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RAGE, REMEMBRANCE, REDEMPTION: THE POETIC RESPONSE TO AIDS

by

Samuel Douglas Ray

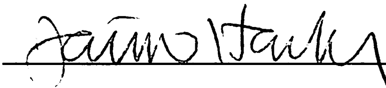
A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford

May 2007

Approved by

Director: Professor Ann Fisher-Wirth



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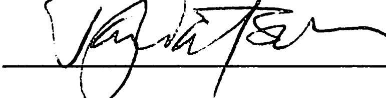

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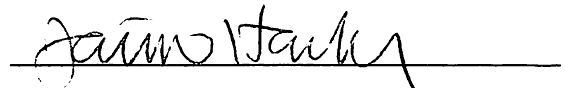

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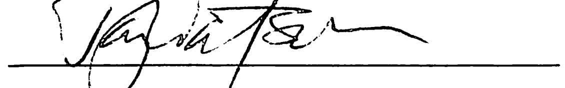

Reader: Professor Jay Watson

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To Ann Fisher-Wirth, Jaime Harker, Jay Watson, the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College staff, and friends – thank you. This project has been meaningful, thought-provoking, and passion-inspiring. I know that as I continue to revisit the work here in coming years, I will always be grateful for your guidance, support, encouragement, critiques, and, perhaps most of all, your laughter.

ABSTRACT

RAGE, REMEMBRANCE, REDEMPTION: The Poetic Response to AIDS
(Under the direction of Ann Fisher-Wirth)

This thesis explores the works of three poets whose works offer a response to the AIDS epidemic: Thom Gunn, Paul Monette, and Mark Doty. With chapters dedicated to each poet's work individually, the thesis examines the works in terms of thematic content, formal characteristics, and sociopolitical relevance. The three central chapters are framed by personal essays that also explore general characteristics of AIDS poetry in the great tradition of the elegy and the lyric. While all three poets offer narratives alternative to the political discourse surrounding the disease, each poet's response is unique – just as each poet's relationship to the disease is unique. The works studied here stand as cultural artifacts of the early days of the AIDS epidemic, when the disease had yet to reach the status of a global pandemic. The deeply personal and, at times, intensely political responses illustrate the struggle inherent in artistic activism – expressing the horrors of individual narratives while attempting to cry out collectively for recognition and response.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part 1 – Prelude........2

Part 2 – Form Elevating Utterance........10

Part 3 – Untamed, Unedited........23

Part 4 – Seeking Redemption Among the Ruins........54

Part 5 – Finale........87

Works Cited........93

Music

By Memory's daughters,

the Muses,

Forgetting,

named Lethe, is hated

And not to be loved.

O for mortals, what

Power there is in songs,

What greatest happiness

That can make bearable this

Short narrow channel of life!

- Sophocles, trans. Reginald Gibbons

Part 1

Prelude

I am part of the first generation of humans never to know a world unacquainted with the AIDS crisis. In fact, during my lifetime, AIDS has become not only a domestic issue affecting specific groups of people, but also a global crisis affecting hundreds of millions of people of every race, creed, sexual preference, nationality, and class. It is an indiscriminate disease. Sadly, though AIDS has had a real impact on the only world that my generation has known, I find it difficult to understand how little my peers care about the pandemic. We have come of age during a turbulent age, rife with examples of human cruelty – multiple wars, many examples of ethnic cleansing and genocide, devastating natural disasters, the proliferation of nuclear arms, and the devastating effects of humanity's destruction of the natural world, among others. My generation's acquaintance with disasters must not breed an acceptance of their causes or effects.

Additionally, though today's highly technical society offers immense exposure to information, I wonder if exposure has an impact resulting in action. Personally, I have found that studying the poetry of AIDS has impacted my understanding of the global

crisis by grounding statistics in personal narratives. As Thom Gunn begins one poem, "I shall not soon forget." Poetry is a powerful form of communication, inexplicable (for me, at least) in its roots and reaches. Federico García Lorca explains the mystical qualities of poetry in this way: "These black sounds are the mystery, the roots that probe through the mire that we all know of, and do not understand, but which furnishes us with whatever is sustaining in art. Black sounds: so said the celebrated Spaniard, thereby concurring with Goethe, who, in effect, defined the *duende* when he said, speaking of Paganini: 'A mysterious power that all may feel and no philosophy can explain'" ("The Duende: Theory and Divertissement"). Poetry as an artful form of communication has been a pillar of civilizations – from the agonistic epic poets of ancient Greece and the Augustan poets who sought, as Horace did, "to teach and to delight" (*docere et dilectare*) to the trench poets of World War I and the poets who simultaneously mourned losses and expressed outrage in response to the AIDS crisis. The sources of poetry may be mystery, but the potential impact is readily evident.

When I was born in Jackson, Mississippi, on October 14, 1985, over 10,000 Americans had already died of AIDS; *Time* had just released an issue with an article on Rock Hudson's "double life" and death of the disease; President Reagan had uttered the word "AIDS" in public for the first time only 28 days earlier; the CDC was holding the first International Conference on AIDS in Atlanta; ACT UP had yet to be founded; AZT had yet to be approved; Freddie Mercury, Liberace, Ryan White, Halston, Arthur Ashe, Paul Monette, and Easy-E had not yet died of the disease; Magic Johnson and Greg Louganis had not made announcements that they were infected; the AIDS Memorial

Quilt had not had its first stitches; *And the Band Played On* had not been written; *Angels in America* had not been performed. I was born in the panic of an epidemic, at a time when AIDS was popularly considered a "gay plague" and not a "global crisis." But, for some time, I would not know about the disease, the debates around it, the outrage expressed by many.

I first became acquainted with AIDS after my dad made a trip to San Francisco for business in 1995. His company, Roche, had recently received approval by the FDA to market a new HIV drug, Saquinavir. When he returned, he talked about the mobs of people picketing their meetings – demanding the company make available to the needy the miracle drug the company was hyping. I did not understand the reason for the picketers' urgency. Later that week, when I came home from school and watched a rerun episode of *Designing Women*, I learned a bit more about the disease. In that episode, a young man approaches the designers of Sugarbaker's to design a room for his funeral. Julia, Suzanne, Mary Jo, and Charlene (Dixie Carter, Delta Burke, Annie Potts, and Jean Smart) immediately wonder why someone so young would approach them for such arrangements. He then tells them that he has AIDS and that he contracted the disease from having unprotected sex with another man. Another client in the room, when she finds out that the rumors are true and that the women are designing a gay man's funeral, says, "I'll tell you one thing this disease has going for it: it's killing all the right people." After an impassioned tirade, Julia throws that woman out of their office. The episode then focused on a PTA meeting debate about sex education in the classrooms, where Mary Jo delivers a speech about her young client and the potential

consequences of not protecting oneself. As the show ends, the cameras focus on the young man's funeral; it looks more like a celebration, with people dressed in bright clothes and a band playing, jazz-style, "Just a Closer Walk with Thee."

Now, when I read the history of my own life alongside the history of the AIDS epidemic, which claims an estimated 8,000 lives per day, I realize that I have the burden of knowledge and the blessing of living. When I was in Washington D.C. in June 2004 as a United States Presidential Scholar, I attended a luncheon in the diplomatic reception rooms at the State Department. Secretary of State Colin Powell welcomed us to the historical rooms filled with famous paintings and pieces of furniture, such as Thomas Jefferson's desk. Then, we listened to a speech by the director of GlobalAIDS, Randall Tobias. His speech reflected his background; he had been the CEO of Eli Lilly, so he focused on the daunting numbers surrounding the disease – numbers of people, the economics of drugs. Because I had an already established interest in the subject, the numbers stayed with me, but many of my peers dismissed the speech as they would the daily stock market reports. There seemed to be an obvious disconnect in the manner in which the speaker approached his audience. The discourse simply was not urgent enough, nor personal enough to affect viscerally even the bright, young, idealistic audience.

But then I realized that the great humanizer of experience – pain, suffering, ecstasy, and everything in-between – is not politics, but the arts. AIDS has had a profound impact on the arts community. Dancers, actors, musicians, directors, writers,

painters have had their lives cut short by the disease and had their lives celebrated and mourned by the artists they left behind. Thus, when I decided to approach the history of this disease, I turned to responses of poets – not only to learn of the powerful experiences that shaped the poems, but to explore the lives of poets connected with AIDS and the poetry of AIDS in terms of empathy, politics, elegy.

To look at the poets who address AIDS is to see a sampling of the world of contemporary poetry. There are those who have the disease, those whose lovers have the disease, those who family members have the disease, those whose friends have the disease, those who treat the disease. There are gay men, straight men, gay women, and straight women who write about AIDS. The formal characteristics of the poems vary as greatly as the relationships of the poets to the disease. Some poets, in addition to writing poetry about their relationship to AIDS, have written memoirs and essays that seek to illuminate some aspect of grief, anger, and healing. That desire to illuminate, to hold a burning light to something difficult to see, serves as a foundation for the works I have read, as well as the analysis that I write.

In this thesis, I focus on the works of three poets: Thom Gunn, Paul Monette, and Mark Doty. All three men are / were gay poets, and each man writes about completely devastating losses. Their approaches, however, are decidedly unique – illustrating the breadth of poetry, the depth of grief, and the power of human resilience. The works studied here also represent works of AIDS poetry from an early point in poets' exploration of the crisis. AIDS poetry, as a genre, is vast. As I mentioned earlier,

it is representative of the lives that the disease affects – men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, rich and poor, rural and urban. I chose to focus on the works of these three poets to understand the gravity and devastation of the AIDS crisis in its early representations. A more comprehensive examination of AIDS poetry would certainly include an examination of the various AIDS poetry anthologies that have been produced, as well as poets such as Tory Dent, Rafael Campo, Timothy Liu, Tim Dlugos, and Richard Tayson, among others.

These three poets' works are part of a great literary tradition in American poetry – the lyric, perhaps even more specifically, the homosexual lyric. Gunn, Monette, and Doty build on the shoulders of the great father of the American lyric and the gay American lyric, Walt Whitman. Just as Whitman embraces the body as landscape of celebration and a geography of sensuality, so do these poets as they explore the tension between the body as a place of pleasure as well as pain in the face of AIDS. Furthermore, Whitman wrote during an incredibly important time in America. He is a lasting voice of the trying times of the Civil War – celebrating and elegizing, addressing his readership in an intimate, powerful manner. Similarly, AIDS poets wrote in response to a time of crisis during which bodies were imperiled by a wasting disease and the social and political responses were, as many would argue, inadequate. The lyrical "I" of Whitman, just like the lyrical "I" of Gunn, Monette, and Doty, invites the reader to step into a new way of seeing things, providing a pathway for an empathetic response at its best and, certainly, an opportunity for careful consideration.

Finally, before delving into these poets' works, consider the tensions surrounding AIDS discourse. *The New York Times* reported on the fifth of July 1995 that "Senator Jesse Helms, the North Carolina Republican who has vigorously fought homosexual rights, wants to reduce the amount of Federal money spent on AIDS sufferers, because he says, it is their 'deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct' that is responsible for their disease." And Jerry Falwell declared that "AIDS is God's judgment of a society that does not live by His rules," while William F. Buckley proposed that people with AIDS "should be tattooed...on the buttocks to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals." That sort of attitude is exactly what the work of the poets studied here fight against. As Mark Doty says in *My Alexandria*, "Don't let anybody tell you / death's the price exacted / for the ability to love." While political structures seek to demonize a virus and those plagued by it, poetry seeks to humanize them, to remember them, to illuminate their suffering.

Palea

Only my mouth taking you in, the greenery splayed deep green.

Within my mouth, your arm inserted, a stem of gestures, breaking gracefully.

Into each other we root arbitrarily, like bushes, silken and guttural.

Palaver, we open for the thrill of closing, for the thrill of it: opening.

The night was so humid when I knelt on the steps, wet and cold, of prewar stone.

A charm bracelet of sorts we budded, hand-made, but brazen, as if organic.

I cannot imagine the end of my fascination, emblazoned but feather-white too.

The gold closure of this like a gold coin is, of course, ancient.

Why can't experience disseminate itself, be silken and brazen yet underwater?

A miniature Eiffel Tower, an enameled shamrock, a charm owned by its bracelet.

- Tory Dent

PART 2

Form Elevating Utterance: Thom Gunn's The Man with Night Sweats

It is difficult to imagine cities like New York and San Francisco – neighborhoods like the Village and the Castro – during the advent of the AIDS crisis. What had become a haven for so many, a city on a hill for outcasts and deviants, was being decimated by a disease that had no cure and that used love as a means to death. The poets who were able to write about the decimation of a community had a powerfully difficult and important task, especially considering the political establishment, which seemed content to ignore the loss of thousands of gay men. Carolyn Muske writes about the challenges poets faced as they came eye to eye with the disease and their own emotions in her essay "Redefining the Elegy":

> The elegiac form, like a graveside path, has been worn smooth in places by the years, but the language of these poems is direct and unsparing in detail; it refuses literary phrasing or the phrasing of eulogy. Part of what fuels the unconventional response is the incongruousness of the dying themselves. The young and strong are disappearing, people at the height of their careers and talents. Children are dying. It is a monumental task to find words for any elegy. To describe the loss of so many who should

have lived into the next century strains all our notions of composition. (*Poets for Life* 10)

Yet, it is exactly that difficulty that underlies the poet's ability to elegize the young and strong that makes those poems acutely poignant. One fine example of a collection of elegies that laments the destruction of gay men and gay culture in San Francisco is Thom Gunn's *The Man with Night Sweats*.

Just over a year after the tenth anniversary of the identification of "patient zero" of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, British-born turned San Francisco-resident poet Thom Gunn published his book *The Man with Night Sweats*. The harrowing, boldly physical title sets the tone for the collection, which explores the physical pain and emotional anguish that an entire community, the gay community, experienced as a result of the epidemic in the early days. What distinguishes Gunn's collection of elegiac works from others in the canon of AIDS literature is the highly formal verse he employs. By representing homosexual desire and AIDS in traditional measures, Gunn filters his subject matter through a form associated with its opposite – heterosexual love and prosperity.

No one explanation exists for Gunn's choosing to write in carefully measured rhythms, but several plausible reasons arise. Considering the chaotic nature of the disease about which he writes and the havoc it reeks upon his subjects, the control exerted over his verse can be seen as an attempt to control the subject matter. Essentially, he seeks to render the infinite nature of death and destruction through

finite form, the unstructured disease through structure. Tyler B. Hoffman argues that "Gunn finds the generic associations of particular forms 'useful' insofar as they are capable of remythologizing gay life, moving those affected by the disease of AIDS from the margins to the cultural center" ("Modalities" 14). To recast the struggles of homosexual men suffering from AIDS in the same terms as heterosexual men in – for example – a warrior culture, Gunn uses those same forms that other poets employed across the ages. Thus the elegies for the marginalized enter into the canon of all people, regardless of prejudices or discriminatory attitudes.

Noting the extremely emotional nature of Gunn's choice of subject, it may seem odd that he uses such rigid forms rather than something more raw, more expansive. But one must consider the use of regular metrical patterns as mechanisms to control the elegiac emotions, similar to the drumming that accompanies a coffin or the subdued rhythms of hymns in a New Orleans jazz funeral. Hoffman notes that Gunn has an "acute awareness of the historical uses of a range of fixed forms, his connection to a poetic tradition that is not as heterosexually skewed as construction of it in the dominant culture suggest" ("Modalities" 15). Gunn himself argues that his articulation of "deviant" sexuality in received forms is not completely radical, saying, "It is possible to speak of the essential conservatism of all poetry, which through its language, its metric, etc., preserves and extends the values of tradition. Yes, but it does so through a paradox: for revolutionary activity is a firm part of that tradition" (qtd. in Hoffman 15). While Gunn's subjects are not conservative and are, for many, immoral, he is not revolutionary in his manner of speaking, which affirms, in some ways, the universality of

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grief and of suffering. And yet, such grief is compounded by social stigmatization and the sense of urgency that charges Gunn's verses; if he does not speak the painful stories of those who die, then no one else would do so. By bringing new experience as represented by the AIDS crisis to the traditional forms, he asserts the values of both the traditions of poetic form and homosexual experience.

The title poem, "The Man with Night Sweats," features a speaker who struggles with the onset of AIDS-related complications. It is the only poem in the collection narrated by a person with AIDS. He grapples with the reality of physical situation: the body that was once resilient is killing itself and refuses to heal:

> I wake up cold, I who
>
> Prospered through dreams of heat
>
> Wake to their residue,
>
> Sweat, and a clinging sheet.
>
> My flesh was its own shield:
>
> Where it was gashed, it healed. (*The Man* 57)

In a poem that discusses the breakdown of physical armor, regularly referring to the body's "shield," the form remains unbroken – dominant iambs with a regular rhyme scheme (a-b-a-b, c-c). But the reader is left only with the desperation of a man dying

swiftly. As the narrator says, "As if hands were enough / To hold an avalanche off" (*The Man* 58). Only the end of life will alleviate his "flesh reduced and wrecked" (*The Man* 57).

In a later poem, "Lament," Gunn elevates the suffering of those dying from AIDS to epic, heroic status by using a traditional form. In the poem, he chronicles a lover's deterioration as he undergoes tests and examinations, takes medicine, and eventually depends on a respirator. Gunn mourns the loss of the lover and remembers him with compassion, but, as Deborah Landau notes in her essay "'How to Live. What to do': The Poetics and Politics of AIDS," he "refuses to offer consolation, as if to do so would trivialize his lover's suffering" (199). Employing the heroic couplets of Dryden and Pope, he casts those dying men as an Aeneas or Odysseus. The speaker says of his friend Allan Noseworthy:

> Now you were tired, and yet not tired enough
>
> – Still hungry for the great world you were losing
>
> Steadily in no season of your choosing –
>
> And when at last the whole death was assured,
>
> Drugs having failed, and when you had endured
>
> Two weeks of an abominable constraint,
>
> You faced it equably, without complaint,

Unwhimpering, but not at peace with it. (*The Man* 63)

The insistent rhyme and rhythm mimics the infected man's defiance of disease, his will to live realistically with the knowledge of his coming death yet unwilling to simply give in. The onlooking speaker finds comfort in the strength of his friend – the grace under pressure that allows him to know how grave his situation is, yet face his fate "without complaint." Essentially, this poem does exactly what all epic poems do – though the hero may die, e.g. Hector in *The Iliad,* he achieves immortality in Homer's dactylic hexameter and in the cultural memory of generations. The form elevates the utterance. The neat coherence of the poetic structure stands in sharp contrast to the speaker's description of a deteriorating world. Gunn brings this dying man, whom society calls "immoral" for his lifestyle, into the realm of heroes – a paragon of virtue to be admired. He does so by requiring the reader to face each excruciating aspect of AIDS complications without any sort of comfort from fiction.

Two other poems in *The Man with Night Sweats* – "Terminal" and "The J Car" – are also written in heroic couplets, and both deal with the poise of dying men. "Terminal" also celebrates the devotion of the caretakers who are also the lovers of those who suffer from the disease: one such sufferer descends the stairs "With firm and gentle guidance by his friend, / Who loves him, through each effort to descend" (*The Man* 65). Gunn further compounds the tragic yet heroic aspect of the man described in the final image of the poem when he says, "I think of Oedipus, old, led by a boy." While "Terminal" describes a man dying and the careful attention of his younger lover, "The J

Car" discusses the death of a budding young poet. The opening lines reflect upon the marginalization and stigmatization of people living with AIDS:

> Last year I used to ride the J Church Line,
>
> Climbing between small yards recessed with vine
>
> – Their ordered privacy, their plots of flowers
>
> Like blameless lives we might imagine ours. (*The Man* 78)

These lines indicate the moralistic aggrandizement of the AIDS virus in the popular political discourse and the subsequent shame that gay men feel as a result. In using heroic couplets to speak of such a tension, Gunn elevates the struggling men and their plights into the mind of the public. The epic form is vital to public discourse, and Gunn asserts that the lives and contributions of gay men, even those dying from AIDS, are of central concern to American culture. As the poem ends, the poet mourns the fact that the young poet never would see his dreams come into fruition; he is dying "only an apprentice to his trade, / The ultimate engagements not yet made" (*The Man* 78). The speaker also mourns the young poet's inability to realize the full development of his own sexuality: "He knew he would not write the much-conceived / Much hoped-for work now; nor yet help create / A love he might in full reciprocate" (*The Man* 78). Not only does the speaker mourn for the loss of the young poet, but also for the poet's would-be lovers.

For his poem "Death's Door," Gunn employs the ballad. The poem depicts a room filled with dead, including the speaker's mother, as they watch T.V. Hoffman notes that the ballad "is marked by a 'neutrality and adaptability to new content,' and is well suited to his desire to introduce a new gay subject matter – the disease of AIDS – into the literary tradition" ("Modalities" 28). Great tension exists even in death among those in the room. So much so that they "woo amnesia" until they are "weaned / From memory" (83). The poem speaks of the separation between the living and the dead, and the difficulty, but importance, of remembrance.

Beyond the use of traditional forms of prosody for the individual poems of *The Man with Night Sweats*, Gunn orders the entire collection as an elegiac sequence that progresses toward the end, which is, in this case, death and silence. The book begins with homoerotic verse such as "The Hug," which claims, "I only knew / The stay of your secure firm dry embrace" (*The Man* 3) and ends with solemn poems like "Death's Door" and "A Blank." Early in the sequence, no sign of AIDS exists. In fact seduction reigns where disease will soon take hold. Lines such as "you gnawed my armpits, I gnawed yours" compose the beginning poems rather than ones like "Death has wiped away each sense; / Fire took muscle, bone, and brains" (68). The second section, which is comprised of "A Sketch of the Great Dejection," links the ecstasy of the first section to the agony of the final section. In the poem, a man seated in a graveyard considers life after AIDS has taken hold of the community. He wonders how he can continue to live his life according to the "fantasies of the past" (*The Man* 19) when the disease was not a concern. Though tempted by the memory of passionate love affairs, he vows to "pursue

the promise, / keeping open to its fulfillment" (*The Man* 20). Landau compares Gunn's "A Sketch of the Great Dejection" to Wallace Stevens's "How to Live. What to Do." She notes that Stevens's poem illustrates the "modern person's struggle to exist without the support of traditional belief structures" ("'How to Live'" 197). As she says, "For Gunn, writing in the age of AIDS, epiphanies are no longer possible" (197). Robbed of all feeling and as dispirited as the landscape, the speaker and his words are powerless: "I was without potent words, / inert" (*The Man* 19). Surrounded by confusion, the speaker longs for past ecstasies, but cannot afford the risks of impending destruction. In the end of the poem, the speaker realizes that his inability to speak powerfully is tied to his body's being denied the ability to experience love. Gunn's sense of the erotic is imperiled, noting:

> My body insisted on restlessness
>
> having been promised love,
>
> as my mind insisted on words
>
> having been promised the imagination.
>
> So I remained alert, confused and uncomforted. (*The Man* 20)

Neither the sensual nor the spiritual is available in the wake of AIDS. Landau says, "The question of how to endure is a crucial one for Gunn and for any poet writing about AIDS. The AIDS epidemic raises the stakes in the modernist crisis of belief and adds resonance to Stevens's dictum that the role of the poet is to 'help people to live their lives'" ("How

to Live" 198). Gunn's picture of existence in the poem is so grim that a way of living seems merely not to die amongst so many already dead. Survival, indeed, is victory. Landau claims that the concluding line of "A Sketch of the Great Dejection" is characteristic of Gunn's AIDS elegies. She says, "If the traditional functions of the elegy are to praise, lament, and console, Gunn's contemporary adaptations of the form consist mostly of lament with a measure of praise and a blunt withholding of consolation" ("'How to Live'"199).

Then, in the third section, Gunn fully sketches the spectrum of the AIDS crisis, lest one consider it only a gay plague. He mentions many groups of affected, marginalized people: homeless people, hustlers, drug addicts, as well as gay men. Finally, in the fourth section, the AIDS elegies appear and end on the most hopeful note possible in "A Blank."

"A Blank" begins in reflection upon the losses of a year past and the loss of perhaps another friend to the disease in an untimely fashion. When the speaker notices a former lover with a child beside him, he speaks gladly of the man's decision to adopt a child "without a friend or wife" and to start a family without the traditional support structures. Hoffman notes the pun at the end of the poem (and the book). He says, "So this was his son!" The son (sun) is that which rises from the ashes of Gunn's elegiac sequence ("Modalities" 34). This is the consolation: this man embodies the choice that gay men have to resurrect life by refiguring families and life after such epic losses. Furthermore, Hoffman also maintains that "by redefining the structure of family in 'A

Blank,' Gunn seeks to break down divisions between gay and straight experience, and, in doing so, is actively engaged in reconfiguring the iconography of AIDS in the popular media" (34). Elsewhere in the book, Gunn depicts committed gay life. In the opening poem, the passion described stems from a relationship that becomes "familial" (*The Man* 3). He also alludes to mythology in "Baucis and Philemon" in which he refers to a gay couple as "wedded." In "A Blank," the father figure renegotiates the reality of his situation, turning grief into possibility. He is one who "transposed the expectations he took out at dark...Into another pitch, where he might work / With the same melody" (*The Man* 84-85).

That same sort of recreation and renegotiation in "A Blank" is present earlier in the book, in the figure of the mockingbird in "Patch Work." The mockingbird sings:

> A repertoire of songs that it has heard
>
> --From other birds, and others of its kind –
>
> Which it has recombined
>
> And made its own, especially one
>
> With a few separate plangent notes begun
>
> Then linking trills as a long confident run
>
> Toward the immediate distance (The Man 23).

What the mockingbird does with his song is exactly what Gunn does with his. He takes the narratives of those he witnesses, reforms them according to his own vision, and disseminates his message. What emerges is a cohesive group of poems. "Patch Work" also references poetically the response to the epidemic of the NAMES Project and the AIDS Memorial Quilt – which serves as an elegy, both mourning losses and proclaiming hope.

Gunn's collection depicts the reality of life surrounding the AIDS virus without any forced consolation, miraculous transformation, or profound epiphanies. As Landau says, "[H]is poems allow readers no escape, requiring them to witness the effects of AIDS unshielded and uncomforted" ("How to Live" 200). The attention Gunn pays to grounded experience in *The Man with Night Sweats* has an urgency and purpose that translates to the reader. As Marie Howe says in her introduction to *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic*:

> The plight of people living with AIDS is our plight, amplified: living and dying at the same time. And they know all too well that we're all living and dying in a culture agonizing over notions of sexuality, race, class, religion, gender, healthcare, housing, who's a legal family, who gets buried where. (xvi)

the poems on AIDS

that are strewn on my desk

like notes from a difficult class

- Michael Klein, from “Positive”

Part 3

Untamed, Unedited: Paul Monette's Spontaneous Overflow of Powerful Feelings

After the terse 1981 announcement by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) that a strange new disease was killing homosexuals, gay men mastered the art of throwing a funeral. This was not something for which anyone could be prepared or trained; there was no Martha Stewart to offer helpful hints. No one was prepared for AIDS. Gay men and their allies had to learn a great many things, and quickly too: how to administer IV drips and change soiled bedsheets, how to organize for decent health care and mobilize friends for around-the-clock attendance upon the sick among them, how to petition an administration hell-bent on cutting spending in every area except the military. So, too, with funerals. With so many young men dying (sometimes a death a week, for some who lived at the epicenters of the epidemic), it was necessary to devise a fitting way to say good-byes. Because those who perish from AIDS were dying out of their season – at 30 or 40 years old, most of them, not the four score years they might once have imagined for themselves – their funerals invariably carried the lament of might-have-beens. But amid the necessary tears, there is a bracing dash of irreverence

in the words of friends and lovers whose excruciating sense of loss does not blind their gaze.

In the "Preface" to his heartbreaking work *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, Paul Monette begins with an epigraph by trench poet Wilfred Owen and an elaboration on beauty, mourning, and decorum. He says plainly:

> Decorum is the contemptible pose of the politicians and preachers, the hypocrite slime whose grinning hatred slicks this dying land like rotten morning dew. I do not presume on the nightmare of Owen's war – may the boys of Flanders be spared all comparison – and I don't pretend to have written the anthem of my people. But I would rather have this volume filed under AIDS than under Poetry, because if these words speak to anyone they are for those who are mad with loss, to let them know that they are not alone. (xi)

He wrote those words on 29 June 1987, just eight months after his longtime partner Roger Horowitz died after battling AIDS for nineteen months. That extreme feeling of loss, despair in the wake of loneliness, and anger at the deterioration of meaningful relationships underlie the forceful works that compose the volume. These elegies are not neat in form, nor reserved in emotional outpouring. Monette says that he wrote the elegies in "the five months after he [Roger] died, one right after the other, with hardly a half day's pause between" (xii). Thus, Monette's elegies preserve the anguish of ruin and fume with the rawness of a man who has lived with the knowledge of

coming loss for months and now experiences the complete absence of comfort and peace. But while the elegies themselves may lack a sense of comfort and grounding in hope, Monette sees the writing process as a healing process: "Writing them quite literally kept me alive, for the only time I wasn't wailing and trembling was when I was hammering at these poems. I have let them stand as raw as they came" (xii).

One must wonder, also, if that same healing Monette sought by writing the elegies once his partner died motivated him to write his memoir *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir.* He begins by saying: "I don't know if I will live to finish this. Doubtless there's a streak of self-importance in such an assertion, but who's counting? Maybe it's just that I've watched too many sicken in a month and die by Christmas, so that a fatal sort of realism comforts me more than magic. All I know is this: The virus ticks in me" (1). To read Monette's poems in *Love Alone* with the knowledge that the same demon that wrecked his and his lover's life would end his as well intensifies the tragedy of the earlier elegies. He could, indeed, have been writing his own. He understands that his position as Rog's lover and caretaker is also, sadly, a position of student. Seeing Roger gives him a glimpse of what he will be; Monette knows he is in training, waiting to do battle himself:

> is this
>
> how being a hero starts or just dying
>
> Ypres and Verdun men have lain down in certain

> fields with all their unspent years but meanwhile
>
> there is the fighting before that the target
>
> practice I'm learning how to hold a sword
>
> but there is no telling what I will do
>
> when I get there stay at my side will you. (*Love Alone* 36)

Monette sees himself as one of the young soldiers fighting in World War I – thus Ypres and Verdun, and he knows that he will do battle against AIDS, "that the target / practice I'm learning how to hold a sword."

The work of an artist at a time when life itself is in question is even more important to prove to himself, to the world, and to history that – yes, he did exist, and yes, he had something to say. John M. Clum explains that Monette's work is paradigmatic for the decimated landscape of gay culture at the time of AIDS:

> In a gay culture now rightfully obsessed with a killer plague, remembering becomes a central act, and it is how and what one remembers that defines much of AIDS literature, art, and film. That focus on memory is a central feature of the landscape described by AIDS-age gay writers, a wasteland in which memory and desire are poignantly intertwined. But what is remembered in this barren land in which love has become death is not the neurasthenic dry couplings of Eliot's rainless land but a lost idyll which no water can restore. In this world memory and desire take on

> new meaning as new links to the past must be forged. The present is sad and terrifying, and the future is drastically foreshortened. Affirming the past is affirming the power of sexual desire; affirming the foreshortened, uncertain future is affirming the possibility of love in the face of death. (648)

Thus, Clum outlines part of the impetus behind Monette's flurry of artistic production at a time when friends were dying regularly and he himself contracted the disease.

Monette died in February 1995 as a result of AIDS-related complications, having produced memoirs, novels, and volumes of poetry that were all steeped in the destruction and confusion of his plagued community. *Love Alone* embodies Monette's idea of the importance of art serving a community and his belief that form (or, perhaps, formlessness) can be a catalyst for proper connection with an audience. In *Love Alone,* the elegies are confused, frantic, and charged with a hyper-emotional overflow of grief. The poet deems attention to lineation, grammatical structures, poetic language, and rhetorical tropes irrelevant. He seems to argue that well-hewn, carefully constructed verse would not best serve a disintegrating world. The distance between stanzas could represent an opportunity missed to validate another's grief, to give someone words for the expression of his or her own suffering. Indeed, Monette's elegies not only focus on personal grief and anguish, but, as Deborah Landau notes, "situates individual suffering within a socio-political context" ("The Poetics and Politics of AIDS" 201). These elegies, like others from the era, offer little consolation, which proves consistent with the

emotional state Monette claims to have overtaken him as he wrote his poems. His poems are "often explicitly polemical" (Landau 201).

He begins *Love Alone* by grounding the reader in his own geography, with a poem entitled, simply, "Here":

> everything extraneous has burned away
>
> this is how burning feels in the fall
>
> of the final year not like leaves in a blue
>
> October but as if the skin were a paper lantern
>
> full of trapped moths beating their fired wings
>
> and yet I can lie on this hill just above you
>
> a foot beside where I will lie myself
>
> soon soon and for all the wrack and blubber
>
> feel still how we were warriors when the
>
> merest morning sun in the garden was a
>
> kingdom after Room 1010 was is not all
>
> death it turns out war is what little
>
> thing you hold on to refugeed and far from home (3)

The landscape is stripped of adornment, stripped of life and love. What remains is a man who is alive among the dead with memories that offer no comfort – Room 1010 is no comfort; it, like the present location of "Here," only conjures thoughts of death and war. The opening of this poem immediately situates the discussion of AIDS in the socio-political realm by connecting AIDS-related complications to war, death, being refugeed, and the lack of home. Lack is the force that churns each phrase, each clause, into the next without any sort of respite, without any sort of mercy. What remain, simply, are words – words on words – as if to exemplify the opening line: "everything extraneous has burned away." In the face of death and immense loss, the niceties of convention do not allow Monette the power of an unchecked onslaught of language, a barrage of images like bullets. He is the warrior, imperiled in a barren landscape, clinging to the only things he has (words) like a refugee who clings to whatever he can. And he realizes, as he addresses his dead lover, that he – though alive – is not safe at all, that he is "a foot beside where I will lie myself / soon."

In those few opening lines of the opening poem of the collection, Monette's unpunctuated, claustrophobically enjambed stylistics become clear. He comments on his choice of style in his introduction: "I don't mean them [the poems] to be impregnable, though I admit I want them to allow no escape, like a hospital room, or indeed a mortal illness" (xii). In his article "Elegies in a Different Key: Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Paul Monette's *Love Alone*," Roger Platizky tells of Monette's reaction to the staid lines of *In Memoriam* as he worked with the poem for his senior honors thesis at Yale:

> Although sufficiently drawn to Tennyson's elegy to agree to researching it for months at Cambridge, Monette soon found himself very frustrated by the pristine, 'Hallmark' quality of lines like 'Tis better to have loved and lost' because they failed, in his opinion, to name the kind of love Tennyson had for Hallam....Monette further criticizes Tennyson's poem for being 'all dickless and exalted, perfectly suiting the reign of the widow Victoria.' He adds, 'I never felt so at war with poetry as I did that summer....For once I wanted poem and life to lead me out of feeling into experience, raw not cooked, and no more perfect phrases.' (348-349)

That distaste for "cooked" and "perfect" language does not merely comment on the aesthetics of a type of poetry, but more generally addresses a type of distilled discourse that lacks the humanity that Monette believes is embodied best in his raw, unclean phrases. He could have just as easily directed his invective towards the entirety of political discourse surrounding the AIDS epidemic.

The action of "Here" takes place in the cemetery after Rog has died. The anguished cry the writer releases acknowledges that death has destroyed his paradise – his homes in Los Angeles and Laurel Canyon, his Jaguar, swimming pool, successful careers have all been lost to disease. The poem reaches a climactic moment when Monette speaks with his dead partner. He says "Rog who will / play boy with me now that I bucket with tears / through it all when I'd cling beside you sobbing / you'd shrug it off with the quietest *I'm still here*" (3). As Richard Tayson notes, "In speaking to Horwitz

(with the reader overhearing), Monette could be King Lear howling for naught against a brutal storm, or Achilles lying face down in the dirt where his lover is now buried" ("Manly Love" 26). The only solace that Monette feels at the conclusion of the poem is a testament to his love for Rog:

> but it doesn't
>
> matter now how long they last or I
>
> the day has taken you with it and all
>
> there is now is burning dark the only green
>
> is up by the grave and this little thing
>
> of telling the hill I'm here oh I'm here (3)

Thus Monette defies any popular sentiment that homosexual men do not exist in committed, loving relationships. His poems portray an abiding love that lasts beyond disease, beyond death. He captures in "Here" the very essence of the vow he could not take with Rog – "for better or for worse." That commitment that Monette's elegy encapsulates in "Here" is also captured in an essay "Puck," which describes a moment in the same cemetery just four years later. Monette is burying his second lover to die of AIDS – Stevie:

> We buried the urn of his ashes high on a hill just at the rim of the chaparral, at the foot of a California live oak. The long shadow of our

grieving circle fell across the hillside grass, where a mere ten feet below I had buried Roger four years before. A shadow that fell on my own grave, as a matter of fact, which is just to the left of Roger's, as if I will one day fling an arm about him and cradle us to sleep. After the putrefaction of the flesh, a pair of skeletons tangled together like a couple of metaphysical lovers out of Donne. And my other bone-white arm reaching about my skull, clawing the six-foot dirt with piano-key fingers, trying to get to Steve's ashes, just out of reach. (*In the Company of My Solitude* 193)

Monette's time in the cemetery allows him an opportunity to sift through the past for details that offer opportunities to reconstruct memories, to love what is lost. But since that time he had together with those he loved is gone and the exact nature of longed-for details is irretrievable, real pain takes hold of him. He realizes that not only are these lovers of his lost, but an entire culture is waning. He encapsulates this struggle to search through the past to retrieve memories that will remind him of what he found so meaningful in "Half Life." As he searches, he occasionally finds Rog:

how is it you spring full-blown

from a thousand fragments it's like picking up

a shard of red-black vase off a Greek hillside

looks like part of a sandal and a girl's long hair

in a flash the white-stone city rises entire

around you full of just men who live to be

90 the buried pieces fit (16)

The job of the poet, the job of the remaining lover, is that of an archaeologist, finely breaking through the sediment of time to remember a way of living before destruction. The surviving half of the dismantled "whole," however, just like the radioactive decay that the title suggests, will soon be no more.

Furthermore, Monette's elegies do not dwell in an area of longing for the past, but many times are overwhelmed by a sense of anger at the current situation for gay men embattled by the AIDS crisis. For example, a defiant, activist-esque type of speech characterizes the opening of the heartbreaking "Your Sightless Days." Monette says, "I remember clearly deciding not to see / anymore myself this out of sheer protest" (6), thus creating solidarity with those for whom he is trying to care for, speak for, and love. His description of Rog's loss of sight clings to whatever it can:

the left one gone in April overnight

two millimeters on the right side saved

and we fought for those that knife of light

and beaten ground raging for day like the

Warsaw ghetto all summer long I dripped

your veins at 4 and midnight watching every

drop as if it was sight itself so did we

sin did we lose you died with the barest

shadows (6-7)

No reticence, no neatness, no minimalism here – Monette lets every detail, every immediate emotion and associated emotion flow liberally. Landau notes that "[t]he lack of punctuation in 'did we / win did we lose you died with the barest / shadows,' for example, effectively conveys the anguish Monette describes. If he had written instead 'Did we win? Did we lose? / You died with the barest shadows,' the lines would resemble [Thom] Gunn's poetry and share its peculiarly discordant sense of control and containment" ("How to Live" 201). Furthermore, Monette's comparison of the AIDS virus to the Jews' suffering due to the Nazis rings loudly with cries of social and political injustice. The crimes against humanity, in both cases, he sees as utterly tragic and demanding attention. While his lover is the one who is literally "sightless," the description could easily be extended to those in power who watched the epidemic surge, but seemed not to see or hear the horror. But this particular elegy is not all horror and darkness. The ending gives a flicker of a fond memory:

when you were the blackest blind you laughed *laughed*

groped your way and stared the noon sun down

How are you jerks would ask *Read Job* you'd say

> exiting of the closet surrounding AIDS, in order to 'look,' to construct retrospectively a textual place to document the gay experience. ("Geographies of the Closet" 174)

What may have initially been a project to cope with an immense loss, then becomes a cultural artifact – one that speaks without any distance or objectification, one that is completely immersed in "self" and "moment."

Another one of Monette's elegies that goes beyond loss and love to a more politicized rage is "Manifesto." Grief-turned-rage is the driving force of the speaker's words. Motivated by the political mismanagement of the health crisis, the general homophobic attitudes of society, and a culture of hatred, "Manifesto" is a cultural criticism which condemns the uncaring systems for their lack of treating those who suffer so brutally:

> and the dark fell anyway and all our people
>
> sicken and have no rage the Feds are lying
>
> about the numbers the money goes for toilet
>
> seats in bombers the State of the Union
>
> is pious as Pius washing his hands of Hitler
>
> Jews are not a Catholic charity when is
>
> enough enough I had a self myself

once but he died when do we leave the mirror

and lie down in front of the tanks let them

put two million of us away see how quick

it looks like Belsen force out all their hate

the cool indifferent genocide that locks up

all the pills whatever it takes witness

the night and the waste for those who are not yet

touched for soon the things will ravish their women

their jock sons lie in rows in the empty infield

the scream in the streets will rise to a siren din

and they will beg us to teach them how to

bear it we who are losing our reason (41-42)

He expresses outrage at the lack of care for the homosexual community – the lack of funding, lack of available pills. Once again, he compares the plight of the gay community to that of the Jews during the Holocaust, this time compounding the image of martyrdom with Jesus and Pontius Pilate. His mention of genocide further implicates the United States government and the Reagan administration in the most extreme sort of human rights violations. In the end of the passage, he becomes prophetic in noting

that AIDS would not remain merely a gay disease, but that its reach would touch families of all sorts. Those who least expect to be effected by the disease would then turn to the gay community for advice in coping, but they would be turning to a community so decimated, tired, and in shambles that no consolation could be found.

A more intense political rage comes forth in Monette's poem "Ed Dying" which appears in Michael Klein's anthology *Poets for Life: Seventy-six Poets Respond to AIDS.* It is an elegy for a friend in which "the speaker's rage at the homophobic mismanagement of the response to the AIDS epidemic permeates his lament" (Landau 202). The scathing anger is clear immediately:

> Hate is an old man fucking, arduous
>
> and half a bone, but I work at it
>
> like Sophie Tucker, a last geriatric fling
>
> like pushing a car uphill with a rope.
>
> Hate the Reagans and their facile cancers,
>
> all straight people with lives and my brothers
>
> who flee to the continent having buried
>
> their allotment. This is the rage of the 8th
>
> year, bent our of shape, crazily displaced,

yelling at the queerest people because

the scum politicos of the NIH are out

of reach, funding the end of the world. (172)

The speaker has an intense awareness of his voiceless status in a society that deems him and his entire community deviant and powerless. He condemns not only the homophobic responses of straight people, but also his "brothers" who abandon the fight for political rights and political action once they experience a loss, presumably of friends or lovers. He acknowledges the fatigue of eight years of battle and sickness, but clearly those eight years do not cause his voice to grow silent. His invective grows more caustic with time, more desperate with more lives lost. And yet, his hate, he realizes, is almost futile, comparing its efficacy to "pulling a car uphill with a rope."

In the next part of the incredibly dense poem, the speaker introduces his friend Ed, as well as describes his own battle:

I massacre whoever gets in my small way – check

Lost in the mail, promise of shirts Friday,

867-4466 my Thrifty druggist rings busy busy

and I need refills like a one-arm bandit,

that kind of thing. As for Ed, Ed is dying

by phone, dwindling in secret, doing without

spunk and visitors. (173)

Here, the speaker captures again the futility of his own rage and compounds his own bitterness by mentioning the plight of one, Ed, who seems forgotten and unattended. The speaker leaves messages on his answering machine "for months there is no reply, but we are / light-years beyond good manners, Ed and I, / loathing bullshit so and the comfort of sunny / disposition" (173). Even well-established intimacy is trumped by an uncaring disease and a society that refuses an adequate response. Hate is Monette's political and aesthetic response to a crisis. As the speaker says later in the poem:

Even as Ed is dying, in Washington

everyone eats his boogers and Mormons file

the plague under Pest Control, Reagan's colon

clear as a bagpipe, his sausage tumors

replicated in lifelike vinyl for souvenirs.

Then suddenly over New Year's: This is Ed.

Thank you for all your messages. I love

your rage. So I hate mostly for Ed's sake now,

and the old man fucking with his dick in a brace

....

There are easier

Ways than all this slamming about, I admit,

But the times comes – say after the third pneumonia,

And they send you home to recuperate with

The wrong dose, 200 fucking milligrams less

Than what will make you live again

....

– the time will come

when you prove you are still alive just feeling

anything at all. (173-174)

Hate is the speaker's expression of love; it is a sign of life amidst so many already dead and so many dying. Silence is no option for the grief-stricken speaker whose friends are constant reminders that the situation in which they find themselves will not improve with time because there is no time for waiting. Outrage is the only response that the speaker judges as meaningful. And he truly believes that intense rage can bring about a miraculous revolution – at least more so than niceties and vapid speech:

And if we wail

and spew bile we say we are not collaborators,

> for Ed would not be dying please without
>
> the complicity of niceness, so many smiling
>
> colon exams. Yes it's hard to keep it up
>
> me and this numb member of mine, rutting
>
> while Rome burns, but to hate everything
>
> half-true – including me, especially me –
>
> a nasty temper works like Spanish fly.
>
> Be hard and cry foul, I order my bad thing,
>
> for we are in enemy hands, buying time like
>
> fallen women in countries torn by the death
>
> grip of keeping things polite. Hate for the same
>
> reason a man might sit and weep: missing Ed. (174)

The speaker sees that to mourn is to lose time and to lose more friends. And that is the spirit behind Monette's *Love Alone* – to cry out to a society for help and for respect, for acknowledgement and for dignity.

This sort of poetry is the work of an activist – redolent of Shelley's Poet-legislator – and is a testimony of the public's inhuman disregard for eight long years of those living with HIV and AIDS. The circumstances are intolerable, and so are parts of his poetry –

deliberately abrasive and antilyrical. The style of the poetry matches the tenacity of the disease. Landau quotes Joseph Cady's observation:

> Monette incarnates this total "wrecking" of his world in a thoroughly "wrecked" form, designed to subject his readers to an immersive "wrecking" in turn – i.e., by throwing them into a completely fractured, unmarked, and destabilizing text and requiring them to make what sense of it they can entirely on their own, he tries to force upon his readers an imaginative version of the shock and isolation that he, Rog, and other affected gay men have had to face. Embodying his devastating content...in an equally devastating style...Monette hopes to jolt his audience out of its denial of AIDS and to urge on it a sense of emergency that he and his community already know too well. (204)

Monette's protest is as much against the society that refuses to care for those with AIDS as it is against the syndrome itself. He seeks to immerse the reader in a spewing torrent of bitterness and anger so as to incite a strong reaction, which he hopes can raise a group of change-agents. As Landau notes, "Monette's poetry performs a crucial function by voicing the rage and frustration of those directly affected by HIV, provoking readers previously unaffected by the syndrome to confront the impact of the AIDS crisis and perhaps inspiring effort to increase the quantity of research, care, and medical treatment for people with AIDS" (205). Monette argues that though the gay community is one that experiences much destruction as a result of the AIDS syndrome, it is not a

uniquely gay disease and attention must be paid to the problem. The problems are not just in the mismanagement of an epidemic, but more deeply rooted in a society that does not see all of its members as fully human and deserving of proper care and compassion. Monette shows his reader no mercy, just as the disease shows no mercy and the political structures show no willingness to act in ways to alleviate the suffering of thousands.

Poetry, for Monette, is a battleground on which to wage war. In his attack poem "Buckley" – also appearing in *Poets for Life* – according to Sheryl Stevenson, Monette angrily addresses Buckley's "schemes of castration or mandatory tattooing for those with HIV or AIDS," and his argument "rises to a crescendo of satiric invective" ("World War I All Over" 5). He envisions how "the spit on your grave will pool and mirror / the bird-less sky and your children's children / kneel in the waste dump scum of you" (*Poets for Life* 170). Earlier in the poem, Monette voluntarily accepts the label that others wish to force on him and envisions solidarity with other gay men suffering under similar oppression:

> I want my F for fag of course on the left
>
> bicep twined with a Navy anchor deck
>
> of Luckies curled in my tee sleeve just the look
>
> to sport through a minefield beating a path
>
> to smithereens arm in arm friend & friend

bivouackeri 2 by 2 odd men out. (169)

This process of appropriating that which is meant to oppress as a source of solidarity is similar to the gay community's claiming the pink triangle used by the Nazis in World War II to mark homosexuals for death camps as a symbol of a unified community. The use of specifically militaristic language like "Navy," "minefield," and "bivouackeri" effectively casts the gay experience in terms consistent with twentieth and twenty-first-century military history. Thus, Monette conveys the desperation and determination of imperiled gay men by a comparison to the more widely familiar war stories of the history books.

In examining the different uses of the war metaphor in Monette's work as well as the work of other poets writing about AIDS, Stevenson notes that "The Losing Side" "runs counter to some of the patterns" (6) that many of his poems commonly exhibit. She notes that, "[e]xploring bereavement through the metaphor of 'losing' a war, this poem interrogates the poet's own military metaphors and surmounts the divisions between gay and straight, PWA [persons-with-AIDS] and non-PWA" (6). The poem takes place in the same cemetery of the opening poem "Here" and focuses on Monette's meeting a grieving mother, whom he calls "Eve." Though their backgrounds are presumably different and though their relationships to their loved ones buried in the cemetery are different, Monette identifies with Eve, repeatedly saying "we," thus emphasizing their similarities. He is momentarily taken aback when Eve asks *"You / have someone here,"* and he says that "we none of us overstep on the hill" (37). At one

point, Monette realizes that his warlike metaphors fail to some extent with Eve, but he tries to make them work:

He fought

so hard I say the blizzard force of your

endurance reduced to fight-talk as if it

were equal combat man to man missing

the zen of war without armies attacked

on all sides drawing yourself like an arrow

so taut the tips of the bow pinched like tweezers

and all the *Iliad* stood in awe that's how hard

Eve nods (37)

When she says, "So did Brian," Monette grows sickly, noting that he sees at that moment:

the sick nothing of life in its full dementia

the clouds of flies above Calcutta human

waves of boys choking the ditches of Basra all

still wailing as they run down Highway 1

out of Hue wings of napalm streaming not just

torture of the just like you but new improved

agony babies conscripted totally weaponless

not a comrade no word yet for enemy sent

to battle without a day in a sunny country (37)

It is difficult for Monette to identify with the woman who stands by him and says that she understands at some level his struggle; it is difficult for him to imagine that *anyone* could grasp his pain as he is immersed in his own grief, his own experience at that moment. Furthermore, in the extension of military metaphors, Monette shows that battles of life have fewer rules than the battles of traditional warfare. Those struggles associated with AIDS that both Rog and Brian faced offer very little chance to achieve cultural distinction, honor, dignity, and an equal matchup with an opponent. As Stevenson says, "Monette's extreme images of innocent suffering…resemble [Wilfred] Owen's bitterest metaphor in 'Dulce et Decorum Est': 'Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues'" (7). In the end of the poem, Monette comes to understand the commonality of his and Eve's plight. He appreciates her and her efforts to understand his struggle. He says, "Eve and I swap / wars peacefully we've got nothing to lose / no more" (39), and she even teaches him a valuable lesson about being on the "losing" side: "she makes me see in her hard fight / not to think Brian could be walking now / that somehow we got to be men together /

we got that far" (39). This poem is a fine example of the reaching impact of *Love Alone.* It transgresses the boundaries of sexual orientation, gender, relationship to the virus, while being true to the gay experience and conscious of its role in gay culture. "The Losing Side" with all its war language makes an effort to find common ground within two people's different experiences of loving, fighting disease, and losing that fight.

Oftentimes poets strive to match their chosen forms to the emotions and narratives they attempt to relate to their reader. Monette does this especially well in "The Worrying." He opens the poem with a torrential rain of thoughts that connect the smallest of worries to the most harrowing of impacts. He begins the poem:

> ate me alive day and night these land mines
>
> all over like the toy bombs dropped on the
>
> Afghans little Bozo jack-in-the-boxes
>
> that blow your hands off 3 a.m. I'd go
>
> around the house with a rag of ammonia
>
> wiping wiping crazed as a housewife on *Let's*
>
> *Make a Deal* the deal being PLEASE DON'T MAKE
>
> HIM SICK AGAIN faucets doorknobs the phone
>
> every lethal thing a person grips and leaves (10)

The disease not only takes over the body in its typical ways, but it also affects those around it – twisting the emotional and psychological dispositions of those who must care for and watch over those who are dying. Later in the poem, he adds:

> here now black on black I wander frantic
>
> never done with worrying but it's mine it's
>
> a cure that's not in the books are you east
>
> my stolen pal what do you need is it
>
> sleep like sleep you want a pillow a cool
>
> drink oh my one safe place there must be
>
> something just say what it is and it's yours (12)

The phrases of the poems, the erratic rhythms make it difficult to separate grammatical units and logical thoughts – a perfect embodiment of the speaker's state of being. Reading it aloud is physically taxing – the form forces the reader to gasp for breath at many instances, as if one's physical being were overtaken by some outside power.

But perhaps Monette's intensely personal firing of his metaphorical Uzi hit his intended mark too well. His elegies may be too intense and too personal. Daniel Mendelsohn offers a careful critique:

> The problem is that Monette's irrepressibility too often curdles into self-indulgence. *Love Alone*...is justly famous for the almost impenetrable

> intensity of its utterances; they do indeed 'scream' and 'rattle on,' as the author promises in his preface....But although some of Monette's shots do indeed find their target ('Pain is not a flower pain is a root,' begins one poem in a wrenching grief-stricken challenge, it would seem, to Baudelaire's prettier but less convincing conceit), a lot of these poems, heartfelt as they are, miss the mark: The poet is so intent on his own feelings that he doesn't consider yours, and you can't help feeling a bit left out. (Sometimes as you read him you can't shake the prurient feeling that you're eavesdropping.) The result is that Monette too often reverts to a kind of shorthand, using cultural icons to do the work of language. When Bette Davis, *Star Wars* and Byzantine saints all come whizzing at you in a matter of four lines, as they do in one of the elegies, you don't even bother to check for wounds. ("Embracing Between the Bombs" 277)

Indeed, 18 elegies that offer neither a break in a line for breath nor any sense of comfort or consolation can be justly viewed as too much, as Mendelsohn argues. Mendelsohn admits that Monette is successful in accomplishing his intentions that he sets forth in his preface. Furthermore, Monette's use of cultural icons represents his attempt to save the memory and history of an imperiled gay culture, much like his elegies preserve the memories of his own personal relationship and his own immediate grief after loss. Mendelsohn's critique could easily be applied generally to lyric poetry – that it is too personal and, at times, self-indulgent resulting in the exclusion of the

reader. But at their best, Monette's poems, like many great lyrical elegies, are effective in appropriating the reader and proposing a world that offers an experience unique to the realm of the text. Citing the cultural relevance and value of Monette's works, David Groff writes a defense in 2002, seven years after Monette's death to AIDS:

> AIDS in America became not only survivable but privatized. Our loud complaints and laments have receded to whispers in the doctor's office, the bedroom, and the dark night of the soul, where words often fail of fail to be heard. To our cooler, eagerly distracted ears, Monette's passions are vaguely embarrassing, his breath too hot on our faces. Which may be our fault more than his, vulnerable as we are to the more facile emotions, even in poetry. Posterity isn't kind to poetry or anything else....A poet of wartime, he scribbled his lines in the trenches, and we always have fresh trenches to inhabit. New wars erupt, new viruses rise, and all the old laments apply. (13)

Earlier in the same piece, Groff, Monette's fiction editor and literary co-executor, writes that Monette does not heed Wordsworth's dictum of poetry arising from emotion recollected in tranquility, especially since he writes some of his greatest poetry "in the white heat of grief over the dying of his lover" (13). He goes on to argue that Monette follows the dictum of contemporary poet Galway Kinnell – that poetry is emotion "recollected in anxiety" (13). Additionally, Groff adds that Monette's idea of creating poems stems from "blazing passion – emotion recollected in urgency, or not

recollected at all but afire right now" (13). *Love Alone* captures a sense of urgency and celebrates the raw, not the decorous. And it seems that all the socio-political as well as personal circumstances that surround the elegies are preserved in the collection as both personal history and cultural record. The shattered form and desperate lines of the poems are indicative of a shattered poet and his devastated community. But Monette's elegies in *Love Alone* will be remembered for the work of his form: he gave shape to an era's grief. As Clum says in tribute to Monette, "Tragedy brings pain and insight: Monette, the writer of novelizations and unsold Whoopi Goldberg scripts, becomes an anguished, eloquent Jeremiah, angry at the insensitivity of many doctors in whose cold hands AIDS patients are forced to become dependent, angry at the disease itself, but possessed, articulate, and gifted with the ability to forge a harrowing beauty out of pain, grief, and fury. Monette became the bard of AIDS" (650).

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A poem should be *"a verbal earthly paradise, a timeless world of pure play, which gives us delight precisely because of its contrast to our historical existence with all its insoluble problems and inescapable suffering...a poet cannot bring us any truth without introducing into his poetry the problematic, the painful, the disorderly, the ugly."*

- W. H. Auden "Here in Hell" qtd. in *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*

Part 4

Seeking Redemption Among the Ruins: Doty's Alexandria

In discussing the work of the Alexandrian poet, C. P. Cavafy, Daniel Mendelsohn highlights two areas of chief interest to the poet: the Hellenistic past and homosexual desire. Noting that both themes become manifest in many different registers, he says that "it is what we may call the erotic past that captures the poet's imagination, since what preoccupies him is lost desire, lost opportunities for such desire, or gratifications of such desire that were too briefly obtained and then lost, too" ("Cavafy and the Erotics of the Lost" 1). In Cavafy's poems, the presence of absence is consuming; longing is consuming. Consider, for example, his early poem entitled "Longings":

> Like the beautiful bodies of the dead who never aged,
>
> shut away inside a splendid tomb by tearful mourners
>
> with roses at their head and jasmine at their feet—
>
> that's what longings look like when they've passed away
>
> without being fulfilled, before they could be made complete
>
> by just one of pleasure's nights, or one of its radiant mornings.

Longing, in this poem, motivates a mournful, elegiac response as well as a myth-making force to imagine attainment and fulfillment represented "by just one of pleasure's nights, or one of its radiant mornings." Cavafy sees the span of a lifetime as too short to fulfill all of one's human yearnings. A city of longing, impermanence, a rich past that lends itself to mythmaking, holy city of love and loss for Cavafy becomes Mark Doty's poetic and emotional landscape for his coping with the immense losses of the AIDS epidemic. In his 1993 book *My Alexandria*, Doty writes poems of a pristine beauty that seeks to contemplate loss in a way that does not dwell exclusively in gloom, but reaches for redemption.

In his memoir *Heaven's Coast*, Mark Doty says that "AIDS makes things more intensely what they already are" (3). In the face of impending doom, he sees the essence of things illuminated with everything nonessential fading away. AIDS becomes the impetus for acute attention and gives extra meaning to that which is valuable. When his partner of eight years, Wally Roberts, was diagnosed with AIDS, Doty became a leading voice among those whose were mourning loss and cherishing memories, seeking redemption among the ruins around him. In an interview with Michael Glover, Doty explains the purpose of his writing poems about the AIDS epidemic: "'Well, the poems I have found myself writing over the last two years are much less about grief than they are about a passage back to participation in the world, about the renewal of that contract that we make with life to be a part of things'" (3). In setting the stage for the world he once knew and the world in which he lives, he begins *My Alexandria* with a poem of destruction and negotiation with new beginnings.

Doty begins to show how disease transforms realities and meditates on how people react to drastic changes in landscape – be they physical, emotional, or spiritual. "Demolition" describes the destruction of a skyscraper in New York City; what is "intact" in the beginning is "topple[d]" in the end. As an entrance to a meditation on mortality, such a poem seems absolutely appropriate. He quickly describes how humans are enamored with destruction: as a crowd gathers to watch the various machinery chip away at the structure, "the crowd beneath their massed umbrellas cheer" (1). He then muses on the human history contained in the material world as:

> Suddenly the stairs seem to climb down themselves,
>
> atomized plaster billowing: dust of 1907's
>
> rooming house, this year's bake shop and florist's,
>
> the ghosts of their signs faint above the windows
>
> lined, last week, with loaves and blooms. (1)

What seemed so alive just days before is tumbling, losing its identity, becoming nondescript clumps of dust. Deborah Landau asserts that "in an image that uncovers the signs that stand in place of substance, 'Demolition' exposes the gap between discourse and the material world and…initiates the thematic concerns of *My* Alexandria – a book largely about the rift between the ideology that surrounds the AIDS epidemic and the specific experiences of people living with HIV" (206). Indeed, the building itself could easily represent the inhuman structures that surround the public discourse of the

AIDS epidemic, such as the words of politicians, religious groups, and various health agencies. Even as they fall, there are still no signs of life except for the onlookers – as if the bakers and florists who are absent from the scene are similar to those affected by the disease. Though they are immediately affected by the disintegrating structures, they are absent – already dead to the debate. Doty characterizes the reactions of the crowd by making a generalization about humanity in saying, "We love disasters that have nothing to do / with us" (1), and adding later that those watching are "joined by a thirst for watching something fall" (1). He seems to say that humans have some sort of strange fixation with disaster, that one cannot not look at a falling building, a representation of humanity's own mortality as well as the mortality of human institutions.

Later in the poem, Doty thinks of how "in a week, the kids will skateboard / in their lovely loops and spray / their indecipherable ideograms" (2-3), saying that in the ruin of demolition, there is a hope for new life and new use. Fresh language he foresees as overtaking the tired signs that announced "baker" and "florist," something noncommercial and vibrant, something unregulated and unstructured. As Landau adds, "Nothing can remain blank, but the progression from an ordered, stable structure to this improvisational scribbling suggests hope for a new, fluid language that will shape this space less rigidly" (206). The rigid structures failed at some point and warranted destruction, and Doty sees hope in the possibility of something fresh. Doty notices the beauty of the open sky, now visible:

the gaps

where the windows opened once

into transients' rooms are pure sky.

It's strange how much more beautiful

the sky is to us when it's framed

by these columned openings someone meant us

to take for stone. (3)

The vision of the natural world through manmade framing makes the former's beauty more obvious, more intense. Similarly, as Doty says in the aforementioned quote from *Heaven's Coast*, AIDS acts as a framework for understanding the living. With knowledge of impending death, one becomes more acutely aware of the value of the moment. There is a redemptive quality in beauty that Doty notes in the end of a poem about destruction. Though the beauty offers some solace amid destruction, the final image, once again, is of destruction as "the whole thing wavers as though we'd dreamed it, / our black classic, and it topples all at once" (3). But that image of destruction is not one wholly of defeat. It establishes a challenge to the stability of existing structures that are constraining – those structures that obstruct the view of the sky. Doty's poetic language seeks to demolish those structures and to view grief, loss, and life after loss in some sort of beautiful, redemptive manner.

At the end of the first section of the book, Doty places the poem "Chanteuse," a poem which reconstructs the world in a marvelous way – the way a nightclub singer or drag queen can play with the ideas of art and artifice with lipsynched songs, sequined gowns, and lavish wigs. Underneath the elaborate palette and unending details, there is unrest, a troubling depth only temporarily relieved by spectacle. After seeing a drag queen, he notes:

Cavafy ends a poem

of regret and desire – he had no other theme

than memory's erotics, his ashen atmosphere –

by going out onto a balcony

to change my thoughts at least

by seeing something of this city I love,

a little movement in the streets,

in the shops. That was all it took

to console him, some token of Alexandria's

anarchic life. How did it go on without him,

the city he'd transformed into feeling?

Hadn't he made it entirely

into himself? (26-27)

And Doty comes to realize that the place where he is – though completely transient, false to a large degree – is just like Cavafy's Alexandria. The place holds him, just as he does it. The city is memory – constructed, realized, and revealed. He ends the poem concerning the drag queen and his ensuing thoughts:

I would say she *was* memory,

and we were restored by

the radiance of her illusion,

her consummate attention to detail,

— *name the colors* – her song: my Alexandria,

my romance, my magnolia

distilling lamplight, my backlit glory

of the wigshops, my haze

and glow, my torch, my skyrocket,

my city, my false,

my splendid chanteuse. (28-29)

There is an illuminating quality to the "radiance," "the distilling lamplight," "the backlit glory," the "glow," and the "torch." Though something may be false, or lost even, it can inspire and offer insight, a construction of something "splendid" – steeped in love and memory.

Later in the collection, in a poem entitled "Fog," Doty uses the hazy substance in the titular metaphor to describe the three-week period during which he and his partner wait for the results of an HIV test. The speaker stands in a garden and notices the buds of peonies "edged crimson" (33) and "a little blood-color" (33). Blood is on his mind, as he waits for the important results, and even the beautiful gardens offer him no relief from thoughts of contamination. The speaker laments: "three weeks after the test, / the vial filled from the crook / of my elbow, I'm seeing blood everywhere" (33). Landau notes that "Fog" "enacts...redemption by transforming the cultural coding of AIDS by situating the lovers' dreadful discovery in a world animated by compassionate spirits" (207). With disease and death on the line, nature shows vitality:

The thin green porcelain

teacup, our homemade Ouija's planchette,

rocks and wobbles every night, spins

and spells. It seems a cloud of spirits

numerous as lilac panicles vie for occupancy –

children grabbing for the telephone,

happy to talk to someone who isn't dead yet?

Everyone wants to speak at once, or at least

these random words appear, incongruous

and exactly spelled: *energy, immunity, kiss.*

Then: M. *has immunity*. W. *has.*

And that was all. (33-34)

This passage shows the speaker's determination not to focus on death, despite his own professed anxiety. To perceive animated spirits in a dying world is to contextualize grief among signs of vitality. These nature spirits take on a further spiritual role when the speaker explains how "one character, Frank,...who lived in our house in the thirties,...asks us to stand before the screen / and kiss. *God in garden,* he says" (34). This characterization of spirits and God is atypical – his spirits requesting to see a homoerotic kiss and God an animate spirit wandering nature. Musing on God, spirituality, and connection between the physical and spiritual realms, the speaker offers:

> Sitting out on the back porch at twilight,
>
> I'm almost convinced. In this geometry
>
>
> of paths and raised beds, the green shadows
>
> of delphinium, there's an unseen rustling:
>
>
> some secret amplitude
>
> seems to open in this orderly space.
>
>
> Maybe because it contains so much dying,

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>
> some secret amplitude
>
> seems to open in this orderly space.
>
> Maybe because it contains so much dying,

all these tulip petals thinning

at the base until any wind takes them.

I doubt anyone else would see that, looking in.

And then I realize my garden has no outside only *is*

subjectively. As blood is utterly without

an outside, can't be seen except out of context,

the wrong color in alien air, no longer itself. (34-25)

Immersed in the wilderness, Doty senses some sort of order – spiritually and ideologically imposed by his own perceptions, "subjectively." Landau argues that "although Doty does not write explicitly about the political world, his transformations are ideological as well as spiritual. Much as the speaker's garden is an 'orderly space' in which design is imposed on wilderness, so his blood is coded by the medical establishment when tested for HIV" (208). The discourses that give the AIDS epidemic shape – used by the medical community, the political establishment, religious organizations, among others – also shape the speaker's body, of which his blood is a part, into something besides his own body. Perhaps such an appropriation of his body

and identity by the epidemic discourse creates the "alien air" in which the speaker finds himself.

The speaker then focuses on the process of being tested for HIV, explaining how he became so well-acquainted with the epidemic's discourses:

> submits to test, two
>
> to be exact, each done three times,
>
> though not for me, since at their first entry
>
> into my disembodied blood
>
> there was nothing at home there.
>
> For you they entered the blood garden over
>
> and over, like knocking at a door
>
> because you know someone's home. Three times
>
> the Elisa Test, three the Western Blot,

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>
> though not for me, since at their first entry
>
> into my disembodied blood
>
> there was nothing at home there.
>
> For you they entered the blood garden over
>
> and over, like knocking at a door
>
> because you know someone's home. Three times
>
> the Elisa Test, three the Western Blot,

and then the incoherent message. We're

the public health care worker's

nine o'clock appointment,

she is a phantom hand who forms

the letters of your name, and the word

that begins with P. (35)

There is a power struggle evident at the outset of this passage. Doty and his partner do not agree to a test, ask for one, or take one. They "submit" to a test, thus showing the medical establishment's control over them. That bureaucratic power invades the "blood garden" previously animated and spiritualized by the speaker. The experience of finding out the definitive test results is so painful for the speaker, compounded by the nameless, unfeeling "phantom" who declares the results, that he resists saying *positive*. He resists that oppressive language of the establishment: "Planchette, / peony, I would think of anything // not to say the word...Every new bloom is falling apart" (36). The speaker's world is shaped by language, and thus he has a ferocious need to "say any other word" to deny that his lover has HIV. He wants to frame this awful experience in a

language that is uniquely his, one that he chooses – rather than one that is imposed upon him by a structural power. As Landau says, he seeks "a 'secret amplitude' to enable breathing room amidst – and despite – the discourses that script the cultural meaning of AIDS" (209). "Fog" represents Doty's resistance of the public health discourse, framing Wally's diagnosis in terms of a spiritualized garden, which seeks the affirming power of love, language, creativity, and spirituality. The last couplet says, "I would say anything else / in the world, any other word" (36). There is a close association between "word" and "world." The only difference is a single letter, which shows the ability of language and of words to shape a world.

Additionally, in discussing Doty's "Fog," Joanne Rendell asserts that the poem is "drag-analogous in that it dislodges and reveals the reiterative ways 'norms' are constructed" (93). She goes on to note that Doty's poem unveils the performativity of the medical world's terminology "HIV positive" and "HIV negative." Classifications like those typically have carried the stigmatization of "HIV positive as 'other', and all too often this 'other' has been collapsed into the sign 'gay'" (93). So when Doty refuses to utter the term "positive," he rejects the iterative process that produces this "otherness." He would rather not embrace the polarizing discourse and the accompanying social responses of "positive" and "negative," but instead embraces the possibility of ambiguity, the transformative power of a fluid language like the fluid air that is "fog."

In his poem "The Wings," Doty also rejects a typical way of speaking about loss and love due to the AIDS epidemic. Instead, he constructs new language, new ways of seeing. As he looks on a fall landscape, he notices:

> There were geese. *There were*:
>
> the day's narration is simple assertion;
>
> it's enough to name the instances.
>
> Don't let anybody tell you
>
> death's the price exacted
>
> for the ability to love;
>
> couldn't we live forever
>
> without running out of occasions? (44)

While the public may see same-sex relationships as breeding grounds for nothing more than death, Doty sees otherwise. He sees homoerotic love as constructive, sustaining, as something valuable and far from self-destructive. He immediately rejects the oppressive discourse of "death's the price exacted / for the ability to love" with a

celebratory notion, "couldn't we love forever / without running out of occasions?" After demystifying one fable that same-sex relationships are the source of HIV / AIDS, Doty muses on an iconic symbol of a response to AIDS, another form of discourse which fights for dignity, the AIDS Memorial Quilt:

> In the Exhibition Hall each unfurled
>
> three-by five field bears
>
> in awkward or accomplished embroidery
>
> a name, every banner stitched to another
>
> and another. They're reading
>
> the unthinkable catalog of the names,
>
> so many they blur, become
>
> a single music pronounced with difficulty
>
> over the microphone, become a pronoun,
>
> become You. It's the clothing I can't get past,

the way a favorite pair of jeans,

a striped shirt's sewn onto the cloth;

the fading, the pulls in the fabric

demonstrate how these relics formed around

one essential, missing body.

An empty pair of pants

is mortality's severest evidence.

Embroidered mottoes blend

into something elegiac but removed;

a shirt can't be remote.

One can't look past

the sleeves where two arms

were, where a shoulder pushed

against a seam, and someone knew exactly

how the stitches pressed against skin

that can't be generalized but was,

irretrievably, you, or yours. (44-45)

Here, Doty explores the power of art to preserve the memory of those whom many in power want to forget. The quilt works against the economic language that often surrounds disasters from a political standpoint. It speaks the names of the dead, holds details of their human lives. Doty sees the various panels of the quilt sewn together, representative of community. That community becomes grounded in a pronoun, "You," which indicates a striking revelation for the speaker of the poem. He understands the reaching effects of the disease. Landau also notes that the use of "you" "blur[s] the distinction between the dead and the reader to emphasize that those lost to AIDS could be anybody – not only the speaker's beloved but the reader, or someone he or she has loved....Doty brings his readers into the poem in a way that dissolves the boundaries" (212) between gay and straight, man and woman, dead and living.

Once again, the quilt and the poem about an experience with the quilt stand in sharp contrast to the homophobic ideology that views AIDS as punishment for men who have sex with men. The quilt (and the poem) offers a compassionate alternative to an oppressive discourse. While the language of condemnation and judgment seeks to

repress the narratives of those who died of AIDS, the quilt offers an opportunity to piece together elegiac narratives of a community.

As the speaker meditates on the loss of so many loved individuals, he realizes that his own lover's name may soon be a part of the quilt. His awareness compels him to plant a garden in which "buried wishes" might:

become blooms

supple and sheened as skin. I'm thinking

of the lily-flowered kind

on slim spines, the ones

that might as well be flames,

just two slight wings that will

blaze into the future;

I have to think they have a will,

a design so inherent in the cells

nothing could subtract from them

the least quotient of grace (47)

By planting a garden, Doty hopes that something will grow from his lover's death, that his "buried wishes" will sprout an "angel" – the deification and reincarnation of his lover. He imagines winged, flame-like flowers, which create an ethereal, spiritualized world from his experience with the physical world. That world he imagines for his lover is free from the physical suffering of the present world and free from the social and political oppression that also exists. That "quotient of grace" is the divine spark that is not concerned with constraining rhetoric that asserts that "death [is] the price exacted / for the ability to love." It is the redemption that grows from suffering. It is the redemption that then frees him to celebrate homoerotics in the following passage:

I dreamed

the night after the fall planting,

that a bird who loved me

had been long neglected, and when

I took it from the closet and gave it water

its tongue began to move again,

and it began to beat the lush green music

of its wings, and wrapped the brilliant risk

of leaves all around my face. (47)

There is vitality and regeneration in erotic acts – no shame or risk. The disease, on the other hand, uses intimate encounters as a catalyst for infection, and society then constructs its own harsh judgments as a result. This poem boldly says that yes, indeed, men will still have sex with men even in the midst of an epidemic. The risks are known, and so are the ecstasies of the erotic. This passage is not concerned with the debate between "safe" and "unsafe" sex; it is, instead, a celebration of the erotic with an understanding of what *could* happen.

Stereotypes of people with AIDS are shattered once again in "Brilliance." In the poem, a woman named Maggie is taking care of a man who is dying of AIDS. He is apparently ready to die, resigned to his fate, having "paid off his credit card" and having "found a home for" his dogs and cats:

He says,

I can't have anything.

She says, *A bowl of goldfish?*

He says he doesn't want to start

with anything and then describes

the kind he'd maybe like,

how their tails would fan

to a gold flaring. They talk

about hot jewel tones,

gold lacquer, say maybe

they'll go pick some out

though he can't go much of anywhere and then

abruptly he says *I can't love*

anything I can't finish.

He says it like he's had enough

of the whole scintillant world. (65-66)

Part of the pain of AIDS is realizing that attachments must be broken, that one's coming death is also others' coming grief. The man is debilitated by AIDS, alone except for his attendant friend, and resigned to his inevitable death. But the poem takes a turn; and, in the process, defies the stereotype (established in the opening of the poem) of people with AIDS as removed and prepared to die:

Later he leaves a message:

Yes to the bowl of goldfish.

Meaning: let me go, if I have to,

in brilliance.

....

So, Maggie's friend –

is he going out

into the last loved object

of his attention?

Fanning the veined translucence

of an opulent tail,

undulant in some uncapturable curve,

is he bronze chrysanthemums,

copper leaf, hurried darting,

doubloons, icon-colored fins

troubling the water? (66-67)

The goldfish represents a longing for vitality amidst disease and decay. The dying man realizes that though he may be dying, he can live the rest of his days not resigned to misery. He chooses "brilliance," which is captured by the goldfish. Landau says that "the last lines of the poem present the fusion between the sick man and the scintillant fish as a subversive and defiant response to an oppressive world" (216). The man chooses to stay grounded in the world of sensual pleasure despite his looming death. The poem, then, does not dwell in the world of brutality and suffering, but celebrates the beauty of pleasure and the pleasure of beauty. Yet, the beauty exists in a world rife with suffering; the tension between pleasure and pain, beauty and suffering is the human struggle of one who knows that death is near – an end to pleasure, deliverance from suffering.

Continuing with the idea of seeking alternatives to the conventional stories surrounding AIDS, "Bill's Story" explores the familial experience of death and dying. The poem's focus is the speaker's sister, Anne, who returns from Africa with "dementia" – "the first sign of something / we didn't even have a name for, / in 1978." She is ill years later and hospitalized as a result. The speaker remembers:

> my mother needed something
>
> to hold onto, some way to be helpful,
>
> so she read a book called *Deathing*
>
> (a cheap, ugly verb if ever I heard one)
>
> and took its advice to heart;
>
> she'd sit by the bed and say, *Annie,*
>
> *look for the light, look for the light.*
>
> It was plain that Anne did not wish
>
> to be distracted by these instructions;
>
> she came to, though she was nearly gone then,
>
> and looked at our mother with what was almost certainly

annoyance. *It's a white light,*

Mom said, and this struck me

as incredibly presumptuous, as if the light

we'd all go into would be just the same.

Maybe she wanted to give herself up

to indigo, or red. If we can barely even speak

to each other, living so separately,

how can we all die the same? (68-69)

The idea of "the white light" is dead to the speaker, purely myth and unimaginative. So the speaker imagines other colors for Anne based on his memories of her costumes that she wore as a performance artist – "Maybe her light was all that gabardine / and flannel, khaki and navy / and silks and stripes." This portion of the poem saves the narrative of a person, in the concrete, sensual details. Writing about individual people with AIDS gives Doty the opportunity to propose an entirely new way of looking at the disease each time he tells someone's story. Each effort is a triumph in preserving the humanity and individuality of that particular person who suffers.

As Doty re-imagines the AIDS epidemic, casts it in new terms, he offers consolation for those afflicted by the disease and by grief. In his poem "Becoming a

Meadow," Doty uses words and books as a springboard for meditation on beauty and possibilities as a source of consolation. The speaker of the poem finds himself in a bookstore during a snowstorm. Having picked up a book and started to read, he comes to the phrase "becoming a meadow," a phrase he finds particularly interesting. He muses:

> a meadow accepts itself as various, allows
>
> some parts of itself to always be going away,
>
> because whatever happens in that blown,
>
> ragged field of grass and sway
>
> *is* the meadow, and threading the frost
>
> of its unlikely brilliance yesterday
>
> we also were the meadow. In the bookstore
>
> while you are reading and I am allowing myself
>
> simply to be comforted by the presence of stories,
>
> the bound, steady presences on the shelves

fixed as nothing else is, I am thinking of my terror

of decay, the little hell opening in every violated cell,

the virus tearing

away – is it? – and we are still a part of the meadow

because I am thinking of it, hearing

the bell-phrase of it: Head of the Meadow

in my head. The titles of books,

the letters of the writers' names blow

like grasses, become individual stalks,

seedheads, burrs, rimed swell

of dune on which the beach grass is writing its book

in characters unreadable or read:

the meadow-book

you are writing, and which you read. (75-76)

In this passage, the speaker is concerned with his own HIV status, but rather than letting that fear overcome his thoughts, he finds consolation in a world in flux. The meadow is a space without distinction or absolutes. There is no positive or negative; the various parts of the meadow are still exactly that – the meadow. Landau says that "[t]he meadow is a place in which conventional narratives about mortality dissolve so that – at least in the realm of the poem – the world itself is utterly transformed" (218). The idea of "the world of the poem" is particularly important to this passage. The speaker is among books in order to escape the snowstorm outside. Furthermore, he seeks refuge in the bound volumes of the shelves from the storm that is the disease. As he says, he is "comforted by the presence of stories." Stories potentially live on long past their subjects, so it is fitting that someone fearful of mortality would be comforted by that which offers a kind of immortality. The books he finds give him passage into a space where his anxiety dies away, where "the little hell opening in every violated cell" becomes inconsequential. Doty seems to suggest that literature possesses the power to offer gateways to narratives alternative to those which one regularly encounters. The poem is a space of, as the title says, "becoming" and not a place of "being."

Later in the poem, Doty illustrates very directly the manner in which one can ignore conventional language and create a more affirming discourse. He says:

And if one wave breaking says

You're dying, then the rhythm and shift of the whole

> says nothing about endings, and half the shawling head
>
> of each wave's spume pours into the trough
>
> of the one before,
>
> and half blows away in spray, backward, toward the open sea. (76)

The speaker fears the one-way narrative that links the virus with death. Instead, he seeks a broader, more expansive space, which takes away the power of the question surrounding the disease. Boundlessness renders the virus and its surrounding narratives virtually impotent. As in the metaphor of the passage above, one wave gets lost in "the open sea." This boundlessness that the speaker longs for here is similar to what Doty discusses in *Heaven's Coast*:

> 'Eternity,' Blake said, 'is in love with the productions of time.' Perhaps, in fact, eternity inheres in the things that time makes; perhaps that's all of eternity we'll know: the wave, the flower; the repeated endless glimmerings and departures of tides. My error, which perhaps really *does* express itself in that pain in the fifth vertebra, lies in thinking the future's something we can believe or disbelieve, trust or doubt. It's the element we breathe. Our position in time – ungraspable thing! – is the element in which we move. Our apocalypse is daily, but so is our persistence. (10)

That thing in which "eternity inheres" for the speaker of "Becoming a Meadow" is the book that proposes a world, a world that appropriates him and offers an escape from time.

Doty's poems in *My Alexandria* seek space beyond the literal, historical, conventional narratives surrounding the AIDS virus. In "Demolition," a more fluid language takes hold of long-established, rigid structures. "Chanteuse" muses on the ability to mythologize, to create new identities and possibilities. And "Fog" reaches for an ambiguous space as freedom from the literal world of "positive" and that word's socially oppressive consequences. "Brilliance" offers the reader an alternative to the traditional story of men dying from AIDS, while "Bill's Story" refuses traditional conceptions of death. Finally, in "Becoming a Meadow," fear of disease fades away in the expansive world offered as refuge in texts. Doty shatters myths surrounding the AIDS virus and those afflicted by it; he proposes alternatives to stagnant, rigid political discourse. His color palette is broad; the musicality of his lines is striking. His poems show that poetry is possibility, transformative when at its best. Landau quotes Doty concerning the power of his own work: "'I have seen such potent connections between people formed because of poems. I know that these do not in themselves constitute social change, but I have been lucky enough to be on the receiving end of some remarkable communications from readers'" (219). Doty's poems resonate with various audiences – gay and straight, positive or negative, people with AIDS and people without AIDS, young and old. The poems focus feelings in a way that Monette's poetry

deliberately does not. Doty's poems are refined, offering clarification of certain overwhelming emotions with a result of having a broad impact in terms of readership.

For Doty himself, the writing he did after Wally died proved life-saving. He talks about the power of writing in *Heaven's Coast*:

> I was writing for myself. Writing, in a way, to save my life, to catch what could be saved of Wally's life, to make form and struggle toward a shape, to make a story of us that can be both kept and given away. The story's my truest possession and I burnish and hammer it and wrestle it to make it whole. In return it offers me back to myself, it holds what I cannot, its embrace and memory larger than mine, more permanent. Always, always we were becoming a story. But I didn't understand that fusing my life to the narrative, giving myself to the story's life, would be what would allow me to live. (291)

Thus, his poems and other writing are both live-saving and life-giving, in love with memory and the memory of love.

I salute you, friends who would not button
your lips but kept them, chapped and bloody, open;

who refused to huddle caged as in contagion,
forced to find your balance from between

the horns of the dilemma how to live
at once outside and inside of your bodies

and dance and balance not struck dumb by fear,
your voice a thread, your proper labyrinth's clue.

- Rachel Hadas from "Arguments of Silence"

Part 5

Finale

The AIDS organization ACT UP has as one of its slogans SILENCE=DEATH with an underlying understanding that attention and resources must be vociferously demanded in order to fight the AIDS pandemic. The disease is far reaching – killing people without regard for nationality, creed, sexual preference, class, gender, intelligence. Because the effects of AIDS are so vast and unwieldy, so are the many strains of discourse that accompany them. AIDS poetry in the United States plays a particularly important role in shaping the language surrounding the disease and the social, political, and cultural challenges faced by persons living with HIV/AIDS and their communities. Much of AIDS poetry depends on the power of narratives to personalize a pandemic that could easily be talked about in terms of statistics and economics. AIDS poetry is equal parts grief, rage, desperation, love, action, and empathy. In AIDS poetry, there is a need to communicate the gravity of individual tragedy within the pandemic while also advocating for far-reaching social, political, and cultural change. It is type of poetry akin to Carolyn Forché's "poetry of witness" – a poetry that moves for social change. Realizing the power of the personal narrative, poets writing about AIDS know that the most difficult story to tell is the one with so many characters that are so important to its telling that it is simply impossible to tell one single story.

The stories of AIDS differ as a reflection of the differences – in race, gender, sexuality, class – present in the community of persons living with AIDS. There must, therefore, be willing readers, willing listeners for the stories of these people and the works of these poets. The continuity of the stories surrounding AIDS lies in the anger, fear, memory, and love that are represented in physical form by the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. One of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, wrote extensively about human cruelty and the importance of memory in shaping human action. In his Nobel speech he offers the following thoughts on memory and poetry:

> Memory thus is our force, it protects us against a speech entwining upon itself like the ivy when it does not find a support on a tree or a wall.
>
> A few minutes ago I expressed my longing for the end of a contradiction which opposes the poet's need of distance to his feeling of solidarity with his fellow men. And yet, if we take a flight above the Earth as a metaphor of the poet's vocation, it is not difficult to notice that a kind of contradiction is implied, even in those epochs when the poet is relatively free from the snares of History. For how to be above and simultaneously to see the Earth in every detail? And yet, in a precarious balance of opposites, a certain equilibrium can be achieved thanks to a distance introduced by the flow of time. "To see" means not only to have before

> one's eyes. It may mean also to preserve in memory. "To see and to describe" may also mean to reconstruct in imagination. A distance achieved, thanks to the mystery of time, must not change events, landscapes, human figures into a tangle of shadows growing paler and paler. On the contrary, it can show them in full light, so that every event, every date becomes expressive and persists as an eternal reminder of human depravity and human greatness. Those who are alive receive a mandate from those who are silent forever. They can fulfill their duties only by trying to reconstruct precisely things as they were, and by wresting the past from fictions and legends.
>
> Thus both - the Earth seen from above in an eternal now and the Earth that endures in a recovered time - may serve as material for poetry.

The poet-activist strives for clarified memories, ones that may offer a powerful impact upon his or her readers. Even as the AIDS pandemic is still, over 25 years after its advent, a cause of destruction among the human race, memory of losses must translate to an awareness of present and future possibilities.

This idea of remembering humanity's capacity for human cruelty became incredibly important in the twentieth century after discovering the atrocities of the Holocaust. Compounding the impact of the atrocities was the lack of immediate response from the United States. As an entire community was devastated, narratives

were lost, histories were lost. Memory became invaluable in preserving a cultural history. Similarities can be drawn between the lack of immediate, meaningful action by governments in addressing the Holocaust and in addressing the AIDS pandemic. And as, at first, the gay community saw many people wasting due to sickness, the importance of preserving narratives intensified. AIDS poetry attempts to represent some of the horror of the trauma surrounding the disease and the various sociopolitical battles surrounding it. Similarly, Holocaust literature captures bits and pieces of the absolute evil that so many were forced to experience. AIDS poetry, like Holocaust literature, cries out to readers to *remember*, begging for *never again*.

In the early days of AIDS, the stigma of being a "gay disease" provided a gateway for the formation of a new language of prejudice. Such prejudice was evident in the government's resistance to provide adequate funding for researching and treating the mystery disease because the disease affected most drastically the homosexual community. There was a lack of access to effective medical care, loss of jobs, expulsion from public schools (e.g. Ryan White), and a general vulnerability to discrimination. A positive diagnosis was not just a proclamation of impending death, but also an immediate loss of many civil rights. Storytelling, memorializing, elegizing has fought this language of prejudice. Personal narratives serve as important political resistance for AIDS activists. These narratives humanize HIV/AIDS.

Harvard medical school professor and poet Rafael Campo has written many essays and poems about his experiences treating AIDS patients and his various

relationships to the disease. He says in "AIDS and the Poetry of Healing," "I am grateful for the poetry that is written about AIDS, in that it has helped me so generously to locate myself in a world irrevocably altered by the presence of the virus" (95). He later explains how the disease and the resulting poetry affect the human community:

> In ravaging our collective immunity, AIDS makes the naked body that much more clearly delineated, almost like beholding a person in the last stages of the disease. The spoken word becomes that much more urgent and honest, the poem that much more purely language. When addressing AIDS, the poet is no longer immune to the outer world, to its biases and hate. I have felt myself before the page to be utterly available, and this form of freedom is the hardest part, because it is the most terrifying freedom there is. The poetry of AIDS, then, is not simply and always about assuming control. Rewritten: it is about losing all control, it is about dying and fucking. Souls dissolving into songs, memories of a lost lover last seen in New Orleans, laments. (99)

Campo sees AIDS poetry not simply as a space for expressing powerful emotions, but as a prayer for understanding. The voice of AIDS poetry is one that does not just cry out to retake the body, but also to celebrate the body's ecstasies. The voice is desirous, fearless.

I began by mentioning ACT UP's slogan SILENCE = DEATH. AIDS poetry reveals that our words are keeping us alive – passionate words, demanding words. Our words

distribute our ideas which are the currency of our existence. Our words demand the funds that are spent on researching the disease. Our words are the names of lovers, friends, neighbors, and relatives. Our words are the blood spilled to fight the vocabulary of prejudice in demonstrations. Our words are the tears shed, the semen ejaculated for and by lovers. Our words are intensifiers, the crusaders that build communities. Our words are neither male nor female, neither rich nor poor. Our words are refusals to die and to submit, like Tory Dent says, as she battled the disease: "We were not born for this, this stainless steel, / this sanitary lack of love, this medicine-vacuum" ("Black Milk"). The poetry of AIDS asks the reader to lose himself or herself in the poem so that it may teach us the weight of our own and humanity's own losses. So that it may teach us that POETRY = LIFE. So that we may choose to live like one of Doty's characters – *in brilliance*.

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Part 3: