



A Pushcart in the Hand is Worth Two Stints as Editor

Hugh Coyle's poem "Love or Nothing" has been chosen to appear in the annual *Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses*. The anthology series, which has been running for more than two decades, is recognized as a consistently outstanding collection of current American literature.

The list of Pushcart authors is long and impressive. The knowledge that his name will be added to this group has Coyle awestruck. "The list contains all kinds of touchstones for me, from early icons like Italo Calvino to more contemporary influences on my work like Mark Doty and Charles Baxter."

Coyle has twice served as the editor of *Out in the Mountains*. A 1983 graduate of Middlebury College, he has also attended the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop and the University of Montana. *Magnetism*, his novel in progress, garnered him the James Fellowship from the Heekin Foundation, and his work has been published in *Christopher Street*, *The Boston Review*, *The Green Mountains Review*, *Vermont Magazine*, *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, and *Bay Windows*. He currently serves on the admissions board for the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and has participated in the Bread Loaf School of English for 12 years.

Despite his upcoming move to New York City, where he will be further developing his association with the writing world, Coyle plans to return to

Vermont often and dreams of settling here again some day. "However," he states, "I would like to make it clear that if and when I do, I have no intention of being editor of *OITM* a third time! At least not yet."

Comments on the Prize-winning Poem From the Poet

"There are so many aspects of my current life in that poem, even though it has all been very much transformed in the creative process.

"To be honest, the idea began on a walk to work, which takes me past a nearby cemetery in which there is a cluster of tombstones that look just like stone phalluses. There was symbolism there, to be sure, but I wanted to push it further — to take it beyond the realm of the significant and place it into the world of the relevant. I commonly pass by a deer as well on my way to work, and that provided a nice counterpoint to the image. So the poem began as a kind of meditation on the two images, and when I imagined someone else contemplating similar things, the main character in the poem was born.

"The poem concerns this man, who has had HIV for the past 15 years and suffered some rather devastating illnesses in that time. Now he lives in subsidized housing with two other HIV+ men, both of whom are living well with the new drug cocktails. A fourth room in the house is empty, a symbol of the changing face of HIV and AIDS.

They call the room "hope," but it's up on the second floor of the house, and the main character is pretty much confined by his wheelchair to the first floor.

"The choice to write the poem in the first person was both a risk and a challenge. I wanted to be able to speak freely and clearly at the end about love and other matters of the spirit, and in particular about the possibility of life after death. It's always a risk to do that in poetry, because there's the possibility of melodrama and sentiment creeping in. The challenge is to let the character speak openly and honestly, and hopefully in a seemingly undirected manner. It has to come naturally and organically from the character, not just from the poet.

"The poem itself evolved through several conversations with other poets last summer up at Bread Loaf, where I work at both the School of English and the Writers' Conference. I decided to read the piece at the staff reading at the Writers' Conference, and that's when the director, Michael Collier, first heard it. A month later, I read the poem to my friend Paul Harris, whom I had met through the on-line writers, group Q!Ink. He liked it enough to send it on to David Waggoner, editor of *Art and Understanding* (A&U) magazine, and I subsequently learned that they had accepted and published the piece in November of last year. A few months later, I received word that Michael Collier had nominated the piece for a Pushcart Award.

"I'm incredibly grateful to the editors of the Pushcart Press for including the poem in the upcoming anthology. It gives the poem a much longer life, and a chance to speak to a much larger audience. I'm hopeful that it will also fit into some sort of historical context that years from now, people may look back to that anthology and continue to gain some insight into the spiritual lives of gay men and the role that

AIDS has played in that ongoing development.

"In the end, I guess I'm happiest that the spirit of the poem *has* lived on beyond its initial publication, and that it can continue to speak its many thoughts and emotions into the future. For me, that's what writing is all about — sending a creative idea into cultural circulation and seeing what kind of effects it can have. I'm overjoyed that "Love or Nothing" will continue on in such distinguished company, and I'm hopeful that its inclusion in the anthology will bring renewed attention to the changing yet still-lasting effects of the AIDS pandemic on the gay community.

"With that in mind, would I call my writing activism? I suppose so. Is it political? Probably. But those aren't the only choices available to us,

and they're not exclusive of other descriptive terms, particularly in the arts community.

"More than anything, I consider "Love or Nothing" to be a spiritual statement, and that's why the title of the poem is rather bold and forthright. People who have read and heard the poem sometimes have different opinions about its ultimate meaning, and I think and feel different things myself whenever I go back to it myself. That's a good sign. It tells me that the work is evocative, that it's alive somehow. If it can prove itself on those terms with other readers as well — whether they're straight or gay, living with AIDS or uninfected — so much the better. ▼

The winning poem, "Love or Nothing," is featured in its entirety at right.

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