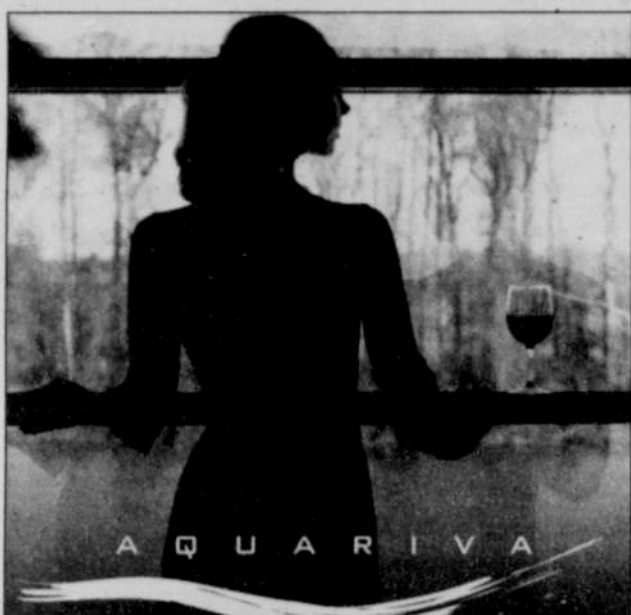




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***** WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR WHEN YOU PLAN A NIGHT OUT? *****

Check out the Nightlife page when planning your next outing

Lose My Breath

Suicides, vigils and the gay death drive

There's a suicide note on my computer." The statement—so shocking and plain—came from a new friend, someone I'd met only a few days earlier (dollar wells at CC's, a Thursday night). It knocked the wind out of me.

Earlier that day: Grabbing my messenger bag to rush out of the courtroom, 3:35 p.m. Dec. 28, I had that very same reaction. My chest got tight; I couldn't breathe. I hustled past the crowd into an empty elevator, pressed 1, flipped open my cell, called a friend:

"They took it away...they won...I don't understand..." I stammered.

The friend was confused, asked for clarity. I got to the first floor, stumbled out into the rain.

"They won," I blurted. "THEY WON. They won the temporary injunction against same-sex domestic partnerships."

While most of queer Portland slept (I mean this figuratively), the Alliance Defense Fund, an aggressive group of gay-hating conservatives, succeeded in postponing (at least until Feb. 1) Oregon's state-sanctioned gay partnerships law, House Bill 2007. Surely by now you've heard of this, right?

There had been statewide parties, from Ashland to Bend, planned to fete the law's victory. Even only a few hours after the deadly court defeat, Basic Rights Oregon's newly appointed executive director, Jeana Frazzini, promised retooled parties—including one at Portland's downtown Armory—to celebrate a separate but unharmed political win: the Oregon Equality Act, which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

But by Jan. 2, even those festive plans had died: BRO backed off its celebratory mood. And so what was produced instead to mark the day? A candlelight vigil.

Perhaps I shouldn't be so surprised: Gays do death better than anybody else. The entirety of my growing up gay in the 1980s and '90s involved a constant intermingling of death with gay desire: the advent of AIDS (Freddie Mercury and Rock Hudson, like many of my young gay crushes, both dead of AIDS), the lynching of Matthew Shepard, the hundred little deaths of each adolescent orgasm, in the parked car or the high school bathroom.

Memory quilts and remembrance services, "die-ins" (remember ACT UP?) and vigils—endless vigils. In eighth grade for my junior high school's "Future Day" (it was Spirit Week), I went dressed in a black sweatshirt and jeans, with cryptic letters (an "H," an "I" and a "V") scrawled in eyeliner across my forehead and arms: My costume represented "The Future of AIDS." I was 14, and already this queer death drive was manifesting itself.

I wonder if some of this crushing emotional weight from so many deaths, especially for those of us who have as yet survived AIDS, might also account for the high rate of depression among the gay men I know here. I like to consider myself fairly egalitarian when it comes to my friendships: gay or straight, old or young, GED or Ph.D., West Hills or Gresham. But among the ever-expanding circle of Portland gay men I meet, I feel this collective heaviness of spirit. There is a hardened exterior with matching hollowed eyes that even a Five for Five Tuesday night at the Red Cap can't cure (although it is a fantastic distraction).

My new friend who wrote the suicide note was



Corner View

BY STEPHEN MARC BEAUDOIN

not the only one recently to disclose such a devastating secret. In fact, I'd gone through my own dark period last summer (it was, coincidentally perhaps, right around Portland Pride) and written a few such things myself, self-pitying and verbose.

But still I wonder if maybe, as gay men especially, our political incapacitation might be due, in part at least, to our collective emotional unconsciousness...or at least our Wellbutrin-hazy existence.

To be gay today is to have been kicked, raped, beaten, spit upon and shoved in the mud—then showering off and repeating the whole damn process for a lifetime. Or it certainly feels like that. We are wounded saints and filthy sinners, and Matthew Shepard is our martyr. It's no surprise that we're expert vigil-producers, or that we cry on command: We've had a lifetime of rehearsal.

That Jan. 2 vigil was moved from downtown's shiny new Armory (accessible, sparkling, democratic) to Southeast's tiny Q Center (hard to find, cramped, gay-focused). A bi male friend of mine told me he refused to attend the vigil because he found the new venue "too gay-oriented" and didn't like the idea of "a whiny vigil." I have to agree; I went anyway.

"They didn't want rabble-rousing," a speaker—one of many political talking heads at the event—announced from the makeshift podium. "They asked me for something solemn and dignified."

And so, with vacant dry eyes lit by a roomful of candles, that tiny fraction of the Portland gay community (200 people, maybe) went through those most familiar of motions again: There was a loss to be mourned, candles to be lit, a purple ballad to be played on the piano (shades of Elton John's song for Ryan White).

But the energy was shiftless, unfocused. It didn't feel right.

First off, where the hell was everyone? I wondered. And then, more fervently: Where was the anger, the rage, the Larry Kramer-brand of polarizing passion that used to define the gay rights movement? Can a community really lose a fight like this and respond only with a vigil?

Maybe nobody cares. Or not enough queer bodies care. Maybe there is too much fatigue from our warp-speed civil rights advances and declines through the decades.

Or maybe Portland gays are all just dead. Politically speaking. 10

STEPHEN MARC BEAUDOIN writes about Portland arts and queer culture at fromeverycorner.blogspot.com. He welcomes feedback at stephenmarcb@yahoo.com.