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Two Worlds

by Lev Raphael

Home

I grew up in upper Manhattan in the shadow of a skinny, strong, athletic older brother whose energy and good looks made me feel chunkier than I really was—and generally inferior.

He also seemed to have a swarm of friends while I had very few. And I always would rather spend an afternoon, hell, a whole day, immersed in a book like *The Three Musketeers* than exposing my awkwardness by "going out to play," words that chilled and even scared me. Why put my failings on display?

In the opening of Dumas's classic adventure novel, the author spends a lot of time describing D'Artagnan's ridiculous-looking horse and it's what first hooked me as a kid. I identified with that object of public mockery,

I had flat feet, bad teeth, and dreaded gym period because it invariably seemed to blare my faults and insecurities like a newspaper headline screaming disaster in bolded capital letters. All the other boys seemed so deft and self-assured. And the whole enterprise often didn't make sense to me. Why the hell would I ever need to climb a rope to anywhere? I wasn't Tarzan or even a distant cousin of his.

My world, as limited as it might be, made more sense: I was an early reader, wrote fiction and poetry starting in second grade, and was in love with the way a book could fold me in its comforting arms and whisk me off to a realm where I was free of shame.

Museum

On Sundays when my family often went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art because entrance was free, I wandered dazed and transfixed through the galleries of Greek and Roman statues, their gleaming white perfection welcomed and even elevated me. I didn't have the words to describe what I felt as a kid aware of some deep unnamable difference, not yet, but their luminous beauty opened a door to other times, other realms, other dreams. Thanks to those statues, I fell in love with books of popular Ancient History, and wandering from one divine being or emperor to another, I felt free.

I'm not sure why, but these large, light-filled galleries tended to be empty, or almost empty compared to more popular parts of the vast museum which was often as noisy as Penn Station, and so I never felt crowded or rushed.

I didn't know it at the time, but those silent survivors of chaotic centuries were healing my wounds, offering hope and exhilaration--because I would someday be

writing about them, about art and museums at home and abroad, about finding peace in a storm of uncertainty, about *transformation*. About being queer.

Their eyes were blind, but they saw into my aching soul and gave me hope as I studied every line of their faces, every fold of a toga.

Their cool, gleaming white surfaces built up my inner life and strength no matter what I looked or felt like—and the gap between the two itself would become a subject as I slowly learned how to turn the world into words. My words.

Lev Raphael is the author of 27 books in genres from memoir to mystery and has seen his work translated into 15 languages. A former Detroit Free Press book reviewer and guest assistant professor of creative writing at Michigan State University, he coaches, mentors, and edits writers at writewithoutborders.com. You can follow him on Twitter at @LevRaphael and Instagram at levraphael22.