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Asylum

the radical
mental health magazine

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We welcome new submissions (articles, creative writing, images, letters etc).

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Asylum

The radical mental health magazine

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Asylum, formerly the magazine for democratic psychiatry, was established in 1986 as a forum for free debate, open to anyone with an interest in psychiatry and mental health politics, practice and policy. We were inspired by the democratic psychiatry movement in Italy and continue to be influenced by radical mental health movements around the world, including the psychiatric survivor and Mad liberation movements. We welcome contributions from service users, ex-users or survivors; activists, family members and frontline psychiatric or mental health workers (anonymously, if you wish). The magazine is not-for-profit and run by a collective of unpaid volunteers. We are open to anyone who wants to help produce, develop and distribute the magazine, working in a spirit of equality and democracy. Please contact us if you would like to help.

The views expressed in the magazine are those of the individual contributors and not necessarily those of the editorial group. Articles are accepted in good faith and every effort is made to ensure fairness and veracity.
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Introducing the Centre for Mad Culture UK

JULIA MACINTOSH

Readers of *Asylum Magazine* may recall an article in the Winter 2024 issue (Volume 31, no 4) with an invitation to explore the work of the Mad Insight Collective. Much has happened for us in the intervening months!

Thanks to a signpost from a friend in the USA, I learned of the Center for Mad Culture – an organisation in downtown Chicago. Founded and led by Matt Bodett, the Center for Mad Culture hosts exhibits, workshops and a small library whilst engaging in education, activism and heritage work to promote mad culture and mad pride.

I connected with Matt immediately, to find out about his journey in creating this inspiring organisation. Coincidentally I was travelling to the USA to see my family in Minneapolis, and a short visit to Chicago was happily arranged so that I could meet Matt in person and visit the CMC. I told him: “this is what the Mad Insight Collective wants to do!” Indeed, we have been daydreaming ever since we began – back in 2023 – about creating a dedicated space for the mad community.

It is therefore with great pleasure that I introduce a new venture: the *Centre for Mad Culture UK*. Established in April, it’s a community interest company based in Edinburgh. It is very early days of course, but it is our aspiration to someday find premises and host a physical space similar to the Center for Mad Culture in Chicago. In the meantime, we will run pop-up and outreach events and will operate online, via our website: centreformadculture.uk

While we are not officially or legally connected to the *Center for Mad Culture* in the USA, we have Matt’s blessing to take on a similar name and he has kindly agreed to serve as an honorary advisor to this project – offering his experience, wisdom and moral support as a friend and ally.

The Centre for Mad Culture UK will be hosting a launch event in Edinburgh this autumn. Taking place on Friday 17 and Saturday 18 October, we will be celebrating our beginning with an art exhibition, talks and creative workshops. For further details, please see the our website and sign up for our monthly newsletter to receive updates.

What started in humble beginnings (meetups in the pub, with a few fellow students on the MSc Mad Studies course at Queen Margaret University) the Mad Insight Collective has embraced a new purpose and is now hanging up its pirate-themed tricorne. As we step into a new chapter, we pick up and don a new hat: the jester’s cap in our logo – a symbol of the mad voice speaking its truth, for the whole court to hear. We welcome and celebrate the mad voice, and we offer it to society as a gift.

We have great aspirations for the *Centre for Mad Culture UK* and we hope you will join us in creating a thriving community around its hearth. ▪

Reimagining Psychiatric Emergency Care

Setayesh Piramoun

As a medical student with a deepening interest in psychiatry, I have spent the past year engaging with psychiatric literature, testimonies from patients, and critical discussions around mental health care. I write this not from a position of professional authority, but as a learner and future doctor someone deeply concerned about the ethical terrain of psychiatric emergency practices.

While I recognize the importance and necessity of emergency psychiatric care including hospitalization in some circumstances, I believe it is crucial to interrogate the methods we accept as standard. Certain practices, such as physical restraint and forced medication, raise serious moral and medical concerns.

Restraint – the act of physically confining a distressed person to a bed or floor – is too often experienced not as care, but as violence. It risks retraumatizing individuals in crisis, and in some cases, has even resulted in death. It may be protocol, but that does not make it humane or healing.

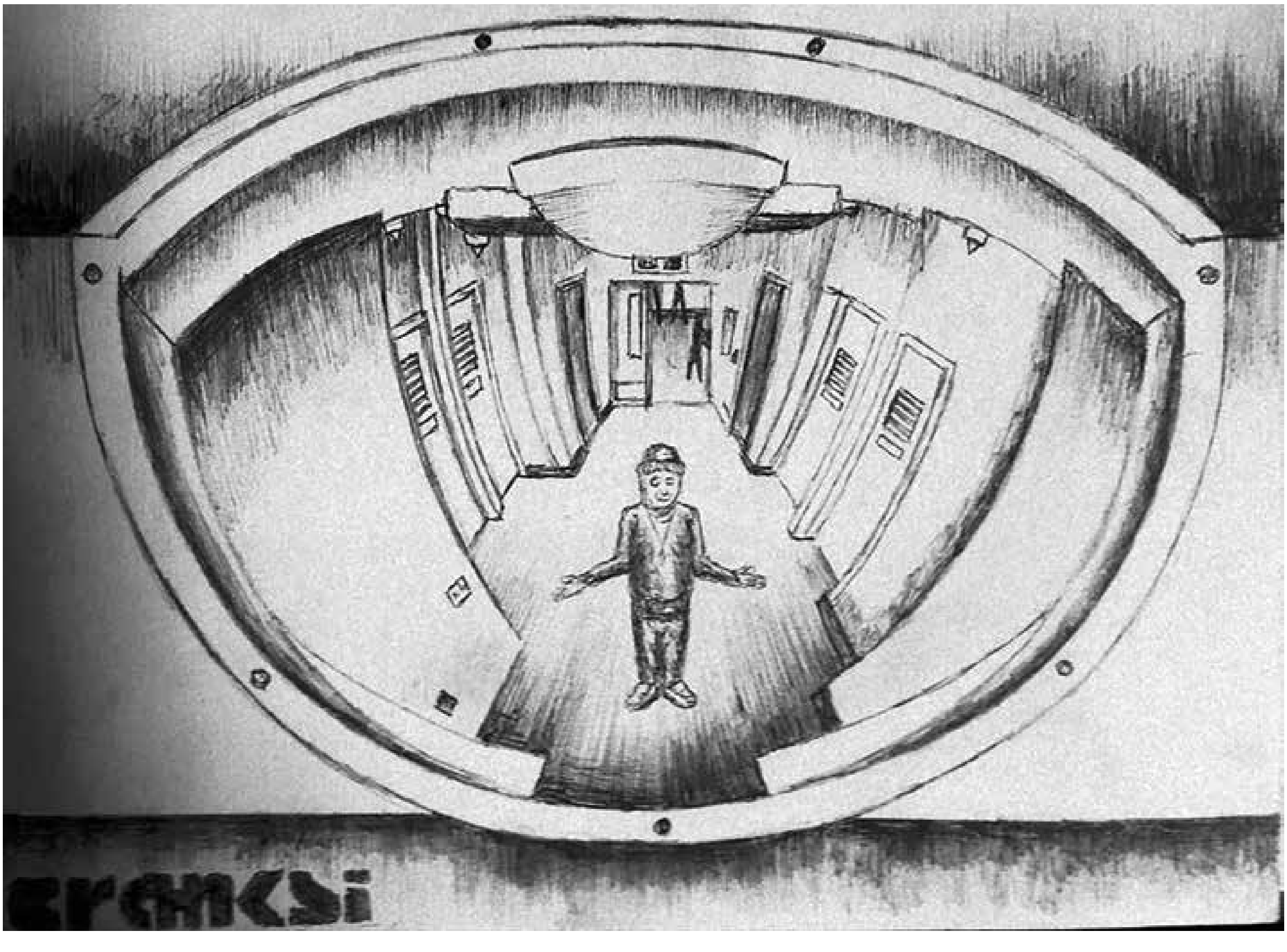
Similarly, forced medication administering psychoactive substances without consent undermines an individual's agency and bodily autonomy. In moments of acute psychological distress, patients deserve dignity and communication, not coercion.

This proposal is a call to rethink how we respond to crisis in psychiatry. I am not advocating for the abolition of emergency care, but for its transformation. I envision calming, non-carceral spaces, where people in distress are met with warmth, not surveillance. I believe there is a place for medication in acute settings but only when used with compassion, dialogue, and respect for consent wherever possible.

What I'm calling for is not radical, but deeply human: psychiatric care that centers understanding over control, empathy over fear; collaboration over compliance.

I hope this contribution can open up conversation about what emergency care could look like، and how we, as individuals and institutions, can take steps toward that future. ■

Setayesh Piramoun is a 18-year-old Iranian medical student who is advocating for more humane mental health care.



Justice for Adam

Joe Loughnane *recently lost his brother Adam and wants his story to be shared far and wide.*

Adam made the very difficult decision to end his own life in the River Corrib. I made the difficult decision to go public with his story as I wanted to highlight the ways systems let him down.

Adam tried every avenue to ask for help but was ultimately not believed. He contacted his mental health support worker shortly before his death. It was clear he was really distressed so the support worker contacted the local mental health services. Once contact was made, Adam packed a bag and the support worker drove him to the hospital. Once he was at the hospital, he presented to A&E where a triage nurse checked him out.

Adam made it clear to the hospital staff that he wanted to throw himself into the river. The hospital decided he needed to be checked by the mental health team who were otherwise occupied. Adam waited for a short period of time before leaving the hospital completely unsupervised. He then made his way to the river where he took his last breath.

This wasn't the only system that let Adam down. There is a wider context to this story. It is difficult to talk about this publicly and I've rarely mentioned this outside my immediate family. Adam, me, and the rest of my siblings were physically and psychologically abused for decades by our father. While most of us moved away from the family home, Adam decided to stay and help out at home. This led to him being a constant target for Dad's anger which progressively got worse as Adam got older and the pandemic hit. Adam was registered with mental health services in Ballybane and previously made an attempt to take his own life 7 years ago.

After days, weeks and months of Dad undermining, provoking and emasculating Adam during covid he assaulted my father in late 2021. Dad suffered minor injuries. Adam, on the other hand, had to lived under strict bail conditions for over 3 years, and had to live with the guilt of being a decent lad who was pushed to extreme measures. While initially living with me for a year or so under these conditions, he had been in emergency accommodation since 2022.

Dad passed away in 2023 from kidney failure and sepsis – a diagnosis which had plagued him for years and which was completely unaffected by Adam's actions. However, the case against Adam was still pursued. This destroyed Adam mentally. He couldn't understand why the system didn't see that he was forced to take such drastic actions. We all provided supporting evidence of the extent of abuse by our father, but this was never factored into any decision-making on Adam's situation. Just before he took his own life, Adam agreed to accept the least worst charge, as he was advised to do, and would have been convicted. This was the final straw.

Adam had faced 10–15 different hearings on this case. He did everything he could to prove his actions but was faced with constant delays. He wanted to fight the case, and we all knew how far he was pushed – but the powers that be forced him to take a conviction. No apology was ever made for the years he had to live on bail - conditions he adhered to religiously.

We are now left without Adam. Without his wit, his intelligence, or his unique ability to phrase mundane things as literary art.

We need answers:

> Why did the hospital let him leave the premises unsupervised when he was clearly suicidal?
>
> Why did the state continue to pursue a case against a young man who finally stood up for himself after years and years of abuse?

I love Adam with all my heart. He was an amazing brother and the world never treated him fairly. I'm asking for any help possible to share my brother's story, so we give him the tiniest but of justice he so thoroughly deserved. This may be too late for Adam, but maybe not for the next person in this situation. ■

Un

Jane Bowkett

I'm feeling very un
Worthy (un)
Protected (un)
Valued (un)
Supported (un)
Seen (un)

THE RULES

KIRSTY NOTTAGE

Her tongue poked between her teeth as Caroline coloured the image. She had learned early that she must stay within the lines. Her parents made it clear—those were the rules. She used blue for the sky, yellow for the sun, and green for the grass. Anything else was wrong.

When she was done, she carried the book over to her father, who studied it in silence. Caroline held her breath, her stomach tingling with anticipation. Finally, a smile spread across his face.

“Look how well you’ve stayed within the lines,” he said. She let out a long breath, only then realising she had been holding it. Relief washed over her. She could be proud of this.

Caroline practiced her writing next. Her letters needed to be clear and neat, with elegant joins, and every word should be spelled correctly. The memory of the ‘rite and rong’ disaster still haunted her, the green ink from the dreaded pen staining her thoughts. Now, she paused with each word, carefully forming each letter, checking and double-checking her spelling before moving on. She’d learned the hard way that what she said was not as important as how she said it.

Yawning, she sat at the piano, her fingers running through the scales. The keys felt cold and stiff under her hands. She had begged to learn the instrument, imagining the melodies she’d play. But music was rules and structure, not freedom. There were so many ways to be wrong – one wrong note, one missed beat, and the whole piece was ruined. Giving up would be easy, but she knew better than to quit. You don’t quit. Choices were permanent, and there was no turning back once you made one.

Having finished her chores, she sat with her parents that evening, feeling a thrill of excitement as guests arrived. Sitting at the table like a grown-up was new, and she wanted to be a part of the conversation. A lull in the chatter was her chance.

“I got a perfect score on my—”

“Don’t interrupt,” her mother’s voice sliced through her sentence. “It’s rude.”

The words stung. She hadn’t meant to be rude, just involved. Caroline swallowed the lump in her throat, forcing the tears away. She nodded, vowing to stay silent, invisible, if it meant staying at the table with the adults.

The rules were endless, closing in like walls she couldn’t escape. “Don’t jump on the bed,” her father commanded. “Don’t get your clothes dirty,” her mother added. “Say please and thank you.” “Don’t eat too much.” “Don’t make too much noise.”

The words swirled in her mind as she lay in bed, her pyjamas clinging to her skin. She was suffocating. Her chest tightened as the commands played over and over in her head. She opened her mouth and screamed.

#

Sitting with the counsellor, she stared at her hands, wondering what she should do or say. The silence hung in the air, heavy and uncomfortable. Her eyes drifted to a pile of colouring books on the table, and she frowned. The counsellor noticed.

“Would you like to colour?” she asked, gently pushing the books toward her.

Caroline hesitated but opened one of the books. Her pulse quickened. The pages were already filled with colour – messy, chaotic splashes of pink where the grass should be, red skies, and purple suns. Her stomach twisted.

The counsellor smiled. “It’s a bit boring to always stay in the lines, don’t you think?”

Caroline’s hand trembled as she reached for a blue pencil. She pressed the tip to the yellow sun. The weight of years of rules bore down on her as she hesitated, the familiar need to stay inside the lines pulling at her, tightening her grip. Her pulse quickened.

And then, with a sudden, breathless urge, she scribbled furiously, blue streaks spilling over the edges of the circle. The sun was no longer yellow. She coloured faster, letting the pencil dart across the page, sweeping through the neat borders she had once worshipped. Her hand moved with wild energy, each stroke a rebellion, each streak a breath of freedom.

For the first time, the rules didn’t matter.

Her chest heaved, her pulse pounding in her ears. The once neat picture had transformed into chaos—no more lines, no more rules. She stared at the page, her hands shaking.

A slow smile spread across her face. For the first time in a long time, she exhaled. ■

Mumma No More

Penelope Peach

My second experience of receiving involuntary treatment in Australia for my eating disorder occurred in 2021. Covid was rife and there were still lots of regulations regarding social distancing. Receiving treatment for an eating disorder as a hospital in-patient is never easy due to the amount of medical monitoring and visual supervision. You get weighed regularly; blood sugars and blood pressure are taken up to four times a day; you're watched whilst eating and only allowed a designated amount of time to eat your prescribed meals and snacks. You're not able to exercise or move around excessively; and you need to leave the door open when showering or using the toilet so staff can see you're not making yourself sick and so on.

However, this admission was especially challenging because I was pregnant with my first child. I struggled with the required weight gain that was needed, so the antenatal team referred me to child safety as they had concerns about both my and bub's welfare. The referral was made without my knowledge, and I was in the dark about it until two child safety officers turned up on my doorstep out of the blue. They said that they wanted to talk to me as they had received a referral, so I obliged and let them inside – big mistake.

As soon as they were inside my home, they started interrogating me. I was a lone, vulnerable, scared, pregnant woman without anyone to advocate or support me. They wanted to know where I was going to be having bub, and who my current supports were, because there was a high chance that, due to my mental health background, my baby would get taken from me at birth.

I became more and more upset as the conversation progressed. I said I would have preferred a phone call first to organise a time for my support worker to be present during the conversation. I kept asking them to leave, and they eventually did after I became quite angry, distressed and dysregulated. Because of this forced interaction, I didn't trust the system anymore, so I cancelled all further antenatal care with the hospital and decided to have a home birth because my birth partner (a close friend) was a midwife.

Then, after discussions with my support worker, we came up with a plan to consider putting bub up for adoption. It wasn't what I wanted, but their horror stories about another client who'd had their baby taken from her in the hospital without her consent absolutely petrified me. As a result, my mental health problems spiralled even further. A month later, I was admitted to the mental health unit for the last three months of the pregnancy as an involuntary patient. During this admission, all my rights were stripped away and, for the first month, I wasn't allowed to be left alone or go off the ward. I outgrew my clothes, from both the forced weight gain and the pregnancy progressing, but the (male) psychiatrist didn't understand how distressing this was or that you need to try maternity clothing on. I felt like a guinea pig as the mental health unit had never had a pregnant patient before.

I was also given confusing advice. Antenatal staff told me it's good to exercise when you're pregnant and I should be doing so, which contradicted the hospital rules for eating disorder patients. This caused fights between the mental health and antenatal teams. Some mental health nursing staff got angry about having to escort me to antenatal appointments (even though it was in the same hospital) – because they were having to leave – and in their minds neglect – other patients to look after me.

Eventually, four weeks after I arrived, I was given escorted leave off the ward and then progressed to being able to attend my antenatal appointments alone. However, when complications occurred with bub, and/or the mental health nurses got scared about the symptoms I was experiencing ("we're mental health nurses, it's not our area of expertise") and, as a first-time mother, I didn't know if what I was experiencing was "normal" or not, I got escorted to the maternity ward to get checked out.

Then the antenatal unit manager got annoyed by having a "mental health patient taking up a bed" and called security – despite me not being aggressive. These kinds of comments and occurrences made me feel like I was a constant hassle and waste of space, as if the staff had better things to do, or preferred look after "easier" and "less crazy" patients.

As the pregnancy progressed closer towards my due date, there were ongoing discussions between myself, child safety and the hospital about what I wanted to do with bub after the birth. Unfortunately, none of the local support services ticked all the boxes for what child safety stipulated was needed for me to have bub in my care part-time. So I was essentially left with two choices – put my child in foster care, where they might be constantly moved around and have no stability, or adopt them out, and they would at least be with the same family long-term.

Due to complications that occurred during the pregnancy, it was decided I needed to be induced. However, since I was a mental health patient, I needed a 1:1 mental health nurse throughout my time on the maternity ward because I may “try and attack the midwives.”

Luckily, I was able to write a list of mental health nurses that I felt comfortable with to be there. This included one of the mental health nurses who was also a midwife, so she was there during the labour and birth. I was also fortunate enough to be allowed to have my birth partner there too, despite the covid restrictions. As there were more complications during and after the birth, I stayed in the maternity ward for four days rather than the six hours that was originally planned (yet another frustration for the antenatal staff) before returning to the mental health unit.

Bub had gone by this stage. I’d reluctantly decided to go ahead with the adoption, so when I returned to the mental health ward, I was physically and mentally exhausted. I stayed there for another week before being deemed “well enough” to be discharged home. I wasn’t physically or mentally ready, and my friend the midwife told the psychiatrist this, but he didn’t seem to care. Three weeks later I was readmitted back to hospital (luckily a different one) with suspected post-natal depression.

Putting a child up for adoption – especially when it’s forced – is a gut-wrenching, heartbreaking and traumatic decision to make and process to go through. To this day I regret it immensely. I have developed Complex PTSD as a result. In Australia, once you sign the adoption paperwork, you have no ongoing legal rights with the child, nor the opportunity to have any contact or involvement until they turn 18 and can make that decision themselves. I wish I had the opportunity to sue the local hospital, psychiatrist and child safety officers for all the trauma I experienced as a result of my “care” (or lack of). However, I didn’t realise I could do this until it was too late. ▪

Penelope Peach is a pen name (pseudonym).

Filling out the post-meal worksheet at the eating disorder clinic

Isabel Grey

We rated meals by moons
waning leftovers were
waxing struggles
logged by skinny sextons.
We arrive with competition guidelines:
who should wane the slowest plate
shall die the quickest.

I markup this printed, black and white post-meal
worksheet
like a catalog collection with circles,
using spring-free pens or eraser-less pencils
at the treatment center.

New moons blindfolded plates,
casting shadows over servings
in the crater-shaped tray-dividers.
Our six meals a day divided into eight phases
And each bite we take is a competition –
Who could finish their meal the slowest,
Keeping fork tines clean,
Knifes free of butter, and spoons empty,
Reflecting our sunken cheeks
As our fingernails dug crescents under the dining table.

And the full moon brings out
the wild in these interrupted walls.
Weight restoration, insurance expiration,
a reluctant triumph in a tankard tummy
within evaluation’s stopwatch.

I chose gibbous, gibson, nutrition
and I see the moon that everyone sees outside
where moons spread out like a celestial table setting
In distant atmospheres, enclosures space expeditions
away.
Joy is under the only moon
Full as a clean plate.

How It Was and How It Is

Tom Bronte

I don’t think people understand. What it’s like. When your mother sees things. Feels things. When your mother says the floor is on fire. In her eyes and on her nerve endings, it is. Whenever she puts her foot on the ground, it burns.

Still, she manages to get to the kitchen and the countertop, pulls out a knife to cut vegetables. All the while she feels herself burning from the bottom up. Then she cooks meals, stepping from foot to foot. I’d call it brave if there was a fire. Brave if I wasn’t used to it.

She would walk back and forth across the dull brown carpet, wringing her hands and crying, “Why don’t they come? What are they waiting for?” And I, a dumb mute 6-year-old didn’t know what to say. So, I sat on the green velvet sofa, until I got bored as the hours passed and turned on the TV. Slowly, I learnt to ignore it.

We would do the weekly food shopping, but she always thought people were watching, waiting to pounce if she did anything wrong. We would scurry between buildings and alleyways rather than walk on the pavement.

They never pounced. Well, just once.

It was the rice that did it. She slipped a two-pound bag of rice into her pocket and carried on shopping. She had a sly look on her face as we went to the checkout. Knowing. At the door a man stopped her, and we were taken up some stairs to an office, where another man, in a light blue shirt and red tie, said “Well...”

“I knew!” She spat. “I knew you were watching, following. I just couldn’t prove it until...” she raised her hand, extended a finger and jabbed it on to the desktop, “Now!”

“Mrs ********… ”

“Ha! You even know my name!” she sounded exhilarated.

“You stole a two-pound bag of rice.” the man said, “I’m trying to warn you rather than call the police.”

“Call the police? You can’t do that. Then you would have to admit this….”, and she paused as she sought the word, “beast, was following me. Stalking me. Creeping around behind me everywhere I went like a purse snatcher!”

“Mrs *******, he’s a store detective. It’s his job to follow people.” The man paused, speared my mother’s gaze, “To make sure they’re not stealing. It’s a legitimate business activity.”

“You expect me to believe that? Ha!” Her voice was full of vindication, “Call the police, I dare you!”

The man let us go. The other man walked us out as every eye in the shop turned to us. After that, every time we shopped, he joined us and pushed the trolley while my mother shopped and swore at him, poor thing. He even filled the shopping bags and put them in the back of the taxi, all the while she told him how awful he was, that she wasn’t a thief, but at least she knew where he was. He would grab a chewy bar or a sherbet and give it to me, all the while looking away.

He would ruffle my hair and call me ‘son.’ I liked it. He bought me a junior fishing set for my 9th birthday and even came on a picnic so that, my mother said, she could keep an eye on him. The last time the three of us were together, I was 16. John – we had started using his name – was fixing a fuse in a lamp, with my mother standing over him, watching like a hawk. I said, “I’m going now.” Nobody turned their head, so I picked up my bag and left.

There is one irony in all this. In the end, my mum was right – someone is watching for her. I rent a flat opposite the supermarket. My Saturday mornings are spent at the window, waiting for her to arrive with John to do her shopping. When I see her go in, I can get on with my day. I fear the Saturday she doesn’t turn up and wonder what I’ll do. ■

Tom Bronte lives with his adorable ex-boyfriend, his maddening best mate, and Bella the House Panther (A.K.A. *The* Cat).

Editors’ note: There are various ways of interpreting this piece of ‘flash fiction’. On the next page Alan Smithee offers his own response to this story.

A Response to ‘How It Was and How It Is’ by Alan Smithee

I have myself experienced my feet and hands feeling like they were on fire. I later discovered these were symptoms related to deficiencies in riboflavin and other micronutrients. Indeed “Burning Feet Syndrome” has been associated with classical niacin/nicotinic acid deficiency (vitamin B3) and knowledge about its impact on the nervous system stretches back hundreds of years.* We also know that alcohol, drugs, various chemicals and carbohydrate loading can deplete niacin levels.

The omission of any medical investigation into micronutrient levels in people who have been psychiatrically diagnosed is a significant problem. This is especially worrying in a population who are often significantly financial impoverished. I think our culture is in a state of denial about our food chain providing enough micronutrients. There is a tendency to assume that nutritional deficiency states are a thing of the past. Yet research by medics have found severe nutritional deficiencies in people from low finance brackets.

For me, the very real nature of ‘the floor being on fire’ was effectively resolved by my taking nutrient supplements. Yet, despite this being a profoundly researched and reported on area of medicine and epidemiology, the medical profession failed to engage with it.

This piece also made me recall incidents as a child where a seemingly kindly neighbourhood was fraught with gossip, subtle exclusion and veiled cruelties. I lived in a single parent family in a middle-class area of Edinburgh known for its snobbery (Morningside). I remember the way my mother was often treated by people, and how certain adults and their children would quietly instruct her on her moral defects and financial failures. I also remember how this affected my mother – drinking spirits but hiding them was a way for her to get through.

No matter what one says, or however much “peer reviewed science” one offers, one is doubted and treated with a mix of kid gloves and paternalism. Unfortunately, seeing people only through diagnostic labels overshadows their lived experience. It means we don’t always investigate what else might be going on in a person’s life. The gravity of being seen as other can produce anxious responses which ultimately makes it impossible to understand people’s life circumstances. ■

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* Makkar R.P. Arora A, et al. (2003). Burning feet syndrome. A clinical review. *Australian Family Physician 32*(12):1006-9. PMID: 14708150.

Healing Our Villages:

Changing our understanding of voice hearing

Carroll Ann Susco

The voices I hear are intelligent beings who know things I don't. They are good, evil, and regular folk. I allowed myself to believe this after re-reading the article 'Wonder, Intensity, Magic: Psychosis-an antidote to paranoia and mental distress' by James Walker in *Asylum* (Autumn 2019). It has been sitting in my closet, the only place I am allowed to smoke, despite my psych nurse finding out that 70-90% of voice hearers smoke. I have been quitting for 10 years, but the eternal cravings wear me down every time. I need to know what the cigarettes are doing for me, but I also need to know the truth about my 'illness'

In graduate school, they taught us about critical thinking – basically, logic which has no unknowable or supernatural component. I taught it myself until my conscience started to bother me that I was ridding my students of their gods. I was also denying God to myself, despite the fact that He had proved He was real to me. But the culture, scientists, and academics don't accept that.

I love logic and still use it. But not on its own. My critical thinking needs help with questions like: if my God is real, are others not? If people hear destructive voices, what should a voice hearer trust? How do the voices get their message out? What are the voices trying to tell me? I have tested my voices on numerous occasions, and they did indeed know what I didn't. My friends shoot that down. Maybe I did know, but I'd forgotten? Maybe it was that dangerous unconscious, that wild, free-willed thing that takes over during sleep? Ever notice how scared people are of voices – and the unconscious?

At some point I let myself believe that the 'voices' are real. I got tired of fighting. I know what I know, and so do a lot of voice hearers. We need psychiatrists on our side, listening to us. Shamans were once accepted. They hallucinated, dreamed, heard voices, and came back to help heal the village. Unconscious modes of thinking can present truths, just as much as conscious modes can. Irrational thinking, not just rational modes, can lead to truths too. I learned this when I disentangled my 'delusions', like any good shaman, and found they were packed with truths.

More and more of us are putting two and two together, but few are listening. Once I was labelled insane, I wasn't trusted again. But, as far as my medications go, I know what works. My psych nurse wants me to come off Depakote, which keeps the voices less powerful for some unknown reason. It just works, like my antipsychotic just works, and they don't know why that is either.

People shouldn't have to go through what I've gone through to find the skimpy answers I've collected, forgotten, and then rediscovered – through reading the back copies of *Asylum* in my closet! I published a chapbook, *Bean Spiller*, about what it's like to be mentally ill, but no bookstores would carry it. The *National Alliance for the Mentally Ill* refused to respond to any of my 20 emails. Maybe they thought I was a frustrated author, but I was trying to add to the scarce information available about what it's like to be a voice hearer.

I need help, both from voices hearers and non-voice hearers. Our villages (of voice hearers) need healing, before we all die from lung cancer. It's time to change the scientific, rational approach, and turn it to something else, that can bend with the weight of what it is to be human and a voice hearer. ▪

Carroll Ann Susco's book *Bean Spiller* can be found via her LinkedIn page.

Cold Water: A short story

Varun Joshi

A vague sense of wanting to go home has followed me around most of my life. A near constant, dull ache that felt impossible to not act on. But I didn't know what action would relieve it. No matter where I went, who I was with, or what I did, the same dull ache followed me around.

It was hard to pinpoint when it started. It felt like a given fact of life that I don't think I even truly understood was there. It's like the feeling of being in cold water: at first there's a large shock but, after a while, you barely even notice it's cold. It is still cold, and it still bothers you, but it's below the surface of your awareness. I hardly remember the first time I was thrown into the deep end; I just know I didn't know how to swim.

I can remember times when the coldness intensified. Like when I felt myself diving for the bottom, expecting my feet to touch the ground, only to realize there was only water. The panic and urgency of drowning in the cold that came from the morning after of a drug binge; the pain of hearing "YOU ARE SELFISH AND INCONSIDERATE, YOU DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR FAMILY AT ALL"; the pain of being romantically rejected because of my ethnicity, rather than my character. The pain that only gets relieved by more pain.

Slowly but surely, the cold took its toll. Even the slightest bit of warmth felt like heaven, but it made the cold feel that much colder. I did anything to feel that touch of warmth again.

When this happened, the warmth became associated with the cold. Instead of realising I needed to be warm, I thought that warmth made me colder. So I learnt to love the cold water and it became all I swam in every day. I ran away from anyone who showed me warmth because it meant leaving the comfort of numbness.

Other people cannot be relied upon for warmth. When they go, even for an instant, the cold intensifies. Then the lonely, cold swimming pool starts to feel comfortable.

That's what I thought, until I tried Xanax.

It was a knob that turned the temperature to whatever I wanted. It didn't just make the pool warm; it made it boiling if I wanted. It felt warm for the first time. Other people actually wanted to jump in and spend time with me in it. I wasn't alone. I wasn't cold. It worked so well that I thought I'd never feel cold again.

But the knob wasn't built very well. Slowly, but surely, it didn't get as hot. I had to twist it hard, hold it there and strain myself to keep it warm. If I let go for a second, not only was it cold, but the cold was worse than ever. My entire body screamed with pain. It hurt so much worse because I wasn't used to it anymore.

After a while, I had to hold the knob in place with every ounce of effort I had to keep it barely as cold as it was before I ever took Xanax. The thought of letting go of that knob was terrifying, so I did anything I could to avoid it: steeling money, throwing fists and breaking noses. Sometimes I would wake up not knowing whose blood was on my body.

One day I turned the knob so hard it broke. The temperature dropped so much I completely froze. My heart stopped beating and I stopped breathing.

I watched my mother and father cry so hard that day. The pool was the coldest it had ever been, but it felt like nothing compared to watching my mother cry.

For weeks, I felt I was going insane. The cold made my body shake, my mind race, and sleep was impossible. I thought I was going to die. But slowly, very slowly, the pool started to warm.

I don't know if it ever got back to the temperature it used to be, but I got used to it. I was swimming in that pool. I was okay. Not happy. But okay.

Now, I keep swimming each day, hoping that one day I will feel warmth again. It won't be the kind of warmth that makes the cold worse; it will be true warmth. A warmth that comes from deep inside so, no matter how cold the water is, I will feel it.

But, until then, all I can do is keep swimming in the cold water. ▪

Varun Joshi

FIVE ROOMS DEEP

Evan Hussen

Five keys hanging by her waist. Every day she checks all the doors, makes sure everything is sealed shut. She wiggles the handles, ensures not even air can slip through.

At the bottom of the right door – a crack, a thread of light, thin as a needle, snakes in.

I don’t know if she hasn’t noticed… or if she just doesn’t want to see it.

These stairs are always so dark and sticky, the sun never reaches – yet I still prefer this ugliness over letting the doors stay open unsupervised. At least this way I know what I am dealing with.

There are five rooms downstairs that I can never let anyone get close to. I know they all know there are rooms, but what they are, is just for us, that is how we stay safe and survive.

The air is heavy and damp. It weighs on you when you go down there. Sometimes it’s easier to hold your breath than breathe. It feels like a mountain is pressing down on your chest.

What else can I do, but to accept my fate? Anytime they scream and call my name, I have to go – like a curse where you have no control over your body, just walk toward it. Every day at least, I go there half a dozen times, the rest of the time when I don’t go it’s not because they get quiet or sleep. I just try to ignore them. If I let them, they would chain me to the floor and make me live there with them in the dark colorless basement.

What is strange is that the doors to their rooms are not locked from the outside; they simply close it on themselves by choice. They sit, jump, scream, they never come up. It’s somehow my fault too; I feed them and that keeps their flame bursting, they know I can hear them even when I am not around.

In the first room there is a child: no face, no name, so I can’t even tell its gender. With its torn-out clothes it sits in a corner as a dark shadow, knees hugged to chest, sobbing.

‘‘They are going to kill me,” it cries, “they are going to abandon me, they are going to starve me.’’

Whatever goes through its mind it shouts, too anxious to sleep, to keep guard; it believes if it falls asleep for a second we are going to throw it out. This has been going on for a long time, but this kid still doesn’t trust anyone, it never sleeps and it keep me up too. This one is the hardest-yet-the-easiest to work with; it does not ask for much and I still can’t make it trust anyone.

Well, this is new. I have never seen this before.

I shout, ‘‘who did this?’’ No answer.

There is a drawing on the ceiling. I can barely see it. It’s a dark figure, like a bird with red shoes. A bird with shoes? I don’t ever remember seeing color in this room before. Where did they get a piece of chalk, and a red one for that matter? Has someone else been here? That is not possible!

Visiting the second room… a woman-looking figure lives here. I can’t fully see her face. I see her thin neck, the veins thick. Pale as a ghost, her eyes are wide open – I know, because sometimes I see a spark. Her long bony pale arms are showing from the elbow down. Rocking herself, she is wearing a big brown heavy skirt. I don’t believe I have ever seen a skirt so heavy. It limits all her movements; she barely moves, it take out all her energy. Her lips are shut together. She doesn’t speak – just hums. The humming never stops. It sounds like crying sometimes, like lullabies.

She rocks herself back and forth. All she wants from me is to sit by the door, to rock with her and hum with her. I don’t know how to help her.

Somehow my visits keep them all alive.

Whenever I leave after visiting her, my heart feels dull in my chest, barely beating. My whole body feels like an extra weight. I feel a sorrow rooted in my belly, sending its branches all over my body, dragging me to the floor.

* * *

At first I hear scratching, then little footsteps running around. When I go down, I see: the last time I was here I forgot to close the basement door all the way. God, they must have lost their minds, thinking they were exposed to the world, that someone might have seen them.

I see a tiny little creature I have never seen before. It is as thin as a stick, looking up, barely holding its head, all grey with white spots. It points at something at the ceiling. I look up and see, a string of light sneaking in, reflecting like a cinema and showing a bird from the outside world. Its pointed finger has red chalk on it.

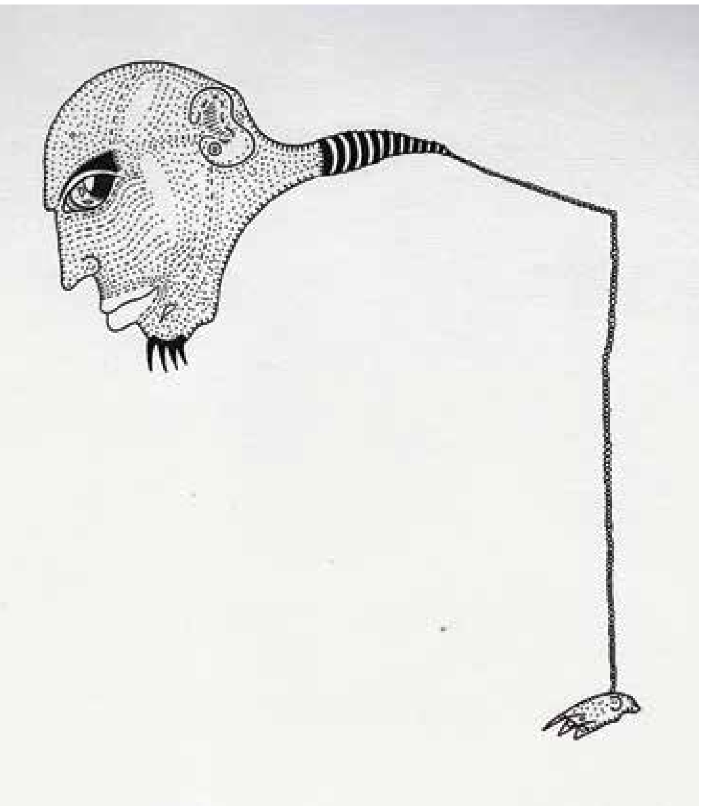

Image credit: Chris Bird

I understand the ceiling drawing, but how it got there I have no clue.

I try to talk to it, saying ‘’it’s called a bird.’’ I continue to explain, as you would to a scared child that is curious and wants to be brave, and say in a calm voice, ‘’Outside of this house there is a big forest, where you can find any kind of animal. You can see all the colors, there are beautiful sounds. Your body is free to jump to run or simply to lay down, you can shout or do whatever it is that you like to do.’’

The creature is listening very carefully. It takes one step up. On the first step it stretches its little neck to see if anything can be seen. I say, ‘’that is very brave of you. You can come higher, even come upstairs to look for yourself.” It hesitates for a second… then runs up and comes back down in a blink of an eye. There is a sense of joy on its face. It starts jumping and skipping around, and from this I feel something deep in the middle of my chest. For the first time I feel there is enough air to take a full breath in. It gives me a smile too. The creature skips back to its room without making a single sound.

* * *

Something is wrong. I can feel it in my breath. Not her, anyone but her. I feel her in every inch of my body, even the air outside her room is colder. My hands shake when I open the door to see her. My heart starts pounding in my throat, I feel dizzy and nauseous. At the same time I think to myself, “why can she have all this effect on me?”

She has a calm, controlling voice when she has something on her mind. She keeps repeating it, until I scream or crawl somewhere without sleeping or eating for days. I usually try not get her attention at all. I She looks like me, but so transparent that she slips into corners and shadows like she was born there. She never blinks; her eyes are so wildly open that it makes you feel she can see through you, into your soul.

She keeps repeating one phrase at a time, making sure she hammers the ideas into your bone. “You’ll see how badly this ends up too.’

he gets close, and slowly she puts her scratchy dry fingers on my shoulder, whispering in my ear ‘You already know all the bad way. ‘Don’t you? Don’t you?’’

My tears fill my throat. I pull away, and it feels as if I have disconnected a thousand watts voltage of electricity from my body. Something between walking and running, I stumble to the stairs. I feel her dark energy lurking behind my back like a black cloud. I stop in front of the first step, forcing myself to move, trying not to vomit, trying to stand upright.

Just then I see the string of light sneaking in again. My eyes follow the light until it settles on the drawing: the red shoes bird. Such an odd idea. Why would a bird need shoes?

For a millisecond I forget, and just like I take a breath, all the way to the bottom of my lungs.

The tiny creature skipping, the light, my own words about the forest, all this rushes through my head. When I look again, I see that I have already taken the first step.

This is new… Is it temporary? Or can I do it more?

Can I even continue like this, without feeling her grip on me for days, making me feel sick without food or sleep? This is all new for me to feel.

As I walk up, I feel something small – a tiny hand slipping into mine. The red chalk brushes against my skin.

We don’t talk. We go up. We just sit on the sofa. A window has opened. A breeze comes in; it feels clean and soft in my soul.

And for the first time I feel the heavy weight of the keys hanging from my waist. I am surprised to see how tightly I have chained them to my belt.

A smile breaks my lips, just a little. I am somewhere between the basement and the forest, while still holding its hands. ■

Truth’s Gateway

Chris Corker

A teenage girl called Truth was the first to jump into the volcano. Having caught the ferry to the island and climbed the mountainside, she looked down only once from the summit before she leapt. It was an individual act in an insignificant place, but its influence would soon spread far and wide.

A classmate called Hope had promised to jump alongside her. Truth had explained to Hope that on reaching the molten centre of the volcano they would be transformed into steam and carried away on the wind to another place. For this reason, she referred to the volcano always as ‘The Gateway.’ The secret of where this gateway would lead was lost with the one who named it. For Truth, at least, it must have been a place far better than here.

Only Truth jumped that day. Despite her promise, Hope watched her friend plunge into the crater and then descended the mountain alone. When the next day those in her class asked her what had happened, Hope told them. Soon the entire school was buzzing with the news. There was something about ‘Truth’s Gateway’, as it was quickly known, that captured the imagination of all who learned of it.

A week later, Hope accompanied two more classmates to the edge of the volcano. Each had the resolve to jump and each became a steam that was carried away on the wind. Afterwards, Hope descended the mountain alone.

#

Truth’s Gateway became a nationwide sensation. People began arriving at the island in droves, either to catch a glimpse of someone entering The Gateway or to do so themselves. Within a year, hundreds had jumped from the edge of the crater and thousands more had witnessed their passing. Some took snapshots of the jumpers in action, while others photographed the steam as it rose, perhaps hoping to see something extraordinary within that white wisp.

The small community of the island, which had lived always on the edge of financial ruin, now found itself with an opportunity to flourish. They were not slow in capitalizing on that chance. Two extra ferries joined the daily rotation from the mainland, tripling the amount of visitors. Arrivals were greeted by food stalls, merchandise booths, and tour guides with solicitous smiles. A rudimentary ski lift was constructed for those with mobility issues and tickets to ride were sold on for double their original retail price. A small wooden post office was built at the crater’s edge so that anyone passing through Truth’s Gateway could send one final correspondence to their loved ones. If the jumpers consented to their letters being publicly displayed before despatch, postage was free.

Commerce also made inroads in the town itself. Makeshift hotels and restaurants sprung up so quickly that yet another ferry had to put in rotation to convey food and other conveniences to the island. Donkeys and camels were imported to offer visitors relaxing rides on the beach, as well as a more leisurely means of ascending the mountain. A waterpark opened and, seeing a golden opportunity, the same management company also constructed a thousand-foot chute from the crater’s edge to give spectators one final thrill on their way home.

Things settled into a tributary pattern. The volcano received bodies, the sky received steam, and the island received economic prosperity. The authorities were concerned by the suicides, of course, and after eighteen months they erected a shin-high fence at the crater’s edge – alongside it was a ‘do not enter’ sign of around the same height. On their advice, the ferry company refrained from selling one-way tickets to the island, clearly believing that those resolved to die would think twice about paying for a return.

Despite these valiant efforts people continued to jump. And as long as those people jumped, there were people to watch them fall. The craze ran for several years. As with most public spectacles, however, the novelty began to wane. For the spectators, very little changed day in and day out – steam was steam, after all, a jump a jump. Visitor numbers dropped and much of the new tourism industry was forced to close, returning the town to what once was: a community just getting by. The two extra passenger ferries were taken out of commission, and the sole boat that remained was more often than not empty. Truth’s Gateway disappeared from the public consciousness and the volcano stopped being special.

No one cared and so no one came.

No one except Hope. She had not visited the volcano during the surge in popularity, but she returned now. Each day she sat at the edge of the crater, beside the abandoned post office and turned over chairs, and looked down into the broiling centre.

Every now and then a prospective jumper came. All of them arrived to see Hope sitting there. They were there to jump and mostly they jumped, and Hope observed in silence as each that did entered Truth's Gateway.

When evening comes, Hope descends the mountain alone. She walks through the mostly deserted town to the port. The ferry takes her over a sea so calm it looks like solid rock. She climbs into her bed and falls asleep before her eyes are closed. In her dreams she sees one thing and one thing only – in her dreams she sees Truth's Gateway.

Note: This flash fiction story was informed by real events at Mt. Mihara, on the island of Oshima, Japan. Reports suggest that over 2,000 people committed suicide by leaping into the volcano during a six-year period in the 1930s, with more than 600 doing so in 1936 alone. The suicides became a tourist hit, bringing a financial prosperity to Oshima it had never known. Mention of the incident can be found in *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide* by Kay Redfield Jamison (Vintage, 2000). ▪

Chris Corker is a British-Canadian writer and translator living in Vancouver.

Dislocation

Amy Tryphena Parkin

It must have been the red brick wall that triggered me. It started with a thump in the chest, emptying my lungs. My mind separated from my body, the scene in front of me blurred. The sounds of the world suddenly muffled by the pulsing blood booming in my ears.

The ground seemed so far, rushing away from me. The whole world disappeared down a dark tunnel. I swallowed hard and dug my nails into my arm hoping the sensation would reattach me to my body. It didn't work. I fell into a dark chasm of temporal dislocation. The present retreated, whilst the past forced its way into my reality.

I was twelve years old again, in a chequered summer school dress. Innocent in white socks and Clark's black patent shoes.

My world blended from the present to the past. I could hear his footsteps running up behind me.

I couldn't feel my feet, my legs were encased in concrete.

I could see the wall of 1996, with its red postbox set into the brickwork.

My chest hurt. *How do I breathe?*

I could feel the sweat rolling down my forehead. My shirt clung to my back.

I felt his hand grab me. I saw the deep lines upon his face, his lurid laughter, his yellow teeth.

I couldn't fight back then, but I could that day. I clawed my way back to the present. I reminded myself of the breeze against my cheek, the solid ground beneath my feet, the rumble of the passing traffic. I found myself clinging on to the crossing post, my life raft in the rip current, in the tides of time.

Breathe, you must breathe!

I remembered how, sucking cool air down into my lungs.
The oxygen hit my brain. I could feel my legs again.
I'm back. I'm safe.

Amy Tryphena is a Cornish writer who has lived with PTSD and bipolar most of her adult life. She can be found on Bluesky @realkernow.bsky.social and Instagram @ bipolarroughguide

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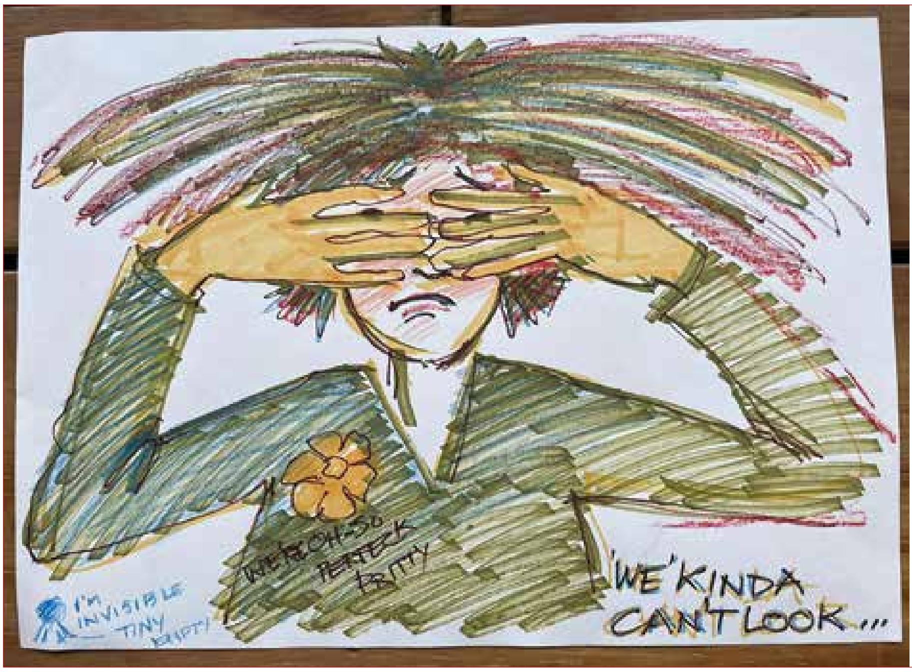
Dialectics

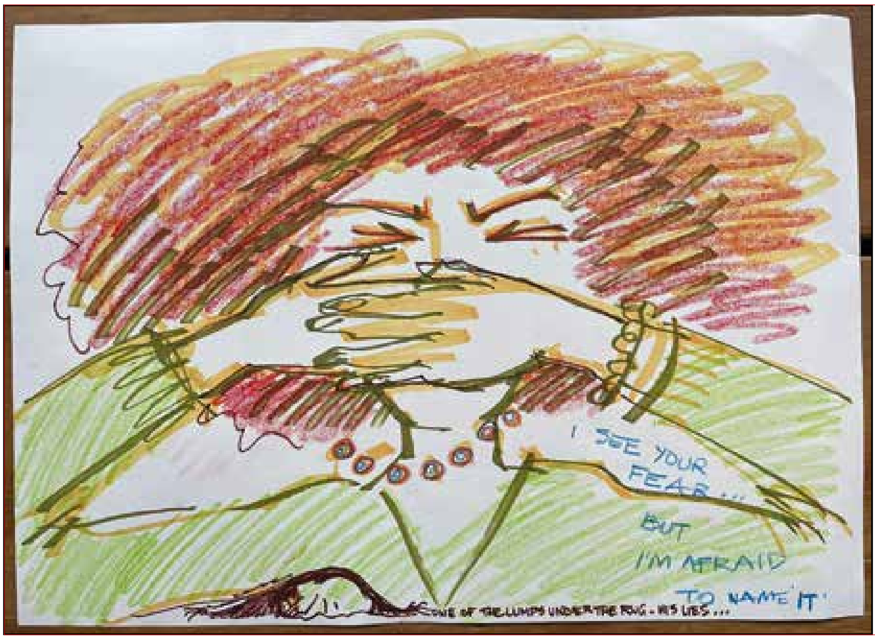
Chris Bird

Hegel was fond of a bagel,
Whereas Spinoza far preferred a samosa…



SEE NO EVIL

HEAR NO EVIL



SPEAK NO EVIL

by AnnaLou Oakland

Patient Pick ’n’ Mix

Rowan Rose

With a new diagnosis: another door closed
A culture of exclusion we cannot deny
Somehow, the services you’ve proposed
Have a barrier to entry, six foot high

Taken drugs? Autistic? In a wheelchair?
You shouldn’t even bother asking
We’ll call you far too complex for care
Reject anyone who dares make a fuss

As the budget gets smaller, so does the box
We’ll find out if a perfect patient exists
Just the ‘right kind of ill’ for your docs
While every person you fail - resists.

It’s certainly one way to save money, right?
Just let in the cases that are easy to fix!
Ignore those lacking the energy to fight
Only the best for the patient pick’n’mix.

You know cherry-picking is unscientific.
It was drilled into you in studies, no?
Not only that, but it’s morally horrific:
Leaving sick people with nowhere to go.

Those of us that you’ve forgotten about -
Make our own spaces: away from you.
You fought **so hard** to keep us out.
And you won – are you happy now?

But inquests tell stories you try to suppress;
You can’t block out the alarms or the sirens.
Yet hold us in contempt for views we express;
Report the bereaved for breaking the silence.

I wish that instead of protecting your beds -
You’d protect your patients: simple or not.
I know you’d prefer it if we were all dead.
Your budget benefits from each person lost.

But we deserve better, we have human rights
We hold you to account: still you slip away
But the witness stand will haunt you at night -
Only shadow hides from the break of day.

Letter

What’s happened to mental health nursing?

There was a time when mental health nursing felt like a real and practical work endeavour, to try and give people the best life possible. Yes, there were individual acts of cruelty, like people being made to go to bed in hospital wards when they only required a drink of water (for the record, I never refused a person a drink of water or anything to eat; I believe a person possesses inalienable rights to such basic needs being satisfied).

Yet, at least in the old days, there was kindness, closeness, companionship, and a feeling that the staff sisters or charge nurse would help you. Thirty years on, all I see now are people climbing the greasy pole of promotion asking: How swiftly is the rota done? Have you audited the kitchen temperatures? Has Fred had a crap this week?

Sisters and charge nurse are now office-based authority figures, elusive, and remote, pulling the strings of puppet-like nurses who do their bidding in the interests of efficiency, not kindness.

People are being left languishing in wards due to being effectively homeless. Where is your nurse when you wish to talk? “In a meeting”, “writing notes”, or “doing meds”.

In the past, it wasn’t always so grim.

Anonymous Ex-RMN (Registered Mental Health Nurse)

LYING BEHIND

JULIANNE FERN BASILE

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depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression **lunch with friends** depression depression depression **big meeting at work** depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression **sure, I'll lead the presentation** depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression **this product is going to be HUGE!**depression **ultraviolet smile** depression depression depression depression depression depression fast food in bed depression depression **CC: TONE OF EXCITEMENT!** depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression **Happy Birthday, Reya! Hope you like the gift. Receipt is in the bag in case it doesn't fit** depression depression depression depression depression depression depression **small talk smile small talk smile** breadcrumbs collecting in sheets depression depression growing into mountains depression depression depression depression depression depression **beautiful day, isn't it??**depression orange glare tears through my eyes like they're scrap paper depression depression depression depression de want to run and hide from all this terrible glare pression depression depression depression **sure, Mom, I'd be happy to help** depression depression depression **nice to hear from you** depression depression deppression bed is waiting for me at home depression depression with a perfect indentation of this heavy body depression depression depression all I want to do is nothing depression **lovely sweater!** depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression nothing is the only thing I can't mess up depression depression depression depression depression **Great lecture, Professor!** depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depression depr **I'm well, thank you! How are you?**

Image credit: AnnaLou Oakland

(Psycho)logical

Margin Tianya Zheng

I memorized the times table by the time I was six, mind very logical and pattern-seeking.

My parents taught me how to recite it in Mandarin, that 8 x 8 = 64 sounds like "Dad is 64."

I laughed and pitied the monolingual Americans who don't have access to such a rhythmic mnemonic to master the multiplication facts.

I have long hoped that my heightened logical capacities would shield me from the ill logic of mental illness. I hoped I could have one foot in reality, and one foot in my dreams.

But madness isn't illogical. It has a logic of its own.

And as I study this psycho-logic, memorizing drug facts and defense mechanisms, I learn the physics of my soul and the engineering of my healing.

Margin Tianya Zheng

A psychiatric hospital is not a factory

John Adlam

The technocrats
are taking over the asylums
with batteries of nostrums –

capitalising the castle,
parcelling up the parklands for gymnasiums
and luxury flats – whilom

mercenaries marching on to market
so long as they've skin
in the endgame. See how they come

in mischiefs, snouts
twitching, scurrying down rat runs
from cosy burrows in Twickenham

and Datchet, shrilling slogans
and batshit paeans to Taylorism,
sniffing for algorithms.

Note: Taylorism refers to scientific management theories designed to increase industrial efficiency, first promoted by FW Taylor, an American mechanical engineer. These theories are frequently applied to the management of hospitals.

Self-Care

Chris Scriven

How much we're encouraged to practice self-care
Perhaps with new highlights revamping our hair

Or maybe its candles surrounding the bath
A bottle of wine (or at least it's a half)

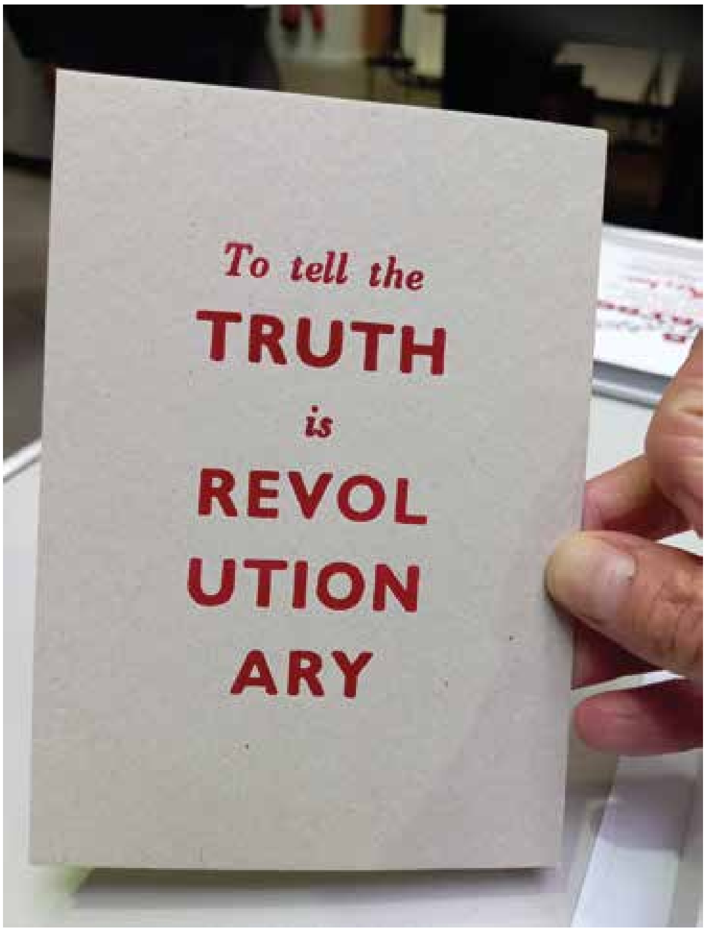
Five pints in the pub or a nice vindaloo,
a scotch on the rocks or some tiramisu

A chocolate fruit fondue, a yoga retreat,
a pedicure's lovely for nine to five feet

We know in our hearts our wellbeing depends
on duvet night rom-coms and Facetime with friends.

A PlayStation game or a crossword or two,
a pyramid teabag to bolster our brew.

Distractions that help us to hide from the truth
that most of our life is state-sponsored abuse.



NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) is the self-proclaimed largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization in the United States. Their logo – a sprig of grass – is designed to convey a community driven, grassroots movement.

However, NAMI receives millions of dollars from major pharmaceutical companies, including Eli Lilly, Pfizer, and Bristol-Myers Squibb. Despite claiming to advocate for the "mentally ill," NAMI routinely advocates for pharmaceutical company interests. Most notably, NAMI opposed the Food and Drug Administration's 2005 decision to put "black box" warnings on antidepressants to warn about child and adolescent suicidality.

Many psychiatric survivors have questioned NAMI's integrity due to their financial relationships.

A group of survivor activists reimagined NAMI's classic grassroots logo to create a skeleton hand holding a pill, showing NAMI's complicity in antidepressant related teen suicide.

Self-Diagnosis

Will (Working RNMH and psychiatry survivor, Merseyside)

We get so frustrated
When our patients
Dare to give themselves
A diagnosis

We want the power
To make those decisions
To stick on those labels
Cos we've had the training

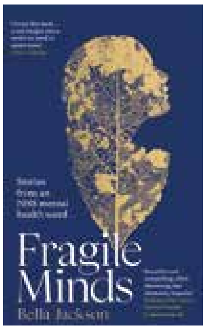
We don't understand
Why someone might want
To put a name to their struggle
And understand themselves

Maybe if we validated
People's experiences
They wouldn't feel they needed
Self-diagnosis

The Ladybird Killer

I always treated insects with more resp**ect** than I did most humans. Always **mov**ed snails out of the way on rainy days. It's important to note: y**ou** cannot simply lift th**em** up, because the g-force wi**ll ri**p them from their shell and kill them, instead, you must place a lea**f next** to them to crawl u**p**on, give them the the sug**g**estion of freedom, **let them** think that they have made the decision themsel**ves. Th**e poet in me **wan**ts to tell you that **my** love for creep**y cra**wlies is something symbolic, about taking it slow, rooting for **the u**nder-dog, an**d ap**pre**ciating the li**ttle things. But rea**lly I j**ust like how slimy they are, and how they have little houses tha**t the**y carry everywher**e- like home is a**lways with you, ex**cep**t home is you. Anyway, I think it stems from childhood (like most **thin**gs), I remembe**r the stormiest of day**s and the suns**hin**e afterwards, my mum with a big black bin bag and a bottle of salt. **Sh**e would make **m**e **pick up the dea**d **slu**gs. Sags of sl**im**y skin sticking to my tiny fingers. I was complicit in murder. 'They e**at** my veg', she **wo**u**ld say in justification**. 'Everybod**y h**as to eat', I'd reply in mourning. I remember when I was about 8, I **went** on holi**day to this caravan park in** Wales a**nd ma**de friends with this sweet little girl. She wore pigtails, and a smile that **could worn off all evils. But she had a secret. Well it w**asn't really a secret, in fact, she was quite proud of it. She enjoyed killing **ants. Her favourite means of murder was sim**ply stomping on them, but she was also partial to the occasional magnifying glas**s to slowly burn them to death. How crue**l she was, to kill something that was just existing, not harming anyone. But **at the same time, I was secretly little bit jealous of her.** It was like all she had to do was stomp on a ant and everything w**o**uld be ok. Like **imagine how easy life w**ould be if you cou**l**d be happy by just simply killing a few ants. Anyway, I'm thinking to**o** much about the p**ast. This is now. Thi**s started two month**s** ago, when I saw the first sign of spring: a Ladybird. Not in my **ga**rden, but instead la**nding upon my ch**est, as I lay in the bat**ht**ub. It came out of nowhere. I said hello to my new little fri**en**d, then pla**ced** him on **some toilet pap**er and s**et h**im free out **of** the window. It was a sign of good luck. A good omen of **thi**ngs to c**ome. But th**en th**ey kept on co**ming. **And I now** know wh**at** it means to have too much of a good thing. Because La**d**ybirds a**re beautiful, b**ut not w**he**n your ste**pping on their** corpses **whe**n just trying to use the loo, not when you ha**ve t**o **swe**ep up the **dead ones** like gian**t** clumps of **dust in order to** walk **barefoot** to the bathtub, not when your worrie**d to** use **the** showe**r in case the** water sp**la**shing out b**ecoming tidal** weav**es wiping ou**t generations of ladybirds: Lady**moth**er**s, Ladyf**athers, **and La**dybabies. So**, I** thought, **th**is **has got** to end. **I can't k**e**ep up** with the daily shuffling of hund**reds** of l**ady birds** from my bathroom to my **w**indow. I mean, the other day **I stood,** fr**esh a**nd naked out of the **shower, smelling** of m**y favou**rite lavender soap. When I **lo**oked down to dry my feet, an**d saw thre**e **ladybirds climbi**ng **up** my pinkie toe. I kicked **and sc**reamed. It **was only w**hen I lo**ok**ed again **that I realiz**ed that th**ey were** just a few red ladyb**ird** sized spots. I mean, you **can** see, this i**s driving me ma**d. The**re** must **be a way to stop** this. So I G**oogl**ed it. Hey Google, how do you get rid of of Ladyb**irds**?'. And **Google replied**: 'you do**n't**. Wit**hout killing them t**here is no wa**y t**o get rid of ladybirds. In fact you definitely shou**ldn**'t' kill t**hem, not just out** of the **go**odnes**s of your heart, b**ut because t**he**re good for the world, they make ecosystems he**alth**ier, they **make childre**n smile, a**nd** my gosh **don't they** look so pretty**, h**ow could you kill a lady bird!'. But I did. And it's n**ot** even like I did it out of kindness, I **di**dn't see one drowning in a droplet **of** water and think I'll put it out of its misery. No, I w**aite**d until I was miserable. Until I w**as** avoiding showering, avoiding bru**sh**ing my teeth for fear I'd find a ladybird between the **bri**stles. So one night, at exactly 1 **am**, I grabbed the hover and set **to w**ork. There was a colony of Ladybirds clustered on **the c**orner of my bathroom window. **T**here must have been thousa**nds.** They all blurred together, black and red dots, upon **bla**c**k and red d**ots, to make bigger b**la**ck and red dots, until **they formed** one big Ladybird. Maybe that made me feel better **abo**ut **sucking the**m up into oblivion**,** like I was just killing **one Ladyb**i**rd n**ot a whole city of them. I applied dish soap to the **wou**nd **of my windo**w, like Google re**c**ommended, to ke**ep them fr**om **com**ing back, and I swore to myself to never speak of th**is a**gain. **But it only** took a week for **t**hem to reappear. **I guess** now I**'ve g**ot to learn to live with my lady bird neighbours. To let t**he**m die, **let the**m live, and to let t**h**em make the stup**id de**cision **of** coming inside my bathroom. I guess I've got to accept th**at** this is their **ho**me as well as we**ll** as mine. But th**e cra**zy thing i**s, I** was telling my friend about this, joking around (beca**use I** can laugh about **this** now), I was **sa**ying about **how** she'd have to **watch** her step when using the bathroom, so that she **doe**sn't end a 'Ladybird Ki**ller**' like me. **But** when **she** got back from the loo, **she** looked at me dead in the eyes, and said '**wha**t Ladybirds?'. I laughed in her **face. Grabbed her** hand, and dragged her to the **bath**room, to point out the red and black **sp**ots, upon red and black spots. I point**ed directly** at them. And yet, she saw nothing. S**he** said, she saw no Ladybirds.

So, am I still a Ladybird Killer, if the Ladybirds don't exist?



Fragile Minds

by Bella Jackson

Book Review

Reviewed by Julia Macintosh

Fragile Minds paints a picture of psychiatry from inside the NHS. The author, Bella Jackson, trained as a mental health nurse and this book chronicles her experience within the wards and community services of her student placement. The suffering she witnessed, and the shortcomings and abuses (both systemic and personal) that contributed to this suffering, troubled her conscience sufficiently that she left the profession at the end of her training. Yet she approached her situation as an opportunity, realising that:

> '… as a student nurse, I occupied a unique position within the psychiatric maze. My time there was finite. I had less paperwork, less pressure and responsibility. I wasn't seen as the jailer, so I could *observe*. I could ask and listen and absorb, read through years of notes, compare assessments, look for inconsistencies. I was both powerless and powerful'.

Jackson reaches her full power in the publication of this book, which offers an insider's view and pulls no punches in its critiques. Officious and remote doctors, exhausted and demoralised staff, and – most significantly – overmedicated, ignored, gaslit and even ridiculed patients; these all feature in the pages of *Fragile Minds* and paint a bleak portrait of the so-called care offered to vulnerable people.

The book is very effectively structured around physical space: for example, the opening chapter focuses on the door to the ward, which locks in the patients and locks out their access to freedom and autonomy. Jackson uses the door as symbolic imagery when describing how a patient managed to get discharged by enlisting the support of her home country's embassy:

> 'The ambassador and Irene stopped together at The Door, waited until a buzzer sounded, and stepped into the outside world. The Door closed heavily behind them'.

Other spaces are explored – the Treatment Room, the Hallway, the Day Area, and others – as backdrops to situations and scenarios that reflect the issues at stake. While offering sympathetic vignettes of her time as a student nurse, Jackson skillfully raises questions about the psychiatric system itself. Issues such as the overprescription of drugs in treatment, the grim use of electroshock therapy, the incarceration of vulnerable people, the slippery nature of diagnosis and the moral injury to workers who must abide by the system's degrading culture.

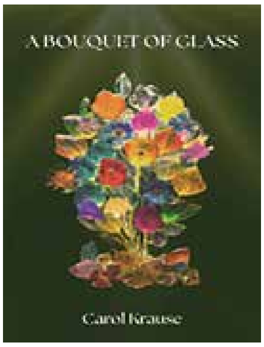
Various patients' backstories illustrate the relationship between poverty, abuse, trauma and distress. Jackson makes these connections in a subtle and artful way – through sympathetic observations and a rich inner narrative which voices her shock and concern at how people's circumstances are received. In most cases, a stigmatising and lifelong diagnosis is slapped onto a person and a stupefying prescription issued, rather than the listening and empathy which might go some way to healing their distress.

Jackson uses the epilogue to state unequivocally the messages that are inherent in these various stories. She poignantly concludes that:

> "It's not easy to live 'well' or to find meaning. When we are overwhelmed by distressing thoughts and experiences our current system tells us we are defective – mentally, chemically. That by handing ourselves over to a professional, by being passive, 'good' patients, we will be fixed. Psychiatry does *to* us, rather than works *with* us".
>
> "Yet, mental distress or ill health is not the same as a broken leg. We cannot get fully well – whatever that means to us – without considering that our distress contains *meaning*. Distress tells us something about our lives. A 'symptom' is threaded through with personal stories and traumas, our losses and fears, the societal barriers and discriminations that have plagued us. If we are aided early on to explore and acknowledge these threads, to heal from them, distress can be a map which enables us to live differently".

Fragile Minds is very accessible in its writing style and gentle tone. While exposing serious and heartbreaking stories of people whose lives have been damaged by what should have been care, Jackson never becomes acerbic, aggressive or blaming. Overall, the book makes a compassionate, assertive and hope-infused case on behalf of the mad movement. With *Fragile Minds*, Jackson proves a formidable ally. ■

Fragile Minds is published by Penguin Books.



A Bouquet of Glass

by Carol Krause

Book Review

Reviewed by Steve Thorp

Around halfway through this exquisite and intimate poetic exploration, Carol Krause writes:

> "Maybe I should write reviews, but then I'd worry about people thinking what happened to my brain could happen to their brain. And there's no chance we are duplicates."

She's writing about reviewing the anti-psychotic drugs she is taking – and wondering if she's become a professional patient in the crazy world she maps out. I can relate to what she says. I'm attempting to write this review, of Carol's words and stories, but how can I do justice to what her brain has produced and what was happening to her brain in the months she was journalling these experiences?

As she says, "we are not duplicates". She beautifully and forensically records her unique experiences in these poems, and that is sufficient. There doesn't need to be anything 'universal' here, and nothing I write can add or take away from the completeness of this work. I loved it, though, and was immersed in the tiny courageous stories of her "uncontainable mind" and how, in a space of time between 2019 and 2020, it "disrupted her plans".

I know from my own life and work that the experiences of 'mind' can be enhanced and elaborated through the writing of poetry. Yet, this is not all Carol Krause does in this collection. This is more than just therapeutic writing; she's making a record of a personal transition (or transitions).

It's unusual to read something that weaves so closely the warp and weft of internal experience and external reality. Inner life is the natural realm of the poet, but Krause knows that something more is going on. The experiences she records are all about context too. Her interactions with the doctors who treat her; her relationships with the drugs that (sometimes) help her; the ways in which the world – everything – can be salient; the community that has been with her along the way, and to whom she expresses such gratitude.

In the acknowledgements, at the end of the book, she says:

> "*A Bouquet of Glass* is a bouquet of hands… I have been cared for by so many. How else could I write poetry?"

The poems themselves are tender and self-compassionate and carry the sort of loving detail that makes me believe that everything *can* be salient. She writes:

> "We're often called sick. Because we don't fit. We stare at a squirrel and our tail bristles. We often get caught gazing at the sky. And rummaging through the dark. This is what they call an emergency. It's when danager happens. Because people like us. We break often. Get hurt often. Fall and trip often. But when we lie flat on the ground, our eyes inside of the sky. People like you. Well, you might want to join us."

However, the 'crazy' she's experiencing is also, literally, disabling. One of the contexts of this book is Krause's acceptance that being given a diagnosis and registered as disabled means something irreversible in her life. Across thirty chapters and 105 poems, she acknowledges that, "If I could learn to habituate, it would be easier to cross the street", but "the salience of strangers' footsteps sounds a global alarm" so this is her life now: "My occupation disability recipient and unknown poet."

Not that her life is anything less than wondrous. She has her talents:

> "Like slipping secrets from the moon and dropping into the underbelly of the human mind. I collect things—shiny things that have been forgotten. I gather them in my trembling hands and offer up a bouquet of glass. I come alive while dancing. I feel at home inside a muddy cave".

She understands that she, and others too, are "wired differently', and that they "are the most beautiful mistake of all."

There are so many extraordinary lines in this collection – and so many images – that touched me. So many stories tangling and untangling along the way. So many 'clear, clean lines', as Ursula LeGuin puts it.

The way in which Krause keeps her eye on the moment-by-moment experience of madness is inspiring, but she also knows that 'crazy' is located in the world itself. The earth warming, the planet dying, a "world that goes to war from scarcity". She writes:

> "I don't want to be selfish as i rise to the microphone with my one final question for people in power but i

> have to ask: if the end of the world comes, what will happen to people with disabilities?"

Ultimately, though, Carol Krause's muddy cave was the place that caught me. When she gives advice to her younger self, or imagines a conversation with a date she never had the guts to pull off, she finds herself underground. Krause is a caver, and that's where she feels at home. She says to her never-date, "I know a hole under the ground. Leads into a maze of rocks. It's best not to talk once you are inside" and of an imagined wedding she writes: "I will wear a helmet and a light. Skip the vows. Head straight underground. When we emerge covered in mud, there will be no one left to document what we found."

There's a photo on her website of her peering – smiling broadly – out of the mouth of a cave. She looks happy and complete in that moment, and it sums up the beauty and uniqueness of this collection. One in which her brain 'wiring' and life experiences; her loving and creative community; her craziness and amazing ability to find salience in every tiny thing; they all come together in this intimate and particular version of a life.

Uniquely personal, but also deeply human.

We are all like this really – or could be – if we could have the courage and help to know where we belong, or don't belong. Where we could be 'me' and not feel the need to fit in with 'you' or 'them'. As Krause herself put it:

> "I wanted to be like you so badly but now i am happy knowing that having no place i belong just means i come from someplace else and it's nothing special but yes it's extra-ordinary." ■

Steve Thorp is an editor at *Unpsychology Magazine*, a poet, an integrative psychotherapist and a retired school counsellor in the UK. You can find him at https://substack.com/@stevethorp

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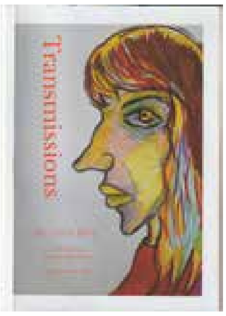


Transmissions

by Chris Bird

Book Review

Reviewed by Vicki Green, Jaén Province, Spain

This book, by regular Asylum contributor, Chris Bird, was briefly reviewed in a previous issue of *Asylum*. However, this reader felt it deserved a second review.

Transmissions reflects on the author's time in his life battling homelessness, drug addiction and undiagnosed schizophrenia in London. Chis covers many themes including the barbaric system someone struggling in situations like his encounter. One gut wrenching poem, 'Our Side', describes authorities, police, park wardens, tearing down tents given to the homeless by a charity, sweeping away their worldly belongings and place to sleep. Another entitled 'They Came from the Shadows' describes with terror-stricken imagery an unprovoked attack on homeless tents by a booze fuelled mob. His descent into a mental health crisis is also dealt with as an ever-present, undercurrent throughout the book.

His writing has a direct style, accessible to all readers and is peppered with humour and unique illustrations of his art. For those of us living in relative comfort and privilege, Chris's poetry and prose offers a terrifying insight into a world on the margins of society, where support structures have been systematically crushed and othering a sinister mantra of the political classes. A world ever more pushed towards precarity, instability and fragility of the masses.

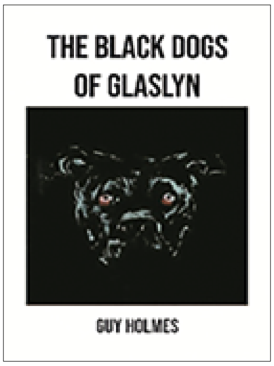
This book invoked feelings of uneasy helplessness and enlightened trepidation simultaneously. It is arranged on a continuous chronological timeline as we follow the writer's life path trajectory during a chaotic, grim and alarming period. He spectacularly describes reeling from desperation, fear, confusion and humiliation to euphoria and being cocooned in care-less warmth with heroin use and addiction, plunging him into a subterranean space. It brings to mind.

His dark humour is unsettling and surprisingly appealing. The story he writes after being sectioned under the Mental Health Act brings forth one of many laughs I felt guilty engaging in. An art therapy scene with Harriet, a teacher 'exuding liberal kindness' had me chuckling and cringing at the same time.

Although it reminds me of the work of Charles Bukowski, it is not at all stylistic or pastiche. It is honest, raw, unpretentious and refreshing. Here is a man who has travelled on a wretched and dismal life-changing journey, relating his experience and making it beautiful in all its distress and torment. This is his unique skill and ultimately his victory.

The illustrations are exceptional, idiosyncratic and harrowing. A courageous tapestry of tumultuous life events, this autobiographical portrait deserves recognition.

I highly recommend it to *Asylum* readers. ■



The Black Dogs of Glaslyn

by Guy Holmes

Grosvenor House Press (2025)

Book Review

Reviewed by Paul Moloney

Background

Guy Holmes worked as a clinical psychologist in the National Health Service for over 25 years. During that time, he published three books in collaborations with service users: *This is Madness, This is Madness Too* and *Psychology in the Real World*. Guy retired from clinical work a decade ago, due to severe mental and physical health problems brought on by work stress, in an environment decimated by austerity. He had worked with some of the most severely abused and damaged people referred to mental health services, and explained his own breakdown as 'death by a thousand cuts'.

Guy continues to have a low-key involvement with some 'Psychology in the Real World Groups' and raises money for groups and organisations to provide free mental health care. All money raised from the sale of his books go to such causes. Community groups can apply for grants up to £1000 at www.psychologyintherealworld.com

The Black Dogs of Glaslyn is his first novel: it is a work of imagination, yet influenced by his own and others' experiences of distress, in a world where there is far too much cruelty.

Paul Moloney, an NHS Counselling Psychologist, based in Shropshire, offered to review it for us:

Book Review

In this gripping novel two separate stories intertwine. In the ancient kingdom of Gwyned dwells The Prince, and his androgynous son, Blaiid. Enter a sinister talking monkey with hypnotic talents; a merchant from a distant land; his handsome male assistant to whom Blaiid is irresistibly drawn; and a menacing black hound.

A thousand years later, Martyn Lewellyn, a psychology graduate, is struggling to come to terms with a traumatic childhood and a drifting adulthood. Desperate for a 'proper career', he takes a job as a 'behavioural experimenter' – inflicting electric shocks on laboratory dogs. This is the pivot upon which the next forty years of Martyn's life turns.

At the heart of the novel is question of the relationship between the story of The Prince and Martyn's confessions, which occur at roughly ten-year intervals, culminating in a dystopian near future where talking treatments, blended with 'AI', have a become an explicit tool of state control. Both stories show how the consequences of deception, exploitation and abuse reverberate down the generations.

Many readers of *Asylum* will realise that the 'learning experiment' – against which Martyn eventually rebels – alludes to the work of his namesake, Professor Martin Seligman, former chair of the *American Psychological Association*. Seligman concluded that his defeated and listless dogs had developed a form of 'learned helplessness', analogous to the deepest human despair.

In the expansive chapter notes at the end of the book, Holmes observes that when he used to teach postgraduate psychologists, they rarely questioned the ethics of Seligman's procedure. By contrast, when he explored the same topic with community psychology groups, they were indignant about its cruelty. This book stands firmly with that lay perspective.

It is rare to find an absorbing and witty drama that effortlessly elucidates present day thinking about the roots of madness, voice hearing, depression, narcissism, and other afflictions of the human condition. Readers may be disappointed to find that the book offers no 'therapeutic' answers to the moral injuries and dilemmas explored in the two tales. However, that is a hallmark of the author's honesty and humility.

The Black Dogs of Glaslyn succeeds in showing how psychological theory and research, taken – not as dogma but as a starting point for reflection – might help us to make more sense of our world; and perhaps to begin the far harder and more urgent task, of thinking about how it might be changed for the better. ▪

NEWS ROUND-UP

CUTS TO WELFARE: UPDATE

Disabled activists have called on the UK government to scrap its “dangerous” and “disastrous” disability benefits bill. Pressure forced ministers into last-minute changes that put on hold their planned cuts to personal independence payments (PIP), at least until they are reviewed. They are still pressing ahead with other cuts – for example, to the health element of Universal Credit for new claimants (in their Universal Credit Bill).

Svetlana Kotova from *Inclusion London* said, “Removing PIP cuts from the bill is a positive step, but there is no guarantee the government will be open to true co-production; more likely, they will want us to engage in ‘co-producing cuts’…The bill still includes deeply harmful cuts to universal credit”.

The *National Service User/Survivor Network* (NSUN) said that these cuts showed that the government “remains willing to attack disabled people” and was “a shameful attempt to divide the disabled community and stifle solidarity”. The proposals would also make it harder for people with fluctuating conditions to qualify for disability benefits (this includes most mental health conditions, especially bipolar, as well as conditions like Parkinson’s) whilst ‘encouraging’ people into the labour market.

Currently, those in the Limited Capacity for Work Related Activity (LCWRA) group are exempt from DWP pressure to work. Proposals sought to abolish ESA regulation 35(2). This ‘substantial risk’ clause allows people to be exempted from the requirement to work or prepare for work, on the basis that doing so would pose a serious threat to their health. This has been an important protection to ensure that people who are extremely vulnerable, especially those at risk of suicide, are not put under pressure to get into paid work. (One analysis found that 70% of those in the Employment Support (ESA) group had attempted suicide, compared with 4% of claimants overall).

It is important to recognise that the mobilisation against the cuts forced a significant climbdown by the government – but it’s not over yet. The proposals will be reviewed by Stephen Timms MP, the outcome of which will doubtless be influenced by pressure, both inside and outside Parliament. Disability rights groups such as *Disabled People Against Cuts* are vowing to fight on, against what one campaigner in Manchester has described as ‘sadistic cuts’. A spokesperson from the user-led activist group *Recovery in the Bin* said:

> “Labour sought to do worse than the Tories…We defeated over half of the measures in this bill, but it will still create a 2-tier universal credit system with much less protection from conditionality. We now know that Labour, Conservatives, and Reform are all hostile toward us, so our struggle must be longer and bigger. We need to be involved in changing the political future of the country, in order to have a chance of a non-hostile government”.

More generally, there are concerns that some campaigns defending disability benefits veer towards seeing (some) physical disabilities as acceptable and deserving, whilst some other disabilities, like psychosocial disabilities (including mental illness), are deemed less so. This appears to be reflected in politicians’ statements, public opinion polls, and even some critical narratives in the mental health field.

Jay Watts has been actively campaigning against the Bill and highlighting its consequences – from a survivor perspective. You can follow Jay on social media and her Substack blog at www.substack.com/@thepsychopoliticalbody. John Pring is also covering these developments from a disability justice perspective on www.disabilitynewsservice.com

CRACKDOWN ON PROTEST TARGETS AUTISTIC YOUNG MAN

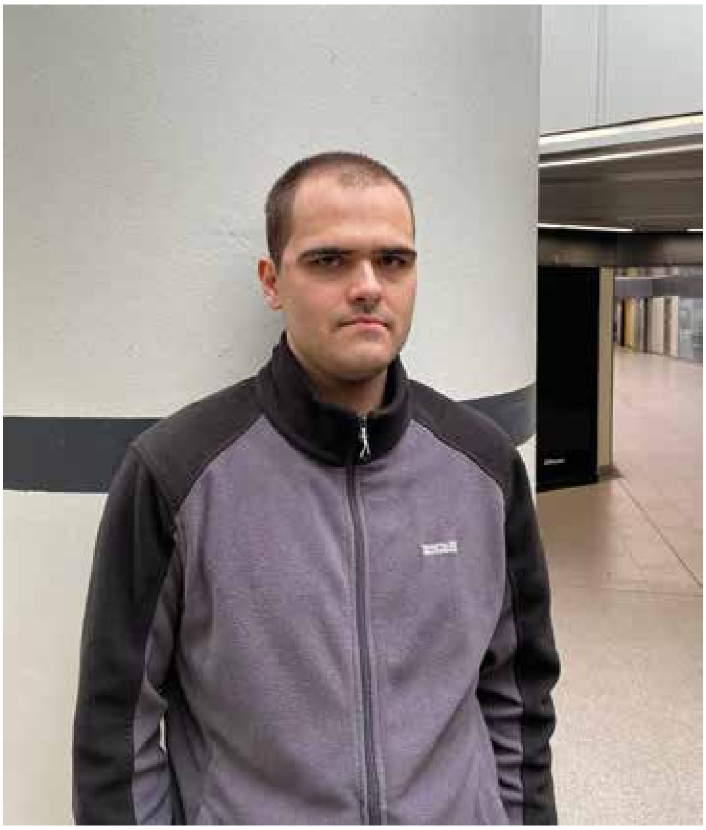
Joe Booth is 24 years old, autistic, has mental health issues, and lives in supported accommodation in Barnet, north London.

For over a year now, Joe has been subjected to a campaign of persecution by the Metropolitan Police Service, designed to stop him taking part in protests. They have treated other activists in a similar way.

On Friday 27th June 2024 at 9am, around half a dozen police officers banged on the door of Joe’s (shared) flat and barged in. The officers searched the flat, watched him get dressed, and took his phone and laptop.

Support staff at the accommodation remonstrated with the police officers, concerned that they were intimidating Joe.

The officers arrested Joe for conspiracy to disrupt important national infrastructure. They took him to the police station and held him in a cell for eight hours.



The police then interviewed Joe. They did not explain to him that he could arrange his own choice of appropriate adult (e.g. a friend or family member). Instead, they allocated a duty appropriate adult, who was a complete stranger to Joe.

They released him with bail conditions that were clearly intended to stop him protesting about the contribution of flights to climate change. The conditions were to not: go to an airport; encourage others to protest at an airport; go to any meetings about protesting at airports; and be within a group of people that could be “reasonably construed” as planning to protest at an airport.

The sergeant who released Joe used an intimidating tone and told him to “be good”.

They police held on to Joe’s phone and laptop, so he had to buy replacements.

He stopped going to campaign meetings and events, and spent the next months living in fear.

Initially bailed for the standard three months, Joe was then told it was being extended for a further three months and that he had to report back to the police station on 27 December, which disrupted his family Christmas plans. Then, just a few days before, the police told him that they were extending his bail for another three months. This took his bail period to nine months in total, the maximum the police can impose without the court’s permission. At no point during Joe’s bail did the police produce any evidence against him. Neither did they tell him what exactly they were accusing him of doing.

Joe’s bail finally expired on Thursday 27th March 2025.

The next morning, at 9am on Friday 28th March, seven police officers banged on the door of Joe’s flat, made his accommodation’s support staff unlock it, and immediately grabbed his arm and searched his flat. They did not have a warrant, but used a legal provision to search the flat without one. After searching his room, they left everything untidily on the floor.

The officers took Joe on a two-hour drive from Barnet to Kingston Police Station and held him in custody until 7.30pm. This time, Joe knew about his right to choose his own appropriate adult, and his older brother Alex attended with him.

The police took Joe’s personal mobile phone and work phone, which they still have. As a result, Joe was suspended from work for two weeks.

This time, the police released Joe with two bail conditions: to not enter the City of Westminster; and to take part in protests only on pavements, not on the road.

He was told to go back to Kingston Police Station at 11am on 28th June this year.

On Sunday 4th May, two police officers attended Joe’s flat and handed him a letter reminding him of his bail conditions – even though he was well aware of them and there was no suggestion that he had broken them.

For 28th June, Joe again arranged his own appropriate adult and also legal representation provided by his trade union, RMT. Joe and his companion were en route to Kingston when the police phoned and told him they were extending his bail until September and that he did not need to attend.

Joe now has PTSD symptoms, including alarm and distress when he hears noises outside his flat.

He has submitted an official complaint to the Metropolitan Police.

Joe’s experiences is part of a wider clampdown on the right to protest. Campaigners on issues such as climate change and Israel’s war against Gaza have found themselves arrested, bailed, banned and even imprisoned simply for discussing the possibility of holding protests.

The fact that Joe’s arrest took no account of his living in supported accommodation, or of the impact on his mental health, makes this situation even more alarming.

A lot of people are supporting Joe in his quest for justice. But Joe is determined that this is not just about him, but about the wider issues. He is encouraging people to sign a petition to Parliament for the repeal of the laws introduced in 2022 and 2023 by the Conservative government that are criminalising protest.

You can add your name to the petition here: https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/734380

STILL CRIMINALISING DISTRESS?

One year on from publishing the *Criminalising Distress* report, MEDACT (Health workers for health justice) have found new evidence illustrating the disturbing (but sadly not surprising) fact that the criminalisation of distress goes on.

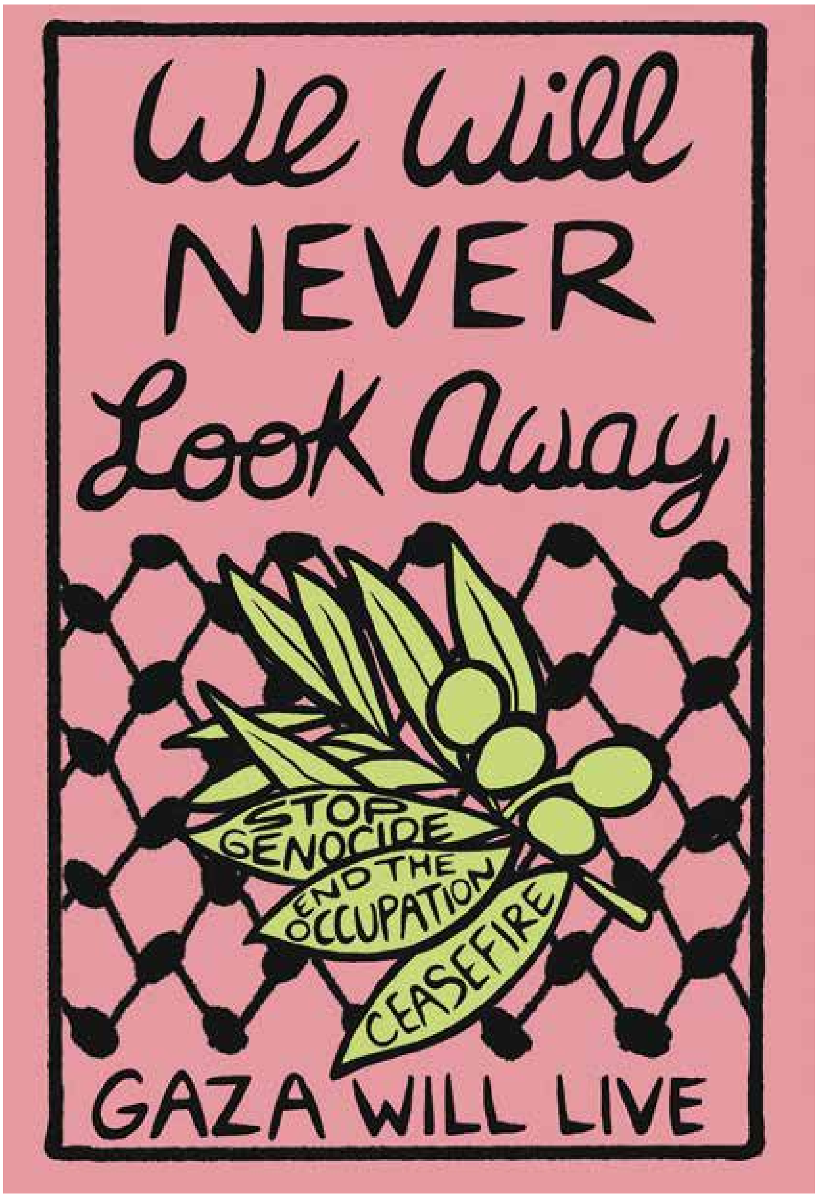
The 2024 report followed the scandal over SIM (Serenity Integrated Mentoring), a scheme through which police officers were embedded into community mental health teams at around half the NHS mental health trusts in England. The project was conducted by members of the *Medact Research Network*, with former members of the *StopSIM Coalition* – the grassroots network which led the campaign to oppose SIM – serving as a steering committee.

They found evidence of ongoing punitive, exclusionary and discriminatory practices in mental health trusts. This was despite NHS England saying in March 2023, as a result of StopSIM's campaign, that these practices should be "eradicated". Their findings also reinforced previous evidence showing that contact with police is often very harmful to patients: potentially invoking fear and shame, compounding distress, destroying trust and risking re-traumatisation.

After publishing their findings, *Medact* wrote to *NHS England*, highlighting the fact that despite the disappearance of models explicitly named 'SIM', there remain multiple examples of similar schemes using different names.

Earlier this year, MedAct received information from a new round of freedom of information requests which made it clear that – "despite NHS England's call for police involvement in care to be "eradicated", the criminalisation of distress goes on". Hil Aked, *Medact*'s Research Manager, said that "Not only does the continuation of such schemes speak to an absence of regulatory mechanisms and accountability, the fact that SIM was ever rolled out in the first place is a symptom of much deeper problems which have neither been acknowledged nor addressed".

MedAct www.medact.org



RECOVERY IN THE BIN PRESENTS

THE RITAS

FRIDAY, 19th SEPTEMBER 6pm - 8pm
live on X and Bluesky

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Results also in the next edition of Asylum

AWARDS INCLUDE

Innovative Activist Award
Ally of the Year
Best Journalist
Political Gaslighter of the Year
Patronising Interventions Award
Worst Co-production Award
Worst Mental Health Trust CEO

We the Balmy Army: a mental health art, activism and mutual care group.

We deserve creative responses, not just clinical ones.
We deserve to be emotionally messy. Kindly, don't put us in a box and tick us off.
We deserve dignity in care: nurses who learn our names, not being told to 'Have a bath' when we feel suicidal. Or mental health provision that doesn't cause us more harm.
We deserve to be taken seriously. We shouldn't have to be suicidal or dysfunctional or trans enough to access care.
We deserve more than just staying alive. To be deprived of what we need or who we are is a death sentence.
(We're not OK. Who is OK right now? What is wrong with you if you are OK?)
We deserve an honest government and corporations.
It doesn't matter if we're having an episode or flare up; we deserve love unlimited.
We deserve to be listened to as the experts of our own lives. Respect our knowledge and experience.
We deserve a nice Chinese meal once in a while.
We deserve to not have to waste time on waste people, with negative views disguised as reforming things they broke.
Some of us deserve praise for not punching people, even when they deserve it.
We deserve to be able to get snacks at 3 a.m. without being screamed at.
We deserve time and space to heal from the Covid-19 Pandemic, environmental and housing crises, not just to be a cog in the job market.
We deserve hugs, good sleep every night, free therapy, free medication and funding to be artists.
We deserve not to be scared of the future.
(Deserve. That word. There's something about it that feels entitled. But when did needing the bare minimum feel unnecessary?)
We deserve to burn it all down and build it up again our way. No barriers, no walls, just care.
We deserve healthcare.

We, the Balmy Army, (and maybe you...)
We demand listening ears and understanding hearts.
We demand £2.50 meal deals, chips and cheese, garlic bread, oreos, capri suns, pizza, chicken nuggets and free safe public transport.
We demand GPs have actual options to help us when we are crying in front of them, begging for help.
We demand an end to the use of the Mental Health Act as the only way to get help, safer neurodivergent spaces for all, an end to BMI, and that 111 pick up the phone. (Mental health hospitals, police stations and prisons are not places of safety.)
We demand a Prime Minister who has experienced having no f**king options.
We demand that this country stop punching down on and scapegoating migrants and refugees.
We demand pet friendly supported housing because my dog is my support worker.
We demand a society of empathy, allyship, funding and reflection. More Arts Council funding for Contact and Balmy, pretty please!
We demand that trans health services have the resources to reply to our emails.
We demand the government stops the cuts to disability benefits, access to work and increases Universal Credit.
We demand an end to demonising queer people for existing, leading to unnecessary deaths.
We demand a society of queer joy, queer love, mad pride, poc pride, joy in being religious or spiritual, disability pride, asexual pride, and so on.
We demand an end to waiting lists of 2 years to get mental health support.
We demand cuddles from Tom Hardy whenever we are over-stimulated. (Provided he is ok with that.)
We demand social media that is appropriate for young minds, and that companies stop exploiting our trauma and pain for profit, causing more harm in the process.
We demand a grown up drug policy that reduces harm to young people.
We demand the right to get wasted and dance because joy is important.
We demand that the struggles of young people in the UK are recognised and linked to the struggles young people face globally.
We demand an end to genocide in Gaza and an end to it being remotely controversial to demand an end to genocide.
We demand the best psychological support for those who survive (and more support for young people who are witnessing it livestreamed).
We demand young people should be able to grow up without the fear of war, terrorism or violence. Shout out to our friends Balmy Ukraine.
We acknowledge that the rich and powerful of England are currently and historically responsible for a lot of wars, conflict, and terrorism globally. We want to play a part in being accountable, learning and healing together.
We demand love as a foundation. Care as a strategy. Patience as a virtue. And the right to be mad at those who make decisions that negatively impact us.

We love you, even when it's hard to love ourselves. Sincerely - Balmy Army