

Modern Grief



remember to breathe

BY NICK MATTOS

Punks push against each other in the packed and sweaty house, the room full of the smell of vegan hot dogs and dirty freebox clothing. I lean back into my seat on the threadbare couch, enjoying the cacophony—tipsy girls with dyed black hair laughing too loudly, scuffed army surplus boots pounding up and down the stairs, the growling voice blasting through the tinny stereo speakers.

“What album is this?” I ask the guy beside me, admiring his handmade “It’s Bobby, Bitch” T-shirt and the Limp Wrist patch meticulously safety-pinned onto his sleeveless denim jacket. “It’s like the Thermals, unplugged!”

“Cranford Nix,” Bobby explains, his voice thick with a four-beers-deep slur. “He was in some punk bands back in the late ‘90s and put out this acoustic stuff, too. Half of it’s about how much he hated his wife doing drugs, and the other half of it’s about how much he loves drugs. Kind of meta, really.”

“Is he local?” I ask.

“No, Detroit. And he’s dead, sadly. I got turned on to his work and couldn’t stop playing this album, and then a year later found out that he OD’d ages ago. I didn’t expect it to hit me so hard, but I literally burst into tears in the middle of a fucking basement show when I found out. My friends thought I was a freak!”

“Maybe we find out how close we actually were to something, how big a space it occupied in our hearts, when it leaves and we are forced to grieve it.”

“I know how it goes. This cat I’ve known and loved for about eight years recently died...” (Note: Yes, I am the guy who shows up at the punk rock house party and sits on the couch talking to strangers about pets. *Hardcore!*)

“Aw, buddy, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you. Anyway, I had this photo of myself and him from years ago, and after I found out the news, I put it up on Facebook as an R.I.P. message.”

“Oh, modern grief!”

“I know, who needs widow’s weeds when you have a Facebook wall? Anyway, I didn’t expect the responses. First off, everyone assumed that the cat was mine, which makes sense. However, when I cleared up that he wasn’t mine—just a good friend’s cat I had known for years—a surprising number of people reacted as though I didn’t have the right to mourn him, as though my not own-

ing him meant that there was no way I could be close to him or otherwise have any emotions associated with him dying.”

“That’s really weird,” Bobby observes. “It’s especially funny comparing it to another recent death: Amy Winehouse. I mean, in the same way that I wasn’t exactly shocked when I found out that Cranford had OD’d at that point in his career—frankly, it was pretty logical—it wasn’t exactly bizarre that Amy’d die at the time she did, either.”

“Sadly, no, it wasn’t. But still, everyone immediately grieved for her!” I note. “Social media went crazy about the news for days. Suddenly, everyone was the biggest Amy Winehouse fan around, and needed to publicly process their grief.”

“This is the confusing part to me,” Bobby ponders. “Loss is constant—it’s just a symptom of living in the material world, you know? But somehow the grieving isn’t constant. Somewhere inside us, there’s a line that defines when loss is okay and when it’s devastating.”

“But where is that line?” I ask, raising my voice over the din of the party. “How close to something do we have to be to justify mourning its loss?”


“I’m starting to think that we don’t get to know that in advance,” Bobby says, his dilated eyes locked with mine. “Maybe we find out how close we actually were to something, how big a space it occupied in our hearts, when it leaves and we are forced to grieve it. I found that out when I burst into tears over Cranford Nix, you found that out when the cat died, we all found that out with Amy Winehouse if we hadn’t already learned it a million times over before her. You don’t get to choose when grief is going to hit you—you just get to feel the bruise, and let it compel you to spill a little in memory of the people you’ve lost.” And, with solemnly closed eyes, Bobby splashes the contents of his fifth beer onto the dirty carpet.

“Shit!” I laugh, shocked. “Someone’s not getting invited back.”

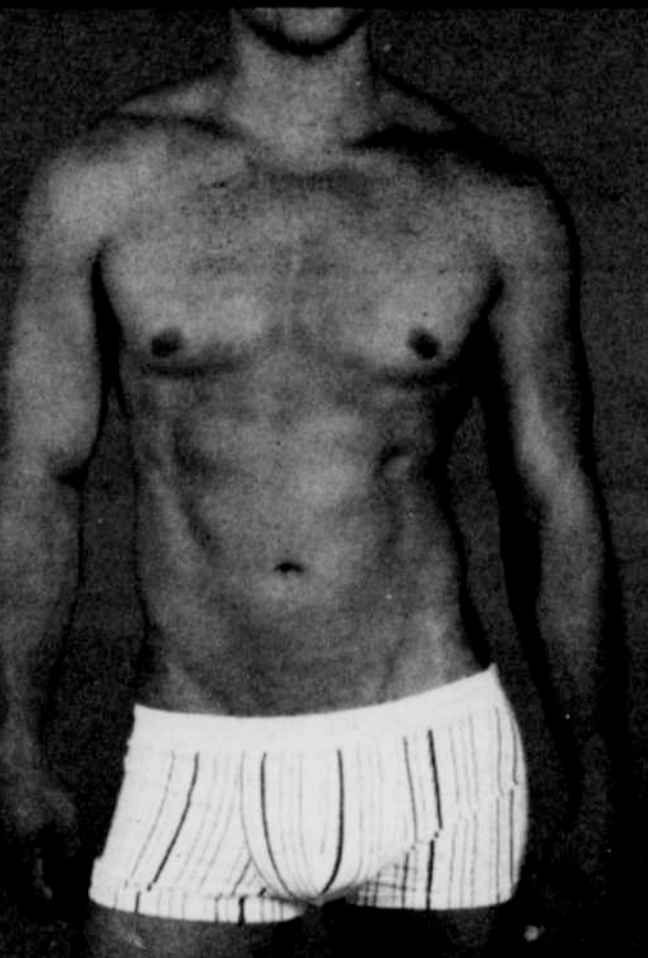
“Whatever—I wasn’t invited anyway! And look, the carpet’s filthy already.”

I look at my glass of soda water, then back to Bobby. “To Cranford,” I say, holding it up in a cheer, “and Amy, and Panna the cat, and everyone else who left their bodies and went on to the next adventure.” I tip my glass, watch the liquid fall through the air and sink out of sight in the dirty carpet, and smile. ☐

NICK MATTOS is by no means a punk—but they sure throw fun parties. Invite him to your show at nickmattos@justout.com.



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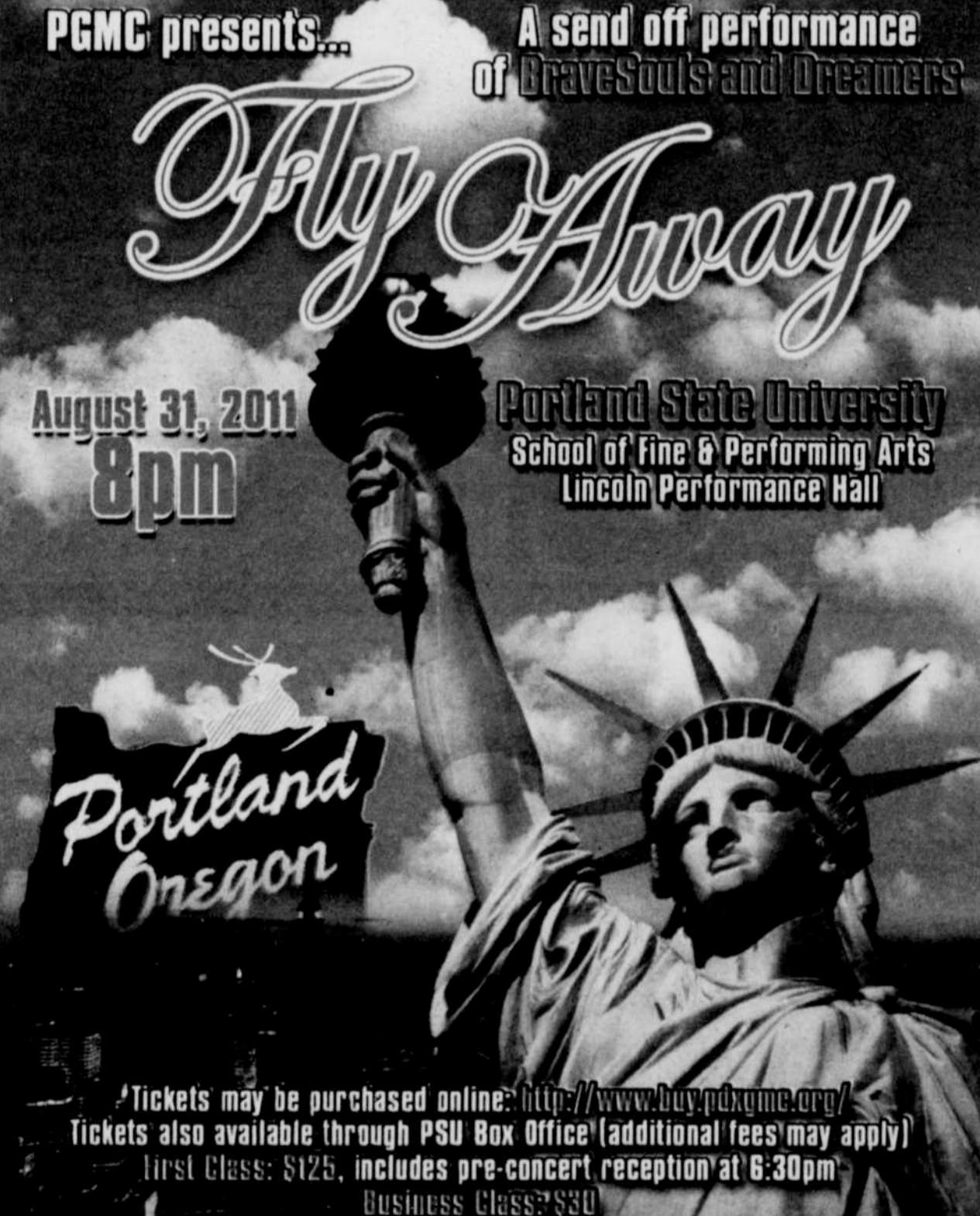
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