



A Poet in Center City Pt.2

Adam Fieled

Photo by Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum
Mike Land at Molly's Books, South Philadelphia, 2005
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#16

The night of the 2000 election is a strange one. I'm working a closing shift at B & N, and a call comes in for me from Elizabeth Yankel, editor of a regional print journal based in Philadelphia called *American Writing*. *American Writing* is ranked high enough (Christopher endorses it too, and they carry it at Borders) that this call from Elizabeth (to inform me that one of my poems, "Icarus in New York," would be published in the next issue) gives me an almost unbearable sense of exhilaration. Like the rest of America, I'm up all night waiting for an election verdict. It never happens. But my ass is kicked into gear by what *American Writing* is, and the new task is to jump into poetry head-first. I want to be thorough—rather than sticking to the texts I know (Beats, Bukowski, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, etc), I want to learn the right histories and ground myself in them. I start with a vengeance—Pound's *Cantos*, the Greek tragedians, Eliot's *Four Quartets*. But the most profound breakthrough occurs one night at B & N, as I'm goofing off—on impulse, I pick up the *Collected Poems* of John Keats. I flip straight to "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and when I hit "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ are sweeter..." my brain turns on its axis. This proves to be the most important moment of my poetry life—discovering the English Romantics.

Through dealing with Elizabeth Yankel, I'm introduced to the Center City literary old guard. Many of the men are gay; if they scope me out, it's to determine if I mean "action." Joe Miller fits this profile; an old friend of Elizabeth's who lives in a duplex apartment at Seventh and Bainbridge. His most prized possession is a photo of himself and a bearded, bespectacled Allen Ginsberg, taken backstage at the Painted Bride in the Seventies. It's on the wall of his study; the other wall is covered by long bookshelves filled with recent poetry books. Joe seems to have read everything; to know what he's talking about. His real penchant is for Philly literary gossip (particularly among the gay poets), and he considers himself the raconteur of the tribe. His heyday, he always says, was the Eighties; that was the peak, the time Philly poetry really swung. There were readings every night and everyone slept with everyone. I wonder if it's all blarney. The hitch with me is that I'm straight. Nevertheless, I arrange a bunch of readings for us to do together— at bookstores, music venues, even at the Kelly Writers House on the Penn campus (I'm finishing my degree at Penn.) The readings are half-festive, half-strained; but because I happen to be sleeping with girls, I deny Joe the gossip-angles he wants. Elizabeth, I'm later to learn, has the same reservations about me that Joe does. For the gays in this tribe, art and gossip seem to be inseparable; are, in fact, flip sides of the same coin.

#18

The old guard are reserved about me; they refuse to deal with Christopher at all. Christopher is pompous about being young and fresh; he'll do anything not to be a bore. The sensibility finger points from Christopher to Morrissey and straight back to Oscar Wilde. As might be expected, Christopher is sexually ambiguous; he frequently makes flirtatious remarks in my direction. But, I notice over the first few years I know him, he only seems to date girls. Bisexuality is one of his adopted poses. Maybe. Joe Miller and Christopher, when they run into each other, have nothing to say. Christopher, at this time, has several poems out in the Columbia Poetry Review. Christopher's writing is more avant-garde than Joe's or Elizabeth's; bits of Pound, Cummings, and "Pop" kitsch. I never lose the sense that Chris is based in Manayunk, which is its own place (at a tangent to Center City) and with its own ethos. Main Street, Manayunk, is posh like Walnut Street, but smaller, more sedate, and cozier. Drinking in Manayunk (as Christopher and I are wont to do) is peaceful and, especially in spring and summer, decidedly a glamorous experience. Some of the glamour Christopher has for me is Manayunk glamour, and he does come off sometimes as a Manayunk transplant in Center City. The first important reading I do with Christopher is at Villanova University (he's an alumnus) on a cool spring night in '01, with J.R. Mitchum. We read to about fifteen female undergrads, and they treated us like big-shots. Who could ask for more?

#19

Bill Rosenblum and I are still working together intermittently. Bill lives in a studio apartment on 21st Street between Chestnut and Market. It's filthy— Bill lives like a pig. But Bill already has a primitive Pro Tools set-up, which means he can record me cheaply and (somewhat) efficiently. I have a cache of songs I wrote in the spring of '96— folk songs, for us to record. One thing I have now also is an album on mp3.com, which I can add to. Bill and I maintain our own routine— record, smoke a little pot, repeat. Bill's infinitely distractible, and I try not to be impatient. He even gets me to watch "Adult Swim" and "Space Ghost," as I did as a teenager. The album doesn't do much— I have a difficult time promoting it (having "offed" myself from doing live gigs in Philly). Everything feels liminal to me except Penn— it's the new centerpiece of my life. College Hall, Van Pelt, Bennett Hall are golden for me; and I covet the armature of an Ivy League education. As I expected, Penn only transferred two years worth of credits from Penn State. Now, in my mid-twenties, I prioritize getting my degree. Christopher, Elizabeth, Bill, and the rest know this is happening— but my life is becoming strictly compartmentalized into discrete bits, which don't always cohere. I will use Trish Webber, later, to bind the whole thing together.

#20

There's a poetry reading circuit in Center City which I'm now heavily involved in. Other than the old guard and Christopher, some contenders subsist who are nearly my age. D.P. Plunkett is a rising star on this circuit. He happens to be ten years older than me. D.P. is bisexual, obese, and his poetry is all rough edges and dirty jokes. He, like most of the old guard, is a historical naïf where poetry is concerned— he's read very little pre-1960. He also, as a high-school dropout raised out in the sticks, loathes U of Penn. It seems natural that we take an instant, intense dislike to each other. His sordid history with Elizabeth and Joe ended in rancor on all sides. I spot D.P.'s big weakness— he needs to be buffeted by people (preferably poets) on all sides. D.P. has one major henchman; a bouncer/poet from Southwest Philly named Doug Winter. Whatever social games come to fruition around them are planned by Doug and D.P. together. They run a reading series out of La Tazza 108. I go sometimes with Christopher. Christopher detests them, but there aren't many reading series in Center City which deliver the "action-quotient" we want, and this is one. We learn fast; there's no use trying to talk with D.P. or Doug unless you're part of their in-crowd. Neither of us is prepared to make much of an effort. Through the whole liminal period of the early Aughts, we work around scenes like this and try and establish something worthwhile, both in and out of the accepted Center City circuits. Christopher snaps pictures relentlessly.

#21

Oddly enough, many of the characters who accrued to my life through This Charming Lab are still around. Larsen remains as recklessly lucky as ever. One summer day in '01, we take one of his girlfriends canoeing on the Delaware. It's very pleasant—we stop at all the little islands to smoke pot, and we're right in the heart of the wilderness. If Larsen's girlfriend almost kills us on the drive home (she's driving stoned, and super-erratically), we don't notice much. Larsen's recklessness is contagious. The Buckners are around, though I've ditched my Goth attire. Occasionally, I'll do a reading with Bill Rosenblum playing keyboards behind me. This happens at least once at Tritone at 16th and South. The shift from music to poetry isn't seamless—I still get in heartbroken moods about my failed attempt to become a successful indie rocker. But another force is gaining momentum in Center City at this time—a bunch of Swarthmore grads are putting together machinery behind a new, iconoclastic, monthly free paper. It's to be called the Philadelphia Independent. The editor is another Bill—Bill Pearl. Bill approaches me to see if there's anything I might like to write for the Independent. We settle on an idea which doesn't satisfy my artist's ego, but does assure me a wide audience fast—an astrology column. Because I write it in a tough-minded way, Bill calls it "The Rizzoscope," after erstwhile Philly mayor Frank Rizzo. I notice the other Independent staffers, especially indie princess Sara Blount. The Independent has boxes like the other weeklies; what it gives Center City is an edge towards youth, freshness, liberal values, and educated quirk.

It's early 2004. Elizabeth died a year ago; I've cut ties with Joe Miller. Trish rewired my brain. I'm doing a reading in Northern Liberties for an online journal called Lunge. It's not just me— there's a bunch of bands playing, short films, and a team of technicians doing "ambient." The crowd is a hundred-plus; the mood is festive. The multi-media angle reminds me so much of Swinging London (my imagination of it) that I get, as in '99, an intense frisson. It occurs to me that now might be the time to write the second chapter of *This Charming Lab*— that the moment might be germane for it. Meanwhile, Bill Rosenblum is producing an album for me. We're recording at his pad at 11th and Webster— "Webster Street Studios." The album was supposed to be just spoken-word; but we expanded and expanded until it looked like we would reach an album's full of tunes. Through Bill, I'm introduced to what the Highwire Gallery is, in the Gilbert Building on the PAFA (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) campus. I begin to put pieces together— this is where I could stage the sequel I've been considering. The curator is an erstwhile roadie for the Grateful Dead— Jim O'Rourke. He's older— short, thin, intense, a redhead. The Highwire is a space to die for; several rooms, all with high ceilings, including one which looks like a cleared-out factory space. Still, the manpower is missing; I need running-buddies for this new "trip." Simultaneously, I graduated magna cum laude from U of Penn and geared up for grad school. Between Penn and hipster-ism, I was an absolute freak.

#23

I met John Rind at the Last Drop at around this time. John was twenty, and had been raised in Center City by an interesting family. His Mom was a therapist; his deceased father had been a hustler and a card-shark; his brother, who was my age, had been murdered on a college campus years before; and his older sister Kyra was a burgeoning fashionista in New York. The tragedies in John's life gave him a precocious sense of humanity; he carried himself like someone who had been through crises. He was extraordinarily good-looking: 6'3, thin, with piercing brown eyes and curly dark hair. Providentially, he was also artistic— a junior at University of the Arts, majoring in film. His nexus was all artistic kids. U of Arts (Sara Blount was another grad) has its own social niche in Center City— the archetypal U of Arts undergrad is a snotty, sexy, know-it-all brat who WILL make it, by hook or crook. Older Philadelphians take for granted that these kids will soon be derailed by circumstance into eternal waiters, bartenders, and service-industry goons. But John's not snotty with me at all (as Sara is). His attitude is flexible and open. He's also a damned good hustler— between his imposing height, looks, charm, and barfly style (he's also precociously sub-alcoholic), he can only be an asset. To add even more sauce, John is an active bisexual. He oozes seduction in all directions, out of all of his pores. Furthermore, we wind up working together at B & N, which assures us a context and constant contact. This is how the fun started— the sense that John and I were a team.

Christopher Severin was in. I'd enlisted him. What I felt we needed was a square— four guys. Ricky Flint, who worked with John and I at B & N, was a half-obvious choice. He was a science guy (grad of U of Chicago) who was also into literature; good-looking, in the manner of the three of us (dark hair and eyes; like me, bearded); a wild drinker and libertine; and a penchant for head-butting, intellectual and otherwise. I knew instinctively he would be the most difficult of the other three to manage. He had some issues with U of Penn; with what I was writing; with how I was running things, even before we began to put shows together. But, importantly, John and Ricky hit it off like a house on fire; two kids in their early twenties (Ricky was twenty-three), solidly Center City, rabid for new (or, in Ricky's case, any) experience; their circuit was tight. So tight, in fact, that often Christopher and I couldn't get a word (or a drink) in edgewise. Ricky likes to spite us two old fogies by sticking to John— but not sexually. Ricky's straightness was also tight. The tensest circuit in the square is Christopher-Ricky; they're both hotheaded control freaks, and they don't get on. Where Christopher is concerned, Ricky starts with shoot-down routines immediately. Just generally, what Ricky brings to the table is some light (vivid, educated intelligence) and a whole lot of darkness. The fire which animates him has a harsh, destructive edge.

I still remembered the Lunge event in Northern Liberties, my frisson, and Swinging London. One of my abiding Swinging London fixations had been the London Free School— a loose conglomeration of artists, musicians, and curators who staged multi-media events around London through the “Swinging” Sixties years. Even before I enlisted the other three, I decided to call our group the Philly Free School. Ricky, of course, had to argue the finer points of why it needs to be called this, even as John and Christopher didn’t resist. If we were going to use the Highwire Gallery as the dominant space, it was inescapable that Jim O’Rourke would be a dominant influence. Jim was an odd mix of East and West Coast attributes— he’d be the first to light a joint for you when you showed up to negotiate with him; he’d always deliver some kind of goods (hash brownies, nitrous tanks) to create a suitably debauched ambience for your events; but he could also get East Coast intense about money and logistics. His vibe was very unique, and people tended either to love him or hate him. Luckily for the Philly Free School, John and I in particular clicked with him instantly. In fact, the John-Adam circuit was as much about channeling the West Coast as it was about channeling 60s London. So the square, aided and abetted by Jim O’Rourke, began to plan events. And when we hit the streets, everybody stared.

#26

The first Philly Free School event was held in July 2004. There were some physical characteristics to the Highwire Gallery space which facilitated the event. The west-facing wall was all windows. The event began in the late afternoon, then into the evening, and we got to watch a spectacular sunset as it happened. We sold Jim's hash brownies for a dollar a piece. This guaranteed that by the end of the night, everyone would be on their backs. As for the acts— Golden Ball played psychedelic space-rock. Many of the Golden Ball guys and the retinue they brought had been my friends in State College. I imported Lucky Dragons from the Lunge event in Northern Liberties; they were pure, laptop driven ambient. The demarcation separating Philly Free School from This Charming Lab happened fast; there were lots of paying customers at the door. Plus, Jim's presence assured that there was free hard liquor floating around. Jim O'Rourke did things right. If we were taking big risks, we also had some protection— the Highwire, not on the Gilbert Building's first floor, could only be accessed by stairs or elevator. D.P. Plunkett droned; Christopher walked around taking pictures with his digital camera; I was clean-shaven. If the "factory room," unfortunately, remained untouched, the important thing was that when the square locked in, we really did work together, even Ricky. I knew instinctively that nothing like this had ever been done in Center City before. Turn the dials up to eleven, right?

Larsen Spurn reemerged at about this time. He had spent time in London with Station, but nothing had panned out for them there. Larsen's new incarnation was as front-man for an industrial-leaning band called ElektroWorx. Unlike Station, who were very raw, ElektroWorx were steeped in multimedia. Their performances incorporated videos and lighting effects. Thus, they were a natural choice for the Philly Free School. Larsen's life had retained a reckless quality; as of '04, he was living out of a recording studio at 13th and Carpenter. As I soon discovered, it was a junk-fest. Every time I smoked pot with Baptiste at the studio, it was dusted with H—I got flu symptoms instantly. There were always people drowsing on the couches scattered around the studio. This coincided with a period Larsen was going through of dating strippers. When Larsen signed on for a bunch of Free School engagements, it was the John Rind-Adam Fieled, West Coast influenced circuit he was working with. John and I could hang out at the studio and not feel out of place. Christopher never particularly liked the junk vibe and Ricky was adamant that only alcohol worked for him. Nevertheless, once Baptiste was convinced that this wasn't This Charming Lab redux (Larsen had hated Bill Rosenblum and Dara March), he didn't hold any of his spoils back from us. I noticed things beginning to sink into a certain miasma—none of us were ever completely sober. The Philly Free School had a Manifest Destiny approach to debauchery—we prized altered states of consciousness. And all of us (including Larsen, with his European edge) were sublimely ignorant of how different we were than the rest of the Center City art scene. We had created a self-contained world.

The debauchery edge of the Free School had some darkness and some light in it. What was always tinted more darkly for us was sexual tension and competition. We worked fiercely together, but there was ferocity between us too. As far as raw sex and how the square worked, it reduced to two basic circuits: John-Christopher and Ricky-Adam. John and Christopher were either would-be or "very much" bisexuals— they were sweet on each other, and on Ricky and I as well. They preferred the bisexual "sweetheart" approach. Ricky and I were straight-up, straight, and macho. We looked for girls. The problem Ricky and I had instantly is that we often wound up going for the same girls. Ricky, being Ricky, had to abuse the living shit out of me (both behind my back and to my face) whenever I won a battle. I wasn't big into subterfuge, but I was big on telling Ricky the truth: my slightly-less ferocious moves worked more frequently than his Genghis Khan ones. It meant that when the four of us went bar-hopping in Center City, the edge of unease between Ricky and I would start early and last until one of us "won." The "sweetheart circuit" had a lot more finesse than we did. After the first half-hour, Ricky and Christopher would go out of their way to avoid each other. Visually, we all knew the square worked— we became the center of attention wherever we went. As all the circuits worked except one, we could always branch off in ones, twos, or threes to flatter, seduce, or co-opt whoever we needed to. There was no precise system— we were selling good looks and youth. Philly in the mid-Aughts suffered no paucity of either.

One thing the Free School needed to do was to chat up poets. We were doing multi-media; just musicians weren't enough. We learned very fast; if anyone among us was going to chat up poets, it would have to be me, or Christopher, or Christopher and me together. That's what the Adam-Christopher circuit was about: poetry. Christopher was very particular about his affiliations; he'd spent four years studying Pound (and the Modernists) at Villanova; it was always Pound who wound up being the major touchstone. If the four of us happened to be speaking with someone with serious literary pedigree, Ricky and John would soon wander off. Christopher and I were older (Christopher was two years older than me, and ten years older than John), and the necessary depth of historical knowledge was there with us. It meant that the major defunct circuit in the square often hinged on Christopher telling Ricky off for not knowing enough about literature (and Ricky dismissing Christopher for being pompous). When all the parts were working together, the scientific objectivity of Ricky's mind allowed him to pick up things very fast (and oozing condescension the while); and John was always ready to learn. Christopher and I had a history of doing readings; we knew how to angle things to get poets to read with us. Even if the poets other than Christopher and I who were associated with the Free School were taken more than slightly aback by how intensely we were living. It was difficult not to think of Rimbaud's "systematic derangement of the senses," and Christopher and I were both suckers for the French Symbolists, even if Christopher's tastes stopped before the English Romantics. On some nights, it really was the Book Nerds vs. the Drinkers— God help Christopher and I for stopping at five drinks and debating what Pound did or did not help Eliot with; John and Ricky drank us two old fogies under the table every time.

#30

It has to be said that, all things considered, the big “getting things done” circuit in the Free School nexus was John-Adam. We were always “on,” always ready to seduce, always working the angles with everyone and everything around us. Lots of subterranean action happened at B & N on Rittenhouse Square, where we worked (Ricky had started off with us, but had been “offed” for molesting female employees). Free School characters would drop in to say hello and commiserate. John and I would smoke a little pot on our lunch breaks (the streets around Delancey Place were conducive) and plan new heists. John had U of Arts kids he wanted to include; he had also become chummy with a gaggle of Temple undergrads who were into poetry. We were too on fire to create a context to be snobbish or elitist; anything young and fresh, with at least some artsy edge, had to work. The big sexual tension between John and I was more personal than my head-butts with Ricky— John was in love with me. He made passes; I deflected them. I was later to learn that many people who saw us on the street assumed we were a gay couple. One of the reasons we so liked to get high was so that John could numb the pain of unrequited love and I could numb the pain of having to deflect him. I was, and remain, incorrigibly straight. Still, these were dark undercurrents in a period charged with vitality and excitement. As a way-station leading to other destinations, B & N worked just fine for us.

