Flawed Families in Biblical Times

They’re wonderful now
but when I told them I was gay,

my mother demanded God’s reasons
for striking her grandchild-bearer dead,
manly loins fertile and righteous impeded
by my barren inclinations, her last straight hope
zooming past as she traveled
the stages of grief from the passenger seat,
my future like a tornado-ravaged town
with collapsed houses on the bodies
of grandsons and granddaughters,
crumpled white picket fences
wrapped around the dead who
looked like Tom Hanks in Philadelphia.

My father took the proactive approach
and said if I tried I could find a butch woman
with a mustache or a petite little thing,
small-chested, like a freshman,
he could coach me around the bases,
close your eyes, son, and you’ll never know.

My grandpa spoke of it
with the hushed words of a repressed war memory,
I was Hitler, I was Mussolini.
He saw me in grotesque scenes with a fat man and a little boy,
pink triangles lost on his sensibilities.
I was Hiroshima aftermath to his peacetime America,
pacific-rim foreign on toes farm-kid strong,
the flag at the post office flying half mast while
taps played solemn and survivors wept.

My grandmother didn’t change at all,
stringing me out with sugar and butter creamed together
until I saw visions of her worshiped in another time,
a one-named siren in a bar surrounded by my people,
dirty jokes and colored hair,
God you would have loved her.
She said homosexuality is genetic,
a decadent recipe passed down to
 diabetic queens of the family.
 I never went hungry.
 Thank you, Grandma.

 I still wonder what he’d say, my brother,
 who arranged my GI Joes in sexual positions,
 who explained biology
 with pornographic magazines,
 who knew before anyone but left
 before I could truly make an appearance.
 When we’d play hide and seek as children
 I always ended up in the closet.

 He would help me out gently.

 I think it was a sign.

Bryan Borland is the founder and publisher of Sibling Rivalry Press, and the founding editor of Assaracus, one of the only print journals dedicated to gay poetry. His third book, DIG, was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award.

from My Life as Adam (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2010)
Joshua Jennifer Espinoza

Birthday Suits

I turned twenty-four and
dad decided to take
another stab at making
a man out of me.
On his command, I drove us
out to Hollywood where
you could get three sets of suits
for a hundred bucks.
*What a steal!* he exclaimed
as though his enthusiasm
would fertilize
something that never
existed within me.
Regardless, I followed him
into the outlet and I
allowed him to wrap
the cheap, heavy thread
around my tired shoulders,
to salt the wound of my body
with his idea of truth.
I let it happen
but I did not forget
what I was
beneath the cover of the flesh:

five million faggy mountains
slicing through fields full
of dreamed-up tongues and
unnamable bluish grasses
each blade the length
of a universe
stretching inward toward
a singular point
of
life-sustaining unlogic—

Dressing myself behind
the heavy polyester curtain,
I listened
as dad held the suit guy hostage
with the oft-told tale
of the night he encountered
real-life Biblical demons,
how at first he felt their presence
tightening inside his chest,
and then witnessed them crawling
up and down his walls
and how he prayed and cursed them
in the name of the lord
until they dissolved
like sugar into the dark
And he never said this, but I
knew he was convinced they
came for me next
    and colored my nails
    and stretched out my hair
    and adorned me with flowers
    and forced my inside places to whisper
        woman    woman    woman
    late each night at the
    moment just
    before sleep
And I knew he knew
who I was becoming
and I understood
what the suits were for     So
I tossed them in the back
of my trunk
where they sat
waiting for years
and the day I sold that car off
    those suits were still in there

Joshua Jennifer Espinoza is a trans woman poet with two collections out and a third due in 2024. Her work has been featured in Split Lip, The Nation, Poetry Magazine, and elsewhere.

from Poetry (April 2019)
The film is nearly ten years old by the time we watch it in World Cultures. My classmates: all girls, all bored. I try to feign boredom as a way to fit in, but it’s hard to hide what I’m feeling. It’s also hard to explain. Yentl wants to study, so she cuts her hair and changes her clothes, pretends to be a boy named Anshel. But she’s too pretty to be a boy, isn’t she? I’ve never seen a boy with cheekbones like that. When I look at her, either way—long-haired girl she was, short-haired boy she becomes—my stomach pangs like it’s lunchtime, but it’s only nine a.m. Later, when Anshel kisses Hadass, the woman s/he’s supposed to marry, the pang becomes a tug, and the tug is lower than my stomach, hard and sharp like my zipper is caught beneath me, and there’s no way to pull it up. You should have seen the light—so soft, almost angelic. Their faces in silhouette as they kiss and kiss, turning their heads every time their noses bump. Hadass wants to do more than kiss, but Anshel won’t let things go any further. I want to know what doing more, what going further means, exactly. I have never seen two women kiss like this before, and every time I think about their mouths coming together in the semi-light and the semi-dark, I feel that tug again. It means something that isn’t meant for words. Instead, I thank Ms. Curran for showing us the film.

This is another day, after class, no one else around. I say, “It’s so nice to see something progressive for once. My parents won’t even let me watch Picket Fences because of what happened last spring.” She doesn’t know the show, doesn’t know what happened. “Oh, just because—well, the two teenaged girls—they kissed each other.” Ms. Curran is so nice, so progressive. She isn’t a nun, and she kept her maiden name even after she got married. She chose not to have children and made sure we always wrote Ms., not Miss, the Gloria Steinem way. But now I see how her brow crinkles, how she twists her head like a corkscrew. “This isn’t like that,” she says. “Yentl isn’t a lesbian.” I startle to hear her say the word aloud. “No—I mean, I know—but she played those scenes with Hadass.” Ms. Curran twists her head again. “Hadass isn’t a lesbian either. She really believes Anshel is a man.” Instead of a tug, a sinking feeling, like a coin dropping into a well. “But—Barbra Streisand is a woman, and she kissed the other actress—I don’t remember her name. In the end, it’s still two women kissing, even if one of them is wearing a disguise.” Ms. Curran becomes more adamant now, says it more firmly this time: “No, it isn’t, Julie. Intentions matter. Reasons matter. All Yentl wants is a good education, and all Hadass wants is a good husband. End of story.”

Julie Marie Wade is the author of over a dozen books of poetry and creative nonfiction, including a Lambda Award Winner for Lesbian Memoir.

from Brevity (May 2020)
Frank Bidart

Queer

Lie to yourself about this and you will forever lie about everything.

Everybody already knows everything so you can lie to them. That's what they want.

But lie to yourself, what you will lose is yourself. Then you turn into them.

*

For each gay kid whose adolescence was America in the forties or fifties the primary, the crucial scenario forever is coming out—or not. Or not. Or not. Or not. Or not.

*

Involuted velleities of self-erasure.

*

Quickly after my parents died, I came out. Foundational narrative designed to confer existence.

If I had managed to come out to my mother, she would have blamed not
me, but herself.

*The door through which you were shoved out into the light*

*was self-loathing and terror.*

*Thank you, terror!*

You learned early that adults' genteel fantasies about human life were not, for you, life. You think sex is a knife driven into you to teach you that.

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Born in 1939, Frank Bidart is a multiple award-winning poet, including the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. His latest book, *Against Silence*, was published in 2021.

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When did you first know you were bisexual?

I will never know how the pleasure I give feels as a body receives it.

I fear strangers, Naomi, even the ones I love. I count their turned backs on the subway.

Some nights I fear even the subway itself—or is it my reflection in the yellowed glass, how I cannot see the city moving beyond me?

I want each round mirror to open as a window might.

Perhaps I always knew, but I mistrusted my knowing. I once stacked my journals to the height of a beloved and embraced them.

Every poem I’ve read to you has been written in this direction. Each word a line on the map I haven’t yet finished that leads me to you.

In college, I got ready for a party with two women I loved who loved each other.

I watched Diana flip Jean’s hair from her freckled shoulders before zipping her into her dress:

the same gesture I’d made in the mirror, alone, before I arrived at their apartment.

I watched them pass Jean’s mascara wand fluently between them, one’s licked fingers curling the other’s lashes, and a question split me at my spine—

like a hand gently cracking a new book’s cover, ready to understand.

Rachel Mennies is the author of *The Naomi Letters* and *The Glad Hand of God Points Backwards*, a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award.

from Poem-a-Day on poets.org (May 28, 2021)
Darrel Alejandro Holnes

Black Parade

Coming out isn’t the same as coming to America
except for the welcome parade
put on by ghosts like your granduncle Roy
who came to New York from Panamá in the 50s
and was never heard of again
and by the beautiful gays who died of AIDS in the 80s
whose cases your mother studied
in nursing school. She sent you to the US to become
an “American” and you worry
she’ll blame this country
for making you a “marica,”
a “Mary,” like it might have made your uncle Roy.
The words “America” and “marica” are so similar!
Exchange a few vowels
and turn anyone born in this country
queer. I used to watch Queer as Folk as a kid
and dream of sashaying away
the names bullies called me in high school
for being Black but not black enough, or the kind of black they saw on TV:
black-ish, negro claro, cueco.
It was a predominately white school,
the kind of white the Spanish brought to this continent
when they cozened my ancestors from Africa.
There was no welcome parade for my ancestors back then
so, they made their own procession, called it “carnaval”
and fully loaded the streets with egungun costumes,
holly batá drum rhythms, shouting and screaming in tongues,
and booty dancing in the spirit.
I don’t want to disappear in New York City,
lost in a drag of straightness.
So instead, I proceed
to introduce my mother to my first boyfriend
after I’ve moved her to Texas
and helped make her a citizen.
Living is trafficking through ghosts in a constant march
toward a better life, welcoming the next in line.
Thriving is wining the perreo to soca on the
Noah’s Arc pride parade float, like you’re
the femme bottom in an early aughts gay TV show.
Surviving is (cross-)dressing as an American marica,
until you’re a ‘merica or a ‘murica
and your ancestors see
you’re the king-queen of Mardi Gras,
purple scepter, crown, and krewe.

Darrel Alejandro Holnes is a Black Panamanian American poet and playwright. He and his work have appeared in Callaloo, Time Magazine, and the Kennedy Center College Theater Festival.

from Poem-a-Day on poets.org (September 25, 2020)
Robin Becker

A History of Sexual Preference

We are walking our very public attraction through eighteenth-century Philadelphia. I am simultaneously butch girlfriend and suburban child on a school trip, Independence Hall, 1775, home to the Second Continental Congress. Although she is wearing her leather jacket, although we have made love for the first time in a hotel room on Rittenhouse Square, I am preparing my teenage escape from Philadelphia, from Elfreth’s Alley, the oldest continuously occupied residential street in the nation, from Carpenters’ Hall, from Congress Hall, from Graff House where the young Thomas Jefferson lived, summer of 1776. In my starched shirt and waistcoat, in my leggings and buckled shoes, in postmodern drag, as a young eighteenth-century statesman, I am seventeen and tired of fighting for freedom and the rights of men. I am already dreaming of Boston—city of women, demonstrations, and revolution on a grand and personal scale.

Then the maître d’ is pulling out our chairs for brunch, we have the surprised look of people who have been kissing and now find themselves dressed and dining in a Locust Street townhouse turned café, who do not know one another very well, who continue with optimism to pursue relationship. *Eternity* may simply be our mortal default mechanism set on *hope* despite all evidence. In this mood, I roll up my shirtsleeves and she touches my elbow. I refuse the seedy view from the hotel window. I picture instead their silver inkstands, the hoopskirt factory on Arch Street, the Wireworks, their eighteenth-century herb gardens, their nineteenth-century row houses restored with period door knockers. Step outside.
We have been deeded the largest landscaped space within a city anywhere in the world. In Fairmount Park, on horseback, among the ancient ginkgoes, oaks, persimmons, and magnolias, we are seventeen and imperishable, cutting classes May of our senior year. And I am happy as the young Tom Jefferson, unbuttoning my collar, imagining his power, considering my healthy body, how I might use it in the service of the country of my pleasure.

Born in 1951, Robin Becker has written eight collections of poetry, including the Lambda Literary Award-winner All-American Girl.