

The Art of Making Wrongness Exact

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There is a new wing. Blueberry color, extra-small, still crisp and unsettlingly unfamiliar. I haven't opened and handled it on the ground. There will be no polite introduction — just a mountain, a launch, and a takeoff marshal with a radio.

"Ready when you are."

I look at the sky as if it might object. I take a breath and let my hands do what they know. That's the whole trick at take-off in paragliding: stop asking the brain for permission. Load the wing. Feel it lift. Run.

The wing comes overhead cleanly, obedient, and then the ground drops away.

This is acro paragliding — not the tourist tandem ride, not the beginner's glide from a gentle hill to a meadow. Paragliding is a free-flight discipline where a pilot flies a foot-launched inflatable glider, shaped like a soft rectangular parachute, using body weight and two brake toggles to control speed and direction. Acro sits at the far end of the sport, where pilots throw their gliders into controlled collapses, stalls, spirals, and rotations. Full stall. Helicopter. SAT. The names sound brutal because the physics are. But the art of acro — the actual art — is learning to be precise in the wrong place. To hold a broken wing in the exact narrow band where it stays collapsed but controlled. To release exactly right, catch the surge, land it clean.

Acro is the art of making wrongness exact.

I've been flying for three years. For the past six months, I haven't touched a glider.

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The six months looked like this: a couch, a cracked phone, a streaming show I couldn't name now if I tried, and the view from the 28th floor of a Chicago apartment building. I'm not afraid of heights. The grayness below the balcony suggested a brief fear, then no problems at all. That pattern of thinking terrified me to the bone.

I was in my mid-thirties, a project leader at a consulting firm, and my brain had stopped working in the way brains are supposed to work. It wasn't dramatic. There was no single breaking point, no theatrical collapse. It was quieter and more insidious: eighty-hour weeks, a Paris-based manager who left comments in all-caps at 8 a.m., feedback forms that spelled my name wrong, a long-distance relationship running on wi-fi and optimism. Each piece, individually survivable. Together, quietly catastrophic. I called it stress. My psychiatrist called it burnout-induced depression and signed me off on sick leave.

Burnout had burned everything: appetite, curiosity, ambition. I wasn't even sure what I wanted anymore — only that I wanted *something*. My therapist called it "re-engaging with the world." I called it "trying not to crumble."

The only clear memory I have of joy from that period is the smell of coffee — just the smell, not the taste — and the distant, stubborn knowledge that I had once felt good in two places: by the sea, and in the air under a paraglider.

That stubborn knowledge saved me. Not a plan. Not a strategy. A memory of where the lights had once been on.

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They still organize paragliding trips on old-school forums, with threads and little plus signs if you're interested. I scrolled through them one afternoon from the couch and found Morocco: a thousand dollars, everything decided for you — where you live, what you eat, where you fly. Not hardcore. More like traveling with the option to fly. Even if I never opened my gear, I'd still be by the ocean.

I didn't understand then how badly I needed someone else to make the decisions. The cognitive load of depression is not a metaphor: every choice, including whether to shower, whether to eat, whether to answer a single text — each one costs something. Handing over the logistics to a camp with a fixed schedule was, medically, the right call. I just thought I was booking a holiday.

I left Chicago still half-asleep and half-alive, with three suitcases and exactly zero certainty about where my life was going.

The first paragliding flight was in the Atlas Mountains. The landscape was a patchwork of contradictions — green valleys blooming with spring, ochre cliffs, dusty plains, and far away, snow-capped peaks. The name alone carried myth: Atlas, the titan who held the sky. I clipped into my harness, trusting my hands to go through procedures as they had hundreds of times before. Pull, lean into it, give it some speed — and the wind filled my glider, and suddenly I was weightless. The ground

fell away, and the world opened — hills, roads, even a river all laid flat beneath. My heart thumped, but I wasn't scared anymore. I took a deep breath, laughed, even shouted.

My first flight in a new country, on a new continent. Proof that I was still capable of lift.

Later, at a coastal village called Mirleft, the flying turns easy and generous. Coastal air is thick to slice through — it hugs you like a weighted blanket, slowing you down, allowing for precious moments to focus on what you feel, not how you survive. In places like Mirleft you can glide for kilometers one way and back again, barely touching the steering lines for hours. Like a lazy seagull, I hovered over the stretched coastline of dust, cliffs, and white foam, the blue reaching farther than my eyes could go.

For the first time in months, I felt light.

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A few months later, India. My instructor, Serge, had organized a paragliding trip to Bir, a small village in the foothills of the Himalayas where the mountains are so high they don't look real — more like a backdrop, brushed in with soft strokes and impossible depth. Serge is about seventy years old. He started paragliding before it was cool, when people stitched their own wings and trusted physics mainly to behave out of courtesy. Around him, you somehow know that the standards are sky-high and feel compelled to match them — not because you feel threatened, but because it's good for you and the most reasonable thing to do. He had been the one to teach me to fly, and that's a bond that never goes away. I hadn't seen him in three years, since I'd moved to the US.

The ritual of preparation steadied my breath: checking lines, helmets, sunglasses, sunscreen, gloves in two layers, sturdy boots, altimeter, camera, radio. Then he looked at my wing, and then at me.

"Ready when you are."

That was all. That was his blessing.

I gave one last look to my lines, shouted "Take-off!" so the others would hear, lifted the paraglider, checked it in one glance, turned, ran — and in three steps the ground fell away beneath me. Every time, it feels like a trick. Like the earth simply forgets to hold you.

Flying in this new spot demanded everything: eyes scanning above, below, sideways; hands adjusting brake pressure by millimeters; skin reading the texture of air and the position of the sun. And then — lift. A soft, rising push into the left console of my glider, like the sky exhaling under me.

But paragliding is humbling.

The very next day, I nearly lost it. I turned into a small canyon someone had recommended — "good lift there." Instead of rising, I sank. The ridge disappeared behind me. The landing field vanished in the distance. My heartbeat outpaced my vario. Fear tightened everything inside me. I started scanning the terraced mountain fields below, green from above, stone and walls when you're actually falling toward them.

At the last moment, a breath of lift brushed my wing.

"Good," Serge said suddenly, as if he'd been there all along. "You found it. Take it."

I spiraled up two hundred meters, shaking with relief. When I made it back to landing, my knees were so weak I could barely stand. It took two hours to get back to normal.

But something shifted after that. The fear didn't leave exactly. It stopped taking the lead.

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Back at the Turkey acro school — where this essay began, with the little blueberry wing — I'm on my second run of the day. The 1800 launch is short and unforgiving. Steep. The takeoff is messy: crosswind, new wing, too much thought. The air carries me anyway.

On the glide to the box, the world goes quiet. Thoughts try to creep in.

Break. Release. Catch. Send.

My first deep-stall entries are a rodeo. Brake inputs have to be adjusted for the new wing. Asymmetry. Crooked exit. I catch too early, then too late. We lose more height than planned.

"Again," the instructor says. "Try to be symmetrical. Legs under."

I breathe. Try again. Better. Not clean — but coherent.

Before the third run, I eat something salty and talk to people because that's what happens between runs.

"Hi! Long time no see," someone says. "How are you doing?"

"Helicopters," I answer, without hesitation.

A pause. I answered the wrong question, but we smile at each other anyway. We're all swimming in the same chemistry — adrenaline, cortisol, something warmer underneath — and the rules of polite conversation soften.

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The morning I climbed above 3,600 meters in the Himalayas, the world opened in a way I hadn't expected. Snow-capped peaks lay beneath me — white, ancient, indifferent. The air thinned into something holy.

"Well done," Serge radioed.

A pause.

"Enjoy it."

Two words. From him, it felt like a medal.

Higher than the snow line, the world turned silent. Not empty-silent. Full-silent. The kind of silence that holds you.

That evening we flew in sunset light — pink, gold, soft as breath. No lift, just thirty minutes of pleasure glide down to the village. I made a video, knowing no one would care about it as much as I would when I'm fifty.

That's me, I thought. That beautiful flying woman is me.

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Here is what I've learned about agency, which is the word for the thing I lost in Chicago and found again in the air.

Agency is not confidence. I had plenty of confidence in my career — the kind that shows up polished and on time and answers questions before they're asked. That's not agency. Agency is the felt sense that your choices matter. That when you decide something and act on it, something real happens. That you are not being carried, or crushed, or managed. That *you* are the one choosing.

Depression is the complete collapse of that feeling. Not sadness exactly. The specific horror of caring what happens but having no sense that what you do will change it.

Paragliding doesn't give you confidence. What it gives you is consequence. You pull a brake — the wing responds. You release — it surges. You make a mistake — you feel it immediately, in your hands and your stomach and your altitude. You correct — it works. The feedback loop is honest and unforgiving in a way that human relationships and corporate systems rarely are. Nobody is being polite

to you up there. Nobody is cushioning the information to manage your feelings. The wing tells you the truth.

That's why I keep going back. Not the adrenaline, not the views — though both are real and magnificent. It's this: in the air, I know exactly what I'm doing and what it costs. I know which decisions are mine. I know the difference between what I can control and what I have to let go of — and I know it in my hands and my body, not just in my head.

In the air, there is no polite fencing. No automated email on a Monday morning. No feedback delivered by a system that sounds like it's congratulating you.

There is the wing, the brake, the sky, and me.

I land softly. I pack the paraglider with steady hands. And for the first time in a long time, I feel not broken, not lost — but capable.

More myself.

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