

# THE VIOLET QUILL READER

THE EMERGENCE OF GAY WRITING  
AFTER STONEWALL

EDITED BY  
DAVID BERGMAN



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breakfast, listen to some music, enjoy himself while he still could—until the axe fell.

The sun had already reached halfway up the sheets. Spence threw them off onto the floor. It was warm—hot, really. Hot as Mexico. The way the sun advanced along the room, it would take another hour for him to be completely bathed in sunlight. He wouldn't even have to go out on to the terrace to sun today.

It was hot as Mexico.

He could feel the rough stone surface of the ceremonial altar cool against his back. It almost made him forget the itching hemp he'd been tied with, hand and foot, to the altar. He was atop the highest pyramid in Xochimilco. Above him, the sky was clear blue, cloudless. Below him, invisible, but known from previous occasions when he'd merely witnessed, the immense stone-flagged plaza was filled with people decked out in holiday finery, covered in flowers, chanting. Pennants flew from poles and towers. Children danced in imitation of old legends. Instruments of all sorts whistled, chimed, clacked and stuttered.

His body was the focal point of twenty thousand eyes, of ten thousand minds. He knew, as they knew, that when the sun had completely illuminated his figure through the astronomically precise arch above him, that everyone would suddenly go quiet in the plaza. Everyone would know that the Vernal Equinox had arrived, bringing life again, and once more demanding its payment from them. He would be the absolute beginning of their year: a dot on their calendar: the focus of their collective soul. When the sunlight reached his eyes, the new chant would begin: the people's plea for the sun to accept their votive.

Amidst the hypnotic droning voices, the Priests would gather around him, their gilded masks blinding him with reflections. They too would begin their guttural prayers to the Solar Deity, asking for blessings, good harvest, victory in battle.

When the sunlight had warmed to tips of his long hair, he would know the time was fulfilled. He would be the center of the people, the nation, the world, the universe. He would see the primitive obsidian knife raised in the air, see its final fatal glitter, see it descend and tear out his bowels.

## From *The Family of Max Desir*



### Robert Ferro

The Family of Max Desir (1983) was Robert Ferro's second novel, and unlike *The Others*, *The Family of Max Desir* was highly autobiographical. Ferro and Michael Grumley often divided their literary and family lives from their sexual prowlings. Max and Nick names Max and Mickey for their sexual prowlings. Max and Nick are clearly based on that other life. The description of John Desir's house—with its large dining room and two-story den—is an accurate description of Michael Ferro's home. However, Robert Ferro and Michael Grumley did not meet in an Italian prison, but rather at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

It seemed a change of venue was needed now that they were going to be a pair, and at Lydia's suggestion and with her help in finding an apartment, they moved to Rome, into a *superattico* near Piazza Navona. To the antiquarian on the ground floor and the local shopkeepers they were brothers, or at least cousins, but likely, as foreigners, to be anything at all. Lydia, with her extravagant costumes and veils, her mute chauffeur, fooled no one. The glint of adoration in everyone's eye when Max and Nick saw her to her car suddenly burst into a flame of respect that soon engulfed the neighborhood. Any official connection might have set them apart; that they should know the sister of the President marked them as *pezzi grossi*. In the market they were addressed as doctor and professor. The antiquarian, seizing a small opportunity, inquired if they had all the furniture they needed for their new apartment.

It was a grand little place with balconies off every room, totally empty. They refused Lydia's offer to swing a few things through the window by crane, the staircase being too narrow for her idea of fur-

niture. Instead they went to the flea market at Porta Portese, Lydia dressed as an English lady and speaking Italian like Ruth Draper. Gorgeous junk accumulated in their wake; when assembled, these objects gave the apartment a religious air, as in the public rooms of a convent, or the sitting room of a priest. Green lacquer walls, extricated grudgingly from the Italian house painter, threw every odd, aged piece into crisp relief—the candlesticks filched from country churches, a marble dog, a one-eyed Saint Agnes, hands clasped miserably before her as if in desperation over her missing eye. A courtier friend of Lydia's who was redoing his studio sent over fifty or sixty varicolored silk cushions no longer needed. This bright pile, in Max's fantasy, might better have been spread upon blazing desert sands beside a passing caravan. Out of the silent, attenuated riot of camels and cloth steps Nick, the dark herdsman. The hot sun through the open windows strikes their backs, the old furniture like bark beside their smooth young skin. Except for food or Lydia's arrangements, they might never have gone out.

His parents' letters from home shrieked with silent alarm. Moved to Rome! Might stay indefinitely! His father took the unusual step of writing to Max directly. Was this the moment to push the bird from the nest? Mr. Desir, larger bird, even threatened to fly over personally if not told immediately what was going on.

So tell him, Nick said. Call him up. Write him a letter. You're with me now.

Impossible to call, only slightly less difficult to put into words, they worked on the reply message together, as they now did everything together. They mentioned *La Stella Nera*, Lydia's help, their intention to stay together always. John received the letter like a cannonball catcher on an off night—not without temporary damage to the midsection. He missed the niceties, the attempts at gentleness, the wish to be accepted, grasping only the headlines of the situation: *Son Gay, Father Disraught*.

Mr. Desir wrote back that he should never have allowed Max to go to Florence in the first place. This had been the basic mistake for which he took all the blame. But to be homosexual was one thing; to be an expatriate was quite another, although perhaps in an unsavory way they were linked after all. In any event, when was he, when were they, coming home?

Oh not for years, darling, Lydia exclaimed when told the facts. Home to what? she demanded; to the ideas and sentiments of Queen

Victoria? Let them work it out on their own for a while, in the abstract. You can't rush this sort of thing with Americans.

John wrote, No matter what, you're my son, and Max's allowance continued to arrive each month at the Banco di Roma.

Nick began an acting career with interviews with several Italian directors—set up of course by Lydia. He got extra work immediately, which led to small parts and actual scenes. His good looks were smoothed out by the camera into idealized perfection. You wondered about the director's taste and priorities in letting such a face flash by without lingering; or so Max thought, turning to Nick in the darkened theater with a smile, luxuriating in the mercury profile of his own film star. On occasion in the days of Cinecittà, a studio car would come for him early in the morning. If it were Marilyn Monroe getting into a limousine at five in the morning, Nick said, she would be carrying a pillow and practically walking in her sleep.

A woman named Isabella cleaned the apartment three times a week, a job that consisted mainly of chasing dust mice across the empty floors on drafts from the balcony doors, and of preparing something like eggplant parmigiana or soup for lunch. They sat down to a meal served by a maid in a dining room in their own home, in a place at any rate which they had made themselves, bent on inventing a reasonable replica of life either as they had lived it as children or seen it in movies or dreams.

They settled in. This meant ordering suits and buying engraved stationery at Pineider. Max wrote stories. Nick joined a theater company that put on plays in English.

From the railings of their several balconies, set into the mansard roof so as to cut the streets from view, they held each other by the waist and looked out over the rooftops, at the tower of this, the dome of that, at the complacent neutrality of Rome. In the street they were foreigners of consequence; up here they were naked athletes of love, sailing over everything.

Max had been infatuated before this but had never got beyond the first, unrequited, reeflike stages of love. The dynamics of falling in love—so stormy, humiliating, exhilarating and changeable—were now replaced with those of *being* in love, which brought a sense of calm, the image of smooth turquoise water and a pearl beach, a lagoon of ease. This process seemed to have happened on its own.

He was the first to fall. Thereafter he wove a web of sexual and emotional enticement, binding Nick to him in tiny exquisite ways. He

angled, as if for a huge fish, the bait being completion, union, the glamour of like minds and bodies, the promise of ambition, the sweetness of constant satisfaction. Every few days Max asked Nick what he wanted, what he missed, regretted, lacked. Max said he would find it, invent it, create it; or if it offended, strip it from his act, like an ugly prop or costume. They must talk. They must identify themselves for each other. They must be clever about their love, avoiding the bone-littered snares and traps set out by a jealous world.

Nick at first did not like to speak of any point further than two weeks in the future. A few years in New York had made him leery of plans, and alert and sensitive to possessiveness. He did not like taking showers together because of the overload of information and sensation—two elements at once. The discovery that he was occasionally skittish, to the edge of paranoia, meant that, at one point, probably in the aforementioned New York, he had been frightened by something, never specified. This weakness was visible only now and then; to Max it meant Nick needed him. He saw it the way he sometimes noticed a tiny scar on Nick's scalp, when the wind blew his hair up in a particular way.

It helped, it seemed, to have met in a foreign country where it was obvious, as it might not even have been clear at home, that they were alone and on their own. Nothing else interested them particularly. Each was incredibly vivid to the other, each being the one point of focus in the other's frame, a focus occasionally replaced on their walks through the city by the details on a monument of antiquity. But only for a moment. Always their attention snapped back to the other's face, to the nape of the neck, the fascinating, specieslike autonomy of the beautiful hands, the sweet, level connection of the eyes.

Lilo in Florence had lied, to intense sexual effect: *Te amo. Ti voglio bene*. Nick was the first to say it in English, the first perhaps ever to feel that way about Max. Max thought at the time that loving might almost have been enough. But being loved in return swept him away completely, and for good. He thought it was as if someone had put a spell on him, that he must always love whoever should be the first to love him back.

Nick loved Lydia like a mother. They had met on the Florentine circuit—the same one Max had glimpsed—which tended to throw together Florence's most sophisticated residents and her best-looking tourists. Nick had gone higher and Lydia had come down a bit, and

they adored each other. Nick said they had not slept together nor had they ever considered it. Lydia was his glamorous mother, he her gorgeous son. Had his parents not still been living, back in Iowa, she'd have adopted him legally. Lydia appealed not only to the boy but to the actor in Nick. Her life had been dramatic even in the days before her brother's administration. She gave Nick a wonderful part to play, the cherished of the rich and sophisticated. In return he gave her the constant reciprocation of a quick, sensitive mind and the glamour of his stunning looks.

For man or woman, you're the ideal mate, Max said.

Nick had come to Europe during the first wave of its rediscovery by American youth in the sixties. He had put himself through college in a leisurely way, that is, through six colleges in five states and Mexico, moving on at will, finishing in New York City with, in the end, a philosophy degree from CCNY. He had known of his attraction to and for men since the age of nine, in the days when a man could take you for a ride in his automobile, have sex, and not kill you. During and after the six colleges, he hitchhiked through most of the United States; and then, rather naturally, he moved on to Europe, keeping it simple, traveling like a tourist of the later, second wave of discovery—the backpackers and hitchhikers, those seekers-after-good on their long way to India and Nepal. Nick was in no particular hurry, took no particular direction. He appreciated the hospitality of local tricks. The idea that London, Paris, Munich, Hamburg had dealt evenly with young men like him for centuries inspired confidence. He had the feeling that if he wandered from place to place with an open mind and high expectations, important and lucky things would happen to him.

In Florence he was whisked off the street and into Lydia's presence. The combination of shyness, good looks and sophistication in a tourist charmed her. They became friends. She found him a job as secretary to an English novelist so that he could take an apartment and stay awhile. Nothing was permanent or needed to be.

Then the novelist fell for Nick and it was necessary to leave. Nick sublet his flat for six months and went to Paris. Meanwhile the tenant dealt drugs out of the apartment. When Nick reentered the country he was arrested—guilty by association. Two weeks later, in the dark forbidding arms of *La Stella Nera*, he met Max.

They hardly saw anyone but Lydia. They would not hear from her for several weeks, which meant she was in Florence or traveling; then

abruptly, irresistibly, she would appear or telephone with The Plan. She strongly favored visits to the country villas of old friends, weekends requiring great logistical migrations of guests and matériel—special food, wine, props, costumes, additional servants, treats, surprises—all the tools of the grand hostess.

We leave Thursday evening by car for Cetona, she announced one Wednesday by phone.

But that's tomorrow night, Nick said.

Don't say you're busy or I'll die, Lydia sighed into the phone. You two are the key to the whole thing. None of them would bother to drag their poor tired bones to the country *yet again* except to see you, my two gorgeous boys. And Saturday will be fancy dress. I'm dressing Max as a sixteenth-century Italian prince, for which I am bringing along certain death-defying diamonds.

I'll tell him, Nick said. What am I to be?

An Attic shepherd, darling, stripped down to a few sable pelts and the glories God gave you. I've hired two sheep. If you don't come, I swear we'll eat them.

The sheep stood about, lamplike, where they were put. Lydia's preparations might even have included sheep sedatives. The weekend company included an elderly monsignor who was Lydia's closest friend and principal social beard; a chic, darkly serious lesbian couple; a middle-aged Florentine count who was the monsignor's longtime companion; two American teachers of art, also middle-aged, married and male; and Max and Nick.

Saturday evening's dinner was fancy-dress. Nani, the count, appeared as a nun. This was taken as an amusing and considerate reference to his consort, Monsignor Alessio, who did not dress. The two art professors were simply and tastefully fitted out as European court ladies in evening gowns and tiaras, like elderly princesses. The two lesbians came of course as men, resembling those of the lounge-lizard sort—convincing but not completely reputable. Lydia said she was Maria José, wife of Umberto II, the last Queen of Italy; her dress was made of cloth-of-gold, her hair piled high and gilded. Max wore tights, a black velvet doublet, and long ropes of Lydia's diamonds. Nick, nearly naked with crook and sheep, was awarded the prize for most beautiful and apt.

Monsignor Alessio appeared at every function on Lydia's schedule of dubious social value or political implication. His rank, age, and

nearly papal demeanor kept him beyond reproach and out of political reach; this in spite of an open fondness for boys. Monsignor Alessio loved angels as they appeared in the form of young boys, *s'intendiamoci*. Such a party as this would never have been possible in Lydia's life, or even in the lives of her servants, without the correct and reassuring presence of the monsignor.

According to Nick, this evening's gay theme was not the reflection of Lydia's sexual preference but the clever idea of a thoughtful and busy hostess, as on another occasion she might, in the same spirit, assemble eight or ten businessmen or a half-dozen chefs. Lydia believed that theme parties encouraged conversation. In another way, and because of her devotion to Nick, the assembly had been chosen to please him and his new friend. If in some vaguely startling way, there was something jejune about the evening, it was perhaps because the lesbians and the art professors seemed deeply disturbed by the way they were dressed. They had mustered enough sangfroid to cross-dress; not enough to go on with it in company.

The monsignor, who had just taken a sip of wine, now accidentally touched the stem of his glass to his plate with a crystal chime, inadvertently stopping conversation and drawing everyone's attention. Giving them all back a startled look, Monsignor Alessio then fell forward on the table. For a long moment the others wordlessly regarded his slumped figure and purplish face, which rested like a baked apple on his empty plate, the wine he had not completely swallowed dribbling like juice in a pink trickle from his lips. Presently, with a kind of spasm or convulsion, the priest, together with his dinner service, slid from the table and landed without breakage on the thickly carpeted floor. Nani screamed. He pushed over his chair and ran around the table to help his friend.

Get a doctor! Help him! he screamed, holding the priest's head in his nun's lap. He can't die, he cried after a moment. He can't! I couldn't!

The lesbians in tuxedos stepped in, calming Nani, taking the last few beats of Monsignor Alessio's pulse, and even going so far as to blow a few extra breaths into his wilting lungs; but it was clear after a few minutes that the man was dead.

It had been his heart, concerning which this was the last of several incidents, but it seemed at the time, to Nick and Max, to be *them*. What strains had they put on the old man's failing health? Not that they had ever spent a moment alone with him, or thought of it. But it

was death at close range, the first for either of them. And it seemed, like so much in their lives—as for instance their meeting in prison—to have some larger meaning. This impression was further developed a few weeks later when the host of a similar weekend house party, at which Lydia was not a guest, just as suddenly dropped dead, this time not actually in their presence but very soon after leaving it. I'm swamped with requests to get you for the weekend, Lydia announced.

That's not funny, Nick said.

*Angeli del morte*, they're calling you, she went on. Are you both already quite booked up?

It's appalling really, Nick said. We are thinking of leaving Rome. Leaving Rome! Just because a few old people drop dead? You'll turn into nomads at that rate.

I have the possibility of work in New York, and Max's father has practically ordered him home.

Ahh, Lydia mused.

Or London, Nick said.

Darling, take a few weeks in Positano, to clear the head. London would only put you to sleep and I don't think Rome is done with you, somehow . . .

But the part in New York did materialize and Mr. Desir said Max would have to come back to the United States or get a job. Feeling the way they did, they let the current carry them home.

At the airport and for the forty-minute drive home to Hillcrest, John registered a hard-edged and total silence, leaving Marie—half turned in her seat—to ask the questions and give the news. That no one else had been there to welcome them was deeply ominous.

When he got his mother alone for a moment, Max embraced her and solemnly apologized—not for himself and Nick but for the oddity, and the uniqueness of the situation, the unpleasant responses it evoked.

It's all right, Max, she said. As long as you're happy and hurt no one. But your father . . . he simply hates it.

What's going to happen? he asked.

Who knows? You must try not to let him upset you, try not to get angry. He says things he doesn't mean.

Like what? he asked.

You name it . . . Oh God. Oh Max! Her eyes filled up but did not spill over. He made every effort to gauge the precise calibration of her

suffering, so that he could hate or excuse himself for it. It appeared that her deepest intention was to protect both him and his father at once.

Max went upstairs and told Nick there was going to be a battle royal and that he would take him to Robin's house for a while.

Max's sister was a clinical psychologist and a pretty cool customer. When Max returned, his father was sitting in the big den alone, not watching television.

Where's Nick? John asked.

I thought we'd better do this alone, Max replied. We don't need Nick for this. Where's Mom?

I don't know, his father said. In her room, I guess. She was here a minute ago.

Max walked around the enormous room, went to the window to inspect the lawn, the extra acre of woods they had bought in the back for privacy; everything, inside and out, in perfect order. He turned to his father.

Where do we begin, Dad?

I don't know, John replied, not looking up, then looking up. You tell me.

After a pause in which he assembled the words carefully, Max said, I recently faced the fact that I am a homosexual.

I'm aware of that, John said.

Well, I guess it's time you faced it too. I like men and I'm in love with Nick.

You've got a fucking nerve coming in here and saying that to me, his father snapped. What the hell do you have to tell me about it for?

Well, you asked why I moved to Rome, and anyway I wasn't going to sneak around and lie about it to you. We're going to live in New York and . . . we'll be right there. Unless you'd rather not see us.

His father didn't answer. Max made another revolution of the room, winding up back at the window, which was a sliding door and therefore an exit. He realized suddenly that he was at an enormous disadvantage, perhaps an overwhelming one. Everything here was his father's.

Mom doesn't seem to care particularly, he said, turning from the window. Why do you?

Because! His father brayed the word. I just don't like it, that's all. Why should I? Who the hell does?

Let's not drag the world into this, Pop, Max said, trying to be as light as possible.

The world is the point, John said. Is *everybody* wrong?

Yes! *Everybody's* wrong! Max shouted back. And it's not the first time.

That's your opinion, John said derisively. I don't agree with it.

Well, what do you expect *me* to do about it? Max said. Pretend I'm straight? So you won't feel bad?

Yes, John said calmly.

You'd rather I was straight and unhappy than happy with Nick.

That's right, his father said.

And I should keep it a secret.

That too.

Or?

Or nothing. You can do what you want. I don't care, John said.

Max drifted out of the den and into the dining room, which had a dark mahogany table twenty feet long in its center, ten high-backed, brocade chairs in slavish attendance, six more against the walls. He wandered into the foyer, which like the den was two stories high. The big chandelier from their triumphant trip to Messina was caught in descent like a crystal parachute. He went back into the den. His father had not moved.

Does Nick make enough money from these films to live on? John asked without preamble.

Usually. He's not established yet. Why do you ask?

I do not approve of this lifestyle, John said, and I have no intention of paying for it.

Well, good, Max said quickly. You can keep your money.

How would you like me to come over there and break you in half?

John said.

How'd you like to work this out for yourself? Max replied, thinking of Lydia.

They glared at each other, but neither moved and the moment passed.

Max went into the kitchen and poured a glass of juice from the refrigerator. He turned around and raised the glass to his lips. His mother was sitting at the kitchen table listening, her hand supporting her chin at an angle that caused her to gaze out the front window. She did not look up at him.

It went on like this for hours. At one point Nick called to find out what was happening.

He's cut off the money, Max said, but I knew he'd do that. He thinks you're after the Desir millions.

Nick said, Pick me up. We'll spend the night at Paul's, meaning a friend in Manhattan. Tomorrow we'll find an apartment.

Max said, Oh God . . .

I know it's hard, Nick said. But you have to stand up to them.

No, my mother is fine. She said as long as I'm happy and he said as long as I'm not . . .

Just leave and pick me up. Your sister is terrific. She's filling me in.

Max began to weep and couldn't stop, not for the awful things that were being said, but for the things that had been withheld. He did not try to hide his tears, and in fact broke down completely in front of his father. Of all his efforts this seemed to have the most effect, though not enough to make any difference. John never cried.

Max went up to his room to get his things and Nick's. Exhausted, he sat for a moment on the edge of the bed. His mother came in noiselessly and sat down beside him. She took him in her arms and he sobbed against her.

He wouldn't even bend, Max said.

I know, darling, she said, and held him as he wept.