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“It will be recorded that the dead in the first decade of the calamity died of our indifference.” —  
Paul Monette

At the end of the past year, the Trump administration dismissed all sixteen members of the federal HIV/AIDS advisory council, a panel that has existed since the Reagan years. This was coupled with deep cuts to public health initiatives and a refusal to name a new acting director for the White House Office of National AIDS Policy at the White House. For many, this was but another tragic addition to the many forms of violence inflicted upon some of the most vulnerable populations struggling to survive in our current political climate.

To be honest, I struggled deeply with this news. As a queer person of color, I have had many encounters with members of my community who had never heard of the AIDS crisis. I recently taught a unit on the literary and cultural history of this period, and my undergraduates still write to me about how it was the material that most resonated with them precisely because it has not been (and in many ways still isn't) taught. Advances in treatment and prevention have made HIV/AIDS “no longer a death sentence,” a turn of phrase I hear often in queer circles. But this has contributed, in my view, to a dangerous cultural amnesia<sup>[1]</sup> of what Lance Wahlert has aptly called the *painful reunion*.<sup>[2]</sup> When homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in the 70s, the rise of the AIDS pandemic in the early 80s forcibly reunited many queer people with the medical establishment that only a decade ago had pathologized them. The consequences of this reunion continue to haunt the lives of queer people living with HIV/AIDS today, many of whom will never have access to treatment.

The AIDS era produced a powerful archive of queer feeling in the face of governmental neglect, cultural stigma, and mass death. This archive, as Carol Muske notes, articulated an urgent “politics of death...that has made dying itself – in bed, away from the battlefield – a political act.”<sup>[3]</sup> In *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog* (1988), Paul Monette mourns the death of his longtime partner, Roger Horwitz, from AIDS.<sup>[4]</sup> But this mourning is *thick*: one that exceeds catharsis as elegy's usual affective mode and embraces unexpected pleasure and memory. But the most powerful of these feelings is *anger*.

Monette prefaces the volume with a note about its form:

*These elegies were written during the five months after he died, one right after the other, with hardly a half day's pause between. 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... I don't mean them to be impregnable, though I admit I want them to allow no escape, like a hospital room, or indeed a mortal illness... I wanted a form that would move with breathless speed, so I could scream if I wanted and rattle on and empty my Uzi into the air.[5]*

While witnessing the devastating loss of a generation of gay men, Monette's poems force the reader to inhabit the "breathless" experience of "no escape," a feeling many gay men shared while in the hospital rooms beside their loved ones or in their own suffering from AIDS. The volume's uzi-style burst-verses—lines rapid firing one after another—lend themselves to an exasperating reading experience like a prolonged, agonizing scream over the course of the eighteen poem cycle. *Love Alone* memorializes Rog, but it is importantly a call-to-action, a battle cry to fight.

I frequently teach the volume's second poem, "Current Status 1/22/87," which exemplifies how Monette's AIDS elegy works:

*marginal no change T-4 four-sixty-five  
as of 12/8 but the labs are notoriously  
inexact nerdy white-coat sits eyeballing  
his microscope counts the squiggles in a cubic  
inch racks them up on his abacus and writes  
his apt # on the lab slip thus I'm fifteen  
less than August thirty-five more than June  
this is not statistically meaningful or am I  
the walking wounded do not count the counting  
begins at breakthrough how are my lymph nodes  
how are they not a mere three-quarters  
centimeter at the neck in the vampire spot  
cm and a half in the armpit not suggestive  
unless they harden or start to throb taking  
four hundred milligrams RIBAVIRIN b.i.d.  
the magic dose if results released 1/9*

prove to be long-term of course when you cry  
all day an afternoon can be frightfully  
long-term but we mustn't muss the curve with  
personal agendas equal dose ACYCLOVIR  
ditto twice a day this part purest guesswork  
doesn't attack HIV but seems to lower  
the general viral bullshit level and besides  
the cornflower-blue capsules go quite nicely  
with the royal-and-white of the RIBAVIRIN rather  
like the flag of an island nation which I am  
bowels normal though I peer at each specimen  
in the bowl like an oracle poking entrails  
David E who just got back from the Rift  
Valley where man began says if you flush  
a toilet five feet south of the Equator  
the spiral flows clockwise five feet north flows  
counterclock this is the only non-medical  
fact I have learned in two years moving now  
to the head twenty milligrams SINEQUAN for  
despair no effect at all but may help  
tip me over into sleep that little church  
of the dark which bars me all its sacraments  
add fifteen milligrams DALMANE 2 a.m. for  
the final knockout not the same as sleep  
not even the same as night but a full-bore dose  
of SINEQUAN makes you Lennie in OF MICE AND MEN  
within two weeks and you eat whole loaves of

Wonder Bread till your moon-face waddled body  
humpty-dumpties off a wall no mouth sores  
fevers sweats bruises like imploded orchids  
nothing significant see you in March  
to put it quite simply I'M DOING FINE  
or as we say in California DOING GREAT  
holding a shiv to the listener's throat as it  
to dare contradiction the test-givers  
bald numerologists and milligram chemists  
all my tribe of shamans and not a one knows  
the iron tests I watched you suffer the six  
spinals three broncs your bone marrow sipped by  
a ten-inch needle till you had enough numbers  
to stump an algebra class pyramided like  
a Mayan calendar exact to the second for  
a thousand years by which time the last Mayans  
stared out of stone eyes at the blue monkeys  
who swarmed their decimal palaces my medicine  
men can't see my condition is just a prefix  
my vast pharmacopoeia no more than a grave  
not to you my friend who bore so many  
milligrams we needed a gram balance like  
a CHARCUTERIE in Paris tests of tests  
my groping docs might just as well use leeches  
for all they can touch my invisible disease  
cracks on the heart don't blip on an EKG  
thus no treatment sorry we don't cure life

Rog I am still in the anteroom of all  
the useless measures leafing old PEOPLES  
reading diplomas deep in my head I hear you  
the night of the third intrusion your larynx  
like slush from an extra milliliter's freeze  
of XYLOCAINE quelling your voice to a strangle  
for two three hours WHY IS THIS HAPPENING  
I DON'T KNOW I said all the bells in my voice  
untarnished and thought how no one had better  
try to say why either or ever suppose  
to know the worst take my pills like clockwork  
because you took yours submit to a week's  
bleeding because you fought like Theseus for  
the white-crowned hill of your reason breakthrough  
is the real thing when these are not just tests  
of fate ball bearings in a wheel of luck they are  
fate made visible which of my thirteen  
pills would I give a dying child which one  
ought the world to be taking morning and night  
to feel this strange communion dose by dose  
this set of printouts clinically healthy why  
does that sound like a qualification 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  
so I don't do anything vain or cease to honor  
you and all our brothers below the Equator

In eschewing the conventions of punctuation and capitalization, Monette refuses the reader an easy encounter with the lines that do not begin and end where we expect. Monette ventriloquizes the clinical voice, which dehumanizes patients by reducing them to T-cell counts while proffering futile treatments that prove to be “purest guesswork,” almost the same as archaic bloodletting or leech therapy. The “vast pharmacopoeia” of prescription drugs that Monette catalogs in excruciating detail exposes the limitations of medical intervention that can only delay the inevitable. As drug names interrupt each line, Monette mocks the absurdity of Western medicine’s promise of a linear narrative of diagnosis, treatment, and cure. For an “invisible disease” that has no cure and no vaccine, this narrative is a destructive fantasy. The rhythms of patients’ lives become synonymous with the symptoms of their opportunistic infections, the schedule of their many doses. The temporality, the very selfhood of living with AIDS is embodied in the poem’s form: fractured, fragile.

Particularly tragic is the fact that Monette knows he will soon undergo the same slow death as Rog. Monette, aware of his own contraction of HIV from Rog, doubts “this set of printouts clinically healthy.” *Why is this happening / I don't know*, Monette admits. The disturbing truth is that neither physicians nor patients know why and what to do about it. But for Monette, there is still every reason to fight—for himself, for Rog, for his “brothers.” In these dire circumstances, we must all learn how to hold a sword.

\*My love and thanks to Aaron Gorelik who first shared Monette with me in 2008.

\*\*For more of my writing on HIV/AIDS, please see my article on the Pulse shooting (<http://impakter.com/theory-epidemic-pulse-legacy-hiv-aids/>) and “‘Requestioning’ AIDS: An Ethical Reflection from 1993 to Today.” *Journal of Homosexuality*. 25.3 (2015): 452-55.

[1] See Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed’s *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (UMinnesota Press, 2011) for a timely reflection on what they term “degenerational unremembering,” a phenomenon of cultural “amnesia as a prophylaxis against loss” (40).

[2] See Lance Wahlert. “The painful reunion: the medicalization of homosexuality and the rise of the queer.” *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*. 9.3 (2012): 261-75.

[3] Carol Muske. “Rewriting the Elegy.” *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS*. ed. Michael Klein. New York: Crown, 1989. 6.

[4] Paul Monette. *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

[5] *Love Alone* xii.