

A BOY'S LIFE

For Matthew Shepard's killers,
what does it take to pass as a man?

By JoAnn Wypijewski

"When I think of how fragile men are," a dominatrix once said to me, "I feel so much pity. All that fear, all that self-mutilation, just to be 'men.' When I heard that those guys in Laramie took Matthew Shepard's shoes. I was so creeped out. I mean, shoes are so symbolic—'walk a mile in my shoes' and all that. Why did they take his shoes?"

From the beginning there was something too awfully iconic about the case. Matthew Shepard— young, small, gay, a college boy in the cowboy town of Laramie, Wyoming, a kid who, his father says, didn't know how to make a fist until he was thirteen—lured out of a bar by two "rednecks" ("trailer trash," "drop-outs," every tabloid term has been applied), hijacked to a lonely spot outside of town, strung up like a scarecrow on a buck fence, bludgeoned beyond recognition, and left to die without his shoes, his ring, his wallet, or the \$20 inside it. With that mix of real and fanciful detail, it has been called a trophy killing, a hate crime, a sacrifice. Press crews who had never before and have not since lingered over gruesome murders of homosexuals came out in force, reporting their brush with a bigotry so poisonous it could scarcely be imagined. County Attorney Cal Rerucha says death by injection is the just response. At the site where Shepard was murdered, in a field of prairie grass and sagebrush within eyeshot of suburban houses, a cross has been laid out in pink limestone rocks. In crotches of the killing fence, two stones have been placed; one

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THE ROMANCE OF THE WEST

bears the word "love"; the other, "forgive." The poignancy of those messages has been transmitted out and beyond via television; it is somewhat diminished if one knows that the stones were put there by a journalist, whose article about the murder for *Vanity Fair* was called "The Crucifixion of Matthew Shepard."

Torture is more easily imagined when masked in iconography but no better understood. Perhaps it all will become clear in October, when one of the accused, Aaron McKinney, goes on trial for kidnapping, aggravated robbery, and capital murder (his companion, Russell Henderson, pled guilty on April 5 and avoided death with two consecutive life terms), but it seems unlikely. "The story" passed into myth even before the trials had been set, and at this point fact, rumor, politics, protective cover, and jailhouse bragadocio are so entangled that the truth may be elusive even to the protagonists.

What is known, though somehow elided, is that in the most literal definition of the word, Matthew Shepard was not crucified. His hands were not outstretched, as has been suggested by all manner of media since October 7, 1998, when the twenty-one-year-old University of Wyoming student was discovered near death, but rather tied behind him as if in handcuffs, lashed to a pole four inches off the ground. His head propped on the lowest fence rail, his legs extending out to the east, he was lying almost flat on his back when Deputy Reggie Fluty of the Albany County Sheriff's Department found him at 6:22 P.M., eighteen hours, it's believed, after he was assaulted. It was Shepard's diminutive aspect—Fluty thought he was thirteen—and the horrid condition of his face and head, mangled

by eighteen blows from a three-pound Smith & Wesson .357 magnum, that most compelled her attention.

Shepard had encountered McKinney and Henderson, both also twenty-one, at the Fireside Bar on October 6. They exchanged words that no

A FRIEND SAYS MCKINNEY AND HENDERSON BEGAN A METH BINGE ON OCTOBER 2; WHEN THEY MET MATTHEW SHEPARD, THEY HADN'T SLEPT IN DAYS

one heard, then left the bar and got into a truck belonging to McKinney's father. There Shepard was robbed and hit repeatedly. Out by the fence came the fatal beating. Shepard must have been kicked too, because he was bruised between his legs and elsewhere. Amid the blows he cried, "Please don't." He was left alive but unconscious, as McKinney and Henderson headed for an address they'd got out of him. En route they ran into two local punks out puncturing tires, Emiliano Morales and Jeremy Herrera, and started a fight. McKinney cracked Morales's head open with the same gun he'd used on Shepard, coating the weapon with still more blood. Herrera then whacked McKinney's head with a stick. Police arrived, grabbed Henderson (he and McKinney

had run in different directions), and found the truck, the gun, Shepard's shoes and credit card. Police wouldn't put the crimes together until later, so Henderson was cited for interference with a peace officer and released. Henderson then drove to Chey-

enne with his girlfriend, Chasity Pasley, and McKinney's girlfriend, Kristen LeAnn Price (both later charged as accessories after the fact), to dispose of his bloody clothes. McKinney, dazed from the gash in his head, stayed home in bed, and Price hid Shepard's wallet in the dirty diaper of her and McKinney's infant son, Cameron. Six days later, on October 12, Shepard died.

Those are the facts as disclosed by court records and McKinney's confession. (He has pleaded not guilty.) In response, the Equality State—which enfranchised women long before anyplace else, which struck sodomy laws from the books in 1977—has disowned McKinney and Henderson

as monsters. So has the rest of the country.

And yet McKinney and Henderson appear to be young men of common prejudices, far more devastatingly human than is comfortable to consider. They acquired the gun a few days before the murder in a trade for \$100 in methamphetamine—crank, speed, crystal meth—the drug of choice among white rural youth, cheaper than cocaine and more long-lasting, more relentless in its accelerating effects, more widely used in Wyoming, per capita, than in any state in the country. McKinney, says the friend who traded him for it, desired the gun for its badass beauty—eight-inch barrel, fine tooling, "the Dirty Harry thing." The trade occurred while these three fellows and their girlfriends were on a meth binge. Before it was over they would smoke or snort maybe \$2,000 worth of the drug. By the time they met Matthew Shepard, says the friend, who saw them that day, McKinney and Henderson were on the fifth day of that binge. They had not slept, he says, since before October 2, payday, when the partying had begun.

Those unreported facts—to the extent that anything can be factually determined in Laramie these days, with everyone involved in the case under a gag order*—may tell more about the crime, more about the everyday life of hate and hurt and heterosexual culture than all the quasi-religious characterizations of Matthew's passion, death, and resurrection as patron saint of hate-crime legislation. It's just possible that Matthew Shepard didn't die because he was gay; he died because Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson are straight.

"If you're telling your feelings, you're kind of a wuss." Brent Jones, a heterosexual who went to high school with McKinney and Henderson, was guiding me through the psychic terrain of a boy's life.

"So what do you do when things hurt?"

"That's why God created whiskey, don't you think? You get drunker than a pig and hope it drains away—or you go home and cry."

"Is that true for most guys, do you think?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"So secretly you're all wusses, and you know you're wusses, but you can't let anyone know, even though you all know you know."



THE PRESS DESCENDS ON LARAMIE

* The order prohibits lawyers; witnesses; local, state, and federal law-enforcement officers; et al. from discussing the case. McKinney's friend says he was visited by black-suited agents of the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Department shortly after McKinney and Henderson were arrested, and told them this story. Before it passed into his hands, says McKinney's friend, the gun had been stolen, which is consistent with court records. Henderson's grandmother says she noticed nothing unusual about Russell when he visited her on October 5. McKinney's friend and the other drug users, ex-users, or dealers in Laramie spoke with me on condition of anonymity.

"You could say that."

"Can you talk to girls about this stuff?"

"Unless you know this is the one—like, you're going to get married, and then you're in so deep you can't help yourself—but if not, if you think she might break up with you, then no, because she might tell someone. and then it gets around, and then everyone thinks you're a wuss. And you don't want people to think you're a wuss, unless you are a wuss, and then you know you're a wuss, and then it doesn't matter."

Among the weighty files on the proceedings against McKinney and Henderson in the Albany County Courthouse is a curious reference. The state had charged, as an "aggravating factor" in the murder, that "the defendant[s] knew or should have known that the victim was suffering from a physical or mental disability." The court threw this out; Judge Jeffrey Donnell, who presided over Henderson's case, told me he assumed it referred to Shepard's size (five foot two, 105 pounds) but was legally irrelevant whatever its intent. In a sense, it is sociologically irrelevant as well whether the prosecution regarded Shepard as crippled more by sexuality or size, since by either measure he was, in the vernacular of Laramie's straight youth, a wuss.

Wussitude haunts a boy's every move. It must have haunted Aaron McKinney most of his life. McKinney, too, is a little thing—not as little as Shepard, but at about five foot six, 145 pounds, he doesn't cut a formidable figure. George Markle, who roomed with him after they both dropped out of high school, describes McKinney as having "tiny arms, a tiny, tiny chest, no definition in his body." He affected a gangsta style—droopy jeans, baggy shirt, Raiders jacket, gold chains, gold on all his fingers. He'd ape hip-hop street talk, but "he couldn't get it going if he tried." His nickname was Dopey, both for his oversized ears and for his reputation as a serious drug dealer and user. His shoulder bears a tattoo of the Disney character pouring a giant can of beer on his mother's grave, an appropriation of a common rapper's homage to a fallen brother: "Pour a forty ounce on my homey's grave."

The prosecution contends that Shepard was lured out of the bar as if on a sexual promise. County public defender Wyatt Skaggs says that neither Henderson nor McKinney ever asserted that they came on to Shepard. And in his confession, McKinney said Shepard "did not hit on or make advances toward" him and Henderson, according to Sheriff's Detective Sgt. Rob DeBree. Perhaps McKinney said something different when he came home that night and wept in the arms of Kristen Price, or perhaps, presuming homophobia to be an acceptable alibi, she thought she was helping him when she told the press that he and Henderson "just wanted to beat [Shepard]

up bad enough to teach him a lesson not to come on to straight people." But once at the Albany County Detention Center, McKinney seemed to take up the pose of fag-basher as a point of pride. At least five prisoners awaiting trial or sentencing have asked their lawyers if the things he's said to them might be leveraged to their own advantage. "Being a verry [sic] drunk homofobick [sic] I flipped out and began to pistol whip the fag with my gun," McKinney wrote in a letter to another inmate's wife. He didn't mean to kill Shepard, he wrote; he was turning to leave him, tied to the fence but still conscious, when Matthew "mouthed off to the point that I became angry enough to strike him more with my gun." Even



RUSSELL HENDERSON AND AARON MCKINNEY

then, he insists, his attitude toward homosexuals is not particularly venomous and the murder was unintentional.

McKinney's mother was a nurse; she died as a result of a botched operation when Aaron was sixteen. Markle says there was a kind of shrine to her in his house, but Aaron rarely spoke of her, and then only superficially and only when he was high: "He was always happy then. Once, on mushrooms, he said that if he would slide backward down a hill, he could see his mom in heaven." According to probate records, McKinney got \$98,268.02 in a settlement of the wrongful-death lawsuit his stepfather brought against the doctors and the hospital. "After he got the money, he had a lot of friends," Markle told me. He bought

cars and cracked them up, bought drugs and became an instant figure in town. He was engaged at one point—"she got the drugs, he got the sex; I guess it worked out for a while"—until the girl found a more attractive connection. "He wasn't a babe magnet," Brent Jones says. He might make a good first impression—he's funny, I was told, though no one could quite explain how—but he

Markle says nothing much mattered to McKinney in picking a fight, except that if he started to lose, his friends would honor the rule they had among themselves and come in to save him.

A stock media image of McKinney and Henderson in this tragedy has them counting out quarters and dimes with dirty fingers to buy a pitcher of beer at the Fireside. It is meant to indicate their distance from Shepard, who had clean hands and paid for his Heinekens with bills, and to offer some class perspective on the cheap. *They were poor, they were losers, they lived in trailers, for God's sake!* McKinney, as it happens, didn't live in a trailer, though he had when he was younger—a nice double one with his stepfather, until recently program director at KRQU radio. His natural father is a long-haul truck driver whom he was heard to call "Daddy" only a few years ago, and in Aaron's childhood the family lived on Palomino Drive in the Imperial Heights subdivision. As teenagers he and his friends would drink and get high in the field behind it—"quite the hangout," according to Markle—where McKinney had played as a boy and where he would later leave Shepard to die.

Henderson spent most of his childhood in the warmly appointed ranch house where his grandmother runs a day care and to which his late grandfather would repair after work at the post office. At the time of the murder,

Russell lived with Pasley, a UW art student, now serving fifteen to twenty-four months, in a trailer court no uglier than most in Laramie and with the same kinds of late-model cars, trucks, and four-wheel-drive vehicles parked outside, the same proportion of people pulling in and out wearing ties or nice coats or everyday workers' clothes, and probably the same type of modest but comfortable interiors as in the ones I visited. No matter, in the monumental condescension of the press, "trailer" always means failure, always connotes "trash," and, however much it's wrapped up in socioculturoeconomic froufrou, always insinuates the same thing: What can you expect from trash?

McKinney and Henderson were workers. At the end of the day they had dirty hands, just like countless working men who head to the bars at quitting time. Dirt is symbolic only if manual labor is, and manual laborers usually find their symbolism elsewhere. The pair had drunk two pitchers of beer at the Library bar before going to the Fireside; no one remembers anything about them at the Library, presumably because they paid in dollars. Maybe they resented a college boy's clean



THE FIRESIDE BAR

couldn't keep that up. Women were *bitches* and *hos*, just like other men, who might also be called *fag*, *wuss*, *queer*, *sissie*, *girly man*, *woman*, the standard straight-boy arsenal, which McKinney employed indiscriminately, says Markle, "about as much as anybody—you know, joking around—he never mentioned anything about hating gays." He talked about marrying Price, who is eighteen, but, according to more than one person who was acquainted with them, he wasn't faithful and didn't seem even to like her much.

He loves his son, I'm told. And what else? Blank. What did he talk about? Blank. What did he fear? Blank. Who is he? None of the boys can really say. Interior life is unexplored territory, even when it's their own. Exterior life, well, "Actually, when he wasn't high he was kind of a geek," says a guy who's done drugs with him since high school. "He wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. He always wanted to seem bigger, badder, and tougher than anybody," says Jones, a strongly built fellow who first noticed McKinney when the latter hit him from behind. "He usually didn't pick on anyone bigger than him. He could never do it alone, and he couldn't do it toe-to-toe."

hands and patent-leather loafers and moneyed confidence; they wouldn't have been the only people in town who do, though acquaintances ascribe no such sentiments to them. UW is a state school, the only university in Wyoming. It stands aloof from the town, but no more than usual. Poll a classroom, and about a fifth of the students are from Laramie, and half say their parents are manual workers. Shepard, originally from Casper but schooled abroad because his father is in the oil business, didn't need a job; Pasley, like most students, did. There's nothing unique here about the injuries of class. In a month at Laramie Valley Roofing, McKinney and Henderson each would gross around \$1,200, roughly \$7.50 an hour. With rent payments of \$370 and \$340, respectively, they were like a lot of people in Laramie, where the median household income is \$26,000, the average monthly rent is \$439, and the average family works two jobs, maybe more.

It's said that McKinney squandered the entire hundred grand from his mother's settlement, and in his application for a public defender he listed \$0 in assets. Before moving to his last address, he and his family briefly lived rent-free in a converted indoor stable with no shower, no stove, no refrigerator, and, in some rooms, a cloth ceiling and cloth walls. But everyone I spoke with who was openly familiar with him through drugs was skeptical about the poverty story. To finance his recreation, I was told by the guy tweaking with him in the days before the murder, McKinney would often be fronted an "eight ball" of meth (three grams, an eighth of an ounce, street price about \$300; for him, wholesale, sometimes as low as \$100), keep two grams for himself, double the amount of the remaining powder by cutting it with vitamin B, sell that, and have \$200 and enough crank to keep two people awake for practically a week before he'd even paid a cent. At one point a few years ago, according to a friend now monitored by an ankle bracelet, McKinney was buying an eight ball every few days.

Maybe he miscalculated the costs of his binge in that first week in October. A few days before Shepard would be tied to the fence, McKinney and Henderson walked into the Mini-Mart where George Markle works, and, in an agitated state, McKinney shouted that Markle owed him \$4,000 and that he needed it. Years earlier, Aaron had bought George a used Chevy S-10 low-rider truck. First it was called a gift, then a loan, then no one talked about it much, Markle says, and after the friendship broke, he didn't intend to pay anything back. That day in the Mini-Mart, Aaron threatened to kill George. He had threatened him once or twice before within the last few weeks, always with Henderson silently in tow. Markle told his boss, but neither of them thought too much of it. "I'm gonna kill you"—it was just

Aaron pretending to be big and bad. It was the way he talked; like when he first came into the Mini-Mart and, seeing George, exclaimed, "Oh, look at that—it's my favorite little bitch, my favorite little whore."

LARAMIE IS AS CONTRADICTORY AS ANYTHING LIBERATED FROM CARICATURE, BUT ITS OUTWARD IDENTITY REMAINS HITCHED TO THE COWBOY

"Things are good enough for me to stay for now," Elam Timothy, a writer, gardener, and handyman, was telling me just before we decided what his pseudonym would be. "I have a relationship, I'm out at work and to as many people as I care to be—but I'm not looking through rose-colored glasses. They're demonizing those boys so they don't have to look at themselves. Yes, this could have happened anywhere, but it didn't. Can we please look at it? That whole 'live and let live' myth. In my mind that boils down to one sentence: If I don't tell you I'm a fag, you won't beat the crap out of me."

"Have you ever been hurt or threatened here?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone who has been?"

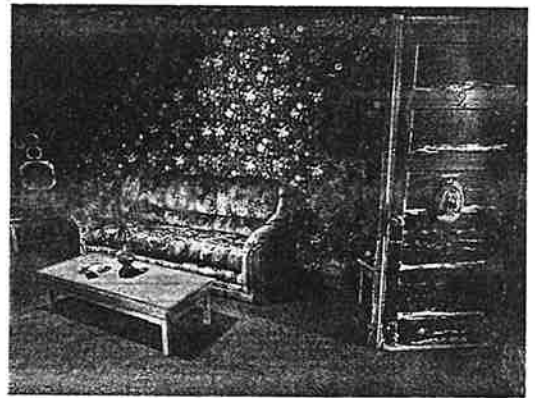
"No, but I don't know many gay men either."

"So what is it that's dangerous?"

"What's scary is just hearing people use the word 'faggot' all the time. It makes me feel like a pig at a weenie roast. Danger isn't palpable, but I keep myself in safe pockets.

I wouldn't expect to find safety in the Cowboy [bar], but Coal Creek [coffeehouse], yeah, that's safe."

Laramie was founded on sex and the railroad, in that order. Women created the region's first service industry, and soon after the town's establishment, in 1868, it was associated with some thirty saloons, gambling houses, and brothels. Before any of that, it was associated with death. Around 1817, a French Canadian trapper named Jacques LaRamie was working these parts with his mates. As the story goes, he was young and handsome, and in winter decided to take his beaver traps upstream on what is now either the Big or the Little Laramie River. In spring he failed to return, and Indians told his erstwhile



MCKINNEY'S CONVERTED STABLE APARTMENT

companions that he'd been killed by other natives and stuffed under the ice of a beaver pond. His headstone thus became the plains, a mountain range, two rivers, a fort, a county, a railroad terminal, and, ultimately, the city.

From the foothills of the Laramie Range, the high prairie where the city is situated stretches out, scored by steel tracks and pocked by late-model houses defiant of the city's already shaggy bound-

BEFORE IT BECAME THE HIGHEST STATE TO WHICH
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aries. From the right vantage point those are obscured, and all that's in sight is the plain and, to the west, the Snowy Range and what, against reason, seems like infinity. People may swoon about Wyoming's mountains and river valleys, but the power is all in the wind, which has shaped the plains like a pair of enormous hands playing in a sandbox of soft soil and red clay, massaging the earth into fine overlapping layers and fluid hollows. Such subtlety is merely the profit of aeons. Over spring break a student from the university left his truck out in an open field while the winds blew thirty, forty miles an hour; within two weeks, the windward side of the truck had been sandblasted down to bare metal.

Laramie, a pleasant place of liberal inclination and some 27,000 people, is not a railroad town anymore. Freight lines rush through but are marginal to the city's economy. It's not a sex town either, though in the history-chaired buildings abutting the rail yard along 1st Street shopkeepers will happily show off narrow cubicles in an upstairs flat, or a slotted box in a side door, where nighttime ladies deposited their earnings under the madam's gaze and key, their work organized as on a sharecrop, with ledgered debt always exceeding income. Carol Bowers, an archivist at the university's American Heritage Center, recounts a history in which the town elders seesawed between plans for eradication and regulation, usually recognizing the superior benefits of the latter. (In one nineteenth-century city record, all but \$20 out of \$240 in fines and fees collected one month came from prostitutes.) So the women were harassed, corralled, controlled by periodic raids, punished for any venture into legitimate civic life by threats to their licenses—but tolerated. "The town didn't want them to go away," Bowers says. "The town wanted them to be invisible."

A hundred years later, sex is almost totally in the closet. Only the truck stops off I-80 are worked, by mobile squads of women or by men,

who also work the rest stops. For every other unspoken desire there's The Fort, a rambling warehouse south of town that has survived Cal Rerucha's tireless efforts at suppression. There men, mostly men, stop in (all classes and tendencies, all night on weekends), nervous and chatty—about a practical joke or a bachelor party or the wife—before surveying the aisles, then scuttling to the checkout with a strap-on dildo or a Miss Perfection "port-a-pussy" or a sexual banquet of videos. A tall, lean man of the muscular outdoors type crouches before a display and comes away with the Sauna Action Pump, guaranteed to improve an erection beyond any natural capacity. Now and then one man is followed five minutes later by another, under the red light and into the video booths in back.

In the best of times, sex is playground to the imagination, the place where what is need not be what it seems, where strength and weakness swap clothes, and the thin cry, "This is who I am, this is who I dream of being—don't hurt me" seeks its voice. Laramie happens now to be associated with sex in the worst of times, sex boxed and squared in the unexamined terms of the "natural" course of things or the unexamined terms of "identity." Many in town are irritated by this association and by all the talk of hate since the murder attracted national attention. McKinney and Henderson, it's said, are "not Laramie." Before his death, Shepard was surely "not Laramie" either, if only because he took risks that other gay men in town might not have. Laramie, it's said, is not censorious about sex, homo or hetero—*We're just tight-lipped. We don't go there. We believe "live and let live"*—and it's certainly not hateful, just as most of the country is not, just as, perhaps, even McKinney and Henderson are not. If they all were, everything would be much simpler.

Hatred is like pornography—hard to define, but you know it when you see it. On the morning before Russell Henderson pleaded guilty, the Reverend Fred Phelps of Topeka, Kansas, brought his flock to the county courthouse with signs declaring GOD HATES FAGS, FAG GOD=RECTUM, PHIL 3:19, SAVE THE GERBILS. Phelps cited as his guide for most of this (the Bible has nothing to say about gerbils) such scriptural passages as Leviticus 18:22, "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination." I asked if he also subscribes to Moses' suggestion a bit further on in Leviticus 20:13, "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, . . . they shall surely be put to death." He said he thought all civil law should be based on biblical code, but "it's never going to happen. I'm a pragmatist, a visionary."

"So, if you could, though, you would execute homosexuals?"

"I wouldn't execute them. The government would execute them."

His only audience were police, press, and a ring of angels—counterprotesters dressed in white robes, their great wings sweeping up before his gaudy placards. The next day the university's student newspaper covered the day's events, running in enlarged type the observation of freshman Kristen Allen that "they have no business using the Bible verses out of context. God hates the sin but loves the sinner." On campus, where Phelps later moved his protest, onlookers expressed disgust at his message and invoked "tolerance."

Before it came to signify the highest state to which straight society could aspire, tolerance was something one had for a bad job or a bad smell or a nightmare relative who visited once a year. In its new guise, tolerance means straight people know of gay men and women, but there is no recognizable gay life, no clubs except a tiny one on campus, no bars or restaurants or bookstores flying the rainbow flag. It means the university might institute a Matthew Shepard Chair in Civil Liberties but has no antidiscrimination policy that applies to homosexuals and no employee benefit policy that extends to domestic partners.* It means the public school curriculum does not say teachers must "avoid planning curriculum promoting perversion, homosexuality, contraception, promiscuity and abortion as healthy lifestyle choices"—the policy in Lincoln County, Wyoming—but it also does not include "homosexuality" among vocabulary terms for sex-ed classes at any grade level and mentions the word only once, for eighth grade, under "Topics to be Discussed . . . particularly as they relate to [sexually transmitted diseases]." It means a father tells his lesbian daughter, "If you have to do this you should do it in the closet," and the mother tells her, "Let's just pretend I don't know, okay?" It means her brother "tries to be as supportive as he can be—and he is—but if a man hit on him, he'd beat the shit out of him. He wouldn't beat up someone for another reason, and he thinks that's an accomplishment—and it is." It means Chasity Pasley's mother won her custody battle over the charge that as a lesbian she was unfit, but her children had to call her partner "Aunt." It means if you're gay and out and attend a company party with your boyfriend, the sense in the room is "We know you're gay and that's okay, but do you have to bring your boyfriend?" It means Fred Dahl, the straight head of UW's Survey Research Center, accepts the university's expression of outrage over Shepard's

* UW president Philip Dubois told me that the university has such an antidiscrimination policy, but as of July 1999 sexual orientation was still not included as a protected category in the university's official Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action Statement approved by the trustees. Nor does it appear in the antidiscrimination provisions for student admissions. Only these formal statements of policy have the force of law, says the ACLU's Marv Johnson.

murder but tells a social work master's candidate named Shannon Bell that her project to poll Wyoming residents on their attitudes toward homosexuality might amount to harassment of straight people, and anyway, "one good rodeo season and Wyoming will be back to normal."

In a graduate-class discussion right after Shepard was found, the high-minded talk was all of tolerance as students challenged a woman who had said she abhorred violence but still. . . homosexuality, it's immoral. Amid the chatter, a cowboy who'd been silent said plainly, "The issue isn't tolerance. We don't need to learn tolerance; we need to learn love."

There may be, as the song goes, a thin line between love and hate, but, however many twists it takes, it is life's defining line. And people like



DOWNTOWN LARAMIE

Phelps are no more responsible for it than pop music is responsible for the murders at Columbine High School. What keeps that line so strong, like strands of the clothesline used to tie Matthew Shepard's wrists, are all the little things of a culture, mostly unnoticed and unremarked, like the way in which the simplest show of affection is a decision about safety, like the way in which a man entwined with a woman is the stuff of everyday commerce but a man expressing vulnerability is equivalent to a quaint notion of virginity—you save it for marriage.

"Masks are no longer as protective as they used to

be," John Scagliotti, the maker of *Before (and now After) Stonewall*, was telling me. "If you're gay, no longer can you hide, because straight people watch TV, and they see how people hide. And also this has changed straight culture, so all the little things you do might make you question whether you're straight, or straight enough. Your own suspicions are suspicious.

"It gets even more complicated now that all these things that represent maleness are very attractive to both gay and straight men. The downside of this, in a way,



THE REVEREND FRED PHELPS

is that straight male bonding, and male bonding in general, especially in rural places, is going to be a very confused thing. Already at gyms, eighteen-year-olds don't take showers anymore—or if they do, they take all their things in with them, like modest little girls. You're confused, you're eighteen, and you really like this guy; he's your best buddy, and you'd rather spend all your time with him than with this girl. And you are straight, but now you're worried too."

The Henderson trial was to have begun on the first Tuesday after Easter. At the Harvest Foursquare full-gospel church that Sunday, people wore name tags and expressed a serene camaraderie. Then they sent the children downstairs to play while the "illustrated sermon"—a dramatization of Christ's Passion and death—took place. It was a stunning performance, beginning with the Jesus character racked with sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane. The narrator said Jesus suffered like any man. Then he said, departing from the script, "Every time I see an image of a feminine Jesus, it makes my blood boil. Jesus wasn't a weakling. Jesus was a man. If Jesus was here today, he could take on any man

in this room." Later, when the Jesus character was tied to a post, flogged by two men—soldiers who took "sensual pleasure" in every fall of the whip, the narrator said—"Jesus didn't cry out for mercy . . . Jesus was a man. Jesus was a man's man." The Jesus character writhed in agony. After he stumbled offstage with the cross, and the only sounds were his moans amid the pounding of nails, the narrator described the tender caress of the hands now ripped by sharp iron. In the congregation, men as well as women were moved to weeping. By the end, they were all singing, swaying, proclaiming their weakness before the Lord.

Time was when "a man's man" could mean only one thing, and in the romance of the West, that meant cowboys. In reality, Laramie is as contradictory as anything liberated from caricature, but in symbolism its outward identity remains hitched to the cowboy. Wild Willie's Cowboy Bar anchors one corner downtown; a few feet away is The Rancher. Farther up the same street is the Ranger Lounge and Motel; down another, the legendary Buckhorn Bar, with its mirror scarred by a bullet hole, its motionless zoo of elk and deer and prong-horned antelope, bobcat and beaver and buffalo, a two-headed foal, a twinset of boar. Around the corner stands the Cowboy Saloon, with its tableau of locomotives and thundering horses, lightning storms and lassos, portraits of grand old men who'd graced the town in history (Buffalo Bill Cody) and in dreams (Clint Eastwood). A wall inside the courthouse bears a silhouette of a bronco buster, whose figure has also appeared on Wyoming license plates since 1936. The university's symbol is the rodeo rider; its sports teams, the Cowboys and Cowgirls; its paper, the *Branding Iron*; its mascot, Pistol Pete; and its recruiting slogan, "It's in our nature."

For the men of Laramie who didn't grow up on a ranch riding horses and roping cattle—that is, most of them—the cowboy cult appears to be as natural as the antlers affixed to a female elk's head hanging on a wall at the Buckhorn. It all seems to fit, until you look closer and realize that this buck is actually Bambi's mother butchered up. For those who did grow up to be cowboys, the rituals and vestments may be just as they were for their fathers and grandfathers—like going to the dance hall on a Saturday night, scrubbed and polished and wearing one's best hat and boots—but the meanings have changed, or at least got more complicated. In a different setting, the

waves of men kicking it up to "Cotton Eye Joe" at the Cowboy Saloon would be high camp, just as the beautiful, guileless cowboy explaining the rodeo to me, undulating in a pantomime of the art of bull riding, could as easily have been auditioning for a spot with The Village People.

Camp still flies under the radar of straight Laramie: heterosexuals didn't wink when the golden anniversary commemorative booklet of the university union featured a sailor flanked by two gamesome cowboys, circa the 1940s, with the caption "Come alongside cowboys . . . let me tell you a sea story . . ." But the rodeo rider doesn't need to know he's a gay icon for such things to tinge his identity, any more than he needs to know he's a Western icon. He grows up on a ranch but takes a degree in civil engineering, forsaking the land but not the culture. His children then trade in the heels and pointy toes for something else, or they affect the look but with a suspect authenticity. Their grandfathers' world is still theirs as well, but now only in nostalgia.

The cowboy was not part of Wyoming's conscious image until after he had ceased to exist in the form later to be romanticized. In 1889, the governor's appeals for statehood contained none of the heroic references advertised on the front of the Cowboy Saloon; instead, he imagined Wyoming as a magnet for industrial capital, a dream that would not be fully abandoned by state planners until 1997. As detailed by Frieda Knobloch, a UW professor of American Studies, the state's history in this regard can be read as a continual longing to be what it is not: anticipation that vast oil and mineral reserves would issue forth factory towns like those in the East; then advancement of the Wild West as a tourist attraction just as the enclosure of the open range was complete. Central to the latter project were artists from the East—Frederic Remington, Owen Wister—whose work was financed or seized upon by local promoters. By 1922 the governor was urging citizens to put on "four-gallon hats" for the benefit of Eastern experience-seekers at the state's Frontier Days celebration. In 1939, even as the Department of Commerce and Industry was lobbying investors with forecasts of a manufacturing dawn, its head man was again reminding locals to dress up as cowboys to "give our guests what they want."

Perhaps some in Laramie bridled so at the presence of the national press on the Shepard case not only out of their own defensiveness and justified outrage at reporters' arrogance—jamming the door when Henderson's grandmother declined to comment, blustering over being barred from the courtroom even though they never reserved seats, mistaking cottonwoods for oaks—but also because of some deep vibrations of that old tradition of outside gawking and self-exploitation. A heterosexual lawyer named Tony Lopez chatted with

me for a long time but nevertheless let me know, "This is home, and you're an uninvited guest."

Now in front of the small ranches on the edge of Laramie, the third vehicle might be a school bus, which the rancher drives to make \$300, \$400 a month in the off-season. No small spread survives just on cattle; in fewer than ten years the

"JESUS WAS A MAN'S MAN," SAID THE PASSION PLAY NARRATOR. "IF JESUS WAS HERE TODAY, HE COULD TAKE ON ANY MAN IN THIS ROOM"

price of a calf has fallen from well over a dollar to sixty cents a pound. The profit margin for these ranches, never fantastic, according to Brett Moline, the University Agricultural Cooperative Extension educator for Albany County, is now "squeezed so tight one financial mistake can be enough to wipe you out." Most ranch owners are in their late fifties or early sixties; younger ones have either inherited the land or are carrying so much debt from buying that they won't be in business long. Without a lot of money to live on and huge assets all tied up in land, the only way to realize the value of what they have is to sell it—usually to housing developers or to out-of-state gentility, who might pay three times the land's worth to set up what Moline calls their "ranchette."

Wyoming, with 480,000 people, still has the lowest population density in the country, and where there's space there is a kind of freedom. The state has no income tax, no motorcycle-helmet law, no law against openly carrying a gun, no open-container law on the interstates (meaning you can drink without worry unless you're drunk); there's a seat-belt law, but it's not enforced (police take \$5 off the fine for another violation—say, speeding—if you're buckled up); until last year children didn't have to go to school before the age of seven and didn't have to stay in school past the eighth grade; unless there's a weapon involved, Laramie police say they prefer wrestling a suspect to the ground to other kinds of force, and in ten years they have killed only one civilian.

"This is the last frontier," says Laramie police officer Mike Ernst, with a curl in his voice. After the university, the government is the biggest employer, and after the bars, the most striking commercial establishments are bookstores and restaurants and, near UW, the fast-food strip. On the fringes of town rise some enormous houses, and elsewhere some people have no running water or refrigeration, so the soup kitchen substitutes



"COME ALONGSIDE COWBOYS..."

peanut butter for meat in takeaway lunches in summer. Most, though, live in bungalows in town, trailers and suburban houses a bit farther out. Except for Mountain Cement and the sawmills,

IT'S EASIER TO SEE SHEPARD AS A CHILD-SAINT,
BECAUSE TO THINK OF HIM AS A MAN EVOKES
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there's little manufacturing work, mostly only retail and service jobs, maid work at the motels, short-order cooking and rig washing out at the truck stops, telemarketing for the hippie kids, and temp work from construction to computers, but none of that pays more than \$8 an hour.

McKinney and Henderson were roofers. Construction has a short season in Wyoming, intensifying even normally intense work. An eight-hour day can stretch into ten or twelve hours of fitting a shingle, banging a hammer, fitting and banging and banging bent over, on a grade, on your knees—bang, bang, bang. "I hurt a lot every day. I'm only twenty-one," Brent Jones told me. "My back shouldn't hurt." Jones works for a competing roofing company. "It's not bad if you use a

nail gun, but if you use a hammer—eight hours of that and you can't even turn a doorknob . . . You just work through the pain. Sometimes you take a bunch of Advil. You go to bed at night and just pray that when you wake up you don't hurt so much."

Sometimes you drink—"booze, the cause of and answer to all of life's problems," in Jones's crisp phrase. Drinking is a pleasure in its own way in

Laramie and a curse in all of the usual ways. Officer Ernst said that if alcohol somehow disappeared, Laramie wouldn't need three quarters of its police force. *The Boomerang's* daily police blotter is dominated by DUI and "domestic disturbance" calls, and not by coincidence. News of murder is rare, but it's ugly. In the year before Matthew Shepard was killed, fifteen-year-old Daphne Sulk was found naked in the snow, dead from seventeen stab wounds; eight-year-old Kristin Lamb, while away visiting her grandparents in the town of Powell, was kidnapped, raped, and thrown into the garbage in a duffel bag. No one calls those hate crimes. Just as six years ago no one called it a hate crime when the body of a gay UW professor, Steve Heyman, was found dumped by the side of a road in Colorado. Law enforcement and university administrators alike simply forgot that murder. After hearing of Shepard's beating,

State Senator Craig Thomas declared, "It's the most violent, barbaric thing I've ever heard of happening in Wyoming."

There are 14,869 women in Albany County, according to the 1990 census, and 1,059 extra men. Stefani Farris at the SAFE Project, a haven and advocacy center for people who've been abused or sexually assaulted, said she thought "people in this town would be spinning if they knew how many times women were beaten by a husband or boyfriend." The state recorded 163 incidents of domestic violence in the county in 1997, nine rapes, and ninety-nine aggravated assaults. In its 1997-98 report, though, SAFE records 3,958 phone calls, almost all from women, reporting battering, stalking, sexual assault, and other physical or emotional hurts, almost all committed by men. It notes 1,569 face-to-face sessions; 1,118 individuals served; 164 individuals sheltered for 2,225 total days. SAFE can't spend much time analyzing perpetrators, Farris explained. "When you see that women are being battered, their children are being abused, their pets are being killed, you see a woman who comes in and we've seen three other women before come in who were in the same situation with the same guy—it's hard to have any sympathy for what the man went through."

The court remands some batterers to the ADAM Program at the Southeast Wyoming Mental Health Center for reeducation, but the project's director, Ed Majors, says that all he can deal with is behavior. "I can't find a dime for services, [so] the deep issues are still not addressed. If you eat chocolate and use Clearasil, you're still going to have problems."

Such as?

"When it's fear or hurt, which is typically the primary emotion at work, when you can't say, 'I'm scared shitless,' most hurt and fear will come out in the only vehicle men are allowed. It comes out crooked. It looks like anger, it's expressed as anger, but it isn't."

"Here's a joke for you," an amiable guy offered: "What do you get when you play a country song backward? You get your car back, you get your dog back, you get your house back, you get your wife back . . ."

"Here's another one: You can have sex with a sheep in Wyoming, just don't tie the shepherd to the fence . . . Oh, God, now you're gonna think I'm an inbred redneck asshole."

There was no trial for Russell Henderson in the end, so what drama his story could arouse had to be fit into one early-April hearing. According to his testimony, Henderson had disagreed when McKinney suggested robbing Shepard, but when they all left the bar, McKinney said drive, and he drove. McKinney



ON THE FRINGES OF LARAMIE

said go past Wal-Mart, and he proceeded; stop the car, and he stopped; get the rope, and he got it; tie his hands, and he tied them. Henderson never hit Shepard, he said. "I told him [McKinney] to stop hitting him, that I think he's had enough." McKinney, in this account, then hit Henderson, who retreated into the truck. Finally, again McKinney said drive, and Henderson drove.

Henderson offered nothing more. How is it that Shepard left the bar with them? Why did they beat him? Why were they going to 7th Street—supposedly to rob Shepard's house—when he lived on 12th? Why did they fight with Morales and Herrera? When Henderson and Pasley and Price drove to Cheyenne to throw away the bloody clothes, why didn't they take McKinney and little Cameron with them and keep on going? Such questions have to wait for McKinney.

At the hearing Henderson looked like a man numb from combat as Cal Rerucha and Wyatt Skaggs—men whose names appear on court documents involving Henderson since childhood—went through the legal motions, as Judy Shepard told the court of Matthew's sweetness and ambition, of his mounting achievements, of the horror of his last days, and the depth of her loss; as Henderson's grandmother, Lucy Thompson, the woman who raised him, told of his own sweetness and disappointments, of his expectations for his GEDs, of the inexplicability of his actions and the breadth of her grief. When Russell told the Shepards, "There is not a moment that goes by that I don't see what happened that night," he spoke as one does of a bad dream half-remembered, hopeless to resurrect the rest. When Mrs. Shepard told him, "At times, I don't think you're worthy of an acknowledgment of your existence," he did not flinch. In a proceeding marked by sobs and tears suppressed, the only figure who flinched less was Mr. Shepard.

Henderson was transferred to the Wyoming State Penitentiary. The word around town, originating with a prison guard, was that the inmates had held an auction, or perhaps it was a lottery, for his services and those of McKinney. Prosecutor Rerucha says he expects the only time Henderson will leave the pen is as a corpse for burial. Only death would have been a harsher sentence. The tumbrels are rolling for McKinney.

It should be easier for the state to cast McKinney's trial as a contest between good and evil: to caricature Shepard as a child-saint, because to think of him as a man evokes a sexual experience no one wants to know; and to caricature McKinney as a devil-man, because to think of him as Laramie's, or anyone's, child sits harder on the conscience. In this respect, Henderson's was the more difficult case, because from the beginning he emerged as that stock character in the country's rerun violent drama—a quiet boy, kept to him-

self, "the most American kid you can get," in the words of his landlord.

Judy Shepard told *Vanity Fair*, "I believe there are people who have no souls," and others have told me they believe some people are just "born bad," but Russell Henderson was born like any child of a young mother in bad trouble—premature, sickly, poisoned by the alcohol in her blood. Cindy Dixon was nineteen when she had Russell, and, as Wyatt Skaggs remembers, "she was the sweetest, most considerate, loving person when she wasn't drinking; when she was drinking, she was abusive, obnoxious, every single adjective you could think of for an intoxicated person." On January 3, 1999, at forty, she was found dead in the



INSIDE THE FIRESIDE BAR

snow about eight and a half miles from town. Early reports had her somehow losing her way after leaving the bars on foot, in light clothing, on a night so frigid and blustery that Elam Timothy and his boyfriend turned back while driving on the road where she'd be found. The death was later determined a homicide: Dixon was bruised, her underwear torn, there was evidence of semen; and now a Florida man, Dennis Menefee, is on trial for her murder. Somehow the fact that Russell lost a mother—and Mrs. Thompson, a daughter—through another murder, a sex crime, never counted for much in all the stories about Laramie.

"I don't like my place in this town," Henderson said to an old girlfriend, Shaundra Arcuby, not long before Shepard's murder. "Part of it," she said, "had to do with his mom and what people said about her. The thing about this town is that who you are is kind of set in stone. It's not that easy to remake yourself."

Shaundra fell in love with Russell when they both were in high school (he a sophomore, she a senior) and worked at Taco Bell. She was confused about an old boyfriend, who was bullying her to

get back with him. "Do what makes you happy," Russell said. "That was the winning point with me," she recalled. "Someone's giving me an ultimatum and someone's telling me to be happy—there was no question what I'd choose." They'd hang out, watch movies; he always came to the door, spoke to her mom. He made her tapes—Pearl Jam, The Violent Femmes. They went to her

THE PROBLEM WITH HATE-CRIME LAWS IS THAT GAY PEOPLE ARE RECOGNIZED ONLY IN SUFFERING AND STRAIGHT CULTURE REMAINS UNEXAMINED

prom; friends thought they'd get married. Then she dumped him: "I was the first female in my family to graduate high school and not be pregnant," she said. "I just couldn't think of marriage. It scared me, so I ran away." Not long after, she'd get married, disastrously, and then divorce.

Most of the guys who knew McKinney in high school didn't know Henderson—"he was a little too good." He collected comic books and baseball cards, loved scouting, even beyond making Eagle Scout. He pumped gas, fiddled with an old Corvair. He played soccer—the "fag sport," as it's known. He had fantasies of being a doctor but was headed for Wyoming Technical Institute for mechanics until he was told, days before he was to celebrate high school graduation, that he wouldn't get a diploma because he'd missed a paper. He was prayerful in the Mormon tradition. About homosexuality, Lucy Thompson says, he believed "everyone has a right to their own free agency." Until he was fifteen he helped Lucy with the dialysis machine that kept his beloved grandfather alive, and watched as his life drained away. Bill Thompson never let on how he suffered. Neither did Russell. "He never ever talked about the hurt that was inside him," Lucy told me. "He'd say, 'That's okay, Grandma; don't worry, Grandma.'" She told the court, "When my husband and his grandfather passed away, so did a part of Russell."

Brent Jones remembers Henderson as "kind of an asshole," less of a troublemaker than McKinney but "his elevator didn't go to the top floor either." He had some juvie trouble. A judge once told Cindy Dixon she'd have to choose between Russell and her boyfriend. She was not in good shape that day and said, "Oh, that's easy," with an approving gesture toward the boyfriend.

It's said that over the past forty years Lucy Thompson has raised half the kids in Laramie. She is a woman of profound serenity. Russell was in his grandparents' care from his birth to the age of five, when they thought he should be in the nuclear family. Cindy was married then, with two lit-

tle girls. Three and a half years later the Thompsons again got custody. In the intervening period, Russell took a physical and emotional battering from his mother's partners. Years of police reports follow Cindy's own familiarity with violence. Once Russell told his grandparents about a harrowing beating he had watched his mother endure. Why didn't he call them? "When that happens, I just freeze, and when I do something about it, I just get retaliation," Lucy remembers him saying.

The standard description of Henderson is that "he was a follower." At work, though, he was the leader, says Joe Lemus of Laramie Valley Roofing. Both boys are nice, friendly people. Sure, they'd talk *fag, wuss, sissy*, Lemus says. "In grade school, you call people *fat, stupid*. When you get older, this is just what you say; it's like calling someone a retard." Everybody does it, even college kids (one of whom scratched KILL THEM under the title of the UW library's copy of *How to Make the World a Better Place for Gays and Lesbians*), even the straight-boy cub reporter at *The Boomerang* who helped cover the case before becoming an intern at *Rolling Stone*. According to police accounts, when McKinney and Henderson came upon Morales and Herrera, it was Henderson who called them "fucking bitches." "Why the fuck are you calling us bitches?" Morales answered, and McKinney hit him from behind. Police Commander David O'Malley testified that in questioning Henderson about the fight, Officer Flint Waters said if police found someone with a bullet they'd have more to talk to him about: "Mr. Henderson laughed and said, 'I guarantee that you wouldn't find anybody with a bullet in them.'"

Lemus says that in the period leading up to the murder Henderson was downhearted; Chasity had cheated on him. McKinney was excited; he'd just bought a gun. They were working between eight and eleven hours a day. Henderson had recently turned twenty-one and was eager to go to a bar. It was new for him, though I'm told he was not a stranger to drink and had his own sources for crank as well. When he was younger, a doctor had told him that because of the circumstances of his birth, alcohol (and presumably drugs) could affect him very badly. His grandfather asked Russell if he understood what that meant. "Deeper than you think," he answered, gesturing to his mother's photograph.

"Certain things make sense only if you're out of your mind," a knowing woman told me. "On meth, you would know what you were doing, but in that moment it doesn't matter. We used to have the rankest, most foul sex when we were on dope. Men don't get erections too well on speed, so already that's bad, but then there's the two-hour blow job, because when you start something, you just have to finish, only you can't finish because he won't get an erection and

he won't have an orgasm, and you'd really like to stop, but you just can't."

Maybe Wyatt Skaggs is right when he says "drugs were not involved in this case," or maybe he's just being lawyerly. Rumors abound about what set that night in motion—love triangles, revenge, a mob-style debt collection. Reality is usually less baroque. Matthew Shepard smoked pot and had at least tried methamphetamine; McKinney dealt drugs and used them with Henderson; they all had a mutual acquaintance who regularly carries a police scanner, whose feigned ignorance about drugs could be matched only by an extraterrestrial, and whom every drug user I met recognizes as a link in the trade. Those things are not rumors but maybe just coincidence. And maybe Skaggs is more right when he adds, "That's not to say [meth] couldn't have been used sometime before; you don't need to take it that night to feel the effects." McKinney and Henderson never were tested for drugs, but then police say that one of the beauties of meth for the user is that there's no sure test for it.

History is one long quest for relief through chemicals, more powerful substitutes for endorphins, released when you cry so hard you run out of tears. But it is difficult to imagine a more unappetizing recipe for relief than methamphetamine. It is made from ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, extracted from over-the-counter cold and asthma medicines, then cooked up with any of a variety of agents—lye, battery acid, iodine, lantern fuel, antifreeze. A former user says it tastes like fake crab "sea legs" marinated in cat piss, but its medicinal benefits, especially for its large constituency of construction workers, is that "nothing hurts anymore; you're wide awake; you seem to accomplish what you set out to accomplish. Only later do you understand that you've been up for two days"—and that, depending on how much you smoke or snort or shoot, euphoria morphs into hallucination, which morphs into paranoia, which morphs into God knows what.

According to the state's Methamphetamine Initiative, Wyoming's eighth-graders use meth at a higher rate than twelfth-graders nationwide, and among juvenile offenders in its correctional institutions in 1997 at least 50 percent had a history of meth use. Albany County is not one of the state's top three target zones, but drug sources in Laramie volunteer that meth is everywhere. Maybe McKinney is lying and maybe he's not when he says Shepard "mouthed off," prompting him to the fatal frenzy of violence, but one crank-head told me that he once almost wasted someone just for saying hi—"You're so paranoid, you think, 'Why is he saying hi?' Does he know something? Is he a cop?" And maybe all the meth users I met were lying or wrong or putting me on in saying

they immediately took the murder for a meth crime because it was all too stupid and, except for one heinous detail, all too recognizable.

None of this is a defense for what happened, but it all complicates the singular picture of hate crime. Why did they kill him? "That was the meth talking," I was told. But why did they pick on him to begin with? "Because he was a fag." So why do you think they didn't kill him because he was gay? "They were regular guys, and then they beat up the Mexicans." And, anyway, "what kind of a man beats the shit out of a wussy guy?"

Ask around for impressions of Matthew Shepard and you find as many characters as there are speakers: a charming boy, always smiling and happy; a suicidal depressive who mixed street drugs and alcohol with Effexor and Klonopin; a good listener who treated everyone with respect; "a pompous, arrogant little dick" who condescended to those who served him; a bright kid who wanted to change the world; a kid you'd swear was mentally defective; a generous person; a flasher of money; a good tipper; a lousy tipper; a sexual seeker; a naïf; a man freaked by his HIV status or at peace with it; a "counterphobic" who courted risk rather than live in fear; a boy who, his father said, "liked to compete against himself," entering races he couldn't win and swimming contests he'd finish "dead last by the length of the pool" just to prove he could do it; a boy never quite sure of his father's approval; a gay man; a faggot; a human being. Any one of those Matthew Shepards could have been set up for death; the only constant is that he'd still be dead, and McKinney and Henderson would still be responsible. Gay men are killed horribly everywhere in this country, more than thirty just since Shepard—one of them, in Richmond, Virginia, beheaded. Gay and straight, male and female, some 40,000 individuals have been murdered since Shepard; the only constant is that they are dead, and that most of their killers are straight and most of them are men.

Among those who advocate hate-crime laws, it's always the sexuality of the victim that's front and center, not the sexuality of the criminal or the everyday, undifferentiated violence he took to extremity. Among the tolerance peddlers, it's always the "lifestyle" of the gay guy, never the "lifestyle" of the straight guy or the culture of compulsory heterosexuality. Even among those who argue that the victim's sexuality is irrelevant—that Shepard died just because a robbery went bad or just because McKinney and Henderson were crazy on crank—the suggestion is that the crime is somehow less awful once ho-



EMILIANO MORALES

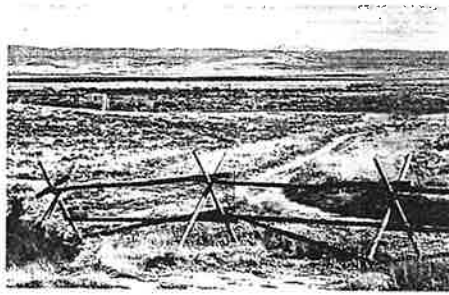
mophobia is removed, and what is brewing inside the boys bears less attention. "The news has already taken this up and blew it totally out of proportion because it involved a homosexual," McKinney's father told the press. Eighteen blows with a .357 magnum—murder happens.

A few years ago during an exercise at Laramie High School, students were asked to list the five best things about being a boy or a girl. The boys' list noted no breasts, no period, no pregnancy, and one other scourge of femininity that the guidance counselor who told me this story had been too stunned to remember. I was at the school, flipping through yearbooks,

noticing that the class of '96, Henderson's class, had identified its number two "pet peeve" as "skinny wimps who complain about jocks." The previous day, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris had killed their classmates in Littleton, Colorado, 140 miles away. Through that crime ran a thread from every

high-profile school shooting over the past two years. Springfield, Pearl, Paducah, Jonesboro, Conyers—every one of those boy murderers or would-be murderers had been taunted as a wuss, a fag, a loser, or had been rejected by a girl, or was lonely and withdrawn, or had written harrowing stories of mayhem and slaying. Two of them had killed their pets. All of it, like the meanness of the jocks some of them despised, was regarded as just boy play—Oh, Fluffy's in the trash can? Boys will be boys. And by the logic of the culture, it was just boy play, like McKinney's brawling, like Henderson's admonition out by the fence, "I think he's had enough." Only when it turned to murder did it register, and for that there's punishment, prison, the death penalty, more violence.

For any of these boys—for any boy, for that matter—what does it take to pass as a man? At Henderson's hearing, Judy Shepard memorialized the number of languages Matthew spoke, the friends he'd had and books he'd read, the countries he'd traveled, the promise life held. As she spoke the courtroom heaved with her agony. But in the story writ large, it's almost as if Matthew's death counted for more than it might have if he had been just a wuss, a fag, her son; if he had been found in a ramble, with his pants down, with a trick (as have so many murdered gay men, whose cases have never been exploited by presidents to win points or by big, polite gay groups to raise dollars); if he had been killed simply because he was tiny and weak; if anything about the murder or its aftermath had forced a consideration of sex and freedom, instead of only tolerance and hate.



THE FENCE

Since Shepard's death, the talk is all of hate-crime laws. But as Rita Addessa of the Lesbian and Gay Task Force in Philadelphia, who nevertheless supports such laws, admits, they "will have no impact whatsoever on addressing the causes of anti-gay violence." They matter only to the dead or the maimed, for even if Wyoming were to become the twenty-third state with a hate-crime law including anti-gay violence, and even if a federal law were to pass, the little Matt and Matty Shepards of America would still grow up learning their place, because for them in all but eleven states discrimination is legal, and everywhere

equality under the law is a myth. It's said that hate-crime laws symbolize a society's values. If that is true, it means gay people are recognized only in suffering, and straight people are off the hook. It means Shepard may stand for every homosexual, but McKinney and Henderson stand just for themselves. It means nothing

for life and, because its only practical function is to stiffen penalties, everything for death.

In her interview with *Vanity Fair*, Judy Shepard said she thought that her son would probably approve of the death penalty if he could know this case, if it had been his friend and not himself beaten at the fence. And in her conclusion at the hearing, she told Henderson, "My hopes for you are simple. I hope you never experience a day or night without feeling the terror, the humiliation, the helplessness, the hopelessness my son felt that night." Not just that night. As a gay man in America, Shepard must have sensed all of those things just around the corner, and not just in violence, not just in blood. Looking back on Henderson's biography, and on McKinney's, I wonder if, in different measure, they aren't already too well acquainted with such things; if perhaps the injuries of terror and humiliation aren't already too well spread around in this season of punishment and revenge.

"If a guy at a bar made some kind of overture to you, what would you do?"

"It depends on who's around. If I'm with a girl, I'd be worried about what she thinks, because, as I said, everything a man does is in some way connected to a woman, whether he wants to admit it or not. Do I look queer? Will she tell other girls?"

"If my friends were around and they'd laugh and shit, I might have to threaten him."

"If I'm alone and he just wants to buy me a beer, then okay, I'm straight, you're gay—hey, you can buy me a beer." ■