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Archives of American Art

Witnesses: against our vanishing

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ET TU BRUTE?

What is living but movement partnered by breathing. To breathe is to live; to stop is to drop. Is that final?

A recent Harper's Index, that mad compendium of deconstructed statistical artifacts, cheerily noted how someone who loves the conceptual world figures. It says for every deep breath inhaled today, the chances it will contain a molecule of Julius Caesar's dying breath are 99 in 100.

Hey, I knew it. The air doesn't just feel close, it is. With every long sigh that escapes my lips I can keep afloat not just the memory of those friends lost to AIDS and cancers and drugs, but their actual first words! Well, why not? They've taught me what I know. Part of what I say belongs to them.

I hear their whisperings on the wind. Ghosts hiss in my ear to wake me each morning and climb in bed with me when I sleep. While I dream they wait, poised and friendly, but not letting go. I toss and turn to some mighty haunting serenades: "Are you lonesome tonight? Is your heart filled with tears?"

Perhaps they're guiding my steps. I often feel as if, though it pours down rain, I walk between the drops. I mean, didn't I take the same drugs, have a lot of the same sex, go to the same places at pretty much the same time as those who are sick and dying or dead? And yet, and yet...I'm okay, no, better than okay, I'm well. I almost hate to admit it.

And there's something else: I get jealous. I see how they, those bright lights growing ever dimmer in the shadow of HIV, can love like there's no tomorrow, and I'm envious. It's not as if I don't know I did that for years, but something in me still adores the irrational. It's not that I want to be sick, it's just that on those days when despair sits heavily in my lap and pulls at my chest like a helpless wretch, it's too hard to grow old without them. It's that old snub, getting out, but we who remain, watching this old century turn like some big bird making a long, furious sweep toward the sun, we have to stay and tell the tale. And it's brutal.

What can I say? How we used to carry on! I don't think I knew anyone, ten years ago, who didn't live a double life. Our secrets were the stuff of legend and we gossiped about them, played with them, all the time. We were bright and ambitious, and in our desire to do it all, have it all, touch God, we left no stone unturned. We took drugs and had indiscriminate sex we couldn't have imagined without the drugs. We took

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risks, artistic and otherwise, and felt safe, charmed. We were young; feelings were still just impressions, arrogance passed for wisdom.

It was a miracle we lived through some of those alcohol-filled, drug-laden, black-leather nights, but it was lucky we had them, too. In those clubs and dark bedrooms, under those blinding coffee-shop fluorescents



at 5 am, we formed a community, a defense against the threat of obscurity. We made each other important, and beautiful.

And then, with no warning, we started getting sick, some with infection, some with grief. The AIDS virus, wearing only its most insidious smile, had crashed the gates of our party.

And now, when the bad news first arrives, there's so much to do, testing, talking, reading, exploring. We make sure our friends get to their appointments, secure the proper medications, find the most comforting healers, hire nurses. We cook the right foods and get them eaten, we encourage rest and also work, keep them working, to work is to levitate, to rise above the politics of treatment, the bewildering moat of fear crawling with snakecharmers and becalmed families. We visit this hospital and then that one, bring more food, tapes, books, friends, cards, letters, pictures, more hands to hold, keep close company and wait, and pray, absolutely, resolutely denying despair a place to sit. No, we say, quietly, not in this room, spare us.

But it just keeps coming, the same stuff keeps happening, again and again, to different people, each time moving a little closer. What can I say? It gets so when I hear the news now I cringe and I wish, for a minute, they were dead already, so we don't have to go through this humiliating process one more time. Then I hate myself for feeling that way. Oh God, I'm just so tired. Forgive me.

At the time my friend Cookie Mueller, who was always there to help me navigate the last dozen years, wrote the piece that follows, she didn't mention she had AIDS, but clearly she was feeling its power. It is reprinted from the City Lights Review because, as of this writing, something she once referred to as a "blue flame aura" has pierced her brain, removing her capacity for speech and some of her gestural abilities as well. But, like the magician who can liberate the linen from a fully set table while leaving the setting intact, the force of Cookie's personality, the light of her soul, if you will, hasn't wavered one bit.

She communicates mostly in pure, nonverbal soul-sound and wild pantomime, and as I watch her frenzied signalling, I realize what rebels we still are, she and I and everyone like us, making the forbidden visible, doing away with stupid secrets and lies. In shows like this one, we can review our triumphs, air our grief, lay ourselves bare, heal, shiver. When we look up at the remaining light of day and wonder where the time went, we can see it in the work not just what we know but how we learned it. It's how we let each other know we're here.

LINDA YABLONSKY
New York, October 1989

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