POZ 5TH Anniversary Issue: Year Five

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MAY 1998

POZ*'s commitment to a captive audience continues with this S.O.S.*

There is a factory in Texas that manufactures vast amounts of multiple drug resistant (MDR) strains of HIV in a population at extraordinary risk of transmitting these strains to others. The members of this group—and those they infect—are the recipients of medical care that, to anyone with basic HIV knowledge, is practically murderous.

This "factory" is the Texas Department of Corrections, and it's hard to imagine how MDR HIV could be any more efficiently created and spread. A recent nationwide *POZ* survey of prisoners with HIV got several hundred responses. In a mountain of mostly bleak and desperate letters, those from Texas stood out, both in volume (40 percent) and in the painful detail of what the writers endure.

Cliff Chase reveals how performance artist John Kelly works magic with "Just His Imagination."

Summer's over. It's a rainy Labor Day in new York City, 1987: "And now, Miss Joni Mitchell." A figure in a long blond wig with bangs and a droopy calf-length "hippie" dress drifts onstage and begins to sing. But unlike most of the drag queens at Wigstock, an annual all-day drag extravaganza, this diva isn't lip-synching, and the voice sounds uncannily like Joni's. It's all there: the yodel-y breaks, Canadian accent, flips of the hair, stoop-shouldered awkwardness. Joni closes with "Woodstock," recast as "Wigstock," the event's theme song, and the "hoodoo" part gets hoots from the well-tweaked crowd. But then she renders the final verse startlingly current, and the mood turns on a dime: "And I dreamed I saw the drag queens/And they were all dressed up like maids/And they had found a cure for AIDS/Across every nation…" A hush falls on Tompkins Park. Men in silver wigs tilt their heads and listen. I notice the rain has stopped, as if this drag Joni has conjured the afternoon light now piercing the clouds above the stage. And when she sings, "We are stardust, we are golden," we believe her. We want to get back to the garden, too.

Award-winning lesbian playwright Paula Vogel remembers "My Brother, My Self."

I wrote my first breakthrough play, *The Baltimore Waltz*, in New York City in 1991. It was inspired by a trip Carl and I never took. He had asked me to accompany him to Europe, but I didn't go,

discouraged by the cost—and unaware that he was HIV positive—so he went without me. As I waited for Carl to die, I sat in the hallway of Johns Hopkins University Hospital, imagining the trip we didn't take and writing the play in my head.

As soon as I named the central character in *The Baltimore Waltz* after my brother, I realized that Carl would be in the present tense for as long as the play is read or performed. In rehearsal halls, I have been able to say, "Carl is a librarian. Carl is the older brother. Carl wants…Carl cares… Carl will go to Vienna."

Italian stallion columnist Mike DeStefano reveals that "Even Tough Guys Get HIV."

Pre-AIDS, my world was limited to a street corner in the Bronx. Me and my pals covered our shame with Italian suits and fancy shoes, and shoved our fear in the trunk of a Lincoln Town Car (if there was room with the dead bodies). My heroes were bull-faced and unafraid; a gentle guy who talked of love and making an honest living was a fool. I had lots of connections—I never waited in line or filled out a single job application, because we had a "guy" who got things done. I was at the top of the local social food chain. Nothing could touch me.

But when I was diagnosed with the gay plague, my friends, the big shots, went AWOL. I often wonder how supportive Frankie Fingers would have been about my HIV status. "Hey, Frankie, I got the AIDS virus." He'd probably offer to find the guy who put the AIDS in my coffee, break his legs, then buy me a cannoli.

JULY 1998

Sean Strub's "The Good Doctor" is a thank-you note to the man who helped him save his own life—and a how-to for others.

Soon after AIDS hit, Dr. Joseph Sonnabend became known as an independent thinker. And from the beginning, this caused him trouble. When he invented safe sex in 1983, gay leaders said he was homophobic and just trying to get gay men to stop having sex. When he cautioned against AZT use in 1986, fellow researchers and activists alike accused him of being murderous, even crazy. He founded both the AIDS Medical Foundation (later AmFAR) and Community Research Initiative (later CRIA), and left each over a clash of principles. His idea that AIDS is caused not by a single exposure to HIV but by many infectious cofactors—his "multifactorial model'—has been alternately reviled and revisited by scientists. His early and then-lonely conviction that AIDS isn't 100 percent fatal gave hope to many PWAs when hope was scarce.

I'm one of the dying he has kept alive. Not through some magic combination of pills he urged me to take, but through an intangible conveyance of hope, respect, trust and—ironically—through urging me not to take certain pills. Since my diagnosis, I've outlived three doctors I had before Sonnabend, each of whom, while caring and compassionate, had sought to prepare me for my

eventual death from AIDS. Joe was the first to prepare me for survival.

AUGUST 1998

Don't ask fiction writer Emily Carter about life with AIDS—"Ask Amelio."

Amelio called while my boyfriend was out. I was in a good mood, having obtained what I needed to want to live on a little longer and injected in into my wrists about 10 minutes earlier. "What are you doing in jail?" "Well, you know. I was driving the wrong car at the wrong time. Listen," he went on, "sometimes girls send us stuff in here. A pair of panties, a ribbon from your hair, whatever." I told him I'd see what I could do. I rarely wore underwear and my hair was short, so I understood the depth of his aloneness. "Don't call me again though," I said. "My boyfriend gets angry."

Things were getting desperate in my corner. My boyfriend was going to kick me out any minute if I couldn't think of any more excuses about missing objects and pawn tickets. The phone rang during one of our confrontations.

"It's Amelio. Listen, sweetheart, I have to tell you something."

"Amelio,"I said, with one eye on my boyfriend who was pointing to the door he wanted me to walk out of with a dollar fifteen in my pocket and a January sleet-storm splattering the street. "I told you not to call me."

"OK," he said, with perfect equanimity, and hung up.

Do you have to be a brilliant plot predictor to guess what it was Amelio had to tell me? No you do not. He was trying to do the decent thing. Now, eight years later, where is Amelio? He may have died in prison, he may still be alive, shuttling between methadone and medical clinics.

"Oh, Viagra!" cries Greg Lugliani when the new blue diamond makes him see stars.

The indignities HIV inflicts seem limitless. Yet unlike protease paunch or buffalo hump, the remedy for impotence—to my mind the most humiliating side effect of all—may have materialized: I am one who happily calls Viagra the new crown jewel of my medicine cabinet.

Voila, Viagra! Suddenly, finally, my dick was rock hard. Not just swollen and spongy as it was wont, but—*Mirabile dictu!*—solid as steel. And it stayed at ferocious attention for what seemed like eternity. When I came, my load bolted out like mercury bursting from a thermometer on the floor a goodfour feet away, rather than oozing out as a sluggish curd. Was that the Hallelujah chorus I heard? Even after falling asleep, I'd wake up intermittently and give myself a satisfying tug—it was still standing.

SEPTEMBER 1998

“Growing Up in Public” is the fate of 15-year-old Justin LeGreci, who just wants to have fun.

“Teenagers are going to have sex,” says Justin. “I want to have sex. Soon.” Justin is bound to enter the world of dating with an unusual awareness of himself as both stigmatized and potentially dangerous. The “innocent victims” born with HIV are coming of age. How will America deal?

I’m uneasy about making a teenager discuss sex at a table in front of his mother and his grandmother, let alone a reporter. But I ask anyway.

“I’ll meet some girl sooner or later, and I’ll want to have sex,” Justin says without looking up. “If she wanted to, I’d say yes—if I had a condom with me.”

Justin’s mother has grown still. “What about your being HIV infected?” she asks carefully.

Eyes averted, Justin says, “I’d tell them that before.”

I mention a girl he met in an Internet chat room: Will they see each other? “We have it planned,” he says with enthusiasm. “When we get our licenses, we’re going to meet up.”

OCTOBER 1998

Sex radical Pat Califia swears by “The Necessity of Excess.”

The epidemic will not end until there is a vaccine that prevents infection and a treatment that eliminates the virus from the body. When there is—please Goddess, both—some will return to pre-AIDS sexual behavior. And that’s as it should be. Because there was nothing wrong with that behavior. In fact, sexual excess has intrinsic value and a spiritual meaning that makes it a vital part of the human experience.

My friend Skip Aiken, an Old Guard leatherman if there ever was one, used to say, “Men ought to share cum with one another.” (Also: “I never knew what I wanted in bed until I had sex with 300 different people.”) His doctor would claim that Skip died of a heart attack, not AIDS, but I believe his heart broke from too much loss and grief. Yet he never altered his conviction that there was something important about that exchange, beyond the climax it betokened.

Someday, a spatter of semen will be a kiss of benediction, not a curse. Let a thousand of those white flowers bloom.

DECEMBER 1998

With “A Bite of the Apple” and a sip of Norvir, Mark Schoofs is cast out of a fool’s paradise.

I’d figured that even though I’m HIV negative, I know what it’s like to be on HAART.

Wrong. This humbling truth hit home recently when I tried a nip of Norvir (ritonavir). I know, I know—why would anyone without HIV ever get near that drug, renowned for gastrointestinal disturbances such as, to use the clinical term, explosive diarrhea?

But I do know that my taste of ritonavir gave me a new appreciation of “the nightmare of life-long adherence.” And it gave me a new reason for staying uninfected. Yes,I’m still frightened of sickness and death. But I’m more frightened of the joy-sapping grind of doctor visits, blood tests and vile chemicals. Those medicines are rightly called miracle drugs for extending my friends’ lives, but I still don’t ever want to take them.

JANUARY 1999

All Lisa Kennedy can do is applaud reverend “Rainey on Parade.”

“On a January night a bit before midnight,” Cheeks begins, “I tell the attending nurse, ‘Don’t come back in here unless I say it’s OK. This night is going to be a conversation between me and my God.’”

“In the beginning it was a pretty prayer,” Cheeks says in a rather rueful aside: “Oh heavenly father, I humble myself. You are the creator and sustainer of life. I’m your child. Oh, hear my humble cry. But the pain was saying something else.”

“I’m giving you the sweet version. The nurse came in the room and said, ‘Can I help you?’ I said, ‘Is your name God?’ She said no, and I said, ‘Get the hell out of here—this is a private conversation.’ I am now sitting up in my bed, screaming, ‘Show up! Show up!’”

Five months later, Cheeks approached the doctor who told him he would never walk again and said, “You were 50 percent right: You were wrong that I would never walk again. But you were right that I’ll be dead by Christmas. You just never said which Christmas.” This is the kind of moral punchline meant to transform doubt into optimism. “And then,” Cheeks adds, “I gave him back every prescription he’d ever given me.”

FEBRUARY 1999

Michael Scarce takes “A Ride on the Wild Side” sans saddle. POZ *takes the heat.*

Rare exceptions to the barebacking norm, these men prize not just unprotected anal sex or even semen but HIV itself as the ultimate intimacy. In a mind-boggling feat of symbolic reversal, they

have taken the dread and deadliness of the virus and transformed it into desire and regeneration. For them, sharing uninfected semen is insufficient because it provides only a temporary bond—the come dries up, leaving only the memory of the experience. But "charged loads," in the XtremeSex worldview, offer a kind of permanent partnership, a connection outside of time. Once you're infected, you're infected for life. Over and over on the XtremeSex website this fantasy plays itself out, and XtremeSexers have used their considerable knowledge of HIV pathogenesis to elaborate it. From the science of how the virus invades—and then is incorporated into—the host cell, combining the DNA of one organism with another to make a new form of life, these men have woven a tale of romance. Some HIV negative bug chasers have gone so far as to attempt to consciously choose the individual gift-giver who will "father" their HIV infection. For these men, seroconversion has become a rite of passage rather than a chance occurrence, couched in metaphors of pregnancy.

HIGHLIGHTS

Louisiana's one-woman ASO **Monica Johnson** brought an April '98 issue for each attendee of her high-school class reunion as a way to disclose her status.

Performance artist **John Kelly** stole the show with a gorgeous "Am I Blue?" photo by pal **John Dugdale**. Look for Kelly's upcoming album of '60s standards and his west-coast show with **Natalie Merchant**.

Ms. June 1998 **Rebekka Armstrong** bared all as *POZ* broke the story on women with protease-related lipodystrophy. We mourned the death of *POZ* columnist **Scott** "Spunk" **O'Hara**.

World AIDS Conference goers woke to find the Global issue, starring doc **Joe Sonnabend**, slipped under their Geneva doors. We paid tribute to faraway HIVers with our International Dream Team.

Emily Carter was on her way up when she gave us the lowdown on falling out of the writing **Roiphe** family and into the pages of the *New Yorker*. Soon after our big-selling fiction issue hit, she won a spot in '98's *Best American Short Stories.*

Barnes & Noble pulled our Back-to-School issue (with coverboy **Brett VanBenschoten**) from its shelves because of the *gratis* condoms enclosed. This only proved our point: Prevention is under erasure in the blackboard jungle.

Zerit posterboy **Michael Weathers** posed as the new face of AIDS in **Richard Goldstein's** look at how pharmaceutical ads glamorize AIDS.

POZ went behind bars to report on AIDS activism among prisoners. Our November '98 cover made stars of Bedford Hills tenants **Pearl Richardson** and **Mary Clark**. When copies reached the prison, autographs were in order.

December ’98 found the face of AIDS in our grandparents. While ABC sniffed out “rest-home Romeos” spreading the virus, **Jane Fowler** gave us the real deal.

Rev. Rainey Cheeks and other black leaders talked turkey about AIDS in their community, and **Martin Delaney** launched our Y2K research series with a five-step plan for a cure.

Tony Valenzuela got on a high horse to tell all about barebacking. Check this month’s letter’s section.

A warm-and-fuzzy **Greg Louganis** (cuddling his Jack Russell terrier, **Nipper**) was just what we needed after the barebacking brouhaha.

In April ’99, adult-film star **Tricia Devereaux** gave face to get attention for the epidemic exploding in the straight porn industry.

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