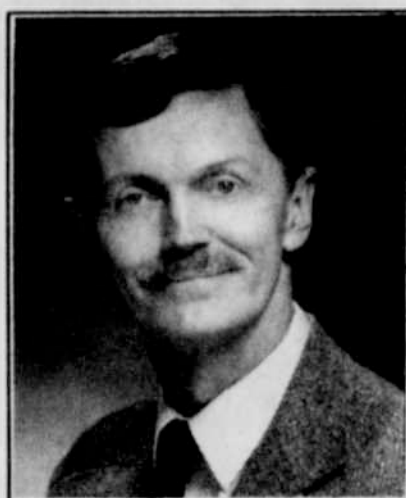


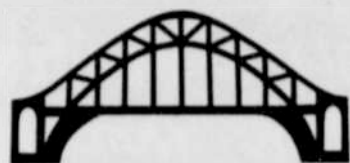
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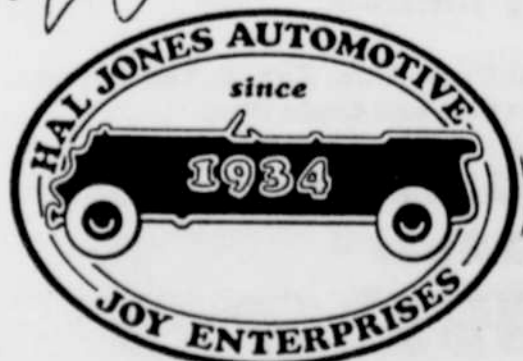
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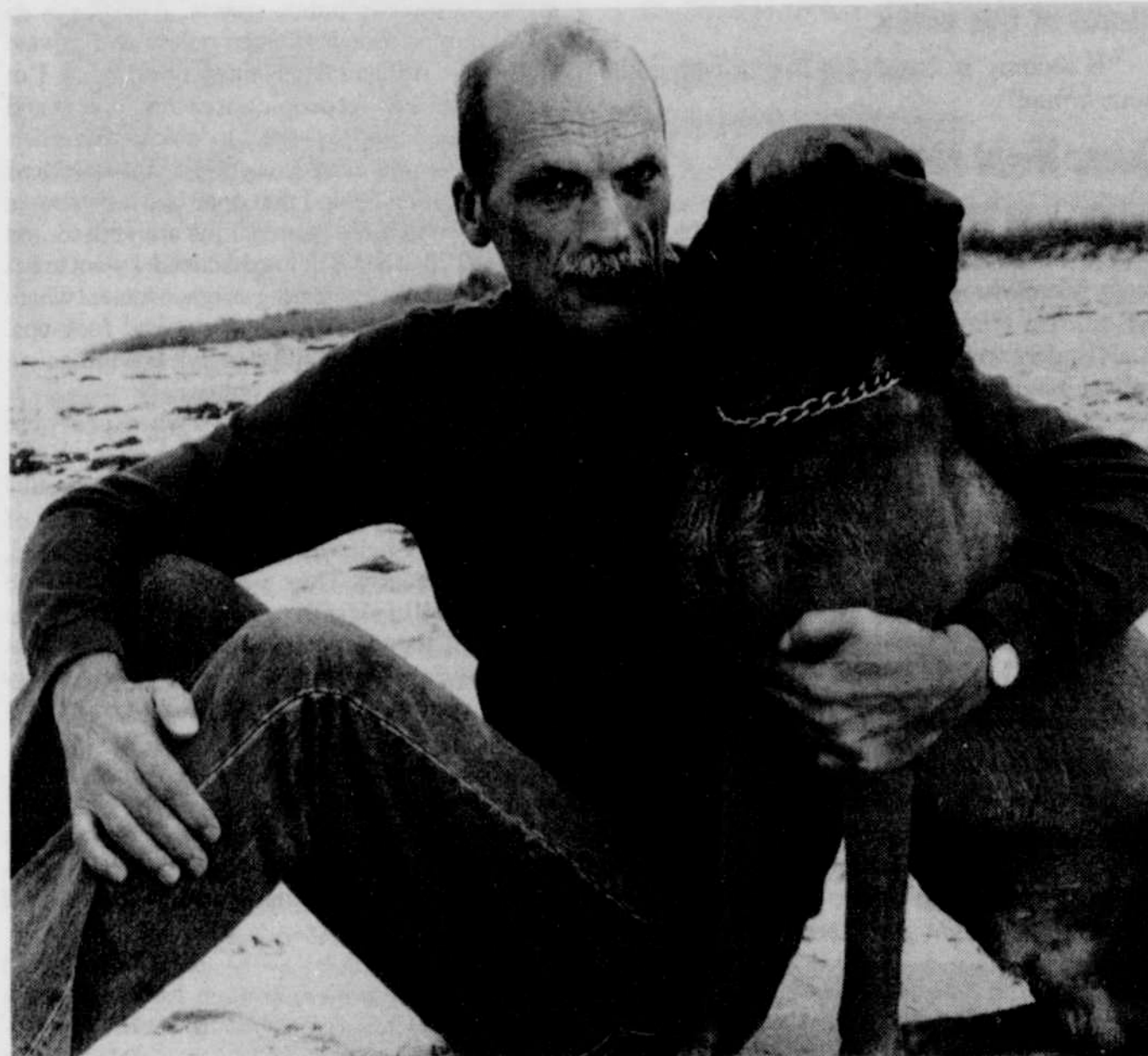
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# "The chiefest words"

John Preston is a man of traditions—some old, some new

by Grant Michael Menzies



John Preston with canine pal

"My eyes," says John Preston, "are the thing everyone has commented on since as far back as I can remember": They are indeed one very striking feature amidst many others, both physically and on a soul-level. You see them, and you see John Preston. Or do you? "It's been the great opening line," Preston chuckles, though his eyes, intensely blue, do not yet join in the fun. "You know, 'Your eyes are...' Fill in the blank. Demonic? Sensual? Cold? Welcoming? People have read into my eyes whatever they chose."

This is not strictly true. What you see in Preston's eyes is what's happening inside. And what's happening inside, be it demonic, sensual, cold or welcoming, is consistently quite intense stuff.

Preston is always on the lookout for what fellow New Englander Emily Dickinson called "the chiefest words, the best words." Perhaps best known as a writer of gay erotica (*Mr. Benson*), and former editor of *The Advocate*, he has served as editor of an important series of anthologies of gay literature. He has edited *Personal Dispatches: Writers Confront AIDS*, *Hometowns: Gay Men Write About Where They Belong*, and most recently, *A Member of the Family: Gay Men Write About Their Families* (Dutton, 1993). One's initial reaction to these stories of gay men's memories of family is similar to the pain of hearing a small boy's cries in the night—the one way a child has of grappling with his perceived fate, with the irresponsible, the too well-meaning or the plain crazy adults into whose midst life sees fit to fling him. These writers have the power to resurrect and the

tenderness to enjoy, the boy in all men—in themselves—that small figure caught by surprise wandering the horizon in back of every man's mind. Does he run in fear from, or does he approach with open arms, the man, the person, he's become?

As we sit in his room at the Heathman, which overlooks busy Broadway below, Preston explains, "This series of anthologies, along with the upcoming *Friends and Lovers*, reflects something I was dealing with in a significant way at the time—*Personal Dispatches*, when I got my diagnosis. *Hometowns*, because I had to reflect on why I had moved back to New England, where I was born, and why that was so important. *Member of the Family* reflects many different dynamics that were going on with me. The motivation behind each of these anthologies was to go and ask other gay male writers, 'How do you deal with this?'"

The 47-year-old Preston came out when very young—"Over 30 years ago," he says. "And my parents had a terrible time with it. But over 30 years ago, we had no language with which to discuss being gay, coming out. There were no youth groups, no PFLAGs, no books in the bookstores, nada. As I look back on it, my parents had two major issues which I, as a young radical, thought were horribly bourgeois excuses on their part, and which I refused to take seriously." A smile of recollection warms those eyes just a bit, like sun on ice. "My father's issue was, 'How are you going to make a living,' while my mother's was, 'How are you going to be happy?'" Preston explains that the final acceptance, as it were, of his gayness came when, as editor of *The Advocate*, he inadvertently picked up the tab after dining with his parents at one of Boston's most expensive restaurants. In his family mythology, he grins, "The time John took Jack and Nancy to dinner at Locke-Ober was when Jack ceased to have a problem with John's being a homosexual. If homosexuality meant that his son could take him to dinner at Locke-Ober, then it was okay by him."

# BOOKS