

QUEER LIBERATION? NO THANKS, WE'LL PASS

BRENT CALDERWOOD

“After years of trying to be “real men” in order to be accepted by heterosexuals, we gave up and ran for the hills of San Francisco. There, we learned the same lessons over again that were drummed into our skulls as kids: If you want to make in the world, kid, you’d better turn that swish into a swagger.”

A friend of mine who’s taking a French class at San Francisco State University told me recently how the professor asked students, one by one, to answer the question, *en français*, “How would you describe your ideal man or woman?” My friend Toby began to describe his ideal—his boyfriend Marco (“His eyes are brown, his hair is black...”)—but the instructor suddenly interrupted Toby mid-sentence. “No, no,” she scolded him in English. “You’re not supposed to use the masculine form of the possessive. You should say, ‘Her eyes, her hair.’”

Toby thought the whole thing was pretty funny, but I wasn’t so amused. I spent my whole adolescent life changing pronouns and possessives, altering my language to pass as straight in school. I even learned to tell fag jokes as often as possible so they wouldn’t be told about me. When a boy in my seventh-grade Pre-Algebra class accused me of having a lisp, which he claimed meant that I was gay, I nearly banished the letter “s” from my speech. Plurals were out of the question. Things became singular, alone.

If I had known then that I’d see that same boy in one of the many gay bars in the Castro some fifteen years later—if I’d understood that he was just the first in a long line of gay men who’d pressure me to pass so they wouldn’t

feel so lonely in the closet—maybe I wouldn’t have taken him so seriously. But take him seriously I did. As a result of my linguistic efforts, I probably have a larger vocabulary than many of my old classmates, but fifteen years later I still shy away from sibilant words whenever I’m the least bit nervous—like when I’m out on a date with a guy who manages to wear his masculinity with some semblance of authenticity and self-possession.

Now in college and talking to my openly gay friend Toby in the office of the Queer Alliance, San Francisco State University’s gay student group, I realized that the same pressure to conform I’d felt in the seventh grade was still alive and well here in San Francisco. Only the words had gotten bigger. Instead of being accused of being a cocksucker, I might be accused—if I were to take a French class too—of improper use of the masculine form.

When I arrived at SF State, I was ready to relax and stop fighting. After years of straining to pass as heterosexual in school, followed by more years of activism and advocacy for queer youth, I was ready to be on the academic equivalent of R&R—basking in the warm glow of queer community that San Francisco promised. I was ready to be accepted with open arms into that community, and I expected that I’d find a boyfriend by the end of my first semester.

But it wasn’t that simple. When I arrived, I was shocked to find that I still felt relatively invisible. What was going on? Hadn’t thousands of students from all across the country come here seeking safe haven from their backward backwater hometowns? The Castro was full of such refugees, even though they were loath to talk about such things at their favorite watering holes. I knew that, ever since the Gold Rush, San Francisco had been a place that attracted misfits and miscreants dreaming of hidden riches and open lives. That was the city’s reputation, but where were these misfits now? Changing their language in classrooms, changing their behavior on the streets to avoid the harassment that still happens.

A lot of people, including most of the gay people I know, think San Francisco is one of the best places in the world for gay people to live. But if

San Francisco is one of the best places in the world for us, that says more about the sorry state of the world than it does about San Francisco. Sure, you can hold hands with your same-sex partner in the Castro. But travel six blocks north, south, east or west from the intersection of Castro and Market streets, and you're just as likely to be sneered at as you are to be cruised. You might even be catcalled by passing motorists.

In a city where many gays look unnervingly like our "Governator" in his box-office prime, most bigots are sensible enough to wait till they're in a moving vehicle to vocalize their bigotry. Just last week, in fact, I was walking through Hayes Valley, the upscale neighborhood just east of the Castro that's home to our city's LGBT Center, when a carload of boys yelled "fag." At first I thought maybe they were calling me "fat"—was this, I wondered, a driveby attempt to urge me to spend more time on the Stairmaster? But no, they didn't care a lick whether I toned up my midsection or not; they were calling me a faggot, urging me to tone down my faggish, gay, unmanly appearance. Their jeers were diminished slightly by the Doppler effect, but rang clearly in my ears even after their car had disappeared over a hill.

Accusations like this, such blatant reminders that I'm not cutting it as a "real man," are blessedly rare now that I'm all grown up. Which makes me grateful, sometimes, to be single. The odds of being pegged as gay go up, after all, when you're coupled, and if you two manage to walk out of the gay ghetto into some other neighborhood without being hassled, you're aware with every step you take that you're making a political statement. If you lean over to kiss your lover in a nice restaurant (since going to a nice restaurant arguably means leaving the Castro), you're not just being affectionate, you're being radical. And if your date seems cold and distant over dinner, you're left to wonder, "Is Bob not interested in me, or is he afraid of being attacked?" Small wonder, then, that even in a city that's about 25 percent gay, very few gay men seem to be in long-term relationships.

The judgments we grew up with, as deeply rooted in our psyches as they are, impinge upon our relationships in ways that are far more pernicious

than the judgments we encounter in our adult lives. As gay men, most of us spent the early part of our lives trying to pass, trying to hoodwink the other guys into thinking we were "one of them"—which doesn't exactly set the stage for honesty and intimacy with other men. And although most agree that things are changing for the better, many of us are still growing up in what feels like a pretty hostile world—one in which our brand of loving is hated, where our desires are viewed as disgusting, reprehensible, weak-willed, evil, or, at the very least, laughable.

Is it surprising then, given this hostility, that many of us would be just a wee bit emotionally bruised? For some, continuing to pass is the strategy. For others, when passing isn't enough, the goal becomes disappearing altogether; higher levels of depression, substance abuse, and suicide in the gay community seem to bear this out. As long as we consider our uniqueness a liability, we'll continue to try to extinguish what's aberrant about us. Isolation and drugs remove us from reality, but only temporarily. When the pain returns, we're forced to either embrace our uniqueness or else extinguish our very being.

This is the shadow, this is the dark current that runs parallel to gay pride parades and increased gay visibility. No matter how accepting some families may be, no matter how many episodes of *Will & Grace* get syndicated or how many people put *Brokeback Mountain* on their Netflix queues, coming out in America is still an act of sacrifice and risk and hope for just about anyone who does it. You're sacrificing your assumed role in your family and society. You're risking rejection, even abuse, from those who are supposed to love and care for you the most. You're hoping you won't feel like you're the only one "like you" anymore—you're hoping to trade passing for an actual sense of belonging.

And certainly, on the surface, San Francisco does provide a place where I don't feel so alone anymore. I can step on any bus in the city, for instance, and know that there will be other out gays and lesbians heading to work and generally going about their lives, just like I do. But if I scratch that shiny iridescent veneer even just a little, I start feeling as isolated as I did growing

up in the suburbs of San Leandro, where homophobes were legion. Just south of Oakland, and only 10 miles as the crow flies across the bay from San Francisco, it was nevertheless light years away culturally and politically. If anything, its geographical proximity to San Francisco made its inhabitants, including its children, more virulent in their hatred of gays, eager to distinguish themselves from the perverts who were parading and making waves on that side of the bay. The close proximity to San Francisco also made them hyperaware of gay cues—so that seventh graders with lisps were suspect, and words like “faggot” and “dyke,” rather than serving their traditional purpose as generic reminders to toe the gender-role line, had a more specific meaning: they were bold-faced accusations, official charges of wrongdoing.

Having grown up in the Bay Area, I’ve witnessed many men metamorphose over time. Now 32 and having been “out” for half of my life, I often run into the skinny, soft boys I knew from queer youth groups in Hayward, Berkeley and Oakland, newly transformed into hulking Adonises. I even occasionally see some of them at the gym, where I seem to be spending as much time as they do. Well out of our teens now, we’ve abandoned our dreams of turning heterosexist norms on their heads and embracing our deviance. After years of trying to be “real men” in order to be accepted by heterosexuals, we gave up and ran for the hills of San Francisco. There, we learned the same lessons over again that were drummed into our skulls as kids: If you want to make in the world, kid, you’d better turn that swish into a swagger.

Despite living in what many refer to as the “Gay Mecca,” I still feel an intense pressure to conform, and the rules eerily resemble the ones that the jocks used to enforce in gym class. Don’t move your hands too much when you talk. Don’t lisp. Don’t smile or make eye contact with other boys (well, with one new proviso: only if you want to fuck them). And don’t let anyone accuse you of being a 90-pound weakling. Get big, big, big. Size matters.

The Castro is full of men who are on their way to or returning from the gym. A lot of these guys would get winded just from walking to their

mailbox, but you wouldn’t know it by looking at them. They’ve made a career out of pumping iron (sometimes literally—you wouldn’t believe how many personal trainers I know), all in the ironic effort to emulate the thugs who pantsed them in the schoolyard.

Don’t get me wrong—I’m certainly not immune. I understand the desire to be considered attractive and healthy, but there’s something frightening about a community of men who are bulking up their bodies to achieve some predetermined definition of masculine perfection, meanwhile neglecting the fragile psyches that drove them here in the first place. When I visit the Castro, I see a lot of hurt little boys hiding inside the suits of armor they’ve created. As gay men, I think it’s time we ask ourselves: What is the armor for? What, or whom, are we protecting ourselves from? From gay-bashers? Doubtful. If Stonewall taught us nothing else, it taught us that an artfully thrown beer bottle is far more effective at deterring physical assault than a high-definition six-pack. No, we’re protecting ourselves from one another—that is, we’re protecting ourselves from being rejected by other gay men.

Having left our homes and old lives behind, we need desperately to find love and acceptance, and the possibility for being rejected yet again, by yet another community, for being soft and effeminate—or even sick, dirty, or contagious—is too much to bear. So we head to the gyms, there to sculpt physiques that look strong and healthy. Then we head to the locker rooms, where we keep our heads down and hone on our finely tuned peripheral vision, just as we did in high school. If we make connections there at all, it is in the steamrooms, where faces and eyes are obscured.

It’s a sad tale, I know, and one I fear will add a new label to my already-chafing nape: cynic. Am I risking ostracism yet again? Who wants to be around a cynic, after all? After all those hours I’ve spent in the gym, the last thing I want to do is earn the scorn of other gay men. My friend Toby, certainly, thought I was being too critical of his French teacher. But if I am critical, it’s because I’m an idealist. It’s because I love men, and gay men in particular. And I think we can contribute more than we currently do—to

ourselves, to each other, to the broader culture. I believe our presence as queer outsiders in a heteronormative world is illuminating. But we can only bring our own kind of light to the world if we are, in fact, present—here, now. Present to the reality that we will *never* gain political, social, or personal acceptance by disappearing ourselves, subsuming ourselves to bland, outmoded notions of masculine identity.

Queer liberation means being accepted as we are. For that to happen, we must each start by accepting, and being, fully *ourselves*—masculine, feminine, somewhere in the middle, or maybe somewhere entirely outside of the gender binary. We're almost there, too. In coming out of the closet, we jettisoned expectations about who we were supposed to be in order to find out who we really were. Along the way, many of us gathered with other gay men in urban enclaves. And although it's understandable that once there, we reverted to imposing those old, familiar expectations on each other, that strategy hasn't brought us any closer to personal or political liberation. It's time to make a change.

It's time to let go of those tired old expectations and give ourselves permission to be who we really are. This will require letting go of a lot of fear, the fear that drove us into the closet in the first place: the fear that we would be punished for failing to be just like the other guys in the locker room. But guess what? Now we *are* just like the other guys in the locker room, in the gyms we've made for ourselves in places like the Castro—so why are we still afraid? If we let go of the fear and look each other in the eye, we will see ourselves in each other. We will see the beautiful, queer, imperfect boys—and men—that we were meant to be all along.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brent Calderwood is a writer, editor, illustrator and musician. His essays and reviews have appeared in magazines and newspapers nationally; his poetry has appeared in journals such as Slow Trains and modern words, as well as in the upcoming anthology Solace. He won a 2007 Lambda Literary Foundation Fellowship for poetry, and he was a 2007 Chancellor's Fellow in English Literature at the CUNY Graduate Center. In Fall 2008, he will begin working toward an MSW in Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley. He lives in San Francisco, where he is finishing his book-length poetry collection, Fault Zone, as well as a memoir.