



**ASH GRAY**  
**PROCLAMATION**  
**STORY**  
**DENNIS COOPER**

**"A DISQUIETING GENIUS."—VANITY FAIR**

# THE ASH GRAY PROCLAMATION

SHORT STORY

DENNIS COOPER



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## THE ASH GRAY PROCLAMATION





*Mackerel lives in a lower-class suburb of Pawheen, Arkansas. He's thirteen years old and wears his dirty hair long. He wanted to be an architect when he grew up. Then he got stoned yesterday and paid a psychic to tell him the truth. According to the spirits, he'll be dead from a drug overdose within forty-eight hours. Having been molested by half the town's male population, Mackerel is something of a pragmatist. So he's embraced an early death with a young teen's impatience. At the moment, he sits on his bike finessing dope off some sixteen-year-old junkie named Josh who lifts weights and has a trendy short haircut.*

JOSH (*impatiently*): If you want my advice, cut your vocal cords out. It's a simple operation. Otherwise you're so awesome, it's scary.

MACKEREL: Thanks, but I'm looking for dope.

JOSH (*darkly*): Thank my uncle. You don't even want to know.

MACKEREL: Know what?

JOSH: That we're gay boyfriends, you idiot. I don't know why we moved out here from LA. You're all retarded.

MACKEREL: Thank him for what?!

*Mackerel kicks one of his bike pedals angrily and it spins. Josh watches the pedal revolve until his eyes are wide with staring.*

MACKEREL: I'm smart enough to know you're just like everyone else in this stupid town who wants my ass, but I don't care anymore.

JOSH (*vacantly*): If you want to ask me something, do it now, because I think I'm hypnotized.

*Mackerel snaps his fingers in Josh's blank face.*

MACKEREL: Okay, do you want my ass or not?

JOSH: No, my uncle does. And he doesn't want it. He wants me to want it. I mean he wants me to have it first. So it's a trial run. But he's the one who has a thing for you. And he's not really my uncle. So, no, not technically.

MACKEREL: You lost me. But that's cool.

JOSH: He wants to be a cannibal. You should hear him talk about me. I'm a junkie, or I'd leave him.

MACKEREL: It's weird, but I saw that happening in a dream. I think I'm psychic.

JOSH: I dream all the time. Heroin's great.

MACKEREL (*angrily*): Then give me some. Jesus.

JOSH: I need to buy a gun.

*Mackerel climbs off his bike and starts undoing his belt. One of his ankles accidentally hits the spinning pedal, which stops it dead.*

JOSH: Oh, shit. I was just hypnotized, wasn't I?

MACKEREL: Here, do it and tell your boyfriend about me. Anything you want.

*Mackerel lays his bike down on the sidewalk, which requires him to bend so far over it pulls his baggy jeans tight.*

JOSH: God, you have, like, no ass.

MACKEREL: Hey, I'm fucking thirteen. What do you expect?

JOSH: No, I mean I finally get the whole pedophile thing. Wow, it's addictive.

*Ten minutes later, Mackerel is in an uncomfortable squat in some nearby bushes, and Josh is on his hands and knees sniffing around in Mackerel's crack like some dog.*

MACKEREL: Dude, hey, gay boy. You're obsessed. But don't stop.

JOSH: It's the illegality.

MACKEREL: And what else?

JOSH: That your ass is so nowhere. It's so flimsy and warm it's like an optical illusion. God, listen to me.

MACKEREL: I love it when you breathe out.

JOSH: Having sex with a thirteen-year-old. Who'd have thought? It's like I finally know myself.

MACKEREL: You mean you know me. Not to be egomaniacal.

JOSH: So you're an anarchist. That's hot too.

MACKEREL: I try. But I'm only thirteen, so it's all just a theory.

JOSH: You're God. I just figured it out.

MACKEREL: Maybe to you. I mean I wish.

JOSH: Seriously. You have to smell you. Use your fingers.

*Mackerel dips a finger in his ass, then pulls it out and gives the tip a very tentative sniff.*

MACKEREL: Hm.

JOSH: What did I tell you?

MACKEREL: I am God, aren't I? Weird.

JOSH: Yeah, well, just don't tell anyone. Otherwise, I'll never get laid.

MACKEREL: It smells like every other ass in the world, only much, much better. That's a guess.

JOSH: Well, duh. Being gay is the truth. You ought to try it. Oh, shit, I'm going to come.

MACKEREL: Knock yourself out. Oh, shit, me too.

*Fifteen minutes later, Mackerel's lower legs have started aching, so he's on his hands and knees. Josh has gotten hard again, and alternates between rimming Mackerel and probing his ethereal ass with a finger.*

MACKEREL: Just give me some heroin. What's your problem?

JOSH: You are.

MACKEREL: That's why I don't care if I die. If one more guy does this to me, I'm going to freak. My blood pressure's insane.

JOSH: You should charge.

MACKEREL: I do. Money's not my problem. Beauty is. It's weird. I used to be no one for years.

JOSH: If you can hold out until you're middle-aged, you'll be no one again. You should see my quote-unquote uncle.

MACKEREL: Thanks, but death calls. That sounded more ominous than it feels.

JOSH: I would have paid you a hundred thousand dollars to do this. But I'm horny so don't quote me.

MACKEREL: That would have worked.

JOSH: I mean I would have if I had it. Maybe my quote-unquote uncle has it. He certainly acts like he's rich. He bought me from the straight world in so many words.

MACKEREL: What do you guys do in bed? Not that I care.

JOSH: This. Only I'm you, and he's every guy who's ever done this to you, if you catch my drift. He also fistfucks me. And he pretends to cook me in the fireplace, and then pretends to carve me into steaks and eats them. I guess they're steaks.

They're invisible, so how would I know?

MACKEREL: What do you mean by fistfuck?

JOSH: What do you mean by what do I mean? It's self-explanatory. Why do you care?

MACKEREL: Because it keeps coming up in conversation. Well, not conversation, because I never say anything back. It must be a fad.

JOSH: I love you.

MACKEREL: Yeah, that word keeps coming up too.

JOSH: I want to protect you from the world, and give you anything you want. I can't believe it.

MACKEREL: Ditto. I mean everyone says that too.

*Ten minutes later, Josh is finally bored of sex, and the two boys are sitting side by side on some grass.*

JOSH (*mournfully*): I'm no one now. I've gone from being you to being whoever.

MACKEREL: I'll be dead in a couple of days, if that helps. Besides, I make everyone depressed. Being God sucks.

JOSH: Being the ex-God sucks worse. I should just let my boyfriend eat me. Who cares anymore?

MACKEREL (*impatiently*): Tell me more about me. God commands you.

JOSH: Well, this is more about me than it is about you, but I'll be happy when you're dead and unattractive.

MACKEREL: That's about me.

JOSH: Then there you go.

MACKEREL: You just need to have sex with somebody who'll never ever have me no matter how much they beg. And I know just the guy, unless you're racist. He's from Bin Laden-ville.

JOSH: Like I care. Like who does it to me ever has an identity.

MACKEREL: I hear that.

JOSH: Is he cute? Not that I care what guys look like.

MACKEREL: I'm a racist. So you tell me.

JOSH: Bin Laden's cute.

*Mackerel grabs his stomach and gags.*

MACKEREL: Then he's cute. God, ugh, that's disgusting. I'm going to throw up.

*About an hour later, Mackerel, Josh, and the aforementioned psychic are sitting in a circle on an old Persian rug in the latter's little storefront. He's just finished reading Josh's tarot cards. Since the psychic is a Middle Easterner, it feels realistic.*

JOSH (*to the psychic*): Quit staring at my crotch.

PSYCHIC: Crotch smotch.

MACKEREL (*to the psychic*): He's freaked out. He needs more heroin.

PSYCHIC: I don't care.

MACKEREL (*to Josh*): Reality isn't reality to a psychic. I'm pretending he's a painting.

JOSH: I've never seen a painting. That's like paint on something flat that looks exactly like a picture, right? Like I care.



MACKEREL: Not really. It's better. It's even more real in a weird way. Like *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* on pause, but more serene.

*Josh thinks about that until he seems satisfied.*

JOSH (*to the psychic*): Okay, we're cool if you can channel my ugly, middle-aged boyfriend. 'Cos he's my problem.

*Hearing that, the psychic shuts his eyes, bows his head, and becomes a kind of human speakerphone.*

PSYCHIC (*in a gay-sounding voice*): I want to eat you. Literally.

MACKEREL (*to the psychic*): I think my buddy knows that, but he wants to know the reason.

JOSH: When you're on heroin, you can calm down just like this.

*He indicates how relaxed his whole body seems all of a sudden.*

JOSH: Being a junkie is awesome.

MACKEREL (*to the psychic*): Can a thirteen-year-old be gay? I've always wondered.

PSYCHIC (*in a gay-sounding voice*): Oh my God, yes. Just let me eat my boyfriend, and we'll talk.

MACKEREL (*to Josh*): Now you ask him something.

*Josh sits there thinking angrily for a minute.*

JOSH: Okay, if you eat me, what will happen? I mean on a universal level. I don't mean the temporary things like pain.

PSYCHIC (*in a gay-sounding voice*): This is nice. It's like we're going to a couple's counselor.

JOSH (*to Mackerel*): See, that's why I love my boyfriend. I need a father.

MACKEREL: Me too. It's weird.

PSYCHIC (*in a gay-sounding voice*): If I eat you, your life will have more implications. You won't just be hot and sixteen and a junkie. They'll write a book about you, or two or three books. People will always want to know why some gay guy would eat you.

*Josh laughs delightedly.*

JOSH (*to Mackerel*): That's so him.

*Just then the psychic's head lifts and his beady eyes reopen. Mackerel and Josh look at him suspiciously.*

PSYCHIC (*dazedly*): It's just erased time for me. But I don't care if you believe me or not.

MACKEREL (*to Josh*): We'd better pay him and go. I know him. But I'll say no more.

PSYCHIC (*to Josh*): Before I moved here from Afghanistan, I saw your ass in a dream.

JOSH: That's . . . nice?

*The psychic whips his tunic off over his head and tosses it aside. His body is fleshy, bordering on obese, but shows signs of having been very well built at one time.*

JOSH: Afghanistan is where heroin comes from, right?

PSYCHIC: Yeah, why?

MACKEREL (*to the psychic*): He's a junkie. We told you that when you were in that trance. But I'll say no more.

PSYCHIC: You know what's saddest about the world since 9/11? Even sadder than your dead and our dead?

JOSH: If it's not about heroin, I don't care. Well, heroin or my boyfriend. Fuck, I wish I understood why we love, don't you? I mean we humans. I would have been a movie star by now. That was my old goal.

PSYCHIC: You're sexy when you're thoughtful.

JOSH: Pshaw. But that's sweet.

PSYCHIC: You would have been a whore. You'll be one anyway. That's foretold by that card over there. I just tell it like it is. I can't care about your feelings. You want some heroin? I could use some too.

JOSH: Sure. I don't care about my boyfriend when I'm loaded.

*The psychic pulls a packet of yellowy quote-unquote dope out of his discarded tunic.*

PSYCHIC: Not to put too fine a point on it, but the thing about the 9/11 bullshit? It wasn't Bin Laden. It wasn't even Al Qaeda.

JOSH: I know. It was our hearts.

PSYCHIC (*with irritation*): Somebody should murder you.

JOSH: Heroin is murder.

*The psychic tosses Josh the quote-unquote dope, then appears to lose his preternatural Islamic-style mystery and cool.*

PSYCHIC (*angrily*): No, really murder you. I mean as soon as possible. Like now, hint hint. If we were in Afghanistan, everyone would want to murder you. You wouldn't last a day. Your stupid American morality is why we hate you and want to live here and hate living here. But you need psychics.

JOSH: You're good.

PSYCHIC: I'm not that good. I'm just ambitious. But you call that terrorism.

JOSH: You think I don't understand you, but I can. Guys have pulled every kind of crap to get my ass. The murder thing is really, really old.

PSYCHIC: Then what did I just say? Either one of you boys feel free to answer, because I'd love to know what you think you know.

JOSH: Then read my mind. Or read his mind. Yeah, read his. I already know what I'm thinking.

*The psychic glances meaningfully at Mackerel.*

PSYCHIC: I can only read the future. And Mackerel doesn't have one. But he and I have been through this already.

JOSH: Okay, then how does his future not happen? If you're so fucking brilliant.

PSYCHIC: Do that dope. Learn by example.

JOSH: That's a thought. But still . . .

PSYCHIC: Okay, you think I'm attracted to you, right? I make you think that. It's an Afghan thing. That's how we bombed your fucking country. There's your proof.

*Josh studies the psychic for a second, then laughs, and starts pouring the quote-unquote dope out on this little mirror he always carries around in his pocket just in case.*

JOSH: You're good. I mean you're really, really good. Okay, you win. What are you into?

PSYCHIC: I'm into you not knowing what to expect. Okay, I'm into rimming and fistfucking. But do that dope first. I like my whores brain-dead.

*Josh is already dividing the quote-unquote dope into lines with this razor blade he also carries with him.*

JOSH (*distractedly*): Sounds good. I mean whatever you said.

PSYCHIC: In Afghanistan, there's very famous canyon called Khakistarikhan. It's the deepest canyon in all the world. When I'm through with you, I'm going to enter your ass in the Khakistarikhan look-alike contest. It's a big event in Islam, and you'll definitely win.

JOSH (to Mackerel): If you'd ever been fistfucked, you'd be so turned on right now.

MACKEREL: No, I wouldn't.

PSYCHIC (to Mackerel): You should develop your gift. Let me have sex with your dead buddy here. Then I'll lend you a book.

MACKEREL: According to you, I won't have time to read it.

PSYCHIC: That's true, but don't make me laugh. I'll lose my focus. Here, junkie. Use this capitalist prop.

*He hands Josh a hundred dollar bill. Josh rolls the bill into a straw, then leans over and snorts up all the quote-unquote dope.*

JOSH: Tell me more about this canyon. I mean more about me.

PSYCHIC: Once a year, a huge prehistoric creature that lives deep in the canyon comes to the surface and does a little dance. He looks exactly like my forearm.

JOSH: Whatever that means. Wow, this is killer heroin. I mean literally. I can feel the legend.

*Josh has started to look too relaxed to be around a Middle Easterner in this political climate.*

MACKEREL (to Josh): Don't you see what he's doing? This is how the whole 9/11 bullshit happened. He just told you that himself.

PSYCHIC (to Mackerel): He's beyond you. Besides, you love it.

MACKEREL: That could be true. I'd have to think about it.

PSYCHIC (*to Mackerel*): Don't you realize it yet? You're the one who wants a sixteen-year-old corpse. I'm just a nice guy.

MACKEREL: You're wrong.

*He points down at the bulge in his blue jeans.*

MACKEREL: This hard-on is bullshit. I just have this whole thing about overdosing on heroin. You started it. Sex is just like whatever. Dying is sex to me.

PSYCHIC: You're too good for this world. As opposed to that corpse or impending corpse over there. You knew him. So you tell me. Dead or not dead?

*Mackerel glances at Josh and sees an ugly whitish color that has to mean death's in the mix, then starts rubbing his crotch to help counteract the unsexiness of his moral dilemma.*

MACKEREL (*somberly*): He's history. We're like historians now.

PSYCHIC: Now I'll tell you the truth. I'm not just a psychic. I'm an Al Qaeda operative. He's my mission. It's all about semantics. Do you want to hear the story? It'll curl your toes.

MACKEREL: They already are. Maybe I'm psychic, because I already know what you're going to say.

PSYCHIC: I'm listening.

MACKEREL: If I tell you, you'll lose your hard-on. But you're a stalker. How's that for proof?

PSYCHIC: I love him. That's where our cultural differences get in the way. In my culture, this is love if you're gay. We're not fancy about it. You think we live in caves because we like to live in caves? It's a metaphor. We live together in caves until we find our own caves and fly away. I searched your country coast to coast, and this junkie's ass is mine. Wait'll you see it.

MACKEREL: Like you've seen it.

PSYCHIC: I didn't have to. That's just your literal American thinking. Don't even try to understand it.

MACKEREL: You're big on words and concepts. If I were gay, I'd say God is sex, and seducing straight boys like me is the prayer. Josh told me his boyfriend had to rob a bank to make him gay. He said before then he was just another guy who couldn't make the football team and turned into a stoner. Maybe he was lying, I don't know. The past isn't my thing. So I question your story. How's that for being psychic?

PSYCHIC: Maybe if I knew myself better, I'd agree. Your freedoms are intimidating. How's that for honesty?

MACKEREL: No offense. All I'm saying is your quest is nothing special. You and him are just porn. Death is sex. I mean my death, not his.

PSYCHIC: So I should murder you too? I'm confused.

MACKEREL: No, I'm just saying we should film it. Let's say, hypothetically, I film you doing gay stuff to him. Then we upload the video onto a Web site, and charge guys to watch. They jack off and imagine they're you and all that. Then at the end of the tape we put a little text that says, "Oh, by the way, the boy you just saw getting fucked and et cetera was dead, ha



ha ha. You're a necrophiliac. Busted." It might be like flying a plane into the World Trade Center, except a lot more profitable for us.

*The psychic scrunches up his face in concentration for a moment.*

PSYCHIC (*laughing*): I wonder who would win in a debate, Bin Laden or you? I'll always wonder that.

MACKEREL: You really need to chill on the Bin Laden thing. I mean if you guys over there in Afghanistan really want to be like the West.

PSYCHIC: I sort of wish he were alive. I mean the junkie, not Bin Laden. Don't get your hopes up. I just mean I wish he knew how much his ass will change the world. But I'm into S&M, so fuck him.

MACKEREL: Not to disappoint you, but his ass is kind of hairy. Not that I've seen it. You could shave it, I guess. We do that a lot over here.

PSYCHIC (*angrily*): That's so typically nihilistic of your culture.

MACKEREL: Here, I'll show you. It's not a trick. You could do it too, for future reference.

*Mackerel tugs on one of the legs of Josh's jeans until there's a naked foot of calf, and rubs one finger gently through its modest thicket of blondish-brown hairs.*

MACKEREL: See that? That's how you know.

PSYCHIC: I don't believe you. You're just superstitious. I know all about superstition. When you're poor and live in the desert you think all kinds of crazy shit.

MACKEREL: You want to bet? You'll lose, though.

PSYCHIC (*laughing*): Sometimes I forget you're only thirteen years old. Sure, I'll bet. What's the wager?

MACKEREL: Okay, if it's hairy, there's no God. And if it's smooth, there is.

PSYCHIC: How about if it's smooth, you can rim for a second. It had better be. In Afghanistan, it's a sea of hairy asses. That's why we're all pedophiles.

MACKEREL: Maybe I'm wrong, but with these calves, it would be a miracle. Anyway, to us a hairy sixteen-year-old ass is exotic. I've never even seen one.

PSYCHIC: Wait, what's the bet again?

MACKEREL: If I'm right, you'll give me enough of that heroin to kill me, and if I'm wrong, there's no God. But let's just do this fucking thing and move on to something else that we agree on like my future.

*They lay Josh on his back, grab his blue jeans by the belt loops and yank them down over his knees, dragging a pair of jockey shorts along with them. Then they roll him over.*

MACKEREL: Okay, that's weird. It's not only smooth. It's also perfectly shaped, if one knows anything about physics. I wasn't just wrong. I'm also gay, or gay for him, or gay for it. I don't know about him yet.

PSYCHIC: Stop apologizing and pray.

*He kneels down, spreads Josh's cheeks, and starts licking and chewing dead ass crazily like he's a lion and it's attached to some gazelle.*

MACKEREL: FYI, we call that rimming in the States because we know God is bullshit. But don't stop.

PSYCHIC: That's strange. We call this praying in Afghanistan because we know God is shit. Let me clarify. His shit. Or rather guys who look like him's shit. You'd qualify.

MACKEREL: That's your fucked-up trip. I'm still at the being-rimmed stage. Shit's for grown-ups.

PSYCHIC: Did you ever know this boy Steve? Blond, nineteen, quit school, converted to Islam, joined the Taliban, blah blah blah?

MACKEREL: Why would I? Unless he tried to turn me on to pot once. Read my mind, but keep rimming him too. Can you do that? We can.

*The psychic shuts his eyes and concentrates.*

PSYCHIC: That's him. Now read mine.

*Mackerel shuts his eyes and concentrates.*

MACKEREL: Jesus, I'm so gay. That's Steve Rosenberg, all right. What a great fucking ass. It makes mine seem like the Titanic.

PSYCHIC: Steve's ass even turned the great Bin Laden gay for an hour. Don't be so hard on yourself. In Afghanistan, Steve's ass is a national icon.

MACKEREL: And I could have had him. I'm an idiot. Tell me everything about Steve's ass, but keep rimming the dead guy.

PSYCHIC: In Afghanistan, when you want to give a cook the highest compliment there is, you use a phrase. I can't translate it. But it's something like, "Thank you for letting Steve sit on my face." Don't quote me.

MACKEREL: Your thoughts are terrorism.

PSYCHIC: Well, this junkie's ass makes Steve's ass taste irrelevant. And it's already cold. Imagine if I hadn't overdosed him. I'm such a rush-to-judgment type.

MACKEREL: Fine, Jesus, then scooch over a little.

*He kneels beside the psychic, and starts rimming Josh too. His technique is a lot more romantic.*

MACKEREL: Can you believe I've never done this?

PSYCHIC: No.

MACKEREL: I wonder how I'd rate? I mean if my ass were this ass, and you were me or whatever.

PSYCHIC: Some things are too beautiful to know. That's why I've never read Proust.

MACKEREL: So how was Steve compared to Proust?

PSYCHIC: I can only speculate. I'll just say that this writer friend of mine who rimmed Steve is called the Proust of Afghanistan

by our literary establishment, such as it is. Before my friend had Steve, he wrote thrillers.

MACKEREL: I want to be rimmed. I mean again. I mean by Bin Laden or you.

PSYCHIC: Like I said.

MACKEREL: You and Steve seem like you were really good friends. But I'm gay so I don't care about friendship anymore. It's lame. Rimming is the truth. Hold his asscrack wider open so I can really eat his hole.

*The psychic spreads the asscheeks helpfully and leans back to observe.*

PSYCHIC: I could watch you do that all day.

MACKEREL: Me too, if I could.

PSYCHIC: By the way, this is jihad, if you care. You guys thought it was those planes. If Bin Laden is astral projecting himself into my body right this second—and if he isn't dead, he is—he's seriously digging what we're doing. I'm so going to heaven.

MACKEREL: That's debatable.

PSYCHIC: No, it's not. Anyway, it's been a second.

*He knocks Mackerel out of the way, and goes down hard on Josh's ass.*

MACKEREL (*angrily*): Friends don't do that. So we aren't friends. I don't know what to call this, though. We like categories over here.

PSYCHIC: So do we, but our categories are gigantic.

MACKEREL: See, we respect death too much. That's the only category that's gigantic over here. We're not like you.

PSYCHIC: So now you know.

*He starts eating Josh out even more hungrily than before. The ass starts shaking and rocking from side to side and inflating and deflating like lungs.*

MACKEREL: I'm bored.

PSYCHIC: I don't know that term.

MACKEREL: Boredom is what we call knowledge over here. The idea is that you never quite quote-unquote know, you just stop caring if you quote-unquote know. That's when you know.

PSYCHIC: Sounds interesting.

*He lifts his head up for a moment and looks sincerely at Mackerel.*

PSYCHIC: I mean that. You're a beautiful kid. I'm just—

MACKEREL: I know. I have to get out of here anyway. I've got a date with that wannabe cannibal guy. I just wanted to see you fistfuck him. It's so notorious.

PSYCHIC: I'll page you.

MACKEREL: Yeah, if I'm not food by then.

*He crosses his fingers.*

PSYCHIC: Page me when you're food. If I don't page you first. Or put paging me in your will. I'm just saying I care about you.

MACKEREL (*angrily*): Then give me some heroin. Jesus Christ, what does it fucking take?

*A half hour later, Mackerel is sitting cross-legged on some grass in the town's little central park talking directly to you readers. He still isn't stoned, and there's a vibe of desperation in his voice.*

MACKEREL (*dourly*): Hey, you want the cutest piece of ass you've ever had in your lives? I mean cutest for you, not for me. I happen to hate my good looks in a complicated way. Anyway, I'll trade you.

YOU: Thanks for spending time with us. You're God, et cetera, and we love your stupid Arkansas accent. Meaning yes.

MACKEREL: I even scream with an Arkansas accent. You'll love that too.

YOU: What's the trade? We're so damned horny.

MACKEREL: Don't rush me. I'm not like Josh. I need to get to know things before I do them.

YOU: At least take off your shirt.

MACKEREL: There's a trick to being me. It's called "who the fuck are you to ask?" When I'm shirtless, you'll know it.

YOU: Then make us hard.

MACKEREL: You already are. All it takes is my face. I think my haircut helps too. Long hair's back. But I guess when you're a pedophile, any kid is porn. Correct me if I'm wrong.

YOU: What do you like to do in bed? We mean what is “fuck” to you?

MACKEREL: Shooting heroin. Next?

YOU: Junkies are so boring. If you weren’t thirteen, we wouldn’t be here. We’d be in Thailand.

MACKEREL (*laughing*): Next. This is awesome. I was never loved when I was straight. So I’m drunk on your gayness. If you weren’t here, I’d be in school or prison.

YOU: The world’s a bar when we’re with you. If you were old enough to be officially gay, you’d realize that’s gay for “we love you.” A thirteen-year-old skinny blond boy drunk in an Arkansas gay bar, Jesus. Let’s play truth or dare.

MACKEREL: Cool. I like you so far. Okay, you earned it.

*He whips off his T-shirt, and hurls it away.*

YOU: Truth. By the way, you have the world’s most perfect little ashtrays . . . we mean nipples.

MACKEREL: Okay, do you have any heroin? And before you say that’s cheating, Kant says truth lies in the question one asks in pursuit of the truth. Actually, Buddha said that too. So now you know me. Oh, and thanks for the compliment, you liars. Dare.

YOU: We dare you to explain your intellect. You’re thirteen. You quit school at eleven. Your foster parents chained you to a bunk bed at night. You’re dyslexic. You’re cute. So how the hell do you do it?

MACKEREL: I’m like a parrot. Literally, it’s a serious condi-



tion. Parrot syndrome. Look it up. Plus I'm psychic and you're not. Truth.

YOU: Okay, we have enough heroin in our pockets to kill you a hundred times over. And clean works.

MACKEREL: Duh.

*He points to his temple.*

MACKEREL: I'm a psychic, you remember? But don't you wish this were a loaded gun?

YOU (*thoughtfully*): Hm.

MACKEREL: I don't like the sound of that.

YOU: Us neither. Even thirteen-year-olds get old apparently. Who'd have thought?

MACKEREL: Then give me all your heroin. God, I hate fags. We're all manipulative and shit. You have fifteen seconds to hand it over.

*He looks at his watch.*

YOU: And we can eat you out?

MACKEREL: Yes.

YOU: And fistfuck you? Bondage, torture, videotape it, kill you when we're done with you?

MACKEREL: Yes, yes, yes. Jesus Christ, are you deaf?

*Mackerel takes all your heroin and works, then runs away without keeping his part of the bargain. Because you exist in the rational*

*world, you have to watch his perfect ass fade away into the background and form a disconsolate circle jerk. The sky over Arkansas picks up on your vibes and grows silvery dark like one-way glass. On the other side of it, God's jerking off. The hicks think weather abnormalities are a sign that Armageddon has arrived and decide to rape their kids before they die. Mackerel rides his bike through streets filled with children's lustful screams. He eventually stops at Josh's boyfriend's house and falls into your trap. You're on the phone with Josh's boyfriend when Mackerel rings his front doorbell, so you let Mackerel go on one condition. Josh's boyfriend is short, ugly, but has clearly spent time in a gym, so he's hot to other gay guys.*

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND (*startled*): Hey, I know you. Or maybe I wish I knew you. I don't know if you're gay, but crystal meth will do that.

MACKEREL: I just turned gay a few minutes ago, so don't ask me. Gee, Josh said you were even uglier, not that I care.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: I get uglier during sex. But thank God for what you see. Guess how old I am? Seriously, take a guess.

MACKEREL: Head-wise, I'd say, oh, mid-fifties, and body-wise, oh . . . late thirties tops. We gay guys have it all figured out, don't we?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Being gay myself, it's impossible to say. One hears tales, though. My neighbor's super ugly, unless you like them fat and straight.

MACKEREL: I love everyone equally. Thank the shitload of heroin somewhere in your house. If it wasn't there, you'd be

alone. Oh, your boyfriend's dead, by the way. I forgot. I'm the new guy.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND (*thoughtfully*): Okay, here's being gay in a nutshell. I should reject you out of grief, thereby proving gay love is an authentic force for good. But the fact of the matter is every gay piece of meat is just a sketch for the next piece of meat, though you're just unbelievably cute, bitch. Did I already say that?

MACKEREL: I'm definitely it, dude. The buck stops here. Well, more specifically, here.

*He gives his ass a playful slap.*

MACKEREL: And, even more specifically, after heroin's in my system, if you're catching my drift.

*Josh's boyfriend immediately pulls a big packet of nice looking dope out of his pocket.*

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Deal. I love hicks.

MACKEREL: So I heard.

*Josh's boyfriend holds out the packet, then seems to have a realization of some sort, and pulls it back.*

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Wait, did you say Josh is dead? Let me guess, or did you already tell me?

MACKEREL (*impatiently*): Okay, fine. You know that guy Bin

Laden? I'm answering your question with a riddle. It's an old straight person trick from my childhood.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Sure, he's that famous person.

MACKEREL: Okay, then what do you think of the trendy idea that all Americans died on 9/11? You know, that all of that shit with the planes proved we're all the same whatever in God's overall concept of whatever.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: I'm into anything trendy. Just look around my living room. In fact, come on in. Where are my manners?

MACKEREL: On one condition.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Deal. I mean what is it? Forgive the sleazy old chicken hawk in me. He'd go to prison for however many life terms to get it on with a thirteen-year-old ass, I mean your thirteen-year-old ass. That's a gay compliment. Enjoy.

MACKEREL: The condition is that we travel to Pakistan together. On your credit cards, of course. There's a cute traitor guy over there I need to see. Long story. That's part one, and—this'll appeal to you—part two, I can get to Bin Laden. Check this out. So I overdose on heroin, right? I'm happy. Bin Laden rims my corpse. He's happy. You film it. Put the camera on a tripod, walk into the frame, and murder him with your bare fucking hands. Then turn off the camera and eat me. Everyone's happy, and gay guys rule the world. It's a no-brainer.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Are you psychic? I make snuff films for a living. Duh, right? That's how I paid for this gay upper-middle-class lifestyle you see before you. Wait, Josh told you I made snuff. Of course. You're not a psychic at all. I'm confused.

MACKEREL: Hunh. If I'd been gay a little longer, I'd say the real gay dilemma is that no amount of working out daily in a gym can make a guy your age interesting to someone my age. The mind goes. It's just a sad fact. I'm so not in the mood anymore. But yeah, I'm psychic.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Then Pakistan it is. On one condition.

MACKEREL: It'd better involve dope.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: I'll pack my things, and—oh, it does—you strip and strike a nice doggie pose on my bed. I may be gay, but I'm not stupid. Well, not that stupid.

MACKEREL: Blahdiblahdiblah I mean deal.

*An hour later, a very sore-assed Mackerel cracks the psychic's door and clears his throat. Josh's buff, elderly boyfriend is right behind him carrying their suitcases.*

MACKEREL: Are you decent? I guess that's a relative term in your case.

PSYCHIC (*anxiously*): Who's there?

MACKEREL: God and a gay guy. Why, who's there?

PSYCHIC: Me, Allah's prying eyes, and some half-eaten teen whore. Wait, did you say God?

MACKEREL: And a gay guy, yeah. Coming in.

*They enter the storefront. The psychic is sitting on the floor in front of Josh's dead body. He's holding a large, bloody knife, and Josh's once so perfect ass is no more, thanks to the psychic-turned-*

*cannibal's terrorist attacks. Josh's boyfriend leans over, looking around in the mini-ground zero.*

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Josh? Is that your truth?

MACKEREL (*to the psychic*): That's a cue to do your thing.

*The psychic shuts his eyes, and appears to go into a mystical trance.*

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): What do you want, babe? I'm kind of busy. Being eaten is like getting fistfucked by the Colossus of Rhodes, only better.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: I told you.

*He sets the suitcases down and reaches into the gore, then rips a chunk loose. He studies it carefully.*

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): What do you want to know? I know everything there is to know now.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: How do you taste?

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): Like blood. That's too easy. You want to know how the world ends? You don't, trust me. It's so not sexy. It's so not gay.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Does it have something to do with the gravitational pull of the dying sun?

*He pops the chunk into his mouth and starts chewing.*

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): Exactly. Boring.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: No offense, baby, but we saw that together on the Discovery Channel. By the way, yum.

MACKEREL: I have a question. Where's Bin Laden?

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): You! Hold on a second. First of all, seeing isn't knowing, babe. There's a huge metaphysical difference, it turns out. Now you, you little boyfriend-stealing white-trash bitch. You're supposed to be dead. I've been hanging out waiting for you. Cross your ass over here.

MACKEREL: Make me. No, seriously, where's Bin Laden? Don't make me unconjure you.

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): Kandahar. Satisfied?

MACKEREL: No.

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): Okay, ask my temporary form where Rakhid's Video is. Bin Laden's in the basement. Hey, you want to know how you die?

MACKEREL: As a hero. Unlike you.

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): Tsk tsk tsk. Tell him, babe.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Tell him what, babe? Oh, right. You've been had. Chalk one up for us patient gay Capricorns.

MACKEREL: I'm not into astrology.

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): Fact, my boyfriend quote-unquote drives you to the airport. Fact, he makes a detour to pick something up at our house. Fact, the guys you stole that dope from are hiding inside. Fact, they rape and torture and whatever you for two days straight, then inject you

with enough dope to kill Shaquille O'Neal, then rape your corpse for another two days. Right, babe?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Pretty much. Well, rape in the broadest sense. If it's ever been called gay sex, it's in your future.

MACKEREL (*smugly*): A hero's still a hero. Arkansas boy's dream to save the world from Bin Laden crushed by evil pedophile ring. Americans love that shit.

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): Yeah, until they do the autopsy and find enough sperm in your ass to start a small third world country. We'll see how heroic you are after they drag your whorish, drugged-out lifestyle through the tabloids.

MACKEREL: Well, at least I have an ass. At least my ass isn't digested. At least my ass isn't some low-end Al Qaeda water boy's Taco fucking Bell. Say something, gay guy. Defend me. What kind of sugar daddy are you?

*Josh's boyfriend stops ripping out pieces of the ass and popping them into his mouth.*

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Look, Josh. Realism, okay? I'm gay, you're dead, he's thirteen years old, you saw his ass, what do you expect? Is death like Alzheimer's or something?

PSYCHIC (*in a sixteen-year-old's voice*): Forget it. So how do I taste anyway? Honestly.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Like blood. Not that I'm complaining.

*Mackerel was resigned to his fate as the world's most extremely murdered boy until they reached Josh's boyfriend's front door.*



*Now he's taken a nervous step backward, and his face is clouded over with thinking.*

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: What now? Your death has so much baggage.

MACKEREL (*ominously*): I feel them. I don't mean psychically. I mean whatchacallit, that humanistic word.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Go somewhere more specific with "them" first. I'm no humanist. And when you're gay, "them" just means straight. So define "them," and quickly.

*He looks at his watch.*

MACKEREL: The former me's. Cute boys.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: You mean like old what's-his-name, my ex?

MACKEREL: For instance.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: So you feel like a blip? Like it's cool I'm so cute to one older rich gay guy and all, but it's not like he's Barry Diller? 'Cos that was old what's-his-name's beef, if memory serves.

MACKEREL: Empathically. That's the word I was looking for.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Break it down.

MACKEREL: Love without sex.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Whoa. Just hold on a minute. What the hell are you saying? This is so early Edmund White. You're far too young to remember him. He wrote novels. Do you know what novels are?

MACKEREL: Was Edmund White like Proust? Please say yes.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Yes. Not that I've read Proust. Like all gay guys, I haven't read a novel since 1994.

MACKEREL: I'm too good for you. What does it mean?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: It means you're the ultimate twink. That's why we all keep rimming you. You're God. Enjoy.

MACKEREL: But you don't fistfuck God.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Says who?

MACKEREL: The Bible.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: You don't have a Bible yet. You have to die first. I promise you it'll be Proustian, whatever that means. I'll buy a thesaurus, whatever that is. I'll put in lots and lots of sex so gay guys will buy it. I'll make you look like whomever you want. Name it.

MACKEREL: Okay, who's the cutest boy in the world?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: You got it.

*He raises his voice such that the tweaking, soon-to-be gay murderers inside his house will hear every word distinctly.*

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Guys, cutest boy in the world. What's your guess?

*Thousands of muffled, gay-sounding voices yell names enthusiastically at the same exact moment.*

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: One at a time. On second thought, pick a leader.

MACKEREL: They don't deserve me. This is super depressing.

MUFFLED GAY-SOUNDING VOICE: Okay, we've got your results. But they're too close to call. How about we just narrow it down, and give you a choice? Any of them will do. You can't lose.

MACKEREL: Agreed. By the way, who are you, leader guy, so I'll know who's the top?

MUFFLED GAY-SOUNDING VOICE: Me? Carl's my name. I'll tell you what. Here's who I used to be, because I'm just a forty-ish, ugly, gay, gym-going dreg who watches too much porn now. But I used to be the slightly queeny but cute enough to make up for it blond boy who hung around in West Hollywood back in the '80s, if you remember that?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: He's thirteen, dope. But I remember you. It's me, Lawrence, the old but muscular enough to make up for it guy. Ring a bell?

MUFFLED GAY-SOUNDING VOICE: Ding, yeah. How's it hanging?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: It's hanging, dude.

MUFFLED GAY-SOUNDING VOICE: God bless the past, right?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: You said it.

MUFFLED GAY-SOUNDING VOICE: Anyway, according to our poll, the cutest boys in the world are Taylor Hanson circa "MMMBop," duh. Aaron Carter at any age, under any circumstances, duh. Devon Sawa circa that TV movie called something like *Tornado*. Aaron Carter. Nick Carter before he got chunky. Leonardo DiCaprio pre-*The Beach*. And did I say Aaron Carter? If not, Aaron Carter.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Tough choice.

MACKEREL: Who's the first one he said again?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Taylor Hanson circa "MMMBop."

MACKEREL: Him.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND (*yelling*): He chose early Taylor Hanson. How hot is that?

MUFFLED GAY-SOUNDING VOICE: Shit. Fine, we're so horny and fucked up on crystal meth that we'll deal with the fact that he isn't Aaron Carter.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND (*to Mackerel, whispering*): Pick Aaron Carter.

MACKEREL: Why?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Why?! Am I losing my mind?

MACKEREL: You mean that "Aaron's Party" dork?

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: Bingo.

MACKEREL (*mournfully*): Him then. But your pettiness is giving me pause.

*Behind Josh's boyfriend's front door, the muffled good news spreads and muffled zippers start unzipping.*

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: So any last words? I mean before you just start saying ouch and all that?

MACKEREL: Yeah, actually. Let history record that a boy who only wanted to serve humanity by serving himself was sidetracked by the jihad that homoeroticism has unleashed upon the cute. My intellect could have saved us, had we known me, but my ass was too great a distraction, albeit for quite understandable reasons. That's it, I guess. Oh, and

a secret. I was just a straight boy who liked being rimmed and told older gay guys he was gay because his girlfriends were so prissy. I don't deserve to die gay, therefore. Think about it. After you've thought about it, talk to me through a psychic of your choice, and I'll tell you the truth of life. Then blow yourselves up in a crowded place. See if I care. Oh, and anarchy rules.

JOSH'S BOYFRIEND: You have a point. But you're so fucking cute.

MACKEREL (*sourly*): Let's just do it, okay?

*He puts his hand on the doorknob.*

MACKEREL: But thanks. I am, aren't I? Tell the world.

## About the Author

**DENNIS COOPER** is the author of the George Miles Cycle, an interconnected sequence of five novels that includes *Closer*, *Frisk*, *Try*, *Guide*, and *Period*. His post-George Miles Cycle novels include *My Loose Thread*, *The Sluts*, which won France's Prix Sade and the 2005 Lambda Literary Award for Best Men's Fiction, and his most recent work, the highly acclaimed *God, Jr.* He divides his time between Los Angeles and Paris.

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