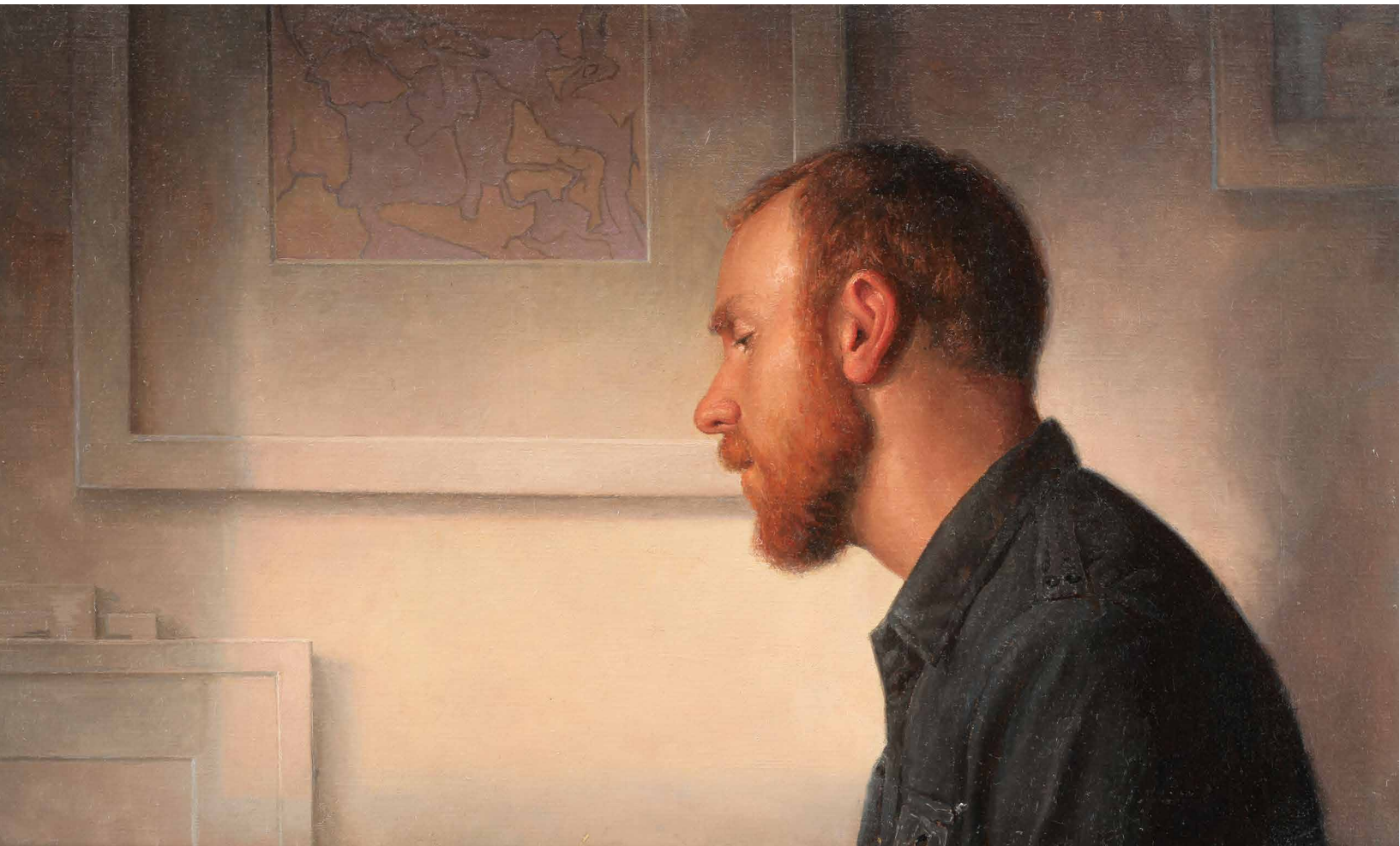


CARLA CRAWFORD

West County, 2018
Oil on linen, 15 x 27 in.



COURTESY ALMAC CAMERA IN SAN FRANCISCO

ANDREW W. M. BEIERLE

In the City of Brotherly Love

Coming out in
Philadelphia in
the late 1960s

I.

In 1967, when I was sixteen, what I now presume to have been a foreclosure unexpectedly forced my family to leave the home in which I had grown up. For no apparent reason, my father abruptly told me that we were moving into an apartment. There had been no prior talk of moving, no For Sale sign in the front yard, no visits from real estate agents or potential buyers. Just, boom! “We’re moving.”

By then it was just the two of us—my father and myself. My mother had died six years previously, and my brother and sister were away at college. We rented what was then called a garden apartment, a two-bedroom unit on the second floor of one of a dozen brick low-rises in a pleasant enough setting, though hardly a garden.

That my father faced financial difficulties should not have been a surprise to me. For most of my childhood, he had been a foreman at the U.S. Steel Fairless Works plant in suburban Philadelphia, a respectable supervisory position that provided a comfortable living, but which he ultimately lost due to his alcoholism. In recent years, he had drifted among increasingly menial and less stable jobs in factories that manufactured rolling stock for the Budd Company or packaged Twinings tea and M&M’s candy. Ultimately, he had taken each of us, in descending order by age, to our local branch of the Philadelphia National

Bank to cash in the savings accounts begun for us by our late mother and periodically increased by gifts from our maternal grandmother and our godparents at Christmas and on our birthdays. My own account held \$500, a goodly sum at the time. My older brother and sister likely lost more. But even our cumulative forfeitures could not stave off financial disaster.

The abrupt move, disconcerting enough on its own, was made more burdensome by the fact that our new apartment was located outside the boundaries of my school district. Not only was it technically improper for me to continue to attend classes at my old school, it put me too far away from a school bus stop to reasonably expect me to walk there in the morning. When he left for work, my father would drive me to my old bus stop. In the afternoon, I would have to cover the distance on foot, walking forty-five minutes to an hour during the wet and chilly months of a Pennsylvania winter and arriving at the apartment as twilight descended.

But there was a silver lining. In the unit below us lived a middle-aged widow and her preteen daughter, Victoria, who were occasionally visited by their son and brother, Theo, who lived in Center City, Philadelphia. Tall and slender, Theo had sandy hair and a hawklike visage, not unattractive but in keeping with his nervous, vigilant personality and piercing eyes. He was in his late twenties and had graduated from Rensselaer Polytech, an engineering school in upstate New York.

I eventually came to think of Theo as my fairy godmother. The gender designation is appropriate, as the term *godfather* conjures up images of a gravelly voiced Marlon Brando, while Theo could best be described as an anorexic Mrs. Doubtfire. A gay man, Theo ultimately took me under his wing and provided me with a safe space in which to explore my sexuality in the years immediately prior to Stonewall, when being gay was still something unspeakable.

More than fifty years later, it is difficult to describe the social context of coming out in the late 1960s and early 1970s to someone who did not live through it. No laws protected the rights of gay men and lesbians to jobs or housing or guaranteed them the benefits and privileges of married heterosexual couples. Indeed, the reverse was true. Gay men were being fired from jobs in the federal government and arrested simply for gathering in bars and clubs.

As a young man, I had no gay heroes or role models in politics, entertainment, or sports. No Pete Buttigieg, no Neil Patrick Harris, no Greg Louganis. In films of the 1950s and '60s, the principal resolution to a gay story line was suicide. The most visible examples of “men like that” on television were stereotypically fey entertainers like Liberace, Paul Lynde, and Charles Nelson Reilly, arch and acid tongued, whose flamboyant personas often were explained away as characters they were creating. Even so, the audience was more likely laughing *at* them rather than *with* them. To this day, I remember the shock of seeing movie critic Rex Reed for the first time on a late-night talk show in 1968 or '69. Reed was young and handsome, his dark hair fashionably coiffed, a silk neckerchief knotted above his open collar. And when he opened his mouth, a purse fell out!

It was not until Theo stepped into my life that I had a more realistic image of what a gay man was like and the kind of person I might become. He opened the door and bade me enter the hidden world I had long been seeking.

II.

There are as many coming-out stories as there are people who tell them. Some are fairy tales, some horror stories. But regardless of content or style, I would suggest that there are three phases common to the process, three acts in the narrative arc of each story: knowing what you like, understanding that it is different, and ultimately discovering how to embrace it.

Each phase has its own characteristics. Phase one—knowing what you like—is the most private, the most personal. You know, without being told, what you like, what makes you happy. For example, there was never a time I liked eating vegetables. It was not a conscious choice. For whatever reason, be it the structure of my brain or the chemistry of my mouth, I hated the way vegetables tasted and would do anything to avoid eating them. I'd sidle up to my mother while she was cooking and ask, coyly, “Do I have to eat *those?*” pointing to lima beans or brussels sprouts. I'd beg, I'd plead, I'd cry. I'd get sent to my room rather than swallow one forkful of kapusta, a vile cabbage-based concoction favored by my Hungarian grandmother.

Likewise, no one ever taught me to find boys more

interesting than girls, men more alluring than women. No one ever offered me a choice or even told me there was a choice to be made. But I know that even as a child of five or six, I was so intensely attracted to the teenaged son of my godparents that I had an emotional meltdown as they attempted to return to New York City after a visit to our suburban Philadelphia home. I was fixated upon him so intently that I remember being absolutely fascinated when his parents said he was maturing so fast, so *potently*, that they had to extend his bed by several inches to accommodate his hormonal growth spurt. I am not saying I was sexual at that age, but I was emotionally drawn to him in ways so powerful that the memory remains visceral more than sixty-five years later.

In phase two, your wants and needs run up against the expectations of the world and are deemed different at best, aberrant at worst. In my case, it was abundantly clear to the neighborhood boys a year or two older than me that I was a sissy. Their name for me was Andrietta, warbled in an almost operatic singsong as I passed by, even if I was on the other side of the street. What made the taunts worse was that they came from the very boys I most admired, most desired, with downy cheeks, broad shoulders, and slender, tapered physiques. It was this jarring rebuke of my unspoken affection that first informed me that I was different and that everybody knew it, from the bully Bobby Wagner to the tech school hoodlums at the bus stop to the sadistic, smirking gym teacher who called attention to my lack of athletic skills in front of the entire class.

The final phase of coming out is both the most difficult and the most public. How do you take what you know about yourself and what you have learned about the world and use it to get what you need to thrive? Are there other people who feel the same way? Where are they and how do you find them?

III.

One rainy Saturday afternoon in March of 1968, Theo came up to our apartment to “chat”—not something one might expect of a man some ten years older than me. I was lying on my bed reading *GQ* magazine when he entered my room, and I remained there as we talked—coquettishly prone on my belly. I was at the time dating Sandy, the first

of three girls with pageboy haircuts and Peter Pan collars on whom I had more or less chaste crushes in high school. For obvious reasons, the relationships never lasted long or progressed past passionless kisses, but they provided me with evidence that I was attractive enough to elicit attention of a romantic nature at a time in my emotional development when that was important. When I asked Theo if he might be willing to drive me to a dance at Sandy's United Methodist church that night, he graciously obliged.

Although I did not think so at the time, I was an attractive young man, with blue eyes and honey-blond hair. I had my mother's high cheekbones and clear skin that I nurtured with pricey Neutrogena gel soap to avoid the acne that had scarred my brother's face. Despite my aversion to athletics of any stripe, I was well formed and effortlessly slender. Through my part-time job at our local library, I found myself in the company of two brothers who spent their weekends surfing at the Jersey Shore. (Their mother worked at the library and had gotten them jobs there.) A longtime friend once described the first time he saw me entering our high school journalism class after having spent a week with Brian and Terry on a surfing trip to Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, at the end of the summer—nut brown, golden maned, effervescently confident. Nothing could have been further from the truth. I was shy and lonely, essentially friendless. But my vulnerability, my high-pitched voice, and my effeminate mien, which labeled me an outcast among most boys at school, did not stigmatize me in Theo's world.

At some point, Theo gave me his telephone number and invited me to visit him if I ever came into the city, which I did with some frequency in my junior and senior years in high school. I was a brighter-than-average student and often found myself bored with my classes and my life in the bland proto-utopian suburb in which I found myself. At least once a month, I skipped school and took the forty-five-minute train ride into Philadelphia, finding myself among the mostly male morning commuters on their way to work, the train coach redolent of cigarette smoke and Aqua Velva.

Beyond boredom, my motivation for skipping school usually came from the prospect of a particularly onerous phys ed activity at school—wrestling class or climbing the rope to tag the gymnasium ceiling, both of which terrified me. The next day, I would forge my father's signature on

an excuse note, knowing that each time I did so, I moved one step closer to reaching a magic number of absences that would result in me being held back at graduation. Not knowing the exact number, I was still more than willing to risk potentially catastrophic consequences for some excitement, a taste of personal freedom, a foray into the independence of adulthood. I knew there had to be something more to the world, and I hoped that I might find it in Philadelphia.

I didn't do anything in particular on these impromptu adventures. After spending seventy cents each way for a train ticket, I rarely had enough left over for a movie or museum admission and only occasionally splurged on a hot dog or a slice of pizza and a small Orange Julius drink. Instead, I whiled away endless hours in bookstores and small, musty storefronts peddling inexpensive gewgaws from exotic locales.

One favored destination was a stretch of sidewalk near city hall—a makeshift encampment of corrugated tin newsstands bursting with newspapers, magazines, cigarettes, candy, gum, and mints. Deep within their darkened corners, tantalizingly out of reach, hung small black-and-white physique magazines featuring what appeared to be naked or nearly naked men, oiled up and posed on sheer cliff outcroppings or sandy beaches, with massive chests, arms upraised as if to hold the world upon their shoulders. I was mesmerized, circling the block endlessly to pass by, over and over, slowing down, stopping to pretend to scan newspaper headlines, approaching from different angles to get a better view, trying desperately not to arouse the suspicions of the eagle-eyed news vendors with their ink-stained fingers and blackened change aprons, ever on the lookout for shoplifters. In my imagination, these unremarkable newsstands promised to be portals to exotic lands, like doors to secret gardens or magical wardrobes or like Chinese laundries that served as false fronts to international centers of espionage. All I needed to do was ask for one of the physique magazines and the ground would open up beneath my feet and, like Alice, I would tumble into Wonderland.

I could not know it at the time, but physique magazines of the 1950s and '60s “acted as a means of sexual self-identification and served as an entryway into the gay community,” according to David K. Johnson, writing in the *Journal of Social History*. “Countless men who came

of age in Cold War America vividly remember their first encounter with physique magazines as part of their journey to self-identification as homosexual.”

Try as I might, I never mustered up the courage to ask for the latest issue of *Young Adonis* or *Grecian Guild Pictorial*, but I found other sources of information and inspiration. To the more determined seeker of wisdom, the city offered access to the burgeoning gay literature of the time. I’m not talking about gay pulp fiction, cheaply produced, with cartoonish covers and titles such as *Four on the Floor*, *Hardhat Fever*, and *New Boy in Town*. Such tripe was generally available only in adult bookstores, which I was too young to enter. Instead, in my mid-to-late teens, I discovered works by such authors as John Rechy and Malcolm Purdy. Rechy’s *Numbers* and Purdy’s *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* both appeared in 1967 and featured almost identical cover models with lean, nearly hairless physiques of the type possessed by John Phillip Law, a B-movie actor noted for appearances in *Barbarella* and *The Love Machine*. I unearthed these books—and others—with the fervor of a truffle hog rooting out the gourmet delicacy whose aroma is said to mimic the natural sex hormones of the male pig.

IV.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1951, the first year of the second half of the twentieth century. My star sign is Leo, my cohort baby boomer, my preferred decor mid-century modern. Before I turned two, my parents moved us to Levittown, Pennsylvania, a housing development that has become synonymous with the suburbanization of America. Created out of gently rolling farmland in Bucks County, some twenty-five miles northeast of Philadelphia, Levittown seemed like the promised land to postwar veterans like my father, who were eligible for government-backed mortgages. Neighborhoods of nearly identical ranch-style homes, differentiated only by the color of their Necco-hued siding and their orientation to the street (one parallel, the next perpendicular), blanketed the land as far as one could see. Homes were clustered into sections with fantastical names like Snowball Gate, Vermilion Hill, and Dogwood Hollow. Levittown—both the actual place and the concept—has long been derided for being appallingly bland and uniform. Until 1957, it was all white by developer

covenant. The most exotic kid in my elementary school was a boy named Juha, whose family came from Finland.

Philadelphia, founded nearly three hundred years earlier, was ancient by comparison. Diverse and gritty, it beckoned my teenaged self with its urban energy and hints of unexplored exoticism. Philadelphia usually gets a bum rap from people who see it as a second- or third-rate version of New York City. But for me, especially as a teenager, the City of Brotherly Love was more than big and sophisticated enough, with charming points of historical interest that rivaled those of Boston, the accessible pastoral beauty of in-town Fairmount Park, and the neoclassical Philadelphia Museum of Art crowning one end of the Parisian-influenced boulevard of Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

In the late 1960s, Theo’s North Twenty-Second Street neighborhood, which shared the street with the mammoth crenellated fortress of Eastern State Penitentiary, seemed somewhat alien to a suburban boy like me. A ghetto on the cusp of gentrification, it featured abandoned rowhouses, some burned out, which could be had for as little as \$2,500 to \$5,000. They alternated with the orderly, fresh-scrubbed facades of others on the block, presenting a gap-toothed smile to passersby. In retrospect, it seemed the perfect place for me to explore a new life, metaphorically rising phoenixlike from the ashes of a constrained and often bleak suburban adolescence I was more than willing to torch.

Theo’s house in the seven-hundred block was a magnet for young men. For some reason, perhaps as simple as his personal taste, it was especially popular with sailors from the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, a large and historic facility on the Delaware River on the eastern edge of the city. He ruled the roost firmly but with love—like a house-mother of a fraternity or the matron of a home for wayward boys. I was by far his youngest protégé.

Theo was rehabbing the three-story rowhouse one room at a time, beginning with the ground-floor kitchen, the heart of the house. In the living room, the walls had been covered with a fresh layer of Sheetrock but remained unpainted, save for splotches of primer and paint samples of various hues. But amid the confusion sat a baby grand piano, which lent an air of sophistication to the otherwise jumbled decor, in much the same way a gay man might scrimp on basics like socks or underwear to afford a cashmere sweater.

In the master and guest bedrooms on the second floor, Theo was taking the walls down to expose the brick beneath, as was au courant. The bathroom would require many months of work and a major infusion of cash. Below the sink, awash with mostly feminine beauty products, one could glimpse views of the kitchen through water-stained holes in the linoleum. The third floor was essentially one large room, stripped to the studs and revealing the lath and plaster beneath, occasionally used as a sleeping space of last resort.

The first time I spent the night at Theo’s home, he and his “friend,” Dennis, made dinner and then took me to a gay bar. I was thrilled but terrified at the prospect. Assuming it would be somewhat seedy, if not downright dangerous, I asked Theo if it would be safe for me to wear one of my prized possessions, a gold identification bracelet, monogrammed, with a tiny rectangular Swank watch inset into it. Although he laughed and assured me it would be fine to do so, I quietly left it behind before heading out into the night. How they managed to get me in, I don’t know, but I do remember the doorman muttering under his breath, “They get younger every year.” No one dared speak to me. I was clearly jailbait.

When we got home, Theo and Dennis retired to the master bedroom while I slept on the sofa, achingly aware that there was only one bed in their room, imagining what might be taking place within. I suppose that had I knocked on their door, I would have been invited in, but I couldn’t muster the courage to do so. That was part of Theo’s charm. He revealed a world of possibilities to me but never forced me to partake.

It was not until several months later, in my senior year, that I had my first gay sexual experience. Theo, Dennis, and I were joined for dinner by a young sailor named Robbie, an adorable ginger-haired Scotsman who was meant as something of a blind date. It was winter and, on the way home from the restaurant, I huddled against Robbie for warmth in the back seat of Theo’s car, one of my hands slipping into a gap between the buttons on his Navy peacoat. He rubbed his stubbled cheek against mine. We kissed. At home, when it came time to go to bed, I followed Robbie upstairs to the guest room instead of bedding down as usual on the sofa. Curious but clueless, I was lucky that the only thing that was required of me was my presence

and my consent. The next day, I took the train home to the suburbs, carrying with me a candle in a wax-spattered Chianti bottle I had filched from the restaurant, somehow knowing it would be a night to remember.

It was not, as I might have hoped, the beginning of a romance. Robbie shipped out soon afterward. So, despite having been officially initiated into gay sex, I was not what one might consider “sexually active.” The visit to the gay bar was not repeated—at least not regularly—leading me to believe that perhaps Theo had known the doorman at that particular club on that particular night and somehow made arrangements to get me in.

For the first couple of years that I knew Theo, I was still in high school. On at least one occasion, I encountered school friends at the Levittown train station on their way downtown for a college basketball game at the Palestra. I blushed to imagine what they would think of my plans for the night: hanging out with gay men eight to ten years my senior. Sometimes we would simply go to a movie. Together we swooned over Robert Redford in *Downhill Racer* in 1969 and debated, quite vigorously, the portrayal of gay men in the 1970 film version of *The Boys in the Band*. While Theo was away at work, I would pore over copies of *After Dark* magazine or thumb my way through his Colt Studios photo packs, featuring impossibly handsome, muscular men in poses reminiscent of those in the physique magazines I had coveted in vain only a couple of years earlier. I picked up the argot of the gay world, cringing at the use of the pronoun *she* for other gay men who may have been too feminine for Theo’s liking. While he sometimes alluded to various gay fetishes in our conversations, he also introduced me to a gay couple who lived two doors down the street, which gave me my first glimpse of what a long-term gay relationship might look like and to which I aspired.

There was the occasional sexual encounter. Theo’s boss once took an interest in me—and then complained to him that he had gotten no sleep. And there were more sailors. (If I had written a sitcom about those years, it would be a cross between *McHale’s Navy* and *Will & Grace*.) A pair of lovers from the naval shipyard once invited me to join them in an excruciatingly drawn-out game of strip poker in which I simply could not lose the final hand—until I left the room and fixed myself a drink to give them the opportunity to stack the deck.

V.

By the summer of 1971, I had known Theo for four years. I had finished my sophomore year at Penn State and would turn twenty in August. I didn't have a summer job, principally because I didn't have a driver's license (I had failed the test not once but twice), and there were no job opportunities within walking distance of my home in Levittown.

That said, my father didn't want me to lie idly about the house, so I arranged to take a summer-school class at Temple University in Philadelphia. Three times a week, I took the train downtown for an ethics seminar. Among other texts, I studied W. Dwight Oberholtzer's just-released *Is Gay Good? Ethics, Theology, and Homosexuality*, a collection of twelve essays across a broad spectrum of religious thought that, according to the back-cover blurb, "opens up one of America's *major undiscussed* problems for frank debate."

I spent many nights and most weekends at Theo's house during the summer session, but once, close to Labor Day, I found myself waiting for an afternoon train home at Suburban Station, adjacent a notoriously cruisy area known as Penn Center Plaza. By this time, I had accrued a certain amount of street smarts. Urban gay life at the time was a constant adventure, a moveable feast, if you knew where to look. One night earlier in the summer, having found myself stranded in the city after missing the last train home and being unable to contact Theo, I made my way to Penn Center Plaza to hustle a place to spend the night. I went home with a man in late middle age, who, before we hit the sack, removed his dentures and his toupee, aging another ten years instantly. As I tell the story today, I waited for him to unscrew his wooden leg—fortunately in vain.

I wasn't on the prowl that afternoon after class, however. Despite the prevailing gay philosophy that sex was a numbers game, championed by authors like John Rechy, I wasn't yet that brazen—or that single-minded. But on that day, I found myself in conversation with a fellow traveler. He was of average height and weight, pale and pink in complexion, with sandy hair, cut short, and blue eyes—attractive, even cute, in a collegiate sort of way. He wore a light-blue seersucker suit, suggesting he was a white-collar worker but with a job that was probably mundane—an accountant or actuary, likely not a high-level executive, who would have worn a more conservative pin-striped suit in

a summer-weight fabric. I had sat next to men like him on the train many times on my way to and from the city.

A while later, I hung back as he checked us into the nearby Philadelphia Sheraton hotel, the lobby bracingly cool in contrast to the bright, hot, late summer afternoon on the plaza. My recollection is that the sex was perfunctory. I was still quite new to this, my repertoire limited mainly to being the passive partner in oral sex. He was modest and a bit clumsy. There was some kissing, lips closed. He did not take off his white Fruit of the Loom T-shirt during sex, and it clung to his torso, growing clammy in the arctic blast of the air conditioner. I recall the scent of Johnson's Baby Powder, likely an antidote to the prickly heat rash he might be prone to when the tender skin of his thighs chafed against the trousers of his seersucker suit in the humid summer air.

What I remember *most* clearly is our postcoital conversation. I suppose I confounded him. He may initially have thought I was a hustler, even though I didn't look like one. I was clean-cut, with modishly long blond hair, wearing madras shorts and a polo shirt (which, come to think of it, may have been as exciting to him as a girl's Catholic school uniform and bobby socks would be to a straight man). When it became clear that I wasn't going to ask for money, he wanted to know why I had agreed to come to the hotel with him. What was in it for me?

No one had ever asked me to explain myself before, to explain why I wasn't ashamed of being gay . . . why on *earth* I would agree to have sex with him without recompense.

The most significant difference between us was that while I was not terribly experienced, being gay was not an issue for me. I was simply horny. There was no guilt. I had turned eighteen in August of 1969, a little more than a month after the Stonewall riots, and I liked to say that I came of age at the same time as the Pride movement. The uproarious zeitgeist of the late 1960s was certainly an essential element in my coming-out story. In the spring of 1969, I had skipped school with several friends to see *Hair* on Broadway. With its groundbreaking references to sodomy and fellatio, *Hair* brought previously taboo behaviors to the forefront of the social conversation. Being gay seemed natural to me. It was what was "happening," a generational tidal wave that would wash away the strictures and mores of the 1940s and '50s, and I was happy to be a part of it.

But how did I explain that to this man? He was older than Theo and the other gay men I knew, though not as old as my father. I imagine he was in his late thirties—too young to have served in World War II; barely old enough to have seen action in Korea. He would have graduated from college in the early 1950s and come of age amid the strictures and constraints of the Eisenhower years. He likely would have been shocked by the turning of the tide in the 1960s. He would not have smoked pot or dropped acid, as I had done by then. And, unlike me, he would have been confused by his feelings for other men—even more so than I had been four years earlier, before I had met Theo. The emotional and psychological differences between someone who was nineteen and someone just shy of forty were at the time far greater than twenty years might have suggested. An entire generation had intervened between the two of us. The government witch hunts and purges of the 1950s seemed medieval to me, ancient history, but to him they were quite real.

I suppose I could have pulled *Is Gay Good?* out of my backpack and begun sermonizing. But to be honest, I found the book pompous and ponderous even then. And it was already irrelevant to me; someone who had abandoned religion did not need a *theology*. I agreed with Oberholtzer's notion, in his introductory essay, that the process of coming out "is to a large extent unplanned. No one . . . sits down on a specific day with a pencil and pad, to scheme, move by move, the capture of his sexuality." Not knowing my host's religious background, I risked raising more questions than I answered.

Unable to think of any other explanation, my response was to say that I (daring to speak for members of my entire generation) attributed my lack of guilt to living under the threat of nuclear annihilation. I actually *said* that to him: I was seeking sex, love, connection, because I genuinely feared imminent—and instant—death.

It seems a bit overly dramatic in retrospect, but in my defense, there was some truth to it. In my youth, we were saturated with messages about the atomic bomb. In school we had air-raid drills in which we were marched out into the nearly windowless corridors of our elementary school to "duck and cover," which may have kept us safe in an earthquake or tornado but almost certainly would not have mattered one iota in an atomic blast. I had seen full-color

cutaways of fallout shelters on the cover of *LIFE* magazine, watched *Twilight Zone* episodes about neighbor turning on neighbor to gain access to a backyard bomb shelter, viewed *Fail Safe* and *On the Beach* not as Hollywood fantasies but almost as prescient documentaries. It seemed plausible to him. I think he bought it.

I would have liked to have asked him to let me keep the hotel room overnight to avoid going home and having to see my father, but of course that was out of the question. And neither of us entertained the notion of exchanging telephone numbers. And so, we walked back to Suburban Station together in an awkward silence, the late-August light still bright and the air only slightly cooler.

Even today, I wonder what was he thinking on that train ride home. Would he have called his wife to say he would be arriving late? Would he have concocted a story as to why he had been delayed? A last-minute meeting? A balky adding machine? There would be no telltale lipstick on his collar, and I did not wear either cologne or aftershave, but he likely would have found some excuse to shower before joining his wife in bed that night to guarantee there was no scent of boy on him.

It may seem odd to wonder if he thought about me for longer than a day or so—let alone fifty years. If he is still alive, he would be ninety years old, at least. Did he cherish the memory of that day—even for a while? Or was it just one of many such assignments in a long and closeted life, among similar experiences too plentiful—or too painful—to recall? Or could it have been a moment of enlightenment, an epiphany, a call to action? Might I have been as important a guide to him as Theo had been to me—had the ruby slipper been on the other foot?

VI.

These memories of my formative years in Philadelphia were prompted by a trip to the city in 2022 for a gathering of writers and educators, my longest visit in more than forty years. In my free time, I retraced my steps from Suburban Station to Theo's neighborhood, now a thriving arts enclave that encompasses the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Franklin Institute, the Rodin Museum, and the Barnes Foundation, with home prices on North Twenty-Second Street in the \$500,000 range.

After graduating from college, I intended on making a life for myself in Philadelphia. But the end of a relationship with a man who lived there—a broken heart from which Theo’s friendship helped me to recover—made me cast my lot elsewhere. I lived and worked in Orlando, Providence, Atlanta, and Washington, DC, before retiring to California in 2010. Obviously much has changed in the intervening years, for me personally and for the LGBTQ+ community—including the way we reference ourselves.

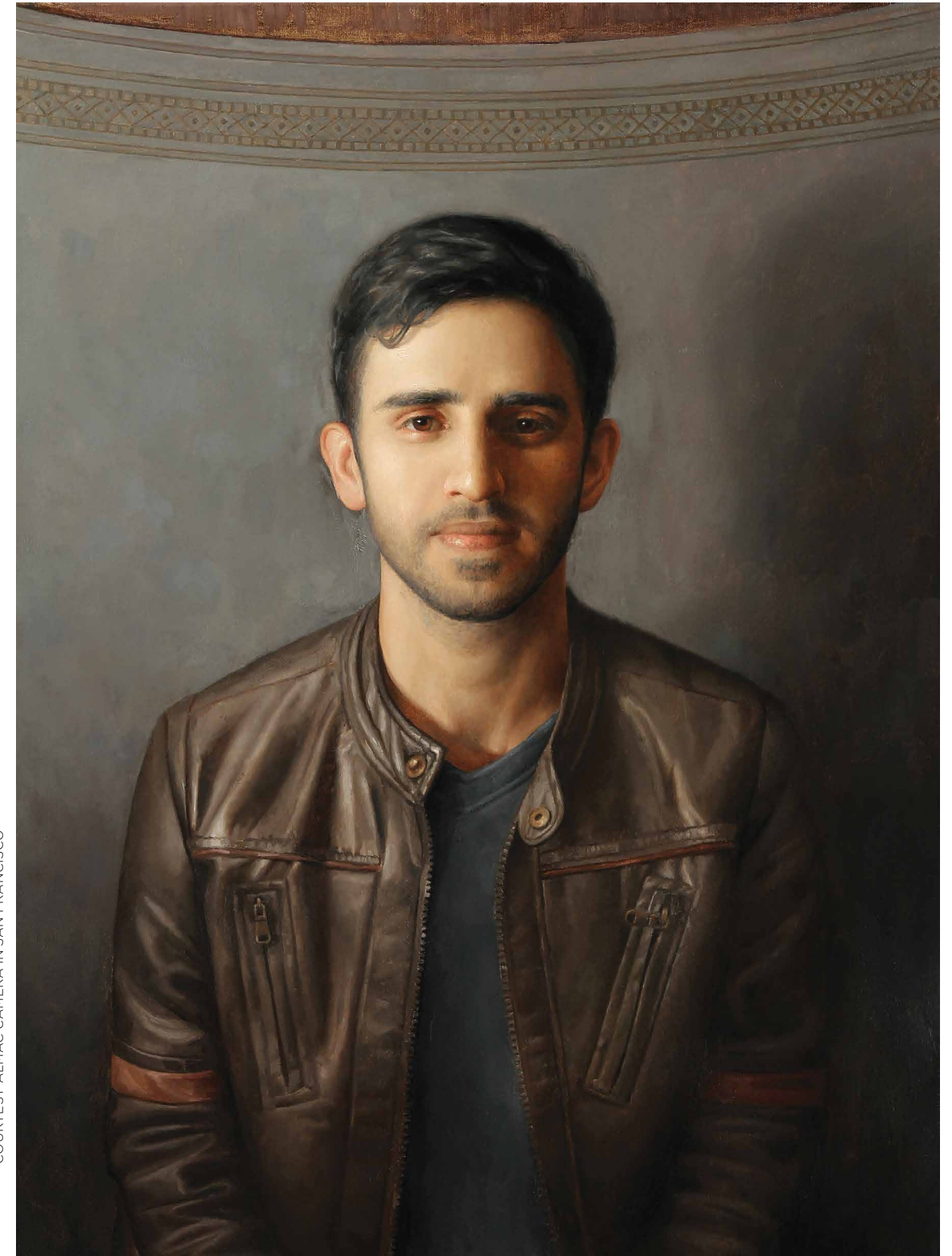
The decades since have been volatile, with progress sometimes inciting a fiery regressive backlash. Half a century after I came out in Philadelphia—post-AIDS, post-gay marriage—gender issues in an infinite spectrum of varieties are perhaps even more troublesome now than in the past because of their very visibility, the revelation of their complexity, and the rapid (one might even say rabid) growth of the radical Right.

One of the perquisites of a long life is the opportunity to review, perhaps even to reframe, our most significant experiences. We remember what is important to us, what is meaningful. We remember what made us happy—and sometimes what damaged us. Being gay has been central to my identity and my life, and it has been an overwhelmingly positive thing. Revisiting my coming-out process and my friendship with Theo—our chance meeting in particular—has made me all the more grateful for the love and support he gave me at the beginning of a remarkable journey.

Andrew W. M. Beierle is the author of *The Winter of Our Discothèque* (Kensington, 2002), winner of a 2002 Lambda Literary Award (Lammy) for Romance, and *First Person Plural* (Kensington, 2007), a finalist for the 2007 Gay Fiction Lammy. He lives on the Central Coast of California with his dog, Bandit.

CARLA CRAWFORD

Ajmal; Refugee from Afghanistan, 2016
Oil on linen, 18 x 24 in.



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