

Autobiographical essays by the author of *Becoming a Man*,
winner of the National Book Award

PAUL MONETTE

LAST
WATCH
OF THE
NIGHT

A HARVEST BOOK

LAST WATCH OF THE NIGHT

*Essays Too Personal
and Otherwise*

PAUL MONETTE

A Harvest Book
Harcourt Brace & Company
San Diego New York London

All personal encounters and anecdotes in this book are true. To protect the privacy of the participants, the names of many of the characters have been changed, as have some of the details about them and the events recounted here.

Copyright © 1994, 1993 by Paul Monette, Trustee, and his Successor
Trustee/s of the Monette/Horwitz Trust u/i 2/12/92

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Requests for permission to make copies of any part of the work should be mailed to: Permissions Department, Harcourt Brace & Company, 6277 Sea Harbor Drive, Orlando, Florida 32887-6777.

The book's epigraph, from *Collected Poems* by Frank O'Hara, copyright © 1971 by Maureen Granville-Smith, Administratrix of the Estate of Frank O'Hara, is reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. The quotes from Sappho are from Mary Barnard, *Sappho: A New Translation*; copyright © 1958 The Regents of the University of California; © renewed 1984 Mary Barnard; reprinted by permission of the Regents of the University of California and the University of California Press. The quote from "The Road Not Taken" is from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem; copyright 1944 by Robert Frost; copyright 1916, 1969 by Henry Holt and Company, Inc.; reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, Inc. The quote from *Private Lives* copyright © 1930 by Noel Coward is reprinted by permission of Michael Imison Playwrights Ltd., 28 Almeida Street, London N1 1TD. The quotes from "Ithaka" are from C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard; copyright © 1975 by Keeley/Sherrard, revised edn. 1992; reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. The lines from "Deer Lay Down Their Bones" are from *Selected Poems* by Robinson Jeffers; copyright © 1954 by Robinson Jeffers; reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc. The last two stanzas of "Moriturus" by Edna St. Vincent Millay are from *Collected Poems*, Harper & Row; copyright © 1928, 1955 by Edna St. Vincent Millay and Norma Millay Ellis; reprinted by permission of Elizabeth Barnett, literary executor. The quote from Fran Lebowitz is used with her permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Monette, Paul.

Last watch of the night: essays / by Paul Monette. — 1st ed.
p. cm.

ISBN 0-15-600202-7

I. Title

PS3563.0523L3 1994

814'.54—dc20 93-47655

Designed by Lydia D'moch
Printed in the United States of America
First Harvest edition 1995

A B C D E

Once again for Winston

*keeper of myth
who had a great idea*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express his gratitude for the good graces of several people who gave invaluable support and inspiration to the writing of this book. *Frontiers* (and especially its editor, David Kalmansohn), where “Puck” first appeared. Merloyd Lawrence, for generously sharing her memories of Aunt Gert. Tad Mosel, for his definitive life of Katharine Cornell—*Leading Lady* (Atlantic-Little Brown, 1978)—written with Gertrude Macy. Brother Toby, Sister Marti, and Sister Julie, whose mission at Starcross Community is a wonder of light out of darkness. Bishop Otis Charles, for his great personal courage in single-handedly changing the balance in the House of Bishops. Ma Jaya and her tireless workers at Kashi Ranch, for the blessings they’ve brought to a suffering people. Neil Baldwin, Executive Director of the National Book Foundation, for uncountable kindnesses and efficiency in shepherding my lecture at the Library of Congress. The Op-Ed staff at *The New York Times*, where a portion of “The Politics of Silence” first appeared. Laurence Goldstein and the staff of the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, where “Mustering” first appeared. My doctors—especially James Thommes, Robert Jenkins, and Aaron Aronow—for keeping my head above water. And Barbara Horwitz, diagnostician *sine qua non*. Tony Johnson, for his gift of humor in calamitous times and the brave example of his own writing. Wendy Weil, my agent and friend for twenty years, for her staunch enthusiasm and her great heart. Finally, Drenka Willen, my editor at Harcourt Brace, for her intellectual rigor and unfailing good humor in the service of keeping me honest.

When I die, don't come, I wouldn't want a leaf
to turn away from the sun—it loves it there.
There's nothing so spiritual about being happy
but you can't miss a day of it, because it doesn't last.

—*Frank O'Hara*

CONTENTS

<i>Puck</i>	1
<i>Gert</i>	29
<i>My Priests</i>	54
<i>3275</i>	89
<i>The Politics of Silence</i>	116
<i>Mustering</i>	132
<i>A One-Way Fare</i>	168
<i>Getting Covered</i>	202
<i>Sleeping Under a Tree</i>	237
<i>Mortal Things</i>	262
<i>Some Afterthoughts</i>	301

PUCK

STEVIE HAD BEEN in the hospital for about a week and a half, diagnosed with PCP, his first full-blown infection. For some reason he wasn't responding to the standard medication, and his doctors had put him on some new exotic combination regimen—one side effect of which was to turn his piss blue. He certainly didn't act or feel sick, except for a little breathlessness. He was still miles from the brink of death. Not even showing any sign of late-stage shriveling up—let alone the ravages of end-stage, where all that's left of life is sleep shot through with delirium.

Stevie was reading the paper, in a larky mood because he'd just had a dose of Ativan. I was sitting by the window, doodling with a script that I had to finish quickly in order to keep my insurance. "I miss Puck," he announced to no one in particular, no response required.

And I stopped writing and looked out the window at the heat-blistered parking lot, the miasma of low smog bleaching the hills in the distance. "You think Puck's going to survive me?"

“Yup,” he replied. Which startled me, a bristle of the old denial that none of us was going to die just yet. Even though we were all living our lives in “dog years” now, seven for every twelvemonth, I still couldn’t feel my own death as a palpable thing. To have undertaken the fight as we had for better drugs and treatment, so that we had become a guerrilla tribe of amateur microbiologists, pharmacist/shamans, our own best healers—there were those of us who’d convinced ourselves in 1990 that the dying was soon going to stop.

AIDS, you see, was on the verge of becoming a “chronic manageable illness.” That was our totem mantra after we buried the second wave, or was it the third? When I met Steve Kolzak on the Fourth of July in ’88, he told me he had seven friends who were going to die in the next six months—and they did. It was my job to persuade him that we could fall in love anyway, embracing between the bombs. And then we would pitch our tent in the chronic, manageable clearing, years and years given back to us by the galloping strides of science. No more afflicted than a diabetic, the daily insulin keeping him one step ahead of his body.

So don’t tell me I had less time than a ten-year-old dog—admittedly one who was a specimen of roaring good health, still out chasing coyotes in the canyon every night, his watchman’s bark at home sufficient to curdle the blood. But if I was angry at Stevie for saying so, I kept it to myself as the hospital stay dragged on. A week of treatment for PCP became two, and he found himself reaching more and more for the oxygen. Our determination, or mine at least, to see this bout as a minor inconvenience remained unshaken. Stevie upped his Ativan and mostly retained his playful demeanor, though woe to the nurse or technician who thought a stream of happy talk would get them through the holocaust. Stevie’s bark was as lethal as Puck’s if you said the wrong thing.

And he didn’t get better, either, because it wasn’t pneumonia that was killing him. I woke up late on Friday, the

fifteenth of September, to learn they'd moved him to intensive care, and I raced to the hospital to find him in a panic, fear glazing his flashing Irish eyes as he clutched the oxygen cup to his mouth. They pulled him through the crisis with steroids, but still wouldn't say what the problem was. Some nasty bug that a sewer of antibiotics hadn't completely arrested yet. But surely all it required was a little patience till one of these drugs kicked in.

His family arrived from back East, the two halves of the divorce. Yet it looked as if the emergency had passed, such is the false promise of massive steroids. I mean, he looked *fine*. He was impish and animated all through the weekend; it was we who had to be vigilant lest he get too tired. And I was so manically certain that he'd pull through, I could hardly take it in at first when one of the docs, shifty-eyed, refined the diagnosis: "He's having a toxic reaction to the chemo."

The chemo? But how could that be? They'd been treating his KS for sixteen months, till all the lesions were under control. Even the ones on his face: you had to know they were there to spot them, a scatter of faded purple under his beard. Besides, KS wasn't a sickness really, it was mostly just a nuisance. This was how deeply invested I was in denial, the 1990 edition. Since KS had never landed us in the hospital, it didn't count. And the chemo was the treatment, so how could it be life-threatening?

Easily, as it turned out. The milligram dosage of bleomycin, a biweekly drip in the doctor's office, is cumulative. After a certain point you run the risk of toxicity, your lungs seizing with fibrous tissue—all the resilience gone till you can't even whistle in the dark anymore. You choke to death the way Stevie did, gasping into the oxygen mask, a little less air with every breath.

Still, there were moments of respite, even on that last day. "I'm not dying, am I?" he asked about noon, genuinely astonished. Finally his doctor came in and broke the news: the

damage to the lungs was irreversible, and the most we could hope for was two or three weeks. Stevie nodded and pulled off the mask to speak. "Listen, I'm a greedy bastard," he declared wryly. "I'll take what I can get." As I recall, the idea was to send him home in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank.

I cried when the doctor left, trying to tell him how terrible it was, though he knew it better than I. Yet he smiled and put out a hand to comfort me, reassuring me that he felt no panic. He was on so much medication for pain and anxiety that his own dying had become a movie—a sad one to be sure, but the Ativan/Percodan cocktail was keeping the volume down. I kept saying how much I loved him, as if to store the feeling up for the empty days ahead. Was there anything I could do? Anything left unsaid?

He shook his head, that muzzy wistful smile. Then his eyebrows lifted in surprise: "I'm not going to see Puck again." No regret, just amazement. And then it was time to grab the mask once more, the narrowing tunnel of air, the morphine watch. Twelve hours later he was gone, for death was even greedier than he.

And I was a widower twice now. Nothing for it but to stumble through the week that followed, force-fed by all my anguished friends, pulling together a funeral at the Old North Church at Forest Lawn. A funeral whose orations smeared the blame like dogshit on the rotting churches of this dead Republic, the politicians who run the ovens and dance on our graves. In the limo that took us up the hill to the gravesite, Steve's mother Dolores patted my knee and declared with a ribald trace of an Irish brogue: "Thanks for not burning the flag."

We laughed. A mere oversight, I assured her. She knew that Steve and I had spent a fruitless afternoon the previous Fourth of July—our anniversary, as it happened—going from Thrifty to Target trying to find stars-and-stripes to burn at our party. No such luck: all the flags we found were plastic or polyester, the consistency of cheap shower curtains. A perfect

symbol, we realized, of the country we had lost during the decade of the calamity.

We buried the urn of his ashes high on a hill just at the rim of the chaparral, at the foot of a California live oak. The long shadow of our grieving circle fell across the hillside grass where I had buried Roger four years before; the shadow fell on my own grave, as a matter of fact, which is just to the left of Roger's, as if I will one day fling an arm about him and cradle us to sleep. After the putrefaction of the flesh, a pair of skeletons tangled together like metaphysical lovers out of Donne. And my other bone-white arm reaching above my skull, clawing the dirt with piano-key fingers, trying to get to Steve's ashes, just out of reach.

But what has it all got to do with the dog, exactly? My friend Victor stayed with me for the first week of Widowhood II. When at last he went off to juggle the shards of his own dwindling immunity, and I woke to a smudged October morning, my first thought wasn't *Oh poor me*, about which I had already written the book, but rather: *Who's going to take care of Puck?* What nudged me perhaps was the beast himself, who sprawled across the middle of the sagging double bed, permitting me a modest curl of space on the far left side.

You must try to appreciate, I never used to be anything like a rapturist about dogs, Puck or any other. My friend César used to say that Puck was the only dog he knew who'd been raised without any sentimentality at all. I was such a manic creature myself during his formative years that it was all he could do to scramble out of my lurching way, and not take it personally when I'd shoo him away for no reason. This was not the same as having trained him. He rather tumbled up, like one of those squalling babies in Dickens, saved in the nick of time from a scald of boiling water by a harried Mrs. Micawber.

And yet when Roger died, and I thought I had died along with him, the only thing that got me out of bed, groggy at

sunset, was that Puck still had to be fed. I could see in his limpid, heartstopping eyes that he knew Roger was not coming back; or maybe he had acquired a permanent wince seeing me sob so inconsolably, hour after hour, gallantly putting his chin on the bed with a questioning look, in case I wanted company. I remember asking my brother in Pennsylvania if the dog could be shipped to him when I died, an event that seemed at the time as close as the walls of this room. But I didn't really like to think of Puck snuffling about in the fields of Bucks County, he whose breeding made him thrive in the desert hills of Southern California.

Half Rhodesian ridgeback, half black lab—or half Zimbabwean ridgeback, I ought to say, since one of my earliest encounters with political correctness occurred in Laurel Canyon Park. In the early eighties it was a place where we could run our dogs off lead, one eye peeled for the panel truck of Animal Control. A sixty-dollar ticket if they caught you—or in this case, if they caught Puck, who left the paying of municipal fines in my capable hands.

He was one of a litter of nine, his mother a purebred ridgeback, tawny and noble, her back bisected by the stiff brush of her ridge, which ran from just behind her shoulders and petered out at her rump. A dog bred to hunt lions, we'd heard, especially prized for being able to go long stretches without any water, loping across the veldt. As a sort of modulation of its terrifying bark, a bay of Baskerville proportions, the ridgeback had developed over time a growl as savage as that of the lions it stalked. Try to get near a ridgeback when he's feeding, you'll see what I mean. You feel like one of those helpless children at the zoo, about to lose an arm through a chain-link fence, waving a box of Crackerjacks in the roaring face of the king.

Ah but you see, there were compensating factors on the father's side. For Nellie, fertile mother of Puck and his eight siblings, had gotten it on with a strapping black lab high up in

Benedict Canyon. A lab who was considered most *déclassé*, perhaps a bit of a half-breed himself, so friendly and ebullient that his people were always in peril of being knocked over or slobbered on. Not at all the sort of genes that Nellie's owners were seeking to rarefy even further. We were told all this in a rush by Nellie's starlet mistress, herself the achingly pretty daughter of a wondrously tucked and lifted movie star of the fifties—a pair who looked like sisters if you squinted, beautiful and not much else, the perfect ticket in L.A. to a long and happy journey on the median strip of life.

This was at a Thanksgiving supper in Echo Park—not the year we found the murdered Latino in the driveway as we left, but I think the year after. In any case, Roger and I had been worrying over the issue of a watchdog for some time now, as a security system cheaper by far than the alarm circuits that wired the hills around us, shrieking falsely into the night. The starlet daughter assured us that ridgebacks were brilliant sentries, ferociously protective.

We went back and forth in the next few weeks, warned by both our families that it was just another thing to tie us down. Besides, we traveled too much, and it wasn't fair to an animal to be getting boarded all the time. None of them understood how stirred we'd been the previous spring, when a whimper brought us to the front door one stormy night. A bedraggled one-eyed Pekingese dripped on the tile, matted and scrawny and quaking in the rain. The most improbable creature, the very last dog that either of us would have chosen. But we couldn't send him back out in the whirlwind either, a bare *hors d'oeuvre* for the sleek coyotes that roamed our canyon in pairs.

We put signs on the trees up and down Kings Road, FOUND instead of the usual LOST (for cats, especially, disappeared with alarming frequency in the hills). Nobody called to claim the one-eyed runt, and it started to look as if we were stuck with him. Without consultation, Roger began to call

him Pepper and comb him out. I resisted mightily: *This was not by a long shot what anyone would call a watchdog.* I felt faintly ridiculous walking Pepper with his string leash, as if I'd become an aging queen before my time. Thus I withheld my sentiments rigorously, leaving most of the care and feeding to Roger—though now and again I'd permit the orphan to perch on my lap while I typed.

And then about three weeks later we were strolling up Harold Way, Roger and Pepper and I, past the gates to Liberace's spread. We turned to a cry of delight, as a young black woman came running down the driveway. "Thass my mama dog!" she squealed, scooping the one-eyed dustmop into her arms. In truth, Pepper seemed as overjoyed as she, licking her with abandon. The young woman called uphill to the kitchen yard, summoning her mother: "Grits home!" And a moment later an equally joyous woman came trundling toward us, crisp white uniform and billowing apron worthy of Tara.

No, no, of course we wouldn't dream of taking money. This joyous reunion was all the reward we needed. And so we trudged on home, trying not to feel even more ridiculous as we hastily put away the doll-size bowls by the kitchen door that had held Pepper/Grits's food and water. We laughed it off, or tried to anyway, gushing appropriately when the daughter appeared at our door that evening, bearing a peach pie almost too pretty to eat. "This is like Faulkner," Roger declared as we sliced the bounty. Faulkner, I replied, would not have used a Pekingese.

We never saw Pepper again—never even had the chance to ask how he'd lost that eye. But it goes to show how primed we were at the end of the year, when the starlet called nearly every day to say the litter was going fast. We thought we'd go over and have a look, but the only time the lot of us were free was Christmas morning. "Now we don't have to take one," I admonished Roger as we turned up the dirt road. A minute later we were in the kitchen, inundated by the scrambling of

nine puppies. "Pick a lively one," I said, though the sheer explosion of canine anarchy didn't seem to have produced a sluggard or a runt. They squirmed out of our hands and yapped and chased. We couldn't have been said to have actually made a choice. The starlet and her human pups were waiting impatiently in the living room to open their gifts. Roger and I exchanged a shrug, and I reached for the one that was trying to crawl behind the refrigerator.

"You don't owe me anything," the starlet trilled. "Just the fifty bucks for his shots." We waved and promised to send a check, clamoring into the car with our erupting bundle. A black lab followed us barking down the drive. The father, we supposed. "He's not going to be *that* big, is he?" murmured Roger in some dismay. By the time we got home we were calling him Puck, in part because some friends of ours had just named a daughter Ariel, and we'd liked the Shakespearean spin of that, the sense that we were bringing home a changeling. The first thing Puck did when he tottered into the house was make for the Christmas tree, where he squatted and peed on a package from Gump's.

I don't remember a whole lot after that, not for the first five years, so assiduously was I trying to avoid the doggy sort of bathos. I do recall how fretful Roger was for the first six months, waiting for Puck to lift his leg instead of squatting. And the moment of triumph when he finally did, on a bush of wild anis. His main lair was beneath my butcher-block desk in the study—where he lies even as I write this, his head propped uncomfortably on the wooden crossbeam that holds the legs in place. We quickly learned that he wouldn't be budged from any of his makeshift doghouses, which came to include the undercave of every table in the house. A lion's growl of warning if you got too close.

I fed him, I walked him. As I say, I was crazed in those years like a starlet myself, frantic to have a script made, fawning as indiscriminately as a puppy over every self-styled producer

who left a spoor in my path. I was so unbearably sophisticated, convinced I could reconfigure the Tracy/Hepburn magic, so glib and airy-fairy that my shit didn't stink. For a time I even began to question my life with Roger, and Puck as well, as being perhaps too bourgeois for words.

None of the scripts got made, of course. I was tossed on my ass as a loser and a failure, unable to get my calls returned, no matter how desperately I courted the assistants of assistants. I fell into a wrongheaded love affair with a hustler—literally, the fifty-bucks-a-pop variety—which reminds me, I never paid the debt to the starlet for Puck's shots, which would have been a lot better use of the money. Within a few weeks the hustler had sucked all my marrow and moved on. I careened through a year of near-breakdown, writing plays but mostly whining, and nearly driving Roger away in the process.

Yet we never stopped taking that evening walk, along the rim of the hill that led from Kings Canyon to Queens, Puck rooting ahead of us through the chaparral. I'm not quite sure how he managed to serve two masters, but was clearly far too well-bred to choose sides. We simply represented different orbits, centered of course on him. I was the one who sat at the desk while he slept at my feet all day, and Roger the one who came home at six, sending him into paroxysms of excited barking. The late-night walk was a threesome, no hierarchy of power. I'm not saying it kept Roger and me together, all on its own, but the evening stroll had about it a Zen calm—so many steps to the bower of jacarandas at Queens Road, so many steps home.

I remember the first time the dog howled, when a line of fire trucks shrilled up the canyon to try to cut off a brushfire. Puck threw back his head and gave vent to a call so ancient, so lupine really, that it seemed to have more in common with the ravaging of fire and the night stalk of predators than with the drowsy life of a house pet. The howl didn't erupt very