

8

gray matter

Disgust with our own existence, weariness of ourselves is a malady which is likewise a cause of suicide. The remedy is a little exercise, music, hunting, the play, or an agreeable woman. The man who, in a fit of melancholy, kills himself today, would have wished to live had he waited a week.

Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764)

Early on in the course of writing this book, I was advised to never, ever use that dreadful phrase “committed suicide.”

Such a thing implies, I was told, a criminal act: the commission of a crime. A cruel linguistic artifact from those judgment-heavy days of *felo de se*, when suicide really was a prosecutable offense (either against the person himself in the aftermath of a botched attempt, or as a financial punishment levied by the government against the victim’s family through seizure of goods and property), today the expression “committed suicide” still carries with it an air heavy with legalistic sinfulness. Not only does it stigmatize the mental illness, whatever it is, that’s thought to underlie the act, but it also pollutes the reputation of the dead, as it presupposes the individual’s failure to rein in the responsible defects of their character, such as selfishness, a violent nature, or cowardice.

“Do we ever say that someone ‘committed cancer’ or ‘committed heart failure,’ even when they may have lived lifestyles that contributed to such diseases?” asks the Australian suicide prevention specialist Susan Beaton.