In 1989, not long after my partner Wally and I took the HIV test, the pain in my back—which had been a chronic, low-level problem—became acute. I went to a chiropractor I'd seen before, a rough-and-tumble kind of guy with a strange, cluttered little office on a shady part of Main Street in the Vermont town where we lived then. Dr. Crack, as I thought of him, was his own secretary, and furnished his office with all manner of cast-offs and inspirational posters, along with many implements of vague and mysterious use. In general, he did not inspire confidence. He snapped me around with considerable force, and though I felt much better after being treated by him, I also felt a mounting sense of nervousness about the degree of force he used. One day the crack my neck made as he whipped it into place was so loud that I resolved to see the new-age doctor my friends had spoken so highly of instead. She had cured one friend of a nervous tic in the eye simply by massaging a spot on her spine; others swore by her gentler style of manipulation.

On my first visit, as I lay on my stomach in a room full of ferns and charts marking the locations of chakras and pressure points, she touched one vertebra which throbbed, seemed almost to ring, painfully, like a struck tuning fork. I felt she'd touched the very center of the pain in my sacrum, the weak spot where my ache originated. When I told her this, she said that the particular vertebra she was touching represented "faith in the future."

Under her tentative touches--delivered with less pressure than one would use to push an elevator button--my back simply got worse, but her diagnosis was so penetratingly accurate that I never forgot it. After a while, I went back to Dr. Crack, and my back got better, but not the rupture in my faith.

The test results had come back negative for me, positive for Wally, but it didn't seem to matter so much which of us carried the antibodies for the virus. We'd been together eight years; we'd surrounded ourselves with a house and animals and garden, tokens of permanency; our continuance was assumed, an essential aspect of life. That we would continue to be, and to be together, had about it the unquestioned nature of a given, the tacit starting point from which the rest of our living proceeded. The news was as devastating as if I'd been told I was positive myself. In retrospect, I think of two different metaphors for the way it affected me.

The virus seemed to me, first, like a kind of solvent which dissolved the future, our future, a little at a time. It was like a dark stain, a floating, inky transparency hovering over Wally's body, and its intention was to erase the time ahead of us, to make that time, each day, a little smaller.
And then I thought of us as standing on a kind of sandbar, the present a narrow strip of land which had seemed, previously, enormous, without any clear limits. Oh, there was a limit out there, somewhere, of course, but not anywhere in sight. But the virus was a kind of chill, violent current, one which was eroding, at who knew what speed, the ground upon which we stood. If you watched, you could see the edges crumbling.

Four years have passed. For two of them, we lived with the knowledge of Wally's immune status, though he was blessedly asymptomatic; for the last two years, we have lived with AIDS.

His has not been the now-typical pattern of dizzying descents into opportunistic infections followed by recoveries. Instead, he's suffered a gradual, steady decline, an increasing weakness which, a few months ago, took a sharp turn for the worse. He is more-or-less confined to bed now, with a few forays up and out in his wheelchair; he is physically quite weak, though alert and responsive, and every day I am grateful he's with me, though I will admit that I also rail and struggle against the limitations his health places upon us. As he is less capable, less present, I do battle with my own sense of loss at the same time as I try not to let the present disappear under the grief of those disappearances, and the anticipatory grief of a future disappearance.

And I struggle, as well, with the way the last four years have forced me to rethink my sense of the nature of the future.

I no longer think of AIDS as a solvent, but perhaps rather as a kind of intensifier, something which makes things more firmly, deeply themselves. Is this true of all terminal illness, that it intensifies the degree of what already is? Watching Wally, watching friends who were either sick themselves or giving care to those who were, I saw that they simply became more generous or terrified, more cranky or afraid, more doubtful or more trusting, more contemplative or more in flight. As individual and unpredictable as this illness seems to be, the one thing I found I could say with certainty was this: AIDS makes things more intensely what they already are. Eventually I understood that this truism then must apply to me, as well, and, of course, it applied to my anxiety about the future.

Because the truth was I'd never really believed in a future, always had trouble imagining ongoingness, a place in the unfolding chain of things. I was raised on apocalypse. My grandmother--whose Tennessee fundamentalism reduced not a jot her generosity or spiritual grace--used to read me passages from the Book of Revelation and talk about the immanence of the Last Days. The hymns we sang figured this world as a veil of appearances, and sermons in church characterized the human world as a flimsy screen behind which the world's real actors enacted the struggles and dramas of a loftier realm. Not struggles, exactly, since the outcome was foreknown: the lake of fire and the fiery pit, the eternal chorus of the saved—but dramatic in the sense of scale, or scope. How large and mighty was the music of our salvation!

When the Hog Farm commune came to my town in an old school bus painted in Day-Glo colors swirled like a Tibetan mandala, the people who came tumbling out into the park had about them the aura of a new world. Their patchouli and bells and handmade sandals were only the outward signs of a new point of view. We’d see things more clearly, with the doors of perception cleansed; fresh vision would yield new harmony, transformation. I was an adolescent, quickly outgrowing religion when this new sense of the apocalyptic replaced it
with the late sixties' faith in the immanence of Revolution, a belief that was not without its own religious tinge and implication. Everything promised that the world could not stay the same; the foundations of order were quavering, both the orders of the social arena and of consciousness itself. I couldn't articulate much about the nature of the future I felt was in the offing, but I could feel it in the drift of sitar music across a downtown sidewalk, late summer afternoons, and in the pages of our local "underground" newspaper, The Oracle, with its sinuous letterhead as richly complicated as the twining smoke of the Nepalese rope incense I used to burn. I was sure that certain sorts of preparation were ridiculously beside the point. Imagine buying, say, life insurance, or investing in a retirement plan, when the world as we'd always known it was burning?

One sort of apocalyptic scenario has replaced another: endings ecological or nuclear, scenarios of depleted ozone or global starvation, or, finally, epidemic. All my life I've lived with a future which constantly diminishes, but never vanishes.

Apocalypse is played out now on a personal scale; it is not in the sky above us, but in our bed.

In the museums we used to visit on family vacations when I was a kid, I used to love those rooms which displayed collections of minerals in a kind of closet or chamber which would, at the push of a button, darken. Then ultraviolet lights would begin to glow and the minerals would seem to come alive, new colors, new possibilities and architectures revealed. Plain stones became fantastic, "futuristic"--a strange word which suggests, accurately, that these colors had something of the world to come about them. Of course there wasn't any black light in the center of the earth, in the caves where they were quarried; how strange that these stones should have to be brought here, bathed with this unnatural light in order for their transcendent characters to emerge. Irradiation revealed a secret aspect of the world.

Imagine illness as that light: demanding, torturous, punitive, it nonetheless reveals more of what things are. A certain glow of being appears. I think this is what is meant when we speculate that death is what makes love possible. Not that things need to be able to die in order for us to love them, but that things need to die in order for us to know what they are. Could we really know anything that wasn't transient, not becoming more itself in the strange, unearthly light of dying? The button pushed, the stones shine, all mystery and beauty, implacable, fierce, austere.

Will there be a moment when you will die to me?

Of course you will cease to breathe, sometime; probably you will cease to breathe before I do, though there's no way to know this, really. But your being, your being-in-me, will last as long as I do, won't it? There's a poem of Tess Gallagher's about the aftermath of her husband's death, one called "Now That I Am Never Alone." Of course.