

I have a friend who is dying. (What a relief to write those words. I've been holding them in for hours, ever since conversation this evening during dinner with other of his friends about how he's "going to the dogs... and when you sleep with dogs you get fleas.") I've known him for about a decade now, and remember so well that lunch he and I had some five years ago when he told me he had tested HIV positive the day before.

So it's been quite a while, and although I don't see as much of him as I used to now that he's moved to a different part of town and out of my immediate family circle, some of my friends and family still see him almost daily. They never tire of telling me, each time more shocked, "He's running with 'po white trash'" (that's where the dog's fleas reference came from.) The fact is, he's not doing anything except, it seems to me, f--king himself to death. And, why not? Even when I was in high school, we used to think "what a way to go!"

I remember six months ago when this behavior on the part of my friend first began to be talked about. Then, it was all about how "He's killing himself. Why doesn't he get more sleep; why doesn't he stop drinking; why doesn't he stay home and rest?" and then they would tell me of my friend's latest outrage. Like when he threw his roommate's TV out the third story window onto the sidewalk below. It was when he threw the TV that I began to wonder why, when we are given the ultimate freedom which the sentence of death is, why, when nothing matters anyway because there will be none of the consequences by which we all have to pay for our acts because we won't be around to pay, I began to wonder why, in the infinite freedom for action which the death knell represents, why do we choose so often the downward path rather than the upward: why does my friend couple with hustlers in the gutters of Polk Street instead of reading the Bible, visiting the sick, creating a work of art... or, even, composing a prayer to last out the last days.

So, I thought this evening about my dying friend and his degradation in the eyes of our mutual acquaintances in this late time of his illness. I thought about "He's f--king himself to death," and I thought about ecstasy, the "out" (ex) "state" (stasis). Tibetan art is based on an image of the body of the Buddha. That image is cosmic, and you are to meditate on—to internalize—that image, to become one with it until you are out of this body into another body that is the body of the Buddha, the body of Nirvana, the body of nothingness. And I remembered, too, that when I was a teenager living in a vast gray neighborhood of entropic dust, I had thought "It's either sex, dope or murder—there's no other way to feeling, no other route to a sense of life, no other path to ecstasy." Although we wouldn't have called it ecstasy. We just called it getting high.

Now I'm older and have more sense. Passionate as always for ecstasy (I think it's the curse of the West; the Oriental religions don't hunger for it... what the hell did Christ do on that cross anyway but *do* ecstasy?). By the time I was 20 or so, I found that neither sex nor dope could do it and that murder hurts people and then society murders you back. It had to be art instead. The esthetic experience is the ultimate eros, the ultimate fusing of flesh with flesh, of flesh with cosmos, of Self with Other, the ultimate ecstasy. I see my friend go burning into Dante's Circle of the Lustful, and I see myself and my art friends go burning, too, in the equally lustful search for more than we are. *Ave Atque Vale*, I say. Hail and Farewell. To us all, each in our way, f--king or art-ing ourselves to ecstasy, to Nirvana, to nothingness.

...But that was then, and this is now. Days, months have passed since that frenzy of concern about a dying friend who as of this later writing is still full of life, days and months since that wild cry of envy, despair and regret for another who is only the mask of oneself. And now another passionate night of the great winds of spring that tear the trees.

I met this evening at an opening a friend from college days who asked me if I had known a young man dead six months or a year; and when I said I had known him, she told me how he had been in her pre-school class when he was four. I asked her if she had known his family, and what it may have been that drove him beyond that blazing horizon we call the boundary of the socially acceptable. Her husband whom I've known for 45 years interrupted to ask about my grandchildren. And then we all, from within this temporary circle of the familial and safe, looked out upon the frenzy of the dying and thought each in our own way that "There but for the grace of God..." and thanked whatever it may be (our lucky stars?) that we had not yet faced the final rape that so many of our friends have into becoming the persons of a tragedy.

I notice that the last note in my journal at the end of this stormy spring night is about Botticelli's *Primavera*, that the rushing wind of spring attacked the virgin earth and flowers spouted from the mouth of the ravished—and is that not so much an esthetic theory as it is one of artistic production, that only from pain and a raping of the senses and of life that great art comes? And must we bear the proof each in our own lives? Please, God, spare us from greatness.