

Autobiographical Flesh: Lying Naked with Gavin Geoffrey Dillard

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We met on Facebook, as I imagine many do in this age of twenty-first century technology. He found me through a mutual friend—yet another man with the last name of Dillard. His friend request read: “I just saw your picture and you’re someone I should know.” Now, I must admit that I get a bit excited, giddy even, when a good looking man befriends me on that magical book of faces, a site where virtual introductions and online interpersonal courtships can lead to face-to-face encounters. Here was a guy who piqued my curiosity with an alluring sense of confidence, in his assuredness that I was someone he should know. At first, I didn’t ask why; I didn’t care. I was flattered. I did, however, ask the other Dillard exactly what he knew about Gavin—“Oh, he’s a gay writer with an *interesting* past. You should read his book,” or something to that effect. A writer? A book? I couldn’t refuse the intrigue and mystery of it all, so I befriended a man by the name of Gavin Geoffrey Dillard.

It didn’t take long (several hours perhaps?) before Gavin and I began writing Facebook novelettes—sexual innuendos and not-so-innuendos attached to photo comments, trailing down the page one after the other. (You’ll have to friend us to find out what warranted the “get a room!” comment from so many.) I couldn’t help thinking how he—a (reformed?) porn star and writer living along the shores of Hawaii—and I—a then graduate student in the oceanless Midwest studying the doom and gloom of death—made this cosmic connection. The only thing I can attribute our meeting to is a photograph, some (probably suggestive) picture of myself with a little chest hair (okay, a lot of chest hair) sprinkled here and there. Trust me when I say that I wholeheartedly believe in the persuasive power of a default photo, in the seductive capabilities of the visual. Gavin must have been a little hot and bothered for a taste of some bearish delight. Ahhhh... the many men who have come looking for a hair follicle—or a thousand—of their very own, a souvenir reminding them of their hirsute conquests, of their fantasy come true. Gee, I don’t sound very modest, now do I? Fuck it! This is not, in any way whatsoever, about modesty. If you know Gavin the way *I* know Gavin, if you have read his prose and poetry, or even if you pay close attention today, you will quickly learn that Gavin, his work, and his life are (dare I say it) *anything* but modest. After all, his is the life of a porn star, the stud who takes it all in the 70s flick *Track Meet*—sadly, misspelled M-E-E-T—and the subsequent life of flowing in and out of celebrity circles, risqué opportunities, and, forgive me, slightly wackadoodle pursuits of a spiritual life. (In the spirit of Gavin, then, I hope you’ll allow me a self-indulgent gesture every so often.) But his life is more than a naked body behind a camera, more than the revolving door of male fans who lined up for him, more than narcissistic navel-gazing.

Several days in to our new friendship, I was hungry to know more, to extend and, to a certain degree, complicate the image of the two-dimensional (yet nonetheless fully realized) cyber Gavin I had come to know. So, I ordered his memoir, *In the Flesh: Undressing for Success*, and

started reading immediately. I learned that his story is that of a richly-layered memoryscape, an attempt at making sense of his journey from *then* to *now*, an archive of complex human emotions with a power to resonate with others, beyond the particularities of his life, whether we come from a similar time, a similar space, a similar place. From page 1, as I began to undress the man in front of me (well, on the pages, at least), I found, rather strangely, that I was also undressing myself, stripping away the layers of my own identity as a gay man—really, as a human being with lived experience—as he and I lie side by side in linguistic coitus, an intensity of words that created thoughts, of thoughts that created feelings, of feelings that created memories.

As pages turned to chapters, I could feel his autobiography slide into my biography, my autobiography reciprocating, needing his biography as much as he needed mine. While hanging on to each and every word of his exposed *Flesh*, we were most certainly engaged in sex—a hot and sweaty intimacy marked not by the physical but by the historical, a passionate intimacy measured in remembrances, in soft and gentle touches of longing. He and I penetrated one another in the details of storied worlds we have not shared, in worlds that have been lived independently of one another, and yet in wor(l)ds that meet somewhere in the middle between *there* and *here*, *his* and *mine*. Somehow, our autobiographies of marked difference melted into a sticky puddle of striking similarity. As each new mini-drama unfolded in his life, I was there, holding him as he held me—captive—nestled in one another’s arms. Our bed was rockin’, and rather than heading completely for the hilltops of a pleasure-centered reality, I kept myself aware of and open to the questioning and reflection of my own life.

I wondered early on in *Flesh* if Gavin might have a fetish for body hair. Look, if the title of the book itself highlights the significance of skin, why shouldn’t I? Well, let me just tell you: this boy speaks of so much hair (and ass!) throughout the pages of his memoir that the Hairy Hall of Fame, should there ever be such a heavenly place, ought to be erected (pun intended) in Mr. Dillard’s honor. Gavin was—is?—hungry for hair. With lush descriptions of a furry chest here and furry legs there, I couldn’t help but see myself in this all-you-can-eat buffet of furry men. (Allow me this moment to publicly praise his exquisite taste.) Then I came to page 51—a chapter entitled “Bear”—about a man Gavin fell for (surprise, surprise; he was always falling!), a man who Gavin recalls he “wanted to spend the night [with] . . . amid that beauty, to wrap [him]self in those masculine arms, snuggle into the rug of a chest, marry him, move right in” (52). The look and feel of Bear became, as Gavin writes, “a pattern [of] a peculiar obsession with hairy Italian gents” (79). Hairy Italian gents you say? Hmm. Suddenly our Facebook encounter makes *that* much more sense. Gavin *is* hungry for hair.

While reading about his love affair with the bear body—of the many men with this distinctly masculine armored aesthetic who were capable of revving up his engines, of lighting his fires—I was reminded of a time before my love of the same, a time when, in fact, I was repulsed by the image of excess hair and weight. Amidst the bed hopping of Gavin’s colorful past, I had somehow become lost along the way, traveling back to childhood, of growing up and discovering the “joys” of puberty, sometime in the wretchedness that is the sixth grade, when facial hair refused to back down without a fight, clearly winning its argument by giving way to the excessive sprouting of hair on the legs and in the form of a “happy” trail, followed by the awkwardness of negotiating my effeminate body in/and this hirsute casing. I had somehow tapped back into the frightening interior landscape of my childhood, stuck in the shadows of

mainstream media, in the shame of my physicality, the covering up of my body at all costs, the fear in the pit of my stomach of watching my body turn into something without my consent, and the perceived looks of disgust, of inadequacy, from others. From the book's beginnings, it became glaringly apparent that Gavin had an early start exploring his body—his sexuality—certainly a jumpstart in age to when I began enjoying the same. Gavin learned early on what “youth and flesh could do and what money could buy” (5). However, I could not share his sentiment, as my youth and flesh did not buy me much, other than a reminder of physical difference.

I felt hijacked. A body on cruise control. Simultaneously inside and outside of flesh. I was desperate for attention, for affection, for the love of others and, ultimately, a love for myself. Since I did not possess self-confidence in the slightest, I placed my identity in the hands of others. I sought out older men—Daddies—who would mold me, who would tell me who and what to become, men whose validation meant everything to me. I was only as good as the others told me I was, and even when they approved, there was always doubt. How was it possible to feel this alone, alienated from my own body and from my engagements with others while desperately searching for my identity du jour? Oddly enough, for as “beautiful” (in a mainstream-marketability-kind-of-way) as Gavin was at the height of his career, I sensed a disconnection, not necessarily from his body, but between himself and others. Did he also feel hijacked? Had his career—performing the role of edible and insatiable adult film star and all of the possibilities and limitations, the highs and lows, that come with such a post—taken over his identity to the point of confusion, numbness? Who was Gavin anymore, and where exactly did he fit in—with others, with himself? These are questions I know well, inquiries that went unanswered for many years.

Gavin's life is one of making connections with men (because Gavin is a connector, someone who likes to feel connected, to be a part of rather than apart from), and yet he knew that the more connections he made would be the more disconnections he would have to endure. Gavin and I seem to recognize a sense of loss in life, which we understand as melancholic on one hand and joyous on the other. From reading Gavin's work, it seems that death has allowed him to acknowledge joy of the moment because tomorrow is not promised. In talking of two of his lovers who died of AIDS, he writes: “Not only does it concern me somewhat physically, but emotionally it affects me, the fear of losing that which I am attached to. Anybody I meet now has the potential of just dying, which I suppose was always an option, but it presents itself as a burden on my heart now” (153).

His fear of losing others resonated deeply with me, and I was transported back to that winter night in 2002 when my partner, without any indication of a medical issue, died of a heart attack. Before there was time to say goodbye, he was gone—unexpectedly, instantly, forever. Sam's death was by far the most challenging emotional obstacle I have ever dealt with. The impossibility of closure in that relationship—to tie up all of the loose ends, to say all of the things that went unsaid—will forever haunt me. In the years following his death (and even now to a certain extent), I had a deep fear of losing others, but reality became all too clear: everybody leaves. At some point in time, whether it is death that knocks or a more enticing opportunity on the horizon, *everybody leaves*. After Sam's death, I wanted to escape the world. I felt as though I had very little for which to live. But I did not escape, because, like Gavin, something, perhaps

someone, explained to me that there was a life at the other side of this death, that I should continue moving forward regardless of the difficulty.

And so I did, to graduate school where, for six years, I danced with loss day in and day out. I wrote loss. I performed loss. I laced myself—my life—with/in loss. It is so very true what Gavin says: “loneliness has always been the greatest impetus for my writing” (83). His and mine are two stories woven together by, through, and across loss. Eventually, doing so on our own timelines, both Gavin and I reached a point where we no longer feared death, but understood it as a necessary part of life’s journey. Like Gavin, I too “am aware of my attraction to the concept of dying, of splitting and getting out of this embodiment. But I don’t see it as my best option at this time. There are too many wonderful things going on” (154). It took me a while to get there, but I am there with you, Gavin. Despite all of the shit life throws in my direction, I am not ready to split.

A hundred or so pages in, after becoming accustomed to Gavin’s voice as written, I felt a need to *hear* his voice—the pitch and prosody of his soul, that which the page is not always able to capture. We had exchanged numbers a week or so before (I told you, this was a torrid love affair), and so I guesstimated the time in Hawaii before calling him at some ungodly morning hour.

“Hello?” he answers.

“I have questions.” There is a pause. “This is Patrizio,” I say.

“Ohhhh...” he laughs. “Patrizio, *come stai?*”

And so we meet and greet with one another, sans computer screen, a re-introduction of sorts. There was no small talk for us; we chatted like old chums. I did, however, have an agenda, so I got right down to business. I had a ton of questions for him, about his past—“What the hell compelled you to do *that?*”—about the people in his life—“Was so and so really *that* hot?”—things the book hints at but go unaddressed, things that, at least as I saw it, called for further clarification. Yes, I was being nosy, and he welcomingly obliged. I think there was a sense in which I was searching for a heightened connection with his life, a deepened authenticity of the events from his past. And let’s face it: the opportunity to engage an author is just the bee’s knees. Well, usually.

We chatted for hours, conversation flowing smoothly. At some point, he began sending photos of several moments he chronicles in his book (photos that were not included in the extravaganza of black and white glamour shots existing mid-text). At first he sent his favorite shot of Leo, entitled “pinch tit.” Then it was a photo of two bare butts hanging out in the pool while taking up temporary residence at Millie’s house. Finally, there was a sweet image of Kahala, James, and a trio of furry kitties. (To learn more about these folks, you’ll have to read the book.) Suddenly, I am reminded that this story is *real*, this *really* happened. I mean, I knew it was an autobiography, but there was an indisputable truth—proof—that *these* pictures offered. The photos provided a sense of historical concreteness, reminding me of the weight of personal stories. From then on, I was grounded in the act of reading his autobiography differently: I would not forget that I was

walking the space of another man's personal history, traversing the details surrounding his many loves and losses. For whatever reasons, there was new life behind his writing, and of my reading.

Gavin dedicates his book "to the living." I find this an apropos dedication for a couple of reasons. First, Gavin attests to his life, his living with HIV despite all of the others who are no longer with us. Second, perhaps knowingly or unknowingly, Gavin's dedication speaks to the autobiographical call: a writer who weaves a tapestry of lived experience into story, an act itself that allows for continued living. Having read Gavin's *Flesh*, where disclosure undoubtedly functions as a means for understanding the self in more meaningful, cathartic ways, I am certain of autobiography's communicative power, its ability to bridge human experience across borders and boundaries while offering a space of self-reflection and restoration. Gavin's story is not my story, and yet as someone outside the specifics of his text, I am afforded an opportunity to reflect and restore as well.

I loved being naked with you, GGD. I loved curling up with you on winter days and nights, just two snuggle bunnies under the covers. I loved that you took me out of myself, away from a reality that has become all too familiar, novelty-less, safe. I loved that you re-awakened a sense of sexuality within me, instilling in me a porno adventure awaiting me whenever, wherever, however, and with whomever I want. I loved that you made me confront an era that came before my first sexual encounter with a man, a history that has impacted who I have become and all of me that has yet to emerge. I loved how you bared it all and somehow asked me to do the same.

But enough about the past; let's talk about the present. I love that we are finally in one another's presence, in the flesh. I love that we can now finish all of those online sexual innuendos we started. I love that your book, almost a year after my initial read, continues to challenge the ways I think about reading and witnessing autobiography. I love that you can finally hear *me* tell *you* the stories your writing—your life—generated.

I love receiving a friend request from a stranger.

Work Cited

Dillard, Gavin Geoffrey. *In the Flesh: Undressing for Success*. New York: Barricade Books, 1998. Print.

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