

## Whatever These Precautions I Invented in My Head

*Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell.*

*He has borrowed his authority from death.*

– Walter Benjamin

1. This is the way it was with the family. This is the way I was. The few accounts I kept are a part of how I know this girl. Writing these same words again, I am replicating a story I know but do not remember.

2. Part of how I come to know my uncle, Tio Augusto, is from the accounts of others. Last year I recorded conversations with his family and friends whom I found on the internet. I notice I just wrote “his family” – a move apart from them. My family too. They must do it too, in a different way. What I am beginning to see instead is the displacement of blame, the slippage of familial time, and the prolonged grind of these conversations.

3. In the summer of 1995, I kept a diary during a trip to Brazil, the one that became the last time I saw him. I was thirteen. I said things to the diary like “C-ya” and “Sorry it’s been SOOOOOO long since I’ve written you.” I was already practicing the writing of the family secrets.

*We brought a yogurt container for Gabriela to pee in at night cuz the bathroom is outside and she peed in it about 8:30 and we found it had a hold in it and the pee leaked all over the house.*

4. How did I know he had AIDS? I didn’t know, because he couldn’t see the virus, I can’t either, and neither could my mother. But I knew from my mother. I’d guess that she told me when I was nine or ten. How did she know? She was convinced he’d never gone to doctors, so she also assumed he’d never been tested. So how did she know if he didn’t? She never asked him about it. His gayness secured his place squarely in the risk group of her mind. Was his gayness a behavior, identity or disease? At the beginning and the end, what matters is that I knew he had it. My mother told me. It didn’t seem like a question or care for his wellbeing, just a fact that couldn’t be corroborated or discussed. I asked her if she could ask him to get tested. She wouldn’t because she was sure he wouldn’t. So that’s how it works, my family’s quiet factory of necropower.

5. What to call it? Fear of the erotic or fear of germs? The sexual politics of a binational family system in an epidemic? Family as a microcosm for nation?

6. The last time I saw Tio Augusto I was thirteen. We stayed at his apartment in São José dos Campos. Purely from memory (unjogged by my diary) the best part of the summer in Brazil was him. He did my hair. Dyed it almost blonde and blew it straight. I loved it and my mother hated it. She loved my curly dark hair and didn't buy Barbies for my sister and I, because she didn't want us pining after a blonde, blue eyed, doll body. Probably because we'd mostly live in the US, and this is what her American husband's mother from Louisiana told my father when he announced he was marrying a Brazilian woman: "Do you mean to tell me you're marrying a black oriental?"

7. Tio Augusto lived in an apartment behind the hair salon that Vovô helped him buy. My mother told Gabriela and I not to sit on his toilet or share plates and cups with him. That secret didn't make it into my diary, but the hairstyles did. A secret I did include:

*Vovô was driving 128 km/hr and the speed limit was 100. So a cop pulled her over and Vovô said she needed to get to the next town fast because Gabriela was a diabetic – and she showed him the meter to test her blood sugar, needles, and a diabetic necklace she was wearing, so the police said – have a good trip, so on and so forth. She's had two other episodes with police that she talked them out of a giving her a ticket and lied. Virgilio (Vovô's husband) said not to write that in here that Vovô lied because when I get to be an Anne Frank and famous that we shouldn't say she lied!*

If one were to *get* to be Anne Frank! *We* shouldn't say she lied – as if my words were not mine but belonging to all the people who make me. According to the next entry, we were stopped by the police again the next day, and escaped unpunished again.

8. Now anything about my grandmother screams transgenerational trauma transmission to me. How did my mother live through her? How unspeakable was Tio Augusto's death, alone with Vovô? He can't tell me. Only one of his friends that I couldn't get to talk to me, but who wrote me on Facebook instead, alluded to it:

4/23, 8:07pm

Cassia

*Hi Yana. I'm going to tell you about him. We got to know each other when gave him and a friend a ride to a gay ball. It was 1982 and after we became great friends. He was marvelous. Very caring. A good counselor... When he became sick he wanted to live here and I offered to care for him, but your grandmother didn't want to shoulder the expenditures. He was very sad to go to Campo Grande. After I'll tell you more.*

4/23, 10:30pm

Cassia

*Calou lived with a lot of simplicity, but he possessed a noble soul. He was a Lord. With habit*

4/23, 10:38pm

Cassia

*With refined habits. He always had heartache and pain around Dona Zuleika (Vovô). He telephoned Campo Grande and implored me to rescue him because he was so unhappy there. In one phone call he told me that she physically assaulted him. She hit him in the face.*

*It hurts a lot to tell you, but he wasn't happy and I'm certain that this is why he died so quickly (after moving to Camp Grande).*

4/23, 10:39pm

Cassia

*After I'll tell you more. I have photos of him that I'll send you soon, but I'm traveling now. Kisses.*

9. I wrote Cassia back one month after this, asking her about the more. I sent new questions: Do you know more about his relationship with my grandmother? My grandfather? Or any of his boyfriends? How long did you know he was HIV+? How did he tell you? I still haven't heard back.

10. Now I wonder how can I write about him without killing him. The brevity of Cassia's information reached me via Facebook chat: a transmission that paralyzed my ability to write her back for that month. Yet I was so grateful for her specifics. And what of this woman who just left these words dangling in a box for me to find. How strange to read someone else's story. His brother, Tio Zezé had a different account of his last days with Vovô:

*Tio Zezé: She (Vovô) enrolled him in the (AIDS care) program in Campo Grande. He went to live with her there, and they closed the salon because it was just giving problems, and we rented his apartment. He stayed with her and he received the rent for the house, which was more than the salon made when it was open. He started studying and took the vestibular (required test for post-secondary schooling) and he wanted to get a drivers license so he could drive. He never had gotten a car but he had a motorcycle, but he drove cars very badly and didn't have a license. He took drivers classes so he could drive, because he didn't want to live in the house with her. He said she was crazy, and he was right. He didn't want to live with his mother. She is very difficult. But after some time, they became really good friends. He resolved the relationship with her. In the last six or seven months he called her maezinha querida. He finished with a good relationship.*

11. I asked my mother if she ever asked him to get tested or to seek treatment. I vacillated between compassion and understanding, frustration and anger.

*Tanea: Yana, I felt totally powerless. Because he had Zezé there, he had good people in his life. And I didn't know much about anything, I felt that he was impossible. He would say to me oh I don't care about anything – if there is such a thing as reincarnation I'll come back and do the same exact thing. You know really, what do you do with somebody like this? I felt powerless. I felt totally powerless. I knew Zezé would tell me. This is bullshit about his test because he didn't test for AIDS and he won't because he's scared. That's what Zezé told me and he is pretty forward. I felt pretty incompetent and overwhelmed by him (Augusto). It's a case so dramatic that I didn't know what to do, the first step... He would call me once in awhile but I didn't feel there was any need for anything because that scheme of life, that way of life worked for awhile, he had fun, and seemed upbeat and healthy and everything seemed okay, and there's nothing I can do. I'm not there and I didn't have a very close relationship.*

I grilled her harder than anyone else. I asked her why she told us not to share plates or toilets with him in 1995.

*Tanea: I was scared because there were all these rumors about how you got it. I wasn't sure. To me it was kind of precaution when around someone that has AIDS, you have to take precautions. Whatever these precautions I invented in my head, you know? I didn't know. And it's confusing Yana too, all these precautions, and you look at him and you don't know because he looked so healthy, you get lost in ignorance. I was scared being in his house with you girls. I was. Yeah. And I knew that the tings I was telling you girls, that I didn't know for sure either. It was straight fear. It was the best I could do... I assumed that he had it Yana, because I know his personality. He is not a person that who's gonna think about what he's gonna do. He's going to do whatever he wants to with whatever anytime. Everything is going to be all right or if its not, whatever. There is no rationale with him. So I said my god you know, I'm not gonna be surprised if it blows up. And then at some point in time I don't remember I heard he had this boyfriend that I think died. So by the time I found this out, I was not surprised... So all we could hope for is that he would be healthy for how long, and be grateful for how long he lived healthy. That's what I basically expected... I didn't think for a moment that he didn't have it.*

If I was the good queer, why didn't I talk to him? About anything. I was twenty-two when he died and I'm still accusing my mother for not talking.

I finish reading my diary from the last trip with him. I am struck by untouchable I had already become by then. How I learned to fight, to swallow, to keep loving. How patiently resilient

the women in our family were in ways that seemed to serve no one at all. I joined them and fell in line.

12. If Tio Augusto were alive now, would his life simply translate into my intergenerational salvation project? To simply reverse the effects of necropower is not enough. I cannot write this to save him, but this may have been my original sin around gathering these oral histories.

13. I am harboring a childish desire for him to confess. Confess to the virus, confess to his queerness, confess to having a maleficent mother, to hear his pain. Desire to hear him break down and tell me how everything was not okay. Desire to absorb this geneological pain into my body. Desire to hear him say it hurt so badly that he couldn't get a satisfactory test, couldn't take care of his body, couldn't resist the cocaine, couldn't get on ARVs.

And desire for whatever else no one will tell me about, whatever else he told no one else about.

*Tio Zezé: He had a funeral. He was frozen and then he was buried. His burial was from a Catholic church in Campo Grande. There was a mass. No friends or boyfriends came - very few people came, because his friends were in SJC, not Campo Grande. Just a few friends of Vovô. She didn't want to tell anyone but everyone knew. No one spoke of this but everyone knew. He loved the cousins in Juazeiro, but they did not come to the funeral, just Lirida was the only one. No one else could. She stayed with me there for three days. The priest was not a priest he knew, he was not religious. He didn't go to church. He had this because Vovô wanted it. She doesn't go to church either but she believed in god. She want to all the churches. The Macumba, the Protestant, the Catholic. Whatever and none of them! She just believes in god. That's all. If someone told her to do something, she'd do it. She just wanted to cure him. But she is catholic, still to this day. She didn't practice or go every Sunday, just believed. He didn't believe. I don't know. I don't think he believed.*

14. I watch a performance of Diamanda Galas' *Confessional* on YouTube – a wraithy, mocking exorcism. I am hollow, clear, and present to my wanting of a confession. I am on a dark hill with no streetlights in a small town in Puerto Rico, where I have come to write. Above the house, the wooden post holding up the power lines forms a T, and the way the vines have grown over morph it into a large cross. A large cross on top of the hill, like the ones in small towns all across Brazil. I am like that nameless priest who performed his extreme unction – only I can administer this ersatz forgiveness over a decade after his body has crossed into liminality. I have nothing to forgive him for, but still, I plough the living for their confessions, for his confession.

This has become much less about a lineage of queer blood but very much one of contagion, confession. What is wanted from a confession is an alleviation, relief. That promise is empty.

From his friend Monica:

*Monica: He didn't tell many people that he had this illness, you know this right?...For many people it was a shock. I heard from Juliana, he didn't talk about it. I don't know if that was because he couldn't accept it, because society still has problems with this... And this is very sad, because this is a moment when people need much more from their friends, family, from everyone, and it's one of those moments where they feel alone, because many times the family doesn't know, doesn't know what to do...He existed in a party environment, where he helped everyone look nice, and they got compliments because of him. I think unfortunately it was really sad to not be able to share that (his serostatus) with friends.*

15. There is not a way for us to break down satisfactorily. Especially during the last scenes.

16. When Tio Augusto died, I received the notice in an email. Not inside an email, for it was the subject line that delivered the news that his blood was no longer being circulated throughout his body:

*From: Tanea Walton  
Subject: Augusto died.*

I was too angry at my mother to call after downing a bottle of cheap wine. I called Tio Zezé and cried drunkenly and terribly on the phone, choking on improperly conjugated Portuguese verbs and alcohol-fueled blustery tears. I think he was annoyed, but he was kind. There was nothing he could do. Viruses don't have intent.

17. This is my favorite story from the interviews. It's from his friend Juliana:

*Juliana: He was very happy, very much so, a character that sort of just sang "do you want to sleep with me?" Because sometimes he joked that he'd just say that and the guy would go with him, but I think it was really trial and error. He'd try, and if the person accepted, the man, he went. There was even one time that a woman fell for him, so much so that he slept with her, and the next day he called me really early in the morning and said, "Take this woman out of here, she's crazy ahahaha!" and we laughed so much...*

*He was the best man there was in this land!!!! You should be very proud to be his niece, because he made many people happy and he was my best friend for my whole life.*

18. I am angry that I missed Augusto's death, angry that my mother did nothing to save him. Angry that she and I did not have the kind of relationship where she'd come save me from

this painful separation from him, this separation from his death, this separation from her. She only tried to save me from his virus.

Swoop me up and take me to Brazil, Mama. Fly me there, fly me there because we know he is sick.

19. In retrospect I am struck by my desire for her to parent him, for me to parent him through her, to parent her through parenting him. In retrospect this is my attempt to be responsible for containing his contagion, while I had all the unsafe sex I wanted.

20. If AIDS is blood and family is blood, then AIDS lives in families. If blood is what makes him untouchable, then does our salvation lie in blood or family?

21. I suppose this is my way of having the last word. Death always means that one does not get to have one's own last word. No one else said the words I wanted to hear, and I gave up. This is what we all do, give in. Do our hair. At the end, I take my film from the trip to the developer, and get to select one photograph to blow up. I chose the one of me, Tio Augusto, his business partner, and my sister in his hair salon.