

And the Wind Cries Mary

An Elegy for Tommy

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*P*oetry can do that—reach the subconscious more immediately and unexpectedly than other forms of expression. I was reading and remembering, one memory yanking another, and even before I set the book down this piece began to form. I moved to my writing place and the first paragraph basically wrote itself even before I assembled the usual comforts I enjoy when I write. It started like this:

Whenever the song cranked out of the speakers at the old Whole Foods on Shepherd, now a pet food store next to Trader Joe's, we dropped our blue corn chips, ayurvedic remedies, wakame seaweed, or whatever else, and rushed around aisle corners, running over each other to look for Tommy. That's because after the slow initial notes, as the raspy voice attached itself like an ivy to the base line, Tommy would always laugh and move his gangly arms all over the place and at the right time yell along with his hoarse voice: "...and the wind whispers MARY!!!" It was an almost daily ritual, as the song was heavy in rotation, and many of us joined Tommy, even those working back in storage, who could not see or hear Tommy, but knew he would be singing. Joyful moments of shared consciousness that brought us glee while working. In the good days we had so many of those moments, but gradually they stopped as one by one people got sick. Then Tommy got sick. Then Tommy died.

That's what came out just about verbatim when I sat down to write. I felt emotionally committed to write more but was not sure where to take it. I knew I had to connect the piece to the poems I had been reading, the source code for those emotions, but needed to lay out some context. I started thinking my way through it, through that time. I looked for and found the only picture I have of Tommy and began investigating why suddenly this mattered to me. The next paragraph is an attempt to capture my feelings about this:

I lived through something momentous back then, a socially traumatic moment I did not fully appreciate while in it. It affected many in my community, but it did not affect me; not directly. I reflect on it now and know that I should have done more. I should have been more present. I was in my early twenties and while my own thoughts were about the life ahead of me, some friends were making peace with the inescapable notion that they might not last but a few months, and those would be horrible months. Others chose not to go so gentle into that good night.

I was not sure how much contextualization this piece needed, and I realize that there are some unexplained references to places and things that only long-time Houstonians of a certain age will fully appreciate; I know I risk excluding people—it's not out of disrespect. Apologies. It was a particular time and place. I also realized that this is about where I needed to get out of the way, let the piece flow on its own, and stop intruding and commenting. So, I let it go:

The place and time are Houston of the mid to late 80s; to be more geographically specific, the Montrose area, that's what it was called. The dozen blocks East and West of Montrose and North and South of Westheimer were by no means an historically designated neighborhood, the area boundaries were somewhat fluid, and it was a state of mind as much as anything else. I had escaped to there from a place not that far away, only about 30 miles due north of Houston as the crow flies, but culturally it was and remains another land: The Woodlands.

In Montrose I found affinity with many of the tribes that congregated in this area: the theatre people, the music people, the artists. As if the Museum of Fine Arts and the Contemporary Arts Museum were not enough, the Menil was built less than two miles away. You could walk in for free and spend an afternoon alone in a small room with four freaking Magrittes. Art shows were everywhere, and there wasn't enough time to catch all the bands playing every night of the week. The critical mass of creative types was thick, housing was cheap, entry level jobs were plentiful, and we could live well on \$600 a month and never be out of beer or smokes. It was great while it lasted.

I moved away from Houston in 1989 chasing a theater life in Chicago with no expectation of returning, yet, somehow, here I stand again. I had not sought a return, it just happened. The threads of my past Houston life had stretched thin from the absence but had not severed, and so they began to re-entwine the memories with the present.

Soon after my recent physical return, that peculiar period in time of my youth was brought back to me while reading the poem “HERE” by Paul Monette, one in a series of eulogies in his *Love Alone* collection. The reading forced on me a reckoning of limited time and a reconciliation of once familiar places. In “HERE” Monette uses place as a reference to his recent loss and to his own inevitable and impending disappearance.

*...I can lie on this hill just above you a foot beside
where I will lie myself soon soon...*

I moved back into the same neighborhood in Montrose where I had lived back then. Same streets, many of the same buildings, houses I lived in, all greeted my return. But it was as if they held on just long enough for me to return and say goodbye; those places, to which my memories were anchored, started coming down soon after I moved back to town. The cheap apartment on Pinedale and Montrose, the Mexican restaurant by Montrose and West Gray that we called La Cucaracha but I think was called La Jalisiencie, or something like that. Demolished only after I got to see them one last time. Some places just changed, like the red brick coffee shop on Westheimer and Yoakum where the hipster baristas now wear leather aprons. Oh, they wore leather in that place back in the day too. Wasn't that Mary's? Or was Mary's on Fairview? I cannot remember everything exactly as it was. Some other places have remained intact somehow. Numbers, the nightclub that exploded my 18-year-old head, remained the dance escape that it was in the late eighties—who knew Steamboat Willie cartoons would be so great to look at while swaying to The Cure?—until Covid came along. The dancing started with one epidemic and ended with another. Bookends to a great party. Somehow Numbers survived Covid, and the dancing started up again. That makes me happy, although I feel way too old for it now.

I moved near a pub on Richmond that at the time went by The Ale House, I think, but now after many changes of ownership and names, all Irish sounding variants, it is called Tin Whistle or something like that. I spent so many of my nights in that place back in those days. When I stepped back in recently, everything seemed as it was, yet something had changed. For a while it puzzled me, but as I stared at familiar walls, I realized that the smoke haze had gone. I could see things more clearly than before.

After I moved back, I sometimes thought I saw glimpses of ghosts of my past. I kept thinking I saw people I knew. At the

Disco Kroger, also torn down a year after I moved back, at the Half Price Book Store, torn down at the same time. But those people I saw looked aged just like me, and I just don't know. I am not confident enough to ask: "Hello there, aren't you...didn't we...?" Now even those signposts to my past have disappeared. The block at Westheimer and Montrose got leveled. Things happened there. Good things. Before cell phones it's where people would go and meet and make plans and see, and talk, and laugh, sometimes get in trouble. I can close my eyes and see it all. I can hear the soundtrack: "First I'm gonna make it, then I'm gonna break it until it falls apart..." The other day I was riding around listening to *West*, an album by Lucinda Williams. In "Everything Has Changed" she twangs:

*...Faces look familiar—But they don't have
names—Towns I used to live in—Have been
rearranged...Everything has changed...*

Thoughts of loss and place and loss of place bring me back to Monette again: "...this little thing of telling the hill I'm here oh I'm here..." I feel trivial when I compare Monette's loss of his soul mate, and soon his own self, with what is just garden-variety aging nostalgia for me. And yet, the past I ache for feels palpable enough to me right now.

Tommy Brasseur was a beautiful human being inside and out. I could not remember his last name because we just called him Tommy Beer. He was the beer buyer at the Whole Foods. I reached out by text to our friend Kelly: "Was his last name Brassow or something similar? I just want to remember." She replied:

*brasseur—he had some Louisiana roots—his parents
couldn't understand him either—he was really
frustrated with that. i don't think he ever fully came
out to them. he was a special shooting star. i think
about him and his pain often. he wanted someone to
love him as much as he loved so badly—he told me
that once. heartbreaking that we loved him but it
wasn't enough—he was so lonely.*

I think those lines by Kelly are as good an introduction to Tommy as anyone can provide. I remember visiting Tommy in some kind of sick house as he was dying, and it was he who tried to cheer me as I moved tentatively in a place where death waited

visibly and patiently on its occupants. He noticed my nervousness and hesitation. He noticed that I was not talking to him as an old friend, but as someone who had put his guard up a little, not sure what to say in front of the obviously faltering body. Tommy started joking with me. Joking about his body. Joking about those around him who were shuffling around on borrowed time as the bill was coming due. Joking about AIDS with no anger nor pity about himself. That was Tommy.

That memory brings me back to another theme in Monette's poems and the poems of other poets in this genre: the decaying body that is still living. In the very first line of "HERE" Monette writes:

*everything extraneous has burned away...as if the
skin were a paper lantern full of trapped moths
beating their fired wings...*

In "The Falling Sky," published in the posthumous collection of poems *Love's Instruments*, poet Melvin Dixon writes:

*Dust already gathers at the grit line of my teeth.
Ash coats my skin like a uniform with no number.*

Tommy's body had also begun to fade from the inside while his skin tried gamely to keep the whole thing together. Last time I saw him, he was a physical ghost of himself.

I remember being vaguely aware of AIDS as I read news and heard reports of what it was doing to the creative community in New York City. Houston seemed distant from all that at first.

Tommy began to disappear after a while. He had "it." "It" was suddenly in the discourse of our community. But even as I was a part of that community of friends, I was also on the outside of that community. I wasn't gay. It hadn't mattered before. We had all hung out together, worked together, went to the same parties. But when "it" started making the rounds of the community, it mattered. Things started happening of which I was not aware. Did I begin to inhabit a peripheral role because I was scared of something I could not understand? Or were my friends needing to consolidate their increasingly scarce resources and had no time for someone who could not fully appreciate what they were going through, for someone who did not share the same danger, the same proximity to sickness and death? Bodies of friends began to change, and we would wonder if it was a sign...or maybe not. Maybe they had always been that skinny. Invariably, they would

fade away from the community. Sometimes reappearing shortly... and looking so different...then gone for good.

Again, the image of a fading body comes through the words of another poet. Thom Gunn in *The Man with Night Sweats* writes:

*A world of wonders in
Each challenge to the skin.
I cannot but be sorry
The given shield was cracked,
My mind reduced to hurry,
My flesh reduced and wrecked.*

Gunn's lines remind me of how brutal AIDS was to the body and how it manifested an inescapable death sentence in those early days. When we visited Tommy my understanding never really adjusted to what I was seeing. He was weak and feeble and yet the same Tommy. I did not understand or accept that he would die. I am not convinced he accepted it either. And then he died. Not just him; there were many. I was not so close to all those losses as I was to Tommy, but I knew them, and we laughed together. Names and faces I have not seen in decades come to the forefront of my mind now. I don't really know who was spared and who succumbed. If there were opportunities for me to become more involved, I did not take them. My life went on, I traveled through Europe, moved away to Chicago, I lost touch with some friends, kept in touch with a few others.

Eventually Facebook came around and some connections were reattached, and memories came out of the Ethernet back into my consciousness. Some of us are reconnecting though we still have not seen each other. Or heard each other. We just deliver and share memories in electronic bits. Bytes? *I don't know which, and I don't care enough to find out right now.*

AIDS was a disease of invisibility for me. People were there and then they were gone. I must also have been invisible to them, naive, uncomprehending, unable to fully grasp and inhabit their reality, and then I became physically gone. The period had a feeling of fluidity as I remember it. I think that is what I appreciate most about Paul Monette's unpunctuated poems. There is a fluidity between thoughts and lines and words. The reader must work hard to pay attention. Pay attention to what is going on. I wish I had paid more attention. To Tommy, to everyone else. I try my best to hear him now as he tells me to "shrug it off with the quietest...I'm still here."