



A Better Life

Randall Mann

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In poems both elegiac and snarky, Randall Mann questions what makes a better life for a middle-aged gay man living through the historic days of Covid and a federal assault on LGBTQ+ rights. The poems, though focused through the lens of the poet's life, engage larger issues, like late-stage capitalism, the lingering and forever impact of AIDS on the gay community, and the insistence of aging.

Mann begins the book with "A Better Life," writing, "It's silly to think / fourteen years ago / I turned thirty." The clever line break that begins the poem is typical of Mann's work: start with a smirk, and continue the thought—here, the ridiculousness of aging, moving from being a teenager who stuffed dirty pictures in his Trapper Keeper to a man who now must mourn his friends, as in a palindrome poem for a beloved friend, Michelle Boisseau, and a wistful elegy for Kevin Killian.

The poems tend toward short, athletic lines that run down the page, often accented with internal rhymes and a great deal of metrical awareness. They sing in their forms, whether they are lamenting the way America encourages people to hide who they truly are, or are celebrating sexual intimacy between men. As the poet considers his own aging and the world that was allegedly going to be the place where things did get better, the past returns—in poems about the 1980s, the Stonewall Riots, Madonna LPs, and *Playboy*. Mann straddles pop and high culture in poems as easily as he navigates between free verse and formal tension.

A Better Life is a poetry collection that is honest and funny. Mann uses his own history to interrogate the experience of American life beyond the cis, white, heteronormative bubble, and he imbues his questions with humor and rhythm.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (May / June 2021)

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