

2024-05-01

Standing at the Back of the Bar

Lawrance Cuellar
University of Texas at El Paso

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Public Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cuellar, Lawrance, "Standing at the Back of the Bar" (2024). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 4082.
https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd/4082

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

STANDING AT THE BACK OF THE BAR

A NARRATIVE

LAWRANCE V. CUELLAR

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Jeffrey Sirkin, Ph.D., Chair

John D. Pluecker, M.F.A.

Raul Coronado, Ph.D.

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright 2024 Lawrance V. Cuellar

Dedication

To the over 700,000 individuals in the United States that have succumbed to HIV including a highly disproportionate number from the Black, Latinx, and multiracial communities.

STANDING AT THE BACK OF THE BAR

A NARRATIVE

by

LAWRANCE V. CUELLAR, B.S.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2024

Abstract

Standing at the Back of the Bar is a collection of semi-autobiographical literary pieces, a hybrid of lyrical essays, poetry, and short stories, that are based on life experiences of the author, Lawrance Cuellar. The book begins with stories of the narrator growing up as a gay Latino in the very conservative, West Texas town of Amarillo in the 1960s and 1970s. The narrator describes and expresses the normalized and internalized homophobia and racism he experienced in the city. As the title for the manuscript implies, he is expected to “stand at the back of the bar” in deference to the white patrons at the only gay bar in town. When the AIDS epidemic emerges in the 1980s, the narrator seeks refuge in Austin, Texas, just as the epidemic is exploding in the white gay community.

In Austin, the narrator begins to unlearn the discriminatory and destructive messages that were implanted in his belief system. As he joins efforts to prevent the spread of the AIDS virus in the Latinx and people of color communities, he begins to see that the racism that exists in the gay community is affecting the resources available to serve his community. Again, he feels as though his Latinx community and other communities of color are left “standing at the back of bar” because HIV resources are focused only on organizations serving the white gay communities.

The legacy of the racism in the gay community that has existed since the 1970s is evidenced today by high incidence of HIV in gay Latinx and Black communities. The lack of attention and resources that these communities needed to fight the disease were kept in the white AIDS service organizations, which were inept at serving the people of color communities. The outcome of this disparity was the demise of community based Latinx and Black AIDS service organizations.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Standing at the back of the bar.....	1
Critical Preface.....	1
Introduction: Do we really need another story written on AIDS?.....	1
Identifying Writing Aesthetics for the Thesis Project	4
A. Influence of Early Chicano Writers	4
B. Awakening to Social Justice Issues through Latinx Protest Literature and other Revelatory Work	6
C. Finding a Writing Style or Voice for Telling my Story	9
Connecting Standing at the Back of the Bar with Identified Writing Aesthetics	12
Major Themes Addressed in Standing at the Back of the Bar.....	16
A. LGBTQIA Issues, homophobia, and internalized homophobia.....	16
B. Racism and internalized racism.....	16
C. AIDS and HIV.....	17
D. Stigma, Shame, and Condemnation	17
Conclusion: Final Thoughts and Next Steps for <i>Standing at the Back of the Bar</i>	18
Brief Note on Nomenclature and LGBTQI Semantics	19
Standing in the Back of the Bar	20
I. The Note (Part One).....	21
II. Letter to Abuelita Matilde.....	25
III. High School Secrets (Part One)	28
IV. High School Secrets (Part Two)	31
V. Amarillo, Texas 1980.....	33
VI. Hello, My Name is _____.....	36
VII. Hiding Places.....	39
VIII. I Met a Man.....	43
IX. Papillon's	47

X. La Vieja.....	49
XI. Billy & Fidel.....	54
XII. Standing in the Back of the Bar.....	57
XIII. The Ritz.....	60
XIV. “I Heard You Say...”.....	63
XV. Gay Liberation, 1983, Elwood Park.....	64
XVI. Miss Gay Potter County.....	67
XVII. The Beginning of the Epidemic, Amarillo, Texas, 1984.....	69
XVIII. The 1984 Miss Gay Potter County Contest.....	70
XIX. The Prodigal Sons with AIDS, 1980s.....	76
XX. The Gay Underground Railroad.....	77
XXI. Keisha	79
XXII. The Note (Part II)	82
XXIII. Rumors, Urban Myths, and Untruths	84
XXIV. 1992 HIV Gay Latino Support Group	86
XXV. The Horrors of the Syndrome.....	89
XXVI. The Condom Breaks	92
XXVII. Luke 3257.....	95
XXVIII. Lessons I Learned from the AIDS Epidemic	102
XXIX. The Rapture, 1995.....	104
XXX. The Funny Thing About AIDS.....	106
XXXI. Savior Complex	108
XXXII. So, You Think You’re a White Guy Now?	111
XXXIII. The Sell Out.....	113
XXXIV. Despedidas	119
References.....	123

Standing at the Back of the Bar

Critical Preface

Introduction: Do we really need another story written on AIDS?

My thesis manuscript is a collection of semi-autobiographical literary pieces, a hybrid of lyrical essays, poetry, and short stories, that are based on my experience growing up as a gay Latino in Amarillo and Austin, Texas. The time period for the work spans from the 1970s to the early 2000s. This important era includes the brief time that the narrator experiences gay life shortly before the AIDS epidemic begins, and then witnesses its widespread and devastating impact on the gay community, especially the gay men of color communities.

Standing at the Back of the Bar begins with the narrator describing his time spent growing up in a small, West Texas, conservative town, Amarillo, Texas. As a child, the narrator realizes his attraction to the same sex and quickly observes that this innate essence makes him a huge target for ridicule and persecution. As he grows up, the narrator fills the vacuum of factual information on homosexuality and the Latinx community with implanted and internalized homophobic and racist messaging from the larger community. The narrator understands that he is a criminal for being gay and accepts any of the harsh abuse and consequences that occur because of his sexual orientation. Additionally, he accepts his second-tier status as a Latino in this predominately white world and he doesn't question the conservative status quo.

The narrator then moves to a larger city, Austin, Texas, as the AIDS epidemic is beginning to expand and explode in the Latinx community. The narrator becomes involved with efforts to address HIV in the Latinx community of Austin, and in other communities of color in the state of Texas. Concurrently, he begins to unpack and unlearn the racist and homophobic lessons that were imprinted and ingrained in him from growing up in the socially conservative

Texas Panhandle. Unfortunately, he discovers that the racism and homophobia that he experienced in Amarillo are still evident, although expressed in different, covert ways, especially regarding the distribution of HIV resources in the communities of color.

Standing at the Back of the Bar describes three time periods experienced by the narrator:

- Growing up gay in the 1970s and 1980s in Amarillo, Texas, a small West Texas town, as the AIDS epidemic emerges;
- Moving to Austin, Texas, as the AIDS epidemic spreads, unabated, and has a devastating effect on the Latinx community; and
- Working in public health to prevent HIV in the people of color communities of Austin and at the state level.

There is a dual impetus for writing this story. The initial reason is to honor the request of a dead friend. The first story in the collection describes how the narrator is trying to obtain a copy of his friend's suicide note. Later in the manuscript, the narrator reveals what the deceased has requested from him: to witness and tell the stories of friends that are suffering and dying in our community.

The second reason for writing this story emerged from feedback received from fellow classmates and colleagues at the creative writing program at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). Many readers of these written stories indicated that they didn't know that the AIDS situation in the 1980s and 1990s was "that bad." I was surprised that the many of the younger readers, including those in the queer community, were unfamiliar with our tragic history from that era. Documenting these historical events is important to our queer community.

I conducted an on-line literature search for books and stories related to AIDS and HIV in the 1980s and 1990s, and discovered that the overwhelming conclusion to the question: Do we need

another story about AIDS? The answer is *Yes!* A review of current literature available about AIDS and HIV during that era shows a lack literature that represent the following:

- Stories from gay men of color living during that time period;
- Stories from gay men of color living in non-urban settings; and
- Stories from gay men of color who were HIV negative survivors of the epidemic.

Literature produced from gay, Latino men who were HIV negative, living in rural areas, and who survived the epidemic, are few compared to the stories from those in our community who were HIV positive and dying of AIDS. At the time, the massive needs of, and the attention to, HIV positive gay men overshadowed the needs of HIV gay negative men. According to Walt Odets, author of *In the Shadow of the Epidemic*, “In the first decade of the epidemic, it has often seemed selfish, inappropriate, or simply ridiculous for the uninfected to have feelings about themselves. Feelings about oneself seemed the exclusive right of those who were infected, sick, or dying, particularly if those feelings were going to demand time or resources.”

The needs and stories, and sometimes even the feelings from gay men who were HIV negative during this time period were, out of necessity, stifled, given the great need and attention that was needed to serve those in our community that were HIV positive.

One of the main reasons I enrolled in the master's degree program for creative writing at UTEP was to learn different techniques for telling stories. In the past, I have tried to honor my friend's request to tell our stories from that time, to relay our unique history, but I did not have the necessary writing knowledge or expertise. Each time I tried to compose some of our stories, I would be overcome with depression and sadness. At times, I didn't know if I needed a good writing program or a good therapist (probably both).

Yet, through my studies at the UTEP creative writing program, I was able to read, examine, and learn different methods for communicating my history, our history, our stories. By discovering different writing structures, especially learning the different formats used in creative non-fiction and lyrical essays, I can step back and provide the necessary distance between myself and the emotional reality of these stories. I see my writing role as one that only relays to the reader what is occurring, and then the emotional processing is done by the reader. The straightforward, almost journalistic, style of writing I choose to write these stories provides me with a way of showing the reader what was experienced without having me to emotionally dissect, parse, and re-live the emotional history.

Identifying Writing Aesthetics for the Thesis Project

Being a non-traditional student that is older than the usual student seeking a master's degree, I have been exposed to a large history of authors and literature that have influenced my awareness and current style. I want to focus on three, general areas, early Chicano writers of the 1970s and 1980s; Latinx performance artists in the 1990s; and non-fiction/lyrical essay writers that were studied in the UTEP master's degree programs. All three of these categories had a deep impact and effect in writing *Standing at the Back of the Bar*.

A. Influence of Early Chicano Writers

Growing up in West Texas in the 1960s and 1970s meant that there was very little access and exposure to any literature, other than the books available at the small local library and those assigned in public school. I had no idea that Chicano or Mexican American literature even existed until 1972, when Rudolfo Anaya published his book, *Bless Me, Ultima*. *Bless Me, Ultima* is a story about a boy growing up in the predominantly Latinx area of Eastern New Mexico.

Antonio Marez y Luna is the Chicano protagonist of the story that lives in a small city called Puerto de Luna, New Mexico. The story deals with Catholic mysticism, curanderos, and the quirky, interesting characters of the tiny village in Eastern New Mexico.

The book references Chicano cultural and societal topics related to being Spanish, Native American, and New Mexican. The myths and beliefs that are written in the book are ones I have heard, stories shared that have been shared within my family, and ones I felt were a part of me, like La Llorona and the healing powers of different herbs, like te malabar, that were available in the yerberia located down the street where I lived. Anaya's book was a mirrored reflection of my world, I could see myself and my community in his book.

Most notable was that Anaya's book took place in a familiar location, Puerta de Luna, New Mexico, the place where my mother was born and raised. The book showed me that our Latinx stories were not only incredibly fascinating and entertaining but were important and needed to be told. I was twelve years old and up until this point, literature was stories about white people and about other places that were far removed from me.

I entered the undergraduate program at the University of Texas at Austin in the mid-1980s and by then, Mexican American Literature was finally becoming more widely available. I took a Mexican American Literature class and out of the several readings we were assigned, two books stood out to me: *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and *Barrio Boy* by Ernesto Galarza.

In both books, the narrators tell their authentic, semi-autographical stories about their experiences being Latinx in a different culture. Like the two protagonists in these Mexican American classics, the protagonist in my manuscript, *Standing at the Back of the Bar*, sees himself as different and is trying to find his place in a world that has told him he has a

diminished or unequal stature compared to his peers. Thirty years after reading these books, there are a couple of descriptions used by the authors that I can easily recall.

In Cisneros's book, it's the vivid way she describes her relationship with Nenny, her pesky younger sister, or when they both make fun of her sick Aunt Lupe, both instances stay with me. They discover that their aunt dies the very same day that they mock her and the narrator laments, "I know I am going to hell." The narrator describes her being close to her younger sister because of the way they laugh, "all of a sudden and surprised, like a pile of dishes breaking."

Like Cisneros's book, I can easily cite some text from Galarza's difficult tale of assimilation: "...a big Yugoslav said Mexican roosters are crazy...because they said 'qui-qui-ri-qui' and not 'cock-a-doodle-doo.'" These two authors write true stories that only they can tell. "Write the story that only you can tell," is some of the best advice I received and one of the main reasons I chose to write *Standing at the Back of the Bar*.

Uniqueness and authenticity. In all three authors highlighted above, there is an unmistakable authenticity and truth to their stories, much like the next group of authors that influenced this thesis project.

B. Awakening to Social Justice Issues through Latinx Protest Literature and other Revelatory Work

When I moved to Austin, Texas, in the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic was beginning to take hold in the white, gay community and was spilling into the Latinx and Black communities. After graduating from the University of Texas at Austin in 1990, I volunteered and then began working as the Program Coordinator for Informe-SIDA, a community based, Latinx AIDS service organization based in east Austin, which was funded by the Austin Latino/Latina Gay

Organization (ALLGO). My role was to provide HIV education and testing services, coordinate bilingual services for the Latinx community, and oversee several Black and Latinx outreach workers.

At the time, the AIDS epidemic was one that mostly impacted white gay men. Larger, legacy AIDS organizations were adept at providing HIV prevention and care to mostly white men, and did not know, or were unfamiliar with, how to conduct educational outreach to the people of color communities. The funds Informe-SIDA received to run a small, ten-person agency, was much smaller than the amount of resources given to the larger, AIDS service agency in town, which employed four times as many employees.

The inequality of resources and services quickly led to the increase of HIV cases in the Black and Latinx communities. In response to this inequity, the Latinx and Black artist communities of Austin and around the nation began producing protest art and literature to highlight the disparity and to promote social justice issues, like sexism, homophobia, and racism.

The creative literature being produced during this difficult time period had a huge impact on me and is reflected in my thesis project, *Standing in the Back of the Bar*. In fact, being exposed to this protest movement changed my worldview and offered a different one from the conservative place in which I was raised.

In retrospect, this was an extraordinary, revolutionary time to be living in Austin. It seemed like not only was I suddenly awakened to the social inequities in the world, but I was witnessing my Latinx community uniting in response to racism, sexism, homophobia, environmental racism, xenophobia, anti-indigenous issues, and many more social injustices. Their responses included defiant, emotional, eloquent demands through their literature.

Most of the protest poetry and performance pieces were recited in public places, like Resistencia Bookstore or on the patio of Las Manitas Restaurant. Unlike today, there was no public forum, or internet, to post and share your work, so an artist had to visually show their work or orally recite their protest pieces. In the 1990s, I was able to have deep conversations and connect with many local artists, like Sharon Bridgeforth (*The bull-jean stories*), Ana Sisnett (*Grannie Jus' Cum*), Maria Limon, and Jesse Johnson, all of whom worked or volunteered at Informe-SIDA. Their work and personal talks with them have influenced me by showing me that artists have a responsibility to respond to social injustices. Their work, mentorship, and guidance on social justice issues not only inspired me, it changed me.

Exposure to this confrontational, conscious-awakening literature led me to believe that I had some learning, or rather unlearning, to do regarding the racist and homophobic ideas that were implanted in my head. One gay, Latino artist in particular influenced my work in *Standing at the Back of the Bar*.

In 1992, I was able to attend the National Latina/o Lesbian and Gay Organization (LLEGO) conference in Houston, Texas. One of the poets showcased at the event was Alberto “Beto” Araiza. He had created several performance pieces that were collectively called *H.I.Vato*. I was so moved by his presentation that I raised funds to bring the Seattle-based performer to Austin, Texas, to share his work at a public performance in East Austin.

In *H.I.Vato*, Araiza describes the narrator receiving HIV services from a white clinic that does not understand his culture, “And that's when main man, white on white, voodoo, big daddy, doctor walks back into the room, seats himself behind his desk and begins to speak. ‘Albert ...’ he calls me by my white name! I adjust. ‘May I call you, Albert?’ I said, ‘Of course,’ knowing I was giving away my greatest power.”

Again, the incredible protest work produced from that era introduced me to different ways to use art and literature to combat homophobia, racism, and other social injustices. Most importantly, their work showed me how to highlight the indifferences by showing their stories and not just telling the stories.

Although much of the literature would be difficult if not impossible to locate, listening to these artists had a profound effect on me. I can't even remember specific titles or names of some of the work, but I'll always remember how the work made me feel. These are special moments in time that I will never forget while attending oral performances: a Latino describing how his family abandoned him, and called him evil for expressing he could be gay; a woman describing the immense racism and sexism she had to face every day at her minimum wage job to try and support her family; or a lesbiana of color watching the demise of her family and community through drugs and violence, powerless to do anything about it.

This is how I witnessed creativity and art expressed from my community. There was no published space available where one could turn to read such creative work. Publishing, or even copying, the work was expensive. But the performance pieces were incredible, these artists spewed out emotional, angry, eloquent pieces of art, which pierced and embedded into our hearts and minds. With this new awakening, I had to find a method for telling my story.

C. Finding a Writing Style or Voice for Telling my Story

I found it difficult to revisit the dark periods in my life in order to relay to others the stories that I wanted to tell about living as a queer man in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. As I started expanding my reading of creative non-fiction and lyrical essays, these pieces provided me with

examples of how I can tell my story. I especially gravitated to stories that were written very objectively, with little or no opinion or emotion as to what is taking place.

Some of the most influential examples to me are the work of Roberto Bolaño, Seema Reza, and Brian Doyle.

A common factor of all three authors is a method of writing creative, fiction/non-fiction pieces in a way that is void of any emotional commentary, or visceral reaction, to the sometimes unspeakable, horror that they are relating.

In Bolaño's last epic novel, *2666*, he writes a five-part story that centers around European literary critics, including the mysterious writer Archimboldi, an American journalist Oscar Fate, and Óscar Amalfitano, a Chilean professor. All of the characters and their stories are interconnected, most through the town of Santa Theresa (based on Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua) where over 300 young, poor Mexican women were murdered.

In the section entitled, "The Part About the Crimes" Bolaño, methodically describes the murders of 112 women in Santa Theresa. The description of each one is done with no real emotion, and he only relays the facts for each killing. The chronicling of the homicides goes on for pages and the sheer volume and weight of the number of murdered women finally wears down the reader. Bolaño doesn't need to tell the reader what a great tragedy or loss these murders are, the facts and great numbers are heartbreaking enough.

When the World Breaks Open by Seema Reza uses a variety of genres in her book, first person short stories, poems, and lyrical essays to describe the events in her life, from domestic violence, losing an unborn baby, and sharing lessons with her sons. She has a unique ability to share her triumphs and losses without dwelling on sentiment. She successfully works to mix different types of writing, and I try to accomplish the same with my manuscript.

I was inspired by Reza's raw and unflinching story telling. This is especially strong when she describes the painful details about her life. In the chapter "Pity," she, at first, relays her excitement at being pregnant again. Toward the end of the chapter, Reza describes the sad process of having to abort her unborn baby. The detailed, harrowing description of the removal of her fetus is beyond heartbreaking and difficult to read. Yet, Reza chooses not to share what she is feeling or the deep emotions that must be going through her mind. She doesn't have to. Narrative, emotional descriptions fail in the face of such tragedy.

Similar to Bolano's writing about the murders in Santa Theresa, Reza decides that sharing her emotional response to what is occurring is not necessary. The reader doesn't need the narrator to put this scene into context or perspective. Although some may want to know a deeper insight into the mind of the narrator, I have chosen to tell the stories in my thesis project in much the same way, as they unfold, with little emotional reaction from the narrator.

Finally, "Leap" by Brian Doyle is only a short, two-page essay about persons who leapt from the Twin Towers during the September 11 attacks. He makes the best use of small text, using short sentences to tell his story. He focuses on two of the "jumpers" who hold hands when they leap from the tower.

There is so much moving, sad information crammed into his short essay. Doyle uses direct, terse short sentences to relay to the reader what is occurring: "Many people jumped. Perhaps hundreds. No one knows. They struck the pavement with such force that there was a pink mist in the air. The mayor reported the mist."

This situation is rife with emotion, yet Doyle chooses to just report on the facts, almost journalistically, about what is occurring.

Again, in *Standing at the Back of the Bar*, I try to emulate a similar writing style that these three writers use: short, terse sentences that only relay what is happening without putting the emotional action in context for the reader. Certain pieces in my story reflect this style of writing better than others and are highlighted in the next section.

Connecting *Standing at the Back of the Bar* with Identified Writing Aesthetics

In my writing *Standing at the Back of the Bar*, my intent is to showcase four of the important elements, I feel, I garnered from the inspirational work cited above:

- Use a variety of genres: first person narratives, poetry, and lyrical essays to tell the story;
- As an educational, advocacy piece, show how racism and homophobia effected the HIV epidemic and its current outlook;
- Emphasize showing over telling the story, without interpreting, and keep the narrator's emotional response to a minimum; and
- Include stories that are unique and authentic to the Latinx experience in the 1970s and 1980s.

Similar to the Sema's book, *When the World Breaks Open*, my story uses both poetry and prose tell the larger story.

Some of the first pieces I wrote for *Standing at the Back of the Bar* are "I Met a Man" and "I Heard You Say..." both poems show the homophobia and racism encountered by the narrator while living in Amarillo. In "I Met a Man," there is also context provided about the Amarillo Police Department and their indifference to the queer population:

"In the early 1980s, the Amarillo Police Department felt that anyone murdered, assaulted, or raped while engaging in criminal activity, such as narcotic distribution, prostitution, or

homosexuality, would be given a low priority for assistance. Their belief was that these lawbreaking citizens were complicit in their own misfortune. And this made sense and we accepted it.”

It is important to remember that homosexuality was still illegal until 2003, when the US Supreme Court in *Lawrence vs. Texas* ruled that criminal punishment for private, consensual adult sexual activities between two individuals was unconstitutional. “This made sense to us and we accepted it,” is repeated in the piece and reflects the acceptance and internalization of this discrimination. The queer community of Amarillo endures and accepts the homophobia they have experienced because they have been taught to see themselves as criminals and are accustomed to being thought of as less than others in the community.

Another piece, “I Heard You Say...” also shows the homophobia and discrimination experienced by the narrator without going into deeper emotional reactions about how the narrator felt. This is also a technique used by Reza and by Doyle

In at least a couple of pieces in *Standing at the Back of the Bar*, the narrator is experiencing intense, disturbing events, yet he plainly describes what is happening without putting the occurrences in an emotional context.

In portions of “The Note (Part I),” the narrator describes the discovery of the body of a close friend who had committed suicide. Yet, the reader has no real insight into how the narrator is feeling or his emotions:

“The morning was chaotic. Finding the slumped, lifeless body of Leo Perez in the driver’s seat of his black SUV, the car’s motor was still running. The interior continued to fill with carbon monoxide from a clear plastic tube running from the exhaust pipe and securely duct taped to a crack in the passenger side window.

Tried the car's doors...locked. A frantic search for a hammer. It took three swings to break the passenger side window, glass was everywhere. Then deadly smoke, the sickening, unforgettable, smell of carbon monoxide, suddenly flooded out of the car."

Throughout this excruciatingly dramatic passage, I avoid providing any indication to the reader about what the narrator is emotionally experiencing. Again, similar to instances in Sema's book, the horror of what is occurring needs no interpretation.

In the section, "1992 HIV Gay Latino Support Group," the stoic description of the deaths is similar to the descriptions that Bolaño uses to detail the tragic deaths of the women of Santa Teresa:

"Greg Sustaita takes his own way out, he is found hanging in his garage. He speaks the truth when I remember him telling me that he will never succumb to the virus. His body isn't found until three days after his decision."

In this piece, I only needed to relay the names and a unique aspect of their life. Again, the sheer number of deaths in the support group is enough to affect the reader without having to explain how the narrator felt about each one.

There are two pieces in *Standing at the Back of the Bar* that are reflective of, and inspired by, the oral performances of Araiza. "The Prodigal Sons with AIDS" and "The Rapture 1995." Both of these pieces describe the experience of living in a time when there was no cure or treatment for AIDS, which meant an early death. In "The Prodigal Sons with AIDS:"

"They didn't want to live here,
For certain they didn't want to die here.
But they had no choice,
Cared for in their final days by terrified families,

Behind tightly closed window curtains and nosy neighbors.”

Their early deaths from AIDS are kept a secret from others in the community and is a cause for stigma and shame, like the Araiza’s “vato” with HIV.

“The Rapture 1995,” is also inspired by Araiza’s story:

“It must be hard to imagine now,

But I swear to you, people can just vanish.

In the mid-nineties, so many queer people disappeared instantly.

To daringly ask about friends,

‘Has anyone heard from José, or Tim, or Steven?’

Meant you had to gird yourself for the answer.

‘He’s not doing too well,’ or ‘He’s in hospice,

Or even worse, ‘No one has heard from him.’”

I have tried to use the same unspoken horror that is reflected in Araiza’s work when he describes being diagnosed with HIV.

In my manuscript, “Hello, My Name is…” is a piece inspired by the work of Anaya, specifically regarding how our complicated mestizo history is not always easy to detail, especially to the Anglo population.

A couple of other pieces, “Letter to Abuelita” “Hiding Places” and “So, You Think You’re a White Guy Now?” the narrator speaks with a uniquely authentic Chicano – Latino voice, reflecting the work of Cisneros and Galarza.

Finally, the pieces at the end, “The Sell Out” and “Despedidas” are homages to the HIV artists from the 1990s. In both pieces, I try to highlight the link between the past and current racism that exists which results in the skewed distribution of funds for AIDS service

organizations. This disparity led to the demise of the HIV community organizations that existed to serve the people of color communities.

Major Themes Addressed in *Standing at the Back of the Bar*

A. LGBTQIA Issues, homophobia, and internalized homophobia

The major premise of the story, *Standing at the Back of the Bar*, is the narrator navigating the world as a gay, cis-gendered, Latino, first in Amarillo, then in Austin, Texas. Being raised in the 1960s and 1970s in a very socially conservative area, the narrator has been exposed to nothing but homophobic statements about being gay.

Again, at the time, homosexuality was a criminal offense and gay people in Amarillo were treated as criminals, similar to drug dealers and prostitutes.

The narrator believes and internalizes all of the information he receives. Later on in the book, the narrator discovers that most of what he was taught about being gay and Latinx is untrue.

There is a short story in the manuscript called “The Gay Underground Railroad,” the narrator becomes roommates with a person he believes is a gay man. As his roommate opens up to him, he discovers that his roommate is actually transgendered (or transexual, as they were referred to at the time). The narrator learns the difficulty his roommate has to endure, every day, even in a progressive city like Austin.

B. Racism and internalized racism

Like the issue of homosexuality, the narrator has grown up in Amarillo only hearing about the subordinate role that Latinx have in the White world, even in the LGBTQIA community. The narrator believes this until he moves away and begins to re-evaluate everything,

he was taught about being Latinx. However, once in Austin, the racism the narrator experiences does not disappear, instead, it transforms and morphs in different ways.

C. AIDS and HIV

The narrator is living in Amarillo at the onset of the AIDS epidemic. He experiences and sees the harsh stigma and discrimination given to persons living with HIV. The author moves to Austin and begins working in the Latinx community to not only address HIV and HIV stigma, but also to address the racism that still exists in the LGBTQIA community that puts his community at risk for HIV.

D. Stigma, Shame, and Condemnation

The issue of condemnation and shame occur at different levels within my manuscript.

As gay men, we were taught having sex with another man was sinful, shameful, and unnatural. Within the world portrayed in my manuscript, there is a general condemnation of being gay and living a gay lifestyle. This judgment is especially strong in Amarillo and is reflected in several pieces, including “I Met a Man” and “Gay Liberation, 1983, Elwood Park.”

There is shame and stigma regarding being diagnosed as having AIDS, especially in Amarillo and in the 1980s. The piece, “The Beginning of the Epidemic, Amarillo, Texas, 1984,” describes how individuals with AIDS are hidden away behind closed doors and windows because their caretakers, usually family, were afraid they would be discovered.

Finally, when HIV is rampant in the gay community, members of our community are expected to act responsibly and avoid risky sex. One piece, “The Condom Breaks” examines a sexual event experienced by the narrator. As an HIV prevention educator, a person who

intimately knows the consequences of unprotected sex, he engages in risky behavior he otherwise works to prevent. The narrator is ashamed to share this experience with other gay men for fear of condemnation and judgment from others in the community.

Conclusion: Final Thoughts and Next Steps for *Standing at the Back of the Bar*

Even though the idea for writing *Standing at the Back of the Bar* was a seed planted several years ago, this thesis project was not my initial idea. In fact, I didn't start working on the project until August 2023, and the work here is relatively new. However, I feel more confident now that I am graduating from UTEP that I have the tools that will allow me to edit, amend, and finalize this promising project.

Standing at the Back of the Bar is not yet a completed project, but I have a very good foundation for finishing this manuscript. I have created a story arc and I have settled on a preferred technique and voice for telling my story. Some pieces in the project, like "The Note (Part I)," "I Met a Man," and "The Rapture 1995," reflect the style of writing I want to use. Other pieces will need more editing work. I also need to do a better job of "painting a picture" or "filling in the colored lines" for some of these stories to provide readers with more detail.

Finally, as I continue to work on completing and adding to the manuscript, *Standing at the Back of the Bar*, the final product will benefit from additional research into other Latinx writers. The literary work presented here can only improve by comparing and contrasting these pieces with the work of these authors, including John Rechy (*City of Night*), Arturo Islas (*The Rain God: A Desert Tale*), and the writings of Richard Rodriguez and Cherrie Moraga. Additionally, there will be ongoing research to identify and read similar literary works, such as *Latinx Writing Los Angeles: Nonfiction Dispatches from a Decolonial Rebellion*, which is a

collection of non-fiction work and essays from contemporary Latinx authors in Southern California.

BRIEF NOTE ON NOMENCLATURE AND LGBTQI SEMANTICS

The terms and language used in the *Standing at the Back of the Bar* reflects the language used during that historical period (1970s - 1990s) in West and Central Texas. At the time, we did not have the vocabulary used today to describe different people and topics currently used in the LGBTQI and HIV community. HIV was called AIDS, gay pride was gay liberation or gay lib, the lower-case Greek lambda (λ) and the pink triangle were the symbols used to represent the gay community before the rainbow flag. Transgendered individuals were referred to as transsexuals, cisgendered designation was not used, and we did not yet have the language to describe and acknowledge non-binary individuals. The LGBTQI community started out as the GLBT community before the other alphabet of letters was added (and more likely, will continue to be amended). The term “Latinx” is used several times in the manuscript. Although I realize this is just the latest iteration in a long line of terminology used to describe my community, the terms “Mexican,” “Latino,” “Chicano,” and “mestizo” are also used.

West Texas in the 1970s and 1980s was an extremely racist place. Derogatory terms for people of color were frequently used, even within the gay community. I have made the decision to not use the racist slurs for Blacks commonly used at that time and place in order to avoid re-traumatization and have chosen not to use the “n-word,” except in one essay, “Miss Gay Potter County Contest.” Other slurs for the GLBTQI community and the Latinx community are used in the story.

Standing in the Back of the Bar

I. The Note (Part One)

The morning was chaotic. Finding the slumped, lifeless body of Leo Perez in the driver's seat of his black SUV, the car's motor was still running. The interior continued to fill with carbon monoxide from a clear plastic tube running from the exhaust pipe and securely duct taped to a crack in the passenger side window.

Tried the car's doors...locked. A frantic search for a hammer. It took three swings to break the passenger side window, glass was everywhere. Then deadly smoke, the sickening, unforgettable, smell of carbon monoxide, suddenly flooded out of the car.

And finally hugging an empty, rigid shell of a body. I knew immediately he was gone.

There were useless paramedics going through the motions, a gathering crowd of gawking neighbors made the scene even more surreal, watching me and my actions like I was in a made-for-TV movie. The unaffected police appeared and quickly ushered me away in the back of a police car.

At the police station, they peppered me with questions: Who? Why? When? And there was an unspoken judgement that hung in the air, as if my actions, or our lifestyle were somehow to blame. The detective avoided direct eye contact. I don't remember the rest of the day.

A week after the incident my roommate, Steven, mentioned there was suicide note found inside the car. Steven had remained at the scene with the body as the paramedics and police finished up their morbid jobs.

"Are you sure? The police didn't tell me anything about it."

"Yes," Steven replied, "I am sure there was a note and I believe it was addressed to you."

I try to avoid interactions with the police, but I am going to have to inquire about the note. Maybe his departing words will shed some light on his emotional state, provide some solace, something to hold onto, some closure.

I telephone the police station and get transferred to a different department. I finally hear a detective's gravelly voicemail and I leave a message for him to call me back.

Three agonizing days, no call back.

I call the police phone extension again and leave a message, another three days pass.

By now, I am consumed by nothing else. I phone a third time and luckily get a live detective who answers. He tells me he doesn't know anything about a suicide note.

I let him know that my roommate was at the scene and was sure there was one, supposedly addressed to me. And I begin to lose my composure, the emotions of the last few weeks reaching a climax, "Look, I know it's real," I know my voice is reaching an octave where I'll soon be in tears, "I've been waiting for over two weeks to get the note. It was addressed to me, so it is my note!"

The detective lashes out, "Look if you are going to have this kind of attitude, I am not going to help you at all! You are not a member of the family, so we don't have to give you any of his personal belongings or any information, including the note, if there is one!"

The disaffected police on the other end remind me who I am. Or rather, who I am to them, just a hysterical, sensitive man who cannot control his emotions. Some silly, weepy Mexican faggot who lost his stupid friend. I remember that I have no power in this situation. Like I am back in Amarillo, relegated to standing at the back of the bar.

I apologize to him and any inconvenience my request has caused. The detective puts me on hold.

~

When the pretty, white gay boys die of AIDS in the movies or on television, they never detail what happens before the funeral. They tearfully show up at the service, smartly dressed, a plethora of flowers, pained faces, and someone offers words of wisdom.

When a poor gay Latino man dies, this is usually a great financial hardship on the family and the community, many can't afford the burial or funeral. It's not just the lack of money, it's more complicated than that.

When Leo Perez killed himself in front of my house, his family was somehow notified of his death. His mother called me from out of state, she was surprisingly unemotional, made a vague reference to his death being because of poor choices, and then wanted nothing more to do with him.

Three days had passed, and there was no way to raise money for Leo's funeral costs. Coming up with \$3,000 (similar to \$10,000 in 2024) in less than a week was a daunting task. No one we knew had that kind of money.

I called the city morgue to inquire if we could send the body to a local funeral home, the director of the morgue said I did not have the legal authority to make any decision on the remains. Only a family member or their designee could take care of arrangements. Most likely, if the body remained unclaimed, Leo's body would be buried in a pauper's grave.

Sadly, many gay men, especially the thousands that died from AIDS, were buried in a pauper's grave. While a pauper's burial may conjure up images of a cheap, pine box being lowered into the county cemetery, many paupers' graves can be less dignified and more efficient. The unclaimed, destitute bodies are sent to a crematorium, where they are all burned together. The aggregated ashes are then interred in some unknown, unmarked location.

New York City's Hart Island, where the city's "pauper's field" or "potter's field" is located, is considered the single largest burial site for persons who died of AIDS in the United States. Most of the thousands buried there were unidentified, unclaimed, or abandoned by their families. Others were from poor families who could not afford burial expenses.

~

After five minutes, the Austin detective is back on the phone and directs me to be at the police department at 3:00 pm on Thursday. And bring some proof of identification.

Getting off work on such short notice is always daunting, but I manage to switch shifts with a sympathetic co-worker.

I arrive at the Austin Police Department, as instructed, they take my picture, and tell me to sit in a busy hallway chair. I wait for some time as police office staff step around me as if I were an annoying box of files. The detective finally shows up and tells me he cannot give me the original note but can only give me a copy. He hands me an envelope and I sign a document.

My immediate instinct is to unfold the letter there, but I want to get as far away as possible from the police station. I shake the detective's hand and leave. I drive to a secluded park, sit on a bench under a shady tree and begin to read Leo's final message.

II. Letter to Abuelita Matilde

Querida Abuela Matilde,

Mi abuelita, cuando tenía unos ocho años, recuerdo que pregunté a mamá: “¿Por qué tienes solo un hermano y una hermana? Papá es de una familia que tiene muchos. ¿Familias mexicanas tienen muchos niños, no?”

"Pues," respondió ella, "eso no es tan cierto."

Mi abuela, me dijo que tú tuviste seis hijos antes que ella. Ninguno de ellos vivió más de dos años. Por lo general, enfermaban y morían porque tú y abuelo no podían pagar un médico o atención médica. Recuerdo que mamá me mostró una foto muy antigua de uno de estos niños, ella está acostada en un ataúd pequeña y rodeada de flores. Parece que tú niña tenía unos dos años. Creo que amaras mucho.

Abuelita, moriste cuando yo nomas tenía seis años, así no conocerte muy bien. Sin embargo, recuerdo las visitas emocionantes y aventureras a tu casa. Bebíamos la única agua disponible, que era de una pompa de agua exterior, encendíamos lámparas de aceite por la noche porque no había electricidad, y tuve que despertar a un hermano en medio de la noche para que caminara conmigo hasta la letrina afuera. Fueron actividades exóticas que hicieron cuando visitamos la casa de mis abuelos y fuera muy especial. Sólo más tarde me di cuenta de que tus condiciones de vida eran el resultado del aplastante legado de pobreza heredado por nuestros antepasados Navajos.

Abuelita, apenas estoy empazando a darme cuenta sobre la escasa existencia de tu dura vida, pero, sobre todo, ni siquiera puedo comenzar a comprender el inmenso dolor de tener que enterrar a seis de tus hijos. Sé que cuando la gente escucha hablar de otras personas que han sufrido una gran pérdida de familiares, como aquellos que viven en la guerra, o que

sobrevivieron en un país del tercer mundo, o que vivieron hace muchos años, tienden a crear una narrativa, como "pues, perdiendo los hijos es algo común en esas comunidades" o "nuestros antepasados eran más duros en aquellos días." Pero no creo en ese razonamiento desdeñoso, es sólo un pensamiento simplista para evitar la inmensa tarea de tratar de comprender una pérdida y un dolor tremendos.

Mi abuelita, creo que amaste a cada uno de tus hijos tanto como cualquiera ama a su propio hijo. Minimizar su dolor para que sea más fácil de entender no es justo. Es difícil entender cómo puedes perder a seis de tus bebés y aun así perseverar.

Creo que te sentías ansiosa y silenciosamente temerosa cuando cada uno de tus bebés mostró síntomas de estar enfermo y oró para que mejoraran.

Seis veces.

Me imagino que cuando se enfermaron aún más, le pediste misericordia a dios, regateaste, encendiste velas en la iglesia, visitaste a un curandero, cualquier cosa para mantener vivo a tu bebé.

Seis veces.

Te imagino conformándote con pequeños milagros, como suplicar por una noche tranquila y tranquila para tu bebé sin dolor.

Seis veces.

Luego, tal vez orar por una muerte fácil y humana para tu bebé.

Seis veces.

Creo, mi abuela, que estabas enojada con cualquier dios insaciable o maldición que implacablemente continuaría quitando la vida a tus bebés, sin justicia, sin piedad, sin razón.

Seis veces.

Creo, abuela mía, que incluso en tu avanzada edad recuerdas a cada bebé, su risa única, su llanto inquietante, su mirada amorosa, su dolor.

Seis veces.

Mi abuela, te amo. Reconozco y honro su angustia y trauma.

Tu nieto, Lorenzo

~

There has been increased interest in the topic of intergenerational trauma, the theory that the magnitude of grief and trauma experienced by our ancestors is so great, it can be passed on to future generations without them even experiencing the original horror.

Research has shown that in the descendants of Holocaust survivors, Black Americans, and Native American communities, the historical trauma that our ancestors experienced is actually reflected in our personalities, our subconsciousness, even expressed in our genes.

I understand that the emotional and psychological wounding of my ancestors over lifespans and across generations is cumulative and resides within me. But it is important for me to remember that historical strength and healing are also intergenerational, that resilience can also be inherited and passed on. Their spirit of survival resides within me and helps me address the horrors and challenges that I would encounter in my own life as a Latino gay man living through the AIDS crisis.

III. High School Secrets (Part One)

When Ronnie Martinez was being attacked, I turned to the front of the room to look at Mrs. McBrady's unaffected face. Her bouffant head was turned downward and remained focused on noisily shuffling papers. Her expression was what frightened me the most. As my fellow student was trying to weather the assault, Mrs. McBrady's puffy, white face had a shrewd, slightly imperceptive, smile on her face. There was a smug indication of satisfaction, normalcy, and maybe redress? The look on her callous face was one that I can never forget.

~

For the residents of West Texas in the 1970s, queer people existed in some world far, far away from Amarillo, Texas, like Oompah-Loompas or Munchkins. Periodically, they would see glimpses of us on television, maybe in New York City or Los Angeles, and definitely San Francisco, but no one really thought they actually knew anyone who was queer or that there could even be any in our town. Sure, there were some of us guys that acted "fruity," or "girly" or "joto" but that was just the way we were, "funny," or "loca" or "queer." They didn't think any of us could be homosexual.

Yet, I knew I was a homosexual since I was five years old. The shock to me was finding out other boys did not have crushes on Peter Brady on the television, or that other boys did not want to chase and kiss other boys in kindergarten. This certain, unwavering clarity about who I was, even at a young age, brought some a clear resignation but with this realization came fear, sadness, and protective isolation, as the world around me slowly revealed itself to be a menacing place for a boy like me.

I became a keen observer, which was needed to quickly develop survival instincts. I listened to the homophobic rants and taunts of adults and children and quickly realized who I

was to them. I was someone who they hated and had every right to hate. I had to pretend to be something else. Still, I had the sense that there had to be others like me. I suspected some of my classmates may have also been queer, but, ironically, they were the ones I had to avoid. Some of them had a harder time assessing the danger in our environment.

Ronnie Martinez was not adept at reading the perilous signs. Ronnie was a light-skinned Latino, slight, with green eyes and a sweet smile that he gave away freely. He was friendly, too friendly for a West Texas boy. During the eighth grade, an awful, life-altering rumor began circulating. Even before the advent of social media, this information spread faster than any viral video or meme. No one questioned the authenticity of this story.

The rumor was that when Ronnie was alone with another boy, a white boy, a seventh grader, Ronnie tried to kiss him. The event allegedly took place behind the gymnasium of our school. The boy's older sister was head of the cheerleading squad – junior high school royalty. When she repeated the story, her clout and social position gave the story even more heft and credence. Her muscled boyfriend was on the football team and his team members took this piece of information as an absolute social aberration and chose to exact vengeance for this perceived evil deviancy. And, for them, Ronnie's friendliness and sweet smile were turned into more evidence that he was queer.

Ronnie's school locker in the hallway had taken a hit with the usual gay epithets shoe polished on the door. I had also heard that some from the gridiron group caught Ronnie in the boys' restroom a couple of times and had given him a thrashing. I had one class with Ronnie, and he always sat hidden in the back of the classroom. I was too cowardly to ever return a smile from Ronnie.

There were six guys from the junior high football team in our class. Loud and obnoxious apes, they would try to outdo each other with taunts of, “pussy,” “bitch,” or “faggot,” as they passed Ronnie’s desk. One day, the guys from the football team lined up and as they entered the classroom, they quietly, slowly shuffled passed Ronnie’s desk. As they did, they spit on him. One by one.

Ronnie lowered his head and hid behind his long hair. The spittle hung from his pretty, light brown hair and then dripped all over his desk. He would quickly wipe the spit away with the back of his hand when one landed on his face. I turned away but could still hear the “snort” followed by the unmistakable sound of the venom spewing from their mouths.

This is when I turned my eyes to the front of the room, and I looked at Mrs. McBrady who was purposely trying to ignore what was happening, yet there was a look of contentment on her face. Her remote aloofness, as she may have caught was going on through the corner of her eyes, conveyed satisfaction.

I’ll never forget the look on her face, her demeanor, it haunted me then and still disturbs me to this day. She saw.

IV. High School Secrets (Part Two)

“Don’t ‘queer’ the friendship!” I have to keep telling myself.

Impossible advice for a lonely, fifteen-year-old gay boy. My sophomore friend Phillip is handsome, kind, and likes spending time with me. He thinks I’m funny, and I like to make him laugh...so it’s easy to slide into a deeper, one-sided, romantic love.

He often invites me out after school to smoke a joint with him. He could invite anyone, but he chooses me! There are cute girls that would gladly go with him to stare into his big, laughing brown eyes and sit close to him while passing the reefer, but he chooses me! I make him laugh. Not muffled chuckles, or weak “tee-hees,” or grins, I elicit loud, uncontrollable guffaws from him. For me, it’s easy to imagine that there is more of a connection between us.

Sadly, Phillip is gone before I can reveal my true, secret feelings. Even to this day, the smell of pot reminds me of our time together.

Independence Day, 1977, Phillip is with friends shooting fireworks on the dark outskirts of town.

An errant bottle rocket...words exchanged between two groups...Philip knocked on the side of his head.

He falls, never recovers, and dies in ICU four days later.

His baseball team members serve as pallbearers and wear their uniforms, escorting his casket down the aisle of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

I don’t cry during the funeral ceremony. On the drive home, I pull over to the side of the road and can’t stop sobbing.

No one present the night Phillip was murdered can identify his assailant.

~

His cold case is finally opened thirty years later by a classmate of ours who is now a police detective. He begins to make some headway into finding the killer.

Afraid of being discovered, the murderer gives up his thirty-year-old secret. Phillip's assailant, now a fifty-five-year-old married family man, confesses.

The Amarillo (Randall County) District Attorney reports to the media that the assailant, "was extremely sorry and must have suffered carrying this secret for all these years." This adult who murdered a fifteen-year-old Latino boy is given ten years of probation.

~

Phillip, I had no idea that your life would be so short. I knew because I was queer, there would not be many people that I would meet that would be kind to me. Thank you, Phillip, for being kind. I'm thankful I made you laugh.

V. Amarillo, Texas 1980

I'm not sure how the residents in Amarillo became so conservative, callous, and angry, but it could be the dismal environment in which we lived. In my seventh-grade history class, we studied the Texas Panhandle pioneers who arrived here in the 1800s. In the textbook picture, a miserable-looking, dirty couple stand by their "home". There are no trees, no stones, and, regrettably, very little building material available to construct a house in this environment, just flat grasslands. So, the early Amarillo pioneers had to live in "dug outs," simple living dwellings that were, as the name implies, dug into the ground, just like their closest neighbors, prairie dogs. Living such a primitive lifestyle can instill a long-lasting hardness, a meanness that can be passed down through their descendants.

Amarillo's economy is one that is based on death and destruction. Maybe that's the reason the population is so conservative, callous, and angry. The three largest industries are beef processing, petroleum refining, and assembling nuclear weapons.

Pantex is the largest assembly plant for nuclear weapons in the nation. Located just northeast of the city, the plant in the 1980's is working feverishly to keep up with Ronald Reagan's nuclear arms race with the USSR. A peace camp is set up across from the facility which is the butt of many jokes in town. The Catholic Church even tried to dissuade our congregants from actively working toward the world's destruction. The bishop said the Church offered assistance: another job, financial aid, health insurance, if only Catholics would leave their jobs at Pantex. This offer did not sit well with Pantex management. Pantex management told the United Way, one of Catholic Charities' biggest funders, that they would no longer ask employees to donate to the organization. This would deny funding not only to Catholic Charities but also to several, other worthwhile charities in town. The United Way responded by quickly

de-funding Catholic Charities. And just like that, Catholics in our city became labeled as “leftist commies.”

Amarillo’s unique geographic location is on the historic Route 66 highway (which spans from coast to coast) and is the nexus for the Santa Fe and other Railroads. This position makes our town a perfect place to set up petroleum refineries. Texas is one of the largest producers of oil and petroleum, and we export this pollutant all over the world. The petroleum refineries in our city are located in the communities of color, although mostly Mexican areas of town because African Americans make up only a small fraction of the community. About five percent of the city’s population is Black, most were run off decades ago. The white people forgot that they needed someone to exploit and do the dirty work, so they need us Mexicans to fulfill that purpose. The link between higher levels of cancer and close proximity to oil refineries is well established. In the barrio, we are reminded of the carcinogen when the wind blows from the east and the refineries spread the smell of rotten eggs all over our streets. When the wind is from the west, the smell of cow shit permeates the town from the acres of cattle feed lots west of the city.

The meat packing industry is a major employer in the Amarillo area. About one-quarter of the United States beef supply is processed here. Processed is a euphemism for thousands of cattle slaughtered every day. The biggest, by far, is Iowa Beef Packers, or IBP, located in the northwest part of town. My friend Jim works there in maintenance, and he hates it. There is so much blood everywhere. They don’t work on a solid floor, they work on a grate so that the blood, entrails, and small pieces of animal carcass are captured underneath and used for all sorts of products. This makes the floor very slippery and there are many accidents. Workers in meat processing plants are three times as likely to suffer a serious workplace injury as compared to other workplaces. Sharp objects are everywhere, and deep cuts and severed fingers are common.

Immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, make up a huge proportion of the workforce here.

My friend Jim tells me he especially avoids the assembly line for the cows going in to be slaughtered. He says sometimes the cattle will try to nudge or nestle you with their snout and you have to move to ignore them.

I identified a lot with the cows. Most likely, they were confused, trapped, and scared. Maybe they sensed that death or some horrible event was imminent. Maybe they needed some comfort or solace from a stranger, but no, they would not find such sentiment, not here, not in this town, with people who are so conservative, callous, and angry.

VI. Hello, My Name is _____

My mother named me “Lawrance V Cuellar”, a unique spelling for the first name and only a stingy, single initial for a middle name. My mom also called me “Lorenzo” or “Lorenzito.” Like a lacey set of napkins or good dinner plates taken out for special occasions, “Lawrance” was tucked away to be used only for formalities and with close family. I never liked my given birth name, when you say my full first and last names slowly, it sounds like someone slowly falling down a flight of stairs.

As I grew older, Lawrance sounded too pretentious and Lorenzo sounded too ethnic for my English-speaking colleagues, so I shortened my name to Larry. I have used this name, a non-threatening, vanilla name, since I entered the white, professional business world. My last name was more difficult for English speakers to wrap their tongues around.

At first annoying, it is now amusing to hear non-Spanish speakers attempt to pronounce my last name correctly and I am used to being called, “Mr. Coo-ell-er.

“Um, it’s pronounced ‘Quay-yarr.’”

“Well, good heavens, who would’ve guessed that was the pronunciation?” as if it were my fault for causing the inconvenience.

Still, I give them props for giving the pronunciation a good try. Some lazy professionals don’t even attempt a correct pronunciation and have mangled my last name and morphed it into something I don’t even recognize:

“Can I speak with Mr. Cooler?”

“Yes, I will always be ‘cooler’ than you, never forget that!”

“Is this Larry Cellular?”

“Cellular? Why yes, my family name is Cellular, we come from the region of the world that invented mobile phones. We have a long-standing, mortal feud with our sworn enemies, the Landline Clan.”

And I occasionally get the dyslexic version, "Cruella."

~

At the beginning of each year in public school, all of the Chicanos would wait to hear how the Anglo teachers would pronounce our names. In elementary school, this was a source of ridicule and shame as our teachers would contort their faces with horrible, painful attempts at pronunciation, until Esperanza became Hope, Jesus became Jessie, and Adán became Aiden. By junior high school, we were used to the silly pronunciations at the beginning of the school year. We would point and laugh at each other when we heard the nonsensical pronunciations.

“Con-shep-shun? Are you here?”

“Is-a-door? Is Is-a-door here?”

“Je-zus? Je-zus? Je-zus, if you’re here, please answer me!”

“Oh-zeal? Where are you?”

Yet I remember my fellow Chicano friends laughing at some of the English names in first grade that sounded odd to us.

I could never understand why they called the very thin boy in my class “Belly” (Billy). Or why any parent would name their child “Dog” (Doug). Even more head scratching was how presumptuous it was to name your child for the profession you wanted for him, “Dentist” (Dennis).

~

Oddly, most people assume the name of a person is a reflection of that person. More accurately, our given birth names are a reflection of our parents or, more specifically, our mothers.

Our birth names are the projection of the hopes, fears, and expectations of our mothers. My name, and those of my brothers, reflect my mother's fear that none of her boys would succeed in a white, English-speaking world, without very Anglican names, like Lawrance and Edward, and.... Ralph. Ralph? Well, my dad's beautiful name was Rafael. My eldest brother always felt he was cheated when my mom anglicized his name and turned it into Ralph.

To be successful, my mother wanted to ensure we had strong, English names. She was afraid our mestizo heritage would hinder our schooling and our social progress. She was afraid to teach us Spanish and told us we were not Mexican, more Navajo and Spanish. And she was right. My mother was from New Mexico. Spain had ruled the area for over 200 years. Mexico acquired the land through the successful Mexican revolt from Spain in 1821, but the area was only under Mexican rule for about 25 years before Mexico "ceded" the land to the United States. Many of the people in the United States southwest consider themselves descended from Spaniards and Native Americans. But the mestizo history is a complicated one, especially to explain to Gringos.

"Just tell them you're Mexican," was what my mom finally decided.

VII. Hiding Places

When you are a queer boy in the 1970s in our small barrio and you have to hide your gayness from others, there are not a whole lot of options. One of best places to take refuge is in the Catholic Church. No one in our barrio questions someone who is working on behalf of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. It didn't matter how much of a bad ass, homophobic bully you were, you still made the sign of the cross when you drove past the Church, just like you made the sign of the cross when you drove by the cemetery. Disrespecting the Church was like spitting in the face of your abuela, it just wasn't done.

Ronnie Martinez, Gilbert Hinojosa, and I all found a hiding place in the Church. No one questioned our lack of interest in girls or sports. After all, who knows? We could be studying to be priests, and you don't want to have someone who is a representative of God against you.

Ronnie volunteers on Saturday mornings to teach catechism to third graders at Our Lady of Guadalupe School. Most mornings, he is reeking of vodka from the Friday night before that he spent at Papillon's, the local gay club.

Gilberto finds a pretty good gig at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church coordinating weddings. Well, it isn't exactly the Church, as Gilberto tells me, "No one has a wedding at the Church without inviting me," and he is right. You see, Gilberto knows all of the traditional dances needed at the wedding reception, like La Marcha, La Vibora de La Mar, the Dollar Dance. He knows when it's time to tirar la liga and lanzar el ramo. As soon as a bride in our barrio is engaged, "Hablas con Gilberto" is the advice her mamá or abuelita will tell her.

Gilberto emcees and coordinates las bodegas, instructing the bride, groom, and guests in Mexican traditional wedding reception activities. Sometimes the couple gives him a tip, other times his dinner invitation is enough.

As for me, I am the co-president of the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO). You'll find most religions have some sort of youth groups to begin indoctrination at an early age. You'll also find that most of the leaders of these groups are often not who they present themselves to be.

My specialty is coordinating youth retreats, where teenage Catholics spend the weekend being pressured by their peers in the Church to accept the tenets of our religion.

~

"Now is the time to accept the Holy Spirit! Open your hearts and let God into your life!"

I look around the room at the teenagers to see which ones are falling for my performance, most are ecstatically swaying with their hands in the air, and some are crying. They have been isolated for three days at our religious retreat with little sleep and rationed food. This tried-and-true method creates an atmosphere that is secluded, and participants are open to suggestion.

Celeste, my CYO co-president, who sports a slight moustache that I envy, and I have worked all weekend to shepherd the young men and women to this point. Extracting late night confessions, trust exercises, and constant praying and meditation have cornered the weary, teen participants.

I look around and see a handful of holdouts, guys in the backroom looking nonplussed. I point to them, "Ask our Blessed Virgin for guidance. Ask her and she will lead you to the Spirit!"

I look over to Celeste, and she cues up the young women in her group to begin singing in a raptured state, arms raised:

"Into Your hands we commend our spirit O Lord,

Into Your hands we commend our hearts.

For we must die to ourselves in loving You"

More crying from some in the group and then participants start hugging each other, except for the three holdouts in the back of the room. They stand, respectfully silent. Celeste makes one final pass in front of the group. As she passes the boys, she sadly shakes her head, as if to say, “You have just missed the boat to eternal salvation, and I feel so sorry for you.” No one can convey so much in one look and a headshake like Celeste.

The priest and the parents then emerge from the next room and join in on embracing the retreat participants.

“I am so proud of you,” most of their parents hold their children, now changed, now saved.

Celeste and I give each other a hug and congratulate each other on another, successful CYO retreat.

“Thanks for your help, Celeste!” I tilt my head to the boys in the back, “I guess we can’t win them all.”

“Oh, I know their abuelitas,” she answers, “We’ll have another shot at them.”

One of the parents comes up to me to shake my hand and says, “You are doing great work here. God is going to remember what you’ve done!” And for some reason I interpret this more like a threat than a thank you.

One of the teen participants, John, comes up to me and asks if I can give him a lift home.

John is clearly still on his spiritual high as we both enter my car.

“Wow, that was intense,” he says, “but how do we keep this feeling in the real world? How do we keep the Spirit?”

I open the glove compartment and reach for a package of cigarettes; I push in the car lighter.

“You...you smoke?”

John seems so surprised. I light my cigarette and give him a closer look. He is only one year younger than me but has apparently fallen for the total experience offered this weekend.

“You try to get by the best way you know how. Be confident in what you are feeling.”

I crack my window and blow out a puff of smoke.

A week later, John and I sneak into Papillon’s.

~

Gilberto invites me over to his parents’ house one night and we sit talking. Even though we use the same hiding place, we’re not close. Closeted gays have to keep their distance from each other in the barrio so as not to raise suspicion. So, I am not sure what he wants, Gilbert strikes me as the kind of person who needs to control people.

He crosses his spindly legs on his parent’s flower-patterned couch and begins, “You know, some people say I’m psychic, that I have deep knowledge about people.”

Well, we’ve both seen each other at Papillon’s so that’s no secret. Like me and the other gay men of color, both Gilbert and I have our place standing in the back of the bar.

He pauses and looks straight at me and says, “You are going to meet or come across someone that will haunt you for the rest of your life.”

I get an eerie, what-the-fuck feeling, then I dismiss his prophetic insight; the meaning could apply to anyone or any circumstance. Most likely, he’s just trying to get into my head, to control me. Gilbert has been known to deliver prophetic announcements like this, just to spook those around him. His vague pronouncements add to an aura of supernatural respect for him. But even forty-five years later, I haven’t forgotten the exact words of what he said.

And just to add to Gilberto’s mysticism, he dies a year later from a brain tumor.

VIII. I Met a Man

I met a man at the park, he took me home to his huge house, which was filled with dark, wooden furniture. He said he was a doctor. On his huge, sturdy oaken bed, he taught me how to place my legs; how to relax and breathe; and how to keep from screaming when it felt like I was being torn apart. I was sixteen and I didn't know if something inside of me was damaged or if I would die because of what I did. In 1976, where would one even find that information?

I met a man at the park, he was only two years older than I was but braver and wiser. We talked in his bed, surrounded by boxes, most of the night until sunrise. He told me he was leaving our small town and moving to New York City the next week. How could he do that? Jump into the abyss like that? Without a net or no one or nothing? "Your time will come," I remember him telling me.

I met a man at a bar who lived in a chicken coop. I should've known he lived in a chicken coop; he told me so. When I took him home to my apartment, I apologized for my place being so small. "No worries," he said, "I live in a chicken coop." Damn my unquestionable trust in metaphors! When I drove him home the next day, he took me to the back of a house. He was living in a makeshift, former chicken coop. I was speechless and didn't know if I was more horrified for him or me.

My neighbor, Phil, met a man who was hitchhiking through town. Our town, Amarillo, Texas, is on Interstate 40, the old Route 66, so we have a lot of traffic, with sometimes desperate travelers, trying to make it from one coast to the other. Phil had a penchant for picking up young hitchhikers and bringing them to his home. One morning, his neighbors found his naked, lifeless body in his bed.

I met a man one night in an Oklahoma bar, a sweet, gentle man that one could see spending the rest of their life with. We exchanged letters, sent flowers, and talked at length on the phone. When he finally came to visit me, he arrived with all his belongings in his small Honda. It was Saturday. By Monday, he had gone through two 24 packs of beer. By Tuesday, I told him it was not working out and he had to leave. By Wednesday I sent him back home.

I met a man at the bar who told me, “I usually don’t take Mexicans home with me, but if you meet me outside in the parking lot, no one will see that I am leaving with you.”

I met a man I knew from high school, Henry. We met at the park, and he couldn’t decide if he was gay. I always found such ambivalence difficult to understand since I was always certain I was queer. In my car, we talked, just talked most of the night. Later that year, he was found stabbed to death in the bathroom of that same park.

In the early 1980s, the Amarillo Police Department felt that anyone murdered, assaulted, or raped while engaging in criminal activity, such as narcotic distribution, prostitution, or homosexuality, would be given a low priority for assistance. Their belief was that these lawbreaking citizens were complicit in their own misfortune. And this made sense and we accepted it.

I met a man at a bar who came up to me and insisted that we go home together. Even though he was handsome, I said, “no,” but he was very persuasive, and I relented. He even talked the bartender into selling him a bottle of liquor because I told him I didn’t have any at home. At my place, we drank and talked late into the night. He was an illustrator and showed me some of his artwork that he had in his car. I read to him some of my written work. He gave me one of his

art pieces to keep. Then, we had a deeply connecting, erotic experience in bed. He left the next morning and I never saw him again. We experienced a whole lifetime relationship in one night.

I met a man at a bar who told me an unbelievable, fantastic story. He was at the park late one night. While smoking a joint on one of the baseball field bleachers, he noticed three men creeping up on him. They were approaching from different angles like a wolfpack. The playground backstop fence was behind him so he could only run toward them not away from them. The man told me, "I remember trying to calculate when would be the right time to run. They had to come closer for me to have a shot at escaping." The man said he ran when the three were about twenty feet from him. He ran as fast as he could to the park's parking lot but he could hear their footsteps close behind him. He could feel one of them punching him in the back, six times. There happened to be a police car in the parking lot. He jumped on the hood of the car; he remembered seeing blood all over the hood of the squad car before passing out. This was such an incredible story, I wondered if it really happened. Later, when he took his shirt off in my bedroom, I saw six two-inch scars on his upper back where he had been stabbed and a huge scar from sternum to belly button where they operated on him. I became ashamed of myself for questioning the validity of the story.

We met the Amarillo Police in the parking lot of the gay bar, Papillon's. Homophobic vandals had struck yet again, this time slashing tires in the parking lot. Two weeks earlier, car windshields had been smashed. The police yelled at us, "You wanna know how to keep your cars from getting damaged? Quit going to a fag bar!" And this made sense and we accepted it.

I met a man at a bar who told me a close friend of his, Charlie, had been found murdered the weekend before after he had picked up a man at the park. He lived across the street from the park. This man told me that he had nightmares of hearing Charlie's piercing screams as he was getting stabbed. He told me there were several other murders that we didn't even know about, but the police didn't care about them and there's nothing anyone could really do. And this made sense and we accepted it.

IX. Papillon's

“First of all, we have rules, okay? I don't know who made them up or where they came from, so don't bitch at me if you don't like them. If you want to come to Papillon's you gotta know, we have standards.

“Why would you wanna go to Papillon's? Well, it is the only gay disco from between Dallas and Denver. Out here, if you wanna get your wang banged or maybe get some hot man-butt action, this is the only place, unless you wanna take your chances at the park. By the way, I'm Jerry Patterson. My friends call me JPatt, but you can call me Jerry Patterson.

“I'm only gonna mention it once, Papillon's is a club for white men. I would've said 'gay' white men but some of these faggots don't think they are gay, or claim they're bi, or whatever. I don't give a fuck, as long as they have spending money. I run a business, not a charity. And I'm referring to a certain kind of white man, if you're poor white trash from the acres of fucking trailer parks east of town, we'll let you in, but only if there is room.

“Oh, I can tell what kind of white guy you are. You gotta be sportin' those labels, Polo, Izod, maybe Le Tigre, but don't you come in here wearing Le Hare from Montgomery Wards.

“Seeing as it's almost the 1980s, we are a pretty open-minded club. We even allow those Blacks and “wets” in if there is enough room. But they are not allowed to sit at a table. They can stand in the back of the bar.

“Now, here's where it gets complicated, so listen. There is a pecking order at the bar that is a combination of different factors: race, money, physical attractiveness, dick size, and age. Good-looking, rich, young white men, who are hung, are at the top. Everyone else falls somewhere underneath. We get it all sorted out.

“What happens if you don’t follow the rules? Well, that’s simple, you get banned from my club. Sometimes it’s a short ban, sometimes it’s a long one. The point is, there is nothing worse than being queer in town and not being able to go to the one place that accepts you.

“This is just the way things are, I didn’t make the rules, so don’t blame me.”

X. La Vieja

Ask Jaime and he'll tell you, "You don't see the first one coming, so it usually doesn't hurt."

Jaime is on all fours right now, like a stunned, trapped animal, trying to comprehend what has just happened, but it only takes him a few seconds to surmise that he's been hit again. As he feels his face begin to sting, he can already hear Kevin start with the apologies.

"Jaime, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

Jaime slowly rises to his feet, "You're gonna pay for it this time!" He tries to make this sound convincing, even more threatening than usual, as he stumbles to his feet and out the door. Kevin follows him, pleading for him to stop, but Jaime has the upper hand now. Jaime jumps into his car and leaves Kevin in the front yard, looking painfully lost.

Jaime checks his face in the rearview mirror and sees a red mark under his eye that is starting to swell. He feels the back of his head and finds a painful lump. He figures Kevin must've blindsided him with a fist to the face, which caused him to hit the wall with the back of his head, knocking him out for a second.

Jaime doesn't know where he is going, he just drives.

~

Kevin is a muscular, ex-Marine, "Oohrah!" He is from the New York area and has lived on his own, sometimes on the streets, since he was sixteen. At twenty-four, he has already lived a lifetime, maybe several. Kevin is into young, teen-aged men, no, boys actually. Through some puzzling twist of fate, he finds himself in this small West Texas town. His past is a well-kept secret so no one, not even Jaime, knows how he got here.

~

Jaime is nineteen but looks sixteen, just Kevin's type. He is 140 pounds and has wrists so thin it looks like you could easily put your thumb and fore finger around them. He's lived in Amarillo, Texas, his whole life. Jaime was on the lookout for a boyfriend, he wanted the baddest, butchest guy available. He'd been out to the Papillon's for almost two years now, a lifetime in teenaged years.

Kevin and Jaime would tell you it was their destiny to meet, opposites attract, they complete each other, yin drawn to yang, and recite other trite love phrases. In truth, each did provide an unspoken need that the other lacked.

In bed, they were equals, both being a top and a bottom. In bed, there was no masculine/feminine. In bed, there was symbiosis. In bed, there was peace.

~

"So, you're the vieja?" One of Jaime's friends asked him.

"No, why do you say that?" Jaime responded, even though he knew why.

"Well...um... because Kevin is more butch, he's more manly."

Jaime didn't respond, he just walked away. He knew that if he was in a competition with Kevin about who was the more manly one, he would lose. Kevin was so butch, people never thought he was gay. Jaime, on the other hand, had these...idiosyncrasies. Jaime had this way of brushing the hair away from his face using the back of his hand, he had this way of swiveling his head too much when he spoke, he had this cautious, delicate gait. All of these actions were finely analyzed, parsed, and dissected by the residents of Amarillo, especially the men, to determine the level of masculinity, presume the resulting sexual orientation, and deem whether this man was worthy of being an equal.

Jaime knows better than anyone that this perception of masculinity, this macho persona, provides you with deference, with cachet, in this conservative town, and is an especially sought after quality at Papillon's.

Like Jaime, many gay men were also looking for the baddest, butchest guy available, a strong, masculine, gringo partner. At Papillon's, this led to several dramatic arguments from a jealous Jaime. After all, no one wanted an odd-looking, skinny, Mexican boy who shook funny when he got angry. At the gay bar, other guys would walk right up to Kevin and proposition him in front of Jaime. This provoked a round of alcohol infused threats and curses from Jaime. Afterward, Kevin would remind Jaime that he was lucky to have him. So, it made it easier for Jaime to look the other way when Kevin pretty much followed up on those propositions.

~

If Jaime had any friends left, he would drive to their place. But they all got tired of the bullshit drama. If Jaime had any friends left, he would ask them, "Do you remember? Do you remember when we were little kids and used to play that Mexican game? We would all take turns being the vieja!"

"Knock...knock...knock..."

"Quien es?"

"La Vieja Ines!"

"Que queria?"

"Un liston."

"Que color?"

"Blanco!"

Jaime doesn't think he's unmanly, only when compared to Kevin does he come up short. He drives aimlessly around the sad little town. He remembers that one time...

~

"Excuse me sir, we've had a report of a disturbance." Kevin opened the door to their apartment to the two Amarillo policemen. The first one sized up Kevin and instantly determined they were from the same ilk. This same officer ignored Jaime and asked Kevin, "What's going on here?"

"Nothing, just got into a fight, we've been drinking," Kevin responded. The second officer was surveying the room...overturned coffee table...alcoholic drinks spilt on the floor...and Jaime sitting in chair holding a bloody dishrag to his mouth.

"Looks like you got the worst out of that round!" The second officer chuckled and lifted up his police radio. "Nothing to report here, just two guys who've been drinking and hashing it out."

"All right, you guys just need to keep it down," the first officer commanded and then walked over to Jaime, "And you," the policeman tapped his finger, hard, against Jaime's skull, "And you don't need to be so stupid! Don't pick a fight with someone bigger than you!"

~

Having assessed all of his available options, Jaime now knows he has to drive back home. Kevin is waiting for him in tears. Kevin runs up to Jaime, hugging him, and sobbing into his chest, "I am so sorry, so sorry." The script is worn but the incantations still have the same powerful effect on Jaime, they signal the beginning of their ritual.

Jaime takes Kevin's hand and leads him to the bedroom. There, they have passionate sex that is viscerally erotic, pathologically sick, and confusing, and stasis has, once again, been established, for the time being.

XI. Billy & Fidel

“Hey there, Moon Pie!”

“How are you doing, Laaamb!”

Billy talks like a Southern actress from some old movie. But his favorite exclamation to express any disbelief, excitement, or anger is, “Huuush!”

When he arrives for work one day, I can see some of my co-workers eye each other and begin to chuckle. He is six foot two, his Afro adds three more inches to his height. He is all sinew and muscle, broad shoulders, large biceps, a V-shaped torso that cinches down to a twenty-eight-inch waist. He sashays into the office on his first day and quickly catches all of our attention.

After a while, I recognize where I have seen him. I was standing at the back of Papillon’s during a drag show. I remember him bursting on stage, wearing a silk, dark blue pants suit and giving a spectacular performance of “No One Gets the Prize” by Diana Ross.

He is a drag queen who goes by the name of “Keisha Nicole.”

I try talking to him the first week of his employment, but he brushes me off. My sense is that he has to be particular about who he can trust and who he can let into his world. Eventually, he lets his guard down and we become friends. I find out even more about him.

He has been doing drag for about five years and is two years older than I am.

I have never met anyone like Billy, the way he talks, moves, and his expressions are hilarious.

He has a male partner who is a Black Cuban, Fidel, who barely speaks any English. Fidel arrived from Cuba last year, in 1980, through the Mariel Boatlift refugee effort. The city is always looking for employment fodder for the beef processing plant, IBP, which only requires

handling a knife; speaking English is not necessary. Trading communist Cuba for ultraconservative Amarillo must have been quite a change. I have so many questions for Fidel, about Cuba, his trip here, his thoughts on our town, but he always keeps silent. Sometimes there are good reasons for not sharing your past.

Billy and Fidel met at The Heights, which is the African American disco in Amarillo. Occasionally Billy and Fidel will argue, which I can understand, given their cultural differences and the fact that neither one can adequately speak the other's language.

I remember Billy called me on the phone one day and asked, "Can you help translate for me?"

"Sure, my Spanish isn't that great, but I'll give it a shot."

"You need to ask him why all of a sudden he has this funky attitude about us."

Hmmm, "El quiere saber porque tu tienes este... "funky attitude." Well, I tried.

~

I went to The Heights only once. A guy I picked up at the park said they served alcohol there after 2:00 am. Sure enough, as we entered the crowded place, the bartenders were not only still serving, but they sold my date a bottle of vodka. The place looked like a 1920s illegal gin joint, with drab paint, dim lighting and a thick layer of smoke hanging in the steamy room. I ventured into a back room and there were several people gambling at table games, like poker. The guys at one table all turned to look at me when I entered the room.

"C'mon Youngblood," one of the guys at the table motioned to me, "you got some money, take a seat!"

I gave him a drunk smile and walked back to the front. Surprisingly, Billy appeared in semi-drag, wearing make-up and a unisex outfit. He couldn't believe that I was at The Heights,

as it was a black club, and my date and I were getting stares. I was surprised that everyone seemed so tolerant of Billy, being dressed the way he was, and I mistakenly thought this was a safe place for queers. I felt comfortable enough to lean over and give my date a peck on the lips.

I couldn't tell any difference, but Billy sensed an immediate mood change in the patrons at the club.

"I think you'd better go," he told me and almost shoved me out the door.

Later, another Black friend of mine, Eve, who was there that night, told me that "the brothers" didn't appreciate the "gay shit" going on.

I asked her why my actions were seen as different, after all, Billy was there in drag, isn't that gay?

"Billy is different. We don't see that as being gay," she said, "We see Billy as being Billy. We have all known Billy since elementary school, and he has always dressed effeminately. We just think it is odd, not gay."

She told me that I was very lucky to get out of the club when I did.

XII. Standing in the Back of the Bar

July 1978, Saturday night, I was eighteen and it was my first time at Papillon's. The man at the front door took my cover charge and told me I wasn't allowed to sit at any of the tables. The tables were for others. "There is plenty of room at the back of the bar." "Okay," I responded. My subjection as a Mexican American to this bar policy wasn't any different from what I experienced growing up in this town. I don't remember feeling the least bit slighted or discriminated against. This was to be expected and these hierarchal rules were normal, and I was used to them. After all, we'd had our whole lives to learn them.

In fact, overlooking the smoke-filled dance floor, I felt euphoric, my "Seven and seven" was shaking in my hand, I felt so ecstatic. I felt lucky that they let me into one of the few places for gays and lesbians in this small town.

Ten or twelve tables surrounded the dance floor. At the largest one sat the owner, Jerry Patterson, surrounded by his elite clientele, some of the most gorgeous white men I had ever seen. The rumor was that a few of the men had been sent away from their wealthy families in Houston and Dallas. They were exiled to the Panhandle, the Siberia of Texas, to spend time with an "uncle who lived on a ranch" or help "a cousin who worked in the oil business." Whatever the excuse, most of their families' intention was to send them someplace far away, where their homosexuality would not be an embarrassment.

With nothing to do in this town, these rich boys did what the wealthy do best, they showcased their money and status. Fifty-dollar haircuts, manicured nails, and facials that produced squeaky-shiny, white faces. Of course, they wore sixty-dollar Ralph Lauren Polo shirts and designer jeans, with names like Sergio Valente, and other labels we never heard of nor would even know where to purchase.

A couple of the guys actually wore full length mink coats when the weather turned cooler. Such an ostentatious display of affluence was jaw-dropping to watch from the back of the bar, as they gathered like showy peacocks to compare their latest purchases. Their automobiles were amazing. One gay couple had two new, matching, gold colored, convertible Mercedes 450 SL. Others drove the usual Cadillacs and Lincoln Town cars, purchased from dealerships in larger cities, since none were sold here.

I coveted their lifestyles, their looks, and more than anything, I wanted one as a lover. All my life, I had only been shown beautiful, white men. On television, movies, magazines, I was conditioned to consider only a small segment of men as sexy and desirable. I was taught that white was better, everything else was settling. I never examined my need to seek out only white men as lovers. I didn't question why I felt that Latino or Black men were not the same, or even a step below.

Looking back, I believe a part of me knew that the bar policy wasn't fair, but there was a resignation and an acquiescence to the discrimination. "Whaddaya gonna do?" The treatment of gays and lesbians of color by the dominant white men was deeply internalized and accepted, as if I were in a spell or a fog or stupidity or laziness. It wasn't until an incident that happened with Billy and Fidel that I started to question the injustice.

A few years after my debut night, Billy and Fidel were supposed to meet us at the back of Papillon's, but they were stopped at the front door. They were told by the door keeper and club bouncer that they would not be allowed inside. No real reason was given, but before long, words were flying, fists were being thrown, and glass was being broken. Billy left the bar with a gash to the left side of his face. He was left with a deep scar that even his heavy use of makeup would barely cover. Every time I met with Billy and saw that scar, it reminded me of the violent

prejudice and suppression he went through that night. After that, I started spending less time at Papillon's and more time at The Ritz.

XIII. The Ritz

From where I sit at the small bar, I can see Gary plying his handsome smile on two older men. He has their complete attention.

On the other side of the bar, Dora is holding court. I can tell she has downed at least three beers because her voice has reached a louder decibel. She is regaling a group of three bar patrons with a story about how she escaped from the back of a police car, a story I've heard dozens of times.

Another night at The Ritz. We come to this bar almost every night.

The Ritz is frequented mostly by older men, and by others who are not welcomed or who are turned away at Papillon's. Or we go to The Ritz because we get tired of being relegated to standing at the back of the bar. Some of the patrons of The Ritz are no longer welcomed at Papillon's because they've been banned. They committed some infraction that Jerry Patterson, referred to as "Fat Patty" here, has perceived as a personal slight or disrespect. The Ritz is a place for the pariahs of the pariahs. A place for the exiled exiles of Amarillo.

The clientele is a mix of older men, assorted lesbians, some patrons with physical handicaps, as well as the odd stranger who wanders in, questioning his sexuality. Of course, the place is popular with gay Blacks and Latinas, but by far, most of the patrons are older men and lesbians.

Mama Phyllis, a white lesbian in her fifties who is difficult to catch sober, is the owner of The Ritz.

Her small bar has a tiny dance floor, a couple of pool tables, and maybe twenty or twenty-five patrons can squeeze in the place. At one time, it used to be a small, Mexican restaurant. The gay bar is not as notorious in Amarillo as Papillon's, so we feel a bit safer here.

My close friends, Gary Saucedo and Dora Alonso love going to The Ritz.

Dora is my best friend from high school. She is petite, cute, funny, loud (especially when drinking) and relishes entertaining the discarded and older patrons at The Ritz. A member of the high school drama club, she was very popular and loves introducing herself as a “lesbian thespian.” Phyllis adores her and practically has Dora running the place. Dora sometimes takes a place behind the bar and bartends for Phyllis.

Gary has a gorgeous, broad, John Ritter, smile which he puts to good use, flirting with everyone. The light cocoa-colored skin on his gymnastically sculptured body and attractive face only enhances his charm. He could have easily “graduated” from standing with us in the back at Papillon’s to the whites only seating area.

Gary, however, is gifted with a sexual proclivity for older men. Really older men, usually those over fifty. He found no use going to Papillon’s, as the guys there only hound him and remind him how lucky Gary could be if he went home with one of them. He finds them annoyingly conceited.

At The Ritz the older guys worship Gary; after all, he is an anomaly. At first, I think Gary is into older men because of their money, but I see him go home with older men who are not well off. He truly likes being with older men, it just so happens that most of these men have financial resources. He also bartends at The Ritz for Phyllis, as a way of keeping the customers happy.

Gary’s weird attraction to older men is advantageous to our relationship. He is in no way attracted to me. I am not attracted to Gary, probably because I am always looking for white lovers. Or maybe because I knew him in high school, as well as Dora, and I consider him more like a younger brother. The absence of sexual tension between Gary and me means that we

develop a truly deep and close friendship with no hidden agenda. We talk on the phone or see each other every day.

A big perk of hanging out with these two is that I infrequently pay for drinks at The Ritz. When one of them bartends, they give me free drinks and when they are on the other side of the bar, patrons will buy Gary and/or Dora drinks along with their weird, quiet friend.

Even though we always have a great time at The Ritz, the prospect of my meeting someone I am attracted to and within my age range is pretty slim. Occasionally, I'll convince Gary or Dora to go with me to Papillon's, but Gary will get irritated, and Dora will get into a verbal altercation with one of the white guys. So, we end up back at The Ritz.

At some point in the night, if Mama Phyllis is bartending, she will take off her shirt and reveal her "saddlebags" (what Dora calls them). Then she will turn on the microphone and take center stage of the small dance floor. She will start on some story that no one can make out because of the microphone feedback and the drunk slurring of her words. Eventually, she will try to sing or do a soft shoe dance in the middle of the floor.

Only once or twice am I able to catch Mama Phyllis not completely incoherent and she will share with me these great stories about being gay in the 1950s and 1960s in Amarillo. Everyone had to be married and gay people would have to sneak out on their spouses to attend private parties at different houses. The police would get wind of such unlawful happenings and raid the soirees, making arrests, and ruining people's lives. There were no gay bars back then, which is why she wanted to establish at least one safe location for us.

To many, Mama Phyllis is a joke, but she is one of the many, unsung lesbian pioneers in the Amarillo area.

XIV. “I Heard You Say...”

I heard you say you are looking for a “beaner” to help you with your Spanish class lessons.

I heard you say let’s kick the shit out of this cocksucker until he’s straight.

I heard you say I am a credit to my race.

I heard you say “pinche maricon” when the car you were in pulled up next to me and then you spit in my face.

I heard you say I am not a man, and I am a disgrace to my family.

I heard you say “faggot” every time you saw me leave my apartment to get to my car.

I heard you say I cannot work there as a waiter, but only as a bus boy.

I heard you say you would kill my cat, Petey, because of his “faggot” owner.

When I was a teenager and asked for your help, confiding in you that I was gay, I heard you say I should kill myself.

“I call a spade a spade. A perverted human being is a perverted human being.” With that quote, United States Senator Jesse Helms adds an amendment to the national 1988 appropriations bill which prohibits the Centers for Disease Control from “condoning” homosexual activities.”

Although the vote is purely symbolic, the US Senate approves the amendment 96 to 2.

XV. Gay Liberation, 1983, Elwood Park

Lorraine and Dee are here, grilling hamburgers and hot dogs for everyone. Wade and three of his friends are here, sitting and smoking at one of the three picnic tables moved close together.

Mama Phyllis, already inebriated, is here with Dora and another entourage of three lesbians. They have covered the tables with brightly colored crepe paper.

Spanky is here in a leather vest, sitting on a blanket with his boyfriend from Dallas that no one knows.

Jaime and Kevin play frisbee.

Another group of about eight men, who I don't know, occupy one of the other picnic tables.

I am here with Gary, and we play hacky sack.

I feel a bit of uneasiness in the group, we are on edge. There are no flags, no banners, only about twenty of us huddled together.

Yet somehow, word has gotten out that we are celebrating, commemorating the Stonewall Rebellion. (It would still be a few years later that the term "Gay Pride" is adopted.)

Wade and his friends turn up the music on their boom box so you can just barely hear the shouts and curses from the cars and trucks that drive by, "Faggots!" "Cocksuckers!" "Burn in Hell!" Some throw trash at us, one car is adept at throwing golf balls at us. We ignore them.

Then I see her two blocks away from the park.

She appears like a mirage, her brightly colored dress flowing behind her, she walks slowly...gracefully...deliberately in high heeled shoes. She brings a flashiness to the drab, gray landscape around her.

I am sitting with Mama Phyllis and Dora at their picnic table when I ask, “Wow, who’s THAT?”

“That’s Miss Odessa Brown,” Mama Phyllis explains, “For the past two years she’s shown up here. She takes the bus from Pampa, in full drag, and walks over to the park from the Greyhound bus station downtown, in high heels, no less!”

Miss Odessa Brown slowly approaches the group and purposely nods her head at others at the picnic. She doesn’t say much else; she takes a seat; and she smiles at these people she hardly knows and probably sees only once a year.

The bus ride from the small town of Pampa, Texas, forty-five miles away, could not have been an easy one, especially for an African American drag queen. And the walk, six blocks from the bus station, she must’ve encountered all sorts of harassment and verbal abuse.

We all assume she is a man in drag. Our community is only beginning to understand transsexuals and what it means to be transgender. It would be several years before we had the language to describe non-binary individuals.

Still, her act is extremely courageous. Her sacrifice, her presence makes us feel that this event is important. She makes us remember to always be our authentic selves, no matter the cost.

On the local evening news, the television anchorperson reports with a smirk on his face that thousands of persons marched for gay rights in San Francisco and New York City. I can’t tell if his intent is to instill fear or laughter in his television viewers.

They marched by the thousands down Castro Street, and in Greenwich Village, and in other large cities to promote gay liberation and gay rights, surrounded by sympathetic allies, supporters, and politicians. And here in our secluded city, the fabulous, inspirational Miss

Odessa Brown endured her annual, lone, courageous, six-block walk from the bus station to the park, through downtown Amarillo, Texas.

XVI. Miss Gay Potter County

“Jerry Patterson here again, to remind you that the annual 1984 Miss Gay Potter County contest is coming up. The winner will represent Amarillo at the Gay Miss Texas Pageant in Dallas this year.

“I take this pageant very seriously, so much so, that when the gay guy who owned the rights to Miss Gay Amarillo wanted to expand the contestants to include the Blacks and wetbacks, I refused. I started my own pageant, Miss Gay Potter County.

“I will not have our crown worn by black, brown, or white trash.

“You know, there was a time when drag queens had a revered place in gay society. After all, it was the drag queens who stood up to the police at the Stonewall Bar in New York City. That’s what started the gay civil rights movement.

“Drag queens have served as the muses for our community, entertaining us through some difficult times.

“Nowadays, drag queens have changed, they have become a joke...sad parodies of their former glory.

“You have some fat ass squeeze himself into a dress and eat dog shit on a movie screen and people consider that entertainment?

“Well, not on my watch. I won’t have the wearer of this crown stoop to such low levels. Why, do you know there is a drag queen, Alice Phallus from Dallas, that takes a hot dog wiener on stage, sticks it up her ass and then eats it in front of everyone?

“The art of drag is changing, morphing into something I don’t like.

“The winner of this competition will also ride in the Gay Liberation Parade in Dallas.

“Being the open-minded person I am, I let one of the Blacks in and a Mexican, and Runner Up Wade, the usual white trash bitch. Our Chelsea LaRue has the best opportunity against any of these queens, white, black, or brown.

“If she can keep an eye on the number of scotches she has before the show, she could actually pull this off.”

XVII. The Beginning of the Epidemic, Amarillo, Texas, 1984

“Hundreds will die in our community.” My friend Dan tells me that it’s just a matter of time before the epidemic will arrive from the large cities. I don’t believe him. I don’t even know a hundred gay people in the city. Besides, if it were true, someone would try and stop this from happening.

But the signs are beginning to show up, they are almost imperceptible. Some choose to ignore them, but one only has to look closely.

Men who moved away years ago begin to return to the city.

When we hear rumors of the first few local men who fall sick, we engage in a horrible blame game.

“Ricky was always a slut, he just loved to get fucked. He really didn’t care who his partners were.”

“Danny was always going to Dallas, he practically lived at the bath house there.”

“Of course, Jaime would get it, Kevin fucked around on him all the time. Are you surprised?”

“John went to New York that one time, remember? That’s how he probably got it.”

We take comfort in slut-shaming and developing disparaging stories as to why the first persons with HIV in Amarillo became infected.

But then reality and fear overtake me, suddenly, intruding on my mind out of nowhere, when I watch TV or I lie awake in bed late at night. I try to remember everyone, everything I did during the past eight years. And I keep getting a sick feeling in my stomach when I return to Dan’s words, “there will be hundreds.”

XVIII. The 1984 Miss Gay Potter County Contest

I'm not sure why Billy decided to enter the Miss Gay Potter County Contest at Papillon's, we all know that Fat Patty already chosen the winner, Miss Chelsea LaRue. Yet, there is Billy, dressed up on stage as his drag queen persona, Kiesha Nicole, along with four other drag queens.

News of the pageant must have reached the straight community because there were five or six protesters outside the front of the club. Since AIDS has been on the national evening news, the local churches have taken an interest in the "vermin" that is in our city spreading disease. Protesters began showing up a few weeks ago, holding up signs like: "AIDS is your Sin" and "God Hates Fags." The increased attention has also brought more police "inspections" into the club, which is never good. But tonight, we put all that aside to crown a new queen.

Once again, Miss Dottie has managed to "sausage" herself into the same red, satin gown to emcee the Miss Gay Potter County contest this year.

"Ladies and gentlemen", she announces, "welcome to the 1984 Miss Gay Potter County contest."

Like wind up monkeys, the audience at Papillon's cheers and claps loudly to her announcement.

The five drag queen contestants stand in a row, behind Miss Dottie.

The dance floor is crammed with white people, sitting in portable tables and chairs. One table is the most decorated and is front and center. Here, Jerry Patterson holds court with a handful of his handsome men.

As usual, lesbians, Mexicans and Blacks are relegated to standing at the back of the club, lucky to get in, especially on a crowded night like tonight. Gary, Dora, and I have decided to attend the performance, I especially want to support Billy.

Miss Dottie continues, “Every year, we gather together as a community to crown our queen. To wear this crown, Miss Gay Potter County, is truly an honor and a privilege.”

Again, claps and whistles.

“And now ladies and gentlemen, on with the show.”

Felipe is the first drag queen and the only Mexican in the contest. She is dressed as her persona, Miss Liliana. I recognize her gown with puffy sleeves as the dated prom dresses you can easily pick up at Goodwill. Miss Liliana’s makeup is passable, and she has teased and feathered her own thick, black hair so that she doesn’t need a wig. Honestly, Felipe probably can’t afford to buy a nice dress or wig.

She lip-syncs a disco song from the early 1980s “Coming out of Hiding” by Pamela Stanley,

She is nervous and stiff, not making good use of the stage space.

Fat Patty’s group ignores Miss Liliana’s performance, and they talk among themselves. She finishes and the audience claps politely.

Darrel is next, performing as Miss Chelsea LaRue. She is the most professional looking, with expensive shoes, a sparkling dress, and styled wig. Her makeup is flawless.

Miss Chelsea begins her number with her back to the audience and then slowly, expertly performs the emotional, uplifting Broadway show tune, “Believe” from *The Wiz*.

Fat Patty and those at his table smile broadly at Miss Chelsea and her performance.

Five seconds before Miss Chelsea even finishes her number, Fat Patty’s table jumps to their feet in applause and cheer. The audience is clapping loudly, whistling and a couple of seated patrons are standing on their chairs, cheering. Miss Chelsea takes a long bow and exits the stage.

Ricky is the next contestant, dressed as his persona, Miss Rikki Rene. She gives an adequate performance, mostly modern dance moves, again Fat Patty and his group barely notice her.

Next up is Wade, dressed as Miss Serene West, she is better known as “Runner Up Wade” because she has entered the contest every year and has never won. She is off on her lip sync, mouthing when there are no words and tight lipped during the lyrics, it’s like watching a movie where the sound and picture are out of sync. She barely moves, she is awful, and it is a blessing when her number is done.

Finally, Billy is up as Miss Keisha Nicole in a one-piece satin, pant suit with flared bell bottoms and sleeveless top. She has on a perfectly coiffed wig and her makeup is almost as good as Darrel's.

The stage lights turn on to reveal Miss Keisha seated as she slowly begins her number. Miss Kiesha has chosen to perform, “And I am Telling You” from the Broadway show, *Dreamgirls*.

I am watching Miss Keisha, when Miss Chelsea, has chosen this moment to loudly walk around the club, trying to distract from Miss Keisha’s performance. Miss Chelsea passes us in the back and says, “You know there is not a chance in hell that Black bitch is gonna win.”

“What the hell do you know, you stinky alcoholic,” Dora snaps back him.

“Jerry Patt would never let a nigger represent our club.”

I look straight at him, “Fuck you, Darrel.”

“You know, I can’t wait until Jerry Patt starts banning you black and brown bitches from the bar for good”.

And now I understand why Miss Keisha has chosen her song! As I listen to Miss Keisha perform, I get that she is using her song to send a message to Fat Patty and challenge his plan to ban us from the bar. All at once, it's like all of us in the back of the club suddenly figure it out.

Miss Keisha continues her lip sync, she starts to shake with energy as she performs, she points at Patterson and his table:

“You can say what you want, I'm not walking out!”

The Black and Mexican guys and lesbians in the back of the room are now really into the performance. Some of us pull up empty chairs to stand on and begin cheering, singing along with the song:

“And I am telling you, I am not going!”

The white patrons in the bar, including Fat Patty and his entourage, begin to look around nervously, unsure what to do next.

Miss Keisha concludes her emotional number. She is shaking with energy and has mascara-streaked tears down her face. She sharply points at each person at Fat Patty's table, demanding:

“And you, and you and you, you're gonna love me,

Oh yeah, you're gonna love me!”

As she finishes, and exits the stage, all of us in the back erupt in applause with cheers and chants for "Keisha".

The club members start to settle down when Miss Dottie appears on the stage.

“Oh my, I would hate to be a judge. There are some really good performances tonight. They are really going to have a hard time choosing a winner,” Miss Dottie says into the microphone.

I see Fat Patty stand and run over to give an envelope to Miss Dottie.

“Oh, maybe not, we have a decision already. If I can have all the contestants on stage.”

The five contestants arrange themselves in a line on stage behind Miss Dottie. Some of us begin to shout: “Keisha! Keisha!” Miss Dottie opens the envelope.

“Without further ado, here are the results: the fifth runner up is...Miss Serene West...”

Okay, we all knew that.

“Our fourth runner up is Miss Keisha Nicole.”

We begin shouting in the back, “Boo! That’s fucked up!”

“Now, now, let’s be mature about this,” Miss Dottie gently admonishes us like she was our fifth-grade teacher, but it’s too late.

Dora picks up an empty chair and throws it toward the stage. I had meant to keep an eye on the number of drinks she has but apparently, she is now drunk and angry. The chair doesn’t even come close to the stage and instead, the chair lands on one of the temporary tables where the white men are sitting.

The white guys begin to freak out and start to scatter with some making their way out the door. I can see the look of terror on some of their faces. They believe all that stuff they read and see on the news about us Mexicans and Blacks, we’re violent, we’re criminals.

Fat Patty threatens to call the police, this inadvertently creates a bigger rush to the front door by the majority of white men. They already know that a run-in with the local police force will end poorly for everyone.

Fat Patty remains defiant, standing at his table with a handful of his lackies, but we’ve made our point. The boys and girls in the back decide to move on to the exit.

~

Fat Patty makes good on his threat and bans all Blacks and Mexicans from his club. But something gets broken that night. Papillon's is never the same, in fact, nothing is ever the same in the Amarillo gay community. The fear of the impending AIDS epidemic keeps many from going back to Papillon's. The increased attention from local churches and police also helps keep the club empty. As a matter of fact, Fat Patty begins losing so much business that he rescinds the ban on gay men of color. But Papillon's closes anyway.

XIX. The Prodigal Sons with AIDS, 1980s

From West Texas dust you came from,

To this dust you must return.

And so they came back, their once young, handsome faces, now emaciated.

Their once strong, muscular bodies now bent and withered.

Like the generations of men before them,

They ran as far as they could from the depressing dust bowl,

That smelled of rotten eggs from the refineries,

And cow shit from the bloody stockyards.

Far from their tormentors, mean spirited and small minded.

They didn't want to live here,

For certain they didn't want to die here.

But they had no choice,

Cared for in their final days by terrified families,

Behind tightly closed window curtains and nosy neighbors

"AIDS," they would sometimes whisper.

They were snatched by a wicked, heartless hand,

And pulled back to this vapid, dusty place.

"Not so fast, you thought you got away,"

But it's from this West Texas dust you came from

And it's to this dust you must return.

XX. The Gay Underground Railroad

People who have grown up in tornado alley, like the Panhandle of Texas, have experienced this phenomenon.

Right before a twister hits, the atmosphere seems to get charged, you can feel the change that something disastrous is about to occur. Your instinct is to immediately look for a safe place to take shelter before the storm hits.

That's the way I feel about the AIDS epidemic. It is about to hit, and I want to make sure I am in a safe place. I do not want to be in Amarillo when it gets bad. I feel confused, trapped, and scared. There is a sense that death or some horrible event is imminent. If I need some comfort or solace, I will not find it in this town.

In 1984, I put in a transfer request to any larger city, Dallas, Houston, Kansas City or Austin. My transfer request to Austin is the first one granted. I'd never been to Austin, nor did I know anyone there. I hear that the Austin City Council had recently passed an ordinance that provides domestic partners with health benefits, and that seems like a hopeful sign.

Dora, Gary, and I talked about our chance to leave Amarillo many times, we'd spend hours at The Ritz fantasizing about how we'd load up our cars, give a big "fuck you" to the city and never look back. When it comes time for me to leave, they both tell me they are not going with me, they are going to stay. I had sensed that they were not serious about moving but I tell them that since I have a job and a place to live in Austin, that I will wait for them, they are always welcome. In fact, I make the same offer to several friends, they can stay with me anytime they finally decide to move from this oppressive place.

Once I settle in, I report my findings to friends in the Panhandle, and soon my small Austin apartment becomes a terminus on a gay underground railroad for queers who want to

relocate here. In actuality, most only come for a visit and swear that one day they are going to move here. Not many do.

Dora and Gary make, at least, one annual visit here and promise, “one day, one day, maybe next year.”

Back in Amarillo, Gary finally meets the guy of his dreams, an older man who owns several gay bars in New Mexico. With unlimited access to drugs and alcohol, Gary has everything he has ever wanted, which ends up killing him. Gary returns to Amarillo in 1994 in one of those pauper pine boxes. His parents have no money to bury him and they refuse to take any resources from the rich man who courted him away.

Dora is still in Amarillo; she still goes out to the bars, and she is still telling entertaining stories to the new gay clientele that replaced the ones who disappeared.

XXI. Keisha

Another person who takes me up on my offer to resettle in Austin is Billy. After living in my new city for a year, he calls me up and says his transfer to Austin has come through and asks if he can stay with me until he finds a place.

“Of course!” I say, I always look forward to connecting with people from back home.

As soon as Billy arrives, his car blows up on him and he has to save up enough money to buy another one. So, his two-week stay with me turns out to be closer to two months. But we make it work and we even take turns sleeping on the couch.

Billy and I become closer than we had been in Amarillo. Spending more time with him, I experience firsthand the amount of ridicule and discrimination he faces every day. Being an effeminate, tall, Black man, who is built like football linebacker brought him much attention. When we are shopping for groceries or at a restaurant, people stare, whisper, and point at him. Seems like Austin is not as tolerant as one would think. Sometimes, Billy will get angry and want to engage them in an argument, but I distract him or dissuade him and tell him they aren’t worth the aggravation.

Having Billy as a roommate is interesting, it means Gospel music playing on the radio on Sunday mornings and he insists on cooking a large breakfast on days we are off from work. I invite Billy to come out with me to the gay bars in Austin and he sometimes accepts, although like Amarillo, there are hardly any Blacks in the gay clubs.

On one night I invite him to the club, only to find him in the parking lot, dancing to Aretha Franklin on his car’s tape player.

“Billy, I don’t understand, what’s up? Why aren’t you in there having a good time? You’re nice-looking, you shouldn’t have any problem picking someone up.”

“There ain’t nothin’ in there for me,” he says, “I’m looking for a man.”

My homophobic radar goes off and I answer a bit perturbed, “So, gay men aren’t real men? So, you tell me, if you’re looking to have sex with another man, where else do you go?”

“I don’t want to have sex with another man. That’s the problem. I’m not a man. I’m a woman.”

I am not sure why it took five years of knowing this person to finally understand, the person who is my roommate is not a drag queen nor a homosexual, Billy is a woman living in a Black man’s body.

I didn’t know a lot about being transsexual and maybe even Billy lacked the words, as well, to express what he felt. But from then on, he became a she and I called him Keisha, her preferred name.

Kiesha feels more encouraged to go out dressed as a female which, unfortunately, brings more attention from on lookers and gawkers.

One night, I am planning to meet some new gay friends at a restaurant in Austin. I tell them I am going to invite Keisha to come along. There is silence on the other end of the phone and then, “Please don’t bring Keisha along, she is just too much. We’d love to have one nice dinner without people staring at us and, potentially, a huge scene.”

I am about to about to give a lecture about tolerance and understanding when it occurs to me: just because I am willing to stand with Keisha and take any abuse that is about to happen, is it okay to force my friends to do the same?

Looking back on it now, I feel ashamed that I acquiesced to their request and did not invite Keisha to dinner with us that night.

~

Eventually, Keisha moves out, I see less and less of her. I try to keep in contact, but I believe she is trying to re-invent herself and wants to leave the past behind. I become concerned because a couple of the guys she is seeing are pretty rough. Most have just been released from prison.

“Well,” she tells me, “Where else am I going to find a heterosexual man who doesn’t mind having sex with a woman in a man’s body?”

The last time I visit her in her apartment, her boyfriend leaves the room because he doesn’t like “faggots.” Keisha and I talk mostly about the horrible impact AIDS is having on people we knew in Amarillo, but I think we both know that we have grown apart.

~

I never heard back from her after that meeting but a mutual friend back in Amarillo, tells me that no one, not even her family, has heard from her in years. Fifteen years later, I find out she has passed. No one knows how she died.

XXII. The Note (Part II)

Leo's sister, Marie, called me from Amarillo and asked about the death. She also inquired about the status of his new truck and his belongings. She told me she would drive down and help with the burial and take his truck and belongings.

When she arrived, we both reviewed options and she reminded me that Leo was a military veteran. He had received a "dishonorable discharge" from the United States Marines Corp for being gay. I remembered he told me that he fought the status of this decision, and the dishonorable discharge was changed to a "general discharge." Thankfully, a possible solution. Marie made some calls to the Veterans Administration, and they were able to assist with finding Leo a burial plot at the National Fort Sam Houston Cemetery, about an hour away in San Antonio, Texas.

~

Back under the shady tree in the secluded park, I open Leo's suicide letter. It's August in Central Texas and my hands are sweaty and shaky. I try not to sully the note. The machine copy is difficult to read and part of the note is smudged.

Dear Larry,

I love you and I am sorry.

I just can't take it anymore, I will miss you.

I think maybe this way I can live forever.

Please take care of yourself

(his writing becomes more distorted as the poisonous gas takes its effect. The next part is more difficult to read.)

I'm not sure what I wrote, probably nothing

I'll never forget you and you will always be in my prayers

You have all our stories, you have to write our stories

People need to know what is happening

Love,

Leo Saenz

~

Leo's death occurred in the late 1980s, well before the epidemic took a horrible, explosive turn in Austin and Amarillo. Maybe he had a premonition and knew what was to come and realized that someone had to bear witness to the horrors and injustices that were occurring. But people knew, they just didn't care.

XXIII. Rumors, Urban Myths, and Untruths

“Poppers are the main cause of AIDS. When you think about it, almost all gay men use poppers, during sex, on the dance floor, even just standing around. Somehow the amyl nitrate weakens your immune system.”

“Definitely a virus developed by the CIA at a US military laboratory. A virus that mainly attacks gay men? How perfect is that for them? We were getting too much power politically and this is an easy way to kill us off.”

“It’s an east coast, west coast thing. As long as you don’t have sex with anyone from that area, you’re good.”

“Look at the role the CIA had in spreading crack cocaine in the Black neighborhoods in Los Angeles. You can’t tell me the government wouldn’t sanction the spread of this virus.”

“Do not take the hepatitis B vaccination. The medical community has encouraged all gay men to get vaccinated for hepatitis B. Everyone I know that gets vaccinated develops AIDS. Coincidence? I don’t think so.”

“Remember the Tuskegee syphilis experiments. The government has no morals when it comes to testing the effect of diseases on marginalized populations.”

“It came from Africa, you know, specifically from monkeys. Someone either had sex with a monkey or ate monkey brains and caught the virus. They then spread it to everyone.”

“There is no such thing as a virus. The reason gay men are getting sick is because of the unhealthy lifestyle we lead: too much alcohol, too many drugs, too many venereal diseases, all of these weaken the immune system.”

“There is a cure for AIDS, but pharmaceutical companies are getting rich off the disease. Why would they want to cure AIDS?”

“Under any circumstances, do not take AZT, it will kill you. Everyone I know that has taken AZT has died.”

On the day after the Norwegian Nobel Committee named Dr. Wangari Maathai the 2004 Peace Prize laureate, she said, “I may not be able to say who developed the virus, but it was meant to wipe out the Black race.”

XXIV. 1992 HIV Gay Latino Support Group

You'll never meet a kinder, gentler soul than Daniel Torrez. I know a lot of people use this cliché, but Daniel truly epitomizes this description. He possesses a quiet strength, sometimes you don't even know he is there, but he is a powerful light for the rest of the support group. He emaciates to around 100 pounds sustained only by sucking on morphine tablets and forced sips from Ensure shakes; he insists on attending every HIV Gay Latino support group meeting. His death affects the group profoundly. If a saint like Daniel could be taken, what chance do we have?

Everyone thinks they have more time. Jerry Saenz waits until the last minute to fly back home to the Valley. He has been running a high fever for two days, he senses this is the time to seek familial caregivers for his final days. He collapses at the Austin airport and is rushed to the hospital. Meningitis. Later in the day, I visit him in his room, he has already gone deaf, he can't hear me. He is gone within three days.

I am not sure of the extent of Mikey Sanchez's intellectual disability or if he understands the infectious disease that will kill him in sixteen months. He tells the guys in the support group that he has "VHI," confusing his viral status with the popular cable music TV channel.

Arturo Castillo is devastatingly handsome, it's not just my opinion, he won Mr. Gay Austin in 1990. Arturo falls in with the HIV conspiracy crowd that eschews medical science. A group of them leave for Brazil for one week to attend a holistic seminar with a homeopathic "doctor" who claims he has a cure for AIDS. Arturo and a friend return, start a colonic business, and begin drinking their urine. I recall the funeral home doing a pathetic job on his beautiful face.

“When I was younger, me and my brother shared a bed and used to have sex almost every night as soon as the lights went out,” Tony Lopez admits this to the rest of the support group. It’s the kind of confession one makes when they know they are dying and need to release all secrets. Tony has an angry death. He is angry at everyone, me included. He just wants to be alone.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said that lying is always morally wrong.

John Cantu calls me in a panic. He has just been diagnosed with HIV. “It’ll be okay, John. Many people are still alive with this disease.” He becomes calm, he believes me, there is hope. A year later, I run into him. He has transformed into an old man, weakly hunched over and walking with a cane. He can’t even look me in the face.

Mike Gauna is inconsolable. His significant other has left him. “Well,” many in the support group whisper, “that’s what you get when you choose a white lover.” Mike says that being abandoned is even worse than his HIV diagnosis. We find out later that his partner has fallen in love and has moved in with his white psychotherapist.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, HIV affects mostly gay, white men. When vast amounts of HIV prevention monies finally become available, AIDS organizations run by white men are very adept at securing funds. They are, however, inept at accessing and providing services to the people of color communities. They refuse to share resources with “minority” AIDS organizations. As a result, HIV rates in the Black and Latine communities skyrocket to 70% and remain so until this day.

Greg Sustaita takes his own way out; he is found hanging in his garage. He speaks the truth when I remember him telling me that he will never succumb to the virus. His body isn't found until three days after his decision.

Leo Perez also seizes control of his destiny. He takes a clear plastic tube and connects it to the exhaust pipe on his car. He then tapes the other side of the tube to the agape passenger side window. I discover Leos's car and his body in my driveway. I break open the passenger side window with a hammer, already sensing it is too late. I hold onto his red-faced, stiff body and I find an apology note with directives. He does not want to be left undiscovered like Greg.

Rigor mortis takes hold four hours after someone has died. The fact that I can recall this statistic so easily bothers me immensely.

One night, I hold Ricky Moreno's hand in the hospital's critical care unit as his life energy oozes away. The guys in the support group take turns giving his hand a squeeze while he responds with a faint twitch. He is gone by the next morning.

At Ricky's funeral, a mutual friend, Thomas Garcia from Houston, attends the service. I let him know that we are going to the family's house after the service to be with them. "No," Thomas replies, "I'm no good at things like this." What does he mean by that? Who the fuck is "good at things like this?" Does he think I am "good at things like this?" How does he get to opt out and leave the hard work to others? The guys in the support group didn't know we had an option to just leave because we're not "good at things like this." I never see or speak with Thomas again.

XXV. The Horrors of the Syndrome

AIDS is not actually a disease but a syndrome or a collection of diseases. In the 1980s and early 1990s, in order for a person to be considered as having AIDS, they must be diagnosed with one of the twenty-three designated AIDS conditions and meet other criteria such as a physician's diagnosis.

Here are some of the top, twenty-three disease conditions that suddenly become very familiar to us:

HIV Wasting Syndrome

Whether caused by gastro-digestive infections, the lack of appetite, or some other unknown factor, many persons with AIDS have a sudden fifteen-to-twenty-pound weight loss. This thin, gaunt appearance is one of the first noticeable signs that a person has AIDS. Patients are instructed to eat half a gallon of ice cream a day to hold onto their weight and sometimes even this large caloric intake is not enough.

Kaposi sarcoma

These black, blue, and sometimes pink skin lesions are the “scarlet letters” for those persons with AIDS infection. If you get this skin cancer in places that can be covered by clothing, you are lucky. Some guys have tell-tale lesions on their hands or on other body locations that are difficult to hide. You must try to hide your horror the first time you see a guy with half his face covered in black lesions.

Pneumonia, and Pneumocystis Pneumonia, and Tuberculosis

Getting diagnosed with regular pneumonia or the new pneumocystis carinii pneumonia is a rite of passage for many with AIDS. And, after almost being eliminated from the United States, tuberculosis takes advantages of the many people with failing immune systems and makes a strong return.

For many, the respiratory diseases literally take their breath away, and they are unable to summon enough strength to speak their last words to loved ones. Their faces, firmly attached to an oxygen mask, can only convey their good-byes through the teary sadness conveyed through their eyes. Our friend, Derrick, said his “goodbyes” through such a plastic mask.

Herpes zoster (shingles)

Shingles usually affects many older adults but shingles in a person with AIDS is more aggressive and virulent than the one seen in older patients. The painful sores can take hold and spread quickly, even to the face, causing blindness. Recovery can mean excruciating nerve pain which lasts for months. Many are taking hard core pain medications, like hydrocodone, oral morphine, and Percodan. In 1995, a new sedative, allegedly non-addictive oxycontin was approved by the FDA and began being used widely by AIDS patients, beginning for many a long, long dependence on the addictive drug. My partner, Andy, becomes addicted to oxycontin for the next twenty years.

Toxoplasmosis

If you have a cat as a pet companion and have AIDS, you have to get rid of it. The same with a pet bird. Toxoplasmosis is caused by the parasite toxoplasma gondii. It is found in all

animals but especially in cat and bird feces. There is a good chance that if you have ever owned a pet cat or bird, you are already infected with this parasite. Your immune system keeps this parasite at bay, until your immune system is no longer working.

The parasite is particularly fond of brain and eye tissue and causes blindness and seizures. My friend Ricky, who was in college to be a veterinarian, had his weepy eyeball swell to the size of a golf ball before he died.

Cryptosporidiosis

This is another parasite that loves to hang around the feces of many animals, including humans. It can be passed through infected drinking water, or contact with human feces (diapers, oral-anal contact). AIDS patients are asked to avoid swimming in rivers, lakes, or even pools. For drinking, bottled water is best, or using water filters; and, of course, no eating raw oysters.

Candidiasis (thrush)

Many people with AIDS have some level of candidiasis in their mouths, so this one can be easy to spot. These white patches of thrush can be quite noticeable when they are talking.

In 1993, AIDS became the most common cause of death among persons in the United States aged 25-44.

XXVI. The Condom Breaks

“Now that we know how AIDS is spread, any gay man in our community that continues to practice unsafe sex is either stupid, selfish, or just plain irresponsible.”

The above sentiment is expressed by gay men who are HIV educators in Walt Odets’ book, *In the Shadow of the Epidemic*. In many ways, gay men who were infected with HIV before, say, 1985, were looked at as “innocent” victims. These men contracted HIV before anyone had any concrete knowledge about the virus or that it even existed, much less how to protect themselves. They didn’t know that when they were engaging in typical gay sex, they were exchanging deadly infectious fluids. They could not be held complicit in their disease and death.

In the 1970s, every gay sexual encounter was a revolutionary act. Every fuck, every suck, every sex act with another man was a rebellious shot at the conservative, heteronormative, status quo. Unrestricted, indulgent sex was encouraged and there was no moral criticism. In the late 1980s and 1990s, most people, especially in the queer community, started to deem that gay men who became infected with HIV through sexual encounters “should have known better.” Gay men who became infected were perceived as self-indulgent, careless, and, most likely, promiscuous. Along with other AIDS activists, I preached this judgmental message in my AIDS education and safer sex workshops.

~

It was one of those rare nights I was having a beer at the country and western gay bar alone. I was a bit homesick, and the country songs reminded me of the ones I once heard at The Ritz. A group of four men came into the bar to play pool. One of them was very handsome, he

had curly dark hair, intense brown eyes, and a well-muscled physique. He immediately reminded me of the body builder, Bob Paris.

I am not sure how we began talking at the bar, but I can't imagine approaching someone who was so above my status at the gay bar. So, I assume he began talking to me. His name was Dan and I invited him over to my apartment.

Soon, we were sitting on my couch talking, then suddenly, we began tearing our clothes off.

We walked into the bedroom and Dan laid on his back. With me on top of him, he signaled that he wanted me to fuck him. Or he could've said it to me, I can't remember. I clearly remember opening the nightstand drawer and reaching for a condom. It was red. I then reached for a small bottle of lubricant, and we began the act.

Then...the condom tore, disintegrated, really. In error, I had reached for the oil-based lube instead of the water-based lube. A rookie mistake but I was not used to having anal sex, as it was a high-risk sexual activity.

I stopped and pulled out.

Then this man, this beautiful man, this Adonis that, for some reason, gave me this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be with him, held me closer. He whispered in my ear, "It's okay, go ahead."

I hesitated and again he softly murmured, "No really, it's fine. I don't mind, don't stop." And then everything I knew about condoms, about staying safe, about being a responsible, conscientious gay man suddenly vanished.

I completed the sex act.

After all, isn't this why I endured all the homophobia, the discrimination, the loss, so I could have sex with another man? What's the point of surviving the virus if all we do is survive? What's the point of being gay if you can't have gay sex?

Still, I couldn't tell anyone what I had done. "Stupid and foolish," I repeated to myself, "you, of all people, should've known better" "what a bad example" "what a hypocrite." And I thought if I became HIV positive that night, I deserved it.

XXVII. Luke 3257

April 8, 1993, 8:10 am

Luke 3257 is coming to see me today. He has a 2:00 pm appointment to receive post-test counseling for his positive HIV test result. I have known his test result since the state laboratory reported it to our clinic three days ago.

April 8, 1993, 9:45 am

Luke 3257 is coming to see me today. Of course, Luke 3257 is not his real name. I don't know the handsome young man's real name. The first letter in the name indicates the counselor, L for Larry, and the numbers indicate the date the client was seen and the client order for that day. We strongly encourage our clients to test anonymously for HIV. We cannot guarantee that their real names will be kept confidential from the state health authorities.

In the 1980s, several states, including Texas and California, consider conditional quarantine measures for those who are identified as having HIV. An op-ed ran in the New York Times suggesting that "everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed."

One client, Rosa Valdez, insists I use her real name. She says, "I have nothing to hide or be ashamed of." Rosa lives at the Rio Motel, a location familiar to the rest of our staff as a guest house that rents rooms by the hour. We have clients who have visited our clinic from that location who have tested HIV positive. Rosa is young, intelligent, and, unfortunately, has a crack cocaine habit. We talk a bit about the availability of substance abuse programs, but she dismisses

any offer for treatment. Rosa is candid with me about her sexual risk activities but remains optimistic that her HIV test will be negative. It is not.

She calls me the day of our post-test counseling session and tells me she cannot find a ride to the clinic. She asks if I can give her the test result over the phone. I remind her that any HIV test result must be given in person. She hangs up and I never hear from her again. Since she is HIV positive and I have her name and possible resident location, I must report this information to the Austin-Travis County Health Department. I am breaking the law if I do not.

Physicians (or a designee) are required to report any case of HIV and AIDS to the local health authority, according to Texas Administrative Code, Title 25, Part 1, Chapter 97, Subchapter F, Rules §97.131- §97.134.

The local health department will assign Rosa's case to a disease intervention specialist, a sort of sexually transmitted disease (STD) detective, that will find Rosa and give her the test result.

April 8, 1993, 11:36 am

Luke 3257 is coming to see me today. I know he must be a raw, stressed, ball of nerves, as I was the time I tested for HIV.

There is an excruciatingly long, two-week waiting period to process the blood sample for HIV.

~

In 1990, I had just returned from my father's funeral, who unexpectedly died of a brain aneurism at the young age of fifty-eight. I return home to find my life partner, Andy, curled up in bed, suffering in severe pain due to blisters along his neck and back. A trip to the emergency room confirms an unusual diagnosis of shingles, uncommon because shingles is usually associated with the elderly and those with failing immune systems. The emergency room doctor recommends both he and I get tested for HIV.

Andy and I call the Austin-Travis County Health Department to schedule our HIV tests. We show up at the clinic, receive education on HIV risk prevention factors, and then we are sent to a nurse for a blood draw.

During the two-week waiting period, I can't really focus on my test result because I am giving Andy my complete attention, as he is still suffering from his very painful shingles episode. Most likely, his test result will be positive, but there is a small sliver of hope for me. Our appointment date finally arrives and we show up at the local health department clinic. My counselor gives me my test result. Negative. The session lasts less than five minutes. I go back to the waiting room and notice that Andy is not there...ten minutes pass...then fifteen...after twenty minutes, I don't need to hear confirmation from anyone. I sit alone in the waiting room, trying to remain strong for the news I know Andy will bring.

~

April 8, 1993, 1:15 pm

Luke 3257 is coming to see me today.

I am ready for whatever his reaction will be when I tell him he has a disease that will most likely kill him in six months to two years.

I have been doing HIV test counseling for six months at the Austin Care Unit. A good HIV testing program finds one HIV positive client for every one-hundred clients tested. I have had five clients that have tested positive for HIV: Rosa and four Lukes (including Luke 3257). I've told hundreds of clients they are negative. I provide positive news and joyful health information to 100 people, and the tradeoff is that I have to provide terrible news to one person.

Profound sorrow, denial, a sense of loss, and anger, are all reactions I've received from those I have given a heartbreaking HIV positive test result. One of my Lukes received a positive test result while he was incarcerated in the county jail. This is the worst place to receive a positive HIV test result because there is nothing I can do for the inmate in terms of referrals, and the inmate does not want any HIV information or materials to take back to his cell.

Discrimination and stigma against incarcerated people who have HIV by staff and other inmates is unnecessarily cruel and rampant.

In 1985, 45 of 51 state and federal prisons segregated persons identified as having HIV.

In southern states, it is worse. HIV segregated inmates in the South Carolina Department of Corrections are required to wear an armband or a badge identifying their residency in the HIV dormitory.

April 8, 1993, 2:02 pm

I get a call from our receptionist that Luke 3257 is here. I find Luke 3257 sitting in our waiting room, and I motion for him to follow me into my office. He takes a seat and I close the door.

I remember his face more clearly now, a white man in his younger twenties, quite handsome with short, curly hair and dark eyes.

I begin the session.

“Hi, how are you?”

“Doing as well as can be expected.”

“I understand.”

Step 1: Confirm readiness to receive results.

“Your test results are back from the lab, are you ready to hear your results?”

Luke 3257 nods his head “yes.”

Step 2: Provide the client with a clear, concise test result.

“Your HIV test result is positive; this means that you are infected with HIV.

I see a brief look of concern flash over his face and then he breaks out into a broad smile.

Step 3: Explore client’s reaction to results.

I give him a few seconds to process the test result, he is still smiling.

“Do you understand these test results?”

Again, Luke 3257 nods his head and says, “Yes.”

“As you remember from our last session, I can arrange for an appointment with a mental health counselor to help you process these test results.”

“No, I’m good.”

I am perplexed by his response. I know from his last session that he has never tested for HIV before. But his reaction leads me to believe that this result is not a surprise to him. It is not unusual to have individuals who receive an HIV positive test result return to the clinic for a re-test. They hope that the initial test was incorrect in some way. I want to ask him if this is, in fact, his situation. However, this session isn't about my seeking information, this session is about the client getting all the information they need.

Step 3: Inform about processes for partner services.

"Because your test result was HIV-positive, it is very important that we start to think about who you've come into contact with, who might also be infected. It's important that anyone who might have been exposed gets tested and enrolled in care, if they are also HIV positive."

"I've only had one partner and he is already aware of his positive HIV status."

"We can help you notify any persons that you may have put at risk. They will not be given your name or information."

Luke 3257 is no longer smiling and what he wants most is to leave the session now that he has received his test result. But I have a few more steps.

Step 4: Discuss an HIV Care and Treatment Plan.

"Medical monitoring of your condition is extremely important. I can make an appointment for you with an intake specialist at AIDS Services of Austin. They can provide you with a range of free medical and social services. Would you like for me to set this up today?"

"No, I have it covered."

"Making an appointment will take no time, I really don't mind it."

“No,” he is more emphatic this time.

“I have a packet of information here with local resources for people who have HIV. If you ever need access to any one of these, please give them or me a call.”

He nods his head.

Step 5: Review HIV Prevention Plan

“Remember at our last session we discussed different sexual risk factors that can spread the virus. I have made a small packet of information for you that contains safer sex brochures and condoms.”

I hand this information to him and he takes it while rising from his seat.

Step 6: Make a Plan to Follow up and Reconnect.

“Hold on, one more thing. Is it okay if I check in with you in about a week? You had mentioned at our last session that it is okay to leave a message at your phone number, (512) 555-8392 is that still the case?”

“Yeah, sure,” he leaves with the two packets of information, and I am looking at an empty seat. If I could’ve blocked the door, I would have, but there is no keeping a client that doesn’t want help or doesn’t want to be here.

I try calling him several times after our meeting, but he never returns my calls.

There are more people to test in the waiting room.

XXVIII. Lessons I Learned from the AIDS Epidemic

1. Try not to look too shocked or horrified when you run into a friend you haven't seen in a while.
Do not ask them how they are doing, you can already tell. Treat them as you normally would, they always think they look better than they actually do.
2. Have that one friend with an access key to your place of residence that can come in and "straighten up" your house before family comes over. Show them where you keep the gay porn and sex toys.
3. If your friends have pets, it's never too early to begin planning who is capable of taking care of their dogs or other fur babies when they are sick or gone.
4. If you need to go to the hospital emergency room, do not go during the weekends, from 5:00 pm, Friday to 5:00 am, Sunday. Unless you are close to imminent death, you will not be seen by a doctor for a few hours. Plus, the odds are very high you will catch something from someone else in the waiting room.
5. If it can be prevented, Central Texas AIDS patients should avoid dying during the hottest months of June – September, since the temperature is usually over one hundred degrees during the day. Try to avoid putting friends through a summertime, cemetery burial, which means all of us guys will be sweating profusely through our dark colored suits.
6. Weekends are the best time to die, you can easily contact social service agencies for any help with funeral expenses on Monday. Thursdays and Fridays are the worst since the body will have to lie unattended until family is notified, and helpful agencies are closed weekends.
7. Do not ask your friends with AIDS to be pallbearers. They can barely stand, and coffins are surprisingly heavy.

8. Take time off work only when absolutely needed. If you run to the bedside of friends or a life partner every time they are in the hospital, you will lose your job because of excessive absences. Save the time off for when they really need you to be with them.
9. Hospital stays are very expensive, but their costs are overinflated. Negotiate with them to bring down the cost of your debt. Surprisingly, many will settle for less than half of what you owe.
10. Couples should keep their finances separate. Eventually, the frequent trips to the hospital and for other medical visits will make you file for bankruptcy.
11. Bankruptcy lawyers are surprisingly expensive, make sure to save enough to pay them before other bills.
12. You cannot make it to every funeral or memorial for a friend, there are just too many. You will regret this for the rest of your life but there is nothing that you can do about it.

XXIX. The Rapture, 1995

It must be hard to imagine now,

But I swear to you, people can just vanish.

In the mid-nineties, so many queer people disappeared instantly.

To daringly ask about friends,

“Has anyone heard from José, or Tim, or Steven?”

Meant you had to gird yourself for the answer.

“He’s not doing too well,” or “He’s in hospice,”

Or even worse, “No one has heard from him.”

“We’re sorry, you have reached a number that has been disconnected,

Or is no longer in service.”

The automated phone recording makes your heart sink.

Your last connection with them is gone.

Unfamiliar faces now answer their front doors.

Did the virus take them unexpectedly?

Perhaps in some unknown place among strangers.

Or maybe they moved away?

To families that would awkwardly take them in.

Or maybe they scurried away?

To an elephant graveyard,

So as not to burden anyone with their death.

And die alone, unknown, buried in a potter’s field.

Where did they go? Where are they?

I don't know, even thirty years later,

I don't know.

~

There is only bad news in phone calls from home.

Amarillo deaths have now caught up with the rest of us.

"Did you hear about Donnie, or Freddy, or Ronnie?"

They died, or are dying, or are very sick.

I'm not sure why some go very quickly,

And others languish for months.

I'm not sure why Ronnie didn't want to go.

He lasted for months in a bedroom at his parent's house,

They live in a very small house, a shack really,

Across the street from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

I wonder if the congregants know,

That a courageous young man is fighting for every hour of his life,

Right across the street from where they pray.

XXX. The Funny Thing About AIDS

The following is a transcript from a recording of one of the early White House press conferences on AIDS. On the tape is Ronald Reagan's press secretary Larry Speakes and conservative columnist Lester Kinsolving. The transcript has been featured in *When AIDS Was Funny*, a 2015 British short documentary film by Scott Calonico and in several news websites.

~

Lester Kinsolving: "Larry, does the President have any reaction to the announcement—the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, that A-I-D-S is now an epidemic and have over 600 cases?"

Larry Speakes: "What's A-I-D-S?"

Kinsolving: "Over a third of them have died. It's known as 'gay plague.' (Laughter in the background is heard.) No, it is. I mean it's a pretty serious thing that one in every three people that get this have died. And I wondered if the President is aware of it?"

Speakes: "I don't have it. Do you?" (Again, laughter is heard.)

Kinsolving: "No, I don't."

Speakes: "You didn't answer my question."

Kinsolving: "Well, I just wondered, does the President..."

Speakes: "How do you know? (Again, laughter.)

Kinsolving: "In other words, the White House looks on this as a great joke?"

Speakes: "No, I don't know anything about it, Lester."

Kinsolving: "Does the President, does anybody in the White House know about this epidemic, Larry?"

Speakes: "I don't think so. I don't think there's been any..."

Kinsolving: "Nobody knows?"

Speakes: "There has been no personal experience here, Lester."

Kinsolving: "No, I mean, I thought you were keeping..."

Speakes: "I checked thoroughly with Dr. Ruge this morning and he's had no... (more laughter) ... no patients suffering from A-I-D-S or whatever it is."

Kinsolving: "The President doesn't have gay plague, is that what you're saying or what?"

Speakes: "No, I didn't say that."

Kinsolving: "Didn't say that?"

Speakes: "I thought I heard you on the State Department over there. Why didn't you stay there?" (Laughter.)

Kinsolving: "Because I love you, Larry, that's why." (Laughter.)

Speakes: "Oh, I see. Just don't put it in those terms, Lester." (Laughter.)

Kinsolving: "Oh, I retract that."

Speakes: "I hope so."

XXXI. Savior Complex

“Don’t move to the big city, you’ll get AIDS.”

These were the parting words of warning from my friends and family in Amarillo before I packed up whatever could fit in my car and moved to Austin, Texas.

In 1984, there was still little information on AIDS, even though about 5,000 people had already succumbed to the disease. President Ronald Regan had yet to even mentioned the word “AIDS.”

So, in the beginning, volunteering for AIDS education efforts in Austin was really self-preservation: I needed to get as much information as possible about the disease.

At first, since there were no AIDS organizations, community volunteers met at people’s houses. These meet ups were publicized on flyers posted at the gay bars or listed in local newspapers, like the local, community newspaper, *The Austin Chronicle*. I would attend, listen, and learn. The majority of attendees were white. When I showed up, a woman said, “Oh good, we need someone who can speak Spanish.” I didn’t tell them my Spanish was mediocre, at best. Again, I felt like I was standing at the back of Papillon’s bar again, watching from the sidelines while white people discussed community options and strategies to address the virus. I knew I could contribute more, but for now, I simply volunteered to hang posters around town and answer AIDS questions from the phone line.

At the time, Austin had fewer than ten diagnosed cases of AIDS. The prediction was that there would eventually be thousands of cases. Impossible! Those numbers couldn’t be credible. I chalked this up to the same hyperbolic rhetoric about climate change and nuclear war. Yes, it could happen, but really? And what could anyone do about it, except worry?

The HIV test finally became available in 1985. If you could take a test that would let you know you had only two or three years left to live, would you take it? How would this piece of information affect your life? Most of us were afraid to take the test and receive confirmation that we actually had the virus. So, many just assumed we were infected. Several years later, in 1990, when I finally received my negative HIV test result, the diagnosis came with a healthy dose of survivor's guilt. Due to the results of some cruel, perverse lottery, I was spared HIV infection. How could I not feel like I owed a huge debt to our community? I needed to pay some type of penance for somehow not being infected despite the uninhibited sex I had in the 1970s.

~

In 1990, I graduated from the University of Texas with a bachelor's degree in advertising, and I didn't want to continue volunteering to do administrative work for the suddenly large AIDS agency, AIDS Services of Austin. The mostly white HIV organization was doing little in the people of color communities—my community. I decided to stop by a much smaller AIDS agency, Informe-SIDA, to see if I could volunteer my services. The decision changed my life. My volunteer position soon turned into a paid position.

Non-profit work was the most grueling, most rewarding, and the lowest paying job I have ever had. We always put in more than forty hours a week: conducting AIDS education presentations, in English and Spanish; facilitating safer-sex workshops for gay men; conducting pre and post HIV testing and counseling; facilitating the Gay Latino HIV Support Group; conducting street outreach at high risk locations into the late hours on weekends; summarizing quarterly activities for our funders; writing grants for funding; coordinating special events, like altar-building for Dias de Los Muertos; and connecting HIV positive clients with services.

The work was demanding and exhausting, yet I felt privileged to be working to lessen the burden of the disease in the Latinx community. There were now thousands of us dying and I couldn't understand why so many in our community continued as if nothing extraordinary was occurring. I couldn't comprehend how people could not assist in this situation.

I was given an unsolicited mental diagnosis from friend, "Honey, you have a 'savior complex,' most likely from the unsolved trauma you received growing up in Amarillo. You don't need to be doing AIDS work, you need a good therapist."

Maybe he was right, not only was the work so intensive, but Andy, my partner, was sick, and so were many friends. I needed to be present for them, as well. I left non-profit work after three years, and I took a position at the state health department in Austin as an HIV Minority Education Consultant.

XXXII. So, You Think You're a White Guy Now?

When I accepted the job with the state health department, understandably, my fellow community activists would rib me and give me a hard time by asking, “So you think you’re a white guy now, huh?”

Their teasing evoked memories of when I first came out to my family in the early 1980s in Amarillo. One of my cousins, Juan, heard about my announcement and confronted me, “So, you think you’re a white guy now?”

We had seen plenty of white gay men, but very few Latinx or Black gay men. There were complex socioeconomic and cultural reasons for our lack of visibility. Because it was rumored that Juan secretly had sex with other men, I knew exactly what he meant.

There was a difference between having sex with other men and living your life, outwardly, as a self-proclaimed gay man. Of course, men have been having sex with other men since...probably forever, but most were still expected to marry a woman and father children. Secretive gay sex was not the issue, it was the acknowledgement that this was how you were going to live your life, having sex with only men, without any shame or secrets. And with the intent of taking another man as a life partner.

In the 70s and 80s, many men, especially white men, were financially able to take care of themselves, they didn’t need their family’s approval or resources. For many gay men of color, this was not the case. Many were, and still are, dependent on family for support and financial assistance. Coming out to your family meant that you would risk losing your support system, emotional and financial. For many of us, it was literally too expensive to come out as gay.

My conversation with Juan did not go well.

“Fucking selfish is all you are, have you thought about how this will affect your poor parents? Tan verguenza!” He was almost spitting at me.

“I can’t live my life as a lie,” I responded.

“Keep your gay shit private! Ain’t nobody want to hear about that shit, especially your family. Have some respect!”

“Oh, you mean keep it private, like you do?”

At that point, I thought for sure he was going to hit me. Instead, he actually lowered his voice and stepped closer to me.

“What’s going to happen when you get AIDS? Do you think those white assholes will take care of you? Pendejo. Those gringo maricones take care of themselves first. Then you’ll be all alone and die by yourself.”

XXXIII. The Sell Out

For some in the HIV Latinx community, I had become a “sell out,” working for a funding organization that many times vexed and misunderstood the HIV prevention work that Black and Latinx agencies were doing in the people of color communities. In fact, I would have been the first to call a colleague working in our community a “sell out” or a “traitor” if they left the hard work on the front lines for higher pay and a cushy position at a state institution.

But I really thought I could make more of an impact on HIV in the Latinx and Black communities on a statewide level. Initially, at least, I thought it was possible.

I was hired as the HIV Minority Education Consultant, while Governor Ann Richards was doing a great job governing the state. Governor Richards appointed an openly gay, HIV infected doctor to the State Board of Health. Under Richards’ leadership, we thought we could finally begin to be seen and make progress.

The HIV prevention work that I observed being conducted by Black and Latinx AIDS community organizations was extraordinary, I was learning from them.

~

I walked with two, Black, female street outreach workers in Houston’s Third Ward, they worked to address more than just the lack of HIV prevention, as this population had multiple needs and few resources. The two women were instantly recognizable by the inhabitants of the federal housing project, where they had weekly, HIV educational sessions in the multipurpose meeting room.

These HIV talks were well attended as the workers would provide food, childcare services, and opportunities to win free food vouchers. While one outreach worker educated the women in one room, the other entertained the children in a separate room, providing age-

appropriate, HIV information, and coloring books. The outreach worker sat on the floor as the children gathered around her. She began to talk to the young children, all under six, about AIDS. I was a bit doubtful, at first, that this very young population even needed this information.

The woman held up a coloring book, “Who here has heard about AIDS?”

A young girl, about five years old, with beautiful brown eyes and hair carefully brushed into bun, raised her hand. She slowly nodded her head and said, “My uncle died of AIDS.” The last part she almost whispered, as if it were a secret. She took two big gulps and then the tears started spilling out of those eyes.

The outreach worker moved over to her, held her, and whispered in her ear. The little girl nodded her head and wiped her eyes.

Although I was very familiar with the effect AIDS had in my Latinx community, I could see how the disease had broader implications, disrupting whole communities and decimating families. I imagined how frightening it must be to a young girl who saw her close family members, her neighbors, and other important adults in her life die from something she knew little about. It was clear that everyone in the community needed HIV education.

~

I was waiting in the running SUV with two other colleagues in a barely lit, dusty road on the outskirts of Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico. We were in the “red light” district and our Latina outreach worker had entered a Mexican brothel to see if it was still okay for her to bring us into the building. She returned with disappointing news, “No, they don’t feel comfortable letting us in tonight.”

About then, five or six women and two men exited the brothel and approached the back of the SUV. The outreach worker opened the back of the automobile and began handing out HIV

and STD education pamphlets and condoms. Although officially she could not use any materials paid for with federal or state grant funds, she worked to find other funding sources. Of course, none of the funding prohibitions made sense since the vast majority of customers who visited the brothel were from United States. They would get infected here and go back to the States.

~

It was a little after noon on a summer day in Galveston, Texas in 1995. The air in the dilapidated house was already beginning to swelter. I could barely see in the dimly lit living room, the heavy curtains firmly drawn. The only light that came into the room was when one of its occupants, frequently and obsessively, parted the curtains to peer out the window. Smoking crack made you paranoid, and the users continued to check the outside of the house to see if they were being watched.

Sitting on a shoddy couch, I was trying to maintain my composure, I knew any sudden or odd movements from me might cause trouble. But I trusted the pair of street outreach workers, Richard and Arthur; they knew this community, this house. They were former addicts, now clean, spreading HIV education and offering testing.

They chose this house to showcase to me the significant work they were doing within the addiction community in Black neighborhoods. They had prepped the “temporary residents” by telling them that they were bringing “a guy from the health department” to show him their work and hopefully get more money and resources.

Most of the people in the house left the living room when Richard, Arthur, and I entered. They went into an adjoining room and closed the door. There was a faint smell of crack, a nauseating odor of plastic burning.

The guys put in an enormous amount of work with this population to gain their trust. They repeated to the residents I was from the health department and asked the group if there was anything they would like to say to me. Most praised the work of the two outreach workers, providing them with contacts for community resources, and sometimes even bringing food with them.

One woman sat next to me, “Please, if you can get me into treatment. I have been looking for drug treatment and there aren’t any beds. I don’t want to live like this!” She waved her arms around the room.

~

I was determined to do what I could to find more funding and resources to support the great work that these Black and Latinx AIDS prevention workers were doing. However, making this happen turned out to be impossible. There were too many obstacles-

At the state level, under the new Governor, George W. Bush, the administration had changed to a more conservative bent.

I was tasked to provide reports to the state government leadership on the needs of Black and Latinx communities regarding HIV. But the reports didn’t really go anywhere. One response from the governor’s office to the status report on HIV was, “Why would we want to release or endorse a report that shows how badly we’re doing in the Black and Hispanic communities?” Other feedback was even more ridiculous, “Do you think you can re-write the report without using the word gay?”

In the mid-nineties, HIV cases continued to rise in the people of color communities. While efforts remained stagnant at the state level, we were relieved when more national funding finally became available to address the epidemic. However, several policy decisions at the

federal level regarding the allocation of HIV funds left our newly effected communities of color with an unequal, smaller share.

First, funding allocation formulas continued to factor in the total number of AIDS cases reported to the CDC, including those from the 1980s. Because so much of the death and disease affected white gay communities in the larger cities in the 1980s, the newer HIV cases reported in the South and in communities of color could not match these numbers. Continuing to count these deceased cases of AIDS did not accurately reflect the emerging state of the HIV epidemic in the mid-1990s. Although changes were made to the formulary allocation in 1996, legacy AIDS organizations currently receiving funds could still include AIDS cases from the last ten years to receive more funding. Again, this provided a skewed view of the evolving epidemic, downplaying the explosion of new cases in the South and the people of color communities.

Second, the currently funded AIDS organizations could see that the epidemic was emerging in other areas of the country that needed services. They were not about to lose their share of HIV funding. In 1996, a provision was included in HIV funding allocations to limit the loss of funds going to legacy AIDS organizations. A “hold-harmless” provision was established to assure that no entity that was currently receiving HIV funds in 1996 would receive less than 92.5% of its 1995 base amount to “avoid disruption of services to (current) organizations while still allowing for redistribution of funds.” Again, the same, mostly white-run AIDS organizations would continue to receive their funding at the expense of AIDS organizations in the people of color communities.

While the federal policies cited above reflect funding allocation decisions for Ryan White funds for HIV care and treatment, these grants made-up the largest amount of federal funding for AIDS. Ryan White funding made up 59% of all funding for HIV in 2004, about 11 billion

dollars. Funds for HIV prevention made a much smaller proportion of funding, about 9% in 1995 and decreased to 5% by 2004 (933 million).

In 2006, the United States Government Accounting Office (GAO) reviewed the processes for determining Ryan White funding allocations and recommended changes to the funding formula.

The GAO determined that the “hold-harmless” provision of allocation, as well as other modifications to funding allocations, prevented AIDS funding from shifting to areas where the epidemic had been increasing.

XXXIV. Despedidas

If you ask fifty people why the AIDS agencies based in the people of color communities disappeared, you will get fifty different answers. For me, the demise of Black and Latinx AIDS community based organizations in the 1990s was based on a combination of factors: discriminatory policy decisions for funding; conservative and homophobic backlash against our comprehensive education; and the demand for accountability by requiring scientifically based, research-oriented HIV interventions, which smaller agencies could not afford. Intentionally or not, funding formulas were skewed to favor large, mostly white run, AIDS service organizations.

The most troublesome problem with HIV funders was their inability to see how racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia affected the HIV epidemic. Latinx AIDS agencies worked to promote queer empowerment, advance sexual positivity, address racism in the queer community, and conduct outreach to the immigrant populations. Grantees couldn't see, or didn't want to see, the connection between all these factors and the rise of HIV in our communities. Most funders were leery to support such advocacy work as the state and local government funding environment became more and more conservative.

And these funding decisions were happening at a time when HIV rates in the Black and Latinx communities were skyrocketing.

Because HIV policies at the national and state level reflected favoritism to the legacy AIDS service organizations, who mostly worked with the white community, Black and Latinx AIDS organizations ran out of resources and had to close their doors. In the end, it seemed like the system had always been fixed against us. It had been ten or twelve years since I was kept standing in the back shadows of Papillon's, and while I'd moved to Austin and devoted my life to helping those in my community, it seemed as though not much had changed for us.

In 2000, the CDC reported that HIV cases among Black and Latino men who have sex with men now exceeded those among their white counterparts.

Goodbye *Mujeres Unidas* in San Antonio, you always reminded us, no demanded from us, to remember that Latinas are part of the AIDS epidemic and must always be included.

Adios *AVES* (Amigos Voluntarios en Education contra el SIDA), you did an amazing job working through the large, Latinx immigration communities of Houston that have always been ignored.

Gracias to *HACER* (Hispanic AIDS Committee for Education and Resources) you reached and educated an amazing number of Mexicans in South Texas. You were embraced and much needed by the local Latinx community.

Nationally, *LLEGO* (The National Latina/o Lesbian Gay Organization) disappeared. They provided much needed, leadership, advocacy, and organizational strategies to the Latinx communities at both the local and national level. Some of the most amazingly talented people I have ever met were part of *LLEGO*.

The *NTFAP* (National Task Force on AIDS Prevention) also went away, working to prevent the spread of HIV in the Black Gay and Bisexual communities. *NTAFP* was one of the first organizations to face a conservative backlash over its use of public funds to conduct sexual education workshops in the Black community and, because of that, lost funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Adios *CURAS* (Community United in Responding to AIDS/SIDA) emerging from a fierce Latinx community grassroots effort in San Francisco barrios to combat AIDS using our community's strength and uniqueness.

A heartbreaking adios to *El Proyecto ContraSIDA por Vida* (or simply, *El Proyecto*). The organization understood the meaning of real community engagement and that you cannot address AIDS in the Latinx community without including multipronged efforts to address racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Mission Statement of El Proyecto: Proyecto ContraSIDA is coming to you—you joto, you macha, you vestigial, you queer, you femme, you girls and boys and boygirls and girlboys de ambiente, con la fé and fearlessness that we can combat AIDS, determine our own destinos, and love ourselves and each other con dignidad, humor, y lujuria.

And a final, painful, goodbye to Informe-SIDA. The organization was not always perfect but never lacked passion for our AIDS work in the Latinx community. We had loud, passionate, internal disagreements, and infighting, of course: we were stressed, we were suffering, we were bearing witness to the death of our community. Still, no one knew the community better than our outreach workers who worked in the heart of east Austin where, at the time, no other AIDS education workers would venture.

Extracting our AIDS community work from our efforts to address racism, homophobia, sexism, and other social injustices was impossible. These social ills were all interconnected. In order to become a better HIV service provider, I had to begin the difficult work of “unlearning” the social hierarchy I had been taught growing up in Amarillo.

I remember working with my colleagues at one weekend retreat when we delved into confronting our deeply internalized ideas of racism and homophobia. I had to question every aspect of my life, every thought regarding my place and my value that had been ingrained in me...it was as if I had awakened from an illusion...as if I had taken the red pill instead of the blue one. The seismic upheaval of this new awareness was unsettling and jarring. I remember driving home from the weekend retreat, down a road I had driven hundreds of times. Suddenly, nothing looked familiar, I was lost. I pulled over on one of the side streets, parked, and began to sob. For the first time I realized, that not only had I fully believed and internalized the racism, sexism, homophobia, and social order that I had been taught, I had also played a part in promoting these untruths.

~

So, goodbye Informa-SIDA and the beautiful community activists and social warriors who taught me so much about being proud of the mestizo joto that I am, that the struggle is ongoing, and that helped lead that young man who was always standing at back of the bar at Papillon's to finally emerge from the shadows.

References

- “AIDS Booklet Stirs Senate to Halt Funds,” *Los Angeles Times*, Archives. October 14, 1987.
- “Alabama and South Carolina: Stop Segregating HIV-Positive Prisoners.” *Human Rights Watch*, April 13, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/04/13/alabama-and-south-carolina-stop-segregating-hiv-positive-prisoners>. News release.
- Anaya, Rudolfo A. *Bless me, Ultima*. New York: Warner Books, 1994.
- Araiza, Albert (Beto). “Excerpt from H.I.Vato – A Performance Piece.” *Journal of Medical Humanities*. Vol. 19, Nos. 2/3, 1998, pp. 93-98.
- Bolaño, Roberto. 2666. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- Buckley, William F. Jr. “Crucial Steps in Combating Aids Epidemic; Identify All the Carriers.” *The New York Times*. March 18, 1986.
- <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/07/16/specials/buckley-aids.html?module=inline>. Op Ed.
- Calonico, Scott, director. *When AIDS was Funny*. YouTube, Uploaded by Scott Calonico, December 2015. <https://www.scottcalonico.com/when-aids-was-funny>.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Bloomsbury, 2004.
- Doyle, Brian. *Leaping: Revelations and Epiphanies*. Loyola University Press, January 2003.
- Galarza, Ernesto. *Barrio Boy*. South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971.
- “HIV ‘Created by Scientist’ for Biological Warfare, Nobel Peace Prize Winner Says.” *KFF Health News*, October 12, 2004, <https://kffhealthnews.org/morning-breakout/dr00026171>. Press Release.
- Islas, Arturo. *The Rain God: A Desert Tale*. New York, Harper Perennial, 2003.
- Kilgannon, Corey, “Dead of AIDS and Forgotten,” *New York Times*. July 3, 2018.

López-Calvolgnacio, and Victor M. Valle. *Latinx Writing Los Angeles: Nonfiction Dispatches from a Decolonial Rebellion*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 2018.

Odets, Walt. *In the Shadow of the Epidemic*. Duke Press, 1995.

Rechy, John. *City of Night*. S.L., Profile Books Ltd. 2021.

Reza, Seema. *When the World Breaks Open*. Red Hen Press, 2016.

Rodriguez, Juana María. *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practice, Discursive Spaces*. New York: NYU Press, December 2008.

United States, Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Update: mortality attributable to HIV infection among persons 25-44 years – United States, 1994." *Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report*. February 1996.

United States, Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "HIV and AIDS – United States, 1981 – 2000." *Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report*. June 1, 2001.

United States, Government Accountability Office. "HIV/AIDS, Changes Needed to Improve the Distribution of Ryan White Care Act and Housing Funds." United States Government Accounting Office Report. February 2006.

Vita

Lawrance (Larry) Cuellar was born in Amarillo, Texas in 1960, which provides a background for many of his literary pieces in which he details growing up in the very conservative environment as a gay Latino. Mr. Cuellar attended Amarillo College, Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, and ultimately graduated from the University of Texas at Austin in 1990 with a Bachelor of Science in Advertising.

In 1998, Mr. Cuellar's essay, "Award Winning Performances" was published in the Texas Gay Publication, the *Fag Rag*, and was awarded first prize in the essay competition.

His essay, "Refuge of Tolerance," was published as a special contribution to the Austin-American Statesman in 2007, as part of their larger series entitled, "Austin Tales from the City."

In 2013, Mr. Cuellar attended "The Screenplay Workshop" by screenwriter and script consultant Jill Chamberlain and the "Community Film Writing Workshop," with Tom Willet, a lecturer and James A. Michner Fellow at the University of Texas at Austin. Mr. Cuellar has written three screenplays. *Intersex*, a 60-minute television pilot, *Miss Gay Potter County*, a full-length film screenplay, and *That One Friend*, a full-length film screenplay.

That One Friend won recognition as one of the top screenplay entries received in the 2017 and 2019 Austin Film Festival Screenwriting Competition, making it to the second round of competition (top 15% out of close to 10,000 recipients). *That One Friend* also advanced to the quarterfinal round in the 2018 ScreenCraft Drama Competition.

After graduation, Mr. Cuellar hopes to continue experimenting and using different writing genres, like screenwriting, to tell stories. Mr. Cuellar has facilitated community writing workshops in the past and would like to bring writing workshops to the elderly, people of color communities, at community senior centers and assisted living facilities.