

sessed with a man no longer interested in him, Kurt growls his way through the Lower East Side, struggling to write his latest novel about a young subway pusher. When people suddenly start actually getting pushed in front of subways, suspicion turns to Kurt, and the distinctions between desire and reality get dangerously fuzzy.

"There was an article in *The New York Times* recently," Mastbaum explains, "about the motorman that drives the subway seeing someone pushed or someone fall, and how far it was ahead of them and it's out of their control. And they have this big picture window to watch this horrible death and it's so intimate, they even see their expressions a lot of the time. And this event can totally ruin them. So I thought it was an amazing idea to see what it's like when somebody becomes obsessed with that."

Us Ones is a close and grueling exploration of a young man's obsession. Written in such breathless, colloquial prose, you feel as if it were mumbled to you by one of those flop-haired, post-post-punks one sees panhandling on a street corner. Alternatively irate and glum, the tone of the novel is so genuine, even those not of that generation will find plenty of footholds to navigate Kurt's tortured psyche. And for those afraid the book is a romp into nihilism, no fears. The book contains a strange kind of optimism in the characters who surround Kurt and try desperately to save him from himself. *Us Ones in Between* is a quick read, a short novel and tightly paced even in the midst of Kurt's bored ennui.

In both novels, Mastbaum explores the frustration young men exhibit with people perceived as inauthentic, even as the same teen struggles to find his own identity. Best of all, Mastbaum writes with authority and compassion about the young gay experience, and with sympathy and unflinching nerve, he allows us to enter into the "why?" of the angry young queer.



Blair Mastbaum recently moved to Portland with his longtime partner, actor and filmmaker Scott Coffey (Ellie Parker).

"People feel alienated from their neighbors and their government and from the people who decide who gets money," Mastbaum says. "It gets worse and worse each year. And young men are given this expectation that they're supposed to grow up and make a family of some sort in that world."

Mastbaum's next book, to be released in November, will be *Cool Things: The Best New Gay Fiction by Young American Writers*, which he edited with Will Fabro.

"It's 20 pieces of fiction," Mastbaum says. "Some are experimental, and a lot have drugs in them. A lot of weird, angry young boys is what it turned out to be."

Mastbaum and Fabro each chose half the pieces for the anthology, with some collaboration on content.

"I had hundreds of submissions," Mastbaum says. "I don't know how Will did it, but I chose instinctually. I tried to find new voices. I was sort of going for my aesthetic...a messy, scruffy beauty of some kind. A fucked-up hopefulness, I guess."

In the end, Mastbaum sees the novels and the anthology as a kind of beacon for young queer men. A way to not feel quite so isolated, lonely and angry.

"If I would have had *Clay's Way* like when I was 16, it would have made everything way easier," Mastbaum says.

Amen to that. 

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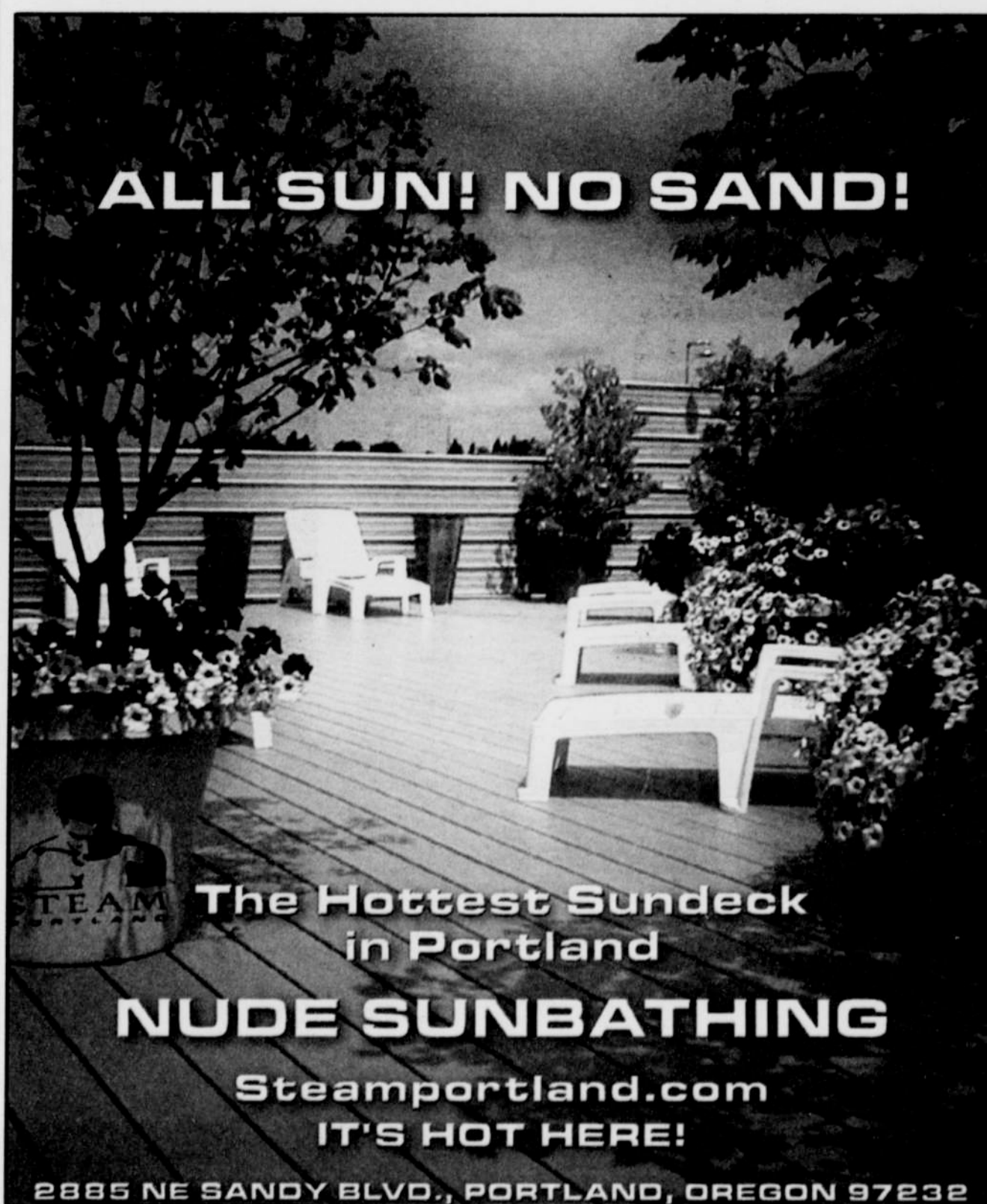


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