# On Writing It

July 1, 2000 By Kenny Fries

One of my proudest achievements is having received the Gregory Kolovakos Award for AIDS Writing for The Healing Notebooks, my early poems about how HIV invades a relationship. So why, as I apply for yet another teaching position, do I hesitate, wondering what a faculty search committee will make of those four letters—A-I-D-S—on my résumé?

According to the Oxford American Dictionary, stigma is defined as “a mark of shame, a stain on a person’s good reputation.” Having a congenital disability (I was born without bones in my lower legs), I am used to unwanted, unwarranted and inappropriate attention. I’ve learned to act and write in ways that refute the image of the “asexual disabled man.”

So what troubles me about those four letters on the résumé in the envelope waiting for the mail carrier? What assumption do I assume will be made? That I have AIDS.

I see that the mail carrier has taken the envelope, leaving today’s mail in its place. I drop the mail on my desk and go for my late-afternoon nap.

I dream of the English department chair who will open the envelope. “What does A-I-D-S mean to you?” he asks, saying each letter separately.

“I’m wondering what it means to you?” I am unable to say.

“I’ve spent my life trying to detach people from the idea that disability is a reminder of their impending death,” I finally say, in the academic manner I hope will impress. And then, suddenly, I’m alone.

“Does AIDS mean death to you?” my ex-lover, Jason, for whom I wrote The Healing Notebooks, asks me. “You thought I’d be dead by now, didn’t you?”

“That was 12 years ago,” I say.

The ring of my phone wakes me. A hang-up. Not even an hour has passed since I fell asleep. The winter sun has already begun its descent.

Getting up, I am disoriented. A month ago, I ran into Jason’s friend Margot in New York City. Margot had written me saying I should be ashamed of writing about Jason’s HIV status in The

Healing Notebooks. On the street at rush hour, she asked me if I had heard from Jason. “Not since he came to my reading,” I said.

“That must have been three years ago.”

I riffle through the mail. Another rejection. Were those four letters on my résumé the reason I did not match their needs? “One of these days,” I think, “I’m going to take those four letters, along with the award, off my résumé—just to see what happens.”

“What does A-I-D-S mean to you?” The interviewer’s question drowns out the TV news as I start dinner. Those four letters mean change and loss and taking risks and needing to be loved and chance and getting sick and writing honestly and having sex and needing help and getting better and needing to love. “They mean L-I-F-E,” I wish I had told him.

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