seems almost admirable, committed as it is to the pursuit of pleasure at a time when such could result in real jail time:

Industrious predator though I was, I was not a bold or reckless one. One of my father’s yarns concerned a man who told a friend that whenever he saw an attractive girl he went straight up to her and said, “Do you fuck?” “My word!” said the friend. “Don’t you get an awful lot of rebuffs?” “Of

27 Ibid., 107.
28 Ibid., 161.
course,” was the reply; “but I also get an awful lot of fucking.” I was not in the least like that. I did not want rebuffs or cuffs, nor did I want the police summoned.\footnote{Ibid., 172.}

On the other hand, descriptions of such risky pursuits are often laced with a peculiar poignance, for, above all else, what Ackerley spent his life looking for was an “Ideal Friend”:

The Ideal Friend was always somewhere else and might have been found if only I had turned a different way. The buses that passed my own bus seemed always to contain those charming boys who were absent from mine; the ascending escalators in the tubes fiendishly carried them past me as I sank helplessly into hell. Unless I had some actual business or social engagement (often maddening, for then, when punctuality or responsibility was unavoidable and I was walking with my host or guest, the Ideal Friend would be sure to appear and look deep into my eyes as he passed) I seldom reached my destination, but was forever darting off my buses, occupied always, it seemed, by women or Old Age Pensioners, because on the pavements below, which I was constantly scanning, some attractive boy had been observed.\footnote{Ibid., 171–72.}

This search for the ideal friend is one with which nearly any reader could potentially sympathize, and it only assumes a creepier cast when Ackerley gets specific about what precisely he’s looking for:

What I meant by the Ideal Friend I doubt if I ever formulated, but now, looking back over the years, I think I can put him together in a partly negative way by listing some of his many disqualifications. He should not be effeminate, indeed preferably normal; I did not exclude education but did not want it, I could supply all that myself and in the loved one
it had always seemed to get in the way; he should admit me but no one else; he should be physically attractive to me and younger than myself—the younger the better, as closer to innocence; finally he should be on the small side, lusty, circumcised, physically healthy and clean: no phimosis, halitosis, bromidrosis. It may be thought that I had set myself a task so difficult of accomplishment as almost to put success purposely beyond my reach; it may be thought too that the reason why this search was taking me out of my own class into the working class, yet still toward that innocence which in my class I had been unable to touch, was that guilt in sex obliged me to work it off on my social inferiors. …if asked then I would probably have said that working-class boys were more unreserved and understanding, and that friendship with them opened up interesting areas of life, hitherto unknown.\(^{31}\)

I quote from this book at length because, in many ways, such a description is hardly out of step with a certain kind of mid-twentieth-century English homosexual bourgeois sensibility that’s not without historical interest, especially since it contains elements of a personal ad that actually persists into contemporary gay circles. In terms of the former, the penchant of upper middle-class English men for working class toughs is well documented; the allure of male coupling was fueled as much by class transgression as the forbidden fruit of the homoerotic. Ackerley’s patronage of young, struggling men is a common enough trope for the time, an outright stereotype, but also one that gestures to a larger gay male subcultural formation that anachronistically styles itself on ancient Greek pederasty: the intergenerational male couple, an older man supporting a younger lover on whom he dotes. While perhaps a bit less common in the twenty-first century than before, with young people needing less and less an entrée into gay (secret, hidden) subcultures,

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 163–64.
other elements of Ackerley’s wish list still ring true: no fats, no femmes, for instance.

Ackerley’s creepiness comes full-force when he transmogrifies his real-life search for the ideal friend through the fantasies of fiction. His one published novel, *We Think the World of You*, is a thinly veiled autobiographical account of one such failed relationship with a potential ideal friend. The narrator recounts his courting of a down-and-out working class youth, with whom he has developed a periodic sexual relationship, but also, curiously, a relationship with the boy’s family, a mother and father in particular. In a more strained way, he also knows the boy’s girlfriend as well, who seems to put up with the older man (as do the parents) because he is so often ready to pick up the tab and to provide other forms of financial support. The title reflects the catch phrase that the family keeps telling him to thank him for his generosity — “we think the world of you” — but it often rings false in his ears. Indeed, perhaps because he is generous with them, and they in turn seem so stinting in appreciation, providing access to Johnny only in dribs and drabs, the narration describes constant feelings of being let down, ignored, or given the short end of the stick. He positively nags and he steadily becomes a pest, always demanding more time with Johnny, complaining when Johnny doesn’t show up for a date because he is spending time with his parents or girlfriend. Things come to a head when he starts taking care of the family dog while Johnny does a short stint in jail. The narrator seems to switch his attentions from Johnny to the dog, whom the family doesn’t want to relinquish. Consequently, the narratives turn to a series of strange and strained episodes, in which the dog becomes the focus of a tug-of-war between a family and a creepy old man, the animal standing in for the absent Johnny.

Ackerley’s narrator comes to some self-consciousness of his own creepiness toward the end of the novel, recognizing the oddity of the situation he himself has instigated:
I found myself afflicted by a despondency which had nothing to do with the perception that I had been put, to a large extent, in the wrong. Say what one might against these people, their foolish frames could not bear the weight of iniquity I had piled upon them; they were, in fact, perfectly ordinary people behaving in a perfectly ordinary way, and practically all the information they had given me about themselves and each other had been true, had been real, and not romance, or prevarication, or the senseless antics of some incomprehensible insect, which were the alternating lights in which, since it had not happened to suit me, I had preferred to regard it.32

These “ordinary” folks “behaving in a perfectly ordinary way” make Ackerley’s narrator seem the creep he is, an interloper, someone who has thrust himself on them, trying in some way to be a part of their family, but in a sexual way (the son’s sometime male lover) for which there were (and are) no “ordinary” ways to understand or accommodate. The creepiness of the situation lies precisely in the ways in which it transgresses normative family relations, while also insisting that the transgression be recognized as valuable, as something that should be perfectly acceptable. The narrator’s recognition of the creepiness he has created here is accompanied by near despair: “Yes, it was true, and it had all been useless. I saw it now and how pitiful it was. It had been a mistake from beginning to end, the total struggle, all that love and labor, passion and despair; it had all been hopeless and unavailing; I had lost the fight for him before ever it had begun.”33 We almost start to feel sorry for him; he seems a potentially queer outsider, storming the gates of normativity, but even here he seems to nag us, his readers for a sympathy that might be too much to ask for.

33 Ibid., 192
For many, Ackerley’s interest in intergenerational relationships itself might seem inherently creepy, but I totally understand it. While a young man, I sought out the company of older men, if not at the time to sleep with them, then certainly to replace the emotional neglect from my own father with other forms of male-male intimacy. My older friend Larry was really exemplary in this regard, providing companionship, advice, and support for my aesthetic interests. Since I didn’t come out until I was well into my late 20s, I was already approaching the age (at least in gay circles) where I was the “older man” who would be looking for a younger lover. That aside, though, I’d always longed not just for an older male friend (which I’d found in Larry) but an “ideal friend,” someone my own age with whom I could explore mutual desires. I had friends, surely, but never for too long. I was just too unstable, too cold and then too needy, and my closest friends were inevitably women, with whom I could share emotionally in ways that I couldn’t with, or that weren’t tolerated by, other young men.

As such, I carry with me to this day a strong sense of lack: I have no lasting male friendships from my youth. And while I have formed more sustaining attachments with men in my middle-age, I miss a sense of continuity, a shared history with men who have known me for more than a decade. Ackerley may have missed such as well. He rarely talks about long-term friendships. Instead he’s always talking about his young men, and wanting to make those relationships (not always, but occasionally, with the right boy) last. I get that too, though perhaps in ways different than Ackerley may have. If you haven’t had the close companionship of boys as a young man — and I didn’t, my creepy, cross-eyed, non-athletic, slightly femmy self being so very off-putting for most boys — then you might try to recover it later. I can only speculate on Ackerley’s behalf, projecting my own senses of loss and lack. But I can certainly identify the creepiness of it, the older man constantly courting the young, trying to befriend them.
Indeed, what draws me to Ackerley’s writing and his search for the ideal friend is precisely what’s creepy in it—the lifelong yearning that’s just a little bit suspect because it lies outside the bounds of what’s normal but is, in its own way, a version of it. Ackerley’s desire for an ideal friend, particularly a younger friend, collapses the marriage and paternal bonds into one. He wanted a lover and a son, a dense intimacy that would offer adult companionship while also filling the void left by his own distant—because he had a whole other family—father. The collapsing seems creepy, or even in the Freudian sense “uncanny,” because it mixes things that are normally separate—or perhaps it reveals the hidden erotics of such relations that we normally keep repressed. But however creepy it might be, I can totally understand it. My father’s emotional neglect of me haunts me to this day, and my uncle’s untimely death seems a lost opportunity to have experienced an alternative home in my youth. So, I have spent a lot of time trying to construct that home, to have that family, and, as I’ve aged, to be a father to the son that I didn’t have myself. And at times that construction has bordered on the creepy.

Not quite like Ackerley’s creepiness. For him, his dog Tulip, an Alsatian bitch, became the family he yearned for, even his ideal friend, a relationship he recounts at some length in his memoir of their friendship, My Dog Tulip. But even in My Father and Myself, Ackerley is often at his most lucid and poetic when writing about the dog: “Yet looking at her sometimes I used to think that the Ideal Friend, whom I no longer wanted, perhaps never had wanted, should have been an animal-man, the mind of my bitch, for instance, in the body of my sailor, the perfect human male body always at one’s service through the devotion of a faithful and uncritical beast.”34 There are truly odd—and yes, creepy—moments of intense physical interaction between Ackerley and Tulip, particularly when the dog is in heat: “In truth, her love and beauty when I kissed her, as I often did, sometimes

34 Ibid., 282.
stirred me physically; but though I had to cope with her own sexual life [...] the thought of attempting to console her myself, even with my finger, never seriously entered my head.”

But there’s also poignant beauty in their friendship, something more fulfilling for Ackerley than he had ever found with people: “She offered me what I had never found in my sexual life, constant, single-hearted, incorruptible, uncritical devotion, which it is in the nature of dogs to offer. She placed herself entirely under my control. From the moment she established herself in my heart and home, my obsession with sex fell whole away from me.”

Did it fall away, or was it channeled elsewhere? Or, to put that creepy question another way, did Ackerley want a perfect body, a perfect soul? And did he wonder, at times, even with the comfort of his dog at his side, what the hell he was doing here?

We creeps ask ourselves such questions all the time, but who perhaps isn’t trying to find solace, a path through a livable life? We are all creeping up on our own answers to how we deal with the families into which we are born, the relations set in motion as we come into being, the languages used to nurture and abuse us into the lives we come to lead. Ackerley’s relationship with his dog was one way of dealing with the creep within, of working out one’s relations to find at least the semblance of contentment. Who am I to deride what he finds with Tulip? My own choices, which I recount in the next section of this book, my apologia, have tended not toward the animal world, though I have loved my pets, and have thought of them as much more than pets, but true animal companions, beings we are privileged to share time and space with, for whom we cultivate the capacity to care. Beyond such companions, though, I have searched for and at times cobbled together my own family of sorts, a found family, following the queer mantra that friends are the family you choose. And in such making there is often more than a bit of creepiness, as Adam Kotsko reminds us in Creepiness. I have probably been

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35 Ibid., 281–82.
36 Ibid., 280–81.
Steve Urkel, the unwanted neighbor who nonetheless becomes a central member of a group that doesn't quite know what to do with him.

There is a young journalist and comics lover whom I hope will read these words and understand me better, and why our friendship was fraught at times. There's a young trumpet player and gaming geek whom I hope will better understand what it is I tried to do, what I was asking for. Walt Whitman, whom I read and wrote about at length in my own youth, says that he hopes to reach out and touch you through his words, whoever you are now holding his book in hand. I always thought that gesture, whenever I came across it in his poetry, just a little bit creepy, but also perhaps delightfully so. At this point in my life, that's the kind of creepiness I can live with, and I hope my comparable gestures to the young men I have loved, whom I thought of as potential "ideal friends," is less creepy than an attempt to foster understanding. Perhaps it can only ever be both in such cases.

These books and experiences have laid out paths for tracing and thinking about that creeping. Is such a theory of creepiness? Creepiness might remain too capacious a category to be fully theorizable, but therein might lie both its complexity and its usefulness. At the very least, I have remaining to me my apologia, my attempt to show how I have tried to put my own creepiness to use.