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EXPOSURES THOMAS ROMA

## The Men of the Vale

*Thomas Roma is the director of the photography program at the Columbia University School of the Arts and the author of 14 books, most recently "In the Vale of Cashmere."*

I FIRST became aware of the Vale of Cashmere in Prospect Park one summer evening in 1976, when a dear friend of mine, Carl, asked me for a lift. He said he was meeting someone, and I ended up dropping him off on a quiet stretch of Flatbush Avenue halfway between Grand Army Plaza and the zoo, where he entered the park through a hole cut in the fence. I came to learn that it wasn't the first or last time he would go through that fence, and I later got to know some of the men he met on the other side.

I again stumbled upon the Vale in the spring of 2001. Late one afternoon while my son was at baseball practice in the Parade Grounds, I crossed Parkside Avenue to take a walk in the park. I found myself wandering down a lane that led to a sunken, overgrown fountain. I had thought I knew every inch of the park, but suddenly I was in a place I'd never seen before: a secret garden crisscrossed with a maze of hidden paths and roadways. Not until I followed a dirt trail to the top

of a ridge and saw the fence below me, with the hole still in it, did I realize where I was. Ten years had passed since Carl had died. I sat on a bench trying to take it all in, and decided to take photographs there in his memory.

After a few false starts, I committed to working between late afternoon and sunset three or four days a week, walking the paths with my medium-format camera mounted on a tripod. I photographed the landscape between 2008 and 2011 and introduced myself to the men I encountered. I'd ask them if I could make a portrait for a possible book, explaining that the long exposure I had to use, between 1 and 6 seconds, meant they'd have to stay very still. Many declined, but many said yes, and I was grateful every time they did.

The resulting photographs are about a time and place — a meeting place, where black, Latino and other gay and bisexual men have long sought one another out to fulfill their wish for community and to satisfy sexual desire.







PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS ROMA/STEVEY KASHER GALLERY, FROM "IN THE VALE OF CAHMERE"



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Thomas Roma.  
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