

Hunger of Memory

New York has become a city of ghosts haunting us all

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published: February 14, 2006

This story was originally published December 5, 1995.

I saw Hugh Steers yesterday on lower Broadway, caught sight of him from behind, with the collar of his black leather jacket turned up against the first real cold of the season, a bit of his unruly cowlick springing up at the back of his skull. I hurried to catch him, feeling elated. Then the light changed and he stepped into the gutter and stopped short to avoid a taxi and looked north and I saw his profile and it wasn't Hugh at all. How could it have been?

Like a lot of New Yorkers, Hugh Steers and I were what you might call good acquaintances. Our relationship was intermittent and had elements of mutual attraction and fascination and half-trust and, of course, utility. We'd met in an odd way, over dinner with his mother, a character so outsize that it struck me then, as it does now, as a perversity of fate that she's invariably described in terms of some relatives of hers (Gore Vidal, the late Jacqueline Onassis) whose fame is grotesque.

I'd been told by the woman who invited me to dine that Nina Straight was bringing her son, a painter. I'd also been informed, gratuitously, that Nina Straight's son the painter had AIDS. It's common enough in this town to be presented with information that says nothing, illuminates nothing, demonstrates nothing beyond a generalized anxiety, and I felt, at the time, vaguely angry with my hostess for miniaturizing Hugh, thinking of the many other things she might have told me about him besides his clinical status.

She might, I now know, have remarked on his laugh. Hugh Steers's memorial service was held on a hot day in June, at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery. There were lilies on a table, one of his difficult allegorical paintings on a large easel, 100 or so friends in pews. A nutty assortment (Chaka Khan and Rickie Lee Jones) of recorded songs, chosen in advance for this occasion by Hugh, played on a poor sound system. Colleagues, a collector, a childhood teacher, and Hugh's brother spoke of him frankly and awkwardly and with emotion, using military metaphor to illustrate his valor, and high Romantic metaphor to show his commitment to art, and leavening the proceedings with remembrances of Hugh's peculiar cackle.

It may show how little I really knew of him, but this aspect of Hugh doesn't figure in my memory. His laugh was apparently a kind of high-pitched shriek, the more unexpected because the young man who emitted it had a face that was a bit too poetically handsome, narrow and patrician, with a distinct marmoreal cast. As one speaker after another evoked Hugh's laughter, I began to think of it as a way he had devised to express something essential about himself: it seemed less a mirthful than an unruly laugh, a sexual sound, and I had the feeling that his eulogists were inadvertently echoing not just the

hysteria it may have expressed but also reviving its rage—which was the rage of Hugh's refusal to be silent.

In no society that I'm aware of is it easy to be queer. To concoct an identity as a gay man amid the ruling class strictures of Hotchkiss and Yale, and in a very public family, is a feat. The photo chosen for the invitation to his memorial service seemed to honor this about him: young Hugh is vaulting off a diving board at a private beach in Newport, a place that's rarely cited without the word exclusive attached. Full of fearless confidence, he's captured midair.

As others memorialized him, I thought about Hugh's specific gifts as a painter and about his stoicism, and then my attention wandered to the steamy weather that made sweat snake down my shirtfront, and then to Renata Adler, with her greyhound profile, two pews ahead, and then to the faces of some men of my generation who'd arrived in couples, beauties of a type that has now developed the added luster of survival. I thought about how eager I was to be free and out in the June air, where I could concentrate not on the late Hugh Steers but on my 32-year-old friend, who I persisted in thinking was alive.

I've realized lately that I underestimate death's noise: what I mean by this is that, over time, New York has come to feel like a city of ghosts. Hugh Steers and the many others who died of AIDS have by now established their beachheads. They're everywhere, it seems, nagging us with reminders of work unfinished, haunting us with truncated careers, dooming some of us to search for their vanished affections, and condemning the rest of us to a state of psychic dishevelment that no one really cares to talk about.

We have set aside a Day Without Art, commemorating loss by giving absence a token place. But the absences are larger than any one day can encompass, and, besides, it seems to me that gay people are already too well schooled in the markers of erasure. It's presence that would be powerful, I think, as expressed in simple acts of remembrance. A friend who is "mother" to a venerable voguing ball house recently remarked on the phone that no fewer than 392 of his friends had died of AIDS: "I'm not joking. I have a list." Last week marked the first anniversary of one "son"'s death, but "every day, every month, I'm reliving somebody else."

For a long time I was in the habit of allowing myself to think that I hadn't really known many people who'd died of AIDS. I had created for myself an emotional economy whose terms permitted me to think of some people as real and others as less so. Intimates or coworkers were authentic. Casual acquaintances, people met through the years, were not. In my eagerness to put distance between death and myself, I recast my experience as a series of nonevents, eradicating chunks of my life because I felt, for one thing, that often the people who could ratify my recollections were gone. I focused my attention instead on the contempt that I felt for the emblematic simplifications of AIDS. I railed against ribbons and quilts. At a certain point, however, it became useless to pretend that, although I hadn't seen Antonio Lopez for a decade, I had never known him. It required too much forgetting to make that stick.

In 1972, I arrived in Paris as a 19-year-old "correspondent" for *Andy Warhol's Interview*, with no local friends and only Lopez's number in my pocket. When I called, Antonio immediately invited me to meet him at Le Drugstore, in St. Germain, where I joined a small party of his friends in an upstairs booth, mute with the excitement of my own ambitions as a parade of glossy people came along. Among them was a dazed blond model called Jessica Lange, and a diffident, severe Finnish model named Eija, and Yves St. Laurent's dour press agent, Clara Saint, and Karl Lagerfeld. At the time I would have liked nothing better than to be taken up by Antonio's high-living set. It never happened.

Instead I befriended Eija, and through her met a young woman whose brother was James Baldwin's boyfriend, and who looked after me in Paris and then again in London, and whom I later lost track of in New York when she married a man said to be a minor mafioso, who bought her a yacht that he painted with murals of Caesar and Cleopatra, and . . . what I'm talking about here is a past, and the lately discovered fact that I have one.

Like a lot of people, I've tended to shun recollection. Nowadays, I'm improving my acquaintance with memory. I'm recalling, for example, Charles Ludlam (AIDS, 1987) once fixing me with a withering look when I innocently asked if he wore the nail varnish from his role in *Salamambo* offstage; and David Wojnarowicz (AIDS, 1992) scribbling me postcards full of earnestness and misspellings in the days when he was living in the street; and Manny Vasquez (AIDS, 1995)—a complicated junkie I grew fond of when I wrote about his Job-like trials in jail—hitting me up for \$20 to buy a Barry White album; and Richard Hartenstein (AIDS, 1989), the drollest man I ever encountered, telling me that the Guggenheim looked like a Braun juicer for trees; and Willi Smith (AIDS, 1987), who, back in 1975, looked as though he and his sister Touki were twinned; and pretty Clovis Ruffin (AIDS, 1992), an ambitious Southerner whose designs you still see on the runways, although no longer carrying his name.

I'm recalling John McKeague (AIDS, 1991), in whose Upper West Side apartment my old friend Paula and I once sniffed poppers and danced around to Eddie Kendricks' "Girl You Need a Change of Mind"; and Vito Russo (AIDS, 1990), who phoned from his deathbed to croak thanks for a tasteless get well card with a pansy nosegay on the front; and Ethyl Eichelberger (AIDS suicide, 1990), who once patiently showed me his method for weaving theatrical wigs, acquired while serving "a thousand-hour sentence" at Robert Fiance Hair Design Institute; and Robert Yoh (AIDS, 1992), a model with a Leyendecker profile, telling a friend of mine that his burial was to take place in a pet graveyard beneath a headstone reading, "Robert: Friend to Man." I'm recalling Adrian Kellard (AIDS, 1992), an artist friend who invited me to observe his KS chemotherapy and to record it for *The New Yorker*, because AIDS, at the time, had scarcely been mentioned in that magazine; and Kevin Kennedy (AIDS, 1991), who was so far gone in dementia when I last saw him at Cabrini Medical Center that his gaze flickered wildly from my eyes to *General Hospital*. I'm remembering Duncan Stalker (AIDS, 1991) arranging, in the late stages of his own illness, a memorial for his dead boyfriend, Guy Bauman (AIDS, 1990), and the cold shock that overtook a room full of well-inured people when the civilized hush of the Frick Collection's atrium was suddenly broken by Duncan's raw, animal cries.

At an editorial meeting the other day I suggested to a group of writers that they consider contributing memories of dead friends to this newspaper for Day Without Art. The meaning of this event had backfired, I felt; the dead deserved something richer than eulogies or the sanitized paeans of that signature late-century theatrical event—the memorial service. One editor at this meeting, a man who has not been living in Siberia for the past 15 years, thought to clarify my intentions by pointing out that what I must be really concerned with was the terror of people dying young. It is true that I am concerned with people dying young, but also with people dying young and unremarked, their inconvenient lives too tidily folded under in our collective will to forget.

This editor went on to proclaim that he had known few, if any, people who'd died of AIDS. Perhaps I misunderstood him, and what he really meant to say was that he hadn't attended at many bedsides. Neither have I. It's true that, when my mother died, at the age I am today, I sat with her in a hospital room and marked each sip of air as, in a final coma, she clutched at my hand with a strength that seemed to rise from some ferocious primal depth. But I've not seen anybody else meet death.

This particular experience, of course, is far from rare in New York City, where by accident, and by

default, and out of compassion, or love, or communitarian instinct, and drawing on unknown reserves, and sometimes guiltily, people have developed an aptitude for helping friends greet and negotiate their own life-threatening illnesses and demise. At least two people I know have assisted at suicides. Yet somehow I cannot connect the people with their acts. This is probably not surprising considering how strongly we're encouraged to ignore AIDS, not merely to make a nightmare bearable, but because the experience itself mostly clutters the lives of those accustomed to thinking of themselves as having no history.

In the room where this editorial meeting was held was a second man, a friend and neighbor of the first, a man whose former lover had recently died of AIDS. For some reason, he'd been unable to cry at the time; unexpectedly, though, he broke down one day during a conversation we had involving a dog. A mutual acquaintance had recently returned from Florida, where he'd gone to collect a pet belonging to a pal now too ill even to care for himself. Something about the image of this small creature requiring protection permitted my friend to shed necessary tears. It was over in a moment. We went on to something else.

Since then, I've been thinking a lot about the ways people compose what Joan Didion once coolly called their "narratives." I've been thinking about the effort it requires to tell yourself stories in order to live. I've been thinking about how, from the pandemic's beginning, the burden of understanding AIDS has been ghettoized, first through acronyms that isolated the disease among one group of people and then through medical and political assurances that the virus hadn't spread to the "general population," whatever that is. I've also had reason to remember a televised interview I once saw in which Toni Morrison deflected a typically fatuous question about racism from Charlie Rose, informing him that she already knew all she needed to about the harm irrational hatred had done her. It was time he consider the damage to himself.

I happened to see Ron Vawter the other morning. He was walking briskly across Prince Street past Dean & DeLuca. He stopped at the corner of Broadway just long enough for me to experience that brief, glissading mental inventory we make a thousand times a day of familiar shapes and attitudes and gestures. I saw Ron's strong profile and his high forehead. I saw what I thought was his winter coat. I saw him move toward Crosby Street in a characteristically hunched and intense fashion. This time I didn't try to catch up. (Ron Vawter, AIDS, 1994).