

TEETH

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listen to the music at:
michaelharren.com/teeth

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The crunch seemed so loud I feared it resonated across the entire back patio of Boulevard Bistrot, an upscale-yet-casual eatery in Houston's hip museum district. The sound was quite literally just in my head, and it was the sound of my tooth crumbling to years of neglect. The nerve, it seemed, had given up months earlier on alerting me to the fact that there was a big problem here, so all that remained was a fragile shell of a tooth that couldn't even hold its own against my impossibly creamy post-shift meal of wild and exotic mushroom risotto.

Even if you've never broken a tooth, I'm sure you can imagine the sound. It's like when you bite down on a seed or perhaps a cherry stone. Something way harder than your standard, you know, chew. Well, it's like that. But worse. The crunch resonates through your head, and through your soul really, as it triggers layers upon layers of shame.

It was the front right premolar, just behind the canine, so it wasn't *immediately* visible, but I still spent an inordinate amount of time in front of the mirror for the next few days trying to figure out how I was going to smile from then on. It was all I could do to ignore the face in the mirror taunting me, "You deserve this." So I did my best to make a plan. If I let out my usual full-on smile, it was definitely too much. But if I pinched in my lips just a bit, careful not to open my mouth as much as usual, maybe no one would notice. And god forbid if someone made me laugh. Then it would all be over.



HERE'S ALL YOU DO

	
1 Brush your teeth every day — thoroughly — with TEEL. A few drops are dry or moistened brush. Feel it clean!	2 Once a week brush teeth with plain baking soda on brush moistened with TEEL. Brush one extra minute.

THIS NEW TEEL WAY CLEANS AND BRIGHTENS YOUR TEETH . . . LEAVES MOUTH DELIGHTFULLY CLEAN AND REFRESHED

TEEL COMES IN A BOTTLE—NO BOTHER WITH TUBES

I mean, let's be honest. We've all heard the jokes about trailer parks and busted grills. Even today, with everybody doubling down on political correctness, missing teeth are still fair game. Sure, Twitter can take you down for practically any other offense. But one overly enthusiastic gap tooth smile, and you could be a target for even the wokest of the woke.

That tooth-destroying risotto wasn't my first broken tooth, but it was my first *visibly* broken tooth. Something about the shame of having a busted-up grill, coupled with my newly sober 20-something gay boy angst, made this an especially hard to manage dilemma. I avoided social engagements, and even AA meetings, for a couple of weeks while I gathered the funds to go to the dentist, anxious and uninsured.

"Wow. What a mess, right?"

That was the dentist to the hygienist during my first dental exam in half a decade. I don't remember much else about the appointment other than that damning observation. I know he pulled out the remains of the tooth at some point, but all I remember now, some 20 years later, is the, "Wow. What a mess, right?"

I mean, he wasn't wrong. But did he have to say it out loud? I was gutted, ashamed, and felt like that face in the mirror had been right: *I deserve this.*

As I mentioned, I was not new to losing adult teeth nor the shame that takes their place. My first big dental problem happened at the height of my drinking and drug use around 1990. Let me tell you, you haven't had a toothache till you've paired it with a hit of LSD. Just imagine a hallucinogenic roller coaster ride from the decaying molar down through the jaw and throughout your entire nervous system and into the universe which

you have just discovered is inside of you and yet somehow you are contained within it as well. For me, an acid trip was already an erratic journey from intense emotion to intense emotion but paired with the throbbing pain of an impacted and infected wisdom tooth, the drug only served to laser focus my awareness on that tooth. And on my feelings of failure at being a drug addict adult who couldn't take care of himself.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was partly using LSD, ecstasy, and alcohol to self-treat my ADHD. Of course, they didn't call it that back then. It was *hyperkinetic impulse disorder* at the time, but I understood it as a learning disability. Which made me feel really weird, and it's one of the reasons I began to think I was defective as a child.

But I also felt sort of special because I got to regularly miss school to see my pediatric neurologist, Dr. Chao, which meant lunch and Shirley Temples with my mom after the appointment.

One night I had to stay up really late so I'd be good and tired for a sleep study the next day. I loved that I got to sit up with my dad and watch *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* that night. I drank hot chocolate, pretending it was the coffee my parents wouldn't let me have, and sat there trying to act like I understood the deadpan humor of this incredibly odd show. As the night wore on, my body became more and more insistent for sleep, but I resisted nodding off as much as I could, empowered by the idea that I had something *really important* to do the next day.

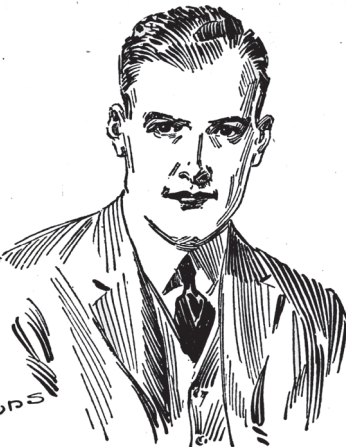
Throughout the years that followed, I was medicated for this hyperkinetic-impulse-whaddaya-call-it, which really did help me with my studies. Still, I felt a lot of shame about having something wrong with my brain and tried my best to hide it from everybody at school.



When teeth are dingy



When teeth glisten



When film-coats show



When film is gone

Study These Smiles

But one morning, waiting for the school bus with the other kids from my block, my older brother came running up the street.

"You forgot to take your pill!" he shouted, waving a wadded paper towel with the pill tucked inside.

The other kids fell silent and curious as he handed me the yellow pill. My heart sank and I felt nauseous as the pit of my stomach filled with shame, mortified that all of these kids now knew about my defect.

"My mom thinks I need this but I never really take it," I said, playing the whole thing off as I dropped the pill on the curb and crushed it into a chalky yellow smear with my shoe, as if to say, "keep your fancy mental clarity and executive functioning, thank you very much."

But, truthfully, I had no idea how the medication was helping me get through

each day. Still, I continued taking the pills until about midway through my junior year of high school, which, I suspect, had something to do with my stepfather. You might remember me telling you about him before? He was one of those "children should be seen and not heard" kind of dudes (read: dickheads). He perpetually resented my sister and me for our argumentativeness and unwillingness to follow his whims without a fight.

And he's the reason we left Houston for some bum-fuck town where he got a new job. Which also meant my sister and I had to switch schools. I was attending Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts at the time. And I still feel sore about not being able to see things through and graduate. That would have been so... special.

This is precisely why Ken was so eager to get us out of there. "Everybody is just going to be normal now: no more special schools," was his battle cry as moving day got closer.

My new high school did have a pretty solid music program, though, so I found my niche pretty quickly. But when I was taken off my “special” medication, my grades declined. I struggled to manage everything. Somehow, the fact that my floundering school performance began when the medication stopped was lost on my mom. She and Ken seemed to place the blame at my feet.

From there, it was a years-long downward spiral. I couldn't participate in much music during my senior year because I just couldn't get my grades up, and Texas had a “no pass, no play” policy for extracurricular activities. Music was the only thing I excelled at, so I was gutted to miss out, and I felt I was letting my choir and bandmates down. Not to mention my parents and my teachers. Wrapped in a blanket of failure, I began to believe that I was just lazy, aimless, and defective. It felt like all I did was disappoint everybody. It's awful being conscious of everybody's frustration at my supposed

refusal to live up to my own potential. As if it was a choice I made.

The truth was, without my medication, the only way I could cope with my messy brain was to shut it off and tune out in whatever way I could. This is a pattern that continued right through to that day in the dentist's office. My teeth had gotten in such bad shape because of my detachment from dealing with difficult things, the very coping mechanism I developed to manage my brain's chemical imbalance. And the depression. And the addiction. And the financial impulse control. And, yes, the shame.



My shame made it that much harder to show up for myself and find a way to correct the problem. I interpreted every toothache, every failed relationship, every call from a bill collector as a reminder that I was failing at being a responsible person. And that caused more shame, prompting me to retreat rather than do something about the problem.

Like I said, a downward spiral.

I really wanted to make this a story about a huge issue that happened to me that caused my teeth to fall into such disrepair. Maybe a story of living on the street after years of addiction and how now I have pulled myself up by my bootstraps and found a way to get it all together. That's the tricky thing with ADHD, though. To people looking from the outside, the symptoms of my condition are easily dismissed as laziness and irresponsibility, but that creates a terrible cycle that is even harder to get out from under. And this is what happened to my teeth.

"What a mess, right?"

Yeah, doc. What a mess. What a beautiful, fucked up mess. But I'm not ashamed of it anymore.

Like many things in our lives as complicated humans, there is no way to avoid shame, especially shame that has built up over many years. The only way out, as they say, is *through*. A couple years ago, at the suggestion of my kind, patient, and unbelievably non-judgemental boyfriend, I became a patient at the NYU School of Dentistry. Let me tell you, it was a *much* bigger mess than it was when that seed of dental shame was planted so many years ago. Still, one step at a time, I have shown up for appointment after appointment and am grateful to report that I am nearing the end of the tunnel. I have had more fillings than I can count, two root canals, two crowns, one extraction, bonding, scraping, cleanings, and reconstructions. I have gotten so

comfortable in that dentist chair that I literally fell asleep during my last root canal.

Even though I still have six missing teeth that will eventually require implants, something has shifted in me. By facing that fear and finding my way out from under what seemed to be unyielding shame, it started to fade away. Over time I discovered that the state of my teeth was *morally neutral*. I picked that phrase up from therapist and social media sensation KC Davis (she's @domesticblisters on TikTok).

My missing and broken teeth just are. It's neither good nor bad that there have been times in my life where regularly brushing my teeth was an insurmountable task. I can brush them today. I can make dental appointments, and find a way to keep them even when my anxiety and shame are screaming at me to no-show and hide at home. Sometimes I will give in and skip my appointment. Sometimes that mess

in my mind finds a megaphone and this momentum I have worked so hard to build will falter. That's okay. I can always get back in the game.

I mean, it's still a struggle at times, I'm not going to lie. But that's why I'm here, telling you about this now. ADHD is part of who I am, just as much as my messy teeth. These are not things to be ashamed of. I take my medicine regularly and certainly don't crush my pills under my shoe. I brush and floss as best as possible and try not to judge myself when I skip it. And, as I aim to live in a space of moral neutrality, I recognize that none of this makes me special. Not my recovery. Not my ADHD. Certainly not my teeth.

And I'm ok with that.



Michael Harren is a Brooklyn-based composer, performer, educator, and activist who combines elements of classical composition with experimental electronics and storytelling to create hypnotic, boldly intimate works, reminiscent of Laurie Anderson, Peter Gabriel, and Dead Can Dance.

Michael is the host and producer of the long running MikeyPod podcast. In production since 2005, MikeyPod invites you to pour a warm drink, grab a notebook (in case inspiration strikes!), curl up with your favorite blanket or four-legged family member, and prepare to be moved by conversations with activist artists who use their creativity to quite literally change the world.

This exclusive zine was created for my subscribers on Patreon who, in addition to the warm feeling of knowing they are co-creating with me, also get lots of perks - free downloads, merch discounts, exclusive patron-only podcasts, and a bunch more. Check out patreon.com/michaelharren to subscribe.

STOP *taking such awful risks with your teeth!*

This zine is #7 in a series written by Michael Harren and edited/designed by luke kurtis.

Previous issues are:

Glorious (2017)

About A Bed (2018)

Tigger (2019)

David (2019)

Three Winters (2019)

Headphones (2020)

Book collaborations include:

Tentative Armor (2014)

The Animal Book (2018)

PROTECTS TEETH
— Beautifully! —

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MICHAEL HARREN

