

OVERTURE

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I lived in Japan in the late eighties. As a lifelong comic book lover, I was struck by the pervasiveness of comics. Children, teens and adults alike read them voraciously. In train stations, cafes, bookstores and beauty salons, I saw people with their noses buried in comic monthlies as thick as phone books. There were historical comics packed with archival detail. Romantic girl comics featured doe-eyed heroines who wept, sacrificed and lived for l'amour. Sports comics focused on intense lads who bounced back from adversity to smack a home run out of the ballpark or spike the volleyball into the face of a bullying rival. Most eye-popping of all were the alarmingly graphic and violent porno comics in which girls invariably got their school uniforms torn to strategically-placed shreds, exposing their nubile wares.

I was an illiterate foreigner, fresh out of college and grappling with both my sexuality and the deciphering of the elegant and enigmatic Kanji (writing system of ideograms imported from China). I never became literate enough to understand the text of the comics, but I enjoyed them immensely, and was almost beside myself when I came upon gay comics in a Tokyo bookshop. The gay comic narratives included romantic love scenes of boys embracing amidst swirls of cherry blossoms and rapturous sex scenes with much attendant grimacing and curled toes. I "read" the stories through the pictures. Sometimes I felt a bit lost, but never did I feel put off or intimidated because the comic book format meant fun, accessibility and beauty to me. Most of all, the comics gave me depictions of what affection and sex between men could look like. I read the comics over and over and found myself so compelled as to finally break my isolation and visit my first gay space—a tiny bar that advertised in the back of the comic.

I never forgot the revelatory power of those comics. Over fifteen years later, when The Institute for Gay Men's Health asked me to create a new wellness publication, I was excited to imagine how a hand-picked group of artists might exploit the comic book format to talk about turnovers in the lives of men who have sex with men. For those who were not raised with football language, a "turnover" is a dramatic event that can change the course of a game. We chose this theme of turning points because we were interested in seeing comics that depict big changes and transitions in the lives of queer men.

In some of the comics, the turnovers are dramatic and quick. For the main character in *Safe*, a single incident of unprotected intercourse leads him into a confusing, arousing and frightening world of sex without condoms. In the final panel, the pathos and ambivalence in the young man's face is deeply moving. In the charming *Black Gay Boy Fantasy*, a virgin outing to a queer rights rally lands a young man in the media spotlight as a publicly gay person and throws him into the depths of infatuation over a fellow protester. The diaristic photo-based comic *Holding onto a Memory*, depicts a teenage boy haunted by loss, anger and love as he laments the death of his best friend.

Other stories arrive at a turning point over time. *Algebra Suicide* reaches back decades to uncover the teen traumas that underpin the main character's barebacking in his thirties. Time and space collapse in the elegant jumble of text and images drawn from period photos, porno and cartoons. *Stroke* uses pure text and design to stretch our understanding of a comic book story. The turnover in his piece takes the form of a gentle and potent realization of the regenerative power of water, movement, and self-care.

Despite the gravity of many of the stories, *Turnover* is not lacking for humor. In *Saturn Returns*, a gay urbanite is stalked by a winged beast as he negotiates leathersex, desire and alienation. The Goya-esque darkness of the scenes is undercut by the quirky depictions of kink sex coupled with knitting, telephone games and picture hanging. *Malware*, is a playful, sexed-up *Charlie's Angels* sendup. A randy trio of gay detectives breaks up a plot to replace face-to-face sex with a malicious cybersex program that has all the addictive properties of a certain speedy street drug so popular with many a gay man these days. Soiree, the fabulous drag diva of *Chelsea Boys*, takes on a butch top identity to immerse ~~herself~~ herself in serial online tricking. The hilariously manic hookups take their toll on the exhausted, unshaven and unemployed diva until a special man sees past his tough guy façade.

When I think of the great turning points in my own understanding of wellness, I remember moments that were simultaneously physical, emotional and spiritual, like learning yoga or committing to protecting myself after enduring an unwarranted HIV panic that lasted six months. Using humor, sex, confession and magic realism, the comics of *Turnover* constitute a rich exploration of wellness, pointing us towards a vision of gay men's health that moves away from the simplistic binaries of safe/unsafe behaviors into a holistic and hopeful understanding of self-care. So, my gentle reader, turn the page and take your medicine.

TURNOVER