Facing It

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Afterword

Having begun this essay in the summer of 1995, I am writing its afterword in the summer of 1997. During those two years the first vague rumors of the efficacy of protease inhibitors and the relative success of combination therapy began to spread and soon became real news. Problematic as this treatment is in many ways—medically, epidemiologically, and socially—it has bought valuable time for the unfortunately small number of people, relative to the magnitude of the world epidemic, who are in a position to benefit from it. In the group of Western, middle-class, usually white, gay men that has been largely responsible for the literature of AIDS witnessing, mortality rates have declined, and there is a certain sense of respite. The energy that for fifteen years went into anger and activism can be partially redirected into what for so long had to be deferred: mourning and the recognition of sadness. These emphases in my essay look like a sign, then, of the historical position from which it was written.

Some of the limits of its perspective come into focus, though, in the light of a diary that appeared in the fall of 1996, *Gary in Your Pocket*, a collection of writing by Gary Fisher—it includes poems and short stories as well as extracts from his voluminous diaries and accompanying notes—which was edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and thoughtfully presented, in a preface and afterword, by Don Belton and Sedgwick, respectively. Unlike the case of diary writers to whom an AIDS diagnosis may come as a unique catastrophe, Fisher’s writing about AIDS is in absolute continuity with the difficulty in being—which is not the same as mere difficulty of being (in French I would say “difficulté à être,” not “difficulté d’être”)—that the whole diary records. Fisher was a black man brought up in a suburb surrounded by mainly white neighbors, whose sexual range included episodes entailing the enjoyment of humiliation and pain at the hands of, for prefer-
ence, white partners, as well as practices that he knew were dangerous to his own and others’ health. There is both a fierce affirmation of self in Fisher’s writing and a certain surprise, even a bafflement or bewilderment, about his existence. AIDS aggravates but does not initiate what Sedgwick calls his “mutilated career” (278) and sees as constituting “a kind of allegory for the liminal” (276).

Resituating AIDS as part of a complex questioning of racial and sexual orthodoxies, Fisher’s work also questions the assumptions I have shared with most of the authors in my corpus, then, in that he seems to have written, urgently, accurately, and voluminously but without much thought of publication or authorship. Both Belton and Sedgwick comment on his “diffidence” (285) and “ambivalence” (ix) in this respect. Concomitantly the scenario of posthumous textual survival consequent on the death of the author, which I have made my leitmotif, is absent from the texts of his that were, nevertheless published {thanks to the fortunate circumstance of his friendship with Eve Sedgwick}. Gary Fisher had a need to write that was greater than his belief in being read. Political skepticism about the publishing industry played its role in this reticence. Don Belton quotes him as saying: “Where can a black, queer sociopath get a fair hearing anyway?” (ix). But, more profoundly, writing seems to have been important to him less as a way to ensure a “cultural future” than as present reassurance, as a way of giving a kind of substance and plausibility to life circumstances that must have seemed not just difficult but problematic and improbable. Thus, a character in one of his stories starts to keep a diary, “straining against her disbelief to be accurate,” because she has been told that “once it’s done . . . there’s no way anyone, even you, can deny it happened” (110).

That same struggle, “against disbelief” and for accuracy, perhaps underlines the urgency with which Rafael Campo, in his remarkable memoir, “Fifteen Minutes after Gary Died” (in The Poetry of Healing [122–56]), describes Fisher filling up notebooks as he lay desperately ill in his hospital room. “The urgency of it all was in the tremulous handwriting, in the earthquake language, in the aftershock bloodstains” (138). Some of these hospital pages we can now read in print; even without the bloodstains they are like a free flow of direct, almost unmediated, subjective record, what he himself calls “a delirium of flashbacks and prayer and pressure drops and diarrhea . . . and dry heaves and waking nightmares and creeping skin and suicidal ten-
dencies and unexpected and Poe-ish exponentials of hate and fear and fright, fantasy and fascination” (258). He was writing, in short, and, as he had said as early as 1989, “dying and writing this” (228), to save his life—but to do so in a number of possible senses. To save it, for example, through recording it, as one might save stamps or collect oddities, but to save it also, in the context of difficulty in being, by convincing himself through writing, and despite “suicidal tendencies” and other evidence of death wish, both of the reality of what was happening to him and of the strength of his desire to live. But finally, too, there is a sense he hints at parenthetically and tantalizingly, when he returns more skeptically, eighteen months later, to the thought that writing is self-rescue: “I wish writing could save my life (the way I may believe reading can)” (241).

This final, unexpected, concession that reading (in the sense of being read?) can be a form of life saving authorizes us then to think that, like writers more assured of publication and audience, Fisher must have found comfort in the thought that there would one day be a portable “Gary” whom readers could carry in their pocket, that a dying author can survive, in a certain sense, through the vehicle of readable text. And because it does, in the event, make Fisher’s writing available for reading, *Gary in Your Pocket* finally does, therefore, ask the questions that are by now familiar to readers of this essay: what does it mean to read, and in reading to mourn the death of, an author whose dying of AIDS is recorded in a testimonial diary? To these questions Sedgwick, in her helpful and subtle afterword, gives answers consonant with what has been said here. “Gary” has been enclosed in a boxlike (coffinlike) container, but simultaneously—and here she relies on a poem by Whitman (“Whoever You Are Now Holding Me in Hand”)—he has become, as no longer a writing subject but a subject of readability, “elusive.” And furthermore, she points out, still making use of Whitman, this elusiveness is the sign of his continued resistance, a resistance that includes resistance to our reading and to our mourning because it is a turning away from those (still living) survivors in whom his own (posthumous) survival is invested.

If this is right, then Eric Michaels’s rhetorical impudences may say something similar to what Gary Fisher’s single-minded concentration on writing, as opposed to reading, might suggest or even the recurrent turning away from his reading audience that is implied by
Pascal de Duve’s apostrophes to AIDS as “sida mon amour” in Cargo Vie. In certain forms of AIDS witnessing, the diary among them, the becoming-readable of the dying author can itself be given to us to read, and thus become interpretable, as a withholding of self—a withholding to which the act of publication does not give the lie so much as it confirms resistance to reading, the “withholding mode,” as a desired and valid form of authorial survival. Thus Whitman:

Even while you should think you have unquestionably caught me, behold!
Already you see I have escaped from you.

Gary Fisher’s interest in writing rather than reading is one form of that authorial withholding, an ultimate way of producing readerly anxiety.

That said, however, when one reads Gary in Your Pocket in the context of combination therapy—thanks to which a fortunate few are beginning to be able to survive, in a less theoretical sense, a syndrome that continues, however, to kill millions and seems likely to do so into the foreseeable future—one is acutely conscious of the fact that Fisher’s extraordinary writing might easily have remained obscure, gone unread because unpublished, and thus been denied access to the very elusiveness of readability I have just celebrated. It might have been, at best, a Nachlass or residue, comparable to the pathetic personal objects the dead leave behind them, sometimes to become props in memorializing practices (like Tom’s eyeglasses in Silverlake Life or Andrew’s sweater in RSVP), but often just to be given away or to become meaningless junk. In that sense, and in a way quite different from the Nachlass that is Barbedette’s Mémoires d’un jeune homme devenu vieux (for Barbedette was a published author and only his reflections about AIDS were confined to unpublished jottings), Gary in Your Pocket speaks in a peculiar way for the countless numbers of those who in the epidemic have suffered but had no socially authorized voice, those without access to the privilege of writing, let alone the mechanics of publication—and for those, therefore, whom combination therapy and similarly expensive treatments will never reach and whom it is therefore imperative for the fortunate to remember, now, more than ever before. Even in a moment of respite, when it
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becomes possible for some of us to acknowledge our sadness and indulge in our need to mourn, *Gary in Your Pocket* serves as a reminder both poignant and pointed that the time for activism and anger is still not over.