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**banned in boston**

**By Isabella De Palo Garcia Perez**

*after the recent ban on LGBTQ+ books by the Texas governor*

when they ban the words that spill from my lips  
in Texas school houses, queer Mexican girls  
will forget that they exist.

they will erase the parts of themselves  
lawmakers find unclean and impure. purging  
everything they'd never said by burying  
me in a library's crypt somewhere.

I guess I should be used to this, you know,  
with the way I already duck down  
against the backdrop of the city and her  
moral crusaders hunting down my virtues  
and slashing wildly at my vices.

when I'd need things like strange fruit  
or dark laughter, I'll be sure to toss myself  
feet first out an open window. after all,  
when they see my simmering wrath  
or taste the spice of my pride, they'll want  
me dead themselves.

for nothing good can come of naked  
lunches and desire lingering  
under doomed slippery elms.  
nothing good can come of my soul

sitting bare and broad on pieces  
of confectioner's paper. no one wants

to see what they suppress.

*lengua at market basket*

By Isabella De Palo Garcia Perez

goya speaks to me with spanish flow  
dialect tumbling down tongues eager  
to taste some semblance of *hogar*  
in white places. the woman next to me  
scoffs at words she can't pronounce,  
repeats them in a mocking tone while  
my eyes trace a boy with a jarritos  
guayaba blush painting his cheeks.

native tongues are not welcomed into  
suburbia. i pull tostadas from the shelf,  
place them next to almond milk, eggos;  
the picture of american dreaming.  
turning my back on the woman jeering  
with lip upturned, i spin myself towards  
tanned skin and sangria suit jackets.

her name tag proudly proclaims 15 years,  
but her eyes say a few too many so i stay  
quiet as she packs pieces of me  
into recycled bags that cost 2.99. i let  
her place them in the carriage before giving  
thanks in our rejected mother tongue.

**right where you left me**  
**By Isabella De Palo Garcia Perez**  
*for Los Nogales*

once upon a river ranch, a man told his daughter,  
“you will stay, even when the world  
abandons you — even when I do too.”  
his sons went north by northeast,  
crossing *la frontera* years before  
it became a hardship, leaving the land  
as it was. the daughter, one of eight,  
stood arm in arm with her sisters  
as they built bricks out of the foothills in the mountainside.  
after, they’d shared a single tortilla  
between the lot of them. the kind of time  
when food had been a luxury.  
the man wanted daughters who wouldn’t turn  
their backs on the river teeming  
with minerals or the ravines they’d scoured  
in their youth. he wanted almost more  
than they could give. and yet, the daughter stayed.

even now, with a table overflowing  
with fruits and a fridge filled with meat,  
I can see how she burns. how her fingers are bent  
with the memories of scrubbing clothes  
down at the riverside. how she holds it all inside,  
a quiet muse only speaking when silence  
is comfortable. she tells me her father left  
with her brothers and all that remains

of a clan of thirteen bright eyed babies  
are three children, grown with grayed hair  
and a penchant for staying right where they were left.

at night, when the stars threaten  
to outshine my namesake, she holds my hands  
in her own. *my first girl*, and she tells me  
of the pride bubbling under her skin. how I was gone  
before anyone could even ask me to stay.  
her male lineage hasn't strayed far from home.  
but I'm so many miles away it feels  
sometimes, like I'm someone different  
altogether. curled up, we watch  
as my brothers twist around a tree, and I wonder  
how to tell her I want to stay.





## **I Will Tell You What I Feel Under the Compulsion of this Evening's Clarity**

**By Nicholas Skaldetvind**

In the stinking air and the bay at dusk shimmering like dimes. The tuba player weaves disinterestedly with the band among parasols. The magpie looks at me going another way. The techno has started and still I feel lonely, trying to decide whether the familiar smell of horses hitched in the kind of river you can walk across is all that is purposeful. I am telling myself that story how nothing can stay the same.

## **The Differences in Details**

**By Nicholas Skaldetvind**

Our past takes on opposites. Take the mornings when we solved everything, and the ones we didn't. Recounting childhood traumas in that certain voice, the unexpected sex when we see eye to eye. Alas, other things set their own trajectory, like the sun in this smudged passenger window and the snow my daughter grows up around in a Swedish photograph. Thus and so we are swimming as I part the Pacific's rising tide in you at its glistening seams, ignorant and sunburned in the face. We are as similar as "mischief" and "mistress." At another time I'd like to say we are exactly alike above our laughter nestling in our mouths and your snoring dog in the backseat as we endure a security guard's chagrin about our "indecent" in the post office parking lot.

## The neon agenda

By Corinna Schulenburg

No, you're not wrong I do have a certain glow  
it's all about the diet you know I started eating  
those neon signs you know the ones  
over the gambling places I gobbled them up  
ionised atoms and poof! this halo, this blazon  
of pick me, pick me and I do get picked  
for all the teams now why just the other day  
I got picked first for softball which for  
a trans woman is very affirming and woah!  
with every hit the ball illuminates and soars!  
oh little globe of Queer light arcing into big blue  
and woah! shopping for fruit a single touch  
sets the melons blazing which is a little on the nose  
but who can critique amid the disco aisles and lovers?  
yup a single bright buss and they go nimbus  
even you dearest distance picked up an aureole  
and oops oh no I forgot hate is always drawn to light  
moths, flame so how do I turn off all this radiance  
visibility is just another word for target practice  
please un-burnish us or wait maybe no  
maybe crank the ions maybe plump the halation  
too much light makes the haters go blink and in  
that blink we enact the neon agenda and then  
it is too late sorry butchers a bullet-proof  
luminescence a luster of unbreakable waves

## The Volcano Disguised as a Little Girl

By H.E. Riddleton

my six-year-old legs cool like magma snaking around the legs of the chair—shaking the whole apparatus supposed to hold me up. born to pop like a sinner or an explosion. not ready for Adderal deliverance: silencer of intensity, plucker of wings. the door's propped open by the brown waste basket. maybe I belong there, in that place in between, surrounded by pencil shavings, empty glue sticks, bottomless sparkly eraser ropes to chew on, but I can't be caught wiggling or orange will become my color again. go to the place you hold. but what if it's no place? what if you're already on fire? what if you don't want to be extinguished? sins cool in the water. swim down, unable to get away before— roasted, cracked open, made a soup of the flesh straying from the self. try to tug at the net. try, but fantasy's not omnipotence. can't break through everything. I can only break. may not know if my mouth will ever stop talking, but that tongue wants to live on the surface. pressure produces the volcano, forgets the lid. lava sips at my thin skin. Someone calls out. too far into far-off feeling to hear it. those painted cards shift behind my name. all the colors now. a receding dinoflagellate wave, tired of inquisition from the land, wiggling towards that site of subduction: aloof startle at the start of the abyss. stick a finger in. won't lose it. electrify the thumb in the toaster. set phasers on DO NOT STUN the curious palm. please keep going. unwind your legs and kick that igneous to the chair in front of you.

**Cougar**  
**By Charles Rafferty**

The cougar had traveled all the way from South Dakota before it died in Connecticut on the Wilbur Cross Parkway. Having come so far to be destroyed, it reminds me of American soldiers marching across the countries of Asia, or the dust of comets igniting in the air above my patio. Somewhere, another cougar is picking up the scent and making the trek, ending in ink that has somehow dried in the shape of the poem before you.

**Someone Admits to Fear of Dogs**  
**By Kiran JS Bonner**

You have to remember  
in some places  
dogs are not like that.  
They wander the streets  
like chickens. No, a world full  
of chickens still has room  
for big delight. Consider  
soft pests, pigeons  
or rats – imagine the luxury  
required  
to cherish just one.

**The Whale**  
**By Kiran JS Bonner**

In one of many circles  
that trans men draw like chain links  
online, one boy, a teenager in a black  
cap, asks  
How do you walk  
like a man?  
His best  
friend mentioned that his stride  
this morning, after pumping gas,  
was so girly it was hard  
to call him by his name. Even when  
he tried observing the others, how  
hips swayed perfectly with personhood,  
he couldn't summarize  
the technique, the commonality.  
Long ago, this is where  
my rage began.  
Jonah,  
most men have never been  
forced to walk in patterns, tessellating  
necessarily close  
to one another. They have never  
even thought about it.





**WINTER SOUP**  
**By Nicole Scott**

This is the first time  
we had soup  
together, and we tasted  
the birthing  
of sincere weather.  
I'm able to disregard  
the slit in the universe  
which caused me to shiver.  
With any luck,  
I will not help  
this happen  
ever again.  
No light will  
bring more shadows.  
Outside the frosted  
window, an empire overflows  
with warm lovers I hate.  
Since that supper,  
my clawfoot tub  
makes more scalding soaks.

## VERMONT IN A CLIMATE CRISIS

By Audrey Fatone

*According to a 2017 study by Environmental Protection Agency, Vermont is predicted to be among the states that are most equipped for the climate crisis. Landlocked with relatively mild temperatures, Vermont is resilient. A massive influx of 'climate migrants', affluent folks from Northeastern cities are expected to seek refuge in the Green Mountain State in the coming decades.*

Sometimes, I imagine moving everyone I love to Vermont. Maybe if everyone pitches in enough, if everyone skips their coffee runs or sells their cars, I could buy us enough land to grow our own peaches and grain and carrots. I think we could bake enough bread. Of course, there will be droughts and insects that may suck us dry. Sometimes the winters will be tough, dark, and long. I'm not sure if they'll be snow anymore, but if there is, if we still wake up to a fresh blanket like an elementary school snow-day, I'll teach everyone to ski. I'll carry chopped wood from the forest, pick out the splinters from my fingertips. I'll stay up late to keep the stove alive. Of course, there becomes the issue of everyone I love sharing same spot in peace. I imagine the awkwardness of ex-boyfriends and people who can't do dishes and the constant heated debate among my conservative grandmother and leftist friends. She will continue to think that God is punishing us for something, and that's why we're in Vermont now, waiting out the forever flood like Noah did. I don't have it all figured out yet. I don't know how I'll make it work, but we'll all bathe in the lake and wake to the crows hollering on the tree-tops, those things I am sure of. No, this isn't a cult. I'm not trying to make up some new religion. I'm not trying to become a dictator of my own small nation. I'm not even trying to achieve some sort of spiritual enlightenment. No, I'll move everyone I love to Vermont in their best interest, a decision based solely on science, a decision based solely on love. I don't know if heaven exists but if it did, it may look something like this: like Vermont in a climate crisis, like some green oasis surrounding acres of dead crunchy grass, like our little farmstead, like the peach juice dripping off our chins, leaving us sticky and sweet, like everyone I've ever loved.

**Night Terror Commodity Fetishism**  
**By Andre Peltier**

Ghost and goblin  
phantasm others  
In the nightmare  
of commonality,  
language drives all  
towards tumbling towers.  
Crumbling towers  
of Ukrainian hospitals,  
Ukrainian refugee roads.  
Crumbling towers  
of three million displaced souls  
wandering Warsaw  
looking for humanity  
and a warm bowl of soup.  
Crumbling towers  
of the negligible difference  
between sleeping and waking.  
We wake and see  
that nothing was ever said.  
Or nothing will be said.  
Unseen forces splintering  
our fertile land with  
genetically modified hatred.  
With call and response patriotism  
where we question and are co-opted.  
With oaths and pledges of allegiance  
And hymns and prayers  
to absent unknowns.  
With problematic ideals  
concerning the existence of good  
and evil.  
With a sense that  
we are all driving  
towards gas chambers.

.  
We all dream  
the common dream:  
language, affinity,  
a warm bowl of soup.  
We all dream  
the common dream:  
spiraling towards Yeats.  
Always out of reach.  
Always/already

out of time.  
Existing in minds  
and books:  
they are the least tangible.  
Lines of meaning  
push them back  
and push them back  
towards a copy  
of a copy.

**Because This is All I Have**  
**By Chad Lutz**

idle hands are instant danger  
the dawn still sets without you  
& this imaginary construct of time  
it makes fools of us all  
we want to believe  
death won't happen to us  
cancer only happens to these people  
a broken neck could never happen cleaning the gutters  
cleaning the gutters  
I'm sorry if my sense of humor  
appears to share a rhyme with tumor  
but I keep my hands busy  
keep them callused  
keep them scrapping  
I woke up this morning  
& hope to do the same tomorrow



**Our Hearts Beat Close to 8:00pm**  
**By Chad Lutz**

the sun sets violently  
over our shoulders  
chucking shade  
& heat like a weak lamp  
she mentions Ukraine  
& how the Russians  
captured a nuclear  
power plant  
I kick a stick  
I've been eyeing  
for half a block  
& snap it in two  
it's true  
I tell her  
not trying  
to commit  
a car honks  
a goose squawks  
a cigarette cherries  
passenger ferries  
as the sun slips  
& trips & falls  
below the fault line  
of the horizon



**Spring Melt**  
**By Steve Gerson**

Spring melt leads to awakening,  
sunflowers emerging in fields,  
Iridaceae pushing through pavement.

Usually.

Not today in Kyiv,  
where ice puddles bear tank tracks,  
tread marks scarring the land.

White acacia would bloom  
where bomb-ravaged tree shards  
now stand skeletal along 1 st of May Street.

In a gutter, alongside a blue and yellow  
cloth torn and grenade savaged,  
gunpowder smudged, swirls an armless doll  
draining in the Spring melt.

But, in a suburban housing  
complex, bullet strafed, blast pocked,  
showered by shell casings,  
rising through a concrete crevice,  
a Ukrainian crocus buds,  
resilient,  
in the Spring melt.

**Only geese fly straight lines**  
**By Steve Gerson**

The wheel ruts scribed the prairie snow  
like meridians on traveler's maps,  
pathways evolving from now to next,  
lines curving in impromptu plans.  
"Where to?" he asked, eyeing the sky  
as if clouds told tales with trusting advice.  
"Try right," she answered. "I always veer  
toward the shadows," earth askew,  
trees shedding leaves in winter chill,  
branches bending above the pond,  
western shorelines pushed randomly  
by contrary winds. "You think it's there?"  
he asked again. She breathed in deeply,  
held a sigh, then weaving her arm in his,  
said, "Let's try."

## **downtown**

**by Nicholas Barnes**

two girls flowed past us. conversation ended in cruelty. vulgar speech between bike chains clicking. i didn't turn around. silence fell on the pavement. *i think it's this way.* cut down a sidestreet. i knew where we were headed, to find a decent cup of joe. someone lost her smoothie. covered the asphalt. didn't even stop. found our coffee. sat down. antelope out of breath. roasted bean respite. before they left: *ma'am, you dropped something.* then we were off. saw concrete frescoes. a narrowly forged park, twelve blocks long. placemats in front of zippertight doors. they said *home sweet home.* thirtydollar tents from chain superstores. made it inside. relief from 95 fahrenheit cityskin. and from nowhere: a moment of clarity. desert oasis. monet's water lilies. saint john's head on a silver platter. van gogh's ox cart of winter wasting death. documentary photographs. and an orgasm of profound violence.

**American**  
**by Tureygua Inaru**

It will be the death of me.  
When they say “She’s American”  
my heartbeat flickers like a dying lightbulb  
a light someone turned on  
when I didn’t want them to.

We are “gritty”. “Pioneers”. “Brave”. Loud”. “Stubborn”.  
All the character traits that are clipped like dead ends  
as soon as they blossom in young girls  
because girls are supposed to be quiet and obedient.

“But she’s an American.”  
“Adventurous, even for an American.”

But I am an American Indian.  
And there were Indian cowboys, I  
want to ride on a horse without a saddle  
onward into the plains of the Wild West, without a map  
while my never-cut hair blows in the wind  
and only optimism guides my way.

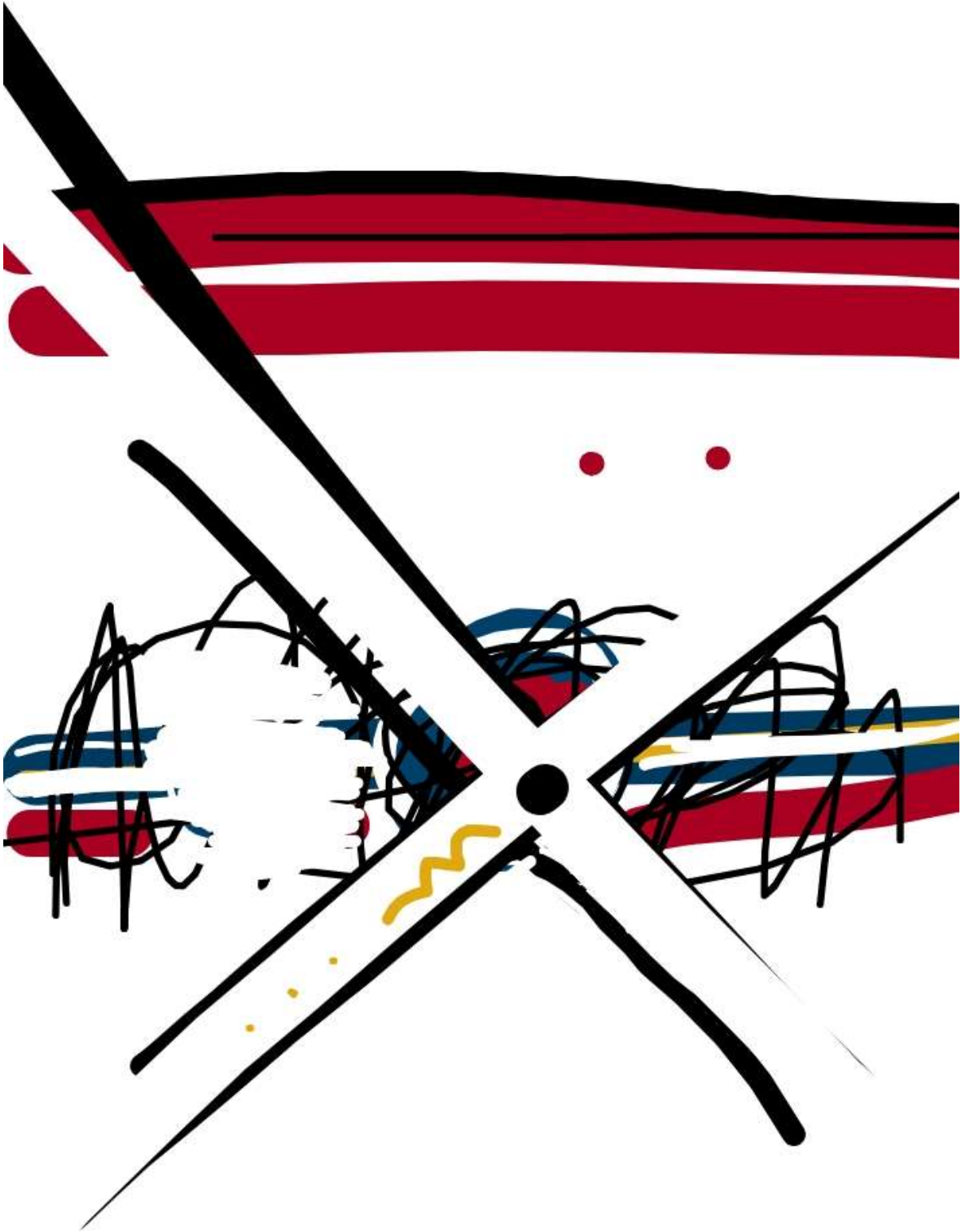
These thoughts are going to kill me.  
I don’t want to be an Indian on a reservation  
or a US-owned territory—I want to be me.  
I want to be free.  
I want that elusive, promised, American Dream  
the Dream that was promised to people who are not me  
the ones who don’t look like me  
who come from far away  
the Dream for which people who look like me  
died so they can have.

I want this so-called waking Dream.  
I want that freedom.  
I would sacrifice being a woman  
or an Indian  
to be an “equal human”  
protected, by God  
from the elements, rattlesnakes, slave catchers  
and anything else that would harm me  
as I blaze my own trail in this land.

After a day of blazing my own trail  
I am tired and must rest.

As I sleep, the American Dream  
forms a protective circle around me  
and fights off all my enemies.

As I sleep, I am cradled  
in the soft womb of an open field  
held inside of God's beautiful sky.



## **The Eyeballs that Took a Walk**

**By William Hayward**

Helen woke up, stretched, and tried to rub her eyes but ended up rubbing a bundle of loose eyelid skin around where her eyeballs had rested the night before.

Helen explored the empty sockets in shock. There wasn't any pain or gore; the empty eye sockets weren't even wet inside. They were curiously dry, almost barren. Sitting up, Helen felt inside the recesses of her quilt until she found her eyeballs. They were floating like debris around her ankles. Picking them up, she looked deep into their brown-greenness and her eyeless reflection looked back out at her. They felt smooth and warm in her hands. Squeezing them slightly to see if she could feel it, Helen was shocked to discover how similar it felt to squeezing her breasts. She stopped squeezing them when a dull pain resounded in her brain. Hitting her ankles with the back of her hands, Helen felt like crying and began to but her tears, instead of coming from her empty sockets, came from the eyeballs. Tears seeped from their moist surfaces and dripped into her bed through the cracks in her fingers. The sight of this was too much for Helen's mind.

She'd had bad mornings before. Lots of them. Mornings filled with empty cereal boxes, sticky eyes, dead pets and broken razors. All of these had been bad mornings, but Helen's mind had always been able to handle them. This morning, to try and help her mind handle her lack of eyeballs, she tried to reason with herself aloud.

"You must be imagining things, Helen. These kinds of things don't happen to you. You're not like the ones these kinds of things do happen to. They're dirty people. You're clean and you've always had eyeballs in your sockets. They've never fallen out before, so I don't see why they would have now."

Her voice sounded curiously hollow, as if it was echoing in the space where her eyeballs had lay. Ignoring this and feeling determined to prove she was imagining the eyeballs in her hands, Helen got out of bed, dressed, and marched into the A&E department of the local hospital. A narrow receptionist's face housed behind a wall of plastic at the hospital desk took Helen's details.

“What seems to be the problem today?”

“I could be wrong, I’m sure I’m imagining it, but it’s possible my eyeballs have fallen out.”

Helen waited for the receptionist to laugh and tell her she was right, she was imagining it, but the receptionist just leaned her face against the plastic screen dumbly with her mouth open.

“... right, take a seat and wait for a doctor to call your name.”

The waiting room was half-filled with people who weren’t holding their eyeballs in their hands. Helen felt dejected as she left the plastic screen and obediently took a seat. She took a compact mirror out of her pocket and looked at herself as she waited.

The skin of her eyelids had shrunk and shrivelled like puckered lips into the maws of her sockets without the support of her eyeballs. Stretching the eyelid skin away from one socket with a trembling hand, Helen slowly pushed a finger deeper and deeper inside it. There was no feeling at all as her finger waggled in the warm air of her head until she went too deep and touched something soft and squishy at the back of her skull. She withdrew the finger just as a doctor called her name.

Helen stumbled after the doctor down several white corridors and into a small cubicle surrounded by a curtain. The doctor drew the surrounding curtain, sat, and put his hands on his knees.

“Tell me what the trouble is.”

Helen, still hoping she was imagining the whole thing, lifted her hands and waved them at her face.

“My eyes. They’ve fallen out.”



“I see. Well, can I?” The doctor gestured with his hands to ask if he could touch Helen’s face.

Helen nodded. The doctor parted her eyelids and investigated her sockets.

“Your vision is normal?”

“As normal as ever.”

“Interesting. Are they the eyeballs that fell out?”

He pointed at the eyeballs in Helen’s hand.

“Yes.” Helen nodded, holding them out.

The doctor pulled on some rubber gloves and took them off her. He handled the eyeballs carefully, inspecting them closely and holding the iris’s centimetres away from his own before shrugging and throwing them towards a hazardous waste bin sitting just behind his chair.

“What are you doing,” Helen screamed.

“There’s no way we could have put them back in your head. Haven’t you seen the news? Those kinds of operations never work in situations like these. Eyeballs are just too delicate. We might have considered trying if you couldn’t see without them, but you can see.”

“I want eyes though. I can’t live without them, what will people say!”

The doctor sighed.

“Get some glass eyes if you’re concerned about that,” the doctor led Helen out of the cubicle and back to the waiting room. “Nobody will say anything then. It’ll be expensive though. The government doesn’t provide funding for vanity projects. My personal advice, if you want it, would be to not go wasting money on them at all.”

Helen didn’t consider the doctors personal advice and walked off without replying. Her phone told her the nearest glass eye shop was on Colmore row and she hurried there. Keeping her head down the whole way to avoid the mass of people who still had their eyes on the way.

The glass eye shop was tiny, tucked between a circus-themed bar and an Argentinean restaurant. It was so tiny that despite its front window being large, with shelf after shelf of glass eyes watching potential customers walk past through it, it was easy to miss. Helen looked at the shelves of disembodied glass eyes through the window. They were eerily realistic. They had everything, the blood vessels, the sheen of moistness, the imperfectness, that real eyes had. A pair of bright green eyes drew her attention more than the rest and she stared at them closely until they blinked. They were attached to an old woman watching her through the window. The old woman waved Helen into the shop. Helen went in and instantly became dizzy from the sheer number of gazes in there, the weight of them falling like bowling balls onto her head.

There were even more eyes in the shop than Helen had thought there were from outside. They lined every shop surface barring the floor itself, unblinking, all-seeing, and every colour under the sun.

“I see you’re missing your eyeballs,” the old woman who'd waved Helen in squinted at her and got straight to business. “When did they fall out?”

“Last night, I think. I went to the hospital, but they told me to come here if I really wanted some new eyes.”

“Only people like me can help in situations like this and I'm the best around. I'm very old now and nothing on my body works too well anymore apart from these,” here the woman held up her hands and showed off her fingers; they were nimble and thirty years younger than the rest of her body. “And these make the finest glass eyes in the world.”

“Well, I want the best. I loved how my eyes looked before. I don't want to have eyes that I love less than before, and I really don't want people to know I'm wearing glass eyes. I want them to be indistinguishable from real eyes.”

"For that kind of realism, I have to tell you, my normal glass eyes won't do. You'll need special ones that will require special work. That will cost money."

Helen paused.

"How much money?"

The old lady blew out her cheeks and clicked her tongue and muttered an idiom, "a penny spent is a penny saved," with a chuckle before becoming deadly serious. "It'll be very expensive. Do you have savings?"

"Yes."

"A lot of savings?"

"I've been saving most of my life."

"Well, think of what you have in your savings and then picture that number being reduced to zero. Do you think that's worth looking in the mirror and looking completely normal again?"

Helen didn't pause.

"It's worth it."

"Good. I have to say it will take time to finish the eyes too."

"How long?"

"A few weeks perhaps."

"I'll have to look like this for weeks? I want to look in a mirror and see my normal face with a pair of normal, but pretty, eyes right now."

"Vanity glass eyes that look real and won't hinder your vision require me to go through a process to make them. That process takes time."

"What's the process?"

The old woman encircled her eyes with her index fingers and thumbs and chuckled.

“I rarely like to tell people about my process. People have refused to pay for the eyes after finding out the process I had to go through to make them. But you don’t seem like a moral type. I can tell you’ll pay no matter what. In fact, if you want to get your eyes quicker, you could help me with the process.”

“How much quicker?”

“You could have them by tonight,” the old woman propelled herself across the shop to a machine with two circular holders jutting from it.

There were two blank glass eyes on these holders and the old woman tapped them.

“These bases need to be filled in. Filling them in is the process and for you to help, you need to know how we do that,” the old woman picked up the blank glass eyes and juggled them. “We have to steal someone else’s vision.”

Helen pretended to be outraged.

“That’s monstrous, despicable, disgusting, revolting. I could never. How do we steal someone’s vision? Do we take their eyes?”

“I have a special machine that sucks it out.”

“Does it have to be someone special or can we take anyone’s vision?”

“It can be anyone, but there are variables to consider. The situation of people’s home security for example. We have to find someone who lives somewhere we can get in easily and suck the vision out without being caught.”

“How can you tell these things without following everyone home?”

“A glass eye maker doesn’t need to follow a target home. I always know the people who have the right variables. I feel it here,” the old woman clutched her womb. “And here,” she clutched her crotch. “Now I have you though, I don’t have to rely entirely on that instinct to decide. We’ll go out right now and you can look at passing people’s eyes and when you see a pair you like, I’ll check

my instinct and tell you if they're a viable option. Remember, the eyes we take the vision from will become your eyes."

It went without question that Helen would help with the process. They left the shop together straight away and began to patrol the narrow streets and alleyways snaking off Colmore Row like ravenous cats, looking at every pair of eyes they passed. Helen started enthusiastically, but as they patrolled past cafes, bars, restaurants, and more people than they could count, she became dismayed because she couldn't see a single pair she liked enough to want for herself. Hours passed. Their feet started to ache. The sun started going down and made everything look orange and the old woman got frustrated with Helen's indecisiveness.

"What's wrong?" She finally snapped. "We've seen some real beauties tonight and you haven't said a word about wanting them. Where's all your want!"

"I loved my eyes before they fell out. They were alive. I know I want to love my new ones as much, or even more than my old ones, so I want them to be alive. Everyone we've seen has dead eyes. Look at them, they're all so dull. It might take a while to find them, but I want eyes that sparkle and smi-" the right eyes interrupted Helen mid-sentence by strolling past her on the street.

They sparkled several metres away and Helen snorted like a pig finding truffles after a long hunt. She followed the eyes with her empty sockets until they disappeared around a corner and then, swiftly, she followed with the old woman following her. Rounding the corner, the eyes she wanted swam back into focus. Helen pointed at the head that held them to show the old woman. Only when she pointed did Helen realise that the eyes she wanted were housed in a skull that sat on the skeleton of a little boy around seven.

"Him. I want his eyes."

The old woman rubbed her womb, laughed, and nodded.

"He's certainly viable. I can feel it all over. He has eyes I would have chosen. Well done."

“I feel ashamed the eyes I want belong to a little boy,” Helen said, walking quicker to not lose sight of him. “But I have to have the eyes I want. You understand that, right? You understand that I have to have the eyes I want?”

“I understand. I don’t judge. You’ve made a tough decision about what you’re willing to do to get the eyes you want, and there’s nothing wrong with that decision. True, it shows you aren’t a good woman, but what does that matter! You are who you are and if you weren’t who you are, you wouldn’t care about not having eyes and you would never have frequented my shop and been on this journey. You needed to be who you are to even be in the situation of making this decision, so try to not concern yourself with thoughts of goodness and badness. Let’s just follow him home. We don’t want to lose the eyes.”

Helen's shame vanished at the old woman's words and they followed the little boy. He was holding the hand of a woman who Helen assumed was his mother tightly. They turned off Colmore Row and onto a narrow path that led them out of the city alongside a canal. The sun had gone down, but the canal path was brightly lit by the lampposts lining it. Occasionally, the assumed mother leaned down and brushed the boy’s hair affectionately. She did it as they left the canal path and again as they walked onto a suburban road with tall houses. The suburban road wasn’t lit by lampposts and was very shadowy. The assumed mother brushed the boy’s hair one more time as they stopped at one of the tall houses. Helen and the old woman watched them walk into the house from across the road. They stood lurking in some of the shadows of the suburban road and waited. The old woman tapped on a little leather satchel hanging from around her neck that she’d brought with her from the shop and whispered.

“Excellent. That house's security looks lacklustre. We'll get in easily. We'll just wait until they both go to sleep before we act. The boy’s young. He should be asleep soon.”

“The woman isn't young.”

“People are in bed when the lights go off,” the old woman pointed at a glowing square on the house's first floor. “When that light goes off, we'll make our move.”

Helen sat on a little wall lining one of the other tall houses' front garden and took her compact mirror back out. She stretched back the loose skin of her eyelids and gazed into the pure blackness of her eye sockets and felt disgusted with how she looked for a second. Then the image in the mirror changed and, instead of pure blackness, Helen saw the silky darkness of the little boy's eyes in her sockets. As he'd walked past her for the first time and she'd decided that she'd wanted his eyes, she'd seen that his eyes were black but that they held flickers of amber and green, like multi-coloured stars. Helen watched with a happy grin as a replica of the boy's eyes appeared in her mirror and her disgust turned into arrogance.

The light on the house's first floor burned deep into the night and the old woman watched it with the attentiveness of a moth while Helen stared at herself with the attentiveness of Narcissus. At a miscellaneous time, the house's light went off with a sudden flick and the old woman acted swiftly. Tapping Helen from her reverie, they crept together into the tall house's back garden. Sneaking over the childish debris that lined the garden's grass, they went up to the house's backdoor. The old woman touched her crotch as they moved up to it and whispered to Helen.

“Everything is lining up. The backdoor isn't locked, I can feel it.”

The backdoor wasn't locked. It opened into the kitchen. The house was very dark and hard to navigate, but the faint sounds of snores guided them to and up a narrow staircase and onto the first-floor landing. The first door on the landing was open and inside it, the little boy was visible, asleep in bed. The snores that had led them to him were coming from a room across the landing. That room's door was closed and Helen and the old woman smiled as they walked into the little boy's room. The little boy was lying on his front with his head buried in his pillow like a tortoise hiding in its shell. The old woman opened the satchel around her neck and pulled out a device. The

device looked like a stethoscope, but with two heartbeat bells instead of one and an empty jar attached instead of earpieces. The old woman knelt down next to the boy while Helen stood over his sleeping form and whispered.

“He looks so small.”

“Children often are. We need to turn him over carefully.”

Helen nodded, and they started to gently rock the little boy to get him to roll over. The boy grumbled at their first touch and they froze. He rolled over, rubbed his eyes, coughed, and Helen almost hit him in the face in fear, but he just sighed heavily and began breathing deeply again. The old woman held up her stethoscope-like device.

“You’ll have to hold his eyes open for me while I attach this.”

Helen went to reach her hand out but froze.

“I’m nervous,” she admitted.

“Don’t be.”

“But I am. I’m afraid that if he wakes up, he’ll look at me with the eyes I want and I’ll feel ashamed about stealing them. I don’t want to feel like that again. It’ll make this much harder.”

“Just don’t think about that. Think about how empty your sockets are now and how you want to fill that emptiness with glass eyes the same aliveness and colour as the eyes enclosed in this little boy’s skull. Think about that.”

Breathing heavily, Helen reached down and touched the little boy's soft eyelids and prised them open.

The boy's sleeping eyes were relaxed and sightless as the old woman gently placed the two metal bells on her stethoscope-like device over the boy’s eyes and, holding them in place with her thumbs, pressed a little red button on the tube leading to the glass jar. The device began humming softly. Helen gasped as a cloud the exact colour of the boy’s eyes started filling the jar. The cloud



glittered and seemed to dance as if pleased to be free from the captivity of the boy and stopped only when it realised it was trapped somewhere else. The old woman hummed quietly as she worked and smiled at the cloud.

“This is my favourite part. This is why I do what I do. It makes me feel so powerful. Oh, I’m so powerful.”

A couple times, as the jar filled up, the little boy stirred, but he didn’t wake until the old woman removed the device. At that moment, the boy sat up and blinked heavily at them. His beautiful eyes had been replaced with two completely white balls.

“Why’s it so dark?” He asked sleepily.

Helen and the old woman began backing away carefully, and the old woman put on a maternal voice.

“It’s bedtime. It’s always dark when it’s bedtime. You know that.”

The boy nodded that he did know that and lay back down and closed his eyes.

“Will it be light again in the morning?” He asked before falling back to sleep.

“No,” Helen answered him anyway as she and the old woman left the room and then she said it once more when they were back on the street. “No.”

The women didn’t speak on their way back to the glass eye shop. The old woman was busy humming happily and Helen, having taken the device from her as they’d left the house, was busy staring at the dark-eyed cloud flitting from one side of the jar to the other. When they got to the shop, the old woman took the device back and carried it over to the blank glass eyes she’d already made for Helen. Taking a large syringe from a wooden desk in the shop's corner, the old woman removed the jar from the stethoscope-like device and poked a hole into the top of it and sucked the cloud out of it and into the syringe carefully. The cloud went willingly and filled the syringe. Helen watched silently from the side, excitement tickling her empty sockets, so she itched them fanatically.

The old woman carefully injected the syringe into an invisible hole in one of the blank glass eyes and deployed half of the cloud into it. The cloud swirled and filled up the glass eye. The cloud swirled, as if desperate to find an escape from the glass eye. But when it realised that again it was trapped and couldn't go anywhere, it formed an appearance in the orb. As was expected, the appearance it took was that of one of the little boy's eyes.

The old woman injected the rest of the cloud into the other glass eye and then tossed her equipment on the floor. Her green eyes glittered with passion as she ran around the shop, dodging shelves, and smashing certain glass eyes for no apparent reason with the energy of a much younger woman.

"It's done and now my second favourite part. You pay, you pay!" She shouted in excitement to Helen, who was barely listening.

She was watching her beautiful new eyes and falling in love as they playfully watched her back. The cloud had settled into its new surroundings and as Helen moved from side to side, they followed her like eyes enclosed in sly paintings in haunted houses.

"So now you pay!" The old woman stopped running around and came to a stop in front of Helen and repeated with a sigh.

"Pay, pay," Helen mumbled, reaching into her purse and withdrawing her debit card without taking her sockets off the beautiful eyes as she pictured how pretty they would make her face look.

The old woman plucked the card from Helen's fingers and nodded at its plastic form.

"Yes, this should be enough. The pin?"

"7892," Helen smiled dreamily, sinking deeper into the depth of the eyes and not wanting to stop.

The old woman patted Helen's shoulder tenderly and then pushed her towards the door to the shop so roughly that Helen stumbled. Helen looked up in surprise at the old woman's push but pocketed the glass eyes without thinking.

"Don't you want to see how they look?"

"No dear. No. The work is done and the payment is completed. Just leave. That's enough now. Working like this takes its toll on me. I am an old woman after all."

Helen stood and, stroking the eyeballs that rested in her pocket lightly with her thumb, left the shop. Walking down the empty street, she skipped. Her heart pounded with the excitement about putting the eyes in and it was more excitement than she'd ever felt about waking up with her old eyes in.

*'Maybe it's a good thing that my eyes fell out,' she thought as she walked down the empty street. 'Maybe the eyes I had before weren't ever right for me. These glass eyes feel like they'll make me feel like the real me and maybe this whole thing had to happen for me feel like I have the eyes that make me feel like the real and best me. Eyes are the gates to the soul, they say, so maybe that little boy was given my true soul by accident and, if that's true, then I did us both a favour by taking them.'*

Happily, Helen sat down on a wooden bench outside the coffee shop she'd gone into before and the excitement of putting the eyes in stretched up into her skull and made her mind burn with such ferocity that she thought little puffs of smoke must have been leaving her vacant sockets. Helen took her compact mirror out again and balanced it on her knee as she took one of the glass eyes from her pocket and slipped it into her head. The eye fitted her socket perfectly, the loose eyelid skin sliding silkily over its form like a ballet dancer. Looking at herself, Helen marvelled that the eye's iris flickered about according to what direction she looked in, so it really was impossible to tell that the eye was glass. Prodding it with her finger, Helen noted that when it was in her head, it didn't feel like glass at all and that it squidged beneath pressure, as a real eyeball would. The eye

didn't restrict her vision at all. It, in fact, seemed to improve it. Covering the socket not yet filled, Helen looked at a sign some distance away and read it with little difficulty.

Giggling, Helen stood up from the bench and span with her arms out. She span and span and enjoyed the feeling of air tickling her outstretched fingers until, suddenly, the back of one of her hands struck something that felt disturbingly like a grizzled face. Stopping spinning immediately, Helen looked and saw that it was a grizzled face. She focused on the grizzled face she'd accidentally struck and recoiled at what was familiar about it. It was a desperate face wearing the body of a man who was clearly homeless; his clothes tattered and hanging off his body, and his skin was dirty and coated with a sickly yellow and orange crust. None of these details was the familiar thing that made Helen recoil. What made Helen recoil were the empty sockets in his head.

As Helen recoiled, the homeless man's empty sockets flexed as he noticed the one empty socket she was still sporting.

"I'm so sorry. I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing. I'm feeling very happy, but I really am sorry."

The homeless didn't seem concerned with her apologies at all. His sockets were flickering over Helen as if she was a map he had to memorise.

"Not paying attention, really? Feeling very happy? Why? Oh, yes, I see. Something good has happened to you, I see that," the homeless man grinned, exposing some teeth the same colour as the crust on his skin. "I can guess what it is too. That old woman in the glass eye shop has helped you."

"How did you know that?"

"I might be homeless and eyeless, but I'm not blind. As realistic as that fake eye is, I can see it's fake. I can see your remaining empty socket too. I tell you, I'd be spinning around without paying attention if the old woman helped me. I've been like this for years," the homeless man spat on the street and rubbed his empty sockets.

“It only happened to me this morning. I woke up and it had happened.”

The homeless man spat again on the floor with greater intensity.

“You should feel lucky it happened when you were sleeping. I wasn’t asleep when it happened to me. I was at work, convincing a client to sign a loan agreement. I worked in a bank and the loan agreement my client was about to sign would have got me promoted to floor manager. Then my eyeballs fell out and instead of signing the agreement, he threw up on it and changed banks. I got fired for making a customer sick and lost everything. No one wanted a man with no eyeballs around. People act as if having no eyeballs and still being able to see is as bad as serially raping and killing don’t they?”

The homeless man looked at Helen for some kind of reciprocation but got none.

“I don’t know. Nobody seemed to care about me not having eyes, but the thought that they might! I know people like you usually get looked down on. The thought that people might look down on me was haunting. Too haunting for me to live with.”

“You mean you haven’t been persecuted or suffered hardship from the loss of your eyes at all?”

"I've suffered emotional hardship."

"But not real hardship like having to steal to survive?"

"I guess not."

"Yet you still went to that old woman and got those eyes?"

The homeless man covered his sockets in shock. Helen took advantage of this to stop listening and put in the final glass eye. She pushed the final eye into her remaining socket and, again, took her compact mirror from her pocket. Looking into its reflective surface, Helen stared at herself and choked back a sob of happiness. Her new eyes blew her old eyes out of the water. She posed her face in various positions and stared at them smiling out the mirror at her. The pure animateness

of them smiling at life with the joy of a child. Before she could lose herself in the eyes, the homeless man who'd uncovered his sockets and noticed Helen wasn't listening to him smashed the compact mirror from her hand.

Helen looked up in surprise at the homeless man. He was trembling so much the crust on his skin was coming off in flakes.

"You went to that old woman who won't help me," he shouted. "That fucking old woman, whose shop has the most impenetrable defence I've ever encountered, and who could help me so easily, but won't because I don't have the money to pay? Bah! To pay is ridiculous anyway. Pay! For something that should be done from kindness? Ridiculous. As ridiculous as you going to her after a single day of not having eyes and her helping you because you have the money. You who doesn't even need her help."

"I enjoyed having eyes. I had them all my life, and I didn't want to do without them. That was the need I had," Helen said defensively. "Besides, sometimes you get things because you want them, not because you need them. There's nothing wrong with that. I wanted my eyes back. It isn't my fault you haven't got the money to pay for her help and it isn't my fault you're homeless and filthy. You can't blame me for that."

Helen blinked her new eyes aggressively at the homeless man and enraged him further.

"I blame you for that," he hissed. "I can blame you, and I do. You didn't think of how this would affect me when you brought those eyes at all. You didn't think of anyone other than yourself and what you wanted. How fucking selfish."

"I don't even know you."

"What an excuse. What a stupid, thoughtless excuse," the homeless man raised his head to the sky and sighed, suddenly seeming calmer. "Now I have to ponder something. I have to decide on something. Don't move."

“I’m going to move,” Helen said, suddenly scared and unsure of why she'd humoured him for so long, anyway. "I need to get home."

She walked quickly, but only got to the end of the empty street before the homeless man sprinted to block her. Holding her still by the shoulders, he shook his head.

“No, no. I need you close by while I ponder and decide. Please. You didn’t think of me when getting the eyes. You can at least do this for me, can’t you?”

“No!” Helen shouted, wriggling from the homeless man’s grip like an eel and kicking his legs.

Helen got away and ran through the streets and the homeless man ran with her, his pondering face hovering just behind her the entire time. No matter how fast she ran, he didn’t leave her side and his face never stopped pondering. After several minutes of this, his pondering face drifted away and was replaced by a determined one. Grabbing her arm roughly and dragging her to a stop, the homeless man put his nose close to her new eyes and inhaled deeply, as if trying to suck them out of her head.

“GET OFF ME!” Helen screamed, pushing and straining against him. “Get away from my eyes.”

“I’m very sorry,” the homeless man whispered, pushing Helen firmly down on the floor and kneeling in front of her. “But I’ve pondered enough. There’s only one good thing I can do that will help both of us. I can steal those eyes. You’ll learn with time not to be so vain and that a normal life with no eyeballs and scared children isn’t so bad and I’ll re-learn what it’s like to live a normal life.”

It was an odd feeling for Helen, feeling someone scoop her eyeballs out and experiencing no pain. She kicked out at the homeless man uselessly the entire time, but it didn't take long. The eyes slipped from her sockets as easily as they'd slipped in and quickly were gone. She watched them leave her skull with a numb feeling spreading up from her belly and into her bones.

The homeless man stood up and moved away from Helen with the glass eyes grasped in his hands. Smiling, he raised them and pushed them into his skull where they transformed his ugly, dirty face into an average, dirty face. The eyes gleamed in the night as they looked down on their former owner, who'd begun tearlessly weeping, and then they were gone. The homeless man ran away, laughing hysterically with happiness.

Helen lay on the floor, crying dryly and feeling sick as she rubbed her head and wondered what to do. Suddenly, from across the street from her, a group of young men appeared. They were walking with eyes wonky from drink. They stumbled down the street and noticed Helen because of the sound of her dry sobs.

“Are you okay?” One of them asked her, swaying heavily.

“No. I need help,” Helen said, crawling towards the men’s feet and clutching at their ankles.

The men pulled her up, jokingly saying they would help her. And then they screamed and fell over each other at the sight of her empty sockets; the sight sobering them up instantly. They didn’t stop to ask her questions about what had happened to her. They just ran away and left Helen alone and dumbfounded with their screams echoing in her ears.

“I just wanted eyes. Do I deserve this?” She whispered, touching her face before running back towards the old woman’s shop.

She ran as fast as she could and when she got there, hammered on the door. The old woman appeared at the window of the shop instantly at the sound of her knock, as if she’d been waiting for Helen. She didn’t open the door.

“What happened?” She asked through the window, sighing and shaking her head.

“There was this homeless man...” Helen began, her words barely comprehensible around her sobs.



“Oh, the homeless man,” the old woman interrupted. “So, he’s finally gotten a pair of my eyes for free. I’ve got to hand it to him, he was persistent.”

“He said you wouldn’t help him,” Helen sobbed. “Will you still help me?”

“Of course, I’ll still help you,” the old woman laughed.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” Helen tried to get into the shop, but found the door was bolted shut. “Will you let me in?”

The old woman coughed and tapped her fingers against the glass of the window.

“As long as you can still pay,” she said.

Helen froze

“The same price?”

“Yes.”

Helen coughed and rubbed her cheeks.

“I was wondering if I could pay in instalments?”

“Mmm... no.”

“Please?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t have the money.”

“I don’t have the money right now, but I will eventually, I swear.”

“When you do, come back and we can get to work,” the old woman smiled as if she was being kind.

“The thing is,” Helen stuttered. “That might take a little while.”

The old woman’s smile disappeared.

“When you get the money, come back,” she said and swiftly left the window.

The thousands of glass eyes watched Helen mockingly as she began banging on the shop window, begging and screaming and pleading with the old woman to come back and at least talk to

her. Her voice grew hoarse and tore from her throat in such a volume that someone in a flat nearby phoned the police to come and remove her from the street. She was still calling to the old woman when the police arrived and she carried on when they went to put her in the back of their squad car. The officers recoiled at the sight of her features just like the drunk young men and one ran to the side of the road and threw up before running to their car and grabbing a bandage to wrap around her head.

“Don’t leave me like this! You could help me, please! I’ll get the money, I’ll get the money, I swear!” Helen pleaded one last time to the old woman hiding somewhere behind the empty but endlessly watchful shop window as a rough, white bandage made her blind.

## Opossum

By Zach Murphy

Pete and Richard's orange safety vests glowed a blinding light under the scorching sun, and their sweat dripped onto the pavement as they stood in the middle of the right lane on Highway 61, staring at an opossum lying stiffly on its side.

Richard handed Pete a dirty shovel. "Scoop it up," he said.

Everything made Pete queasy. He once fainted at the sight of a moldy loaf of bread. Even so, he decided to take on a thankless summer job as a roadkill cleaner. At least he didn't have to deal with many people.

Richard nudged Pete. "What are you waiting for?" he asked.

Pete squinted at the creature. "It's not dead," he said. "It's just sleeping."

"Are you sure?" Richard asked as he scratched his beard. He had one of those beards that looked like it would give a chainsaw a difficult time.

"Yes," Pete said. "I just saw it twitch."

Richard walked back toward the shoulder of the road and popped open the driver's side door of a rusty pickup truck. "Alright, let's go."

Pete shook his head. "We can't just leave it here."

"It's not our problem," Richard said. "They tell us to do with the dead ones, but not the ones that are still alive."

Pete crouched down and took a closer look. "We need to get it to safety," he said.

Richard sighed and walked back toward the opossum. "What if it wakes up and attacks us?" he asked. "That thing could have rabies."

"I don't think anything could wake it up right now," Pete said.

Richard belched, "It's an ugly son of a gun, isn't it?"

“I think it’s so ugly that it’s cute,” Pete said.

“No one ever says that about me,” Richard said with a chuckle. “I guess I just haven’t crossed into that territory.”

Just then, a car sped by and swerved over into the next lane. Pete and Richard dashed out of the way.

“People drive like animals!” Richard said. “We’d better get going.”

Pete took a deep breath, slipped his gloves on, gently picked up the opossum, and carried it into the woods.

“What are you doing?” Richard asked. “Are you crazy?”

After nestling the possum into a bush, Pete smelled the scent of burning wood. He gazed out into the clearing and noticed a plume of black smoke billowing into the sky. The sparrows scattered away, and the trees stood with their limbs spread, as if they were about to be crucified.

“Jesus Christ,” Pete whispered under his breath.

Pete picked up the opossum and turned back around.

**the lizard and the butterfly**  
**by taryn o'neill**

1] < check it >

6X. My sleeve is tapping at six times the normal rate! The Nasdaq is nutso. China. <Again>  
Government held back data on manufacturing. <Shocker> It's gonna drop. 46,233.02. Can they feel  
it?

Nope. Just a pretty Barbie face behind that desk. Perfect cheekbones and skinny arms. Not soft and  
squishy. Like me. Her haptics must be woven into her dresses 'cause I can't see 'em. Not that it's  
helping.

Biotech.

GAH! SNEAKY CAT. Always popping up right before the bell. You get the hopes of a nation  
rising and falling in the span of a second. What data did you just — 46,232.24.

BANANAS! <I'm off> But STILL. First time Dow has dropped below 47K since '26. <fyi the  
algorithms are all redundant, they're just running along a mobius strip on the route to nowhere.  
Money is all an illusion. The founders knew this. Apparently my grandfather knew it too. He was  
sharp.>

OK.

Bloomberg Terminal: Disconnect.  
Regular data resume.

Time to breathe.  
I will look around.  
To the edge of my room.  
I have five minutes before snack.

<A thin ray of light is sneaking past the shade and scooping up the dust in the air. It knows not to  
come near me though.>

Ugh. Uggggh. Butterflies, they're here. Something is coming —

WHATTHEFUCKISIT?! FUCKFUCKFUCKFUCKFUCKFUCK —

<Grey sheets, walnut wood, 5 minutes until snack. Grey sheets, walnut wood, 4 minutes and 57  
seconds until snack...> The desk on my face is nice and cool.

I smell rosemary.

IT'S TODAY.

<I flap my hands over and over, BREATHE Hilly> She's COMING.  
What do I do? I need to prepare. <Focus>

2] < framing >

Back then.

Nothing and everything were getting done. Not the important stuff. I have numbers in a folder somewhere. <What is the folder but a representation of clusters of data. There is no blue shaped folder in your computer. It is the programmer thinking you are dumb and creating an image of something it thinks you can handle. Not that I'm saying you're dumb.>

Humans work well within a system, <'specially me, duh> We have a day, a month, a year. We are taught to exist inside schedules: semesters, work weeks, weekends, vacations. When we don't have them, the energy dissipates. Time becomes transparent. When there is nothing to frame your space.

<FOCUS Hilly>

I have matching scars on my forearms. One by a cat, one by me. Mine is deep and straight. The cat's jagged and surface. The cat's is new as I played roughly with her two days ago. I got in trouble. She only visits this floor once a week. I don't know if hers will leave a mark. Mine did.

These butterflies in my stomach are poking me. They are smart, they remembered before I did. Different organs with their own circadian rhythms that I can't yet crack. They must have a sixth sense. Can they predict what I can not, what it will be like to see her? I can't see the pattern yet, or at least it's locked away.

"Hillilly?"

Snack time. Mina smells clean today — "your food luv — I need at least 2/3s of it eaten."

<Yuck, it's the pink bowl of mush.>

"I —uh uhuh - I phett - "

<Fuck. My fucking mouth.>

"It's ok luv — take your time."

<Like you even know what time even is you fucking retard.>

"I —uh uh — menaa"

"Or just swipe it out —" pointing to my tablet —

<Fuck you. I may look sweet and plump but I can swear like any other 14 year old.>

“Are you excited?! It’s your big day!”

Oh. RIGHT. Fifteen. One Five. NOW it makes sense. My goddamn birthday.

I wave my hand at her and pull my food towards me, glaring. She registers me with a knowing look, stepping towards me, her fleshy frame, “I know sugar... They’ll be here soon. It’s important for you to keep your glucose levels normal. I don’t have to tell you that.”

She places an arm on my shoulder, I flinch but she maintains her touch, pressing down harder. I feel a wash of dopamine flow through me.

“I’ve set your sleeve to give you alerts when they arrive at reception. You good to get yourself dressed, sweets?”

I nod. My heart slows. She picks up of spoonful of the thick acai and hands it to me. Whatever.

I finish the bowl.

Eat think repeat. Eat think repeat. Walks at dusk, when all that’s left of the sun is its scatter.

[3] < memory >

My mom. Labeled a late bloomer, an ‘old soul’. She loved Joni Mitchell <Canadian, folksy> when everyone else loved Beyonce. She said her mom loved Joni, too. <*Just before our love got lost she said... I was as constant as a northern star...*> She would tell me how how special it was that I was a girl, our mitochondria DNA unbroken from our female ancestors, “How amazing is THAT?!” She would stare at me, her clear green eyes, bright against her lashes, threatening to sprout tears. Now I realize she was hoping I would understand.

I understand now. She was an artist. I know she was a writer, actor, painter, performer. A magical thinker. An explorer of the invisible. She found meaning in almost everything. She had ‘to do’ lists and whiteboards, scraps of notebooks and pads of paper. And there were these invisible things called IDEAS. One would take her over and she would spin, euphoric. Dad would smile and tell her it was a great one. Because there were hundreds of them. Ideas. All great. All unfinished. She never turned them into anything complete outside of her mind <she should have worked at a think tank her parents always said>. She would say how she wanted constraints forced on her, to follow things through, but every new week brought another one, causing her to abandon her other idea children <as I looked on>. The ideas always put her in a state of awe. She was getting to the truth about the universe. But for every new book she started to devour, another article clipped and highlighted, ten hairs hair would fall out, and her autonucleoids and cytokines would rise.

If she just had had a structure to capture her energy.

Lost Kinetic Potential.

--

I remember a story she would tell me about the butterflies. One day she found two floating, dead, in our pool. In a panic she scooped them out with the old blue plastic mesh thing that would hang on the fence outside her office window. She laid them down and shook off the water and put them on the concrete, in the sun. Something about the light that would heal them. She just knew. And after a few minutes they twitched and started to move. But only slowly. Dragging their wet bodies in circles along the concrete. Knowing her, she must have been crying. She fed them sugar water the way her entomologist friend had told her too over twitter and placed them on pieces of shrubs <I saw the archived Instagram post>. For two hours she coaxed them along with her voice and her will. Pulling one of their wings out from behind where it shouldn't have been <so fragile>. Not sure if that was the one that died. But one of them survived. Bob, as she called it <male or female who knows>, found a mate, and they would dance and fly around the yard. Making little butterflies. She had saved the species. She was happy then, even in the growing fog. She buried the one she could not save.

--

Huh.

That biotech blip at the end of the day was Something of Note. A new drug that shows promise? WBE prototype leak? <I'm not supposed to know about this yet but I do.> Primary folder open, subfolders, 200 bookmarks, Alt Open All. In what manner should I search? Source articles, full research and appendix available. Let's skim these suckers, see if there is something of note. What is subterfuge? Open tab, search, define. What is the evolutionary argument against reality, copy paste search. New data. Scan new email, screen capture, send. To myself. For review in the background.

I love this rush. The moment to feel real and whole.

M U L T I T A S K. <I shouldn't say that word.> They say consciousness evolved out of it. The need to regulate the flood of sensory input. Or maybe it was analogies.

<focus, Hilly>

I remember the hospital. The blue line that would take me from the front door to the elevator and then down the hallway to her big door. Then to her single bed with wires hanging from a metal pole we named Alfred. It would beep. It was trying to talk to me. Her eyes would crinkle when she would see me. But she knew not to reach out her arms. And dad wouldn't force me into them. We would stand there, her body in pain, fighting itself, my body twitching from the light behind the curtains — her eyes boring into me —

FUCKFUCKFUCK <BREATHTHEEEEE HILLY>

4] < reasons >

An early article called it "The Over-Tasked Mind". Our brains that once looked for patterns in tall grass to detect a tiger now looked for patterns in every bip, bop and boop. The mind is a tool. It has a purpose. But survival is easier now and the tool mutated. A generation of people hunched over



their phones, vertebrae compacting, eyes straining, FOMO, sleep stunted by the blue light, but that was the least of their problems.

The first research papers were scoffed at: “Your phone is making you sick.” But it wasn’t the phone itself that was to blame, but how it made you think. *Unencumbered*. Your phone, your computer tether, opening a multiverse of portals, projecting your SELF into the ether. Your brain, the train, on a never ending track, addicted to the ‘ding’. Your happy place, the nucleus accumbens, lighting up with every alert, swimming in dopamine. But along with it came MULTI TASKING <shhhhhh> which lead to STRESS. Your brain mistaking #crazybusy for real stress, flooding the body with the big C — cortisol. Just to survive. As it always had <in periods of war and tiger attacks> which led to our inner soldiers deployed, immune response 10 hut!... fanning the flames. INFLAMMATION. The delicate HPA Axis, our endocrine and immune systems symbiosis, up in smoke. A flood of cytokines. Exhaustion. Depression. Too long in this cycle. Phew.

*The body fought back. It believed it was being attacked. BY IDEAS.*

<It sounds so simple but even the simplest virus can be the most deadly.>

She wasn’t special. Just early.

--

She found a dead lizard in the pool. Pasty white with a bacterial film bubble around its mouth. There was no life left to save. She was quick to see that, I now realize. She buried it too.

--

We had this copper sink. A left over from the previous owners. Derelict looking until an accident with a lemon revealed a rose pink glow under the burnished stained brown. For hours she would squeeze lemon juice onto a scrub brush and clean it until it shined... marveling at the science, the chemistry of citric acid on copper — “See?!” But knowing all too well that water and air were foes of this newborn glow. But she couldn’t help herself. Elbow grease and time. Things she had, back then. The glow was like the ark of the covenant <my dad told me that> — so beautiful but not meant for this reality. I’d sit there, on the edge of the counter, watching her squeeze lemons into the sink, desperate to see the glow. Me, ignored in the shadows, not able to contribute. She didn’t care motherly cares. She was an alchemist, addicted to the glow... to the light that called to her. She didn’t take too kindly to my screams against it.

But there were things we shared in the dark. The smells of her plants, of basil, rosemary, lavender. Only a smell can bring you out of a deep sleep, she once told me. Something about the hippocampus. Or something.

--

Decision. Movement.

DISCONNECT.

I take off my sleeve and push my body up from my chair.

<Ow> Legs are stiff. And fat. I have faith <in statistics> that my genetics will shift.

The air moves around me,  
no data,  
my eyes sift through a sea of molecules.

The closet door opens, like an airlock <pop>. The light turns on, a warm glow.

A row of clothes. Greyscale <mostly>. She loved her fashion. I could see her brainwaves dancing amongst the colors and patterns of the new Fall Collection. She wanted places to wear things, events, a social calendar of culture and intellect. <Her mother had had places to wear things, on the arm of my grandfather.> What would she want me to wear? A sweater, soft shirt, easy pull-on pants. <See, I can guess! Put myself in her shoes. She wouldn't want anything to snag my frizzy hair.>

Dad. I'm sure he's lost more of his. Stopped taking those hair pills when hers kept falling out. Solidarity. I remember. I know it hit him the hardest. That he couldn't take care of us both.

He would get frustrated with her — her need for naps, for help with me. How her 'productive times' were right at the time the nanny would leave and he would get stuck with me and a half cooked dinner. He was such a Saint! Looking at her with both reverence and fear. All that he must have felt. Emotion was supposed to keep us bonded as a community, used to find a mate, protect our offspring. It was for survival.

But when it merged, fused with higher intellect the seeds of destruction were born.

Why do we need to know the truth about everything? It's not worth losing your mind over.

Okay, here we go. I can feel those hormones kicking in. <Fucking sexist world!> The warning signs were there. Ignoring the autoimmune issues popping up with greater frequency, as women tried to decide what being a woman meant. Mom would talk about it. Clucking at her friends with the two kids and a chip on their shoulder, guilty for having the job, for leaving it, with a husband they said they despised (but secretly loved) while trying to fit into the jeans their daughters wore and still be the care taker. Care. I looked it up. It's root meaning *lament* and *grief*. Sorrow and wail. Apt. So came the fatigue, the foggy brains, more cases of Lupus, Hashimotos, and of course MS. All in a time when the future was being invented <mostly by men>. A new Cambrian explosion.

An explosion. Yes. It was ugly. As if every brain was quantumly entangled, connected through an invisible field of pheromones. Mass sickness, no matter your creed. Septic shock. 225,000 dead in six months. Millions in bed. Bodies declaring war on its owner.

<We were already deep in battle>

--

SHUT THE FUCK UP!

<Why are people are talking outside my door, WHEREAREMYHEADPHONES?!>

Breathe. Stupid emotions. <I don't want Mina rushing in because of an alert>

The lizard, floating there. The one that she buried. It was one of those days when she knew I could hear her. Understand. She told me about our lizard brains, that we had evolved from them, that pieces of the reptile were still in us. <ewwww> She grazed my skull with her finger tips, touching at the base to point out the cerebellum. Then point to a picture where our lizard brain, our limbic system was... the amygdala, the hippocampus shaped like a horse shoe. Our primal urges, our emotions were the same as a million billion years ago <yes, I know more like a hundred thousand> that they can overpower our smart noggin, the cortex, at the front of our head — she tapped both of our foreheads. We are still at the mercy, she explained, of our past, of where we came from. The trick was to realize when the lizard was awake and not to let it control you. She was in awe of the dance between the thoughts and feelings. The billions of neurons responsible for our selves.

She whispered that my grandfather was involved in something big, something about understanding it all <my grandmother had died of Alzheimers>. The world didn't know how close we were to figuring this whole brainy mess out. But soon, she whispered, soon.

I think she always wished she could be validated for the depth of her thoughts. Her ideas, no matter how unformed. But she couldn't control her lizard. It ate her from the inside out.

[5] < analysis >

Evolution is funny. Nature selects in mystery. It knows what is fit before we do.

Millenniums of royalty kept the world in check, from growing too fast or out of sync with nature, shedding rebel blood to secure their own. Maintain the status quo! <Unless you were some Roman emperor>. The visionaries and change makers were thrown in the dungeons. But once the slaves and serfs were freed, once a steam ship cut a route to the new world, where meritocracy was birthed... the whole thing went to hell.

I mean WAKE THE FUCK UP!

The people who *made* the phones, the networks they run on, the platforms they feed, *most of them are like me*. It only makes sense we could handle the load, not rewire our brain. The warning signs were there (though a decade too late), yet you treated it like a bottomless Coke, an amusement park that you never had to leave. As if you were capable of anything more than a vacation there?! I MEAN, C'MON! THE ARCHITECTURE WAS INTENTIONAL. Do you think they didn't know that all this would happen, that it would mutate the masses? You were warned.

You may be pretty, but you're really fucking dumb.

<Sorry>

<Hormones>

--

“Honey? How’re you doing? I saw a few big little blips there...”

Mina has her head poked around the edge of the door. Sneaky cat.

“Ffff— iiiii”

“Fine? OK good luv. They’ll be here in 12 minutes. Beautiful sweater you picked out, goes so nicely against your skin!”

Then a warm and gushy smile, pulls her head back to the hallway and shuts the door.

Mina <in her capacity> knows I like 12 minute reminders. It gives me two minutes to prepare to know that they are less than 10 minutes away. 600 seconds. 12. being 6 if divided by 2 and if added is 3 which times 2 times 1 is 6. 6. the number of particles needed to create a complex shape if vibrated. 6. The extra dimensions to find for string theory. It’s not a number my neuro-type usually prefer. My invisible idea.

I look at the violet cotton against my arm. The weave of high vibrating strings.

--

I once saw Mina on the staff computer on her lunch break. The big dull grey screen. One portal, only ever a single one, now. The AAs, the advanced algorithms <no one will call them AI’s, come on> presenting her with everything she needs to know. A singular mandated focus.

Clarity. The Compartmentalization Act of 2025 was a terror to most. But then it became a relief <to some>.

The world is limited now. People throttled as to how much bandwidth they can consume. The amygdala is now blocked from the stimuli it adored. Firewalls In the brain. The Firemesh. <Soothes the brain, Saves the body!> It came out quickly, already prototyped for other pursuits. The ‘neural link’, ‘neural dust’, a theoretical answer to the looming AI problem — already entrenched in geek lore by books and billionaires. If only they knew it would be fast tracked and recalibrating to make people less, not more. Jobs and lives required to be simplified and streamlined. The zombie Bloomberg hosts — happy with their one job of relaying market news, and of their Barbie arms.

I’m exempt. Not throttled. My computer and un-meshed brain free to roam what’s left of the public web. <It still exists, just in a streamlined form.>

Next year, I’ll have access to The Arktos server. The grand poobah. 16 is the entry point. The corporations, the brain trusts will come calling, with consent. For I have a brain that can interact with the algorithms... I can predict, analyze, feel. In my own special way, my body happy to partake in the neural dance. I love the data, tapping at my arm. Can meaning come from it? If a pattern can be discerned. A pattern is beautiful. A pattern is a hat tip to the universe. The momentary glimpse of its grandness.

But I don’t mistake it for Joy.

--

*Fucking shit.*

<Background refresh complete>

FUCKING SHIT!

*Conclusive findings on ability to transmute A-spectral neurons into resilient neural and entric neurons. HPA Axis stabilized with 3D rendering replication. Up for Peer Review.*

<A-spectral neurons, that's what I have! You know what this could mean?! SPECTRUM PEEPS FTW!!>

My Grandfather said, to fix something you have to know how it works. You then have to know how to *duplicate* it. In having to fix the brain we were forced to solve its mystery. Understand it, fully. Its connection with the whole body, with the gut <20,000 neurons there>. The quick influx of funding helped. The roll out of rudimentary 50 bit quantum computers helped too <duh>. Necessity breeds Invention. To solve the epidemic we had to be able to copy the brain and study its code. Whole Brain Emulation. WBE. It's not public knowledge yet, talked about in labs and behind oak paneled doors, places my grandfather could go.

--

The lizard and the butterfly. The lizard couldn't survive the pool, the man mixed chemicals, nothing of note or nature to cling on to, too heavy to float. But it had the final laugh.

BEEP.

They're here.

— —

[6] < arrival >

A journey to get up to my room. 242 seconds on average for most.  $2 \times 4 = 8$  minus 2 equals 6. Should I open my black out curtains, even just a bit?

<I dig my nail into my arm> BANANAS. <Stop it Hilly>

The beginning of my life was shadowy. Not bright or fully formed. Until it was. Suddenly. And the brightness hurt. *"So how, children, does the brain, which lives without a spark of light, build for us a world full of light?"* <Mom's favorite quote from a book about a blind French girl and a Nazi.> Why is the future always white? In the movies: Bright, stark, colorless. Unless it's post apocalyptic and then it's more

to my greyscale liking <but so depressing>. I have this nightmare of a blinding white Arkos tower that will wrap its tendrils around me and sync in through my eye.

I CAN'T LIVE IN A BRIGHT FUTURE DON'T THEY SEE?

--

Through a sea of molecules  
Into the bathroom.  
I stumble.  
I push up my violet sleeves.

Why *did* I scratch my arm?? I know why the cat did, but was it play or to protect? Why did I? To be in the moment. With my body. To see what blood would do.

There are my eyes. In the mirror. Are they like hers? I suddenly can't remember. How will I get from here to old? Who will help me? What will cause my wrinkles if not the sun on vacation on some Italian island that I might never get to go to. Who will teach me? What is it that bonds a child to a parent, to mother? I left behind some fetal cells, lodged in her tissue, having escaped through her blood brain barrier. Did my cells change yours, Mom? Could part of me have hurt you? You saw choices beyond me. Too many. But my existence didn't quell them, only multiplied them. Choosing for 2. You thought you'd be tethered to the Earth. Why didn't I help? It is her fault, it is my fault — It's too late to help — How will I continue on this ancient female mitochondrial DNA, THIS FEMALE BLOOD LINE —

WHY AREN'T YOU GIVING ME THE ANSWERS??!?!  
FUCKFUCKFUCKINGANSWERS!

— —

I can feel my body.  
Entirely on the floor.  
The cool tile beneath me.

Once the tile had been wood. A bench. In a restaurant with palm trees around it. My head not on tile but on her lap, a silky dress oblivious to my food stained eight year old hair. The butterflies were angry, stabbing with their little pointy wings right under my ribs. < I would eat too fast.. always>. I couldn't breathe. <And so sad because we were in a restaurant in one of the few times I could go out, I must have been having a good week.> People walked by us. We were in the lobby. The only place where I could stretch out. But she ignored them all, their stares, didn't care what they thought. She had laid me out with my head in her lap. She said in a calm voice... "I will fix you, okay?" There was this light in her eyes, now I remember. And she clapped her hands together like a bell, and rubbed them in a blur. And then placed one on top of the angry butterflies and the other one on my belly. Then she rubbed gentle circles over where it was sore. So softly. Barely pressing. I could feel her heart beating through the tips of her fingers. Circle after circle, as she looked at me with gentle kindness. The butterflies didn't like that at first, but then they got lazy... and sleepy. And found it hard to poke. They finally agreed it was best just to leave. I felt soft and comfortable.

Melting into her lap. I don't know what she did. She had made them go away. They disappeared. Freed. She was full of magic. An alchemist. Not meant for this world.

"Hillary?"

My father's voice. Right on time.

I look up, <Hi Daddy.> I smile.

"You okay?"

"YYYUUEESS".

He laughs and joins me on the floor.

"It looks like you've grown again."

<It looks like more of your hair has fallen out.>

He smooths my cheek and gently kissing my forehead.

"Happy Birthday kiddo, I've missed you —"

I snort and scrunch my nose <I hate his nickname but it makes me laugh>.

He pulls something from his back pocket. A tiny bouquet of rosemary sprigs. Tied with a string.

"They're from the garden."

I take them and press them to my nose, breathing in the molecules. My heart tickles and then is warm.

"Alright, let's say hi to her, okay?"

Yes. It's time. He helps me up, He leads me into my room. To the desk, I sit. Attaching my sleeve my arm. I look towards the door.

"Are you ready?"

I nod. I can feel my warm heart beating, my mitochondrial DNA preparing for contact.

He lifts up his case, next to the desk and gently pulls out a small blinking tower. <He must miss her so.> He syncs it to my desktop. She held on. So much longer than everyone else. She waited just long enough. For her idea to become reality. <Grandad would be proud.>

"She'll be so happy to see you."

And my sleeve comes alive in a million flutters as light floods my brain — The most beautiful light that I have ever seen —

<hi mom>

<hello my darling>

— —





## Jacob Quickly's Partial Death

By Marco Etheridge

Jacob Quickly died today. His being only a partial death, it was not front-page news in the local newspapers. No one captured a video of Jacob Quickly's demise. The event did not go viral on social media sites.

The day of his death was not so different from any other day of his life. Jacob Quickly rose from his bed. He washed and brushed himself. Standing before his closet, Jacob scissored his long thin legs into a pair of clean blue jeans. He pulled a presentable men's extra-long shirt over his skinny torso. Once dressed, Jacob looked very much like a well-tended scarecrow.

The breakfast Jacob ate on the day he died was no different than his breakfast any other morning. He ate one piece of whole-grain toast with butter, one piece of fresh fruit—on this day it was an apple—and drank one cup of black coffee. Dishes washed, Jacob set out from his small apartment.

Jacob Quickly walked through the world feet first. His legs were usually far in the lead of his torso. His body seemed in danger of being left behind, his arms swinging wildly as he tried to catch up to his legs. Jacob Quickly looked, in fact, very much like a huge wading bird dressed in human clothing, stalking down a city sidewalk.

Perhaps Jacob would have been better off if he really were an enormous bird. But his fate was to be born human. Jacob Quickly is not well-suited for being human. In fact, he does not do well with day-to-day life. He is a man who lives in his head. Jacob does not have a girlfriend, nor does he have a boyfriend. He misses a great deal of what passes for the pageantry of life. But on the

day that Jacob Quickly partially died, he quite suddenly became very much involved in the gritty business of living.

On that sunny late morning, Jacob Quickly was forty-two years old. He had spent the previous twenty-seven years convincing himself, and everyone around him, that he was not afraid to die. What he was afraid of, he often said, was dying badly. It was a sleight-of-hand, a trick to confuse his own mortality. It was also untrue. Jacob Quickly was very much afraid of dying.

Jacob invented elaborate fantasies in which he met his death heroically. He rescued school buses full of frightened children, only to be shot down by the villain's last bullet. He scooped a box of abandoned puppies from train tracks. The train cut Jacob in half, of course, but the puppies survived and grew to be faithful dogs.

As his fear of death grew, so too grew the heroic daydreams he concocted. And as time went on, Jacob Quickly's brain repeated these scenarios so many times that a strange transformation took place. Jacob Quickly's brain was afraid to die, but his stork-like body was not.

At some cellular level—perhaps through endless repetition, perhaps through magic—his body absorbed all of the inanities that Jacob Quickly's brain invented. Having no brain to tell it otherwise, Jacob's body was only awaiting the opportunity to perform heroic feats sans fear of death. And today was that day.

Here is what happens.

Jacob Quickly is striding west along a busy city sidewalk. The sun is blazing behind him. Ahead of Jacob, on the same sidewalk, a young married couple walks toward him. These are the Langes, James and Martha, although Jacob has no way of knowing this.

Martha Lange is pushing a stroller. The occupant of the stroller, baby Jessica, is squalling most alarmingly. Capering in an erratic orbit around the Langes, and doing his best to bump into his sister's stroller, is three-year-old Benji Lange.

The infant tempest rising from the stroller captures the attention of the adult Langes, Martha and James. Little Benji, desiring the family spotlight, decides the time is ripe to make a break for it, and break he does.

Sprinting away from his family, he dodges towards a gap between two parked cars. He is screeching with laughter, looking back over his shoulder at his preoccupied parents. Beyond that fateful gap is a blur of speeding vehicles.

Jacob sees all of this. His brain stutters and buzzes, but his body knows what is about to happen.

Jacob's body leaps into action. It knows exactly what to do, even if the brain is frozen in confusion. With three lunging strides, Jacob Quickly is airborne, sliding feet-first across the hood of the first parked car. His eyes see the maelstrom of traffic on the boulevard, make calculations, and send instructions to his legs. Jacob lands on his feet facing the oncoming blur of a checker cab with a front grille the size of oblivion.

Jacob's scarecrow arms reach forward and down as his legs thrust his body forward. His bony hands know exactly where little Benji will appear. He snatches the boy up by the armpits and spins him into the sky, mere inches in front of the hurtling taxi's massive bumper.

Not wanting to frighten the child, Jacob's lips spit out loud airplane noises. Benji's delight in his escape turns to sheer joy as he suddenly learns to fly. Jacob Quickly pirouettes in the street, a

matador in afternoon traffic, his cape a squealing toddler held high. The roof of the taxi cab passes just under little Benji's kicking sneakers.

Abbas Bukhari, the Pakistani taxi driver, passes so close to Jacob Quickly that he could have bitten the buttons off of Jacob's shirtfront. It is fortunate for everyone that he did not choose to do so. Instead, Abbas Bukhari sees a toddler flying over the hood of his taxi. He sees a scarecrow holding the child aloft as his taxi sails past. None of this should be happening.

Mister Bukari is not a large man, but his scream is very large. The noise of it fills the taxi and a portion of the street as well. The frightened cabbie slams on the brakes. The checker cab slides and bucks to a stop in a cloud of smoke and a string of rich Urdu curses.

Jacob Quickly spins the joyful Benji down to his chest. The toddler is giggling and squealing "Again, do it again!" as Jacob staggers through the gap between two parked cars. He hands the boy to James Lange. It is only when he sees the ashen faces of James and Martha that Jacob's body reconnects with his brain. Then his legs give way and he slumps onto his ass, headless of the hard concrete sidewalk.

Back in the street, Abbas Bukhari launches himself from his cab and slams the door. He is oblivious to the chorus of horns rising behind him. His only desire is to beat and pummel. He must punish the insolent man who has frightened him more completely than anything this insane American city has ever thrown in his humble face.

He lunges between the parked cars, gains the sidewalk, and sees the horrible man sitting on the concrete. Then he sees a father holding a wiggling child, and a crying mother reaching for the same child. The man and woman are standing helpless over this scarecrow man splayed out at their feet.

In that instant, Abbas Bukhari understands exactly what has transpired. Anger flies from him as he thanks Allah, again and again, from the bottom of his heart. He steps forward to join the group and manages two steps before his legs also give way. Without knowing how or why he finds himself sitting beside this crazy stranger.

The scarecrow leans against him, and Abbas Bukhari feels tremors running through the man's body. He puts his arm around this trembling stranger. The man is crying, and when Abbas looks up into the eyes of the parents, he sees tears running down their cheeks as well. Then everything grows blurry, and Abbas knows that he is weeping and he is not ashamed.

In the months that followed his partial death, Jacob Quickly learned a great many things.

Jacob Quickly learned what to expect when he knocked on the Lange's front door. The door would pop wide as if opened by an invisible butler. And no higher than the doorknob was Little Benji Lange. He would squeal "Uncle Jack-Bub, airplane me, airplane me!" and Uncle Jack-Bub would lift Benji with his scarecrow arms and spin him into the Lange's living room.

He was a frequent guest at the Lange apartment, where he became the champion at cooing baby Jessica to sleep. Not being the center of attention annoyed little Benji no end. His jealousy propelled him from the room in search of the noisiest toy in his arsenal. The Lange household was chaotic and often ear-shattering. Uncle Jack-Bub came to love it very much.

He also learned that he possessed a deep fondness for Pakistani food, at least the food prepared by Fatima Bukhari. In the many long hours he spent with his friend Abbas, Jacob learned what it was like to grow up in Karachi. He marveled at his friend's stories of arriving in America with almost nothing, of meeting his beautiful Fatima, and of driving a taxi in a crazy American city.

Jacob stopped inventing elaborate scenarios for his heroic death. He did not need them anymore and also he did not have the time. Jacob Quickly was far too busy. People seemed to have invaded his quiet life.

There were frequent dinners with the Langes, of course, noisy and boisterous meals. The evenings shared around the well-tended table of Abbas and Fatima Bukhari were more peaceful. Loud and quiet, both became as important to Jacob as air and water.

And, as if he weren't busy enough, Martha Lange had a friend, a woman named Caroline. Martha's friend was fond of tall, thin men, but she was not lucky in love.

After several dinners at the Lange's, meals that were even noisier than usual, it became apparent that Caroline was particularly fond of Jacob Quickly, and he of her. They agreed to try an outing away from the squealing children, just the two of them. That has become a regular occurrence, much to Martha Lange's satisfaction.

Jacob Quickly often thinks about the morning he partially died. Who could blame him for doing so? He has tried to explain the whole thing to Caroline, but with only limited success.

Caroline, for her part, disagrees with Jacob's terminology. She says that a partial death is a silly way to describe what happened. According to Caroline, death means losing something, and that is certainly not what happened. Caroline claims that those few crazy moments were a giant cosmic alarm clock. She says, "You didn't die, Jacob. You woke up." She tells Jacob to look at all he's gained.

It is easy for Jacob Quickly to heed her words. He has become quite skilled at seeing all he has gained. Following Caroline's instructions, he reaches for her hand, looks into her beautiful dark eyes, and smiles his scarecrow smile.

**Tin Roof Café**  
**By Emily Cogburn**

Stella dropped spoonfuls of the vanilla-scented praline and sugar mixture onto a reusable baking mat stretched over the restaurant's bamboo prep table. She only made the confections once a year and they sold out as soon as she presented them to her customers on Christmas Eve. That day, they only served gumbo with rice or potato salad and the pralines for dessert. Stella's mother, who had opened the restaurant in 2120, some eighty years ago now, had taught her the recipes, and she hadn't changed them much, only to substitute ingredients when the need arose.

Trey stirred the gumbo simmering on the old-fashioned electric stovetop, which was powered by the restaurant's battery. The seventeen year old would be leaving in less than a year to go to college and Stella didn't know if she'd be able to find anyone to replace him. Not a lot of people wanted to work in the only café in a town with fewer than a thousand residents.

Stella went out to the dining room. The twenty tables were empty, bamboo chairs propped against the cleaned tables, mop robot whirring around the clay-tiled floor. Through the front window, she saw her daughter and granddaughter approaching on the dirt and shell-paved road. The electric and solar-powered, self-driving taxi that had delivered them turned around and ground away on its specially designed off-road tires. Stella's grandmother had told stories of hot, blacktopped roads snaking around the state years ago, but Stella didn't remember them. All the streets she'd ever seen were made of various natural materials, depending on the climate and ecosystem of the area.

Her daughter Marla looked angry, her mouth drawn into a tight line. Her cropped hair stuck up from her head, streaks of gray mixed in with its light brown color. She wore the loose-fitting hemp jeans that she'd had for at least three Christmases and a beige linen blouse under a thick, hemp jacket. Stella's granddaughter Joan, who had just turned seventeen, had more fitted jeans and a



hemp T-shirt decorated with embroidery. Her beige hemp jacket seemed to engulf her thin shoulders. The faraway look in her eyes told Stella she was probably listening to music or some other programming on the microplayer that was always shoved into her ear. Stella had one, but she found it disorienting since it tapped directly into the user's brain to deliver auditory and visual content.

Stella opened the unfinished bamboo door, hugging her daughter and granddaughter and ushering them inside. She knew better than to ask where Zachary was. Her son-in-law disliked the country just as much as Stella's late ex-husband had. He would be visiting his family in New Orleans for Christmas, the same as every year.

"You're making pralines and gumbo again," Marla said as they walked to the restaurant's kitchen. "I can smell it."

"It's a Christmas tradition." Stella wished they didn't have this conversation every year.

"Sugar is a wasteful commodity," Marla said. "Land-hogging and almost no nutritional value."

"I know," Stella said. "Almost everything else I serve is grown by me or the people in town. The sugar comes from Port Allen, but I only order enough for the pralines." She could tell that something was bothering her daughter and it wasn't the sugar. But she also knew what Marla would say if she asked her. Nothing. Marla was fifty and sometimes she still reminded Stella of a petulant teenager.

Trey gave Joan a half-smile, commiserating with her over the crazy adults fighting. But she didn't appear to notice him. Ever since she'd begun high school, Joan had seemed to retreat into herself, at least to Stella.

“I can’t believe you still have that old stove,” Marla said. “How much of the restaurant’s battery does it suck up?”

“Not as much as the HVAC system. Do you want to talk about that too?” Stella said. “Or do you want to repeat how I should replace the battery? The place runs fine. We get plenty of solar power on sunny days and the battery stores enough to take us through the cloudy ones.”

“It could be more efficient. I’m guessing the stove still doesn’t heat up well after a few overcast days.”

Stella sighed. “I manage.”

“Wait a minute,” Marla said. “Why isn’t the restaurant open? It’s only four o’clock.”

Stella straightened herself up. She knew that she had shrunk as she aged and now she was shorter than her daughter. Her body had also become thinner as she progressed through her seventies. Clothes hung on her and she had to cinch her hemp belt tight to keep her jeans from slipping down. “I decided not to serve dinner anymore since Blanche retired.”

“Blanche retired? You didn’t tell me that.”

“I was going to. She worked her last shift a few weeks ago. On her seventy-sixth birthday.” Out of the corner of her eye, Stella saw Trey offer Joan a still-warm praline. She smiled at him and took it.

“Don’t you think it’s time you retire too? Sell the restaurant?” Marla said.

“No one would buy this old place.”

“That’s not the point and you know it. You’re seventy-four. That’s too old to run it by yourself. Besides, someone would buy it for the land. The pecan trees, the satsumas.”

“No,” Stella said.

“There’s a new retirement home right near my house on the North Shore. I toured it. It’s nice, Mom. You’d like it.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I don’t want to be good for nothing but crafts and jigsaw puzzles.”

“Retirement homes aren’t like that anymore, you know that. The elders have real jobs, like knitting scarfs, hats, and sweaters, shelling pecans or peas, and sewing. This one has a little farm out back with goats, chickens, and different crops depending on the season. They might even let you cook.”

“Gee, that’s mighty kind of them.”

“Come on. You know this place is too much for you,” Marla said.

Stella looked at Trey and he nodded. They had worked together long enough that he knew she was asking if he could finish making the gumbo and pralines. Trusting that her daughter and granddaughter would follow, she went out the back door.

As she walked through the garden behind the restaurant, she instinctively checked on all of the elements that powered the operation of the Tin Roof Café. The three wooden cisterns had enough water left in them for at least a week of dishes and restroom operations, especially since the built-in filtration system allowed her to recycle the dishwashing and restroom sink water. Only the sewer waste traveled to the parish treatment center. Unless the weather was unusually dry, she didn’t have to use the cistern water to irrigate the garden. It was filled with plants suited to the damp Louisiana soil—cabbage, mustard greens, turnips, and winter squash now that it was December. She plucked a few weeds as she strolled and behind her, she heard or rather sensed, Marla and Joan doing the same. It was almost second nature to them. Crops were everywhere and everyone tended

to them. Schools began teaching agricultural practices to children from preschool, so even the youngest could tell a weed from a carrot plant.

Trees surrounded the garden. The large pecan trees loomed over, branches still holding a few nuts. Fruit in various stages of ripeness hung from the smaller satsuma, lemon, and blood orange trees. Stella plucked a few satsumas, cradling them in her arms. She'd serve them in the café or trade for items she didn't produce herself such as farmed shrimp and catfish or the occasional pig, chicken, or rabbit. How could she leave this place, the café that had belonged to her mother, the place she'd given up her marriage for? She couldn't.

#

Stella gave Trey a hug goodbye, turning away before he could see the tears in her eyes. She would miss the quiet teenager, who always seemed to somehow know what she was thinking. He planned to study engineering at Louisiana State University in the fall and he wanted to go to Baton Rouge now, in spring, to find housing and a campus job. He'd promised to return someday and help Stella improve operations at the restaurant. She'd smiled and thanked him, but she doubted it would happen. There were too many jobs in the state's capital at the manufacturing plants that created everything from pots and pans to furniture made from the bamboo growing on most of the farms that had once been for sugarcane.

After he walked down the road, disappearing into the thick landscape of trees, Stella sat at a table and waited. It felt strange to be idle, but she didn't want to miss Joan's arrival. At 7:30 a.m., she began to get restless, but just as she was standing up to go back to the kitchen, she saw the electric taxi pull up. Joan emerged from the little box, dragging a hemp backpack that looked like it held a week's worth of clothes. Rather than going outside to meet her, Stella watched, wanting to glean what information she could from Joan's body language.

Her granddaughter wore a loose linen blouse that almost completely covered her shorts and hemp-rope soled shoes. Her hair hung down on both sides of her face, ending at the chin line. She seemed more aware of her surroundings than usual, and Stella surmised that it was because she didn't have her microplayer in her ear.

Stella thought the lack of the microplayer was a good sign, but she still didn't know what to expect from her granddaughter. As a young child, Joan had loved the café. She'd stood on a stool in the kitchen, playing with a ball of dough, run through the dining room greeting all the customers, and raced around the garden chasing bugs and snakes. But when she'd turned thirteen, Stella remembered her becoming more reticent, quieter.

Finally, she got up and opened the door, hugged her granddaughter, bag and all, and led her back into the kitchen. "Do you want something to eat before we open?" she asked.

"Um, yeah, I guess." Joan appeared uncomfortable and Stella wondered again why she was here. Marla hadn't said, only asked if Stella was willing to have her visit. She hadn't even told her how long she was staying.

"Eggs and biscuits?" Stella said. That was Joan's usual meal when she came to the café. It hadn't changed since she was three or four.

"Sure."

"Go ahead and sit down." Stella indicated the stool set up next to the prep table. She drizzled pecan oil into the cast iron pan and plated two sorghum and millet flour biscuits while she waited for it to heat up. She cracked in two eggs she'd gathered from her own chickens that morning and let the whites begin to turn opaque before stirring them with the bamboo turner and adding a

bit of goat's milk. Sprinkling on just enough salty Cajun seasoning, she scraped them onto a plate. Then she poured some water for Joan and began to clean the skillet.

She almost forgot about Joan as she fell into the rhythm of preparing for the day's customers, setting one low-energy, high efficiency cooker to boil potatoes from the garden to make hash browns, turning the other one on for the grits, and making fruit salad from strawberries, melons, and blueberries grown just a few miles to the north. When she remembered her granddaughter again, she saw Joan putting her dirty dishes into the dishwasher and brewing a pot of coffee with chicory. Even cut with the locally grown plant, the coffee was expensive and most people drank it au lait, half coffee, half milk.

Stella watched Joan, amazed that she remembered how to use the electric coffee maker. Then again, maybe she just figured it out. Technology was easy for young people.

Before Stella could think about Joan any more or train her, customers started arriving. Schoolteacher Charlie Benson arrived first, and she immediately poured him coffee, knowing he had to be at Magnoliaville Elementary by nine a.m. "Hey, Stella," he said. "I see you have a new helper."

Stella turned to see Joan greeting Liz Hebert, who worked at the Magnoliaville shrimp farm. Joan seated her at a table and pointed to the seasonal menu that Stella had written on the wall using chalk she made from eggshells. For breakfast, eggs and home fries were almost always available, along with grits and biscuits. The varieties of sausage, bacon, and ham changed the most, as well as fruit. Once, she'd featured omelets with crawfish and shrimp or vegetables, but since Blanche retired, she'd simplified her breakfast offerings.

Liz glanced at the menu, probably just to be polite. Stella knew she'd want biscuits with honey and coffee, the same thing she always ordered. Suddenly, Stella realized that she'd forgotten to program Joan's microplayer to connect with her point of sale system. How could she have

neglected that step? Was Marla right that she no longer had the mental capacity to run this restaurant? Did she belong in the old folks' home like she said?

Feeling defeated, she headed back to the kitchen, glancing at the screen where the orders displayed. Bacteria trapped inside the glass responded to signals from electronic devices and formed words. Now, they spelled out "Table 4, café au lait, biscuit with honey, fruit." Somehow, Joan must have programmed her microplayer into the system. Stella smiled and got to work. She should have known, but then, she had very little understanding of her granddaughter anymore. Stella felt all of the fifty-four years that separated them.

She plated the biscuit and grabbed a fruit bowl just as the screen updated to add Charlie's order of scrambled eggs and bacon. Later, she would find out more about Joan. Now, it was time to work.

#

Stella had always scheduled deliveries for after lunch. Since she wasn't serving dinner anymore, the time was relaxed, a chance to catch up with her suppliers, who were also some of her best customers. Liz arrived first, and Stella left Joan doing dishes and went out to meet her.

"Got shrimp, catfish, and crawfish today," Liz said, opening the back doors of her electric truck. She wore loose hemp overalls and a straw hat, her usual working outfit.

Cold air blew out, along with the scent of fresh seafood. Liz grabbed a porous canvas bag of live crawfish which were crawling over one another with their insect-like feet. "Do you have my bags?"

Stella again cursed her brain, which seemed as porous as the crawfish sack. "I'll go get it."

As she turned, she nearly ran into Joan, who was holding a fistful of empty canvas sacks. “Sorry, Grandma. I didn’t mean to startle you.” She handed Liz her bags and said, “What kind of refrigeration does your truck use? HFOs or plastic crystals?”

Liz’s suntanned face crinkled as she smiled. “Seems like last time I saw you, you were knee high to a goat.” She tossed the empty sacks into a bamboo crate in the back of the truck. After handing Joan a bag of shrimp and Stella a small bamboo crate labeled “catfish,” she closed the doors. “Plastic crystals. You know they’re not made of that old material we used to call plastic. The word refers to the state of the crystals, in between solid and liquid.”

Joan nodded as if she knew exactly what Liz was talking about. Stella didn’t, but she kept her ignorance to herself. She did know that the restaurant’s cooling system, and the refrigerator and freezer, used HFOs, a kind of gas, which Marla informed her was becoming an outdated technology.

Once Liz had driven away, Stella and Joan took the seafood back to the restaurant and placed it in the walk-in refrigerator.

“Are you studying refrigeration in school?” Stella asked.

“No.” Joan gazed at her with her clear, brown eyes, and at that moment, Stella saw Marla at sixteen. But Marla had been rebellious and angry. Mad at Stella for the divorce from Marla’s father, which had been, in her mind, exclusively Stella’s fault. Later, she’d even seemed to blame her for his death. In contrast, Joan’s calm was almost disconcerting. But Stella didn’t have time for any more reflection. Jonah and Michael would be arriving soon. She went back out front with Joan following and the two men clattered up the road in their foot-pedaled cart.

“Stella!” Jonah called, jumping out of the four-wheeled contraption he’d built himself. Of the two, he was the mechanic, while Michael grew most of the vegetables they sold, along with their



two sons and hired helpers, men and women who belonged to the Louisiana Farm Workers Association, a subsidized state agency that provided labor to farms. Farmers paid the agency, which then provided fair wages to the laborers, who, like everyone else, also received government health care, retirement, and childcare.

“Good to see you, Joan,” Michael said, lifting bags of zucchini, spring onions, and summer squash from the cart. “You’re usually only here at Christmas.”

“I’m spending the summer with Grandma,” Joan answered.

Stella gave her a sideways glance. Why was she so nervous about talking to her granddaughter? She kept telling herself she wanted to wait until they had time to talk, but there had been plenty of moments during the day when she could have asked a few questions. Stella knew she was just afraid Joan would be like Marla, constantly judging her and finding her wanting. When had their relationship taken that ugly turn? As a young child, Marla had loved her mother, admired her. Back then, Stella had worked with her husband Simon for the state Department of Environmental Quality. But Stella had never liked living in Baton Rouge and that had been part of the problem with their marriage.

Michael stared off into the distance for a moment and Stella knew he was telling his microplayer to record the amount of produce they were delivering to the café. “Y’all need help bringing this inside?” he asked.

Joan was already picking up the sack of squash, leaving Stella to accept the crate of tomatoes from Jonah. “We got it,” she said, and the two men continued up the road.

“Is anything else coming today?” Joan asked, trailing Stella back to the restaurant.

“No,” Stella said. “Now we feed the pigs, bring out the compost, and weed the garden.”

After stowing the vegetables in the cooler, they left through the back door of the café. Joan pushed the wheelbarrow containing the vegetable scraps that would be added to the compost heap while Stella carried the bucket that held slop for the hogs—leftover grits, shrimp shells, half-eaten biscuits. Stella knew now was the time. She should ask her granddaughter...what? She didn't know how to frame the question. The girl was so young. Stella could barely remember how it felt to be that age—choices laid out like playing cards in front of her. She hadn't known which to choose and before she knew it, Simon had chosen for her. She'd quickly realized she'd made a mistake, but it was too late. She was pregnant with Marla and her course had been set.

Joan headed toward the compost heap. Stella watched her pick up the shovel, turning the rich, black dirt over the eggshells, melon rinds, and cornhusks as if she'd been doing it her whole life. The afternoon sun turned her light brown hair golden, and she seemed like a goddess to Stella, impossibly young and strong.

The handle of the heavy slop bucket bit into Stella's hand. She hurried to the pigpen and emptied it into the trough. How long before she wasn't strong enough anymore to do it by herself? How long before she had to sell the restaurant and admit that Marla was right?

Marla had been ten when Stella had finally left Simon. They'd both wanted to hold their marriage together until their daughter grew up, but they'd had to admit that they were making each other miserable. Stella wanted to quit her desk job and move to the country, wanted it so badly that she thought she would burst out of her skin. He had moved up to a high level management position and couldn't, or wouldn't give it up. The push and pull went on until Stella's mother died. After the funeral, Stella took Marla with her to the café and she could see it like a vision, them living there, happy.

Joan walked toward her, removing the microplayer from her ear and shoving it into a small bamboo case. To Stella, she seemed to have grown taller over the course of the day and then it hit her like a shot ringing out in her ears—Joan was like her. She wanted to be here, in the country, at the café. Stella bent down and plucked a few tomatoes, placing them into a cloth bag she'd stowed in her pocket, telling herself not to get so excited. Perhaps she was wrong. Joan's story wasn't her story. Her granddaughter wasn't a younger version of herself.

Stella started toward the house and Joan said, "I'll pull some of these weeds for you, Grandma."

Stella hesitated. Should she say no? Tell Joan to come inside? Maybe her granddaughter wanted some time outside by herself. Stella knew what that felt like, so she nodded and went inside the house. Their talk could wait a little longer.

Soft lights flicked on in the living room as she entered, activated by the motion sensor. When she'd moved in with Marla nearly sixty years ago now, she'd been surprised at how old everything seemed. She'd visited her mother at least twice a year, making the trip by train to the nearest station in Thibodaux and then taking an electric taxi the rest of the way, sometimes with Marla and Simon, sometimes alone. But coming there to live had made her see things differently. She'd noticed the burners that didn't work on the electric stove, the loose solar panels on top of the house, torn window screens, and the broken sensors on the lights. Her mother had put all of her energy into the restaurant. That was her true home and soon it had become Stella's too. Still, she'd set herself to fixing the house slowly and now, so many years later, it needed to be done again. But even with only serving breakfast and lunch at the restaurant and closing Mondays, it was hard to find time and energy to do more than the bare minimum to keep the place maintained.

The kitchen light didn't come on as she moved into the room; instead, the window tinting lightened, allowing more sunlight in. The glass window automatically adjusted to the amount of light and heat, darkening the tinting during the hottest times of the day and scaling it back when someone was in the house. The tinting was made of tiny organisms somewhat like algae that responded to signals sent by the house computer.

Stella placed the tomatoes on the bamboo counter, which also served as a cutting board, and took a half-used bulb of garlic from the clay bowl Joan had made for her when she was in middle school. Joan had told everyone back then that she was going to be an artist, but Stella had seen an engineer in her designs, which were always precise and practical. The bowl, for example, had three different compartments—a large, oblong-shaped one for the bananas that grew on the tree behind the house, a deeper one for oranges and onions, and a small, shallow place to put garlic.

After mincing the garlic, Stella got two ears of corn from the scrap metal and bamboo refrigerator along with a bell pepper. Once she'd prepared all the vegetables and placed the scraps in her compost bucket, she lifted her cast iron skillet onto the stovetop and scooped in some of the butter she got from Macon's Dairy a few miles up the road. Over the sizzling, she heard the door open and felt her hand shake a little as she brought the garlic to the pan.

"Can I help?" Joan asked when she'd finished washing her hands in the sink.

Stella moved back to the counter to get the onions and peppers, catching Joan's scent of sunlight and soil. It suited her and Stella thought again that maybe her granddaughter was like her. "No, I'm fine. Go ahead and sit down." She paused, searching for courage. "How long are you staying?"

Joan perched on the edge of the bamboo stool covered with a cushion local artist Heather Dupree had made in exchange for a week of breakfasts at the café. "I'm not going to college."

Stella stirred the vegetables in the pan, waiting. She was surprised but not shocked. She'd known Marla was upset about something at Christmas. This was it.

“Mom doesn't understand that I can't sit in a classroom anymore. She's got my whole future planned out for me—graduating from LSU, getting some job in an environmental field, and marrying and having kids. I don't want that.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Work here in the café. That's what I always wanted to do,” she said.

“I didn't know that.” Stella wanted to believe her, but she was skeptical. During her visits to the restaurant, at least in the past few years, Joan had spent most of her time on her microplayer, ignoring the world. And yet, the Joan she'd seen today was different.

“I know you don't believe me. I was off-track for a while. There was this guy...anyway, I thought I was in love. And he got me into playing some of these microplayer games. Not just him, that was what all the kids did. I guess I wanted to fit in. But when he broke up with me and started dating this other girl, I thought, wait a minute. I'm not really that interested in these games, this music, the videos I watched with him. I was just doing it. So I stopped.”

Stella put the corn into the pan and added Jonah's Cajun seasoning. Joan sounded like herself at seventeen, at least what she remembered of being that age. It was so long ago but, if she tried hard enough, she could recall what those feelings were like. Wanting to be like everyone else. Needing to fit in.

“I didn't use the microplayer at all for a while, except for schoolwork,” Joan said. “I freaked out my mom because I'd just stare out the window. She thought I'd gone nuts. What I found myself thinking about was you and the café.”

“You used to love it here,” Stella said quietly.

“You know what they say? What you wanted to do when you were ten years old? That’s what you should do with your life. And when I was ten, I wanted to move here.”

“You did?” Stella tried to remember if Joan had ever said that to her. She didn’t think so, but she could see in her mind the skinny girl in shorts running through the garden.

“And then Mom kept saying you should sell the café. I thought about it closing and I couldn’t stand it, so I told her I wanted to come. She said no, of course. Over and over. But I guess she finally got tired of hearing it and told me to spend the summer here. She said by fall I’d be tired of it and want to go to college.”

“Do you think you will be?” Stella asked.

“No,” Joan said, sounding twice as old as her seventeen years. “I don’t.”

Stella believed her.

#

Marla was walking up to the café as she had hundreds of times before. But the anger that had defined her whole being in the last few years was gone. It had been replaced by another emotion that Stella couldn’t place. Not happiness, but something else. Maybe acceptance.

Stella decided not to go into the kitchen and tell Joan that her mother had arrived. Not yet. She went outside instead and met her daughter on the front steps.

“I’m sorry,” Marla said.

“For what?” Stella was a little scared. What had happened since she’d called two days ago, saying she was coming, that this was Joan’s last opportunity to attend LSU in time for fall semester?

“For being angry with you. I blamed you for the divorce, but it wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t Dad’s fault either. I get that now. And his death. He always took chances in the ocean. He would have swum on that red flag day whether you all were divorced or not.”

“How?” Stella felt silly but she couldn’t seem to say anything else.

“Joan. She made me see. She really is happy here. Just like you are. I thought I was doing the most important work, saving the world. But that’s not for everyone. She just wants to live her life, be part of this little town, make a difference in her small way.”

“She’s doing well here,” Stella said. “And you’ll be happy to know she’s helping me make the place more efficient, like you wanted. She took the battery apart and replaced some of the components. She has other plans too.”

“You won’t have to sell the café? If she stays?”

“I don’t think so. Trey says he’s coming back. After this year, he’ll be able to finish his degree remotely. I think he wants to come because of Joan, but I didn’t tell her that.”

Marla smiled and she looked so relaxed and happy that Stella felt the same way. She’d never thought her daughter could change, cast off that burden of anger she’d carried for so many years.

“Let’s go see her,” she said.



WHAT WOULD THE WORLD LOOK LIKE IF  
GIRLS WERE TAUGHT THEY WERE VOLCANOES  
WHOSE ERUPTIONS WERE A THING OF  
BEAUTY, A POWER TO BEHOLD, A FORCE  
NOT TO BE TRIFLED WITH?

WE ARE VOLCANOES. WHEN WE WOMEN  
OFFER OUR EXPERIENCE AS OUR TRUTH, AS  
HUMAN TRUTH, ALL THE MAPS CHANGE.  
THERE ARE NEW MOUNTAINS.

THE SPACE BETWEEN MY MOTHER AND HER  
MOTHER, THE SPACE BETWEEN MY MOTHER  
AND ME, THOSE ARE THE BORDERS ON THE  
MAP OF AMBITION THAT WE EACH HAVE DRAWN.

WE'RE EACH OF US ALONE, TO BE SURE,  
WHAT CAN YOU DO, BUT HOLD YOUR HAND  
OUT IN THE DARK?

THE REVOLUTION ANNOUNCES ITSELF WHEN  
THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE  
CONNECT AND BECOME READY TO RISK  
PUTTING THEIR FEET ON THE GROUND  
FOR AN UPRISING.

YOU CANNOT BUY THE REVOLUTION. YOU  
CANNOT MAKE THE REVOLUTION. YOU CAN  
ONLY BE THE REVOLUTION. IT IS IN YOUR  
SPIRIT, OR IT IS NOWHERE.

ANGRY WOMEN ARE FREE WOMEN.

NO MATTER HOW INTELLIGENT A MAN IS,  
HE CAN'T SEE WHAT HE DOESN'T KNOW  
HOW TO SEE.



## Spatial Highlights of Faith Deconstruction

By Zachary Pattison

### I: Parsonages

“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”<sup>1</sup>

Religion is a drug; this is the declaration of Karl Marx. It’s true—religion changes one’s perception of the world, much like any mind-altering substance. People interpret the world differently on religion. Adherents praise it for its life-changing effects. Much like a drug, religion is all consuming; it’s an addictive and expensive way to spend your time. Many people use religion recreationally or as a coping mechanism. I was not as lucky. This is my story of religious detox and rehabilitation—of faith de(con)struction and healing from religious trauma.

I grew up with the church as my second home. I am the son of a pastor who is the son of a pastor, and I was expected to take on the family trade. Thankfully this intention was never fully realized, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. I spent my childhood living in parsonages—houses that the church owns in which the pastors live. To me, these houses were defined by amateur fix-it jobs and a haunting sense that I was sleeping in god’s guest house. For my family, parsonages were spun as a benefit when pious professionals decided to move my dad around every few years. With their convenience, living in parsonages also meant never settling into a place. My room was never fully mine. I knew that, even though this room was called my room for now, we would have to ask the church for permission to paint the walls blue. I always tried to make the best of it, though. New home, new horizons.

My early experiences of religion were like that of a parsonage. My faith was never really something I owned but something I occupied. It was given to me as a benefit of my historical circumstance. I was born the son of a pastor, and by virtue I would occupy the space that was set aside for me.

“This is the armor of god,” my father said one Sunday morning. He held up cheap, child-sized armor he procured from the local Christian bookstore. The light shone in tones of green and yellow through in the century-old stained glass and reflected off the faded red carpet as a group of us kids sat around my father. I was distracted by the musty smell of the pews and the flicker of ceremonial

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right Introduction, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Penguin: London, England, 1992). 244.

candles. Dad's message was on Ephesians 6, but the implication was that the church was to raise young children to fight in god's army. I realized I was a budding young soldier, and I was scared to death. Nothing prepares a kid to fight in a cosmic battle against evil—certainly not a plastic sword. As a 10-year-old, I was mortified. The being that created me also required a stint in some heavenly armed services. If going to heaven was my inevitable goal, there was no escaping god's draft.

I attended youth group every week. In dusty basements I listened to pastors warn me about being left behind when the rapture comes. The thought of suddenly being whisked up to heaven was meant to be blissful, but it proved horrifying for a preteen. In these shoddily-painted rooms, my youth pastor warned us that anytime we checked out a girl in the hallway it was the devil testing us. I knew that when my body communicated anything to my brain, I was to ignore it and give it to god. I offered lofty-yet-impossible purity promises. The emotional manipulation was successful, though. When I inevitably failed to suppress my chaotically hormonal teenage emotions, I felt I had failed god. I'd return to youth group each Sunday, approaching god like a scared child, fearful of wrathful vengeance.

My family also led half-a-dozen annual mission trips to the Navajo reservation in Utah. Two dozen Midwesterners would slog across the country in fifteen-passenger vans to run a vacation bible school for native children. I was naive, and my public-school history education left me unprepared for the racial legacy my white body conveyed to the Navajo people on their partitioned, illegally-relegated land. White, midwestern evangelical subculture didn't adequately prepare me for the racial awakening I would later gain from these self-serving trips in graduate school.

These out-of-body moments were commonplace in my childhood. Evangelical Christianity obscures the role of bodies in favor of holiness.<sup>2</sup> As a depressed teenager, I cut myself and rubbed erasers against my skin until it burned, leaving reminding welts on my arms. I also struggled with body image, starving myself until my stomach screamed for intervention as I looked in the mirror, disgusted by what I saw. This was especially confusing as a teenage boy. My experience with religion resulted in me not understanding how to interact with my body. I learned to bury my emotions, ignore my impulses, and pray. This convinced me of my own holiness. At this point I was on the short path to following the family trade. Or, at least I thought.

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## II: Rental House

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<sup>2</sup> Jamie Lee Finch, *You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity* (Jamie Lee Finch, 2019), 86.

American evangelicalism wasn't always associated with conservative policies. It has roots in progressive 19th century social stances.<sup>3</sup> Early American Evangelicalism was concerned with spreading good news to all that would listen; it sought to bring material freedom for those who followed. Fast forward a century to 1979, the year Jerry Falwell Sr. founded the Moral Majority to deny fellow-evangelical Jimmy Carter a second presidential term. This was the same year that American evangelical leaders followed Catholics in rallying against abortion—six years after the passing of *Roe v. Wade*.<sup>4</sup> The end to this new focus was achieving Reagan's political dynasty. This solidified the current marriage between evangelicalism and right-wing politics. It's not hard to connect the dots from 1979 to 2020, where an estimated 76% and 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump—a businessman with a well-documented lifestyle diametrically opposed to Christian values.<sup>5</sup>

When I went to college, I chose Christian worship as a major. A local church had hired me as a youth and worship pastor. At this point, my faith defined me. After my junior year of college, I married the girl I'd been "dating" since middle school and attained what I thought was the ideal Christian marriage. We consolidated the few things we owned and moved into a small rental house. We were young and naive, but I was excited for our future. New home, new horizons.

My turning point came in 2011. Occupy Wall Street occurred the same time I began reading Karl Marx and James Cone. Trayvon Martin's murder happened a few months later. This was the first time I noticed Evangelical silence on social issues that didn't involve boycotting Disney. I spent endless time reading the "radical words" printed in red. Jesus had a lot to say about social issues, but none that my pastors wished to take seriously. Instead, they misappropriated Jesus' words and spiritualized his overtly-material teachings. This disconnect confused me.

I couldn't reconcile how I had been so wrong, but I knew I had to change. Christianity was supposed to be an ancient religion oozing with modern relevance. However, current iterations seemed less about saving people and more about religious leaders controlling people and consolidating wealth. The dissonance sent me into a spiral. In a desperate attempt to take my faith seriously, I tried talking about racism, sexism, and classism from the pulpit. A few responded positively, but most congregants were upset that I was using a holy book to advance "politics." They

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<sup>3</sup> Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Randall Balmer, "The Real Origins of the Religious Right," *POLITICO Magazine*, May 27, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/religious-right-real-origins-107133>.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Newport, "Religious Group Voting and the 2020 Election," *Gallup.com* (Gallup, December 3, 2020), <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/324410/religious-group-voting-2020-election.aspx>.

complained to my pastor, who responded by avoiding me. I was enraged and isolated. Other pastors were bastardizing the words of the bible and *I* was the one getting pushback for trying to speak truth?

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### **III: Church Office**

Deconstructing one's faith is a relatively new phenomenon in circles of former evangelical millennials. It has come to describe a process wherein someone examines the content of their beliefs, reevaluates their legitimacy, and arrives at a new understanding. The development of faith deconstruction has roots in French philosophy, specifically in the work of Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction looks different for everyone who engages in the process, and it leads everyone to a different place. Those who undergo deconstruction actively take their agency back, gaining autonomy from faith leaders who benefit from vulnerable, unassuming congregants. Deconstruction can result in a more meaningful belief system, converting to another religion, or leaving religion all together. For me, deconstruction wasn't a journey I actively sought out; my process started before I realized what was happening.

"I had planned on firing you today but was talked out of it." These words began pushing me out of the church. My pastor started our first meeting in months with this confession. He was fuming because I had recently taught the youth group that god loved gay people—something our church considered sinful. The church leaders had tasked me with leading the youth group, structuring worship services, and filling the pulpit in the pastor's absence. It wasn't until I was ousted as a "liberal" that they realized how dangerous my young and unfettered authority was.

I sat silently in my pastor's office, separated from him by his oversized desk. He was dressed unusually professionally, and his tone was more authoritative than usual. He was trying to scare me into submission. He berated me about leading the congregation astray, ending with the phrase: "You have lost my trust." I was upset and confused as to why he had taken punitive action instead of fostering a discussion. He concluded the meeting by saying it was "water under the bridge," and that from here on he would keep a closer eye on me. I dashed from the meeting towards my office.

I only made it half way up the stairwell until I fell, my body uncontrollably shaking. The emotions I had trained myself to bury for years emerged with a vengeance. I sat weeping in the dark, head in my hands, experiencing my first panic attack. The evangelicalism I occupied until that point was disembodied spirituality. It intentionally downplayed material conditions in favor of ethereal holiness. Now, my body was a host rejecting the parasitic religion that had been growing within me

for years. When I finally made it to my office, I collapsed into my chair trying to compose myself. I was livid. After a few moments my shaking stopped. I gathered my bag and swiftly descended the back staircase to the parking lot, hiding my tear-soaked face. I lived about an hour from the church, so I had time to decompress before getting home. As an introvert working an inherently social job, I savored the commute. This night was no exception; I needed time to sit with what had happened.

For the next few months, I was a twenty-something pastor flirting with agnosticism. I presented myself professionally on Sunday mornings. In the evenings, I questioned my faith while I smoked cigarettes on my commute. My pastor's blatant abuse of power fueled a hatred and distrust for religious authority—the same authority I embodied. Being a pastor made it especially hard to question god, and not only because leaving the church would mean leaving my source of income. Questioning god while occupying a pulpit meant betraying the people I was charged to lead. My job was to guide others—to have answers. Now I was out of answers. The congregation felt betrayed, and my pastor made clear that my words were no longer welcome.

For a year after college, I was a pastor by day and a skeptic by night. Panic attacks were more familiar than prayers. My bachelor's degree prepared me for a career as a pastor. Deep down, I knew this was a fever dream. A trusted professor encouraged me to consider career alternatives, so I applied to graduate school. While I didn't know what would come next, I knew I didn't believe in the god I to whom I prayed professionally.

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#### **IV: Apartment**

Religious trauma syndrome is a condition wherein people renegotiating their relationship with religion suffer from a complicated shattering of their lived experience. It's social, emotional, intellectual, physical, and existential restructuring. Jamie Lee Finch contends that it's most akin to PTSD.<sup>6</sup> Religious trauma is death by a thousand cuts. Now that I was forced to reckon with my own lived experience, I felt each and every one.

In my office on a sunny May afternoon, I answered a phone call from a 919-area code. It was Duke University informing me that I was accepted to their Master of Theological Studies program. Ironically, my chosen treatment for burgeoning religious trauma was going to divinity school. I went to a small rural public school and came from a family that shopped at Dollar General to make ends

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<sup>6</sup> Finch. *You Are Your Own*, 61.

meet. That Duke accepted me was a miracle. Nonetheless, I hoped to graduate either holier or healed.

Come June, my wife and I packed our belongings into a U-Haul and caravanned to North Carolina. We excitedly unpacked the truck into our new one-bedroom apartment, experiencing our first summer in the south. We cranked our central air conditioning, made friends, and embraced whatever may come. Geographically and spiritually removed from my past, I'd never felt more alive. New home, new horizons.

Duke was a different universe. Deconstruction was my only goal, and I had two years to go as deep as I needed. Hell was first to go. How could a loving god force their own creation to suffer for an eternity?<sup>7</sup> Inerrancy next, then original sin, then atonement theories. I sat before my theological shelf, pulling out every doctrine, examining each and seeing them for what felt like the first time. While this energized me, it wasn't long before my shelf was empty. My deconstruction took myriad forms, but none proved healing or holy. These realizations helped me understand how I got where I was, but little guidance on how to proceed. I was trying to reconcile this divergence, fearing it lost in the dark. But my conclusions were there, staring me in the face, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

One particularly warm March morning they finally did. My coffee lacked effect as I slumped in my chair. My "Liberation Theology" professor spent an hour teaching about how United Methodist missionaries had historically traveled to Native American reservations and founded Christian schools. Indigenous people were trained to assimilate to white American culture under the guise of Christian living. Their bodies were disciplined in order to save their souls. Having run vacation bible school on the Navajo reservation, I had participated in this colonial practice. I didn't need caffeine; I was jolted wide awake. In this moment I knew none of my beliefs could be reconciled. By embodying Christianity, I had perpetuated evil in countless ways. I had performed these abuses with pious pleasure. I knew I had to apologize and renegotiate my existence.

Some people change their beliefs as a result of apologetics. In this way, forms of atheism can be as rigid and racist as forms of Christianity. Richard Dawkins and Ken Ham are mirrors, facing off against one another, adorning different jerseys. Every argument has an easy answer. For others, beliefs flow from intuition and careful examination. I arrived at my conclusions because my body and brain had rejected god. My worldview, my chosen career path, and my twenty-some years of

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<sup>7</sup> I intentionally use they/them pronouns for god. The way god is portrayed in scripture is best encapsulated in the use of gender-expansive pronouns.

spiritual discipline were now meaningless. I had a diploma and I thought I had graduated from religion. I was furious, but I hoped to channel my anger into something positive.

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## **V: Cabin**

Religious beliefs are like cabins. They both need foundations. They keep inhabitants safe from life's inclement weather. They're unnaturally constructed from found components, and both require a decent amount of trust and upkeep.

It was my wife's dream to build a cabin on her family's Indiana farm. Much like my parsonages resembled my faith, I also wanted my own place to signify this new phase in my life. We'd spent a year working overtime as coffee shop managers, saving every penny. Copious amounts of research filled my brain with cabin designs. I bought some books, sketched a few hundred blueprints, and was ready to build something. In June of 2017, we packed our belongings into another U-Haul and trekked back to Indiana. A non-profit had hired me to start an after-school program for 5th and 6th graders. This new journey gave me energy amongst my existential death of god. So, I bought some neckties and brushed up on long division. New home, new horizons.

Two days before my 27th birthday, I started digging the holes for our cabin. I established the foundation, secured the frame, ran the pipes, stapled the insulation, laid the floors, and finished the interior. My days were long, filled with the sounds of power tools and the smell of freshly cut lumber. My skin was leathery from hours in the sun. I grew muscles in places I had never felt before. Each evening my showers ran brown from sawdust and sweat. We spent five months and our entire savings building our home. Every inch of our tiny abode was our own doing.

A few days after Thanksgiving, we unpacked our boxes in our new home. The cabin was cozy, heated by a wood-stove and filled with familiar decor. We handled a few inevitable problems—minor plumbing issues and a roof leak. Nonetheless, it withstood its first relatively harsh Midwest winter. I was relieved. Despite this miracle I still felt empty and directionless. My cabin was proving sturdy, but unsurprisingly it didn't solve my problems.

Nine months after moving into our cabin my faith de(con)struction process came to a head. I had recently turned 28. The void from losing my religion left me exhausted and depressed. My job was emotionally taxing. My wife and I were having serious marital problems. I sat in the fetal position, whiskey-drunk in a camping chair, fully believing that the dark August sky would envelop me entirely if I tried to move. I was outside, loosely gripping a cigarette, engulfed in a cloud of bonfire

smoke and self-loathing. My wife tried to comfort me, but I was unresponsive. “What can I do? What do you want?” she asked. I was silent for a few moments. Finally, without the threat of hell to dissuade me, I uttered what felt like my first honest confession:

“I want to die.”

She broke down in tears and went inside, knowing that after I eventually stumbled to bed, I’d chase my toxic combination of alcohol and existential dread with a bottle of sleeping pills. This wasn’t the first time I’d tried. She hid the bottle, saving my life. After a few minutes of searching I collapsed onto my side of the bed. I considered alternatives, but ultimately couldn’t bring myself to move. Dizzy and defeated I passed out, soaking my pillow with snot and tears.

Later that week I confessed this suicide attempt to my therapist. He intervened with a prescription. His referral to inpatient therapy was never submitted, as my wife was a therapist at the mental health facility. He knew this conflict of interest would cause a stressed-induced implosion. Two different prescription attempts resulted in a week-long, migraine-induced slumber and a few trips to urgent care. I longed for the convenience of prayer, checked out, and bought more whiskey.

The energetic person my wife had married was gone, and in his place a shadow. I had stopped loving her and was proving to be an abhorrent roommate. On Christmas Day she told me she had fallen in love with my friend who had been pursuing her behind my back. He had a PhD in theology and the ironic aspiration of being a Christian ethics professor. He comforted her as they bonded over their mutual attraction. This betrayal thrust me into an angry haze. Over the course of a month I bounced around hotel rooms while we discussed next steps. We admitted our faults and ultimately accepted our irreconcilable differences. After splitting our assets, we made the separation legally-binding.

At the end of February, I officially moved out of my cabin, abandoning another structural belief surrogate. My religious trauma made it hard to accept being divorced. I moved my few belongings into a cheap studio apartment. In this dingy, bleak space, I spent seven months in boxes, living paycheck-to-paycheck, getting fucked up every day. My daily regiment included a bottle of whisky, as much weed as I could afford, and twice the prescribed dose of opiates to manage my almost-daily panic attacks. I’d replaced religion with other drugs, but I was relieved to feel numb without eternal consequence. New home, new horizons.

Thankfully I had a small support system who regularly checked on me. My friends watched me spiral. After a final near-suicide attempt, they intervened. A new doctor gave me another attempt at



recovery. A few questionnaires led to my diagnosis of major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. She recommended a different medication with fewer side effects. Determined to live, I let these meds run their course.

No fiery sermon or impassioned prayer had ever given me as much hope as my diagnosis. When I finally understood the reasons for my suicidal ideations, I felt that I could better manage my mental health. Some malevolent creator didn't intentionally bestow me with a dysfunctional existence. The reason I was having frequent panic attacks and suicidal ideations was a toxic combination of my brain chemistry and decades adhering to an oppressive, disembodied faith. Hope for healing existed outside of religion, and I could move beyond how it had defined me.

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## **VI: Nomadism**

For many people wrestling with shattered religion, they make a new picture with the remnant pieces. Deconstruction can often lead to a more vibrant faith. I had to throw away my broken faith; the jagged pieces cut my hands as I tried to rearrange them into something new. I lost much of what I had built—a marriage, friends, my career, a cabin. My process of de(con)struction became an all-consuming self-destruction. Replacing religion with different drugs was just as expensive and almost as lethal.

Reimagining god is isolating. Dealing with religious trauma can be physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausting. For many of us who grew up in Evangelicalism, deconstruction entails ontological change. Deconstructing our faith can mean losing relationships with others, with our past, and even with ourselves. It's walking out of a worldview with all the answers and hoping to find direction as we venture into the dark. The loss is painful, and it often leaves a permanent hole. However, these changes are inevitable to allow for new growth. I still struggle with depression and panic attacks. I've even had a few religious relapses. My de(con)struction process didn't solve my problems, but it gave me healthier diagnoses and treatments.

Thanks to Brené Brown, I tried vulnerability. I replaced prayer with medication and confession with therapy. I cut back my drinking and quit abusing pain meds. I made David Bazan's *Curse Your Branches* my soundtrack as I learned how to irreligiously grieve from Joan Didion. Albert Camus helped me see my own happiness through Sisyphus's. In an ironic twist I finally died to myself, but I assure you I didn't take up any cross to follow some distant messiah.

Wholeness isn't a place at which one arrives; it's not a destination with an airport into which we can fly. It's a lengthy road trip with frequent stops. Finding wholeness through deconstruction is like learning to walk; it's a process where sometimes you take a few steps forward and others you fall flat on your face. Each outcome brings its own insights. In the midst of my spills, I experienced things I could never have imagined. My parents and I cried together in my living room as we made amends. I became a vegetarian and reclaimed ownership of my body. I came out as bisexual. I got a job advocating for abused and neglected youth—my way of counteracting the evils I spread as a pastor. This job led to me starting law school with a full ride scholarship. I met an amazing partner who loves and supports every part of me—from my mental illness to my sarcastic sacrilegiousness. She's in a doctoral program with ambitions to be a literature professor, and she's got the brains and a heart big enough to accomplish this and so much more. We eloped last year, promising to support one another through all of life's unpredictability.

I'm in my early thirties now. Moving is my normal. I've come to enjoy my existence as a nomadic heretic. I appreciate that each new home signifies my growth. I wrote many of these words in my old downtown apartment. It signified building healthy relationships—with myself and with others—as well as ample amounts of pandemic baking. I've since moved to a new place with my partner. I finished writing this in our first house together, which was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for railroad workers. It signifies late nights studying and a deep appreciation for second chances. The future isn't clear, but I'm more hopeful than ever.

I encourage you to interrogate your beliefs. Do the work. Take time and reflect. Find supports. Get a therapist. Listen to your body and take notes. Embrace vulnerability. Consider the implications of your faith. Experience legitimacy in your doubts. Embrace the new realities these insights bring. It's heavy, but I promise that healing awaits. I can't tell you where your journey will take you, but I'm confident that you will come out with a deeper understanding of yourself. I hope that, wherever you arrive, it's a place of honesty. I wish you all the wholeness that my process gave to me. Even if your life is geographically fixed, may you experience new homes and new horizons along your way.

## **(I'M A) JEW OF A DIFFERENT COLOR**

**By Andrew Sarewitz**

I'm a white male, dark hair and eyes, gay, Jewish, not Bar Mitzvahed (my choice).

I came to New York City in the late 1970's. Early on in my second year at NYU, Emily, a friend and fellow student asked me what it is like not to be white.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I am white."

"No you're not," she said nonchalantly. "You're a Jew."

I admit it got me thinking.

I am not an Ethiopian Jew or even Sephardic. By origin, I'm Ashkenazi, and when not sun tanned, I'm very pale. Both of my parents were born in Philadelphia. My background is Russian and Belarusian. I had mistakenly believed that Vitebsk, where my father's father lived until 1905, was part of Ukraine, not Belarus. Apparently that's not correct.

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My mother, born in 1923 and raised on Gainor Road and 54th in the Wynnefield section of Philly, had gone to college at Goucher in Baltimore, which she adored and as a young woman, found defining. But because of money was tight during the Depression years, her parents said she would have to return home to continue her education in state. Her younger sister wanted to go to college, and my grandparents couldn't afford to pay for schooling that was outside of Pennsylvania. So my mother came back to Philadelphia and went to U. of Penn. My aunt enrolled in Penn State.

What Mom hadn't told me until later in life was that she first attended Syracuse. After one semester, she left. When I asked her about it, she said she preferred not to revisit that time. In 1941, Syracuse was a sorority-heavy school. Being Jewish, she was not allowed in most. She didn't lay blame there, but that's the conclusion I drew.

Speaking specifically and only for people I personally know, my generation of East Coast American Jews didn't suffer the anti-Semitic and overt alienation those coming before me did for thousands of years. Literally. Though my parents would have been protective, I didn't even know that kind of hate still existed in my world.

I had a peripheral awareness. The subject came up when my oldest brother was applying to college in 1967. For certain schools, including Harvard, there were strict quotas for Jews.

Where I grew up, I had friends of various backgrounds without questioning how we saw each other. Looking back at the street on which I was raised, Forest Road, our house was placed about halfway up the street. The homes directly below and across, housed Jewish families, as were the majority of those up the hill. But I believe almost all of our neighbors down the road were Christian.

I was educated and abstractly aware of the Holocaust and Eastern European pogroms, but I thought of them as history.

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After the mass suicide of the population at Masada in 73 AD, there would not be a Jewish state again until the inception of Israel in 1948, a direct result of the six million murdered Jewish men, women and children during the Holocaust: one third of the world population of Jews. Masada, the Middle East fortress built on a mountain's plateau overlooking the Dead Sea, was a free nation of Jews, placed there by King Herod and considered a safe haven for Herod to escape from the Romans, if need be. Herod never stepped foot on Masada. When the Romans set upon invading the tiny mountain-top society, they were surprised to find every citizen dead. There had not been a plague and there was plenty of fresh food found throughout. Rather than being enslaved again, the Jews of Masada slit the carotid arteries of every adult and child.

Jewish isn't simply a religion. It is a culture as well. I don't live by the structured religious teachings, no matter the variations from Reform to Ultra Orthodox. I just consider myself to be a white, Jewish guy from New Jersey.

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Both my parents have died and I cannot claim what their religious or spiritual beliefs were toward the end of their days. There can be warm solace in accepting God and religion into your soul as you near death. I was under the impression that both my parents were Atheists, as a permanent reaction to the millions of murdered souls — not just the Jews — during the Second World War. When I said something about his Atheism toward the end of my father's life, he got angry with me and said I should not speak for him.

He had been raised in an Orthodox household, and his children were raised within the Reform temple. But according to Mom, my father, while serving in the military, tried to go to services in Philadelphia during the high holy days. No synagogue he tried to enter would receive him without a ticket. My mother said he never attended religious services again after that.

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One of my close friends from high school and college, Lynette, was raised Catholic. When her brother passed away as a victim of AIDS, her faith was an enviable comfort. It helped significantly in easing her pain: having the ability to believe that we shouldn't question why God allows certain things to happen. I don't live with that luxury.

The question asked by Emily stemmed from the way Jewish people had previously been viewed throughout the world. As if not being white means you're less than. In Russia, Jews were not allowed to hold citizenship. White Europeans destroyed entire African societies to build the economic staple in Europe and the New World called slavery (Negroes weren't considered fully human beings in the days of Thomas Jefferson). African nations made slaves of their own people as well. Jews were enslaved from the time of the ancient Egyptian dynasties.

During the era in which I was born, circumcision was an American norm. I could easily pass for other origins, especially when I had been in the sun for a while. I never turned terribly dark, so it

looked as if I was naturally olive skinned. In the summer months, I was often asked if I was Italian or Greek. To break other stereotypes, a lot of Jews coming from Poland were blonde. My father was a toe-head as a child, with hazel eyes.

One thing I have never written about and am truly ashamed of is not liking that I fit a certain Jewish look. Students of World War II will know that there was a degrading sketch used throughout Nazi Germany to “recognize” a Jew. Big nose and in profile, a neck slanting out from voice box to chin. It’s why I don’t like having my picture taken from the side. I’m the only one in my family to have the “Jewish” neck. If my mother read this, she’d be furious with me.

Years ago, I asked my father if he remembered ever suffering anti-Semitic discrimination. He said he hadn’t. Out of his earshot, my mother said that wasn’t true. Both in the army and in his academic pursuits during his college years, he had been singled out. Our last name is recognizably Jewish. The house in which I grew up was a football field’s distance behind Orange Lawn Tennis Club, which did not allow Jewish membership until sometime in the 1960’s.

I am not equating the day to day, systemic racism facing black and brown people with my privileged experience. I don’t see myself as someone who chooses to “pass,” as they used to say. I’ve just always thought of myself as being white.

My mother went to an all-Jewish summer camp in Pennsylvania. My father was the first Jewish cardiologist “allowed” to practice at Orange Memorial Hospital in New Jersey, in the mid 1950’s. My maternal grandfather, who worked for a non-Jewish paving company before and during the Depression, was able to keep his job because of a forward-thinking boss. The company’s accountant tried to have him fired for being a Jew. Instead, his boss called the accountant into his office and in front of my grandfather, fired the anti-Semitic accountant.

In the summer of 1977, Orange Lawn Tennis Club held its annual tournaments before the pros traveled to Wimbledon. Cars were parked up and down the neighboring blocks. On one of the weekend days of the semi-finals, someone going to the games parked in our driveway. I was having some friends over, so they blocked in the car by parking behind it. I caught the driver successfully inching out. I walked outside with my friends and said, “you know this is a private driveway.” The guy behind the wheel, young and blonde said, “Fuck you, Kike!” My friend Dave, defensively responded, “hey, I’m not Jewish!” (He’s Greek...). I burst out laughing. It remains the only time I have been called a derogatory term aimed at Jews. At least to my face.

I had visited other areas of the United States in my teens. In the hills of Appalachia in West Virginia, I met a local man who had never met someone Jewish before. Farther south, in the Carolinas, someone told me they thought Jews had horns. And one of my long time friends who was raised in northern Connecticut was taught in her church that Jews crucified Jesus, not the Romans. Her husband, who himself is a Jew, teased her about that belief. But falsehoods like these have taken root over the centuries. And as we’ve witnessed through recent politics, repeat a lie enough times and it becomes the truth. An unbelievably egregious lie still perpetuated is that Jews sacrifice a Christian baby at Passover. It’s so preposterous, who would believe it? When, on Oprah’s show she matter-of-factly dismissed it as untrue, my mother became enraged. “Oprah has such significant reach. She should address this with moral outrage and seriousness.”

When AIDS began to infiltrate the American psyche, it wasn't entirely understood how it could be transmitted. It was killing off gay men, intravenous drug users who shared needles and hemophiliacs, but rumors flew that perhaps it could be spread to the general population by mosquitoes, like malaria. There was talk of putting gays and anyone with AIDS in concentration camps. When my father said that wasn't even worth intelligent attention, I reminded him that I'm sure that's what a lot of Jews in Europe said in the 1930's.

However Jews are categorized here on the populated East Coast of the United States, I have lived my life like any other white person. Being gay, a Democrat and even living in New York City have invited more outward abuse by far. Hate may change and evolve, but it will be a cancer among the human race today and forever. Still, I feel lucky to have been born at this time. Whether by education, tolerance or secular immersion, being Jewish is something I rarely think about with any weight or substance. But isn't that how history repeats its mistakes?

## **We Need to Talk About Jerry**

*Or, a (com)passionate call for a paradigm shift toward restorative justice*

**By Lindsay-Rose Dykema**

In 2018, I read Angela Davis and became an abolitionist. Since then, I've been talking about restorative justice to anyone who will listen. Most people have no trouble wrapping their heads around its basic principles, but quickly demand my opinion on accountability circles with Ted Bundy, or...what to do with the child molesters. I usually shut it down there. Clearly, I'm not trying to talk about keeping child rapists *on* the streets.

But it's time to talk about Jerry.

Last week, I binge-watched the second season of *Cheer* on Netflix. Having somehow missed the news in late 2020 that my favorite cheerleader from the first season had been charged with sex crimes against minors, I was not emotionally prepared for Episode 5. Jerry was denied bond and is currently incarcerated, so he was unavailable for an interview. But we heard from the 13-year-old twins whose brave disclosures led to the FBI investigation against Harris. Something broke inside Charlie the day he saw Jerry on TV being honored by President Biden. He was only 13 and knew he'd lose most of his friends if he spoke out. But he didn't want what happened to him to happen to anyone else. So he did.

We heard from many of his teammates, who expressed shock he'd never spoken about his demons. But how could he have, really? His impulses will always be taboo in our society, and rightfully so. And who did he have to talk to? By the time he was loved by a few, he was loved by so many. And that gave him easy access to boys who idolized him. Now, Jerry is isolated from all of his friends, teammates, and chosen mothers. He is unable to seek emotional support or talk to them about the how's and why's of what the hell happened, because in the cage, he knows every word he speaks or writes is monitored and recorded. That means it can and will be used against him by the state.

We heard from troubled villain La'Darius, who said if he'd known any of it, Jerry's fate would have been "worse than him going to jail...especially when one of your best friends you know went through something like that." Take solace, La'Darius. Jerry is sitting in a cage full of people who also want to hurt him in the way he hurt others (others like you and like them, back in the day).

We heard from veteran Gabi, who tearfully said that despite everyone always asking her *how could you possibly be friends with a child molester?* she couldn't turn her back on someone who'd always been there for her. I may not agree with Gabi's stance on the "to poof or not to poof" issue, but I felt her pain very acutely here. I have a once-dear friend in a place like Jerry's in, for committing a crime much like his. I see nuance and have not turned my back on him. That said, it takes me weeks to open every letter he sends me. I haven't written back in months. I don't tell anybody that I've written to him at all. I know all too well that Gabi and the few others who have not yet turned their back on Jerry will carry secret shame that their love for him will be seen by others as slaps to each of his victim's faces. Any appreciation of the deeply troubling nuance of his story in its tragic fullness puts them at risk of being seen as child rape apologists. This is largely because Jerry himself has not apologized, and, until his very last appeal has been exhausted, he won't. He will be understandably focused on survival, and the number of months he will be subjected to terror and abuse in a cage.

No, he will listen to his lawyer's advice and say everything in his power to deny, minimize, or conceal the harms he has committed.

And we heard (a little) from Coach Monica, who described a heartbreakingly optimistic letter from Jerry, in which he declared his intention to become a motivational speaker, seemingly oblivious to the reality that his worst days have not even started. Monica doesn't elaborate on why his hope was so troubling. But in this context, "toxic positivity" doesn't quite capture the eerie surprise of an apparent absence of empathy in someone you love, someone you thought you knew.

Restorative justice principles and practices hit my radar when I read Howard Zehr's seminal work. As Zehr describes it, our current retributive justice system is based on several faulty basic assumptions we have carried about crime. These include the idea that wrongs create guilt, rather than liabilities or obligations; that this guilt is absolute (either/or); and that the guilty must be punished, in such a way as to inflict pain. When a prosecutor charges someone with a crime, the state becomes the victim. Meanwhile, the actual person(s) harmed are rarely given access to resources to help them recover the sense of safety they have lost, and they have no input in how the process unfolds. They may not even be notified about what will happen. "The process," Zehr writes, "is assumed to be the responsibility--indeed, a monopoly--of the state." And then, of course, it is up to the state to determine the suitable punishment, without considering degrees of responsibility, or the fallacy that human behavior is always chosen freely. The restorative lens, by contrast, defines crime as harm to people and relationships, and seeks to provide the *experience* of justice and safety for those harmed. As it turns out, we can constructively denounce crime by doing things *for* the victim, rather than against the offender. But restorative justice practitioners typically avoid defining people by these terms, instead using "survivor" to honor the ongoing process of transcending painful or unjust experiences, and "responsible person" to honor that we are all more than the worst things we have done, and that many perpetrators have previously been victimized themselves.

In 1995, I was a cheerleader for the Bad Axe Hatchets in Bad Axe, Michigan. So yes, I loved every minute of *Cheer*.

In 2005, I completed my residency training in psychiatry. I spent the next 15 years listening to stories of people who had been incarcerated for "crimes" that often stemmed directly from desperation, poverty, or symptoms of their illness. Many were targeted and victimized in prison, and some were even subjected to solitary confinement, which the World Health Organization has classified as torture. But in reality, many of them had already survived more than their fair share of hardship; adverse childhood experiences including physical and sexual abuse are ubiquitous in the (mostly marginalized) folk I tend to treat nowadays. We all saw how rough Jerry had it.

In 2016, I committed a boundary violation with a patient, exchanging emails that progressed from bibliotherapy recommendations, to flirtatious banter, and to words of affection before I finally told my supervisor about the e-mail exchange and transferred the client to my supervisor's care, which devastated him. I had been too ashamed to seek out her help before it went too far. My employer reported the incident to the state medical licensing board, and for one count of negligence, my license was put on probation for one year.



I can't say whether my former client's wounds have healed with time. I surely hope so. As for me, the shame around what I did, coupled with fear of losing my livelihood, almost killed me. But instead I kept breathing and got more training in maintaining professional boundaries, spent years in therapy to understand and heal the woundedness that had led to my behavior, learned to be rigorously honest (to myself most of all) in self-help fellowships, developed a daily meditation practice, and built a strong network of people who know and accept me as I am. My shame became a window through which I could see what I have learned. And, because this is publicly available information, others are warned about the exact nature of my struggles as a clinician. For those who have chosen to trust my growth, I am immensely grateful.

In 2019, I was raped in a hotel room by my then-partner, who was in seminary school at the time, training to become a minister. A year later, he and a seminarian classmate started a "Loveline" podcast. In which they answered listeners' questions about sex and relationships from the perspective of our shared spiritual affinity group. I went down a rabbit hole and listened to every episode. On Episode 4 they engaged in witty and progressive repartee about sexual consent for their listeners.

That was my Charlie moment. Something broke inside me.

I decided to speak out. What I wanted was safety for myself, warnings for others when appropriate, and mental health treatment for my ex, who had survived his childhood physical abuse but not yet done any healing work to understand the scars it left him with. After a period of discernment, I wrote to the dean of my ex's seminary school, and I asked our shared spiritual affinity group to consider measures that might protect me from running into my ex.

I worship with another group now. But "forgiveness" -- I swear, the word has feathers.

In *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation Through Anger*, Lama Rod Owens wrote a chapter about his first Buddhist teacher, a man he credits for saving his life. He describes the anger and hurt he felt when he realized his purportedly celibate teacher had violated the extraordinarily vulnerable relationship between teacher and student by having sex with multiple female students. His spiritual community had been complicit in allowing misconduct to continue for years, even by low-key shunning a student who had reported him. When things eventually came to light, Owens describes his teacher's videotaped apology, in which he did not take responsibility for the harms he had caused, as "bullshit." Spiritual leaders make mistakes, he writes, but "regardless of the mistake and the resultant harm, we have to show up in person to be held accountable by our community." Owens says he still loves his teacher, and honors what he learned from him.

Owens has learned to live in the gray. He talks about "making a home in the complexity." He calls us out on using words like "evil" and "crazy" as lazy cop-outs to more complex thinking. "The gray is where we head to the edge of our practice where our hearts break and we are forced to sit with both the love and the rage," he writes. "In the gray middle is where I begin to articulate my hurt. In the gray middle my pain is a mirror for myself so that I begin to know what I need to do to get free from suffering."

I, as a physician, a wounded healer, am standing between a spiritual leader and a celebrity cheerleader. Three very different roles, but all imbued with two things: inherent reverence and an imbalance of power. This is a combination we must always regard with due care, using all the resources at our disposal to do no harm. We must care for ourselves and hold ourselves accountable. It seems to me today that of the three of us, I am the only one who is getting free.

We all must broaden our view and live in the vast, spacious gray, even if doing so only reveals more brutal layers of suffering. It's easier and simpler to turn away, and try to find some solace in vengeance.

I don't know where anyone's solace roams. But I guarantee they won't find it there.

So, why not expand the search?



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