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## HOW TO LOVE A POZ MAN

*for J.R.*

Scientists will tell you several things: First, they'll say that we vary in the way we respond to outside stimuli. (They'll be thinking of how we respond to virus.) They'll say, *Some stave off the virus for a very long time; others succumb to it right away.* Say, *Better to begin HAART treatment now,* to the man in the corner who cannot fall asleep. Say, *Better to hold off on treatment so that you have options in the future,* to the man who still drives himself to work each day. Scientists will tell you several things about a poz man's response to outside stimuli.

(They'll be thinking, of course, of how he responds to virus.)

What they will not tell you, and what they will not be thinking, is that the man who shivers from the cold, thin river of ice that flows through his veins knows more than anyone else how to make love. They will not tell you that he has learned out of lacking what it means to fully receive. That each infected and dying cell that now makes up his tired, deteriorating body — from the soft, wet pillow of his hungry lip to the perfect mound of flesh just below his belly — each individual cell has learned not to turn itself away from the warmth of another man. That after an endless string of exile he has learned to respond to whatever outside stimuli offer the slightest asylum.

When you touch him — especially at the soft curve of the shoulder where hair often refuses to grow — his skin will flutter like a featherless bird in the palm of your unsuspecting hand. You may even notice the tiny bumps flowing from his shoulder to

the side of his torso, spilling onto his hip and down the inside of his leg. *I cannot begin to describe how good that feels*, he may say when you trace the path with your fingers.

All you will do is touch him.

This is how a poz man responds to outside stimuli.

And when the skin that quivers just beneath your fingertips begins to feel as though it is going to explode or retreat — you won't know which — you will stroke it like a tender wound because it will seem the natural thing to do. And as you stroke it like a tender wound because it will seem the natural thing to do, his eyes will roll back into their sockets. And you will want to say, *I am here*. Want to say, *Your skin has a soul all its own*. And if you, too, are poz, you will want to say, *It's hard to tell where I end and where you begin*. But you say nothing because words have no place in this most holy of sanctuaries, and instead, you allow your fingertips to find those remote places where words only intrude.

And as his eyes roll back into their sockets, they will trigger that thing within his brain that tells his head to lean all the way back as if you are bathing him with your presence. And as his eyes roll back into their sockets, his mouth will open ever so slightly, and a breath too faint to hear will escape into the silent ether and beckon you to kiss him.

And you will.

And the kiss will begin with lip against lip, and your heart will race just short of seizure. Lip against lip and you will want to burst out of your skin. Lip against lip and

the walls around you will develop their rhythm. Their own private heartbeat. Lip opening lip and tongue against impatient, unquenchable tongue.

And scientists will not tell you what happens next, so there is no way for you to know what to do when his body invites you to enter him the way a city too long silent suddenly invites sound. You think, *All this wonder in the palm of my hand.* Think, *He is as vast as an open field.* Think, *To be inside him is to meld with all his beauty and all his history and all his joy and all his pain.*

The intensity grows, and you think only of melding.

So you cover his mouth with your hand as you enter him because the unspoken rule has already established itself: words only intrude. And as you enter him, he will touch the soft curve of your shoulder where hair often refuses to grow, and your skin will flutter like a featherless bird in the palm of his hand. And tiny bumps will flow from your shoulder to the side of your torso, spilling onto your hip and down the inside of your leg. And you will want to say, *I am here.* Want to say, *Our skin has a soul all its own.* Want to say, *It's hard to tell where I end and where you begin.* And your eyes will roll back into their sockets, and your head will lean back as if he is bathing you with his presence, and your mouth will open ever so slightly, and a breath too faint to hear will escape into the silent ether.