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Much of the rationale for New York’s graffiti is explained in Lee’s words—the need for self-assertion, particularly among urban youth whose creativity is stifled by an overbearing city; the need to be remembered; the need to define themselves differently than society has; and the need to feel in control, in some small way, of surroundings they deeply fear.

Chris Pape says graffiti writing was “just something to do. If we had Little League where I grew up, I probably would have put my energy into baseball and now I’d be with the Yankees.” He pauses and then smiles, “Well, maybe not the Yankees.”

Whatever the motivation, Lee, whose full name is Jorge Lee Quinones, contends that the public appreciated both the graffiti art and the artists when they were at their peak nearly two decades ago. “The art captured a movement which New Yorkers understood, a message of color on darkness, individuality, continuity, and survival,” he says. They also respected the artists beyond the art, for the danger they ran to paint the subway cars, bringing the trains to life with color and imagination amid the dark and crumbling city.

“I was always scared shitless down there in the tunnels,” Lee recalls, although also always intrigued by the subway system. “We were poor and didn’t travel much, so as a kid I would get excited whenever my mother took me on a subway train. I was almost infatuated with the construction, the speed of the machinery, its power, the darkness and mystery of the tunnels. It was like a big monster: neglected, derelict, desolate, dark, and dreary like the city itself. Each gray car looked like a sad clone.”

Lee began graffiti writing in the subways when he was fourteen and “saw graffiti as an actual thinking and physically challenging process. I saw the meditation and discipline it took. I thought, wow, I can express myself in the same heroic, anonymous way. People could see it and say ‘Yo, that kid was daring; he worked through the night to do that, while I slept.’ I wanted to be respected, whether they liked what I did or not. I could turn out color and change the way people looked at the system. I had control of the subway.

“We dared to put art right out front,” he says. “The media put us down as vandals, but Picasso used spray paint, too. There’s continuity there, man.” He complains that the Transit Authority is committing “artistic genocide by showering off graffiti with acid rains and operating graffiti-proof trains.”

One graffiti writer actually wrote a poetic lament to his fading craft suitably in black ink:

There once was a time when the Lexington Line was a beautiful line
When Children of the ghetto expressed with art, not with crime.
But then as evolution past,
The transits buffing did it blast,
And now the trains look like rusted trash.
Now we wonder if graffiti will ever last ???[4] (/read-267812/?page=32#n_4)

THE FABULOUS FIVE STOPPED PAINTING LONG AGO. “WE GREW UP,” says Lee. Mono became a policeman. Slave is a drag racer down South. Doc is an electrician. Dirty Slug, who went to college, has disappeared.

Lee, now thirty-two years old, is a successful artist on canvas. “My studio is not a subway tunnel anymore, but when I paint, I’m in the tunnel again, where things are clear-cut and dope. And my message is the same. I still capture movement, survival. It has to do with struggling in New York. The tunnels make artists strong within themselves. Behind my stuff is a story; it’s life. I want it to live.” *The New*

Yorker magazine called Lee Quinones “a sort of Jasper Johns figure ... stylistically speaking.”

“Lee was the best, king of the lines,” says Ace, a thirteen-year-old “toy” who aspires to Lee’s fame, but a “toy” like him has a “wacky style,” which in graffiti jargon means he has no talent yet. He “bites” or steals other styles, and he fails to “get up,” which means leave his mark, or to “tag” around town widely enough to be noticed. “Taggers” must leave their calling cards hundreds of times, often on the pieces of established graffiti writers, to win recognition. Worst of all, Ace’s tags drip, which is the most obvious sign that a writer has not yet mastered his paint can.

With subway train graffiti a vanished art form, some of its would-be practitioners have moved into the tunnels themselves, but the dangers are terrifying—a third rail pulsing with electricity, criminals, drug addicts, rats, and rushing trains that often leave insufficient clearance with walls for a standing man.

Many, particularly the young taggers, do it just for thrills. “Like jumping gorges,” explained one recently arrived young boy from upper New York City, “or jumping off bridges.” Another likened it to mountain climbing and leaving a flag at the peak.

Tracy 168, an established writer, made it sound natural: “We were like moles [as kids],” he told Craig Castleman, author of *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*. “If anyone chased us, we ran into the nearest subway station and we’d be gone [into the tunnels]. No one would follow us down there.”

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Runaways

“We’re not like the other people down here. We have the future.”

—Frederick (1972–1991)

IN 1988, TWO HOMELESS BOYS FOUND A LOOSE GRATE AT THE northern end of Riverside Park on Manhattan’s West Side. They lifted the metal grid and slipped into the underground for a safe night’s rest. They called it their hole. Over the next few years, other homeless boys and some girls, most of them runaways also looking for a place to rest, joined to create a community of about twenty teenagers in the hole.

One of the two founders was Frederick, a light-complexioned black youth with curly hair and a wide-eyed look. Born in New York, he had been on the streets since his mother became too addicted to alcohol and heroin to care for him or maintain an apartment. When he was twelve, one of his mother’s boyfriends raped him. After that he felt more comfortable away from their flat. He mostly hung around Penn Station, asking for handouts. He came to know the homeless men who lived there, and when his mother lost their apartment and moved in with her supplier, Frederick began to live with various homeless men in the cardboard shacks that lined the outsides of the station. He was thirteen years old.

“They took care of me,” Frederick says. “Sometimes I’d be laying next to them and I’d feel them getting hard but they didn’t make me do nothing,” he shrugs.

A social worker persuaded him to enter a foster home. “One night I was in bed and I hear my foster dad come up to my room. ‘Whatcha want?’ I say. I knew it would be bad cuz he didn’t turn on the lights. He just wanted to say good night, he says, but then he starts kissing me and put his hand over my mouth and raped me. I left after that bullshit!” he spits out with unusual anger.

“I think I became gay after that,” he adds, reverting to his passive manner.

After a few more months on the street, he registered himself at the Covenant House, a shelter in Manhattan for runaway and homeless youths.

“Too many rules there,” he complains. “When to eat, when to sleep, what you had to do if you wanted to stay.”

By age fourteen, Frederick was profoundly cynical toward anyone who wasn’t living on the streets. “On the streets you know what people want,” he explains. “Sex, drugs, food, warm clothes. You know what they’re after. People who got homes, I don’t know what they want. I never been like them. They say they just want to help you for nothing, but no one wants to do anything for nothing. Everyone wants something. I can’t figure what they want but a good fuck.”

Back at Penn Station, he lived with several different men. “They started giving me money and I figure I could keep getting fucked for nothing or I could get money for getting fucked. It stopped bothering me. I took money.”

On a cold spring day, he remembers, he met David at the station. A runaway from a foster home in Illinois, David is a skinny, red-haired boy. He was “just sittin’ there on his hot dog [duffel bag] like this,” Frederick hunches over with his head hung miserably in his hands, “and he doesn’t move so I go up to him because he was my age and I thought I could help him. I said ‘you want a donut or something?’ He was like a puppy. I had to take care of him. Turns out he was gay, too, molested and all by his stepfather when he was only seven.”

If David resembles a puppy, he looks like an incorrigible one—playful, soft, and vulnerable. He is also annoying, unable to stay with a conversation for more than a few minutes, and a habitual liar.

“He’s a congenital liar,” Chris Pape says. “One day he’ll tell you he’s dying of cancer and the next day it’s tuberculosis. He even lies about things that aren’t important, like what he had for dinner.”

Tunnel people become irate at his stories at times. He was one of a group of underground homeless who appeared on Sally Jesse Raphael's talk show about mole people. The story of his life that he related there was totally different from the one he told me just two months earlier. Bernard was part of the audience and became so furious during the show that he rose and challenged David.

"I don't know where he was coming from with all those stories about how horrible we got it in our tunnel," Bernard says. "He always said he loved our tunnel. All those stories about how bad it is in our tunnel were made up. It's pitiful," he says disgustedly.

David often goes into a bookstore with young boys for whom he buys comics. Pape often sees him there and, because David is so unscrupulous, he suspected David intended to take the boys into the tunnels for sex. But he didn't. "I've followed him several times, and I've never seen him touch any of the boys," says Pape. "I think he just likes their company. He relates to them better than adults or even teenagers. Mentally, he is very young."

Frederick and David began turning tricks in their hole on the Upper West Side with homeless men in the tunnels as well as working men from the streets. They were joined by Carlos and Dameon, teenagers whom they found homeless in the park.

"I don't usually like it," Frederick said of the sex when I last saw him. "But I don't care much. I know I'm gay." That summer he had huge dark rings under his sad eyes and was frighteningly thin. He swore he was well, "just stomach flu I can't get rid of," he insisted in a hollow voice.

"Anyway, it can't be AIDS cause you can't get it until you're at least twenty. A doctor who came down here for a quick one told me that."

Frederick died of AIDS-related pneumonia the fall of 1991. Dameon died a few months later.

David now wanders the tunnels and has withdrawn even further from truth. "After Frederick died, David turned to all lies," says Carlos. "He don't even admit he's gay anymore."

Frederick had brought into the hole two young runaway girls from Iowa, Monica and Felicia, "to shelter them from the men up top," says Carlos, who has accepted the responsibility for them. "Frederick told me I was gonna hafta take care of the girls until they found their way. I don't know how to, but I'll try." He worries about leaving them in the hole while he is away because homeless men still go there seeking the boys and might rape the girls.

"Frederick was always looking out for me." Carlos continues as he explains his debt to the older boy. "He took all the bad ones [men] who came down to the hole and refused to pay for it. They scared me. They'd hurt you.

"One time I told Frederick that I didn't know if I was really gay, and he told me to stop doing tricks, that I didn't need to; he'd take care of me. So I did stop, and I felt better. After he died, I was walking the park, all sad and stuff, and it was like Frederick entered my head. I decided never to get screwed by any guy again. I didn't need to, and I decided to stand up for myself and take care of the others like Frederick did."

Carlos, who is seventeen, decided that the community would move deeper into the tunnel, away from the entrance that was so well known, but more accessible to the surface at a different spot. "It's a good place because the girls can just walk out and sneak into the back door of a welfare hotel and take showers and stuff," he says proudly. "They've never been bothered."

"We let other kids, real young ones, live with us and we sort of set up camp for them. We think of Frederick a lot and the things he used to say to us. Sometimes I miss him, but I'm not sad for him. Because he can't be anywhere worse than where he was here.

"Sometimes I wish he could see all we done. We made it much better than it was, and I think he'd be proud," he says sheepishly. "We've changed everything but the name. We can't call it home. We still call it the hole."

However, the rules have changed. "No sex in the hole," Carlos says flatly. "No drugs, either. We do that for the girls," he confides, "because they don't do no drugs, usually."

No dating among those who live in the hole either?

"Hadn't thought about that." After a pause he says, "We're like brothers and sisters. Who'd wanna date?"

A FAIRLY SIMPLE TAPPING CODE ON THE TRAPDOOR GAINS ENTRY TO the runaways' hole. The faces are all young. Some are open and trusting, others tough and closed. Their short personal histories vary, but most come from foster homes, group homes, or orphanages. A few left close families to ease the strain on their impoverished parents. Their anger and depression are understandable. The surprise is the amount of hope and caring among them.

Monica and Felicia

"I SEE PEOPLE IN SOUP KITCHENS SOMETIMES WHO HAVE LOST HOPE," says Felicia, a bright-eyed, fifteen-year-old white girl. "Like a man the other day who just stared at his plate. I couldn't get him to eat. I saw a teardrop fall into it, but he didn't move the whole time. I cried all day after that. That's the only thing we got, is hope. All of us are gonna make it someday. That's what keeps us going."

Felicia's sister Monica is two years older. They ran away from their Iowa home a year earlier, after their stepfather molested Felicia. Monica called the police, but they did not arrest the man. Their mother seemed to believe the girls, but, says Monica plaintively, "she wanted him more." So they packed up and headed for New York City.

"I figured it was far enough away from them," Monica says, "and we can make it here, we can." The two never considered entering Covenant House or another shelter for fear they'd be separated or sent back to the parents.

Monica lied about her age to get a job as a waitress in a seedy bar. “If I get really good at it, I can go work as a hostess at a really nice place and meet a really rich man and marry him, and we’ll be set for life,” she smiles, hope still alive in her rich brown eyes.

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