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LA WEEKLY

**SOME
QUEER
IDEAS ABOUT
THE POLITICS OF
REPRESENTATION**

BY ROBIN PODOLSKY

THE MANY
VERSIONS
OF

M R A U N E T T E

*In pursuit of manhood
in the age of AIDS*

{ by Doug Sadounick }

THE MANY VERSIONS OF

by Doug Sadownick

... I had enough of being solo before I was twenty-five to last me my next three lifetimes. If it's true that you have to love yourself before you can love someone else, then I trust a certain self-regard must've kept me above water during my decade of drowning alone. But I think it went the other way for me — that I've learned to love myself because somebody else finally did. Seeing myself whole in another man's eyes, deeper than any mirror, and neither of us looking away because there's so much lost time to make up for.

— from *Becoming a Man*

Paul Monette may be the country's pre-eminent writer on AIDS, but there are at least half a dozen other versions of him. He is the AIDS poster boy who screams "Murderers!" at Christian fundamentalists during a Queer Nation demonstration. The public spokesman who receives an honorary doctorate from the State University of New York at Oswego, acknowledging that part of him feels entitled to whatever society offers him. The L.A. celebrity who kisses the cheeks of the nation's queer upper-crust at Trumps. The 46-year-old who confesses in a whisper that he's learned how to put "love" and "fuck" in the same sentence. The queen who sports tails at a Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation gala and exhorts closeted industry figures, "Go out there and be queer and be fabulous!"

There are other versions, too: Monette the Dad, holding salons for young Latino, black and white writers at his West Hollywood home; Monette the Disaffected, despairing at the paralysis of the politically correct gay and lesbian left — which occasionally blasts him for his Ivy League pretensions and pop novels; Monette the Artist, producing two novels (*After Life* and *Halfway Home*) and two nonfiction books

*In pursuit
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(*Borrowed Time*, nominated for a 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award in biography, and *Becoming a Man*, just published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) in the last seven years; and Monette the Disenfranchised, dying from AIDS.

Today, however, only one Monette makes a showing: the Marlboro Man. Monette corrals an unruly stallion around a ring at a Malibu ranch house. Educated at Phillips Academy Andover, and at Yale, a former English teacher at Milton Academy and Pine Manor College, he is at ease in these surroundings.

About a dozen guests arrive for afternoon tea and maybe horseback riding. For most of them, this image of Monette doesn't jive with the Monette they know. His only concession today to his urban identity is an ACT UP T-shirt that offsets his cowboy hat and boots. Perhaps Monette gets away with this clashing sartorial statement because he belongs to a generation of gay men who felt entitled to reclaim what had been denied them for centuries. Through Monette's life — and early fiction — his example embodied a dream in which gay men would gradually find two elusive ideals: an end to hatred from heterosexuals and love among themselves.

AIDS shattered that dream. Or did it? Part of Monette's courage, and literary value, has to do with how he has responded to what many deem "the broken promise." He is a rarity among older gay men in that he maintains a genuine link with younger, more radical queers. He understands that ACT UP, Queer Nation, the underground homo glamster scene, Radical Faeries, the Smiths, queer spirituality, to name a few, are logical consequences to the social revolution he and his generation initiated — not a break.

"Hello, dears," Monette calls out to the guests. "Just in time for a ride before lunch. C'mon, c'mon, don't be shy," Monette the Hostess purrs. "These horses wouldn't hurt a homo." Most relent. Monette guides the willing into the saddle and leads them along the ring. Only Monette and Winston Wilde — Monette's new lover, whose ranch this is — approach the one wild horse, which also happens to be their favorite. In some ways, this gathering is a coming-out party for the two men. Wilde, 35, is younger than Paul: an L.A. native who struts in his boots like a guy who has made kinky sex with women and men his life's work.

Monette saddles up the horse. In a moment, he is circling the ring fast. Then he seems a little less sure. Then, a swerving. The saddle begins to slip off the



PAUL MONETTE

What Paul Monette's
Becoming a Man offers is a
profound opportunity, especially
for men, to reach a part of
themselves that is considered
inefficient (and even offensive)
by the culture: the part
that is most queer.

horse, and Monette crashes to the ground. And then a startled cry for help.

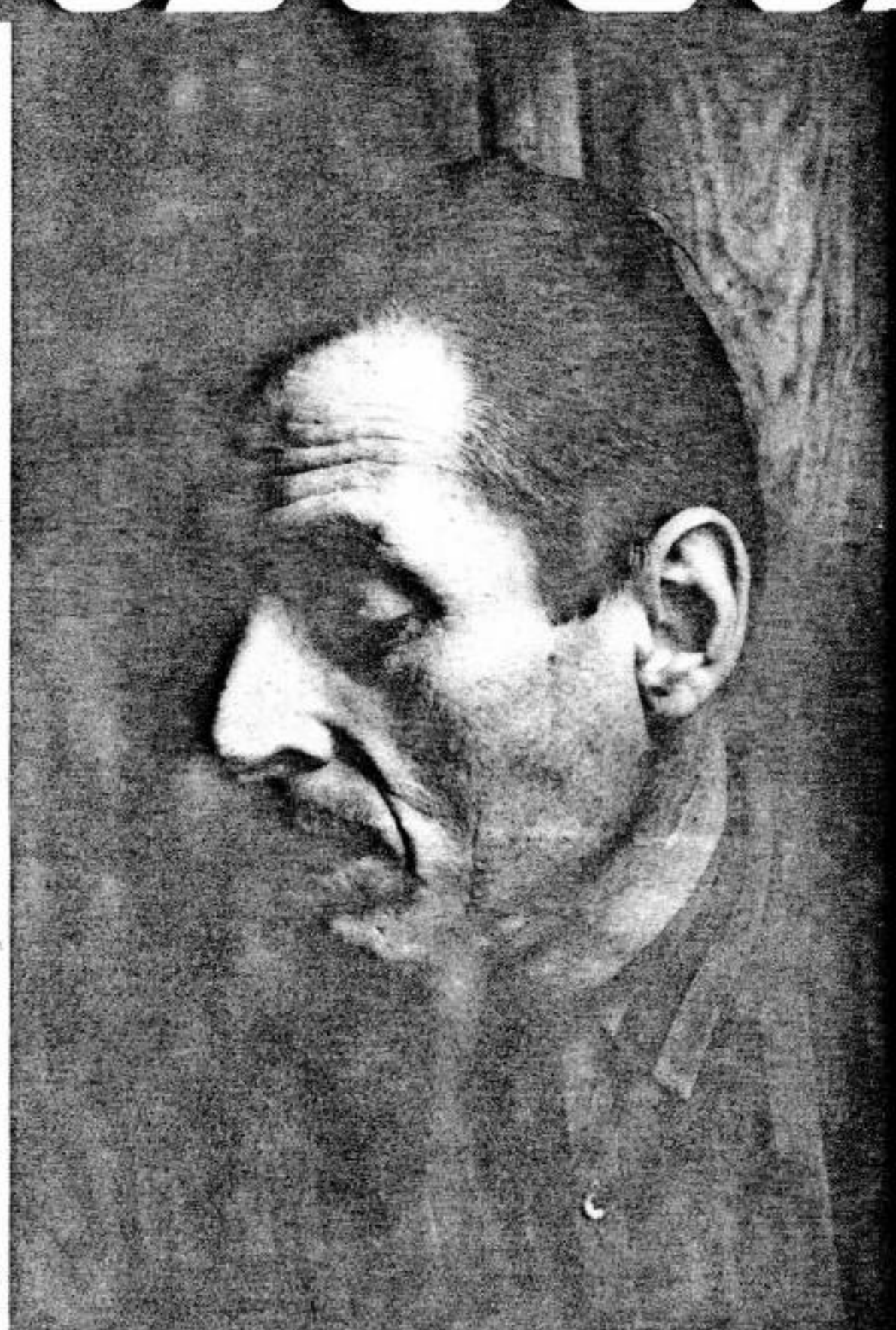
Everybody else had a childhood, for one thing — where they were coaxed and coached and learned all the shorthand. Or that's how it always seemed to me, eavesdropping my way through twenty-five years, filling in the stories of straight men's lives. First they had their shining boyhood, which made them strong and psyched them up for the leap across the chasm to adolescence, where the real rites of manhood began. I grilled them about it whenever I could, slipping the casual question in while I did their Latin homework for them, sprawled on the lawn at Andover under the reeling elms.

And every year they leaped further ahead, leaving me in the dust with all my doors closed, and always a new and better dead bolt. Until I was twenty-five, I was the only man I knew who had no story at all. I'd long since accepted it that nothing had ever happened to me and nothing ever would. That's how the closet feels, once you've made your nest in it and learned to call it home.

— from *Becoming a Man*

Monette hovers around the crowded set of *Thirtysomething*. He looks concerned. Michael Steadman (the show's JAP) mouths lines about gay identity to the cardigan-wearing character Peter (the show's FAG). Monette wrote the first draft of this script. God knows how many other drafts it saw. Peter has tested positive for HIV. Michael is sorry. Richard Kramer, head writer of the series and director of this episode, winks at Monette, as if to say: "Look, Mr. Radical. You won. You got your fucking vision on network TV. It's activism." But all Monette can do is touch the bandage near his neck, the place where a lump has just been removed for a biopsy. "They took it out," he kept saying, over and over again. Everyone thought he was referring to his tumor. He was referring to the "activism."

Unexpected words coming from a man groomed for privilege. Monette was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1945. In his autobiography, *Becoming a Man*, Monette paints the middle-class life in forgiving strokes: "The lurid banalities of the Fifties was all there in incubation, the postwar slumber of the soul, tuned to whatever felt easy." The slumber is almost all that Monette can remember — namely that he spent most of his life trying to forget he was a fag. The litany of self-hatred becomes his real bio: the fear of bees; the running like a girl; the trips to dad's factory; the Oedipal agreement with his mother not to tell his father about necking with a boy; possessive mom, absent dad; a boy who'd rather play with paper dolls than his baseball; sex with boys from the lower class; straight



photographs by ted soqui

A's; family rectitude masquerading as homophobia; the "running at half-speed so as never to catch up with the [soccer] ball ... in a constant state of humiliation. The real Greeks would have stoned me as a coward and sent me into slavery."

It's a familiar story — the gay boy who internalizes his secret as his enormous shame, and thus becomes painfully introverted: "Never lost my temper, never raised my voice. A bland insipid smile

glazed my face instead, twin to the sexless vanilla of my body."

Compensating for the shame gets mistaken for having a personality — Monette plays the Courtier, a role perfected by gay men and hated by straight men. "I learned it early," he says, "substi-

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tuting my oh-so-worldly banter for the hetero rites of passage." He offers a shoulder for the women to cry on when their men act distant; the boy who finds popularity not on the football field, but in gossip.

There's a pathetic scene in the autobiography in which the teenage Monette tells a clique of girls that the school prom queen was sleeping with the prom king — a lie. Soon after, the boy arrives at the Monette house while the family is dining to reclaim his girlfriend's honor: "I was like a captive who spills all the secrets as soon as he sees the torture room, before the first whip is cracked. I think I even begged . . . I knew I would do anything not to fight, betray whole armies if I had to. And understood obscurely that a wheedling tone of self-effacement — apologizing for my very being — was the only way to neutralize the force of a real man."

There are years of pining after men in college, years dating women, catching moments of illicit sex as a prep-school teacher, then writing rarefied poetry in the manner of Wallace Stevens. In 1974, at



the age of 28, Monette meets Roger Horwitz, a lawyer, and comes out as a gay man. They move to L.A. and live together for 10 years. The union redeems Monette, grounds him as a writer, and transforms him into a loyal lover.

During those years with Horwitz, Monette becomes a popular novelist. In 1978 he publishes *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll*, in which two male lovers team up with a legendary movie goddess, an estate caretaker and a repressed prep-school teacher to protect a mansion that could be sold to developers. The critics may have dismissed it as an overwrought potboiler, but Monette began developing a vast audience of gay fans. ("People still ask why I don't write like that," Monette says.) A year later, he produced *The Gold Diggers*, a murder mystery set in Hollywood. In 1981, novelist Felice Picano wrote a scathing attack on Monette's third novel, *The Long Shot*. He repudiated L.A.'s gay literary scene, dismissing Monette as incapable of producing anything but Tinseltown crap. The article, a precursor of a whole set of attacks that Monette would suffer years later, all but killed Monette's novelistic career. It was, Monette says, the last straw, seriously undercutting his confidence.

Then came AIDS, which killed Horwitz. Then it killed his second lover, Stephen Kolzak — a member

TED SODUJ

of ACT UP/L.A. and a casting director for *Cheers*. Not to mention dozens of friends and associates. But the very genocide that devastated Monette and the gay community made him an important writer. It's a ghoully irony that Monette takes no pleasure in. "I'd rather be writing glib fiction," he told me once, "than be witnessing this holocaust."

Vinnie made a hawking sound and spit a glob of phlegm on the brick beside Austin's face. "Come on, homo — lick that off." Austin whimpered and tried to pull back. Vinnie brought up his knee into Austin's kidney, making him cry out. Where were the teachers? All old maids, two floors away in the teacher's room, eating their own bird lunches. "Lick it, homo," Vinnie hissed . . .

Vinnie and his boys sprang away, shrieking with laughter. Instantly, I busied myself with my lunch box, terrified they would notice me. As they swaggered away, neither I nor anyone else made a move toward Austin — slumped in the corner as if it would have been easier to die than survive this thing. We all went hurrying away to eat our waxed-paper lunches. I never, never talked to Austin again. But, as I hastened to assure myself, we hadn't been friends anyway.

— from *Becoming a Man*

"Someone read those lines to me over the phone," snickers Felice Picano 11 years after he launched his first attack on Monette. "We shared a big laugh. It's vaguely English. When Monette was nominated for a Publishing Triangle Lifetime Achievement Award, which Adrienne Rich, James Purdy and Audre Lorde have won, we simply howled. Please! I have never gotten the hype over him."

Neither have many New York and L.A. writers. "There is something all too slick about Paul Monette's writing," says novelist David Feinberg. "The sheen is too polished, the artificial veneer too smooth. I admit I have a bias against an author who lists novelizations of *Nosferatu* and *Predator* beneath novels, poems and nonfiction." Last year, Edmund White, perhaps the country's most prominent gay literary figure, proclaimed in *The New York Times Magazine* that "at the very moment so many writers are threatened with extinction, gay literature is flourishing as never before." He went on to list numerous writers. Conspicuous in his absence was Monette.

Much of this criticism, says David Roman, a gay-studies professor at the University of Washington, can be attributed to the narrow perspective of the East Coast. But even in Los Angeles he has his strong critics. "I enjoy Monette's writing," says Masha Gessen, an associate editor at the *Advocate*. "But I do get infuriated at the excruciatingly slow process by which he discovers the limitations of his own privilege." Gessen deplores not so much the absence of lesbians and people of color in Monette's work, but the gay backscratching that goes on to make Monette such a national figure.

Not true, says writer and ACT UP/N.Y. founding member Larry Kramer: "No other gay novelist has taken on AIDS as passionately and militantly as has Monette. No other is as relevant. Every other writer has relinquished his responsibility to the dead and dying. Where the hell have Andrew Holleran, Edmund White, David Leavitt been on this issue?" Five years after its publication, Kramer asserts that *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* is still the most powerful account of love and loss to have emerged from the epidemic.

Borrowed Time tells in wrenching detail how Monette lost his lover Horwitz to AIDS in 1985. The story takes place before the era of prophylaxis, ACT UP-style activism, gay biologists and underground drug runners. But it's not AIDS, or gay social analysis, or even the drama of Horwitz's death that makes *Borrowed Time* a classic. It's the blending of all these forms. Monette can write like a journalist: "Everyone gay starts out in the closet, of course. The [Gay and Lesbian Community Services] Center, by proclaiming 'Gay' on the building on Highland, had

made a stand about coming out . . ." He can be a diarist: "While Roger drove, I read aloud an article from the *Advocate*: 'Is Sex Making Us Sick?'" He can be poetic about AIDS: "But a gay man seeks his history in mythic fragments, random as blocks of stone in the ruins covered in Greek characters, gradually being erased in the summer rain." And he can still write like a born melodramatist: "Roger was very good about me crying now, where he used to get impatient and tell me to pull it together. He would let me weep it out, soothing me but offering no

contradiction of the tragic. 'My poor little friend,' he'd say tenderly. 'So many things to worry about.'"

The novels that follow *Borrowed Time* collapse under the weight of politics and analysis. *After Life* starts out with a promising conceit: three AIDS widowers meet in the hospital as their lovers die. Like all Monette books, it is a love story between gay men who fear love. But unlike the memoirs, one feels Monette battling with his own contradictions — a chirpy story line vs. an acerbic voice; railing against privilege while at the same time

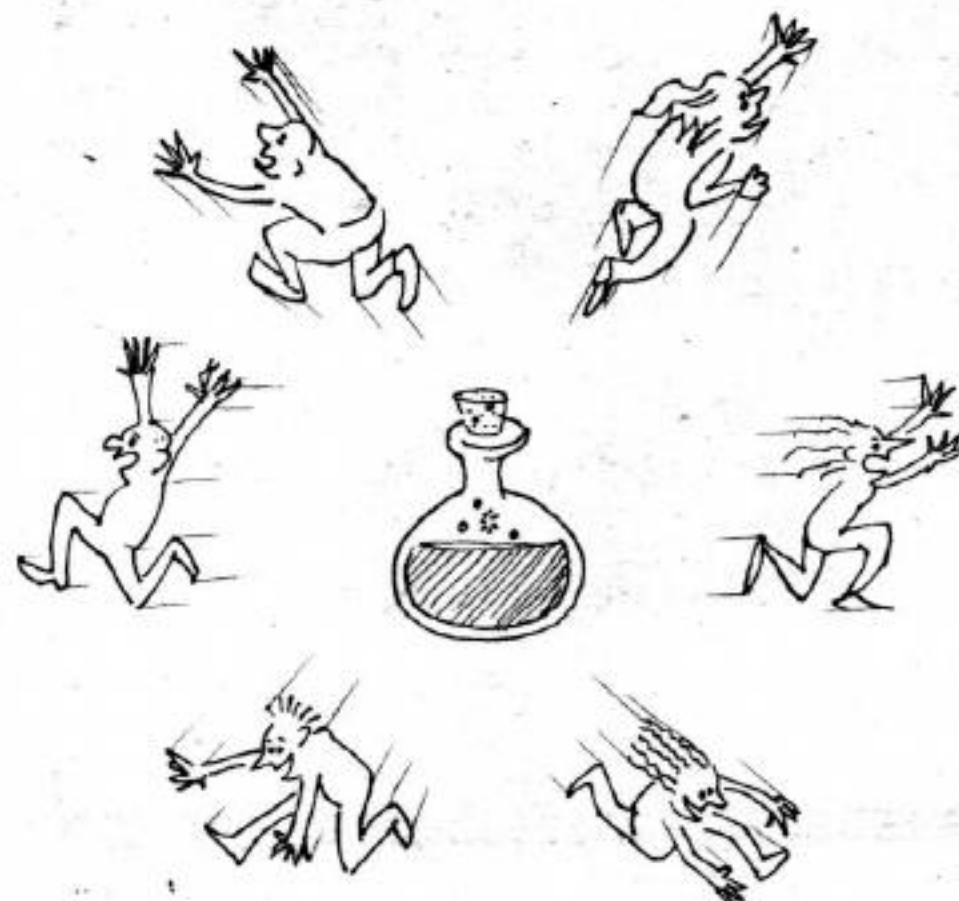


Fig. 1. THE STINKBOMB.



Fig. 2. THE CHANGE OF SEASON SALE (June 12-July 5).

Fig. 1, when opened, emits a vile odor quickly driving people from the immediate vicinity. Fig. 2 works on same principle, only in reverse. The Nike Store. Shoes, apparel and accessories. 8465 Holloway Drive, West Hollywood, CA 90069, (213) 654-8898.

identifying with it.

The problems are even more glaring in *Halfway Home*, one of the most vicious diatribes written against heterosexual family life, and therefore all the more disappointing when it falters. Tommy, the protagonist who has AIDS, is a lapsed Catholic performance artist famous for playing a drag character called Miss Jesus. Tommy receives a surprise visit from his older brother, Brian, whom Tommy hasn't seen for 10 years. Brian is running from the law, and must bring his family to Tommy's house for protection.

It's not a bad idea, if it weren't one of many.

Monette captures the enormous rage so many gay men feel not being recognized as the culture's artists, leaders and elders, and in Tommy's particular case, as a surrogate parent. There's added anger at the prospect of dying prematurely: "In the glint of the moon, Brian's skin fairly radiates with health. The bristling hair on his belly is thick with hormones. He'll be fifty, sixty, seventy and still be winning trophies. And I'll be dead, dead, dead." But the wrath peters

out because the Hollywood B-movie plot never does. Monette has spent much of his time earning a living as a hired Hollywood hand — novelizations, screenplays — and too much of the time, in *Halfway Home*, it shows.

However, Monette's *Becoming a Man* is one of the most complex, moral, personal and political books to have been written about gay life. Never dogmatic, or too pop psychological, Monette's voice remains subjective yet authoritative as he re-examines his life. Monette layers memory with commentary, dissent and

manifesto: "In any case, I only speak of myself when it comes to love, careful not to insist that everyone belongs in pairs, or indeed that a couple constitutes the highest reach of earthly passion."

But the greatest contribution Monette makes isn't about the way he overlays memory with gay sociology, but in articulating the impetus behind the book: "This is what I am sifting for, to know what a man is finally, no matter the tribe or gender." With *Becoming a Man*, Monette cracks the walls that separate gay and straight men by suggesting that each is sifting for the same thing: What does it mean to be a man in the era of the Absent Father? Behold the queer Robert Bly. It would be a mistake, however, to say that Monette is reasserting a version of machismo. He has no admiration for sexist bullies in gay community organizations and Hollywood board rooms (not to mention the gym) who oppress women and "the fems."

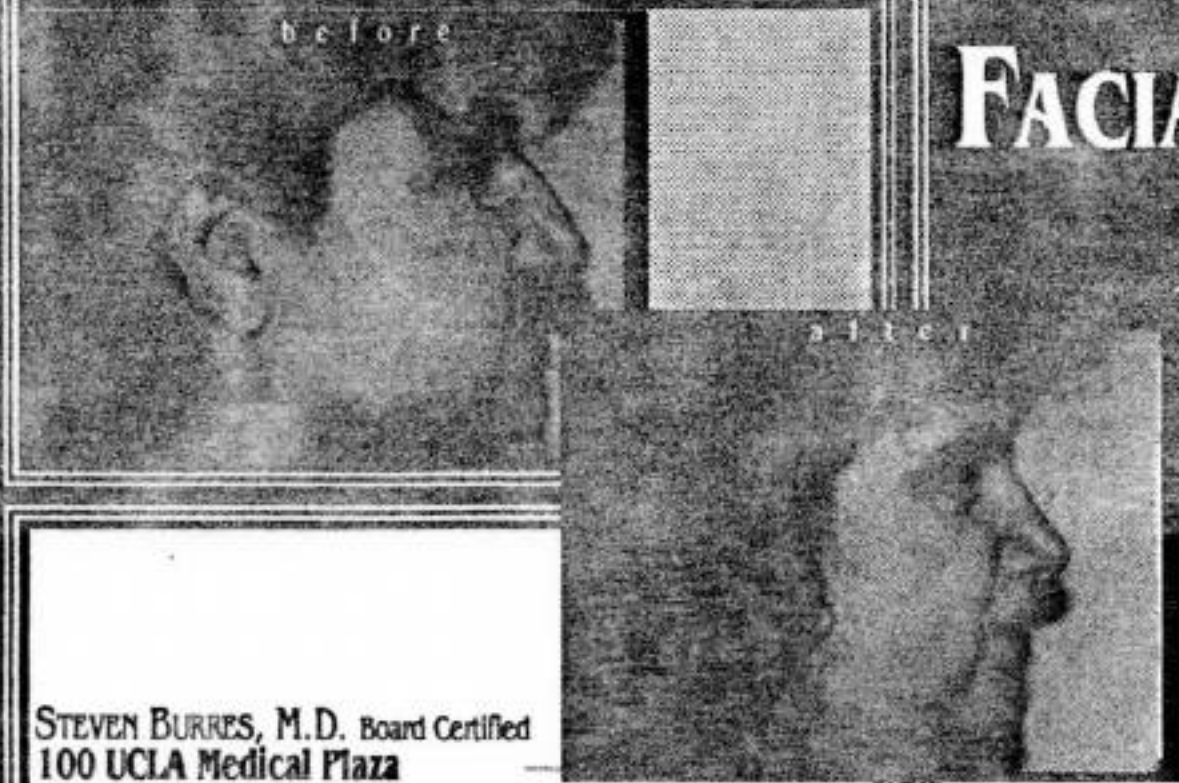
"For too much of my lifetime," he says, "being a man meant not being a woman. And that is just so wrong-headed to begin with. I guess it's a quality of humanness. I know so many men define themselves in terms of their work, and they find out on their deathbed that the office wasn't everything. A lot of people define themselves in terms of their children. But there is a kind of 'selfhood' that too few think on, that maybe being a gay man can start to model. And to be a real man, I think, is to make peace with 'Self.' There is a great deal of femininity there. There is such a real fear of Self in our culture."

A gay man can hardly read Monette's story about his suffering around coming out and not revisit, and thus reinterpret, his own story. But *Becoming a Man* goes further. The closet becomes a metaphor for all men's secret selves, gay or straight, the part they keep suppressed, even to themselves. What Monette's book offers is a profound opportunity, especially for men, to reach a part of themselves that is considered inefficient (and even offensive) by the culture: the part that is most queer. "The rich thing about the word 'queer,'" says David Groff, senior editor at Crown Publishers, which published Monette's AIDS novels, "is that in its older meaning it means unique. Everyone is a little queer, some not enough."

Forty-five and dying by the inches, I finally see how our lives align at the core, if not in the sorry details. I still shiver with a kind of astonished delight when a gay brother or sister tells that narrow escape from the coffin world of the closet. Yes, yes, yes, goes a voice in my head, it was just like that for me. When we laugh together and then dance in the giddy circle of freedom, we are children for real at last, because we have finally grown up. And every time we dance, our enemies writhe like the Witch in Oz, melting, melting — the Nazi Popes and all their brocaded minion, the rat-brain politicians, the wacky fundamentalists and their Book of Lies.

— from *Becoming a Man*

A joint is passed around the pool. Monette laughs. Winston Wilde, Monette's boyfriend, gives Monette a hug. A gaggle of L.A. artist-activists cluster shyly by the pool. Almost all are single — except for Monette and Wilde, who can't seem to stop touching. It's Paul's house — he has lived in it with lovers Horwitz and Kolzak — but Wilde seems firmly ensconced. "Why are they



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all so fucking lonely?" Monette whispers to me as I follow him into the kitchen for some beer, referring to his young guests. "Don't they realize that we win when they love?"

Monette met Wilde a year ago after Kolzak died from AIDS. Wilde says that Monette's literary friends kept their distance from Wilde; he hadn't, it seemed, mourned long enough. "It took me until I was 28 to fall in love with a man," Monette says. "Now I'd rather be remembered for loving well than writing well." A few men in the area stop their conversation. "I don't mean to be doctrinaire," Monette says. "It's just that I never felt good about who I was as a man until I was in love with another man."

Yet the morbidity that affects the men around the pool can be found throughout the gay community. AIDS reminds gay men that happiness is permanently irrevocable. So why bother getting involved? Because, Monette says, there is no other choice. And maybe, just maybe, love is the only reliable political weapon gays can command during the holocaust. As Monette writes in *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, his book of AIDS poems published as a companion to *Borrowed Time*:

I love you little friend here I am my
sweetest pea
over and over spending all our
endearments like stray coins at a
border
but we wouldn't cry then no
choked it because
they all said hearing was the last to
go...

WAIT WAIT I AM
THE SENTRY HERE nothing
passes as long as
I'm where I am we go on death is
a lonely hole two can leap it or else.

Love and loss, for Monette, offer the ultimate initiation toward selfhood as well as a way to understand one's oppression without being broken by it: "May [these poems] fuel the fire of those front lines who mean to prevail... We will not be bowed down or erased by this. I learned too well what it means to be a people, learned in the joy of my best friend what all the meaningless pain and horror can not take away—that all there is love. Pity us not."

The AIDS crisis has taught Monette that art isn't enough. It's almost as if Monette feels a drive to save souls before he dies. "It must come from something Protestant in me," he says, "a need to be a role model, but I want the 17-year-old that I was to be able to read a love story and believe love is possible for him, because I didn't have it. Had I been given *Rushes* by John Rechy or *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* by Edmund White or *Closer* by Dennis Cooper, it would have meant even more years in the closet before I came out. I know there will be people who will read this [quote] and say, 'That Monette, he has so much agenda.'"

And it's true. Monette does have an agenda. He'll give the keynote plenary speech at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force conference in Los Angeles this fall. He gave the opening speech at a benefit for the AIDS Mastery Foundation this spring. He gave the opening speech at the GLAAD benefit in May and won a Visibility Award. He will speak at the American Library Association conference this month. He gives talks at colleges, readings, conferences and rallies.

This "queer visibility" seems at least as important to him as novel writing. "The idea," he says, "is to create a movement around rage, one that includes women, African-Americans, queers, etc. But first you must tell the stories, stories of rage."

"The damage is so systemic from the particular business of spending the first 15 or 18 or 21 years of life lying every second of the day, that you have to use a lot of different ways to heal. You have to confront your own rage, self-hatred and self-defeat—things that haven't really been done in the gay movement. It's the

distinction between coming out in the world and 'coming out inside' that [psychologist] Don Kilhefner makes, and it's crucial if we are to survive as a tribe and get a handle on these emotions..."

In working his political agenda and writing his feelings into it—however awkward that avalanche might be—Monette models a new way to be a queer writer, one that puts activism on the same footing as art. "I remain convinced," Monette says, "that if you want to be a writer and change the world, go change a dying man's diaper first, or go hold a

teenage kid's hand as he comes out, and then we'll talk. The era of writing in which gays play by the formalist rules of American fiction at the expense of their political values is over."

Paul is lying in bed. By his side: a table filled with a dozen medications. His lips look brutally sunburnt. His voice has a shakiness that seems new. "How does it feel to be in another sick room?" he asks.

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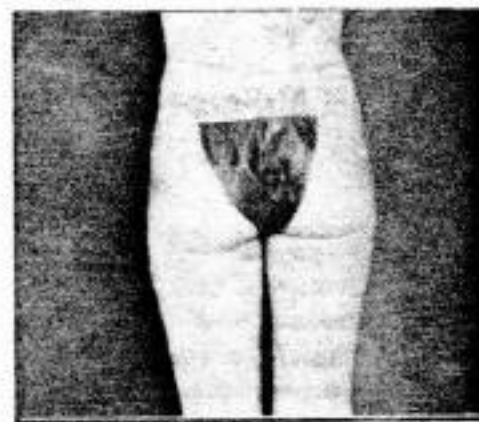
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Before



After

Other Procedures Include:
• Natural/Chemical Face Peels
• Nose Sculpting
• Eye and Face Lifts
• Facial Line Removal
• Breast Augmentation with Saline Implants

• Cheek/Chin Implants
• Permanent Lip Enlargement
• Breast Reduction/Lift
• Mole Removal/Scar Revision
• Calf Implants
• Pectoral Implants

From the initial consultation to surgery and all follow-up visits, you are treated as an individual. My goal is to work with you to achieve a great natural look that enhances your best features.

Financing is available for surgical procedures. Insurance accepted where applicable. Bank cards accepted.

**BEVERLY HILLS INSTITUTE FOR
FACIAL & BODY SCULPTING
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has come: a rare form of fungus in the blood. But that wasn't what almost killed him; rather, it was the reaction to the drug used to treat the fungus. "Having been the king of seropositive, or the queen as the case may be, having AIDS is more challenging than I had ever given it credit for."

Disaster arrived when Monette developed an extreme allergy, Stevens-Johnson's syndrome: "I had a rash from head to foot and all the skin came off my mouth, lips and eyes." He did pull through. Now he must receive infusions of Amphotericin for four hours a day. "I don't feel defeated in my personal fight yet," he adds. "I feel as if I have some resiliency and passion and some real longing to live. Among other things, my life works. I live with someone I love, and have work to do every day, and have marvelous friends, and really respect my community and love being part of it. I think I have at least a couple of years."

It is a hard way to end a series of interviews, but Monette seems intense and optimistic: "I can't promise the dignity and courage in death I have witnessed, but I will try."



Monette talks about how poignant life feels all of a sudden. The sound of Piaf's voice, watching the video of *The Elephant Man*. Does he consider this AIDS a final test of his manhood, a burning away of all privilege to feel human?

"I don't ascribe to any of that spiritual shit around AIDS being a lesson," he says. "It is a terrible tragedy. At the same time, death does underline the opportunity of life, which is to comprehend Self, and to live Self is to struggle to be unique. One of my characters in the PBS special, a 14-year-old, talks about his friend: 'My parents don't like Russell because he is gay and that is stupid because I like Russell a lot because he is weird and I like weird people.' And I like weird people, too."

Wilde arrives home. It's time for lunch — soft food because of Monette's lip condition. Monette gives Winston a kiss. He asks for another jar of Vaseline, his lips still chapped from the drug reaction. "Winnie, I think there's a jar in the car," he yells out. "If Sherlock Holmes found five empty jars of Vaseline in my car, what would he think?" There is laughter. Wilde touches Monette's scarred lips. They laugh again, Monette the man talking to his lover just like a little boy. Then Monette gets sleepy and it's time to go. **LA**

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