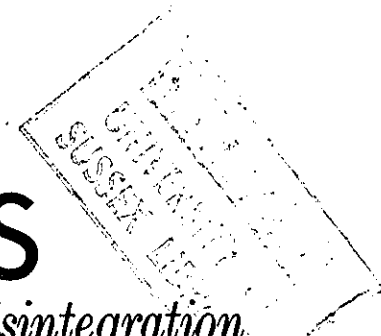


CLOSE
TO
THE
KNIVES

A Memoir of Disintegration

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ



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**This Book Is For: Peter Hujar
Tom Rauffenbart
Marion Scemama**

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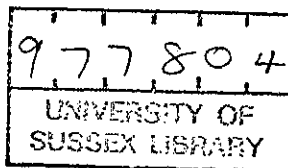
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"longer than China, bigger than Berlin
I go to a far away place within
taking a journey with 67 eyes
flying through fire all over the skies"

Keiko Bonk

"... every stinking bum should wear a crown."
Iggy Pop

LIVING CLOSE TO THE KNIVES

I'm sitting in his hospital room so high in the upper reaches of the building that when I walk the halls or sit in the room or wander to the waiting room to have a cigarette, it's the gradual turn of earth outside the windows, the distant plains filled with buildings that have a look of fiction because from this perspective they flatten out against one another into the distance until there are thousands of windows (each one containing at least one human being that shows no sign of life) looking like small models of a train set against postcard-perfect reproductions of late winter skies and sunsets; the yellowing of sparse clouds and miniature water

tanks. Leaning against the glass of the window of his room I see dizzily down into the street and wonder what it is to fall such distances. I'm afraid he's really dying. When we brought him in here it was just for some routine tests because he wasn't pissing for days and the slightest movement of an arm or leg brought nausea. He was expected to stay for only two or three days; it's been a week now and he barely opens his eyes for more than a few seconds. I came into the room this morning, the door swinging open to pale light and that steady figure outlining the sheets. His breath was coming in rapid-fire bursts like a machine gun. I turn from the silence and the window and look at him and an iris appears beneath one half-lifted eyelid and its strength bores right through me. I turn away almost embarrassed having as much life in me as he hasn't. The iris was the size of the room; it dwarfed the winter light filling the streets outside the window; it radiated across the heavy clouds with fifty thousand windows reflecting the blue of sky through it.

Whales can descend to a depth of five thousand feet where they can and must sustain a pressure of one hundred and forty tons on every square foot of their bodies.

He seemed to wake for a moment; he drifted soundlessly for a while, then asked me in sounds that took five minutes to translate to help him into the nearby bathroom so he could shit or something. I manipulated the machinery in the structure of the bed so that his upper body rose toward me and his legs sank away. I placed my hands beneath his back, it was hot and sweaty, and I pulled him into a sitting

position, took one paralyzed leg after the other pulling them over the side of the bed. Then I realized he was going nowhere. He was limp and his eyes were closed and his mouth against my arm breathing wet sounds. I felt my body thrumming with the sounds of vessels of blood and muscles contracting the sounds of aging and of disintegration—the sound of something made ridiculous with language—the sense of loving and the sense of fear. I looked into his face: the irises expanding and filling the room, the curtains of eyelids shutting down over them to lift again and again. I tried to explain that he was too weak to make the trip three feet away to the bathroom. I was suddenly scared and embarrassed again. “I’m not strong enough,” I said, tilting his head back. The sounds of nurses and hospital gurneys far away in the halls but he said nothing—his dark eyes just staring and flickering back and forth from side to side in strobic motion. Was he sleeping? Was he dreaming? What thoughts lay behind them? What pictures forming? Do blind men have visual dreams, dreams of color, dreams of form?

After giving birth a female whale produces more than two hundred gallons of milk a day.

In the yellowing dusk the red bricks of the buildings go to sleep; they fade into the shadows of streets and only the uppermost windows show the slow night coming on. I can place myself out there in the sky: lie down in the texture and dream of years and years of sleep and I talk inside my head of change and of peace for this body beside me of life for this body beside me of belief in these unalterable positions in the

shifting state of things; of disbelief, of need for something to suddenly and abruptly take place, like that last image of some Antonioni film where the young woman looks at the house her father built and because of her gaze it explodes not once but twice in slow motion, huge fireballs of rupturing gas lines and couches and tables and chairs splintering into waves of shards and light and glass drifting in glittering helixes and even the entire contents of the family refrigerator lovingly spilling out toward the eye in rage, a perfect rage that I was beginning to understand, seeing myself hovering in the atmosphere outside the building’s walls and wanting a shout to come from my throat that would level all the buildings or else have a strength in my hands where I could rip open the earth like cheap fabric and release a windscreen of lava and heat or with the fists banging against my thighs create shockwaves that would cause all the manufacturing of the preinvented world to go tumbling down in a slow and terrifying beauty till all the earth was level or maybe just to have some water pour from my head.

First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. The Other World is where I sometimes lose my footing. In its calendar turnings, in its preinvented existence. The barrage of twists and turns where I sometimes get weary trying to keep up with it, minute by minute adapt: the world of the stoplight, the no-smoking signs, the rental world, the split-rail fencing shielding hundreds of miles of barren wilderness from the human step. A place where by virtue of having been born centuries late one is denied access to earth or space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world. The world of coded sounds: the world of

language, the world of lies. The packaged world; the world of speed in metallic motion. The Other World where I've always felt like an alien. But there's the World where one adapts and stretches the boundaries of the Other World through keys of the imagination. But then again, the imagination is encoded with the invented information of the Other World. One stops before a light that turns from green to red and one grows centuries old in that moment. Someone once said that the Other World was run by a different species of humans. It is the distance of stepping back or slowing down that reveals the Other World. It's the dislocation of response that reveals it for the first time because the Other World gets into one's bloodstream with the invisibility of a lover. It slowly takes the shape of the cells and their growth, internalized until it becomes an extension of the body. Traveling into primitive cultures allows one a sudden and clear view of the Other World; how the invention of the word "nature" disassociates us from the ground we walk on. While growing up I was constantly aware of the sense of all this in the same way one experiences a vague fear yet can't distill the form of it from the table or the cup one is holding or the skies rolling beneath the window frames.

Ever since my teenage years, I've experienced the sensation of seeing myself from miles above the earth, as if from the clouds. I see the tiny human form of myself from overhead either sitting or moving through this clockwork of civilization—the huge ticking mass of it—and it all looks like something out of everyone's control. Or rather, in the control of only a few: those that made up the gears and springs of the preinvented machine or those that threw themselves from the tops of bridges and buildings. And with the appearance of AIDS and the subsequent deaths of friends and neighbors, I

have the recurring sensation of seeing the streets and radius of blocks from miles above, only now instead of focusing on just the form of myself in the midst of this Other World I see everyone and everything at once. It's like pressing one's eye to a small crevice in the earth from which streams of ants utter from the shadows—and now it all looks amazing instead of just deathly.

By the last weeks of his life he'd lost most of the feeling in his legs and when he could get himself to his feet, he would fall endlessly forward, arms spinning like windmills until one of us would grab him and guide him. It became a routine. He'd first refuse help as a condition to accepting it; at times it seemed as if every variation of reaction and response had to pass through his brain and out his lips before he could accept certain things or acknowledge limitations.

One day over breakfast he told me he planned to go by himself to Penn Station the following weekend to take a train to see a new doctor on Long Island—earlier that week I'd seen a fifteen-second spot on the evening news about this doctor who was administering typhoid shots to people with AIDS and claiming there were some good responses. The typhoid supposedly sparked the immune system into working again. I would usually tell him of any new developments I'd heard about, if for no other reason than to give him a sense of hope, something reassuring. He'd somehow found the name and address of the doctor and made an appointment. I told him I'd be glad to drive him out there but he shook his head, no, and said he preferred going out there by himself by way of Penn Station. We all knew this was impossible; he couldn't walk across the room without falling, patterns of

bruises appearing on his pale white skin. Most of his friends were concerned about whether or not his body could withstand the dosages of typhoid which apparently were expected to produce fevers of up to one hundred and seven; but we also knew that when he'd made his mind up it wasn't beyond him to drag himself to the train station. At least he'd have that much control over the illness and his life. By Saturday, three days later, he consented to let me and Anita drive him out there. The morning rolled around and it took us an hour and a half to get him dressed and down the stairs to the car, blankets bound around him to ease the cold heat dial set at full blast and still he was shivering. He'd been in a bad mood for months and this morning he was in his usual good form. He was enraged about dying and took it out on most of us. Anita had told him recently that if there was something any of us could do to make it all stop and for him to get well, some gesture we could make—a wave of a hand, a throw of a switch, something liquid or tablet we could give him—we would; but there was nothing. He softened a bit after that.

Before we even got over the Williamsburg Bridge in morning traffic he began suggesting there was a faster route. I told him I'd gone over the map and there was no faster route. He kept insisting and I missed a turn for the expressway so I stopped the car on the side of an overpass and studied the map again. There was no faster route. "There's a faster way—you just don't know it." He pulled himself deeper into the blankets looking pissed as a hornet. The traffic was worse on the expressway with cars whizzing by at eighty to eighty-five miles per hour. Somewhere out by one of the airports he announced that he had to take a piss and that I should pull over and stop the car. I was in the left lane, cars were driving at breakneck speed and a light rain was falling

and there was no shoulder to stop on. I told him I'd have to get over to an exit. "Just pull over and stop—I have to piss." There's nowhere I can stop; I have to reach an exit. A wave of his bony white hand, "Pull over . . . just pull over." I looked at Anita through the rearview mirror and pulled over, cutting off a speeding car to reach an exit that was coming up. She grimaced back at me. We rode through the rain-colored streets filled with used-car lots and bright whipping banners until we found a gas station and I pulled up to one of the pumps. I asked a cute attendant for the bathroom but there was none. Peter insisted on getting out to piss anyway so I went around to his side of the car and unstrapped him from the seat belt. After pulling off his blankets, I reached toward him to help him out. "Don't touch me." Peter I have to touch you to help you out. "Don't touch me it hurts." In the last few weeks his senses got hypersharp. He could smell a piece of metal across the room and insist that you get rid of it. Perfume or garlic banished a visitor to a chair on the other side of the room or caused him to throw up. The attendant was filling up the tank as Peter walked by windmill style across the lot. Anita asked, "Are you okay?" "If he wasn't sick I'd crack him in the teeth," I answered. The gas tank full, I paid for it and went to find him. He was pissing into a flowerbed that belonged to a two-story white-frame house, his arms jerking back and forth to maintain balance. I felt a little nervous. This didn't look like friendly territory. When he was done I buttoned his pants back up and led him back to the car. The attendant stared at us as I helped him back into the seat. Then the layers of blankets. "I don't want the seat belt on." I said, "You have to have the seat belt on; what if there's an accident?" "I don't care." I continued putting it on. "I don't want the seat belt on . . ."

"We're not going anywhere unless it's on." He resigned himself to having the seat belt on, "Don't touch me." We were back into traffic, circling side streets, trying to find the entrance to the expressway again. He looked like some old billy goat in a cocoon, his eyes peeled for something to snap at. "I know there's a faster way."

An hour later we reached a suburban street filled with fat wet trees hanging over quiet sidewalks. The street was also lined with no-parking signs so I pulled up in front of the doctor's house, an anonymous-looking place with a high plank fence around its backyard. I let Anita and Peter off on the sidewalk. You go in and I'll be right back. I drove a few blocks and found a nursery-school parking lot, parked the car and walked back feeling relieved that the ride was over. In the distance I could see Peter staggering on the front lawn flailing about in rage. He staggered toward Anita then turned and teetered to the roadside. She stood there with her small hands clasped together, traffic whizzing by. Peter disappeared behind a big hedge—the kind they shape into hippos and elephants at kiddie parks. By the time I reached Anita, he was in the distance, a tiny speck of agitation with windmill arms. I asked her what happened. "I don't know, one minute he was complaining how long the ride took and when I said that maybe you did the best you could he went into a rage—he threatened to throw himself in front of the traffic. The saddest thing is that he's too weak to throw a proper fit. He wanted to hit me but he didn't have the strength." Where's he headed? "He said he was going to the train station to go back home." We walked after him. He was staggering alongside a chain-link fence which separated him from a group of schoolkids kicking a dented soccerball around. He turned briefly, saw us coming, tried to cross the

street, changed his mind, started walking toward us, changed his mind again, turned around and started walking back toward the train station. I shouted his name and he hesitated for a moment then resumed walking. When we caught up with him he turned and started talking angrily. "Look," I said, "just forget it—none of this is important . . . we came to see the doctor. We're here, so let's go see him." He calmed down a bit and the three of us walked back to the gate and followed the path to the side door.

Up a couple of steps inside the screen door was what looked like the interior of a trailer: fake wood paneling, functional desks overflowing with papers and some rooms to the left where the patients moved in and out, and where a tall man in a white lab coat occasionally appeared to wave them in. To the right were a couple of doors lining a short hallway and beyond that a waiting room, Leave-It-to-Beaver comfortable filled mostly with men. Just next to the entrance a pale boy leaned against one of the desks waiting to pay his bill. Peter recognized him from the office of the doctor both had been seeing for most of the last year and whom both had decided to stop seeing—some scientist uptown in Manhattan. The scientist was working with nontoxic antiviral drugs he'd developed. He'd been treating cancer patients for years until the government brought a case against him for malpractice on numerous counts. He is now on a five-year probation. The fact that the government entered the scene was one of the things that convinced Peter that the doctor might be a genius. All of us hoped it was true. Over the past nine months he'd collected a drawer full of brown bottles each containing the most recent "cure" developed by this man. Some of them required injections which I administered. The deciding factor for many people to leave this doctor was a vaccine he'd

developed from human shit which each person was eventually injected with. When Peter told me about this treatment I figured that because shit was one of the most dangerous corporeal substances in terms of passing disease (check the statistic on Belle Glade, Florida, where there are no adequate sewage facilities) maybe this guy figured out something in the properties of shit to develop a vaccine. After all, the bite of a rattlesnake is treated with a vaccine made of venom. But I also assumed that the doctor had at least made a vaccine for each patient out of their own shit. Later we found that one person's shit served as a base for all treatments. Almost all the patients treated with this became extremely ill. Each one who mentioned this fact was told privately that he or she was the only one who reacted badly. This turned out to be the case many times. There were regulars to this doctor's office that Peter would ask the doctor about. There was one young man in particular who everyone immediately fell in love with; the one all of them pinned their hopes on as an example of the possibility of success with the doctor's treatments. When Peter asked how this or that person was doing he was told: fine, fine. Recently he discovered this was not true at all, many were dead and buried and the young man everyone loved had died as well.

Peter talked with the pale boy inside the door for a while. The kid said he had been at the edge of death with T.B. and Kaposi's sarcoma which extended all the way down his spine and up into his ass. A couple of months after taking the typhoid treatments he was feeling better, "Just a touch of T.B. and most of the cancer has disappeared." The front door opened and an elderly gentleman who the boy had been living with in the Hamptons, came over to the desk and laid out a pile of personal checks. He proceeded to fill out and

endorse each one to the scientist running the clinic. Check after check after check. After awhile a short seedy guy with lots of white teeth came over and introduced himself to us. He was the brains behind the typhoid treatment. I immediately felt uncomfortable with him. He reminded me of a guy who'd sell you dead chameleons at a circus sideshow. He told us to fill out the forms and sit in the waiting room until called. The waiting room was filled with people who recognized Peter, all former patients of the doctor in upper Manhattan. This cheered Peter up. Anita and I looked at each other in disbelief. Here was an office filled with people who were searching for "the cure." The grapevine brought them from one end of New York to the other to test out different therapies, sometimes combining them, sometimes improving for short periods of time, sometimes dying from them. What amazed us was that most of the people in this office had found this treatment independent of each other. To me, the idea that this treatment might help out with Kaposi's made a bit of sense. The introduction of a foreign element to the body sometimes sparks the immune system into momentarily working properly. Outside of New York, I'd read about some people who had done work with certain photochemicals, painting them on Kaposi's lesions which after some time dried up and fell off the skin. But in the few studies done, none of these therapies did much to stop the advancement of the more than three hundred other opportunistic infections.

One guy in his mid-thirties, a sad looking blond, asked Peter if he remembered him from fifteen or so years ago. He used to go by the name of Dorian Gray—apparently they'd had an affair back then. Peter suddenly did recognize him. "Of course I dropped the name some years ago." Peter asked

him if he was on AL7-21 and he said, "No; I just have ARC not AIDS so I'm not worried; I don't think I'll need any of that stuff."

The room was filled with AIDS-speak for the next half hour. One of the guys was a sexy Italian man who'd developed AIDS from intravenous drug use. He and his girlfriend joined the conversation comparing different therapies and how each combined this or that treatment in different ways. Everyone was emphatic about his or her chemical or natural agenda. Talk swung to the typhoid doctor and half the room tried to convince Peter he shouldn't tell the doctor he was currently taking AZT. "He'll refuse to treat you; he wants you to give up everything but the typhoid shots; something about his research . . ." Finally the brains behind the business called us into his personal office. It looked like it had been decorated by Elvis: high lawn-green shag carpets, K-mart paintings and Woolworth lamps. Lots of official medical degrees with someone else's name on them. Anita had come along to help Peter describe his medical history because lately he was a bit slow; words came in small clusters after much hand movements; he confused easily. The doctor asked him how he knew he had AIDS: "After all, you may not have it." Peter tried to describe the last year's medical events. His description was disjointed and unrevealing. Anita tried to step in at some point to help and Peter waved her angrily away. The man said, "Fine, fine. Now you must stop having sex . . ." Peter said, "I've been celibate for two years." The man rambled on about how he must stop having sex, or if he did, he must use rubbers. Then he suddenly said, "Okay—go in and get your first shot." He got up to usher us out of the office but pulled me back into the room just as I was passing through the door. "Are you

homosexual?" "Yeah," I said. "Have you been tested for the HIV antibodies?" "Uh, no," I said, "and I haven't any plans to." "Oh," he said, "but you would be perfect for us—get the test and I'll start you on the treatments right away . . ." I cut him short, "Thanks . . . I'll think about it."

While Peter was getting his first shot Anita and I decided to ask the doctor to explain the theories behind his treatments. When we told him we want to discuss the treatment, he brought us back into his office. He immediately launched into some monologue about money: "... if the patient hasn't any money . . . well . . . we can work something out—I'm not in this just for the money . . . but, if they have money, they will pay. Oh, will they pay!" Anita told him we were just interested in how the typhoid treatments worked. We asked that he not spare us the medical jargon. He started off talking about how all the other doctors were quacks and how the government was trying to stop him from doing these treatments. He said he wasn't really a doctor but a research scientist with degrees in immunology. He'd hired a certified doctor to administer the shots. He went into a lengthy monologue about the immune system that made very little sense and ended up with talking about the thymus gland—only, when he gestured to his own body to indicate the location of the thymus, he pointed first to his stomach, then to his chest, then to his head saying, "Or wherever it is . . ." While we were recovering from that disturbing bit of information, he went into his research on various viruses and how he had settled on typhus as the virus that would successfully spark the immune system. When we asked him to elaborate further he took out a piece of paper and drew a series of circles on each side of a dividing line. "Say ya got a hundred army men over here; that's the T-cells . . ." We were

interrupted by his assistant who told him he had to interview new patients. We left the office and looked around for Peter but he was nowhere to be found. The assistant eventually told us he was outside looking for a ride back to the city. Anita and I then realized that Peter had been in the doctor's office for merely ten minutes. We grabbed our coats and rushed out to find him standing on the sidewalk in front of the place. He looked confused. "Oh . . . I thought you went home without me . . ."

Before heading back to New York City we stopped at a diner along the highway and ordered food. Peter was agitated and demanded to know what we had thought of the scientist and his treatments. I explained what Anita and I had learned from the man in terms of his theories and how unsettling it all was. He looked sad and tired. He barely touched his food, staring out the window and saying, "America is such a beautiful country—don't you think so?" I was completely exhausted from the day, emotionally and physically and looking out the window at the enormous collage of high-tension wires, blinking stoplights, shredded used-car lot banners, industrial tanks and masses of humanity zipping about in automobiles just depressed me. The food we had in front of us looked like it had been fried in an electric chair. And watching my best friend dying while eating a dead hamburger left me speechless. I couldn't answer. Anita couldn't either. He got angry again, "Neither of you would know what I'm talking about . . ." Finally I said, "Peter, we're just very tired. Let's go home."

On the ride back you could cut the tension in the car with a buzzsaw. Fighting late afternoon traffic, we finally arrived back on Second Avenue and just about had to carry him up the stairs. "Don't touch me, don't touch me." He

staggered over to the bed and crawled in with all his clothes on, lying there with two eyes peeping from beneath the covers. "Is there anything you need? Anything we can do for you, Peter?" An angry "NO!" So we left. Later, talking on the telephone with Vince, I heard that Peter had talked with him minutes after Anita and I had left his house and Peter said, "I don't understand it, they just put me in bed and rushed out."

Dream. Night before Peter died. In this sleep I end up on a late-night street near a building awning like a garage port or hotel overhang and there are two thugs, street guys, tight white t-shirts, sexy thick arms and faces of possible violence: jail faces. There's a small glass box. I look through its lid and see a short fat snake with desert or jungle markings. The two guys tell me it's a pygmy rattler but there is no rattle on its tail. I lift the lid or they lift the lid and the snake jumps and fastens its teeth to the side of my nose. There is no real pain but it's there for a long time, each guy trying to pull its shiny jaws apart to free me. I'm bending over in a semicrouch waiting patiently, thinking of its poison flowing into me but no real fear of dying or anything. I'm amazed at how patient I am.

Standing in the street next to the curb, water runs like from some hydrant in the summer. There's a small blue-and-white boat like a ferry, a child's toy bobbing in the water. I crouch down to look into its tiny front windows. A voice (like from a P.A. system) says, "One of the passengers died before the ferry arrived this morning . . . none of the other passengers were aware . . ." The ferry suddenly becomes an enormous boat, a life-sized ferry, and it is bobbing on the

ocean or river and I'm staring through the windows at what looks like a scene from an E.C. comic. The first person, alone in the front seat, stares straight ahead unmoving—obviously dead by the look in his eyes and by the shape of his skull pushing against the flesh and the almost gray-green pallor of his skin. The other passengers sit like stick dolls, some with missing teeth or hair. They're alive but not moving, staring at the back of the dead passenger's head.

I can't form words these past few days, sometimes thinking I've been drained of emotional content from weeping or fear. I keep doing these impulsive things like trying to make a film that records the rituals in an attempt to give grief form. It's almost winter and I drive west of New York to film myself bathing in a lake in some of the only virgin forest left on the eastern seaboard. I hold a super-8 camera in my hands and spin around and around in the woods thinking of dervishes; thinking of the intoxication of freedom witnessed in death.

Now I've driven north of New York City to the gravesite on a gray day filled with random spots of rain on a dirty windshield. All those birds' nests high in the winter trees. Everything rich and black and wet and brown, the serious rich darkness of his photographs. I'm kicking around the cemetery mud among huge lifeless tractors and the ravines they've made strewn with boulders and wet earth, talking to him; first walking around trying to find him was so difficult I started laughing nervously, "Maybe I can't find you, Peter." And these erratic paces back and forth from his ground soil back to the car, cigarettes lit, camera retrieved from the backseat and brought back to the un-

marked gravesite for a picture of Neal's flowers, "He loved flowers; loved them..." Months and months of illness and the house was always filled with flowers; some so big and wild they didn't even look like flowers; more like beings from some lunar slopes. All these erratic movements till finally I stopped myself, forced myself to contain my movements. Walking backward and forward at the same time, I realized how rattled I was. I was talking to him again. I get so amazingly self-conscious talking to him a thousand thoughts at once. The eye hovers in space inches from the back of my head; seeing myself seeing him, or, the surface extension of him—the wet tossed earth—and further seeing his spirit; his curled body rising invisible just above the ground; his eyes full and seeing; him behind me looking over my shoulder at himself rising over my shoulder, watching me looking at the fresh turned earth where he lies buried.

I try talking to him wondering if he knows I'm there, if he sees me. I know he sees me, he's in the wind, in the air around me. He covers the fields in a fine mist. He's in his home in the city. He's behind me. It's wet and cold but I like it like that. Like the way it numbs my fingers, makes them white and red at the knuckles. Strangers pat the earth before various stones around me; cars idle at the roadsides and long valleys and ridges on into the distance and everything is torn up and uprooted in this section—all the wet markings of the earth and the tractors, all these graves freshly developed and those birds' nests giant and wet-leaved as if they've been dropped by unseen hands into the crooks of tree limbs. I talk to him, so conscious of being alive and talking to my impressions, my memories of him, suspending all disbelief. I know he's there and I see him. I sense him in the hole down there under the surface of that earth. I see him without the

covering of the plain pine box. The box no longer exists in my head, there's just a huge wide earth and grass and fields and crowfeet trees and me, my shape in the wet air and clouds like gauze like gray overlapping in fog and I tell him I'm scared and confused and I'm crying and I tell him how much I love him and how much he means to me and I tell him everything in my head, all the contradictions all fear and all love and all alone.

And his death is now as if it's printed on celluloid on the backs of my eyes. That last day when friends came to speak reassurances to him or to read letters from other friends to him or touch his hands or feet or to simply sit by his bed—there were people arriving and departing all day long—there was some point when I was sitting at the far corner of the bed in a chair thinking about leaving when I looked toward his face and his eyes moved slightly and I put two fingers up like rabbit ears behind the back of my head, a gesture, a high sign we had that we'd discreetly give when we bumped into each other at a crowded gathering in the past. I flashed him the sign and then turned away embarrassed and moments later Ethyl said, "David . . . look at Peter." We all turned to the bed and his body was completely still; and then there was a very strong and slow intake of breath and then stillness and then one more intake of breath and he was gone.

I surprised myself: I barely cried. When everyone left the room I closed the door and pulled the super-8 camera out of my bag and did a sweep of his bed: his open eye, his open mouth, that beautiful hand with the hint of gauze at the wrist that held the i.v. needle, the color of his hand like marble, the full sense of the flesh of it. Then the still camera: portraits of his amazing feet, his head, that open eye again—I kept

trying to get the light I saw in that eye—and then the door flew open and a nun rushed in babbling about how he'd accepted the church and I look at this guy on the bed with his outstretched arm and I think: but he's beyond that. He's more there than the words coming from her containing these images of spirituality—I mean just the essence of death; the whole taboo structure in this culture the mystery of it the fears and joys of it the flight it contains this body of my friend on the bed this body of my brother my father my emotional link to the world this body I don't know this pure and cutting air just all the thoughts and sensations this death this event produces in bystanders contains more spirituality than any words we can manufacture.

So I asked her to leave and after closing the door again I tried to say something to him staring into that enormous eye. If in death the body's energy disperses and merges with everything around us, can it immediately know my thoughts? But I try and speak anyway and try and say something in case he's afraid or confused by his own death and maybe needs some reassurance or tool to pick up, but nothing comes from my mouth. This is the most important event of my life and my mouth can't form words and maybe I'm the one who needs words, maybe I'm the one who needs reassurance and all I can do is raise my hands from my sides in helplessness and say, "All I want is some sort of grace." And then the water comes from my eyes.

I go into these rages periodically that can find no real form where I end up hitting the backs of my hands against the television set instead of giving in to my real urge which is to rip the thing out of the wall and toss it blaring out the

window into the traffic. Or I wake up from daydreams of tipping amazonian blowdarts in "infected blood" and spitting them at the exposed necklines of certain politicians or nazi-preachers or government health-care officials or the rabid strangers parading against AIDS clinics in the nightly news suburbs. I carry this rage in moments like some kind of panic and yes I am horrified that I feel this desire for murder but it all starts with a revolving screen of memories that mixes past and present. It contains the faces and bodies of people I loved struggling for life, people I loved and people who I thought made a real difference in the world, or at least who lent some kind of balance to those whose images and intents we get served daily through the media. It begins with the earliest memories, when sexuality first stirs beneath one's skin in an organized social structure that would kill you spiritually or physically every chance it has.

I remember when I was eight and a half, some nineteen-year-old kid brought me up the elevator to the rooftop. Under the summer night sky he placed my face against his dick and I almost lost consciousness because of the power of the unconscious desires suddenly surfacing and how for a week afterward this eight-year-old plotted murder because of fears that the guy would tell someone and I'd be locked up or institutionalized and given electroshock and how I studied my face in the mirror day after day to see if what I'd experienced was written there and the confusion I felt wondering if I'd become this hateful thing, and yet my face remained the same. For months afterward I searched the public library for information on my "condition" and found only sections of novels or manuals that described me as either a speedfreak sitting on a child's swing in a playground at dusk inventing new words for faggot—"...butterfly,

wisp..."—or that people like me spoke with lisps and put bottles up their asses and wore dresses and had limp wrists and every novel I read that had references to queers described them as people who killed or destroyed themselves for no other reason than their realization of how terrible they were for desiring men and I felt I had no choice but to grow up and assume these shapes and characteristics. And I grew up living a schizophrenic existence in the family and in a social structure where every ad in every newspaper, tv and magazine was a promotion for heterosexual coupling sunlit muscleheads and beach bunnies. And in every playground, invariably, there's a kid who screamed, FAGGOT!, in frustration at some other kid and the sound of it resonated in my shoes, that instant solitude, that breathing glass wall no one else saw.

I hear endless news stories of murder around the nation where the defendant claims self-defense because this queer tried to touch him and the defendant being freed and I'm lying here on this bed of Peter's that was the scene of an intense illness and the channel of the tv has been turned to some show about the cost of AIDS and I'm watching a group of people die on camera because they can't afford the drugs that might extend their lives and some fella in the health-care system in texas is being interviewed—I can't even remember what he looks like because I reached through the television screen and ripped his face in half—he's saying, "If I had a dollar to spend for health care I'd rather spend it on a baby or an innocent person with some illness or defect not of their own responsibility; not some person with AIDS..." and I recall Philip's description of finding someone he knew almost dead on a bench in Tompkins Square Park because no hospital would take him in because he had AIDS and no

health insurance and I read the newspaper stories about the politician in Arizona saying on the radio, "To solve the problem of AIDS just shoot the queers . . ." and his press secretary claimed the governor just didn't know the microphone was on and besides they didn't really think this would affect his chances for reelection. And I have the memory of Peter eating alone one morning a couple of months before he died at Bruno's restaurant on Second Avenue and 12th Street and Bruno himself in the middle of the packed restaurant coming up to Peter saying, "Are you ready to pay?" And Peter saying, "Yes, but why?" And Bruno taking out a paper bag and saying, "You know why . . . just put your money in here." Peter put five dollars in the bag and Bruno went behind the counter and brought back his change in another paper bag and tossed it onto the table. And what all this says in an instant. At first I wanted to go into Bruno's at rush hour and pour ten gallons of cow's blood onto the grill and simply say, "You know why." But that was something I might have done ten years ago. Instead I went in during a crowded lunch hour and screamed at Bruno demanding an explanation and every time a waitress or Bruno asked me to lower my voice I got louder and angrier until Bruno was cowering in back of the kitchen and every knife and fork in the place stopped moving. But even that wasn't enough to erase this rage. A former city government official concerned with administering AIDS policy, in a private city meeting on housing for poor people with AIDS, said, "What you want is a little place; an island where you can isolate these people so they can bang each other up with this AIDS virus . . ." Statements like this are not uncommon in government meetings and the city of New York is dragging its feet on this disease just like every other city and federal agency in the

country—they simply don't care—and they're allocating just enough money so it looks good on paper; not good, but at least on paper their asses are covered so in the future when the finger of responsibility points in their direction they can say, "But we did something." The government is not only withholding money, but drugs and information. People with AIDS across the country are turning themselves into human test tubes. Some of them are compiling so much information that they can call government agencies and pass themselves off as research scientists and suddenly have access to all the information that's been withheld and then they turn their tenement kitchens into laboratories, mixing up chemicals and passing them out freely to friends and strangers to help prolong lives. People are subjecting themselves to odd and sometimes dangerous alternative therapies—injections of viruses and consumption of certain chemicals used for gardening—all in order to live. And then you get these self-righteous walking swastikas claiming this is god's punishment and Buckley, in the daily newspaper, asking for a program to tattoo people with AIDS and LaRouche in California actually getting a bill up for vote that would isolate people with AIDS in camps and when I react with feelings of murder I feel horrified and tell myself that it is fascist to want to murder these people and in my horror at my feelings I attempt to rationalize them by going further saying but in this culture we accept murder as self-defense against those who try to murder us and what's going on here but public and social murder on a daily basis and it's happening in our midst and not very many people seem to say or do anything about it. There's not even an acknowledgment of this murder from most of my friends. In the evening news I'm told that violent acts against homosexuals

are up forty-one percent over last year and to get away from all this I go to a cinema in the neighborhood to see a movie and it's called *Hollywood Shuffle* and it's about the plight of certain minorities in the movie industry and halfway through the movie I have to watch this stereotypic fag with a dick and designer perfume for a brain mince his way through his lines and I want to throw up because we're supposed to quietly and politely make house in this killing machine called America and pay taxes to support our own slow murder and I'm amazed that we're not running amok in the streets, and that we can still be capable of gestures of loving after lifetimes of all this.

Previously, before leaving the city to go someplace else for a long time, the city would suddenly change. It was revealed to me as if I had let go of something that was keeping it hidden. Wonderful things tended to happen or reveal themselves in the days before departure. Life or living seemed quite an amazing spectacle. There was humanity beneath every gesture moving along the sidewalks. It was a sudden vision of the World, a transient position of the body in relation to the Other World. I came to understand that to give up one's environment was to also give up biography and all the encoded daily movements: those false reassurances of the railing outside the door. This was the beginning of a definition of the World for me. A place that might be described as interior world. The place where movement was comfortable, where boundaries were stretched or obliterated: no walls, borders, language or fear.

With the appearance of AIDS and the sense of mortality I now find everything revealing itself to me in this way.

The sense that came about in moments of departure occurs, only now I don't even have to go anywhere. It is the possibility of departure in a final sense, a sense called death that is now opening up the gates. Where once I felt acutely alien, now it's more like an immersion in a body of warm water and the water that surrounds me is air, is breathing, is life itself. I'm acutely aware of myself alive and witnessing. It's like a long-distance runner who suddenly finds himself in the solitude of distance among trees and light and the sight and sounds of friends are way back there in the distance. All behind me are the friends that have died. I'm breathing this air that they can't breathe; I'm seeing this ratty monkey in a cheap Mexican circus wearing a red-and-blue-embroidered jacket and it's collecting coins and I can reach out and touch it like they can't. Time is now compressed. I joke and say that I feel I've taken out another six-month lease on this body of mine, on this vehicle of sound and motion, and every painting or photograph or film I make, I make with the sense that it may be the last thing I do and so I try and pull everything in to the surface of that action. I work quickly now and feel there is no time for bullshit. Cut straight to the heart of the senses and map it out as clearly as tools and growth allow. In better moments I can see my friends—vague transparencies of their faces maybe over my shoulder or superimposed on the surfaces of my eyes—making me more aware of myself, seeing myself from a distance, seeing myself see others. I can almost see my own breath, see my internal organs functioning pump pumping. These days I see the edge of mortality. The edge of death and dying is around everything like a warm halo of light sometimes dim, sometimes irradiated. I see myself seeing death. It's like a transparent celluloid image of myself is accompanying me

everywhere I go. I see my friends and I see myself and I see breath coming from my lips and the plants are drinking it and I see breath coming from my chest and everything is fading, becoming a shadow that may disappear as the sun goes down.

POSTCARDS FROM AMERICA X Rays from Hell

Late yesterday afternoon a friend came over unexpectedly to sit at my kitchen table and try to find some measure of language for his state of mind. "What's left of living?" He's been on AZT for six to eight months and his T-cells have dropped from one hundred plus to thirty. His doctor says, "What the hell do you want from me?" Now he's asking himself, "What the hell do I want?" He's trying to answer this while in the throes of agitating FEAR.

I know what he's talking about as each tense description of his state of mind slips out across the table. The table is filled with piles of papers and objects; a boom box, a bottle