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—The Self-Made Man—

A cult writer turns 40 and struggles to come to terms with his traumatic childhood as he tries to make the leap to Hollywood.

By Ashwin Seshagiri

On a weekday evening in San Francisco's Mission District, the cult writer Stephen Elliott paced the length of a small bar as a crowd of fans waited eagerly outside. They were lined up for the Monthly Rumpus, a recurring variety show to promote the culture and literary website that Elliott launched in 2009. It was September and warm, and everyone was all smiles.

Inside, the space was dimly lit; a handful of red light bulbs dangled from the ceiling. The place doubled as a theater, and smelled like a mixture of bleach and beer yeast. Standing near the entrance, Elliott wore a pilled-at-the-collar green t-shirt, torn-at-the-knee jeans and black court shoes that have seen better days. Tattoos peeked out from underneath his sleeves, and he had holes in his ears where large metal loops used to be. He didn't look like much. The mass of people outside weren't there for his looks.

Elliott is the author of seven books over the past 14 years, including "The Adderall Diaries" and "Happy Baby," the latter of which was named one of the best books of 2004 by Salon and the Village Voice. The story of a troubled S&M addict who struggles with memories of his traumatic childhood, "Happy Baby" was edited by Dave Eggers and translated into Danish, Italian and German. The New York Times Book Review said it was "surely the most intelligent and beautiful book ever written about juvenile detention centers, sadomasochism, and drugs."

The year "Happy Baby" came out, Elliott wrote "Looking Forward To It," a personal narrative about following presidential candidates around the country before the 2004 Democratic primaries. In the following years, he used his growing literary acclaim to raise money for liberal political candidates by hosting fundraisers where writer friends read excerpts from their books. Prior to the 2008 election, Elliott helped raise more than \$500,000 for Barack Obama. The New Yorker writer Ariel Levy once called him "the most well-connected person in his income bracket."

Elliott has covered politics for the Huffington Post, followed bands for Spin magazine and written erotica collections that appeared in Best American Sex Writing anthologies. His website, TheRumpus.net — featuring short stories, book reviews, cartoons and sex columns from contributors — now receives 700,000 pageviews a month. When he adds his own contributions — he sends them out in the form of email newsletters called the Daily Rumpus — they appear as

stylized diary entries. Elliott's emails describe running away from home as a teenager, dominatrixes dragging him around on leashes and his constant struggles with loneliness.

His success comes from making public what most people guard privately. In his fiction, he invents plots, characters and conflicts to talk about the real trauma in his own life. His angry father, his mother's death when he was young, the three months he spent in a mental institute — they all appear in his writing, along with tales of sexual escapades in Amsterdam and drug binges in Chicago. Elliott has made a name for himself by loading works with tales of addiction, masochism, homelessness and hopelessness. He's about to do it again.

Elliott recently co-wrote and directed a film called "Cherry." Marketed as an insider's look at the sex industry, the film will soon be distributed by IFC Films. It stars James Franco; Heather Graham, who appeared in "Boogie Nights"; and Dev Patel, the star of "Slumdog Millionaire." Elliott spent the better part of the past year and a half hopping back and forth from New York and Los Angeles to complete "Cherry," dedicating his life to his debut film. But on this evening in the Mission District, like he often does, Elliott made a point of coming back to San Francisco to host the Monthly Rumpus.

Fans shuffled into the bar, called the Makeout Room, and the opening act started playing folk music. Elliott then made his way to the other side of the venue. As he moved through the crowd, fans offered hugs and hellos. The venue was nearly filled to its 200-person capacity.

"All I want to do is direct these days," Elliott told me. "It's awesome. You get to interact with people. I'm happier when I'm interacting with people."

When the music died down, Elliott took the stage. A bearskin was hooked to the wall beside him, next to velvet red drapes lining the short perch at the far end of the bar. Behind him hung The Rumpus banner, with the tagline: "Waste Time Better."

Elliott squinted at the crowd. The cropped curls of his hair glinted as he shifted his stance. He pointed to his ribs and joked that the evening's event was going to disappoint like one of his relationships.

"This reminds me of the time one my girlfriends carved 'possession' into my side," Elliott said with a matter-of-fact delivery. "She misspelled it. It's when I figured it wouldn't work out."

The crowd laughed. He smiled. The lights shining on Elliott made him seem larger than his 5 foot 9 frame. After lobbing a few more jokes, Elliott introduced the first act of the evening and drifted to the back of the room.

"I like being on stage," Elliott told me. "When you're a writer, it's a very a solitary thing. I like the lights shining on me."

Elliott says he began writing in 1981 — a year after his mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis — to make sense of the world. He grew up in a middle class neighborhood on Chicago's north side and comes from a family of writers. His father, who made his living in real estate, wrote short fiction and plays (he wrote "The Autobiography of Jesus Christ," which was put out by a print-on-demand publisher); his older sister is now a health reporter for a trade publication.

"I started writing when I was 10, and I just kept doing it," Elliott told me. "I didn't realize it at the time, but it was a release valve."

Over the next few years — as Elliott has recounted in interviews, in his books and in essays published on various websites, including *The Rumpus* — he watched his mother slowly erode on his family's couch. He and his sister would bathe her. Every day, he would empty the urine bucket she kept by her side.

During that time, Elliott's behavior wasn't entirely angelic. The year he started writing, scribbling poems and taping them to his bedroom walls, he began smoking cigarettes and weed. He and his friends grew their hair long and broke into parking meters. Elliott said he was drinking and dropping acid by 12.

His mother died when he was 13. After her death, Elliott's father had become angry and his behavior appeared erratic, according to Roger Dimitrov, Stephen's childhood best friend. Dimitrov, now a psychology PhD student in Chicago, remembers Stephen's father as imposing and icy. ("When he enters the room, the temperature falls," Dimitrov told me.) Once, Elliott has written, his father shaved his head after an argument. Not long after, he handcuffed Stephen to a pipe in their basement.

Elliott ran away after that and, as he does with most things in his life, he eventually used those stories in his work. The head shaving and handcuffs incidents appeared in his second novel, "A Life Without Consequences," on *The Rumpus*, and more recently in "The Adderall Diaries."

"I was chased away by my father's rage," Elliott wrote in "The Adderall Diaries," which is presented as non-fiction memoir. "Transformed by it, perhaps. That's what the caseworkers could never understand. It wasn't the handcuffs or the beatings or his shaving my head. That was nothing. It was the terror."

When he ran away, he wrote, he first slept in broom closets of nearby apartment buildings or above the Quik Stop market near his family's home. If he was cold, he hid out in a laundromat. Stephen spent his 14th birthday drinking cheap vodka in the basement of a building he had broken into. Eventually, months after he had left home, the police found Stephen sleeping in a doorway, and hauled him in. Stephen became a ward of the state, living in and out of group homes or on friends' couches until he turned 18.

No one who knew him well doubted Stephen's intellect. Dimitrov moved to Florida in his early teens and remembers how Stephen figured out how to hack AT&T's phone system so they could call each other for free. Stephen earned straight A's in his last two years of high school and competed in chess tournaments as a teenager, reaching the sixth-ranked spot for his age group in Chicago.

Stephen went on to study history at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. During his junior year, he told me, he dropped out and moved to Amsterdam. He worked as a barker in the red light district, luring passersby on the street into live sex shows. Theo, the main character in "Happy Baby," does the same.

Amsterdam, Elliott has written, was where he had his first encounter with sadomasochism. It was an experience he described in explicit detail in an essay on the culture and sex website Nerve.com: One night, he went home with a burly Dutch woman he met at a hostel. She had spiky hair, clay-colored skin and called herself "mommy." He spent the night sobbing as she tied him up, gagged him, held a knife to his genitals and molested him with a strap-on dildo. He felt oddly comforted and terrified by what she did to him.

"When she was done," he wrote, "I slept curled in a ball facing her, my forehead against her collarbone, her heavy arm across my shoulder."

Throughout his college years, Elliott kept writing. When he returned to school, he started gaining recognition for his work.

"In my senior year, I won an undergraduate competition for a short story I had written," Elliott said. "I thought, 'Crap, I can get paid for this?'"

After college, Elliott returned to Chicago, and worked odd jobs as he tried to get his work published. For several months, he worked as a stripper on the city's north end. That job later inspired Elliott's third novel, "What It Means to Love You," a story of three dancers who navigate Chicago's sex work underworld. He also began hanging out with other writers, filmmakers and artists — bright, creative people who, like himself, had tough upbringings. With them, he experimented with cocaine and other drugs.

By the time he entered graduate school for film studies at Northwestern University, Elliott told me, he was shooting heroin. Once, he injected himself with a dose that nearly killed him. (The scene appeared in "The Adderall Diaries.") It was Thanksgiving of 1995, he said, and he spent eight painful days in a hospital bed recovering from his overdose.

There is no such thing as a turning point in Elliott's life. What's clear is the role writing has played in helping him escape his circumstances, especially the agonizing ones. After his overdose, Elliott published his first professional story, which was about an encounter he once had with his father. It appeared in a nonprofit monthly magazine called *The Sun* in 1996. He was living out of his car at the time, driving cross-country.

When it was published, the story received no critical attention. Elliott craved recognition, he told me, and to achieve that, he decided he needed to produce something better for a publication with a wider circulation. The next few stories he submitted to publications were all rejected.

"So I thought, okay, I need to write a novel," Elliott said. "That will get me the reaction and feedback that I need."

He wrote the novel. It was called "Jones Inn." It was based on journals Elliott kept during the months he was on heroin. "Unsuccessful," Elliott called it. "Of course." Boneyard Press, which publishes horror comics and biographies of serial killers, released 2,000 copies of the book, with his name misspelled on the cover. (The second "T" was dropped from his last name.)

In 1998, Elliott moved to San Francisco on a whim. Three years later, he received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship, a prestigious award to spend two years writing in residence at Stanford University. Raymond Carver, Vikram Seth and Tobias Wolff have all been Stegner Fellows. The fellowship was the first time Elliott had dedicated himself purely to the craft of writing. While there, he sold two novels — "A Life Without Consequences" and "What It Means to Love You" — and laid the foundation for "Happy Baby."

The story of "Happy Baby" travels backward in time, following the novel's narrator Theo as he copes with the emotional scars he suffered at group homes as a child. Dave Eggers, the book's editor, said that the reverse chronological order of the book was a happy accident; Elliott had unintentionally sent in sections of the manuscript backward, and Eggers thought the story was more powerful ordered that way. Salon.com's review of "Happy Baby" claimed it was "a most impressive little novel, heartbreakingly and bewilderingly alive in a way most bigger books can't even imagine."

Elliott's memoir, "The Adderall Diaries," came out in 2009. The book is about how he coped with a paralyzing spat of writer's block by self-medicating with a drug

commonly used to treat ADHD. He begins by following a murder trial in the Bay Area, but the book ultimately shifts to ruminations about Elliott's own past and his struggles with his father.

When the New York Times opted not to review it, he was crushed.

So, Elliott decided to publicize the book himself. He organized a lending library, offering an advance copy of the book to readers if they would pass it on to others after a week. He also went on what he called a do-it-yourself book tour across the country, reading in people's homes if they agreed to host at least 20 people. He filled 73 readings in 33 cities in three months. The tour was covered in the Times. He also developed an iPhone app for "The Adderall Diaries," creating one of the first interactive apps for a book. It included a discussion board for readers to talk about the memoir with others, 60 extra pages of book tour diaries, a video interview and a feed to keep readers up to date with news and events. The Times ran a story on that, too.

Then along came James Franco — the Academy Award nominated star of "127 Hours," "Milk" and the "Spiderman" trilogy — who optioned the film rights to Elliott's memoir. It wasn't for much money, Elliott said, only \$2,500. But the deal represented more than a financial transaction.

"I just think you have to change when your work gets stale," he said. "That's why people go from one medium to another, but it's not the medium, it's what comes before that. It's why you want to express yourself. That's the highbrow way of talking about it. The lowbrow way, you know, is: I need attention and this is how I get it."

By the time of the "Adderall Diaries" option, Elliott had begun developing a reality TV show for the Showtime Network about San Francisco-based Kink.com, the world's largest fetish porn website. At Kink, Elliott teamed up with Lorelei Lee, an adult film star with a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from New York University. The two began collaborating on the screenplay for a film called "Cherry," which is based on Lee's life. It is the coming-of-age story of a girl who runs away from home before she finishes high school and winds up making adult films in San Francisco.

Elliott told me he wrote "Cherry" with Franco in mind, and at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah last year, Elliott began convincing the Hollywood star to play a supporting role in it. Elliott didn't have a director at the time. He recognized that the \$500,000 he had raised to produce the film wasn't going to attract an established director, so Elliott decided to direct it himself.

"Because there were all these famous people in the movie, I knew that all the investors were going to get their money back," Elliott told me one afternoon last

fall in Los Angeles as he edited the film. "They were really just hoping that I didn't blow it."

Elliott sat barefoot in the dining room of an apartment above Sunset Boulevard that he and his editor had rented to complete "Cherry." Heavy curtains were drawn closed and ornate picture frames littered the walls. On the dark wood dining table in front of him, Elliott had connected a flat-screen TV to a laptop computer. With one hand, he gingerly ran his fingers along the laptop's keyboard. With the other, he tilted the TV screen to get a better look at it. He then tapped the spacebar key and began reviewing scenes that his editor had finished that morning.

In one scene, the protagonist's mother, played by Lili Taylor, vomits in the bathroom of the family's apartment. The character has a drinking problem, and the protagonist, Angelina, holds her mother's hair back.

As the mother flushes the toilet, leans back and, in agony, says there's nothing left to come out, we hear the sound of the front door slamming off screen. An angry voice shouts: "What the fuck happened here?" Then, a large man in a work uniform trounces toward the two women. The shot is low and we can't see his face. Throughout the movie, we hardly ever see the stepfather's face but it is clear he is menacing. The scene cuts back to the bathroom. As the man peers inside, Angelina slams the door on him. "Everything is fine," she says.

"No, not everything is fine, Angelina," he barks from the outside, banging and kicking the door with his boots. "I work all day for this shit!"

The scene ends with a tight shot on Angelina. We hear sounds of the mother writhing on the floor close by. Glass shatters in the next room as the man continues his tirade. The film cuts away with Angelina looking dejected, staring into a far corner of the bathroom, shaking her head.

In a previous cut of the film that Elliott showed me, this scene appeared about a quarter of the way in. But in this new version it would now be one of the first scenes. Elliott said he wanted viewers to get a clearer sense of why the protagonist runs away. Having seen different iterations of the film, the reorganization makes the plot easier to follow. But the allusion to Elliott's upbringing in this scene is hard to miss — a sick mom, an angry father figure, a runaway teenager. "Cherry" is not about Elliott, but his life bled into it anyway.

Elliott often says that he doesn't know how he feels about anything until he writes about it. Like other writers and artists, he uses his craft to process his life experiences — to put them out in the world as a way to understand and reconcile them, make them real. There is one topic that, for much of his career, Elliott has seemed stuck on: his father.

In “A Life Without Consequences,” the father character is a man bound to a wheelchair, who talks through his whiskers, “chewing on his words.” Elliott describes the man as a “monster, Frankenstein, a machine.”

The monster analogy recurs in his autobiographical writing. “The monster was irrational and impossible to tame or hold to account,” he wrote in a Daily Rumpus letter from November 2010. “You could see the fur rising with each breath. And if you woke the monster you didn’t know what would happen.”

In “The Adderall Diaries,” Elliott wrote that his father blamed him for his mother’s illness, even when he was a child and the state threatened to take custody of him. “Before the hearings,” Elliott wrote, “my father whispered to me outside the courtroom, ‘You killed your mother,’ something he still says in the notes he sends to me.”

When Elliott turned 18, he briefly moved into the home of Maria Duryea-Kmiec, a then-single mother of a school friend. She has seen the trauma of Elliott’s childhood in nearly all of his adult writing. “I know there was this bitter anger that drove him for a long, long time,” she said when I reached her by phone. “Through all the books, you can hear it, you can touch it, you can taste it. The pain, the nonchalant talk about horrible things happening to people like it was nothing, but it wasn’t nothing. He was deeply affected by it.”

Duryea-Kmiec recalled one time when Elliott had a book reading in Chicago, and there was a heckler in the crowd — his father.

“He started shouting out during the middle of the reading,” Duryea-Kmiec said. “‘Oh, there I am! The abusive father!’ We were in the Borders, and nobody knew what to do. One minute he’d be saying, ‘Isn’t he the most wonderful boy in the room?’ The next minute he’d say, ‘Oh, the poor abused child... It’s utter nonsense.’ Finally, he just sat down like it was nothing. We were all so shocked and offended.”

So was Elliott, she said. He froze in front of the crowd and turned pale.

I asked Elliott once whether he remembered any nice moments from his childhood. He recalled his dad teaching him how to drive, when Stephen was 12. “He had this giant convertible,” Elliott said. “It was a 1970 Cougar, sky blue, with white leather interior and original hub caps. The red, white and blue ones. He would take me to the parking lot at the park, and let me drive around. It was our best moments.”

It was such a vivid memory — beautiful and detailed — that I wanted to know if Elliott’s father also remembered it. I found a phone number for him in Evanston, the Chicago suburb he had moved to, but it was disconnected. I later tracked

down his email address and wrote to him one night last November. By morning, he had responded.

"I don't know why he always tells people I taught him to drive in the Cougar," Elliott's father wrote back. "In actual fact, I taught him to drive at age 15 in a green 1968 Oldsmobile, 4-door Delmont, in the parking lot at Warren Park, in the summer of 1986."

It struck me as strange that his father would dispute one of the few warm memories that Stephen has said the two shared. But, as I would learn over the following months, Neil Elliott disputes many dates and details of their past. After our first exchange, Stephen's father started emailing me with some regularity. He wouldn't talk to me by phone, he said; he'd tell me about his son only if we kept communication to emails. His notes were long and raw, berating his son, discounting the bad-father stories. In one email, I received 31 attachments with old letters and family photos — images of an adolescent Stephen locked arm-in-arm with his dad, smiling.

"One of the myths that Steve has promoted is that we were estranged," Elliott's father wrote. "Even while he was on the streets, I frequently took him and his pals out for steaks. He was taken by the State of Illinois in August of 1986. In December of 1986, I learned that he was living in a group home near one of my apartment buildings, and I gave him work painting apartments and doing other things. And from that time on we were no longer estranged."

Stephen doesn't deny that he saw his father after he left home. But he has not said his relationship with his father was good.

As Stephen's writing career took off, he noticed his father leaving a "trail of denials" on his Amazon.com reviews and other places online. "I had based my identity on a year spent sleeping on the streets and the four years that followed," Elliott wrote in his memoir. "It wasn't much of a foundation. He was questioning my story, telling anyone who would listen that I had made up the whole thing, my entire life."

Stephen found himself qualifying the accounts of his past, starting off all his stories by saying that people remember things differently — something he continues to do in interviews.

"I wondered how much I had mythologized my own history, arranged my experiences to highlight my success and excuse my failures," he wrote in his memoir. "How far had I strayed from the truth?"

Critics, including his father, have drawn parallels to James Frey's "A Million Little Pieces," the memoir of addiction that landed on Oprah's book club. The book later drew controversy when it was discovered to be largely fictionalized.

As long as people have been telling stories of the past, there has been a tension between what people remember and what really occurred. For Elliott, who uses fiction to explore the material of his own memories, this tension is exaggerated by the shocking nature of his work and the frequency with which he so openly talks about the traumatic events of his childhood. The tension is further magnified each time his father disputes one his stories.

"I don't know the year or make of the car," Elliott responded when asked again about the time his dad taught him how to drive. "That's not important. There's a handful of facts in the world, but they are dwarfed by interpretation and memory. A lie requires intent. "

As Elliott was writing "The Adderall Diaries," he went to see his father. He told me he wanted there to be a way for them to reconcile their starkly different versions of the past. (The scene also appeared in the memoir.) The two had barely talked in years, and both seemed ready to forgive. They met in Chicago, beside Lake Michigan, and exchanged awkward apologies for their behavior throughout the years. At one point, Stephen told his father that he realized he loved him. It was a moment both men recounted to me.

His father offered to help Stephen with "The Adderall Diaries," saying that there were things he remembered that he could add to the story.

"I tell him he doesn't even remember how many high schools I went to. And anyway, the memories are the point," Elliott wrote in his autobiography. "What we remember, and how we order and interpret what we believe to be true, are what shapes who we are. I tell him the book is for me."

Throughout his career, Elliott found himself in a cycle of telling his life story — recounting, over and over, what happened to him in the hope that one day he'll arrange his memories in just the right combination to unlock their grip on him. It took him six other books, a handful of short-story collections and hundreds of email newsletters to find a way to come to terms with his childhood. Facts or embellishments, his memories of the past were part of his narrative. Those close to Elliott noticed a change after he wrote "The Adderall Diaries."

"When he wrote the last book, it was like a catharsis," Duryea-Kmiec said. "It was this very painful process of steps. He came to this crossroads: Was he going to let this man run his psyche for the rest of his life or move on? *I'm done with this. I don't need this anymore.* The anger was gone. The bitterness was gone. It was done."

But it wasn't done for Neil Elliott. Stephen has not stopped writing about his past and, despite the reconciliation they both recounted to me, Neil can still be brutal when describing his own son.

"An idiot savant is someone who is not very smart, but has a special gift," Neil wrote in an email to me. "Steve has a writing gift, but he isn't smart. Ask him what he thinks of the universe, of God, of Darwinism. His intellect is very shallow."

Neil Elliott also sent me copies of old letters he had mailed to his son, in which he wrote that after Stephen's mother's death, Neil felt he must play the role of both parents. "I was a lousy mom," he wrote. "Didn't look after your nutrition. Didn't tuck you in a night [sic]. Didn't teach you anything about manners or cooking."

In his emails to me, Stephen's father described events that took place nearly two decades ago, with guilt and fury still ricocheting through his memories. Stephen, on the other hand, no longer reads his father's emails or listens to his voicemails, which Stephen still frequently receives. He has spent the past several years trying to move on.

"I can't remember how many years I walked down the street and imagined my hands wrapped around his throat," Elliott said plainly when I told him about his father's emails to me. "When I was angry with him, I was only hurting myself."

Seeing Elliott now, it's hard to tell his past was anything but mundane. He doesn't drink. He spends his evenings playing board games. On most Sundays in the fall, he obsesses over his fantasy football standings. His friends in San Francisco use the word "healthy" to describe him.

"Cherry" now represents an opportunity for Elliott to move past the cycle of his life story, but that opportunity poses a host of new questions: If he's no longer talking about himself, will people like what he has to say? What will Elliott's narrative become if he's no longer telling the world that he's a group-home kid defined by his mother's death and his father's rage?

"For Steve, it's always been about finding a reason to be lovable," said Roger Dimitrov, Elliott's childhood friend. "If he's a movie guy and has a position of power, it's, 'You have to like me because I'm this guy.'"

Dimitrov, however, questions where this is all heading for Elliott.

"The hurdles keep getting bigger and bigger," Dimitrov said. "First it was writing a book. Then it was writing a better book. Then it was getting reviewed in the New York Times. It keeps going bigger and bigger and I wonder where is it going to go? Will it get to a point where his need for approval is replaced by real intimacy?"

In February, "Cherry" debuted at the Berlinale in Germany, one of the world's leading film festivals. It received negative reviews.

Variety's take on the film read: "Elliott's graceless helming is utterly lacking in the sort of wit needed to put this sort of material across; at best, 'Cherry' could be described as camp in the original, Susan Sontag sense of the word, because it's clueless as to just how bad it is."

Days after the film's debut, Elliott was in Manhattan's Union Square, taking calls with his producers as groups of tourists shuffled around him. He hunched inside a down jacket and was visibly anxious. The film's poor showing in Berlin left him scrambling to finalize the theatrical release and distribution deals he had been negotiating for the film.

"I don't care about the money," he said as he walked along 4th Avenue. "If I break even on this, great. All I really care about is exposure."

It was sunny out. The only signs of winter were the leafless trees swaying in the wind. Elliott was headed to Housing Works, a bookstore located on a cobblestone street in SoHo. He would be hosting a Rumpus event there later that night.

A month earlier, while he was putting the finishing touches on "Cherry," Elliott launched a new project for the Rumpus called "Letters in the Mail." For five dollars a month, subscribers receive physical notes from well-known writers like Dave Eggers and Jonathan Ames. It was spur-of-the-moment inspiration for Elliott to start the program, but the throwback effort received significant attention in its first few weeks — the New York Times, the Guardian UK and USA Today all covered the launch. Recently, Elliott appeared on CBS' This Morning to promote "Letters."

Housing Works was big and airy; exposed ducting and tall, wide pillars gave it an industrial feel. People began filling the bookstore an hour before the event, which featured various writers reading excerpts from their letters. By the time Elliott went on stage to introduce the night's performers, fans had nearly overtaken the building.

As Elliott spoke, a small spotlight zeroed in on him. He had on what appeared to be his performance uniform: A Levi's-brand white t-shirt, which was turned inside out, and a pair of faded jeans.

"I used to write letters to my girlfriend," Elliott said. "Fifteen years ago, when she was traveling through Europe, I would send her letters *poste restante* to whatever town she was supposed to arrive in next. They were long, sometimes as long as 20 pages. I wrote them all by hand. She never wrote me back but it changed my writing."

Handing off the stage to the first reader, Elliott moved to the back of the crowd. After a few moments, he began scribbling in a small notebook. His elbows were pinned to his sides as his left wrist curled over the pages. As “Cherry” neared completion, Elliott began writing again about his past with detail in the Daily Rumpus — about how he ran away, the group homes or when he contemplated suicide.

I told him that his father continued to write to me about the past. He too was fixated on specific memories, like the time he shaved Stephen’s head.

“He trashed a house that I was desperate to sell to make a living for my family,” his father wrote to me. “He trashed it repeatedly so that each night after my other work I had to go in and clean and paint for hours. I controlled him, and gave him a crew cut military haircut. And I would do it again. That little son of a bitch had no business trying to keep me from making a living.”

Elliott smiled wryly when he heard what his father had written. “Did he tell you that he shaved my head twice?” Elliott asked. “The second time was when I tried to kill myself and was put in a mental hospital. I bet he didn’t tell you about that.”

Elliott said he doesn’t know if one can ever truly get over those kinds of experiences. But constantly looking back can get in the way of what’s happening in the present.

“It took a long time to stop thinking about those things,” Elliott said. “I’ve got other problems now. ”

Elliott turned 40 in December. Those close to him are settling down, buying homes and raising children. Elliott still lives like someone much younger. He rents an artist’s loft in San Francisco’s Mission District, but in the last year has hopped from his Los Angeles sublet to another sublet on the edge of Brooklyn’s Williamsburg neighborhood. After “Cherry” is released, Elliott says, he doesn’t know where he’ll live.

“I got so used to being homeless as a kid,” he said, “I never fully transitioned back into sitting and stable and in one place. It’s too easy for me to get up and go.”

The last act of the evening was the New York-based singer Alina Simone, who performed a song she had written about “Letters in the Mail.” Her voice was wistful as she sang about the nostalgia of hand-written letters. “The loneliest, the loneliest, the loneliest,” she sang, pointing to Elliott. “The loneliest, the loneliest one is you.”

Elliott isn't sure what his narrative is now, he told me. He just completed his first film, but he doesn't know what it will do for his career yet. He has spent his whole life thinking about what his childhood has meant, but these days, when he writes about things from his past, it means something entirely different for him.

"Now, I search through old stories to talk about something else," he said. "I want to write about disappointment, about the movie. The group homes are metaphors. I'm just using stories from my past to help me look around and understand the present."

Simone sang on. Elliott stood close to the stage, bobbing his head to the music. Periodically he scanned the room, calculating as to whether the crowd was having a good time. The next day he would get up and negotiate with producers again. He'd have to talk about the reviews and why they shouldn't hinder the film's release. He'd have to think about what his next project would be. But for that night — as Elliott watched fans of the Rumpus crowded into the bookstore — people were all there for him. Smiling, Elliott turned to Simone.

"I liked you better in your letters," Simone sang. "I liked you more as words on a page."