

Créée au Contemporary Arts Center de New Orleans en 2019 par Lyam B. Gabel, *the dance floor, the hospital room, and the kitchen table* est une performance pour 3 comédien.nes enquêtant sur l'histoire de la solidarité queer, depuis l'épidémie du SIDA et le mouvement de libération queer jusqu'au COVID-19 et les identités trans et non binaires. Vingt-deux témoignages enregistrés par des patients atteints du SIDA, des survivant.e.s, des militant.e.s, des personnels soignants, nous sont donnés à entendre : on se souvient alors comment des patients gays servirent de cobayes à des dosages d'AZT mortifères, de la peur de la contamination, de la solidarité des lesbiennes avec les gays atteints du SIDA ; on apprend que 25 % de femmes de couleur étaient atteintes du SIDA et que les anti-avortement n'avaient pas droit aux soins. OWEN, gay de 35 ans environ, HANNAH, vingt ans environ, bisexuelle noire, et FRANKIE, la trentaine, queer non-binaire trans masculin, dialoguent avec ces voix chorales, fantômes du passé : iels reviennent sur leur expérience de souffrance et de solitude et questionnent ce qui unit et divise les membres de la communauté LGBTQIA+. Les personnages évoluent entre le passé et le présent dans un espace scénique qui devient tour à tour piste de danse disco, chambre d'hôpital, table de cuisine. Le spectateur est invité à traverser les nuits blanches en boîte de nuit ou à l'hôpital, à partager les conversations dans la cuisine où cette communauté queer s'indigne contre l'indifférence criminelle de l'État à l'égard des homosexuels atteints du SIDA dans les années quatre-vingt, et revient sur l'organisation de la solidarité transgénérationnelle aujourd'hui. Loin de tout pathos, grâce au prisme de l'archive, cette pièce documentaire, festive sur la piste de danse, questionne les fantômes queer du passé, voire du futur, pour tenter d'affirmer les identités plurielles, et en appelle à la survivance de mémoires intimes comme porte d'accès à la résilience, à la survie, et la vie à venir.

the dance floor, the hospital room, and the kitchen table

Research and Writing by Lyam B. GABEL¹

Featuring the voices and stories of Anne-Christine d'Adesky, Cass
Brayton, Cindra Fauer, Donna Persona, Ganymede Cupbearer,
Gabriel Stelian Shanks, Harry Breaux, Hank Trout, John, Maxx
Sizer, Matt Stanley, Paul Aguilar, Rick, Richard, Suzie Silver, Susan
Haugh, Timothy Haggerty and more



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

“Eratothistography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations.”

-Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*

“How can we take care of the ghosts who take such care of us?”

-Hil Malatino, *Trans Care*

CONTENT NOTE:

This script includes references to sex and sexuality, depression and suicide, drinking and drug use, illness, death and dying, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia.

LANGUAGE NOTE:

The language that the LGBTQIA+ community has used to describe itself has changed over the years. Some words which were/are considered offensive by some members of the community are used in a way that feels self-empowering by others. This is complicated by the race, class, gender, and geographical location of the speaker.

This is a play about haunting
About possession
About who possesses history
How history possesses us

This is a play about a history that is also a present
and a present that is also a history.

This play is a kinesthetic ritual for remembering. It moves. It should move and the performers should move and the people watching it should also move.

Who:

Three queer researchers.

For the sake of this text, the researchers are named OWEN (he/him), FRANKIE (they/them), and HANNAH (she/her), after the performers who are originating these roles.

OWEN is a white gay man in his mid-30s

FRANKIE is a queer non-binary transmasculine person in their early-30s

HANNAH is a Black bisexual woman in her early-20s

Where: a queer archive of care

Track 1

The archive is talking to itself.

ANNE-CHRISTINE VO. One: Listen. Like just that...

RICK VO. It seems like another lifetime, another age, you know, literally another century...it seems far away but it doesn't take much for it all to come back. Every room in this house, if I put my mind to it, reminds me of him.

DONNA VO. As hard as I try as diligently as I try. I cannot really like transport you to that time.

SUSAN VO. Yeah, because I think—I guess the main overarching thing is a lot of loneliness. And a lot of yeah, just loneliness. Yeah, and I shared that, like a lot of people share that. That loneliness.

WARREN VO. Everybody else was saying this was a death sentence, you know, you're not going to make it, you got six months to live. Of course. I had never been sick. I'd never had an opportunistic infection. I'd never had anything and I never have I've always been asymptomatic. And it was really you know for a long time there was a whole lot of survivor's guilt. You know, it's like why me, you know, why am I alive when everybody else around me is not.

VINCE VO. We were all still paranoid about getting sick, it was weird because you wanted to love your friends but you were afraid of them at the same time and not understanding what was going on but you always wanted to show up and do the right thing.

GABRIEL VO. I think the saddest thing for me was I got used to it. It became something I was good at I hated being good at it. I still hate that I could do that. I still feel like when my father died, I was able. To use the skills. I learned in the AIDS epidemic, too. To be there for my mother and channel, my own grief, for a time. When I could do it, you know, like, all of those sort of practical skills. I learned in AIDS epidemic. I still have and I hate having those skills.

Those aren't that isn't healthy but it is the only way your psychic can protect you.

HANK VO. When you're up to your ass in bedpans it's hard to find time to write about being up to your ass in bedpans.

BILL VO. Just little things make a big difference.

CRAIG VO. I'm still grieving. I'm still grieving. That's why I'm still grieving, I'm still grieving. It's not over.

GABRIEL VO. I think it is an unresolved grief.

JOANI VO. We were there. We remember

GABRIEL VO. There's no way to talk about this as a survivor that centers my pain. I want to say the people who had HIV is where this needs to stay and live. There is a, as a survivor, there's a separate set of sort of psychic and emotional damage. It's weird to talk about because I don't want to put myself at the center of the narrative. They need to be at the center of the mirror. But I am broken by it. That's the truth. I miss them. I miss them very much.

REBECCA VO. And then people kept dying we change things I was able, you know, I'd be there in the hospital watching someone get a medication which we'd fought for access to and there they were getting that medication, but the fact is people kept dying.

DORIAN VO. If you look at a lot of the print ads pretty much white faces young bodies. That's not the face of HIV. 25 percent are women, most of them are women of color. It's like really racism in the gay community seems pretty damn high.

TIM VO. I used to call Paul, you know once a month. I mean it's always nice to have friends on the west coast right? Because you can call late. And we talked once a month or so, you know one of those relationships, and then one time I called and his number had been disconnected and forwarded to a number in Minnesota. And I

thought he maybe had gotten sick and gone home. His sister picked up and we chatted and he had passed away. He was a terrific guy. He was always positive. At one point he had like 4 T cells and he said, “We’re going to live through this and we’re going to be...You know, there’s gonna be something that will come down the pike.” There was *nothing* coming down the pike at that point, but I thought “he really believes that.” I was always like “I’m going to be one of those very nice young gay men who is very dead.”

Sometime during the next voiceover Owen walks in. He’s alone, and removes his mask.

The room feels...full.

HARRY BREAU VO. When all those people died of AIDS, it created a break for the first time ever in history from one older homosexual being able to mentor a younger homosexual. Being able to express what goes on—show them how to eat, show them how to decorate, show him how to do hair or whatever you want, you know, whatever it was that gay people did before AIDS. We used to pass it along gingerly and nicely in a lot of ways to the younger people so that they have an idea what it was to be gay. But when AIDS came along you— meaning, in general, you but you specifically because your age— you lost an entire probably two generations, technically, of people that had any experience that you could benefit from having it passed along.

He sees the microphone and whispers into it.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

OWEN. Hello?

*Suddenly it's just an archive, but the room is still alive— aware of him.
He tries not to overwhelm the space. He settles at the archive table and*

in that moment Frankie enters. They are wearing a mask. Owen goes for his mask.

FRANKIE. It's okay.

OWEN. Are you sure? I can...

FRANKIE. No it's okay, do you mind if I?

OWEN. Oh yeah, sure! Of course. I'm vaxxed.

FRANKIE. Yeah me too.

OWEN. Ok.

FRANKIE. Ok.

HANNAH walks in, hangs up her bag, takes off her mask and goes directly to a box. OWEN stands up, "is this the archivist?" HANNAH looks at him.

HANNAH. Hello.

What are they doing here?

OWEN. Hi.

FRANKIE. Hey.

HANNAH puts the box down on the table and starts riffling through it. FRANKIE doesn't budge and is looking over her shoulder.

HANNAH. I'm Hannah.

FRANKIE. Oh. yeah. Sorry. Frankie.

OWEN. Owen.

HANNAH. What are you looking for?

FRANKIE. I'm not sure.

OWEN. I just like being around old things.

HANNAH. I'm a researcher.

FRANKIE. Oh?

OWEN. Yeah? That's cool.

FRANKIE. I've always wanted to be a person who knows/ what they are looking for.

HANNAH. /You can

FRANKIE. I don't know. I'm kind of a "know it when I see it" type of person.

Some more looking

HANNAH. Do you think that queer ghosts are different than regular ghosts?

FRANKIE. I'm not sure that I believe in ghosts/ what do you mean queer?

OWEN. /what do you mean regular?

HANNAH. Like, are they angrier?

OWEN. Maybe they're less angry.

FRANKIE. I think that queerness is kind of about the future so I mostly think that if there is such a thing as ghosts they wouldn't be queer. Like they could be gay but they wouldn't be queer.

HANNAH. I just keep getting the sense that if you scratch the surface of all this talk about queer futures and our endless prismatic selves there's a lot of death underneath that.

Track 2

HANNAH. I struggle with representations of queerness that center trauma, but I also struggle with this kind of triumphalist and ultimately assimilationist idea that being queer is just like...totally ok now. Like we have PrEP and so we are moving on. Like we're not still living with HIV in all the ways. And so I wonder about how we have survived because I wonder about how we can continue to survive. Because I guess maybe I think that's what queerness is about. Survival.

And I need to learn how to honor people that we've lost, that's so important, but I also need to figure out how to care for the folks that are still here. Because we didn't lose a whole generation actually, I've talked to some of them. And it's messy, and it's euphoric, and it's terrifying, and it's tragic.

Because memory is messy.

But also... memory is like a portal. Archives are like portals.

FRANKIE. To where?

HANNAH. Excuse me?

FRANKIE. A portal to where?

HANNAH. Oh. Umm. I'm not sure.

Hannah finds a tape in a box

Maybe that's what I'm researching?

She puts it in the tape player, puts on headphones, and listens. The space kind of pulses a little with the memory.

FRANKIE and OWEN inch closer, she takes off her headphones so they can listen.

It's still too quiet, she amplifies it with a microphone.

As they listen to the voice something shifts, a touch, a closeness, a feeling.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

PAUL VO. People became afraid to touch each other, to hug each other, to... because we didn't really know then what caused it. We had no idea. We had no test. We didn't know what was causing it. Most of us were pretty sure it wasn't airborne, because there would've been a lot more people dead. I remember when my first friend that I knew had died. This was even before Ward 5B had started. And we had gone to visit him, he and his partner had owned a frame store on Haight Street. And when we heard he was in the hospital, my little sister, well, my best friend, but my little sister decided we'd go visit him. And so, you know, we got a bunch of stuff together in a gift basket because you do that for people when they're in the hospital. We didn't know what to expect. And when we got there he was in isolation. He was under a big oxygen tent mask covering his face and everybody going in out of the room was covered head

to toe in, in surgical gear hat, booties, masks the whole nine yards, gloves... and that was the only way that anybody went in and out of that room and I just remember him the look... Just the fear in his eyes. Normally, this really upbeat, lively, funny guy just sitting there, so afraid because, you know, everybody was like, in these masks and stuff. And I remember, something... I don't know what it was natural caregiver in me, defiant teenager, take your pick but before I left that room, I took my rubber glove off and I grabbed his hand and I told him, you know, stay strong or something like that because it just felt like the right thing to do.

With Owen's help Hannah presses stop on the tape player but doesn't quite pull herself out of whatever is happening.

HANNAH. Should we be doing this?

FRANKIE. LOL Which part?

HANNAH. I'm not...totally sure.

OWEN. Is there... is there someone that we should ask?

FRANKIE. I think I need a drink.

HANNAH. I guess we're doing it.

OWEN. (*to the space*) Is that ok?

FRANKIE. I don't know.

HANNAH. It's just.... it's just the stakes seem pretty high.

FRANKIE. How high are they?

OWEN. (*to the space again*) What are the stakes?

They wait for an answer

HANNAH. I'm not sure about that either.

FRANKIE. Now what?

OWEN. Now we wait?

FRANKIE. For what?

OWEN. For something else to happen.

...

Isn't something supposed to happen?

They do, wait, for a while

*They look at all the *stuff**

And it starts to like... call them.

*Owen starts rustling around in boxes and *surprise* hits a tape player. Frankie finds a box of tapes and starts to put one on the player that Hannah was working with.*

GANYMEDE/OWEN. I mean the city blew up and we instead of becoming a party-loving sexually promiscuous crowd. Suddenly we were an angry force of nature to be contended with.

SUZIE VO/FRANKIE. It just felt like the end of the world and there are so many things that felt like the end of the world in the 80s

CINDRA VO/HANNAH. And I mean those were the days that we would just go into a meeting with, I don't know, the Department of Health of New York City and we didn't like what they were saying, so we would just blow whistles really really loud and people would just want us to get the fuck out.

Owen finds a whistle. Looks at it, maybe cleans it off, and makes the decision to blow it.

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. I had no idea. Being that naive kid that I was, I had no idea what to expect. So I mostly just watched and listened and took a seat and there weren't that many women.

ANNE-CHRISTINE VO/HANNAH. I mean a lot of the women were very close to the guys.

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. I didn't know them but Courtney-Sharp, and there was one other trans woman... The two of them were the only ones I ever really I think... or maybe there was three but there was a few and boy these people were gutsy because the gay community did not accept them and they were like fighting tooth and nail the whole way. I think, you know, back then, I was afraid of the feelings I was having and I was scared of that life. I want to say, almost, I was scared of the trans people of the trans women, maybe just because I was like, you know, I knew how I felt but it was terrifying.

ANNE-CHRISTINE VO/HANNAH. I had really close male friends and I also had close women friends. I had some affairs with people in Act Up. So, you know, that was the scene. We were all together and very close to each other.

CINDRA VO/FRANKIE. What's that expression? You don't don't eat where you... Don't shit where you eat. We worked where we fucked and we fucked where we worked and there was no, there didn't seem like there was ever a need to be professional.

Owen finds a boom box

INGRID VO/OWEN. We always had a strong women's caucus in our chapter of act up and we were very involved in clinic defense. We had a banner that said: ActUp Women: pro-sex and pro-choice. We were trying to make it clear to the men in ActUp that abortion was something they should be concerned about. It was also about sexuality-related Healthcare and victim-blaming and basically this idea that you don't deserve health care because you had this kind of sex that we don't approve of.

OWEN stops the tape for a moment, they share a look. OWEN starts the tape again.

INGRID VO/OWEN. They're all you know in their leather jackets, they used fashion and art as part of their activism and, it just was like this is the kind of activism I want to be doing.

Owen rewinds and replays to underline this, until they can all repeat it

INGRID VO/OWEN. this is the kind of activism I want to be doing.

INGRID VO/OWEN/HANNAH. this is the kind of activism I want to be doing.

INGRID VO/OWEN/FRANKIE/HANNAH. this is the kind of activism I want to be doing.

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. So basically the meetings were run by two co-chairs and the meetings I went to had a man and a woman co-chairing. The first thing they would say in the meeting was they would address the FBI "we know you're here"

OWEN. we know you're here

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. and I can't remember exactly what they would say, but they would basically say "we know you're here recording us"

HANNAH. we know you're here recording us

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. I mean back in those days the federal government still saw gay community as a threat. But anyway, so they would start off the meeting like that which was a little bit scary in a way to someone like me. I'm like "Wooooaaa Am I gonna get arrested?" so then they would just start talking about the things they had on the agenda. I think you know, the meeting was pretty raucous, you know, it was not quiet. I mean, there are a lot of people milling around talking there were lots and lots of chairs set up. I would usually sit in the front so I could hear. Afterwards there was a lot of, yeah, people getting up and socializing and talking and stuff and I

didn't have anybody to talk to so I guess I would sort of try to look like I was doing something and then when I got too uncomfortable I probably would leave.

A voice comes from the room

SUSAN VO/HANNAH. Because I think I guess the main overarching thing is a lot of loneliness. And a lot of yeah, just loneliness. Yeah, and I shared that like a lot of people share that, that loneliness.

HANNAH. I mean, I guess that I think the main overarching thing is a sense of loneliness. And a lot of yeah, just loneliness. Yeah, and I share, that like a lot of people share that, that loneliness.

Like I can be in a big vault of all of these papers and all these voices and know that these are me

and not me.

I first got interested in the early years of the HIV epidemic when I heard stories of lesbians who cared for gay men when they were dying. And how—in the words of some of the older folks that I talked to—and let's be clear these folks are like 50s-70s, but I'm in my 20s and queer time is sometimes...accelerated—some of the older lesbians that I talked to said that it's the first time that they felt connected to gay men. And the alphabet is aspirational right? LGBTQ is aspirational. We are an imperfect collection of different identities with different needs. But I got so fascinated with, and fixated on, the role of lesbians who took care during that time.

And then I was in the library, at school, and I found *Women, AIDS, and Activism* and seriously, read this book, so much of it sounds like it was written today and not 32 years ago at this point. And the first thing that was in the book, the very first thing, was a rejection of this caretaker narrative. They were like look HIV affects us too! It affects women! And it's understudied. And we were—are—leaders in the movement.

And you see it now—like HIV is a present presence for so many of us but especially for women of color and yet we still can only take 1 out of two of the PrEP options and it took until [[DATE]] for that to happen.

So I started thinking about how we all are still living with

by which I mean living in a world with

HIV

and I started thinking about care more broadly—

thinking about activism as care

and intimacy as care

and drug trial participation as care—

and how like when we think about healthcare

it's all connected

it's our bodies

it's in us.

So when I talk about ghosts

what I mean is the way that the past haunts how I think about myself

and all of my interactions

and how I make family

and how I organize.

I mean the parts of my older kin that are in me

even if we're not blood,

even if we don't know each other.

I mean the me but not me.

That's in me.

Owen puts in another tape. Hannah runs over the amplify it.

GANYMEDE VO/OWEN. My partner was one of the ones who suffered with very high doses of AZT that poisoned his bone marrow and made his his pancreas not operate and you know because he was that guinea pig and many others like him. They figured out the right dosages for AZT. At first when prep came about and Gilead was granted the only license for PrEP with their drug Truvada. I was thinking like why would healthy people want to take this noxious drug that has so many side effects. And then I realized my brothers died so you could have this medicine.

They all listen for more

It doesn't come

FRANKIE. Should we keep going?

HANNAH. Owen?

OWEN. I'm fine.

FRANKIE. Do you want to stop?

OWEN. I don't think so.

HANNAH. ????

OWEN. No.

FRANKIE. ??????

OWEN. No, I don't want to stop.

HANNAH. Ok.

FRANKIE. Ok.

OWEN. Ok.

FRANKIE. Do you think it gets easier?

HANNAH. In the queer future?

FRANKIE. Ok, ok, ok,

maybe so—

maybe

I think in reality I don't think queerness is about the future.

I think it's about being late

and stuck

and about loss

about missing out on things.

HANNAH. And not being able to sit in chairs correctly

OWEN. Wait, did you say you think queerness is about lattes?

HANNAH. Why is iced coffee gay?/ I still feel like I don't fully understand...

FRANKIE. NO.

I think it's feeling like we've lost time—like I lost time—like I have FOMO for this whole childhood I could have had. But I don't want that. To be stuck, and feeling the weight of that grief.

Track 3

OWEN. How do you think we get unstuck?

FRANKIE. I don't know.

OWEN. I think maybe that's what I'm researching?

HANNAH. I feel like I'm just understanding this... what this is... my relationship to it.

FRANKIE. This history

OWEN. It's not just a history friend.

HANNAH. Yes. Yes. I know. I guess all of it. I go looking for the queer ghosts in my own family tree and they're not there. It's hard for me to find myself.

FRANKIE. Do you feel like you need to find them in your own family tree?

HANNAH. Maybe... maybe not. But I want them to be there.

I'm like.

I just came out.

FRANKIE. Wait what?!

HANNAH. Yes.

OWEN. Stop.

FRANKIE. How just is just?

HANNAH. Like...a year? Or something? It's a process. It hasn't been so easy to define.

OWEN. Welcome.

HANNAH. Yes. thank you.

FRANKIE. LOL why are you welcoming her? Are you the person at the gate of gay letting folks in? Are you the host at the gay house party?

OWEN. Yes. yes, I am.

HANNAH. It's just...

I'm **researching.**

I'm trying to find my models.

I'm looking for me.

But I keep flipping through files and finding not me. But also...me?
It's hard to explain.

OWEN. I would like to welcome the ghosts of prior you but not you to the gay house party.

(an incantation)

The question is not if we are haunted but how we are haunted

The question is not if the past is present but how it is present

And what it does to our bodies

In our bodies

The box of tapes glistens. They seem queer (whatever that means).

FRANKIE finds a tape, and puts it in the tape player.

HANK VO. In the 80s and 90s we danced to forget. We danced to forget all the crap that was going on around us. Nowadays it's more like we dance to remember. Yeah, we dance to remember those people that aren't here to dance with us anymore.

The voice is like a portal. Hannah, Owen, and Frankie are on the dancefloor, but still in the archive, and time and space are slippery again. They latch onto some of the words, move it through their bodies.

OWEN finds a dusty boom box and presses play. Music moves through the space, gently at first and then with more force. The researchers let it infect them.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

TIM VO. (*music starts here*) The entire gay city went crazy, you know, we all went sort of insane.

It's like all I do is drink.

It was just like being caught under a bell jar, and it felt that way because you couldn't fight an enemy you didn't know. And if there was an enemy, it was internalized. I mean literally internalized. I mean the enemy was in you

It's like all I do is drink.

You know, there was a joke that the cause of AIDS was track lighting and industrial carpeting...or you know poppers. Poppers were immediate. They were easy cause you could just throw the poppers away. I remember I was on the dance floor once and some older guy pulled out a bottle of poppers and I was dancing with my friend. I said in my best Dorothy Parker. "Oh, there's a Dying Breed" You know, but that's how you dealt with it.

It's like all I do is drink

He came into the White Horse and he said, Did you hear the bad news about AIDS? "Oh, no bad news about AIDS really?" what the fuck there is no good news about AIDS, and that was a very surreal part of it. It just kept getting worse. It kept getting worse for 15 years. That's a really long time.

It's like all I do is drink

Sometimes you would suddenly realize you hadn't seen somebody in a while and you tended not to ask about them because you knew. My friend Dan's lover died and he didn't show up very often and but at one point I said "where's Steve?" and he was like, Steve died five months ago.

He wrote Steve's mother. And asked—there was a picture of them together—he asked for a copy of it. Steve's mother cut it up into 45 pieces and mailed it back to Dan.

OWEN stops dancing, finds the fragments inside of an envelope and lets them fall.

TIM VO. *(coming from the tape deck. the sound echoes, skips, distorts)*
we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to

live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...

TIM VO (*music ends*) You know, that all seems like history now.

The room shrinks, returns to normal but Frankie and Hannah are still dancing

Owen presses stop on the boom box

Hannah stops first, out of breath.

OWEN. Do you think that queer ghosts are different than regular ghosts?

HANNAH. What do you mean different?

OWEN. Like, are they angrier?

FRANKIE. Maybe they're less angry.

OWEN. Maybe the question isn't are they angrier, but am I angrier when I think about them?

Am I angrier when I can't find them or know their names?

FRANKIE. Would they want me to know their names?

How would they even want to be known?

Track 4

OWEN. Is this our inheritance? Scribbles on bar napkins and anonymous photographs and half-used notebooks full of half-lived lives?

I don't know what to do with that.

I don't know how to hold it

How I am supposed to mourn people I never meet?

I dance and I fuck and I...

I mostly don't think about it.

But sometimes it climbs out of my stomach and into my throat

unexpectedly

when I'm like

dancing

or running

or kissing.

And it feels like ghosts—

or ghosts are the only things that can help me deal with it?

how it feels in my body...

It's like...

I don't know what to do with like the
gravity of the
entire fucking state of the world.

And I need help.

And then I remember.

There are people who lived through that
there are versions of me
like people like me
but not me
and some of them I can pick up the phone and call
but a lot of them
like a whole lot of them
I maybe need to call a different way
but like I need them to understand what it is to be a person like me
living in a time like this.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

A phone has been knocked off the hook in one of the boxes.

Owen takes it out

Tries to answer it

He puts it on the table

Still off the hook

RICHARD VO. I was alone with this doctor in the room who says “well, it wasn’t an abscess.” and I didn’t hear—I don’t remember anything after that except a few things about treatment, and statistics, and “goodbye,” and then he walked out and left me alone.

FRANKIE presses play on a tape, rewinds it and goes back to the same piece of audio over and over.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I’m here doing it. I’m taking care of you. I love you. I can’t bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. He left the room and I was in complete shock—like I couldn't move and the door opened and one of the nurses turned and just came running in. She opened the door ran in and held me and I just cried and sobbed.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. (*music starts here*) First person I called was my friend Phyllis who is my bestie from the women's clinic and still one of my best friends. And I cried on the phone with her, sobbed on the phone. And I think she came and brought me home.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. I was so scared. It was horrible. So my friends, umm, rallied.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. They did, like, everything I couldn't do—cook, clean, at that point I could still bathe myself, but I couldn't make food or do anything like housework-wise or drive.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. I was really freaked out. I couldn't... I didn't want to be alone. So people stayed with me.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. We had a potluck at my apartment to sort of figure out what I needed, who could do what, and to create a calendar, you know, stay organized. All with the background music playing of you know, I'm going to die. I'm not going to get through this.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. It was a nightmare. My friends were great, but it was hard to like scream and cry with them and tell them how frightened I was because they wanted me to get through it. They wanted to make me better—which, I wanted to get better, but I was just like beside myself with Terror and Fear and I was afraid to freak them out, and they were doing so much. And so at that point I called Shanti and I talked to somebody on the phone I vividly remember having somebody hear me for the first time and say

OWEN. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO/OWEN. I understand and that must be terribly scary. Just listening without trying to change my feelings, you know or anything. It was exactly what I needed. And he supported me on the phone for two weeks. I could say anything and you know, there was no judgment, there was no wall of "you can't feel this" or "you can't say that". And at that point I was really really really really sick and homebound except for going to the radiation treatments which were daily and chemo was like once a week and I started having bad side effects from the chemo and from the radiation, the burns, and I had this giant wound and diarrhea and I couldn't control my bowels and it hurt like the, you know, like you're shitting razor blades and you know, it was just like the worst darkest time.

GAYNEMEDE VO/OWEN/FRANKIE. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. So Simon was there through all that, you know, he was always the person I could call and talk to and I only saw him once a week, but that was so important because my friends they did all the practical stuff.

GAYNEMEDE VO/OWEN/HANNAH/FRANKIE. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. I'm still best friends with Simon 30 years later. We stopped being volunteer/client about a year into it but we had grown close at that point—like to the point of we wanted to stay in each other's lives, even though he no longer could be my volunteer. I wanted to be—I *want to be* friends with him. We did this ritual. We did a very conscious ritual of turning a hundred and eighty degrees and letting go of that relationship and then returning another hundred eighty to a friendship. You know sharing about each other's lives and actually, you know, being part of each other's families and I think that happened a lot. People just become so close. They become part of your family. (*music ends*)

Owen is left holding the phone

He looks at Frankie and Hannah

Frankie takes his hand and puts it to their ear

FRANKIE. Hey Richard.

They open it up so that Owen can share

FRANKIE. Thanks for talking

OWEN. I just...

Thanks.

RICHARD VO. Yeah

OWEN. I needed that.

I'll call you again tomorrow.

RICHARD VO. Great, see you in a bit. Ok. Bye.

Owen hangs up the telephone.

He picks it up. It floats.

So when I talk about ghosts,

I mean the parts of our past that stay present with us.

The ways that we *are* together.

because of the ways that we *were* together.

Track 5

OWEN. I guess my question is, how do I hold it in both hands?
How do I care for the ghosts, and also care for the living?

HANNAH. When I'm just starting to figure this out, what do I do
with my own grief?

I want to learn how to find joy when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to have hot sex when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to hold community when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to make dinner when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to get sober when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to go to bed on time when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to laugh when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to write when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to dance when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to fall in love when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to love well when the world is ending.

*FRANKIE and OWEN head back into the archive. They dive in deep.
FRANKIE opens a box and a voice emerges.*

CASS/FRANKIE. I lived with somebody for a while who I moved in
with when he got diagnosed. He was somebody I was I had a crush
on, I was kind of in love and it was not reciprocated but I felt okay,
he needs me and I just want to be near him. I want to care for him.
I was always wanting some sort of more physical connection just you
know, touch, and he was more and more suspicious of it. And so it
was not a good situation. It got more dysfunctional and we'd fight

and withdraw to our own corners of the house and I felt like well, he's not getting what he needs from me, I'm not getting what I want from him, and maybe if I, you know, move out he'll have more room in his life for somebody. He didn't really want me to move but I felt I was doing the right thing. Maybe I was running away, and maybe I was abandoning him. That's not what I felt at the time. We were in a downward spiral and for whatever personal failings I couldn't put my own agenda on the back burner and just sort of let it be and be in the situation as it was. Several months after I moved out he ended up in the hospital at General. I went to visit him in the hospital and we hadn't seen each other for a while, but it was kind of—it felt nice being there with him... and he asked me to wash his back and that was... like it was an invitation to touch him and to care for him in a way that he let go of all of his kind of suspicions and weariness and just and it's kind of ...The most tender thing I think I've ever done in my life was to wash his back.

A moment of touch

A moment of song

FRANKIE hands the tapedeck to OWEN, and helps him to get started. He holds the tape player to his body, and holds every word in his mouth.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

JOHN/OWEN. I kind of fell in love with J Paul as soon as I saw him. He was a bright fish, you know in a rather dull pool. Our home was like living in an art piece. He painted and he made all his own clothes. He was an amazingly creative soul. I mean, this was really what drove his life. He had huge dreams about what he was going to do. The world was going to be different because J Paul is in it, you know, and so when he realized that none of that was going to take place it was a roller coaster ride. We had seen all of our friends end up with AIDS. I'm the only Survivor of all of them.

J Paul always kind of laughed at my worldview. He said

“John you want life to be like a Doris Day and Rock Hudson Musical and everyone's going to drive off in the end in a convertible and live happily ever after. You know, it's not that way.”

And he proved it. So that was an interesting lesson to learn—a kind of a slap to the face, but you know.

He was in and out of the hospital—mostly in the hospital and the very last few days that he was there they knew that he was going to be passing probably within a day or so and so he asked me to take him home because he wanted to die at home. And so I told the doctor J wants to die at home and they didn't want to let him go. The doctors had never seen those kinds of cancers reacting to a body in that particular way and so they wanted to keep him there till the very end watch the entire process and then do an autopsy. The whole idea of an autopsy for J Paul was like the antithesis of everything. I mean, he was an aesthete, he was just not interested in having his beautiful body cut open. So he said no to all of that and the doctors actually walked away and would not sign him out of the hospital. He was hooked up to machines and stuff. I got a nurse and I said if you will help me there'll be less blood, but he's coming home with me. And so she helped me, and I got him home. But um, the last 24 hours he entered into a kind of painless state. So he was not on drugs and he was without pain and so so we just sat and talked for a long time. And that's kind of how we ended our relationship with the long conversation about our life together and it was an important conversation. But as he started drifting, you know, I said

Jay I think you're you're ready. And he said there's one more thing he wanted me to help him with, and that was to get dressed because he was a fashion major. So... sorry...so he had his clothes chosen and I helped him get in his clothes and you know laid him down and put on his favorite music and his favorite incense and held his hand.

A moment of touch

A moment of song

OWEN hands theapedeck to HANNAH and gets her started.

REBECCA VO/HANNAH. Dog was just this extraordinary human being. I always struggled to figure out what pronouns to use because because they were using "him" when I met Dog and were using "her" later. But in retrospect, given, you know, what Dog

always said to me about not feeling like they were any gender at all and the way Dog was in their body and in the world. You know, I am certain, as certain as anyone can be, that Dog would really have found a home in, you know, in the non-binary identity and community. And- And had that community existed when Dog was alive, they might be alive now.

So Dog and I became partners following a demonstration in DC. We were protesting for single-payer, universal healthcare. And we went into the capital on a tour like, you know, got in line and everything and then just lay down on the floor of the Rotunda and did a die-in and started screaming until they dragged us all out. But after this, when we finally got released from custody, we spent that night together. And that- That was pretty, kind of, representative something that would happen within that movement, it was just all very intense all the time. And, you know, intimacy was a way that people took care of each other. You know, you can't talk about the movement without seeing even, you know- I think it's lying to talk about the movement and not say, you know, "that sex was something that brought joy to the movement and made it fun and wild and people came to meetings to meet other cute people." And there was a lot of that, there was a lot of like, "ACT UP is where all the cute guys are at so all the cute, guys go there." and things like that. But there was also this, you know, sometimes we, you know, we were really emotional and, you know, came together as a response to that. And so that's how things started between me and Dog. And then, we were just a pair, you know, and I was, I mean, we weren't exclusive and we- there are lots of other activists and a lot going on, I'm not gonna lie about that. But Rebecca and her Dog were kind of a thing.

And we were very close friends with another activist named Collin Blakeney, who was in and out of the hospital all through like, 1992-1993. And so we were part of Collin's care team. and, you know- And so, a lot of my life during those years was like, work, ACT UP meetings, demonstrations, the hospital with Collin.

And when Collin died, Dog went into a really bad depression. And then Dog also started transitioning at that time, and so was going by the name Kaci and identifying as female and was, you know, on hormone therapy. And, you know and- But- But Kaci's mental health was really bad and Kaci was- started dealing with her grief by using heroin. And alternating between heroin and

HANNAH. Xanax, Kaci overdosed three years to the day after Colin died. So it was very clear that it was just like she was basically saying, "I'm never going to recover from this, I'm never going to be okay."

FRANKIE. Hannah?

HANNAH. Yeah?

FRANKIE. Do you think that queer ghosts are different than regular ghosts?

HANNAH. What do you mean?



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

FRANKIE. Like, how would they even want to be known?

How do we know what to call them?

...

I mean, ok, there is an agreed-upon right way to talk about trans ghosts and tbh trans people, live people, in the past and that's to al-

ways use the name and pronouns that they were using most recently to talk about them the whole time.

And that is MOST people's preference

Because trans people don't become trans when they tell you that they are

It's been inside them for their whole life.

It's been inside me for my whole life.

Whether they knew it or not

or i knew it or not

but for me

it's slipperier

it's becoming

My name is Frankie

But I used to be called something else

And this name has opened up a portal

To let out so many things that have always been inside

So sometimes the old name feels like it belongs to another person

Me but not me

And they're not dead

The name isn't dead

But they can feel like a ghost

And I have so much love for them

And everything they went through
I would never deny them
But I can't carry their anxiety and trauma anymore
Naming is a portal to a lighter place
It's a way for me to have some agency over my body and my story
And when I talk to older people, a lot of folks do this thing, they
like-backwards identify their friends as non-binary "You know he
was very fey, very non-binary"
trying to wrestle with how to talk about people in the past
people who might have moved into this linguistic space that we
opened recently to describe something that has always been here and
has been forcibly erased through linguistic and other violence.
And I really wish,
Kaci,
that you were here to tell me how you want to be talked about.
I think you'd be like 50?
And it is fucked that you are not someone that I can just call.
Especially because Rebecca thinks
that if the doors that have been opened for me were open to you
that you might still be around.
So when I talk about ghosts
I'm talking about stolen time
and wisps of knowing

and spirits that can't be contained with language.

And I want a queer past that I can use to chart a queer future

But fuck it's hard to talk about.

Hannah presses rewind and play on a deck that is already there. She goes back to a piece that she remembers.

HANK VO/ HANNAH. In the 80s and 90s we danced to forget.
We danced to forget all the crap that was going on around us.
Nowadays it's more like we dance to remember. Yeah, we dance to remember those people that aren't here to dance with us anymore.

A dance to remember, and a dance to forget



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

HANNAH. What do we do now when the world is ending?

Fever in a parking lot, gonna dance away this grief

Heart in a chamber, beating for your love

Hot sex on a burning beach, and a party just for me

ALL. When the world is, when the world is, when the world is
ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is ending

FRANKIE AND OWEN. I can feel you, reaching across time

Your fingers brush my spirit as I groove into this dream

Learning to remember how you feel

Kiss me till I can't forget that the love we share is real

ALL. When the world is, when the world is, when the world is
ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is ending

(Music break)

ALL. I want to learn how to love you when the world is ending

HANNAH. I want to find joy when the world is ending/

FRANKIE AND OWEN. I want to learn how to love you when the
world is ending/

ALL. When the world is, when the world is, when the world is
ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is ending

(freely) When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is ending

FRANKIE. I had a dream last night that Lou Sullivan taught me how to shave.

OWEN. Do you want Lou Sullivan to be your daddy?

FRANKIE. /STOP

HANNAH. Isn't that a little irreverent?

FRANKIE. Maybe. Maybe I do want that.

OWEN. What was he wearing?

FRANKIE. I don't remember.

HANNAH. /How did you know it was him?

FRANKIE. We could just...recognize each other.

Sometimes I think that I read Lou Sullivan's journals and they like...magically made me trans.

HANNAH. Whoa.

FRANKIE. I know that it didn't happen like that. I know that's like... reductive and maybe deeply problematic to even be hinting at, but...I was sitting in a reading room at an archive, with fluores-

cent tube lighting, and some other artists looking at old porn, and a researcher reading something else—I'm not sure what—and an archivist that I know that I was annoying because I asked for way too many boxes because I wasn't sure what I was looking for. But he gave me the journals at the last minute. And they felt important. Maybe because they felt old and old things feel important. And I didn't want to ruin them but I wanted to touch them, to run my hands up and down them. And I read a passage he wrote about his lover, Johnny. About lying with him, and running his fingers over his skin like I was running my fingers over the pages of this tiny notebook. Something about yearning. And the way that he talked about clothes! And boys. I think...I think I didn't know that boys could do that actually...or that I could?

And then I read through, into the years when he was sick, and his last journal entry and I was terrified and my face was flushed with rage. He wasn't 40 yet when he died. He would be 70 now. Or I guess maybe he is 70 now. Just like...not on this plane. Does time work the same way for ghosts?

...

I think a lot of other trans people find what I found in an archive on youtube or tumblr or tiktok.

OWEN. It's very on-brand of you to find it in an archive.

FRANKIE. Thank you?

HANNAH. OMG how are we going to archive that.

How are we going to archive all of our fucking recorded zoom calls and sourdough starters/ and wordle.

OWEN. And fucking grindr

FRANKIE. How will we explain grindr to people in the future?

OWEN. How will we explain grindr to the ghosts?

FRANKIE. Ok hi! Hello! Ghosts?

I heard that you actually had something analogous to this—
that there were boys standing in windows along [[STREET]]
and that just meant you know,
“come upstairs”

so it's like that
but on a phone?!
that also has a screen?!

HANNAH. like star trek!

FRANKIE. but not just video
like

you can know where the boys are

OWEN. (well kind of like how far they are from you)

FRANKIE. without needing to walk down the street

HANNAH. or stand in your window.

FRANKIE. AND

And and and

You can just disclose your last test!

And people are fucking jerks about stuff BUT

you can disclose your status and

DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU CAN BE UNDETECTABLE
NOW?

OWEN. U=U!

FRANKIE. It's like

really great

and really thank you

SO

Yes

That.

It's a weird world in a computer in the back pocket of my 501s and I think you would have been very happy there.

Track 6

HANNAH. I think about that all the time. What's missing. We don't put bedpans in the archive because they're gross,

OWEN. we don't put dirty rags and scrub daddies in the archive because they're gross.

HANNAH. We put posters and pretty things

FRANKIE. and stories with heroes.

OWEN. But it's important that we have bedpans in the archive.

FRANKIE. And other weird things.

HANNAH. Because those are actually the things that queer life circles around.

OWEN. It's so mundane.

HANNAH. The Queer Mundane.

They all look at the tapes, and decide to play one more.

TIM VO/FRANKIE. There are two kinds of support people: there were emotional support people and there were what were called practical support people. I was a practical support person. I couldn't deal with my own emotions about AIDS. You know, let alone deal with somebody else's, but I can scrub the toilet and I can vacuum and I can, you know, go to the market and I mean I like those kind of things. They're very concrete.

They're very I know this is helping somebody. So I did that for two or three years and it was funny because you had to do this completely over-the-top training. It was like an entire weekend, you know, and I was really I know how to clean a toilet already, I don't need training!

But it was about dealing with all the issues about AIDS and I still remember it was at the Shanti headquarters. It was all very new agey. People talking about healing and support. I still remember you had to go Friday night and it went to like 11:00 at night. And then you were supposed to be back there at 9:00 in the morning on Saturday and there was a potluck for lunch. Well, I still remember everybody did exactly the same thing. They went home and they made pasta salad because pasta salad is quick. So at the lunch at The Shanti on Saturday there were like 43 pasta salads and I said “Good thing I like pasta.”

Track 7

OWEN. Did you find what you were looking for?

HANNAH. What?

OWEN. For your research. Did you find what you needed for your research?

HANNAH. No.

I'm not sure that what I'm looking for is in here.

FRANKIE. I'm still not sure what I was looking for.

OWEN. Do you feel better or worse

FRANKIE. I feel a pull

OWEN. A pull?

FRANKIE. Yeah

Like a solar plexus feeling

OWEN. Yearning is the inheritance of queer people and ghosts

HANNAH. And regular queer ghosts

The researchers arrange the tape decks and boom boxes and tapes and phones into a shrine and stand by it.

RICK VO. And that night I had a dream. And the dream was I was standing there and Jason was there. And I knew in my dream he was dead. It was like a visitation. He didn't say anything but he smiled and he was now my height rather than taller than me and we hugged and I said to myself I want to hold onto this moment. Don't let this dream end. Of course it did. It did.

The tape continues to run

Fragments of photographs fall from the sky

TIM VO. (*coming from the tape deck. the sound echoes, skips, distorts*)
we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to
live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through
this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and
we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going
to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're
going to live through this and we're going to be... we're going to
live through this and we're going to be... we're going to live through
this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're
going to be... we're going to live through this and we're going to
be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...

The researchers leave

and the archive keeps talking

PAUL. (*sound effects fade through the monologue*) We don't have a vaccine or cure for HIV. And yes, I know. They're two totally different viruses. Don't get me started on that, but it's 40 years. I mean, death has been a part of my life every day. Since June 5th, 1981, my entire adult life. Whether it was watching a friend, wither away and die or whether it was waiting for that other shoe to drop and it was going to be my turn. Death has always been there. It's like the specter hanging over my whole adult life, you know, and so when covid hit, it's like, oh my God, here we go again. I stood up and applauded with dr. Burke's said that first press conference, that I watched the week that San Francisco sheltered in place and she said we need to look to the long-term survivors of HIV because they've been through this. And they know what to do. And it was like, wow, maybe it was all for a reason. Maybe I survived for a reason. Maybe this was the reason maybe I'm here to show your generation. What you do in the face of pandemic, it kind of felt that way, you know, there was a moment. I'll never forget it. I was sitting here watching TV and it was David Mirror because he's so cute. We love David Mirror and he started talking about the deaths in New York. And on the TV, they

were showing the mass graves that they had been digging and the refrigeration trucks and I I couldn't function. It was, it was like this bizarre fugue state. It was like this wave of grief and fear and anxiety was coming over, and going to pull me out like a riptide. And I was just like, like the anxiety was over... I've never experienced that kind of anxiety in my life. And all of a sudden that that wave became the arms of everyone ever lost to AIDS. And it'd- they just enveloped me. And and the voices were in my head saying it's okay. We got you. You know what this is. You've been here before, you know what to do. This is why you're still here. You're here because you're them when you need to show them.

Lights on the stage go dark

the click of a tape player

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