An Apology

“The boy looks up
As the grieving sound of his own begetting
Keeps on.”
— Allen Grossman

I was identified early in life as a creep. Now I’m trying to figure out how to survive as one. Damage shapes the mind. My perceptions craft my paranoid experience of the world. But is such paranoia purely psychological? Is it not also in some ways justified, a survival mechanism? Further, can my creepiness be used strategically to reveal the structures and values that make some lives less livable? Put the question another way: how can I creep without being creepy?

My memoir and theorizing in the previous sections have been attempts to approach such questions, just as much as they have been attempts to recover what was lost, what was taken, from my youth. Like the minimalist music I loved as a teen, I rehearse the same themes and questions over and over, pounding the chord again and again and listening for the telling differences in the repeating arpeggios. I think a similar impulse has been at play in the recovery of the word “queer,” another term with which I have a strong set of identifications. The emergence of the word queer as a rallying cry in the immediate throes of the AIDS epidemic and then in the scholarly halls of academe and the rise of queer theory have called attention to how many LGBTQ folk are not in fact damaged, sick, twisted perverts, but actually offer critical insights about the social, cultural, and political structures that actively position people along a spectrum of health (or disease)
tied to their sexual behaviors and interests. Being queer is less a designation of an innate condition and more the potential to see the workings of power through bodies and lives. In so many ways, we come to our identifications not just to know ourselves but to find a place—from privileged to abject to resistant—in a social hierarchy.

But queerness is different than creepiness, and I don’t think I want to mount a defense of creepiness in quite the same way that would recover it as a term of resistant identification. Queerness should be cultivated. I’m less sure about creepiness. There are some forms of creepiness of which we should be wary. But I do think we should push our comfort zones about what we find creepy. For we have pathologized some forms of creepiness that are really more about curiosity and the desire to make connections—attributes and proclivities worth cultivating. At the very least, I understand from even just having written this book that so much of my own creepiness was given to me—in part through my queerness and the lingering associations between creepiness and homosexuality, but also because of the intense homophobia with which I grew up, cultivating within me, feelings of fear and self-loathing that made me hide—made me look as though I had something to hide—that made me seem creepy.

Still, I sense the need to defend my creepiness, to offer something of an apologia, even if it’s a thing, this creepiness, more given to me than cultivated. But wait: I know that’s not entirely accurate. To this day, I carry within me that sense of creepiness that profoundly shapes my expression of desires. What do I like? I like the furtive thing, the somewhat covert expression of desire. The subtle glances. Catching an eye, turning away, wondering if I was found out. I get turned on by secrets. But I somehow want to be caught. There’s a doubleness here.

The covert and coded fascinate me because of that doubleness—the need to hide but also the itch to reveal a secret. I remember changing for PE and the kid next to me, someone
I barely knew, started complaining about the school’s uniform requirement. He seemed particularly upset that the coaches had dictated to us what kinds of underwear were and were not acceptable: briefs, not boxers, jockstraps even better. We were 15, maybe 16, and I kept looking aslant at him while we both quickly changed, skinny legs sticking out of the required white briefs. To this day, I’m somewhat aroused by this exchange. Was he trying to communicate something to me, talking about his underwear? A normal boy wouldn’t think so, I’m sure. But since normal boys seemed to have no trouble communicating with one another, then surely those of us not normal needed some kind of cue to exchange information, register interests, to connect. I’ll never know. But the sheer possibility, wrapped in the covert, excited me. Many young queers today can come out, can more readily identify one another, but that just wasn’t true of those of us growing up in less enlightened areas just a few decades ago. In all of my educational experiences, through the completion of my PhD at 25 years of age, I never — never — met an openly gay teacher. Some were surely gay. I know now some were. But precisely the lack of disclosure, and the necessity of signaling either interest or identity in some other way, has indelibly marked the discursivity of my own desires, how I understand them, how I enact them, how they are to me. So, I have played out the fantasy of that boy in the changing room a million times, wondering if the man I’m talking to is trying to tell me something, if we could slip away somewhere secretly and do our thing, returning to the light of day different but not recognized, except to each other.

I enjoy the little things, that must remain little, that perhaps have more significance because they must remain so. I’m sitting in a Peet’s early this morning, writing, but also scoping out the boys in their gym shorts, looking for a little caffeinated rush before hitting the gym. Do they suspect the little thrill they give me? At my age, surely, it’s a little rush, more a tickling in my briefs, but I squirm in my upholstered booth nonetheless, massaging something that still seems alive, even vital after all these years. A deep down thing.
But the covert never remains just so. Take this boy I run across, for instance. Walking across campus, I nearly strut, feeling my power. I have become aware of how I stare people down, feeling the pleasure in eyes averted. A student I know tangentially, someone who has approached me without much success, seems weasely as he passes by, afraid to gesture in recognition, his lowered eyes darting quickly left to right. Perhaps I won’t see him if he doesn’t make eye contact. Indeed, I learned early to be a predator, a nearly clichéd trajectory for one so often a victim. We become our experiences. But my predation is generally harmless, just a fleeting creepiness at the corners, or a creepy conversation that happens only in my own mind. At the very least, I’ve been damaged enough by others that not only am I covert, but I’m always watching them carefully, wondering when they might strike next — wondering how I might strike first.

Watching others is surely an activity that can border on creepiness, and it’s one that’s been particularly difficult for me as a cross-eyed person, and my crossed-eye has no doubt played a role in giving me a creepy look. An article in *Cosmopolitan*, “9 Things That Make a Dude a ‘Creep,’ According to Science,” listed the following, amongst other indicators, of creepiness: “He watches you before interacting,” “He touches you frequently,” “He steers the conversation toward sex,” “He likes to take pictures of you,” “He has greasy hair,” and “He never looks you in the eye.”¹ Now I’m well aware that *Cosmo* is hardly the most vetted source of reliable information (despite the tag line of assurance: “According to Science”), but I have seen similar reports with nearly identical lists circulating on the Web for some months. And I cannot deny that my already confessed penchant for taking pictures of guys, however surreptitiously, makes me

creepy, and would confirm my creepiness to those around me if they knew. For all I know, my creepiness has been so confirmed by some who may have spied me taking a picture of a dude. But my general unwillingness to look people in the eye stems from my desire not to have people notice that I’m cross-eyed. I’m still, to this day, ashamed of having what used to be called a “lazy eye.” The obvious asymmetricality that it gives my face is one of the traditional markers of ugliness. While a beauty mark is acceptably asymmetrical, a crossed-eye is not, perhaps in large part because people wonder if you’re actually looking at them — which, as we know from Cosmo, signals creepiness. So, I’m forever in a real double-bind if I want to reduce my overall creep effect.

And the pressure either to correct or compensate for the crossed-eye is high. After all, who can forget Jack Nicholson’s frightening visage, eyes veering toward one another, as he peeks through the door in The Shining. This is the iconic image of insane horror, the creep gone psycho. But even before that film came out in 1980, my parents were on the case, hauling me to the ophthalmologist to see what could be done about my unsettling look. For some time as a child, I wore a patch over my stronger eye, in what would become an increasingly futile attempt to strengthen the muscles around the “lazy” eye. If my crossed-eye made other children a bit wary of me, the patch didn’t help. In fact, if you’ve ever seen someone with a patch over an eye in public, you have probably been a bit unsettled. Such seems only natural, as I reflect on it; our sight is one of our most precious senses, so damage to it is disturbing. Surely a crossed eye seems like damage — a lessening of visual power, a reminder that not all of us see as well as others, and that we are all headed eventually to the great darkening, the final turning off of the lights.

As noted, I was made aware early of the weirdness of my (quite literal) view on the world by other children, my would-be playmates, our first real critics: they generally either shied away from me, shunning my freakish visage, or pointed out directly
my botched condition. Eventually one young man just told me directly that the problem was that I didn't look people in the eye. And that, consequently, made me seem… weird. His honest assessment of the situation hit me like a revelation. So, I spent innumerable hours training myself to look more directly in the eyes of my interlocutors. But such a move can elicit some uncomfortable interactions, for both parties. Many folks, in the midst of conversation, move a bit to the left or right, trying to figure out, practically unconsciously it seems, if I’m still looking at them. When I call on students in class, acknowledging a raised hand, they often wonder if I am in fact calling on *them*, or perhaps the person next to them, or someone else entirely. This must be a disconcerting experience, and I have tried to laugh it off, especially when a student asks, confusedly, “Are you looking at me?” I quip: “I’m looking at all of you.” Sometimes nervous laughter follows, sometimes not. Even someone who has since become one of my dearest friends, when we first sat down for lunch together, kept shifting in her seat, trying to determine which of my eyes was indeed looking at her. She’s a blunt gal originally from Missouri, and she couldn’t help but show me with her bodily gyrations of discomfort that I should show her better what I was really looking at.

Part of what must have contributed to my sense of shame, my desire to hide my crossed eye and turn –however creepily– away from others is the relative absence of others who are noticeably crossed-eyed. You just don’t see many of these folks. And when you do, you tend not to forget the experience. I can remember every lazy-eyed person I’ve interacted with, no matter how insignificant the encounter. The overweight student who herself wouldn’t quite look me in the eye, no matter how much I tried to catch her gaze in the profoundest empathy. The travel agent booking my flight to San Diego who daringly didn’t hide behind glasses; she was approaching her senior years and probably realized that people just weren’t looking at her anymore. The collaborator who keeps her pleasant face hidden behind an array of increasingly spectacular glasses and a wave of blond hair cover-
ing half her face, one eye included. The game designer and media scholar who affected such a badass attitude that you almost didn’t notice his crossed eye because you were more attuned to the verbal barbs launched from his mouth. This is a litany of compensations, of strategies to draw attention away from the eyes, except perhaps in the case of the older woman, who may not have given a shit anymore. Of course, some people are just plain lucky and don’t need to do much to avert the inquiringly confused gazes of those wondering at whom you’re looking. A list of “40+ Celebrities with Wonky Eyes” lists, at the top: Paris Hilton, Ryan Gosling, and Heidi Klum as people whose eyes don’t quite line up.² I couldn’t stand to look further down the list because, as I gazed at these beautiful people, sure enough, their eyes were somewhat unaligned. But who gives a fuck? Their sheer attractiveness otherwise so overcompensates for any oddity of the eye. They may be creepy in other ways (I don’t know, not knowing them or paying much attention to contemporary celebrities), but they won’t be creepy because of their eyes.

But I remain a bit creepy and increasingly don’t mind. In fact, I have leaned more recently toward the practice of looking at people directly and all but daring them to notice or remark upon my crossed-eye. Of course, this strategy results in its own intensification of creepiness. Remember Cosmo: “He watches you before interacting.” A corollary of that signal is “He stares at you.” A fine balance is at play here. If you don’t look people in the eye, they think you’re a creep; if you do so to excess, they think you’re a creep. In a spirit of advocacy for all who are ashamed of their lazy eyes, I have opted for the latter creepiness. Such seems like a queer reclaiming, a challenge to normative standards of beauty. Consequently, though, not many people enjoy talking to me, I wager. I make no apology.

And I continue to look, to probe with my eyes, my mobile technology vectoring a bit of my creepy watching, as it probably does for a lot of folks. I have already admitted to surreptitiously taking quick snaps of guys’ butts. Just on the subway today, coming back home from visiting a colleague in Hollywood, I’m standing next to a young guy, buff, cute in a rough trade way, muscle shirt, backwards baseball cap, khaki shorts that hug his tight ass. I stand behind him so he can’t see me ogle him. I take out my phone, pretending to check messages, but who am I kidding: there’s no connectivity underground. I snap ten, fifteen pictures of this guy’s ass. It’s almost like I can’t help it. And then I’m reversing the camera to take pictures of myself. To be fair, I take more selfies throughout the day than anything else (obsessively checking the cleanliness of my nose), and I don’t frequently take pictures of other people without them knowing. But I do, often enough. And I go back and forth, snapping pics of the cute and unsuspecting, more often than not just their asses, and then my own face: back and forth, ass and face. And then, at home before I leave for work, I’ll snap a few of my own ass, sometimes in my briefs, sometimes my khaki-clad butt, checking myself out in the mirror, a late Lacanian mirror stage, and I wonder what I’m doing. Am I real enough? Do I have a perfect body?

What the hell am I doing here?

It’s a complicated creepiness, fetishizing these pics of my own and strangers’ asses, looking at them throughout the day, visual mantras that give me a little charge, that seem a bit dangerous to check out with others in the room, thinking I’m checking messages, responding to texts. I creepily queer my day this way, introducing a bit of the erotic, the auto-erotic into a departmental meeting, a lunch with a colleague, a walk from building to building.

Indeed, I confess, perhaps the creepiest thing I do is my covert snapping of pictures of guys. Standing in line or walking through a mall, it’s all too easy to take out your phone, looking as though
you are responding to a message or declining a call, when in fact you are taking a photo of a body part that has attracted your attention, snagged your gaze. I love the little bit of underpants peeking out of the top of low-riding shorts. I feel myself constantly on the hunt for such sightings. Yesterday I caught a bit of waistline, briefs or maybe boxer briefs, Champion brand. I passed by the young man sitting bent over his laptop, and then passed by again, catching another glimpse of his gray shorts. Champion — an inexpensive brand, perhaps a working boy, or not someone who cares much about the brand of underwear he buys and wears, probably not lingering over the packages like I do, imagining how such underwear will make me feel as I walk through the world in it.

I sound like a fetishist, and so I am. Underwear fascinates me. Ever since I was a kid and saw bits of it sticking out of guys’ pants, I eagerly look for those signs of the hidden, those pieces that snuggle against the privates, the additional layering keeping us from one another, protecting. My trainer wears Under Armour, a fun brand that hugs the skin. He probably wears it because it wicks away sweat from his body, keeping him dry and clean. But the name alone — Under Armour — suggests a need to protect the goods inside, with an added gesturing toward suiting up to do battle. But I still hear the slipperiness of armour into amour, the phallic package and curving buttocks sheathed in clothes that safeguard them but also show them off, inviting touch, stroking, caressing, fondling.

Ok, I creep myself out because I imagine but never touch. Unless one counts the (admittedly invasive) covert photographing. Is that a form of touching? Maybe what’s creepy is just my following and not following through and making the pass, asking for the fuck. My creepy behavior strikes me as insufficiently goal oriented. And maybe that’s the problem. I walk around admiring men’s behinds, even collecting images (rarely ever with the faces) of their body parts and admiring them at my leisure — and none of them know. People find such behavior creepy — that I
am having thoughts about strangers without them knowing, that I am creeping on them without them recognizing my creeping. But doesn’t that define the nature of our intersubjectivity, of our mutuality on this planet? We creep on each other all the time, wondering about each other’s lives, imagining what it’s like to be someone else. At least it seems to me that that’s what you do if you’re not completely and narcissistically self-absorbed and are in any way remotely interested in the lives of other people.

Granted, not everyone creeps like I do. And I admit that I perhaps take my creepiness a step or two further than most. I remember following a young man around a museum. He was gorgeous, in short tight khaki shorts and a tight black t-shirt, his mop of hair begging for a hand to reach out and pull his head back a bit, revealing his pouty lips and full eyes. I never got close enough to see the color of them, but no matter: I enjoyed following him around, alone, wandering from room to room of modern art. What was he thinking as he stopped before a work of art? Was he admiring it? Was he wondering what the hell the artist was thinking? The ever receding doubleness of the experience increased my interest, me wandering while wondering what he was wondering about what an artist was imagining as he worked with those oils, as she arranged these items. But is this a receding, or a coming closer? Surely, I could’ve sidled up to him and engaged him in conversation, but how many times have I or you or any of us done that and been greeted with some skepticism, or even shock? It’s hard to approach strangers. It’s creepy if you don’t do it just right. So maybe it’s a little safer to creep and wonder, moving along with another human, trying to walk, if not in his shoes, at least near them, in his footsteps. The act of imagination here is what’s important to me. Certainly, I snapped a pic of his cute little butt, the deliciously jutting curve of his behind answered by him raising his hand to his head, scratching an itch, or a fumbling toward a question with which any of us might identify: What next? Why am I here?

What the hell am I doing here?
I know I am not the only one taking such covert pictures, and I’m sometimes creeped out myself by the thought of people taking such pictures of me. Though I hope they do. I’d be a little disappointed if no one ever did. I put on my tight gym shorts and tight black t-shirt and go get a coffee, sitting down to write this book, and hope that the hipster barista is checking out my ass as I walk away with my $4 coffee. I suspect he’s not, but I have caught some glances at times. I totally wear these shorts because they are eye catching, perhaps because they’re going to draw the eyes of that barista even if he doesn’t want to look. Maybe that’s even creepier than I really want to be. Or not. I recognize my male privilege in wearing clothing that’s gaze-attracting, even as I can feel somewhat safe in my skin, knowing I’m not likely to be raped or attacked.

But at times I do feel the gaze as potentially hostile, and I wonder if the tightness in my shorts is perhaps just a little too snug. Am I asking for too much attention? And is the attention I’m getting not the kind I would want? That, after all, is the source of so much creepiness: unwanted attention. And yet I’m willing to take the risk in attracting it. You can meet some interesting people through it, have some chance encounters, however small or fleeting — or consequential. I think of Samuel Delany, writing at length in his critical memoir *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, about creeping on the poor and working class in old Times Square. He’d given them money for blowjobs, sure, but he also claims to have met some wonderful friends — folks he otherwise wouldn’t have met.³ I don’t pursue sexual exchanges the way he did, but I do at times get compliments, get a comment on my computer bag or tattoo. Granted, not all attention is the attention I want, and the older women who scope me out don’t creep me out, but I also don’t encourage their stares. Just not what I

³ While I don’t quote from this book, I feel compelled to cite it because it’s something you should read: Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
want. But I accept that that’s part of the deal. You present yourself and you understand that people will look.

I’m looking too.

The most interesting creeping I’ve experienced was once when, sitting in a pizza parlor waiting for my slice to be heated up, a young guy comes in to make an order. Just the kind of boy I like, standing straight up, his khaki shorts hugging his behind. I pretended to check messages on my phone and snapped a pic of his cute little ass. When I focused in on the picture later, zooming in and out to admire the curves of his glutes, I noticed another young man, slightly behind and to the side, looking straight at me taking a picture of this young man. I was totally creeped out. Did he catch me creeping? Did he know what I was doing? Or was he creeping me, not knowing at all that I was creeping this other young man? I’ll never know, but I return to this picture often, wondering what he’s thinking. He’s totally cute: a bearded hipster with glasses. But beyond his physical appearance, what I love about him is his willingness to spy on me, his interest. If I’d known he was there, if I hadn’t been as distracted by the other boy’s ass, I might have looked back and smiled. Maybe.

Or maybe not. And this perhaps is the limit of creepiness. My creepiness and the creeping of others tells me that we are curious—but afraid. We look, but don’t want to touch. And I generally don’t—want to touch, that is. I’m not predatory in this behavior. I’m not looking for a sexual conquest. And when I’m creeped upon, I don’t think others are necessarily thinking about sexually engaging me. We are intrigued. But we decline to make contact.

Is this a failure? Am I holding back? Oh totally. I don’t want you to know how much of a creep I really am. Or we might get close, we might become friends, and then you might hurt me. Then again, in my own creepy way, perhaps the creepiest thing
I can do is leave you wondering why you’ve read this far, having invested this much time in my thinking about my creepiness.

Yes, to be sure, there are other limits to consider. Without a doubt, there’s a gender dynamic to this that I have to acknowledge yet again. I can indulge my creepiness in no small part because I’m a man. Women who are creeped on in the way that I sometimes creep on young men are completely within their rights to feel not just creeped out but afraid and angry. They are subject to so much more actual attack than men are. So, I need to make some differentiations. I’m not talking about the kind of creeping that leads to stalking. In fact, I’d make a huge distinction between the creeping I’m describing and stalking. The former is an acknowledgment of interest and curiosity; the latter an imposition of damaged need and perverted desire. I can offer my apologia for creepiness; there is no such for stalking, which is simply predatory behavior that refuses to recognize the object of interest as capable of feeling or response or sovereignty. I came close to stalking Faith, the older woman who was my friend in college. But even I knew, creepy as I am, when to cut it out and back off.

Certainly, part of my creepiness is a fascination with youth, perhaps an attempt, however odd, to recover a sense of my own youth, my younger body. I want to see myself again as young and desirable. No, that’s not right. I want to see myself as young and desirable for the first time. Of everything taken from me, that might be the thing I resent most: I never had a sense as a young person that I was desirable, that I could be desired, because I was too busy worrying over how my own desires were damning me to hell. When nearly every time you masturbate as a young person and you think this is the ejaculation that baptizes you into the Church of Satan, you can’t help but feel fucked, damaged. So, I’m actually grateful for seeing those movie images of Tom Cruise dancing around in his underpants. They actually
CREEP
still move me to this day. They showed me, however fleetingly and illicitly as my friend and I snuck into the rated-R movie, that there was a different way to relate to my body. I’m constantly recreating those images, taking pics of my own ass wiggling around, catching glimpses of others. I’m recreating that sense of the possible. Even now, I’m sitting here at Peet’s next to a cute young guy, creeping him, but not enough to creep him out. Why don’t I talk to him? Because I really fetishize potential. I look at these young people and want their lives, if only because my own youth was so taken from me.

I’ve worked out other ways to recreate my relationship to my body, to craft other scripts for me that try to repair the damages done. I have complex rituals, fantasies I attempt to enact that tell a different story about me, my body, my desires. They’re almost all totally creepy, if only because they sexualize places in ways that aren’t really meant to be sexualized, at least not the way I’m sexualizing them. Like snapping a pic of a guy’s butt on the subway, I’m covertly making sexual a scene that isn’t supposed to be. And if people start paying attention, they’d see what I’m doing. Sometimes I think they do see, but quietly participate in my creepiness.

But some places just seem to beg for creepiness. For me, the gym is one of the most powerful of such scenes. As a kid, PE classes were a constant site of trauma; I was awkward and ungainly, completely ill at ease in my body, a dis-ease made all the more palpable for me by the ceaseless taunts and ridicule of my peers. What kind of pathetic faggot are you? Can’t you even catch a fucking ball? We don’t want that fucking faggot on our team. Yes, I was the kid always chosen last. Correction: I was not chosen, but relegated to the team unfortunate to wind up with me because I had to go somewhere.

It took me a long time to feel—even remotely—comfortable in gym spaces. I avoided them for decades. But as I got older and started to put on weight, and as my joints sent signals that
they were only ever going to become increasingly inflexible, I decided I needed to get over myself and start working out. I found a trainer willing to work with me and joined a gym. It was terrifying. Ok, perhaps I exaggerate a little bit—but only just a little. What helped me get over the panic, though, was the presence of numerous good-looking, often young bodies. While I’d never have looked openly while an adolescent, now, an older man, no one was looking at me, so they didn’t seem particularly to care that I might be surreptitiously checking them out. They just weren’t expecting it. Or if they did, they thought me harmless. Gratefully, I realized they weren’t policing me, as I had been viciously policed in high school.

So, I checked them out. And loved it. A young guy gets onto the treadmill next to me and I can breathe in his masculine energy. A guy next to me bends over to lift his weights and I can check out the taut curves of his butt. I eventually began to look forward to going to the gym to see these young buff bodies, some regulars whom I anticipated seeing, but always surprised by new flesh. And then the trainers themselves became an interesting object of scrutiny. I was surprised by how often they—always young men I chose to train me—had to touch me, to correct postures, to adjust positions, to help me feel the muscles they were trying to isolate for attention. I’d go once, then twice, sometimes three times a week so I could feel their hands on my body. By this point, I already had a lover, even a husband, but I couldn’t help but thrill to the touch of these young muscled hands, correcting me, massaging me, guiding my body in ways they wanted.

Could they feel my pleasure in their touch? Did they feel it themselves? Of course, no one talked about it. And therein lay part of the pleasure of the scene for me: here were bodies touching, certainly in ritualized and pre-scripted ways, but touching nonetheless. Here was a man, I’m sure always straight, helping me help my body—and always by touching it, stroking muscles, caring for my body. I had paid them to do so, surely, but they were attentive to my body in ways that I never had been. They
delighted when I lost weight. They praised my growing biceps. They chided if I confessed about eating that early morning donut. They wanted me to want a better body, a stronger body, a body that another man could praise openly in this once, to me, immensely hostile space.

I was transfixed by their interest. I felt myself transforming, in body and mind.

We never talked about relationships. I suppose that these trainers were all schooled not to get personal with their clients. I respected that boundary, never offering personal details but also never inquiring. I didn’t really want to know about them. And I frankly didn’t want them to know about me. I felt they might touch me less, or differently, if they knew I was queer. I preferred to keep it, in a word, creepy. At least in my own mind. I was just getting too much out of it, in body and mind.

And wow, could it be creepy—but deliciously so. I remember seeing a dude at the gym carrying a belt with chains. What the fuck is that for? A trainer took me to the TRX machine, a complex system of ropes with handles and metal loops. I couldn’t help but think of this as a large restraining device, out in the open, the trainer, my master, putting me through my paces. At his instruction, I’d grasp the handles, wrapping the ropes around my wrist, strapping myself into the machine, while he’d bend down to whisper in my ear, “Get it up, squeeze that ass.” I’d go down again and again into a squat. If I didn’t put enough weight on my heels to support myself, or if I didn’t go down far enough, he’d lightly swat my upper thigh. “Get it up, squeeze that ass.” I’d work harder and harder, wanting to feel that swat, and he’d reward me with the strangest of gym lover’s talk: “I love it when you drip,” my sweat flinging off my forehead when I moved from one set of ropes to another, doing a circuit of deliciously painful exercises that I ultimately came to crave as much for the resulting endorphin release as for any touch of my trainer’s hand.
My favorite trainer, with whom I worked out for two years, would tell me—if I had to be away for a week or so—that he missed me. He’d do a little jig while we worked out, excited by my progress, caressing my biceps as they steadily grew, putting me in the upright pushup position for a couple of minutes if I fibbed on myself about a carb I shouldn’t have had. I wanted both his praise and his censure. I wanted him at times to punish me. I’d walk into the gym and literally ask to be punished. I wanted a hard session. I wanted to drip. I wanted him to love it when I dripped. One of his co-workers, a young woman, would look at me, then look at him, and say something like: “He only dances when you are here.” Perhaps she was playfully teasing him, but I couldn’t help but think to myself, how dare she make him self-conscious about our time together. For of course, I figured that, if he knew how much I got off on our time together, he’d turn away. Maybe. I don’t know. We were never intimate in any way that wasn’t perfectly visible to all in the gym. I never talked about my husband. To be fair, I never jerked off to this guy either. But I loved, if not him, then our time together sweating. And I frankly relished the tension between what I imagined happening and what was really happening. That’s perhaps the creepy part, the part that generates creepiness: we were doing something that was perfectly normal to anyone looking in, but there was always the possibility that one of us, namely me, could be interpreting it in completely inappropriate ways. That is, I could be eroticizing something that, for him and for probably most everyone else in the gym, wasn’t really supposed to be erotic.

Or was it? I don’t know, honestly. There is the delicious perversity of the sauna, people assembling post-workout to relax for a few minutes, to sweat together. I ogle a near naked boy flexing himself in the heat, removing his shorts in a full display—wanting to display—his chiseled torso, his emerging abs, his finely sculpted arms. Who couldn’t imagine this as anything but a call to admire a tight young body? I do, even as I recognize the limits
of desired articulation; an approach would be unwelcome, but admiring glances not. What qualifies as creepy here?

Surely, at times, lines are crossed. Craigslist is full of ads for guys looking for hook ups in the shower stalls of gyms, or “missed connections” with one guy asking another, one he’s been eyeing in the weight room, if he too has been checking guys out, if perhaps he might have noticed himself being admired. I never hooked up with a guy in a gym. But I had one trainer for a bit, just a couple of months, who could tell I was totally into the gym as a scene of punishment, that I understood the gym as not just a space to discipline my body but to play out fantasies of being a young tough stud working out with other tough studs. I didn’t perform well on one challenge when we were alone one night at the gym, and he slapped my ass, hard, when I stood up. I totally jerked off to that scene when I got home. The trainer and I never talked openly about it, and he had to move away shortly after, but he could tell that my interest in the gym was complex, and he was willing to offer something of a helping hand.

I have no doubt I could have more such experiences if I sought them out. There’s part of me that is surely deeply masochistic, that would delight in such punishment. Even returning to the gym every week is a form of masochism, given how often gyms were sites of tortured encounters and bullying for me as a child. I recreate the scenes of pain the better perhaps to control them, perhaps even master and overcome them, even as I still, to this day, think of myself as fully deserving punishment.

But I have also come to think that the creepiness of the gym doesn’t emanate from just me. At the most basic level, the gym, with all of its ropes and weights and chains and grunts and people checking each other out, is actually in the service of making people more erotic, to each other and to themselves. Surely, exercising in the gym is about being healthy. But isn’t it also, like so many other parts of our culture, about remaking bodies more enticing? About fitting into particular norms of appeal or at-
traction? I admit wanting to be more attractive physically, even as what drove me to the gym was a need to ease the creaking in my joints and to stop the ever-expanding belly from ripping my pants in two. But I won’t lie: I loved slipping on my favorite nylon gym shorts, feeling my ass tone as I did my squats, checking out the studs sweating and grunting next to me. I can’t be the only one.

I’ve come to think the gym is saturated with a kind of fundamental creepiness, a split between what people are ostensibly there to do and what they secretly hope will happen. Many of us are not just taking care of our bodies — and that we surely are doing, and it feels good to take care of one’s body, especially when one had been taught for so long and so powerfully not only to disregard the body but to understand it as the source of sin, as that which must necessarily be denied. We also recognize the space for the scene of semi-erotic exchange it is — and for some people it is so very explicitly. More particularly for me, I’m both taking care of my body and making very queer — and creepily queer — a space that isn’t supposed to be queer, that isn’t supposed to be about open homoeroticism, however homosocial it is, with men touching each other and praising, however competitively, their progress.

Do I return to the gym, a scene of past shame and fear, in order to be acknowledged — but now on my own terms? Do I eroticize these times to repair them through play? Do I submit to the punishment — but am now the one calling the shots, paying the trainer who has to please me, ultimately, to keep his job? I now control how I am hurt. Nishant Shahani, in *Queer Retrosexualities*, argues that “It is not the affective state of shame that is, in itself, reparative. But it is its shared memory, transformed in retrospect that marks the reparative possibilities of shame for queer thinking.”4 Maybe so. Maybe I am recreating scenes from

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a collective shared memory — that banishment of the little faggot from the scene of manly camaraderie — but doing so in ways that allow me to control better what happens. I suppose a full queering of the gym would make the objects and trajectories of my homoerotic desire very palpable, would confront these buff boys with the homoeroticism of the gym itself. I’m not sure I’m doing that. In fact, I know I’m not. I’m doing something creepier. I’m allowing the secret of the homoerotic to stand, but insisting I can enjoy it anyway. I don’t fool myself into thinking that I now belong in this place. But I permit myself the delicious perversity of enjoying it, and frankly of using this space and these trainers to facilitate my pleasure, even as I refrain from naming out loud what it is to me.

Ultimately, I make no promises about the uses to which I will put my body; I don’t improve it to be a better worker, to reduce my future health care costs. No, I seek out the gym to feel myself a tough sexy fucker, to eye openly other men, to feel the touch of men in care for my body. I seek out the gym to experience everything I was denied as a boy, an adolescent — the right to feel my body as desirable, as worthy of care.

I know that my description of this might be creepy to some reading this. But I suspect it’s a creepiness that even the trainers, and not just the one who swatted my ass, participate in. Or is it the prerogative of the creep to rationalize his creepiness by imagining his desires as shared by those around him? I know I rationalize; any apologia is perhaps more rationalization than not.

Rationalizations aside, if we’ve learned anything in the foregoing exploration of creepiness, it’s that creepiness is certainly situational, and what marks one as creepy at a particular time and place might strike another as simple eccentricity or even normal behavior in another. What I do that might strike some as creepy, the various stories I’ve told here, may just as well strike
some others as, well, all too human and ordinary. Patterns and possibilities of creepiness emerge in a variety of places, and it is surprising how often we can mark such patterns, unsettling to me at times how often I have marked them in myself. We all judge ourselves. And the judge, jury, and executioner, when not realized in actual institutions meting out punishment for actual crimes, are still all powerfully present internally. But they are also present throughout the culture, sometimes in subtle ways re-enforcing norms.

J.R. Ackerley, and even Adam Kotsko, might have explored varieties of creepiness as a way, if not necessarily to normalize them, then at least to understand them, perhaps even invite our sympathy. Such emotional reorientation around creepiness is rare, though. In fact, two recent films I’ve been obsessed with, *While We’re Young* and *The Overnight*, each pick up the specter of the creep with the possibility of salvaging him but ultimately re-assert normative family ties and identities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given how many times we’ve seen the creep appear vis-à-vis families, these engaging and often hysterically funny movies begin with married couples, a little bit dissatisfied, each looking for something different. *While We’re Young* concerns a middle-aged couple courted by and becoming intimately (if not sexually) involved with a younger couple, while *The Overnight* moves us to think about swinging and hints at polyamory as a lifestyle.5 Both films invite viewers to gawk a bit — to creep on? — and perhaps poke some fun at urban hipster youth, even as they attempt to appeal to that viewership. But they also push us into somewhat unexpected and often unexplored intimate territory that gets, well, creepy.

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5 Both films, while flawed, are worth seeing, if only for the discussions they might provoke: Noah Baumbach (dir.), *While We’re Young*, Scott Rudin Productions, 2015; Patrick Brice (dir.), *The Overnight*, Duplass Brothers Productions, 2015.
Specifically, the movies probe the boundaries of what marriage is and speak to a simple truth: two people cannot be everything to each another. We need others. Or we are at least interested in others, even if not always sexually. Marital complexity isn’t new to American cinema, and many dramas play out the difficulties of legalized coupledom. I was traumatized by *Kramer vs. Kramer* as a kid, wondering what would happen if my parents divorced, and I thought *Fatal Attraction* a dire warning in my young adulthood about the dangers of cheating. And more recently, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, however tepidly, offered its own spin on different kinds of “contractual” relations. But the complexities of intimacy — especially the opening up of a relationship to include others — is rarely coded as not creepy in some fundamental way in much of this pop culture film — hence *Fatal Attraction* and *Fifty Shades*.

But to their credit, these films try. In fact, as excited as I am (as a queer man) about the 2015 Supreme Court decision that expands marriage rights nationwide to lesbians and gays, I’m almost more intrigued by the questioning of marriage offered by *While We’re Young* and *The Overnight*. Along such lines, many viewers will find much to relate to in these films. In Noah Baumbach’s *While We’re Young*, middle-aged Josh (Ben Stiller) and Cornelia Srebnick (Naomi Watts) seem to have a good if somewhat staid life in New York, Josh having hit something of a dead end in his documentary film career. His big and baggy film about a leftist intellectual is overlong and going nowhere. Enter a young couple, Jamie (Adam Driver) and Darby Massey (Amanda Seyfried). Jamie presents himself to Josh after one of the latter’s classes, claiming to be a fan of his work. The couples go out to dinner, and the older pair is clearly charmed by the younger duo’s seemingly creative approach to life. The foursome participates, for instance, in a drug-infused ayahuasca ceremony, projectile vomiting their way to supposedly insight-bearing hallucinations. Jamie and Cornelia make out a little bit in this extended scene, but it’s all in good fun (for now).
In subsequent hangouts, we see and share with Josh and Corneila the discreet charms of the young — their retro sensibilities (playing actual board games, not computer games; buying vinyl, not MP3s) and art- and pleasure-focused life. They’re invigorating, as the young often are. And as Jamie is an aspiring filmmaker, Josh has a chance to play at being a mentor to someone who seems genuinely interested in his (otherwise forgotten) films. Something of a bromance blooms between the two, and we wonder where this all will lead, particularly as Josh begins to adopt the attire and manners of the younger man, while also constantly picking up the check for dinners and drinks out.

On the other side of the continent, in Patrick Brice’s *The Overnight*, Alex (Adam Scott) and Emily (Taylor Schilling) are young marrieds with child who have just moved to Los Angeles, lamenting that they not only don’t have any friends in the area but also are unsure how — in their post-college 20s — to go about making friends. Enter Kurt (Jason Schwartzman) and Charlotte (Judith Godrèche), a flashy couple to the rescue. Kurt meets Adam and Emily in a park after discovering that their young sons have hit it off and enjoy playing together. Kurt invites the new-to-town couple over, and a lovely dinner turns into an overnight of skinny-dipping, pot-smoking, and soul-baring bonding. Kurt and Charlotte are the wealthier versions of Jamie and Darby in *While We’re Young*, but no less arty; Kurt has a studio where he paints pictures of sphincters. We also see a bit of early bromance as the overly endowed Kurt helps Alex deal with his feeling of penile inadequacy. The presence of cocks on screen (however prosthetic) signals an increasing sexualization of the evening, which ramps up when Charlotte takes Emily on a booze run that turns into a trip to a massage parlor so Emily can peep through a hole while Charlotte gives an impromptu hand job. We wonder where this adult slumber party might be headed.

What’s particularly compelling about these films is the frankness with which male–male intimacies are treated. Josh and Jamie’s
intergenerational bromance acts in a surrogate father/son or big bro/little bro fashion for the two, but it’s not without its complexity. We see the two in deep conversation with one another, often over meals on “man dates.” In a twist, Josh comes to envy Jamie’s creativity, the mentoring relationship flipping a bit, and the portrayal of their friendship risks some complexity as they seem both intimate and competitive at the same time — perhaps an inevitable combination in male bonding in American capitalist society. There’s nothing overtly sexual here, but it’s clear that Josh needs the younger man, just as much as Jamie needs Josh’s mentoring and connections. In The Overnight, Kurt helps Alex “come out” about how much he doesn’t like his body (especially his penis size). At one point, the wives stumble across Kurt photographing Alex sexily wriggling his butt, and we wonder with them what exactly guys actually do when they are alone together. But they are getting to know one another, and Kurt’s ease in his own body translates into a jock-like encouragement to Alex, as though he’s coaching his player to get back in the game of self-confidence and strut his stuff. Kurt engineers a “show” for the ladies so Alex can show off his manhood. These are intimate moments between men. And curiously, they come after all of the men are married. In watching these interactions, I couldn’t help but think of I Love You, Man, the 2009 film that tracked the emergence of the bromance into mainstream culture. But in that film, the bromance occurs before the marriage — in fact, it must occur before the marriage. We get the sense that our hero, Peter, has to pass through the gauntlet of learning how to relate to a buddy before he can mature into a coupled relationship with a woman. The heterosexual path is maturing from relations with your friends to your spouse. While We’re Young and The Overnight flip the script, showing the power and potential of male–male intimacies within a heterosexual marriage. I can’t help but wonder what’s changed in the past several years, if not perhaps greater queer visibility prompting greater comfort with a wider variety of male–male intimacies.
Both films are played for lots of laughs, especially *The Overnight*, which can be hysterical, even if at times creepily uncomfortable with its frank portrayal of straight guys trying to figure out how to flirt with one another. And they both nicely foreground, without too much recourse to stereotype, the attractions of young hipster culture, however achingly white and privileged. But each movie also turns a bit serious, as comedies do, before resolving the tensions created by the couples’ newfound intimacies. In *While We’re Young*, we learn that Jamie has essentially engineered his meeting with Josh to get closer to Josh’s famous father-in-law, a leading documentarian of his generation. Jamie has ambitions, and he’s not beyond using others — and Josh’s (Platonic midlife crisis) interest in him — to get what he wants. In fact, Jamie’s fabrications are creepily extraordinary. He’s concocted not only his friendship with Josh but the subject matter of his own documentary — an irony given the “truth-telling” ethos implicit in documentary work. But no one but Josh seems bothered by this. And when Josh confronts Jamie about both his professional and personal deceptions — a somewhat ludicrous if still pathos-driven declaration of hurt: “I loved you,” followed by Jamie’s “I really liked you” — we are left wondering where the truth in any relationship might be. To borrow from a filmic metaphor, such truths are perhaps mostly the projections we cast on each other, needing others to perform roles in our different dramas. Josh is certainly left wondering what needs he tried to fill through his friendship with the younger man.

Meanwhile, *The Overnight* ramps up to fever pitch, and just as the foursome is about to call it a night, we learn that Kurt and Charlotte are trying to spice up their now-defunct sex life by swinging a bit, with Kurt particularly interested in Alex. All this comes after Alex and Emily have a movingly painful and honest conversation in the bathroom about how, as committed as they are to each another, they nonetheless think of others, sexually and intimately. A little bit of truth goes a long way to mutual understanding. And just as the party is about to break up, all four wind up in bed together, starting with a group hug leading
to the boys kissing one another. The silent soundtrack (a little bit of fleshly slurping aside) is comically interrupted by the two little boys bursting into the bedroom wanting breakfast. Alex and Emily flee, and the night, now morning, ends in a hungover walk of shame, but still funny.

*While We’re Young* and *The Overnight* move us toward ways of talking about such needs and possibilities, such necessary extra-marital relations. But traditionally, comedies end in marriage. Conflicts are resolved, love secured, and all is now right with the world, at least for the time being. But what’s often most interesting in a comedy is less the expected resolution than the complications encountered along the way—complications that can suggest possibilities of unhappy endings, but also alternative paths forsaken. With both *While We’re Young* and *The Overnight*, I couldn’t help but think of those forsaken paths of desire, and I ultimately regretted the easy ends both films make of tough loves. Predictably, the films exhibit a failure of nerve to follow through in helping us imagine capacious alternatives, new trajectories for sustainable and nurturing relations with others. *The Overnight* ends with the two couples running into each other in the park where Kurt first met Alex and Emily; the meeting, initially awkward, quickly turns bathetic as the two couples comment about how their adventuresome evening led them to reaffirm their commitments to one another as spouses. Kurt and Charlotte are even in therapy. At the end of *While We’re Young*, we see Josh and Cornelia about to catch a plane a year or so later, having had their own child in the interim. The answer for them is simple: get your own kid, not someone else’s.

Curiously, children haunt both films. In *The Overnight* they sleep in the background, waiting to remind the adults to stop playing around, while having a child is the ultimate answer to the problem of growing older and feeling old before your time in *While We’re Young*. Indeed, what I find most challenging about both films is the shadowy presence of kids, who are often asleep in both movies. They may slumber, but they are stark calls to
remember what a “normal” marriage is: the serious business of child production. That’s a lot of pressure for two people, who often have multiple and divergent interests. Perhaps, after all, child rearing is too much to ask of just two people — but neither film goes there, even if each falls back on the presence of children to assure the return to normalcy and the happy ending of (thera
dized) marital bliss. And the heteronormative is reaffirmed.

I’m not surprised, ultimately, at the end of either film, and I often chide myself for expecting too much from these corporately pro-
duced entertainments, however “indie” they are. For both films, the moral is clear: reaffirm the marriage, hunker down with your spouse, and make your own damn family. At a time when the right to marry has just been extended in this country, we have a unique opportunity to think collectively about what a marriage is — and perhaps about how much pressure we have put on the institution of marriage. If anything, we might read these two films as anxious questionings about the limits of marriage to satisfy our needs, both for sexual intimacy and for family. We’re letting more kinds of people get married now — a good thing, surely — but perhaps these films are generating some (nervous?) laughter about the limits of marriage itself. And while the comedic genre might traditionally end with valuing the bonds of marriage, these funny, poignant films at least pose interesting thought experiments about the inability of marriage to fulfill all our needs, much less address our curiosities. The fact that these films are showing us heterosexual couples confronting the boundaries of their relationships is telling. Perhaps the queering of marriage might offer new possibilities for thinking about such questions, for entertaining more interesting thought experiments.

Such entertaining requires that we risk creepy territory, that we give ourselves permission to probe creepiness. I must admit, as someone who has worked as a college teacher for over 20 years and is now solidly middle-aged, I found While We’re Young a bit painfully — and creepily — close to my life at times. I’ve had some wonderful friendships with former students, little broth-
ers and sisters who have energized and reinvigorated me professionally and personally — as well as one such friendship with a young man that, while not at all predatory like the one depicted in While We’re Young, ended with an inability to manage expectations and projections. Shit happens. Similarly, the odd threesomes and foursomes of my 20s comprised my own personal version of The Overnight. Now queerly married, the one thing I know about marriage is that my husband, as wonderful as he is, is a huge part of my life — but a part. We both need others, even if not necessarily sexually. And childless, we have learned there are many ways to make a “family,” not just biologically. My dearest friend Karen, whom I refer to as my non-sexual life partner; my best straight and married friend Michael, who has identified our relationship as a kind of romance and who so wanted to hold my hand during a pride parade; my former student David, who is so like the son I never had but always wanted, who texts me pictures of himself on his various journeys and adventures to let me know what he’s doing, that he’s ok — all are terribly dear to me. But also, my gym trainer, and also perhaps the boys whose butts I snap pictures of.

Such queer family building is something that many gays are adept at, and the possibility of sexual plurality in gay relationships is something that I take as part of my gay inheritance, a bit of being in the world that, while not unknown amongst straights, is more culturally supported amongst many gays of my generation. I could, for instance, contrast the foregoing two films with Edmund White’s story of his sexual experiences in My Lives. White isn’t afraid to detail his sexual exploits, his extramarital obsessions, even when they border on the particularly creepy. Indeed, while mainstream film curtails the creep, queer culture, I contend, finds ways to embrace them at times — not always, and not evenly, but definitely more so than normative straight culture, and with few apologies.

Published in 2006, with the author well into his 60s, My Lives focuses dominantly, if not almost exclusively, on the author’s sex-
ual exploits. In chapters variously describing “My Hustlers” and “My Blonds,” White recounts one sexual episode after another, his experiences ranging from numerous one-night stands to relationships of different durations, frequently punctuated with affairs and occasional group sex. Even more innocuously titled chapters—“My Shrinks,” “My Europe,” and even “My Mother” and “My Father”—are laced throughout with sex, sex, sex.

One stunning chapter, late in the book, “My Master,” recounts a sadomasochistic affair between the author, who’s 60, and a man in his early 20s. White describes being whipped, tied, fucked, and pissed on by this young man, called “T,” who introduced himself initially as a fan of White’s work but soon became the elder man’s object of obsessive sexual interest. Recounting the height of this passion, White tells us, “Now my life was full, purposeful, directed: every waking moment was aimed at T.”6 White’s interest in “T,” compared to past liaisons, takes a particularly compulsive turn, and the author obsessively clings to “T,” especially when he feels the younger man is growing bored with the relationship and wanting to move on to set up house with someone closer to his own age. White repeatedly emails and calls the younger man, who ultimately puts additional distance between White and himself to ward off the burden of White’s desires and emotional investment. White is hardly blind to his own compulsive and creepy behavior here; in fact, he seems to revel in it. The chapter is filled with both self-mockery and pathos, constantly blurring into one another. On one hand, he shows us his post-”T” self, riddled with self-hatred, cruising web ads for hookups all night long; we see him “clicking on the computer and tapping out obscene messages, an old man with a belly hanging in the sling of his T-shirt, sitting for hours and hours in his underpants, bare feet getting cold from the air sluicing in through the badly insulated window.”7 On the other hand, such self-mockery turns pathetic in his realization that “It

7 Ibid., 256.
did seem so unfair to me that we could have had sex a hundred eighty times together over twenty-six months and then one fine day he could decide unilaterally, almost as a whim, that it was all over.”

White’s fiction has always skirted the line between the imaginative and the memoir, but his outpouring of work in the late 2000s—including the novel *Married Man*, the stories in the collection *Chaos*, and the memoir of his youth in *City Boy*—signals a ramping up, as it were, of a seeming need to “tell all,” and quickly. White himself seems aware that his drive to narrate, whether under the guise of barely disguised fiction or in lurid autobiography, has become, well, a bit creepy. Within the context of narrating “My Master,” he painfully recounts his own drive to narrate the events as they unfolded, not just in retrospect: “I told everyone.” And he does, telling the sordid tale to anyone who will listen—friends, family, colleagues at Princeton, even his partner since 1995, Michael Carroll, to whom he turns to help him lick his wounds when suffering “T’s various blows and rebuffs, literally and figuratively. Such narrative compulsion becomes self-reflexively thematized in the text as White imagines his friends reading the chapter on “My Master” and thinking “TMI” — “too much information.” But then the passage moves quickly to a recounting of yet another perverse sex scene and White’s feelings of being inadequate to the task of serving his demanding young master. In reflecting on the book and this chapter in particular, White confesses that

While writing it I knew perfectly well that, especially in chapters like “My Master,” I would be leading the usual reader too far, dangerously deep into the realm of the perverse, but I was willing to take that risk: I wanted to sound like a regular guy who turns out to be seriously eccentric, the passenger beside

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 257.
you in the plane who seems boringly normal until his talk takes an unsettling turn.\textsuperscript{10}

And he succeeds. He often creeps us out.

Critical reaction to \textit{My Lives} has been at times unflattering with reviewers complaining that it is “obsessive” and lacking in depth, often “equating […] human complexity with a handful of words.” At best, according to Peter Conrad in \textit{The Guardian}, “\textit{My Lives} is a saga of picaresque promiscuity, a Satyricon of satyriasis” in which “homosexuality is central […] treated as something heroic but also obsessional and at times degrading.”\textsuperscript{11} In general, critics seem to lose patience with White’s sexual antics. As White himself puts it, “The book as it stands is heavy on sex and light on intellectual adventure or artistic retrospection.”\textsuperscript{12} But I must admit that the sex White recounts is never boring; an armchair psychoanalyst (and White positions you as just such a reader at times) would have a field day here, particularly with White’s recounting of the closeness of his relationship to his mother and his rather distant and disapproving father. But the sense I get from the critics is that White’s sexual behavior seems childish, and that a man his age should really (fucking) know better. Even a colleague of mine in Women’s Studies complained, after hearing me give a talk about White’s work, that White seemed like a troll. Why won’t he just grow up?

In a word, why does he have to be such a \textit{creep}?

I’m attracted, I admit, to the creep in all of these folks — in Edmund White, in the Ben Stiller character, in Ackerley and his search for an ideal friend. None of my experiences with folks

\textsuperscript{10} This and the following quotations by White are taken from an addendum to the Ecco edition of \textit{My Lives}, which includes interviews with the author and other commentary. Ibid., 7.


\textsuperscript{12} White, \textit{My Lives}, 13.
have bordered on anything like that described by White, and I’m almost a little envious of the author and his bold forays into truly creepy territory. He allowed himself a connection, however unusual, however unconventional, however open to the judgment of those around him and those reading him that he might just in fact be a real live creep. I’ll likely never go as far as White does, but I respect the desire to cross some boundaries, to risk a certain creepiness, in the pursuit of knowing others, even reclaiming a bit of a lost youth — or a youth never had.

Perhaps we are all creeps sometime. I’d like to think I know when to stop, when I’ve perhaps gone a bit too far, or am about to. I could tell you, for instance, about J., a barista at one of the coffee shops where I do most of my morning writing. (We’ve been here before, if you remember.) He’s a nice kid, in his 30s, exactly the kind of boy who gets my attention: not too cute, perhaps a little intense, but not all that much really. It’s the hipster drag, the beard and flannel, the rough looking pants that make him look prickly, when, in fact, he’s actually a very nice man: wanting to engage in conversation, share restaurant recommendations, inform you about the $7 coffee you’re drinking, and wish you a very pleasant morning.

In a moment of weakness (his), he confessed some personal trouble one morning, a need to move quickly out of his current apartment and find another. He confessed that such was only part of his larger fears for his future as he was past 30 and still slinging coffee, in however a high-price fashion. He needed a career, but found himself fumbling. I was moved. I carry with me various greeting cards, a minor occupational hazard as a handwritten “thank you” or “thinking of you” often goes a long way to making someone’s day and thus keeping my large network vibrant. I took one out and wrote him a note, saying, no, I wasn’t coming on to him, I am in fact married, but I was concerned,
I’m a teacher, working with a lot of young people, and invited him to email or text me to talk more about his situation.

Weeks passed, and I thought that I couldn’t show my face there again. I’d done something truly creepy. I’d left a note, with contact information, to a stranger—a male stranger at that. I debated within myself, all of the voices of creepiness clamoring for attention. How weird could I be? At best, you’re just a fool. But then again, what’s wrong with reaching out? His may have been, as I’ve characterized it, a moment of weakness, but he nonetheless reached out himself, if only momentarily. Why not reach back? But really, what a creep I am. How can he not read my note as anything but a gesture, a potentially unwanted probing of sexual interest? After all, I was just a tiny bit attracted to him. I’d asked after the boots he was wearing once, where’d he get them, did he like them, while wondering, purely in the twisted halls of my own fantasy, if he’d like me to lick them clean, scuffed as they were. But seriously, that was just a passing thought. I’m not going to engage him sexually. Perhaps I could be a friend. I like helping young people. I like helping young men, particularly young men, because of my own damaged “youth.” I sound pathetic. I don’t even sound as confident as Edmund White, just abjectly prostrating himself to his desires for young male flesh.

So, I avoided the coffee shop, coming close only once while walking around the consumer plaza where I’d once felt somewhat comfortable. I wasn’t there by accident. I went one late afternoon practically daring myself to get close, just to sneak a peek through the windows to see if he was there. I walked through the maze of hipster shops, even daring to pass by the shop, only with the stealthiest of glances in. Fuck, I’m stalking. I’d already googled the coffee shop, which has a ton of Instagram pictures, looking for this guy, to see if he was in any picture. No luck. Another week, I’m not hearing anything, and I’m confident he’s told everyone in the coffee shop that I’m the creepiest of creeps, this old guy who left him a card, silly old faggot.
And then he texts. A long, lovely message about how he’s sorry he didn’t get back in touch, he’s been meaning to write, he’s just been so busy with the move, but my card made his day, maybe his week, and he’d love to get together for a drink or a coffee or lunch, because, after all, you can never have too many “good” friends. That’s what he wrote: “good” in quotation marks, just like that. And I spent fifteen minutes wondering what “good” means. I texted back and invited him over for a drink that night, and he couldn’t, of course, already had plans. But in time, we had a burger at the hipster bar near my house and we started to get to know one another. He’s a nice guy, a little lost, but trying, maybe not trying too hard.

And that was that. Further attempts to get together just didn’t happen, although he always responded politely to my texts, claiming he wanted to get together but always had something else going on. I resumed visits to the coffee shop, and he was never anything less than pleasant. I became more formal and stiff, feeling rebuffed. I once even purposefully engaged another barista in friendly banter, laughing loudly at our shared jokes about a $7 cup of coffee that just wasn’t quite worth it, and hahaha before turning to my formerly potential friend and paying for my drink with a stone-cold face.

In writing this out, I realize that here is the real creepiness. Nothing creepy in asking to be friends. But perhaps a bit creepy in punishing someone for not trying as hard as I wanted. Or for saying no by putting me off, however gently. For just needing, for whatever his reasons, to put his energy somewhere else. And I inevitably think of my father, who put his energy somewhere, but rarely into me. And of my uncle, who didn’t live long enough to parent me in ways I can only imagine in retrospect. And various friends who are busy with their own lives. And while I wanted to hold this young man accountable for all of the ways in which I’d been robbed of my youth, I knew I needed to turn away and leave him alone.
Have you liked where I’ve taken you? Have I creeped you out? Have you perhaps creeped yourself out in having read this far? I’ve enjoyed the reactions when I’ve told people that I’m writing a book called Creep. I get off on their perplexity, even confusion. Surely, Jonathan, what do you know about being a creep? You seem so nice, so successful, so put together.

But creepiness is a long-term relationship. Even at 50 I’m trying to figure out how to use it, lest I be used by it. It’s a tricky balance. And I wonder if my story here has only been a generational accounting, its lessons, such as they are, nontransferable across the decades. Maybe my particular creepiness, cultivated in the hot mess of the homophobic deep south of the 1970s is a special thing — one that, hopefully, fewer and fewer will have to experience. But still, I can’t help but think that we are all driven by some demons, and, even if you make friends with them, they are still demons. Surely, at times they can teach, even guide. You just might not always like where they take you.

And as I’ve suggested, sometimes I think we can be creepy in critical ways, or at least I fool myself into thinking such a thing is possible. Come with me, back to New Orleans, the scene of so many crimes, and not just against me and my kind. One more story of creeping before I let you go. One more attempt to make an apologia for what I’ve become.

It’s late March, just past midday, a bit humid, but not unbearably so. I’m about to board a van with a bunch of strangers who have all signed up for a Katrina tour, a three-hour survey of the devastating floods that submerged ninety percent of the city in the aftermath of the hurricane and the failure of the levee system. Folks from New Jersey, Illinois, and even Canada talk excitedly about water damage and urban blight. Almost 10 years to the day and the floods still fascinate.
Besides our guide, I’m the only one from New Orleans. I was born and raised here, but I’m not telling anyone. I’m undercover, a closeted native. I want to experience the tour as a visitor, a stranger, as someone whose family wasn’t impacted by Katrina and the flooding (even though we were, dramatically). I want some distance. Or maybe I want to erase the distance I have felt from this place; to remember, to reflect, to live all of it again. But I definitely want to creep up on the place, perhaps take it unawares. Approaching the ten-year anniversary of the event, I want to feel my way again, toward which memories are important. As you now know, I left New Orleans over twenty years ago; a queer man struggling with his sexuality in the Deep South, I needed to leave to find myself in less hostile places. I’m torn. This has been home and not home. I wonder — after time, the storm, the flooding, the blood in the water — what it can be to me now. Regardless, I still feel a little creepy not outing myself as a native, if no longer a local. I’m, yet again, in disguise, hiding, peering out. I’m creeping.

The tour is one of many you can get in and around nola, with visits to the French Quarter and old plantations just upriver being some of the most popular. I am surprised that Katrina tours are still so in demand. I had to call around to a couple of places before finding an empty seat in a van that accommodates about 12. I get to ride shotgun with the tour guide, a guysy guy in a Saints ball cap, a native New Orleanian, someone I could’ve gone to high school with in Metairie, the large suburb to the west, just over the 17th Street Canal. He’s been a guide for well over a decade and knows his stuff, winding the van through the old city’s small streets, up Canal, around the French Quarter (streets closed for one of the many outdoor music fests), and into the Faubourg Marigny, one of the oldest neighborhoods near downtown. He jokes throughout the tour and is particularly playful with the kids on the van, testing their knowledge of historical events. But a certain seriousness lurks in the background. Constant reminders of flood levels, references to famous buildings that no longer exist, details of renovations undertaken since the
waters receded. We can’t go into the lower Ninth Ward apparently. According to our guide, city officials have put the area on a “no tour” list. Some of the wood used in the Brad Pitt homes (Pitt’s Make It Right organization built over a hundred sustainable homes in the area) is apparently rotting, not having been treated to withstand the abundant moisture in the area. (Pitt’s foundation is suing the supplier.)

While most of the afternoon focuses on Katrina, our guide weaves in some other local color, particularly the famous above-ground tombs. When your city is largely six-plus feet below sea level, you don’t bury people in the ground. We pull over to walk around an old cemetery, dates in the family vaults stretching way back into the 18th century. As new generations pass, old remains are swept to the back and fall to the bottom, piling on top of one another over the years.

Thinking of the dust of generations easily recalls scenes from almost exactly a decade ago. My sister called on a Sunday, sobbing into the phone, just days after the storm and reports of the flooding were being televised nonstop. My dad wouldn’t live much longer. He’d been suffering from Parkinson’s for well over a decade, his health slowly deteriorating. The last year had been particularly rough, the physical and cognitive debilitation having taken a sharp turn for the worse. I had visited earlier in the summer, at my mother’s insistence, to give her a hand. As his primary caretaker and approaching 70 herself, she was wearing out. It wasn’t a pretty sight. In the middle of the night I found him stark naked and standing over his bathroom sink, water running, his body rigid and paralyzed. The water had woken me up. He had no idea what was happening or how he’d gotten there, but I was able to get him back into bed.

That was about a month before Katrina. I had no reason to doubt my sister’s assessment of the situation or the deep pain in her voice when she told me I should come as soon as I could. Kissing my partner Mack goodbye, I was on a plane the next day.
Getting into the area wasn’t going to be easy. New Orleans International Airport was completely shut down except for emergency and military traffic. Same for roads in and out of the city. My parents had retired to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, to a spot pretty much in the direct path of Katrina. In the dead of night, having stayed up to watch incoming reports about the storm’s predicted trajectory, they’d been able to get across New Orleans and make it all the way to west Louisiana, outside of Lake Charles, near the Texas border, where much of my mother’s extended family still live. She’s from tough Cajun stock, the French country people who, expelled from Canada once the British took over, settled in the swamps and watery byways of southwest Louisiana. It’s remote country, inhospitable, hot and humid. Of the numerous small towns between Baton Rouge and Houston, Lake Charles is among the largest. After a flight from Cincinnati to Houston, and a puddle jumper into Lake Charles, my brother-in-law picked me up at the airport.

My mother and I slept in the waiting room that night, fitfully, having pulled together a few uncomfortable vinyl-covered chairs, surrounded by other evacuees waiting out news of their loved ones. In the morning, my mother, sister, and I stood around my father’s bed, holding vigil over his pitifully wasted form, his breaths coming in slow but jagged. His face pinched in unconsciousness, he wouldn’t ever open his eyes again. The nurses assured us it was only a matter of time.

My father died about ten hours after I arrived. His frail body and mind couldn’t handle the stress of the evacuation. My mother was convinced the overtaxed hospital staff couldn’t attend to him properly. He was a Katrina victim, one of many old, sick people who didn’t survive the storm. He was fortunate to die in a bed, with family surrounding him.

Days later, we had his funeral and then waited for permission to get back into the affected areas to see what remained. For weeks, many folks were stuck in west Louisiana. My mother, sister, and
brother-in-law, along with their three kids, stayed with an aunt and her adult children, many of whom lived in trailers or homes they’d built around their mother’s trailer, off a small road that bore their family name. The water would often run brown for a bit when you turned on the tap. Eventually we learned that my sister’s and mother’s homes had negligible damage. An aunt, uncle, and their sons, though, had lost everything, flooded out of the city.

The people in the tour van want to see blight, which itself seems a bit creepy, a looking in on others who have suffered, a slight gawking at damages endured. There’s not as much of it as there used to be. In 2006, I drove to the area with a photojournalist, Jon Hughes, to do a story about the devastation. The storm surge had taken out nearly every building along Highway 90, the beachfront road on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We saw miles and miles of abandoned homes that had sat under nine to twelve feet of water. Plenty of blight.

Nine years later, driving through the upper Ninth Ward, we see a destroyed home here and there, desolate with orange spray-painted X’s still noting when the building had been inspected for remains, human and otherwise. Mostly we see newer homes now elevated, as much as ten feet off the ground, with carports holding empty the space for future floodwaters. Our guide points out how older homes had been lifted up, or just moved completely to somewhat higher ground. He talks about his home in Lakeview, flooded under eight feet of water, and the weeks and weeks of driving into the neighborhood with family to salvage, clean up, repair, and rebuild, returning to Baton Rouge after dark when the curfew came.

13 As always, thanks to Jon Hughes, not only for going on the original trip with me, but for allowing me to publish his photograph of me from that trip: Jon Hughes / http://photopresse.com/.
Habitat for Humanity and the city built the seventy-two homes of Musicians’ Village, centered on the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music, providing music instruction for area youth. Brightly colored in oranges, purples, greens, a creole medley, they house local players, an attempt to preserve the city’s jazz heritage. The wrecked and abandoned, next to the colorfully new, hopeful for the future.

Such contradictions are everywhere here. In a beautiful poem about the city, “before the storm: geographers in new orleans,” Romanian-born American poet Andrei Codrescu writes about how his adopted city instills in its inhabitants a “knowledge of finitude that is intimately woven into our psyches / and that urges us to live intensely before the assured cataclysm.” Growing up, we always felt the “assured cataclysm,” quite physically. Nearly every hurricane season we’d be packing the car to head west or north, fleeing a storm. We always knew that the city would eventually flood. The protecting levees were destined to fail. The waters that receded would surely rise again. New Orleans knows the cycles of life, celebrates them in its many festivals and its contradictions: its intense love of pleasure and its tolerance of corruption, its nurturing of the bon vivant and its deep racial segregations, its sexual openness and its intense homophobia.

The schools and churches that gave me a love of reading and music also taught me to hate myself. The relatives who fed me their delicious food withheld their love. Even after the storm, as we huddled in my aunt’s trailer outside Lake Charles — my father dead, my mother and sister wondering if their homes still existed — one relative offered that Katrina was God’s punishment on New Orleans for its sinful ways, and another complained to my aunt that Mack, my partner of 15 years, who had made it into the area for my father’s funeral, shouldn’t be allowed to stay in her trailer. We ate our boudin and shrimp creole, and I could only

14 Andrei Codrescu, Jealous Witness (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008).
thank the god who had struck my hometown that I’d escaped, however scarred.

One of New Orleans’s nicknames is “the city that care forgot.” I felt I knew those forgotten cares well. I still feel them, ghost bruises, creeping under my skin.

But in our tour guide’s tone I hear a care that I’d not noticed before, or perhaps one that I didn’t know how to hear. Maybe it’s one that only Katrina and the failure of the levees could make audible for me. We stop at the 17th Street Canal, site of the most devastating levee breach of all. The guide’s voice strains a bit. He’s been talking for nearly three straight hours, but I sense something else happening. He’s getting riled. He points out the massive construction — new walls, new pumps, new floodgates — but he’s not proud. He wonders why all this wasn’t here before. The van slows down so we can see the historical plaque marking the location of the breach. It’s a typical brown piece of metal, and the guide reads the words with increasing emphasis, his voice cracking at the end:

On August 29, 2005, a federal floodwall atop a levee on the 17th Street Canal, the largest and most important drainage canal for the city, gave way here causing flooding that killed hundreds. This breach was one of 50 ruptures in the federal Flood Protection System that occurred that day. In 2008, the US District Court placed responsibility for this floodwall’s collapse squarely on the US Army Corps of Engineers; however, the agency is protected from financial liability in the Flood Control Act of 1928.

An “ooh” escapes from the back of the van, but we are otherwise silent until someone points to some of the houses around the levee, asking why anyone would want to live here again. The guide almost loses composure. Sitting in the front with him, I see his hands clench and unclench, the healthy pink of his face
reddening a bit more. “This is the important part. We didn’t ask to be flooded. Blame Uncle Sam.”

I have to admit, I like his anger. I’m glad he’s pissed. He should be. And he shouldn’t tolerate the questioning from the back of the van, wondering why and what someone would choose: this is his home.

I am trying to understand how Katrina changed things for me. It’s complicated. The storm, my father’s death—a welter of ambivalent feelings and memories of my boyhood. Perhaps abandonment is a key here. I had abandoned New Orleans, feeling it had abandoned me, just as I had been emotionally abandoned by my father, and by a social world and Catholic doctrine that bullied and degraded me. I had decided to leave this place, that had left me first, and find family and home somewhere else.

In the aftermath of the storm, as I sat with my family, flooded out, my particular relationship to New Orleans was exposed, requiring an accounting of the bodies I’d left behind. And how could I think of those bodies, those intimacies bloating in my mind, and not think too on my own queerness, the queerness that drove me from my home? I remember my family, father, mother, sister, and me, sitting in a pizza parlor, a rare treat out. I must have been 11 or 12, and the Beatles’ song “Got to Get You Back into My Life” comes on, and my father chuckles and quips about me: “That’s what he thinks about me.” He knew. He knew even then that he was a shitty dad, and I was growing up in a shitty place that would make me feel so outcast. As a child. A child. And after all these years, forty-odd years, that still stings, even as I’ve let so much of the hurt go. I realize the very first creep in my life was my father. But as I held my father in my arms while he died, I knew—and know to this day—that his lack of affection hadn’t completely damaged my own ability to love, however creepily that love comes out at times.
CREEP
Finally, nearly two weeks after the storm, my father’s ashes packed in the car, we were able to get across the city back to our family houses — my mother’s outside of Bay St. Louis in Mississippi, directly in the path of the storm, my sister’s in Mandeville on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Some shingles missing, some food wasted. Otherwise everything was all right.

I rode back with my cousin, just a couple of years older than me, someone I hadn’t seen in two decades, possibly more. A devout man, he was generous of spirit, unlike many Christians I’ve known. He told me that he and his siblings had often wondered about me. I braced myself, but then he clarified. They’d wondered, but not because I’d been cast out: I was the one who had gotten away. They were intrigued, curious. They’d often imagined what it would be like to leave, though few of them ever did. I’d never even imagined such a perspective: that others, my cousins, could envy, even in a small way, my having moved on. That they identified in me a courage I couldn’t acknowledge myself; I’d felt it, not as courage, but as the only way to survive.

A small thing? Maybe. But Katrina enabled me to hear it. It just feels a little creepy that it took such a catastrophe — such damage — to cut through the damage done to me.

There is part of me that thinks of Katrina all the time. Part of my fascination is its avoidability. Surely a Category 5 hurricane is a force to be reckoned with. But the damages exacerbated by human failing, by human negligence, demand an accounting. So too do the damages done to me, a young queer man, drowning in waves of homophobia. But I was beginning to feel lucky, sitting in that van, touring the damage, having survived. A creep, yes, but one who survived.

The tour over, I drive back to my mother’s house. There are no pictures of Mack and me in my mother’s home, although my sisters and their families have been on display for years. After setting my breakfast plate down in front of me, my mother heads to
the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. I hear a tiny click as she locks the door. And I chuckle to myself. We are alone in the house. Whom does she think is going to walk in on her while she’s urinating? It’s hard for me not to hear that click as the reverberating sound of all of the silences between us — the lack of trust, the absence of intimacy, the truths untold. Am I a creep to her too, still, after all this time?

I’m always preparing myself for the worst. Stealing myself for the inevitable disappointment. Fortifying myself against the expected rejection. I don’t wonder why anymore. And yet I’ve tried to be open to my mother’s story, my father’s, and others’, such as Ackerley’s and White’s. And my own. I want to understand. I even, some days, want to forgive. Lidia Yuknavitch, that wonderfully creepy chronicler of her own damages, says late in her memoir, The Chronology of Water, “Maybe forgiveness is just that. The ability to admit someone else’s story. To give it to them. To let it be enunciated in your presence. It’s your job not to flinch.”15 Another way of not flinching is becoming aware of when we are creeped out — and not turning away. Obviously, you have to turn away from some creeps. But maybe not everyone. And if you’ve read this far, you may have flinched — you might still — but you haven’t turned away. Not completely.

But I know it’s hard. I told a good friend once about my father’s work, about how he hated every day of his life what he did, and she expressed pity for him. But I don’t want to have pity for him. I feel in myself an attempt to resist sympathy, and I recognize my creepiness in that withholding of pity, that turning him into an object, my refusing to see him as a damaged person himself — as the creep he was. At the same time, I can’t deny that I also feel myself becoming dispassionate about former grievances, pain lessening with time. I’m worrying past worry a little more every

day, like a hole in a coat you no longer mind as you mindlessly finger it.

And then I remember one day, months after the storm, walking along the beach in Bay St. Louis, surveying the damage sustained. Someone had set up a Christmas tree on the beach amidst the debris. A bit creepy. But still hope in the middle of destruction.
Alexander, Jonathan

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