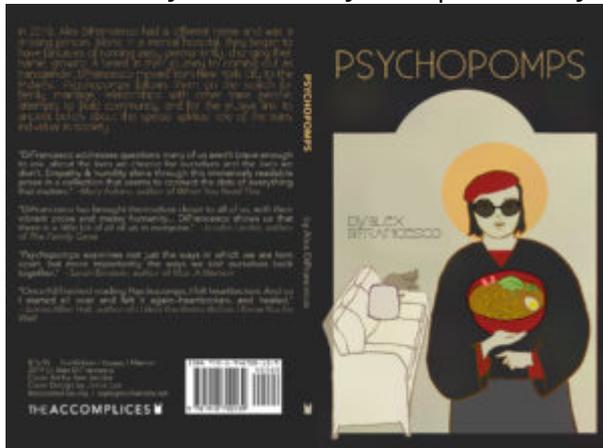


# We're All Constantly Becoming: Alex DiFrancesco On Looking Outward and Inward, Safety Nets, and PSYCHOPOMPS

written by Andrew Byrds | January 30, 2019



[PSYCHOPOMPS](#) releases on February 19th from Civil Coping Mechanisms, and is now available for pre-order.

**A//Byrds:** In the first essay of your collection, you extol on and also lament the Herbert Selby Jr novel LAST EXIT TO BROOKLYN, very specifically/eponymously on the transgender character Georgette. You mention how the death of this character had a profound effect initially due for literary reasons, but eventually for its perspective on identity in your own life. It's a staggering introduction to what is quickly becoming one of the most heartbreaking collections I've read, and it's raising a lot of questions within the first five pages. So I'm wondering, do you believe that the potential death of one's identity acts as an impetus in transcending the body and allowing for someone completely new to arise? Do you believe people change, or that we carry a sense of identity from birth, be it nature or nurture?

**AF:** I think both of these things are right. I think, in a personal sense, for me to become who I am now, I had to really let go of many things that made me who I was. Unfortunately for me, a lot of this came in the form of people who had perception of me that didn't allow for me to become who I needed to be. This happens to more people beyond just trans people – think of romantic love, and how with some forms of it, you can hit a point where you either grow together, or you have to let go of the other person so you can keep growing. We're all constantly becoming, and trans people may take that in a different direction in some ways, but in others, it's just deeply human to reform, to regenerate, to become someone new at multiple stages of your life.

At the same time, there's still this part of me that's who I always was. I knew I was trans when I was five years old. I trusted the people around me

more than myself to tell me who I was for much of my life, and it was to my own detriment. So, in many ways, there was a period in between when I tried to be someone that was not really me, but this person was also entirely me. A sadder, less authentic or true version of me, but still me. We all maybe carry those doppelgangers, too, whether we like to admit it or not, whether we're trans or not. In the case of someone who is in the closet most of their life, like I was, I maybe think an analogy is the person you are when you're with your best friend versus the person you have to be to much of the rest of the world – only being stuck in the second mode all the time with no reprieve, and thinking maybe that's who you really are.

**AB:** We start heavy and then gradually segue into talking about what dogs are the cutest, I can promise that bookend.

To an extent I believe that all our lives we are essentially the same person, but gradually add more layers to our physical and metaphysical selves. There's beauty in the complexity of human nature, paradoxically it can fuck things up fast. It's an old question, yeah, do people ever change? Our identities seem to be in a constant state of fluctuation, and I mean that more so as we come to better understand ourselves more than having no idea who we are. And clearly it's a theme your book sets, but it also delves into the concept of suffering for your art.

Is there a difference between turning your suffering into art vs. suffering for your art?

**AF:** I don't know if people ever change, really. I have a different haircut, clothes I like more, a chest binder, and shinier men's dress shoes. I've worked really hard to get a handle on things I think are undesirable traits for someone who's masc-identified, which I got away with a lot easier as a woman. I mean, I think there's also a thing that happens with people who suffer trauma (which segues into your second question here a bit), where you have to unlearn the things that helped you survive so you can start living well and thriving instead of getting by. So yeah, that and the better shoes – those are my best changes.

There is absolutely a difference between turning your suffering into art and suffering *for* your art. The latter is contrived, and it fails you after a while. You can't play the same one note over and over and expect it to stay beautiful. Making your life a mess for the sake of art at the expense of yourself is a trope I don't get down with in terms of being an artist. However, if you happen to lead a life that's full of suffering (I'm not sure many lives don't have a lot of suffering?), not of your own devising, but it's what comes to you because that's life – yeah. Make that shit beautiful as often and as quick as you can.

**AB:** You reference music a lot in your writing, including a piece which makes immense use of break-up albums as a source of inspiration, not necessarily for the emotional support but as a springboard for honesty in writing. From past conversations we've had via Twitter, I understand Nick Cave seems to be important in your own creative sojourns. When did you first start exploring his works?

**AF:** It's definitely no secret I adore Nick Cave's work. I first picked up one of his albums when I was 22 and worked in a record store, and it was *The Boatman's Call*. I connected with it super deeply when I moved back to New York City after two years of community college in Pennsylvania, moved into a horrible apartment with a creepy roommate, and would listen to it on repeat. I remember lying in this room (it wasn't even a room, it was like a 5x8 square made out of Styrofoam blocks and cheap fabric) with "Green Eyes" on my headphones and just crying over and over. We also had a horrific bedbug infestation. I'm pretty sure these are the ideal circumstances to fall in love with Nick Cave over.

I got more into his other albums maybe 5 – 6 years ago, *Murder Ballads*, *Tender Prey*, *Dig*, *Lazarus*, *Dig!*, *Let Love In*. *Skeleton Tree* broke my heart. I think he has this incredible ability to destroy you and put you back together before you know what's happening.

**AB:** what made you decide to write the book

**AF:** I think the book sort of blossomed out of from the essay "Psychopomps," which deals with trans people metaphorically guiding each other from one life to the next, sometime in positive ways, sometimes in really awful ways. In writing it, I wanted to show the breadth and individuality of the trans community, while also weaving in this notion that's really present in trans and queer history that trans identity was once this sacred role in society. That essay sort of sums up how I feel about trans community and the world in general: the potential and the harsher realities that exist side by side.

I've also had it suggested to me, to go back to the essay you mentioned earlier, that this book was my attempt to write a break-up album. That's not untrue. A lot of it was me grappling with my divorce from the person I transitioned with.

Also, you've got to get through the day somehow, and writing books helps me do that.

**AB:** What made you decide on using the essay format in detailing this journey of yours, over something like poetry?

**AF:** I'm a horrible poet.

I actually started writing essays solely for money, then discovered I really enjoyed it. As the book took form, I began experimenting more with the essay form, incorporating lyric essays and being less linear.

But I'd never be able to pull off a collection of poetry, honestly.

**AB:** There's always time, poetry means an array of different things now and transcends form. We live in a climate where simply speaking could be considered poetry.

How challenging was it to write *PSYCHOPOMPS*, from a creative and personal standpoint? And how did you overcome these difficulties?

**AF:** I first began writing essays that appeared in *Psychopomps* years and years ago. I had no idea how to write an essay; a lot of the work I did was bad and unpublishable. But over time, I sort of got my legs underneath me with writing essays, and something else began to happen. They weren't just essays about *me* anymore. The essay where I was a missing person became an understanding, in part, of a woman who had disappeared intentionally to get away from her life; some of the essays became about trans community, and I was a backdrop, or a person who provided context, and nothing else; I did research about a hate crime that deeply affected me in hopes of memorializing a queer elder who's no longer here. I think this was the true challenge, how to take these essays from outside my own life and experience, expand them, make them make larger circles in the world. I would say that just takes time, and a great deal of looking both inward and outward.

I'd also like to say that digging up your pain is serious work. I don't say that to mean I take myself so seriously, but rather the work is hard and heavy. I had to look a lot of things right in the eyes that I didn't want to. That members of my blood family would rather see me dead than trans. Or times I'd been a real asshole and fucked up relationships. It's so easy to knee-jerk reaction these situations. But, you know, it's harder to think that, "My family would rather me be dead than trans because in some weird way some of them thought they were protecting me and it came out like this." That's a horrible thing to look in the eye and try to feel some sort of empathy towards. It's hard to look at the situation where a lover you still care deeply about left you for someone else because you were an emotionally unavailable asshole to them. I'm a fiction writer at heart, but I've found that fiction can also be a protection for the layers of this sort of thing. You spin it into a story, you hit the right points in terms of genre, or craft, or whatever – and sometimes you leave the deeper emotions untouched, while managing to evoke them for someone else. Writing non-fiction took that armor away from me, and it's terrifying and vulnerable to be so out in the open with your heart.

**AB:** you've touched on this briefly in one of the last questions, but which essay in your collection do you feel has made the biggest impact on you?

**AF:** I'd definitely say the last essay in the collection, "For Bobby, with Love." In it, I dug into the details of a hate crime that happened when I was five years old in my hometown, to a coworker of my mother's. Calling the people involved, and the family members of the deceased was heart-breaking. But also, looking at my own life in connection with what happened to this man, and at the sort of fear and terror for queer people at the time he lived in were all pretty devastating.

**AB:** in what ways do you think the last few years, especially since 2016, have shaped queer writing?

**AF:** In some ways, we're really writing for our lives now. And I think, in the wake of the Trump presidency, many, many editors and book people have stepped up to have our backs. I'm astounded, often, by the amount of amazing editors out there willing to promote trans and queer voices because it's the right thing to do, to amplify. These people will never understand how fiercely

appreciative I am of them, and how grateful.

In another sense, there's been a flood of trans books and trans authors on the market. This is a good thing! Back just a few years ago, I think the only trans book that was ever talked about was Imogene Binnie's *Nevada*, which is a fine book, but it's also so unfair to place the burden of being \*the\* trans book on one piece of work. Now there's so so much – from experimental authors like Never Angel North, to sort of more academic and technical and wonderful authors like Trace Peterson, to ritualistic and ecstatic poets like CA Conrad, to spec-fic authors like Charlie Jane Anders – the list goes on and on and there's so much good stuff on it, and we're seeing more and more.

In some ways, the horrible political climate is, against its best efforts, making trans art flourish.

**AB:** How has this recent influx of queer/trans writing impacted your own writing? As in, are you finding it easier to be more open with your own identity? Not necessarily making it easy to be completely open, but at least easier?

**AF:** For me, it's created a bit of a safety net. I've seldom been attacked online for my work (I think there's been like one or two exceptions to that), which I find kind of shocking because the vulnerability in a lot of these essays leaves me wide-open for transphobes to attack my character or identity in many ways. I mean, I talk about being mentally ill, suicidal, homeless, a sometimes asshole, being raped, being discriminated against, all sorts of things that leave me out in the open. But I've overwhelmingly found people, even those who don't share my experiences, to be kind and understanding. And the times that other trans people have found my email address and reached out to me have been incredible. I am constantly waiting for the bottom to fall out of this, though, so I'm not sure if it's a false sense of safety.

**AB:** Has writing this collection brought you any validation in terms of your identity? Was it more cathartic or therapeutic for you publishing *PSYCHOPOMPS*?

**AF:** I was sort of shocked by the whole process. Though I'd been publishing personal essays, it amazed me how much people seemed to like *Psychopomps* (it, after placing in CCM's Mainline, also accidentally placed in another respected competition after it had been withdrawn). In some ways, it gave me a wider view of my life and community to write. In some ways, it was extremely healing to put into words my grief over my loss of my family, and my divorce. That people were interested in reading about all this was a great surprise, though.

I wouldn't call it therapeutic, so much, because a lot of craft and stylization went into creating it. It has an off-handed tone, but it's not a journal entry. It's structured. It was definitely work. But I'm also a workaholic, and throwing myself into work can be very healing for me. Maybe it's both things.

**AB:** they say some artists produce the same work but in new ways, others tend

to let go of their experiences after putting them out there for the world. Looking forward, are there any future projects that excite you? What are you hoping to tackle next?

**AF:** I'm neck-deep in a novel set in my hometown right now. (There will certainly be echoes of what we get from *Psychopomps* of my hometown in it, too). It's a sci-fi/ghost story hybrid that takes place in the haunted places of the Wyoming Valley, a coal mining valley in the northern Appalachian mountains in Pennsylvania. It notably features such places as Concrete City (an abandoned coal mining village from the early 1900s that still stands in the woods of Nanticoke, PA), Centralia (the town abandoned to a mine fire in the '60s that was the setting for *Silent Hill*), and an old sanitarium in Clarks Summit, PA. I've got a solid first draft and am hoping to have it finished in the next few years. I'm finding that a blend of history and futurism is new to my work (my first novel is alternate history, my second near-future), and I'm really digging getting to have a foot in both of these worlds. Ghosts make for excellent commentary on history, oppression, and violence. I've been very inspired to write this project by the books *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *White Tears*.

As for letting go of experiences, I may write another memoir some day far in the future, but for now, it seems like I've said enough about myself, and want to go back to crafting my world-view through fiction.

**AB:** *Psychopomps* comes out February 19th thru the Accomplices label, and before we call this an interview, are there any final thoughts or shoutouts you wanna give?

**AF:** Every damn person mentioned in the pages of this book, from poets Vivien Ryder and Tai Maag, to the people who wrote all the breakup songs, to every amazing writer who blurbed me (Sarah Einstein, James Allen Hall, Mary Adkins, Joselin Linder), to my partner Adam Wishneusky, to my former lawyer and good friend Ron Kuby, to my best friend Sarah Baker and her family, to the barista who bought me coffee every morning while I was writing this book in the shop he managed, to every person who's lent me \$20 for groceries and told me not to give up yet. I can't stress enough how this book wouldn't exist without every last person mentioned here.

---



**Alex DiFrancesco** has published fiction in The Carolina Quarterly, The New Ohio Review, and Monkeybicycle. They are a winner of Sundress Academy for the Arts' 2017 OutSpoken contest for LGBTQ+ writing. DiFrancesco's non-fiction has appeared in The Washington Post, Tin House, Longreads, Brevity, and was a finalist in Cosmonauts Avenue's inaugural non-fiction prize. Their storytelling has been featured at The Fringe Festival, Life of the Law, The Queens Book Festival, and The Heart podcast. DiFrancesco has recently moved from New York City to Ohio, where they are still trying to wrap their head around "Sweetest Day."