Monette & Merrill

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“Two Deaths, Two Lives”

By J.D. McClatchy
University of Wisconsin Press

We have seen the best minds of our generation destroyed by AIDS, and *Loss Within Loss* (University of Wisconsin Press), a collection of essays about 25 of those inspired but interrupted lives written by comrades and lovers, is our unique “Howl.” Here is an excerpt from “Two Deaths, Two Lives,” by the poet J.D. McClatchy.

EXCERPT

For years before he died, everyone knew that [writer] Paul Monette was sick. It was his subject, his means to life. [Poet] James Merrill had told no one -- or no one but his lover and his lawyer, each sworn to secrecy. And until a slight physical erosion set in, years after his diagnosis, he kept the secret. In 1993, we traveled to the Glimmerglass Opera Festival in Cooperstown. One afternoon, Jimmy asked if I’d stop by his room. There was a bit of banter, then his face grew uncomfortably grim. “I want to lay something serious on you,” he said....

Having been entrusted with a dire secret, the first thing I did was tell someone else. The bearer of A Secret, if he is to be of practical use, has himself to be secure, and I didn’t want to live on intimate terms with someone and have that ghastly fact unspoken between us. But why, five years now after his death, tell the secret in public? Jimmy was by nature too polite ever to have extracted any sort of promise from me. But implicit in his revelation, his muffled plea, was my silence. While he was alive, countless times I lied. I was untroubled by the deception, even in the presence of those who weren’t taken in....

Jimmy didn’t want to become a spokesman, a hero, a case study. He didn’t want to run away with the AIDS circus, in the company of a menagerie of less than minor talents hoisting a banner. In our culture, with its appetite for intrusion and exposé, it may now be necessary to keep things secret merely in order to keep them private....

For both James Merrill and Paul Monette, death -- or rather their slow dyings -- distilled their lives, wrung out an essence. Paul’s activism, even his extremism, was a part of the extravagance that had marked his style as a writer and as a friend. His outsize gestures pushed his death away by forcing others to confront it. Would it be fair then to characterize Jimmy’s behavior as “pacifist”? I think not. His fatalism was as much an attitude, a protective coloration, as Paul’s defiance. He

wanted to view his condition as just another (albeit mortal) stage on which life acted out its terms. He treated his disease as he treated every other occurrence: as a phenomenon to be observed, absorbed, pondered, transformed. Though he died on the verge of pharmacological advances that have since prolonged the lives of patients, he lived as they do, with a wary confidence and due resignation, and the determination to work as if there were no tomorrow, to return to us by way of his art all that life had given him.

From "Two Deaths, Two Lives" by J.D. McClatchy in Loss Within Loss: Artists in the Age of AIDS *© 2001 J.D. McClatchy. Reprinted by permission of author.*

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