

*Bryan Borland*

## **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)

Julie Marie Wade

## Yentl

(October 4-8, 1993)

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.

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.

from *Half-Light: Collected Poems 1965-2016* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017)

*Rachel Mennies*  
**September 23, 2016**

*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,  
holy 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*.

from *All-American Girl* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996)