PERSONAL HISTORY

LOSING RELIGION AND FINDING ECSTASY IN HOUSTON

Christianity formed my deepest instincts, and I have been walking away from it for half my life.

By Jia Tolentino

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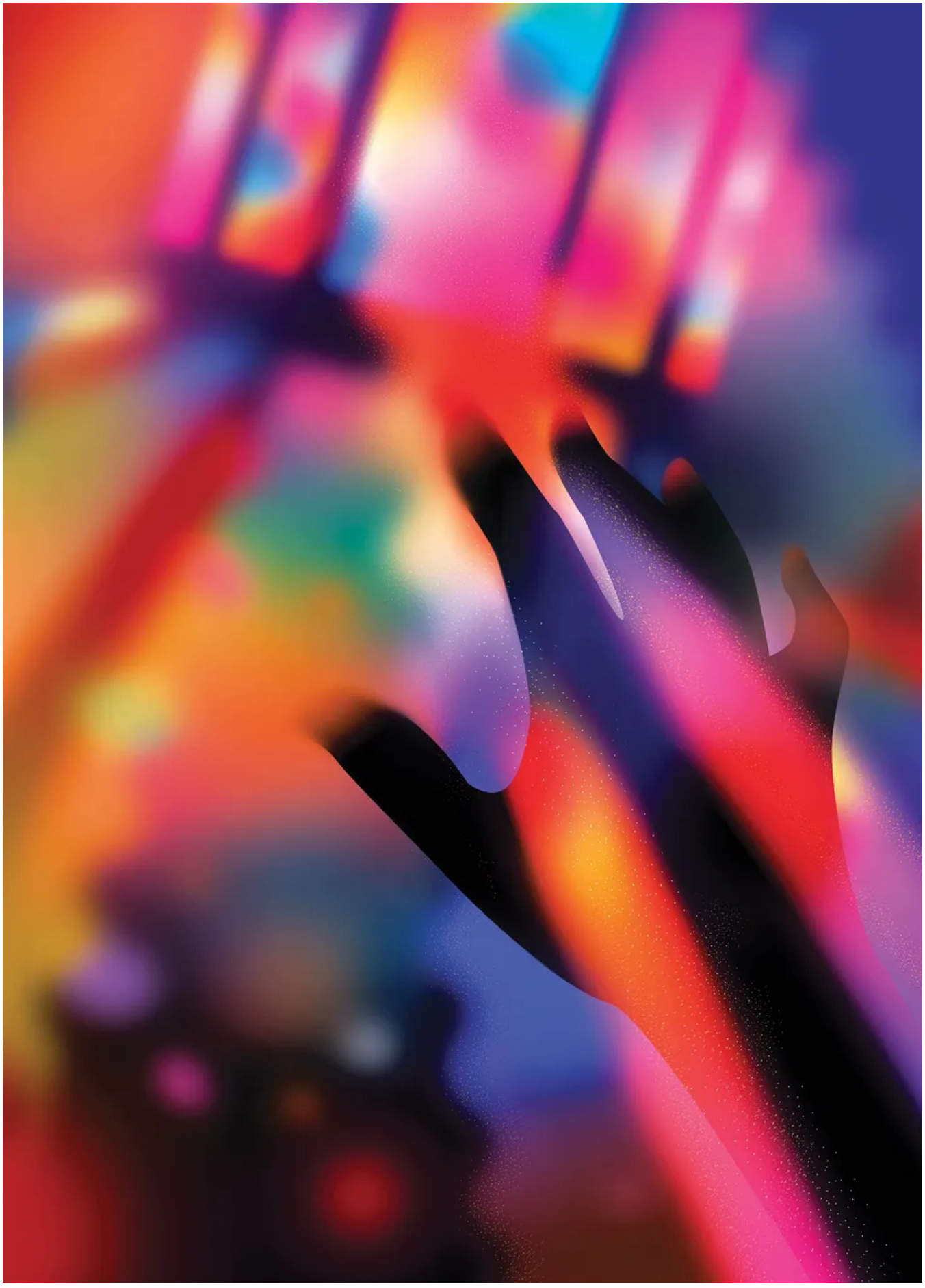

I've been walking away from institutional religion for half my life, fifteen years dismantling what the first fifteen built. Illustration by Shawna X

The church I grew up in was so big we called it the Repentagon. It was not a single structure but a thirty-four-million-dollar campus, built in the nineteen-eighties and spread across forty-two acres in a leafy, white neighborhood ten miles west of downtown Houston. A circular drive with a fountain in the middle led up to a bone-white sanctuary that sat eight hundred; next to it was a small chapel, modest and humble, with pale-blue walls. There was also a school, a restaurant, a bookstore, three basketball courts, an exercise center, and a cavernous mirrored atrium. There was a dried-out field with bleachers and, next to it, a sprawling playground; during the school year, the rutting rhythm of football practice bled into the cacophony of recess through a porous border of mossy oaks. Mall-size parking lots circled the campus; on Sundays, it looked like a car dealership, and during the week it looked like a fortress, surrounded by an asphalt moat. At the middle of everything was an eight-sided, six-story corporate cathedral called the Worship Center, which sat six thousand people. Inside were two huge balconies, a jumbotron, an organ with nearly two hundred stops and more than ten thousand pipes, and a glowing baptismal font. My mom sometimes worked as a cameraperson for church services, filming every backward dip into the water as though it were a major-league pitch. There was tiered seating for a baby-boomer choir that sang at the nine-thirty service, a performance area for the Gen X house band at

eleven, and sky-high stained-glass windows depicting the beginning and end of the world. You could spend your whole life inside the Repentagon, starting in nursery school, continuing through twelfth grade, getting married in the chapel, attending adult Bible study every weekend, baptizing your children in the Worship Center, and meeting your fellow-retirees for racquetball and a chicken-salad sandwich, secure in the knowledge that your loved ones would gather in the sanctuary to honor you after your death.

The church was founded in 1927, and the school was established two decades later. By the time I got there, in the mid-nineties, Houston was entering an era of glossy, self-satisfied power, enjoying the dominance of Southern evangelicals and the spoils of extractive Texan empires—Halliburton, Enron, Exxon, Bush. Associate pastors flogged fund-raising campaigns during Sunday services, working to convert the considerable wealth of the church's tithing population into ostentatious new displays. When I was in high school, the church built a fifth floor with a train for children to play in, and a teen-youth-group space called the Hangar, which featured the nose of a plane half crashed through a wall.

My parents hadn't always been evangelical, nor had they favored this tendency toward excess. They had grown up Catholic in the Philippines and, after moving to Toronto, a few years before I was born, had attended a small Baptist church. When, in 1993, they moved to Houston, an unfamiliar and unfathomably large expanse of highway and prairie, one pastor's face was everywhere, smiling at commuters from the billboards that studded I-10. My parents took to his kind and compelling style of preaching—he was classier than your average televangelist, and much less greasy than Joel Osteen, the better-known Houston pastor, who became famous in the two-thousands for his airport books about the prosperity gospel. My parents began regularly attending services at the Repentagon, and, soon afterward, they persuaded the

school's administrators to put me in first grade, even though I was four years old.

I would regret this situation when I was in high school at the age of twelve. But, as a kid, I was eager and easy. I pointed my toes in dance class and did all my homework. In daily Bible classes, I made salvation bracelets on tiny leather cords—a black bead for my sin, a red bead for the blood of Jesus, a white bead for purity, a blue bead for baptism, a green bead for spiritual growth, a gold bead for the streets of Heaven that awaited me. During the holidays, I acted in the church's youth musicals; one of them was set at CNN, the "Celestial News Network," and several of us played reporters covering the birth of Jesus Christ. When I was still in elementary school, my family moved farther west, to new suburbs where model homes rose out of bare farmland. On Sundays, as we drove into the city, I sat quietly in the back seat next to my cherubic little brother, ready to take my place in the dark and think about my soul. Spiritual matters felt simple and absolute. I didn't want to be bad, or doomed. I wanted to be saved, and good.

Back then, believing in God felt mostly unremarkable, occasionally interesting, and every so often like a private thrill. In the Bible, angels came to your doorstep. Fathers offered their children up to be sacrificed. Fishes multiplied; cities burned. The horror-movie progression of the plagues in Exodus riveted me: the blood, the frogs, the boils, the locusts, the darkness. I was taught that the violence of Christianity came with great safety: under a pleasing shroud of aesthetic mystery, there were clear prescriptions about who you should be. I prayed every night, thanking God for the wonderful life I had been given. On weekends, I would pedal my bike across a big stretch of pasture in the late-afternoon light and feel holy. I would spin in circles at the skating rink and know that someone was looking down on me.

Toward the end of elementary school, the impression of wholeness started

slipping. A teacher advised us to boycott Disney movies, because Disney World had allowed gay people to host a parade. Another teacher confiscated my Archie comics and my peace-sign notebook, replacing this heathen paraphernalia with a copy of the new best-seller about the Second Coming, "Left Behind." Three girls were electrocuted when a light blew out in the pool where they'd been swimming, and this tragedy was deemed the will of the Lord. Around this time, television screens were installed all over campus, and the senatorial face of our pastor bobbed around on each one, preaching to nobody in particular. At chapel, we were sometimes shown religious agitprop videos; in the worst of these, a handsome dark-haired man bid his young son farewell in a futuristic white chamber and then, as violins swelled in the background, walked down an endless hall to be martyred for his Christian faith. I cried. Afterward, we sang "I Pledge Allegiance to the Lamb."

In middle school, I became conscious of my ambivalence. I started to feel twinges of guilt at the end of every church service, when the pastor would call for people to come forward and accept Jesus. What if this feeling of uncertainty meant that I needed to avow Him again and again? I'd been taught that my relationship with God would decay if I wasn't careful. I wasn't predestined, I wasn't chosen: if I wanted God's forgiveness, I had to work. I started feeling agoraphobic in the Worship Center; thinking about these intimate matters in such a crowded public place felt indecent. I took breaks from services, sometimes curling up on the couches in the corridor, where mothers shushed their infants, or reading the Book of Revelation in the unsupervised pews in the highest balcony.

The author at home in suburban Houston, in 1995. Photograph courtesy Jia Tolentino

One Sunday, I told my parents that I needed a sweater from the car. I walked across the echoing atrium with the keys jangling in my hand and the pastor's voice ringing through the empty space. In the parking lot, the sun burned my eyes and softened the asphalt. I got into the passenger seat of our powder-blue Suburban and put the key in the ignition. The Christian radio station was playing—89.3 KSBJ, "God listens." I hit the Seek button, sending the dial to country, alt-rock, the Spanish stations, and then to something I had never heard before. It was the Box, Houston's hip-hop radio station, and it was playing what it always played on Sundays: chopped and screwed.

The Greater Houston area is as big as New Jersey and contains seven million people. Its freeways trace nineteenth-century market routes, forming the shape of a wagon wheel around downtown. There are no zoning laws: strip clubs sit next to churches, shining skyscrapers next to gap-toothed convenience stores. The city is less than an hour from the Gulf Coast, with the alien-civilization oil refineries of Port Arthur and the ghost piers that rise out of Galveston's dirty water. There's an irradiated spirit to everything: an impurity that can feel like absolution.

By some measures, Houston is the most diverse city in America. It's also a deeply segregated one, with a long history of its wealthy white population quietly exploiting minorities in order to shore up the city's vaunted quality of life. For decades, Houston's government placed its garbage dumps in black neighborhoods, many of which bordered downtown. It was in some of these neighborhoods, in the nineties, in cheap bungalows behind patchy lawns and wire fences, south of 610 and west of 45, that the Houston rap scene was born. Alongside the legendary Port Arthur duo UGK, rappers like Z-Ro, Lil' Keke,

Lil' Troy, Paul Wall, and Lil' Flip concocted a narcotized bang and sparkle that one can still hear in hip-hop. It sounds like an Escalade vibrating under the influence, like someone pulling up in a car with spinners and rolling down the window really slow. It shows up about a hundred seconds into last year's No. 1 hit "Sicko Mode," by the young Houston rapper Travis Scott, when he samples Big Hawk, a South Side rapper who was shot and killed, thirteen years ago, at the age of thirty-six.

Big Hawk was a member of the Screwed Up Click, which was led by the man who created chopped and screwed: Robert Earl Davis, Jr., better known as DJ Screw. Davis, whose life was chronicled by Michael Hall in *Texas Monthly*, was born in 1971, in Bastrop, outside Austin, to a trucker father and a mother who held three cleaning jobs and bootlegged cassette tapes from her record collection for extra cash. A cousin with whom Davis learned how to d.j. gave him his stage name after watching him use a screw to scratch up records he didn't like. Screw moved to Houston, dropped out of high school, and started d.j.'ing at a South Side skating rink. In 1989, he hit the wrong button on the turntable, and the tempo slowed to what would become his signature wooze. A friend gave him ten dollars to record an entire tape at that tempo. He started recording Houston rappers over mixtapes, directing their long, fluid sessions as he mixed, and then slowing the tape down, making it skip beats and stutter, like a heart about to stop. He made copies of his mixtapes on gray cassettes, which he bought in bulk, labelled by hand, and sold out of his house, to customers who waited in cars lined up around the block. In 1998, Screw established Screwed Up Records, behind bulletproof glass in a store near South Park. Nothing was for sale except those cassettes.

By then, Screw was getting physically heavier and slower, as if his body had started working at his trademark tempo. He had become addicted to codeine cough syrup, also known as lean. Lean is now permanently associated with rappers, partly because of notable acolytes of the substance, such as Lil Wayne.

But drugs are demographically flexible. Townes Van Zandt, the country-blues artist, who was born in Fort Worth and made his name playing Houston clubs in the sixties, loved cough syrup so much that he called it Delta Momma—DM, as in Robitussin. He sang one song, 1971's "Delta Momma Blues," from the genial point of view of the drug: "Well, my delta boy I'm afraid you're up too tight / But you take it slow and somehow you'll come meandering out my way / And I'll take you in my arms and make it right."

Chopped and screwed mimics the feeling you get from lean—a heady and dissociative security, as if you're moving very slowly toward a conclusion you don't need to understand. It's perfect for Houston, where you can pass a full day without ever getting off the highway, where the caustic gleam of daytime melts into a long, swampy night. The music sounded right to me as soon as I heard it, sitting on the old seats of my parents' Suburban, in the parking lot of the megachurch. I was in eighth grade, and Southern rap had already ascended, permeating even the Repentagon. At cheerleading camp, we tied thick white ribbons in our hair before stunt practice, listening to OutKast and Nelly; in ninth grade, we played Ludacris, and in tenth grade T.I. One summer, everyone started twerking: we dropped to the floor and clumsily thrust our hips, mimicking the motions that were spreading like a virus, clapping for the girls who could do it best. In high school, we would spend some of our evenings at youth group, where we sang about Jesus, and others going to teen night at a Houston club, driving into the thicket of liquor stores and strip clubs a mile up on Westheimer, entering a dark room where the girls wore miniskirts and everyone sought amnesty in a different way. (There was a lack of zoning in our cultural lives, too.) Sometimes a foam machine in the ceiling would turn on and soak our cheap pushup bras, and we'd glue ourselves to strangers as everyone chewed on big mouthfuls of Southern rap.

We had been taught that even French kissing was dangerous, that anything not marked as white and Christian was murky and perverse. Eventually, it was the

church that seemed corrupted to me. What had been forbidden began to feel earnest and clean. I went to college and began considering different ideas of virtue. It was hot out the first time I tasted lean, on a night when everyone was home from school. I drank it with ice, booze, and Sprite, from a big Styrofoam cup. Soon afterward, I was in my friend's pool, wading through hip-high water. The song "Overnight Celebrity" was playing, and it sounded like it would never end—like it had been slowed to Sunday's chopped-and-screwed tempo, thick enough to carry me. The water felt like I could hold it. The sky was enormous and velvet. I looked up and saw the stars blanketed by the glow of pollution, and I felt as blessed as I ever did when I was a child.

I have been walking away from institutional religion for half my life now, fifteen years dismantling what the first fifteen built. But I've always been glad that I grew up the way that I did. The Repentagon trained me to feel at ease in odd, insular, extreme environments, and Christianity formed my deepest instincts. It gave me a leftist world view—a desire to follow leaders who feel themselves inseparable from the hungry, the imprisoned, and the sick. Years of auditing my own conduct in prayer gave me an obsession with everyday morality. And Christian theology convinced me that I had been born in a compromised situation. It made me want to investigate my own ideas about what it means to be good.

This spiritual inheritance spurred my defection: by the end of my teens, I'd lost interest in trying to reconcile big-tent Southern evangelicalism with my burgeoning political beliefs. Many of the rich white Christians I knew believed —albeit *politely*, and with generous year-end donations to various ministries— that wealth was a kind of divine anointment, and that they were worth more to God and country than everyone else. People at my school often whispered the words "Mexican" and "black," instinctively assuming that those descriptions were slurs. The Gospels preach economic redistribution—"Let him who has

two tunics share with him who has none," and so on—but everyone around me seemed mainly to believe in low taxes and the righteousness of war. George W. Bush was adorable, and the Patriot Act made him a hero; there were, without question, weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Public demonstrations of faith often doubled as performances of superiority. Sometimes, at chapel, a troupe of Christian bodybuilders ripped apart phone books as a demonstration of the strength we could acquire through Jesus. At Halloween, the church put on a "Judgment House," a walk-through haunted-house play in which the main character, a high-school student, drank beer at a party, succumbed to further temptations, and wound up in Hell.

It wasn't hard to sever my ties to these theatrics. But, for years, I retained an intense hunger for devotion. First, I turned my attention inward. I kept a devotional journal, producing a record of jagged and fierce spiritual longing. I pleaded for things I still find recognizable. "Help me to not put on an act of any kind," I wrote. I told God that I wanted to live in accordance with my beliefs, that I wanted to diminish my sense of self-importance, that I was sorry for not being better, and that I was grateful for being alive. "It's hard to draw the line between taking pleasure in God's purpose and aligning God's purpose with what I take pleasure in," I wrote, between entries in which I wondered if it was inherently wrong to get drunk. The church stood on one side of my life, and what I wanted—a moral code determined by my own instincts, and an understanding of unmitigated desire—stood on the other. I was in the middle, trying to resolve a tension that, at some point, I stopped being able to feel. Eventually, almost without realizing it, I let one side go.

Throughout these years, I read a lot of C. S. Lewis, the strangest and yet most reasonable of twentieth-century Christian writers. I went back most often to "The Screwtape Letters," a collection of imaginary correspondence sent by a bureaucratic demon named Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood, a "junior tempter" who is trying to lead his first human subject astray. The book's title

had odd, coincidental echoes that hinted at my relationship to its central subject—the ordinary temptations that could lead a person to Hell. "The safest road to Hell is the gradual one," Screwtape reminds Wormwood, "the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." When I first came across that sentence, I felt as if someone were reading my palm.

My road that way has, in fact, been gentle, although there were signposts if I'd wanted to see them. I could say, for instance, without too much oversimplification, that the year that I stopped believing in God—2006—was also the year I first did Ecstasy, in a friend's college apartment. We swallowed pills that had been crushed into Kleenex, and then we slipped into a sweaty black box of a music venue down the street, and I felt weightless, like I'd come back around to a truth that I had first been taught in church: that anything could happen, and a sort of grace that was both within you and outside you would pull you through.

Like many people before me, I found religion and drugs appealing for similar reasons. ("You require absolution, complete abandonment," I wrote, praying to God my junior year of high school.) Both provide a path toward transcendence, a way of accessing an extrahuman world of rapture and pardon. The word "ecstasy" suggests this etymologically, coming from the Greek *ekstasis*—*ek* meaning "out" and *stasis* meaning something like "stand." To be in ecstasy is to stand outside yourself. The "Screwtape" demon tells his nephew, "Nothing

matters at all except the tendency of a given state of mind, in given circumstances, to move a particular patient at a particular moment nearer to the Enemy or nearer to us." I have been overpowered with ecstasy in religious settings, during bouts of hedonistic excess, on Friday afternoons walking sober in the park as the sun turns everything translucent. Church never felt much more like virtue than drugs did, and drugs never felt much more sinful than church.

The first woman who is known to have published a book in English was a religious ecstatic: Julian of Norwich, whose name possibly comes from St. Julian's Church in Norwich, England, where, in the fourteenth century, she lived in devotional seclusion. At age thirty, Julian experienced sixteen extended and agonizing visions of God, which she collected in a book called "Revelations of Divine Love." She describes feeling "a supreme spiritual pleasure in my soul" and being "filled with eternal certainty," a feeling "so joyful to me and so full of goodness that I felt completely peaceful, easy and at rest, as though there were nothing on earth that could hurt me." But, she writes, "this only lasted for a while, and then my feeling was reversed and I was left oppressed, weary of myself, and so disgusted with my life that I could hardly bear to live."

This kind of delirious experience is seemingly a human constant, recounted with more or less identical phrasing in many different eras and attributed to many different sources. In 1969, the British biologist Alister Hardy began to compile a database of thousands of narratives that sound almost exactly like Julian's. One man writes, "I was out walking one night in the busy streets of Glasgow when, with slow majesty, at a corner where the pedestrians were hurrying by and the city traffic was hurtling on its way, the air was filled with heavenly music; and an all-encompassing light, that moved in waves of luminous color, outshone the brightness of the lighted streets. I stood still, filled with a strange peace and joy." Technically, Hardy's archive is a compendium of religious experiences, but the accounts within it resemble

transcripts from the supervised drug sessions that were conducted in the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties, during the brief period when Ecstasy could be used in therapeutic settings. (More recently, clinical trials with Ecstasy have begun.)

The substance that would later be called Ecstasy was first developed in 1912, in Germany, by Merck, which was trying to find a treatment for abnormal bleeding. For decades, it was known by its technical name, 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, or MDMA. In the seventies, a number of scientists tried it themselves, and a network of underground MDMA psychotherapists began to grow. In the eighties, the drug was labelled an empathogen, or an entactogen, because it can generate a state of empathy, by blocking serotonin reuptake and inducing the release of both serotonin and dopamine. During this period, Ecstasy was sometimes called Adam, by therapists, because of the state of Edenic innocence that it seemed to prompt in their patients. "Adam sessions" were collected in a 1985 book called "Through the Gateway of the Heart." One subject, a rape survivor, writes, "I felt expansive, physically exhausted but full of love and a deep feeling of peace." Another writes, "I do intend to become a perfect temple for this God-consciousness." A third subject identifies the drug as a religious pathway to "allow, invite, surrender God into my own body."

The attainment of chemical ecstasy, empathogenesis, occurs in stages. The drug first strips away the user's inhibitions, then it prompts the user to recognize and value the emotional states of others, and, finally, it makes the user's well-being feel inseparable from that of the group. Unlike other drugs that provoke extraordinary interpersonal euphoria, such as mushrooms or acid, Ecstasy does not confuse the user about what is occurring. Your awareness of self and of basic reality remains unchanged. For this reason, Ecstasy can provide a sense of salvation that might be more likely to stick than, say, a hallucinogen epiphany delivered from a face in the clouds.

In 1985, the Drug Enforcement Administration banned Ecstasy for a year, as an emergency measure, amid a rise in recreational use. Shortly before the ban ended, a D.E.A. judge recommended that MDMA be placed in the Schedule III category, for drugs, like ketamine and steroids, that have an accepted medical use and a moderate to low potential for abuse and addiction. Instead, MDMA was placed in Schedule I, the category for drugs with high abusive potential, no accepted medical usage, and severe safety concerns. It was around this time that a drug dealer renamed the substance Ecstasy. Despite the ban, the drug went global in the nineties, at raves. At the turn of the century, the D.E.A. estimated that two million hits of Ecstasy were brought into the United States every week. Its availability ran in cycles. By 2011, when I returned to the States after a year in the Peace Corps, Ecstasy had been rebranded as Molly, and it was once again a mainstream drug, engineered for the decade of corporate music festivals—both a special-occasion option and no big deal.

Ecstasy's magic is strongest at the beginning; it dissipates through repetition. I've become careful about using it—I'm afraid that the high will blunt my tilt toward unprovoked happiness, which might already be disappearing. I'm afraid that the low that sometimes comes after will leave a permanent trace. But, still, each time, it can feel like divinity. Your world realigns in a juddering oceanic shimmer. You understand that you can give the best of yourself to everyone you love without feeling depleted. This is what it feels like to be a child of Jesus, in a dark chapel, with stained-glass diamonds floating on the skin of all the people kneeling around you. This is what it feels like to be twenty-two, nearly naked, your hair blowing in the wind as the pink twilight expands into permanence, your body still holding the warmth of the day. You were made to be here. The nature of a revelation is that you don't have to reëxperience it. In the seventies, researchers believed that MDMA treatment could be discrete and limited—that once you got the message, as they put it, you could hang up the phone. You would be better for having listened. You would be changed.

They don't say this about religion, but they should.

"What if I were to begin an essay on spiritual matters by citing a poem that will not at first seem to you spiritual at all?" Anne Carson writes in the title essay of her book "Decreation." The poem is by Sappho, the Greek woman who supposedly threw herself over a cliff in the sixth century B.C. out of an excess of love for Phaon, the ferryman—though, for Sapphic reasons, this is unlikely. Carson connects Sappho to Marguerite Porete, a Christian mystic who was burned at the stake in 1310, and then to Simone Weil, the French intellectual who, while living in England during the Second World War, starved herself in solidarity with her compatriots in German-occupied France and died in 1943. The spiritual matter that Carson seeks to address is mysticism, the belief that, through attaining a state of ecstatic consciousness, a person can achieve union with the divine.

Carson cites Sappho's Fragment 31, in which the poet looks at a woman who is sitting next to a man, laughing with him. Sappho describes her feelings as she watches the woman. In Carson's translation:

. . . thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me.

Fragment 31 is one of the longest extant pieces of Sappho's work, preserved because it was excerpted in "On the Sublime," a work of literary criticism from the first century. In the seventeenth century, John Hall translated Fragment 31

for the first time in English; in Hall's version, the "greener than grass" line is "like a wither'd flower I fade." The Greek word in question is *chloros*, the root of the word "chlorophyll"—a pale yellow-green color, like new grass in the spring. As the narrator takes on the quality of that color, a translator could imagine her growing paler, fading—the "pale horse" in Revelation is a *chloros* horse. Carson reaches for the opposite effect. As the narrator stares at the woman she loves, she becomes greener, and the line becomes an expression of ecstasy in its original sense. Sappho steps outside herself. Love has caused her to abandon her body. The green grows greener. Some essential quality deepens as the self is removed.

The word "decreation" is Weil's term for the process of moving toward a love so unadulterated that it makes you leave yourself behind. "Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy," she writes. "For in the soul filled by the object no corner is left for saying 'I.' " She dreams of vanishing, but this fantasy reinscribes the dazzling force and vision of her intellectual presence. It's a "profoundly tricky spiritual fact," Carson writes, describing Weil's quandary. "I cannot go towards God in love without bringing myself along." Being a writer compounds the dilemma: to articulate the desire to vanish is to reiterate the self. Greener, not paler.

Carson's book includes a three-part libretto in which she imagines Weil in a hospital bed as "the Chorus of the Void tapdance around her." In a line that makes me shiver, Carson's Weil says, "I was afraid this might not happen to me." She expires in the white space that follows the libretto, reaching the logical end point of her philosophy of devotion—an ecstasy that is not so different from death. To grasp at self-erasure is to approach a total annihilation that can be achieved only once. I have wondered if this is part of the reason that many evangelical Christians seem eager for the Rapture, the prophesied event in which they'll depart the earth and ascend to Heaven. When you love something so much that you dream of emptying yourself out for it, you'd be

forgiven for wanting to let your love finish the job.

The last time I participated in anything on my old church campus was high-school graduation. I was wearing a white flowered sundress under a royal-blue robe, and I was onstage at the Worship Center, looking up at the bright lights, toward the empty balconies, giving the salutatorian's speech. I had turned in a different speech for approval. I barely remember what I ended up saying—I know I made at least one joke about the Repentagon. My classmates whooped, but, as I crossed the stage to accept my diploma, an administrator hissed his disapproval. The distance between the place that formed me and the form I had taken was out in the open, and widening. The next Christmas, when I came home from college, my church held a holiday service at the Toyota Center, the huge downtown arena where the Houston Rockets play. I spent much of the afternoon getting stoned with a friend, and, in the middle of the spectacle, I started to lose it. The country star Clay Walker was singing, his face looming huge on the jumbotron. I left my parents, edging my way out of the stadium seating. Outside, on the perimeter of our church service, venders were selling popcorn and brisket sandwiches and thirty-two-ounce Cokes. I went to the bathroom, overwhelmed, and cried.

I wonder if I would have stayed religious if I had grown up in a place other than Houston and a time other than now. I wonder how different I would be if I had

been able to find the feeling of devoted self-destruction only through God. Instead, I have confused religion with drugs, drugs with music, music with religion. I can't tell whether my inclination toward ecstasy is a sign that I still believe in God, or if it was only because of that ecstatic tendency that I ever believed at all. The first time I did mushrooms, the summer after my freshman year of college, I felt vulnerable and rescued, as if someone had just told me that I was going to Heaven. I walked down a beach and everything coalesced with the cheesy, psychotic logic of "Footprints in the Sand." The first time I did acid, I saw God again—the trees and clouds around me blazing with presence, like Moses' burning bush. Completely out of my mind, I wrote on a napkin, "I can process nothing right now that does not terminate in God's presence—this revelation I seem ready to have forever in degraded forms."

A couple of years later, I did acid in the desert, in a house at the top of a hill in a canyon where the sun and the wind were white hot and merciless. I left the house and walked down into the valley, and felt the drugs kick in when I was wandering in the scrub. The dry bushes became brilliant—greener—and a hummingbird torpedoed past me so quickly that I froze. I experienced, for the first time, Weil's precise fantasy of disappearance. I wanted to see the landscape as it was when I wasn't there. Everything was rippling. For hours, I watched the blinding swirl of light and cloud move west, and I repented. At sunset, the sky billowed into mile-wide peonies, hardly an arm's length above me, and it felt like a visitation, as if God were replacing the breath in my lungs. I sobbed, battered by a love I knew would fall away from me, ashamed for all the ways I had tried to bring myself to this, humiliated by the grace of encountering it now. I finally dragged myself inside and looked in the mirror. My eyes were smeared with black makeup, my face was red from crying, my lips were swollen; a thick, whitish substance clung stubbornly around my mouth. I looked like a junkie. I found a piece of paper, and, after noting that the ink seemed to be breathing, I wrote, "The situations in my life when I have been sympathetic to

desperation are the situations when I have felt sure I was encountering God."

I don't know if I'm after truth or hanging on to its dwindling half-life. I might only be hoping to remember that my ecstatic disposition is the source of the good in me—spontaneity, devotion, sweetness—and the worst things, too: heedlessness, blankness, equivocation. Sunday in church isn't the same as Sunday on the radio.

In the fall of 2000, a few months after I first heard DJ Screw's music, he was found dead on the bathroom floor at his studio, with an ice-cream wrapper in his hand. He was twenty-nine. Coroners found that his body was full of codeine; his blood also flowed with Valium and PCP. His heart was engorged, possibly the result of sedentary days and nights in the indulgent vortex of the studio. At his funeral, in Smithville, the town where he grew up, old folks sang gospel and rappers nodded quietly along with the hymns. People lined up outside the church the way they'd done outside Screw's house to pick up their tapes. They were honoring the sound that darkened Houston's anonymous, looping highways, that seeped through the veins of the city, setting the pace and the rhythm of its people as they slipped past one another in cars.

That year, I got on a bus and rode in a convoy east toward Alabama with a thousand other kids. On a middle-of-nowhere beach, we participated in mass baptisms, put our hands up in huge services where everyone cried in the darkness. We groped one another on the bus afterward, and in the morning we talked about how good it felt to be saved. Later, it was one of the boys from that trip who chopped lines on my friend's kitchen table as I waded through her pool, drunk on syrup, staring at the stars. There are some institutions—drugs, church, money—that align the superstructure of white wealth in Houston with the heart of black and brown culture beneath it. There are feelings, like ecstasy, that provide an unbreakable link between virtue and vice. You don't have to believe a revelation to understand that something inside it was real. ♦

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