

REPORTORIAL

BY

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**THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

I met them young and frightened.
It was San Francisco in the '80s.
In the Castro, the last bitter Irish bar
held out against their gayness,
and boys who had survived
a father's belt, boots to the ribs,
bottles smashed against their skulls,
showed a different kind of bruising,
smacked purple by a cancer
that spoiled their handsome faces.
Some seemed baffled
by the microbes in their brains.
I came to them as a reporter,
and they'd offer up their stories
with a cup of coffee I would sip
to show them their saliva did not
scare me. I remember one—
his army jacket hung on a frame
that had carried twice the weight.
Now he was a hanger for his coat.
We talked in a cafeteria, and then
he stood and hugged me too hard
for a stranger. He was a tall man
in his twenties who needed me
to know he was not a ghost yet, and
clung as if I were the raft to save him.
Or as if... and I'm still sorry, sorry
I imagined, face pressed against
rough cloth and the sharpness
of his shoulder, he almost hoped
to give me his disease. A reason
to remember how he felt.