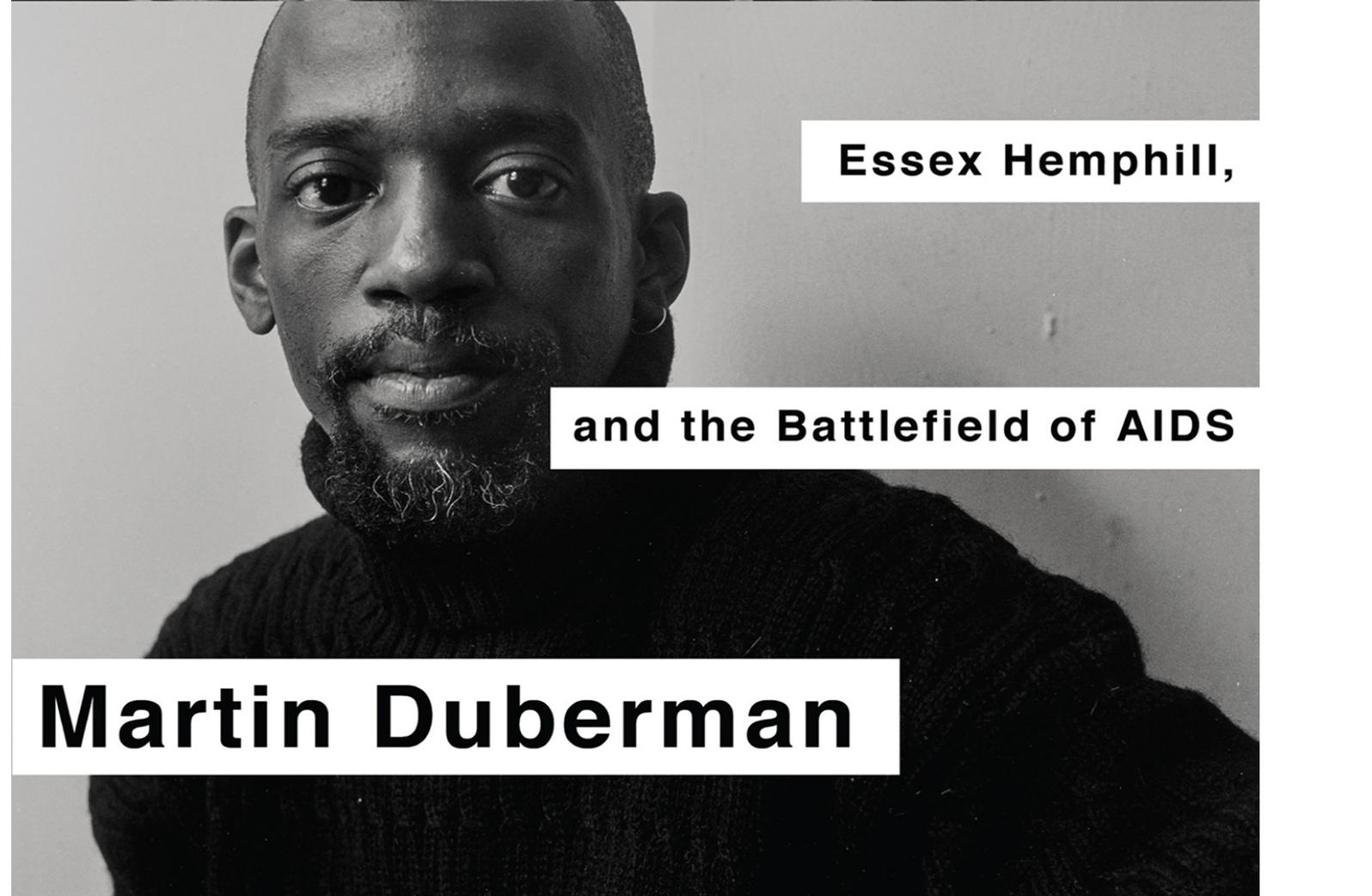


A black and white portrait of Michael Callen, a young man with dark hair, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He is wearing a light-colored, button-down shirt.

# Hold Tight Gently

**Michael Callen,**

A black and white portrait of Essex Hemphill, a Black man with a beard and a small hoop earring, looking slightly to the left of the camera. He is wearing a dark, textured sweater.

**Essex Hemphill,**

**and the Battlefield of AIDS**

**Martin Duberman**

HOLD TIGHT GENTLY

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ALSO BY MARTIN DUBERMAN

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HOLD  
TIGHT  
GENTLY

Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill,  
and the Battlefield of AIDS

Martin Duberman



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*To the memory of those lost to AIDS*

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There's a certain slant of light,  
On winter afternoons,  
That oppresses, like the weight  
Of cathedral tunes.

Heavenly hurt it gives us;  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference  
Where the meanings are. . . .  
—Emily Dickinson

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

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Since the midnineties, public concern in the United States about the AIDS pandemic has continued to decline, even as the disease continues to spread. The number of Americans who consider AIDS the most urgent health problem facing the nation dropped from 44 percent in 1995 to 6 percent in 2009. One reason, surely, is that AIDS has become less and less a white disease and more and more a disease associated with people of color. Globally, fewer than half the people afflicted with AIDS are receiving treatment, and in light of recent budget cuts reducing AIDS expenditures, that number is likely to decline further. Even in the most “developed” countries, suppression of HIV through antiretroviral medication remains incompletely effective.

In its most recent (May 2012) report, with data through 2009, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows a vast disparity of new infections among racial-ethnic groups in the United States. Though African Americans make up only 12 percent of the population, black men who sleep with men account for 45 percent of new AIDS diagnoses. This is despite the fact that young gay black men have fewer partners, less unprotected sex, and lower rates of recreational drug use than other gay men. Some Latino men who sleep with men—who made up 20 percent of new AIDS diagnoses in 2009—like some African American men do not primarily self-identify as gay (not least because many consider “gay” a white term). Those who sleep with women as well as men help to account for this, especially in hot-spot cities such as Washington, D.C.—for the recent realization that new HIV and AIDS cases among African American women are now comparable to rates for women in sub-Saharan Africa. Infection rates continue to rise among white gay men as well, but the mortality rates aren't as high: comparable: the proportion of deaths among whites (and especially among those with high levels of education—and the income and access that follow) has declined, but HIV and AIDS among men and women of color in the United States of all sexual preferences continues to skyrocket, especially among lower-income populations. African American women are now dying at fifteen times the rate that white women do. Self-identified gay men of all colors, however, are still fifty times more likely to contract AIDS than any other demographic group.

One would expect to find mainstream LGBT organizations and spokespeople still vociferous and active in pressuring pharmaceutical companies and researchers to come up with better treatments and preventative strategies, and governmental agencies—the CDC, the National Institutes of Health—offering greater services to those already ill. But that isn't the case. The sense of urgency *among gay people themselves* is seemingly gone; a portion of the new generation dislikes using condoms for safe sex and tells itself that with the advent of protease inhibitors, AIDS is now a “manageable” disease. It is, for those who can afford and who can tolerate the medications, though no one knows how long they'll remain effective and what secondary damage they're doing along the way; for some people the drugs don't work at all, for others only briefly.

The older generations of white gay men who have physically survived the epidemic have buried their dead—and to a regrettable degree, their heads in the sand. As the longtime AIDS journalist John Manuel Andriote has put it, the “traditional donors—middle-class and affluent white gay men—have

‘moved on’ since they can now get their HIV-related medical care from their private physicians. . . . The old ACT UP slogan of ‘Silence = Death’ still holds, if by ‘silence’ we mean withholding of support.” Since the midnineties the mainstream gay agenda has demoted AIDS from its top priority and replaced it with what those of us on the left call the assimilationist items of legal matrimony and the “patriotic” right to serve openly in the armed forces.

In Africa, AIDS is primarily a heterosexual phenomenon, but in the United States it remains profoundly gay one, with poor, young, nonwhite men disproportionately impacted—though children, intravenous drug users, and heterosexual women are hardly immune. But self-identified gay men in the United States do still make up 48 percent of the 1 million people currently living with AIDS. We haven’t even reached the point where the annual increase in gay male patients being treated exceeds the number of gay men being newly infected.

My hope is that this book will shed additional light on our current approach to AIDS by scrutinizing more closely the earlier years (1981–95) of the epidemic, and in particular the pre-ACT UP (1981–85) period. I’ve chosen to tell this story through the lives of two gay men, the singer and activist Michael (Mike) Callen and the poet and cultural worker Essex Hemphill. The two never met and had little in common. Mike was a white midwesterner who came to New York City after college to pursue a singing career. Essex was an African American gay man who grew up in Washington, D.C., and knew early that he wanted to become a writer, and specifically a poet.

Both men were diagnosed with AIDS early in the epidemic. Mike became a leading maverick in the organized efforts to fight the disease as one of the earliest originators of “safe sex” and the People with AIDS Self-Empowerment Movement. Essex largely avoided the white-dominated public protest campaign, primarily devoting himself to participating in and fostering the black gay male and lesbian cultural flowering in the 1980s now widely referred to as the “second Harlem Renaissance.” The experience of the AIDS epidemic was in critical ways dissimilar for the white gay community and the black gay one, and that distinction is one of the major themes of this book.

I knew both Mike and Essex, though only slightly. What I did know, I admired greatly—and wanted to know more. I viewed Mike as an undersung hero of the AIDS protest movement and Essex as an undersung poet of major importance in black cultural circles. In Mike Callen’s case, the search for previously unknown material proved comparatively easy: not only did he have a temperament frank to the point of transparency—or, in the eyes of his detractors, to a fault—but he left behind a very large archive of letters, speeches, diary notes, organizational materials, and—as a performer and songwriter—lots of music.

Telling Essex Hemphill’s story proved more difficult. He left behind one published collection of poems; an anthology that he edited of writings by black gay men; appearances in Marlon Riggs’ and Isaac Julien’s films; and a smattering of correspondence, much of which remains in private hands. At the end of his life, Essex told a number of close friends that he wanted his papers to go to the Schomburg Center, the branch of the New York Public Library devoted to black culture. But they never arrived. My own polite letters of inquiry to Essex’s mother, Mantalene, went unanswered. However, she did, some fifteen years ago, send a batch of his letters and manuscripts to his literary agent, Frances Goldin. Luckily, I know Frances well; she generously gave me full access to the material, which it turns out includes the manuscript of Essex’s unpublished and presumed lost novel in progress, “Standing in the Gap.” I’ve quoted from portions of this treasure trove throughout the book. To further fill out Essex’s story, I’ve conducted lengthy interviews with many of his close friends and have also been given access to letters and other materials in private hands.

Essex's temperament was considerably more guarded and enigmatic than Mike's. A person of charismatic charm and mischievous guile, Essex could often be enchanting, but he keenly guarded his privacy and—while not at all prudish—persistently warded off those who probed for details about his personal attachments or the state of his health. He was so intent on protecting his inner life from unwanted scrutiny and so quick to react to any threat to his principles that some mistook this integrity for hauteur. His poetry, often autobiographical, makes it possible to map certain aspects of his inner life, yet I suspect that even if Essex had left behind a massive archive, it would most likely contain little about his intimate feelings and struggles.

For all these reasons, this book contains more personal information about Mike than about Essex that reflects both the nature of their respective personalities and the kinds of material each left behind. Though they were very different from each other, I hold these two exceptional men in equal regard and have made an equal effort to bring their remarkable stories to life.

## Before the Storm

Soon after Mike Callen completed college at Boston University in 1977, he moved to New York City, and soon after that, he became ill with shigella—intestinal parasites. At first, he thought he'd gotten food poisoning from the Kentucky Fried Chicken stand on Forty-Second Street that he frequented. Trying to shrug off and explain persistent, exhausting bouts of diarrhea, he told himself that he'd always been more or less sickly, which was true: as a sensitive, scrawny youngster in Hamilton, Ohio, he'd gotten an ulcer in the fifth grade, a second one in the eighth grade, and yet a third in the eleventh. Then, during high school, he'd been hospitalized twice, once with mononucleosis and once with hepatitis.<sup>1</sup>

A tender, hyperactive child, Mike was playing canasta with some older family friends one day—cheating and winning, “screeching” (his description) with delight—when one of the women put down her cards, gave him a stern look, and said, “If you don't watch out, Michael, you're going to become one of those homosexuals.” He had no idea what that meant, but he caught the overtones of imminent doom and realized that the prediction was meant to frighten him. Did that explain, he asked himself, why he often felt nervous and was repeatedly cautioned about being too “animated”? At age eight, for instance, he twirled a baton at the head of a neighborhood parade with such giddy glee that eyebrows were raised; and he remembered running into the house at a young age, “flapping his arms like a little sissy,” and his father slapping him hard across the face and yelling, “Don't you *ever* do that again!”

The neighborhood lady's use of the word “homosexual” piqued Mike's curiosity and he decided to ask around. It turned out that everyone in the town of Hamilton knew that “homosexual” meant Delmore Knight, that “dirty old man” who hung around the Greyhound bus station and enticed young boys to do “nasty” things. Although Knight was said to have a doctorate from Oxford University and was even rumored to have won some academic prize, no one in Hamilton seemed to doubt that he deserved the regular beatings that a cadre of high school jocks dished out to him. Republican and evangelical, Hamilton was a Dixie border town known as well for its strict adherence to racial segregation. According to Jennifer Jackson, who went to high school with Mike, Hamilton was “a town with secrets, with a polite midwestern refusal to acknowledge how many were hurt and excluded,” exemplified by the crumbling Victorian Poor House Hill, which sat on a visible precipice, initially serving as a debtors' prison, then an orphanage, then a home for the mentally ill—“a perfect storm of misery and entrapment.”<sup>2</sup>

When Mike and his brother, Barry, a year older, were in their early teens, their parents decided the time had come to tell them about “the facts of life” (their younger sister, Linda, was exempted from the talk). The boys' mother, Barbara Ann, was a part-time elementary school teacher and their father, Clifford, a factory worker at General Motors. Both were deeply religious Baptists and the topic of sex was at least as embarrassing to them as to their two young sons. During her part of the “birds and the

bees” session, Barbara fell back on traditional church teachings. Mike remembered her saying that sex was “dirty and disgusting, messy and a bother, but beautiful if it resulted in a child.” After the three children had been born, she and Cliff still had sex once a week to prevent him from getting headaches and hemorrhoids, or turning grumpy.

Mike’s father uncomfortably expanded on the theme: “The man puts his penis inside the woman and they make a baby,” he told the two boys. “Do you understand?” Cliff asked. Barry, who’d broken out in a cold sweat, nodded yes. Mike, bright and stubbornly outspoken, said he was confused; why, he asked, should he concern himself with putting his penis “inside some stupid girl and peeing inside her just to make a baby; what if the baby turned out to be dumb like my sister?”

Cliff’s response was a non sequitur: “Never be afraid to ask us anything.” Fine, except that Mike’s main fear was his father himself. He always “smelled of grease”—Cliff worked at GM’s Fisher Body welding doors—and was remote and unemotional. Mike became convinced that his father “hated” him and often dreamed that Cliff was stabbing him “with one of those cheap steak knives they kept giving us free for a fill-up at Shell.” His closed-down, evasive father was, in fact, a decent, if embittered man, liberal (considering his time and place) in his political views and struggling to understand his children—though as a devout Baptist he would always find homosexuality repulsive, even immoral.

Life hadn’t been easy for Cliff. After his own father’s early death, he’d had to forgo college to support his mother and sister. After he married Barbara Ann and had children of his own, he worked ten hours a day, seven days a week, at GM—enduring a ninety-mile daily commute round-trip. According to Barbara Ann, he refused every chance to climb the corporate ladder since he felt that would entail the “sacrifice of his beliefs and his morals,” would force him, if he became a foreman or superintendent, to treat employees below him in a “degrading and demeaning” manner that would make them “feel like just so many cattle.”

Cliff dreamed of leaving GM altogether, but every idea he had of another way to make a living—starting a restaurant, moving to Arizona to open a small store—somehow broke down. He struggled to avoid seeing himself as a failure, but the effort further closed him off emotionally, made him a hard-shell Baptist in all but name. Trapped himself, he “forced” (as Mike saw it) his wife, Barbara Ann, to go to college and get a teaching certificate, though she preferred being a stay-at-home mom. They had “terrific fights” about it and Barbara Ann finally yielded, but in her unhappiness she put on a great deal of weight and according to Mike “had a nervous breakdown.”

During his senior year in high school Mike took over the running of the house and did all the shopping, cooking, and cleaning, with little assistance from his siblings. (Cooking would become a lifelong pleasure for him; he deeply associated it with “sensuality and hedonism,” and he reveled in “cooking for his man.”) In retrospect, he felt the “housewife” role had been thrust on him, or perhaps he assumed it, because he was frequently mocked in high school as a “sissy,” a sort of substitute woman. He had his admirers: Jennifer Jackson, two years behind Mike, was one of them. She recalled his sensitive response to her one day when he spotted her standing in line to audition for a school play “twisting and turning behind the curtain, ready to run.” Mike went over to her, asked her if she’d ever acted before (she hadn’t), and drew her out about her difficult background and family life. “He listened,” Jackson recalls, “and he wouldn’t let you stand there feeling alone and irrelevant. He sensed my despair somehow and didn’t turn away. . . . There he was, with those hands waving around, perfectly articulate, telling me things *wouldn’t be okay, but eventually I’d get out of Hamilton somehow.*” She never forgot his kindness.

But Mike’s detractors in high school far outnumbered his admirers. He was frequently bullied and baited as a “faggot,” and at least once pissed on in the locker room after gym class by a circle of male

classmates. All of which made Mike feel self-conscious and insecure about his appearance. He avoided all mirrors, refusing to look at his own image. As a result of the constant harassment, he attempted suicide twice before the age of twenty-one. Remarkably, he somehow managed, despite excessive chores and excessive ridicule, to maintain a straight-A average throughout high school.

He was not only bright, but exuberantly articulate and musically gifted. From an early age, he idolized Barbra Streisand as “the most brilliant artist of the time” and especially appreciated her “willingness to be awkward and gawky if needed to get the sound out.” Bette Midler was another favorite, and Julie Andrews—he sang in her register. He dismissed both Neil Diamond and Elton John as “fake” when expressing pain. A friend told Mike that he sang in “the same sweet vein as Barbra Manilow—but was better.” As early as high school, Mike started to dream about becoming a cabaret singer, a dream that his married music teacher did his best to sabotage: when Mike was a junior, the teacher tried to rape him, and when Mike successfully fought him off, the man retaliated by writing denunciatory letters about him to try to thwart his efforts to get a music scholarship.

Mike’s first choice for college was Boston University. Though he’d never before traveled out of the sixty-mile radius around Hamilton, Ohio, he flew to Boston for a voice audition. Sitting nervous on the hard bench outside the fourth-floor audition room, he suddenly had to go to the bathroom. To his astonishment, all the stalls were occupied and several men were waiting in line. It suddenly dawned on him that they were there to relieve themselves in several senses. Later, a jubilant Mike would claim an epiphany: “I knew. I knew I was where my destiny was bringing me.” When his turn came to enter a stall, his heart was pounding.

The walls of the stall were covered with gay graffiti—“meet me here 7-8-73.” Two large holes had been drilled between the stalls and Mike became aware that through the holes “two eyeballs on either side” were looking at him. Then a mouth appeared where an eyeball had been. Mike immediately got an erection and started to sweat. A note on toilet paper arrived from underneath the stall: “STICK IT THROUGH.” He did—and instantly ejaculated. As he later wrote, “My body was at peace for the first time ever.” He sang his heart out at the audition and won a full vocal scholarship to BU. If he was fated to be Boston’s Delmore Knight, he told himself, that was just fine.

Despite its auspicious start, Mike’s first year in Boston was the most difficult of his life to date—at one point he told his parents he was going to give up school and return home (“I can’t take it”). He stayed, but his triple adjustment—to college, to the Northeast, and to being gay—brought him close to despair. He wrestled with thoughts that “the Bible would damn me if I admitted my [homosexual] feelings to myself.” But he decided—bravely, given the limited support systems in those years for a young person coming to terms with a tainted sexual orientation—that no sin was “more deadly than battling the self.” By his last year in college, he’d become conscious of “how wrong society was about homosexuality, a discovery that made him “question *everything*.” It was, he later said, “a very painful period; I didn’t know what to believe or who I was.” By the time he graduated, he’d declared himself an atheist and written to friends and family back home that society, not him, “had a long way to go” toward accepting gay people. In this—as would prove the case with much else—Mike had rapidly jumped to an “avant-garde” position.

Whatever Mike did, he did with zest and intensity—including the pursuit of sex. He would later say that his “shamed-based” sexual fantasies—“quick and dirty”—had been formed “pre-Stonewall.” From freshman year on at BU he haunted the fourth-floor men’s room in the music building, then broadened out into the gay baths and gay bars (never his favorite—he disliked alcohol, felt that contact took too long, and he was too horny). Initially, he let others suck him off. The first time he reversed roles, he put Saran Wrap—he’d grown up in a germaphobic home—around the other man’s

cock, but he never took to sucking and professed to being somewhat puzzled and repulsed by oral sex. It didn't help that he early on got gonorrhea of the throat and ever after had a recurring fear of contracting a syphilis chancre on his vocal chords—a terrifying prospect for someone planning a singing career.

He discovered the orgiastic gay male bathhouses while still in college; one of his first partners there told him that he was “built to get fucked,” positioned Mike to sit on his erect cock—and voila! Mike had a moment of “sheer revelation.” That same night he got fucked five times and decided that he'd unquestionably found his sexual destiny. From then on, he made a habit of announcing to his potential trick, within the first few moments of their encounter, that he was a “stone bottom.” But unlike some other bottoms, Mike never became interested in fist fucking; he heard too many stories of anal fissures and serious injuries. In New York City a few years later, for the first and last time he fistfisted somebody at their insistence—and promptly threw up; “it was so gross to me.”

As an undergraduate Mike started to read gay-themed novels, especially Edmund White and Andrew Holleran, and plays, in particular, Tennessee Williams. In his spare time he was practicing hard enough to pick up some secretarial skills and several part-time jobs, realizing that he had to prepare for the hard-knock life of trying to make it post-college as a singer. He stayed shy, though, of gay politics, then in its infancy—the Stonewall riots had occurred only in 1969 and the modern gay rights movement still had few troops.

One day Mike picked up a copy of the alternative weekly the *Boston Phoenix* and was astonished to read about an organized gay and lesbian group on the BU campus that was planning a picnic by the Charles River. On the given day, he circled warily near the picnic site and was spotted by a member of the gay group, who called over, “I think you're looking for us.” (Mike fit the “loose-wristed” stereotypical view of what a gay man was supposed to look like.) Three months later, Mike, verbally smart, and archly, campily funny, was elected president of the group. But that first foray into gay politics proved disillusioning. As is often the case with political groups, especially college ones, many people would sign up to help out on a committee or at an event and then not show up at all or fail to follow through. This ran directly counter to Mike's highly organized temperament. He'd driven himself, even under difficult circumstances, to complete whatever he'd promised to do; he had little patience for sunshine soldiers. Yet his overall experience with the BU group convinced him that gay politics was antithetical to his personality. He'd dutifully march in the gay pride parade once a year but as an individual, not as a member of any group.

Looking back on his college years later in life, Mike would describe himself as “paralyzed by regret.” He'd had to hold down a job nearly full-time while going to school and could “barely remember classes. A time that should have been joyous was not.” Part of the problem was that it felt “DEVASTATING . . . to plop down into completely unfamiliar territory.” He felt like a “social cripple. I discovered that the way I did things—dressed, ate, talked, etc.—was NOT the way others did them and I got very embarrassed and shy and insecure.” Mike perhaps overstated his devastation—any drama queen would. He excelled at school and, thanks to a few of his professors, became a lifelong, voracious reader.

In his senior year, Mike came out to his family. His brother, Barry, took the news in stride and they remained close and supportive. The news was received badly by the rest of his family—Mike and his father didn't speak for two years. It hadn't helped that Mike had also declared that he was a nonbeliever, an atheist. His deeply religious mother, despite having thoroughly internalized the Baptist view of homosexuality as sickness and sin, nonetheless reiterated her love for Michael (“You can expect that to remain steady, regardless”) and even wrote him that she would “respect your rights

to believe what you choose to believe.” Younger sister Linda maintained a cool distance, cowed perhaps by the vehemence of the family dynamics.

Michael had dated girls in high school and had several close female friends; they told him that his gentleness and respect attracted them (he would soon in fact become a pronounced, outspoken feminist, later on somewhat campily branding himself a “lesbian feminist”). But he’d never “done anything” with a woman, unless kissing Maria Lingley inside the abandoned A&W Root Beer warehouse counted. The girl he dated longest was Lisa Gaylord, and she later explained to Mike “the agony” she went through because he never made any sexual moves on her: she blamed herself for not being pretty or smart or talented enough; later in life Mike apologized to her and to another young woman he’d dated for “fanning such flames of self-doubt.” When his parents suggested that “before locking himself into a dead-end lifestyle” he seek counseling, he dutifully presented himself for the eight free sessions the university provided, but no spark of sexual desire for women resulted. He was confirmed Kinsey “6,” exclusively attracted to his own gender—a status he’d proudly embraced throughout his life.

Following graduation, Mike moved to New York with the goal of becoming a singer, a cabaret performer, but he arrived with minimal financial reserves. After paying his first month’s rent on a dingy apartment, he had a mere \$20 to his name. He haunted the employment agencies, but it was the late 1970s: New York had been hit by the national economic downturn and Mike’s hard-earned secretarial skills failed to land him a job. When the twenty dollars went, he made the practical decision to head up to Times Square—then a hustling mecca—where he gave some guy a blow job for \$4 (he didn’t feel in a position to haggle).

That enabled him to eat, but he began to feel “really helpless, like ready to cry,” fearful of a nervous breakdown.” He’d initially seen the move to New York as a gutsy risk, but relocating to a very tough city to break into a very tough profession—during a recession, no less—now seemed like a mistake. In his early twenties, broke and jobless, he was also without friends, let alone contacts in the entertainment field. While still in college, he’d done a few auditions and had been told that he “had the stuff to make it”; he’d even had a nibble from a manager that didn’t pan out.

But Mike had a tenacious streak and an internal strength that belied his scrawny looks, histrionic ways, and a less than validating upbringing. He refused to throw in the towel and crawl back to the Midwest—not even when he was awakened by a rat crawling over him in bed one night, or when a fire broke out in his apartment. Developing insomnia, he turned to sleeping pills. But then the symptoms that he’d initially ascribed to “food poisoning” began to proliferate—mysterious fevers, weight loss, night sweats, fatigue, and relentless diarrhea. Ever since his arrival in New York, Mike—enchanted with the multiple opportunities for sex—had freely indulged. He made no connection, initially, between his superactive sex life and his burgeoning list of physical ills. Finally, after he’d begun to hyperventilate, he got scared and crawled over to a gay men’s health clinic in the West Village.

The doctor on duty happened to be Joseph Sonnabend, a South African-born specialist in infectious diseases who’d trained at Edinburgh’s prestigious Royal College of Physicians, done his medical field-work in South Africa’s shantytowns and impoverished villages, and then gone to work as a laboratory virologist under Alick Isaacs, one of the discoverers of interferon, the antiviral agent at London’s famed National Institute for Medical Research. The field of molecular biology was just coming into its own, and Sonnabend shared in the discovery that cellular protein synthesis was needed for interferon to work. He’d moved to New York City in the early 1970s to work with the noted virologist Rostom Bablanian at Downstate Medical Center, and became an associate professor and associate attending physician at medical centers in Brooklyn.

In 1977 Sonnabend began working for the Bureau of Venereal Disease Control, part of New York City's Department of Health, and then, in 1978, he opened a private practice in Greenwich Village specializing in infectious and sexually transmitted diseases, with a mostly gay male clientele. With the arrival of a perplexing cluster of symptoms in a growing number of his patients, Sonnabend's background as a microbiologist, virologist, and infectious disease specialist, as well as his experience in the South African townships, proved ideal for coping with this mysterious and mounting phenomenon. As early as 1982, he created a network of experts, independent of government agencies, to run tests on the samples he'd regularly send them from his patients. He also continued to do basic research on the properties of interferon both at Jan Vilcek's lab at New York University and at St. Luke's–Roosevelt Hospital Center.<sup>3</sup>

When Mike Callen arrived in his office on West Twelfth street in the Village, Sonnabend took one look at him and said, "You're very, very sick. Who is your doctor?" "You are," Mike croaked in response. That was the beginning of a relationship that would have profound consequences in the years ahead, not only for the two men but for the gay community and what would become the AIDS movement. Sonnabend, at age forty-eight, was already well along in his career, having been an assistant professor of microbiology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine before opening his private practice. Though he'd fathered three children (with three women) and been briefly married, Sonnabend openly self-identified as a gay man.

At this point in time, the gay liberation movement was still in swaddling clothes, though following the Stonewall riots, its initial thrust had been radical. In the early seventies, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), the most visible and active organization, had called for substantive social change, had denounced oppression of all kinds (not merely of the antigay variety), and had tried to form alliances with the Black Panthers and the Latino Young Lords. But as is typically the case in this country with protest movements, GLF had run into the centrist roadblock of American ideology and had given way in short order to the less radical Gay Activists Alliance. That group, in turn, had been superseded by the National Gay Task Force, which confined its agenda solely to what it defined as "gay rights" and adopted the traditional tactics of electoral politics and lobbying as its chosen means. The organizational transformations involved only a small fraction of the gay community. Most gay people remained closeted and apolitical.

What did attract hordes of adherents were the slogans and practices of *sexual* liberation. This segment—according to most estimates, about 20 percent—of the gay male population redefined "promiscuity" as "adventuring," and the baths, the "trucks," and the back rooms of bars and bookstores became jammed with the tangle of eagerly experimenting bodies. Many of those bodies came down with hepatitis, herpes, syphilis, gonorrhea, shigella, amoebiasis, and an assortment of other sexually transmitted diseases. The stricken multitude kept Sonnabend's waiting room packed.

A caring and compassionate man, Sonnabend was widely admired for his brilliance as a diagnostician but was no less notorious for his disorganized, eccentric ways. He was devoted to his patients but not to keeping a tidy or time-efficient office. When Mike would refer friends to Sonnabend, he'd tell them to "take *War and Peace* because you might finish it in the waiting room before you get seen." Mike himself had to wait four hours on one day and was then subjected to watching Sonnabend eat his lunch in front of him during their consultation—some of the food dripping into his beard, while the loud, ancient air conditioner drowned out part of what he was saying. Mike decided it was time to look for a different doctor. But one visit to another well-known gay physician, "Phil Williams," sent him fleeing back to Sonnabend. Williams proved not only "imperious" but moneygrubbing. When Mike called him back into the examining room to ask

belated question, the good doctor added \$25 to his bill. Sonnabend, by contrast, saw his patients as part of an unfairly ostracized community—"the health and well-being of gay men were of little concern to society at large"—not customers to be bilked for maximum profit, and he would often forget to bill them—to the admiration and irritation of his beleaguered staff (according to Abbott Tallmer, who worked there for several years).

By then Mike had finally landed a job doing office work for the Bradford National Corporation and he'd switched to a more livable apartment as well. He kept reminding himself that he had to make contacts, find an agent, get his singing career going. But he *loved* sex and spent much of his spare time hunting for and having it. During his first two years in New York he took to heart the popular gay lament "so many men, so little time" and cheerfully referred to himself as a "slut"—a label he would proudly proclaim all his life. Disliking alcohol and disdaining the chitchat of the bars, he opted for the gay baths (St. Mark's was his favorite) and the stalls at the Hudson Street Bookstore in Greenwich Village.

At all times—who can predict a street encounter?—Mike carried with him a jar of lube, 25-cent packets of K-Y to ease entry, a bottle of poppers (amyl nitrate, which produced a disinhibiting rush), two (before and after) five-hundred-milligram pills of tetracycline as anti-STD prophylaxis, and Handi Wipes for the cleanup. Though Mike hardly resembled the muscled gym-built physique then coming into fashion, he had no trouble attracting partners. He was delicately, willowily, handsome: six feet tall, olive skinned, green eyed, and thin (around 135 pounds), with naturally curly dark brown hair—through the right kind of spectacles, something on the order of a Renaissance cherub (minus the wings). Mike wasn't interested in most of the "extreme" sexual practices then in vogue (fist fucking, water sports, scat, or S/M). His single-minded focus was on getting fucked. When he totted up his sexual scorecard in 1982, at age twenty-seven, he figured that since coming out, he'd been "penetrated by an average of 3 men once every 3 days." Deducting for sick days, that put him in gold medal contention with a total of 2,496 partners, of whom he professed to know the first names of no more than a hundred.

He was outspoken and unashamed about his "sluthood." Not every fuck had been magical, but the vast majority, he insisted, had given him pleasure. And what, he wanted to know, was wrong with that? No coercion had been involved, no pederasty, no exchange of cash, no pretense at faithfulness or romance. Like other gay male sex radicals of the day, Mike denounced the puritanical fuzziness then sanctioned multiple monogamous orgasms in order to produce children but frowned on a comparable number with multiple partners to produce pleasure. He did "not accept the concept of sexual addiction at all." A bit later, after he'd become a spokesperson for a segment of the People with AIDS (PWA) movement, he'd read his sexual history somewhat differently, referring to his generation of sexual liberationists as "predatory, shame-based, dark, use-once-and-throw-away, no contact sex—[all of which went] deep into our wiring." Later still—in part as a result of reading books by "sex-positive" feminists—he'd reclaim and celebrate his "slut" years.

There was one hitch: the escalating number of STDs. Mike was in and out of Sonnabend's office so often that they eventually shifted to a first-name basis. Mike was fond of saying that "if it isn't fatal, it's no big deal," but Joe was less nonchalant about his multiple, incessant infections. When Mike contracted hepatitis for the third time and developed fevers, night sweats, and bloody diarrhea, Joe hospitalized him. Consommé and a battery of tests were his diet for a week. His acne and hemorrhoids improved but a firm diagnosis remained elusive. Sonnabend called in a tropical disease specialist, but the best he could come up with was "atypical malaria." Mike had never been to the tropics, and the paracytology tests failed to confirm that diagnosis or any other. The doctors were back

to where they began—scratching their heads.

And not just those in New York. The appearance of other, seemingly anomalous symptoms among young gay men was beginning to puzzle physicians elsewhere. The most perplexing were *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP), typically associated with the suppression of the immune system; and the appearance of purplish spots on the skin. Sonnabend was among the first to recognize that the spots were indicative of lymphatic tumors, a rare cancer known as Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) that was traditionally associated with elderly men of Mediterranean origin. Mystified, doctors began to compare notes with colleagues around the country.

Mike wasn't Joe Sonnabend's only patient to experience night sweats and weight loss. As the numbers mounted, he decided to send blood samples to the University of Nebraska, the only place at the time with up-to-date T cell testing technology. Joe drew blind samples from three groups of patients whose histories he knew well: ten were in monogamous relationships; ten were in sexual open-ended relationships, both partners "dabbling" with third parties; and ten were, like Mike, "sluts." Sonnabend's theory was that the degree of immune deficiency would correlate differently for each group—a theory confirmed by the test results: the monogamous group had on average the highest count of protective CD4 cells, the sluts the lowest.

Knowing that Mike was "highly suggestible," Joe refused at first to provide his individual results. He gave Mike assorted excuses: the technology was new and its reliability not fully tested; yes, the three groups did have distinctive patterns, but no one knew why; and so on. "Well, you must think that means *something*," an impatient Mike persisted, "so you might as well tell me. I promise to keep my blabby mouth quiet." And so Joe finally did: "Your immune system is shot—your crucial CD4 cell count is lower than I'd hoped." "How low?" Mike persisted. Joe retreated to generalities: "I can't tell you for certain. Obviously it's better to have more CD4 cells than less, since they indicate the health of your immune system. But the CD4 count is known to fluctuate considerably for a given individual—so don't start getting crazy on me." Within days, Mike fell into a clinical depression that lasted some six months. The year was 1980.

In June 1981, the CDC reported in its prestigious journal *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (*MMWR*) that between October 1980 and May 1981, five young men in Los Angeles, "all active homosexuals," had come down with PCP and two of them had already died. A few weeks later the *MMWR* added twenty cases of KS among gay men in New York and six in California to the puzzling count. That led the *New York Times*' medical reporter Dr. Lawrence Altman to write a short article in July 1981, reporting that a fatal "gay cancer" had been found among homosexual men who'd had "multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners." Thus was the equation drawn early on between gay male promiscuity and terrifying disease.

It was a familiar pairing. The view that equated homosexuality with "sickness" had long held sway both in the general population and among the medical "experts." Thanks to pressure from the post-Stonewall political movement that arose in the early 1970s, some progress had been made in disassociating the two phenomena; the American Psychiatric Association dropped homosexuality from the category of disease as early as 1973. But the new gay political movement had drawn only a small number of adherents; many gay men (lesbians much less so) associated gay liberation during the 1970s with sexual freedom, not with attempting to shift public opinion through educational efforts or pressure politics.

In the historically significant election year of 1980, the fledgling gay movement played little role; its issues ignored by the major political parties. Ronald Reagan's ascension to the presidency marked the onset of a conservative retrenchment that would have horrific ramifications for the mounting

epidemic and—in tandem with economic distress—heighten the plight of the disadvantaged general, bringing the era of civil rights to a screeching halt. Within a year of his election, Reagan's Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act inaugurated massive cuts in social welfare, soon followed by several-billion-dollar reductions in food stamp and child nutrition programs. Funding for the construction of subsidized housing fell from nearly 145,000 starts in 1981 to a mere 17,000 in 1982, disproportionately affecting low-income African Americans and Hispanics. By 1982, much of the limited progress that had been made in this country, starting with Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiatives against poverty, would be wiped away.

The Reagan agenda had a different set of priorities: increased spending for combating "communism" (especially in Central America), an emphasis on traditional family values ("Just Say No"), and a "trickle-down" theory of supply-side economics that envisioned a future harkening back to Herbert Hoover. The key spokesmen for the administration, Gary Bauer and William Bennett, held traditional values about gender and sexuality that reached back beyond Hoover to the late nineteenth century. Reagan did appoint a few African Americans to high judicial office, but they were uniformly tried-and-true conservatives opposed to affirmative action and to extending federal action on school desegregation: to chair the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, for example, he chose Clarence Thomas, that exemplar of deafness to human suffering, who would later be elevated to the Supreme Court.

To further ensure that the underclass would fail to improve its lot, Reagan embraced states' rights—that traditional weapon of white supremacists—and mocked "welfare queens." In a speech he gave in Philadelphia, Mississippi—the town where three activists against segregation had been brutally murdered in 1964—Reagan made it clear that "states' rights" would indeed retain its long-coded meaning of "white supremacy." Those other undesirables, homosexuals, sex workers, and intravenous drug users, would be treated dismissively as well. As Congress gradually increased funding over the years for AIDS education and research, it would always be *more* than the Reagan administration had requested or would spend.

During the 1980s as well as today, Washington, D.C., itself was something of an anomaly. It simultaneously has a high median income level and a nearly 20 percent poverty rate (exceeded only by Mississippi). During the economic restructuring in the country as a whole during the 1960s and 1970s, technological advances had led to the loss of many manufacturing jobs; they were replaced by low-paying service jobs and a high level of unemployment—which disproportionately affected black workers. In the public sector, ironically, blacks with college degrees were able to find professional jobs in the federal government, leading to a significantly larger black middle class whose comparative prosperity contrasted sharply with the decline in economic security for the majority of blacks.

D.C. has always had a large African American population—in 1970 it reached a peak of 70 percent of the whole, since declining to about 50 percent. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, rioting that raged for three days had broken out in black neighborhoods and been quelled only by some fifteen thousand federal troops. It wasn't until 1973 that Congress had given the District home rule, providing for an elected mayor and a thirteen-member council. In 1975 Walter Washington became D.C.'s first elected mayor and first African American to hold the office. He was succeeded in 1979 by Marion Barry, another African American leader, but one—he'd been chair of the radical Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—of a quite different stripe.

Not surprisingly, few blacks—fewer than one in ten—had voted for Reagan in 1980 or supported his draconian measures, but that shouldn't be taken as the measure or proof of a unified local black

community. Many members of the churchgoing black middle class in D.C. feared Barry as a dangerous extremist, a threat to whatever “betterment” they’d managed to attain, and in the Democratic primary for mayor they’d supported his opponent, Sterling Tucker, former director of the cautious Washington Urban League. Neither Barry nor his antagonists, moreover, had as yet shown any awareness or concern for the all but invisible black gay men and lesbians living in their midst, often in isolation from each other.<sup>4</sup>

In 1980, the largely hidden, unorganized world of black gay people stood in stark contrast to the visibility and assertiveness of the white gay community, as spearheaded by the newly radicalized D.C. chapter of the pre-Stonewall Mattachine Society. Though its membership never exceeded a hundred people, with a mere dozen serving as the activist core, D.C. Mattachine had successfully challenged the discriminatory policies of the Civil Service Commission and had gone on to pressure the federal government for concessions on additional issues.

To its credit, D.C. Mattachine had attempted to recruit members from the African American gay bar Nob Hill, though with scant success. Mattachine, like many white-dominated gay organizations then and now, never understood that the issue of sexual orientation was merely one, and not necessarily the most important, issue that afflicted black gay people on a daily and ongoing basis. Washington, D.C., was segregated in all but name—meaning not just the bars, but schools, housing, medical facilities, and employment opportunities as well.

A black gay presence was just beginning to emerge openly in D.C. and in the nation at large. As early as 1975, a group calling itself the Baltimore Gay Alliance had appeared, and by 1978 the D.C. Coalition had emerged as well. Then in August 1979, just two months before the first national gay march took place in Washington, the initial issue of *Blacklight* magazine appeared under the editorship of Sidney Brinkley (it would continue publishing until 1986).

Simultaneously, a somewhat select core group of openly black gay men and lesbians—from writers to filmmakers to service organizers—emerged into prominence, among them Billy Jones, Delores Berry, Gil Gerald, Essex Hemphill, Michelle Parkerson, and Renee McCoy. The D.C. black gay community realized fairly quickly that it had the potential to form a national organization, and among their first actions was to ensure that the 1979 March on Washington included their voice. They formally incorporated in October 1980 as the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG). By 1984, it had chapters in half a dozen cities and, unlike some other African American organizations, actively committed resources to fighting AIDS. Though some well-known figures would be involved over the next decade—including Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Joseph Beam—NCBLG had to wage an ongoing struggle, which it ultimately lost, to raise money and build its membership rolls. Marginalized communities, even when comparatively well educated and gifted, usually lack an abundance of all resources except suffering.<sup>5</sup>

The reasons are many. It’s probably safe to say that, despite individual variations, for many black gays, race—a shared history and marker of oppression—was and is the primary source of identity with gender and sexual orientation often secondary (particularly since the latter can be usually hidden, if necessary). That was certainly true for the poet Essex Hemphill. “My race,” he once wrote, “even at the point of birth, was more important than my sexuality. That’s going to always be the case. . . . I love my race enough to know that I’m a Black man first and foremost and that my sexuality falls on a line after that.”<sup>6</sup>

It’s often been argued that homophobia in African American communities is more deeply entrenched than in white ones, but that assertion, I’d suggest, mistakenly equates the black church

with the black community—and even the church, it can be further argued, has in recent years come around somewhat on the issue. When *Blacklight* began to publish in 1979, the comment of Bishop William A. Hilliard that “the Church is diametrically opposed to homosexuality” or the public stated view of Bishop Jasper Roby to the effect that unless homosexuality ceased, it would “destroy it all,” probably typified the view of most traditional black church leaders and goers. After all, heterosexual blacks had themselves been caricatured for so long as (among other things) “lustful sexual beasts” that upholding middle-class white norms of monogamous pair-bonding and excluding noncomplying members of their own community had become an instrument of self-defense. Since then, as attitudes toward homosexuality have grown more progressive in general, so have those within the black church.<sup>7</sup>

Even back in 1979, black families, arguably, didn’t disown or “throw away” their nonconforming children to the same extent that white families did (and still do). When the poet Essex Hemphill, for one, spoke of “home,” as he often did, he quite literally meant his own family—not the white-dominated gay “community.” The implicit agreement between black parents and their gay offspring often hinged on keeping the news tightly confined within the family circle. This was not the case with Essex. “I exercise the same candor with my parents,” he once wrote, “that I exercise with most people.” And candor was among his most marked characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

Essex had been born prematurely and with a heart murmur in 1957—he was two years younger than Mike Callen. The second oldest of five children (three sisters and one brother), he was born in Chicago but raised mostly in Washington, D.C. His parents, Mantalene and Warren, had a stormy relationship that ended in divorce. Essex had a deep love/anger bond with his mother, Mantalene, a strong, dignified woman who would later hold an administrative job in the copyright division of the Library of Congress. But he rarely had a positive word for his alcoholic and abusive father (only once did he refer to *both* of his parents as having been “inspiring” to him). In his poem “Vital Signs,” Essex recalled witnessing his father’s violence: “I . . . always see him punching and pushing, slapping and yelling.” One of Essex’s close friends in adulthood recalls him saying that once he was even witness to his father stabbing his mother. In the poem “Fixin’ Things,” Essex describes the family’s dynamic

In retrospect, it wasn’t the sound  
Of my mother crying that hurt most,  
It was the sound of my father leaving  
His marriage, his house, his familiars.

In the debris of ruptured bloodlines,  
In the domestic violence of our families,  
In the turbulence we call love was bred  
The possibility of my dysfunction, and yours.  
I tell you of the hatred  
That seized the boyhoods  
Of my brother and me,  
How we fought violently in public,

Drawing blood as if it would  
Allow us to see  
What was wrong with it,  
With him, with me . . .

As a youngster, Essex spent summers with his maternal grandmother, “Miss Emily”—for whom he felt “pure love”—at her home in Columbia, South Carolina. Her late husband had owned a small

restaurant in town, but because it attracted a “risqué” crowd it had been declared off-limits to Mantalene and her siblings—except to deliver the peach cobbler Miss Emily made at home (though the kids would sneak by after school for lemonade or soda pop). Among other things, Miss Emily taught Essex to cook and praised him for turning out food that reminded her of her husband’s.

As a growing boy, Essex wasn’t inclined toward athletics: “In the black neighborhood I came from, there was an emphasis on being able to play basketball or football. I, instead, was attracted to gymnastics because of the way the body looked. But I knew instinctively that if I had said, ‘I want to be a gymnast,’ among the fellas I ran with I would have been labeled a sissy.” Essex’s tight, slender frame never grew much beyond five feet six inches. As he later put it, “I was the smallest of the fellows that I ran with when I was growing up. When you’re the smallest, you absorb the blows of other people trying to be ‘manly.’ I guess it’s an awful fact of adolescence. That drove me to writing, to think.”

But though small, Essex was a handsome boy, with a symmetrical face marked by intense searching eyes and an engulfing smile when he chose to bestow it. His soft, caressing voice could also be especially when speaking on serious matters, ring with passionate conviction. He began writing poetry at age fourteen, while still in high school: “After dinner I would wind up going back to my room and writing in my notebook. I didn’t realize I was writing poetry. I was just writing about the events and thoughts of my day.” But poetry was from the beginning his most congenial medium, though he would later try his hand at a novel, and some of his adult essays would profoundly influence his generation of black writers.

I was fortunate enough when researching this book to discover a batch of some fifty of Essex’s unpublished early poems (mostly from 1974–75, during his seventeenth and eighteenth years), which he bundled together under the rubric “Talking with a Friend . . .” The disarmingly casual title was aptly chosen, for though these first efforts have autobiographical value, Essex made scant claim for their literary merit and never included any of them in the chapbooks he began to publish in 1982, at age twenty-five. He even entitled the first poem in the batch “Act I”:

like a baby realizing it has legs to walk with  
like a bird realizing its need to spread its wings and fly  
so in act I I have filled a need  
which in the beginning was only the need to  
let thoughts, ideas, and my feelings  
come forth, and speak  
the language of 17 years of living

In another poem in the series, he spelled out why he’d felt the need this early to turn to verse:

The essence of these poems  
is the me  
locked inside of me  
trying to express  
the turmoil  
sometimes felt within  
sometimes hard to express  
but always holding  
meaning

In one of these poems, dated May 25, 1974, Essex begins to convey the “differentness” he felt from most other young men, and the value he placed on it:

I cry sometimes  
knowing it won't take nothing away from my blossoming  
manhood  
You cry don't you  
or  
are you just another  
one of those  
uptight and totally in control  
of my emotions type of people  
who wouldn't be able to cope  
with themselves  
if any emotion was shown . . .  
  
and sometimes  
I cry  
for you, too . . .

As a teenager, Essex continued to make other cherished self-discoveries:

Walk alone  
little boy  
never move with  
the maddening crowds

Never forget  
where you came from  
because no one else  
ever will . . .

Walk alone little boy  
tomorrow  
you'll be a man

In some of the later poems in the series, the maturing Essex reflects back with tender regret on certain aspects of his childhood:

when I was a child, I walked in the woods  
on hot July afternoons,  
that were cool and dark,  
holding secrets,  
which sent slight chills up my spine,  
when I knew that I would never know  
of them completely.  
taking mother nature's children,  
like the birds that never sang for me,  
and the turtles that always stayed in their shells,  
and frogs that croaked in disgust at my probing  
fingers,  
. . . and soft brown baby rabbits I had found  
died,  
because my hands and my love was not gentle enough.  
. . . crying I ran home to my mother  
whose hands were gentle enough love warm  
enough to calm my broken heart.  
I didn't know they needed more than I could  
give them so that they could live.

In a piece Essex entitled "A Woman Our Mother We Love You . . ." he expressed the lifelong

devotion he felt for his mother, the family peacemaker, in lines amply, if awkwardly, expressive:

---

And you know that whenever we've found the  
heat in the kitchen too hot, to handle  
we've come back into the living room  
where you are, so that you could help us  
sort out, the experience, feeling, or whatever  
it was that we confronted on life's battlefield  
and with all of that,  
you also give us the encouragement to go back  
and try again

Yet Essex's deeply religious mother, Mantalene, would hardly have been pleased with the January 12, 1975, poem he wrote about church-going:

and the preacher asks the smartly dressed  
HOLY ladies  
to pass the basket  
and give/pleas [*sic*] give  
if only a dime/but a dollar  
let your SOUL be cleansed  
for a dime????????????????  
Its for the church  
he takes  $\frac{3}{4}$  of what they give  
and puts it in a saving account, in his name  
the name of the Lord  
who likes those who give  
so that others may receive . . .

The hurt and disappointment that Essex experienced at the hands of his father is the likely subject of the poignant poem he dated February 23, 1974:

You built my hopes up high  
knowing that you wouldn't  
be at the bottom to catch them  
when they fell

You promised you would be there  
whenever I needed you  
but you never came

You promised me I wouldn't be hurt by you  
but the pain is still here  
because  
you and your promises are gone

The simmering anger that Essex felt for anyone—perhaps including his father—who dared mock his dreams comes out strongly in the poem he entitled “Revenge,” dated January 21, 1975:

Step on my dreams, and I'll break your legs  
and feet into pieces which will never, ever  
fit together again,  
You will be crippled.  
call me names, and I will still your mind,  
Busting it in half with a brick,  
which has your name signed on it,  
it is there that the names were thought . . .

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