

Content Warning: “Headlines, Bodylines” contains descriptions of filicide/violence against people with disabilities; ableist ideas; mass murder; mention of Nazism; and discussion of eugenics.

Headlines, Bodylines By Madeleine Trees

I. *Woman Killed in Tragic Assault*

Today, the death count goes up. Today, a woman who moved on wheels was killed by someone who loved her enough to marry her. She died before anyone could come to help. She never used the automatic button for the doors. She glided on through like it was nothing, and nobody ever pushed in front of her. She always had the same smile, the same nod, for everyone who met her eyes, whether she knew them or not. I did not know her well. We shared perhaps a few cursory conversations. We exchanged the kind of covert acknowledgement that passes between users of mobility aids when they meet in public—the kind that is so subtle as to be perhaps chalked up to imagination. So no, I did not know her well. But she was a person whose office was very close to mine, whose path I crossed on a daily basis, whose face in the news article sent to me by a friend stirred instant recognition and instant, plummeting shock. I did not know her well, and now I never will. Perhaps she was not killed for being different. The details are still unclear, and for the sake of her memory, we will not speculate. Still, I share with her the state of crippled legs, and I am consumed with what I would have been thinking: *yet again, the odds are stacked against me.* She did not know that she would see the trees passing her by one last time, perhaps hear the cold echo of migrational birdsong, and catch one final glimpse of the early-darkening sky two days before New Year’s—there was no reason to think these days would be made up of “last times.” She went through the doors like anybody else, and like anybody else, her mind wandered to thoughts of what 2022 would bring, and then, like every other person who has ever died, she left, and we were left without her.

II. *Mother Speaks on the True Struggles of Raising an Autistic Child*

“Sometimes I think about just driving off a bridge with him in the backseat.” The words of a mother whose child is on the spectrum, who is fed up with continuous tantrums, unpredictable sensitivities, and the tendency to communicate

in ways the neurotypical person finds difficult to relate to.

“Sometimes I think it would’ve been better if he was stillborn.”

Facebook commenters nod in sympathy for this mother’s plight, the curse of the puzzle piece that came into the world through her—“Sometimes we *all* have thoughts like that”—“Nobody really understands what we’re dealing with”—“I just wish my kid were *normal*.”

Thoughts are not something anybody can police but the fact remains that, in 2013, a boy named Alex was killed and the Internet did as the Internet does and instantly divided.

“Perhaps this mother made the wrong choice, but it was certainly understandable”—“We don’t know what he was like behind closed doors”—“Maybe it was better for him not to have had to keep suffering,” the yea-sayers crowed, bright with the passion imparted by diluted eugenicist thought.

It is never the fault of the child. The only way it was better for Alex was that he no longer lived in a house with a mother who was plotting his murder, and he no longer lived in a world where predatory foundations used him to twist the views of the public.

A Forbes reporter skillfully urged readers to realize that, while Alex could not help the way he was born, the greatest illness is the lack of support that leaves a mother so desperate for help—whether her child walks the spectrum or not—that a sudden death seems to be the only option available.

These thoughts cannot be policed, but they come into a parent’s head when that person feels so desperately alone and thinly spread that the extreme feels commonplace and the darkness seems endless. Make no mistake that the parent who follows through deserves to be alone with that action forever, but this is a world where needing help is seen as weakness, and this is a world where there are people for whom it is too late. The truth is that when an average person sees somebody who is impaired, they do not see a full life, a beautiful life, one that can truly be led, one that is valuable. They see an object of pity or even ridicule. They presume that the afflicted must live a life of anguish, grief, and constant isolation. It becomes easy, then, to be sympathetic to the caregiver who makes the humane choice, the graceful choice.

And yet, there is bliss in every life. Children who are non-speaking still express joy, anxiety, fear, and the sweet neutral contentment of being secure. People who have difficulty moving about still find novel ways to explore their environment and delight in every discovery, no matter how small.

The fact remains that Alex died confused and feeling perhaps more alone than his mother, who was standing over him, not keeping watch, but hastening him out of this world. He did not know why the person who fed him, who birthed him, who bathed him, and who comforted him was doing something so very upsetting. He did not know

what he had done wrong this time.

III. *Euthanasia's Silent Graveyard*

In 1939, Hitler ushered in what was only the logical conclusion of eugenics philosophy: those whose bodies or minds were designated “unworthy” were slowly phased out of the production line. It started with neglect—allowing patients to starve, become dehydrated, or succumb to infection or injury, ignored by the eyes of the doctors who tended them. Inaction that causes harm is, itself, an action. Active action then becomes easier. Buildings rose specifically to facilitate extinction, gas or injection, neither administered with care or compassion, both designed to simply get the job done, get it done fast, and move on to the next one on the calendar. It rose to open secrecy and stayed there for two years, until the church stepped in, and then it continued as a halfway-open secret. 70,000 people were killed before this point, and 200,000 more would follow. Those bodies—already broken by circumstance, by birth, by human hand—piled up, like toys thrown carelessly aside, or lumber scheduled to be moved. The SS members who later slaughtered Jews, Romas, and other undesirables were trained for prime efficiency at just such centers. Those disabled bodies were the beta test, becoming the model for a massive loss of life throughout the war. The medical field thought for quite some time that infants and those with intellectual disabilities could not truly feel pain, that their cries and struggles were mechanical instincts telling them something was putting them in danger, or that they served the biological function of drawing the protective attention of a parent. Yet the pain that they experienced nearly 100 years ago has been so deep and longstanding as to affect the generations to come, seeping down with every botched attempt at institutional care, roiling in the bruises left by a careless caretaker, leaching extra poison into the words hurled at us by the hateful – as if we needed any more of that. Not only does it taint our present and our future but, crucially, it tainted *theirs*, ultimately ending them completely, and had we only stepped up to acknowledge that and really try and change things, we might not still be battered by the past.

IV. *March 1st: May We All Live Another Year*

We have our own Day of Mourning. I did not know this until I had been disabled for four years. There is a website that catalogs every case in which a disabled person is killed by family members—at least,

every case *that we know of*—starting from 1980, ending never.
Red text lines the right-hand side of the screen,
offering categories by which one can browse these catalogued deaths,
organized in a way not so much *clinical* as it is *numb*. It is easier
to deal with the crushingly immense amount of data
in the detached way that academia affords instead of as I have done:
imagining each face,
each soul,
fading out of a world that it had to *work* to be welcomed into,
perhaps feeling like it was finally starting to belong,
only to be snatched away too soon to find out.
I cannot bring myself to browse these indexes—“Relationship: Offspring”—“Status: Suspect
Deceased”—“Type: Fatal Neglect”—“Undated”—
“Name Unknown”—
lest every face weigh as heavy on my soul
as that of the woman who passed me in the hall each day.
I want to shake humanity like these mothers shake their children,
jarring teeth together and rattling brains
until every single person feels each human loss as *wholly human* and *wholly a loss*
and vows that these terrible acts be cleansed from our genes,
that this world will be rebuilt so that it no longer disables us.
But I am a solitary cripple poet
whose words best reach those already like me,
not those blessed and blinded by normative ability.
I am lucky to have parents who never shook me
or had waking fantasies of burying me in the backyard,
to have found loved ones that empower my existence
and take me in the form that I am made.
I can only offer solace where grief has already taken place,
as comfort necessitates a preceding painful event.
So, even with March 1st months away,
even though we have but one official Day of Mourning,
we are mourning right now. The list is growing,
right now.
Our sorrows are shared one to another. None of us is immune
to a pain greater than what our bodies generate in various ways. We may feel isolated
but we are never alone, and the grief spreads like a ripple,
its energy displacing all objects in its path.
And if those infamous five stages take us to the most energized stage—Anger—
let us stay there.
Let us take up arms and take to the streets. Let us
speak up when it would be uncomfortable for those around us.
Let us put a face to each name. Let us
use our grief to propel us into the future on whatever extremities or technologies we possess.
Let us declare and demand the simplest thing: that, after all these years,
this grief shall end with us.