

Life on the Coastline: The OITM Interview With Poet Mark Doty

by Hugh Coyle

On April 13, the renowned poet Mark Doty will return to his former home state to deliver the keynote address at the Vermont CARES annual dinner in Burlington. Doty's most recent book, the prose memoir *Heaven's Coast*, chronicles his relationship with Wally Roberts and offers beautifully moving meditations on the grief and despair which followed Wally's death from AIDS. Doty has also published a number of poetry books, including *Atlantis*; *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*; *Turtle, Swan*; and *My Alexandria*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

This past summer, Doty was a faculty member at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Ripton, Vermont. During the session, I had a chance to talk with him about his life and his work. What follows are brief excerpts from that interview.

Hugh Coyle: Can you talk a bit about your time in Vermont and your reasons for moving to Provincetown?

Mark Doty: About a year after Wally's HIV diagnosis, we left Vermont. He was healthy, but like anyone in that situation, we didn't know how long he would remain healthy.

At that time, there were about twenty identified cases of AIDS in the state. Vermont CARES was a new organization. There was very little in the way of support and services. Living in Montpelier, we had the sense that the central fact of our lives — which was the reality, the pressure, and the fear that his HIV status raised for us — was not reflected in that community. It was like our reality was one thing, and Montpelier's reality was another thing, and it felt very isolating. It's not that people weren't concerned or anything; I just think that we wouldn't have had a community of people with common experiences, whereas Provincetown offered us greater support for us as a couple, and an excellent range of services.

We went at just the right time (1990), because by late 1991 or so, Wally's health was beginning to be compromised. So we got to really enjoy it, and we got to get a community around us and have a sense of home before things grew really difficult.

HC: What motivated you to write a memoir rather than poetry?

MD: I had been writing poetry during Wally's illness, bits and pieces, and obviously I didn't have a lot of time to spend on it because the demands of taking care of him would prohibit long periods of working. I've always felt that writing is what I did to know what I felt. I couldn't really stop; it kept being my way of getting through the experience.

After he died, I felt completely incapable of writing a poem. I felt that if I was going to write a poem, it would have to express everything, and there was no way that a poem could do that. But I needed to write, and I was lucky because I got an invitation a little while before Wally died from Brian Bouldry to contribute an essay to a book called *Wrestling the Angel: Gay Men Write About Faith and Religion*.

About six weeks after Wally died, I was washing the dishes one night and I thought that if I felt like

writing, I'd try writing that essay. I could write a sentence, and then that sentence would lead to another, and it started to feel like a kind of lifeline that I could follow this thread of thinking and give voice to what I felt.

So I wrote the essay, and when I was finished I wrote another one, and I decided that what I was writing were not separate essays, but a chronicle of grief. As I wrote about that grief, I also wrote about the history of the relationship, going back to tell who he had been and who we had been together.

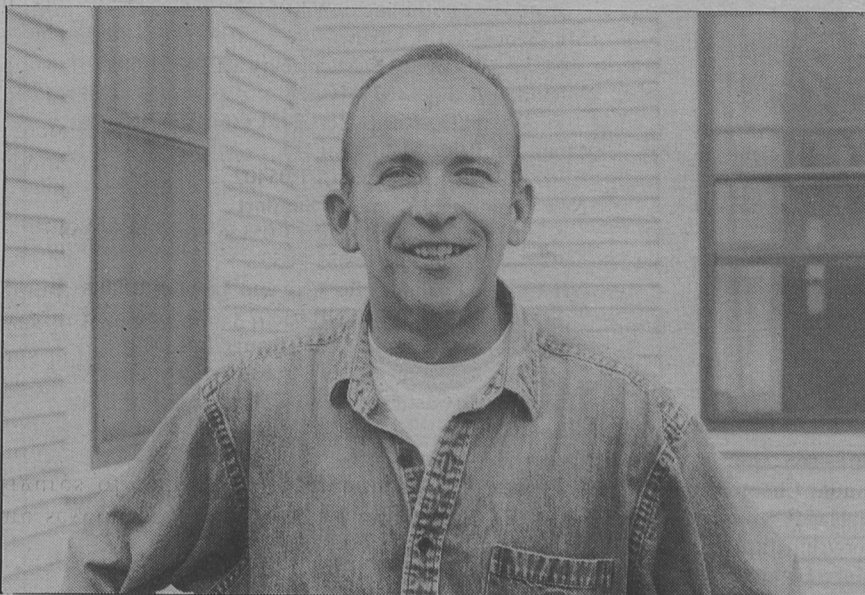


Photo by Hugh Coyle

Mark Doty at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, where he was a faculty member in August of 1996.

It saved my life, to be honest. And eventually, during that year, I found myself writing poems again.

HC: You read a new long poem the other night, and a number of us were moved to tears and moved to laughter at the same time. Can you talk a bit about that poem, the one about the turtles for sale in New York?

MD: Turtles are sort of a totem for me, and there are several poems in which they appear. They're figures of vulnerability and they're also self-protective in interesting ways. I don't know that I could explain why that seems so appropriate to me or why that compels me. But in that poem... I saw this bowl full of turtles for sale on Broadway, and was so struck by these little vulnerable things in that grand city and their will to live. They seemed so much a figure of the epidemic for me: here are these individual lives trying to make it, trying to thrive with so much against them, which is true not just about AIDS but about gay people's lives in general — there are so many forces to say that you're not going to live, you're not going to love, you're not going to do well. And there are those little creatures trying to be themselves. So it was an image that really spoke to me.

One of the lessons that came to me from living with Wally's illness was that in that awful time, I was never so close to anyone in my life. There was so much intimacy in it; there was really so much

beauty in it, and while he was leaving the world (and nothing worse ever happened to me), it was also the most intimate thing I've ever done with another human being. He took so much pleasure in life, even when it was not reasonable to do so.

HC: We keep looking for a central metaphor that works well for the AIDS epidemic or for a gay man trying to come to terms with himself in the modern world. I can see how the turtle image works really well, that you have an animal that can actually

"come out" of itself — it's probably one of the only animals that can.

MD: You know I never really thought about turtles in just that way, but I think it's a really smart connection. The epidemic is such a big thing. It's like we live inside it, so profoundly, that it's very hard to see. We sometimes fool ourselves and think that either we understand it or that its story has been told.

One of the questions that I got from journalists sometimes about the memoir was, "Well, aren't people tired of this story of AIDS?" As if it was just

one story! And I think we're just beginning to hear it and see it in its many dimensions.

HC: In your poem "The Tiara," you wrote, "I think heaven is perfect stasis/poised over the realms of desire." How do you feel about those lines now after having written *Heaven's Coast*?

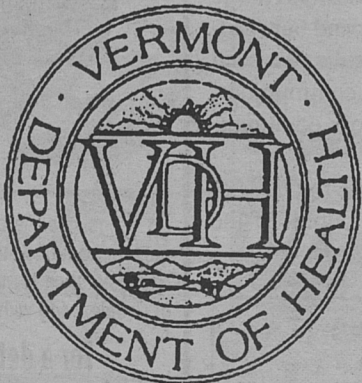
MD: I think there was a point where I did think of heaven or of perfection as being something complete and static. I think I probably wouldn't write that poem the same way now because of the experience of living close to death, where change is vitality, change is what makes things alive. There is no growth, no affection, no coming into being without things passing.


The title of *Heaven's Coast* has to do in part with where I live, which is such a beautiful heavenly landscape, and in part with the coast between living and dying, between being and not being. What I love about a coastline is that it is a border that is in between, and it's always shifting, and you can't have that kind of perfect stasis that I was reaching for in "The Tiara." What you have instead is a place where life and death are pushing against each other, always back and forth, and nothing stays the same for long.

I'm glad I don't have to live there all the time. I don't think any of us can. But when somebody you know dies, it seems like that's where you go. It takes you right up to what it means to live. ▼

**For
confidential
HIV/AIDS
Information**

**Call
800-882-AIDS**





Tax & Accounting Services

Browns Trace Building
P.O. Box 910
Richmond, VT 05477

Julie M. Miller
Certified Public Accountant

802-434-6466 TEL
802-434-6465 FAX