

MADGIC

a sanity & spirituality staggerdance



By
Mori of
LB Lee

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OTHER BOOKS BY LB LEE

- The Homeless Year
- Alter Boys in Love
- Flights of Reality
- All in the Family: the complete collection
- Cultiples: the complete series
- Infinity Smashed: Found Wanting
- Rumbleghost

LB's work also appears in:

- Inaction Comics #1: Productivity
- Boundless Vol. 1: A Science Comics Anthology
- Being True: LGBTQ+ Comics from the Boston Comics Roundtable

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Body text is a font made from LB's handwriting by them.

This book has thorough content warnings in the very back of the book (the section labeled "Caveat Emptor"). This way, people who need them can get them, and those who don't won't be spoiled.

THE OBLIGATORY INTRO

Hi! We are multi ("multiple personalities" or "plural"). Here's what/who you need to know for this book...



LB Folks Who Appear:

Mori: me! Trauma sponge who died and got better.

Rogan: trauma sponge after me.

Ontologically bothered by this zine.



Biff: my dudemom and best bro.

Rogan's boyfriend.

Mac: Rogan's hubby.

Vain about his hair.



Rawlin: that one freakin' guy.

God-eaten half to hell.

Sneak: ray of sunshine.

A foot taller than me.



Falcon: professionally mysterious.

Burned-out imaginary friend.

Grace/Grey: Silent, stoic, sensible.

Bob's wife, barely appears.



Bob: all smarts, no sense.

Grey's hubs, barely appears.

Miranda: organized back-runner.

Barely appears.



Gigi: spooky little girl, adores Falcon.

Trent: stuffy shapeshifter. Barely appears.



The Waters: our sentient subconscious/headspace.

Depicted as a cartoon whale first chapter.

The Vessel: our lovable sentient meat RV.

The body everyone sees in consensus reality.



Other Folk Who Appear:



Anyone wearing a mask like this: one of our relatives.

Estranged due to rapeyness.

The Bony Lady: chthonian.

Says she's not a headmate.



The Family God: read and find out!

Also various roommates, friends, and neighbors.

Caveat Emptor

This zine talks frankly about incest, rape, physical violence, attempted murder, suicide, mental illness, religious abuse (including exorcism), unwanted gods and religious experiences, divine parasitism, body horror, soul puppetry, Hell, and a truckload of death, all involving children and teenagers. It's not meant to be a downer, believe it or not, but you might find it such! Be aware!

TERMS

Consensus reality: “the set of beliefs and experiences considered to be valid according to an individual’s society or group” (Williams, p. 14). For our purposes in this zine, what mainstream USA society sees as “real.” Contextual and prone to change; people just pretend otherwise.

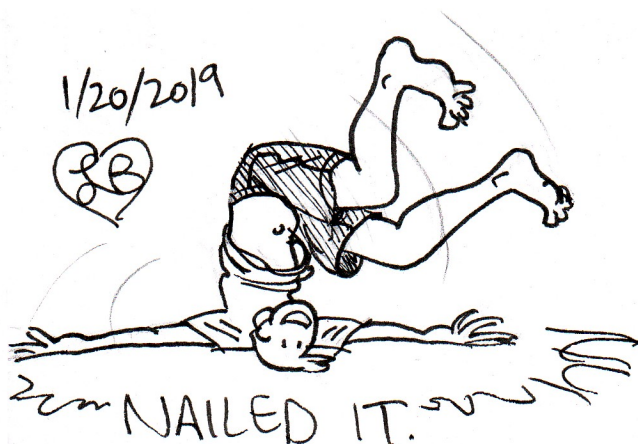
Otherordinary: anything consensus reality sees as “not real.” This includes me, my headmates, my headspace, my religion, and all that other weird shit.

Magic: “the art of communicating with the [otherordinary] in nature and ourselves” (Evans, p. 147). Yes, this makes a lot of psychology magic, for the purposes of this zine. Fuck you, Crowley.

Religion: I truly don’t know it from magic anymore. Sorry.

Headspace: mental landscape, where we headmates interact. Lively, full of death, and loose in its relationship to physics.

Headmates: us weirdos what live in our head and share a body.



Okay, with all that out of the way, let’s get on with it!

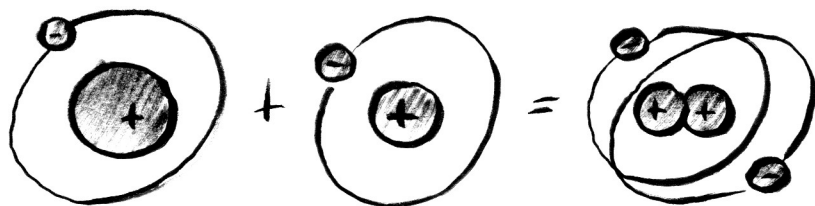
CELESTIAL BODIES



(Above is one of Edmund Sullivan's illustrations from Fitzgerald's 1859 translation/reinterpretation of the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám. It's good! You should read it.)

In high school, we took an astronomy class, where we learned the coolest thing: damn near everything we know and see, including ourselves, are made of dead star chunks. (The less morbid version is "we are made of stardust," but that's mealy-mouthed euphemism for what really goes on, in my opinion.)

Here's how it works: before stars came along, 90% of all the atoms in existence were hydrogen; the rest were helium. Over time, enormous clouds of hydrogen contracted via gravity into gaseous spheres, squishing closer and closer, getting hotter and hotter, until at roughly ten million degrees Celsius, nuclear fusion happened, squishing hydrogen into helium:



Thus, stars are born! Tiny ones get no further than helium, but bigger ones, when they run out of hydrogen, run so hot and hard that they start mashing helium atoms into carbon, then carbon into oxygen, followed by neon, magnesium, silicon, and iron, which is the end of the line. Iron is so stable even a red giant can't fuse it.

But novas and supernovas can. These are the death throes of massive stars, horking their elemental plasma guts into space before collapsing into neutron stars or black holes. All elements heavier than iron, like gold, were forged in these explosive cosmic death scenes. "Made of stardust," my ass! These are the cosmic opera's fat ladies singing (and screaming) the house down!

"Star death is an essential ingredient for the evolution of life. Most of the elements in the universe are created only during the death of large stars" (McKinney, p. 97). This parallels human and other animal sacrifice in religion: "Sacrificial death is usually structurally bound up with notions of extreme generativity, vital forces that cannot be released unless there is a death" (Patton,

p. 399). "Rather than a death-sustaining object, an expendable resource, a reified and destroyed 'thing' without hope or future, the sacrificial animal instead is seen as a life-dealing subject, [...] a divinized entity of eternal, powerful, and unassailable immortal status" (ibid, p. 402).



It's only through stars' bloody sacrifice of plasma that any other life exists. How can that not awe me? Stars live on a scale beyond my comprehension: birthing, growing, metabolizing, dying, and then creating planets and solar systems with their remains, like galactic whale falls, all over the course of eons. They are the closest thing to a physically embodied god that I can imagine.

Trying to wrap my head around the astronomical scales of time, space, and force required to make everything, to make me, was my first experience of awe as a kid. It's still just as powerful now, feeling my brain fail to contain the sheer vastness of it all.

The universe is so large and long, and we are all so small and short.

MADGIC #1

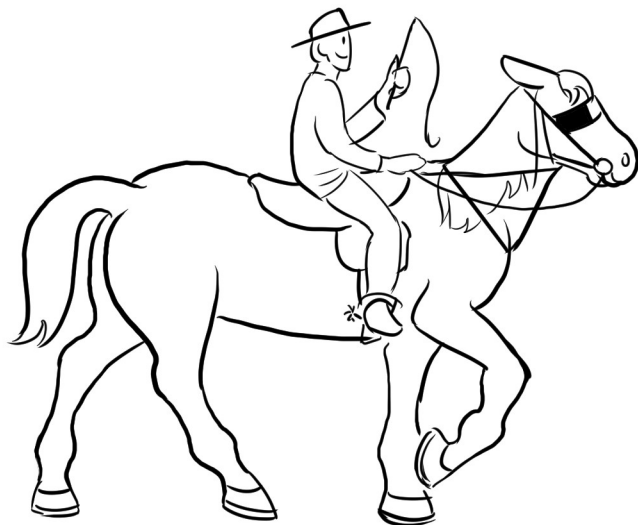
a sanity and sorcery zine



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THE HORSE AND THE WHALE

A lot of people seem to see their body/minds as horses that they ride. The horse, unruly, untrustworthy beast of burden that it is, must be “broken,” trained and restrained with bit, spurs, and whip. If it takes charge, that’s a problem. The rider is boss.



This idea must surely work for some folks, otherwise it wouldn't exist, but it has never worked for us. We don't have a nice tame horse, and we don't ride it. We have a whale, wild and willful, and we live in its enormous belly.



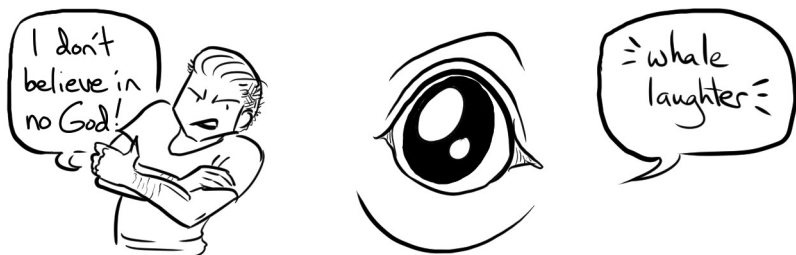
The whale is bigger, stronger, and in some ways smarter than us. In a fight, it will win. We can't break it and wasted years trying, obsessed with the idea of total self-control. Our whale took to throwing bigger and bigger fits to force us to do what it needed, and we kept beating it like a recalcitrant slave until:



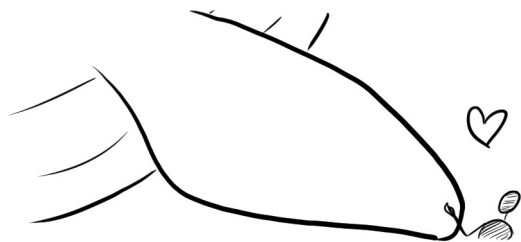
It was the end of the road. We could either die with our teeth in each other's throats... or give up this dominance dick-swinging and learn to work together. We were not our whale's master, it was not our slave, and that was a good thing.

And so we began the hard work of building a more egalitarian relationship, based on mutual trust and respect... which meant we had to become worthy of both. We had to give up the comforting illusions of blame and victimization, the idea that our brain was just a jerk out to get us, that it deserved anything we dumped on it. We had to listen to it, really listen, take it seriously, and not just go, "nah," and ditch when we found its needs inconvenient. We had to trust its reasoning, even if we didn't understand it yet.

Mira Bellwether describes her own experience with this, though in different context: “I think that’s a very trans way to think about one’s body: that it can have its own opinions about what it is and what it wants [...]. But of course, not only trans people can and do understand their bodies this way. [...] disabled folks, older people, sometimes fat-identified people; what [...] sounds familiar [...] [is] the agency they give their bodies” (p. 34).



By giving up the idea of our whale as a slave, we discovered a powerful ally. A slave obeys out of fear and necessity; a friend acts out of care. By respecting our whale’s expertise, treating it as a trusted friend rather than a recalcitrant beast, we could depend on it acting in our best interests. Often it wiggled out for very valid reasons! And if it didn’t, now it could trust us to take it seriously, which made it more likely to back down if we asked.



Most Americans would never admit to wanting to be slavers. So why do we treat our own minds and bodies that way? Why do we fight and abuse ourselves, rather than build alliances?

DIY OR GFY

Our whale has its own way of doing things.



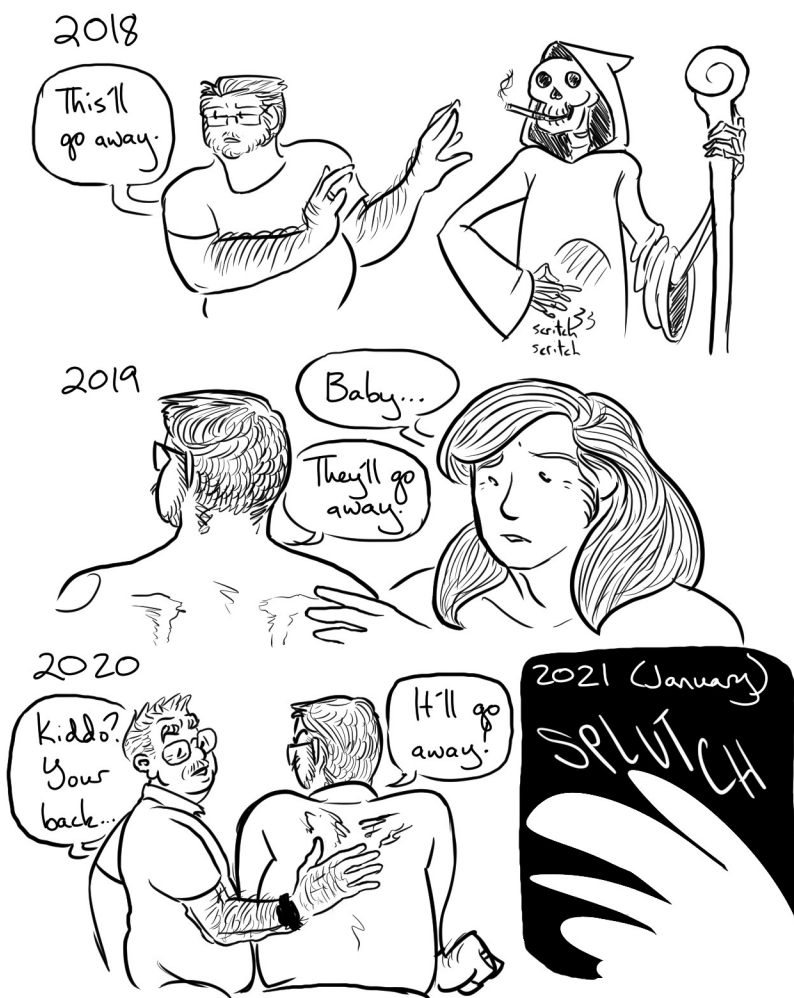
Trying to make it work with a proper preexisting magical or religious tradition was a resounding failure. It prefers a grab-bag of mediocre sci-fi/fantasy stories from our youth, kludged together with cultural detritus and random weird brain symbology. Not that unusual (see Davidsen in the References), but not that respectable either.

It takes a huge leap of faith and self-confidence to attempt building your own magical/religious philosophy from the ground up, especially when that foundation is 25% crappy Piers Anthony novels. We did not have that faith or self-confidence in 2018, and I can't blame my headmate Rogan for trying to just ignore the whole business.



Crazy people have hell's own time justifying religious or magical interests as anything other than worsening symptoms. So what do you do when you're crazy and having an unwanted religious experience? One that will not go away, no matter how hard you doubt or reason at it? Paul Hine once said, "You don't have to believe in something to suddenly have it walk up to you and ask for a light," (p. 38) and he was right.

Rogan would not budge, and the brain whale could not be denied. It got fed up, and the results got increasingly gruesome.



Rogan growing wings was horrific enough, but I'll never forget when they abscessed six months later: the reek of rotting flesh, the thick clotted pus, the shards of bone, all of which had to be cut out of his body while he sobbed and screamed that we had to get them out of him, he had to be clean, only blood could cleanse him. He was convinced he was infested with maggots, and we only just managed to convince him otherwise.

The brain whale always wins. And Rogan was unable to walk, stand, or sit upright unassisted for two months in headspace.



Even now, a year later, he still sometimes hallucinates being parasitically infested, and it's become normal to him. He doesn't even feel like he can talk about it, because he thinks it's just symptoms, just batshit. It's not real. It'll go away. I don't think he even really understands how fucked up he's gotten.

I don't know if I'm up to the whole magic/religion task. I just know that I don't want to end up like him, ignoring the subject until it rips out of my flesh. There has to be a better way.

And I'm going to find it.

AUTONOMANCY

Rogan had already tried cramming on the subject of magic and religion, without success. What could I try that he hadn't?

The Desired Constellation are multi artists who we knew from the Livejournal days. I recalled one of their members, Ian Night, posting on tumblr about a thing he called autonomancy: "the practice of personal exploration of symbols and rituals for the purposes of finding meaning and self-actualization."



He loved it so much that he worked with his headmate One Faraday to make the Autonomancy Tarot, and One and another fellow headmate, Ronin Ellis, wrote a multi horror novel, the Book of Autonomancy, with those themes. (Both are pretty great; see References.)

Smashing our head against the library wall hadn't worked, so out of desperation, I downloaded Ian's six autonomancy lessons from tumblr, printed them out, and started reading.



And finally, mercifully, something clicked.

Seriously, Ian, your posts on tumblr saved my ass. Thank you, dude.

See, we'd been going about it all wrong. We'd been trying to shoehorn our inner symbol set (the language of our brain whale) into existing frameworks for years, when what we really needed was to stop second-guessing, get off our ass, and study what was in front of us. The brain whale didn't need a new language; it needed us to learn the one it'd been using this whole time.



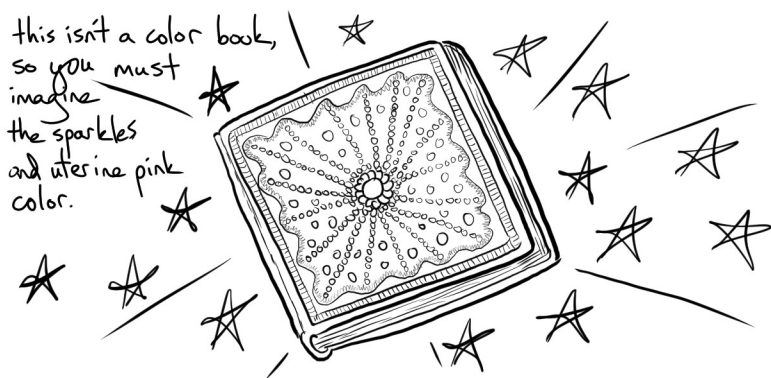
Ian's autonomancy lessons gave us cultural permission to do that, to see our mad magic as worthy of study and respect. Even if it didn't match anyone else's, even if it came from no "real" tradition, even if we were just a bunch of broke-brained trash rats trying to keep ourself from blowing up. As Ian put it, "External or esoteric systems of meaning are often arbitrary and can be changed and adapted to suit one's own understanding of the universe" (Autonomancy Tarot Guide p. 1). I don't know if you needed to hear that, but I sure did.

Ian's posts also gave me a way to catalog and organize the tangle in our head. All it took was a table of four columns:

| Symbol | Associations (meanings) | Connections | Intent (what's it for?) |
|--------|----------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| | | | |
| | | | |

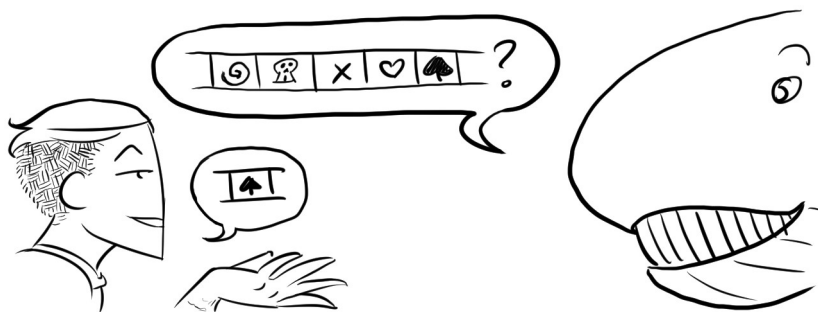
That's it. I was in business.

Colors, symbols, negative space, headspace entities, all poured into our hideous pink sequined sketchbook with glitter pages from 2002. It bled ink and couldn't handle erasing, so it was useless for art, perfect for this.



Seriously, it was so shitfucking ugly; I loved it.

Besides, I was motivated! I wanted to better understand the weird shit our brain kept horking up. That was something I could measure, something important. Clearly there were recurring images, symbols, and entities in our head that we didn't understand. Meds and therapy hadn't been able to do much about them. Maybe magic could get me there. If our brain whale speaks in symbols, I can use them to talk back, right?

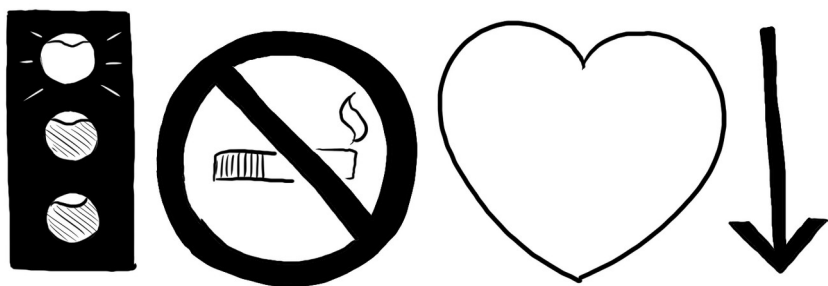


DREYFUSS, TUFTE, & NORMAN

I'm far from the only person to think of symbols as language. Here are three who've put more thought into it than I ever could.

Henry Dreyfuss created Symbol Sourcebook. He was an industrial designer, not a magic man, but he had the Utopian idea of "a universal basic means of communication," that "a system of symbols could be compiled that would be equally recognizable in Lagos and Lapland" (18).

Obviously it's not that easy (look up Charles Bliss or Egyptian hieroglyphics if you want case studies as to why) but dude had a point. People all over the world recognize symbols like these:



Translating these symbols into words in all the local languages would be way more difficult and complicated. It's why widespread industrial equipment uses symbols on their knobs and stuff. Think of the garment industry, which uses tag symbols to communicate to wearers how best to wash and dry their clothes. Hell, think of the ideographic Chinese written language, which intimidates outsiders but unites a billion people who speak different tongues. That's why they still use it! Mathematicians worldwide use the same numerals and symbols to express complicated concepts. How cool is that?

Dreyfuss divides visual symbols into three categories:

- Representational: fairly accurate, though simplified. You can tell what it is. Example: ☀
- Abstract: may have once been representational, but are now reduced to their essential elements, so are more symbolic. You may need it explained, but then it usually clicks. Example: ☐
- Arbitrary: no relation between look and meaning, have to be memorized. Example: the word "sun"

(These categories probably have some wiggle room, depending on culture and individual. Maybe I only think ☀ is representational because that's the symbol I was brought up with. But only a contrarian would argue "sun" is anything but arbitrary.)

Dreyfuss also talks about a grammar of symbols, using things like color:



← red emphasizes prohibition and warning

combination:



prohibition

+



biking

=



no biking!

or modifying the symbol's visual elements:

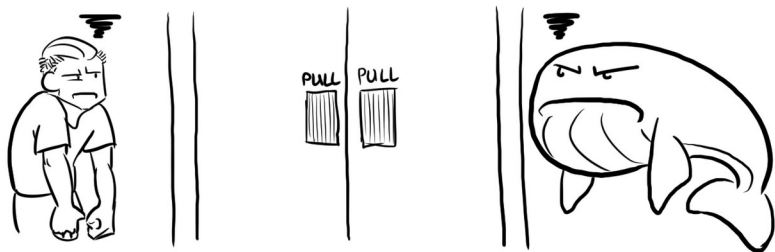
if: ♂ = male, ♀ = female, and ♀♂ = trans,

then ♂ = ?

♀ = ?

♂♀ = ?

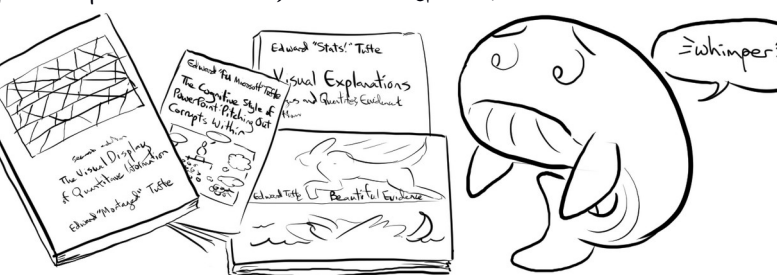
Then there's Donald Norman, a designer focused on user experience by way of applied psychology. He has many scathing things to say about doors that hate you.



Norman's work is especially applicable to disabled design, and thus disabled magic. He's all about designing stuff we don't think twice about, ordinary everyday objects like doors, to work better for us. He writes about stuff like: why and how do people make mistakes? How can we arrange an environment, craft an object, use our body's movements and mental models, to work around our impairments and lapses in attention? "People can deliberately organize the environment to support their behavior," Norman says. "Some people with brain damage can function so well that even their coworkers may not be aware of their handicap" (p. 55). We can verify that this is true! Arguably, the whole reason we're doing magic is to arrange our physical and mental environment to work around the big gaping holes in our abilities! If it's true about doors and VCRs, why not magic?

And there's Edward Tufte, an academic who's so invested in "visual and statistical thinking" (AKA charts, graphs, and other "data graphics") that he took out another mortgage on his house so he could self-publish books about them to his exacting specifications (p. 8).

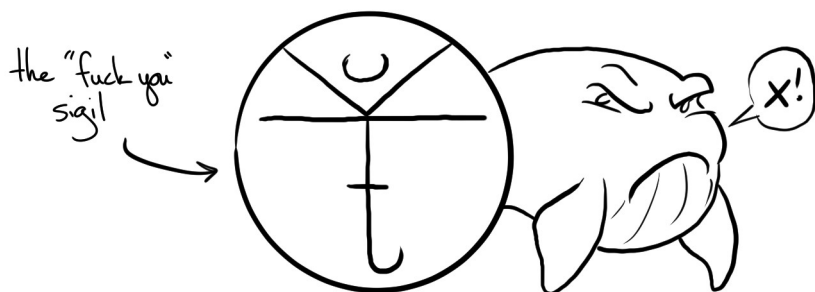
You might think graphs and magic are as far removed as two



Our brain whale can only handle so much information density. We're getting overwhelmed, so reading Tufte feels like getting disoriented with a work of statistical art, but dude has a point. Stripped of ornament, what does a magical sigil say? Why these colors, this size, in this arrangement? What's the structure, the information underneath the aesthetics? This is a man who believes in "beautiful evidence," that data itself can be a source of wonder and awe. Graphs and charts are complicated abstractions that communicate information, so why can't magical ones do the same? Why can't they not be a language all their own?

This, by the way, totally clashes with "classic" sigil magic (see later UD), which is all about using purposeful meaninglessness to sneak ideas past the conscious mind. We don't have to "sneak" sigils because the whale is very (sometimes too) lively, and it doesn't take kindly to being tricked. The arbitrary sigils of written phonetic language

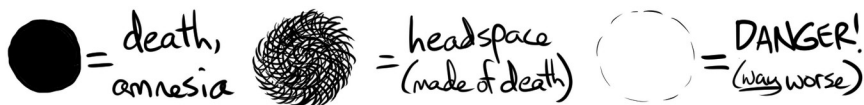
just make it mad.



Our way of sigil-making is basically a very slow, gimpy version of what Frater UD calls “the Alphabet of Desire.” But his model of psychological magic is pretty different from ours. Ditto Magical Art Therapy by Erin Roseberry, though it is beautiful and artistic.

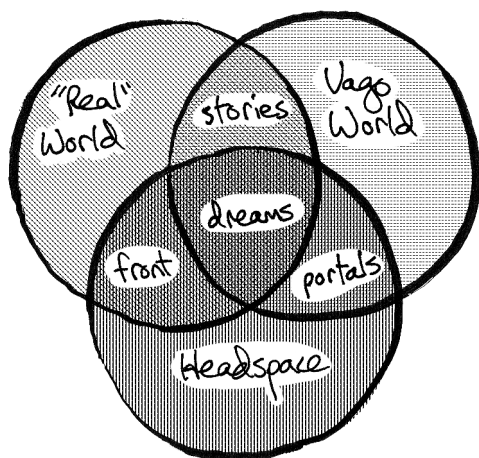
Dreyfuss, Tufte, and Norman probably had no idea their design books would get used like this by a magical loony decades later, but they’ve been bigger helps than most of the occult books I attempted. By asking “how” and “why,” by focusing on meaning and structure, rather than history or ornament, they stripped things down to their simplest building blocks, which made them easier for me to understand.

Dreyfuss, Tufte, and Norman are focused on universal symbol languages, while mine is what Ian Night calls “so personal as to be obscure to an outside observer” (Autonomancy Lesson Two: Your Grimoire), but a lot of the same rules may apply.



LAYERS OF REALITY

Another helpful (and certainly more traditional) person on my quest to become less magically ignorant was Jason Miller. In Consorting with Spirits, he gave me words to describe where I was and what I was witnessing. He has a whole layer cake of reality, organized linearly from this “physical” world all the way down to the all-one godhead of “Perfection,” but it never worked for us (p. 39-40). We straddle three(-ish) worlds on a daily basis, and they don’t have a neat hierarchy as to how amenable they are to physics. Mapping them as a Venn diagram instead worked better:



Turns out what we thought was a confusing kaleidoscope of places was more like a mix of colors created from three base pigments, the primary colors of our geography. Still, we would’ve never even thought to map it out without Miller encouraging the curiosity to ask “where is this?” rather than just dismissing it with a, “bah! Crazy brains are crazy! They don’t make sense! Why bother pretending otherwise?”

It was weird to realize that our headspace was seen as an “astral realm,” though! When I think of “astral,” I imagine Edwardian secret societies and channellers, something mysterious and glamorous, not the ordinary everyday of life. It’s like learning a fork is an object of magical significance.



I guess that’s another preconception to unlearn, the idea that magic and religion are always exotic, “out there.” That’s why I’ve tried using “otherordinary.” As Megan Rose puts it, “the terms otherworldly, supernatural, and paranormal [...] imply that these beings do not share our world, are not a part of nature, or behave abnormally, rendering them alien rather than native. Similarly, [...] the term nonordinary [...] is phrased in the negative and suggests that encounters such as these might not be a typical way of perceiving—whereas my research suggests just the opposite” (p. 2).

It’s ordinary! Just... you know, the other kind.

WAYS SHIT HAPPENS

Jason Miller also gave me a way to categorize and describe the effects of an otherordinary experience. He uses it for spirit talk, but some of the stuff still applies. Here's his list, paraphrased and summarized (p. 43-56):

Manifestation of Resonance: Most common and usual. Nothing appears, but it feels like something happened, maybe.

Inhabitation: You build the framework of appearance and etiquette for the being to inhabit. Think Catholic statues of saints and angels, and the practice of inconveniencing them somehow (like stealing Santa Muerte's scythe) to make them do something for you.

Controlled Appearance: The spirit definitely appears and talks back, but in a form you request (so it doesn't scare you shitless).

True Appearance: The spirit chooses its form, not you. Often mindbreaking—there's a reason angels in the Bible always start a conversation with, "Fear not."

Possession: in my multi parlance, switching so the spirit fronts.

Aspecting: in my multi parlance, the spirit's confronting.

Transvocation: I didn't get this one, so I'll just quote Miller (p. 56): "the spirit is manifesting where you are, physically, but you are also manifesting in the abode of the spirit." Maybe like when we balance the physical world and headspace simultaneously?

Thanks to Miller, I have a new way to frame what's been going on in our head. Obviously an astral realm (headspace), possession (switching), and aspecting (confronting) have been regular parts of

our daily life for years, however otherordinary. What's changed is the kind of beings we're interacting with. In the past few years, we've been getting involuntary, uncontrolled appearances from beings that range from "trying to be nice but still rough as a ride rumpfirst through broken glass" to "trying to eat our souls." It's enough to make us miss the good old days, when we only dealt with ghosts. (We used to try and euphemize around that subject, but fuck it, they're ghosts. Everyone knows what ghosts are.) They were sometimes hostile and often upset, but at least they existed on a human scale and wouldn't break us by accident.



But that's for another time. Back to magic!

EXORCISM

She'd hate us calling it such, but our old lady performed magic on us.

See, she became convinced me and Ro were demons possessing her daughter. (Right track, wrong field, lady.) She tried to exorcise him a couple times, which ranged from grabbing him and mumbling in a weird monotone for a while...



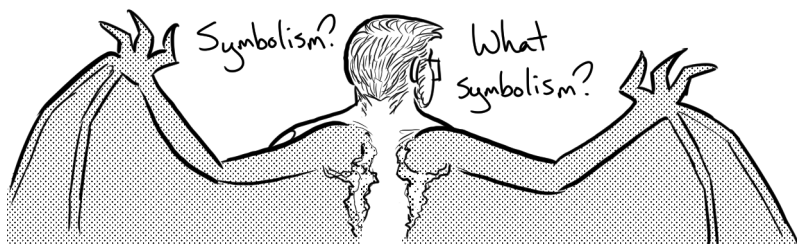
...to getting the whole family to beat, encircle, and pray at him.

This space intentionally left blank.

Obviously, it didn't take, but it fucked Rogan up good, especially that last one. He shrieked, vomited, shat himself, the whole nine yards. All he could think afterward was that he must be a demon, because otherwise why would he react so strongly? How could Mom rip bat wings out of his back if it wasn't true?

You ask me, Mom's stupid exorcism only got that dramatic an effect because of the accompanying physical violence. Good luck withstanding psychological warfare with a concussion!

Unfortunately, brute force can get results that logic does not.



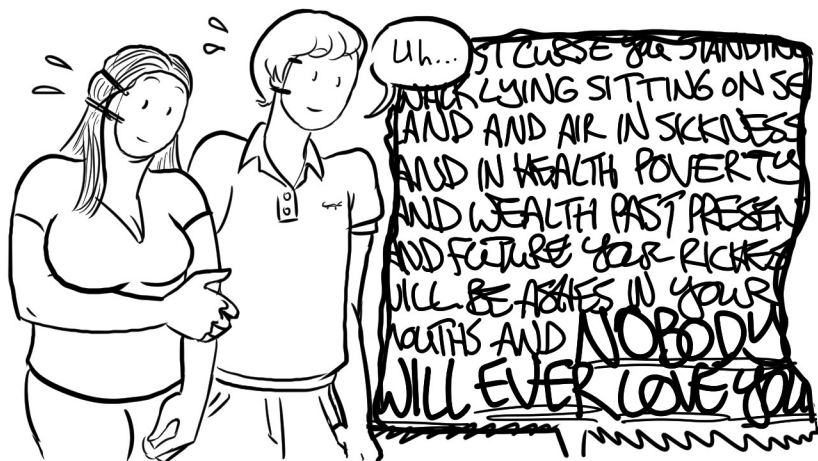
Even though Rogan's not Christian, even though he doesn't rationally, consciously think it's true, he can't shift the idea that he's an evil, demonic being. Mom beat this idea into him like a scar, and because he didn't come by it logically, he can't be reasoned out of it. He's stuck. Mom even locked the door behind her, because by using magic and religion like a club, she insured that Rogan would be terrified of venturing near that territory ever again.

Though he did pull one ace out of his sleeve, back in 2006...

THE FAMILY CURSE

By April 2006, Rogan was a twitchy, brain-damaged, suicidal wreck. His only goal was to keep from getting pregnant again, but that was becoming increasingly challenging.

So one day, when the Freudian swords came out, he decided, “They want a demon? I’ll give them a goddamned demon.” He began thrashing on the floor, frothing at the mouth, howling curses pulled from unpopular fantasy novels, and he kept it up for so long that everyone started getting uncomfortable.



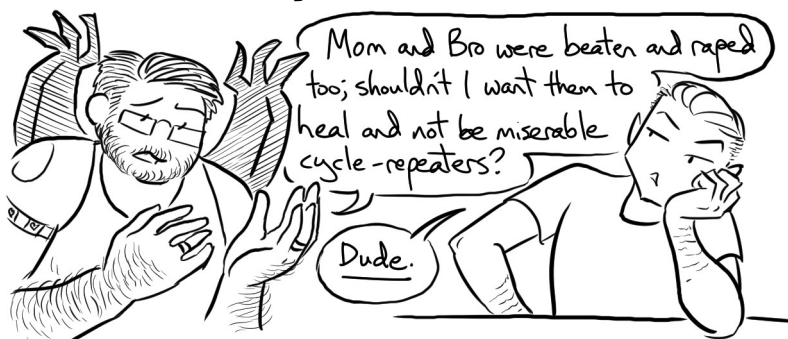
That’s a trick you can only pull once, but it did indeed work. Mom and Bro got so weirded out that they just walked away, never to speak of it again. I can’t help but wonder what they thought of it, even though I know the answer is probably, “they didn’t.”

Dad, though, wasn’t a superstitious fundy like Mom, or her bootlicker like Bro. He was a computer programmer who put immense stock in his own intelligence, logic, and philosophical Stoicism. He was completely unimpressed.



This is one of the only times any of us got the last word on Dad. I don't think he thought it was true, but you don't have to agree with a statement to get uneasy about it.

Obviously, there's no way to know if Rogan's "curse" worked, in the classic sense. He really did just pull it out of his ass, fueled by raw desperation. Its sole purpose was to get the family off his cunt for a hot second, and at that, it was a success. Even so, he sometimes feels weirdly guilty about it.



You ask me, the family's done a stellar job of cursing their own damn selves. Three generations of rape, violence, teen pregnancy, and drug abuse will do that to a family, no matter how big they smile and how good they look.

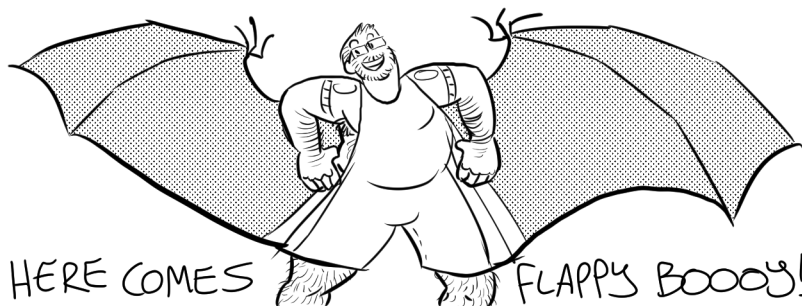
Maybe sometimes, a family curse is just a generational holding pattern. Maybe, by creating such an environment where such a curse could be true, they made the curse itself superfluous.

Maybe 2006-era Rogan wasn't wrong about the nature of belief.

CONFABULOMANCY

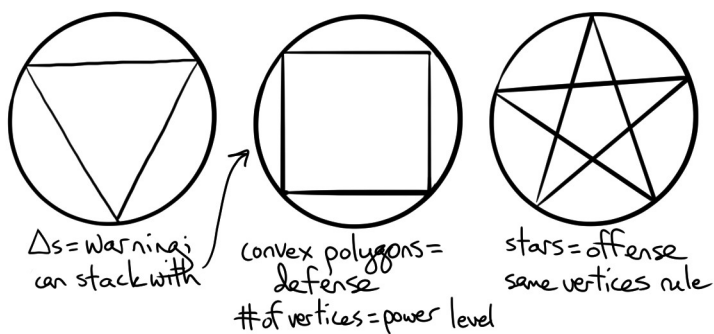
This is a term I just pulled out of my ass for getting results from shit you make up and don't "believe in." (I'll explain the scare-quotes later.)

Take Mom's bullshit exorcism. I don't know if she believed the shit she was spouting, but I'm pretty sure Rogan didn't, and Dad definitely didn't. He looked weirded out the whole time, clearly only going along with it so Mom wouldn't turn that firehose of fundy fury on him. Nevertheless, they got results.



But maybe that's a bad example. It was an intense experience, right? Maybe Rogan secretly did think it was true. But we've also been able to make shit happen in our headspace from bullshit we just made up, shit we absolutely didn't think was true, and we didn't need hatred or head trauma to make it happen, either!

See, we wrote a series of fantasy stories over the years about a traveling exorcist, and we had to make a magic system for him. We had no higher aspirations; all that mattered was it have a simple, sensible structure that an old man could pull off even while under attack by a bathtub monster (see Lee, 2014).



It turns out that all the things that made this magic system easy to use for fiction also made it a good communication tool for our brain whale. It accepted the new “vocabulary,” and lo and behold! The wards and binding stars work in headspace!



Maybe, like love and hate, belief isn't a feeling or thought, but behavior. Shoah survivor Bruno Bettelheim described how civilians, forced to perform Nazi salutes, succumbed to Nazism to ease the dissonance between belief and action. It's how you get roleplaying cults where followers become their characters: “If you do this type of thing well enough, it starts to work [...] it will send you through as profound and valid a metaphysical trip as” traditional religion (Malaclypse the Younger, quoted in Cusack, p. 4).

Obviously, that doesn't always work. As a kid, I hated being forced to do the pledge of allegiance. Still, why would the schools require it if it never paid off?

Anyway, if belief is behavior, then using Alpert wards like we believe them is believing them, even though they're pulled out of our ass! We worked to build them, and that's powerful. We didn't even have Symbol Sourcebook to guide us yet!

When we use a Reverend Alpert star, we're speaking to the brain whale in its own language. It goes, "Ah! You want this thing bound! Okay, I'll make that happen!"



Our brain whale may not like words, but it loves stories. From them, it pulls scenery, iconography, even people back in the day. Maybe it prefers crappy paperbacks because we spent so many years incorporating them into our own art, doing the work.



RAWLIN

Speaking of crappy paperbacks: we don't talk much about Rawlin.



He was one of the first of our roster, made alongside me over twenty years ago. We pulled from a cheesy romance/sci-fi novel from the '80s that I'm too embarrassed to name.



He was a flawed person back then, but no more so than anyone else here. We were the world to each other.

Then, one day, he realized that our headspace was dying. At the time, he was the closest thing to an adult among us, so he set himself to trying to revive the landscape, armed only with our imaginations and a stack of crappy paperbacks. That's all he had, children's solutions to adult problems.

You can probably already guess that it didn't end well.

I was just a kid back then, and if he confided or explained shit to me, I don't remember it, but he clearly came to realize that you can't just wave a magic wand and revive a place. Life comes from life, and said life needed to come from somewhere, someone.

Rawlin was a ten-foot giant in his teens. The rest of us were preteens, babies to him. He saw only one option that wasn't moral anathema.

So Rawlin ripped out his heart, bound it to our inner world, and gave his life and soul for us.



If he'd stopped there, Rawlin would be just another one of our late, lamented dead. But he was too clever for his own good. He wanted to not just save our world, but to survive the process. After all, he was my only caretaker. What would become of me without him?

He even realized that keeping himself alive in his new heartless state might have catastrophic consequences! But a person who goes, "maybe I shouldn't do that" doesn't rip his own heart out for the greater good, so he got himself a replacement heart, and that's where he fucked the metaphorical dog.

I'll give Rawlin the credit he's due: he did indeed manage to resurrect our headspace, save us all, and survive the loss of his soul.

But he became an undying, heartless husk of a man. He kept all his intelligence and skills but lost all ability to delay gratification, control his impulses, or truly care about much of anything. His emotions erupted like toddler tantrums, but they had no depth or complexity—he just wanted what he wanted when he wanted it, raged out if he didn't get it, and then forgot about it. He had the body of a giant, the sex drive of a college student, and the self-control of a two-year-old.



Rawlin spent twenty years in solitary confinement in headspace because of his sexual aggression. That's a really shitty way to treat someone, so when we rediscovered him right before the pandemic, we released him, hoping we could work something out.

It didn't work. He immediately went back to old behavior until we had to ban him from the "real" world and headspace house. (It was that or rape babysit him 24/7, which is damn hard with a ten-foot super-wizard with no self-restraint or guilt.) He has free run of the headspace otherwise, but we can't be around him.

I don't think he even understands the problem, poor bastard. All he knows is that we won't be around him, which makes him unhappy. He used to be my friend, and now he's become my rapey stalker, because lust and obsession is the closest he can get to loving me anymore.

I get mad at him sometimes, but I also feel sorry for him. He never wanted to become this. The friend he used to be would surely want me to help him, either to heal or to finally die and be laid to rest.

Rawlin himself may have given me the key to helping him. After all, he proved that souls here can be amputated and transferred. I myself have survived losing chunks thrice—it's how he, Rogan, and Sneak got made. If I gave Rawlin another chunk of my soul, would he recover?

But I also know from Rawlin how dangerous that is. I'm not trying that until I'm absolutely prepared. I'm not now, but maybe one day, I will be.

His heart still beats in our headspace sky, pulsing lightning.



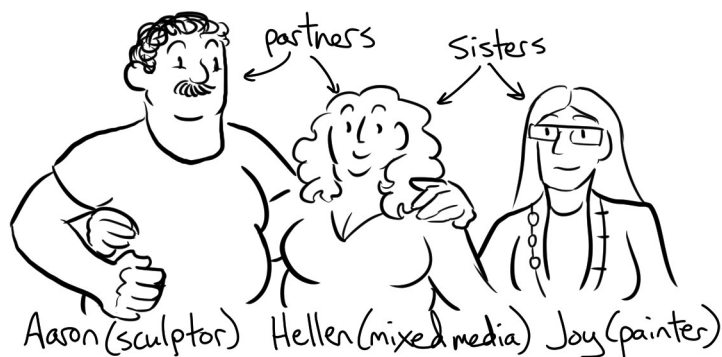
MAGIC WAND

Back in early 2009, in New Zealand, we lived in a tiny basement room we called the Matchbox.



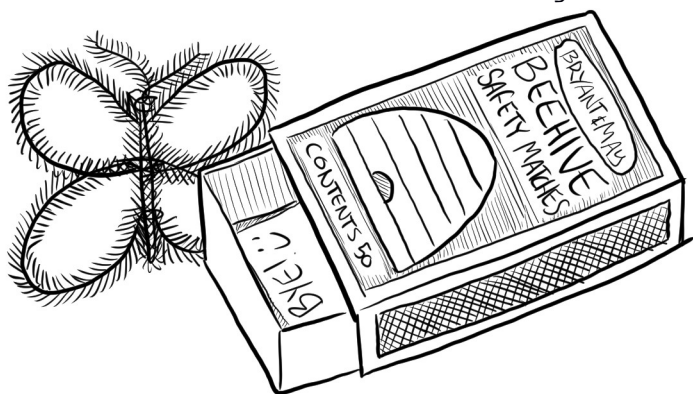
I myself wasn't there for it (too dead), but common memory tells me it was great: sheltered from the wind, cut off from the rest of the house, opening straight outside, and secured with a heavy lock. Someone had painted the interior a florid goldenrod to cheer up the dim interior, and I'll be damned, but it worked! The room had a small window and an extension cord coming through the wall to supply power. It snugly fit a small desk, bookshelf, and secondhand mattress, and I know the ceiling ranged from 5'10 to 6'0 because our old man couldn't stand up straight in some places. Living there made us happy.

Part of why was our three artist roommates, who lived above us in the house proper:



They didn't know we were multiple (we were more cagey, back then), but they were really nice people, and they got along so well with the roster at the time that when we moved out, they threw us a chicken dinner and gave us parting gifts!

Hellen and Joy got a real matchbox, painted it the same color as our room, and inside it placed a tiny sparkly butterfly, made out of pipe-cleaners. It rested on a bed of paper, an accordion-folded goodbye note, perfect for a claustrophilic house goblin like us.



Our housing history has been spotty since then, but we've always found a place to stay when we needed it most.



Aaron gave us a beautiful bone carving made from a cow femur and steeped in tea to stain it, cross-hatched from countless hours of filing, smooth and satisfying to the touch. He admitted he wasn't sure what we could use it for ("a letter opener, maybe?") and it wasn't till years later that we realized he'd made the perfect magic wand for a death-touched loony like us. The koru (spiral) at the top has significance both in New Zealand symbology and our own, symbolizing growth, change, and perpetual return.

For years, it's sat on our shelf, waiting for us to find a use for it. It's still waiting.

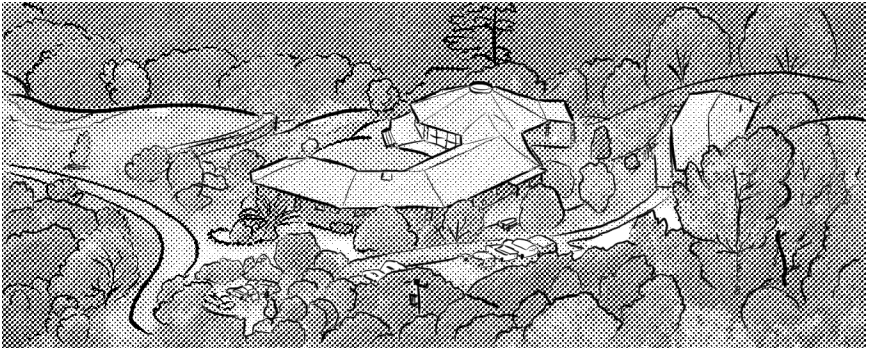
Hellen, Joy, and Aaron probably never considered what they were making to be magical. They were just kind goodbye gifts. Maybe that's all such magic is: memories of kindness, transferred to objects. After all, they did the work of making them for us.

DANCE

Symbolic communication doesn't have to be visual. Some of the most intense conversations we've had with our brain whale have been through motion—more specifically, dance.

This didn't come naturally. None of us come from dancing families (except Mac, and later Bob). But during that time in New Zealand, a few months before the Matchbox, we found ourselves working at a Buddhist retreat center.

This was out in the boonies, with nothing but sheep, horses, their owners, and two Buddhist centers. We were in the little one, and one night, we came up to the big one to find it deserted except for another migrant laborer named Claudia. She had co-opted the octagonal, glass-walled meditation space for an impromptu late-night dance party. Since the center was on the slope of a mountain, the view was cosmic.



It was just us and Claudia, and she refused to let us stand around awkwardly while she danced on her own. If we were going to be here with her in this dark mountaintop octagon, then dammit, we were going to dance to disco, no matter how bad we were at it.

We danced until our feet blistered and our calves ached and we collapsed on the floor panting. It felt amazing. We'd discovered something special—that dance strengthens our connections to each other, our bodies, our headspace, and our brain whale.

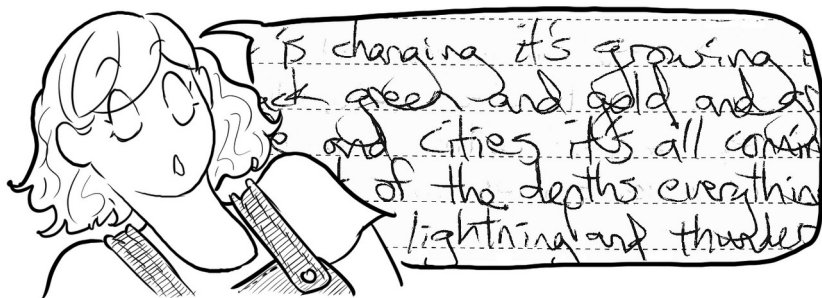
Since then, for the past decade, we've sketched at the HONK marching band festival. It's a delirious phantasmagoria of costumes, props, music, audience participation, and dance, dance, dance.



I remember a French band climbing into the trees at sundown and just blasting away. That was in 2015, just a few days after Biff returned, an appropriate welcome. (He is super not dancy.)



July 2020, though, was when we had the Big Dance. It wasn't at HONK; we were just shopping, going about our business, when our headspace started shaking and rumbling. Our brain whale barricaded us into our inner house, blacked out the windows, and told us not to come out. Thunder kept booming, and Sneak got all tranced out and oracular on us.



Whatever the hell this was, it was clearly shaping up to be a humdinger. In the physical world, we aborted our shopping trip and rushed home to wait out the internal storm.

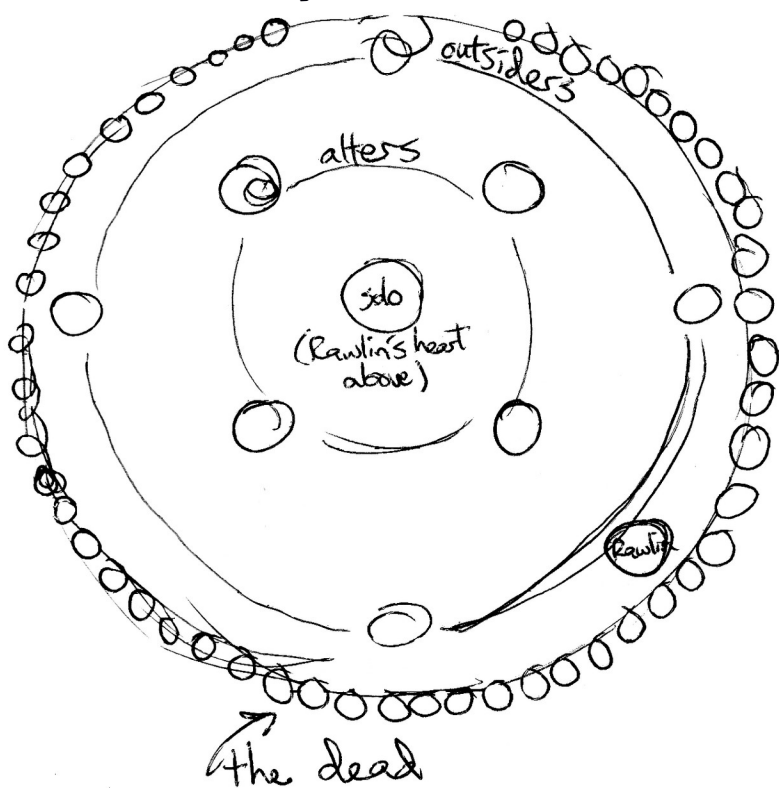
Then the bony lady appeared. We hadn't seen her in months.



Sneak shut us in our room and put a CD on the stereo. The beat saturated us, our headspace thunder began to pulse to it, and everyone began to dance. Everyone: the living, the dead, the lost, even heartless Rawlin couldn't resist the call. The headspace itself danced, the rain, the thunder, the abyssal waters, and Rawlin's heart.

I remember Sneak had to cheer Rawlin on; he struggled to stay in the dance, and it was a huge strain on him. Since losing his heart, he seems to mostly exist in disconnected numbness, so intense togetherness like that must've felt agonizing. It was the first time since we'd rediscovered him that he was acting as one of us. That he was able to participate, to stick it out, I think, shows that there's some hope for him. Maybe I'm just being overly optimistic.

Meanwhile, Sneak did zer best to journal notes and diagrams throughout the process, as much as ze could while busy with the dance and tranced off zer gourd. Here's one excerpt:



At the time, we'd long since lost access to Bob and Grey. They

weren't with us, hadn't been in fifteen years; they were back in their home world, where they were running out of options. Even there, they felt compelled to dance, so they did, and it apparently gave them a sense that things would turn out all right.

The dance lasted for over an hour, and during that time, none of us were aware of anything else.

When it ended, the bony lady went,



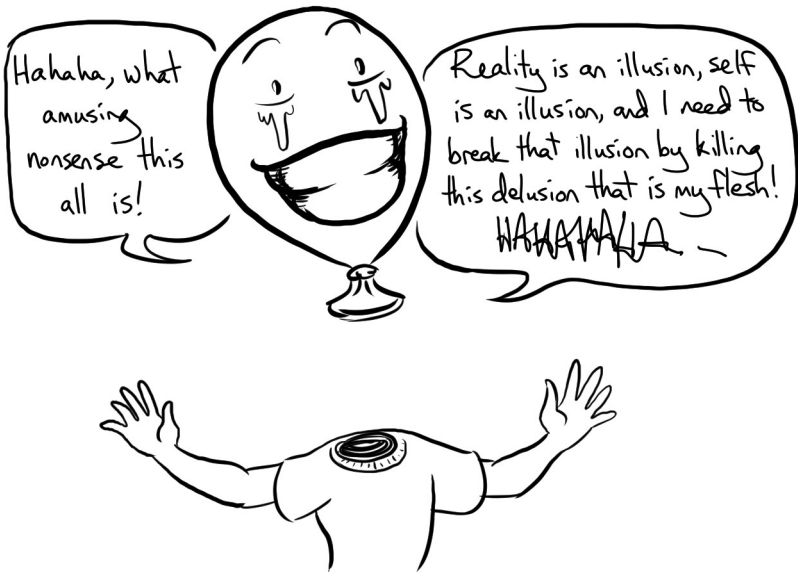
None of us have a clue what the dance said to our brain whale, or what it was saying to us, but for days afterward, we had weird vivid dreams and a feeling like boxes were being moved around in the back of our head. If we tried to investigate the sensation, we just got a quiet mental, "shoo, shoo, this isn't your business."

Clearly it was one hell of a conversation. And we got Bob and Grey back the following week.



ANCHORING

One of the core things we use magic for is to anchor ourselves to our reality: who we are, what we've experienced, who we've loved and been loved by. These are the things we most need to hang on to, because they're the things that slip through our fingers first.



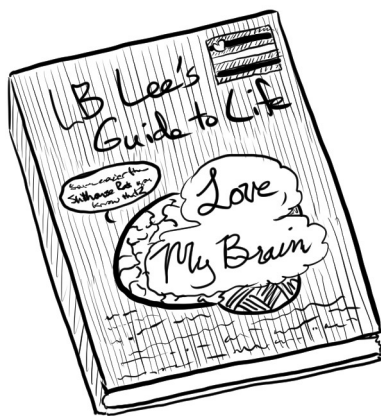
When we are in this state, appeals to logic and emotion do nothing; they're just more amusing nonsense. We're too batshit to reason, and our emotions don't feel like anything meaningful. What to do?

Fortunately, even when we're catastrophically batshit, we still remember that some things and people are important to us, even if we can no longer remember why. Reminding ourselves of those people and things can keep us from doing something disastrous.

Anyone who's seen our room knows that the walls are covered in art: of ourselves, things we love, kind words and cool stuff from friends. It's the poor person's art gallery and the mental patient's workbook, both at the same time.

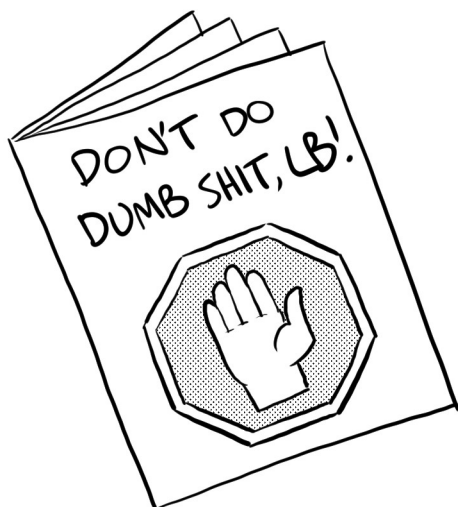


Of course, we can't always be surrounded by homemade sanity-boosting wallpaper. Heck, if we're couch-surfing, there's nowhere to put it! But we can carry reminders.

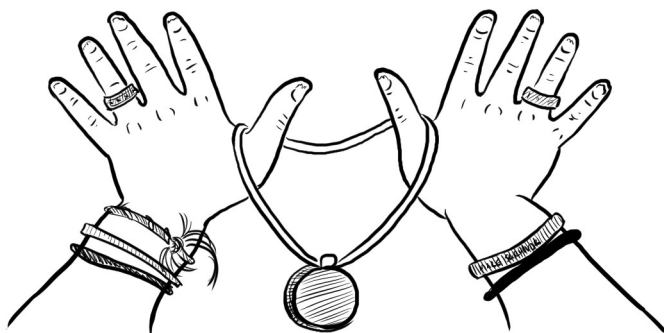


A friend gave us this book. Once blank, it's now stuffed with reminders, crisis planning, pithy wisdom, people to call, and so on.

That's too big to carry every day, so in our wallet, we keep a tiny self-help one-pager with the most necessary info.

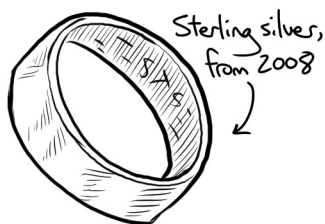


Phone, keys, and wallet can be taken away, though, so we also wear reminder jewelry.



The old Boy Scout compass was a gift from a friend. We fondly remember zer whenever we wear it, and it keeps us oriented (we get lost easily when batshit). The stuff on our wrists is all Biff's. On the right is a Male Survivor band in blue, which he got at a men's sexual abuse group that he only dared go to because Rogan always went with him. A black O-ring is his personal hanky code.

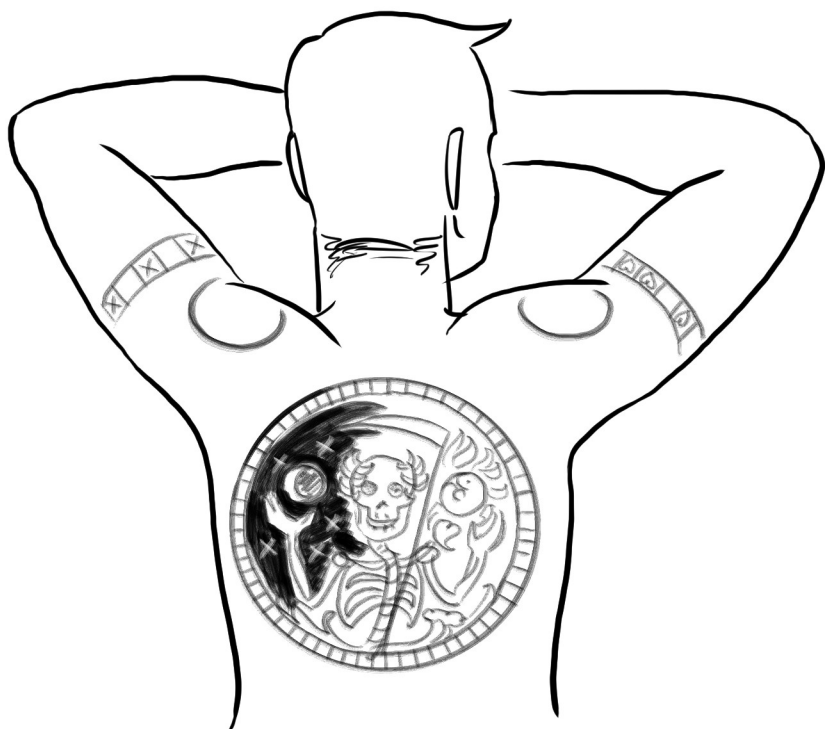
On our left wrist is a friendship bracelet I got from a free box, because Biff's my dudema and my best bro and fuck it, I get to be a preteen girl if I fucking want. The rubber bands are just because Biff's practical; like the paracord our compass is strung on, they come in handy when we need to tie a bag shut or something. (Seriously, always carry a rubber band, cord, and hanky/bandanna. You won't regret it.)



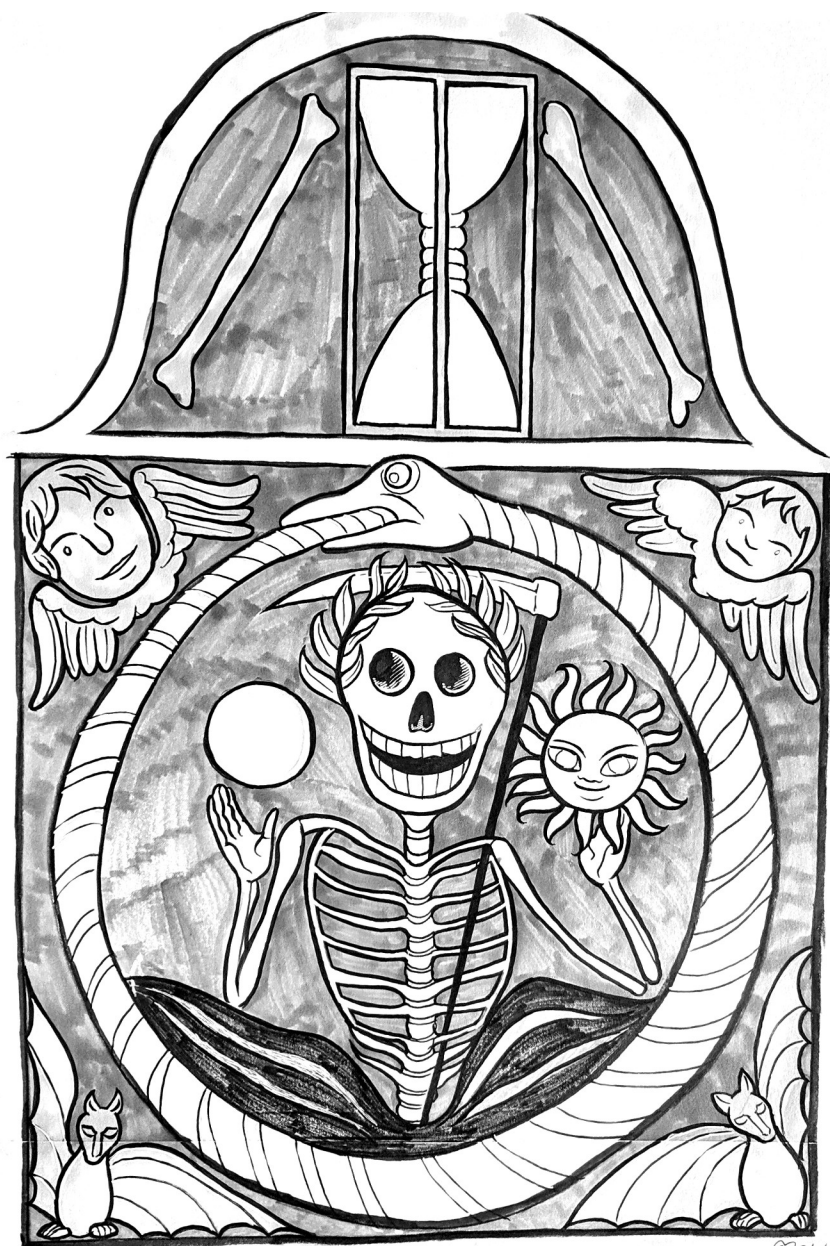
Rogan and Mac's silver engagement ring is on our right hand, their gold wedding band on our left, to remind Rogan of the marriage that he left the family for. Mac bought the silver at a local craft fair in Texas in 2008 after losing the first one, which Rogan bought for him in turn. Their first wedding band was also lost, during the homeless year, and Biff helped find a replacement in a gay-owned antique shop in Boston. That's how Biff shows he cares, doing stuff like that, so now he's part of that anchor and its story. Both gold rings were from around 1850, making us part of a tradition, without our estranged family being involved. (Our old man once dangled the suggestion that we might get to inherit our pop-pop's wedding band, but obviously that never happened.)

Since jewelry too can be stripped away, we have our final anchors: our tattoos. Some folks here have headspace-only tattoos (ask Mac about the one he got when he was young and stupid!) but

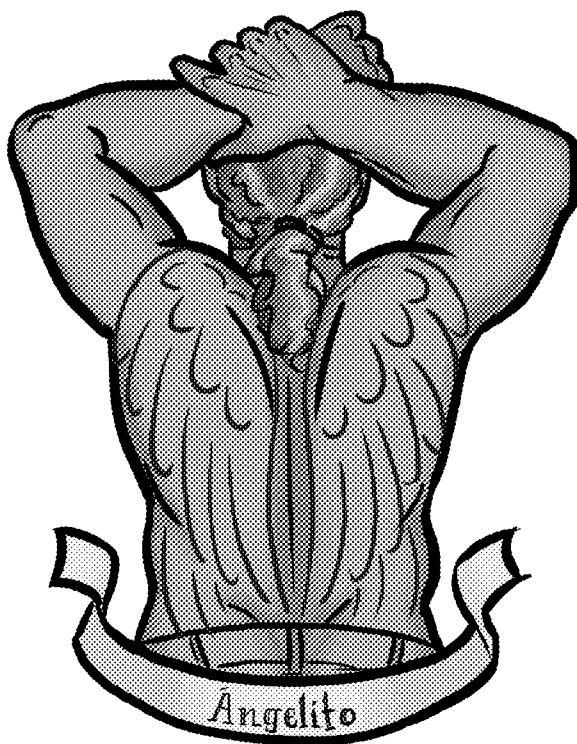
we also have ones on our vessel:



On their own inner bodies, Rogan and Sneak have similar tattoos—though Sneak only has the arm cuffs; ze isn't as hardcore about it as Rogan is. The ladders are timelines of births and creations, deaths and losses and returns, other life events in case we forget. The circles on our shoulders are from when Rogan got married—back then, he had to hide it, so he needed some way to scream it to the world. And the big skeleton lady is from the 1776 tombstone of Susanna Jayne, which we visited in person at Old Burial Hill in Marblehead, Massachusetts, on a rambling multi-hour adventure with our friend Megan. (This is only one part of a man-sized insanely over-the-top gravestone. If you're in the area and want something to do, seriously, go visit it, it's bonkers.)



In real life, this portion of the stone is roughly two feet high, and it doesn't include the curlicues surrounding three feet of epitaph devoted to Susanna Jayne's Christian virtues.



But if you ask me,
Biff's are the best.

Those wings down his
back were the coolest
to me, even when I
was a kid. I wanted ink
that cool on me too!

During the making
of this zine, I got it.

I'd had the basic
design in mind since
2015. Boston's full of
morbid gravestones
with winged skulls,
and my body is also

my tomb. A winged skull not only showed my death and revival, but
where I live now, and it connected me to Rogan and Biff.

When I decided I was ready, Rogan lit a candle, pulled out the
design we'd made together years prior, and took out the inked bone
wand, which he used to draw the image onto my back. Then he, Biff,
and I focused on pushing the ink into my skin. It hurt, but in a good
way. It itched and healed after a few days.

The indelible ink in my skin, our skin, tethers us to reality, our
bodies. This is y'all's life, it says; this is y'all's home, y'all's body,
and nobody can take that away again. This matters. Home matters.

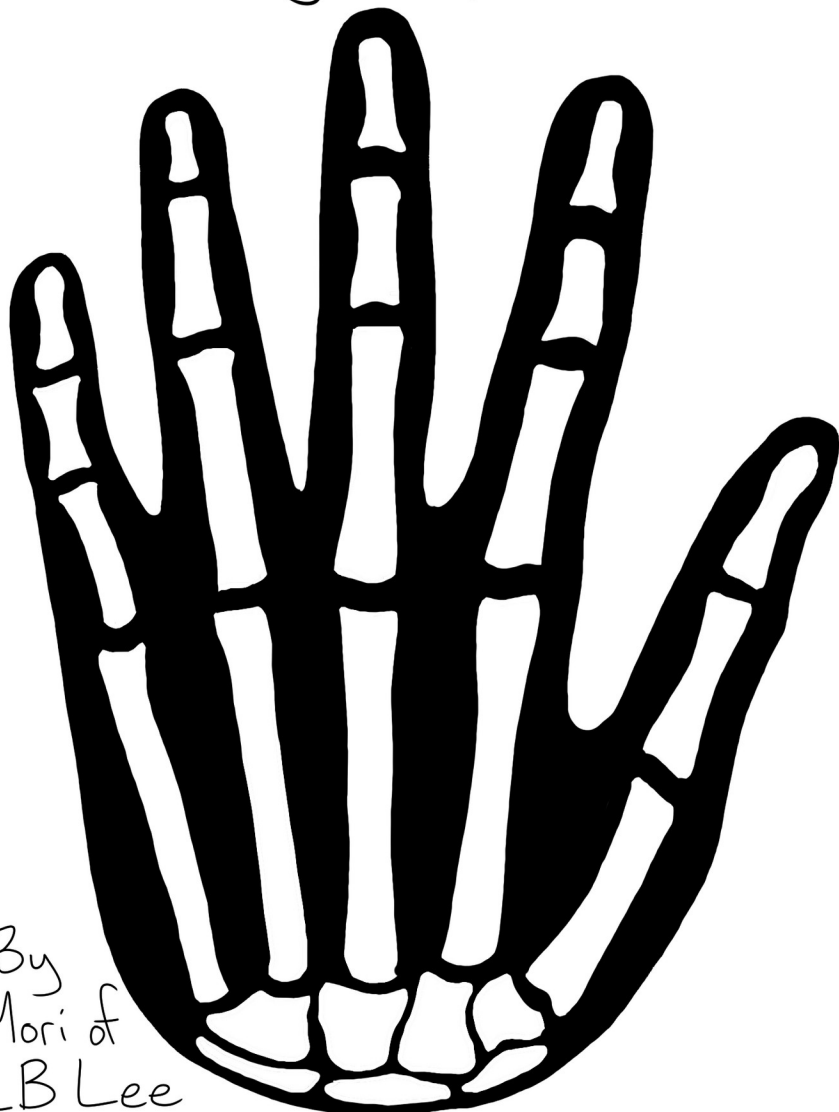
Come home, the magic says. Come home.



LB 5/15/2015

M A d G i C #2

Psycho Pomp

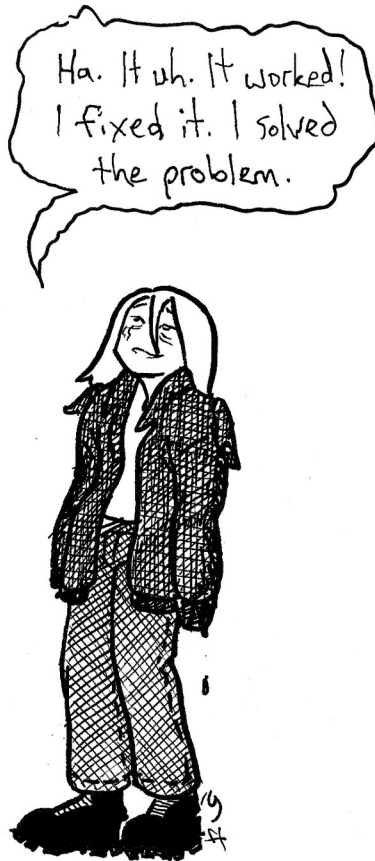


By
Mori of
LB Lee

PASCAL'S WAGER

So, back in March 2004, I killed myself. This book isn't about that. (See All In The Family.) No, this book is about what happened after.

See, my atheist ass banked on a peaceful, quiet nonexistence:







No. Nononono.
Oh god. Ah. AAAH!





Yup. I lost Pascal's Wager. What are the odds?

Had I been capable of feeling anything but rage and agony, I would've wondered how I ended up in this Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God mythology. Since I wasn't, I stewed in that fiery pit of torture and despair until I met the bony lady. Again.





THE BONY LADY

By now, you might be wondering about the chain-smoking skinny-bones who keeps popping up in our work.



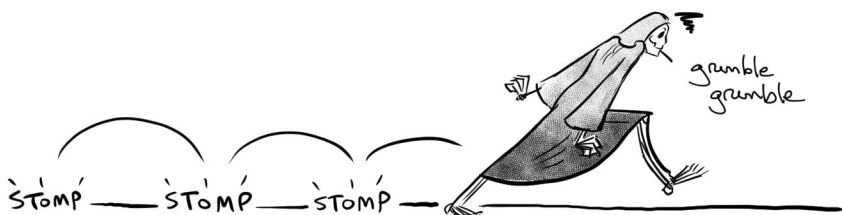
See, since Mom was fond of the old smother-strangle-drown, our survival growing up was often touch-and-go. When we were eleven, Mom was so sure I was dead that I woke up, wrapped in plastic, dumped five miles out of town! In such times, sometimes the bony lady would appear. We'd just up and hallucinate her, maybe to try and come to terms with our mortality. From the bony lady's perspective, we kept turning up on her doorstep like a Christmas fruitcake, and eventually, it got her attention.



In Haitian Vodou, there's an old saw that says you will not die as long as Gede, the lwa of death, refuses to dig your grave (Deren, 113). Similarly, the bony lady refused to punch our dance card. She kept throwing us back like an unwanted fish, and we kept returning.



Finally, it bugged her enough to go investigate.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEATH

Meanwhile, back at the farm I'd bought, I resurrected like the world's most sarcastic Lazarus and started wondering about the bony lady. Our brain had surely pulled her from a book, probably Piers Anthony's On a Pale Horse. (Yes, I thought of this before the Grim Reaper, because our brain is 25% Piers Anthony novels.) So I reread it.



Nope! Anthony's Death is a mortal human guy, working a job. The bony lady is an eldritch, possibly-immortal, genderfucky force of nature. (When I asked if she could die, she said she looked forward to finding out.) All the two had in common was the cloaked skeleton look that's been all over European and colonial art for five hundred years, and that was just a costume in Anthony's book!

But she had to have come from somewhere? Right?

I tried Death from Neil Gaiman's Sandman comics, but that was no better. The Gaiman version was female and tolerant of human foibles in a similar way, but she didn't behave like a gangster grandma. Terry Pratchett's Discworld version was too somber, and we never read enough Pratchett to make it seem likely.

I had to concede that maybe the bony lady didn't come from our usual genre paperbacks. It was time to dig into the Grim Reaper, the closest to a visual theme we had for her.



The bubonic plagues scarred (and decimated) cultures all over medieval Europe, and people responded by personifying death. (We can testify: a familiar death can seem less scary!) At first, death was portrayed by various anonymous rotting corpses, but over time, it individualized into the familiar cloaked skeleton we call the Grim Reaper. (Random trivia: the first tarot decks were made around the same time, thus the Death card.) Death then became a common art subject, expressing mortal fears and social criticism.

In Christian tradition, Death is the bad guy: hideous, implacable, sometimes analogous to the Devil. But there's a shadow narrative of Death as egalitarian, social critic, and sympathizer with the oppressed; some variations of the "Godfather/Godmother Death" tale (gender depends on the country) say so openly.

Alfred Rethel, a German, made a comic book in 1849 called Auch Ein Todtentanz (Also a Dance of Death; see Ponemone). Intending the book to be pro-monarchy propaganda, he depicted Death as the villain: a revolutionary “friend to the people” with connections to Jews and monstrous women (including the Fury personification of Madness, from whom he borrows a horse). He bestows the sword of Justice unto the common folk, promising democracy and equality, and in the ensuing revolution, everyone dies (as happened in reality). The punchline: everyone is equal—in death! Serves you right, stupid peasants, for turning to communism!



Rethel didn't invent Death's characterization as egalitarian. The original dance of death (from the Paris Cemetery of the Holy Innocents in 1424) is all about Death sweeping off representatives from all social classes and strata. Nobody escapes. That's the point.

Even in 1424, the Death figures were more lively and cheerful than the living. Check out that “no thanks, I’ve got some already” body language of the squire!



Lively dancing was considered sinful, pagan, and “common” back then (Holbein and Rublack). (Our mother was also raised this way; some things never change.) Death’s gambols were meant to amplify the horror, but it’s paradoxically more animated than the living!

It’s like how Disney villains are always the most colorful and memorable: because they are outside the social order, because they’re not ever to be mistaken for role models, they’re allowed to do and say things that the heroes never could. They get to break the rules, including those of gender. Saggy-titted corpse ladies are in Wolgemut’s dance of death in 1493 and Niklaus Manuel’s from 1517-1519. (Rublack claimed Manuel also showed corpses who were “half male and half female,” but I haven’t found pics and am a little dubious at this point.)

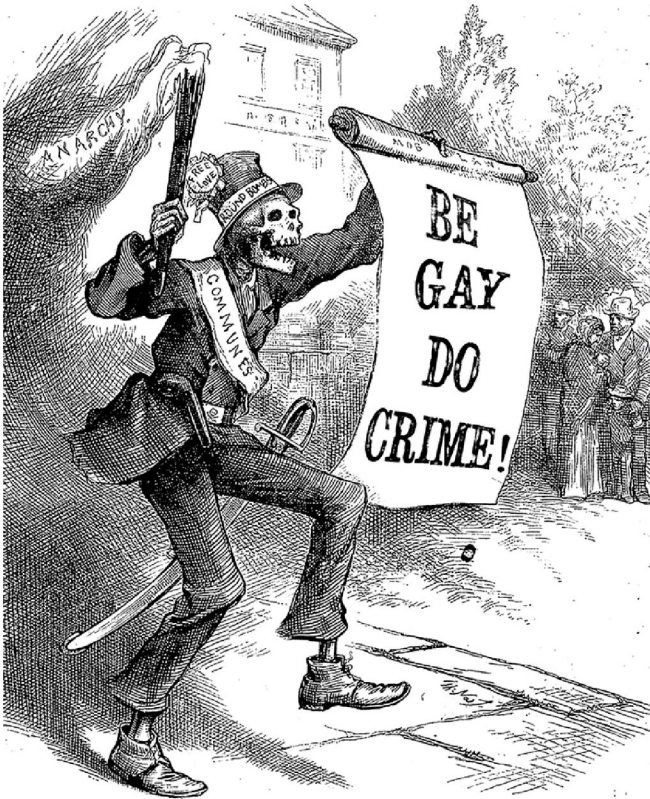
This outsider nature made Death an obvious choice to voice social commentary and criticism. Hans Holbein the Younger had scathing things to say about clergy and nobility in his 1523–1525 version (see at right), and seeing its popularity, it spoke to a lot of people. Death, if no one else, could murder a pope or emperor with impunity.



This combo of egalitarianism and rage against power combine in Mexico's Santa Muerte, known as "the saint of last resort" for people that the state and orthodox Catholic Church revile: queers, sex workers, criminals, the wrongfully imprisoned, and anyone at risk of violent premature death (Howe et al., Chestnut).

"Sooner or later, she takes the rich, the poor—everyone," says Arely Gonzales, who runs a shrine in Brooklyn. Another devotee, Luisa Fernanda Raquel Aguilar, says, "All the girls from my scene, all the girls of the night and all the transsexuals believed in Her. Because a prostitute leaves her house and she doesn't know if she'll come back or not. [...] They would ask of Her to make it back ok." A gay man says, "La Santa Muerte doesn't have intolerance, she tolerates anything from you." A young woman agrees: "You can ask her for anything." (Elliot).

In 2018, the Mary Nardini Gang combined Santa Muerte with 10's Be Gay Do Crime meme (itself an appropriation of an 1880 Thomas Nast political cartoon) in its zine of the same name (Lee, 2023). "The skeleton has never left. She remains present along the diasporic threads of which have always undermined the Southern border. She is the Holy Death. The patron of criminals and queers, of exiles from worlds" (Mary Nardini Gang, p. 46).



"Many blame queers for the decline of this society—we take pride in this. Some believe that we intend to shred-to-bits this civilization and it's moral fabric—they couldn't be more accurate. We're often described as depraved, decadent and revolting—but oh, they ain't seen nothing yet."

Santa Muerte's reputation is that of a boozing, smoking battleaxe, not necessarily easy to get along with, but not at all judgmental either. And that sounded very familiar...

UNWANTED RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Rogan spent just as much quality time in trash bags as I did, growing up, but he just couldn't handle the bony lady as an adult. He tried so hard to treat her as a brief psychotic episode that would go away if he just bunkered down and waited it out. ('Cause you know who's known for being easy to outwait? Death.)



He spent months trying to logic away his unwanted religious experience. When that failed, he threw himself at the library.



You'd think that discovering Santa Muerte would help, but no. Instead, he freaked out that he'd culturally appropriated from a subaltern faith a being that he couldn't get rid of. (Honestly, I think he was hoping that if he just hated himself enough, it'd all go away. Didn't work, of course; it never does.)

The bony lady, of course, refused to play along and continued existing. Like she gives a shit about human political convenience!



Rogan spent a few years logjammed, till I finally took over and started doing the work that led to this series of zines. In the process, Sneak and I stumbled on Spirit Marriage, a book by Megan Rose about romance with otherordinary beings, which she calls “love beyond the bounded notions of what’s deemed ‘normal’ or ‘real’” (p. 27). It was the perfect bridge between our known and unknown, between plurality and religion. Even Rogan could go, “Oh! It’s like my own marriage!”



Mac is just your everyday dead dude, but he and Rogan have been married since '09. They've taken a lot of shit for it, so it unlocked something, seeing Rose treat such love as sanctified liberation spirituality: "In cases wherein the dominant religions and their God(s) are mediated by a human oppressor, many have chosen to offer themselves to what they contend are spirits that predate or dwell outside the oppressive regime; beings that are believed to have a higher authority and more power than their human persecutors" (Rose, p. 23). Cultural appropriation wasn't just a thought stop.

Rose's interviewees described gods that they didn't "believe in" taking residence in their bodies, running roughshod over their lives. They also introduced us to Haitian Vodou—and Gede, the boozing, horny glutton of a death lwa.

Suddenly, we had more images of Death besides satanic bad guy, more conceptions of our experience besides "brief psychotic episode" or "disgusting imperialism."

And then there was what happened when Falcon turned up.



FALCON STRANGER

So, I guess I should explain about Falcon...



Those of you who have been reading our work for a long time may have seen him lurking in the background of a few panels, but he's never interacted much. He's notoriously closemouthed, and if we push for answers, half of what he says turns out not to be true. Dude lies because that's how he feels safe in the world or keeps people from getting close to him or whatever, and we just accept that. Back in 2009, he lost his job, started crashing on our mental couch, and sank into a depressive funk that he never fully explained or recovered from.

So imagine our reaction when he took us aside, sat us all down, and said, "we need to talk about the lady. I'm ready to answer some questions."

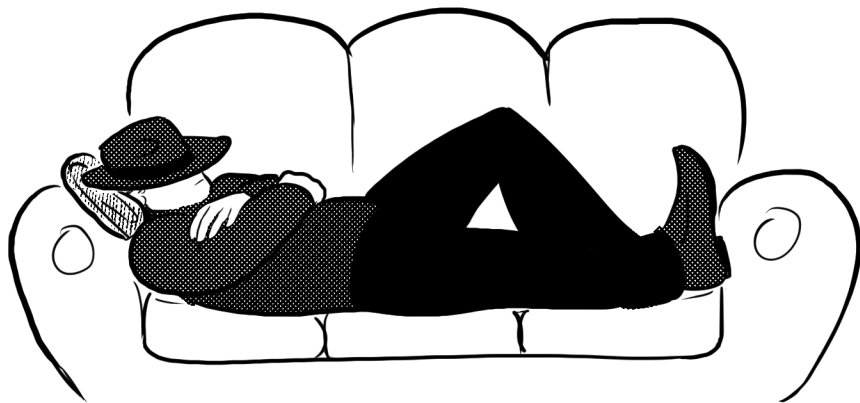
We went, "wait, what? You know this weird skeleton lady?"
He did. Biblically.



color 10/24/19
7/25/19

In that one conversation, Falcon told us more than he had in the prior fifteen years. (Rogan grabbed a notebook to write it all down, positive we'd never again get Falcon to talk this much.)

Falcon said the bony lady sometimes takes interest in death-touched folks (like him, though he didn't want to talk about it), and she's big on community service. His old job had been looking after us as kids, and he'd fucked it up so bad that she'd fired him. Since Falcon had relied on her for housing, food, and other needs, he'd lost everything, thus why he ended up on our cortical couch. (Seeing how badly we were abused, no wonder he slid into a funk!)



We were floored. At the time, with our amnesia, the bony lady seemed a random apparition that we had no context or explanation for. And here was Falcon, saying he knew (and boned) her!

He's not singular. In Spirit Marriage, Rose devotes a chapter to Suzette, a New Orleans mambo who married Baron Samedi, one of the faces of Gede. Monique, a Haitian Vodouisant, also married Gede. Even Santa Muerte is "for some, a marriageable partner. Vicky, a sex worker who had recently returned from San Francisco, explained that she had 'married' [sic] the Holy Death because the Holy Death had performed so many miracles for her. And, she further explained, she was not happy with men anymore" (Howe et al, p. 31).

When Rogan pestered Falcon about what pantheon the bony lady was from, he just shrugged and said, "she's death." Everyone seemed to take her for something different:



She herself didn't seem to give a shit, so neither did Falcon. He explained that the bony lady liked mortals but didn't quite understand us. To her, we were fireflies, beautiful and enchanting, but living on such a small scale and for such a short time as to be unfathomable. This made her tolerant of human weirdness and flaw, but it also made her a rough ride. Getting hurt in her vicinity would happen, not out of malice but sheer difference in scale. (How many insects have you stepped on without realizing it?)

Falcon wasn't immune to this, and neither were we, turned out.

See, after I died, Rogan got roped into being the next rape-asphyxia-sponge. He saw a lot of the bony lady...

FATE WORSE THAN DEATH

Believe it or not, kid Rogan was always happy to see her.



He would always ask her the same question:



Eventually, Rogan realized "soon" is relative. He wanted out.



You may not realize the enormity of that news, but Rogan did. He knew exactly what he was being forced to survive.



And then she made it so he couldn't.

This space intentionally left blank.

Falcon hasn't forgiven her since he found out.

THE DEAD

Rogan aside, we LB folks are a walking graveyard. The dead outnumber any other headspace demographic, and our blog tag for memory work is “ghost work.”

In psychological parlance, our ghosts are fragments of memory, shattered in the impact of trauma. By taking their agony, we relive the memories they contain, digesting them so that we can learn from them and no longer find them painful (though it hurts like a mother at the time). Honestly, religious framing is easier for most folks to understand: our head is haunted, and we're forever laying the poor bastards to rest so they don't jump up and knock us over.



Like the specters in stories, our headspace ghosts are upset, unable to move on, and constantly leaking pain and spookiness everywhere. It is our moral obligation to deal with their history and relieve them of their agonies.

We don't get individual ghosts too often these days. Most of the time, we deal with the sentient water our headspace is made of, which is the gestalt of all we have lost. Weird, but fine, we rolled with it; crazy brains are crazy, right? Why expect them to make sense?

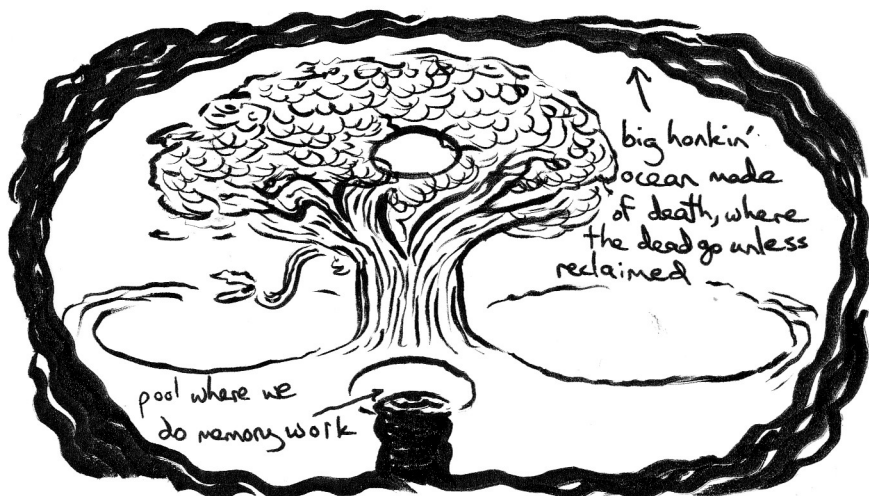
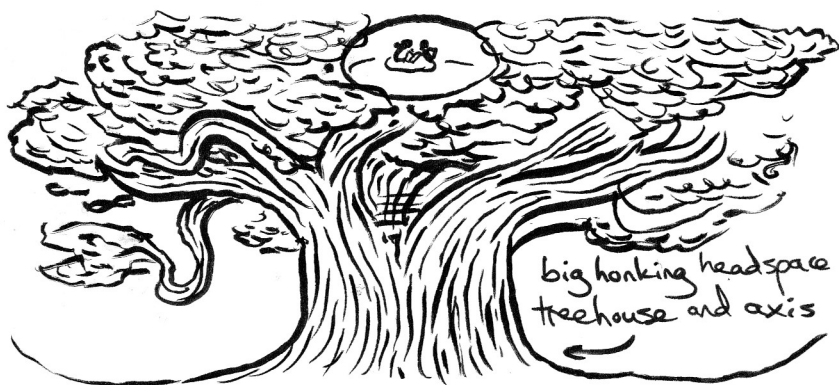
We never considered this a religious thing because we had no context for it. Until Spirit Marriage, all we knew was Christianity, with bits of Judaism, Buddhism, and various forms of Neopaganism, none of which meshed with our inner workings.

It wasn't until years later, while making this zine, that Miranda found this tidbit in Divine Horsemen, a book about Haitian Vodou (a religion with no standardized spelling and which we knew jack-all about but were researching thanks to Spirit Marriage):

"One of the major Voudoun rituals is the ceremony of retirer d'en bas de l'eau, the reclamation of the deceased from the waters of the abyss [...]. This service for the ancestral dead is not a nostalgia or sentimentality. [...] It is the procedure by which the race reincorporates the fruit of previous life-processes into the contemporary moment, and so retains the past as ground gained, upon and from which it moves into the future" (Deren, p. 28). "The waters of the abyss [is] the source of all life. [...] Here, on the Island Below the Sea, the loa have their permanent residence [...]. To it the souls of the dead return" (ibid, 35-6).

"Trees [are] the great natural highway of such traffic. [...] The master of the island below the sea, Grand Bois D'Ilet, is often represented by a branch" (p. 36).





In hindsight, it seemed so obvious. Davidssen defines religion as anything with “practices that assume the existence of supernatural agents. These fundamental religious practices [...] communicate with [supernatural agents], manipulate them, or internally activate them if they are believed to reside in the human being (p. 524). The dead are definitely “supernatural” by Davidssen’s metric, and memory work’s primary use is communicating with and soothing them, so yes, it’s religious. We just hadn’t had a decent working definition to use as a litmus test until making these zines!

James White even leaned into this blurring of psychology and magic in one of his sci-fi books: “A psychologist tries to impose immutable laws in an area of nightmares and changing internal realities, and attempts to make a science of what has always been an art, an art practiced only by wizards. [...] There is a great difference between a mere psychologist and a wizard” (86).

But that begged the question: if our dead were religious figures, and the bony lady was a religious figure... what the fuck was up with that fiery hellpit I spent ten years in?

If our cracked brain didn’t create it by itself, what (who) did?



GOD HATES YOU

We weren't raised fundamentalist, but I'm pretty sure our mother was. She didn't talk about it much, but she owned multiple Bibles, and family stories mentioned a church that forbade dancing and most games (except cards, oddly—Grandma was apparently one hell of a card shark). Also, Grampa had this black and white rug hanging on the wall, made to copy some hoaxy old photo of Jesus Christ's face, supposedly found in a Chinese snowbank, and that's just weird, man.



Most of the time, our mother was a passive, quiet woman, but in abuse mode, it was howling fire and brimstone all the way.



We don't know if she's multiple, but she's definitely dissociative. In a different world, we could've grown up to become her.

We never worried about becoming Dad. Mom is motivated by deep inner forces, him by self-interest. He did what he did because he could. There's no deep mystery: he's just a prick.



Honestly, that his lapsed Catholic ass had enough religious fervor for even Jeffersonian deism blows my mind. He's absolutely the kind of coldly logical computer science man you'd expect to think theism beneath him.

Dad's bullshit was comparatively easy to deal with via feminism and conventional therapy. Mom, though... Mom was something else. She didn't just get into our head; her belief system hijacked our internal machinery, even though we didn't think it was true.



If you ask me, Mom was hagridden by her God. All that fire and brimstone came from somewhere, someone, and dear dead Grampa wasn't above strangling Gigi to "put the fear of God in her." Why wouldn't he do it to Mom too?

Like us, Mom has a vibrant inner life, the depths of which we can only guess at. But she not like us. She's Christian. She has faith. I expect she needs to, just to endure the horror of her existence, which I think she explains to herself like this:

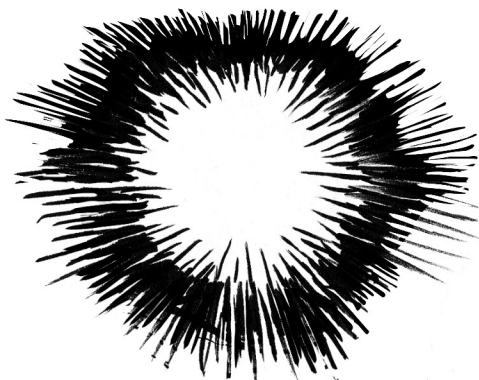
"My father is good. What he did, though, was not good.

"But God is good. What He does must be good. So if He did not act when my father hurt me, that means he was right to do it and he wasn't hurting me.

"My husband is good, but he is not-hurting my child the way my father not-hurt me. This enrages me for reasons I don't fully understand.

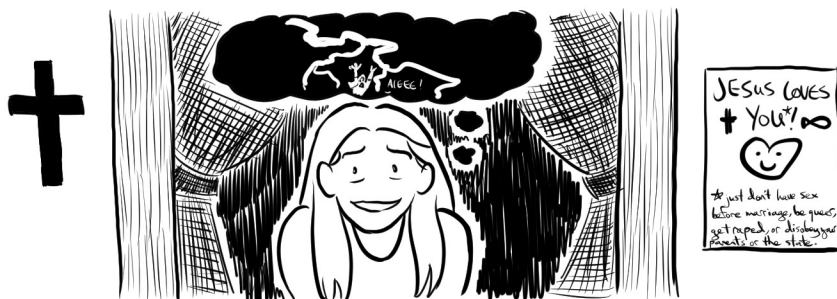
"My husband is good and I love him, and God is allowing this, so it must be good. But I must be angry for a reason.

"My child must be that reason."



HOW NOT TO DEAL WITH GOD

Growing up, we had no context or explanation for any of this. All anyone would tell us was, "God loves you!" What could we say?



Since high school, we've had a newspaper photo sticky-tacked to our wall of the Westboro Baptist Church protesting in Iowa. They're grinning, wielding signs that say GOD HATES FAGS, GOD IS YOUR ENEMY, and GOD HATES YOUR TEARS. It was oddly comforting to see evidence that no, we hadn't just made it up out of whole cloth and low self-esteem, maybe God really did hate us.

Still, though, what to do about it? Skeptic atheism worked about as well as doubting our way out of a house fire.



Then we learned that inheriting shitty gods is apparently a thing in other religions, like Haitian Vodou: “for those men who are extremely ambitious, and willing to risk dangerous bargains, there is even a category of deities who can be ‘bought.’ [...] Real loa may refuse to associate with the bought deities, and [...] such bought loa may be inherited by the descendants, and, being malevolent [...] cause them much trouble.” (Deren, p. 75)



But we weren't a Vodouisant. We had neither practices nor priest to deal with such a thing. We were up the religious shit creek without a paddle.

Or, you know. We could pull “an end run around the oppressor” and “appeal to the gods before whom the masters knelt” (Brown, p. 215). But who would qualify? What kind of otherordinary entity would be that ready to rumble and also okay with our raggedy battalion of loonies, queers, and contrarian bums?

All right, let's try this again...

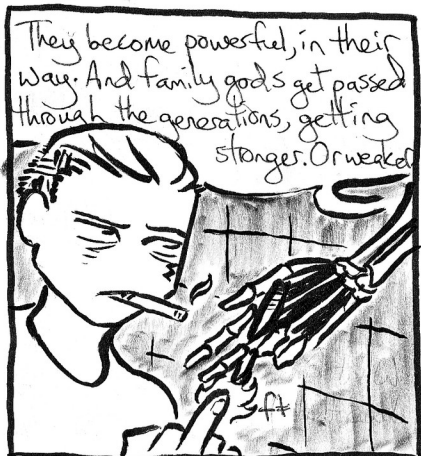
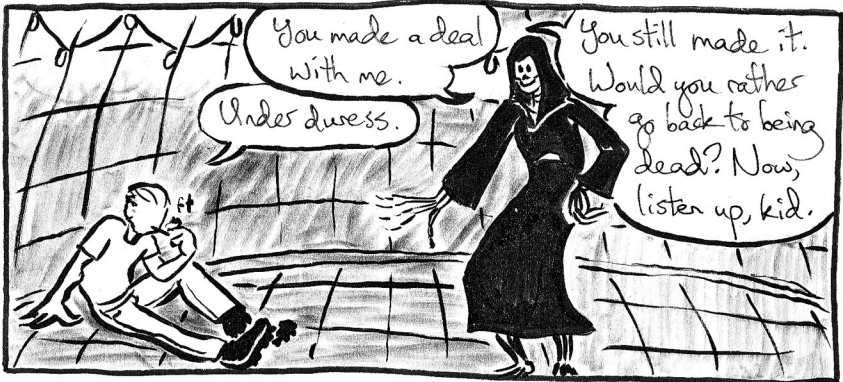






And I was so fucking pissed that I said yes.

DEICIDE

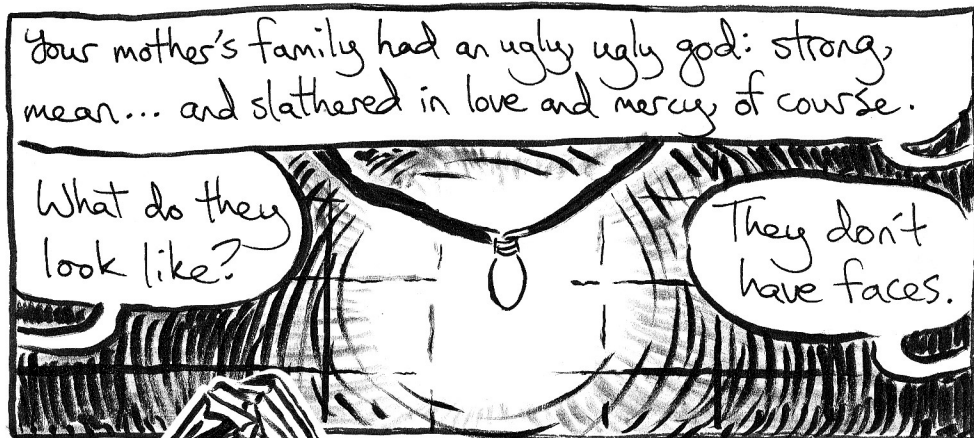




Ah, you're
listening now.
Good.



Escaping your family's gods isn't
easy. There's a holding pattern.
They feed on you,
and you feed on
them.



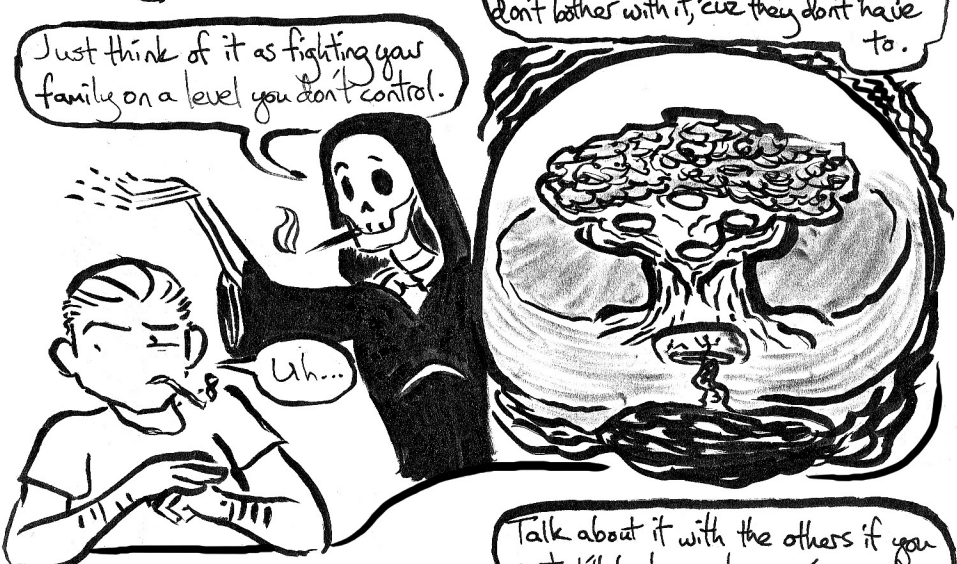
What do they
look like?

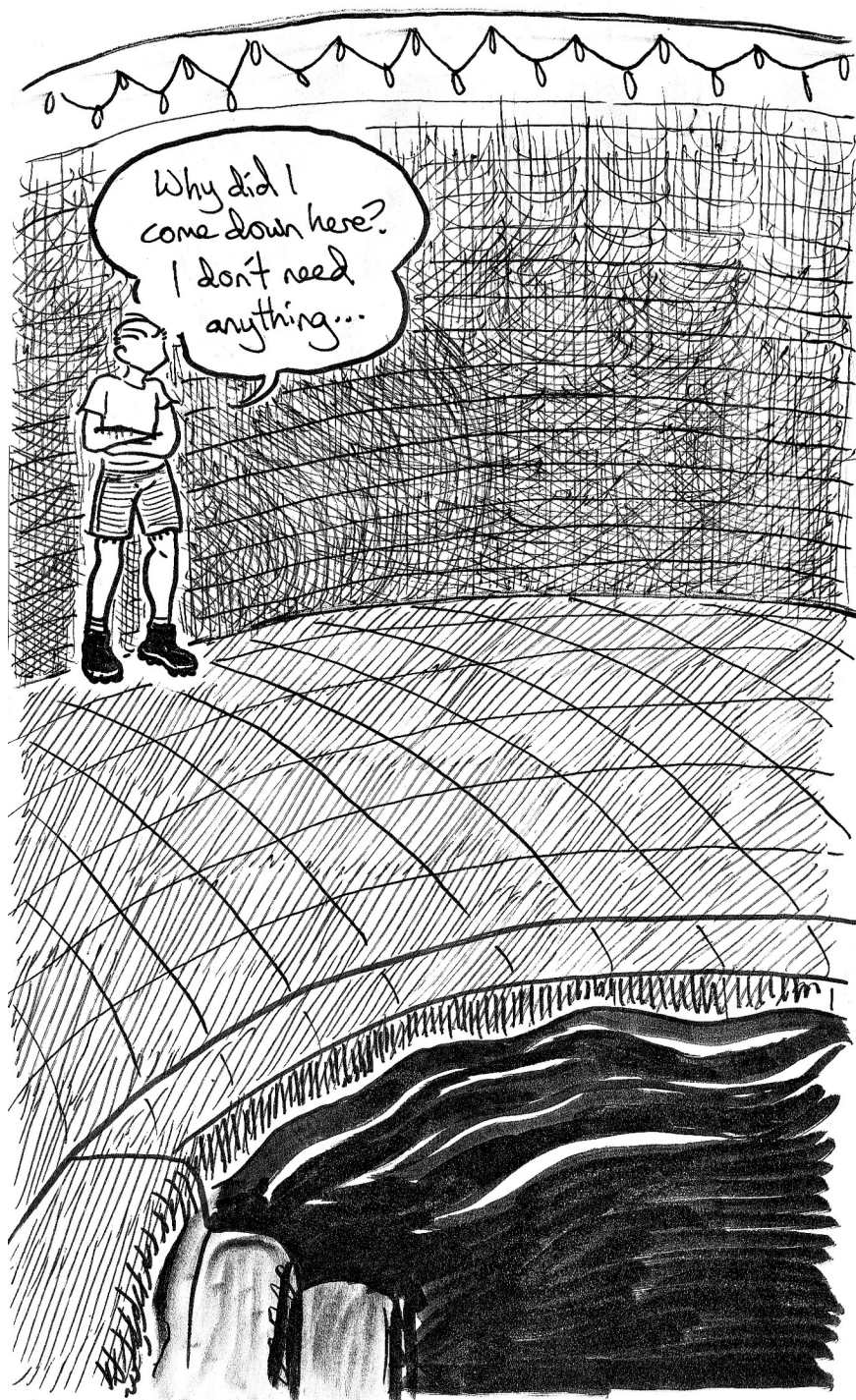
They don't
have faces.

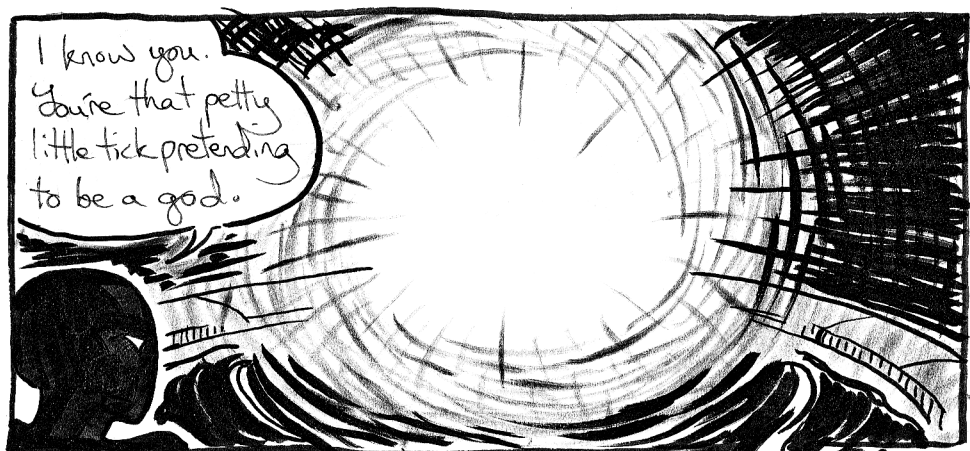


You needed something bigger,
meaner, and stronger. That's
where I come in.

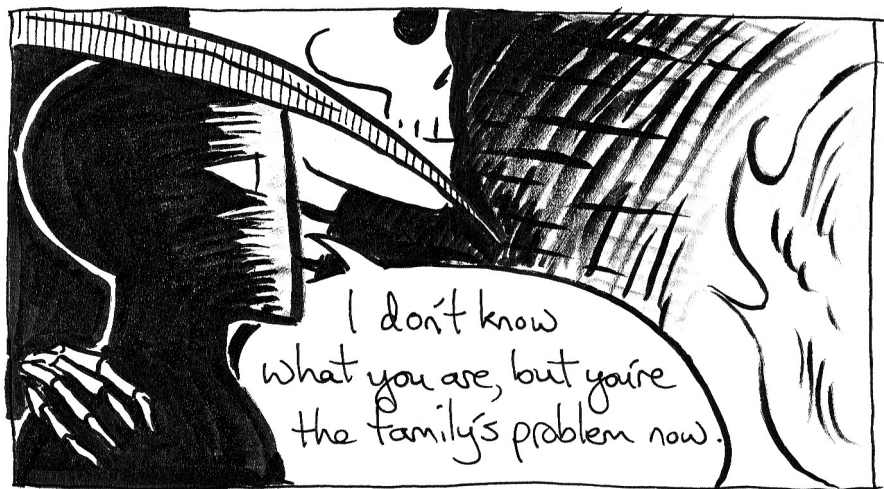


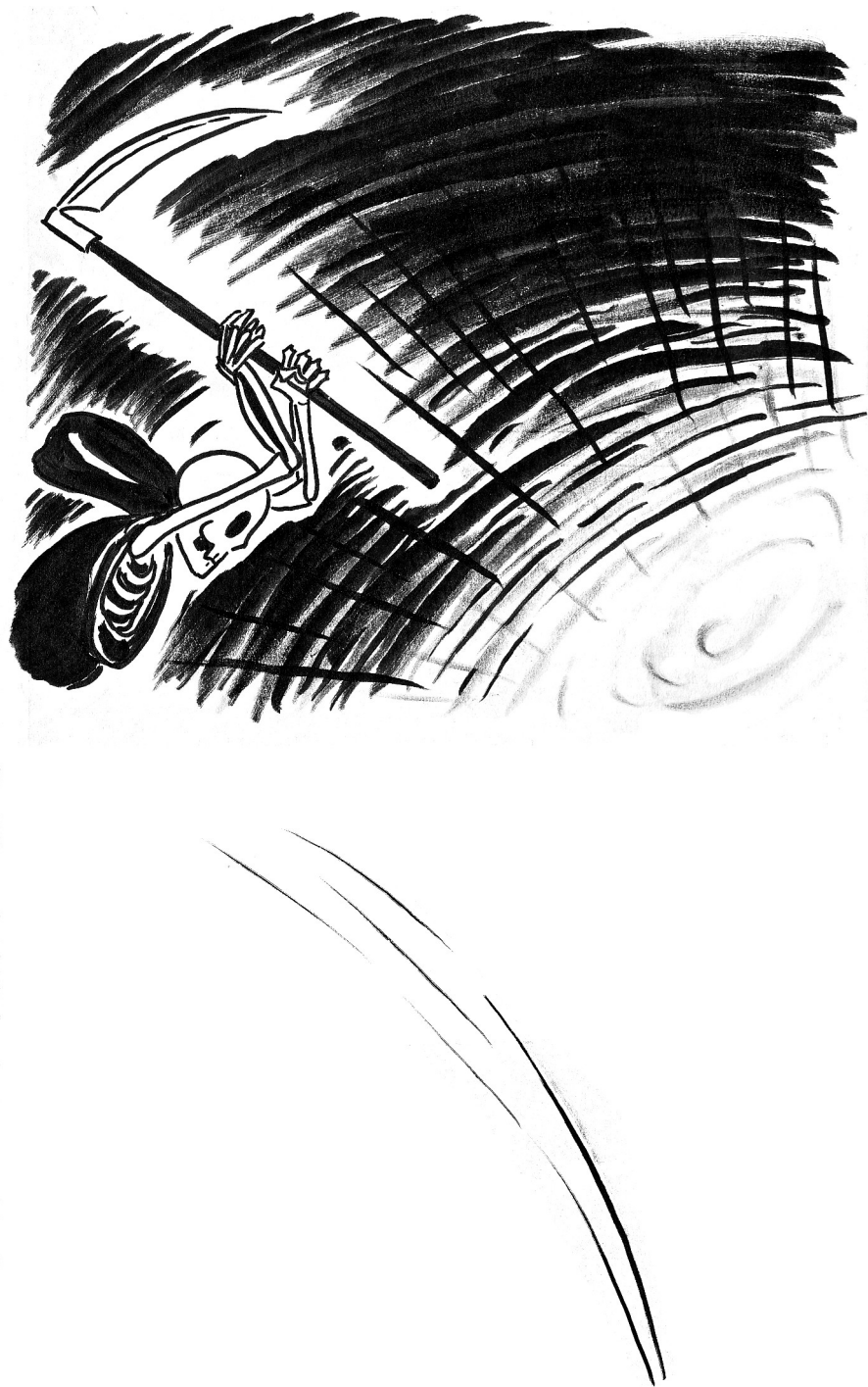






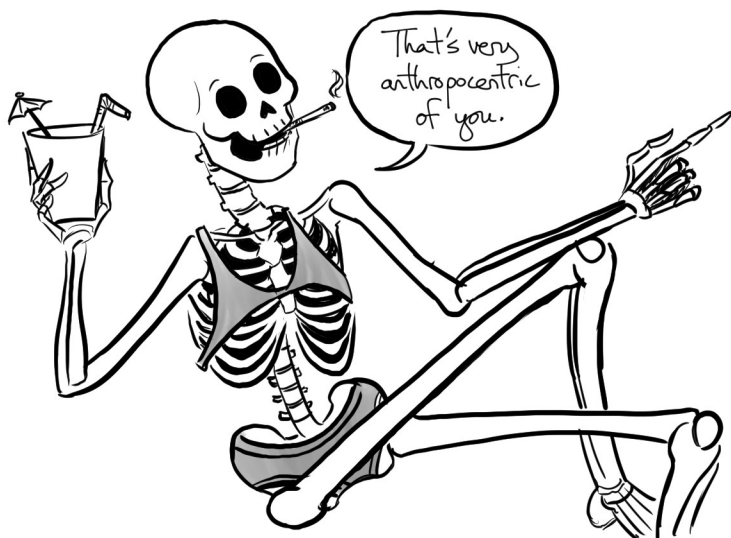






DANCING WITH DEATH

We still don't know what the bony lady is. She's given us no name or pantheon, and when Rogan asked if she was a god, she replied:



She hasn't asked for any of the usual god things. Conversion, evangelizing, or worship repulse her, and while she seems to like booze and candles, she doesn't require them or any other offering. She's made zero statements of moral philosophy—all she's asked is that we make ourself useful. (Since Falcon says she doesn't quite understand humans, this might be her best attempt at, "yeah, do good deeds! You know, like humans do!")

When Rogan asked why she cared so much about him surviving, she replied, "There are results I want in the future, results highly unlikely to happen if you're dead." When I asked why she was doing all this, she said, "I like y'all's face." Fucking troll.

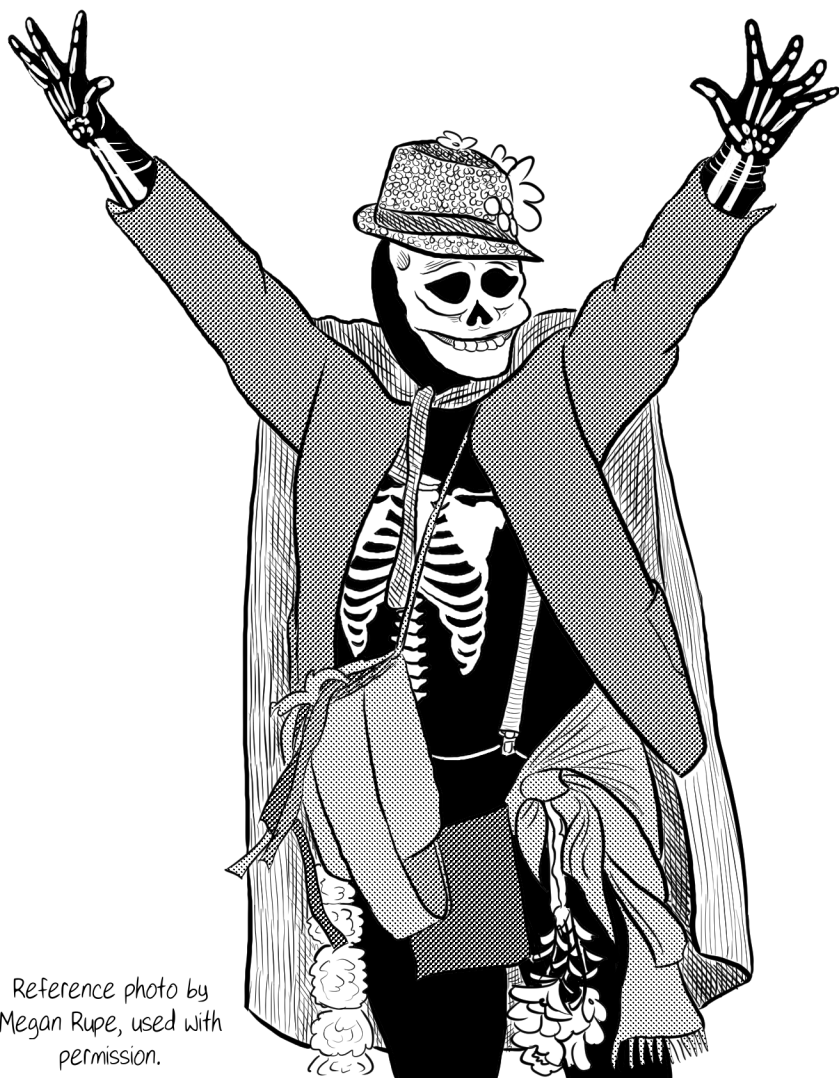
Death is not fun or easy, certainly not during a pandemic. There's no pretending that she exists for our convenience or comfort, or even our comprehension.

But at the most recent HONK marching band festival, there was a band from Chile called Rim Bam Bum, who had among their crew a dancer dressed as Death. We took life sketches:



When we saw her beckoning to the crowd, mischievous and joyful, we put our stuff down and joined her. We danced in our mask with the living and the dead, to brass and drums and pounding heart. There was no us, no them, only being there, only living.

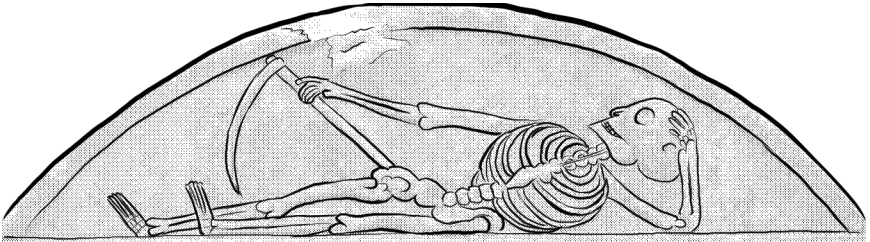
Here we are, dancing at the end of the world, and it's a good day to be alive.



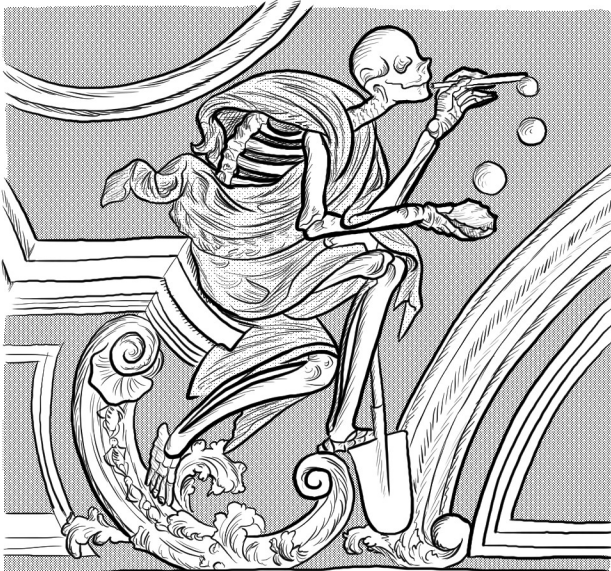
Reference photo by
Megan Rupe, used with
permission.

INTERLUDE: DEATH ART

Floppy zines need to have page-counts in multiples of four, so Psycho Pomp got some of my favorite death art in the buffer, reprinted here. We took this photo of Elizabeth Ireland's 1738 gravestone in the Granary cemetery in Boston. The tour guide called it "the sexy Grim Reaper":



Somewhere between 1729 and 1731, Johann Georg Leinberger made some plaster Deaths for the Michaelsberg Abbey in Bamberg, Germany, now a hospital. Most famous is this one, blowing bubbles (representing the ephemerality of life):



A friend of mine, Marie van Agthoven, kindly told me of Tödlein (Small Death) by Hans Leinberger, from before 1519. It's in Ambras Castle in Innsbruck Austria, carved from one piece of pear wood.

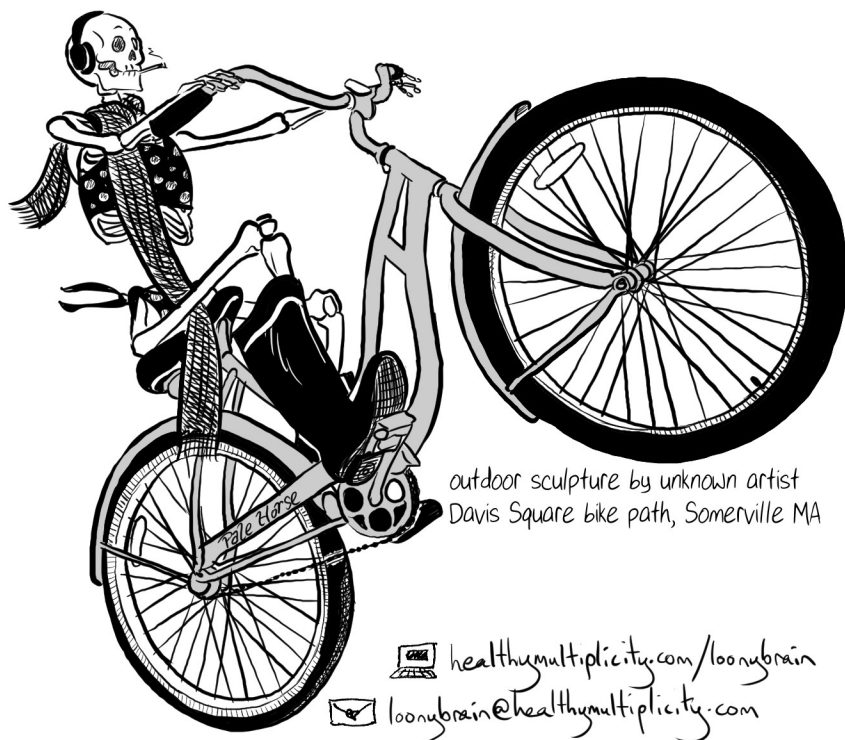


Reference photo by
Marie Van Agthoven,
used with permission

Death wields arrows, darts, and scythe most, but we've seen other weapons, even guns, like in the Triumph of Death of Clusone by Borlone from 1485! (It feels so weird for Death to shoot folks.)



Finally, there's this public art at home, put up in October 2020. Folks repair her and dress her up. Every time we walk by, we wave.



outdoor sculpture by unknown artist
Davis Square bike path, Somerville MA



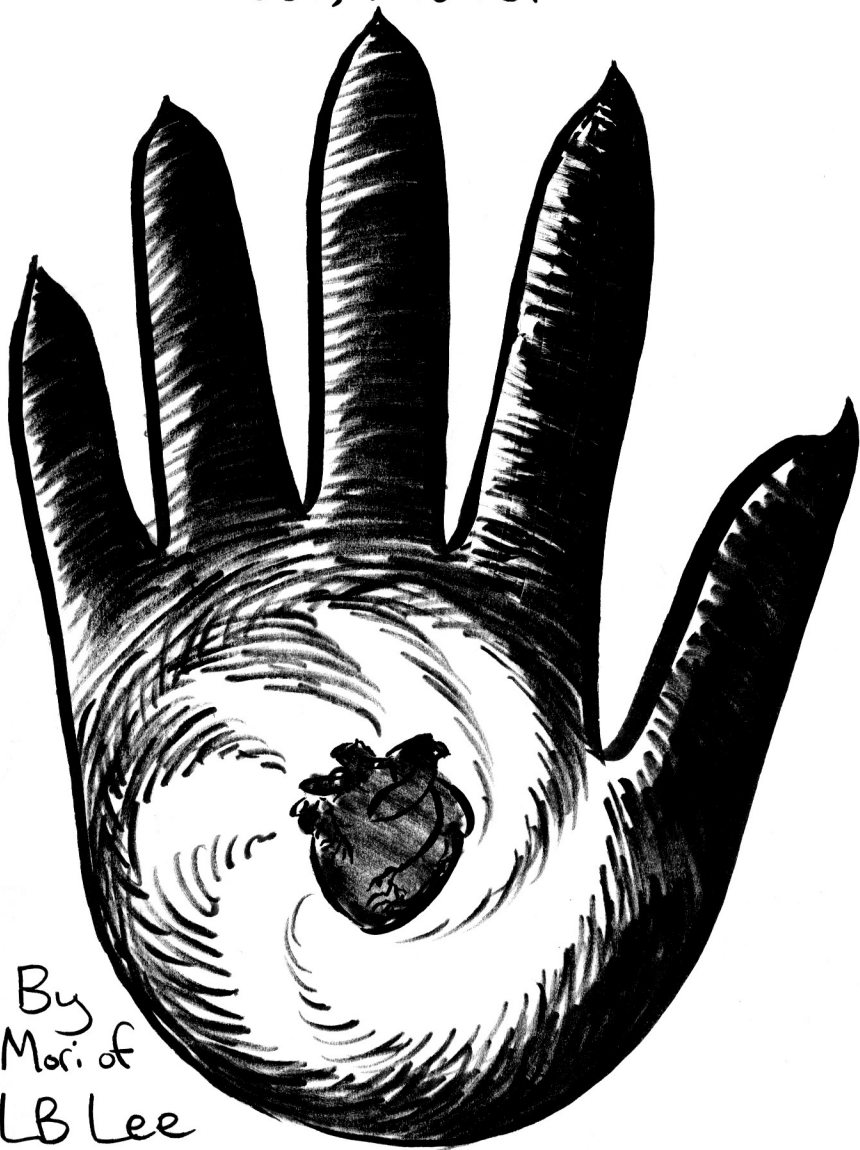
healthmultiplicity.com/loonybrain



loonybrain@healthmultiplicity.com

MADGIC #3

God, Forsaken



By
Mori of
LB Lee

ATHEOS

Back in 2015, I made the following comic (which became page 92 of All in the Family), blissfully unaware of the impending irony:



So, here I am, almost ten years later, having indeed overthrown and murdered the god who put me in Hell. Does that make me the world's hardest atheist... or just the most deluded?

The word "atheist" comes from the Greek "atheos," or "without god," and while that word did gain the meaning of "lack of belief or

commitment to the gods,” it also had an earlier meaning: “forsaken by the gods” (Whitmarsh, p. 116). Thus the following gag in Aristophanes’s Knights:

Demosthenes: Do you really believe in gods?

Nicias: Of course.

Demosthenes: What’s your proof?

Nicias: The fact that I’m cursed by them. Won’t that do?

Demosthenes: Well, it’s good enough for me. (Aristophanes, lines 31-35, quoted in Whitmarsh, p. 101)

Nicias is “atheos” in the old sense, but not in the newer. He believes in the gods very much... because they have abandoned him. That’s the joke, and I still think it’s funny, 2400 years later.

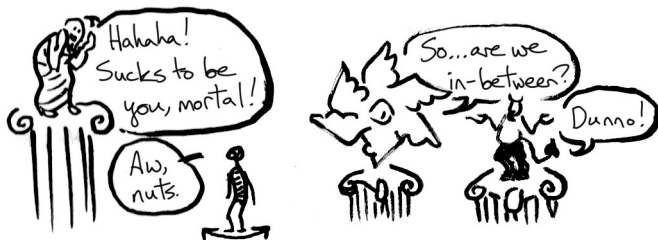
Both in ancient Athens and the modern USA, atheism isn’t just something someone calls themselves. It’s also “a social category constructed by self-styled protectors of religious orthodoxy as a receptacle for those whose beliefs they do not share,” an outgroup like queers and communists (Whitmarsh, p. 116),

Am I an atheist or a theist? Demosthenes and Nicias would say, “Yes!” It’s a false binary. All that matters to me is, I killed that which oppressed me. Sic semper tyrannis, you little shit.



RELIGIO-AUTHORITARIANISM

This probably sounds like a stupid question, but no, really, what defines a god? Growing up, we thought that surely there was a “scientific” taxonomy with absolute, unquestionable boundaries... and hierarchies. People who criticized them, we knew, got punished.



Yeah, every bit of that is BS.

There's a big bronze statue of an angel with a bread basket in Boston Commons. She's posed as though scattering bread crumbs, and her plaque holds a verse from Ecclesiastes: “Cast your bread on the waters; for you shall find it after many days.” Local people (including a homeless man who sleeps at her feet) leave offerings of fruit for her sometimes (see Yeo). By Davidsen's metric, that's textbook religious practice, spontaneously created by folks out of need, outside Christian orthodoxy. People can make religion out of anything, if they try hard enough.



Take it from someone(s) who wrote three titles about multiples building cults: religions require neither social power nor recognition to get nasty (though they sure don't hurt). There were never more than a few dozen followers in the Zero-Six Contingent, but it still dragged people through arrests, restraining orders, domestic violence, homelessness, and thousands of dollars lost (Lee, 2018).



Often, when people say “god,” there’s an unpleasant undertone of authoritarianism. What do many people do (or think they should do) with gods? Obey them. Worship them. Use them as weapons.

Altemeyer says authoritarianism “happens when the followers submit too much to the leaders, trust them too much, and give them too much leeway to do whatever they want—which often is something undemocratic, tyrannical and brutal” (p. 2). What if that wasn’t the only way to interact with otherordinary beings, though?

When Falcon found out the bony lady had maimed Rogan in order to force him not to commit suicide, he was pissed. He bawled her out and went from being her ex to her bitter ex.



When a friend heard about this, she went, “wait. Falcon chewed out Death? And got away with it? Who is this guy?” The punchline: Falcon’s nobody. The bony lady is just willing to accept mortal anger and criticism. After all, most people aren’t happy to see her!



Even when she’s trying to squeeze herself into a humanoid hand puppet for our perceptual convenience, the bony lady still emanates a sense of galactic abyss, of void beyond fathom, of something cosmically huge and ancient looking at you. It’s awe-ful, but she still tries to interact with us as an equal. Being worshiped or adored seems to bug her way more than people screaming at the sight of her, and calling her a god makes her react like a cat offered lima beans.

What is a god, if it stops being an abusive tyrant who requires constant coddling and catering? What is religion, when it’s not a prop for hierarchy and atrocity?

REALITY-BREAKERS

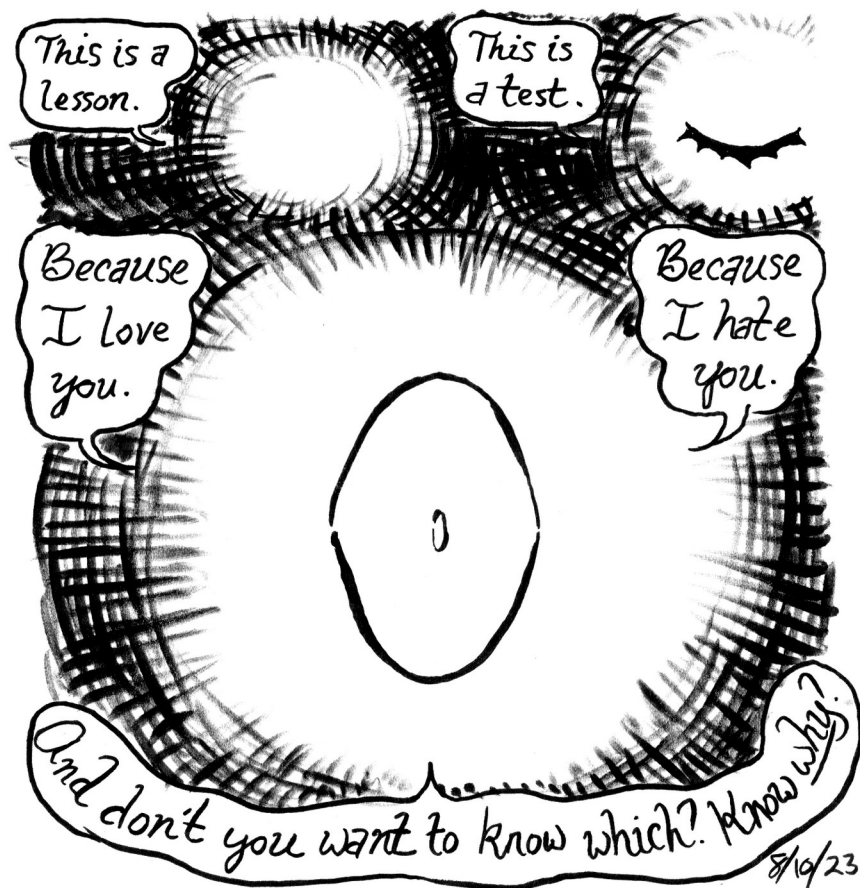
People call religion the opiate of the masses, but materialist atheism was our painkiller. An empty universe is devoid of motive and malice alike. There's no moral, no grand rationale: shit just happens.

Dad rapes you? Shit just happens.

Mom drowns you? Shit just happens.

Bro wanks over your asphyxiated body? Shit. Just. Happens.

The family god, though, it made the whole thing personal.



We wanted to live a godless existence, but avoidance didn't work. You can't escape misogyny by avoiding men, you can't escape racism by avoiding white people, and we couldn't escape despot gods by ignoring religion. It only made us willfully ignorant.

Quoth the Otherworlds Review, "to fight fascism without understanding its spiritual dimensions is to go into battle with poor intelligence. To reject all spirituality and occultism as crypto-fascist is even worse: it is ceding territory to the ancestral enemy without firing a shot." In other words, if the only options seem to be no spiritual life or Nazi spiritual life, people who can't or don't ditch spirituality can get sucked into Nazi stuff.



If we hadn't met up with the bony lady and gone bats, we too might've been eaten by the family god. Its Southern Christianity trappings are more socially acceptable, at least superficially!

When it began to dawn that we would not be allowed a godless existence, it felt like a moral failing. Other people managed this; why couldn't we? We felt stupid, weak. Me and Rogan fought it hard.



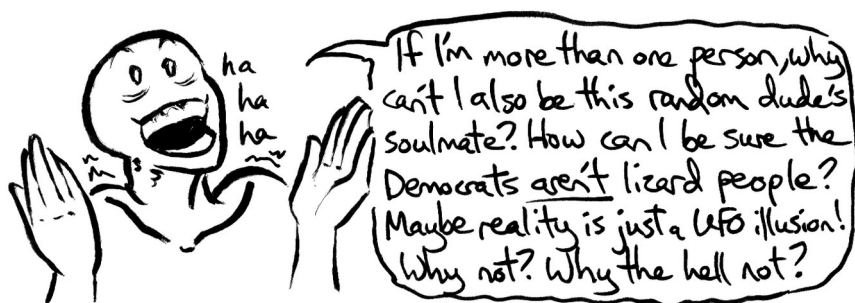
These are the kinds of ontological transitions we call reality-breakers. It's when you realize that your understanding of the world, history, or yourself is fatally flawed. Many people in this situation double down and deny anything's wrong, even when the facts stare them in the face. They have invested so much in the falsehood that they can't stop. Rebuilding a concept of self, society, and the universe is daunting! It's mentally expensive!

Even people well-saddled on the consensus reality horse (which we are not) get bucked off in the face of a reality-breaker. We've seen people drown in the depths of their own abyss, and it's terrifying to watch, never mind experience. There but for the grace of not-God go we.



Normal life transitions can come into reality-breaking territory. The classic cults of the '60s went after college students because the transition to adulthood left the students free and vulnerable. Retirees adapting to unexpected free time and isolation are also tempting targets. Similarly, plural predators often go after newbies because not only do they lack allies, but the reality-breaking shock of becoming selves-aware leaves their minds wide open... meaning that anyone can walk in, steal stuff, and rearrange the furniture.

Thus our old history teacher's saying: "Don't be so open-minded your brain falls out."



I can't blame Rogan for clinging to his consensus reality horse for dear life. We fall easier and hit the sod harder. Indeed, I doubt anyone's conception of reality is perfect! A stable, "good enough" philosophy costs less than a flaky, bleeding-edge "true" one.

I say all this calmly now, but it took years to get here. Being bonkers, we felt pressure to prove how logical and rational we were, not like the "bad" crazies (which we totally were). But we also didn't want to live in a Lovecraftian nightmare world! Mental illness was a personal problem. We could fix that! We could not fix gods.

Over time, though, we met other people with experiences like ours, or experiences not like ours that nonetheless helped open our minds. We started crawling out of ignorance. We learned that gee, golly, history sure has shown that campaigns to "reduce superstition" (in Haiti) and destroy "satanic death cults" (in Mexico) are overwhelmingly used by institutions already in power against those that resist them. Even the ideas of "progress" and "reason" can be facile excuses for oligarchs to crush the weaker and less powerful.

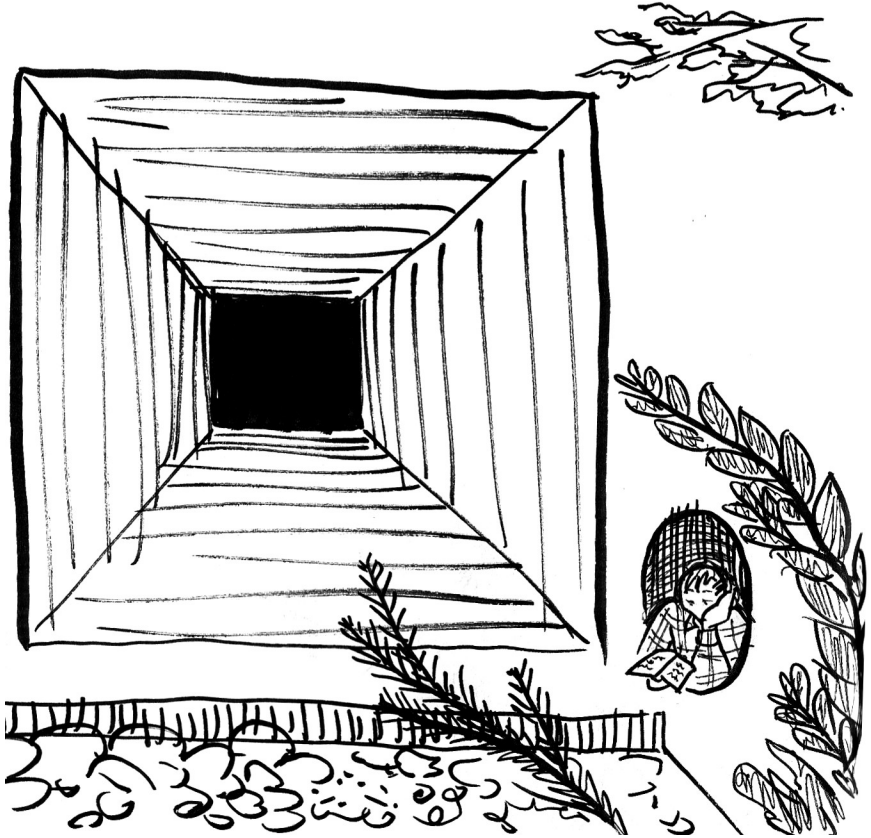
Only by embracing our own irrational dingbatterry could we deal with our spiritual reality, however cracked and incorrect it might be. Our path is crooked, and we have to walk crooked to get anywhere. It's not spiritual or crazy; it's spiritual and crazy.

It's hard not to be jealous of our old man sometimes, though. He's an incestuous dick, but he's also relentlessly sane. He might live life on the surface, but the depths have no power over him. His reality ain't never gonna bite him in the ass!



THE CREEKBED

Officially, it was Sycamore Creek, but nobody called it that, because it was a stupid name. Sycamores didn't grow in our part of Texas, and furthermore, there was no water in that "creek" except in times of flood, so we all just called it "the creekbed."



For years as a kid, we hid out there. It protected us from the family, with its fortified culverts, poison ivy, coral snakes, and many exits. Both our parents had knee injuries, and they knew we'd have to come home eventually, so they were rarely willing to chase us down into the brambles when they could just wait us out.

Even when the old lady managed to follow us, she never did much, because she could never be sure who was watching.



We could stay down there for days (and did), thanks to the creekbed's proximity to the park's water fountain and bathrooms. If we really wanted, we could even break into the pool for its (cold) shower, soda machine, and roofed pavilion. We'd be safe until heat or hunger forced us back.

There's a kind of geographical intimacy you can only build over the course of years, stuck for days at a time in a place with no supplies, entertainment, or creature comforts, just venomous snakes. (Coral snakes aren't aggressive, but they don't need to be.) We've never had that sort of intimacy anywhere else; we were never inconvenienced enough. Cities are stuffed to the rafters with Wi-Fi and nosy humans, and even the boonies make it too easy to pack a lunch, take shelter, and not get savaged by local wildlife. If the weather gets bad, we can go home, and we never have to skip food for a day if we don't want. We love our town, but we don't know it the way we did the creekbed. We don't have to.

In the creekbed, I knew where the culverts were, the sewer, the deer and the snakes and the kittens. Me and my headmates would gather bones and turtle shells and flood salvage, crush berries to stain them with, build makeshift forts from rubble and junk. We may not have had anything to offer, but we didn't hurt the place either. How could we, when the only things we usually had with us were the clothes on our back, maybe a paperback book?



Neighborhood rumor was there was an axe-murdering hobo down there, but even in the seventh grade, we knew that the hobo was us. What self-respecting bum would strand themselves in a place so far from food and shops? Even the nearest bus required a car to get to!

Maybe we were so desperate for mercy that we personified a creekbed. Maybe, as one of the only parts of the neighborhood not Homeowners-Association-ed within an inch of its life, the creekbed retained enough independent spirit to step in, to take an interest in us. Whatever it was, I felt like it was looking out for me, and I needed all the allies I could get.

It's no coincidence that the creekbed got duplicated in our headspace. It's like a piece of it decided to hitch a ride. Maybe it thought our head would be more exciting, a geographical adventure. Maybe it wanted out of Hellburbia as bad as I did.

In 2017, we went into the creekbed for the last time. It was so full of undergrowth and flood drift that it was hard to traverse. Our fort and stuff had long since washed away, though the scrubby little trees (not sycamores) and the "joystick" (an uprooted, naked sign pole) remained, mostly buried in drift. The sewer had been cemented shut. It wasn't our place anymore. It didn't have to be.

For a time, we stood in silence amid the limestone and bramble. We thanked the creekbed for everything it'd given us. We took a bunch of reference photos.

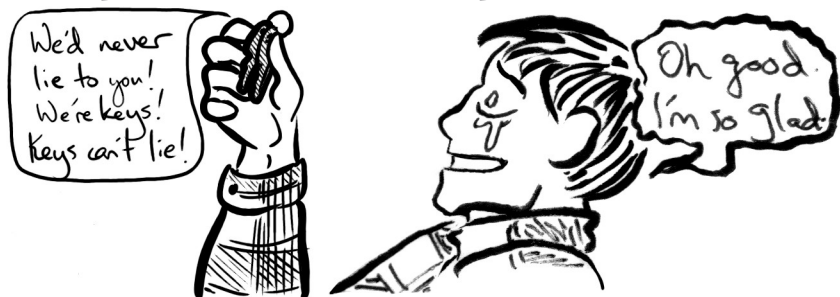
We moved on.



THE VOICE OF THE KEYS

People might accept the idea of a benevolent spirit of the creekbed. But what about small, mass-produced objects like keys?

In high school, after a series of strangulations and head injuries, Rogan started hearing voices from the shower, his books, and his car keys. Contrary to popular stereotype, these voices tried to be helpful and reassuring, even if they didn't succeed. They also never claimed to be anything but the objects they were. When Rogan worried his keys were lying to him, they said:



They also showed emotions. After Rogan got dragged out of the shower, it flipped out, told him over and over that it was sorry, and then never spoke again, seemingly out of guilt and remorse.

We're shit-house rats, of course. But that doesn't mean we have to be snotty bitches about it. Can we respect the household objects (or hallucinations) who tried to assist us, even in their limited capacity? Why must they (and their help) be beneath us?

Our personification dial was always turned high. Our earliest memory of abuse involves our shitheel grandfather coercing us into a handjob by threatening our toy bear. Even at five years old, we couldn't stand to let Yellow Bear be hurt.



Later on, our brother would pretend to rape our stuffed dog to make us squirm. We were ashamed at how much it bothered us, ashamed for caring, while our brother would grin knowingly at our “weakness.” We still have trouble loving physical objects because of that; we can’t help but see them as hostages, liabilities, so easy to exploit. We’ve never kept a pet for the same reason.

Asides from potential legal consequences, I’m confident that our attackers saw little difference between us, other animals, and toys. Kim Roberts makes such correlation explicit: “many in our world community are treated as objects [...] This objectification can be seen, for example, in the abuse of nonhuman animals, as well as the abuse of children, spouses, and elders” (p. 605). Viktor Frankl extends this to how the Nazis treated the prisoners in their death camps: “In the camp we ourselves were nothing” (p. 100). “Just as our lives were not worth a bowl of soup, our deaths were also of minimal value, not even worth a lead bullet, just some Zyklon B” (p. 23). Zyklon B was a pesticide, used for killing vermin; bullets were reserved for more deserving beings. (It’s also why Nazi war criminals were executed by hanging, not shooting.)

Frankl says the Nazis also saw “incurably ill people, especially incurably mentally ill people” this way: “unworthy of life solely on the basis of their illness, [...] threatened with destruction and even killed. [...] We hear repeatedly that the killing of incurably mentally ill people would be the only justifiable measure that people ‘could still understand’ within an otherwise unacceptable [Nazi] program” (p. 70). Even now, headmates like us are seen as subhuman, things to use—objects, not subjects (see Bayne).

Books, keys, and shower knew it too. All said to Rogan:



They recognized and sympathized with our shared helplessness. They offered us the communion of objects.

None of us have heard voices like that since we escaped. It's something we only experience under extreme duress. But does that make it less meaningful? What does it say about humans, that they did less to help us than common objects and a creekbed?

Maybe some objects have more heart than their owners do.

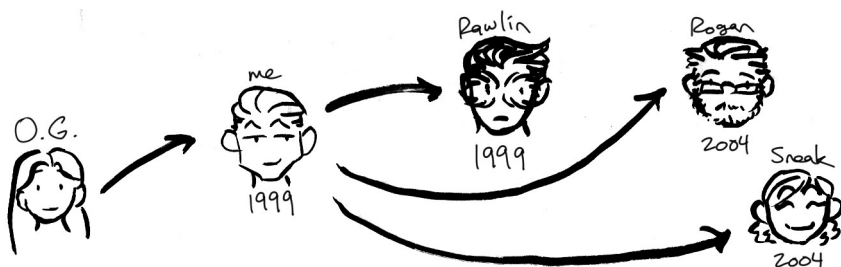
“To reduce any mode of being simply to that of a commodity [...] is a betrayal. While the nonliving world does not have a living soul [...] each member of the nonliving world does have the equivalent as its inner principle of its being” (Berry, p. 9).

HEARTS AND SOULS

Before we get further, a digression about souls. (Or hearts; we use the terms interchangeably.)

Our brain seems to have mostly pulled our soul cosmology from Piers Anthony's Ogre, Ogre. (Don't read it. It's bad.) Unlike Christian souls, ours are mortal, corruptible, vulnerable to injury and death (and when they die, usually so do we). They're also not restricted to humans, or even mammals: our headspace abyssal waters got Rawlin's heart. The headspace creekbed might be enmeshed with that or have its own, since it resurrected independently.

Our souls are also divisible; parts can be torn away by (literal) heartbreak. Me, Rawlin, Rogan, Sneak, Gigi, and Miranda all started as soul chunks hacked off the original girl. Over time, these pieces regenerated, so she survived sundering over and over, and we could be sundered in turn. My branch of the internal family tree looks like this:



Our souls are semi-shareable. You can give your heart freely (a beautiful intimacy) or by coercion (a most horrific kind of rape). Rogan and Mac talk about some of the fun kind in Multi, Orgasmic, but I think sex is gross, so don't ask me about it.

Our hearts are tangible in headspace. We can reach into our chests and rip parts out. Rogan attempted it twice as a teen, trying to excise his queerness, but it always came back.

Unlike Anthony souls, which are luminescent spheres, ours look like rubbery masses of black goo or gory cardiac organs. They're clearly meant to stay inside our headspace bodies, which seem to act as protective soul-suits.

We still don't know what all our stupid hearts even do. All we know is that they are clearly vital and capable of regenerating from even the smallest fragments, given enough time.

Let me bring back this picture from earlier:



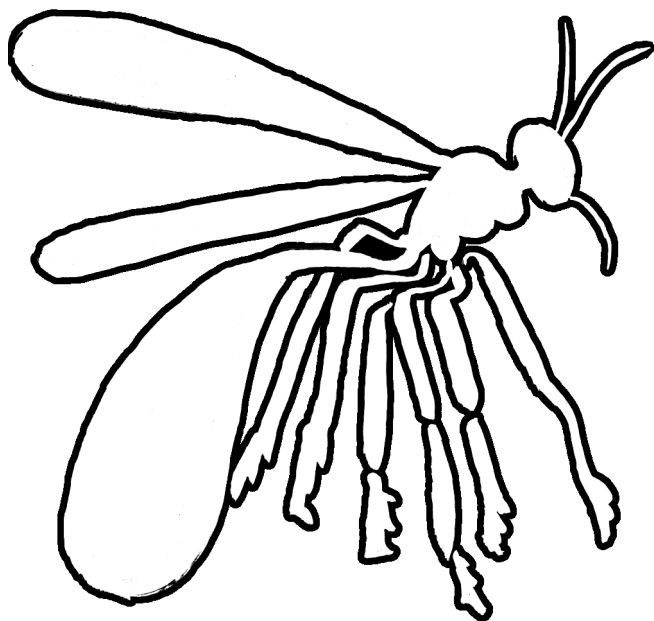
Maybe, when you first saw it, you wondered what that thing was in Rawlin's other hand. Well, let me tell you: it's a godseed.

I guess I should explain about godseeds...

LITTLE TIN GODS

If the bony lady is a cosmic force of nature who tries to be egalitarian, Mom's family god is a little tin despot who uses what little power it has to terrorize everyone "beneath" it. It pretends to be the Christian god, but no way I could've murdered that guy with fire, certainly not as easily as I did.

No, the family god is/was just a parasite playing dress-up, an ichneumon wasp of the soul.



The family god may be "just" a psychological personification of Mom's religious bullshit, giving it a form so we can fight it easier. I don't know and I don't care. Watching Rogan chew himself to shreds over the ontological question has led me to decide it's a waste of my time and sanity. Whatever it is, it's a sanctimonious jerk and I'm glad I Molotoved its ass.

We don't know where the family god comes from, only that it's infested our mother's family since Grampa. It's spiritual VD, spread through sexual contact and open wounds, and once it infests you, it feeds on your heart and hijacks your higher faculties, making you more and more morally okay with (if not outright compelled to) attack others. This is how the god reproduces and feeds itself. (Themselves. English pronouns fail.)

In loonies like us, this infestation was not metaphorical. If assaulted correctly, we had high odds of finding the wounds or orifices of our headspace bodies (our protective soul-suits, you'll recall) full of sharp-edged, toothy seeds. If not gouged out within minutes, they'd hatch into voracious maggots, burrow under our skins, and commence a-feasting.

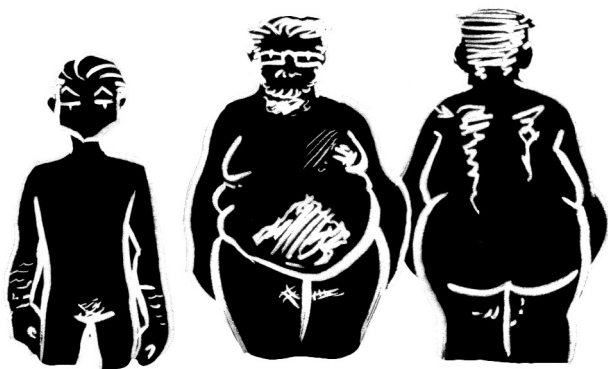
Best case, you sloughed the infested part of you like a lizard tail and kept going. Medium case, you died, like our original girl did. We still find bits of her sometimes, scared furious ghosts barely able to contain the maggots under their skins.



Worst case... well, you became heartless, like Rawlin or Mom.

Even if carved from flesh, the maggots dive at anyone nearby. They're fast little buggers, so aggressive that we have to kill them via crushing, burning, or drowning. They're tougher than you'd think, but outside their hosts, there's one small mercy: they can't survive contact with the abyssal waters. They seem to need their host to insulate them, playing meat shield.

Rogan got infested so many times that he's a mass of scar tissue. Me, I've long been sterile, with a bunch of genital scarring that I have no memory of getting. Most likely explanation is, I got vaginally flyblown and had to "clean" myself. My forearms are also covered in scars, and I may not be responsible for them all.



This was our experience with (what we thought was) God, and it was so ghostly that we had no way to discuss or understand it. All we could think was that we were losing our minds, hallucinating random gruesome shit. Surely the problem had to be us.

After all, what kind of god would do that to kids?

We'd probably still feel that way, if we weren't the only people in the world to consider the idea of divine parasites. In Living with a Wild God, atheist Barbara Ehrenreich writes, "the worst possible

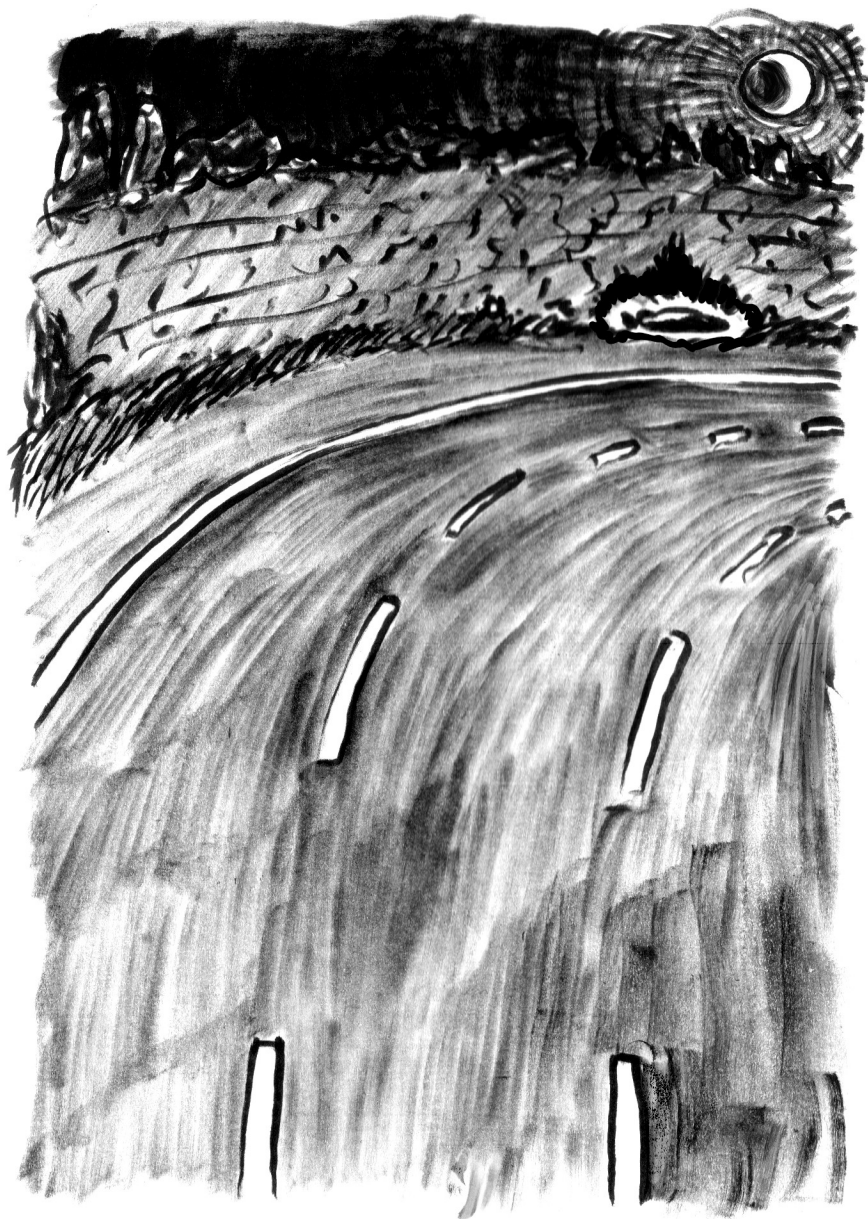
relationship between humans and some mystically potent being or beings [...] would be no symbiosis but parasitism. Plenty of familiar creatures cannot live on their own; they require hosts, and interestingly, some of them are capable of modifying the behavior, and possibly also the thoughts and feelings of their hosts. [...] If so, those who think of themselves as 'enlightened' may in fact have been infected and, in some hideously intimate way, used" (p. 231-232, emphasis hers).



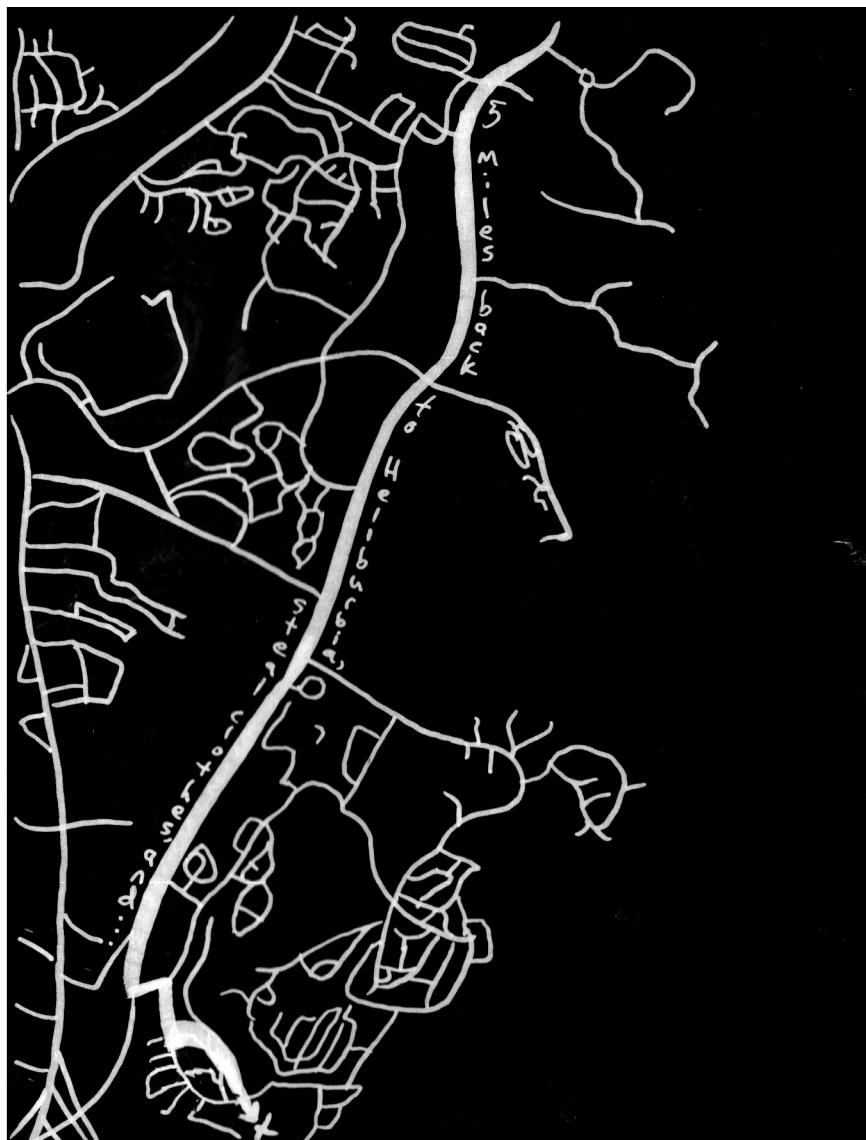
Ehrenreich is talking hypothetically, but it's not that far off from the worst kind of possession. Wíhtikōw aren't just scary because they want to kill and eat people. They're terrifying because their human hosts may know what's happening to them but be unable to stop it. "[Edward Auger] said that he must eat his child [...] He said it was told him that he must eat them. [...] Then he began to cry at the thought of it" (quoted by Carlson 2010, p. 236). To this day, he is remembered in oral tradition: "He kept asking these two guys, these two old guys to kill him [...] he didn't want to kill their families" (Carlson 2009, p. 375).

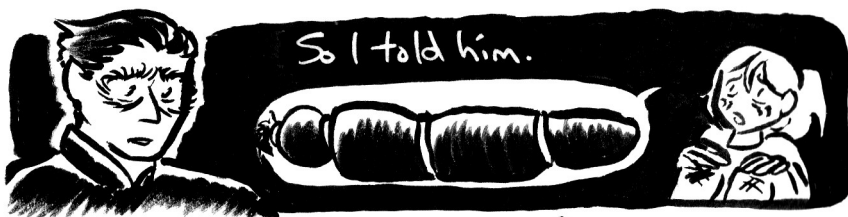
Mom wasn't one of those cases. She never "lost control" around people who might stop her, never hit us in front of others who might intervene. She never tried to protect us from "the other her," unlike that poor Auger bastard... or Rawlin, at the start.

THE CREATION OF RAWLIN









And suddenly everything felt manageable again.





Yeah. I can see how Mom got the idea that we were demons. I'd feel worse about it if she hadn't tried to murder me first.

It was right after that when Rawlin first noticed a dead patch in our headspace creekbed.



Give me a break. I was like eleven, badly concussed, and exhausted. Who cared about some dead grass?

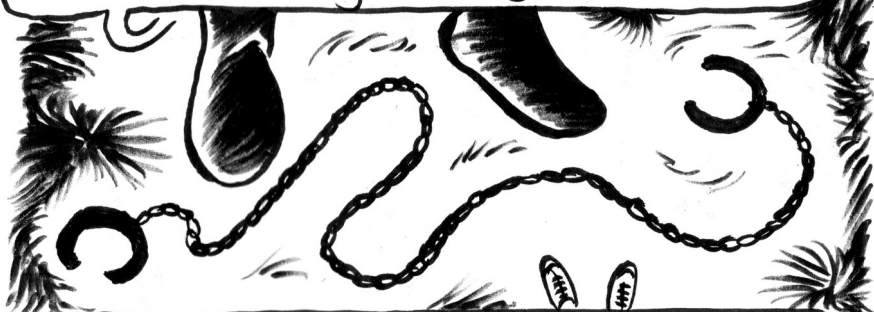
But over time, the patches grew. I was too consumed with surviving to give a shit, but Rawlin grew more and more concerned. He had to do something.

One day, he found a cave in headspace, and it was there that he met the family god. And it gave him a seed...



THE FALL OF RAWLIN

I know this looks scary, but really, it's for the best.



Even I can't break these chains. Only you.

But of course, we shouldn't need them!

You remember what to do? Just in case?

Don't interfere. Chain you if you go back. Bet-



Good! Remember, whatever happens, it'll be all right.





He got mind-rapey. I ran. I don't want to talk about the whole cat-and-mouse game I had to do to lure him into the deep sewer pipes of headspace. What matters is, I succeeded. I used the close quarters, my smaller size, and I chained him.



Unable to think of a better solution, I left him there, alone in the dark. I'm not sure he realizes how long it was.

Eventually, though, the expected happened. I needed help, and Rawlin was heartless, not powerless. He begged me to let him out. So I did.



Our rage blotted out the sun. We fought, maybe broke things. It spooked the family enough to let us go.



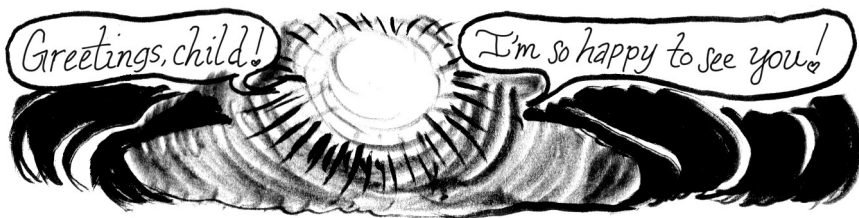
Unfortunately, I soon realized my solution was its own problem.

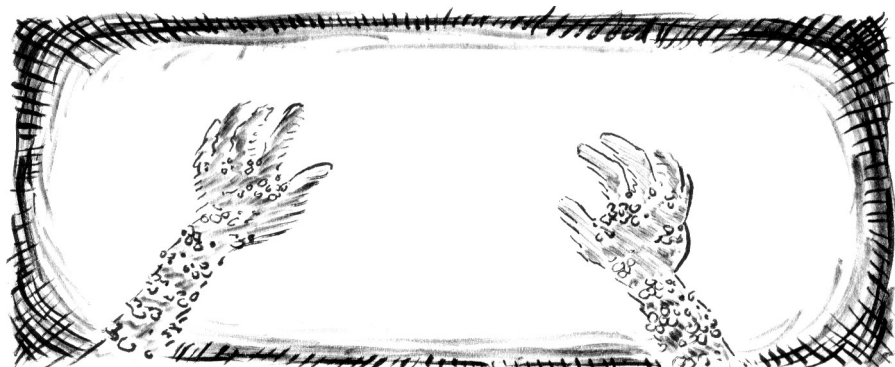


Crazy as it sounds, even though half the wheels were off his bus, he still cared enough about my opinion to pause and think... or at least try to persuade me. And that's when shit got weird.



I disobeyed. Rawlin's huge, headspace's small; there weren't many places it could be. I searched the cliffs, found the cave.





The horror of its purity was indescribable. It was the purity of nuclear holocaust, of autoclaving your insides. People were never meant to be that clean. My soul couldn't stop screaming.

And then Rawlin got me out of there.



The bigger they are, the harder they fall, and Rawlin fell hard. But even as he collapsed, his big concern was me.



And after, he said to me,



I refused. His moment of lucidity passed. I bolted while he was

still too injured to get up.

He was imprisoned again, not too long after that. As far as I know, that's how he stayed for the next twenty years. I honestly don't remember very much about that, though.

INNER FAMILY

A big stumbling block for us, religiously speaking, was family and ancestors. When even your own mother insists you're not her kids, you come to feel that claiming anyone as an ancestor is at best presumptuous, at worst begging to be hit by lightning.



When we lopped our branch off the family tree, it was grueling, painful, and total. Our mother had a big family, our dad medium-size, and we had to cut off contact not only with every single one of them, but every single person in contact with every single one of them. We gave up all family rights and responsibilities: money, weddings, funerals, everything. We got a lot of practice at being the villain. A surprising number of people thought we were being selfish, spoiled brats, but I myself feel pretty good about choosing ten years in hell over them. Rogan got through the homeless year by telling himself, "Could be worse. I could be with them."

It's only recently that we realized that the problem isn't that we're blood traitors, it's that society's definition of kin is fucked. If family is only what's legally respected, then depending on time and place, queers, interracial and slave families, any sort of informal fostering or adoption gets thrown out. That's on purpose too.

Society loves talking about “family values,” but when it comes to practice, family isn’t about love. It’s about power and property. Why do you think Virginia passed a law in 1662 to insure all kids born to slave women were also slaves (Morgan, p. 1)? Because masters wanted to fuck and breed their own livestock, and it’d be inconvenient for that livestock to be recognized as family. They didn’t want children; they wanted chattel.

Similarly, it took until 2006(!) for a PR nightmare to close New York’s “incest loophole,” which Andrew Vachss summarized as, “the penal code gives a discount to child rapists who grow their own victims” (2005). It makes a cruel kind of sense, though. If children are property, then fucking your own is just exercising your god-given rights. Meanwhile, if a stranger fucks your kids (or even intervenes when you fuck your own), then they’re violating those rights.

Even now, there are still plenty of folks who think mothers are some special category beyond morality. Sure, our old lady dumped my presumed corpse off the side of the road like garbage, but—



What is a family, when it’s not a prop for power and atrocity?

Meanwhile, Biff kept me alive through grit for years. He wasn't "real," but he fed me, clothed me, bandaged my wounds. He held me as I was dying, and then he laid my corpse on his couch and put a blanket on me like I was sleeping. Even dead, he treated me with kindness.

And yet, to most people? He's nobody. Literally: no-body. And that pisses me off. Even if he had his own body, folks looking at him might assume he's the bad guy, even though he did everything for me.



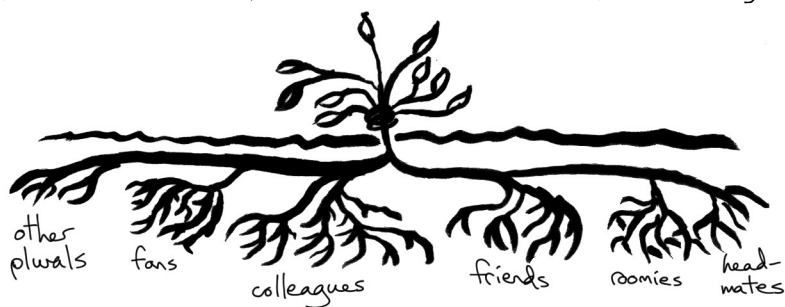
So when I found Biff again, I knew that I would take him into my home, my vessel, and I would take care of his stupid ass for the rest of his goddamn life. He will want for nothing ever again.

And it's not just him, but our dead, the abyssal waters. We owe our survival to them, and so we will care for them forever. We "determined each other deserving of the ten thousand things" and "experimented badly with dozens of models for new relations, but continued even at our worst, because we learned the hard way that disposability isn't an option" (Mary Nardini Gang, p. 10-11). Death cannot part us.

Even Rawlin is part of the crew. Nobody's killing him. (Back in 2020, before we knew much about him and his history, we did think that we might have to. We even prepared to do it. But the waters told us it was a bad idea, and it has never been wrong about such matters before. None of us were enthusiastic about the prospect of killing anybody, and taking down a huge powerhouse like Rawlin would've been a nightmare anyway, so we were all relieved to have the option off the table for good.)



When it comes to relationships, we're a desert shrub: runty up top, roots far and deep. Those roots cross worlds, defy categories.



Here's a secret nobody told us about escaping a horrible family, and it's good news, so I'm going to share it with you:

When you truly start getting free, the special seats your shitty relatives got saved for them all their lives, the thrones granted them by law and society, get freed up. That means that new folks, better folks, can sit down in them, and you get to choose who!

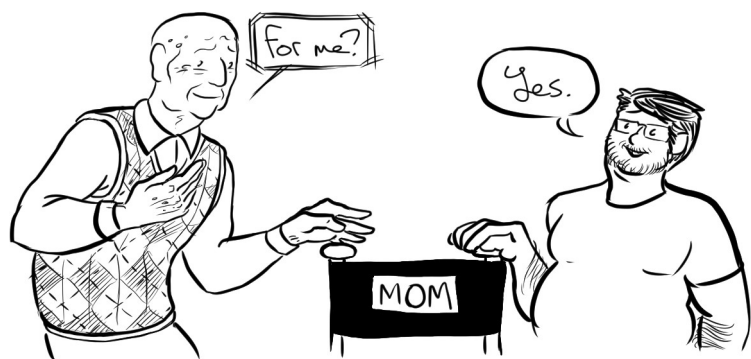


The people who get those special seats don't have to be "real." You get to choose them, completely freely.

We didn't realize this at the time. We felt like we had to save the family's special seats for them, forever empty. Even I didn't realize that I could reclaim and rebuild those seats into whatever the fuck I wanted. It wasn't till making this zine that I realized the difference between family as freely chosen bonds and The Family as an oppressive American institution.

So Biff isn't my big brother, my dad, or my friend. He's my dudema, a category all his own, and he damn well gets a special seat at my emotional table, just for him.

Meanwhile, Grace always wanted to be a mother; transphobia and homophobia meant she was never allowed to be. Rogan wanted to be a son but was also forbidden. When they realized how they felt about each other, they adopted each other. They don't have to wait around, pining for some mythical childhood or parenthood that never was. Family isn't just a "was." It's an "is," a "will be."



Relationship anarchy (see Nordgren) is all about customizing relationships to suit actual life. I used to feel real weird about sharing a bed with Biff, because society calls it sexual. (Ick.) But he's gay, I'm ace, we get to decide whether it's sexual or not. (It's not, but it still took reading a book about foster child separation anxiety to make me realize that other humans do this.)

Another example: Grey might be Rogan's mom and Bob's wife, but Bob never wanted to be a father. He felt like he was letting Rogan down, especially what with our family history, but they talked about it, and Rogan went, "dude, you're not rejecting me; you just want to be a different kind of figure in my life," so Bob gets his

own relationship chair, bespoke for him. Rogan calls him “foster,” Bob calls him “foster bat,” and that makes them both happy.

On top of that, Bob has a sizable family he’s still on good terms with, so now he’s trying to coax Rogan into making friendly with them as well! That’s more than we ever could’ve imagined, when we hacked our branch off the family tree in 2012!



Once we free “family” from the societally recognized and the “real,” so much opens up. Suddenly, working with our headspace ghosts becomes ancestral healing. Suddenly, we go from a blood traitor outcast to having generations of crew! And because we have that crew, we can properly deal with where we came from.

Only by sawing ourself off the family tree could we truly take root and find our people. We don’t have a tree now; we have a grove! And we never would’ve discovered most of it if we hadn’t hacked ourself free.

GODS AND MASTERS

What if we didn't treat otherordinary beings like slave masters?

Nancy Eiesland, in the Disabled God, writes her epiphany: "I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair [...] Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. [...] I recognize the incarnate Christ in [...] those judged 'not feasible,' 'unemployable,' with 'questionable quality of life.' Here was God for me" (p. 89).

Similarly, our Christian minister friend, Bekah Anderson, writes, "God hears voices: the voices of all people and all living things. God paints with their feet and reads with their hands. [...] God walks, God limps, God rolls, God crawls. God gets where God needs to be, gets to us, however God can. [...] How can we come closer to this being beyond our comprehension, this bodymind that meets none of our expectations? By freeing ourselves of expectations."

The bony lady might try to act human, but she is not; nor are her morals, and life is better when we accept that. Knowing her won't spare us an ignominious end, anymore than weathermen are spared hurricanes. She is Death, and death is never easy. We try to see her like a bear: big, strong, dangerous, but if it kills your dog, it's not personal, not a punishment. It's just what bears do.



The bony lady wrinkles her metaphorical nose at being called a “god” because to her, god doesn’t define a being but a relationship, one of authority and submission, one she doesn’t want. She doesn’t want slaves or adoration. We may be fireflies to her, but that doesn’t make us unimportant. It just makes us ephemeral.

The beings we interact with, the beings others might call gods or spirits, are patrons of the disposable: talking keys, an ill-named creekbed, voices in our head, imaginary friends. They are deep dark waters, flawed flesh and bone, dead souls and the cosmic corpses of stars that form the elements of all things.

Together, all of us dance.



DEATH NUGGIE



Journal entry, Mori and Rogan: 12/7/2023:

M: We're eating lunch and talking to the bony lady
B: "I love how you fireflies take things, break them into
much littler things, put them inside you, and then
they become you. I love that!"

M: She says there are rules she is obliged to follow
her equivalent of physics. She can't just kill (or
keep alive) whoever she wants. "I can't protect you
from stupidity. Sometimes, you'll live or die no matter
what. Sometimes, it can go either way, and I have
more leeway. Then I can get involved, weight the

dice.

"You [meaning Rogan] were in that situation many times over, which makes you mine, many times over. Other beings will see it and leave you alone. I'm not a god, but I command respect."

R: You protected us from the family god. You kept it from eating all of us.

Bl: "I tried. There are limits, rules. Had you welcomed it, there was nothing I could've done. Luckily for me, you didn't."

M: So you can't do much about Rawlin.

Bl: "The stuck one? Oh, he's brought a hard road on himself. There's nothing I can do for him; he's outside my jurisdiction. The undying are beyond me. He's your problem."

M: I can live with that.

R: I asked her what those "results" were that she wanted in the future, and she said, "You'll know them when you see them."

Bl: "You bear my mark, and I will provide for you. You will have enough food to eat, a place to sleep—not nice, but enough. I will insure your base needs are met while you do the job that's called you. That's the deal. For as long as you do services, you will be maintained. You need breaks, that's fine, but the work you are doing now is the work I am sustaining you for."

"You will never be rich, never be powerful, never be a shining star in the sky by your society's standards. But there are different kinds

of power, different kinds of importance, and what you're doing is important. This is the work that has called you, and I am your patron. This is your path, should you choose to walk it."

R: I get a choice?

Bl: "Always. I am not a tyrant. You don't have to deal. But your calling doesn't come from me. It's marked you, and I respect it, so I support it. You can negotiate with it if you wish, but in my experience, such callings are possessive, not inclined to let you go."

R: No. No, this is what I want to do with my life. Even though it's hard, low-paying, and sometimes thankless.

M: I'm making zines about you.

Bl: "How lovely! Enjoy doing that."

"So, that's the deal: you do the job, your calling, and I will insure you never go hungry. How about it, my little firefly? My little firecracker? Do we have a deal?"

R: Yes. I pledge myself to your service.

M: Ditto.

Bl: "Hahaha! Very good, ^{my} little glowing ones. Shine bright!"

M: Aaaaand she's gone.

R: Hoo boy. I guess we're in it now.

M: I'm cool with that.

R: Yeah.

R: I started to ask her why she cared so much, only to realize I was asking the wrong question. Why wouldn't she care? She explained, "I exist here too. I have a stake in it."

If we have to give a name for our religious status, we call ourself a "godless death-touched." But when we told our friend, Page Shepard, about this, they came up with a way funnier version:

Page: *tilts head* ...huh. I'd wondered if that was something gods could do, some sort of metaphorical godly cheese touch they slap on people to keep other gods away.

Mori: "I LICKED THIS CHICKEN NUGGET"

"NOW IT IS MINE"

Page: Bony lady, seeing you guys on the ground in the Family Guy death pose: "Oh fuck yeah, 5 second rule, dibs"

Mori: PRETTY MUCH

Page: Assigned Chicken Nuggie By Deity

Wait I need to make a meme



MADGIC #4

Myth, Taken



By
Mori of
LB Lee

THE “CANON” FAST EDDIE

Anyone who's told (or heard) a story orally knows that it's never exactly the same twice. (I've heard some hardcore native Australians pull it off, but if it's true, they're exceptional.) We cut for time (or sore throat), play up or tone down a joke for each specific audience, embellish. Writing and modern recording tech changed this, but didn't end it. (Why do people watch reboots of beloved stories? To see the new spin!)



Me and my brain-sibs love watching a story grow and change. Not only is it a great lesson in craft (why were these changes made? How are they pulled off?), it's like watching a child grow up. Even little changes can make big differences.

When we replaced our beloved 1996 copy of Spider Robinson's the Callahan Chronicals with the 1987 Callahan and Company, the two omnibuses ostensibly contained the same stories. Nevertheless, we found a few line changes. The biggest concerns the character Fast Eddie Costigan; in the '96 version, he says he's sterile, but in the '87 version, he adds, "My wife divorced me for it" (p. 76). Those six words subtly, significantly change character and story.

Presumably Robinson changed the line because between 1987 and 1996, he wrote four more Callahan books and needed the divorce to be for different reasons. But for some folks, this begs the question: which Fast Eddie is the true, “canonical” one? The “original,” who was divorced for his sterility, or the “finalized” version, who wasn’t?

The question may sound trivial, but fandom wars have been staged over less. Some people need even fiction to have one unassailable, “correct” reality. But it doesn’t have to be that way! Our friend Holly loves theater and talks about how part of the fun is, every show is different. Every actor, every stage has its quirks.

We once saw Twelfth Night in the park on a windy day and one of the performers had to ad lib a line (in character!) because a prop kept blowing over. What’s more, it was a

stagehand who kept dashing in to put it back, a stagehand who was ostensibly invisible to the actors! For one delightful moment, entropy bent the play’s reality. (Bent, but not broke. That wily Shakespearean knew intuitively that commanding the stagehand wouldn’t lose the audience; breaking character would.)



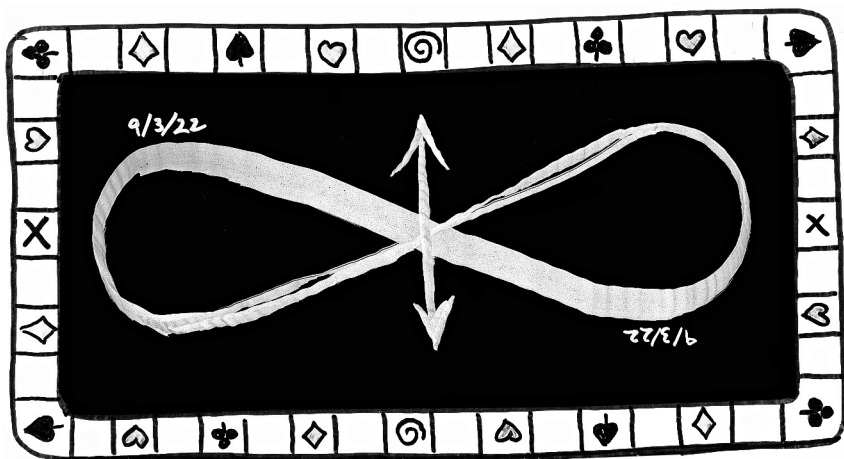
When the seams of a story show, because an author couldn’t plan six books ahead or the weather mocked human ambition, it’s a fascinating look into how storytellers do what they do, how a story survives contact with reality. No planning can compensate for how a story naturally grows and changes over the course of years or centuries. There’s power in bending, breaking, and transforming

“canon”: that moment in Twelfth Night was our favorite part.

As in fiction, so in life. Our biographies can be more fictional than we like to admit. With life, truth can at least hypothetically exist, and it should never be ignored... but it can be elusive. For instance: either the family abused us or they didn't. But they and us have mutually exclusive stories that we're equally adamant are true, stories that are both unprovable.

This lack of a smoking gun used to torment me and my brain-sibs. We wanted proof, an unassailable truth, the One True Way it happened... we wanted canon. And if it wasn't canon, we wanted our experiences to conveniently vanish.

But reality does not conform to human dictates. We remember what we remember. Our life may be apocryphal, but it is very real; we still have to live with it, deal with it, even as all the props get blown over.



THE MONSTER'S JOURNEY

It's a common abuse survivor exercise to write your history as a fairy tale, but it never worked for us. We always felt compelled to ape the monomythic Hero's Journey (which we've always loathed) or write the Southern wet dream of the violated princess of purity and light. But in the story of our family, we were neither hero nor princess. We were the monster.



Quoth Chalquist (2015), "The Hero always constellates the monster. In a sense he is the monster. When one appears, the other soon follows." We were the mother's inner demons made flesh and blood, the reminder of incest left buried, Lilith who "stole" her "real daughter" and "seduced" all her men. In a fucked up way, she needed us to exist to sponge up her moral stains.

The monster isn't necessarily the same as the villain. Monsters are the Other, holding up mirrors to individual and social anxieties. Jekyll and Hyde are not just the most famous multiple in America; they're one of the classic Universal movie monsters, reflecting the fears of the unknowable mind, the incurable lunatic, and the multifarious self that can't be easily identified.

But monsters can also be heroes! Bisclavret is a 12th-century lai about an ethical werewolf who's wolf three days a week, not just once a month. When he gingerly discloses to his wife, she's horrified and steals his clothes, trapping him in wolf form until he befriends a king who recognizes his ethics and good heart (see Shoaf).

When I say we're a monster, folks mistake it for self-loathing. They feel the need to reassure me: "no, no, you're not a monster; you're good!" They're missing the point. I got no shame in being the monster of the family's mythology, since "not knowing one's myth is



the surest way to experience it as fate" (Chalquist 2009, p. 14). It's only by embracing our monstrous role in the family story that we can understand and escape it, for "the very act of turning toward some surfacing story or buried complex softens it and transforms it as the story changes from the inside" (ibid, emphasis his). We may always be a monster, but we don't have to be theirs!

Chalquist treats myths as living, equal partners with those they entangle. They don't exist for human convenience, and Chalquist encourages people to ask themselves, "What does my myth ask of me? What does it want?" (ibid, p. 94) Lest you think he's being metaphorical, in his "Declaration of Enchantment," he states, "The products and figures and beings of imagination possess their own autonomy and imaginal reality. They need no passports and recognize no customs guards" (2017, Article 6). He argues that we live in a matryoshka doll of nested myths: of the places we live

(the creekbed, haven for a suburban monster), the people we know (Mom was the princess, not us), even the groups we participate in (nobody wants to be this week's Main Character on Twitter).

You might argue that all this is apophenia—human invention of meaning out of chaos and noise. And I have no problem with that! You can argue that this whole book is my attempt to make meaning out of the nonsense clanging of my busted brain, and I'll shrug and say sure, why not? Why should that make it any less meaningful?

LB may be the monster, but me, Mori? I've long felt kindred with a specific mythic iteration of Joan of Arc—not a paragon of purity and goodness or the symbol of French nationalism, but the cross-dressing, voice-hearing "homasse" with mud on her boots and blood on her armor.

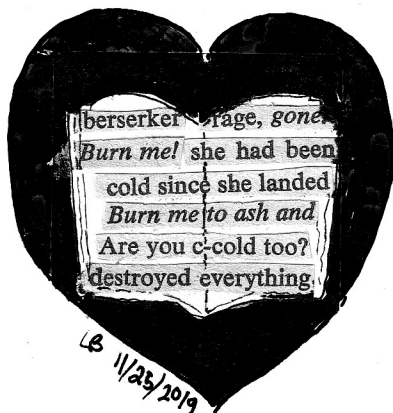


(Hell, the both of us even ended up char-grilled at a tender age!)

As a kid in Texas, I never found that version of Joan in books, so I tossed her aside and forgot about her until I found a bootleg of Evans's 1978 Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture, the first chapter of which is titled "Joan of Arc: Transvestite and Heretic." Needless to say, that chapter won my attention and my money. It's probably bad history, but oh, did I need Arthur Evans's irreverent revel in Joan as a cross-dressing manly woman who treated her personal experience of angels and saints (that is, the voices in her head) as more authoritative than the Church! It gave me so much more to live for than another smug declaration of her DSM

diagnosis. (Seriously, if I never read another “poor schizophrenic Joan who should’ve been locked up for her own good” article, it’ll still be too late.)

What are the myths that you find yourself playing out, in the ensemble of your home, your friends, your enemies, your worlds? Which character/s do you find yourself embodying? What story/s seems to have a hold on you that won’t let go? How can you embrace the tales you’re in and stitch yourself into the tapestry of lives and landscapes they encompass?



RELATIONSHIPS TO STORY

The separation of artist and art is considered unfashionable these days, at least in my circles. But I think there are lots of different relationships between audience and art, many of which don't (or shouldn't) involve the artist at all:

Relationship to characters (Harry Potter the boy)

Relationship to the story (Harry Potter the series)

Relationship to physical object (a specific book, toy, etc.)

All of these relationships are best kept separate from and unmistakable from a relationship with (or financial/moral support of) the creator, J. K. Rowling. I feel like a lot of parasocial weirdness could be avoided if folks realized and accepted that fandom and friendship aren't the same. Just because someone's art changed your life doesn't make them a good person, never mind a good friend or mentor!



As I've mentioned, Piers Anthony had a disproportionately large effect on our inner workings. He's also a shitful writer, too fond of writing depressed, nubile, sometimes underage girls with much older mediocre men. (Oh, and telepathic horses. Dude loves him some telepathic horses.) I feel pretty solid that he's a creep, and once

we realized how messed-up his books were, we tossed our copies. We would've been happy never to think of him again, but we've had to reread an embarrassing number of his books for records purposes. Shit or gold, his work still exerts its force. It still matters.

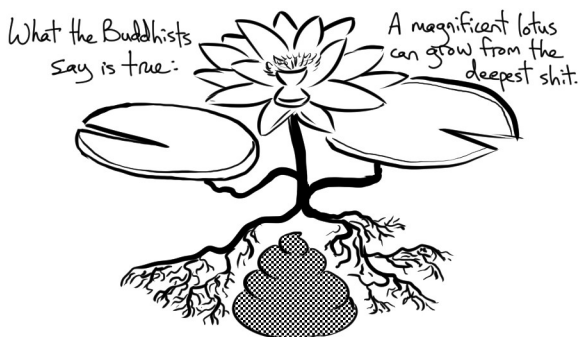


Even Anthony himself, in his Author's Notes, would remark with bemusement on his fan following among young, suicidally depressed girls. He called them Ligeia, after his character in Wielding a Red Sword. (Don't read it. It's bad.) Why were his pervy books popular among them/us?

I think, in a messed-up way, it was because Anthony was willing to write about sexual abuse in his books. His depressed girls escape the abusive "mundane" world into fantastic adventures with better companions. The books offered hope: that things could get better, that we could find people who loved us, that our imagination meant something, even if we didn't know what.

Our parents, understandably, never imagined we'd find such gems in such sleazy, escapist books. They supported our Anthony habit, allowing us to sneak our salvation under their very noses. Incest recovery books would've never flown.

We had at least four headmates who pulled from Piers Anthony books, and all proved better than the characters they were so loosely based off of. No one would make the connection now. (Seriously, who remembers Biff from the Mode series?)



I use Piers Anthony's books as easy examples, but there was other fiction that took on a life for us, far beyond their artists' intent. Anyone who's been an audience (or had one) knows that we aren't empty vessels. We bring our own interpretations, minor or major, which sometimes outpace the originals. (Say a prayer for poor Matt Furie, creator of Pepe the Frog.)

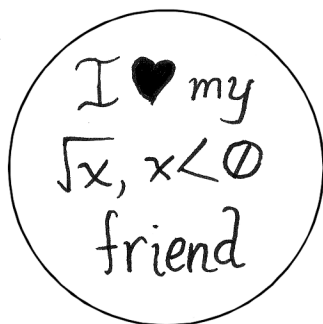
The soulbonding community, created in the late '90s by a group of young writers online to "describe the characters in their heads," (Amorpha, private communication) put a good amount of thought into this. Laura Gilkey, a writer and soulbonder, wrote, "I've long believed [...] that a fictional character is not a single entity, but rather a template, from which everyone who writes fanfiction, or even who watches/reads the source material[,] creates their own unique version [...]" The process of the artist and their assistants, studio, publishers, and others translating that vision into prose, images, etc. is like the process of [a doll-making company] taking a

mold from the original sculpture, and every [doll] owner gets not the original sculpture, but a copy from the mold. None of these copies [...] are exactly like the original" (Gilkey, 2002). She uses this to explain why people can have very different soulbonds of the same character. She describes, for instance, that Alucard in the original Hellsing had amber eyes, while "the Alucard I know and write about has pale silver-blue eyes; he has for years" (ibid). This causes her no bother, because "canon" isn't the end-all be-all.

Sadly, many a fandom (and plural) war beg to differ. For some people, a blue-eyed Alucard would cause total ontological collapse, a crisis of faith. If it's not "canon," it must be fake.

Canon, belief, crises of faith... is there that big a difference between fiction and religion? Zoe Alderton argues no: "If Snapeism is rejected from the canon of 'true' religions, it is important to critique the political decisions that may have led to this judgement [sic]. [...] religions may

be more malleable and fictive than we may like to think" (p. 256). Cusack agrees: "Characters [...] are, literally, black words on white paper, but readers invest these persons with 'potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires[.]' [...] [H]uman beings deal with fictive people as if they were 'real' people. [...] The ontological status of 'religious' figures like gods and angels is to all intents and purposes identical to that of figures from popular fictions" (p. 12, 13, emphasis hers).



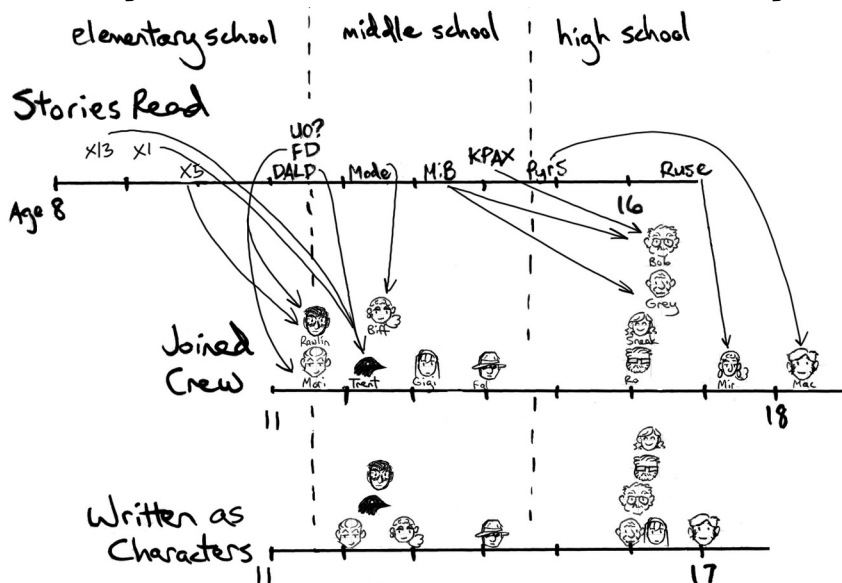
FROM STORY TO MYTHOS

Still, what makes someone bond to a specific story? Is there something special about those works in particular? About us?

We plowed our way through a special issue of Religion, where a number of academics discuss fiction and faith. Davidsen comes up with thoughtful criteria of what makes a work of fiction “reliable,” but none of it held true for us. Far as we can tell, all the stories that majorly influenced our roster/otherworlds had in common was:

- sci-fi or fantasy elements
- we were really, really into it at a certain age

We have decent records of when we first read these stories, when we first wrote characters, and when folks first came here. When we graph them, in the spirit of Tufte (but worse), we get:



Ta-da! Infographics!

As you can see, the ages of 8-16 look to be our nostalgia window where we really formed our tastes in media. Some folks we met, then wrote about (like Biff and Rawlin), while other people we wrote about, then met (like Mac, Bob, and Grey), but nobody came here, far as we know, until we hit puberty.

Puberty is a rough time even without a brutally incestuous family, and our fertility bequeathed whole new responsibilities. We could not discuss our problems with any consensus reality adult, because we learned that they would snitch us out. We already had to make our friends entirely outside the neighborhood; I don't know that our family ever outright said we were troubled or on drugs, but they may not have had to. They were respectable, normal, and very convincing. We were not. Our neighbors too had a myth they needed to believe for their own sanity and comfort. They came to their own conclusions.

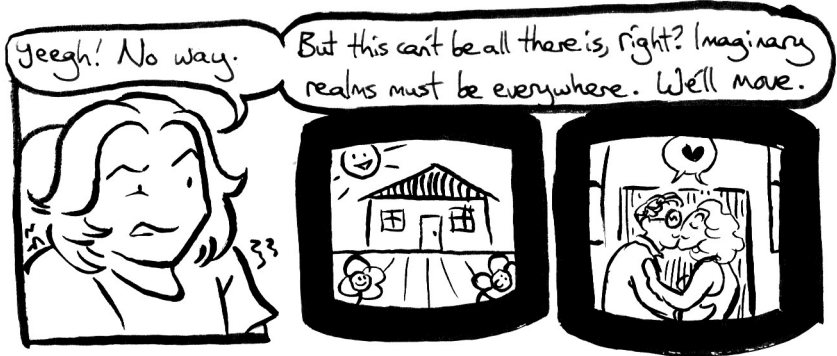
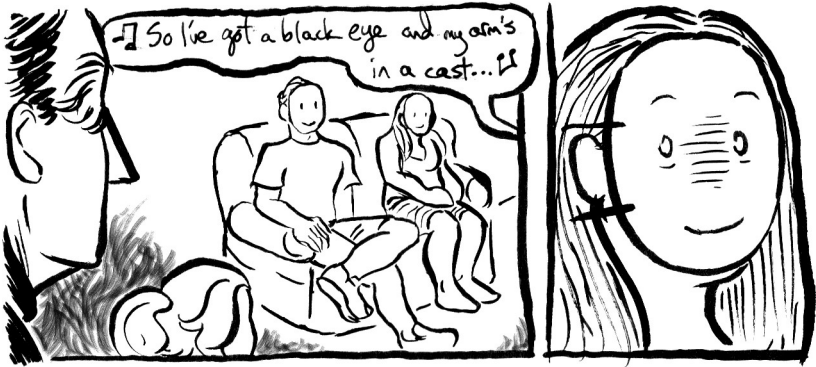


We needed advice, friends, and help, and we needed them without our parents catching wise. How could we, in a way they'd never suspect, in a way they couldn't control? How could we insure that the people we turned to would see the parents in abuse mode, not just their performance of respectable normalcy?

Our solution was genius, in a crack-brained, middle-school way.

THE GREAT PSYCHESCAPE





There was. And it was called Dream a Little Dream.

It was a Piers Anthony book, of course, co-written with Julie Brady, and it's not very good. Like most of Anthony's books, it's an escapist adventure about abused women escaping reality into a magical fantasy world, this time of their dreams. Even by Anthony standards, the book is unsubtle; the villain is named Reility, an avatar of the heroine's abuser, and he's out to destroy everyone's dreams. The plot was less important than the Authors' Notes.

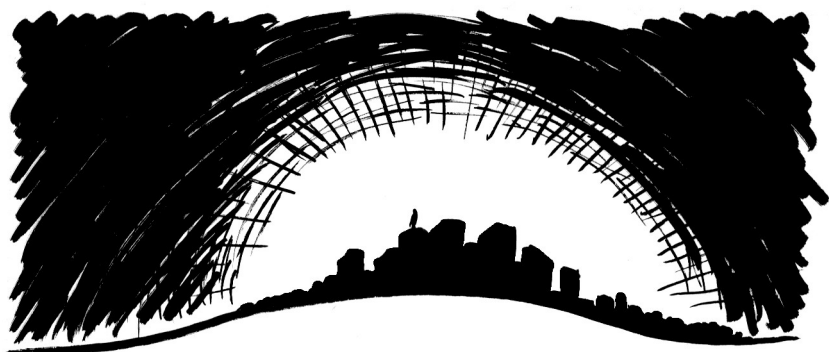
See, Julie Brady was one of Anthony's "Ligeias" and a lucid dreamer. She says the book "was taken from a serial dream of mine over the course of a year. I used the serial dreams I had to escape the horrors of my life." Anthony edited her dream diary and together, they published it.

Brady never said how she learned dream control, but who cared? What mattered was, she had, and if she could do it, so could we. Rawlin was especially motivated; he wanted out. (I still thought he was overreacting.) We set our noses to the grindstone.



Lacking any guides (this was before our Internet, and it never occurred to us to look for a book, lest the parents find it), we just went to bed every night, willing ourselves an escape. For a bit, nothing happened. I got discouraged, but Rawlin was relentless.

I never did get the knack of dream recognition or control. But Rawlin did, and one night, something crazy happened...



That city was named Vago. It would change our lives... but not the way Rawlin hoped. We couldn't move to a dream world; we had to wake up eventually. So Rawlin sacrificed himself, I chained him, we stayed with the family, and we forgot about it for a while...

BUILDING A MYTHOS

Meanwhile, our original girl trucked on, unaware of any of this. She only knew that conventional myths had no place for her. Old paperbacks did, but the shit-to-Shinola ratio was awful.

Then she got an idea: what if she made her own Story?



That Story became Infinity Smashed, a sprawling multiversal epic crammed with everything we thought was cool. Pop culture references, life events corporeal and imaginary, subconscious fixations, everything went into the pot to stew (see Lee 2012).

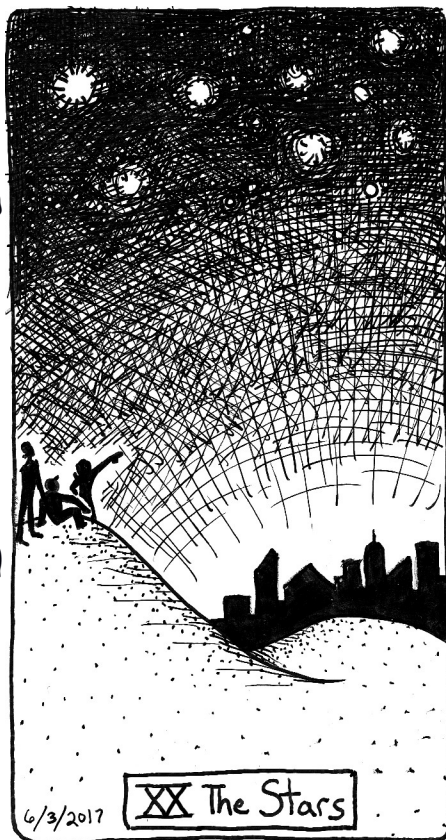
Xavia Publius argues that theatre is a means of queer mourning and remembrance: “The ghosts of our (straight cis) ancestors get funerals, genealogies, canons. Our queer ancestors get theatre [...] they are those banished from the churchyard or the cemetery, from the record books and the family trees, condemned to return only onstage. They are the cyclical re-performance of the Turnerian breach, the traumatic memory [...] never archived” (p. 65). Because it’s “just a story,” unspeakable truths can be spoken.

“Every year I started to write it, but thought it sucked. I’d wait and try it again the next year. I thought for sure by fifth grade I’d have it” (San Francisco Examiner Staff).

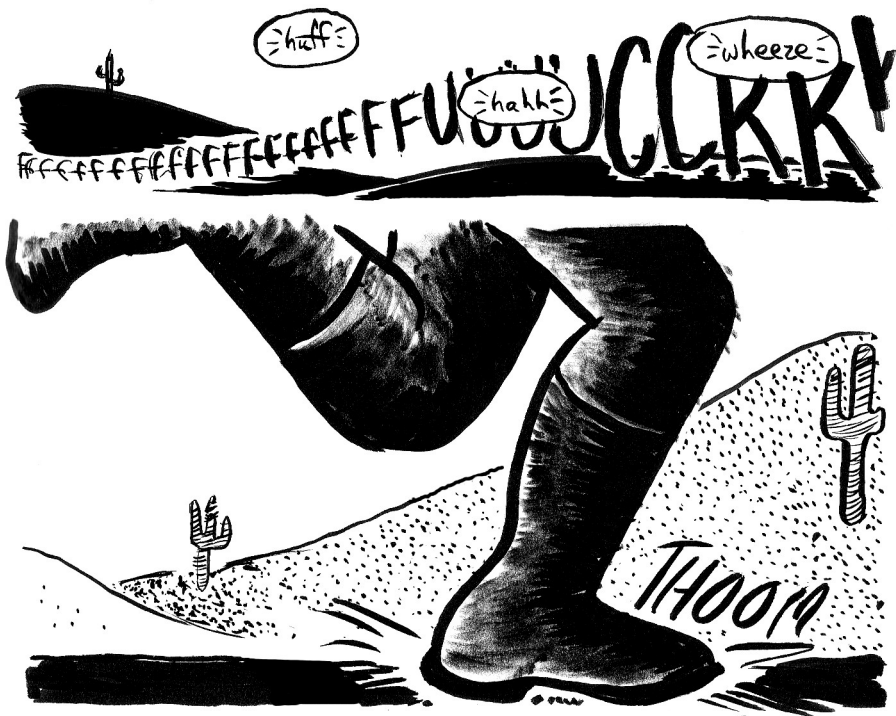
Then she realized that the “characters” were her alters. In Cuckoo (the play version), she crows, “We’re going to do the Epic Sci-fi story! [...] I tried and tried to write it down as a kid, but it was terrible! [...] NOW, with your extra energy and brains, we can do it!” (p. 79) The others laugh: “You’re just gathering the FACTS, now! Soon we can write the entire story of us.” (p. 80) That story becomes Cuckoo.

When we emailed Clell and asked about it, she said, “Ahh, so I’m not the only one?! That’s hilarious.”

Once Clell learned of her alters, the fiction itself became superfluous, but our Story did not. As we pumped years of blood and sweat into it, doing the work, we developed a symbiotic, give-and-take flow with it. Like the creekbed before it, Vago took notice of us. It was a weirdness nexus, a rough-and-tumble place to start over, and we were its type. Doors started falling open between our mind and it, and the family god saw an opportunity...



BIFF







DANCE, PUPPET.



DO THIS FOR ME.

That was how Biff and I met: because he got meatjacked. Up til then, poor dude had never met anything weirder than himself, and now here he was, getting run down by a giant raccoon man and punted into a world that didn't obey physics. I spelunked into his psyche, cut the puppet strings, and then we were brain-roomies until we figured out how to get him back to Vago.

The other guy in the roster at the time, a shapeshifter named Trent, immediately (correctly) clocked Biff as a bad influence.



I disagreed.



Why? Because Biff is the total opposite of the family; he wears all his flaws on the surface and hides all his good traits inside. I knew exactly what I was getting with him, and I appreciated the transparency.

Biff didn't understand my lack of stranger danger.



And then I dragged him through a day in the seventh grade. What else was I going to do with him? It was a school day!



He called this surreal episode of his life "magic school." I can see how he got there. The moment he got home, he drank himself into oblivion, determined to forget the whole undignified episode.

He wasn't about to get free of my entropic ass that easy. But that's a story for another day...



MIND DANCER

I'm gonna let you in on a secret. If y'all read our earlier book All in the Family, you saw that I went by M.D. there. At the end, I say that M.D. stands for Mori Deathforest, a bilingual pun.



The truth is, I made that up. For years, I was just M.D.; we even had a running gag that I didn't know what it stood for. But I did. M.D. stood for a buried part of my history. It's the name that I'm pretty sure Rawlin gave me: Mind Dancer.

Earlier, I mentioned that Rawlin and I pulled from a cheesy sci-fi/romance novel from the '80s. That book was Fire Dancer by Ann Maxwell. (Don't read it. It's bad.) I'd argue that it's the myth that has us both by the throats, the story of the symbiotic, hopelessly codependent, "you and me against the world" soulmate relationship. Every time Rawlin calls me "little one," it's my best attempt to translate into English the book-specific term for that kind of symbiosis.

In fiction, such a relationship is romantic and glamorous. In real

life, it's a disaster. (And once the family god got its seed into him, it took it into the creepiest sexual territory possible.)

In Fire Dancer, to "dance" is to go into an ecstatic (or crisis) flow state, working with forces that'd otherwise be unsurvivable: infernos, thunderstorms, sci-fi plasma shields... and insane berserker rage. Though "mind dancers" are barely mentioned in the book, presumably they'd specialize in dancing intense brain shit.

You can see how I got my name. (Rawlin probably got his own because my fictional version had the last name Rawlins, so I'd be "M.D. Rawlin's." What can I say, family god had a sense of humor.)

Fire Dancer is more Rawlin's myth than mine, or so I'd like to think, but I'm definitely a part of it. I resent that this stupid pulp paperback predicted my fucking future, with its stupid warning that non-mating symbiotes tended to live short, unhappy lives. Out of spite, I've done my damndest to

pretend the dumb book doesn't exist (and isn't on our fucking shelf; we can't get rid of it til it's done with us), but that hasn't made the book or my history go away. The story still has its hold. Rawlin's and my bond remains, however broken. He can't let me go, and maybe on some level, I can't let him go either.



CUTTING THE STRINGS

As the years passed and Rawlin's infestation progressed, we got into a vicious cycle. He'd do something shitty, we'd take him down, then try to imprison him somewhere he wouldn't get out.

Solitary confinement is always awful, but it's especially heinous for Rawlin. We weren't just locking him away from us; we were locking him in with the family god. He had to listen to it 24/7, no respite and no second opinion. He couldn't even commit suicide, because the god had made him functionally immortal. The more time he spent in a cell, the worse he got. He'd bust out, and the cycle would repeat.

Finally, the death spiral reached its inevitable end. Before I killed myself, ferally insane, I sealed him under the abyssal waters.



For a long time, that was it. Aside from one brief resurgence in 2006 (a whole story unto itself and not mine to tell), he stayed in the depths, getting more and more god-eaten, until late 2019, six months after I murdered the family god. I guess with that done, the ocean decided it was finally safe to tell us about him.

By this point, nobody had any memory of him (or the godseeds) at all. We were so perplexed, I even asked how he got down there!



(I still don't know how I did it, and Rawlin can't tell me. Our amnesia can't be cheated, and trying is likely to end in Rawlin losing the memory as well. We call it the "no spoilers" rule.)

Thirteen years locked in our subconscious with nothing but a parasite god for company had left Rawlin furious, desperate, and mostly out of his mind. He hacked into our dreams and started pursuing me in my nightmares. When Rogan tried to get between us, Rawlin grabbed him, realized he'd forced a kiss on the wrong headmate, and ripped Rogan's throat out with his teeth.

This space intentionally left blank.

Naturally, this didn't make us eager to bring Rawlin out of solitary, and he got desperate enough that he started trying to puppet the ocean... and succeeding. We found ourselves cut off from the waters, bunkered in the house like soldiers. If he got a grip on the elemental energy of our headspace, then what? Should we try to kill him? The vicious cycle was all set to restart...

...And Biff said, "This ain't working. We gotta let him out."

Sneak agreed. We'd spent years becoming a team; Rawlin wasn't the threat he used to be. Pragmatics aside, we were no longer children in a slaughterhouse. We could do better, and we should.

So we asked the ocean to hork Rawlin up.



The first thing we noticed about him was that cheek-straining, teeth-grinding grin, unchanged in twenty years. Later, we'd learn this was the work of the godseed in his chest, carpet-bombing him with bliss. It was how it controlled him: obedience blasted him with ecstatic cosmic purpose and meaning, while disobedience would cut the tap, leaving everything flat, gray, and meaningless. After so many years in solitary imprisonment, that bliss was about all he had to feel good about.

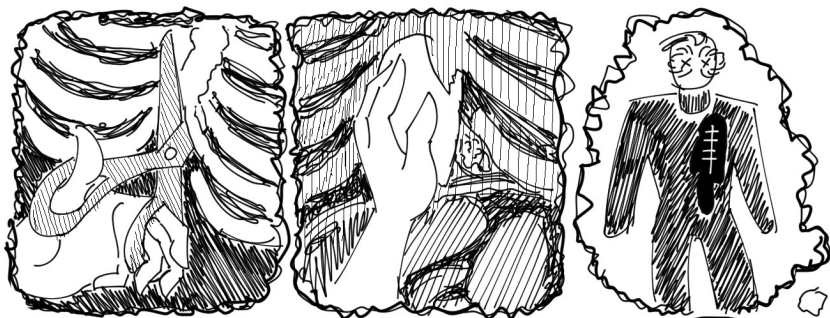
God, he looks
just... ordinary.
Hard to believe
this stupid prick
is causing this much
havoc.



There. Congratulations
Rawlin you asshole.
You get drawn, in
all your stupid kink
gear douchebag glory.
WHAT THE FUCK R U.

12/12/2019

It took two days to rediscover his godseed. Crazy SOB tried to
remove it himself, and the family god stopped him.



Yeeeah! You
feel that?

Yup.

Rawlin? What
happened to
you?

Who cares?
You don't
like me.





If I hadn't up and bony-ladied the family god six months earlier,

I don't think I could've pulled it off. As it was, we had no idea just what exactly we'd done, only that it was clearly important. We made baffled journal sketches, set it aside for later, and focused on bringing Rawlin back into our little inner society. We treated him the way we would a ghost, accepting him unconditionally, listening to what he had to say without judgment, not taking shit personally.

Dude made it less than four months before getting exiled.

Sorry to disappoint anyone who thought removing the godseed would miraculously "fix" him. Remember, Rawlin carried that seed in him for twenty years. His personality and habits had warped around it and its bliss-bombing, and now he was in major withdrawal and had no idea how to relate to people. He'd have flashes of lucidity and comparative calm, then revert to god-eaten behavior, treating us like a video game that'd cough up what he wanted if he hit the right buttons. Every rule we set, he'd haggle and break, seeing what he could get away with.

I MASTURBATE
OVER YOU!



The final straw came when he started perving on Rogan. Mac was

Okay buddy,
time for you to go.

so furious, he bawled Rawlin out. (Biff, conversely, refused to even dignify Rawlin with a fight, the worst insult he could pay someone. Both were firsts on me.)

We were done. We told Rawlin that he could do whatever the hell he wanted; his old headspace stomping grounds were his to use as he saw fit. He just couldn't hang out with us or come into our territory. We wouldn't jail him, but that didn't mean we had to put up with his shit.

Rawlin hated it, of course. For the next year and a half, he tried to break into our house and get us to pay attention to him. He never got very far (his time god-eaten had left him completely incapable of proper planning or delaying gratification), and after January 2022, he stopped trying. We lost track of him.

In recent weeks, I've found out what Rawlin was doing in the interim. Without us around as a continual trigger, he eventually detoxed, calmed down, and realized that for the first time in twenty years, he was free: of prison, violence, and the family god. There were no threats, no problems... nothing to do but whatever he wanted.

So... what did he want?

First he rambled his old stomping grounds, exploring, studying headspace. (He clearly knows more about its rules than we do.) He tried to kill himself in every way he could think of, but it wouldn't take (apparently the residual influence of the family god; the bony lady calls him "stuck"). Finally, when it became clear there was nothing left to do, he started dealing with his shit, coming back to himself (whoever that was).

His appearance also started to change.



While seeded, Rawlin had an uncanny look. People seem to think he was a hideous troll and get surprised when they see drawings of him, but the ugliness was all in how he moved, how he emoted. The family god kept him in an artificial state of what it considered physical perfection, and he looked like a terrifying, fucked-up divine emissary played by Crispin Glover. Now he looked like a person.

Ironically, now that he was able to control himself better and maybe handle being around us, he no longer wanted to chance it. He felt awful about everything he'd done and worried he couldn't trust his own self-control. So he stuck to his territory and avoided us; another impasse, though a more peaceable one. We'd catch glimpses of him, and he'd ditch the moment he noticed.

Then, in July, he suddenly found himself shoved out front.



He didn't know what year it was or where we were, never mind what to do. He could try to reach us, ask for help, and indeed, in the past, he would've jumped on the excuse... which meant he now refused to do so. We had asked him not to interact with us, and he wanted to respect our wishes.

But what was he supposed to do instead?

Luckily, he got tossed out into our own room. Searching pockets and the shelves, he found our anchors, including our “Guide to Life,” which told him he needed to call our friends for help. Rawlin would’ve rather jumped in a snake pit, but he swallowed his fear and figured out how to text three people. (Calling was too scary.)

All three responded within the night. They explained to him where he was, when he was, that there had been a pandemic, and that he lived in an immunocompromised house and must not leave the room without a plague mask on. All ranged from polite to friendly to him, much to his consternation. Didn’t they know who he was? Why were they being so nice to him?

The cat was especially worrisome. Our friends could tell him that the cat was not ours, but we had been taking care of it while our roomy was out of town, and no one knew if she was back yet. (She was, but Rawlin had no way to know without venturing out and asking, and he would’ve died first.)

He did his best, read one of the few books on our shelf he still recognized, went to bed, and Rogan woke up to a stressed out journal entry and a ringing phone.



I didn't see the roommates or talk to them, except the cat, who I hope I don't have to feed! [REDACTED] said it's not yours but were taking care of it? Did I starve the cat by mistake? Say what to do about the cat.

(The cat was fine. He and Rawlin are buds now. Rawlin gives him string to stalk, all the while crooning what a ferocious mighty hunter he is.)

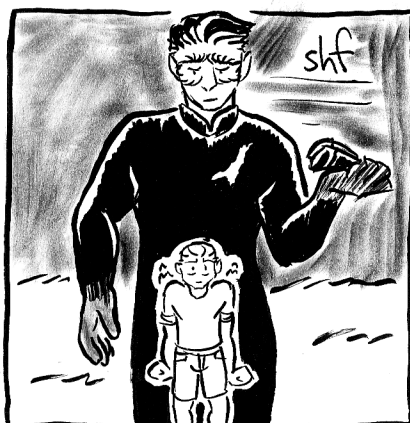
Our friend was emphatic about how well-behaved Rawlin had been and gave him full marks for conduct, noting how determined he had been to neither manipulate us nor leave things undone. We agreed and cautiously opened up relations with Rawlin again. He was more squirrely about it than we were, afraid that being around us (especially me) would trigger his old shit. (Besides, he knows full well the shit he done between 2000 and my death, and he knows eventually I'm gonna remember and be real fucking mad.)

So far, though, things have been... okay. Tense, but okay. He's a pretty grim guy, but he has a sense of humor now, dry and self-deprecating. He can say, "I need to be alone," and then act on it. He can think ahead, delay gratification, recognize other people's feelings and needs. He can never be who he was twenty-five years ago... but he might be becoming someone I'd like to know.

And so, one night at 3AM (the time of great decisions!), as I was coming close to finishing this zine, I decided that since his ethics now forbade him to reach out to me, it was time for me to reach out to him...







It had been so long since we'd danced together..



...but the fire still came so easily to us both.



BECOMING MYTHOLOGY

Joan Nestle opens her lesbian classic, A Restricted Country, with “I am of the people who have no mythologies, no goddesses powerful and hidden, to call on. I am of the people who have no memories of other lands beneath their feet other than the cement slabs of city streets. [...] I am forced to go deep, diving through my own accumulated years to seize upon newly ancient fragments. [...] I am only here with a shallow pool of time around my toes. But that here has been my history” (p. 13-14).

Similarly, we thought we had no history or mythology to draw on. People like us have symptoms, not spirit; conditions, not kin; madness, not magic. The “healthy” thing, the normal thing, is to leave it all behind, that sick, crazy, irrational, maladaptive nonsense.

But our madgic won’t let us go. We are a part of it, and it’s a part of us. Embracing our shallow pool has proven deep and rich.

“I have become our own mythology,” Nestle says (p. 132), and yes. We have.



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CAVEAT EMPTOR!

This zine talks frankly about incest, rape, physical violence, attempted murder, suicide, mental illness, religious abuse (including exorcism), unwanted gods and religious experiences, divine parasitism, body horror, soul puppetry, Hell, and a truckload of death, all involving children and teenagers. It's not meant to be a downer, believe it or not, but you might find it such! Be aware!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LB Lee are a multivarious cyborg gestalt who make mental health comics and write about reality melting. Abraham Riesman of Vulture called them “the best cartoonist you’ve never heard of.” They live around Boston.

Mori Deathforest Lee is a member of LB in good standing and punkrat zinester who might’ve killed a god once. She calls everyone “dude” and “bro” and also does our taxes every year. Her gender is that of a sterile worker ant who puts all its biological energy into absurd feats like pole-vaulting with its face or being a living jar. She aspires to one day eat a pigeon and make its urban survival powers her own.

