



**Darebin
Arts**

An Abridged Biography of Hermes Butler by Bailey Dihayco (Winner)

Hermes Butler was born on 4 April 1987, at the end of a chain terminating in a junkyard compactor. The presiding obstetrician was heard to have reported him a remarkably healthy-looking baby boy of just over 7 pounds, perfectly within the national average of all relevant health parameters, excepting the junkyard compactor chain. An attending second specialist added that this attribute was “extremely outside of the usual.” The boy’s father, amongst the first generations of men who attended childbirth and quite drunk, kept demanding answer to the same question, *What’s it about? What’s it about?* Child and mother were both kept one more day for observation, but it was eventually decided that no urgent medical matters presented, and they were discharged into the care of their hungover chaperone. Hermes slept soundly for the ride home and for most of the following afternoon, while his father phoned some key family members from the kitchen and his mother, sleepless and medicated and still, sat on the back porch and smoked her remaining 17 cigarettes one by one without pause.

By the age of four Hermes appeared to be entirely habituated to the chain on his lower leg. In the first few years he could be found plonked on the floor of his playpen, chewing gently at the closest links with that same mild curiosity of all toddlers, but this didn’t last. At four he no longer waddled with an ambulatory arrhythmia but had instead developed, his father noted with some pride, a kind of dogged, obdurate gait; one whose essential character seemed to radiate out into the rest of him.

At around ten years, when he had been filled in on his situation, he began having dreams of a dry, barren enclosure where he was dressed in an ill-fitting formal suit, and the normally imperceptible contraction of the chain had become a ferocious, dog-with-a-ragdoll-esque tug. He would stumble and skid in the pebbly, powdery dust toward an ever-closer gnashing of mechanical teeth, screaming *Wait, I’m not ready!* until he woke, shivering, clutching at his ankle.

Perennial doodling in the margins of his textbooks throughout high school revealed a surprising aptitude for geometry and perspective—officially diagnosed by an art teacher who wore way too many beads and said *there's a real oneness to it* about anything she thought was good. He entered a newly minted architectural design course at RMIT in the late spring of 2005 and exited with distinction four years later into a share house on the border of Fitzroy and Kew. He lost his virginity in this house to a girl with a pretty scar across her mouth, who fed him sugar-soaked strawberries and read him Emily Dickinson, and as they loved he felt the July cold of the chain against his heel.

At 29 he received a federal grant for the design of a recreation space in a mid-sized reserve and didn't tell a soul until it was done, jittery and manic and underweight.

In 2018, one of the men from his old share house was put in traction following a car accident. The ex-housemate was augmented in crucial places by wire and aluminium, steel staples holding him together where he had come apart, a melding of medicine and metallurgy. Much later, when he had recovered but for the faintest of limps, he told Hermes how the accident had made him feel “tethered” for the first time; to the intravenous drip, to the bed, to this white-walled world. Hermes found himself suddenly sobbing loud, ugly, goat-like sobs, for which the other man placed a lingering, uncertain hand upon his shoulder.

The night before his 45th birthday, Hermes sat on the bed in a hotel room in Tucson, Arizona, a menagerie of artisan pop-up cards and well-aged wine from his project team on the nightstand, and he began to pull on the chain. Slowly, hand over fist, he dragged the familiar links until he had accrued enough slack to loop his ankles, and then loop them again, and then again, until he had encased his legs to the mid-thigh with a thick mesh of varying greys. And again. And again. When his arms became too entangled to use, he began rotating on the spot. When gravity stalled out the steady, steel climb up his body, he dropped to his knees with a heavy clank. And at last, when there was no slack left to pull, he rose aching to his feet and stood under the bulky, leaden weight for as long as he could bear.

Three friends, one of them a middle-aged law student whom Hermes would against all odds marry six years later, took him on a Sunday drive to a mildly famous Arizonian rock formation the following weekend, where their car tyre blew out and they stayed, well into dusk, lacerating their hands on soot-black tools and eventually calling roadside assistance. Hermes took the time to mount the peak of the outcrop and admire, both personally and professionally, the ceaseless, boundless level of the desert, a flat stage upon which his future stretched in steel links inexorably North-West.

He never left America.

By the time he was 60, it had become mathematically irrefutable that there was a junkyard in Eatonville, Washington with his name on it, and in October of that year his wife made it literal. She had researched the place obsessively for three months, until Hermes came to her office one morning to tell her enough was enough and she showed him something beautiful and unexpected: she had bought the lot from its cirrhotic owner and transferred to the deed to Hermes. She broke the news to him in a nervous, breathless staccato, shaking with the fear that she had lost her mind and done something ghoulish, and he held and kissed her until the fear, and the shaking, went away.

It was a former student of his Art and Architecture class that first suggested designing a building for the site. The idea seemed immediately sour to him at the first, gaudy and daunting and wrong-headed, but the more he turned it over in his mind the more inscrutable his reasons against it became. His nightmares about the chain had stopped. He no longer worried about how little he could travel before it thrummed taut and held him back. And so, on a rainy Monday evening, he sat down at his desk and began to doodle once again.

Hermes lived to be 78 years old. It was not an exceptionally long time, but it was deep and it was wide. He was last seen by his wife, his brother-in-law, his two nieces, his one nephew, and two family dogs, striding into a single-storey, open-plan, white-washed granite, state- and NCARB-approved mausoleum with East and West facing casement windows. By the end, the chain was clear of the ground all the way from man to machine, but Hermes went freely and peacefully. The building is still there, if you're interested: it is open to the public, tended monthly by groundskeepers, and bears the plaque, *HERMES BUTLER, 1987—2065, who built a life with no blueprint.*

