

Paradise

*(point of
transmission)*

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ANDREW SUTHERLAND



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‘Like ghosts, what inhabits us is neither unequivocally dead nor alive. [...] Since it comes from the otherness of the unconscious, which itself persists atemporally [...] the enigmatic message functions similarly to the virus, since HIV persists beyond the life of its original host.’

Tim Dean, “Bareback Time”.

‘Squash it into almost nothingness,
into something so small, smaller
than it already is, so it won’t show,
cannot be counted,
like ghosts and gases, its true existence
undiscovered, lurking’

Justin Chin, “Undetectable”.

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About the poems

At the end of 2014, after living, studying, and working in Singapore – my place of chosen residence – through my late teens and early twenties, I was diagnosed HIV-positive. The laws in Singapore forbade HIV-positive foreigners from holding extended residence in Singapore. At the time of diagnosis, we were not even allowed to enter the country as tourists, although that has since been lifted to allow HIV-positive foreigners to travel within the ninety-day tourist window.

I did not immediately leave. The next six months were months of liminal space and borrowed time, as I began antiretroviral treatment in Australia and clung to the fading trace of my life in Singapore, wrapping up arts projects and relationships until finally I was faced with no choice but to accept that my future was in Australia, where I could legally reside and seek treatment. There had always been deep ambivalences and complexities in being a white Australian in the post-colonial, Chinese-Singaporean majority city-state, and HIV transmission meant that the possibility of a hybrid identity was to become something more akin to a dismembered one.

To be diagnosed HIV-positive at this time – as in, perhaps, any time – also represented a liminal kind of space. Well after the ‘Lazarus moment’ of antiretroviral treatment, but just before the popular or accessible advent of PrEP, it took years for me to decipher how I was to relate to my HIV diagnosis, especially as it was the cause of such a literal upheaval in my residence and sense of self. These poems, primarily written between 2017 and 2021, find themselves within that sequence of physical and psychic journeys: from seronegative to seropositive; from ‘growing up’ as a resident of Singapore to finding my place as an adult in the Perth of my childhood; as well as from secretive about my HIV-status, in which the art I produced was rooted in the trauma of HIV transmission without naming it, towards a more public life. These poems creep around what scholar Tim Dean, who writes with great clarity about the complex shadows surrounding contemporary HIV transmission, would describe as a kind of haunting.

In (*narrative*), transmission and diagnosis are written as moments of rupture: of sacrifice or violence, of movement and of break. Histories and mythologies, both personal and observed, are recast over the spectre of seroconversion. In (*metaphor*), the poems track the movement between spaces, tracing the shadows of residence, citizenship and the self in the gap between Singapore and Perth. Finally, in (*paradise*), these concerns coalesce into a different set of hauntings: attempts toward new signifiers and new mythologies, in which continuous or persistent living-with-HIV is characterised by Queer modalities of intimacy, yearning and transformation.

Almost all of these poems were written on Whadjuk Noongar Bibbulmun land, and the publisher of this book stands on Walyalup. I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which I reside and the long, unbroken line of stories told by First Nations peoples in so-called Australia. I acknowledge that sovereignty of this land was never ceded, and I pay my respects to elders past and ongoing.

I also wish to acknowledge the privilege that has allowed me to write this book and to live a public life as an HIV-positive individual. It is not something that was easy to do, and I do not take the privilege lightly. Everyone's relationship to disclosure with HIV must be their own. This includes the privileges and protections that my ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, as well as the class and familial structures around me, afford me in this country.

If you have purchased this book, you might consider providing financial support or mutual aid to the lived experience of Poz communities, in particular by paying the rent to Queer and/or HIV+ First Nations peoples through organisations like BlaQ, or in assistance of HIV+ migrants through organisations like the HIV/AIDS Legal Centre. I strongly encourage you to research ways you can best provide support or reach out to your local or regional HIV/AIDS peak body or peer-led organisation.

(narrative)

AIDS Play 1991

This is the year I was born.

Re-creation. Context & its dizzy cries.
Whenever we choose memory, it lives only
for the sake of those who are yet waiting.

If I had to identify death, it would be as the cat
under the wheel of some childhood neighbour's car.
After that, it's just another thought about a road.

I don't think I can be responsible for describing loss.

Virgo '91. In this scene, I'm Time.
In this scene, Time represents a baby.
Interested actors perform the past, & I

cry at all the wrong moments. The past
performs a sickness. Time is still a baby.
The Reaper turns four on TV. 1991,

2014, 2021: I want to write a history
that speaks precious little. How I keep
my mornings swallowed: 2021, 2014, 1991.

*As a newborn in 1991, I have no knowledge of or connection to the
AIDS crisis, except one sharp & unexpected burst of memory,
in which I recalled my HIV diagnosis back in 2014 –*

World Tree

for Edith Podesta

(Robertson Quay, Singapore)

The day I tested positive, I walked from the clinic at the quay to my old university. And, I am sorry to admit, as I walked through the city – a forest built to scrape the sky – I pictured myself at the top of each tower. A lean. A glance. A wobble. Still, I continued to walk. Each building became a tree, or the branch of a tree, fused together from a fire and asking permission to be fire, again. I looked up, and with the daylight's sun, I thought I could make out the moon and stars.

And I heard the bark of dogs.

The sun and the moon started to shake, vibrating with terror, and I saw a pack of hounds, drooling and baying, dashing across the blue sky. The sun and the moon tried to flee across the heavens, but the hounds could not be outrun. All the burning trees from which I longed to fall shuddered around me as the sun and the moon were snuffed out; torn apart by the gaping jaws of dogs. And slowly, one by one –

the stars started to drop from the sky like flies.

They fell out of sight, and as they fell, sight too fell away – and all that remained for me to see was an image of myself suspended upon the last light of a sky-scraping branch, like an outdated magazine in a waiting room, or the tiniest drop of blood on a thumb. Hanging from the tree, eye torn from a socket's grasp, dripping vision down the path below.

Yet still, I continued to walk.

Because that will not be me. Every day I keep my two eyes widened, clutched like lanterns; beaming from my skull, and brightening, too. I climb branches only to confirm the leaves, and the baying sounds of dogs don't follow.

137 near Trujillo

137 sets. Chan Chan to Las Llamas.
And just dug up, in greatest numbers
found – remains – and of a sole event.

Yes, all at once, a single march, just
one event perhaps a time of crisis,
a particularly special need to leave
a legacy behind, largest in the world
so far and maybe I'll suggest
for now / for now / still now – we
know this as the cradle of mankind.

Lesions to the breastbone, dislocated
ribs; a cut, a move, remove. 137 sets
of little sternums skulls the many fragile
bones of feet with toes to march
together Chan Chan to Las Llamas.

Perhaps a time of crisis the stormy
weather needing answer yes all at
once largest known offering of its
type the scale is incredible all in
the past uniquely fascinating habit
of a civilisation, of a time, though I'll
admit at times I've had the thought
we're tucked within our cradle, still?

200 camelids, too – in choral screams
from other throats to join with 137:
as still there's need for every set of
hands held jaws gaping knees buckled
by the weight of all they are to give

*and there must be something
we can do about the weather –*

And I wonder if it's worth
remembering: beasts of
burden face the mountains

all children face the sea.

Loop

when street cats
stare snake-eyed
and each snake carries
a cat's-eye

when pot plants
only starve
or drown; and
even the dishwasher
looks super disappointed

when you put your fucking headphones on.

when the past
keeps breaking
its commitment;
perpetual resurrector,
these flowers
from a nec-
romantic heart

though the original is always chosen
over the re-make. and even now
I suspect I might be one of the
violent men, after all.

when the cum
is dopamine,
escaping

when paradise is desire
or disgust, and it never
mattered which

when you tell a person how they are mistaken,
before they ever find the words to speak.

tell me what I don't know.
I'm waiting for you to say when.

Sodom & Gomorrah

we throw these names around
 like any old thing
 a city as behaviour as a lifestyle
 history / a future / doom

actually, my friend told me
 the people of Sodom & Gomorrah were erased
 because they ravished angels
 I was going to google but then got bored
 &amp decided to just roll with it

& oh! those tantalising halos
 that we may know
 the perfect length of wing
 they could almost be swans but fuckable

heaven as a host of fuckable swans, each hissing for oblivion
 is this divine? look not behind
 be blind be pillars of salt
 be bare-backed nations such strange flesh

sin is probably a failure of the imagination
 we do so often hurt people, though
 sometimes I think I'd like to see myself vanish
 if only for a little while?

 maybe after douching

 sure I think sodomy's great
 but I don't think I've ever tried gomorry??
 ... is a joke I should probably cut from this poem
 ... is a question that doesn't ever keep me up at night

 & I'm not saying I'm an angel, but –
 would it be so surprising if I were to wake in feathers?

I really got into cinema around the same time I fell into sex
 & in a bleaker orgy had the clarity of mind
 to lean back & quote *Salò* to the fuck-thick air
 the reference was lost on all involved
 but I still laughed & kept at it

this part's just to let you know, this is not a sex-negative poem
 & just to let you know (as far as I know)
 no angels were harmed while writing
 & also FYI I'm into suffering, not pity
 unless later I want something from you
 in which case, salt-pity will have to do

I want my fucking to be rough & oh so languid
 like it was in the old days
 those days of being wild
 those halcyon genesis days

I want to try sodgorrah
 just you & I: gomodom
 I know that sounds like another joke but it belongs here anyway
 I am deep & copious; well-watered & green
 fuck me like twin cities
 fuck me like utopia's coming
 it's coming

actually, the only names that still interest me from the Bible
 are Salome & Judith
 & isn't that funny??
 how it all comes to a head

Salome

for Stefanos Rassios

A poster for a production of the Strauss opera catches my eye, and on a whim I message Stefanos. *Random question, but why haven't you ever directed a Salome? It seems right up your alley.* The sex and blood; the beheading. The lurid, lesser passion play of it all. *I suppose it's never caught my attention,* he answers. *Why? Are you thinking of doing one?* No, but the possibility of *Salome* has been on my mind, of late. Maybe I would play the lead. // Seroconversion is the time period in which HIV antibodies develop and become detectable in the blood. The body's efforts to defend itself against the virus inevitably fail. The immune system becomes compromised, and it is no longer your body, entirely – it is now your body + HIV. You are likely to experience an intense bout of fatigue, fever, and ache, as your cells rehearse the multiplication – the movement – that will be performed from here into the future. Once this internal choreography has been learnt, the outer shell of sickness will pass. Afterwards, you will test positive. // *It's tricky to find anything sympathetic about Salome,* Stefanos texts. I admit I hadn't given much thought to character. *Bring me the head of John the Baptist,* she says. Not a selfish demand, but the only plausible recompense for unchecked ability. What else could be enough? Salome's talent curves with exponential growth, which might itself be the opposite of sympathy. A performance, in exchange for the head of a prophet. // When I experienced seroconversion, I was rehearsing a shadow dance for a corporate entertainment gig. Behind a screen, the outline of my body was supposed to approximate a lion's head, then seamlessly shift shape as the dance unfolded. For two weeks, I felt I was more sickness than body. Drowning in impossible weakness, I would crawl into pitiful lion shape, desperate only to move. Did I pray to God? Why is it that I can't remember? On the other side of the screen: the head of a lion, before the shadow transforms again. // Does this mean that when Salome dances, she is dancing the death of prediction? Put another way, Salome dances the sheerness of the present. Which means that even after the event – when everything is over – Salome is still dancing. Salome dances, with the ceaseless multiplication of the present. Now Salome continues to dance.

Breed

i. wet

it's very long
 big, big, life's
 so long – and
 your pythonic
 yearnings *take your unwrapping*
 basic needs
 no thing be-
 tween; care-
 less by design

yes squeeze
 that growing
 length and *fling me far beyond*
 what I was
 taught, what
 un-fun brains
 no longer care

yes: that growing length.
 okay: take your unwrapping.
 still: to fling me far beyond.

and as they
 evaporated
 into thin air
 it's like no-
 body else
 was angry and if
 they were what
 did it matter
 no malice

parts of machines
 that could no
 longer run – they
 pulled away just
 pull away not out
 but flinging far
 in slow, slow
 motion; vacuum
 it was always
 meant to be

and you: you're
 kindling, you,
 you represent
 (yes you're
 a sign) all
 things that could
 be set ablaze,
 but wet, so
 purely wet,
 damp centring
 like a universe
 of orbits, nothing
 orbiting, like
 cruelty, praying
 for a world rammed
 back and forth
 the axes; I'm
 the centre *spilling*

ii. whimper

each cold and new desire
 is first made of a mouth
 that never can be filled.

not completely. always
there is room for more.
you'd better drop your jaw.

but I'm a talker: beg, narrate.
paw feebly at the door
just half a step behind,

still waiting to roll over.
a bad actor, though I love
to play a role. and as a whole

damp declarations voiced in
pants and pitches from some
other world are barely worth

a variation. hunger is
a solo-cycle, written for
a choir. words spent for you

alone repeat into a rumbling
moan, a bound-mouthed thunder;
forever calling for the next.

my lips speak muzzles, little licks,
but wolf grins have no sound,
unless you hear a scraping

of the teeth. don't I deserve
my whimpers be believed?
these open jaws I've wettened

are to prepare you for
what's yours – inside of me.
I like to think I'm sure I feel

a howling; you bury yourself deep.

iii. waste

there is a long shadow.
there, with aftermath.
this is what lives
at the core of the earth.
at the root. in every branch.

a doubling. a splitting.
there is a half and half.
there, with afterimage.
what grows of memories
near the surface of the soil.

time is a two-way street. this is a closing door.

to be shaped by all the bodies
held before you. to be shaped to
all the bodies that await an after.
drag make-up in your housemate's bed.
I need time to kiss me back.

control yourself. this is certainty.
beloved gods stay where you leave them.
I'm waiting underneath the change.
the future remembers how to leak.