

Pages from an abandoned journal

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In 1980 I found Gore Vidal's short story collection *A Thirsty Evil*. Vidal had published this in 1956 and the short story entitled 'Pages from an abandoned journal' gave me license to do my own recording. The story signalled to me that it was okay to pick things up, drop them at will, leave sentences half completed and to write, in my own space and time, what was of importance to me. In other words: to 'abandon' myself. I offer here, a few pages from my abandoned journal.

April 1990

We travelled from the Mountains to Sydney and had a picnic tea on the harbour at Mrs Macquarie's Chair. While crazy Japanese weddings went on around us, we watched a full moon rise up over the harbour. A warm evening, a pink sky; the Sydney I love.

After that we went to see *Death in Venice*, a classically gay opera written by Benjamin Britten for his long-time lover, Peter Pears, to play the lead role of Aschenbach. Dark gondoliers ferrying a dying man around Venice – it was a reflection of our living dreams. Graeme Murphy also staged his dance version around this time. In his Venice it was all men in white towels and saunas and death.

Our cultural artefacts are reflecting what's happening. It is Sydney, gay Sydney at the turn of the decade and beautiful young men are dropping like flies.

On the following Monday, after seeing the opera, I attended Brian McGahen's memorial service. Tim died two years ago and Eric will die soon and too many other names to be recalled.

January 1997

I can hear the thumping noise from some factory in East Brunswick. A dog barking somewhere, trams rattling away, occasionally an airplane overhead; they've all gone to work and I have some time alone.

It seems they have all been reading the book by Eric Rofes, *Reviving the Tribe*, and talking about borrowed time. But I'm nervous of slogans. I'm not sure whether a tribe can be revived – all those dead men can't be danced back into life – and I don't seem able to muster the resources to deal with a concept like 'time'.

Despite myself not wanting to use images of tribes or war, anything I try to write about HIV becomes filled with war imagery. Even the information from a conference in Europe about new HIV drugs I rewrite as: There are reports from afar about changes, but lines of communication are hard to keep open when some on the ground still believe that photon machines will preserve their immune systems.

It's true though. Some are so dazed by this war they really don't know who to believe. (I don't believe in photon machines but the fellow I had sex with yesterday did. Sadly, he believed a photon machine he had in the corner of his flat would protect his declining CD4 counts.)

May 2001

He said he was watching his life flickering on the back of his eyelids – he sounded kind of surprised but not disturbed. The room in which he died faced the mountains. I remembered the way I watched the cloud shadows pass over the mountains and sitting there with dad thinking, yes, this is what life is. The sun is there, the clouds are moving, the mountains are there and I can watch this shadow play across the mountains. It was a beautiful day, so clear, the sun so strong and the cloud shadows I could see I imagined were similar to the images moving through my father's mind.

From Italo Calvino's Six memos for the new millennium: Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combination of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.

January 2010

The Black American poet, Essex Hemphill, who died of AIDS, writes of his own attempts to return to home and community, to return to what was. After all the searching, he says simply: 'I cannot go home as who I am, and that hurts me deeply'.

This year I have been working on a project about HIV-related stigma and discrimination. Often those words have come into my mind about the experience. I cannot go home as who I am, and that hurts me deeply.

My other favourite writer is the ageing lesbian poet, Adrienne Rich. Her recent collection of essays, *The Human Eye*, begins by recounting the way she became friends with and interested in the poetry of Thomas Avena.

Thomas Avena, amongst other things, was the curator of the Smithsonian AIDS history project *Face to Face*. He was also the editor of a literary magazine which rewarded its contributors with food items, such as smoked salmon, in exchange for poetry.

Adrienne Rich, famous and celebrated poet, was happy to exchange her poetry for smoked salmon. And she was actually more interested in getting to know Avena and his poetry than in having her own work published in his magazine. Having read some of his poetry now, I can understand why.

In his collection, *Dream of order*, are the lines: 'We still crave the body/but we need/its avoidance/and what we want/is impossible.'

This sentiment probably cannot be captured in HIV prevention messages or campaigns. But I think there is something here with explanatory power and, if understood, could help reduce the moralism that exists about HIV and its transmission. We still crave the body but we need its avoidance and what we want is impossible.

Until recently, John Rule held the position of Deputy Director at NAPWA. Rather than us writing a tribute to his many years of service to the organisation, we asked him to contribute something of himself. And he did. We thank him for this and for all the other things he's given us over the years and wish him well for the future.

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