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TEENS | ADULTS | INDIVIDUALS | COUPLES

Amazon Trail: Verbal Arrows

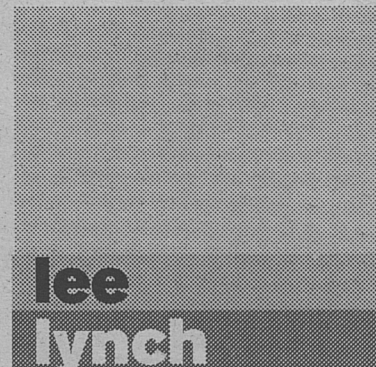
I am a butch, I take the verbal
arrows straight to my heart.
Forty-three years after coming
out I am still a walking target for
abuse. Aren't I too old to have to
suffer these ignorant young fools?

Or old ones, like that fool
in the white house. The fool that
about 50 percent of American vot-
ers support. I don't need statistics
to tell me that's the 50 percent that
still fears and hates me because I
am queer. It's not over yet.
Ousting the fools from the hill will
help, legions of us marching for
our rights will help, insisting on
living freely and openly will keep
us stronger and more healthy, but
as long as this country's leaders
are having a field day dismantling
democracy, there will be homo-
phobes, anti-Semites, racists and
bigots of every stripe unabashedly
encouraging their young to tor-
ment anyone different from them-
selves.

Why didn't I just cross
the street and say to the kids who
were harassing me, "Did you want
to say something to me? 'Cause I
have something to say to you. I
have never hurt you. Let's learn to
live together." That might have
stopped their foul tongues,
momentarily halted the words they
learned from their elders.

I didn't because it never
even occurred to me. My head is
still somewhere back in the 1950s
when the word queer was whis-
pered, was only an insult.

I have a mindset that
expects castigation. I spent so
many years dreading the taunts,
the blows, the busts, that there is a
track of fear worn deep in my psy-
che right between the track where
my defiance resides and the track
of optimism. My first thought is
about how soon I can sell my
home, my beloved sanctuary. My
second, that the permission's been
given from on high, vilification of
gay people is being encouraged
again — not only by the social con-
servatives in power, but by ven-
omous religious backlash. Some
Episcopal men in skirts would
rather start a new church than have
a gay bishop. The Catholic head
honchos, perhaps to distract from
their child abuse scandals, are
preaching against gay marriage.
The message gets to me in the
form of these wisecracks that grow



louder and lewder over the
months.

My third thought is that
these are disenfranchised
teenagers. There's obviously not a
lot of money and English is a sec-
ond language to them. Should this
make a difference? Sure, it should
make them more sensitive to peo-

ple who share their caste of Other.
But it doesn't work that way;
instead, it makes me more sympa-
thetic to them. I rage, I cry, I
understand.

What I'd hoped for here
in the quirky, old part of town, was
some anonymity, but I don't dress
anonymously, I don't walk anony-
mously, I don't write anonymously.
Even gray-haired, when I'm
supposed to have reached blessed
invisibility, they notice the butch
walk, my companions. Do I bring
it on myself, hugging my lover
hello or goodbye in broad day-
light? Do I bring it on myself,
walking with my short-haired
friend? What do I have to do to

live my life in safety? Go straight?
Fat chance.

Here comes my friend
now, come to walk, just walk in
peace — until the taunts begin. I
will, of course, do what the anti-
gay Episcopalians and the staunch-
ly moral Catholics insist is right, I
will turn the other cheek. It's all I
know to do, all I've ever done
even before I knew I was gay and
was pelted with words whose
meaning I didn't understand. I
keep on keeping on, walking with
my head high, trying to find the
positive in all this. I bless them
through gritted teeth. I breathe in
all the light I can absorb and thank
the goddess for giving me the
strength to keep this up these 43
years. I breathe out peace and ask
the universe to help my abusers to

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dismantling democracy,
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love, not hate. I shrug off the ver-
bal arrows and turn the corner,
where I rant to my also-wounded
friend.

This war has been raging
against us forever. Damn, it hurts.
Within a few minutes, though —
and until next time — we're laugh-
ing. After all, we're the lucky ones
— we get to be gay. ▼

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Lynch is the author of eleven
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