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Into the woods

Books

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by Jim Piechota



In the Vale of Cashmere by Thomas Roma; powerHouse Books, \$30

In his densely-bound pictorial treasure *In the Vale of Cashmere*, poet-photographer and monographer Thomas Roma celebrates the rarefied, thinly-veiled existence of cruising areas, namely Brooklyn's Prospect Park, a secretly humming haven for African-American gay men on the prowl.

Some believe public park cruising areas, stigmatized for their association with perilous desperation and depravity, have become as extinct as color-coded bandanas, disco, and telephone sex-lines. Instead, the modern horndog generation gets to see who is readily available for takeout with the touch of a fingertip on a hook-up phone

app. Yet the thrill of the outdoors and the lust for anonymous encounter persist to this day. With the presentation of these 75 black-and-white portraits and landscapes, Roma unforgettably ushers one American park and its hallowed area called the Vale of Cashmere out of the shadows and into the spotlight as a clandestine grotto of social and sexual communion for men of color. Less popular than the 36-acre "wild garden" of the Ramble in Central Park, this destination caters to a minority who cherish its exclusivity, its primal urgency, and the natural beauty of both the wood and the walkers.

A vivid, informative introduction provided by Jamaican-born poet and Lambda Literary Award finalist G. Winston James tells the history of the 585-acre Brooklyn park, first opened in 1867, and of its darkest era, when a serial killer took the lives of four men in 2000. He also writes of the risks one takes when venturing forth into the park under cover of encroaching dusk. James writes that while his image is not featured in its pages, he

believes he is "metaphorically represented" in Roma's pictorial "as an Afro-Caribbean gay man who sought sex in the Vale of Cashmere, and by my very nature as one who has been given to erotic chase in public spaces."

In a project begun in 2008, Roma spent three-and-a-half years dipping in and out of the wooded areas of the Vale and the Rose Garden located above it, asking permission to memorialize who and what he'd witnessed there, and to produce these photographs. He dedicates the book to Carl Spinella, a close friend, former roommate and frequent visitor to the Vale, who died in his arms from AIDS-related maladies. Roma's strolls into the Vale began in memory of Spinella.

Some photographs are starkly beautiful while others are mysterious, haunting, and seductively inviting. The faces and the gestures speak of sexual identity and community. A tank-top blows in the breeze on a bare tree limb at the crest of a hill; random cruisers cling to the edge of a paved trail; gloves, newspaper shreds, torn condom packets, and hats adorn downed tree stumps. The afternoon sun sets on the distinct, chiseled features of black men shrouded behind bushes or obscured by wildflowers, under ball caps or tucked deep inside hoods: fat, thin, shirtless, do-ragged, some framed by afros, dreads, and bald heads.

Artistically stunning, pensive and thought-provoking, Thomas Roma's photos are representative of our diversity, of the vast differences that separate us, the enduring struggle uniting our hearts, and the carnal and communal nature of our collective desires.