

Praise for Dennis Cooper

‘[A] brilliant, triumphantly lurid writer as well as a supremely talented, elegant stylist whose prose is smart and nervy. He might also be the last literary outlaw in mainstream American fiction’

Bret Easton Ellis

‘Without a doubt one of the most vital and important writers to emerge in the past fifty years, and his genius goes far beyond mere taboo-breaking . . . Cooper’s books are dissection tables of desire; they take a bone saw to the dreams, sexual fantasies, obsessions, youthful delusions, and myths of fame and individuality that have come to define our private and public selves’

Interview

‘In another country or another era, Dennis Cooper’s books would be circulated in secret, explosive samizdat editions that friends and fans would pass around and savour like forbidden absinthe . . . This is high-risk literature’

New York Times Book Review

‘A master of transgressive literature featuring all manner of minutely observed depravity . . . each novel is a brilliantly crafted piece of transgressive literature’

Tony O’Neill

‘His work belongs with the likes of Poe, the Marquis de Sade, Charles Baudelaire and Georges Bataille, other writers who argued with mortality’

San Francisco Chronicle

‘Cooper is a profoundly original American visionary, and the most important transgressive literary artist since Burroughs . . . An American master’

Salon

Closer

Dennis Cooper is the author of the George Miles sequence of five novels, of which *Closer* is the first. He is also the author of *My Loose Thread*, *The Sluts*, *God Jr.* and *The Marbled Swarm*. Cooper's other works include short story collections, poetry and the essay collection *Smothered in Hugs*. He divides his time between Los Angeles and Paris.

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Closer

Dennis Cooper



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for Richard

When you're expecting bad news you have to be prepared for it a long time ahead so that when the telegram comes you can already pronounce the syllables in your mouth before opening it.

—ROBERT PINGET

Introduction

Closer was first published in 1989. I read it then, a story about teen gay boys obsessed with sex, discontented seekers, wanting and rejecting each other, sullen and smart boys, passive rebels mostly on drugs. I remember, back then, laughing at the absurdity of their exaggerated listlessness: *Closer*, a disturbing and stark comedy of contemporary manners, a society of boys on self-destruct, a satire of some kind.

Almost thirty-five years later I am again reading *Closer*, the same words, sentences, structure, the same chapters in the same order. But the whole has been thrown up into the air and come down as something else. Mostly I don't remember the novel, just the atmosphere of it, and what I do remember is not necessarily what I read in 1989.

This second reading – call it my first reading.

The chapter 'John the Beginner' starts *Closer*. John is in high school, as are all the others in the book, except for Phillipe, an older man, a predator or a lover or both. John hates his face,

is still loyal to punk. He is disaffected, like the other boys in the novel, and a teen artist who ‘didn’t know what he was doing’. (4) He draws portraits of ‘the best-looking students because they were fun to deface’. (4) Soon, John’s anti-interpretation, anti-art stance about his work infuriates his teachers, whose brilliance they once praised. The youthful artist, and Cooper the author, doubts art’s significance. This doubt occurs throughout the novel. John thinks, ‘What if his drawings weren’t really important at all except as places to put his confusion’. (14)

John’s doubts about art’s validity intimate *Closer*, in part, as a meta-fiction. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Gay Man. Cooper wonders about the validity of a novel to explicate the lives of these boys. Novels are, like any other art, Cooper suggests, places to put confusion.

And *Closer* is confusing, generatively so, because of the complexity of the characters, their emotions and the lack of them. Their own confusion, as I read, turned into mine, a reader’s. I don’t identify with the boys; and don’t need to, though some readers always look for identification, which may or may not occur; it is a mistaken approach to any art I think. I read also for dis-identification. They are not I, and I encounter other ideas and worlds.

In every boy’s chapter – John, David, George (two chapters), Cliff, Alex, Philippe (he has a chapter but is an adult), and Steve – there comes an insistence on fucking or being fucked. They finish, go on to the next activity, as if the sex hadn’t happened, or at least it is not remarked upon.

Their affectlessness is not explained, and making general

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sociological or psychological analyses seems pointless, worse, reductive. Cooper doesn't make their ways of being reasonable – oh yes, absent parents, fathers more present than mothers, they have no power over their children's lives. Cooper writes outside of usual explanations – they are new, they are in their own cosmos. He is writing them into existence on the page, as experiences.

John says he's a better artist than a person, and George tells John his life is his art. Their sensibilities might evince approaches to how to live as an artist or jejune expressions about being artists.

George Miles enters the novel in the first chapter. George is the beautiful boy of the novel, most wanted, most likely not to succeed, most preyed upon, and most loved, especially when he plays dead. John makes drawings of George. Later they fuck or John fucks George 'and [keeps] his eye on the last and definitive portrait [of George]'. (18) Their sex, whatever it is, occurs and ends.

Cooper writes casual, seemingly uninteresting and even meaningless sex, though I'm not sure I can be confident of what meaningful sex is. The sex scenes rebuke pornographic versions of boys having sex. Cum shots, moans, lustful breathing, nothing like this happens. How the sex is written might make some, none, or many readers desirous. It is quite perfunctory. And I'm not a young gay man, and they are, of course, different from each other. I also don't need to be one kind or any particular kind of person to read *Closer* and feel the story.

The artificiality of porn is discussed by two of the boys, Alex and Cliff, who are plotting their own porn film. More teen

artists. Watching porn, looking at porn drawings, they plan to shoot George Miles surreptitiously, while he is being fucked by Phillippe in a ritual in which George plays dead. The sexual ritual that Phillippe inflicts upon George – or that is wanted by George – is, at the very least, ambiguous. It appears to be a sadistic encounter, because George is passive, playing dead, but maybe George wants this, he wants to be dead. He takes LSD like candy, and needs it to function, like to go to school. By playing dead, being taken, and not partaking, he might, in his mind, be registering his art. Images of dead people abound in art history.

Miles's skin, his beauty, his passivity – Phillippe lusts for him, and wants to be as far inside him as he can be. He opens George's ass and anus wider and wider. He wonders if he might love him. Later, Phillippe brings a friend for a threesome. The friend is menacing. Much of the novel plays with casual menace, a sense of foreboding – it seems that none of the boys are safe. In a crucial scene, Phillippe's friend, alone with Miles, moves beyond the limits of play, if that's what this is. George awakens from the threat of death as if from a dream or a nightmare, Cooper emphatically and dramatically enunciating the perils of erasing the boundary between fantasy and reality. George doesn't really want to be dead-dead.

Getting inside George is a metaphor and an actual event. Cooper's suggestive title, *Closer*, alerts readers to the novel's philosophic position. Phillippe gets deeply inside George Miles, maybe to know the mystery of the other. And it might seem logical to believe one gets closer to another human being, when one body enters another's. Yet getting inside, Cooper

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understands, is not getting closer. Not necessarily knowing the other, not finding intimacy, which is more complex than that. It is almost ironic that penetration happens as much as it does without it.

In the last chapter, 'Steve the Forefront', Steve doubts his ability to know anything. 'Trouble is, I only know about death from song lyrics and movies, so I don't know how to react . . .' (137) Will life become 'real' for him, or will it always seem a simulation. And about being closer, Cooper writes: 'People don't really know one another unless they're speaking. As soon as they shut up, no matter how close they've been, that understanding is gone. They become cute, ugly, tall . . . I find this frightening most of the time.' (137) That's Steve speaking, after he's had sex with Keith, 'which was very expected and pleasant'.

Cooper fuses a so-called reality, having sex, with powerful fantasies about it, and about pretty much everything else. The novel rides on the sharp edge of ambiguity. Sex is sex, its own event or experience, and then it's over. Sex doesn't change the boys' lives. Should it? What do they want. Where is pleasure for them. If sex isn't the answer, what is?

The question is important, and I think it is also important to know the time and context in which Cooper wrote this powerful, outrageous, often funny, highly crafted novel – the height of the AIDS crisis. Back then, Cooper was criticised for representing sex in ways that seemed to give permission to unprotected sex. Back then, fantasy itself was dangerous.

Cooper isn't a realist writer. He knows fantasy and lust and danger are also part of reality. He tests and contests it, writing

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of strange desires, the unknowable, and mysteries, refusing conventions that appear to show life ‘as it is’. The boys are Cooper’s creations, they are close to boys, not actual boys. And that is, after all, what fiction is: verisimilitude.

Dennis Cooper is a remarkable and fascinating writer, a great stylist, a unique thinker, who, through his fiction, risks being misunderstood and often is. His novels put belief, conventional wisdom, and credibility in jeopardy, and he can make readers very uncomfortable. It reminds me of Wittgenstein’s statement: ‘I don’t know why we are here, but I’m pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves.’

Lynne Tillman
September 2022

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JOHN

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John, 18, hated his face. If his nose were smaller, his eyes a different brown, his bottom lip pouty . . . As a kid he'd been punched in the mouth and looked great for a couple of weeks. Six years ago punk rock had focused his life. John liked the way punk romanticized death, and its fashions made pretty good camouflage. He dyed his hair blue-black, wore torn T-shirts, smeared his eyes with mascara, and stared at the floors of his school like they were movie screens. He'd never felt more comfortable with himself.

Nowadays punk bored his schoolmates. John stuck it out, but the taunts and cold shoulders were threatening to ruin his new confidence. One afternoon he hitchhiked home, grabbed a pencil and paper and wrote down his options. "Make enemies." Trouble was, he'd always felt so indifferent toward people. "Therapy." That might have meant he was hopeless. "Art." On the strength of some doodles he'd done as a kid, and that his mother had raved about, he enrolled in a life drawing class.

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John's teacher was fairly impressed. He announced to the class that the "work" was "unique" and compared it to "brilliant police sketches." John knew this was only a guess but the attention was just what he needed, so he refused to confirm or deny any interpretation, no matter how stupid. It was the tactic his favorite bands had always used to stay hip. That did the trick. Students would crowd around him after school and kind of hint how they wouldn't mind modeling when he had a moment.

He didn't have time to draw everyone, but being picky meant choosing an artistic goal. John couldn't. He didn't know what he was doing. He wound up selecting the best-looking students because they were fun to deface, and pretty easy to bullshit. He'd just sort of casually say that maybe he was portraying how tortured they were behind their looks and they'd gasp at his scribbles like they were seeing God or a UFO.

One afternoon a sophomore named George Miles took a seat in John's bedroom and tried not to blink. He'd looked cute, maybe even a little too cute, across the school cafeteria but one-on-one he twitched and trembled so much he made John think of a badly tuned hologram. John tried to draw but George was already ruined without his help. "I'll take a Polaroid," he thought, "in case I become a photographer." Reaching for the camera, he happened to notice the bed. No film. "Listen, I've got another idea," he said.

In bed George shut his eyes, went limp, and kind of squeaked, all of which were okay with John. He'd only had sex a couple of times, once standing up in a toilet stall, the other time with a guy about fifty who'd done all the work while he held his ass

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open. With George as a prop, he tried out a bunch of positions he'd seen in a porno film. He made a lot of mistakes, like it took him forever to get his cock hard enough to slip inside George's ass, but if George noticed or cared, it didn't show.

The next morning John's drawing teacher asked him to stay after class for a few minutes, waited until the room cleared, then announced that although John "quite rightfully" liked to let his "heavy artistry" speak for itself, he might use the platform of an upcoming assembly to "help enlighten . . ." John tensed up. "No way," he thought. "In the words of the rock star Bob Dylan," the teacher concluded, eyeing John's clothes, "why not 'shovel a glimpse into the ditch of what each one means.' It'll count as a test."

From being a punk, John felt a slight pang of conscience. Punk's bluntness had edited tons of pretentious shit out of American culture, so, although John suspected that his work was nine-tenths pretentious shit, he tried to take the quote seriously, despite its has-been author. He agreed to the lecture idea, then spent a month taking notes and rewriting the notes until they didn't embarrass him. At dawn the day of the assembly he chewed on a pencil and tried to read what he'd written.

"Punk orders us to demystify everything in the world or we'll be doomed to a future so decadent, atomic bombs will seem just one more aftershave lotion and so on. What you seem to like in my drawings is how they reveal the dark underside, or whatever it's called, of people you wouldn't think were particularly screwed up. But you should know the real goal of my work is a Dorian Gray type of thing. I make you look awful, and I start to look really good . . ."

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That afternoon he stood in front of the dimmed student body while slides of his portraits appeared on a giant screen over his head. He was planning to speak after thirteen or so. As he studied the mostly bored audience, he couldn't help but distinguish a few guys he'd drawn or still intended to draw scattered through the forgettables. He reread his speech, thought it sounded too much like he didn't know what he was saying, grabbed the microphone and blurted, "My portraits speak for themselves."

Afterward most of the teachers avoided him. Five students put out their hands. He scheduled a couple of sittings, then chucked his script into a wastebasket. He smoked a joint and was wondering what his work might actually say if, through some sort of miracle, its lips could move, when he stumbled on George vomiting in a rest room. "How did you like my talk?" John asked. "I didn't go," George replied, looking down at the mess he'd made. "I don't want to know what your work is about."

John drew a circle. He added two vertical lines, spaced several inches apart, to make a neck. Facial features appeared on the page as random shaky lines, fine as the hairs on a barbershop floor. They became lifelike through shading. That involved tilting the pencil then dragging it along the grain of the paper in various directions. Two sloppy ovals came next. John filled them with black blobby shapes that were meant to be pupils but could have been something he'd spilled on the page accidentally.

John studied the portrait, then George's face, then the

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portrait, and made the eyes look like caves. It looked more like an ad for some charity. He tried to erase the eyes. The paper tore. He threw the sketchpad aside. "George," he groaned, "let's get undressed." They lay on the bed and put their faces in each other's crotches. At one point John leaned back and made absolutely sure George was as cute as he'd thought a few minutes before, then he plunged in again.

He felt something that could have been love but was too manageable and kind of coldly interesting. It was more like he understood how love might feel. The sensation itself wasn't anywhere as disorienting as love was rumored to be. Actually it didn't feel that different from having completed a portrait, except George's skin felt so great. That was the weirdest part, feeling how warm and familiar George was and at the same time realizing the kid was just skin wrapped around some grotesque-looking stuff.

"Huh?" That was George's voice. John was about to say, "I didn't say anything," when come spurted into his mouth. "Jesus, George," he choked, "couldn't you warn me or something? I was figuring something important out. Shit." To keep from causing a scene he turned his back and sulked. Propped up against the far wall was the portrait of George side by side with a sketch of a previous subject. Even damaged, George's looked better. John scrambled out of bed, grabbed his sketchpad and started comparing the portrait with every other one he'd finished. "Hey," he muttered, "I've got an idea. Get dressed."

They headed for Dump, a poorly lit gay bar well known for its loose clientele. John dropped George off on a barstool, then felt his way along the walls, squinting. After a few rounds John

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spotted someone he liked slouched on a gray vinyl couch near the video games. The guy wore his hair in a shark fin straight down the top of his head. It looked as stiff as a saw. His eyes were outlined with mascara. His mouth dangled open. The button he'd pinned to his torn leather jacket read, *I have many brains but I can't think*.

John ordered George to sit down at one end of the couch, and took his place at the other. The punk tried to seem unimpressed by their cruising, but eventually he turned and glared at the worse offender. It took him an hour to stop calling John a fake punk, faggot, scum, asshole. . . . George fell asleep. John feigned boredom until the punk started to nod out. Then he mentioned the drugs he had stashed in his bedroom. "Sounds good," the punk yawned. They made it home. After a few joints he said John could watch him jerk off.

John had the punk and George lie side by side on the bed. He crawled over their bodies while they masturbated, examining each in great detail and making comparisons. Below the neck they were just about even: smooth, washed-out, skeletal. Face-wise the punk wasn't much. His eyes were drab, his nose had been broken, his ears were caked with wax, his skull was shaped like an egg. He would have been nothing without punk. John sympathized at first. Then he realized he'd better not care or he'd never get hard enough.

He rolled George onto his stomach then climbed on top, tried to get his cock hard, couldn't, thought he could stuff it up George with his fingers but that didn't work so he rolled George back over and fucked his mouth. The punk sat a few feet off, watching them with a vacant expression that could

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have meant anything. John tried not to care but it attracted his eyes like a mirror. When he finally managed to come his concentration was so bad he missed George and got sperm all over everything. “Shit.”

A few blocks away from John’s parents’ place there was a cob-webbed mansion that two generations of neighborhood kids had dubbed “the haunted house.” It sat far back from the street. To reach it kids had to scale a brick wall, then wade through an acre of dried grass and faded newspapers. Until he was twelve, John was too overwhelmed by the words “haunted house” to check the place out. When he finally tiptoed inside one afternoon it was nothing, an empty thing. He’d spent a half hour picking up pieces of broken chairs, used prophylactics and smelly bums’ clothing.

The morning after the three-way with George and the punk, John woke up from a nightmare in which that house happened to figure. “Hmm.” He roused the boys, then suggested a field trip. The punk shrugged, staggered down the hall, came back with a can of John’s mother’s hairspray and started repairing his mohawk. George crawled out of bed. He was moving a little mechanically, as if afraid he would drop something. “So, did you sleep?” John asked. “Bad dreams,” George squeaked, then shook his head back and forth to erase the word. “Actually, uh, well, last night was the first time I realized . . . Oh, forget it.”

As soon as they’d scaled the wall, John and George fucked in some bushes. The punk watched for a while, then he kicked them until they quit. All three collapsed on the steps of the house, dusty and spent as ghosts. John tried to tell them the

story of how he'd discovered the place, but after a few minutes George strolled inside and started tapping the walls for possible secret compartments. The punk seemed more interested in the graffiti left over from earlier trespassers. He ran around scrawling the best on the backs of his hands with the tip of a burnt wooden match.

John ended up at a second-floor window, half listening to their racket. He watched a blond about eight years old ride his bike past the front of the grounds very fast. John imagined how frightened the kid would have been if he'd glanced up and spotted a male silhouette. Or had the world gotten so generally ugly and fucked up since he was a kid that a haunted house seemed kind of quaint? "If that's true," he thought aloud, "then so are my drawings. God, I can't think about this." He called the punk and George. The second they entered the room he ordered them to strip.

The punk punched a hole in the wall instead. George bit his nails. After glancing from John to the bloody fist about a dozen times he stumbled into the hall. John rolled his eyes, crossed his arms and tried to look like he meant what he'd said. The punk punched another hole, then another, then another, et cetera. John was deciding to leave when the punk paused, checked out the holes, which formed a crude five- or six-foot-square swastika, grinned for the first time that John could remember, and started hitting himself in the face and chest.

His belt rattled. It was a handful of bicycle chains twisted together and held in place with a rusty combination lock. Once in a while he'd quit hitting himself long enough to spin the dial a few times, squint, yell out some numbers, try the lock again,

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swear, and go back to hitting himself. John was mesmerized, the way he was when he did lots of weird combinations of drugs and felt like he could control other guys with his mind. In this case the cuts, bruises, scabs and blood smears made the punk look a bit like John's portraits.

The punk got his belt off, stripped naked, and threw himself onto a mattress that someone had left in one corner years back. "Hurt me," he yelled in a hoarse voice. "Fuck me up and I'll never forget you. I really fucking love violence. I want to tell all my friends what we did so they'll hate me or call me a fag or whatever, but fuck them. I'm not a poser like they are. I want to do everything so when I die they'll say I lived and tell bad jokes about me but who cares. I like getting crazy and you seem okay. Anyway, why not?"

John thought, "If my drawings could talk I bet they'd say something like that." "Okay," he said. He rolled up his sleeves and knelt over the punk's heaving back, fanning the B.O. away from his nose. He took a deep breath, then sank his teeth into the curve of one shoulder. "Leave a mark," the punk whispered. "Leave marks wherever you want. Make it memorable or whatever." This time John bit very hard. The skin still wouldn't break. "Try the back of my neck."

When John withdrew he saw some holes in the shape of an Xmas tree ornament. "That's it," he said. "I've got an idea. Get ready." The punk balled his fists. John bobbed his way down the back leaving bites in a regular pattern, four across, every few inches. Reaching the ass-slope he paused, massaged his sore jaw. The wounds were a really crass pink except the ones farther up, which had turned kind of violet. A few even

leaked blood in long, thin strands that reminded him vaguely of tinsel.

He leaned back a few inches, spooked by the power of what he was doing. He tried to remember the name of the famous artist who'd shot himself and crawled across broken glass in his Jockey shorts. He couldn't. This seemed more original anyway. Doing horrible things to yourself was just me-generation angst shit from the seventies. A bleeding punk kid was so much more horrific and ridiculous and sort of moving too. Was that because of the Xmas connection? He thought suddenly of the pile of chains, smirked. "I'll make his ass a gift."

He pushed the punk's legs apart and adjusted them like an old TV antenna until the ass was roughly the shape of a box. Then he picked up the chains. Each lash left a red ribbon. He tried to aim, but the ribbons still came out too lopsided, so he had to make the whole area red. He was filling it in when the punk got impatient, rose up on his elbows and craned his neck to get a preview. First his eyes froze on something behind John. "It's the cops," he croaked.

It was George framed in the doorway, one hand clamped over his mouth. "Don't move," John said. George took off. John chased him downstairs and out the front door. Midway across the yard John grabbed George's shoulder, ripped a hole in the shirtsleeve and brought them both crashing down on a pile of old newspapers. "I want . . . you to know . . . that had nothing to do . . . with us," he puffed. George struggled up to his feet, clutched his left knee and winced. He managed to say, "But I thought . . .," then he hobbled away.

John wandered back to the room. It was empty. On the

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wall next to the mattress he found a fresh swatch of graffiti. *Bill was here more or less.* A trail of blood led from there to the door. John followed it down the hall. At its end he could just see the punk's silhouette shivering in the light coming through a smashed window. John accidentally stepped on a creaky board. The silhouette tensed, turned, broke a chunk of glass off what was left of the pane and held it out to John like broken glass was a gift.

"Kill me," the silhouette rasped. "I can't feel anything. I mean you're okay. Shit, I don't know. . . . I guess I've wanted somebody to kill me for over a year or whatever so don't fucking worry. Do what you want to me. I don't care. Really. When I'm dead you can fuck me as much as you want. I've tried to kill myself lots of times. I just can't. Anyway, nobody knows I'm here. You won't get caught—" "Stop," John said, waving his arms, "wait, I feel . . ." He vomited down the front of his shirt.

John bought the latest issue of *Art News*, hitchhiked home and flung himself on his bed. He surveyed the pictures, read a few scattered reviews. The only name he recognized was Carl Andre's because of a slightly embarrassing scene at the city museum three months before. John had entered its modern wing, seen a bunch of metallic squares on the floor, and asked the guard when the installation would be finished. He'd been brusquely informed that "the floor" was this man's work of art.

Maybe if it had been some kind of punk anti-art thing he would have thought it was great. But a critic was talking about "classicism." "No way." John skipped a few dozen pages. He preferred advertisements to articles anyway. With them he

could draw *his* conclusions. Take the puke-colored painting of some young boy's head in the ad he was squinting at. "This artist hated his childhood so much," John mused, "it makes him vomit." He gasped when he noticed the work's title, *Jonah and the Whale*, in the small print.

He'd guessed right. It was the first time that he could recall being right about art and this shook him a little. Sure, it could have been some kind of fluke, but if it wasn't and he was beginning to understand art, that might mean he could understand what he was trying to do with his life. What if that ruined his work? What if his drawings weren't really important at all except as places to put his confusion, and once he'd figured that out, the inspiration for them would dry up like the wife-and-kids fantasies he used to have as a kid?

John noticed the word YOU in block letters so large and blue it could have been a kind of summons from God. It was only an ad for the School of New American Art offering critiques to young artists who sent in samples of their work, fifty bucks, and an s.a.s.e. John stared at the word for a while then decided he might as well mail in some stuff and let the experts tell him what he ought to do next. He grabbed the sheaf of his drawings, took out several of George, snuck into his parents' bedroom and stole some cash from the drawer where they kept their emergency funds.

The following month's only highlight occurred on a Thursday. John had been keeping his eye on one particular freshman all year. The guy had a cherubic face. It was meticulous, as though conceived by computer, but in every other way he was a shambles. He talked out loud to himself, walked

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around in what seemed like a hypnotic trance, claimed that he was a pop star, et cetera. David always had the unnerving effect that George usually did during sex, or that that punk had had when John was biting him up. But pending word from the experts, John tried to avoid being overly ambitious.

That day they happened to stand side by side at the same urinal. John was so agitated he couldn't start to piss. Even from inches away, David was one of those guys who were so cute their skin looked like plastic or candy. He was oblivious to John and spent their precious few seconds together babbling to the wall behind the urinal about how somebody was following him. It was all John could do not to interrupt, not that he'd know what to say. He couldn't decide if he wanted to draw David, fuck him, beat him up or fall in love with him.

On the way home from school John took a detour so he could walk through a park. The usual ghosts of themselves were throwing balls in slow motion down corridors marked on the lawn. Balls stopped wherever. The old guys cheered in their rickety voices. Using his books as a pillow he lay on his back and watched the clouds move around for a while. He was glad no one he knew was nearby since he had to admit he found the sky kind of peaceful, despite the clichés that had piled up there over the centuries.

He let his mind veer all over the place. The sensation was sort of like being chased through the dark by a mob, or trying to chase down a mob that had split off in different directions. He closed his eyes and maybe half fell asleep, he wasn't sure. When he reopened them he'd forgotten what he had been dreaming. It was dark. He picked himself up. At the edge of the

park he took a piss on the feet of a statue of some long-forgotten war hero, a granite man covered with bird shit.

That night he was drawing a boy named Simon whose head was shaped like a large glass of milk with some brown turf on top, chalky eyes and the mouth of a fish. Maybe it was John's nap but he couldn't get into the session. They shared a joint, then a beer, still nothing. John saw Simon to the front door making various excuses, none of which made any sense. They were waving goodbye when his mother strolled up with a letter for John in her hand. "And clean your room," she said.

The letter was one typed page, single-spaced. A Professor James somebody liked John's submission. He said some stuff that John didn't quite get about "straddling a line between confusion and hard-edged realism," and "passive-aggressive pencil work," and how the drawings were "obvious mirror images of the artist," and general words of encouragement. John ran to the phone, dialed George's number then hung up. "What the fuck am I thinking?" he thought. Instead he ran into his room, shut the door, turned the lock and yelled, "Great!"

One month and fourteen tries later John had George down. He glanced from portrait to model and back a few times, ripped the page from his sketchpad and held it at arm's length for George to see. "I think I look like I'm wearing a Halloween mask," he whispered. "That's true," John laughed. "Oh, wait, you mean in the drawing." He double-checked. No, George was too stoned or something. The sketch was an obvious masterpiece in every possible way. John hadn't felt so spooked by anything or anyone since he'd noticed that haunted house when he was five or six.

The Beginner

He stripped and walked into the bathroom. The stress of completing the portrait had left him unusually raunchy. He ran a damp washcloth under both arms, across his cock, between the cheeks of his ass. He tried to whistle the tune of The Smiths' "Handsome Devil" but the thing had no melody so he just sounded asthmatic. He smelled the rag and threw it over the top of the mottled glass door of his shower stall. When he got back to the bedroom George automatically stripped, and lay facedown on the bed.

A week later they went through the motions again. George sat on the chair near the window and got that weird look on his face that John decided meant one of two things, "Don't hurt me," or "What's the matter?" John could vaguely remember when George had meant danger. Now he was only the easiest guy to lay hands on. There was nothing intimidating about him at all. Nothing. John put down his pencil and pad. "George," he said, "something is obviously bothering you. Not just today but in general. So what is it?"

George's head jerked. "Oh, umm . . ." His eyes flicked all over the room. "Everything," he mumbled. John asked again then wished he hadn't because George's head gave a last shake or two and dropped back on the chair like he'd been shot. "I'm just completely fucked up," he whispered. "I don't have any real friends and I can't do my homework at all anymore. Sometimes I wish I was dead. Nothing makes sense like my mother has cancer and I don't know what's going to happen to me when she dies. It's nice to see you but I'm so alone all the time . . ."

George went on like that for an hour, despite having made every point he was going to make in the first thirty seconds.

Closer

John managed to seem like he cared because the fact that George had any troubles at all was so unexpected. The actual troubles were serious, John supposed, but there was nothing profound about them. Maybe they were a little more nerve-racking than other pretty young men's, maybe not. John could hardly be sure, since he'd never been handsome himself.

Later they fucked or, rather, John fucked George and kept his eye on the last and definitive portrait, which, luckily, he'd framed and hung in clear sight of the bed. He put George through their usual twists and occupied himself trying to phrase the announcement he knew it was time to make. Words didn't seem that appropriate until they'd dressed, reached the front door and promised to phone. "I hope you understand," John added suddenly, "that I'm a much better artist than I am a person."

"I don't know what you mean," George said. He rested his hand on the doorknob. "I mean I've decided to make art my life," John said, "and if I'm going to do that I can't let myself deal with why you're fucked up. My work's my mirror, like that professor said. I'm weird enough as it is without figuring out why I'm so weird, if you know what I mean." George nodded, turned the knob. "You mean I scare you?" he asked. "No, I mean I can't see you again." George started trembling. "Oh."

John put George out of his mind, which wasn't easy since the guy's face was all over his work. One day he stuffed his drawings away in a bureau and canceled upcoming appointments. School closed for Xmas. He spent the holidays drinking himself sick in nightclubs. One of the packages under the tree was a blank book. He described his activities in it. When classes

The Beginner

resumed he enrolled in creative writing, having reread his entries a few times and mused, “Genius.”

Unlike John’s life drawing teacher, the writing teacher kept up with cultural shifts. Mr. McGough didn’t strain to include dated slang in his talks. He was forty-six but claimed his life had been changed by “that bump in the road to salvation called punk.” Jules remembered John’s lecture and spent a few minutes one class discussing how clever John’s statement had been. John shrugged and let Jules believe he’d calculated the outburst. After that Jules seemed to look upon him as an equal. They hung out a lot.

John guessed Jules was gay. He’d do things like one night he asked John to name every rock singer he’d like to draw and/or fuck. After a few dozen, Jules raised one hand and pinched the bridge of his nose like a psychic. “Your ideal,” he said, “is a pale brunet, your age, thin, male, sad eyes, big lips. His nose is perky. His ears might as well be invisible they’re so attuned to his face, like the handles on something one lifts to one’s mouth when thirsty . . .”

Jules talked like that because he was a poet. One of his best poems included this image: “a boy’s screaming countenance faced the horizon, emitting a fresh brand of sunlight.” Vaguely inspired, John hitchhiked home the day he read it and made a drawing. Jules liked that. Next thing John knew they’d begun a collaborative project in pictures and words. Jules arranged, with John’s punk roots in mind, to hang their work in the janitor’s closet, which, as it turned out, was much roomier than John had thought.

Sometimes when Jules finished a poem John would stay up

all night adding smudges and smears to an earlier drawing until the two seemed to relate. Other nights he'd erase part of a portrait and give Jules free use of that space. By sticking to George, John not only recycled old stuff, he gave the newer work continuity. It took several weeks to complete the allotted thirteen. One evening John laid them out on Jules's living room rug. They clunked their beer cans together. "When this is all over," Jules announced, "let's have a three-way with some jerk."

They held their premiere during lunch hour. Most of the faculty drifted through, eyeing the work with suspicious expressions. Among the students who came was a very drugged George. He took two wobbly steps into the room, tried to focus his eyes and groped around for the nearest wall. Jules studied George for a minute or two then told John, "That one's perfect for you and I'd love to watch." "I'm sure you're right," John said, double-checking, "but . . ." He shook his head back and forth.

DAVID

Inside Out

I'm a talentless but popular young singer and I have the feeling someone is watching me. I use the term loosely because I have few feelings, and even they're too simple, like primary colors. Fear is the basic one lately, no thanks to my nemesis (it could be male, female, imaginary, ghost—I'm not big on subtleties) poring over my every move, whether I watch TV, eat breakfast, ride a bike, sleep, shower, go to school. . . . It's hard to describe the sensation. Maybe rape or demonic possession come close. I wouldn't know and I don't really care, to be perfectly honest.

The only thing that distracts me is fame, as in being onstage or recording or having my photograph taken for one of those teen magazines I'm the superstar of. I really am their star, meaning I'm on the covers, the foldout posters, and most of their articles focus on how great I look. I must be a great person, right? I think it follows. So why is this nemesis after me? What does it . . .? I can't . . . Oh, never mind. Sometimes I know how