

COBALT



ISSUE 1

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Issue 1

Brian Russell | Awash

Awash
No One in Particular
Romance of the Unfamiliar
Preface

Georgia Kreiger

A Blue Daring
At the Ruins

John Abbott

Wintering

Steven Leyva

In Creole

Andrea Dickens

At the Clay Studio

Jen Michalski

Sweet Rotten

Mandy Taggart

The Wild

Emily Kiernan

Tabula Rasa

James Claffey

Bolt the Door

John FitzGerald

Humans Learn Beliefs

Brian Russell

Awash

The unthinkable prospect
Of a world in which I am left
To my own devices

Which are few and as soon
As the batteries die useless
First order of business

I draw a map in the sand and
Mark where I stand as the capital
Of civilization within me the
Detailed blueprints of the pyramids
And the concept of zero
Beyond me the finite frontier

The many miles of undeveloped
Shoreline with spectacular views of a
Sea filled with intricately depicted
Monsters just as the first of our kind

Must have done I make a list
Beginning with all the things I need
To do to survive then moving on
To art then astronomy then industry
Then medicine then technology

For now I've got to hurry the sun
Has begun its descent and I've yet
Caught a fish worth keeping.

Brian Russell

No One in Particular

On the occasional and unpredictable nights
When you're without a roommate
I like to read aloud from whatever happens
To distract me at the moment I read aloud while
You sleep as I would if you were a child or
If we'd ever had one to read to
As if you were a child and not a woman
Who was never the type to be ashamed
Of her age just a couple hundred years
Ago odds are we'd both be dead by now anyhow
I read aloud Economic life was intertwined
In these turbulent times
With the life of politics and the life of the mind
To no one in particular sitting in a hospital
It's easy to see the only life that matters
Is the life of the body tired I close the book and rest
My head on your chest which rises and falls
To the rhythm of the empire.

Brian Russell

Romance of the Unfamiliar

Mercifully our life together
Hides what we can't bear
To see our everyday depreciations

Until a friend after seeing you says
Jesus man she's wasting away
I don't know what to
Call it other than relief to hear
The clear voice of empirical truth

In my eyes you're eternally
The girl in the photo on the mantle
From a trip to Morocco remember
It was our last day
We hadn't taken a single picture
In a week we were too consumed
By whatever was inside us

Ripening and the intrinsic romance
Of the unfamiliar our plane was leaving
In an hour so we sprinted through the
Crowded streets to the mosque I can't
Remember its name but seen through its
Glass floor the breathless blue Atlantic's sun
Stippled waves stunned us into
Silence taken at arm's length
You can't see any of it in the picture nothing
Other than our burnt and glistening faces
Our unbreakable elation.

Brian Russell

Preface

I can't seem to help
It I preface the conversations
I don't want to have
With you with the phrase
The book says
As if I'm simply the messenger
Of bad news the book says
We should talk
About what you want to wear

I can't finish the sentence

I don't want to think
About it about going through
The closet through all the clothes
I told you you didn't need I'll
Inevitably find the black and blue
Dress you wore just once I never
Understood why you kept it
I still remember it
That new year's eve
In Chicago my god
Do you remember how
Cold it was that year
Standing outside the bar with
Everyone we knew we weren't ready

For the night to end you
Couldn't stop shaking I couldn't
Get a cab but we were still filled
To capacity with warm happiness
Remember your tears froze in black
Streaks on your face no I'm
Sorry how can I possibly choose
The last thing I'll see you in.

Georgia Kreiger

A Blue Daring

My teenage daughter tells me that my roasted red pepper soup is totally sick,
meaning, in her vernacular, delicious.

My politics, apparently, are also sick, as my lit survey student suggests
after witnessing my zeal for Civil Disobedience,
meaning, in this case, off-beat.

Sometimes migraine or the pangs of middle age cause me to regress
to an inner cry of the childish, Oh, Momma, I feel so sick –
which is to say, in need of pity.

And when a student calls my office one morning moaning into his cell phone
as he vomits into a toilet in some shabby apartment somewhere,
his own or a friend's, (neither of us at this moment can be sure),
his words, I can't come to class because I'm sick, indicate,
I'm almost certain, hung over.

And all I know at that instant is that something in me would like to be there
with that boy, holding his head as he empties himself
into some grimy toilet, sweat glowing on his chilled,
fever-pink boy's cheeks.

Something in me—emptied, blue, and daring—longs to be somewhere not here,
out where zealots march and rant, out where young men pass out
and awaken not knowing quite what happened,
only that they will not make it to class, but remembering, at least,
that they must call.

Something in me, too, calling—sending out a distress signal
from an unmapped ocean of longing, surely a sickness,
but also so familiar, so intense
that it is sweet and, somehow, delicious.

Georgia Kreiger

At the Ruins

Year twenty-five: I redecorate while you tend the dead.

I shift the furnishings to reinvent our rooms,
rake at indentations in the carpet, rename the plants.

You bring the dead out of their dusty darkness
into our lived-in spaces, unwrap them, gently, from their layers
of protection, call me in to look. And though I am afraid at first,

they are beautiful, flattened like folded linen,
gelatinous light over bone. I look to the walls and paint,

endless painting, walls stretching into a tunnel of wall—
True Blue to Violet Ice.

You scuff like a tourist through our house
where I've replaced old what-nots with new,

called an old bedroom a new office,
turned the kitchen from Autumn Glory to Frosted Aqua.

You lay the dead out, lovingly, and shine a reading lamp
to admire glowing faces that collapse and sag
around their stopped stories. I look away

to shake out filmy window treatments
that will introduce new views into old spaces.
We work back to back, a Janus-faced union.

You lift the dead, carefully,
like children stilled by sleep, and carry them to the door.
I turn to look toward morning as you step out into the dark.

John Abbott

Wintering

This year will find me
wintering in crawl spaces
and tunneled out
sections of earth
we call basements,
places where light
comes through
diffused in grays
and earth tones.
The resulting version
of sunlight
is so weak
I come to prefer
darkness,
a state which
seems static
in comparison to the changing
seasons. Sometimes I enjoy
not having the pressure
of keeping up
with anything but old
movies and older books
and, when I'm feeling
ambitious, shaving by
candlelight in the absolute
quiet of winterdawn.

Steven Leyva

In Creole

I speak Creole to the mirror
a bayou has its own summer
I drop the needle on vinyl—it is pierced and out spins strange fruit
summer is the Eden of all mosquitoes—needles pointing at everyone
as if to name them through extracting blood

I make beignets from scratch
kill mosquitoes against my arm
if the naked dough goes as dark as elbow skin
there can be no quick rescue
I powder with sugar
in Creole I can't remember the word only the accent
extracted as I bite down and name it all good

Andrea Dickens

At the Clay Studio

I. Throwing Pots

My hands have grown large-knuckled,
useful hands, an artist's hands.
I'm two decades into this craft, and George,
the gruff-handed senior potter at this studio,
still provides tasks for times between shows:
this week, 200 bowls,
no more than 10 different shapes.
Half-shaped bowls grow like slick mushrooms
on planks in the kiln yard. They await their foot-trimming, final shaping
while I throw, and throw.
And I amass a garden of sky-drinking
cereal bowls, Japanese noodle bowls, palm-fitting tea bowls.
By Thursday, they bend all the groaning greenware boards:
The drying process and firing takes so much out of them,
five pounds of clay becomes a soup-bowl, small serving-bowl:
I have to aim large just to make
something small.
His idea's an old one,
repeated like a koan through centuries of apprentices.
Somewhere in Kyoto, Gloucester, Asheville,
other youngish potters like me
sit at wheels in a studio, doing the same.
We know throwing is only mechanical memory,
and our hunched bodies know

trained hands will always recreate known worlds.
I'm on 187. My right wrist has ached for a week.
At 4, I get up, walk to Dino's for coffee.
And by the time I've returned,
rain has started. I gather in the remaining bowls,
from the kiln yard. Most are fine, a few,
the ones caught under the eaves,
too damaged by the runoff rain: they weren't yet ready
to be bowls cupping soup or rain.
They'll be recycled into clay. And again from them, I'll throw new bowls.
For it's just clay,
and everything can be made again.

II. Bisque

There are always tasks we think we've mastered.
For me, it's the bisque,
but in this firing, one bowl cracked,
an S-curve crack, a beginner's crack.
I'm surprised, humbled.
I'd only kept 92 of the 200. Now, 91.
So I set aside the bowl; we'll carry the busted bisque,
the ones that we won't glaze-fire,
down to the lake below the kiln yard, and toss it in,
my arm heaving to its tendon's limits
a good substitute for an emotion a bit meaner
than broken-pot melancholy.
Still, there's an odd spite or comfort in knowing that my mistakes,
even in the wet lake bottom,
will take 1000 years to revert to mud.

III. Kiln Opening

Anagama wood kiln: fired twelve days, cooled eleven.
Its gently arched spine
summons our attention, now that the smokestack no longer
tongues flames. Our pots all arked up
like duplex animals, getting cabin fever.
Tomorrow we'll open it. Slowly the temperature
has arced its decline.
The smoke's cleared; the kiln-door bricks no longer glow at night.
We're almost ready
to summon our pots back into this world.
Last night, I sat outside in the kiln yard and listened to the kiln cooling.
Without the kiln-fire, I could see the stars again,
and tomorrow, in the pots we pull from our primordial fire cave, we'll see
the negative stars,
pinpricks of iron and manganese
those black stars, frozen in a private act of leeching from stoneware,
and star-flinty wood ash trapped in glaze
for the next few thousand years.
There are always our expectations. And our fear.
The hope that months of work pays off, the fear
we have to scrap and start anew.
George wonders about his new blue glaze, wonders
whether he put the his blue-glazed teapots in the right place.
Wonders
if the flame path will bleed blue
across shino bowls, chun plates, copper-red bottles.
Every time we open this kiln,
any kiln
we hope for good ash-glazes, lustrous like water, matte like earth,
we hope to trace the paths of our dancing kiln-gods,
paths grazing the sides of pots.

For they are gods, and their paths are marked
by trailing shadows left while escaping.

Jen Michalski

Sweet Rotten

When Clea writes, it's always about her 2-year-old daughter. It's not that Hennie minds too much, it's just that she loves Clea more. She has loved Clea since they were high school freshmen, when they cut gym class to smoke cigarettes behind the cafeteria, since Hennie joined the Army two years ago and went from Fort Knox to Fallujah. She loves all things about Clea to the point that she knows them, and it is her preference to hear about those first, if not exclusively.

She waits for these pieces while sitting on the floor under the payphone at the base, a single light bulb at the head of the darkened corridor turning the waxed linoleum into a glass sea. She pushes her foot against the tiles, wishing she could slip in the cool oily water and emerge in the swimming hole near Blackwater Falls State Park, her fingers entwined in the blond ponytail that lies like wet rope on Clea's back.

"Kaitlin is talking so much now, Hennie." Clea's voice is twangy, a familiar key of home. "I can't wait until we come to see you."

"I can't wait, either," Hennie answers, picking at her desert boots. "I don't have much yet. I've got a bed and a futon, though. I could sleep on the futon so you two can share the bed."

"Don't be silly—there will be plenty of room for all of us."

Hennie wants to press the issue but doesn't. There are nights when she stays on base, when the others go out to drink and shoot pool, that she presses all of Clea's letters together and reads them like a book, trying to find answers. Words like love and lonely and miss you become taffy, their meanings stretched and twisted depending on Hennie's mood. And yet she is analyzing a situation that is flat on Clea's end, dynamic on hers. Hennie has woken to mortar explosions and carried a child's hand in ice, hoping it could be reattached at the first aid station. She has fired an M4 from a rooftop into

a crowd and still feels the clutch in her stomach from it. She has felt sand grinding in every orifice, heat in her nose and eyes like dry fire. She has traded one hell for another.

But Clea has changed as well, in two years, she knows. She is a mother, a wife. Maybe she has exchanged rotten apples for rotten apples. Hennie wonders if Clea has resigned herself to their taste, whether she has.

“I miss you so much,” Hennie whispers, her lips touching the receiver. She hears distant chaos, followed by Clea yelling, a child crying.

“Sorry, Hennie.” Clea’s voice, breathless, returns. “Kaitlin gets into everything, and god knows Gary don’t do a thing around here.”

“It’s okay,” Hennie kicks the floor with her heel, feels the cement underneath vibrate in her foot and up her ankle. “I gotta go, anyway.”

She changes into her sweats and heads to the gym. She will run the indoor track until exhaustion, and then she will run the two miles to her apartment complex off Route 130, to the one-bedroom on the second floor, where she will fall asleep without another thought in her head. Her apartment, except for a few things, is as bare as the day she signed the lease two weeks ago. She does not know yet what she wants her new life to look like, only that she wants Clea to come. She wants to see Clea in the bathroom, combing the knots out of her hair, to see her heating up water on the stove. She wants to see if Clea will fit, if she can make her fit. If she wants to fit.

They fit once, like layers of sediment, their particles distinct but protective of the other, weathering earthquakes, excavations from police, social workers. They had planned to run away. When Hennie found the opening, the Army recruiter who set up in the corner of the high-school cafeteria, his pressed clothes and cologne drawing more girls than boys over to his table, she took it, the promise of adventure, a career, an identity instead of 30 hours a week and no benefits at the box store after graduation. She would pull Clea out of the ground with her, and they would blossom in some other place, weeds that they were.

Until Clea got pregnant. Whether Clea had actually loved Gary or whether Gary just offered her a way out of her mother's house Hennie was not sure. Or maybe, in retrospect, Hennie is just delusional about things. They all must come to an end. Kids grow up, fairy tales unravel. But Hennie wrote to Clea every week in Iraq, even more than she wrote to her brother or her mother; sweet letters of regret, of longing, and Clea did not discourage them, writing back, and her words Hennie chewed during nights in the oven dark desert, digested, savored.

The Greyhound from Big Ugly, West Virginia, almost five hours, comes in at ten o'clock Saturday morning. Hennie watches the passengers depart, sees the familiar eyes and faces of the mountain people she has left behind, proud, hard eyes, set lips, closed stances. Hennie remembers those things in herself when she first left home, the chip on her shoulder. But when she came back from Iraq and got stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland, she took the metro into DC to find an Afghani restaurant she'd heard about. She got a library card. She spent hours looking through the museums at the mall, at Asian and Indian art, aviation, natural history, the world much bigger than she had ever imagined, and somehow, she felt more secure in it than she ever had in Big Ugly.

"Hennie!" She hears Clea's voice from the steps of the bus. Her face is obscured by a smaller Clea, who clutches a Cookie Monster by the neck. Hennie steps forward, opening her arms as Clea pushes Kaitlin into them and turns toward the luggage compartment of the bus.

"Say hi to your Aunt Hennie!" she says to Kaitlin, who studies Hennie in a daze. She smells of dried fruit juice and sleep. Kaitlin presses Cookie Monster against Hennie's cheek.

"Kiss Cookie Monster," she orders, and Hennie touches the matted fur with her lips as Clea comes up with an old hard-shell suitcase and folded stroller. Hennie remembers, when she enlisted, how a favorite biology teacher raised money among the teachers to buy her a soft-shell Samsonite suitcase with wheels that rolled every way. It was the first and perhaps only thing she really owned.

"Hey, girlie, you look fine." Clea weaves her arms around Hennie and Kaitlin. Hennie can smell Clea's perfume, a Calvin Klein knockoff she bought at the mall back when they were teenagers, and she feels a wet click in her throat. The small of her back sweats. She bends with her knees and places Kaitlin between them to get a better look. Clea's acne has cleared, and she wears the faintest trace of makeup. Her hair is unbraided, cut in a shag. Hennie runs her hands through the tips, grazing her

cheek, before Clea picks Kaitlin back up.

“Do you like my hair?” Clea follows Hennie to her subcompact. “Gary hates it, but it’s so easier to take care of now, and I just don’t have the time, with Kaitlin.”

“If you like it, I like it, too.” She heaves Clea’s suitcase into the trunk with the stroller.

“I can spike it a little with gel—it looks really nice when I go out with the girls sometimes,” she explains. “Shit, I forgot the car seat. Gary had it in the truck when he left this morning, and I didn’t even think about it. I’m going to have to sit in the back with Kaitlin, Hennie, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Hennie answers. “It’s not far.”

“It looks like you’ve done good for yourself,” Clea says. “New car, new apartment. Remember when we were going to hotwire Mr. Jenkin’s truck and run away on thirty-five dollars?”

Hennie remembers everything in between those words. She remembers Clea’s hand in hers, the warmth of her breath in her ear. She remembers their fearlessness, their dreams as hard and shiny as the pennies in their pockets. She still has the blur of tattoo on her inner thigh, a squared “C” made by Clea with a blunt penknife the night they stole a fifth of Wild Turkey from Clea’s father, the night they drew their plans in the air with the ink of sweet drunk.

“Yeah—we were going to find a deserted barn or log cabin and live off the land. I lived in a tent for two years—I’m sure I could do it, no problem.”

“What about Kaitlin?”

“We could homeschool her.”

“You haven’t changed, girlie.” Clea laughs. “That’s what I love about you.”

Hennie tries to catch Clea’s eyes in the rearview mirror but her face is bent, turned toward Kaitlin.

“You miss your daddy, baby?” Hennie watches Clea stroke Kaitlin’s long hair. “I bet your daddy misses you.”

§

Hennie takes Clea and Kaitlin to the Applebee’s in Columbia for dinner. She had dreamed every night of a little place in Capitol Hill, a French place she had read about in the Washington Post, candlelight and wine and violins. But Clea seems satisfied here, ordering an overpriced, watered-down margarita and a steak.

“Where do your boyfriends take you out, Hennie?” Clea asks and takes a generous sip of margarita. Hennie searches her eyes, pulls apart her word taffy, before shrugging.

“Nowhere. I don’t go out very much. Sometimes I go out for wings with friends.” She does not tell her about the men from the base who ask her out. Some of them are earnest, gentle. They’re lean like sticks but strong, pliable. The kind of men she imagines taking care of her, if she wanted to be taken care of. Nor does she tell her about the time she took the metro into the district to that women’s bar, where she met the Georgetown student, lithe and covered in black, holding a globe of red wine in her palm. She wants to tell Clea how some have it so easy, they wear their feelings like a badge and their families don’t care and their families have money that sends them to Europe and to college and no one worries about getting beat up or whether their friends won’t speak to them anymore. She doesn’t tell her about the kiss in the girl’s apartment, the paper with her phone number that Hennie threw away, ashamed, before she got back to the base.

Clea breaks a mozzarella stick into thirds and gives a piece to Kaitlin, who shakes it in her hand like dice.

“I’ve been staying at my mom’s a lot,” she says after another sip of margarita. “It’s not that I regret having Kaitlin...it’s just that having a baby is so hard, and Gary is no help.”

“What does Gary say?”

“He always says he’ll change. He changes for a little while, but it never sticks. I feel so stuck sometimes.

Gosh, Hennie, I wish you would come home.”

“I got a job here now. And I got my own place.” Hennie reaches across the table and takes Clea’s hand, stroking her knuckles, before she drops it. “Why don’t you move here, with me? There’s all kinds of stuff here for Kaitlin—children’s museums, and good schools.”

“Yeah? That sounds nice.” Clea holds her empty glass toward the waitress. “I’ll take another one of these.”

§

“You got to buy some curtains, Hennie,” Clea says. They have dragged the futon into the bedroom and tucked it underneath the window, where Kaitlin sleeps in the dark with kicked blankets and Cookie monster dangling precariously from a relaxed hand. Moonlight from the window angles over her and onto the bed, cutting across Clea’s stomach and Hennie’s hand, which rests on it.

“I just pull the covers up tight,” Hennie answers, bunching them in her palms and pulling them over herself as she straddles Clea. She feels Clea’s breath, hot and sweet, in the space between them as she leans in and kisses her. She has not kissed Clea since the summer after graduation, in her father’s truck at the railroad tracks. The train had come, miles and miles of cargo cars separating them from Gary’s place, where Clea was going to get a dime bag. They kissed jokingly and then kissed for real, and Hennie said I love you and Clea did too and then the tracks were clear and the dirty trailer stood in darkness before them except for that red and blue window lit up, where a confederate flag hung as a curtain. Gary’s place. Gary, just a dropout dealer Hennie never thought much of, until he was at the party in the Turner’s field and Clea left with him that night. Just to his place, to score some weed, Clea had winked at Hennie.

They hadn’t kissed since then but they are kissing now, soft and full of sweet drunk and just sweet, too. Hennie keeps the covers over them and they fumble with shirts, with bras until Kaitlin stirs on the futon, a soft thud, and they stop. Clea pulls the covers down. It’s only Cookie monster on the floor, but she gets up anyway, puts him back in Kaitlin’s grasp, then presses her shirt to her chest, goes to find her cigarettes.

Hennie waits in the bed, listening to Clea smoke, talk to Gary on her cell phone. In the bare living room, even her whisper bounces off the walls.

“I miss you, baby,” Clea says to him, as Hennie lies on the mattress, spread eagle. In Fallujah she’d think of the smell of apples, Red Delicious, Ginger Gold, Empire. They reminded her of home. She thought about all those apples, heavy on branches for the taking, and how they’d fall off, rot on the ground. If she could have just one, she used to think, she’d be happy. The moon slivers white on her leg. She crawls back under the sheet and waits.

Mandy Taggart

The Wild

Through a tall stand of grass, the tigress slips like flame. A flicker of presence in the periphery, the absence that makes you tense the back of your neck and look again. As she emerges, she turns her head to the left and looks with alien eyes into a camera. I've got her here with me now, bordered in paper, a stilled menace with flattened ears and black lips lifted to expose the horrors beneath. In the inky shadows, the faintest suggestion of bars.

I'm taken. It's been seven years now. My rooms are in the basement, brightly painted behind the locks, a piece of life scooped from deep inside the earth. He had it waiting long before he took me. My family believe that I'm underneath the ground, that I've been there for years and years... and so I am. Ironical – that's one of the words that he's taught me.

I get up from my bed, take down the thesaurus and trace the path of his intentions, hunting through twists of meaning for a truth that weaves between the words, coils around the branches and offers itself. It was for my own protection, he tells me. Taken. Protected, kept and preserved, an insect in amber, a treasure, a secretion.

He's educated me well – I know that. I would never have learnt so much in school. One-to-one teaching, he says, is far better than a classroom full of other girls to lead me astray, and boys to welcome me when I got there. Dressed me, too – before I even came, he had boxes and boxes of clothes, enough to last me all the way from the size I was then until I grow up. I don't know where he got them. I'm in the next-to-last size now.

And he brings me beautiful things, educational things, to decorate my rooms. I ask most of all for animal pictures, captured souls to open up my walls and ceilings to the wild. The coyote that rears back her head and closes her eyes against the sun, the wolf that slips between trees and passes into shadow. The tigress with alien eyes. I gaze into her eyes – all night sometimes, by torchlight, trying

to draw her spirit into mine.

Even the tigress is in a reserve, he tells me. If she ventures beyond the margins, the hunters will shoot her.

The bolts are sliding, the keys are turning, and the clock says five a.m. He emerges, head lowered, from the passage into my rooms, and tells me that I can go out this morning. I'm already dressed, like I am every morning, just in case. I follow him along in the darkness, up the wooden steps and through the trapdoor. Through the blinded kitchen I keep my head down as I should, then I wait while he begins opening the back door locks.

I live for these mornings, the times when I can breathe deep and sense them there. My fellow hidden things, clinging to the undersides of leaves, tangling around in the roots. Gone, in the trembling instant before you look. We are the primal, the forbidden, the lost and gone forever. We left our shadows behind in songs and the stories people tell to frighten children.

On the mornings when I go out, he stands at the door and watches the road. When I first came I begged all the time to get out, but the years went by, and the childhood faded out of my voice, and now I don't beg any more. Instead, I talk of Vitamin D, remind him of rickets, and sometimes he lets me out as a reward for learning so well.

He's still fumbling with the last set of keys. I bite my lip and try to breathe slowly. Best not to let him see how much I want it.

A helicopter came once, while I was outside, and I hid without even being told. It wasn't the police: only a company taking an aerial photograph of the house. They called a few days later, wanting to sell it to him, but he sent them away. So I'll never know whether I appear in the picture as a blur in the foliage, or the suggestion of skin. A trick of the light. I'm not even sure that I show up on film any more.

We don't have many callers, and I never hear traffic in the distance, so I think we're a long way out. When people do come, offering their photographs or their salvation, he keeps the basement locked and tells them he has everything he needs.

It was after the helicopter that he brought me the picture of the tigress. My best picture, for the best thing that I ever did for him. He worries less now, and says they gave up hunting for me years ago.

The locks are open now. His hand presses the small of my back, coaxing me forward. I swallow – it's like learning to walk, every time. I reach round and clasp his fingers briefly to reassure us both, then let go and step out.

The air stands poised for a second, then rushes into the back of my head and up into my brain. It nearly overwhelms me, and I close my eyes. I tell myself that one day, outside will be normal: because one day, I will leave.

It will be on a morning like this. Midsummer, a wet dawn, with drops of water hanging fat on the ends of things. The branches will be strung with cobwebs, angled through with clear light. The first piping cry will be in the trees.

I will step forward, like I do now. I will draw in living light and stand in those first moments of day that the sun only touches on a few mornings of the year. Stolen daylight, with a charge that quickens the muscles and sets the senses on an edge.

Back in the present, my feet are silent on the grass as I walk. I wonder if the tigress ever hears the softness of the morning, or the sounds of the land at peace. Wherever she goes, her ears must be filled with alarm calls and sudden burstings from the trees, as hunters and hunted alert one another. The menace that she carries is a reflected one, speeding back towards her in the light from a thousand pairs of eyes.

I ask him sometimes about the day when he took me. It's a story he likes to tell. I was on a back road, he says, walking towards the forest with a long stick over my shoulder. I just disappeared between one quiet bend and another. Old enough to remember, but the mind plays tricks with things like that. I remember the smell of manure and rubber on the floor of his car, a rope in my mouth, hammering sick fear in my chest. But not the event of my taking.

I grasp a cool handful of leaves and shiver as the raindrops run through my hand and down the inside of my arm. I can feel him watching me now, although I didn't feel him then. He knew about my

family, and the things they did to me, and that I needed to be protected. I wouldn't go back to them.

When he drives into town, he checks my locks before he goes. Once, I had a dream that he left all the doors unlocked and unbolted. His car skidded away and I looked at the doors, pressed my hands all over them in wonder, but I didn't leave. Couldn't even climb up into the house, because all I could see in my mind was his face when he came back to find me gone. When I woke up, I understood that we both must be ready for the day that I leave. Otherwise, it would hurt too much.

I press my forehead against the trunk of his apple tree. I want it to leave a mark, something real that I can feel with my fingers later, back in my rooms. He's standing behind me now, taking hold of my waist. He doesn't usually do this, not outside. His hands are gentle – a true love's hands, he tells me, not like the boys out there in the world. I knew something about those dirty boys, dirty men, even before he took me.

He presses against me harder, and I taste wet leaves. Without him my blossom would have withered, my body fattened, and I would have fallen before my time. Instead I've grown strong. Fit and well, healthy, rosy. Educated, beyond others of my age. I have food, fresh air sometimes, even exercise, with equipment that he brought down for me. But a day will come: the day that I leave.

It's time to go inside. As he's leading me back, he tells me that I'm nearly a woman now. This is a new thing. He says he doesn't know what he'll do when I finally become one. And then he cries. The keys turn, the bolts slide, and he leaves me alone.

As the clock hands creep, I run on the treadmill, pushing it behind me with my feet, and think about what he said. It's true: I'm nearly a woman. My body has softened and lengthened under his hands. I want to ask him for makeup and use it to shadow my eyes. I consider these things, and worry for his tears, and wonder again about where all the clothes might have come from. Then I need to put those thoughts away from me, so I look up at the tigress.

When the day comes, the day that I leave, I will walk to the end of the garden. I won't be frightened, because I've already been taken. Spoken for, reserved. I will crouch to find the hiding place, between the fence panel and the wild ground, and pull out my bag of supplies. Something will fly out of the

wet hedge, breaking the cobwebs and scattering heavy drops. It will not wake him, because I will have put him to sleep.

I will take the bag, sling it over my shoulder, and stand. The ground will begin to roll beneath my feet and the leaves will beckon me forward. I will guess a direction and follow it. Before I was taken, I used to do that – set off for the end of the rainbow, away to seek my fortune with a handkerchief tied to the end of a garden cane. Perhaps I always knew that one day I wouldn't come back.

There is no bag of supplies yet, no way through the bolts, no sleeping potion, but I will find them. I can't let myself doubt that. I will hoard up tiny possessions: a knife, a map, a lock of his hair. Water, my torch, matches in a waterproof bag. A cache, like in the survival books he showed me. I will live in the woods, eating berries and drinking nectar out of nutshells. I will conjure a prince from the stump of a tree and live happily ever after.

But on that day, when I first walk into the wild, I will be the tigress. I will look out through her eyes, feel my shoulders rolling, the muscles driving, something rising in my chest. My claws will scrape the road.

As I turn back for the last time, to bid him goodbye, a forest of briars will begin scrambling over the eyes and nostrils of his house. I will turn away again. Behind me, a flock of magpies will lift themselves off his roof and flap away into the east, silhouettes against the rising sun. Seven, for the story that can never be told.

Emily Keirnan

Tabula Rasa

The first one found me a month after I got out of the hospital. I was walking back from the gas station down the street from my house when I heard someone coming up behind me, running in thin-soled shoes that slapped hard against the concrete. It was almost dark and no one else was around. It had been a hot day, and the three blocks I'd walked to the gas station tired me so I could feel the sweat pooling in the creases of my arms. I couldn't run. A thin feeling worked its way through my exhaustion—fear, I realized slowly—but when I stopped and faced him he was bent over, hands on his knees, breathing in gulps of air, thin and elegant and weak. His clothes didn't fit him right, all too long and too roomy, like they belonged to an overweight and awkward teenage girl. His hair fell in front of his eyes. He said my name and stood beside me, panting.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I don't know what happened, but I'm sorry."

He looked young—a sweet neurotic's face. Much too young, really; I don't know what I could have been thinking. He was excited; his hands shook. I wanted to ask him what I had done to him, but I had not yet learned the kinds of questions I am allowed, the sort of intrusions that are forgiven me, so I didn't say anything. I don't speak well anymore: between my thoughts and my words there is a dangerous gulf where my language becomes indirect and aphasic. When I need to say something well, I usually write it down, but I didn't have a pen the evening my first abandoned lover caught up to me.

"I'm sure you had your reasons," he said to my silence, "but this has been really difficult for me." He couldn't go on then. He kept glancing away, and I realized that he was about to cry. I noticed he was shorter than me; I usually only date tall men. He reached out to touch my arm, but I pulled away because I hate being touched by strangers. His look was so shocked and empty that I knew I could get away. I turned and went and didn't dare turn my head to see him watching me.

That was cruelty, I know, but I can't express how used up I was then—how tired. I've tried to do better. I've had plenty of opportunities. What I would tell him, if I saw him today, is that I was born at the age of thirty-two with a Ph.D. in comparative religion. It happened in May, almost five years ago now, when a small blood clot that had been forming in the muscle of my calf unhooked itself from the wall of its blood vessel and went traveling. There's no way to know where all it went—it's long gone now—but it was probably floating around for some time, looping up and down the veins of my legs, floating through my arms and in and out of my fingers, casting its brown, ugly shadow against the back wall of my eyes. Most clots don't go far; like unambitious children they mature close to home. I was an unusual case, and I take some pride in this. My clot, like myself, had ambitions; somewhere along the line it slipped past the borders and the barriers and made for the holy lands of heart and brain. I imagine it passed through my heart more than once, though I never noticed its presence there, or if I did, I never complained of it to anyone. The snag-up came in my left frontal lobe: I don't know if it was the first time the clot had made it so far north, or if it was a return visit, but this time something caught. I like to think it was my expensive education that was the problem—what had once been wide, empty boulevards of thought had become urbanized ghettos of idea. I'd developed my mind so finely that the steel wires of nerve and tissue which held me together had grown tangled, and the synapses had grown close and leered at one another across a living stream of streets and alleys, my blood—a barking, honking, ungentrified mess.

Apparently, I had a weak vessel wall near the spot where the clot lodged itself, and the backup of blood caused the vessel to burst and hemorrhage. "That wall was going to give sometime, Maggie," my doctors have told me on many occasions. "You're lucky this happened when you were young and healthy. You're lucky for that clot." They believe in a strange variety of luck known only to neurologists, but after a fashion they are right. If we make exception for the astoundingly bad luck of having a major stroke at thirty two, if we omit the partial destruction of an excellent mind that held significant sentimental and vocational value, if we take all that as a starting point, then I have had rather remarkable luck. I am, after all, basically sound.

My brain, after the stroke, contained one broken spot, behind the clot, and one starved spot, ahead of it. This is a fitting description of the kind of damage I have suffered: I cannot feel my right arm—that's a broken spot—and the vision in my right eye is badly and strangely distorted—that's a starved spot. I have a lisp now—starved spot—and I cannot memorize written instructions, broken spot. Basically, though, I walk and talk, and the ways in which I am strange or uncomprehending are

not immediately and publically noticeable. I have found enough people willing to understand and forgive my difficulties to feel understood, cared for, and happy. I got married two years ago, and was relieved to find that love is much how I remembered it.

In my memory, too, there are these broken and hungry places. Many memories are, as far as I can tell, unaffected. Others I remember clearly enough, but in a way I can no longer express, except to say it is through a kind of synesthesia. There are whole years that I can hum, but not describe. The two years right before the stroke though, that must have been right where the dam broke: that's all gone. I remember (perfectly, despite the champagne) the night of my best friend Jessie's 30th birthday party. I hosted, which means I mixed the drinks, and we made a fire on the Delaware beach where we'd been vacationing together since sophomore year of college. When the rest of us went swimming, my boyfriend Chris stole all the fireworks we'd bought to take home with us to Pennsylvania and threw them on the fire. He hid in the bushes and watched us come screaming out of the water, mostly drunk as hell and thinking it was the end of the world.

I woke up in the hospital and the doctors stood over me saying, "Maggie, do you understand what I'm saying?" and when I finally did they told me that a blood clot from my leg had lodged in my frontal lobe and caused a weak vessel to burst and hemorrhage and that I'd collapsed while walking my dog and had almost died and the dog had run into traffic and had died and that Chris had been dead for almost a year from a motorcycle accident. I cried most for myself and second most for my dog, because I'd had him for eight years and only remembered dating Chris for two months though I know now that we were together fourteen, and lived together for his last six. But it wasn't quite like that either—it wasn't like I went to sleep on the beach and woke up in the hospital thinking "where'd everybody go?" Really, I couldn't think well in the hospital at all.

Those two years were, I am sure, the two years to miss. The friends who knew me with Chris can't understand this. They get upset, try to tell me how happy I was, how good he was, and they hate that he left no hole in me that calamity couldn't fill. What they can't see is that the love and loss conundrum is one I cannot contemplate unless I am able to compare life with to life without. As I see it, I've been saved. I don't know much about Chris, but I know enough about loss not to wish for it. Perhaps this is callousness—I have been callused—but I'm told that I cared for Chris deeply when he was alive, and that I took his death hard, as hard as anyone could need to prove my love. Harder than

that. Now that Providence or Biology has stepped in to clean away all my love and suffering, I don't think any more tributes can be asked of me.

Two years after the stroke I met the man I would marry, and even then there was no pang, no jealous ghost rising up from my battered psyche. I met Richard in church, where we were both imposters. He sat stationed in the front pew beside his elderly mother, every Sunday until her death, and still there after, he says, for me, as I wept and prayed over the part of myself that had gone numb, excoriating the place where my faith had been, hoping to shock it awake. He let me go on thinking he was a true believer, as long as that was attractive to me, but in time we were revealed to one another. We spoke our vows in my back yard, to a justice of the peace and a few witnesses who I thought would be able to watch the ceremony without a twinge of regret— to share fully in my forgetful and stainless joy.

My husband met me twice before I met him—we shared some chatter over fellowship cookies and tea, discussed the sermon, and noted the warmer weather. He says he didn't really notice me then. He says I became much more beautiful, after. Once I was alone and once, he tells me, I was with a man I cannot now identify.

“Was it Chris?” I say. I've shown him pictures, though they upset me—the inscrutable look on my own face as I pose beside him. On the back of one Chris wrote “Magdalena and me at the Christmas party.” My full name is Margaret, so this bothers me too.

“No,” Richard says, “this was later. This was an older man. He didn't act like your boyfriend.”

I let it go; it isn't the only mystery.

My friends don't like to tell me much about that final year before the stroke, the year of my mourning. They get embarrassed and quiet. They have reasons, I suppose—a multitude. They do not want to tell me something I will have to tell Richard; they know my penchant for confession. Other losses in my life have been followed by proportionate periods of promiscuity, drinking, and other self-induced numbnesses, so I can only assume that a particularly large loss would end in a particularly irresponsible spree. My education gave me a wide sampling of religious responses to suffering, and I knew mine worked just as well.

With my friends unwilling to talk, the best indication of my state of mind before the stroke comes from the people who stop me in the street, come up to me in bars, or flag me down while I'm driving, and ask me where I disappeared to. They are always men, and they always come at me with a look of anticipation, like something is really about to get explained. Clearly, they are the people I should have called back. I have been surprised by their variety, and by their numbers. When these encounters became regular, I started to experiment. I had a system for a while: I'd tell the blondes the truth and lie to the brunettes. I tried a lot of different stories—I'd been called to the side of my dying mother in Poland, I'd been arrested for tax-evasion, I'd fallen in love with someone else, I'd tried to kill myself. The brunettes often asked me out again, but the blondes never did. Now I just lay my ring-hand on the table, and the blondes and brunettes nod alike, as if this explained everything. They have never approached me when I am with my husband; I hope that they will not.

I haven't met any forgotten lovers for a year or two now. I don't know if I've gotten to the end of them, or if they've just stopped approaching me. I'm pregnant; that might be scaring them off. This wasn't something I'd planned, but it's alright. I had to stop taking birth control pills after the stroke; the doctors said they could have caused the clot. I'd always been suspicious of them—intuition, I suppose. I've never been afraid of drugs, but something about the pill always made me nervous, and I never liked to be on it unless I was dating someone seriously and didn't want to use condoms anymore. I was surprised to learn I was on it when I had the stroke. Neither I nor any of my friends know who it might have been for. I suppose it's better that I don't meet him now, with the ring and the baby, but I can't help but wonder. I suppose I could have met him already, but I don't think so; I like to believe he would distinguish himself somehow. I've made mistakes in life, but I've always fallen in love with good men.

If I meet him, I'd like it to be like this. I would like it to be seven months from today. I would like the baby to be with me, but too young to hold onto the memory when it's over. I'd like to look pretty. I don't have any specific idea of where we'll be, though it should be somewhere where we won't have to always look into each other's faces. When I imagine the scene to myself, I imagine us in a car. It would be nice to have something to keep my hands busy, a destination to force our separation, stick shifts and seatbelts in the way, easy to blame for the awkwardness of the inevitable hug.

I haven't any idea what he'd look like, though I flatter myself that he'd be attractive, with the sort of stern, sensitive face I've always liked. I don't care what we'll say, except that I will try to tell the truth,

and he will not be angry. I do not know him well enough to also hope he won't be sad. I'd like it if he seemed familiar, and not because my sunken brain was spitting up some sodden reminiscences, but because he reminded me of someone dear and concrete—my father, or my brother, or my best friend from highschool. I would like to look at him and know that it was I who loved him, and that I do not now.

I'll come home at night and Richard will be sleeping. When I've put our child to bed, I will go to him and lie next to him and tell him that I have loved and been loved, and that all love is only loyalty except for mine, which is forgetting, and which is perfect, and which is whole. For him I have been made innocent and new; I would have chosen another, I might have chosen a hundred others, but I have been washed clean.

James Claffey

Bolt the Door

The curtains are always shut in my grandmother's bedroom, the air camphor-thick. She kneads the rosary beads, and mutters, "Hail Holy Queens," and "Our Fathers," and never ventures outside, save to be driven to Sunday Mass by Da. She looks like one of those old women in the Grimm's Brothers' stories, ready to lure me into her lair.

One day, Mam knocks on the bedroom door and comes into our room. Your grandmother is dead, she tells my brother and I. Say a prayer for her with me. We kneel by the bed, Mam, Donal, and me. For the repose of her soul, Mam says. Hail Mary, full of grace...

Da drives us all down the country to Granny's funeral in Athlone. I've never seen a corpse before. In the parlor of my uncle's house before the undertakers take the coffin to the church, she lies, dried out—the rosary beads entwined in her right fist and the picture of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux in the other.

In Coosan cemetery, the coffin rests on two planks of wood as fists drop clay onto the shiny lid. By a chain link fence several old women shuffle toward the grave, rosary beads clutched in their hands. Ravens pick at the side of the road in solidarity.

After her death I begin to see and hear her ghost. It's at night she scares me the most. The mumbled groans from behind her bedroom door. Granny, lying there, rigid, arms by her sides, her watery eyes fixed on the ceiling.

The luminous hands of the alarm clock point to 3 a.m. and I swear I can smell her rosewater perfume, and hear the dry bones cracking in the next room. This is stupid because she's dead, and I saw them put her in the grave.

The floorboards creak on the landing and I pull the sheets up to my chin. Another creak and I slide under the coverlet.

I emerge from my hiding place an hour later. Only my brother Donal's snores can be heard. I creep out of bed and search for my slippers in the dark. I shuffle to the door and put an ear to the wood. Nothing. I can't open it. My bladder strains. I need to pee. She might be out there on the landing. I can't do it. Instead, I open my cotton pants and let the yellowish pee leak onto the wallpaper. I shake my mickey and creep back to bed and cry into the pillow.

That's the beginning. The nightmares. In some of them she beckons me from her deathbed. The picture of Jesus. His staring, mournful eyes. The beating heart. Bloodstained walls. I wake, saturated with sweat.

Afterwards, lying in bed with the hot-water bottle cold at my feet, the weak odor of wetted leaves wafts under the door, the bathroom too far away from the safety of the bedroom.

Night after night I recreate this shameful ritual. In the mornings I try to forget everything. Instead of skulking in the dark and dribbling pee down the wall, I know I have to face my fears. So, one night, I open the door, inch-by-inch, and sprint along the landing, stumble down the three steps to the toilet, the presence of something behind me. I pull the bathroom door shut and slide the deadbolt across to save my life. I'm comforted by the sound of my pee trickling into the water. Breathing heavily, I pull the door open and run back up the stairs to my bed and fall into a deeper sleep.

A few weeks later, walking home from school, I stand on the same spot we found Granny that one day she disappeared from our house in her nightgown. The house is a big, abandoned Edwardian, next-door to Lahart's Garage. A force draws me toward the house, the corrugated iron over the front door filled with graffiti and torn posters advertising Fossett's Circus and Christmas pantomimes of years gone by. I hoist my schoolbag higher and enter the overgrown front garden, the air full of spilled motor oil and rubber tires.

Long shadows from the horse-chestnut tree in the front yard trail up the red-bricked walls. Virginia creeper crawls everywhere, all the way up to the eaves where a sparrow bobs in and out of a wood-knot, almost hidden by the ivy.

At the side of the abandoned house lay broken ladders and ancient paint buckets covered in dribbles, the same blue-royal as the eaves. The smell of the paint is omnipresent. I hug the wall as if at any moment the entire house will consume me. Beads of sweat collect on my forehead. A tight fist squeezes my walnut-sized heart.

Swallowing hard, my chest still hurts. Inside, a giant hole in the floor exposes the basement twenty feet below. A few planks of flooring and ceiling fragments jut out from the walls. In the web-strewn corner of the room, elevated four feet above the broken floorboards, my grandmother floats, her white hair shines and her crooked finger beckons. Something gives way and my pants dampen. I sprint home, run up the stairs, into the toilet, bolt the door, slump to the floor, and sob.

John FitzGerald

Humans Learn Beliefs

“The good thing about science is that it’s true whether or not you believe in it.”
— Neil deGrasse Tyson

At the time of this writing, humans are not aware, except by rumor, of any other species capable of making sense of these symbols, or whatever light they shed upon human thinking. Many humans believe that there presently exist other organisms or entities comparable or even superior to humans on other planets in other solar systems. Indeed, many well-respected scientists opine that the odds overwhelmingly favor the existence of other life in the universe.

Since 1985, the SETI Institute (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) has combed the skies with its, “telescope array,” waiting for a, “man-made,” signal from space. Its website boasts employment of over 150 scientists, educators and support staff who agree with the statement: We believe we are conducting the most profound search in human history — to know our beginnings and our place among the stars.

In 1977, I graduated from high school. That same year, NASA launched the Voyager 1 spacecraft on an interstellar mission to explore Jupiter and Saturn. Thirty-three years later it is still out there, at the edge of our solar system, farther away from the Sun than is Pluto.

It is, in fact, the farthest human-made object from earth, at 17.4 billion kilometers (10.8 billion miles) from the Sun. It is estimated the craft will reach interstellar space around 2015, and it will be forty thousand more years before it approaches the next planetary system. Who knows if humans will still be here at that time.

From the ground, NASA scientists signal the craft at the speed of light.¹ The signal takes 16 hours, one way, to arrive. On board is a golden record, a phonographic sampler of our culture, including natural sounds, music, images, and spoken greetings in 55 languages.

Carl Sagan, who selected the contents of the phonograph, said, “The spacecraft will be encountered and the record played only if there are advanced spacefaring civilizations in interstellar space. But the launching of this bottle into the cosmic ocean says something very hopeful about life on this planet.”

Astrophysicist Stephen Hawking suggests that intelligent alien life almost certainly exists, but unlike Sagan, thinks it is a mistake for us to try to contact them. In his view, the outcome of an alien visit, “would be much as when Columbus landed in America, which didn’t turn out well for the Native Americans. We only have to look at ourselves,” he says, “to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn’t want to meet.”

In May of 2008, the Pope’s astronomer José Gabriel Funes, a Jesuit priest, told *L’Osservatore Romano* that there would be nothing surprising about the existence of intelligent extraterrestrials. He also said that he believed in the Big Bang theory as the most likely explanation for the origin of the universe, and that evolution is a given. On November 1, 1992, nearly 400 years after the fact, the same Catholic Church finally acknowledged its error in trying Galileo as a heretic in 1633, and sentencing him to life imprisonment for confirming the Copernican theory that the earth circled the sun.²

¹ Light travels at 300,000 kilometers, or 186,000 miles per second. It takes about 8.3 minutes for the light of the nearest star, our Sun, to reach Earth. Other stars are so much farther away that the distance is expressed in the amount of time it takes light to travel in one year (as measured on earth – about 10 trillion kilometers or 6 trillion miles). This unit is deemed a light year. The next nearest star to the Sun is a red dwarf in the constellation Centaurus, called Proxima Centauri (from the Latin word *proxima*, meaning nearest to). Light from that star takes 4.3 years to reach Earth. Our Milky Way Galaxy spans about 100,000 light years. The light from some of the stars in our galaxy can therefore take tens of thousands of years to reach us. Light from stars in nearby galaxies can take millions of years to reach us. The light from quasars, the farthest objects we can see, left their sources billions of years ago, and is just reaching us now. We are therefore looking back in time when we look at the stars.

² In 1543 CE Nicolaus Copernicus published his treatise *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, demonstrating that the motions of the planets we witness from earth could be explained by earth circling the sun, beginning a scientific revolution that would ultimately undermine the geocentric worldview. But Copernicus could not prove his theory, and continued to believe in the celestial spheres first posed in the 6th century BCE by Anaximander, as expounded upon by Plato, Aristotle, and Ptolemy. Beginning in 1610, Galileo used his telescope to discover the rings of Saturn, and provided support for the heliocentric view through his observations of the moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus. In 1632, he wrote his *Dialogue*

That same year, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican Secretary of State, defended the church for burning Giordano Bruno at the stake in 1600, saying that though it was a, “sad episode,” the Inquisition was, “motivated by the desire to serve the truth and promote the common good.” Bruno had asserted that the earth was not the center of the universe, but that the center was relative to the observer. The handbook for inquisitors (1578) stated that the purpose of its penalties was not, “for the correction and good of the person punished, but for the public good in order that others may become terrified and weaned away from the evils they would commit.”

In all likelihood though, an announcement by SETI that a non-organic signal has been received from outer space would profoundly affect human consciousness. We would not even need to be “visited.” The mere knowledge of the existence of others in the universe intelligent enough to emit a signal we can detect would be life-changing.

Not only would our privileged image in the universe be shattered, but we would literally become earthlings. Everyone on earth would be part of the “home team,” united across national boundaries. It is almost as if the church is preparing for this eventuality, or is it, inevitability?

By definition, a belief cannot be known, you either know a thing, or you believe it, but once a thing is known, it is no longer a belief. No one ever knew the earth was flat, they were only told it, and believed. I don't believe in “royal blood,” yet there are kings, and while I can see why the kings would favor this concept, I see no reason for others to go along with it.

I also don't believe one needs to acknowledge non-belief in God in relation to the beliefs of those who do. I am not an infidel or kaffir compared to a Muslim, nor a goyim or gentile compared to a Jew. For the same reason I am not an atheist compared to a Christian, any more than I am amythical for not believing in Zeus, awiccan for not believing in witches, or spectral for lack of belief in ghosts.

One either chooses to accept unsubstantiated beliefs or one does not. To the extent one does not, we already have a word for it: reasonable. To the extent one does, we have a word too: superstitious.

Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, which led to his arrest by the Inquisition. It would take another 200 years for the heliocentric model to gain popular acceptance.

All belief is instilled. And the reason you believe anything is because you trust in or fail to question the source of instillation. No human is born with any particular belief. Even identical twins raised by the same parents do not, upon reaching the age of personal reflection, necessarily share all the same beliefs.

The definitive source of belief is perception, and though we know mirage and illusion exist, belief in our own senses goes mostly unquestioned. One of the goals of scientific experimentation is to guard against the errors of perception. Memory is the accumulated experience of our senses.

Another preeminent source of belief is reliance on the word of others, which to a certain extent must be trusted if language and social cooperation are to have any utility. Such testimony gains strength according to the fidelity and number of those who support it. Non-evidentiary sources include inferences and coincidences mistaken for causation, such as form the basis for belief in magic; and of course, desire, which focuses attention on what is favorable to it at the exclusion of what is not.

Humans speak about things unseen, including their own internal dialog. And we know humans lie. We know because we lie, and have been lied to.

But even so-called knowledge is subject to revision. If human experience proves anything, it is that nearly all of what we once took for knowledge proved wrong, and was therefore only belief. Yet, in its time, there was no doubt of its infallibility.

For thousands of years, the theory of “spontaneous generation” provided the answer to the question of how life sprung where none had been before. By the time Aristotle wrote History of Animals, he considered it common knowledge that. “some plants self generated,” and some animals sprung, “from parent animals according to their kind, whilst others grow spontaneously and not from kindred stock; and of these instances of spontaneous generation some come from putrefying earth or vegetable matter, as is the case with a number of insects, while others are spontaneously generated in the inside of animals out of the secretions of their several organs.”

Even such thinkers as Newton and Descartes ascribed to this theory. By 1665 Robert Hooke discovered the cell. In 1668 Francesco Redi demonstrated that maggots do not appear in meat when flies are prevented from laying eggs, proving the theory of spontaneous generation false.

The alternative hypothesis was biogenesis –the idea that every living thing comes from a pre-existing thing, or egg. In 1675, van Leeuwenhoek discovered microorganisms, ending the theory that small creatures (like maggots) arose from inanimate matter. In 1861, Louis Pasteur, upon proving that organisms do not spontaneously appear in sterile material was quoted as saying, “Never will the doctrine of spontaneous generation recover from the mortal blow struck by this simple experiment.”

In 1871, Darwin addressed the vacuum left by refutation of the theory, suggesting that life may have begun in a, “warm little pond, with all sorts of ammonia and phosphoric salts, lights, heat, electricity, etc. present, so that a protein compound was chemically formed ready to undergo still more complex changes,” which is to say, by spontaneous generation. In 1924, Russian biochemist Alexander Oparin in, *The Origin of Life*, proposed that the spontaneous generation of life theory “disproven” by Pasteur, did in fact occur once, but had since been rendered impossible because earth’s living organisms would now immediately consume any organism spontaneously generated. He suggested a “primeval soup” of organic molecules could be the source of life.

Working independently, British geneticist J.B.S. Haldane arrived at the same conclusion.

In 1952 Stanley Miller and Harold Urey conducted their now famous experiment testing the Oparin/Haldane primordial soup theory on the chemical origins of life. Using a mixture of methane, hydrogen, and ammonia to represent earth’s early atmosphere, boiling water to represent the ocean, and simulated lightning from an electrical spark, they successfully synthesized organic compounds from inorganic materials. Miller reported the soup produced five amino acids, essential molecules to all life, and the building blocks of proteins.

In 2007, scientists revisited the findings using modern techniques, and found more than twenty-five amino acids. All life on earth is produced by combining just twenty amino acids. Still, the question of abiogenesis, or how living things originally arose from non-living material, remains relevant to this day.

Today, for instance, of more than six billion humans on earth³, over half believe in the God of Abra-

³ I believe, though I have never counted them. Indeed, I believe in the number centillion, though there is nothing in my experience to verify it. And I only believe in the Big Bang, because I cannot know it to be true.

ham. A third believes in Christ, and a sixth in Allah. Since each of the three religions condemns all but its own adherents, all humans must therefore be doomed.

Humans realize others pray against them, the way two siblings run to a parent each to tattle on the other. So before a battle, opposing factions might pray. And if both pray, the prayers of one must be better than the other, for the request of one is granted only at the others' expense.

Stripped of their niceties, all such petitions beg that their enemies be disfavored: Let them go extinct, for we are your people, the true believers. Let our prayers be answered rather than the prayers of those who compete against us. Let us be your favorite people.

Thus arises sacrifice. The notion we can do or give something to the object of worship to make our prayer superior. Because when two competitors vie, and both pray and sacrifice and dance, and some have success at the expense of others, it is taken by the devout to mean one of two things: either the prayer of the successful was more deserving – leading to ritual and repetition; or, the successful prayed to the stronger god, leading to conversion of the unsuccessful.

Adherents to such beliefs cannot possibly be questioning their underpinning. Of course, they associate the beliefs with ancient texts they accept as sacred, but the authority of those texts is never examined, though they can be traced back to a culture that adopted them to explain and reinforce what at that time had only recently come into existence – a patriarchal, agricultural economy controlled by a god-appointed elite.

Proof may exist, for example, that supposed favoritism of a sacrifice of meat over vegetables is an indictment by pastoralists against agriculturalists, at a time when agriculturists – the current culture of ninety-nine percent of earth – were expanding their fields into the shepherds' grazing pastures, represented biblically by Cain killing Abel.

The evidence may show that a Semitic people in Iraq invented our way of life many thousands of years ago. And whatever minor changes we've made to the structure remain, superficial as a coat of paint. We may have decorated our own house, but those Semitic people built it.

A long line of extinct humans before us demonstrates that it is the ultimate vanity for Homo sapiens to believe its species represents the pinnacle of success, and that evolution stops with them, or that no other way of life could have existed for the millions of years before one particular culture came to equate its invention with the creation of humanity itself, and a God-given right to rule the earth.

There may be proof that a cooperative way of life existed for hundreds of thousands of years before males came to subjugate females, rendering half the human population subservient to the other.

Evidence may establish that human lineage was once traced through females, who built their own homes, tilled and owned all arable land, invented pottery, weaving, and planting, and were the main providers for their offspring with little or no input from the father.

Surely, there was a time before any human understood the connection between sex and the procreation of offspring, so women were revered as magic, and absent the knowledge of paternity, humans seemed to be born of goddesses.

The fact is that humans co-evolve with environment, the Selector of natural selection, but have, to a great extent, selected themselves, and it is the traits and qualities that females favored which presently exist in males, and vice versa.

It may be that humans are not innate sinners, born flawed, with a built in need to be punished, but are instead born predatory animals with an overriding desire to get their own way, and that desire, sometimes interferes with the absolute right of nature.

All organisms go extinct, and a long history demonstrates that Homo sapiens may be a dead end.

The end of every warrior, philosopher, genius, prophet, savior, or king, no matter how holy, wise, rich, or powerful reveals, that life here is life and death is death from which no human ever returned, and that one's time on earth need not be intentionally suffered through in favor of reward in an afterlife.

Zealots and politicians have argued since their invention over whose ideas are purer, and it's time to stop. Our history is one of a continuous people, and the only difference among them is their beliefs, none of which are more human than any other. And perhaps anyone could accept these possibilities

if they were other than offended, angry and defensive at so much as the mere suggestion that their sacred beliefs be scrutinized by even themselves.

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