

Affirmations, or An HIV Rhapsody

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after Derek Jarman's "Blue"

*"We dramatize: turn our lives into comedy or tragedy, victory or victimhood."
(Francisco Ibañez-Carrasco)*

This body: what am I going to do with this now, how am I to look at it? Stare at it from afar, as if into a collaged horizon, with a head or a breast peering out on paper, or up close with the veins in my eyeball plastering itself on the shimmering pixels of a television monitor like when I was a child and nobody was looking? I tell Jayson that I do not fear this body, while everybody in the table chatters about something, everything, nothing, I cannot really hear; I don't even think I can hear myself. I tell him, on Sunday I'm going to get a full physical examination. What I don't say to him is, I actually dread these, the words, because what do they mean? Suddenly it is morning and I'm not at Fred's anymore, instead I am in front of a doctor in his office and he's scribbling something on a piece of paper. He looks clean I think, but that's not really the word—polished, like a face on a glossy magazine sheet. He's losing hair I want to comment as he flicks his flashlight pen on and he tells me to open my mouth and say a big "aaah." I wonder what he's looking for, what doctors' hands are in search of when they *feel you up*, how do they not mistake malignant tumors, swollen nodes, the latent and the treacherous, say, for the familiar bumps and grooves, protuberance and depression one has since birth? I worry about the stench of my morning breath as I close my mouth, something that never did cross my mind even after making out with all those complete strangers. He's barely even touched me and we're done, not even a courteous, anything else?, to which I might've answered, yes, I have something *in me*—but it's over now, he sends me out of his office with the

piece of paper to hand to a woman behind a marked desk. They really don't look at you, these men and women typing, searching for your name in their database, like the sleepy-eyed attendants in the lobby of motels—how many have I entered, exited?—the clatter of the keys without any definite climax, but the abrupt pauses as if constantly rehearsed. I turn to the television; a woman goes to the nurse's desk to complain about the reception, I want to see Pope Francis, she says, it's the last day of his visit. The nurse apologizes, there's nothing he can do. I squint trying to discern between the grains of the static and the tiny ecstatic hands of the waving crowd.

ANOTHER CLINIC, ANOTHER flat-screen television. I am in a waiting room, waiting for my number to be called. Here we're not called patients, here we're called "clients," and I am suddenly reminded of other worldly pursuits. *Patience*: the ability to wait for an indefinitely long time. Not really my strongest suit. Today I am supposed to get my CD4 count for the first time, and I am waiting indefinitely for the results to come out. I don't ask what it means, I am nervous, though I know what this type of blood cells are for, what they're referring to, though I still cannot fully grasp the words, the context and their meanings, how they operate in a phrase, a sentence, a conversation, even a thought, nor the intimacy in which every individual who has acquired the virus hold every medical terms close, like a keepsake or a picture under a pillow. I am not, haven't been, entirely acquainted to it yet, so to speak. A while ago, a councilor explains to me through his surgical mask how the virus attacks the T-cells, as in a war, like a siege, he continues, between the AFP and Abu Sayyaf. This confuses me for a second. We are in a much smaller room now, a dimly lighted cubicle with comfortable sofas (I'm thinking coffee shop, maybe a chat show). Then he produces a series of laminated catalogues and asks me in a sing-song voice to point out what my next goals are now that I've been diagnosed positive. The plastic has no more sheen; how many sweaty, balmy fingers, swollen fingers, discolored, skins flaked and scabbed, grazing only the sheath, have tapped at the cartoon figures on the paper underneath? I point at something, anything, wanting to pierce through, to see some version of an outcome, in the flesh, this body hence: To the boy outside in the waiting room, arms and face pink from inflammation, covered in coarse dead skin cracked like some whitened bark of a tree, do they say the same things to him, with the same lyrical intonation? To the boy who can barely walk, barely cough out a sputum, face ashen under the hood of his jacket, accompanied by his mother, is he shown the same

diagrams illustrating the same goals, asked the same questions altogether with the same degree of tempered detachment and consolation? A horror film is being shown in the waiting room, demonic possession, scenes of gore and mutilation, disfigured faces and bodies. Thursday, as I am told, is CD4 day so it is a bit crowded, a spectrum, a parade: from those who just got tested and waiting for their results, to those already on ARVs and there for their pill bottle refill, and to those whose bodies are now host to opportunistic infections, who's just recently found out the underlying cause of their illness. We are all watching the same thing—until somebody switches it to a quaint Korean film, about a man and his fiancé, and his gay lover coming to visit all the way from Paris.

I TELL MY friends I have HIV and a few of them ask, “Who do you think you got it from?” I want to say: Maybe I got it from the man who took me to Galaxy Inn, a hole-in-the-wall motel with a red door somewhere in Pasay where you have to knock and a Chinese man answers, who wouldn't even bother to look at you as you pay ₱150 to rent a rickety room because he's too busy watching a Chinese soap opera. Or could it be from that guy I sucked off behind a tree in Quezon Memorial Circle as a group of tourists came passing by? Was it Mark, Leo, JR, Alex—names misspelled, borrowed, used, and reused, called upon, sometimes merely numbers in a phonebook only materializing as a hard-on or some sudden remembrance of a slick tongue making its way down a nipple, on a rooftop, while the roommate's out, while they're there, a threesome in the backseat of a car, groping each other while driving along the stretch of a road in Laguna, waking up in a crook of a tattooed arm, a mettle of hair, an Adam's apple, curve of a neck, an embrace, do you like that, that honeyed question in the middle of a thrust, that thing called fucking, *kantutan*, *chupaan*, fondly, sour breath, morning breath, beer spit, milk spit, don't cum inside me, cum inside me, where do you want me to shoot, on my chest, my hair, my face, just kiss me, oh please just kiss me, Mark, Leo, JR, Alex. How do you answer *this* question, *who*? You can still have sex, I am told by two councilors on different occasions, and I haven't even mentioned anything. There are safe ways to do it, I am informed, you can do “mutual masturbation,” play with each other's “sensitive parts,” but in fact what they are telling me is this: you must make do with calculated affection. I assume the position. These words mean well but these words do not touch the body, they do not caress, pinch, tickle, do not pucker or sliver goosebumps when met with a warm breath, they do not penetrate. At the pre-

test counselling I am asked, prior to taking the HIV test, how many sexual encounters have you had? I say 50 right off the bat, no, less than 50, I begin to bargain like a lady in a market, 40, no 48, 36, who keeps count, why keep count, just write a number, I'll just write 30, she says and jots it down.

THE VIRUS LOOKS like a complicated but an unfinished *parol*, an awkward rendition of a star. It is an object and I must recognize and treat it this way, lodged inside my body, my cells, attaching itself to my healthy T-cells then burrowing into it in order to replicate itself and take over, some other version of me mutating. They sprawl tiny specs of green under an electron microscope like a tattered carpet of neon-tinted moss. Coming home from the testing center, my sister catches me going up to my room and immediately asks if I'm OK. She's recounting this moment to me, how I looked, as if my face was going to come off my skull, like wet cloth, obviously betraying my answer, yes, I am. We laugh. I have always been compelled to know, but what comes after knowing? The following day I head straight out to Manila. Deep breaths. In the MRT a man coughs next to me. I am jostled along by the crowd in Taft Avenue Station, someone's scratching an itch, picking his nose, someone's sneezing, I don't hold my breath, and in the intersection of Pasay and EDSA I immediately reacquaint myself with its familiar smoke and fume, belching mouths, jeeps and buses, an abundance of hidden illnesses yet unmapped, talking, cognizant beings carrying with them different biological endings some medical term would later categorize and ultimately terminate. I walk along Roxas Boulevard and someone spits, I walk along Mabini St., and someone's burning a small pile of garbage on the pavement next to a rotting corpse of a rat—plants and animals, I read somewhere do not die like human beings, they merely wither away—the city still sweltering in the three o'clock, afternoon heat. I pass by Remedios Church and in the plaza right across, there is a shooting of a shooting scene, policemen behind the doors of their unit cars, guns aimed at the criminal, as a man shouts to the crowd through a megaphone something I cannot discern because his voice only comes out as intermittent clacks. I move along and don't look back when they start firing the mock gunshots, or so I think it's mock. I actually want to sit by the bay and watch the sunset, this time without the help of some film's lens, without a woman in a red dress unravelling a monologue to some lovelorn boy leaving the city; I text this to Mix and G., adding, I feel like a second-rate character in a 1970s social realist novel, but I don't see the sunset because of some strange turn of the weather, and suddenly it begins to drizzle, and the clouds

over the bay look like rain. It's a long way home and I don't want to catch a cold after all.

HERE THEN IS the geography of risk: We mustn't mistake this for the horizon of obliteration, though we might succumb, in a split-second of naïve longing for something beyond this corporeality, to the luxury of nothingness. The blind turns, the sudden dislocations, like the stinging sharp gasp of entering icy waters, there the shadow contours itself, muck, clay, matter, and all reason is gone. What use is reason when slurping tongue, eating ass, or sucking cock? I am available when I risk myself, I am here fully undressed, not just the clothes on my back, but down to my bodily fluids, this, without consecration, I give to you or I receive, *as is*, slick, some viscous mucosa that strings when my fingers part. But you have to know this: there is a virus being passed around, and I have it, and this virus remains ever more potent and lethal when we do not utter it, when we do not name it in a conversation with a friend, a lover, or even a stranger, my dear, sweet stranger, you have a right to your own destruction, yes, but I refuse to be complicit to it, so I'm exposing myself to you, for you, like a wound, whispering, see this, if I can use my body for pleasure then I can face it with all its menagerie of terrors. You, body, you terrible, terrible beautiful thing, this is my letter to you: you are no more than the body of a man who's feet and arms are coiled to his pedicab, grease and sweat and fungus between his toes, or that naked woman squatting along the side-street of España, her ripe, blooming anus hanging above an estero, as if waiting to be plucked. As we walk pass the scaffoldings, the shadow-men sliding in and out of the hollow ribcages of the sprouting condominium buildings of an unfamiliar Cubao, I describe to M., much to his dismay, a man I met online who posts pictures of his sexual conquests and their blood-smearred, beaten assholes. This man has tested positive, and like a caption, this information suddenly makes the images unsettling, even for my taste. M. scolds me endearingly: whenever your most perverse fantasies materialize, you withdraw, you can't take it—M. who is fiercely against my view regarding unprotected, casual sex, insofar as I do not condone, but also do not endorse it. This is pure ambivalence; but then all choices are, up to a certain degree, right at the crux of finally deciding, and to expose oneself to risk is one of them. But what concretizes, what makes the risk real, tangible, and therefore all the more mortifying is the arrival of a consequence, an outcome, that appears to be misunderstood as the negation of a certain risky act, so it bears repeating, in case fantasy do become reality, the nightmare it transforms

into is not some form of punishment or revelation but only, as its course, its immanent aftermath. Gizzards on a travel documentary show. My sister and I watch as the camera makes a sweep: chicken and cow liver, heart, lungs, entrails, grilled, sautéed then tossed, I'm almost choked. I turn to my sister and she quickly gives me a resolute, "No." I haven't had my Hepatitis A shot yet apparently. I don't believe I've been poked this much in a week, I tell the nurse in January as he sticks the fifth needle in my left arm. I don't know if he's smiling or frowning behind his surgical mask. He throws the excess blood in a bin with the other excess blood; where do excess HIV-infected blood go, I wonder? Extraction, immunization, viral loads, CBC, blood levels, first-line drugs, second-line drugs, drug resistance, baseline, vocabulary soundbites thrown around clinics, counselling rooms, hallways with waiting, wilting patients, almost always alone, behind doors with the biohazard sign. If the virus is an object then I must also counter it with another object, the ARVs, I say to my doctor who seems amazed at my calmness. You're open about your status, he comments, as he gets sample bottles of ARVs from his medicine cabinet, and I reply, if I stay quiet about this, doc, I'm going to die. He lets out a polite laugh because he knows this is both exaggeration and truth.

THE SIDE EFFECTS of the antiretroviral drugs *may* include: "decreased appetite, depression, insomnia, abnormal dreams, sleep disorders, depressed mood, headache, dizziness, somnolence, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, rash, skin discoloration, fatigue; fat redistribution, redistribution/accumulation of body fat, including central obesity, dorsocervical fat (buffalo hump), peripheral wasting, facial wasting, breast enlargement; abnormal liver and kidney functions; immune reconstitution syndrome has been reported in patients with combination antiretroviral therapy, [wherein] during the initial phase of combination antiretroviral treatment, patients whose immune system responds may develop an inflammatory response to indolent or residual opportunistic infections (such as *Mycobacterium avium* complex, cytomegalovirus, *Pneumocystis jirovecii* pneumonia, and tuberculosis)"—what is going to save me is going to displace me permanently, a most severe metamorphosis, and I am going to be witness to my slow and inconvenient degeneration! But the doctors assure me otherwise, this may or may not happen, and in the same breath redouble, the virus might mutate and become drug resistant, so you must adhere, no matter how bad the ARVs make you feel, you must take it on time. There is no sing-song tone this time, and a blank is drawn. Everything is so uncertain. My sister interrupts some other

time, I'm just thinking, you get it from pleasure—although, I supplement, you also get it from sharing needles, blood transfusion, and from breastmilk when the mother is HIV positive—but that word, that word never fails to compel. *Ne pas céder sur son désir*: how can you not give in to desire, how can we ever secede from it when all experience is, at its core bound in the heightening of the senses, a scent, a musk, an aftershave, gorgeous, calloused hands, a deep breaking voice, the putrid rank of an armpit, moist lips, a sigh. Felix, in *The Normal Heart*, emaciated, like a worn-down gargoyle, shoulder blades and spine protruding, and body riddled with purple KS lesions, asks Dr. Emma if he and his partner can kiss; this was the early 1980s when HIV and AIDS were frighteningly new and there was no treatment for the either the ailing or recently diagnosed. There is still no cure for the virus, there are only medicines (here in the Philippines, it is relatively free), combination drugs which comprise the highly active antiretroviral therapy, HAART, that stem the process of the virus's reproduction, turning HIV into a "chronic manageable, but episodic disability" as Ibañez-Carrasco puts it. Can we kiss, Felix asks, and I am back at Sarah's one summer a long long time ago, my Summer of 100 Kisses. I never even got to kiss more than five people but I am delighted. How many have I kissed so far, having always assumed it's a legitimate life goal to kiss as many people as possible? I am in P. Tuazon one night bringing S. home after I break the news to her in person. We haven't spoken to each other for over a year because of a fight, for reasons I forget now, and she kisses me on the lips before saying good night like we always do.

IN THE DESERTED lobby of an apartment, at past three o'clock in the morning, CMC says to me: stop talking as if it were your last, please, because it's not. She's mad, and we're both drunk. I tell her I'll do my best.

THERE'S A BUZZ like a mosquito, a kind of habit that is as deadly, another exaggeration and truth, a tabloid blind item, we have a friend who just tested positive, and conspiratorially, you better get checked, while in some boarding house there is a running joke of somebody having HIV, or while waiting for a play's open house, a group of college students laugh as one of them taunts the other, drinking out of his cantina, *yak, kadiri, may AIDS*. That's Tita Aida for you. A joke is *not* humor, for humor is lived, it is everyday, sudden and ephemeral, where in the direst, cruelest of situations there is courage and endurance to laugh in acknowledging ones profound pathetic limitedness, and find that despite being the measure of all things, we are in turn, measured

by our exact finitude. Jokes, on the other hand, are icebreakers for the bored, the ignorant, and the malcontent, and most of the time, the privileged. A joke necessitates a punchline, it's the only way it can survive, and in this joke, *I am* the punchline, I am outside of it, and I tell Mix, for the first time ever, I feel like an absolute, definite *other*: They don't have what I have and this excludes me. To say *a cruel joke* is redundant; perhaps a joke is really not humane.

AT THE DESK at the social hygiene clinic in Project 7, a woman fills up my form and asks for my gender, to which she also answers, in a low voice, MSM, but I don't understand this so I quickly say, *gay!*, in a louder voice—although I prefer *bakla*—so that even the rowdy, chirpy GROs in their baggy day clothes getting their health cards can hear it, but she writes MSM anyway. You're getting checked for, she asks next, this time in an absolute whisper, I lean forward, but decide not to respond because she's going to answer it for me anyway, you're getting checked for HIV, mouthing the acronym, and just so we're clear, I nod and pronounce it for her, yes, I'm getting checked for HIV. She's embarrassed *for* me; a coworker comes to the table and asks her what she wants for lunch. I offer my right arm to the nurse, Ate Luna, who then asks me if I'm ready, as she unwraps the plastic syringe, and I say, this is my third time to come here this week, I think I am. She apologizes as she searches for a vein, all the health workers in QC were in Angeles for a workshop. She jabs it in and pulls it out, and Ate Luna is the only nurse who does not give me any bruising. I wait for the result while everyone is out for lunch and it is silent in the testing center, except for the outdated, crisping, plastic-covered posters of men glancing sideways, who I suppose, do not know their status and are in a sexual health quandary; a stray *hantik* crosses my leg. I walk past patients adorning both sides of the hallways in the doctor's clinics building of a hospital, like garlands, walkers, canes, and wheelchairs as shiny ornaments. I find a seat next to an old man and the familiar faces of young men wearing caps, big sunglasses, and surgical masks are there, and across me, two of them seem to be having a very lovely conversation. The same men are in my clinic in Cubao, caps, big sunglasses, surgical masks, with a slight variation of hoodies. There, in their file cabinets, I am not called by my name, I am a number code. I ask my doctor why and he says here we don't use real names, for confidentiality purposes, for your protection, and I notice this too in almost all of the sign-up sheets I boldly inscribe my name onto, in some boxes, just a mishmash of numbers and letters, and sometimes just gibberish. Patient

zero will be proud. But why not when we are so used to this, pulse bursting with excitement and dread, so enamored by the alleyways and waiting sheds where the incompetent shaft of streetlights merely fine tune our sight to a haze, smoldering pumps of iron lifted into the air, gym locker rooms, saunas, always behind something, a curtain of smoke, a coughing fog machine, as we wait in anticipation for the drag queen to finish her act so that we can squeeze and embroil ourselves into a dim mass of bodies with no fire exit where we are sliced open, pieces of meat, by strobe lights and discoballs, and once they turn the houselights back on, we run out into the streets tucking in our wigs and half-slips and we pause to check if we're acting like a clerk, an employee with a desk, a father, a boyfriend, a mason, a *kumpare*, a barista, an engineer with a hardhat, a business man, a responsible man, a man of honor. So I am jumping on the bed wearing my sister's flowy, gypsy skirt with paisley prints and I am nine or ten, the soft, lingering feel of the fabric on my legs, possessed by the way it floats when I land. Suddenly my mother calls me, she's seen me through the doorway. She tells me not to remove the skirt, as I approach her, heart beating fast from all the jumping, my baby brother in her arms, suckling contently on her tit. Mother and child. She says nothing for a while, just stares at me, until she asks me if I know what a screaming faggot is. I shake my head. That's what they're going to call you if you continue to act like that.

BORGES: "ALTHOUGH A man's life is compounded of thousands and thousands of moments and days, those many instants, and those many days may be reduced to a single one, the moment when a man knows who he is, when he sees himself face to face."

BATOPERI, ILOG DUPINGA. I am standing on the riverbank watching a group of children circle a stone outcrop in the middle of the river, about two-storey high. Once in a while, two or three of them would climb up the rock, until all I can see are darting shoulders and heads with wet hair reflecting the midday sun, then they would disappear followed by a splash, catching their breaths as they reemerge in the water to watch the next set do the same. I watch them do this over and over. The last time I jumped off another outcrop was in Bacolod after a workshop, much higher than this; there were also children, diving and somersaulting into the water. I didn't even think twice back then, I just took off my clothes, took the leap into the greenish pool, and when I resurfaced, I was surrounded by small, bobbing, giggling heads, egging me to do it again. I

want to do it again, so I call out to the children, how do I get there? They said, just swim across. But the current is fast and strong, I say, I can't even keep my balance from where I'm standing. Just go with the flow, one of them yells; I have more respect for rivers than seas because the little whirls and whirlpools underneath are more unpredictable, but still, I manage to cross, paddling as hard as I can until I reach the part where the rock divides the water, where it is calm. Bakla!, a girl suddenly calls, and when I turn she is not looking at me but at a skinny boy, about nine or ten, who's on top of the rock with the other older boys, that's his name?, I ask the girl, and she nods smiling, why, I ask, and she shrugs, "*Bakla siya, rumarampa siya gabi-gabi.*" I laugh as I am dumbfounded. I watch Bakla for a moment as again and again, he climbs up the rock, and I realize he's the one leading this little expedition, driving his companions to jump to the part where it's deeper, do different couplings, in twos or threes or fives, of choreographed dives, sashaying before plunging down, then without any pause hiking back up again. Relentless. At last it's my turn and they are all staring up at me. I look down and it's pretty high. I hesitate. But Bakla shouts, "*Sige na, kuya, sige na, hinga ng malalim, talon!*" I do and I hit the water and when I open my eyes, everything is blue.