

THIS WILD DARKNESS: The Story of My Death
By: Harold Brodkey

Yes, the inevitable arrival of one's death is a concern of more than passing interest. For most of us the prospect of nonexistence, as we are periodically reminded of it, is depressing. One day it will happen. Yet few of us must face knowing just when it will.

In 1993, Harold Brodkey learned that he had contracted AIDS. The disease was the unexpectedly late consequence of homosexual experiences engaged in a full generation back. "This Wild Darkness" is his unsparing chronicle of the two-plus years he lives out a fate that overtook him earlier this year. Pulling out all the stops—and then some—Brodkey, whose career has been a critically controversial one, picks at the scabs of his feelings and thoughts in punishing detail.

"In the confused, muddled velocities of my mind was an editorial sense that this was wrong, that this was an ill-judged element in the story of my life. I felt too conceited to have this death. I was illogical, fevered, but my mind still moved as if it were a rational mind—the mind, everyone's mind, is forever unstill, is a continuous restlessness like light, even in sleep, when the light is inside and not outside the skull."

Particularly unstill is the restlessly nuanced Brodkey intelligence, whether it is defiantly spurning "any human gesture of solidarity," coolly theorizing that "it's ecological sense to die while you're still productive, die and clear a space for others," or gratuitously administering a mean blow: "It is so boring to be ill, rather like being trapped in an Updike novel."

Aloof and combative as he is throughout, Brodkey proves touchingly tender toward his wife, the novelist Ellen Schwamm—his "human credential," as he wryly refers to her. His stated wish to die in order to spare her is met with fierce resistance. She wants to be with him for as long as possible despite the potential danger of infection.

As Brodkey passes through predictable emotional way stations, including Kubler-Ross's definitive five (anger, denial, bargaining, depression, acceptance), a resourceful wife placates or remonstrates with her suffering, difficult mate.

Much of this death memoir seesaws the reader to the point of motion sickness. The hallucinatory intensity of a nonfiction work

is characteristic of Brodkey's convoluted stories, alternately entrancing and repelling. This book-length descent from the ranks of the living is a tour de force of brilliant observation and cranky willfulness.

There is occasional relief from the verbal onslaught of this driven being as he digresses. Brodkey compares with enviable insight the variant national styles of aggression that one encounters in traveling abroad—all of which, predictably, are anathema to him. Or he interweaves the intrinsically American penchant for optimism, as reflected by our collective susceptibility to advertising hype, with the hopelessness of his terminal condition.

Uncharacteristically stoic is Brodkey's description of the stance he enforced upon himself as an adolescent while being sexually fondled by his adoptive father. The impression gathered here is that he may not have come to terms completely with his bisexuality. When he discusses his gay adventuring, he makes it clear that in these encounters he was not being done to but the doer.

Less than a year before his death, the author journeys to “insolently pictorial” Venice, where he allows himself to be feted by his publisher. The flesh may be unwilling but the vaunted Brodkey imagination still catalogues prodigally. He zeros in on today's disguised forms of Italian fascism, on the inner meaning of a gondolier's physical stance, on Veronese's view of the world from within the small church where he painted. Even in twilight, little escapes the glittering eye of this literary mariner.

Throughout this slim volume, one supposes that its narrator will not go gently into the goodnight. And yet, in a reflective coda that amounts to an apotheosis, Brodkey does just that. Looking out his window, he beholds midtown New York, content in the knowledge that he did it his way.

“I can't change the past and I don't think I would. I don't expect to be—understood.” For those who make it through this brave, uncompromising book, though, Harold Brodkey will be understood. Complex and abrasive as his work is, he stands out as a totally engaged man whose artistic energy will be missed.

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