

# NEVER AT HOME AT HOME

By Robert D. Kirvel

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** 'We loved, that is, until skin and muscle and brain tissue unexpectedly seized before withering from an affliction so righteously viral in selective desiccation that a leader of the free world dared not speak its name.' *The devastation of AIDS that nearly wiped out and redefined a subculture is the subject of this trenchantly focused essay that stares unblinking into the heart of darkness. The gloves are off and every word, line and paragraph hits hard. His anger is visceral, his (our) loss immeasurable and his demand for the right to space, to love, resplendently confrontational and unflinching. But the thundering voice he raises that echoes in our collective conscience finds 'home' in a Romantic/Byronic identification with nature that is...* both a real place and a metaphor for the real me that once was possible when the light still shone for me on some possible tomorrow.' *We admit to being a little in awe of Robert Kirvel, who we first published in Issue 2 (Nonfiction), because as a writer, he's in a place we'd like to be.* Culture the verbal denials I've encountered over the years and incubate for truth, and the results reveal themselves as false positives.' *When you're this good there's only room at the top.*

## Never At Home At Home

Don't say, "I don't know what you mean," when you mean something else. No one is deceived when the message is code for avoidance.

I used to socialize with dozens of people. Scores. We'd meet in the city every weekend to swap the melodies of our private lives, boogie afternoons into sunset, then breathe nocturnal aromas into dawn. We rejoiced in an illusory freedom from institutional and legal judgment, unshackled, we supposed, from the faith we'd given up to others who needed to believe in something at the expense of someone else. We were mistaken.

We were hundreds, thousands before the premature jubilation was overtaken by physical afflictions only a few survived. Several fell weekly at the outset, more than a hundred the first year. Hundreds of thousands eventually succumbed in the U.S. alone, many with only a small section of a patchwork quilt for a tombstone to commemorate second deaths. I'm talking about those who died a little at first on the inside of emotional alienation, then again from religious condemnation, quack "therapy," or plain old bigotry. You know the ones: the pasty boys who were egged in alleys or stabbed or shot in broad daylight or strung up on barbed wire; the swish or fem or shy disowned by moms and pops across Middle America; the macho men or bodies beautiful or leather guys who scoffed at narrow-mindedness only to die both inside and out during a plague witnessed by the world and reinforced by political denial because, after all, who cares about some social-sexual deviants?

If you say, “I don’t know what you mean,” or, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” or, “No one can possibly understand what others lived through then,” I hear the words as something else. Culture the verbal denials I’ve encountered over the years and incubate for truth, and the results reveal themselves as false positives. “I don’t know what you mean” might imply disagreement, as in: I don’t want to discuss it further because you’re wrong in your thinking. Or it could mean I don’t care and never will. It could mean I wasn’t there and don’t know much about it, or we live in such different worlds we’ll never understand each other. But don’t say, “I don’t know what you mean,” to suspend the possibility of dialog in dismissal.

When I say now, I mean the vogue of shrugging memory loss. When I say then, I mean how life experiences construct an individual’s truth. This is what I mean. We were Turkish or Irish or Spanish in origin, African and Australian and Asian, every flavor of devout or secular. We were mostly in our 20s and 30s, and we usually lived and worked and loved in urban locations. We loved, that is, until skin and muscle and brain tissue unexpectedly seized before withering from an affliction so righteously viral in selective desiccation that a leader of the free world at the time dared not speak its name.

Can you tell from once-flawless skin all a youth might have become? Do you know how far someone’s hands might have extended the curative power of mercy to counter injustice, had they lived? These were the days of then, them versus us, deniers against a dying breed, and each time another of us died, part of me died as well.

It’s tempting to dismiss a man who’s lost patience with now because of then, and doesn’t cotton to rationalizations. But instead of crooning a tune about job or financial insecurities in the modern era, the era of alternative truths, tell me instead what you understand about endings. While you’re at it, forget the notion there’s something in this world called karma, because there isn’t. Full stop.

What you want, of course, is for people to forgive and forget. But remember: you might not realize how much you love someone—or someone loves you in return—until the person’s consciousness vanishes on some plague-filled afternoon.

The modern-day disease-spreaders keep coming to my door now, so let me remind you. Every time I start something, there they are again. If they keep calling and knocking, I will not be responsible, so I yell at them, “Go away. I’m not at home. Nobody’s here,” but they keep knocking or ringing or popping up on television and social media. It’s not nice to label someone a disease-spreader, is it?

Everybody plans for the future, thinking about grand times ahead or just down the road. The disease-spreaders have their minds entirely on the future, with their boxed cookies and plastic speeches and good-news pamphlets preaching faith everlasting in the current currency. They look forward to a brighter tomorrow beginning tomorrow, a happy tomorrow filled with prosperity and spiritual fulfillment, or even just another tomorrow like today, starting tomorrow. What they suck at is planning for a crap tomorrow, the one with endings where everyone you ever knew and loved lies under a quilt headstone. You know, a tomorrow like the one that is actually going to happen to every one of us in the end. A tomorrow as in reality. We stink at

planning for that kind of tomorrow. Joan Didion said something like that somewhere or other, and she was right. Everybody loves beginnings—another baby and a new car with that new baby and new car smell—never thinking about the heap on which everything ends up being tossed, babies and lovers included.

Is that too bitter? Am I a fool? Is there a reason I sound angry?

You want everyone to be like you rather than to think as I think and remember what I remember. But the truth is every time I hear the righteous magazine and faith dispensers talk, I can feel my IQ plummet from atmospheric ignorance. What I hear is the same story from individuals—much like holocaust deniers—and an entire society that doesn't know enough to plan for an honest-to-god tomorrow. They're sweet though, right? The magazine and tube and cookie kids are sweet like hard candy, but with an intellectual core of denial that'll rot all the teeth in your head.

Maybe you've gathered I never believed in providence or pyramid power, in a god of vengeance and mercy, in the dichotomy of right and left hemispheres, in the gastrointestinal value of gluten-freedom or my bio-superiority. If all those things are nonsense to me, let me share instead something that's true, and then maybe you'll hear the truth in what I mean. It's about a physical place in mental space, but it's truer than anything else I ever knew.

Listen. Please.

Imagine you embark on a road trip into the Gallatin Canyon along a highway that clips the northwest corner of Yellowstone Park. Or imagine my taking that drive before the ones I knew and loved were gone, and before I even understood who I was. If you haven't been out to that Western territory of the United States, you won't understand what the country is like, and I can't do justice to the terrain by describing it in words. It's a real place you have to see for yourself and breathe in and allow the essence to penetrate the brain. The air. The pine and spruce growing there. As if everyone a person ever knew were still alive. It's a big horizon embroidered below by white-flecked streams alive with the living and echoes of the dead. Alive with the potential of who you really are as a person.

See? I can only use words here, and words can't do it justice. But let's keep trying anyway.

I looked over my shoulder while driving that road the first time one autumn afternoon, and there it was. A dirt lane leading to a place set back from the highway, and I was certain. I knew. I belonged there more than any other place. Belonging has nothing to do with ownership, by the way, nothing to do with money or ancestry or orientation. The feeling of belonging there among the trees and streams was overwhelming and never left me. It remains as powerful now and indisputable as the day I first saw the place. It's nothing like the disease-spreaders around here who want to step into my life and give it "meaning," if I would only let them in. Only the place I'm describing is real to me in a personal sense.

I'm in that pine and spruce terrain in my brain every time I think about it. It has nothing to do with a decision or time. Or, rather, it transcends time. I'm in yesterday's windstorm with the gusts scraping twigs along an outside wall of the ranch house. I'm in the way the pine and spruce

and wind call my bones and address something central in me. Something that is me. And if I can feel so enraptured by an image and feeling caught with a sideways glance, then I wonder: what else have I missed in life? Life itself? The genuine article?

I am the leaves piled in a corner the wood-rail fence makes with that ranch house. If you turn my leaves over, the damp underneath is the slight of old wounds left behind. Remember, I know something about wounds, the dead and dying. Some part of me has always been there and is there now.

Down deeper still, under the damp, lay the rot of last year, a season my better counselors tell me it's best to let go, as if letting go of feeling fertilizes the soil underneath to encourage my new growth. Just let it all go, folks try to tell me, to sprout new branches that will touch the eaves and scrape the outside wall of the ranch house in the wind for some future me standing inside to hear. A future me that was once possible. As if the place harbored curative spirits, and every time I hear the sound of wind in the branches, or image it, I am at home in the place I knew before seeing it. It is my place. The only place I ever understood for the life I wanted to live. Discovering the place was like being born while alive and given a chance at genuine life.

It's real, is what I want to say to you. It's both a real place and a metaphor for the real me that once was possible when the light still shone for me on some possible tomorrow. It's the genuine article. You don't have to like the place, my place. You don't have to approve. I'm not an estate agent trying to sell you property or a state of mind, but what you can't do is dismiss a place as wrong for someone else because it isn't right for you.

I walk up to the front door, and someone I've always known opens it wide. I'm in the past of that place with its pine and spruce climbing the vertical mountains behind the corral; I'm in the present logs and future decay that will return to nature my nature. I belong in that place in my head and heart every day of my life and with every part of my body, and discover there's a word for it. The word is authenticity. Authenticity. It's a physical place. It's an emotional place. I am that place, the me that once was before the world insisted my nature was somehow mistaken.

Now I'll tell you something else. Years later, I drove that road again, alone, longing for the place in the wild mountains, but finding it was not there. Which is the way the future lets a person down, the way time works. The way leaving a piece of yourself behind and uninhabited, along with those departed, sometimes means you can never get it back to it. If you miss such things in life, they're gone.

If you say, "I don't know what you mean; I don't know what you're talking about," I can only answer that maybe you don't know because you won't allow yourself to feel something like that. You were not there when we danced and sang, I know, and if what I'm describing now still means nothing to you, maybe you aren't really here either, now, listening to what I'm saying. Or are you listening?

Sure, I know you're supposed to like the well-intentioned among us because they're sweet and adorable, or the talking TV heads because they're so hypnotic, addictive, but that's not the story here, and neither is my rage. That's putting the fart before the horse. People come at me to

spread their evangelical nonsense I think of as disease. The good-news missionaries of condemnation come pounding on the door expecting their phony cookies and pulp-fiction chasers will nourish a satisfying tomorrow, as if they know about a tomorrow I might once have lived or the real one that arrived ahead of its time with the death of almost everyone I cared about. People want approval, and when they don't get it, they believe I'm the enemy, though I'm not the enemy. So who is really the enemy? What is the enemy? You want to blame me because I make you uncomfortable? You want to blame me because you refuse to acknowledge another person's truth? So do you like my honesty? Do you love me the way anyone deserves to be loved? Will you love me in some magical future you think will arrive spontaneously with the sunrise of a harmonious tomorrow?

Right there: that's the problem. Magical thinking about how our problems can disappear given enough time and without expending any more effort than throwing a few dollars at a cause. Thinking how it's all so much better nowadays, and the injustice and ignorance that wiped millions of souls from the planet happened way back a long time ago, and it's not like that anymore today. And it's not your fault. And you didn't do it.

On top of that, I'm the lucky one because I survived. Right? So just get over it and move on, right?

Here's what I can do. In my head even now, as late as it is, I can walk in that conceptual forest of lodgepole pine and Engelmann spruce where streams trickle down the mountain canyons and rumble past a ranch house. I breathe in air where imagination is everything, as Einstein put it once, and inside my head and body, I am that place. Genuine and whole as I might once have been and remained. Being myself.

You can decide there are two types of people in this world: the true-believers and the grumps out there, essentially the young and old, the upbeat versus cantankerous pessimists. But I say there are as many types as there are dreams and as many dreams as people who aren't dead inside, and in my head, I can return to the trees and wind and be alive again.

Now, I wait for my metaphorical tray of powdered milk and Pablum. I hear the door to my room being locked every night by thoughtful caregivers. It's the same metallic click every night to keep me safe from myself. Or so some suppose. Click. Do you hear it? It's right there in my future and in yours.

It's the same, sad click I recall from childhood. Of playground exclusion and familial denial, the click of a gate locking worshipers in the church of intolerance, into the minds of family-value voters, inside the doors of county jail cells and psychiatric wards.

I close my eyes and return to those woods and am free to realize a vision of being complete at last. Of being myself. Now, when everything and everyone else I ever knew are gone, when it's dead quiet around me and no one is banging on my skin and the phone isn't ringing and breaking news isn't blaring, I close my eyes and inhabit a terrain where I cannot live too slowly.

I live slowly then, slowly, breathing in and out a final recollection on behalf of all the ones I knew or loved who never got to live and breathe what they might have been. Instead of the anger you think you hear me casting into the air tonight, might it be a song of mourning for so many lives?

Forgive and forget, I keep hearing people say, and my answer is yes. And no. Yes and no. No, never forget. Just don't say it to me again. Don't say, "I don't know what you mean."

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

*At a relatively young age, I'd lost more friends and acquaintances than many people know over the course of a lifetime. The hybrid story, "Never At Home At Home," is principally nonfiction seasoned with surreal imagery intentionally evocative and vexing. Distressing to write and harrowing to read, the essay, rather than mere venting, is a challenge to individuals with edited memories—or, worse, ignorance—about events only a few decades ago. Surviving a tragedy that cut short the lives of an estimated 330,000 gay men in the U.S. (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/docs/factsheets/cdc-msm-508.pdf>) and 32 million humans around the globe (<https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>) also arouses in me what feels like an obligation to the silenced, and in the current political climate, a responsibility to remind our better selves about a fraught past. I want to say, "Understand, please, our recent history," especially in the context of ongoing expressions of social disapproval and partisan antagonism aimed at "those people" (immigrants, minorities, the disenfranchised, the LGBTQ cohort, and many others) who remain outside some mythical, mainstream "us." Is the essay choleric, and is acrimony warranted? Yes, on both counts. A remedy then? One avenue suggested here is to recognize individual authenticity versus its absence—often manifest as witlessness and self-deception—riling those within and beyond our immediate purview.*

#### **BIO:**

Robert D. Kirvel is a Pushcart Prize (twice) and Best of the Net nominee for fiction. Awards include the Chautauqua 2017 Editor's Prize, the 2016 Fulton Prize for the Short Story, and a 2015 ArtPrize for creative nonfiction. He has published in England, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, and Germany; in translation and anthologies; and in dozens of U.S. literary journals. His novel, *Shooting the Wire*, was published in August 2019 by Eyewear Publishing Ltd., London. Most of his literary publications are linked on <https://twitter.com/Rkirvel>.