

Grief, Guilt, and Giant Neotropical Toads.

This piece is a creative nonfiction personal essay.

Please be advised that this essay contains references to suicide that some readers may find distressing.

Toads terrify me beyond reason.

This phobia has plagued me since childhood. As far as I'm aware, a toad has never stolen my money in a holdup, hurt my little sisters' feelings, or betrayed my trust. Yet, for as long as I have been alive, I have gone to the ends of the earth to avoid looking at or making contact with their blistering brown skin. When I was ten, this phobia was cemented by a haunting encounter in my parents' laundry. The air was thick with the smell of fabric softener as the washing machine rapped repetitively against the corrugated iron wall. Shoeless, I stood washing my hands in our al fresco washroom when a street gang of toads cornered me, their bulging bodies casting morbid silhouettes against the dimly lit walls. Always partial to dramatic flair, I wailed at the top of my lungs, a damsel in distress, until my dad scooped me up and saved me. After the event etched itself into my psyche and the fear paralysis had worn off, I spent the night cleansing myself fervently until my arms pruned from elbows to fingertips.

Years later, on a Wednesday night in spring, I found out that Ben had taken his own life. In a daze, I stumbled into the garden, fell to the ground, and screamed until my lungs gave out. Lifeless, I watched with glazed eyes as a toad leaped onto my head and into the garden bed. I didn't flinch. I wasn't scared. How could I be afraid when the scariest possible thing had already happened to me? How could my feeble mind and broken heart find a shred of regard to devote to anything other than Ben? How could I reckon with this? How could he do this to me?

Grief, guesswork, and guilt are compelling perspective changers.

When Ben was alive, he was an omnipresent character in the life of everyone who knew him. Ben was funny, in the way that only a handful of people are; without having to bend, tense, or try. He was quiet, but when he spoke to you it was as if he had given you a key to a door that nobody else had ever opened. Ben never lied; he was incapable of it. He would look at you with unwavering intensity and would release a blunt force of formidable honesty. Ben was attentive -

when we would see each other after extended periods of no contact, he would excitedly list all of my achievements as if he were a teenage Taylor Swift fan. He never really had to *say* much to make you feel supported, loved, and important - he would look at me and I would just know. Ben was interesting, smart, introspective, talented, and kind. He didn't know how to use the serrated edge on cling wrap boxes and pronounced the word "can't" with an American accent despite having never lived there. Ben was someone I feared I would never truly know, no matter how hard I tried, how hard I yearned, or how much I hoped he had grown. A sense of dread always surrounded him, the taste of tragedy lingering on my tongue - a flavour that left me helpless, wishing I could come up with anything good enough to say to allow him to take a proper breath. Ben was stuck so deep in the profound void of his mind that he lost sight of the light.

In the aftermath of his death, Ben was reduced to a tragic headline: the boy who killed himself, a stark label that seemed to obliterate the vibrant person he was. Perhaps the saddest part of losing someone to suicide is how the shock, horror, and guilt wipe away the good things about a person's life. All the love, passion, and light-soaked joy shrink to nothingness, like fire through a flower bed. Forgotten are the adventures, the side-splitting inside jokes, and the hours spent babbling in car parks. All the trivial, mundane, beautiful parts of life get hidden under a sadness so heavy not even a stadium full of herculean bodybuilders could lift it.

I enlisted all of my strength into remembering everything I could about Ben, the insignificant moments; the way his face would scrunch when he felt awkward, the way his hands looked when he held a cup. How else could I live with myself in the ruins of such a terrible thing if not with the reminder that my memories carried all that was left of a person that I loved so achingly? I made it my mission to ensure that any happiness I felt was married to guilt. Guilt for the fact that I am here and he isn't - guilt that someone so bright and beautiful is missing out on the joys of life. Guilt for the fact that maybe, just maybe there was something *I* could have done, but failed to do. *I* could have loved him better. *I* failed; *I* could have loved him better. Guilt is a very self-centered feeling. It ignores the nihilistic truth of the word, blunt and honest just like Ben, that we have no control over anybody besides ourselves.

Guilt is necessary. It teaches us empathy, redistributes emotional stress, and is a vital part of processing grief. It is a feeling that blooms among the numbness, where sometimes feeling

something, anything, is better than feeling nothing. Guilt is a rope that pulls you out of the trenches, but begins to blister your hands if you hold onto it for too long.

About nine months after losing Ben, his mother called me. I hadn't heard from her in weeks, so I pulled into the nearest car space, or rather any space that would fit my car, and picked up the phone. She asked me to tell her a story about Ben. For a moment, the request was strangely startling. I'd been so focused on his pain, that I had forgotten his happiness. And so, I told her about the time that Ben taught me how to use chopsticks, embarrassed on my behalf that I hadn't taken the time to learn before going on a date with someone of Chinese descent. Sitting in my car, parked illegally in the middle of the city with a police car two hundred meters down the road, I felt the closest to at ease that I had felt since before Ben died. Simple as it was, this moment was a blissful light during a monumental darkness. It was a reminder of the good in the world, a reminder that I so desperately needed. It prompted me to think of yin and yang, of how there is light in all darkness and darkness in all light.

When I think of Ben there is a black hole of darkness, but the darkness is a spec compared to the brightest, most blinding light I feel when I remember his smile, his laugh, and his voice. I was blessed enough to be there in some of his happiest moments, a gift from the universe that I still don't understand what I did to deserve. I was blessed enough to know him. Reflecting on these memories, I realised I had been so lost in my guilt and grief that I had forgotten how important it is to tell his story in full. I had distracted myself with the Sisyphean task of discovering to what degree I was to blame; rather than honouring Ben, I had been using guilt to inhibit myself from relishing life's joy. I had been belittling myself and Ben's memory by plaguing the timeline with unnecessary and needless guilt.

So, I tell his stories - an equally selfish notion as it is selfless. Telling his story honours me just as much as it honours his memory. We were an important part of each other, a connection only paralleled by a twelve-year-old boy and his gaming console - a connection that when broken is devastating and monumental. Sometimes my mind still wanders, listening to the constant whirring that tells me that there was something I could have done - something we all could have done, searching to feed the insatiable hunger for someone to blame. But there isn't anyone to blame.

Untangling the web of guilt is a menial and time-consuming task, it's no simple feat to quit the blame game. This is not a step-by-step guide to how I magically healed myself after the sudden death of someone I loved deeply and profoundly. I can't heal it; nobody can. Not even a Texan-evangelical preacher with a god complex and "healing hands". The magnitude of grief does not waver, grief does not shrink as the years go by. Instead, I have found that my life has grown around my grief. I have learned that to honour Ben, I must fully embrace my growth and accept that there is no growth in guilt. In the early stages of my grief, I believed that growth meant forgetting, moving on, and leaving Ben behind. But growth doesn't mean forgetting - I was naive to think that I could forget about someone of his magnitude in the first place. I think about Ben every single day. Ben lives on in every part of me, all the idiosyncratically human parts.

I think back upon that encounter with the toad that Wednesday night in spring every so often, always macabrely amused by how the overwhelming grief instantly erased a lifetime of immense fear. For whatever reason, toads have not scared me nearly as much since. In retrospect, I can see that toad as the gift that it was: the perfect metaphor for my impending growth. A scant consolation gift when put in context, but whatever, I'll take it. Just as my fear of toads was irrational, so too was the guilt that I carried after Ben's death. I live in Australia's subtropical Queensland, and as unfortunate as it may be, toads are as much a part of the furniture here as Damo the truck driver is at the local pub. Just as I will have to face toads eventually - in circumstances where I am shoeless and afraid, I must continue to face and process the guilt I feel around Ben's death. The grief endures; but so does the love.

Every day presents a new bouquet of emotions, light and dark. The light makes me smile in my worst moments, and the dark makes me wonder how I will ever make my way out of the endless tunnel. But always, as if an answer from some higher power, I see his light.

I always will.