

Remembering Trauma: HIV/AIDS Literature and Intergenerational Memory

A Creative and Critical Response

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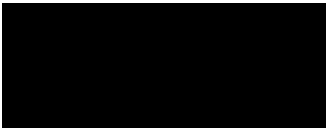
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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.



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Abstract

The thesis consists of creative and critical sections that explore and discuss the AIDS crisis and the way in which memories and experiences of it can be explored in the present. The creative portion 'Ricordare' is a series of vignettes that move from the past to the present, alternating points of view from the narrator, myself, and that of a relative who has died of HIV/AIDS complications. The work explores the stigma attached to the disease, even years later, and the way in which memory is problematised due to this. It represents a quest to understand the past and endeavours to represent the life and suffering of a man whom both family and time has tried to forget.

The exegetical portion of the work examines the short stories of Susan Sontag and Andrew Holleran in conjunction with the work 'Ricordare'. Using the framework postmemory and its evocation of memory and pain in the present, I argue that the literary devices and themes present within these works allow for interactions with experiences of trauma to occur, and provide a framework through which memory can be accessed and mediated in the present. The thesis aims to highlight the essential nature of literatures of trauma, and the importance of writing and reading itself as a means of understanding the past and ensuring experiences of marginalisation, trauma and loss are not forgotten through the distance time provides.

Ricordare

By Jasmine Castellano

*We all deserve absolution,
but especially You. You and Faith,
You've got the same hungerpunch, same song
still rising off the watertrain running through the laws
of a man dead set on daylight
digging marbles from the trees
of a Love not scared to make no sense
still monkey enough to see
the same devastating reason for living this life*

- Buddy Wakefield 'Giant Saint Everything'

For Salvatore.

I.

The wind carries their laughter across the back paddock.

Salvatore is hunched over, his delighted giggles gasping out of him as his cousins run about and tag each other. It's spring, and the breeze is warm as it laps at his arms. Sweat beads along his hairline as he catches his breath, Nonna calling out to them dotingly from her chair under the fruit trees.

Apples, figs, and prickly pears had teased them from just out of reach, and she had given a soft laugh at their childish despair as they tried to jump up and grab them. Salvatore and his cousins had watched excitedly as Nonna had she reached up, grasped a small treasure, and brought it to her nose to smell the sugary sweetness. She hummed an idle tune, a smile stretching the loose skin of her mouth before she passed the fruit along to one of them.

Salvatore had pushed Maria out of the way, both of them squabbling over who was to receive the honour. He reached it before her, crying out in victory and laughing when Nonna grabbed his ear and chastised him with a fond exasperation. The white folds of her apron were gathered into a makeshift pouch, the fruit jostling happily around as she retrieved more. Salvatore had placed the pear with the rest, careful not to bruise it, his feet quickly shifting to chase after Josie as she ran up and smacked at his shoulder.

He collapses on the grass now, sprawling his limbs out and squinting up at the sky. He tries to make shapes amongst the clouds, spotting a rabbit, then a horse, then a lumpy mass that makes him giggle and go to call out to his brother and tell him it looks like his face, but a tickle against his arm stops him. Salvatore looks and there's a small worm lazily crawling up his skin. He sits up so quickly his head whirls with a second of dizziness, an involuntary whine leaving his mouth as he impossibly tries to hold his arm further away from him. His nose scrunches up and he raises his hand to smack at it, but pauses when a shadow falls over him, Nonna hovering above him. She tuts at him, shaking her head and ushering him to stand.

"Essere gentile," she murmurs.

It is kind, but stern, and Salvatore feels a rush of shame at her reprimanding him.

“Mi dispiace,” he says, staring at his feet.

Nonna’s withered hands, wrinkled from years of farming, reach out and pluck the worm from his arm. She cups it, nodding for Salvatore to follow as she shuffles over to a nearby tree nestled amongst her lovingly tended patches of flowers, and places it upon a leaf.

Salvatore’s hair falls into his eyes as Nonna cards her fingers through it, smiling at him and sighing.

“Call for lunch,” she tells him, her English fractured and slow.

“Okay, Nonna,” he says. He runs across the paddocks, raising his voice and shrieking to his cousins to come inside for food.

Years later he will think of that lesson, still squeamish when the fluttering wings or scuttling legs of insects touch him. He will try and do the same; collecting the tiny creatures in his hands, walking outside to find a leaf or a patch of grass, and set them down in silent acts of remembrance.

II.

Salvatore is bored.

It's Sunday, and the air in the church is thick and stifling. Father Dominic had pulled him aside before mass, placing a hand on his shoulder and asking if he was ready for the responsibility of altar boy. Salvatore had tried to nod respectfully, resisting the urge to scratch where the cheap robes his mother had pulled over his head that morning itched at his arms. *It's an honour*, she had said earlier in a rush, huffing in exasperation and moving past him to kneel next to his sister, rubbing ferociously at a stain Carmela had managed to mar her dress with.

He tries to repeat that to himself now, and knows his father will be cross if he doesn't fulfil his duties. But his mind wanders, and he traces his eyes over the stained glass of Mother Mary, picking out the chips and marks he has memorised from years of sitting in the hard pews. He glances over to them now, picking out his family amongst the sea of devoutly bored faces. Gino's eyes are glazed over, and Salvatore watches as his brother fiddles with his tie, loosening and then tightening it again when their mother turns to him with a stern look and slaps at his hand. Salvatore bites back a giggle, and tries to train his face back into a look of solemn reverence. The priest drones on, and Salvatore's skin continues to itch. The hot summer morning prickles at the back of his neck, beads of sweat running down his spine and sending a shiver through his body.

A sharp clearing of a throat snaps him to attention. There is an awkward lull, and Salvatore moves with a jolt. He rushes to ring the bells seated next to him, breathing a sigh of relief when the Priest continues with his Eucharist prayer, urging the Holy Spirit to come down and bless their bread and wine.

Salvatore hates the taste of it.

Gino and Carmela are giggling quietly when he looks to them, the murmurs of warning from their mother not enough to dampen their amusement at their brother's mistake. Salvatore doesn't mind; he likes making them laugh. He catches Gino's eye and they share a sniggering smile as he pokes his tongue out. He brings his hands to

his head and sticks his fingers up either side in a pair of makeshift devil horns, nodding in the direction of Father Dominic. Salvatore delights when Gino has to bring his hands to his mouth to smother his laugh. The smile slips from his face when he looks to his father, seated next to Gino and glaring to Salvatore with a familiar look of disappointment. He makes a sharp cutting gesture through the air with his hand; his jaw clenched tight in a stern message of *stop it, right now*. Salvatore's stomach drops, and he fixes his eyes back to the stained glass.

Father Dominic's droning voice invites him and the other altar boy to rise. The boy's name is Francesco. He holds his head high, sidling in front to reach communion first, giving his thanks and bowing his head like a good Catholic boy who probably doesn't forget his nightly Hail Mary. Francesco went to the same school as him, two years ahead, his age showing as he towered over Salvatore, his church robes barely long enough to graze his anklebones.

"Franco's son is a good boy," his father had said one night. "He made the football team."

It was small talk around the dinner table, but Salvatore knew it was meant as a barb at him.

"I tried, Papa," he told him quietly.

Papa had exhaled harshly through his nose. "Sicuro," he muttered.

Salvatore did not tell him what had happened when he stepped onto the field. Francesco had been there with his friends, a few footballs scattered around as they sat on the grass, their shirtless chests glistening with sweat in the afternoon sun, Salvatore coming to a halting stop as a tightness pulled at his groin.

"It's il piccolo principe," Francesco cut in, drawing a laugh from his friends.

He caught himself staring at the fullness of Francesco's lower lip as he spoke, something unsettling crawling under his skin.

He didn't stay after that. The burning in his eyes was humiliating, the boys' jeers stabbing at him as he turned and rushed back to the school, hatred burning in his gut.

Salvatore's feet move of their own accord as he takes the bread from Father Dominic with a mumbled 'amen'. He holds the bowl of Christ's flesh close to the altar, and the congregation begins to line up and wait for him to pass them a piece of salvation. The dry, tasteless bread dissolves on his tongue as they move past, and Salvatore tries not to gag as he swallows hard, not meeting his father's eyes as he stops in close. He stares down at the cracked leather of his father's shoes, blindly handing him a piece and ignoring the irritated huff as his father walks away.

The mass passes quickly after that. Before long he is packed into the car with his siblings, pulling the robe over his head and breathing heavily as the cool air soothes his skin, his father's comments about his disrespect for God background music to the relief. Salvatore stares out the window, thinking of the tree house he and Gino still need to paint when they get home.

III.

Zia still doesn't talk about you.

She keeps a photo in the dining room, right above the tortured face of Christ on the cross. It is you, Carmela and Gino huddled together as children. It fits in; a puzzle piece along a great timeline of photographs Zia has perfectly curated.

She took me with her once to buy a frame and I watched as she ran her fingertips along different finishes of wood and curled metal, humming and shaking her head until she found one worthy. I had thought the one she picked was ugly, the wood too dark and engraved with garish flowers. I had been proud, though, to see it hung on the wall in a place of honour. Her and Zio's smiling faces stared back at me from a snapshot of their last wedding anniversary, dressed in their best clothes at a restaurant serving Calabrian food Zia said she could make herself for a quarter of the price. I had stared at the new addition, taking it in and tracing my eyes over the stretch of photographs.

I don't know why, but I noticed it then.

The photos of your siblings increased along the wall. Their wedding portraits were in larger and more ornate frames, photos of each of their children dotted around them on the day of their births and proud graduation moments. I was only 11, but I knew your name, and could pick your face out amongst a sea of grins.

Your absence stuck out like a missing tooth. Only chubby cheeked photos of you as a child dotted the wall, not further along, missing amongst the ageing photos of your siblings.

"Zia?" I called. She was standing off to the side, running an old cloth along the window sill to catch dust she was paranoid marred her home. She turned to me, smiling and making an absent noise. "Where's Salvatore?" I asked, pointing towards the latter cluster of frames.

The pause was heavy. The lines of Zia's face seemed to deepen, and she reached down to clench at her apron, the threadbare material pulling tight across her soft hips.

"Zia?" I repeated.

Nonno had come into the room then, and walked to his sister's side. She was silent and hunched in on herself, looking even smaller than usual. I knew I had said something wrong, but I didn't know what, or why she was so upset.

"Lucia?" Nonno asked.

Zia seemed to snap from the moment, looking to Nonno and shaking her head as she walked out of the room in a flurry of floral fabric and disappeared around the corner.

Nonno followed her. I sat on the lounge, worry making my hands tighten and fiddle with the hem of my dress. I stared at my lap resisting the urge to look to the photos once again, even as your young face imprinted itself on the backs of my eyelids.

Nonno's heavy steps returned a few minutes later, his fists buried deep in his pockets.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

Nonno had exhaled deeply, and sat down next to me, making me bounce a little on the lounge cushion. He wrapped his arm around me, and I curled into his side, the familiar scent of his aftershave calming me.

It was quiet for a moment, until Nonno heaved another deep sigh.

"Zia is, she does not—" Nonno broke off, the limits to his English frustrating him.

"Lei è facilmente suscettibili." *She's easily upset.*

"I didn't mean to upset her," I sniffled.

"Lo so, bella." *I know, beautiful.*

“Should I go see if she’s okay?”

“Lascialo da solo.” Nonno cautioned. *Leave it alone.*

“But—”

“È per il meglio.” *It’s for the best.*

“Okay,” I whispered. I stopped asking then, but it did not quiet my mind.

Nonno took me home after that. I thought of your face as I fell asleep that night, remembering your smile and thinking it was kind as my eyes fell heavy and I drifted.

IV.

There is a crack in the roof of Salvatore's room. He doesn't know how long it has been there, the small stretch of it spreading since his childhood and snaking its way across the plaster. It branches off, small webs extending from a focal point of pressure; going, going, going, until—

He bites back a hiss as he shifts, ribs aching at the slight movement. Finding a way to curl up that doesn't hurt is a challenge. The pain thrums low and insistent beneath his skin, an unceasing awareness he cannot distract himself from. He wonders if he stares hard enough if the crack will split further, crumbling the old roof above him and covering him in dust; breaking as the words finally spill from his mouth in an exhausted rush.

There is a bruise blossoming across his stomach. A farewell note courtesy of Francesco, marring his skin as a twisted reminder, their boyhood insults no longer enough for him to make his point. Salvatore wonders if his dad would be proud of him if he were one of those boys. If he banded together with them to tease the girls, sneaking cigarettes behind the canteen and planning how they would spend Friday night after school, hormones thrumming through their veins as they pretended to listen in class. Maybe it would be easier. He would smell heavily of smoke and alcohol that the teachers would turn a blind eye to, dismissing him as one of them. It is a far off fantasy, another world that doesn't mesh with this one.

There's a knock at the door. It opens before he can call out to whoever it is to go away. Carmela slips inside, closing the creaking wood behind her with soft thud. They stare at each other for a fraught moment, her eyes darting down to where Salvatore's protectively hugging his torso. He tries not to flinch from the weight of her gaze, clenching his jaw hard and moving to sit up. He cannot bite back the gasp of pain that hisses through his lips as manages to settle against the headboard, breaths heavy like he's just trekked up a great flight of stairs. The wood digs painfully into his back, pressing against his tender flesh.

Carmela is still staring, her young face creased heavy with worries she should not have to consider. He wonders when he started to fail her as a big brother. He remembers when he used to take her into his room when Papa would become angry. Their mother would try and pacify his temper and they would dart away into Salvatore's room; dragging a set of drawers in front of the door and praying to Mother Mary to deliver them from the grips of their father's beer bottle.

Now she is the one that does the pacifying, their mother long since given up, but Carmela continues to stand brave, taking the brunt of their father's disappointment in him. *"You shouldn't have to," he had told her on a rare quiet weekend Papa had been at work. "He won't hurt me," she had replied, busying herself with her textbook.* Not like he would you, had remained unsaid.

She has grown up without him noticing, he realises. A veritable young woman, no longer a small girl.

"Do you want some ice?" she asks him then.

"No, it's okay."

They both fall silent.

"Mama's worried about you," Carmela says eventually.

Salvatore tries not to flinch. He does not want to worry her of all people. Papa's disappointment he can handle, but seeing the anxious creases of his mother's face, the way she often raises a hand to her mouth with a shake of her head, words escaping her when he and his Father's tempers clash. It makes a stone of shame lodge itself deep between his ribs, stabbing deep with each tear she tries to hide from him.

"She shouldn't," he sighs back, picking at a loose thread on his bedspread.

"Shouldn't she?" Carmela asks. She is not looking at Salvatore, but her hands clench in a tight ball in her lap. She is so like their mother, her features a younger and less

strained version, none of the traces of Papa in her face that makes Salvatore cringe away from Gino at times.

“What are you trying to say?” he asks eventually. A brief swell of panic rushes under his skin, his heart pounding heavy in his chest.

“They know you sneak out, Sal,” Carmela sighs. “We all do.”

He doesn't respond. His frustration clogs high in his throat, and he doesn't know how he could begin to explain. How she would take it if he let the sordid truth of it roll off his tongue, not hiding it behind layers of teenage rebellion.

“I thought you might,” he says instead.

Carmela reaches for his arm, wrapping her fingers around his wrist to try and grab his attention.

“What are you doing?” she asks. “Where do you go?”

Salvatore feels trapped by her gaze. He is older than her, he should be the one worrying and protecting her, trying to scare off the boys he knows are starting to stare. But instead he feels flayed open, all the ugly parts of him exposed for her to prod at.

“It doesn't matter,” he mutters.

“It matters to me!” she insists. Her hand tightens around his wrist. Salvatore tugs it away, remaining staunch in his silence. Carmela bites her lip with worry, and they sit next to each other like marble statues, everything he cannot say filling the space between them.

“Please be careful,” Carmela whispers eventually. He can hear the tears in her voice, thick and painful through each word.

He still does not say anything, his chest tight.

Carmela breathes out a shuddering exhale, and rises from the bed. Salvatore's gaze fixes back to the crack in the roof. It seems worse than before, branching off and splitting the white plaster into ugly mars.

"Papa worries too, you know," Carmela tells him, pausing halfway out of the room.

Salvatore snorts. The one thing he is sure of is how little his father cares.

"He does," she insists. "Try to remember that."

She pulls the door shut behind her as she leaves. Salvatore collapses back onto his bed and buries his face in his too hard pillow. He pretends the stinging in his eyes is from the onions he can smell his mother cooking as she starts dinner.

V.

I went shopping with Zia Josie once. Mum had insisted I go to bond with her, despite my pleas as I imagined how sore my feet would be as I was dragged from shop to shop with her looking through every rack for the perfect dress. Mum had insisted though, and I reluctantly went with her, purposefully wearing a hideous pair of joggers I knew Zia Josie would scrunch her nose at. I had never enjoyed shopping, much to the dismay of many of my female relatives whose main idea of bonding was their weekly therapeutic shopping trips to Bondi Junction.

Zia scurried into a homewares shop that day and I followed her in, dragging my hand across a faux fur throw blanket artfully sprawled in a messy heap across the display bed. I fought the urge to sit on the bed, my feet still sore despite my appropriate footwear, and watched as Zia went to inspect a series of gaudy vases adorning a table. I stopped close to her, and she turned to me, eyes stuck to the bottom of the vase, trying to ascertain its price.

“Do you think this will match—” she began.

“Giuseppina? Is that you?” a voice called out, cutting her off.

Zia and I both turned. An older man was standing behind the register, half smiling towards us, his eyes lighting up as he got a full view of Zia’s face.

“Ah, it is!” he said excitedly.

He rushed towards us, and I noted the slick parting of his hair and the too tight stretch of his shirt across his chest. His eyebrows were carefully waxed, still sitting thick and heavy above his eyes, a small gold cross glinting from the open collar of his shirt, nestled between wiry curls peeking out from his chest.

“Marco!” Zia said in surprise.

The two came together, kissing each other on both cheeks and hugging for a short moment, speaking over each other in an excited rush.

“It’s been so long!” Marco intoned.

“I know, I know,” Zia exclaimed. “You know how things are.”

Marco nodded in agreement, eyes flicking towards me in question, and Zia picked up on the unspoken queue.

“Ah, this is my niece, Maria’s daughter,” Zia said, gesturing towards me.

Marco’s face lit up, and he leaned in close, kissing both my cheeks and giving me a warm hug as if we were more than passing acquaintances. I still wasn’t sure who he was, but his cheerfulness made me smile.

“Of course! Look at you, you were a baby the last time I saw you!” he exclaimed.

It made sense. I did not recognise his face, but he and Zia embraced like long lost family members. I had grown used to a large hoard of extended friends and family seemingly knowing me when I could not recognise them; generations of people that had lost touch as time passed but whose blood drew them back together even years down the road.

“It’s nice to see you again,” I told him, ingrained politeness prompting me.

Marco smiled again before turning back to Zia. Their conversation flowed quickly after that, rapid sentences that cut in and out of each other with short laughs, their hands raised in animatic gestures, splitting between Italian and English in a fractured rush. My attention drifted, and only stray words registered after a while.

I watched as another woman walked around the shop, stopping at the register and steadily growing more agitated as she was left unattended. I found it amusing seeing the obvious looks she kept shooting towards Marco and Zia, and the way they ignored

it in favour of each other. Their conversation drew back my attention mid sentence, Marco asking, "...and Lucia? How is she?"

"Oh, you know," Zia waved off, as if that explained it all. There was an odd look on her face, a tightness to her words that I had long since learned meant she was uncomfortable.

Marco sighed. "It's been years. You think they'd-" he broke off. "Salvatore would hate it."

Your name snapped through me, my gaze quickly swinging back to both of them. Marco was staring over Zia's shoulder, seemingly lost in thought, and Zia's smile froze on her lips.

"You knew Salvatore?" I asked before I could stop myself, drawing both their attention towards me.

Marco looked confused. "Yes, of course, *bella*. He—"

"Oh, we don't need to get into that," Zia laughed, although it was put on.

I watched Marco as his face closed off in what looked like familiar defeat. I had never seen Zia do that, something verifiably *rude* by her standards, but Marco just nodded as if he expected nothing less.

"You're right, you're right," he muttered. He tried for a smile, but it was strained and barely reached his eyes. "It was lovely to see you again," he said to me, leaning in for another round of kisses.

"You too," I told him.

"We must catch up sometime," he insisted to Zia.

"Of course," she promised. I could tell she did not mean it.

They repeated the process of kisses before Marco walked back to the counter, bidding us farewell with a quick wave. Zia had already turned, ushering me out of the store, and I watched as the smile fell from her lips.

“*Minchia*, his poor mother,” Zia muttered. “How she doesn’t see it I’ll never know.”

She rustled around in her handbag, passing me a handful of her shopping bags as she huffed and looked for her phone.

“Who was that?” I asked.

Zia paused and looked at me, something warring across her features. “An old family friend,” she settled on.

There was more to it and I wanted to know.

“He knew Salvatore? Zia Lucia’s son?” I asked.

Zia sighed, finally finding her phone and grabbing the bags off me again, squinting down at the screen and trying to dial a call.

“We knew him growing up,” she said with a wave of her hand. “We lost touch after, well, everything.”

I still did not know what had happened, and the purposefully evasive way everyone talked about you made me even more confused.

“What happened?” I pressed.

“It’s a long story, *bella*,” she said.

Her attention was elsewhere after that. I tried to call after her, still wanting to know more, but she was already walking into another store, her handfuls of bags jostling

about as she started talking in rapid fire Italian to whoever she had called. I followed her dejectedly, not for the first time wondering what could have happened to make everyone so reluctant to talk about you.

VI.

Salvatore's room is full of boxes. He is sitting on his mattress, the sheets stripped and tucked away. His walls were bare when he came home this morning. All the posters and drawings from his younger cousins, the odd bits of newspaper clippings and movie has stubs had been crumpled in the rubbish, stuffed so full the bin was overflowing.

He already feels like he does not belong. Mama had told him to come back when his father would be at work, but she could not look him the eye when he knocked on the door of his childhood home, stepping back and walking into the kitchen before he could so much as lean in for a kiss. He had fought the urge to go after her and draw her in for a hug, wanting to make her laugh with some silly joke he knew she did not quite get but still found amusing.

He is not allowed to do that anymore.

He grabs the packing tape on the bed next to him, steeling himself and pushing away his thoughts. The boxes are quick work, his belongings mostly clothes and a few stray books he can't bear to leave behind. It only takes him an hour to have them all ready to go, his watch ticking by too quickly, reminding him he is on borrowed time in the confines of these walls. He marvels that so much of his childhood could be packed away so quickly.

He lifts two of the heavy boxes and moves to the door, fingers straining and using his foot to pull it open and precariously balance, freezing when he hears a muffled shout from the other side of the house. Salvatore rushes to the lounge room, boxes dropped with a loud bang, worry making him momentarily forget.

“What's—” he asks, but he falls silent as he takes in the scene.

Mama is huddled on one side of the room, Carmela at her side, both of them trying to talk down Papa who is practically vibrating with anger. Gino's there too, his arms

crossed over his broad chest, silently watching. He is the first to notice Salvatore, and his lip curls up as his brother stares at him.

“Mama,” Salvatore croaks.

Mama sobs, shaking her head and turning away from him.

“Get out of my house,” Papa spits at him. He is visibly shaking, clenching his fists and glaring at Salvatore like he’s a piece of scum under his boot.

“Tony, please!” Mama pleads. Carmela keeps trying to comfort her, drawing her in and making gentle hushing noises, casting desperate looks to Salvatore as her own eyes fill with tears.

“Get out,” Papa repeats. He takes a menacing step forward and Salvatore cringes back, fear stiffening his body.

“Just let him go,” Gino says. He steps in front of their father, pressing a hand to his chest to hold him back. He towers over him, gently but insistently trying to push him away and broaden the distance between him and Salvatore.

“*Finnocchio*,” Papa hisses at him.

Salvatore flinches, nausea crawling through his abdomen, his eyes stinging with tears he refuses to let his father see him shed.

“Get your things and go,” Gino says, barely bothering to look back at Salvatore as he does.

“Gino—” he swallows.

“Don’t,” Gino tells him, harsh and cold. “Just go, Sal.”

Salvatore's chest tears itself apart. He rushes to load the boxes into the back of the car, the house and his mother still crying, Gino watching from the porch as if to make sure he goes, all of it blurring and fractured in his vision, his lungs stuck heavy in his chest. He tries to make as few trips as possible, refusing to raise his eyes from his feet even as he hears the gentle sobs his mother lets out.

The final box is loaded into the car, and Salvatore looks back to the house, tracing over the familiar brick archways for what feels like the last time. Everyone is inside now, no one there to wave at him as he drives off or to yell out pleasant farewells. His weight drops into driver's seat, hands still shaking as he puts it into drive but reflexively parking it again when he hears the slamming of the front door. He cranes his neck and it's Carmela, rushing out of the house towards him. Desperation claws at his lungs, his lips quivering as she rounds the car towards him. She is breathing heavily, a look of pure helplessness marring her pretty face, both of them knowing there is too much to say and not enough time.

"I'm sorry," Carmela settles on. Her words are broken, and Salvatore feels a momentary stab of hatred for making his little sister sound so shattered. "I'll come see you soon. I have Marco's number."

Tears sting at Salvatore's eyes. "I'll talk to you soon," he promises, pinching at her nose. Carmela gives a watery laugh, leaning through the window and hugging him tight before wiping at her eyes and walking quickly back up to the house. Salvatore watches through the rear view mirror and sees her disappear. He wipes at his eyes and slowly makes his way down the pothole-ridden driveway.

VII.

My mum keeps everything. My brother would joke to me when we were younger that she is a hoarder. He insisted that she never remembers anything because she doesn't have to; all of it stacked inside gift boxes bought from the bargain store down the road, ready to be called upon and pulled out for examination. I think it runs in the family sometimes. I catch myself doing it too, and force myself to throw things away before I end up with a room dedicated to moments that someone will have to clean out when I die. Jessica thinks I'm just morbid when I mention it, but then again she has always been more like Mum.

I rifled through one of those boxes after school in a fit of boredom once. I was in high school and the tightness of my buttoned winter blouse had annoyed me. I huffed in frustration, pulling the buttons loose and holding the box tight to my chest with the other. I dropped on the carpet next to my brother, who has staring off into the distance rather than at his TAFE work mapped out before him. Pulling the lid off I bumped him with my shoulder and he sighed, pushing his books away with ink stained fingertips.

"I'm trying to do my work, you know," he huffed.

"Then do your work," I mimicked in the same annoying voice. He pinched at my arm in retaliation, a sharp bite of pain that made me squirm. I ignored him, pulling out the tiny folds of paper and spreading them across the carpet. There were bouquets of flowers across the fronts, mixed in with gold crosses and rosary beads, all of them different but still holding the same images.

"Why does she keep these?" I asked.

"You know Mum never throws anything away," he sighed. "It's what she does."

I thought it was depressing.

I wasn't thinking about you then, I didn't know I had reason to. I picked up the shining pieces of cardboard, flicking through them and recognising a few faces I could pick out from family functions when I was younger, but most of them I didn't know.

One was of a great uncle, Zio Carlo, his pudgy face one I could not recognise. He was smiling in his photo, but still managed to look serious. His bowtie was undone around his neck, his arm around his wife who was cut out of the photo. I did not remember much of him, but Mum had always made me go up and kiss him hello, and he'd pull on my plait and tell me I had grown. I remember going to his funeral and picking up one of the cards, then shoving it between the gap in the car seats on the way home.

"Here," I said, passing it to my brother. I kept handing him ones of people we knew, and he would hum and sit them in a little pile on top of each other, the others of unrecognisable faces thrown back into the lid of the box.

I picked up another, but this one was smaller the rest. I wasn't paying that much attention at first, distracted by the Law and Order episode playing on the TV, but I eventually flicked my eyes down, and froze as I stared at the name.

Salvatore Moretti 1956-1988.

It was the first photo of you I had seen beyond childhood. Your face was handsome, and you looked happy with your hair in frizzy curls and a bright blue polo hugging your chest.

"That's—" I broke off. I nudged my brother to get his attention.

"What?" he asked.

"Him," I said, indicating the card. I don't know what I was thinking, but it felt like something was clicking into place, and Zia Lucia's time weathered face flashed to the front of mind.

“Salvatore, yeah,” he said offhandedly. “Zia Lucia and Zio Tony’s son.”

“Oh,” I said. I sounded upset, and my brother looked at me in confusion.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I could not look away from your face. I thought you had lived overseas maybe, that you did not come home for the holidays and had steadily grown distant. That Zia didn’t like talking about you because of your rare visits. I felt that stupid that it had never clicked before, that I did not realise what had happened.

“I didn’t know he died,” I said eventually.

My brother wasn’t paying attention. He took the card and added it to pile, dragging his work back in front of him when a couple of minutes went by and I stopped passing them to him. Something sank heavy in my stomach, and I swallowed hard, staring back to the TV lost in thought.

VIII.

Salvatore drums his finger against the café table. Sharp stabs of pain shoot up his fingers at the action, the nails bitten short and bloody with nerves. He is early, the obnoxious clock above him telling him it is still ten to ten, and there's no reason for him panic just yet. The familiar café is the same as always. He hasn't been back in months, but he knows the patrons well. Maria Bianco is at the deli counter. She's wearing the same winter jacket she has had for years, a grotesque floral thing with a frayed hem his mother always eyes suspiciously. Lorenzo is behind the counter, slicing up prosciutto "*magro, magro!*" for the housewives, and all of it is at once familiar and terrifying.

Maria turns in his direction, hands full of carefully wrapped deli meat, the wide splay of her hips halting in their movements as she recognises him. Salvatore catches her eye and tries for a smile, feeling it fall as she clears her throat and looks away.

Ah, he thinks bitterly. Word's got out.

She used to bring him sweets when he was little, sugar dusted biscuits that left a powdery rim around his lips, and she would pinch his cheek and tell his mother how handsome he had become. Now she turns away, dumping her armful into a basket and hurrying down an aisle away from him. It's what he expected, he tells himself, but the pain of it still shoots like a lightning bolt through him.

Papa still refuses to speak to him. Mama has called twice, her forced pleasantries jarring them both, all too aware she has to sneak away from her husband's unceasing disappointment to do so. *He misses you, she tires tries to tell him. You broke his heart.*

"They don't deserve you," Marco had insisted, holding Salvatore in bed as his sobs had wracked his body. *"Mi dispiace, mi dispiace."*

Salvatore's hands shake, a nervous tick he can't force himself out of lately, and he forces himself to move from the too warm building. The courtyard is deserted. No one sits here in winter, and the quiet calms his nerves. It has only been a number of

weeks, but already he feels like an invader on foreign soil, unwelcome and unwanted. He is at once grateful to be rid of the place and simultaneously missing it like a front tooth. The once familiar shapes of his hometown draw together like battle lines, daring him to cross it and face the consequences. It hurts, lancing through him so sharp and strong that surely others can see it, can see the wounded red spilling from his torso, painting him bare for all the world to ogle and laugh at.

The scraping of a chair whips him back the present.

“Hey,” Carmela says, so low he almost misses it.

She is in her school uniform. It is a scene he has witnessed hundreds, thousands of times. He always joked Carmela looked like she had been through a war everyday after school, her clothes rumpled and stained, hair sticking up in a frizzy halo around her head. As if on cue she raises her arm with a quick gesture, fingers uselessly trying to flatten the unruly mess of her curls. It is so familiar it aches, and Salvatore can’t stop the momentary sadness from gripping him. Her bag drops with a heavy plod to the floor, and she sits too hard and too fast, tipping in her chair for a moment. Salvatore shoots out to steady her, her startled yelp making a wide smile stretch the corners of his mouth.

Just like that, the tension is broken. Carmela lets out a snorting laugh, an endearing, childish that he and Gino would often tease her about endlessly.

“Watch it,” he smiles.

“Shut up,” she snaps, pure fondness dripping from her voice.

Something slots into place, a feeling of rightness, and Salvatore’s shoulders finally loosen.

“I ordered you a coffee,” he tells her.

“Sugar?” she asks.

“Three,” he grimaces.

Carmela lets out a pleased hum.

“How’s school?”

“Fine.” *God save me from small talk*, is what her facial expression tells him.

“Gino?” he asks before he can stop himself.

Carmela’s face screws up, her eyes shifting to something over Salvatore’s shoulder.

“He doesn’t know I’m here. Either does Papa.”

Salvatore nods. “I didn’t expect much else,” he admits.

It still hurts. The few times he has spoken to Mama she has made excuses; Gino being at work, or out with his girlfriend, or taking a shower that seemed to conveniently last the entirety of their phone call. Salvatore isn’t even sure he even *wants* to speak to Gino, his anger still roiling in a molten pit, but the small boy aching for his older brother’s approval whines out in sadness.

“You’re staying at Marco’s still?” Carmela asks abruptly.

“Yeah,” he says without hesitation, surprise colouring his tone. He worries for a split second, thinking maybe this will be it, that confirmation of it will make Carmela stand and walk away for good, her disgust and the weight of their family’s disapproval finally too much for her to bear.

“Good, I like him,” she says instead, and something warm settles inside him.

Salvatore’s smile hurts his cheeks.

“I can’t stay long, Mum wants me home to help with dinner,” she tells him with a roll of her eyes.

They talk about nothing, and it is exactly what he wants. Carmela relays to him gossip from the girls in her school, her nose scrunching around the names of her peers she doesn’t like, face so open he wonders how she ever hides a thing. He asks about her art classes, eyeing the splotches of paint and ink smeared in a constellation across her hands. Her eyes light up and she digs an enormous book from her bag, showing him photos of paintings that he doesn’t understand, but make Carmela sigh with a dreamy wistfulness.

“I should go,” she says finally with a hint of sadness. Their chairs scrape in unison as they stand and Carmela moves in for a warm hug before he can bring himself to ask.

Maybe, maybe I can survive this, he thinks. She cuts through a wedge of his anger, a ray of sunlight shattering some of the darkness Marco had sighed hovers over him in a suffocating cloud. His skin warms as she buries her face in his neck, her comforting weight making him melt, his back curving down to meet her short height.

“Thanks, kid,” he mumbles.

Her arms tighten in response.

IX.

Your father died on a Tuesday.

It was sports day at school. The office lady had bustled onto the field, wobbling as her heels sunk into the dirt. She drew my teacher aside and I knew something had happened when their gazes swung to me. Mum was waiting in the office with a sullen droop to her shoulders, her hand clenched around a crumpled tissue.

“Zio Tony passed away, bub,” she told me.

Her look was expectant, and guilt churned in my gut when I wasn't hit with a sudden sadness. He had always been old and grumpy; had never been kind or offered a warm hug like my nonno often did. He had grabbed at the fat of my cheeks one Easter Sunday, circling his other hand around my upper arm and squeezing tight. “*Sei grasso*,” he had tutted to me. My cheeks burned with embarrassment and I had vowed not to talk to him after that, the grudge set firmly in my mind.

It seems childish now when I think of you.

I knew he had been sick for a while. Mum had taken us to the hospice to see him, and I remember thinking his skin looked as though it would tear if I touched it, paper thin and tinged an unnatural blue, his eyes glassy as he looked at us without recognition. I felt sorry for him, and thought dying like that was a lonely business, surrounded by family who may as well have been strangers to his dementia-riddled mind.

His funeral was a few days later.

Swarms of distant relatives and friends packed the church in Liverpool, an army of dark clad bodies muddying up the too humid air of the building, offering condolences as sweat gathered on their foreheads. The service was long, drawn out with countless prayers and teary-eyed odes of remembrance, all mourning for the man who once was.

“A loving father to his sons Gino and Salvatore, and his daughter Carmela,” the priest intoned.

It was one of the only times I had heard your name so freely spoken. It made me wonder if it had been a slip up, if it would upset Zia Lucia to have the seemingly taboo reminder of her son’s name thrown into the air for all to hear.

A derisive snort to my left broke my daze.

“Sure he was,” Zia Mary muttered next to me, sarcasm dripping from her tone.

I had heard your father often spoken of with such distaste, like a putrid smell cloying heavily to our family members’ noses, forcing their faces to scrunch up and their eyes to squint in suspicion. I had never asked, but my experience of his harsh demeanour and his swift dismissal of the women in our family was answer enough.

The service finally ended, but we quickly moved on to Zia Carmel’s house, a veritable black cloud descending to pick at spreads of food with no hunger, offering condolences to a family who looked as though they would rather be left alone. I had snuck off for a moment, the atmosphere oppressive and making panic grip across my ribcage, meandering down a quiet hall at the back of the house.

They didn’t know I was there and I should have left, but the frantic rush of their voices kept me stuck in place. It was your brother and sister, standing close and glaring fiercely at each other.

“He shouldn’t have mentioned him!” Gino hissed.

“Enough!” Carmela snapped. “He was our brother, *non essere un bastardo!*”

“*Non mio,*” Gino finished, voice hard.

He left, storming down the hallway and leaving Carmela with a miserable droop to her shoulders. She had raised her hands in the sign of the cross, holding her palm flat

to her forehead for a moment. I wanted to hug her then, to take her into my arms and give comfort, but I wasn't supposed to see this, it was private; an act of mourning. Had she done the same for you? I hoped so. I thought of you often, morbidly wondering what your death had been like when I lay awake at night with too many thoughts racing across my mind. Had you been alone? Was your mother there? Did you know you were loved? Did people gather in a church with their darkest clothes and masks of sympathy painted across their faces?

Gino's reaction told me otherwise.

X.

The bar is packed tight on a Saturday night.

The writhing of sweat drenched bodies is hypnotic, rolling together in seductive waves, the music blasting so loud it echoes through Salvatore's eardrums, everything else drowned out amongst it. It's too hot, the air too tumid to breathe, but Salvatore doesn't care, taking in huge lungfuls of it with reckless abandon.

Marco was here but he slipped away. Salvatore had watched as Marco trailed his hand down the arm of a boy with caramel skin, swaying in and pressing his lips to the boy's throat, catching Salvatore's eye from a few feet away with a silent question of, *is this okay?* Salvatore had nodded, losing himself amongst the crowd again; touching, feeling, grabbing purchase on the bodies of strangers, at once alien and comforting.

His mind is hazy; time a foreign concept, the heat along his arms and front, the welcome embrace of a stranger's body, all blending together in a crash of endless sensation. He's hard, he realises, grinding forward against a guy with hair the colour of fire. It is too much and not enough, this endless parade of willing partners, blatant *want* in their movements he cannot bring himself to look away from. The smell of sex and sweat clings heavy, the scent cloying, sickly, pounding through his senses with an addictive rush. The man in front of him grips his waist, pressing in impossibly closer, a flash of red dancing across the blur of Salvatore's vision. He loses himself in the mouth of a stranger, biting his lips and grinding forward with a vicious rush of desire, adrenaline shooting through his veins like the best high.

The frightened schoolboy seems a lifetime away, pushed from the present with a burning shot of vodka, blazing through his body and lighting him up with a freedom he never knew possible.

He breathes it in, lungs filling with life, sinking in and letting his senses drown out his thoughts.

XI.

I was terrified when I told my mum. We were watching *The Sound of Music* on a rare night we had the house to ourselves. My fingers itched where I had them twined in the crocheted blanket across my lap, my mother none the wiser to the worries plaguing my mind. It felt like it was escaping me, like I would never be able to say it unless I told her right then, on a too cold winter night when the lack of interruption would keep my anxiety at bay. Maria had begun singing to the children about her favourite things when I blurted it out.

“I think I like girls, Ma,” I stuttered.

I couldn't believe I had said it, that it was out there, unable to be taken back, hanging like an unanswered handshake, grasping in the lonely air and begging for a response. It was an eternity before she spoke.

“Oh,” was all she managed at first.

I don't blame her for it. She didn't know what to say, and she was not prepared for her daughter to have such a crisis. Years later she told me she regretted her reaction. I came back to her, my eyes red and my lips worry bitten, imploring her in a quiet voice that it hadn't changed. Maybe that was the hope of any parent— for an easier life for their child, something chalked up to a teenage misunderstanding and not a harsh reality they would need to face day to day. I had craved her acceptance, though, and the suffocating silence felt like a punch to the chest, tears spilling down my cheeks and snot dripping from my nose as I sobbed.

“Oh, my darling,” she had sighed, wrapping her arms around me and drawing me close to her side. Her warmth comforted me, the smell of her perfume wrapping around me, halting the fear still holding me in a vice like grip.

She had paused the movie by the time I calmed down. I remember because Captain Von Trapp's face was frozen in a look of consternation, ready to snap at his horde of

children. I had stared at that, focusing on his face and sniffing as I mumbled, barely audible, “Will they hate me?”

I did not have to clarify who I was talking about.

Our family is hard work, Sal. A crawling sense of *wrong* often rises up within me whenever I’m around them, the panicked parts of my consciousness blaring like wailing ambulance sirens, repeating *not the same, not the same* when I stare at our cousins getting married and having babies, knowing I will not invite them to my own wedding one day. I am anticipating a bomb. A ticking growing steadily louder in the distance, waiting for the moment they find out, and willing a bulletproof vest to cover my chest and protect me.

It took her too long to respond.

“*Bella*, there’s things—” she paused and her brows creased. “My cousin Salvatore was too and he—he died, bub. Zia and Gino, all of them, they don’t like talking about it and I don’t want you to be hurt. They don’t like—it would remind—it just might be best not to mention it to them.”

For the first time it was confirmed blatantly to me, not just insinuated with venom or sympathy laced phrases. I couldn’t put my frustration into words.

“Everyone acts like he never existed,” I insisted, irritation colouring my tone. “Did they hate him because he was gay?”

“He was unwell, bub,” was all she supplied. “C’mon, let’s finish the movie.”

AIDS, my mind supplied.

My brother had told me days after I find your memorial card. He was an indelicate teenage boy, not thinking twice before confirming my suspicions. “Yeah, he died of AIDS, poor guy,” he had said casually, throwing clothes into an overnight bag, barely thinking anything of what he had said.

I wish I had made her say it then. I don't know what it would have achieved, but it would have been something. Better than this. Better than the silence that pervades our family, this suffocating weight of shame that pushes too much into the past.

My mother hadn't said more of it in that moment. She patted my shoulder once, making an excuse about needing a cup of tea as she bustled into the kitchen, leaving me with my fists still curled into the blanket. I wanted someone, then. Someone who knew, someone who would understand. I didn't know anyone else like me and my loneliness yearned out with a starving hunger. I never knew you, Sal, but I miss you.

Maybe we wouldn't have been so lonely among them if we had each other.

XII.

The sterile smell of the hospital room itches at Salvatore's nose. Marco is clutching his hand, squeezing so hard Salvatore's knuckles crack together, but he stays silent, welcoming the distraction in any form he can take it. There are too many of them in the room. The nurse had stared disapprovingly as they arrived, warning they would have to leave soon or cull their numbers, but none of them seemed willing to listen.

There is a fear amongst them. It is palpable in the air, unspoken but static, hanging over their crowded huddle. Salvatore can't bring himself to mention it, can't force himself to get the words out other than offering a commiserating grimace when he catches Paul's eye across Anthony's bed. The clock ticks, and time passes. Jason is asking Marcus about his promotion as Paul begins lamenting the state of the crappy hospital food, as if any of them have an appetite. Grace sits in an armchair in the corner, a book open on her lap but her eyes still, lost in thought, the mirage of normality broken by the sleepless bags under her eyes. The flat lines of small talk are cutting. He doesn't know what to say, what to do—how to comprehend that Anthony, *Anthony*, in his brilliance and beauty and his lust for life—is now there; small, with oxygen tubes plugging his nostrils and breaths drawing into his lungs like an enemy battle.

He is not the first to be sick. Far from it. Lately every ring of a phone hits with a dreaded punch to the chest; all of them waiting, fearing, trying to comprehend. Anthony is the first Salvatore truly fears for. At first it was just a man talked about in whispers, then others in a useless newspaper clipping, then a friend of a friend, then—

Fuck. He had—he and Anthony—they had. Oh, *God*.

Marco keeps telling him not to think about it, that it is unlikely. That Salvatore is alive and well, they both are, and there was no sense in worrying, but he speaks the words as if he is trying to convince himself, too. An edge of desperation that makes something tight and rolling curl in Salvatore's gut.

"I'm scared," he says, breaking the tension.

Silence falls in the room. Grace sniffs, bringing her hands to cover her eyes. Paul shifts, a sigh leaving his mouth as his shoulders drop, a veritable puppet with his strings cut. They are going through the motions, all of them, trying to figure out how to act and what to say with nothing to turn to for guidance. The sheer unknown wakes Salvatore up at night, forcing his eyes open with a gasp and a panic so strong gripping his limbs he feels frozen to the bed.

“We all are,” Paul says eventually. “It’s—fuck. I don’t know what to do.”

It says everything and nothing all at once.

Eventually they are forced to leave. The nurse arrives, a facemask tightly covering her lower face as she snaps a second pair of gloves on her hands. They have to bid their farewells quickly, Salvatore leaning in close, needing to touch, his lips pressing against the slick sheen of Anthony’s forehead. “*A domani,*” he whispers. Anthony is not lucid enough to respond.

Salvatore finds himself in the hospital chapel afterwards.

He falls to his knees before Christ. His gaze traces over the altar, fear and terror lacing through him. It hits with a sucker punch. The anxiety on the nurses’ faces, the barely held in disgust, the doctors standing at a distance so measured they were practically out of the room as they gave a too sterile account of his *condition*. All of them refusing to say it, refusing to utter the hated word *AIDS* as if the term itself was contagious. The anger was palpable, all of them shifting restlessly, staring at the doctors who provided no answers. *What are you doing to help?* He had thought with venom. *You’ll barely touch him to check his temperature, what the fuck is wrong with you people?* There were no answers, even in his head.

Tears choke out of him. It hits, over and over again, hopelessness, as he has never felt tearing his insides apart. He prays, but a sick rush of realism knows it is too late for Anthony. The shine in his eyes is gone, his voice reduced to a barely audible whistle.

He's a young man in a withered body, each second ticking too fast and too long, crawling closer to an unknown end.

Salvatore suddenly and viciously wants his mother, wants her to take her into his arms and soothe him, even now, when years have passed since she last surrounded him with her warm embrace.

He is angry. It pulses through him, his sobs taking a violent edge, every second of this closing in tight like a noose, choking his life from him, from all of them. The face of Mary is taunting on the altar, staring at him with a patience and cruel disregard that has his fists clenching. He gasps, eyes closing, his cheeks wet with an endless rush of tears.

God, he thinks. Someone help us.

XIII.

Your sister's house is nice. She lives in the city now, in a terrace in Glebe with dying vines crawling up the front. It's a far cry from Western Sydney, but it fits her. She works at a museum my mother had told me, but I could have guessed anyway; her home more a stretch of jigsawed canvases vying for attention than walled in rooms. My mother had hurried into the house earlier that day with her sewing supplies, ready to measure the shawl your sister wanted for some gallery opening.

We weren't meant to stay for long but Carmela had laid out a spread for lunch—antipasti that politeness would ensure we ate. The conversation was polite, my mum knowing Carmela better than I did, but she soon excused herself, rushing to the bathroom after one too many glasses of wine. Carmela's posh crystal wear clinked together with pleasant tinkles as she cleared the table, offering me a small smile as she moved back and forth.

I found myself staring at a painting hanging on the wall across from me. The harsh lines of black slashed across the canvas intermingled with soft pastels. It was meant to be some modern work of art, I thought. It was jarring and didn't quite work, the style so harsh in comparison to muted tones of the other canvases. I was concentrating so hard on the thick gouges of black on white that I missed the quiet steps that approached me on the worn, threadbare carpet.

"I bought that for my brother," Carmela spoke behind me.

I jumped, needlessly feeling guilty for not hearing her approach. "Gino?" I questioned.

She snorted. "Gino's idea of art is a pin-up poster of Pamela Anderson. No, this is one of Salvatore's favourites." Hesitation warred on her face before she continued. "He would take me to galleries when we were younger," she said finally. "He lived near the city and I'd stay with him for weekends. He didn't get much of it but he tried. He liked this artist," she nodded her head to the painting with a smile. "He said it was one of the only ones that made sense to him."

“That’s cool,” I replied, young and inexperienced, but she seemed to appreciate the sentiment. “Thank you,” I added. I knew it was a rare moment, a vulnerability threading her words as she spoke.

“Would you like to see some photos of him?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said without hesitation. She brought me to a bureau, a beautiful old thing with wood the colour of a polished chestnut. There were countless photos of you.

“He was handsome,” she stated simply.

I agreed. Your smile was warm; a kindness to your face that put me at ease. They were unlike the photos at Zia’s house. You were a man here, your hair longer and curling around your ears, your shirt open with the brazen confidence of youth, your feet buried in the sand in one with your arm resting against a muscled shoulder just out of frame.

She has the same eyes as you, Carmela. I realised as I stared at the snapshots of your face. There is the same shape and brightness, shining from her face as she looked to me that day. I was hit by a wave of sympathy, thinking how hard it must have been for her, must still be for her.

I could not think of anything else on the drive home. It had taken me so long to piece together the meagre things I knew about you, to parse through it amongst the avoidant gazes and comments of our family. It made me happy, I realised, to know there were still parts of you here in some way. There is a fragment of you.

There, in a living room, holding a place of honour.

XIV.

The light in the bathroom is harsh. Salvatore has been sitting on the toilet for what feels like hours, his insides twisting and stabbing with violent lurches. It is late and the apartment is quiet, only the vague sound of water creaking through the pipes to keep him company. His head is heavy, his throat aching as he swallows hard, forcing down a sudden rise of bile in the back of his mouth.

He has been sick for weeks.

His suit is bunched up on the bathroom counter, the careless heap unmoving since he had stripped earlier that day, a rush of heat lighting his skin so fiercely he had rushed to douse himself under the ice cold water of the shower. *Another weekend, another funeral*, Marco had rasped out, pulling his tie off and splashing water across his face. Salvatore couldn't fault him his forced indifference. It was hard, too hard, too much loss to cope with one after the other.

All we can do is keep going, Grace had said to him. *There's no other option for us*. He did not want to tell her that he feels like a porcelain statue, cracks appearing on his façade, ready to shatter at any given moment.

He refuses to look at his reflection when he rises to wash hands. He knows what he looks like. He knows his clothes hang more loosely than before, the definition in his arms less noticeable. His pants have become bigger, less form fitting, and the winter breeze that has crept upon them in the last few weeks feels as though it could cut to his core. Marcus hasn't mentioned it, but the lingering looks he thinks Salvatore doesn't notice have dragged like razor blades across his skin.

They had buried Anthony in a navy suit two months ago. It was his favourite, one that he had made Salvatore come to the fitting for, so excited that he could finally afford a proper suit with his promotion. It had been too big on Anthony's thin frame as his body lay in the casket, so frail Salvatore could barely recognise him.

His hands shake as he washes them. A scared voice repeats Anthony's name over and over again, taunting as it echoes, reverberating around his skull, all of their faces swimming and haunting in front of him.

Anthony. Patrick. Marcus. Howard. Peter.

His knuckles whiten as he grips the bathroom counter.

“Sal?”

The voice startles him. His heart jumps in his chest before he registers the familiarity, his mind slow as if wading through mud. Marco is sleep ruffled. His hair sticks up in a million directions, a pillow crease embedded in the side of his cheek. He is bleary eyed and yawning, rubbing a hand across his face as if to shake himself awake.

“Why are you up?” he asks.

“I still don't feel well,” Salvatore says to the floor.

He forces his gaze in a reluctant arch up to Marco. He is more alert now, biting his lower lip, his face creased with a worry Salvatore had hoped to never put there. He's staring, silently asking what neither of them wishes to utter, Salvatore's admission finally too much for them to ignore what has been silently brewing for weeks.

“Marco,” he says miserably, words hanging in the air.

“We'll go to the doctor tomorrow,” Marco says quickly. “You'll be fine. You probably just need some antibiotics.” The desperation in his voice tells Salvatore he *has* to be fine. Marco shuffles in close, wrapping his thick arms around Salvatore's middle and Salvatore can't help melting into the familiar shape of him.

“Yeah, of course,” he echoes, lips pressed to Marco's throat.

He doesn't tell Marco of the waves of dizziness, or the rash across his stomach that has him gripping Marco's back in fear. He squeezes his eyes shut, counting slowly in his head, willing the wave off the dizziness to abate. Bone deep tiredness clutches at him, rolling and pooling at the base of his spine, a clump of worry that feels paralysing.

Just the flu, he forces himself to think. *Nothing else.*

XV.

At Christmas two years ago your brother Gino was drunk. The smell of salt was thick in my nose, our family spread out against the sand in a mass of blankets and umbrellas, the hum of conversation fading to the background as I lost myself in the endless swirl of the waves. Gino was sitting in a fold out chair, feet buried in the sand as he methodically tore thin ribbons off the label of his beer bottle. I watched as a small bead of moisture travelled down the neck of the bottle, meeting its end at the sun stained cracks of his hands. I don't know if I had intentionally sat close to him, but we were off to the side, the noises of our family dulled as the wind whipped my hair into a frenzy.

"I had a brother, you know," he mumbled.

It took a moment for his words to register. I had never heard him talk about you, had never heard him talk about much at all. He was not an eloquent man, and he rarely spoke at family gatherings, seemingly happy not to get involved with the countless overlapping voices. His words now, though, ran together with a beer-laced slur, tripping over the heaviness of his tongue, coming out in a confused rush as if they were battling to be spoken before each other.

"We didn't really look much alike," he continued. "I always looked like my dad. Carmela, though. God. I look at her sometimes and think it's him staring back at me."

His fingers were gripping his bottle so tightly I feared it would break, shattering to a million tiny pieces beneath the weight of his words.

"Fucking ghost, right?" he laughed with no humour.

I wasn't sure what to say, what to do to not scare him off. It was fraught, a sudden tension in the air, his words landing with a sharp jab. Every mention of you seemed precious, a collection of fleeting moments I had to huddle to my chest and protect in fear of them being snatched away again.

“Can you tell me more about him?” I pressed.

It was the wrong thing to say. Gino froze. He looked to me in shock, as if he just registered I was there, the realisation that I had witnessed the words spilling from his slack mouth hitting him with a punch. His cheeks reddened, and before I could apologise he was pulling his sunglasses down over his eyes, shaking his head as if to clear away his drunken haze.

“I need another drink,” he replied instead. He rolled in his chair, his large stomach weighing him down, grunting as he found his footing. As I watched him amble away, his empty beer bottle dropping to the sand beneath him, I thought that maybe we all had regrets we kept buried within us, pushed to the brinks of our minds and forcibly forgotten under a facade of anger, only cracking every now and again to expose our raw insides. Just as easily as that it closed off, and when he returned he did not speak again, but stared out to the waves, a meditative silence I knew better than to break.

XVI.

The wind is biting.

Salvatore shivers as it sneaks its way under the blanket wrapped around him, cold shooting down his spine and making him ache. It is too cold to be at the beach, the clouds overhead dark and unwelcoming.

“We can go,” Marco offers.

There is desperation in his voice, and Salvatore closes his eyes. He reaches blindly for Marco’s hand, squeezing it tight with his grasp. Marco has worker’s hands; they’re rough, the skin cracking and tinged with embedded dirt, in desperate need of a moisturiser that he always rolls his eyes at, always setting Salvatore into a huff. The fondness of it pulls at him now.

“I like it,” Salvatore insists.

“Okay,” Marco replies.

Salvatore’s chest tightens, a sharp stab lancing through his ribcage. It has come to be a familiar sensation, and his vision narrows, each grain of sand resting against his bare feet somehow magnified and cutting. He doesn’t know what name to give it, and the confusing mess swells higher. It is not anger – he thinks he’s been angry enough to last several lifetimes. Sorrow, maybe.

Marco thinks he has given up.

“I want you to fight!” Marco had yelled at him weeks before. “You’re acting like you’re already dead,” he continued, voice cracking.

As soon as it has come it is gone.

Grace had said as much.

“You’re likely to fly between emotions,” she told him. “It’s normal. It’s part of the process.”

Marco had wanted him to see a proper psychologist. Salvatore had refused, calling Grace again and assuming her few undergraduate psychology classes were enough.

“You should see a professional,” she’d implored and Salvatore had barked a humourless laugh.

“I’m dying, Gracie,” he replied. “Nothing they say is gonna change that.”

He has run out of ways to apologise for that.

Something tickles his hand. Salvatore fights the urge to instinctively slap at it, keeping his arm still. His eyes trace down and *there*, across his fingers, a lady beetle is crawling. It’s a bright speck of red against the washed out pallor of his skin.

“Look,” Salvatore announces.

Marco’s wide shoulders swing towards him. Salvatore raises his hand, slow and steady, scared of the salt thick wind blowing the creature away.

“You hate bugs,” Marco insists.

“They’re not so bad,” he replies.

He shivers at a gust of wind, and Marco is quick to wrap the woollen blanket tighter around his shoulders, trailing his hand down to Salvatore’s waist and dragging them closer together. He did that when they fought sometimes. He would use his size and strength to drag Salvatore close to him, even tossing him over his shoulder one memorable time and Salvatore’s anger had turned into unexpected laughter.

“I’m not – put me down!” he yelled, delight lacing the words.

"I can't help it you're a runt," Marco had laughed.

Salvatore leans against Marco's side, tilting his face up towards his. Marco hums and sways in close, planting a kiss across Salvatore's mouth that is warm and full of life.

Marco will be okay, he hopes. He is strong and capable, has stood by Salvatore with a valiant stubbornness worthy of fairy tales. He holds Salvatore at night like he is something fragile and precious, tracing his hands over the thinness of his ribs, nuzzling into his neck and gripping intently as though Salvatore will disappear if he looks away for a moment. He is selfishly glad that it happened this way. He does not think he could have been as strong as Marco, has barely been able to get up for each funeral that marks their calendars with bloody epitaphs.

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" Marco asks him. His fingers trace across Salvatore's cheeks, dipping across the sunken skin.

He himself traces the beloved lines of Marco's face. *He's too young to look this old,* he tells himself. His face has a hollowness that only sleepless nights bring. Salvatore stares back down at the lady beetle, cocooned in the warmth of the blanket, the material rippling as the breeze hits it.

Essere gentile, Nonna had said.

His lips spread into the familiar shape of a smile. His eyes meet Marco's, the brown and green he loves shining in the spring sunlight.

"Yes, I'm sure," he replies.

XVII.

Your sister still speaks to Marco. I think that would make you happy. She invited me over again for lunch not long ago, absent my mother so it was just the two of us sitting across from the stretch of your presence against her wall. We both knew what we wanted to talk about, but it took a while, as if it was too fragile to broach at first, a subject so rarely opened that dust covered the creaking pages titled *You* in her mind. I think she was just as desperate, even more so than I was, grasping onto a lifeline of someone who she could share this with, share you with, who would not push against it and try and forget.

She told me your mother still blames Marco for what happened. As if you were inextricably controlled, a puppet on his strings with no choice. *Ridiculous*, Carmela had sighed, bitterness lacing her tone.. Does your mother blame herself, too? Is the remorse, so deeply threaded it only emerges with brief glimpses, buried down so far to allow her to continue day to day? If like Gino, it rears its head sometimes, overwhelming and suffocating, a hit of feeling so strong she *has* to ignore it, cannot face it in fear of what it unfolds, in fear of whom she would blame otherwise.

She said Gino thought you were punished, thought all of you were, that your want for freedom, for expression, for an escape from the struggling confines of expectation were enough of a reason for a cruel maker to cast a plague upon you. Carmela's anger at that was refreshing, even if the sadness she could not escape when speaking of you pulled at me. The unfairness of it all, the loss, the unwillingness of those even closest to you to be there for you in your time of need, unable to move past the great swell of shame that pervades our family.

You are at a distance from me. I have photos, I have retellings, I have stories Carmela generously shares through the pain, memories Marco keeps close to his chest and only talks of to her; jokes and childhood tales that time too easily loses at it stretches on. I look at the photos of you, see you ageing throughout them, face thinning and jaw strengthening, but your eyes remain the same, a brown so dark they strike through.

It is the history of you, spread out amongst clippings and fragments.

XVIII.

Salvatore often wonders what things would have been like in another world.

There is the world where he becomes a lawyer and Marco a doctor. Marco would have the monotony of his patients, his practical tools and work, fuelled by the quiet joy of helping those in need. Salvatore would be successful, a career man, someone his mother spoke proudly of at her weekly lunches with her friends. Marco would care for him deeply and fiercely, with small actions that spoke of things he could not bring himself to say. Things would be peaceful.

There are other worlds.

There is the one where Salvatore never gets sick. Perhaps he would have married a good Italian girl, pushing down his yearning for more, reduced to glowing embers rather than a roaring heat. He would have kept his father's company, he and his wife beginning their lives in a townhouse near the city. Their home would be filled with sunlight and hand-me-down furniture that chipped away within the year, Friday nights filled with wine and the laughter of new friends. He does not think this Salvatore would have been happy.

There is the world where he and Marco live together to a peaceful old age. They have children and they are beautiful and consuming, moving through life with an explosion of colour and noise. They grow old together in their home, lived in and loved, still standing through the complications of life. Salvatore thinks they would have gone on adventures, too, visiting the places their 2AM talks in abandoned parking lots had only ever dreamed of. Perhaps they would have grown closer still with age, or instead the cares of the years would have worn on them, as they slowly grew distant and dim.

There are fantastical worlds, too. Sometimes Salvatore is a pirate and Marco his first mate, and they sail the seas and discover new treasures together. In others they're members of a space colony on Mars, or they're awaiting orders on the bridge of a star ship, shiny Starfleet insignias burning on their chests as they travel at warp speed. The ridiculousness of it makes him smile.

He carefully maps these worlds out, again and again, their ramblings smeared with imaginary ink across his mind, distracting him as the smell of antiseptic seeps into his bones.

His mother's fingers card through his hair, and he is a child again. He thinks Marco was here, just now, with Grace and some of the others, but their voices echo in the distance, the familiar lull of them fading, pushed from his mind with each drag of Mama's soft fingertips across his scalp. Salvatore's breath eases from his lips with a long exhale, his mother's humming vibrating through to his core.

He slips, the darkness welcoming him with a warm tug.

XIX.

I am not sure what I believe in. My mum would surely try to convince me that you are watching from above in some breathtaking afterlife that we pray for in church on Sundays. *There's a heaven, she says, whether you want to acknowledge it or not.*

Carmela told me you believed in that.

She gave me memories of you. They are not my own, but they scramble around my brain, tripping over each other and trying to force themselves into a sequence that makes sense. You were ten and you were a child torn between terror and delight, you were a teenager barely past graduation when your father cut you off like a bad limb, and then you were twenty two, time passing too quickly until your thirty-second birthday hit, not knowing as you blew your candles out that—and, then—

My brother always told me I feel too fast and too much, that there are no brakes when I latch onto something and throw myself at it, that I'm an exposed nerve waiting for pain to hit. I don't mind taking the pain if it makes the memory of you less lonely. You deserve more than that.

Saying life isn't fair seems trite.

I read a poem a few years ago that has been stuck in my head ever since. It's by Buddy Wakefield. He's a slam poet, and he speaks with a passion that lights fire through your veins. He said.

We all deserve absolution.

But especially You.

You and faith.

I wonder if you're a million tiny atoms exploding across the stars, spread out amongst the air we breathe and dancing across sunlight. Every part of you still here but in another form; freer, able to move, run, out there amongst it all.

It's too sentimental, but I like the thought.

I don't know how to finish this. What else do I say to you? I'm sorry doesn't seem good enough. I am, though. I'm sorry for what you suffered. I'm sorry for our family. I'm sorry you had to hide so much of yourself and pass without your mother by your side.

I'm sorry.

Words are not enough, they never seem to be, but it is something. I don't know what it is worth, but here it is.

There are flowers on your grave when I visit it now. Some from Marco. Some from Carmela. I add my own, a bunch of sunflowers that light up the grey marble. Their vibrant petals brush against a photograph of your handsome face; a suspended fossil behind a cracked amber casing.

HIV/AIDS Literature and the Work of Postmemorial Reconstruction

A Critical Essay

Introduction

“Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all.”

(Judith Butler in Pearl, 2014, 20).

The AIDS crisis represents a rupture in time and a trauma so significant that it has inspired a genre of literature in which the experiences of individuals afflicted with, and suffering the social consequences of, the disease could share their experiences. Literary texts acted as some of the first forms of cultural writing to address the epidemic, and often aimed to defy the dominant stereotypes perpetuated by the mainstream media. The lack of knowledge concerning the disease meant that the LGBT community became the focus of stigma and alienation because, as stated by Treichler (247), “for the individuals and groups most vulnerable, the first over arching models posited rudimentary notions of identity, community, and transmission”.

The AIDS crisis exists as “a double epidemic: one biomedical, called AIDS, and the other a social pathology, an epidemic of blame that functions to deny collective responsibility” (Chambers 232). This amplification of multiple forms of trauma is further reiterated by Thomas Keenan (Caruth & Keenan 258), stating in an interview in 1994, “[t]here’s a double trauma here. On the one hand, there’s a cataclysmic event, which produces symptoms and calls for testimony. And then it happens again, when the value of the witness testimony is denied, and there’s no one to hear the

account, no one to attend or to respond – not simply to the event, but to its witness as well.”

I will argue in the following sections that this conception of postmemory and the transference of the experience of AIDS across time and place is explicitly apparent in the works of Susan Sontag and her short story ‘The Way We Live Now’, Andrew Holleran’s two texts ‘Ground Zero’ and ‘Reading and Writing’, as well as in my own creative work, ‘Ricordare’. The transmission of memory of the AIDS crisis can be said to challenge normative understandings of memory, and instead involves a more complex system of identification taking place to form the structures necessary to experience, embody and reimagine. Marianne Hirsch (*Surviving Images* 20) uses her concept of postmemory to explore this transmission, stating, “[t]he work of postmemory, in fact, is to uncover the pits again, to unearth the layers of forgetting, to go beneath the screen surfaces that disguise the crimes and try to see what they both expose and foreclose”. The creation of community and identity both through the act of writing itself and through the reading of texts meant that literature acted as the means through which the AIDS crisis could be explored by a community pushed to the fringes and ignored by society at large in its time of crisis.

The framework through which I will analyse the effectiveness and methods of postmemorial work can be classified under the term created by Ross Chambers known as ‘foster writing’. As a literature of loss portraying an epidemic, the literary works serve the dual purpose of providing both cultural documentation of experiences of trauma, as well as serving as a key means of transmitting those experiences to future generations. As stated by Chambers:

Foster writing, then, fosters in the double sense of the word. It's a surrogate, offering a form of hospitality or pseudohome to that which is culturally homeless and agencing a phantom cultural existence for it. But it fosters, that is, encourages, the entry of the culturally homeless into culture, albeit in the uncanny form it owes to the highly mediated act of its presencing. Where once it was culturally ignored, like a waif, the haunt is recognized, in the form of pain. These are the inevitable conditions of survival, contingent on the relay of writing, for a memory that culture would rather forget. (200)

Described as the “readerly effect of foster writing” (Chambers 200), phantom pain “is the capacity to experience the pain of another, or of others, as wholly or partly indistinguishable from a “remembered” pain of one’s own.” (Chambers 201). The pain Chambers describes thus constitutes itself as a transmission of memory that affects individuals who connect and identify with it so deeply that it becomes part of their personal and community history. By interacting with literature portraying trauma, subsequent generations, particularly LGBT+ people distanced from the initial context of the crisis, are able to be involved in a process of adopting the pain from one’s community as one’s own pain.

The way in which foster writing enacts phantom pain within its readers relies upon the repetition of specific tropes and fictive devices that work in conjunction with each other to remove the barriers of time and space when interacting with literary works. For Chambers (202) “asyndeton, in the form of fragmented narrative, and hypotyposis (or vividness) are the key tropes that, in combination, produce such an

outcome”. With asyndeton, the removal of syntactic connectives results in, at times, fragmented and disjointed texts that read as fractured conversations or thoughts. Hypotyposis, conversely, relies upon the hyper focus of details or objects within texts. When these two devices interact, Chambers’ suggests that the reader fills in these gaps apparent by asyndeton with their own prior experiences of pain. Combined with a sense of hyperreality, the combination of these devices allow for identification with the pain of others to take place, subsequently allowing the memories and emotions associated with events to be felt by the reader in a complex system of association and adoption. According to Chambers (207), once this process has taken place, “we remember them; and their pain is *realized*, by us, in the form of a phantom pain of our own”.

“Foster writing” thus exists as a type of literature that relies upon the identification of one’s own experiences of pain, projected onto past historical representations of trauma, and the subsequent ability to empathise, feel and adopt these experiences as a result. Memory becomes a collective whole through which generations separated from events are able to interact with and draw feeling from, rather than remaining at a measured distance enforced by time and space.

However, while this concept in itself is useful for direct familial connections, the rupture and discontinuation of memory offered through the AIDS crisis presents itself as a more complex process of transmission. Postmemory, in conjunction with this understanding, exists as the more appropriate concept to describe the transmission of AIDS memories and experiences from earlier generations to the next. Hirsch (*Surviving Images* 9) describes it as “an intersubjective transgenerational space of

remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma...defined through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma”.

While postmemory can occur directly from parents to children, the AIDS crisis represents transference through the development of kinship and community across time. The loss of life constituted by the crisis reveals a gap through which transmission is problematised. This loss of direct connection to the AIDS crisis—continually diminishing due to many of the survivors ageing, or those who wrote and proliferated much of the fiction dying before the advent of appropriate medication—means affiliative postmemory functions as the form of transmission for AIDS literature. As Hirsch suggests:

Affiliative postmemory would thus be the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation combined with structures of mediation that would be broadly appropriable, available, and indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission...[t]he idiom of family can become an accessible lingua franca easing identification and projection across distance and difference. (*The Generation of Postmemory* 115)

Thus, affiliative postmemory exists as the form of postmemory most applicable to the AIDS crisis, through its subversion of normative familial modes of transmission. For Hirsch (1996), photographs reconstruct the past and expand the circle of postmemory to those who take part in their viewing and consumption. Coinciding with Chambers’ notions of foster writing and the phantom pain it enacts, fiction ultimately produces

the same effects of inherited memory in relation to the AIDS crisis, and can allow for the transmission of experience to occur across generations in similar ways.

The adoption of memory is thus reliant on the construction of a community or family, or more appropriately, a group to which one feels a sense of belonging and place, rather than purely through the adoption of experiences of foreign or non-affiliated groups that can otherwise lend itself to occurrences of appropriation. The texts of Sontag, Holleran and—it is hoped— ‘Ricordare’ attest to this fact. I will thus argue that these texts constitute examples of AIDS literature that can be used for current and removed generations to interact with the memories and experiences of the AIDS crisis, subsequently taking part in Hirsch’s notion of a postmemorial generation connected through the events of the past as they are reimagined and relived in the present.

The production of postmemory through the reading of fiction, and in turn the writing of it, in the present thus relies upon the adoption of these events through foster writing and the experience of phantom pain. As I will discuss, these concepts can be viewed through the work of Susan Sontag, Andrew Holleran and, to some measure, through my own text ‘Ricordare’. Through these forms of literature, memories of the AIDS crisis are able to be *felt*, reproduced and interacted with by subsequent LGBT generations, and through their interactions project their experiences onto the past, and ultimately relate in complex ways to texts, ensuring experiences of trauma are not forgotten, and enter a web of continual retelling.

Part 1: “He’s Still Alive”: Susan Sontag and the Discourse of Hope

Ellen said it wasn't good to give him this end-of-the-world feeling, too many people were getting ill, it was becoming such a common destiny that maybe some of the will to fight for his life would be drained out of him if it seemed to be as natural as, well, death.

(Susan Sontag, 'The Way We Live Now')

Within the context of New York City in the 1980s, Susan Sontag's short story 'The Way We Live Now' acts as one of the key texts in the inception of a literary canon exploring the epidemic. I will argue that Sontag's short story, in conjunction with her critical theories on stigma and alienation in the essay *AIDS and its Metaphors*, were able to begin processes of reconciliation to ameliorate discourses of stigma during the AIDS crisis, and in so doing her writing, involving literary devices necessary for foster writing and phantom pain, allows for the transference of memory and the construction of second generation postmemory to occur. Sontag's short story was able to give voice to the marginalised by contesting dominant media representations, and ultimately created literary depictions of hope that subverted the discourses of death and dismay characteristic of the time period. In these ways, Sontag's work depicts the ability of literature to combat experiences of trauma, both during and after the epidemic, while preserving and projecting this memory into the present.

The rise of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s within New York City, and the socio-political context of its emergence, remains central to interpreting Sontag's texts. As a

disease largely unknown and unnamed before this period, the first forms of wider public awareness concerning its spread appeared in *The New York Times* in 1981. As stated by Pearl (2), “[f]irst termed GRID, for “gay-related immune deficiency,” the syndrome was defined and given the name AIDS by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in 1982”. By 1984 it had become public knowledge that the disease spread through sexual transmission via a blood born pathogen, and was largely affecting gay and bisexual men, as well as drug users and other marginalised individuals (Goldstein 298). It was only in 1985, nearly 5 years into the crisis, that the death of Rock Hudson became the first instance of President Reagan acknowledging the crisis. As stated by Pearl (2), “[i]t was partly this sense of neglect by government officials responsible for allocating resources and of life-threatening delays on the part of the Federal Drug Administration who oversaw the pipeline for experimental AIDS drugs that escalated grassroots reaction and incited AIDS activism”.

‘The Way We Live Now’, given this context, is a preeminent text to the literary canon developed during the AIDS crisis. Sontag’s short story was first published in November of 1986 in *The New Yorker* and exists as one of the first literary texts to address the epidemic and defy the dominant stereotypes perpetuated by the mainstream media. During this time, the lack of knowledge concerning the disease meant that the LGBT community became the focus of stigma and alienation. The development of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in 1987, along with the emergence of a new class of drugs in 1988, classified as protease inhibitors, ultimately allowed the discourse around AIDS to begin to change from a death sentence to something treatable or even preventable (Clum 251). Sontag’s short story in comparison occurs prior these events, in the midst of a community of ostracised

individuals still struggling through the unknowable future of a poorly understood disease with unreliable treatment and a dismal outlook for those infected.

Following Chambers' conception of foster writing and phantom pain as a means of enacting memory within the present, 'The Way We Live Now' exists richly with the devices of asyndeton and hypotyposis to create, sustain and transfer meaning. The structure of the text functions as the first indication of asyndeton, and of its ability to combat the disorder and fear associated with the early events of the crisis. The short story depicts the struggles of a seriously ill man as related through the conversations of his friends and family in a stream of non-normative monologues conveyed by an unnamed narrator. As stated by Pearl (24) "narrative is a way to make order out of confusion, to make sense out of seemingly disparate and random events, and an attempt to impose meaning and order on what can be experienced as extremely chaotic". While the format of the story is non-traditional, its events and movement through time are able to form coherent, identifiable experiences during a time of upheaval.

'The Way We Live Now' subsequently acts as a bridging piece to Sontag's essay *AIDS and its Metaphors*. Despite being published two years after the short story, the essay fully conceptualises the critiques inherent within 'The Way We Live Now', and can be viewed as a critical companion that both informs and reflects the text. As stated by Treichler (261), these elements "points to the relevance of these non-fiction works for further illuminating the story". In the essay Sontag ultimately explores the way dominant understandings of AIDS, created by a culture on the brink of social divide between liberal and conservative ideals, is reliant on using associated

conceptions of AIDS, such as the notion of it as a plague and foreign invasion on society, to alienate, other and disseminate harmful tropes about those afflicted (Sontag *AIDS and its Metaphors* 12). As stated by Sontag (*AIDS and its Metaphors* 14), “[t]he metaphors and myths, I was convinced, kill.” Ultimately she suggests that these negative associations created a feedback loop of negative connotations that led to a denial of humanity and recognition.

Sontag’s essay recognises the need to provide structure during a time of unrest by subverting existing alienating forms of media, and her earlier work through ‘The Way We Live Now’ does so by delivering a guiding and informed narrative. As stated by Miller (833), Sontag’s work means that it “becomes possible to see more clearly connections among beginnings and endings”. By creating a story in which the unknowable is given purchase and some comprehensibility, “the writer creates a closed, static (still), verbal system that surrounds and controls fear and death with words” (Treichler 256). As expressed by the man’s friends within the story, “everybody is worried about everybody now, said Betsy, that seems to be the way we live, the way we live now” (Sontag *The Way We Live Now*). The use of narrative is able to explore and control this fear. By portraying the experiences of friends and relatives as well as of those of the ill man himself, the story is able to provide a way for these concerns to be projected and relatable both to the characters within the story and to the audience reading the work, past and present. This reliability, and the structure found within a non-normative style of writing, allow future generations to interact with the text, invoking emotion and relating to the concerns and interpersonal relationships that epitomise the AIDS crisis.

'The Way We Live Now' further exemplifies the need for structure to make sense of traumatic experience through the use of writing within the story. There is a hyper focus and a self-awareness of the act of writing, enacting Chambers' concept of hypotyposis by creating an awareness of the richness of language, as well as the complex system of literary interaction they are engaging with and its importance as a means of documenting experience to preserve it. The ill man in Sontag's text begins a process of keeping a diary to make sense of his experiences. As told to his friend Donny: "he'd begun keeping a diary for the first time in his life, because he wanted to record the course of his mental reactions to this astonishing turn of events, to do something parallel to what the doctors were doing" (Sontag *The Way We Live Now*). The diary repeats throughout the course of the story, noted by the conversations between his friends, and has an overarching image of hope and coherence for the future. In his efforts to make sense of his illness and legitimise it by writing in a diary, Sontag's story is able to both affirm the experiences of AIDS, give them a base, and provide a sense of structure and cohesion to an illness with an unknown future.

'The Way We Live Now' further indicates the necessity of the creation of community to both provide support and maintain identity, but also as a means of sharing experience, memory and connectedness in a time of societal rejection. The text situates itself "[i]n marked contrast to the sensational 'spread of AIDS' stories appearing regularly in the mass media... by speaking sympathetically and fearlessly to and about the communities that were forming around HIV/AIDS" (Treichler 251). The story provides community through the congregation of friends at the ill man's bedside, but also through their ability to relate and understand their experiences through each other. As explored in the story, Quentin observes, "don't you

think...that being as close to him as we are, making time to drop by the hospital every day, is a way of our trying to define ourselves more firmly and irrevocably?" (Sontag *The Way We Live Now*). Literature is able to challenge and work through processes of grieving, allowing experiences and feelings that are otherwise repressed by mainstream society, because of the attached stigma, to be proliferated and explored. Treichler (252) further reiterates this connection of community and asyndeton, stating that the story's "long run-on sentences seek to represent a collective voice, a community". Identity is created through the intricate complexities of the ill man's life, and through the congregation of individuals who affirm and grow together in response to his illness, indicating into the present the importance of these communal structures in interacting with and making peace with trauma, allowing it to be felt and adopted.

This theme is also apparent in *AIDS and its Metaphors*, where Sontag criticises the lack of identity given to patients suffering with AIDS. Sontag argues that the physical signs of illness, specifically frail bodies and sore marked faces, allowed dominant representations in media and culture to depict individuals as faceless 'othered' bodies (Sontag *AIDS and its Metaphors* 57-59). This metaphor and its physical characteristics come into play, creating stigma and an inability to see individuals beyond their disease and potential ability to spread it. Narratives and media representations concerning the illness, as stated by Goldstein (298), thus often failed due to their "struggle to give the person with AIDS a fully human complexity" (Goldstein 298). It is noted within the story that doctors repeatedly "conferred at his bedside about his body" (Sontag *The Way We Live Now*). The detachment of the person from their body, and the creation of the individual as diseased, thus

necessitates the role of the ill man, his friends and the story itself to humanise him as something more than a 'body'.

The role of literature in combating this remains central to fighting the stigma and detachment associated with the disease. As stated by Pearl (27), fiction is able to combat this through "the representation and reinforcement of a character's whole unfragmented body, through the fiction's determination to outline and keep whole the ill body" (Pearl 27). As the story progresses, the man becomes less defined by his illness. As expressed by Donny within the narrative, "he talked less about being ill... which seemed like a good sign, Kate felt, a sign that he was not feeling like a victim, feeling not that he *had* a disease but, rather, was living *with* a disease" (Sontag *The Way We Live Now*). The multiple voices within the narrative deconstruct the faceless AIDS patient narrative. The man, despite being nameless, is created as a whole person who happens to have AIDS, rather than being entirely defined by his illness.

The stigma attached to AIDS and the people suffering from it during this period further characterises much of the narratives and representations available. As explored by Sontag (*AIDS and its Metaphors* 16) moral judgments of the infected and the habit of society to categorise illness and make the disease "identified with evil, and attach blame to its 'victims'" also attributed to processes of stigmatisation. Due to these attitudes present during the time period, much of the reaction to the ill led to a situation wherein "stigma, discrimination, and neglect... characterized the societal and governmental responses" (Crimp 317-318). Similar to the fight for identity and wholeness amongst discourses of a diseased body that is alienated by medicine and society, Sontag's work acts in reaction to these stigmatising rejections and attitudes.

The fight against the stigma of the ill and the fear of the disease itself are negotiated throughout the course of Sontag's story. As affirmed by Jan, she states within the story that "I know for me his getting it has quite demystified the disease... I don't feel afraid, spooked, as I did before he became ill" (Sontag *The Way We Live Now*).

Similarly, Yvonne, visiting from London, expresses her amazement at the ill man's interactions, stating that "no one's afraid to hug him or kiss him lightly on the mouth... people I know, people who would seem to be not even remotely at risk, are just terrified" (Sontag *The Way We Live Now*). These reactions tie in with and allow relations to form through Chambers' concept of phantom pain. As he reiterates:

[P]hantom pain is equally uncanny because it makes for a strong sense of connection and continuity, but of an unexpected kind, a connection between subjects – the subject of the remembered pain and the subject of the remembering – that are to be separate, because other. (Chambers 201)

The attitudes portrayed here ultimately contest "the widespread fear of dealing with those dying or dead from AIDS" (Kellehear 211). By creating an environment in which the ill man is supported and cared for, despite the fear and unknown, Sontag's work is able to proliferate systems of sympathy and engagement, allowing for vital messages and themes from the outbreak of the crisis to be engaged with and projected to the audience

By providing a story in which those afflicted with AIDS were embraced and not assigned an alien 'othered' status, the text ultimately begins a process that aims to

rectify the discourses around AIDS. 'The Way We Live Now' adds to the creation of a literary canon that contradicts the associations of AIDS as a plague or punishment, ultimately providing fiction that can purge "the stigma of guilt, sin, and corruption with which... homophobia have stained it." (Clum 653). The ill man himself fights against this stigma and form of othering by embracing the realities of his disease. As exemplified in the story:

[I]t was encouraging, Stephen insisted, that from the start.... he was willing to say the name of the disease, pronounce it often and easily, as if it were just another word... as in no big deal, Paolo interjected, because, as Stephen continued, to utter the name is a sign of health, a sign that one has accepted being who one is, mortal, vulnerable, not exempt, not an exception after all, it's a sign that one is willing, truly willing, to fight for one's life. (Sontag *The Way We Live Now*)

By not rejecting the disease, and fighting against the stigma attached, the work is able to give voice to the voiceless in its context. Sontag's work, both critical and creative, thereby function as "models for mourning and renewal... as elements in a cultural response whose aim is to promote survival, demand attention, and defeat stigma" (Goldstein 315). In combating these attitudes in the past it also fights them in the present, allowing readers to combat some of the oppressive misconceptions that still surround AIDS; projecting remembrances and a humanising force that enacts processes of relation.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in *AIDS and its Metaphors* Sontag explores the seemingly taken for granted connection that AIDS = death that dominated much media criticism of the time, despite the development of new drugs after 1988. Sontag believed that metaphors that inhibit, classify and other aided in this narrative of death. As stated by Sontag (*AIDS and its Metaphors* 53), “[f]rom classic fiction to the latest journalism, the standard plague story is of inexorability, inescapability”. This notion is further mimicked in the story when despair and hopelessness is conveyed by the doctors. As expressed by Hilda, “they didn’t know what the hell they were doing... the truth, the real truth, as Hilda said, upping the ante, was that they didn’t, the doctors, really have any hope.” (Sontag *The Way We Live Now*). Those in places of institutional power are depicted within the story along these lines, with the characters feeling at loss and unable to combat the lack of hope or action they can undertake to combat the disease. This is an important social reality that is carried through the story, one that societal forces and the passage of time can make us forget.

However, by the end of the story, ‘The Way We Live Now’ comparatively challenges this conception of AIDS and death. Rather than reinforcing “the sense of the omnipresence of AIDS” and its inevitability, the story itself does not end with the man’s death, but with his wary and battle worn community still hopeful about his continued survival (Sontag *AIDS and its Metaphors* 70). This ending marks itself as revolutionary given its context, directly challenging and contradicting the idea of AIDS being synonymous with the non-survival of the afflicted individuals. As reiterated by Clum (648), such an ending has the possibility of “affirming the foreshortened, uncertain future... affirming the possibility of love in the face of

death”. By providing one of the first stories to support this possibility, Sontag’s text attempts to subvert dominant associations of the disease.

‘The Way We Live Now’ thus contextually allows for a reclaiming of AIDS discourse to occur. Much of the power pertaining to the depiction of AIDS, specifically within this mid 1980s context, related to the “struggle for rhetorical ownership of the illness: how it is possessed, assimilated in argument and in cliché.” (Sontag *AIDS and its Metaphors* 93-94). The final passage of Sontag’s story fights for this ownership, echoing the vivid focus on writing, continuing in asyndetic structure, stating:

And he was still writing his diary... I was thinking, Ursula said to Quentin, that the difference between a story and a painting or photograph is that in a story you can write, He’s still alive. But in a painting or a photo you can’t show “still.” You can just show him being alive. He’s still alive, Stephen said.

(Sontag *The Way We Live Now*)

The main character’s depiction as “still alive” epitomises the significance of Sontag’s work. Returning to act of writing in his diary parallels with the purpose of the short story: to provide narrative and structures that project hope for the future. Chambers (200) reiterates this, describing, “writing as itself an agent in the sense that it both records the evidence of a break... and produces a continuity, which is the survival, despite that break”. Given its context, ‘The Way We Live Now’ ultimately ends on a note that affirms life and the possibility of longevity *despite* the presence of AIDS.

Sontag's short story 'The Way We Live Now' and her critical essay *AIDS and its Metaphors* thus exist as defining works in the conception of foster writing and the action of postmemorial reconstruction within the present. Through the construction of narrative, the short story is able to humanise and, in the context of its publication, defy dominant discourses that stigmatised and alienated members of the gay community with the disease. As stated by Pearl (29), "[by] making a narrative and making it whole the work can be said to be remedying loss". By analysing the story alongside Sontag's critical work, the two texts can be shown to provide structure, community and identity during a fraught period of uncertainty. The text constitutes as aiding the work of postmemory when, as explored by Hirsch:

Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible. (*Surviving Images* 9)

Both the characters within the story and its real life audience are thus given control and positive representation. Within depictions of the AIDS crisis and its ramifications it is "the *damage done* that defines and gives shape to the initial event, the *damage done* that gives it its name" (Erikson 184-185). This damage is what Sontag explores, ultimately providing a means of engaging and ameliorating some of the trauma, and in so doing remember. 'The Way We Live Now' is a text that is important to the present inasmuch as it represents the past; it provides the basis for a revisionist movement against oppressive narratives, involving key literary devices that enact

processes of relation, and ultimately provides valuable cultural documentation of memory and experience that can be felt within the present.

Part 2: *Chronicles of a Plague*: Andrew Holleran and the Discourse of Remembering

Introduction

Andrew Holleran's collection of short stories—hybridised into the form of creative essays—speak of his experiences during the AIDS crisis, his interpersonal relationships with those experiencing the disease, and the sense of destruction and wrought upon the LGBT community within New York City. Loss and despair prevail as narrative themes within his work, but concurrently motifs of survival, compassion and unimaginable strength pervade the pieces. I will be discussing two of his essays within the collection, 'Ground Zero' and 'Reading and Writing', and the way in which they exemplify Hirsch's conceptions of postmemory, and the characteristic ways in which literature can evoke pain, systems of relational sympathising and the adoption of memory. The collection serves as a reminder to all LGBT people, and society as a whole, that what was—and is still being—endured cannot be forgotten or relegated to the past.

Originally published in 1988 under the title *Ground Zero*, the collection has since been republished under the title *Chronicles of a Plague*. Holleran's own commentary in the second edition highlight the necessity of AIDS literature to continually be republished, taught and interacted with in an effort for it to remain in the cultural zeitgeist and have an enduring effect. As stated by Lee:

Engaging with the concept of AIDS literacy at the present critical juncture goes a long way towards recovering ‘the promise of the queer past’ and establishing ‘a history of [gay] readers.’ Furthermore, to the extent that literary representations of AIDS may be just as—if not more—valuable to the process of identity formation as was ‘gay literature’ before the onset of the epidemic... stories are especially illuminating when read in the present, supposedly ‘post-AIDS’ historical moment. (147)

Chronicles of a Plague represents a history and community on the brink of destruction, caught in the grips of an epidemic that still mars the face of queer culture today. Through its raw and gritty realism and its use of literary devices, Holleran’s writing moves through space and time, blurring the lines between what is cohesive, what is raw and unfiltered, and ultimately critiquing what is remembered, *how* it is portrayed and the ways in which systems of relation both problematise and assist the efforts of AIDS literature.

Ground Zero

I wander around the city, past the buildings going up on Third Avenue, the crowds on Fifth, aware that inside the external aggrandizement of the city's power and glitter is another, small city that haunts the mind as a sort of doppelganger. The city as cemetery.

(Holleran, 161-162)

Holleran's choice of venues within his work focus around scenes of gay cultural institutions, from bath houses to apartments, and in the case of 'Ground Zero', the dilapidated Metropolitan Theatre. 'Ground Zero' presents itself in opposition initially to messages of hope, instead presenting a narrative that is struck to its core with the injustice and suffering that has occurred, the effects of a disease that have irreparably changed the face of the LGBT community and the way gay men could live their lives and control their sexual freedom. This idea is reiterated by Sontag (*AIDS and its Metaphors* 72), who explores the notion that during this period "[s]ex no longer withdraws its partners, if only for a moment, from the social. It cannot be considered just a coupling; it is a chain, a chain of transmission, from the past." The Metropolitan that Holleran wanders in a haze, watching pornographic films on movie screens and viewing naked men too scared to touch each other in face of annihilation, drastically morphs from its pre-AIDS outbreak existence.

Following Chambers' framework for the creation of phantom pain through foster writing, 'Ground Zero' relies upon asyndeton in its form and structure.

Holleran's voice—with his past self as narrator— moves between focus, his thoughts shifting as the setting around him adapts, snapping back and forth in a fractured collection of overwhelmed contemplation. This structure is mirrored by the actions of the men he watches as he narrates his thoughts. He laments, "Eddie's not here now. Other people are. They wander back and forth—across the foyer, up and down the aisles, searching, searching" (Holleran 169). The fractured nature of the writing, skipping between words and reading like a distracted monologue, transforms into a metaphor for the dual fracture in community and identity.

Furthermore, the use of hyperfocus on specific images and themes within the story provides key insights into the prevalence and inextricable links between fear, sexuality and desire that the AIDS crisis came to represent. As Holleran narrates his time in the Metropolitan it transforms from its past existence as a "dark, warm chamber of seed" (171) to a den of disarray where men wander around lost, the freedom once offered by anonymous sex now fraught, with ejaculate that "lies there, like plutonium" (171). He contemplates the intermingled fear and desire, watching as men begin to touch each other then ease off, the reality of gay existence during the epidemic momentarily suspended in the comfort of the theatre, but crashing back down as Holleran notes the absence of people who used to frequent the establishment. 'Ground Zero' exemplifies the way in which "[f]ear gives everything its hue, its high" (Sontag, 1986), leading to a troubled form of existence for many gay men. This hyperfocus on sexual details, as well as the bodies and physicality of sex in itself, displays the literary techniques necessary for foster writing. Holleran's mixture of pain, longing and resentment for life before the crisis illuminates a key perspective

during the crisis, and offers a vividly stark memoir of the effect disease had upon sexuality, everyday life and cultural institutions.

Despite the at times derisive attitude towards collectivity in Holleran's 'Ground Zero', the work also alludes to the necessity of community in the face of disaster to share and preserve memory and the lives of individuals lost. Holleran initially laments the lack of joy found in community establishments, how the disease has pervaded all aspects of life and offers little to not escape from its devastating rampage. He mourns:

The bars, the discotheques, that are still open seem pointless in a way; the social contract, the assumptions, that gave them meaning are gone. They turn you serious, if you stay long enough—because every bar, every dance floor, reminds you eventually of a friend. The memory of friends is everywhere. It pervades the city. (Holleran 164)

The text illuminates a disconnect, depicting both the necessity for and the reaction against community and communal rallying. Despite this, the Metropolitan in Holleran's work still acts as a community centre of fractured gay and queer men grouping together to escape, not just the disease, but also the outside world that alienates and demonises them for their natural desires. There exists for Holleran a dichotomy between the straight world and that of queer people. He states in two instances:

[W]hen I get down to the street, my instinct is to run, not walk, straight through this earthly hell to the Metropolitan and, once its doors close behind me, relax. (Holleran 162)

I keep thinking there's a beach at the end of this," a friend said. "An island, and we'll be happy again." In the meantime, I come to the Metropolitan the moment I get back to Fun City. (Holleran 169)

The overwhelming stigma faced in the day-to-day world made the Metropolitan, even with its deathly reminders, a safe haven for Holleran and queer men during this time period. The lack of relatability to the outside world, and the dominant discourses that viewed AIDS "metaphorically – as, plague-like, a moral judgment on society" (Sontag *AIDS and its Metaphors* 60) necessitated the formation of insular communities to provide structure and camaraderie in a time of great alienation. This necessity ultimately points towards the additional need for community as a means of memory transference.

The significance of 'Ground Zero' as a tool for postmemorial construction lies in its ability to offer a multifaceted insight into Holleran's personal experiences of the crisis. At the distance provided by time, Holleran's work allows readers to "revisit the archive of AIDS narratives and to reconsider those texts both for their historical significance and their aesthetic investments" (Lee 148). While not exhibiting overall themes of hope in the same vein as Sontag's work, his writing gives insight into the workings of the crisis; the way in which he addressed and related to the fear around

him, writing and documenting it for future generations. This is further reiterated in the next piece I will discuss, 'Reading and Writing'.

Reading and Writing

'Reading and Writing' in contrast does not present itself as an essay of distinct camaraderie or overt defiance in the face of oppression. Rather, it questions the legitimacy and efficacy of writing itself in representing such a plague, asking if the forms of remembering honoured when years separate the outbreak of AIDS from the present will only be those that provide hope. What is necessary to a literature of loss is a complex array of works representing a complex set of responses. Each work of literature embodying the AIDS crisis exists both within itself and as part of a wider community, subsuming each other to create a multi-voiced whole to commemorate the varying people and experiences of trauma, ultimately creating a canon that must be studied, remembered and accepted for its complexity of voice.

'Reading and Writing' is such a text. Holleran's writing is raw and unfiltered, speaking in derision of the methods his community has adopted as coping mechanisms. There is an exhaustion and sense of panic, a need for escape; senses that are vital to understanding the fear and unknown faced by the LGBT community during this time. As explored by Hirsch, "[f]or survivors who have been separated and exiled from a ravaged world, memory is necessarily an act not only of recall, but also of mourning, a mourning often inflected by anger, rage, and despair" (661). This anger, despair and a pervasive sense of uselessness in the face of tragedy is what Holleran's work epitomises and transmits in 'Reading and Writing', providing a cultural document that analyses itself and the importance of literary memory in the midst of disarray.

In addition to its analysis of the efficacy of writing, 'Reading and Writing' also displays the fictive devices necessary for the transference of memory through foster writing and phantom pain. The piece, like 'Ground Zero', carries the same fractured and discontented voice at times, taking advantage of devices of exaggeration, metaphor, and a reflection laden narration that blurs the lines as an essay interspersed with creative recollections. Similar to Sontag, the hyperfocus on writing and *stylised* writing creates the vividness necessary for hypotyposis. Holleran's writing is rich, talking in similes and vivid imagery, contemplating his derision towards hope encapsulates itself through his testament, "[w]e are to gods as flies to wanton boys; they kill us for their sport" (Holleran 85). The vividness of his writing interacts with the reading process, exemplifying the very nature of trauma reading as a "compulsive seeking out of similar circumstances" (Erikson 184),

Much like Sontag's work, Holleran's writing attempted to present reality through the medium of literature, and in doing so presents a vivid example of a postmemorial text that can carry the past into the present. As stated by Lee (146), "Holleran attempts to draw intertextual connections to make sense of the present crisis". 'Reading and Writing' explores the problems inherent to writing, namely the difficulty of doing so in time of such upheaval and loss. Holleran (79) states, "AIDS is like staring at the sun—so, in a way, is even reading and writing about it". Despite this difficulty, Holleran reiterates the importance of writing, even when it cannot present a solution or cure for a ravaged community, stating, "[t]he novel is occasionally the way we bring some sort of order to the disorder of life" (Holleran, 83). Similarly to Sontag, much of Holleran's discourse came about as a response against dominant media narratives. AIDS existing as a construction of language is a dominant theme. He states

this, "[m]any of us have seen our generation wiped out in announcements from the Harvard School of Public Health. Some of us have been told we were terminally ill by Barbara Walters." (R&W, 86) Despite the fact that the "the act itself cannot furnish a cure" (Holleran 146) Holleran's narration further discusses:

"Writing about It, besides, presented an ethical dilemma: How could one write truthfully of the horror when part of one's audience was experiencing that horror? How to scare the uninfected without disheartening those who had everything to gain by cherishing as much hope and willpower as they could? "Don't you think it's time now," a friend said, "to introduce some light at the end of the tunnel?" (Holleran 81)

Holleran (14) reiterates this importance, stating, "[i]t seemed important that there be some record of what he went through. We are not entirely free of the dead". What reiterates itself, over and over again, amongst his work is the pure necessity for literature as a means of processing, healing and representing what has occurred. Holleran is the "the survivor... who acts as eyewitness and recorder, bearing the burdens of history and the imperative to reconstruct the cultural text" (Larabee 229).

His role as a survivor and a documenter creates for both the reader and himself a sense of community—a relational interaction in which "AIDS made people ask: What are we to one another?" (Holleran 10). While "trauma has both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies...drawing one away from the center of group space while at the same time drawing one back,"(Erikson 186), which in itself is reflected in Holleran's doubts, overall his aptly titled 'Reading and Writing' eventually concedes

to the necessity of communal relationships and an interactive literary culture, providing an educational document with the necessary devices to ‘foster’, in the sense of Chambers, a place within society for previously marginalised and ignored experiences. In doing so, Holleran creates a legacy for the future—stories rich in texture and voice, providing valuable snapshots and insights into the crisis, and ultimately allowing his writing to enter a postmemorial sphere through its continued republication and discussions.

Part 3: *Ricordare* and Postmemorial Reconstruction

The writing of AIDS literature in the present takes on a politicised and complex process of memory and transmission. ‘*Ricordare*’ exists as a deeply personal text at its core, endeavouring to explore that which is unsaid, battling through the stigma and shame still attached to HIV/AIDS even decades removed from the crisis. In doing so it aims to keep the memory of those who suffered, in this case a family member to my narration, from being subsumed into the past. ‘*Ricordare*’ can be viewed as a bridging piece, connecting the past to the present. Its fragmented narrative, modelled on the work of Sontag and the split structure of Holleran’s essays, endeavours to break the silence erected by a family in relation to AIDS, ultimately aiming to give humanity back to the sufferer that is its focus, Salvatore, providing a face to a disease that is all too readily dismissed or not understood in the present.

‘*Ricordare*’ demonstrates the use of literature in exploring and understanding the past, giving structure, meaning and imbuing that past with urgency in the present. As Hirsch suggests, the construction of postmemory and the act of writing about that which is removed from the here and now is the result of the “fictional imagination... fueled in great part by the desire to know the world as it looked and felt before our births” (Hirsch *Past Lives* 661). This fictional imagination is what spurs the construction of postmemory, that is, the impulse behind which the examination of the past in the present relies. Postmemory occurs because of a *need* to understand the past, to relate to those with similar experience and connectedness, and allow their voices to be heard even beyond the grave.

The structure within ‘Ricordare’ mimics the literary device of asyndeton necessary for foster writing and phantom pain. The disjointed sections, told alternately through Salvatore’s third person voice and the narrator’s first person voice, blurs the line between conventional structure, allowing for a movement between space and time that connects the past to the present. The first person narration within the story, talking to Salvatore himself, aims to construct a compelling dynamic, that of conversing with the dead, to occur. The particular use of direct determiners, the frequent relation of ‘our’ family, our experiences, our cousins—all of these create a dialogue and connectivity between that which is lost and that which is in a process of regeneration to resurrect the forgotten past. This structure ultimately allows for the “bringing together of broken pieces: the symbolic remembering of dismembered identities” (Chambers, 200).

This is further reiterated through the notion of a ‘gaze’, both literally through the characters’ interactions and viewings of themselves and others, but also through the notion of the text as gaze, an all seeing eye of sorts, delving into the past while imbued with the present. The gaze is hyperfocused throughout, through the eyes of the characters and through religious iconography, with young Salvatore’s eyes as they “trace... over the stained glass of Mother Mary” (7), to the photos “above the tortured face of Christ on the cross” (10) in his mother’s home, and the face of Mary “taunting on the altar” (41) as he prays within the confines of the hospital. This gaze explores the multiplicity of religious influence, both through ideas of salvation crossing with that of oppressive societal and religious structures—a dichotomy of faith, a desire for deliverance but also the dual shame brought out by said faith and institutions.

Hypotyposis, in this sense, *creates* these hyperfocused gazes, both literal and

figurative. In doing so “reality becomes oddly dual” (Chambers 203), and the sense through which the story can be vividly interacted with. Both these instances of asyndeton and hypotyposis ultimately allow for systems of interaction to take place, in which readers and writers themselves are able to humanise experience, interacting with the process of foster writing and phantom pain and the literary devices necessary for its transference.

‘Ricordare’ represents familial postmemory but also complements the formation of affiliative postmemory. It exists in lieu, the narrator connected via blood relation but still alienated enough from the story of Salvatore that he may as well be a distant stranger for all that he is ignored and shunned by the family. It reiterates the problem inherent in much of AIDS history and transference, in that there is the issue of gay “generation trouble that have been engendered by AIDS” (Lee 142). Through the sheer loss of life represented by the crisis, much of the history of AIDS is problematised. The necessity of a family or community structure to share and provide insight into the past is demonstrated in ‘Ricordare’, both as the fulfilment of the continuation of culture and memory, but also as a means of emotional support. As lamented by the narrator, “Maybe we wouldn’t have been so lonely among them if we had each other” (38). There is a yearning—a desire for connection and for community that transcends space and time. This desire creates an “evocation of survival through a transcendent and psychologically transparent collectivity” (Larabee 232), a collectivity that occurs in spite of and *because of* the forces at work in society that marginalize minority experience. ‘Ricordare’ ultimately suggests the necessity of community, or personal relation, for the transference of intergenerational memory,

both because of its reliance on interpersonal relationships to connect emotions, but also as a means of survival amongst marginalised people

‘Ricordare’ ultimately presents itself as a text to highlight the importance of traumatic memories and the contexts and experiences of those involved in the crisis through the character of Salvatore. Lee (168) echoes this necessity of continual engagement, stating, “to make AIDS history, we must first encounter the texts, lives, and contexts that constitute AIDS’s unfinished history”. Hirsch’s conception of generational postmemory is reiterated through the second generational nature of ‘Ricordare’ and the way in which:

Second generation fiction, art, memoir, and testimony are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma. (*The Generation of Postmemory* 112)

The figure of Salvatore within the story is the source of this unfinished history—one of many innumerable stories forgotten by time, distance and the frequency of human consciousness to attribute experiences of suffering to the past, rather than engaging with the very real effect they still have upon the present. The systems of relations enacted between humans, both familial and community focused, highlight the way in which it is the role of the living to ensure the dead did not die in vein and are remembered.

The instances of phantom pain and postmemory within the work of Hirsch, Holleran and 'Ricordare' portray the significance of literature in transferring memory and the effectiveness of emotional engagement with these texts, even when time, points of view and opinion vary between them. The necessity of texts from the initial outbreak of the AIDS crisis are shown to be monumentally important, transferring key memories, suffering and stories from those personally involved in the event. At the same time, the framework of postmemory allows for works from the present to gain significance, ultimately allowing processes of reflection that uncover aspects of memory and the past that could otherwise be lost.

Conclusion

AIDS literature represents an endeavour critical the function of human memory, that is, the importance of remembering—remembering the context and experiences of the disease; remembering the trauma inflicted upon a disaffected community; remembering the stories that weren't allowed to be told, not letting those who suffered die in vain; and most importantly, transforming and bringing these stories to the present, and in doing so ensuring they are not relegated to the past. As stated by Sontag (*AIDS and its Metaphors* 76) “[p]art of making an event real is just *saying* it, over and over”. The works of Susan Sontag and Andrew Holleran enact these processes in differing ways, adding to a body of work that can be accessed and interacted with.

AIDS literature is as important to the present inasmuch as it represents the past; providing the basis for a reactionary movement against oppressive narratives and involving key literary devices that produce a system of sympathising, ultimately providing valuable cultural documentation of memory and experience. Through relations of phantom pain through foster writing, Hirsch's notion of postmemory can be conceptualised and realised within the present, forming the basis for community engagement.

All of the works represent varying contexts, voices, and opinions, but all are able to tap into similar fictive devices and modes of communication that allow for the transference of memory to occur when the texts are studied and viewed, even with distance from the initial event. Through their vivid representations of pain and

trauma, Sontag and Holleran's works exist as a "mimesis of a haunted subjectivity.... a text that itself haunts: not just "about" pain, it also *hurts*." (Chambers 202). This pain allows for the adoption of memory, and ultimately begins a practice of ensuring past pain is not forgotten. As discussed by Peterson:

Since the 1996 International Aids Conference in Vancouver, which saw the official announcement of the success of protease inhibitors in treating patients infected with HIV, pronouncements that declare the end of AIDS have been ubiquitous, as if by sheer discursive repletion Americans hope to conjure it away for good. (144)

With time and distance from the crisis, the threat of it being 'conjured away' or relegated to the past is a relevant concern. But, as seen through the short stories I have discussed, literature points to itself as the answer. As suggested by Holleran, by making concerted efforts to ensure these texts are interacted with, by writing continually about post generational experiences of the crisis, and by not letting those who died be forgotten, literature can act as the key means of memory transference in the present. Ultimately, AIDS literature, as any literature of loss, constitutes itself as a collection of memory and trauma, and the way in which we in the present choose to engage, reply and discuss this body of work establishes the way it will survive and persevere in cultural consciousness.

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