



PAUL MONETTE

BORROWED  
TIME

AN AIDS MEMOIR

**Tender and lyrical . . . Heroic."** —NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

A HARVEST BOOK

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HARCOURT BRACE & COMPANY

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Praise for *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir*

"Powerful . . . Agonizing . . . Rises to shattering eloquence. The category of gay literature no longer applies: we enter the universal arena of human loss."  
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"Enormously affecting . . . impossible to put down . . . The sense of loss contained in this book transcends one man, one gay couple, the gay community . . . Monette strikes a universal chord."  
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"*Borrowed Time* brings the plague years home as no other book does. It is impossible to read this love story without weeping . . . The effect is so over-powering, so emotion-charged that at times we simply have to stop reading."  
—*Newsday*

"Intensely felt and finely written . . . Likely to survive the tragic period it records . . . Completely human and completely real . . . One experience we cannot forget." —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Intense . . . Heartbreaking . . . A necessary document for a time when many have been forced to negotiate their contracts with death."  
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"This is a riveting story—the dark, more personal side of Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On*."  
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BORROWED TIME

ALSO BY PAUL MONETTE

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B O R R O W E D   T I M E



I don't know if I will live to finish this. Doubtless there's a streak of self-importance in such an assertion, but who's counting? Maybe it's just that I've watched too many sicken in a month and die by Christmas, so that a fatal sort of realism comforts me more than magic. All I know is this: The virus ticks in me. And it doesn't care a whit about our categories—when is full-blown, what's AIDS-related, what is just sick and tired? No one has solved the puzzle of its timing. I take my drug from Tijuana twice a day. The very friends who tell me how vigorous I look, how well I seem, are the first to assure me of the imminent medical breakthrough. What they don't seem to understand is, I used up all my optimism

keeping my friend alive. Now that he's gone, the cup of my own health is neither half full nor half empty. Just half.

Equally difficult, of course, is knowing where to start. The world around me is defined now by its endings and its closures—the date on the grave that follows the hyphen. Roger Horwitz, my beloved friend, died of complications of AIDS on October 22, 1986, nineteen months and ten days after his diagnosis. That is the only real date anymore, casting its ice shadow over all the secular holidays lovers mark their calendars by. Until that long night in October, it didn't seem possible that any day could supplant the brute equinox of March 12—the day of Roger's diagnosis in 1985, the day we began to live on the moon.

The fact is, no one knows where to start with AIDS. Now, in the seventh year of the calamity, my friends in L.A. can hardly recall what it felt like any longer, the time before the sickness. Yet we all watched the toll mount in New York, then in San Francisco, for years before it ever touched us here. It comes like a slowly dawning horror. At first you are equipped with a hundred different amulets to keep it far away. Then someone you know goes into the hospital, and suddenly you are at high noon in full battle gear. They have neglected to tell you that you will be issued no weapons of any sort. So you cobble together a weapon out of anything that lies at hand, like a prisoner honing a spoon handle into a stiletto. You fight tough, you fight dirty, but you cannot fight dirtier than it.

I remember a Saturday in February 1982, driving Route 10 to Palm Springs with Roger to visit his parents for the weekend. While Roger drove, I read aloud an article from *The Advocate*: "Is Sex Making Us Sick?" There was the slightest edge of irony in the query, an urban cool that seems almost bucolic now in its innocence. But the article didn't mince words. It was the first in-depth reporting I'd read that laid out the shadowy nonfacts of what till then had been the most fragmented of rumors. The first cases were reported to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) only six months before, but they weren't



in the newspapers, not in L.A. I note in my diary in December '81 ambiguous reports of a "gay cancer," but I know I didn't have the slightest picture of the thing. Cancer of the *what*? I would have asked, if anyone had known anything.

I remember exactly what was going through my mind while I was reading, though I can't now recall the details of the piece. I was thinking: How is this not me? Trying to find a pattern I was exempt from. It was a brand of denial I would watch grow exponentially during the next few years, but at the time I was simply relieved. Because the article appeared to be saying that there was a grim progression toward this undefined catastrophe, a set of preconditions—chronic hepatitis, repeated bouts of syphilis, exotic parasites. No wonder my first baseline response was to feel safe. It was *them*—by which I meant the fast-lane Fire Island crowd, the Sutro Baths, the world of High Eros.

Not us.

I grabbed for that relief because we'd been through a rough patch the previous autumn. Till then Roger had always enjoyed a sort of no-nonsense good health: not an abuser of anything, with a constitutional aversion to hypochondria, and not wed to his mirror save for a minor alarm as to the growing dimensions of his bald spot. In the seven years we'd been together I scarcely remember him having a cold or taking an aspirin. Yet in October '81 he had struggled with a peculiar bout of intestinal flu. Nothing special showed up in any of the blood tests, but over a period of weeks he experienced persistent symptoms that didn't neatly connect: pains in his legs, diarrhea, general malaise. I hadn't been feeling notably bad myself, but on the other hand I was a textbook hypochondriac, and I figured if Rog was harboring some kind of bug, so was I.

The two of us finally went to a gay doctor in the Valley for a further set of blood tests. It's a curious phenomenon among gay middle-class men that anything faintly venereal had better be taken to a doctor who's "on the bus." Is it a sense of fellow feeling perhaps,

or a way of avoiding embarrassment? Do we really believe that only a doctor who's *our* kind can heal us of the afflictions that attach somehow to our secret hearts? There is so much magic to medicine. Of course we didn't know then that those few physicians with a large gay clientele were about to be swamped beyond all capacity to cope.

The tests came back positive for amoebiasis. Roger and I began the highly toxic treatment to kill the amoeba, involving two separate drugs and what seems in memory thirty pills a day for six weeks, till the middle of January. It was the first time I'd ever experienced the phenomenon of the cure making you sicker. By the end of treatment we were both weak and had lost weight, and for a couple of months afterward were susceptible to colds and minor infections.

It was only after the treatment was over that a friend of ours, diagnosed with amoebas by the same doctor, took his slide to the lab at UCLA for a second opinion. And that was my first encounter with lab error. The doctor at UCLA explained that the slide had been misread; the squiggles that looked like amoebas were in fact benign. The doctor shook his head and grumbled about "these guys who do their own lab work." Roger then retrieved his slide, took it over to UCLA and was told the same: no amoebas. We had just spent six weeks methodically ingesting poison for no reason at all.

So it wasn't the *Advocate* story that sent up the red flag for us. We'd been shaken by the amoeba business, and from that point on we operated at a new level of sexual caution. What is now called safe sex did not use to be so clearly defined. The concept didn't exist. But it was quickly becoming apparent, even then, that we couldn't wait for somebody else to define the parameters. Thus every gay man I know has had to come to a point of personal definition by way of avoiding the chaos of sexually transmitted diseases, or STD as we call them in the trade. There was obviously no one moment of conscious decision, a bolt of clarity on the shimmering freeway west of San Bernardino, but I think of that day when I think of the sea change. The party was going to have to stop. The evidence was too ominous: *We were making ourselves sick.*

Not that Roger and I were the life of the party. Roger especially didn't march to the different drum of *so many men, so little time*, the motto and anthem of the sunstruck summers of the mid-to-late seventies. He'd managed not to carry away from his adolescence the mark of too much repression, or indeed the yearning to make up for lost time. In ten years he had perhaps half a dozen contacts outside the main frame of our relationship, mostly when he was out of town on business. He was comfortable with relative monogamy, even at a time when certain quarters of the gay world found the whole idea trivial and bourgeois. I realize that in the world of the heterosexual there is a generalized lip service paid to exclusive monogamy, a notion most vividly honored in the breach. I leave the matter of morality to those with the gift of tongues; it was difficult enough for us to fashion a sexual ethics just for us. In any case, I was the one in the relationship who suffered from lost time. I was the one who would go after a sexual encounter as if it were an ice cream cone—casual, quick, good-bye.

But as I say, who's counting? I only want to make it plain to start with that we got very alert and very careful as far back as the winter of '82. That gut need for safety took hold and lingered, even as we got better again and strong. Thus I'm not entirely sure what I thought on another afternoon a year and a half later, when a friend of ours back from New York reported a conversation he'd had with a research man from Sloan-Kettering.

"He thinks all it takes is one exposure," Charlie said, this after months of articles about the significance of repeated exposure. More tenaciously than ever, we all wanted to believe the whole deepening tragedy was centered on those at the sexual frontiers who were fucking their brains out. The rest of us were fashioning our own little Puritan forts, as we struggled to convince ourselves that a clean slate would hold the nightmare at bay.

Yet with caution as our watchword starting in February of '82, Roger was diagnosed with AIDS three years later. So the turning over of new leaves was not to be on everybody's side. A lot of us

were already ticking and didn't even know. The magic circle my generation is trying to stay within the borders of is only as real as the random past. Perhaps the young can live in the magic circle, but only if those of us who are ticking will tell our story. Otherwise it goes on being *us* and *them* forever, built like a wall higher and higher, till you no longer think to wonder if you are walling it out or in.

For us the knowing began in earnest on the first of September, 1983. I'd had a call a couple of days before from my closest friend, Cesar Albini, who'd just returned to San Francisco after a summer touring Europe with a group of students. He said he'd been having trouble walking because of a swollen gland in his groin, and he was going to the hospital to have it biopsied. He reassured me he was feeling fine and wasn't expecting anything ominous, but figured he'd check it out before school started again. AIDS didn't even cross my mind, though cancer did. Half joking, Cesar wondered aloud if he dared disturb our happy friendship with bad news.

"If it's bad," I said, "we'll handle it, okay?"

But I really didn't clutch with fear, or it was only a brief stab of the hypochondriacal sort. Roger and I were busy getting ready for a four-day trip to Big Sur, something we'd done almost yearly since moving to California in 1977. We were putting the blizzard of daily life on hold, looking forward to a dose of raw sublime that coincided with our anniversary—September 3, the day we met.

Cesar was forty-three, only ten months older than Roger. Born in Uruguay, possessed of a great heart and inexhaustible energy, he had studied in Europe and traveled all over, once spending four months going overland from Paris to China at a total cost of five hundred dollars. He was the first Uruguayan ever to enter Afghanistan through the mountains—on a camel, if I remember right. He spoke French, Italian, Spanish and English with equal fluency, and he tended to be the whole language department of a school. We'd both been teaching at secondary schools in Massachusetts when we met, and we goaded one another to make the move west that had always been our shared

dream. Thus Cesar had relocated to San Francisco in July of '76, and Roger and I landed in L.A. four days after Thanksgiving the following year.

Cesar wasn't lucky in matters of the heart. He was still in the closet during his years back east, and the move to San Francisco was an extraordinary rite of passage for him. He always wanted a great love, but the couple of relationships he'd been involved in scarcely left the station. Still, he was very proud and indulged in no self-pity. He learned to accept the limited terms of the once-a-week relations he found in San Francisco, and broke through to the freedom of his own manhood without the mythic partner. The open sexual exultation that marked San Francisco in those days was something he rejoiced in.

Yet even though he went to the baths a couple of times a week, Cesar wasn't into anything *weird*—or that's how I might have put it at that stage of my own denial. No hepatitis, no history of VD, built tall and fierce—of course he was safe. The profile of AIDS continued to be mostly a matter of shadows. The L.A. *Times* wasn't covering it, though by then I had come to learn how embattled things had grown in New York. The Gay Men's Health Crisis was up to its ears in clients; Larry Kramer was screaming at the mayor; and the body count was appearing weekly in the *Native*. A writer I knew slightly was walking around with Kaposi's sarcoma. A young composer kept getting sicker and sicker, though he stubbornly didn't fit the CDC's hopelessly narrow categories, so that case was still officially a toss-up. And again, we're talking New York.

I came home at six on the evening of the first, and Roger met me gravely at the door. "There's a message from Cesar," he said. "It's not good."

Numbly I played back the answering machine, where so much appalling misery would be left on tape over the years to come, as if a record were crying out to be kept. "I have a little bit of bad news." Cesar's voice sounded strained, almost embarrassed. He left no de-

tails. I called and called him throughout the evening, convinced I was about to hear cancer news. The lymph nodes, of course—a hypochondriac knows all there is to know about the sites of malignancy. Already I was figuring what the treatments might be; no question in my mind but that it was treatable. I had Cesar practically cured by the time I reached Tom, a friend and former student of his. But as usual with me in crisis, I was jabbering and wouldn't let Tom get a word in. Finally he broke through: "He's got it."

"Got what?"

It's not till you first hear it attached to someone you love that you realize how little you know about it. My mind went utterly blank. The carefully constructed wall collapsed as if a 7.5 quake had rumbled under it. At that point I didn't even know the difference between KS and the opportunistic infections. I kept picturing that swollen gland in his groin, thinking: What's *that* got to do with AIDS? And a parallel track in my mind began careening with another thought: the swollen glands in my own groin, always dismissed by my straight doctor as herpes-related and "not a significant sign."

"We're not going to die young," Cesar used to say with a wag of his finger, his black Latin eyes dancing. "We won't get out of it *that* easily!" Then he would laugh and clap his hands, downing the coffee he always took with cream and four sugars. It looked like pudding.

I reached him very late that night and mouthed again the same words I'd said so bravely two days before: We'll deal with it. There is no end to the litany of reassurance that springs to your lips to ward away the specter. They've caught it early; you're fine; there's got to be some kind of treatment. That old chestnut, the imminent breakthrough. You fling these phrases instinctively, like pennies down a well. Cesar and I bent backward to calm each other. It was just a couple of lesions in the groin; you could hardly see them. And the reason everything was going to be all right was really very simple: We would fight this thing like demons.

But the hollowness and disbelief pursued Roger and me all the

way up the gold coast. Big Sur was towering and bracing as ever—exalted as Homer’s Ithaca, as Robinson Jeffers described it. We were staying at Ventana, the lavish inn high in the hills above the canyon of the Big Sur River. We used the inn as a base camp for our day-long hikes, returning in the evening to posh amenities worthy of an Edwardian big-game hunt. On the second morning we walked out to Andrew Molera Beach, where the Big Sur empties into the Pacific. Molera stretches unblemished for five miles down the coast, curving like a crescent moon, with weathered headlands clean as Scotland. It was a kind of holy place for Roger and me, like the yearly end of a quest.

“What if we got it?” I said, staring out at the otters belly up in the kelp beds, taking the sun.

I don’t remember how we answered that, because of course there wasn’t any answer. Merely to pose the question was by way of another shot at magic. Mention the unmentionable and it will go away, like shining a light around a child’s bedroom to shoo the monster. The great ache we were feeling at that moment was for our stricken friend, and we were too ignorant still to envision the medieval tortures that might await him.

But I know that the roll of pictures I took that day was my first conscious memorializing of Roger and me, as if I could hold the present as security on the future. There’s one of me on the beach, then a mirror image of him as we traded off the camera, both of us squinting in the clear autumn light with the river mouth behind. Back at the inn, I took a picture of Rog in a rope hammock, his blue eyes resting on me as if the camera weren’t even there, in total equilibrium, nine years to the day since our paths crossed on Revere Street. His lips are barely curved in a quarter-smile, his hands at rest in his lap as the last wave of the westering sun washes his left side through the diamond weave of the rope.

How do I speak of the person who was my life’s best reason? The most completely unpretentious man I ever met, modest and decent

to such a degree that he seemed to release what was most real in everyone he knew. It was always a relief to be with Roger, not to have to play any games at all. By a safe mile he was the least flashy of all our bright circle of friends, but he spoke about books and the wide world he had journeyed with huge conviction and a hunger to know everything.

He had a contagious, impish sense of humor, especially about the folly of things, especially self-importance. Yet he was blissfully unfrivolous, without a clue as to what was "in." He had thought life through somehow and come out the other side with a proper respect for small pleasures. "*Quelle bonne soirée*," as Madeleine once exclaimed after dinner one night with us in Les Halles, a bistro called Pig's Foot. Wonderful evenings were second nature to us by then, with long walks at the end, especially when we traveled. Days we spent cavorting through museums, drunk on old things, like ten-year-olds loose in a castle. Roger loved nothing better than a one-on-one talk with a friend, and he had never lost track of a single one, all the way back to high school. The luck of the draw was mine, for I was the best and the most.

We met on the eve of Labor Day in 1974, at a dinner party at a mutual friend's apartment on Beacon Hill, just two days before Roger was to start work as an attorney at a stately firm in Boston. He was thirty-two; I was twenty-eight. Summer has always been good to me, even the bittersweet end, with the slant of yellow light, and I for one was in love before the night was done. I suppose we'd been waiting for each other all our lives. The business of coming out had been difficult for both of us, partly because of the closet nature of all relations in a Puritan town like Boston, partly because we were both so sure of what we wanted and it kept not coming to life.

"Spain!" Roger writes in his diary in 1959, after three days' hitchhike from Paris to Madrid. "If only I had a friend!"

For if there was no man out there who was equal and simpatico, then what was the point of being gay? The baggage and the shit you



had to take were bad enough. But it all jogged into place when we met, everything I'd brooded over from the ancient Greeks to Whitman. It all ceased to be literary. My life was a sort of amnesia till then, longing for something that couldn't be true until I'd found the rest of me. Is that feeling so different in straight people? Or is it that gay people have to keep it secret and so grow divided, with a bachelor's face to the world and a pang like dying inside?

The reason he got such a late start as a lawyer was that Roger lived a whole other life first. During his freshman year at Harvard Law he was simultaneously writing his dissertation for a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. That work grew out of a decade of Europe and books, the bohemian ramble, complete with beret in one black-and-white of the period. A month before he was diagnosed, we saw a production of Philip Barry's *Holiday*, and Roger laughed on the way out, saying he'd done exactly what Barry's hero longed to do—retire at the age of twenty.

He left Brandeis after his freshman year and went straight to Paris, where he worked as a waiter and flirted with being a poet. The *patronne* of Restaurant Papille was Madeleine Follain, a painter by vocation, the daughter of Maurice Denis and wife of the poet Jean Follain. Roger reveled in all that passionate life of art, and the journal of his nineteenth year, two hundred close-typed pages, burns with the search for the perfect feeling and the words to speak it. When he finally graduated from Brandeis, he returned to Paris for two more years, working at Larousse and Gallimard. Then he took a long sojourn in the Middle East, where his aunt was married to an Israeli diplomat. Once he wandered for weeks through Ethiopia, eating goat around village fires, walking up-country to the monastic caves at Lalibala, till even the guide lagged back for fear of bandits.

Then in 1965 he packed in at Harvard's Widener Library, reading French, reading everything really, till he finally concentrated on the novels of Henri Thomas. He was senior tutor in Dudley House and took his meals at a co-op on Sacramento Street, a chaotic Queen