

Paul Monette

The Worrying

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
his prints on scrubbed my hands till my fingers
cracked washed apples ten times ten no salad but
iceberg and shuck the outer two thirds someone
we knew was brain dead from sushi so stick
to meatloaf creamed corn spuds whatever we
could cook to death DON'T USE THE D WORD
EVEN IN JEST when you started craving deli
I heaved a sigh because salami was so de-
germed with its lovely nitrites to hell with
cholesterol that's for people way way over
the hill or up the hill not us in the vale
of borrowed time yet I was so far more gone
than you nuts in fact ruinous as a supermom
with a kid in a bubble who can't play and ten
years later can't work can't kiss can't laugh
but his room's still clean every cough every
bump would nothing ever be nothing again
cramming you with zinc and Haagen-Dazs so wild
to fatten you up I couldn't keep track of
what was medicine what was old wives' but see
THERE WAS NO MEDICINE only me and to
circle the wagons and island the last of our
magic spoon by spoon nap by nap till we
healed you as April heals drinking the sun
I was Prospero of the spell of day-by-day
and all of this just the house worry peanuts
to what's out there and you with the dagger at
your jugular struggling back to work jotting
your calendar two months ahead penciling
clients husbanding husbanding inching back
and me agape with the day's demises who

was swollen who gone mad ringing you on
the hour how are you compared to ten noon
one come home and have blintzes petrified
you'd step in an elevator with some hacking
CPA the whole world ought to be masked
please I can't even speak of the hospital fear
firsts bone white the first day of an assault
huddled by your bed like an old crone empty-
eyed in a Greek square black on black the waiting
for tests the chamber of horrors in my head
my rags and vitamins dumb as leeches how did
the meningitis get in where did I slip up
what didn't I scour I'd have swathed the city
in gauze to cushion you no man who hasn't
watched his cruelest worry come true in a room
with no door can ever know what doesn't
die because they lie who say it's over
Rog it hasn't stopped at all are you okay
does it hurt what can I do still still I
think if I worry enough I'll keep you near
the night before Thanksgiving I had this
panic to buy the plot on either side of us
so we won't be cramped that yard of extra grass
would let us breathe THIS IS CRAZY RIGHT but
Thanksgiving morning I went the grave two over
beside you was six feet deep ready for the next
murdered dream so see the threat was real
why not worry worry is like prayer is like
God if you have none they all forget there's
the other side too twelve years and not once
to fret WHO WILL EVER LOVE ME that was
the heaven at the back of time but we had it
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 easy
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

from *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog* (St. Martin's Press, 1988)

Stefania Gomez

At the New York City AIDS Memorial

Your absence is a bisected city
block where a hospital once stood.
The footprint of a yellow house on Providence's east side
we once shared. Demolished. A white pickup you drove
decorated with black dice. The ground beneath it
crumbled—poof—then paved over, engraved like verses
into stone. When I was told what happened to you,
I sank to the wet floor of a bar's bathroom, furious
that you left us to reassemble ourselves
from rubble. To build, between subway stops,
some saccharine monument
pigeons shit on, empty except for a circle of queens
chattering, furnishing the air like ghosts. Your death
means I'm always equidistant from you,
no matter where I travel, where I linger,
misguided, hopeful. Last night, by candle light,
a woman unearthed me.
Together, she and I grieved
the impossibility of disappearing
into one another. Poof. Since you died,
erasure obsesses me. Among the photos at the memorial,
one of a banner that reads WHERE IS YOUR RAGE?
ACT UP FIGHT BACK FIGHT AIDS, carried by five
young men. Your face in each. Your beautiful face.

from *Poem-a-Day* (Academy of American Poets, March 10, 2022)

John D'Amico
from **The AIDS Memorial project**



Tony Vito Anthony Gramaglia
(pictured left)
(January 13, 1959 - May 3, 1995)

The moment we met. And the exact place. In 1984. And the moment I heard that you had died. In 1995. I remember. And I remember the Le Car that you drove until it caught fire on the 101 freeway half way to the valley.

I remember the meals at Angeli Caffe and that first lunch when I stopped by and sat alone and watched you hurry around delivering pizzas and jokes to table after table.

I remember the time we went to the Huntington Gardens and the time we stayed at the Tropicana Hotel. The time we met for brunch in Hollywood and the last time I saw you and touched your foot. And I remember long naps in your apartment on Poinsettia, thinking, "this could last and last and last and last." And the fingernails story and the pictures that you sent me from your childhood as a baton twirler. And the way you taught me that photos can talk. And they still do. I remember your breathy laughter and the way it seemed you became lighter and lighter and lighter until you one day disappeared.

I remember the time you helped me set up the Jeff Koons sculpture at the Bloom's house. And the time you moved away to San Francisco with Sam and Keith. And the time you moved back with Tom and Steve. And the first time we had sex. And the time I ran into you at the Farmer's Market. And the Dalmatians that ate sticks in your yard and the Christmas dinner next to the hot guy whose leather jacket groaned when he reached for a roll. And the ventriloquist you introduced me to, twice.

I remember the Hay Rides and the angels and the long talks and all that laughter and the way that you would wash your apples before you ate them. I remember the writing classes. And the exact park bench that we sat on when you told me you had AIDS. I remember that little house in Laurel Canyon with the bronze door knob, and kissing you on the stairway of the apartment you lived in the night we met. I remember Irene Borger comparing you to Kyoto, "too beautiful to bomb."

Who could forget any of it?

Kat Moore

Catch: A Memory in Three Fragments

1

It was 1983 and I was six years old, riding between my father and brother in my father's Oldsmobile, back when front seats stretched from door to door. My father drove, and my brother, who was nineteen, already grown, sat on the other side of me with his window down and his arm draped on the door, his elbow jutting out of the car a little. The wind tousled our hair. They both smoked, and spoke with their hands, though my father kept one hand on the steering wheel. The ashtray jutted out from the dash, and occasionally my knees bumped into it. The sky was gray with impending rain. My father turned the car into a McDonald's parking lot. The tires hit a rough patch in the asphalt, and the to-go cup full of Coca-Cola jumped out of the cup holder and flipped quickly. My little hands reached out and righted the cup, the bottom barely dusted by ashes. Bob took the drink from my hands. He smiled at me and said, "Good catch. Good thing you were here."

2

In 1986, Madonna's best friend and former roommate passed away from AIDS. The next year, at one concert, the pop icon handed out a comic book to share information about the disease that had taken her friend. I didn't know this then, of course—only years later when I searched through Madonna archives on the internet, hoping to trigger memories of my brother. He and I both adored the queen of MTV: her confidence, plastic bracelets, hair spray, and, of course, her music. The comic was about a little boy who had contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion. The boy, Ricky, is in middle school, and the comic opens in a classroom with another boy telling the teacher, a blonde woman who may or may not be Madonna, that he is afraid of Ricky because Ricky has AIDS. The teacher, in a modest skirt suit with pink colors, her hair swept back away from her face except for bangs that fall over the frames of her glasses, reminds the student that Ricky is his friend and that he must try to be more understanding. While reading a scan of the comic online, I remembered my own health class in middle school. The day the teacher spoke of HIV and AIDS, the subsequent snickers from the other kids. I ran out of the room and into the hall. My teacher followed me out and hugged me under the fluorescent lights next to the lockers. She wasn't Madonna, but she had blonde hair and glasses and Madonna's compassion. I cried in her arms and told her about my brother. This was back when AIDS meant death—quick and painful. Images of men withered down to bone, with small dark splotches on their skin. Back when my mom had separate cups for Bob to use whenever he dropped by, cups that would be thrown out immediately after he left the house.

3

In the memory, Bob smiles at me. This is why this memory stays. That smile. The approval. In the moment, I felt completely loved and needed. The cup flipping, so insignificant, and so illogical. Wouldn't we have gotten the cola after going through the drive-through and not before? But I see the sky, the golden arches as the car maneuvers into the lot, the flick of ash from my father's cigarette, the bump, the cup bouncing out of the holder and into my hands, Bob's white

polo shirt, the taut muscles in his forearm, the hair curling away from his head, upward, his smile, a burst of heaven. If I hadn't been there, the cola would have spilled. If I hadn't been there, Bob would not have smiled.

from *Creative Nonfiction* (online)

Melvin Dixon

Heartbeats

Work out. Ten laps.
Chin ups. Look good.

Steam room. Dress warm.
Call home. Fresh air.

Eat right. Rest well.
Sweetheart. Safe sex.

Sore throat. Long flu.
Hard nodes. Beware.

Test blood. Count cells.
Reds thin. Whites low.

Dress warm. Eat well.
Short breath. Fatigue.

Night sweats. Dry cough.
Loose stools. Weight loss.

Get mad. Fight back.
Call home. Rest well.

Don't cry. Take charge.
No sex. Eat right.

Call home. Talk slow.
Chin up. No air.

Arms wide. Nodes hard.
Cough dry. Hold on.

Mouth wide. Drink this.
Breathe in. Breathe out.

No air. Breathe in.
Breathe in. No air.

Black out. White rooms.
Head hot. Feet cold.

No work. Eat right.
CAT scan. Chin up.

Breathe in. Breathe out.
No air. No air.

Thin blood. Sore lungs.
Mouth dry. Mind gone.

Six months? Three weeks?
Can't eat. No air.

Today? Tonight?
It waits. For me.

Sweet heart. Don't stop.
Breathe in. Breathe out.

from *Love's Instruments* (Tia Chucha Press, 1995)

Rafael Campo
The Distant Moon

I

Admitted to the hospital again.
The second bout of pneumocystis back
In January almost killed him; then,
He'd sworn to us he'd die at home. He baked
Us cookies, which the student wouldn't eat,
Before he left--the kitchen on 5A
Is small, but serviceable and neat.
He told me stories: Richard Gere was gay
And sleeping with a friend of his, and AIDS
Was an elaborate conspiracy
Effected by the government. He stayed
Four months. He lost his sight to CMV.

II

One day, I drew his blood, and while I did
He laughed, and said I was his girlfriend now,
His blood-brother. "Vampire-slut," he cried,
"You'll make me live forever!" Wrinkled brows
Were all I managed in reply. I know
I'm drowning in his blood, his purple blood.
I filled my seven tubes; the warmth was slow
To leave them, pressed inside my palm. I'm sad
Because he doesn't see my face. Because
I can't identify with him. I hate
The fact that he's my age, and that across
My skin he's there, my blood-brother, my mate.

III

He said I was too nice, and after all
If Jodie Foster was a lesbian,
Then doctors could be queer. Residual
Guilts tingled down my spine. "OK, I'm done,"
I said as I withdrew the needle from
His back, and pressed. The CSF was clear;
I never answered him. That spot was framed
In sterile, paper drapes. He was so near
Death, telling him seemed pointless. Then, he died.
Unrecognizable to anyone

But me, he left my needles deep inside
His joking heart. An autopsy was done.

IV

I'd read to him at night. His horoscope,
The New York Times, The Advocate;
Some lines by Richard Howard gave us hope.
A quiet hospital is infinite,
The polished, ice-white floors, the darkened halls
That lead to almost anywhere, to death
Or ghostly, lighted Coke machines. I call
To him one night, at home, asleep. His breath,
I dreamed, had filled my lungs--his lips, my lips
Had touched. I felt as though I'd touched a shrine.
Not disrespectfully, but in some lapse
Of concentration. In a mirror shines

The distant moon.

from *The Other Man Was Me: A Voyage to the New World* (Arte Público Press, 1994)

Mark Doty

The Embrace

You weren't well or really ill yet either;
just a little tired, your handsomeness
tinged by grief or anticipation, which brought
to your face a thoughtful, deepening grace.

I didn't for a moment doubt you were dead.
I knew that to be true still, even in the dream.
You'd been out—at work maybe?—
having a good day, almost energetic.

We seemed to be moving from some old house
where we'd lived, boxes everywhere, things
in disarray: that was the *story* of my dream,
but even asleep I was shocked out of the narrative

by your face, the physical fact of your face:
inches from mine, smooth-shaven, loving, alert.
Why so difficult, remembering the actual look
of you? Without a photograph, without strain?

So when I saw your unguarded, reliable face,
your unmistakable gaze opening all the warmth
and clarity of —warm brown tea—we held
each other for the time the dream allowed.

Bless you. You came back, so I could see you
once more, plainly, so I could rest against you
without thinking this happiness lessened anything,
without thinking you were alive again.

from *Sweet Machine* (HarperCollins, 1998)