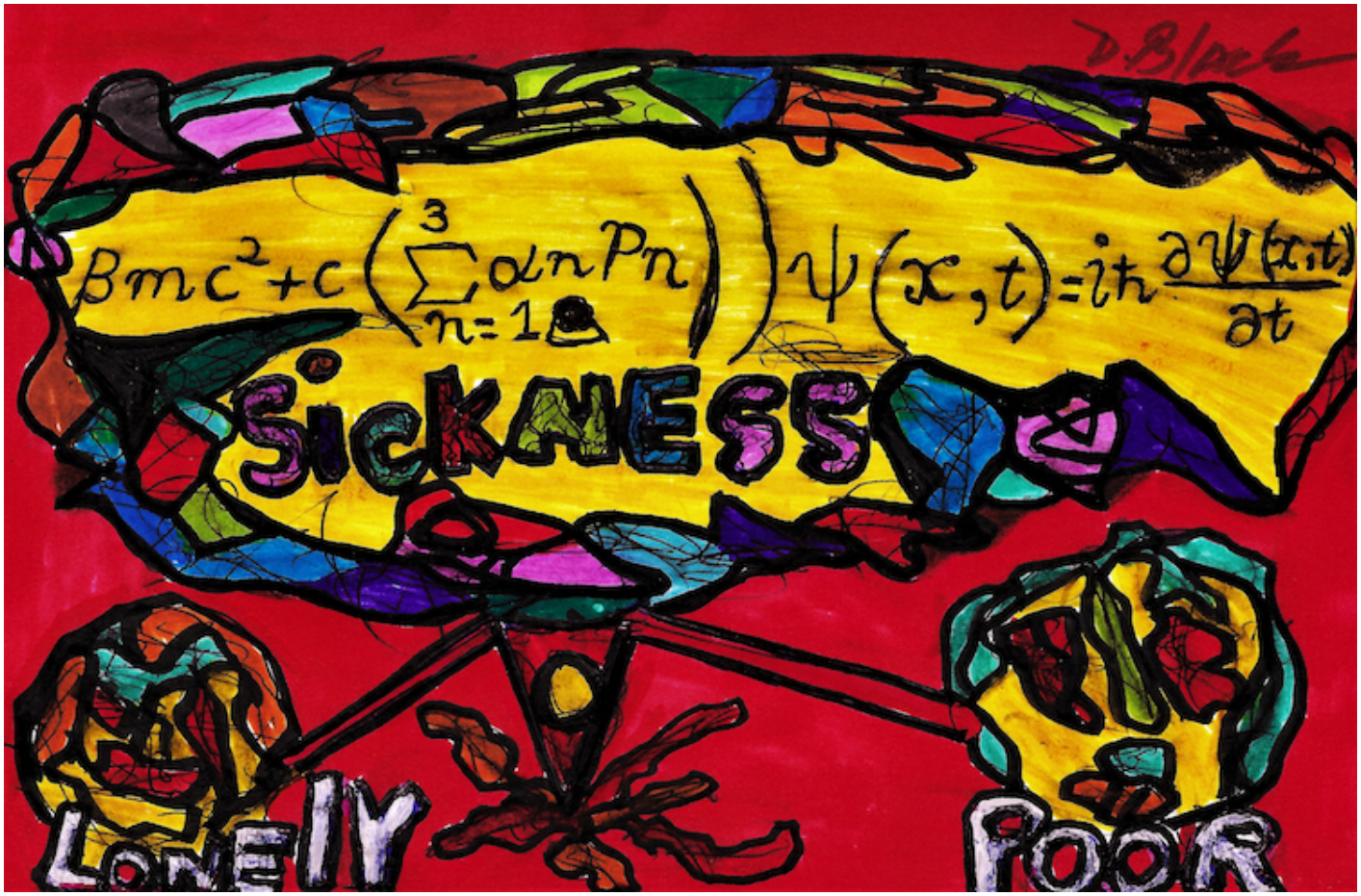
Reborn [1]

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Essay by Gracie Bialecki

A Wellness Saga in Three Parts



PART I: TOO ESOTERIC

The new doctor is Indian, speaks English, and we meet at her office on Boulevard Picpus. Platypus Street, I think as I wander through eastern Paris, clutching two sheets of her health initiatives. They're almost too esoteric for me, and when I tell Fred what I must do to become a well-circulating, energy-filled individual, he calls my doctor a charlatan, spiking my anxiety, until I call her that too. My charlatan.

My constitution is endangered by lack of routine, my seventh-floor *chambre de bonne* smack in the middle of the city, bright lights, and loud noises. Through my meditation cushion, through the oriental rug, through the building's stories, I

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feel the metro growling. Already there are horns and sirens; decibel levels have increased since the transit strikes and the weekly protests screaming past my door. The obvious solution is moving into Fred's serene side street. Charlatan's orders.

These days I eat my lentils piously, always pre-soaked, putting down my spoon between mouthfuls. I've acquired a new thermos which will save me from the dangers of cold water. But when I unscrew it in the corner of the library, the ginger tea inside is scalding, undrinkable.

My younger body thrived in adversity—tumblers of whiskey on the rocks topped off with Diet Coke. Now even seltzer's bubbles are forbidden—liquor and ice both non-starters. I think of the bottomless coffee, street meats, reckless quesadillas. The audacity. Tortilla chips were my last hope, but my charlatan took them away. No snacks and nothing airy. Remember, I'm already ungrounded.

After we make love, I ask Fred to lie on top of me, a human stress blanket. He falls asleep and I listen to his breathing. This is what relaxing is, I tell myself, fighting the invading thoughts. I'm practicing relaxing. I'm relaxing. Relax.

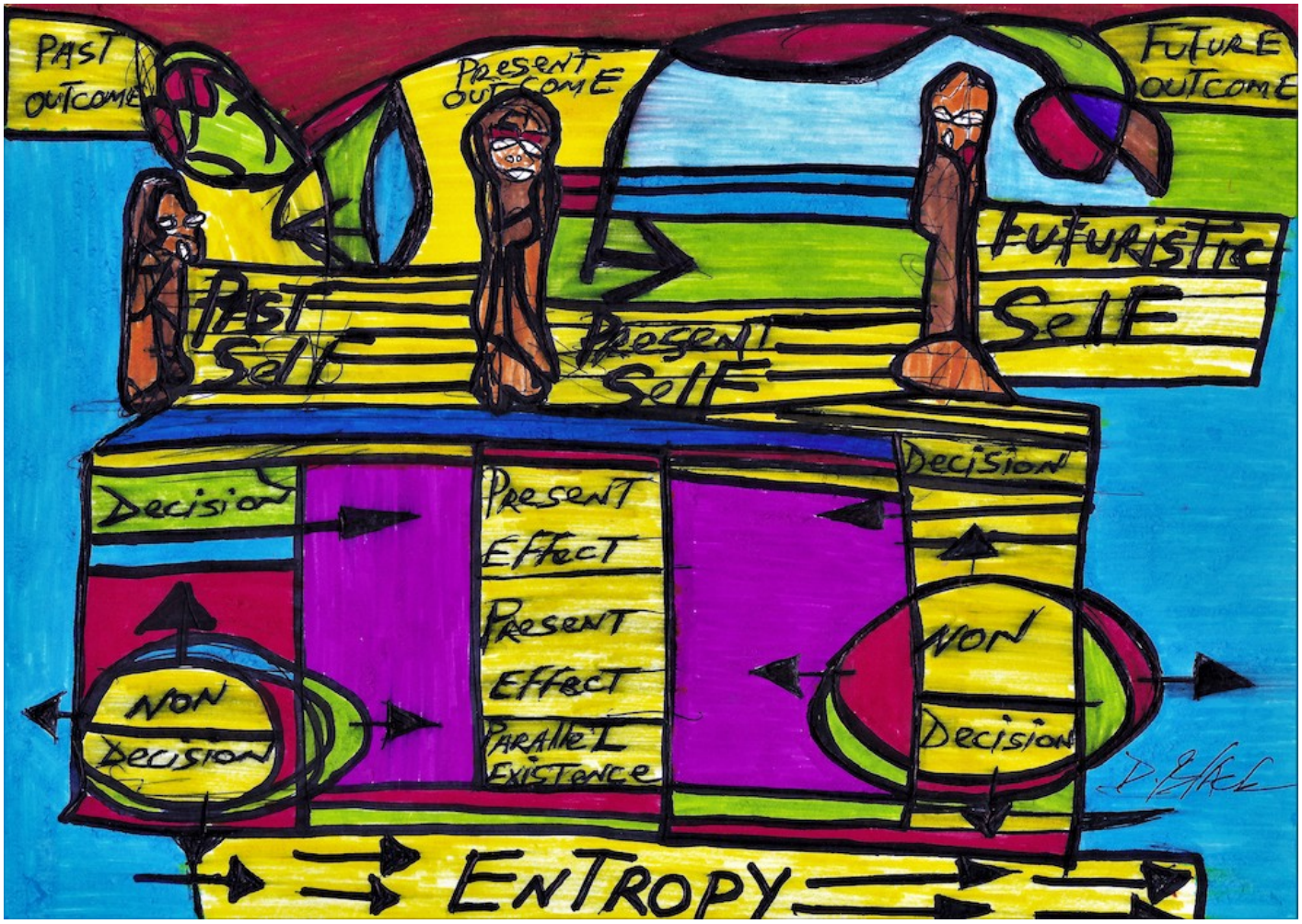
At the café with my colleagues, I crumble and drink an oat milk latte. It's an accident. They made us two. When someone snaps a photo, I almost admit I'm signed into my dead friend, Michael's Instagram. Walking home my digestive system is shocked, my entire body shaky. Is it too much to ask to sleep peaceful and shit normal? Other people have it so easy. Other people are unconcerned.

On New Year's Eve I listen to holistic podcasts while sipping red wine, zero-sum. On the balcony at the party, the stoner's rolling stale tobacco sprinkled with weed, and I exhale one glorious white cloud after another. *Il fait toujours froid la nouvelle année*, I say stoically, remembering all the icy parties. *Oui, c'est janvier*, comes the reply. Back inside, I don't feel high, just burnt.

I'm reduced to permissible cravings: sweet, sweet potatoes sprinkled with cinnamon, mashed with fork tines. After yoga I go to buy these and other organics from the approved list. It isn't until I'm back up my seven flights and unloading the bags that I realize there are no sweet potatoes—my frantic mind could not even remember.

The lesson will keep repeating itself until the lesson will keep repeating itself until the lesson will keep repeating itself until the lesson will keep repeating itself until it's learned.

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PART II: LOVING KINDNESS

Back when I included the Stepmonster in my loving-kindness meditation, it worked so well she gifted me her rose gold iPhone 6S to replace my stolen 7. Now my MacBook's been jacked and she's out of the picture, so I pray to the French Craigslist gods. The seller proposes meeting at the Montparnasse Starbucks. A safe space. In my moment of doubt, he pulls up the specs to assure me the gold Air we've been negotiating is not rosy. But holding my phone against it, they match perfectly—both begging to be Apple picked.

My faith in humanity is so easily swayed. Possessions are stolen and given. People marry, die, or leave my father for good. Some losses are easier to let go while others require finding peace. Michael is always in my loving thoughts, and some mornings I feel his ghost close. *Look at you now*, he says, not in a rapper way but in his bearded benevolent one.

My friend's dad dies the day we have plans. I drink two and a half whole glasses of wine in moral support, and we hit my vape pen in the middle of the jazz club, exhaling through our scarves. *Yesterday I meditated for him*, I say over the syncopation. Since Michael passing, I've become increasingly spiritual.

Being a good friend gives me a woozy hangover and red sores around my mouth. I play Whac-A-Mole with my acne, dabbing the dots with tea tree oil, wondering if I'm paying penitence for a pock-free adolescence. Was there someone I wronged? My charlatan would blame the wine, but answers are never that simple.

Last time she said I need to run less and ground more. My exercise compulsion may be disturbing my digestion, even constricting my colon. All week I forego my usual cardio and hip-hop for chants and breathing exercises. And it's true—I feel radiant, holy, even, when I arrive at the library. If vanity is the root of my maladies, where does that leave my

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body? Where is the line between self-love and softness?

But on Friday I rebel, run hills, then do abs on my oriental rug blasting Rick Ross who wants a hundred million dollars and a bad bitch, no actually, two hundred and ménage in his palace. Lyrics My One True Ex once analyzed as Rick Ross on the human condition. I'll never be able to listen and not think that. It's over three years since I cut all communication, and I want so bad for him to know he still makes me laugh. But I stay the course, switch to side plank, and just think:

May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you be happy. May you live with ease. May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you be happy. May you live with ease. May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you be happy. May you live with ease.



PART III: ZERO

At the library, I'm retraining myself to sit with my legs uncrossed, feet rooted so my tortured hips begin to untwist. Sometimes I last five minutes before I find my calves double wrapped back around each other. I've developed a dual canteen system to cool my thermos tea. Occasional scalding still occurs.

These days I stew my apples humbly, cradling the bowl and inhaling the spiced steam before my first bite. Fred is puzzled by my concoction until I tell him it's a mélange of applesauce and oatmeal, American oddities he wouldn't understand. It's heavy on the cardamon though, *très bon*, he admits, not knowing I'm healing him, too.

On the holistic podcast, the housewife calls her kitchen a sacred space. My kitchen is a bathroom, literally, my

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shower's in the corner, and I hop out when I hear the burners hissing. None of my pots are instant; my non-stick becomes increasingly non as my whole-grain basmati fuses to the bottom. I scrape it patiently, exhaling and practicing, grateful for the un-burnt grains.

I've begun a new breath and meditation process guided by a woman in all white. Her voice is serene, accent faintly colonial, and each of her days surely blissful. In the mornings, we clear our negativity and focus on what matters to us. She invites me to zap all my thoughts to nothing. To zero.

The list of topics for my next charlatan's appointment grows: skin of a teenager, circulation of a geriatric, ginger consumption unprecedented, digestion regularly irregular, sleep semi-restless. She never responded when I emailed the records of my diagnoses. They're decades old, and I can still barely keep my prescriptions filled, never learning when to take my pills.

My supplement regime has me worried I'm turning into the Stepmonster. It must've taken multiple upcycled tote bags to move out her collection of capsules and serums. Do they even fit in her Chelsea studio? Lately, when I mist on my expiring essential oils, my reflection is unfamiliar. It's not just my mottled skin and browning blonde. The face that stares back at me is different, changed, but I can't say how.

Some days I miss tortilla chips. Feel so far from the freshwoman who drunk drove the One True Ex's SUV for super nachos. I miss him and my American life with its dramas and dependencies. Some days I want so bad to be back in New York, smoking with Michael in his book-lined palace. The conversation brilliant, whiskey tumblers condensing, each lumpy joint making life even more magical. Now I'm half the stoner I used to be, liquor-free, and he's gone. It's all gone.

Inhale. We'll now meditate on absolute stillness. Nothingness. Like everything becomes zero. Your pain is zero. Your problem is zero. Distractions zero. Negative thoughts zero. Worry zero. Wanting zero. Anything that crosses your mind moves to zero. Illness zero. Loss zero. Longing zero. Exhale.

Everything to zero.

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Art Information

- "The Equilibrant of Conditioning [5]," "Synchronized Parallelization [6]," and "States of Potential and Non-Potentiality [7]" © Darrell Black; used by permission.



Gracie Bialecki is a writer and literary coach who lives in Paris, France. Her work

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has appeared in *The Atticus Review*, *Monkeybicycle*, and *Epiphany Magazine* where she is a monthly columnist. Bialecki is the co-founder of the storytelling series Thirst, a Poetry Editor at *Paris Lit Up*, and the author of the novel, *Purple Gold* (ANTIBOOKCLUB).

For more information, visit Gracie Bialecki's website [8].

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