This chapter looks at the ways in which three gay men tell their stories of coming to London penniless in the 1950s and finding ‘home’ there. Their testimonies suggest ways in which the city and particular areas within it could accommodate and shape queer lives in different ways. They also suggest shared concerns about making home which relate to the social and cultural positioning of homosexual men in the post-war years. Rex Batten (b.1928) gathered his memories of the 1940s and 1950s in a fictionalised memoir, *Rid England of this Plague* (2006). There he describes his rural working-class upbringing and his first love affair with a middle class man called Ashley; his move to London to take up a scholarship at RADA; and his life in a bedsit in Camden, where he and his boyfriend John experienced a frightening brush with the law. I contacted Rex after reading his book and interviewed him at his current home in East Dulwich which he shared with John until his death in 1994. The novel, he told me then, was 90 per cent autobiographical.  

Alan Louis (1932–2011) got in touch with me after I advertised for project participants with older gay men’s groups in London, and I interviewed him in 2010 in the common room of his sheltered accommodation in Hackney. This for him did not feel like home and he reminisced chiefly about his ‘camp’ life in various houses in Notting Hill in the 1950s. He had moved there from his working-class family in Portsmouth, on England’s south coast, and over the years that followed worked in a series of relatively low-paid office jobs as well as DJ-ing. A friend gave me Carl Marshall’s hand-written health diary and memoir after his death in 2010. I had met him once before at his flat in Kennington on a social rather than research visit and so whilst Alan and Rex talked to me with my specific project in mind, Carl’s testimony was not geared in that way. He was born in 1938 and brought up in
Kent largely by his poverty-stricken grandmother. He moved to London in the late 1950s after deserting from the army where he had served in the band. He worked in a variety of low paid, largely service sector jobs whilst also making music. Latterly he focussed on his photographic work. His memoir traces the development of that work and his social and sexual adventuring (including on the burgeoning leather and SM scenes) until the late 1960s. It is, however, tellingly structured by the places he lived. This is the main way in which he orientated himself in London then and remembered the city and that period when he looked back from the 2000s.

Like Alan and Rex, Carl’s account is retrospective, coming – as with the others – some 50 years after the period he describes. He, they, shuttle back and forth, comparing times and places in their differently formulated accounts, and bringing into particular focus the complex dance they had to perform as they lived out their daily relationship, social and sexual lives in the city. This ‘evidence of experience’ allows us to recoup aspects of queer life in the 1950s and 1960s which would otherwise escape the archive. It is not, though, some base-line truth. It is necessarily partial and modulated by experiences and circumstances since – Rex’s more settled home from the 1960s, Alan’s disaffection with his later accommodation, and Carl’s ill-health from the late 1990s, for example. Their testimonies are laced sometimes with nostalgia and sometimes with relief at having moved on, and are shaped in particular ways by generic conventions of the novel, the memoir, or the structure of interview. These things do not invalidate what is said and they are not things I want to screen out. They indeed tell us something about the ways memories of earlier homes are caught up in complex and unpredictable ways in the later lives of these men. Domesticity is as much about the play of memory and personal history as it is about the circumstances of home life in any particular place and moment. The first part of what follows thus deals with Rex’s recollections of rural life and how those memories are wrapped into his account of his subsequent time in London in the 1950s. Alan’s and Carl’s testimonies then help to give a sense of the dangers and possibilities of the capital in those years – dangers and possibilities which, I suggest finally, are gathered into their later experiences and understandings of home.

**Homeward bound: Rex**

When Rex was 20 he moved from his family home in Dorset into his lover’s house in a nearby village. He lived with Ashley (not his real