

# Changing Men

## SPECIAL SECTION



25 **Manhood and Physical Disability**  
Thomas J. Gershick and Adam Stephen Miller

33 **Coming Out Blind and Gay**  
Phil Rich

31 **Hallelujah Halloween**  
Paul Kahn

## DEPARTMENTS



2 **Letters**

19 **Fiction**

Fratello di Latte  
Steve Lewis

43 **Fiction**

Loving Amy  
Mairead Cronin

49 **Sportsmen**

Riding with the 'Spur Posse'  
Mike Messner

51 **Men & War**

Peace Conversion:  
Deprogramming the Militarized Psyche  
Tony Switzer

55 **Before Us**

A Farewell  
Sally Roesch Wagner

57 **Men & The Media**

Rock Music and the Crisis of Masculinity  
Michael S. Kimmel

59 **Book Review Essay**

Allen Smalling looks at recent sex manuals:  
*The New Joy of Sex* by Alex Comfort, M.D., D.S.C.  
*The New Joy of Gay Sex* by Dr. Charles Silverstein and Felice Picano  
*The New Male Sexuality* by Bernie Zilbergeld, Ph.D.

61 **Book Reviews**

*American Manhood* by E. Anthony Rotundo  
*Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies* by Richard Mohr  
*Whatever Happened to Passion?* by Garland Richard Kyle  
*Awakening From the Deep Sleep* by Robert Pasick  
*Against the Tide* by Michael S. Kimmel and Thomas E. Mosmiller, eds.

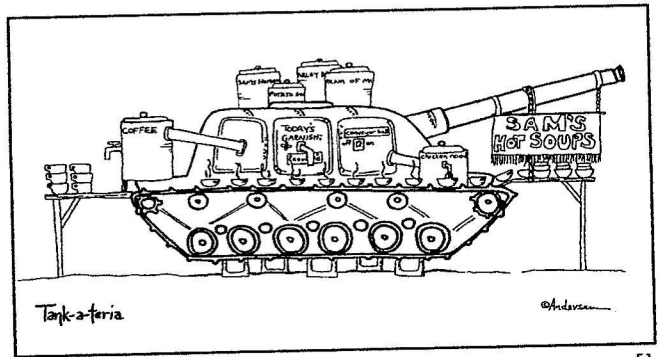
67 **Audio Review**

Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph. D reviews  
*Learning to Live Without Violence*

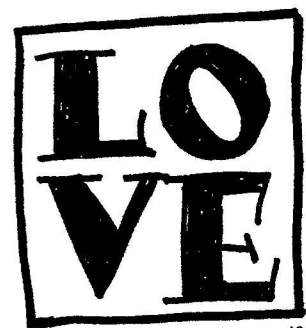
68 **News from NOMAS**

Report from the National Organization for Men Against Sexism

71 **Classifieds**



page 51



page 43

F E A T U R E S

**The Way She Touched Me** 4

An American man and a Korean woman (don't) meet on the streets of Seoul  
Richard Newman



page 4

**An Interview with Marilyn French** 7

Discussing men, power and her latest book, *The War Against Women*  
Vance Lemkuhl



page 7

**Men in the Kitchen** 11

Excerpts from the parodical *Journal of the Institute for Male Cookery*  
Jack T. Thornton

**Loosen the Homophobic Grip** 14

A queer performance artist/activist's call to brothers' arms  
Keith Hennessy

**Men in Picture Books for Young Readers** 37

A look at new images of men in recent books for young readers  
John Stewig



page 14

**Epilog** 41

A man's story of obsession and self-betrayal  
Arnold Rabin

17 Queer Queer? Queer! Timothy Buttercup • 18 Canticle David-Glen Smith • Woman in The Wings Reuben Halpern •  
23 Joel Was Eight Years Older And Seemed A God To Me Jason Jonker • 42 Garden Christopher Butters • 45 Writing  
Home: Poetry on Violence and Abuse The Meeting Myles Gordon • Father's Song Jason Jonker • making shit  
happen Michael P. Smith • "...I might go to jail but your little ass is going to the cemetery. Wait till I get my hands on  
you, you bubblegum dumb ugly fucker..." Lucinda Mason • Summer Camp Richard Ballon • Sojourner Truth Sings to the  
Woman Spirit Kainoa Koeninger 72 Tree of Heaven • Hope/La Esperanza Louis Villaire

P O E T R Y

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An American Man and a Korean Woman (don't) Me

RICHARD  
NEWMAN

# THE WAY SHE

It was not until two weeks after I arrived in Seoul, South Korea, the city in which I was to spend my first year as a full-time teacher of English, that I felt courageous enough to venture on my own into its urban landscape, a terrain where neither my language, my culture nor my face was the norm. I knew that in certain circles Western features were considered very attractive. I had been told that some Korean women have plastic surgery to give their eyes the double lids characteristic of people from my part of the world but that knowledge did nothing to make me feel better when the children whose families were my neighbors pointed at me on my way to or from work and laughed as if I were an animal at the zoo. Their cries of *mi-gook saram, mi-gook saram innida*—"It's an American! It's an American!"—made me wish that I could lose my beard, my body hair, my height, and acquire the extra flap of skin that gives Asian eyes their distinctive shape. I was determined, however, not to feel like a freak simply because I was different, and I had decided that this weekend would mark the beginning of my learning to feel at home in a new country.

I planned to eat in Chong-no, a busy part of Seoul where one of my co-workers had taken me on my first Saturday in the country. As I emerged from the doorway of my building and into the street, all my attention was focused on repeating over and over again the few Korean words and phrases I had learned, "*Kalbi-tang juseyo; neign-myon juseyo; kimchi taw juseyo; mul juseyo.*" Armed with these expressions, I intended to order a cold noodle dish (*neign-myon*) for lunch and then beef soup (*kalbi-tang*) for dinner. I also would make sure that the waiter brought me more spicy cabbage (*kimchi*) and water (*mul*) whenever I wanted. Walking to the subway, I was so determined to negotiate

successfully this first solo encounter with everyday life in Korea that for a change I didn't notice people staring at me. I even managed, when the woman at the fruit stand smiled and said to me *anyong-haseyo* (hello) to respond, *neh, anyong-haseyo.*

When I boarded the train that would take me to Chong-no, I felt confident. And when I got off and was able to find the same exit from which my friend had begun showing me around the week before, I was even more sure of myself. Unfortunately, I could not remember how to find the restaurant where he and I had eaten. So I headed in the direction where the crowd seemed thickest and began, with no particular destination in mind, to weave in and out of the stream of people cramming the street. With no immediate goal to focus on, I had nothing to distract me from the stares and snickers of which I was the object. I began again to feel huge and fat, awkward and clumsy, like when I was a teenager and still unable to move gracefully in the six-foot body into which I was growing.

**B**ecoming progressively angrier and feeling more and more humiliated, I decided that it was time to go home. So I turned around and headed as fast as I could back towards the subway, and almost missed it when a woman standing in front of Pagoda Park, where the Korean independence movement got its start in the early 1900s, looked at me and called something out in English. She was wearing leather sandals with no socks and a purple cotton dress cut to fit the curves of her body. Her long black hair was disheveled but not dirty, and her hands and her knees were calloused. I guessed she was about my age, twenty-seven or twenty-eight, but the dark leathery skin on her face and the creases that appeared around her eyes and at the corners of her mouth when she

smiled made her look much older. She looked out of place among the men in business suit and women better-dressed than she was, but I was so relieved to think that I had found someone to whom I could speak English, that to me, it was everybody else who looked as if they did not belong.

I hadn't understood her right away, so I asked her what she said. This time she was very clear. She looked me straight in the eye, spoke the words, "I love you," and with the first two fingers of her right hand began to mime a blow job. Shocked and confused, I immediately turned and walked away as quickly as I could, but she was not so easily dissuaded. Panting slightly from having to run after me, she appeared at my side and—before I could protest—her arm was around my waist and my arm was being put around hers. She looked up at me with a smile I can only describe as angelic. "You, me," she said, "fuck-fuck, all night, real cheap!" I smiled back at her—what else could I do?—took her arm from my waist, said, "No, thank you," and set off in a different direction.

"Not'ankoo!" Her voice was high-pitched and mockingly flirtatious as she caught up to me, put her arm back where she thought it belonged and again offered to fuck me all night, in any way I wanted, for "real cheap." I turned around again and took off down a side street lined with what looked like art galleries, storefronts with pictures and frames hanging in the windows. I desperately hoped I was walking in a circle that would eventually lead me back to the main drag, but I couldn't be sure. I passed a small car covered from trunk to hood with shoes a woman was trying to sell and almost tripped over an old man sitting on the street, his stock of nail clippers, cigarette lighters, key chains and other assorted knick-knacks spread out neatly on the pavement in front of him. I don't know how many different streets I took trying to lose her, but each time

## the Streets of Seoul

# TOUCHED ME

Miraculously enough, I had been traveling in a circle, so it was only a few minutes before I found the Chong-no subway station, got on the train, and was headed back to my apartment. All through the ride, however, and into the night until I fell asleep, her last touch

haunted me. There was no sex in it, no aggressiveness; she simply touched me. That simplicity gave rise in my mind to the following questions. What had made her change so quickly, and so profoundly, when I told her that I was not a soldier? Why did she assume that I was a soldier? Was she actually a prostitute? If she wasn't, why would she assume as a matter of course that the way to approach an American soldier was by offering him sex for money? What if she had simply been poor and hungry and could think of no

I looked over my shoulder the woman was right behind me, half running, half walking, and still promising me the night of my dreams.

People were staring now with more than curiosity, but I didn't care; all I wanted was to get rid of her. So I let her catch up with me, and when—smiling with triumph and anticipation—she began to twine her arm once more around my waist, I took her wrist in my hand. Gripping her tightly enough so that she would not be hurt but would understand that I was serious, I pulled her—not wanting to make a completely public scene—into a small alcove between the two nearest buildings. Her eyes were wide, first with fear and then with honest confusion, as I glared at her and said, slowly, in as angry a voice as I felt I could allow myself without attracting more attention, “Go away! Just leave me alone!!” My words seemed to paralyze her, and as she stood there, silent, staring at her wrist, I took the opportunity to walk away again.

“Are you a soldier?” The voice behind me was empty of its earlier aggression. “No,” I answered, “I’m a teacher.” I was ready in my frustration to push her away if I needed to, but it was as if my answer had triggered a switch in her brain, for her behavior changed instantly. Without touching me, she continued to walk in the same direction as I was and asked politely if I wanted to stop in a coffee shop for something to eat or perhaps to sit in Pagoda Park and talk. She offered to show me around Seoul and to help me learn Korean. She said something about where she lived, but I couldn't understand her, and anyway all I could think was that she obviously could not be trusted and that I needed to get away from her before I found myself in real trouble. So I kept on walking, ignoring her until finally she slowed down, touched me gently on the lower back and walked off in the opposite direction.



other way to get something to eat?

Answers to some of these questions came to me as I learned more about Korean culture and the relationship between Korea and the United States, particularly in the context of the presence of the U.S. Army on Korean soil. As it has done in many other countries, this presence has brought with it Western-style prostitution in all its permutations and with all its accompanying vices. It is not my focus here, but the distinctions between Western-style prostitution and the "courtesanship" practiced in East Asian countries like Korea and Japan are significant—not because one is necessarily "better" or less oppressive of women than the other, but because an understanding of the difference can help to illuminate the sexual lenses through which the two cultures view each other. Both, of course, contribute to the oppression of women, but to see in the actions of women like the one I encountered in Chong-no a reflection of Korean culture—or even of male dominance "Korean-style"—is to participate in the sexual stereotyping of Asian women as voracious, exotic, always eager and enthralled by the more potent sexuality of Western men. It is also to deny the socio-economic imperialism of U.S. foreign policy and its effects on the cultures of countries it influences. Justly or not, our soldiers have become known not only for their willingness to purchase sex from Korean women, but also for thinking of sex as all that makes it worth having Korean women around.

This attitude is understood to be shared by American businessmen, and, through a perfectly logical if unfair generalization, by the rest of the Korean men as well. Without fail, all of the Korean men I met and with whom I became friendly offered at some point to pay for me to have sex. As it was explained to me by one such man who later became a good friend, his male clients from the U.S. generally expected that pleasure would precede business, and he had assumed that my idea of an evening's entertainment would be the same as that of my countrymen.

Yet even after I had said no many times, these men, including my friend, would repeat the offer whenever the opportunity presented itself. It would be misleading to imply that the sex trade in South Korea is patronized only, or even primarily, by Korean businessmen humoring their North American counterparts in the interests of making a deal. In fact, Korean men make frequent use, both personal and business-related, of the sexual services available in saunas, male-only barber-shops, Turkish baths, "room salons" (a kind of

geisha house), certain discos and karaoke establishments, and other places as well. The pleasures sold at such establishments are considered one's right by virtue of being male, and not to take advantage of them is, in part, to deny one's maleness. To be offered a woman by another man, then, is to be offered a chance at becoming "one of the boys."

When my friends made such offers to me, I felt more tangibly than I ever had before the ways in which, *through my body*, I am subject to assumptions and interpretations that have nothing to do with who I am, and everything to do with whom I am supposed to be. I was entitled to the sex they offered simply because of my penis, because of the power and privi-

**The pleasures sold are considered one's right by virtue of being male, and not to take advantage of them is, in part, to deny one's maleness.**

lege attached to its being attached to me. The fact of my penis was assumed, by definition, to have engendered in me a desire for that power.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect, though, of my encounter with this face of Korean patriarchy was how easily my refusal to purchase sex was interpreted not as a matter of principle, but as either a matter of my preference at the moment or my belief that sex was inappropriate without love. Men either took women or didn't, but whatever the mitigating circumstances, the right to take them, the bedrock reality of what it meant to be male and sexual, was not something I could disown.

The woman in Chong-no held this right up to my face and rubbed my nose in it. By offering herself to me, she was offering as well the opportunity for me to "be a man," to claim her as a symbol of all that my manhood entitles me to. To do such a thing, however, would have meant not only sacrificing my integrity. To have allowed that woman to sell me sex would have meant saying yes to everything she believed I was, everything that she believed made me a man. I ran from her

because I did not want even to have to make the choice of refusing her, because the very fact that I had the choice meant that the power to have her was already mine. In much the same way that the stares of the Koreans made me wish for a body that looked like theirs, I would, during those fifteen or twenty minutes when the woman was pursuing me, have given anything for long hair, breasts and a vagina. For if being a man meant being chased by a woman selling sex on the street, then I no longer wanted to be a man.

It would do justice neither to my experience nor to the reality of that woman's life to say, simply, that my encounter in Chong-no raised my consciousness. For, in fact, my consciousness had been raised years before. I remember sitting and talking with my mother about the time when I was growing up and she had to work to support my brother, my sisters and myself. "Money was tight," she said, "but more than once I turned down offers, very attractive offers, that men made to sleep with me. And the men were of all types, businessmen, construction workers, you name it. The only thing they had in common was that each of them had a dick." I felt very small when she told me that, tainted by my gender in a way that I could not wash off, and I promised myself I would never be the kind of man for whom sex was a commodity, for whom my mother was something that could be bought and sold.

In Korea, I discovered that this is the kind of man I already am, that I have no choice but to be, if not in my actions, then in my body. To the degree that my body is not something from which I can run away, the challenge of taking responsibility for the power and privilege that comes with being biologically male is the challenge not simply of refusing to participate in the commoditization of women's bodies. It is the challenge of finding ways to inhabit my own body so that such commoditization is rendered as the betrayal of self that it always is.

For myself, the old truism about hindsight notwithstanding, a good start would have been to have gone with that woman to the coffee shop of her choice and, at the very least, to have learned her name.

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