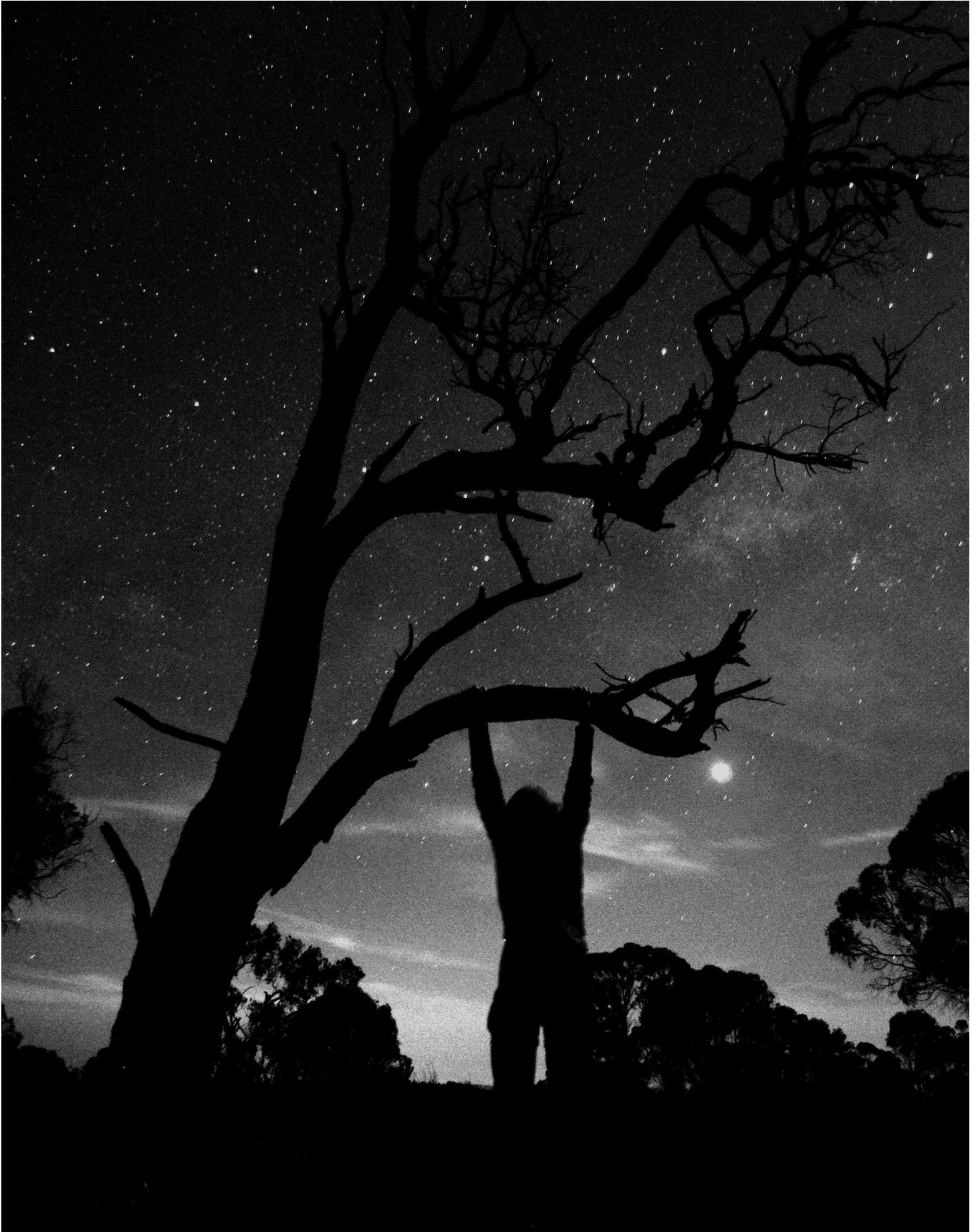


A person stands in the foreground of a vast, red rock canyon. The canyon walls are high and textured, with dramatic lighting creating deep shadows and bright highlights. The person is small in comparison to the massive scale of the rock formations.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR BLOWING YOUR MIND!

Thoughts on Mental Health
Steven Morgan
www.stevenmorganjr.com





THE WIND NEVER LIES



When I was young I believed the world spoke to me. Lightning split across the sky to the pulse of my thoughts. Rings around the moon prophesized the apocalypse. My cat winked at me to let me know he *understood*. Clouds parted like curtains to welcome a shining God.

For most of my youth this deep connection to the Natural world mystified me, pulling me into forests and spinning my imagination wild. Then at age twenty-two I finally discovered its secret.

Earlier that year I had been diagnosed with major mental illness. Suddenly I had wondered—often painfully—how much of my past was led not by free will or cosmic connection, but by disease. As I searched for answers, I

absorbed medical texts, self-help books, and bestselling memoirs. I grew increasingly vulnerable to biological explanations for my behavior—*Your brain is broken*—in part because these theories absolved me of guilt and responsibility for experiences that were shameful. For instance, I was relieved to learn that repeatedly tapping in patterns of three to save my grandmother's life was caused by an overheating of my caudate nucleus. And I felt less maniacal knowing that six months contemplating death every hour was caused by low serotonin.

Yet the flipside—the explosive creativity, moments of divine insight, periods of super-wit and magnetism, communication with Nature—was not so easily resigned to biological determinism. How was I to make sense of this paradox, that while some mood

swings are grave and disabling, others are rich with meaning and evolvment?

According to the respected literature Bipolar Disorder is a disease of the brain. This means I would have to deny scientific reason to cherry-pick which extremities are diseasified and which are not based on their subjective worth.

At the time, I needed answers, not another harrowing epoch of existential angst, so I adopted a mental illness worldview and began to label everything that veered up or down in my experiences as caused by pathology in my head. In effect, I re-authored my life story, tossing fragments of my history into clinical categories of mania and depression.

One day I came across text that specifically labeled *believing the wind is communicating with you* as a symptom of Bipolar Disorder. I immediately thought about my friend. She had also felt a deep connection to the world, and she was also diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. We had shared moments of profound synchronicity in which the wind had danced inside our unmedicated conversations at exactly the right moment, too right to have been a coincidence.

With my new perspective, there was only one explanation for this experience and others of a similar nature. They were simply neurochemical errors devoid of meaning.

From then on, the world still spoke to me, but I stopped listening. When the wind would swarm me at too perfect a moment to be coincidental, I would remind myself, *The wind isn't speaking to you. You have a mental illness that makes you believe otherwise.* I began to lose trust in my intuition and the significance of my experiences, and the way I made meaning of the world suddenly became a suspect for deceit. Such is the effect of being diagnosed with an illness that presumes to know your mind better than you ever can. You resign your voice and become a doubter.

*

My resignation to a forecast of disability was short-lived, however. I have always harbored a fierce independence that—whether consciously or unconsciously—puppeteers my actions, and eventually we sought to unweave mental illness. But first I had to

make major life changes.

At the time I was fulfilling a typical Bipolar prognosis by living at my father's house as an unemployed artist. My fresh diagnosis was an ace in the hole to excuse inaction, but I felt ashamed and irresponsible for not holding my weight as a man. In an effort to jumpstart my life, I dove into a highly-respected social program that trains and places promising college graduates as teachers in the poorest areas of the country.

Here was a chance to reclaim my dignity. Here was a challenge to prove I could be successful just like everyone else. Here was an opportunity to show my friends and family I was not a lost cause naïve to the real world and blanketed by idealism. I invested all my pride in the endeavor, throwing away my Bipolar label overnight and the sedating mood stabilizer that came with it.

My training consisted of grueling eighteen-hour work days for five weeks straight. At first I was vivacious, often praised by my colleagues for creativity and energy, but by the end I had completely burned out.

I landed at my assigned region of South Dakota with barely any life-force. In a lonely house along a dirt road, I was overwhelmed by sleeplessness, paranoia, disconnection, feelings of abandonment and utter exhaustion. Despite a desperate attempt to revive myself with exercise and meditation, I eventually fell apart and landed in a hospital.

Here is what I wrote several months after the experience:

When I walked into the hospital, slow as a ghost, my arms bloodied and face covered in agony, I noticed the hospital workers noticing me. It felt very intrusive, and I wore a scared, nervous face in front of their inquisitions, both verbal and silent.

"Sooooo, how long you been Bipolar?" The doctor's chirpy South Dakotan accent made the question all the more intolerable. I felt like her question was cruel, invasive, insensitive, ignorant, said with a doctor's ease while I sat there in the gloom of my misery expected to answer in a coherent way.

"What kind of question is that?" I replied. I wasn't confrontational. Indeed, I was scared because deep down, the question made me feel more insane than I had previously acknowledged.

Even now, I can feel the humiliation of awakening in that rocky bed: eyes weighted with tears, skin torn by teeth marks, throat lined with liquid charcoal, hand punctured by IV, thoughts clouded by Haldol, heart stinging with guilt, mind terrified and confused. And I recall the doctor inches away from my face holding a pill between her thumb and index finger. *This will make you feel better,* she smirked with vague condescension, as if the boundless suffering before her was just another Bipolar gone off his meds...shame on him.

I cannot explain in words the trauma of those months. What I can tell you is that for years a mark had been appearing on the center of my chest that changed in color according to my moods. Though it had arrived in a shade of brown,

the year after South Dakota it doubled in size—like a virus spreading—and deepened into a blood red. Every morning thereafter, I saw that mark in the mirror and it reminded me of my utter failure at life, as inescapable as my breath beneath it.

I wanted the rest of the world to see my pain too. One night, after drinking and ripping car keys across my forearm, I took a razor and shaved my head—a highly symbolic act since growing out my hair led to my first girlfriends—then grabbed a knife and hacked away at my face, chest, and arms.

Alongside a second hospital stay, it was becoming too difficult to deny I had serious problems, and equally as alluring to again accept the bottomline that mental illness explained me. Tired and defeated, I stopped trying to connect the dots and came to see my breakdown in South Dakota as the result of quitting medications, getting manic, and crashing into depression. With that association in mind I became terrified of discontinuing medications ever again. And there were plenty of people to confirm the wisdom of my fear. In fact, I soon discovered that all Bipolar advice orbits around one unshakeable core: Whatever you do, no matter how good or stable you feel, NEVER quit your meds, or else...

This way of thinking is justified by the belief that Bipolar is an incurable chemical imbalance in the brain which medications help restore. Given the overwhelming presence of this theory in the media, medical texts, and amongst professionals and peers, I presumed it was backed by hard science and became invested in



taking pills for the rest of my life.

I even began openly expressing to others that I was taking *my meds*, as if the choice made me a *good patient* worthy of inclusion and accolades. However, my emergence into a walking advertisement for the pharmaceutical companies came at the price of repressing internal conflicts. Indeed, no matter how much support and validation people offered, no matter how many times I reminded myself mine was a medical disease *like diabetes* which required medical solutions, the pills never quit instilling within me their unlisted side effects of shame, unnaturalness, isolation, and dependency. It is simply impossible to forget you are crazy when you eat from five bottles of pills every day.

Still, I could not consider quitting medications because I could not think outside my experiences. To survive then, I lowered my

expectations and silenced my shame.

And with that I swept away the shards of my identity, aimlessly crawling through a new world where the limit came before the sky, and I solemnly accepted that my mind would forever be prisoner to the punishment of my brain.

*

After a brief relationship resurrected feelings of abandonment, the mark over my chest was aching and my spirits were sinking. In response, I grasped at straws to restore my worth. Eventually my efforts transpired into creating a film about Bipolar Disorder. I sold many of my possessions to purchase film equipment, all the while rationalizing a need to push myself into highs and lows to make the movie more realistic.

After months of mad creativity, I

recall an evening where I could not form sentences from beginning to end. A couple of days later I wrote a suicide note and tucked it into my mattress, then checked into a hospital.

My previous hospitalization had been relatively helpful, but this stay was pure damage. Having my shoelaces taken away now felt degrading, pointing to stick-figured faces—Happy, Sad, Angry—while setting a daily goal now felt infantilizing, smoking in a cage with other demoralized people now felt depressing, being locked indoors after voluntarily checking-in now felt infuriating, being told not to carry on conversations with the opposite sex now felt discriminating, and being observed every fifteen minutes during my sleepless evenings now felt invasive.

Yet my integrity was buried beneath a need to be liked, so I behaved as a good patient, never connecting my humiliation to external circumstances.

After a week I lied to the psychiatrist about my suicidal status, and upon release I made a vow: *I will never return to a psychiatric hospital, no matter what sacrifices are necessary to stay afloat.*

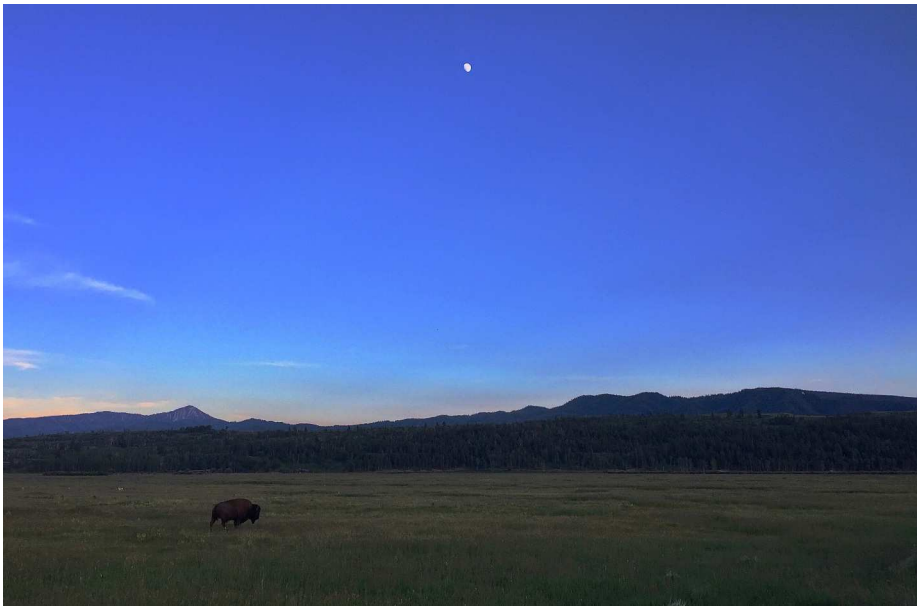
To pass each day I drank just enough beers to sedate my thoughts. To pass each night I popped sleeping pills at dusk. Though I remained desiccated by suicidal thoughts for months, I knew from experience that the pain would eventually dissolve.

There was also a reason to be hopeful. While researching the aforementioned film, I met a

woman who raised money for me to attend the state's Certified Peer Specialist Project, which trains people with psychiatric labels to work in the mental health system from a peer perspective. Though I knew nothing about this line of work, I was encouraged by the prospect of employment.

At the two-week training, I kept my recent hospitalization a secret, and was skilled enough at hiding disillusionment to push through classes for the first week. Then, over the weekend break I hiked eleven miles to a desolate beach. As I stood in front of the ocean, I was starving to feel her presence but could not connect. Nature was severed from my nerves. An immense rage swept me and I screamed at the full capacity of my lungs, then flapped in the sand like a fish out of water, murmuring





and drooling and gasping for life.

When I returned to the training I broke down sobbing to a peer. She listened to my confusion and loss, then revealed some of her own struggles, particularly as a writer. Referring to a creative project she was working on, she said, *If I don't finish this, I will have failed at life.* At any other time, in any other context, her words would have slipped by, but instead they flipped a switch.

Suddenly I realized I too could fail at life, which meant I too could succeed, which meant that life was not just a careless unfolding but purposeful, and if she could emerge from immense struggles to inhabit meaning, perhaps I could too.

This brief sense of optimism carried me through the second week of training, and upon returning home I began the slow work of moving away from lost causes and toward some kind of intentional, integrated life.

**

Jack was a 60-year old bear of a man, fluff but stern with eyes that frequently watered from inspiration. He sat on a meditation cushion on the floor to look upwards at me as a gesture of humility. There was a seriousness for truth in the air which I immensely valued. He never reduced any of my experiences to mental illness nor used any diagnostic vocabulary, but I still subscribed to those contexts for making meaning.

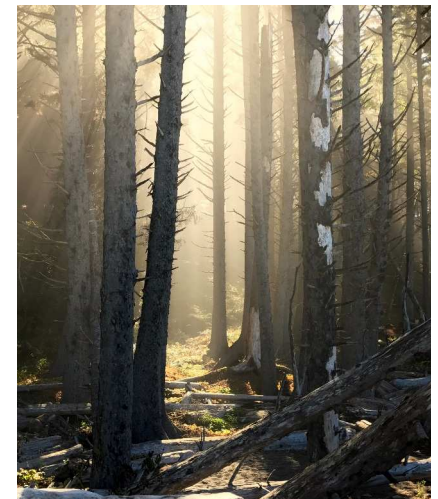
At our first therapy session, I poured out my Bipolar story while he listened patiently, still as a rock. In the final minutes he responded: *Now, I would like to tell you about myself.* Then he happened upon exactly the right words, in exactly the right no-bullshit tone, with exactly the right conviction: *Steven, I too am a wild man.* And he meant it.

From then on, I knew I would be leaving practicalities at the door. Our work was to map dense forests of archetypes, dreams, gods, love, manhood, and madness. He introduced me to the work of Carl

Jung, whose concepts were a lantern in the darkest realms of psyche.

During our fourth meeting together, I haphazardly recalled a dream. I had always dreamed vividly, often shaken in the morning by their complexity of imagery and intensity of message. Though I had derived some truth from them in the past, I had never been able to decode their ultimate function.

The dream I spoke of contained a buffalo, who appeared near the end and told me, *Do not be afraid.* I remember feeling the dream was inconsequential, but Jack treated it with sacredness, remarking,



Steven, there is nothing meaningless about Wakan Tanka. Wakan Tanka is the name given to the Buffalo/Great Spirit by the Lakota Sioux, whose land I had lived on while in South Dakota. Though I had failed to make the obvious connection, Jack helped me realize that the buffalo's appearance in my dream meant something. I was being communicated with.

The more I gave attention to my

dreams, the more they responded, and soon I was navigating symbols too multifaceted to be trivialized in words. The immediate effect of this experience was profoundly healing. For one, the messages directly opened up locks to expansion and elevation, but more significantly they became an umbilical cord back to God.

While diagnosis had disconnected me from others and my own experiences, my dreams mended this separation by reconnecting me to humanity, the divine, Nature, and also to the inseparableness of the three. Their mythological nature made me feel important again, as if I were decoding a great secret that was inaccessible to—or at least denied by—most people. There was admittedly a dangerous element of ego-satisfaction (*I'm special!*) built into this process that would need addressing later on, but at the time the pride was absolutely necessary for restoring my sense of value to the world.

Of course, nine months of therapy was not all *Ah ha!* moments. There was grieving over relationships and suffering from opening the floodgates of repression and clearing the spiderwebs to my past. But Jack became a father in these scenarios, validating my secrets and loving me for the volatile creative spirit that so infused my passions yet isolated me from others. He even told me once he loved me, and he meant it, a moment of naked humanity that single-handedly patched a tear in my heart.

All of my work with psyche culminated in a peak experience. I had been reading Eastern spiritual texts for years, but despite a brief flirtation with meditation in South

Dakota had yet to actualize it. One night I decided to try again, and as I sat in the moonlight in front of a white wall, a surge of energy transmuted me, presenting a ritualistic dance of truths and visions that shook my consciousness to its core. For the two months that followed, I lived behind a colorful trance through which I could see auras and vivid patterns everywhere. At first, meditation fostered this psychedelic experience, but as the intensity faded it became a vessel for me to a clearer and more direct world.

During this time of evolvment, I used my training as a peer specialist to work at a progressive recovery center for adults with psychiatric labels. Inspired by the people who came there, I began to grasp the concept of recovery in mental health. To me, recovery meant that I could live a meaningful life with illness. My self-conception shifted from believing disease fueled my emotions to believing disease fueled some of my emotions, and I graduated my story from *I am Bipolar* to *I have Bipolar*. Still, I was locked into psychiatric seermongering that my brain would forever be hostile in its natural state.

Then one day everything changed.

*

After moving to Vermont for a new job, I began attending meetings and trainings with individuals who were leaders in the consumer/survivor/ex-patient movement. At one of these week-long trainings, one of the facilitators was a bright man whose empathic charisma immediately earned my respect.

Midway through the week, he revealed he had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and was not taking medications. Now, until that moment, despite all my research and conversations, I had never met nor heard of anyone diagnosed with major mental illness who was successfully living without medications.

I was perplexed. I probed for his secret, and he smiled warmly, replying, *I believe that if this is something you want to do, you will find a way.* The integrity in withholding his path empowered me to find my own without his influence. Yet his presence was enough—a living example that life without medications was possible—to inflame my will. The second before I was staying on my chemical regime for life. Now I was interested in quitting.

I approached withdrawing with caution. There was enough distance between my present experiences and past meltdowns to forget the force of cyclonic emotions. I was terrified that my brain would revert to its diseasified operations once relieved of its medicinal police. I cut most of my doses slowly to test the outcome, while maintaining a commitment to a healthy lifestyle as fundamental to staying centered.

The whole process took six months, after which I noticed two shifts: my mind sharpened and my heart opened. Both of these factors were double-edged swords. On the one hand I could think more clearly and feel a wider spectrum of aliveness. On the other hand my restored intellect would once again lead me to face the graveness in the world, and my



increased sensitivities would once again produce dense emotions in response.

But the real challenge came to my identity. At first I was too occupied with watching for signs of mental slippage to indulge in existential contemplation. But after a few months, as I realized I was clearer and even relatively grounded, the question inevitably arose: *What happened to the chemical imbalance in my brain?*

To find answers I started researching heavily. Instead of relying—as I had in the past—on government agencies, major organizations, professionals, and bestselling books for explanations of mental illness, I went straight to the source: to the scientific journals that provide empirical evidence to support or refute psychiatric theories.

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The first and most striking fact I unearthed was that a chemical imbalance had never been observed in a human brain. Surely, I thought, this must be a mistake, as everything I read elsewhere concluded that an imbalance of neurotransmitters was the cause of mental illness. Such a ubiquitous claim would have to be backed by solid science, *right?* I then discovered there was no way to measure live neurotransmitter levels in the human brain, so there was no *healthy level* of neurotransmitters by which to even make comparisons. Furthermore, I learned that if chemical imbalances did exist, they could be caused by a person's experiences. Therefore, if I did have an imbalance, I would have no way of

determining whether it had biologically erupted to cause my psychological, spiritual, and emotional crises, or whether it was a biological reflection of them.

Soon enough, I realized that even though the chemical imbalance theory was a gross oversimplification of how the brain and mind operate, it was coasting through the masses on a wave of propaganda designed and funded by pharmaceutical giants, who directly benefitted from its treatment implications.

As my presumptions fell apart, I investigated more into the concept of psychiatric recovery. I found that nearly all long-term studies indicate that the majority of people diagnosed with major mental illness significantly recover over time. That was news. Furthermore, I learned that medications are ineffective and even harmful to a large cohort of people with major diagnoses, and that some alternative treatment models which use little or no medications have produced better results than treatment-as-usual. That was news, too.

But if mental illness is a brain problem, and if people who experience mental illness can recover significantly, what happens to their brain problem? Is it fixed? Was *mine* fixed?

At this juncture I stumbled onto neuroplasticity. In science, neuroplasticity refers to the brain's natural ability to change, adapt, and heal across the lifespan. I learned that the brain was highly malleable, changing its structure and chemistry in response to both internal and external stimuli—from thinking positively to

experiencing trauma. Most importantly, I learned that utilizing the brain's natural potential to heal, people were recovering from massive strokes, head traumas, overcoming learning disabilities, rewiring obsessive-compulsive behavior, erasing the pain of phantom limbs, restoring memory acuity, enhancing cognitive processing during old age, learning to see without eyesight, strengthening muscles just by thinking about them, using meditation to create lower-stress neurological states, and on and on.

If people could train their brains to overcome these problems, why not major mental illness?

The research base for neuroplasticity and psychiatric recovery was small, but there was enough evidence to strongly suggest that many of the biological abnormalities correlated with psychiatric symptoms were reversible or could be compensated for by other areas of the brain.

And so I quite naturally asked, had my brain *physically* changed? Had my lifestyle changes reversed my mental illness on a physiological level?

Certainly this was the case with obsessions and compulsions. Whereas I once got stuck performing irrational rituals all the time to relieve anxiety, years of challenging my thoughts had equipped me to disengage from habitual mindstreams. With the power to observe and respond in different ways, I completely eliminated most obsessions and compulsions. Studies into Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder have visually documented that

such efforts actually rewire the brain.

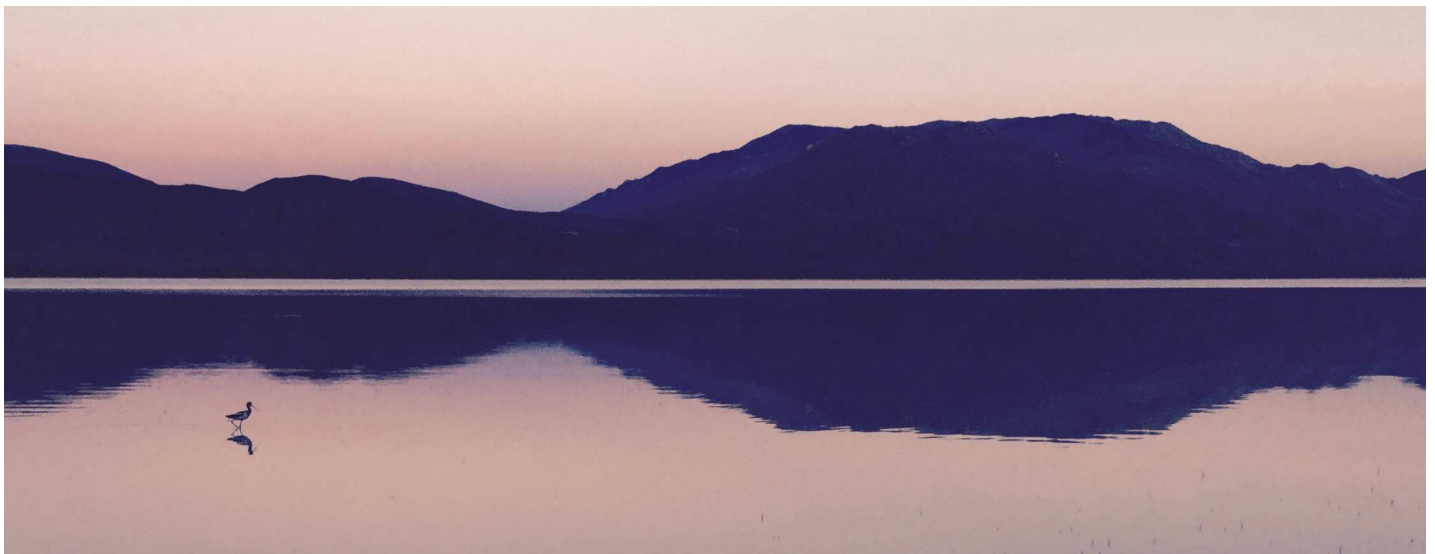
But Bipolar Disorder was different. It was always presented as chronic, persistent, and lifelong. Was I just in remission like the literature said, an unmedicated brain temporarily strong but ready to surrender at the first invasion of stress?

I was not satisfied with that hopeless hypothesis. It seemed a slick way to firewall psychiatric creed—*No one beats Bipolar Disorder*—against anyone who is

Manual used by professionals to diagnose people had no medical objectivity whatsoever, and was instead a collection of opinions about behavior that changed with social trends.

There was no doubt that people with major diagnoses underwent profound psychological, emotional, and spiritual suffering. Yet the evidence that such suffering was caused by a biological disease was flimsy, no more convincing than the evidence that such suffering was caused by a complex psychological reaction to

As I learned and integrated this information into my worldview, the glue that stuck mental illness to me loosened. I started to wake up to a different reality, one in which I used terms like experiences instead of symptoms, trauma instead of disease, problems instead of illness, and neuroplasticity instead of chemical imbalance. I engaged in a process of re-authoring my life story once again, casting off the disease paradigm and shifting my self-conception from *I have Bipolar* to *I am fully human*. At the same time I experienced an incident of painful



well without medications. So I changed the question from *Am I still Bipolar?* to *Who decides what is Bipolar and what is not?*

I was amazed that by merely asking a different question, I encountered a hidden world of alternative perspectives. I dove into criticism of psychiatry—most notably into its history—and grew outraged at what I found. I came to realize that mental illness was a culturally-defined construct, prone to bias and judgment. Indeed, I learned that the Diagnostic and Statistics

overwhelming life circumstances. But biological psychiatry had won the rights to define mental illness, in no small measure because it met the ideological needs and financial ambitions of pharmaceutical companies, who in turn funded many of its institutions, scientists, and research grants. The endless other vessels to understanding behavior—sociology, psychology, anthropology, mythology, spirituality, or just plain ol' individual interpretation—had been overpowered.

discrimination that reminded me of my status in society.

I had applied for an expensive scholarship to attend a breathwork retreat with progressive psychiatrist Stanislav Grof and Buddhist psychologist Jack Kornfield. My scholarship was approved, after which I was sent a standard medical questionnaire. At the top it indicated the workshop was not appropriate for people with certain conditions, including those *with mental illness*. However, I assumed the

workshop's pioneering facilitators would factor in my current health, which I documented in detail as evidence that I was *appropriate*. After a lengthy discourse with Dr. Grof's assistant in which I further pleaded my case, Dr. Grof personally rejected my scholarship on the grounds I was a risk.

I was devastated. My exhausting efforts to arise from the restraints of diagnosis were simply not enough to convince others I was not disabled. No matter how I conceived of myself, my psychiatric history would forever follow me. Though I found my ensuing rage challenging to navigate without medications, I was equally thankful that I could feel such intensity again. In the past, I would employ coping skills to eliminate strong feelings, but this time I used them as a catalyst for action and advocacy.

Over the next year, I translated the research I had gathered into written resources and presentations. I worked with other mental health workers to create more recovery-based environments, while bringing my new perspective into support groups as a facilitator and educator. I also began sharing my story publically, and each time I uncovered more and more of my authentic voice.

And something strange happened: that mark over my chest that had gauged my pain for eight years, that had been confirmed by a dermatologist as a stress indicator and not an allergic reaction, that had physically mirrored my mind as it shattered and my heart as it choked, that mark of suffering disappeared.

It has been many years since I quit medications and over a decade since I last entered a hospital seeking help. Nothing has been steady, and I have stumbled along a rocky path that is at times overwhelming, at times insightful. Such is life, and I am grateful for it.

Each day, my story grows and changes in unpredictable ways, but one thing has become clear in my understanding: *I am not nor have I ever been mentally ill.*

Yes, at certain times I fit all the criteria for Bipolar II in the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual, but the conclusions of a small group of academics who create taxonomies of human behavior hardly constitute my truth, thus I grant them no authority. Instead, I perceive my experiences as a complex manifestation of intrinsic character, society and culture, relationships, physical health, biological processes, past experiences, collective energies, and forces beyond my understanding, and each varies in degree depending on the situation.

But none of my experiences are ill.

Indeed, I cannot believe that I have something inside me called Bipolar Disorder, for my thoughts and emotions which could be labeled as such are not separate from my selfhood and therefore I will not postulate them as disordered. That would be denying and perhaps hating myself. All of it—the ups, the downs, the middle ground—*is* me. I cannot apply the same logic of having a disease like diabetes toward the myriad of feelings and

experiences that I essentially *am*. Otherwise, I would have to split my mental content and emotions—both of which often escape my conscious control—into healthy and unhealthy compartments according to arbitrary judgments from doctors whom I have never met, and to be honest, that's absurd, dismissive of existential purpose, and detrimental to the integrity of my complex existence. It also breeds more inner conflict.

I believe that in most instances, though not all, the reduction of experiences to biological causality sucks dry the poetry of life and denies that extremes can in fact be the final, necessary, and dangerously unpredictable step before new maturation.

So where does this leave me? Things come up, things go away, and when they do, there I am. The wind blows, but it never lies. When despair arrives, I *am* despair. When fired up arrives, I *am* fired up. If I choose to sink back into a witnessing state cultivated by meditative practice, I *am* witnessing. States of existence—dangerous to judge and painful to deny, rolling on and on and on, each one pushes toward the next by some force which I do not comprehend. It is the Great Mystery, and I feel utterly okay not having figured it out.

This is not to deny the impact of extrinsic events upon well-being. Like nearly everyone who receives a major psychiatric label, traumatic experiences have influenced me and continue to contribute to my suffering. As a society, we all need to wake up to the obvious connection between trauma and psychiatric disorders. But just as I am no longer willing to resign my

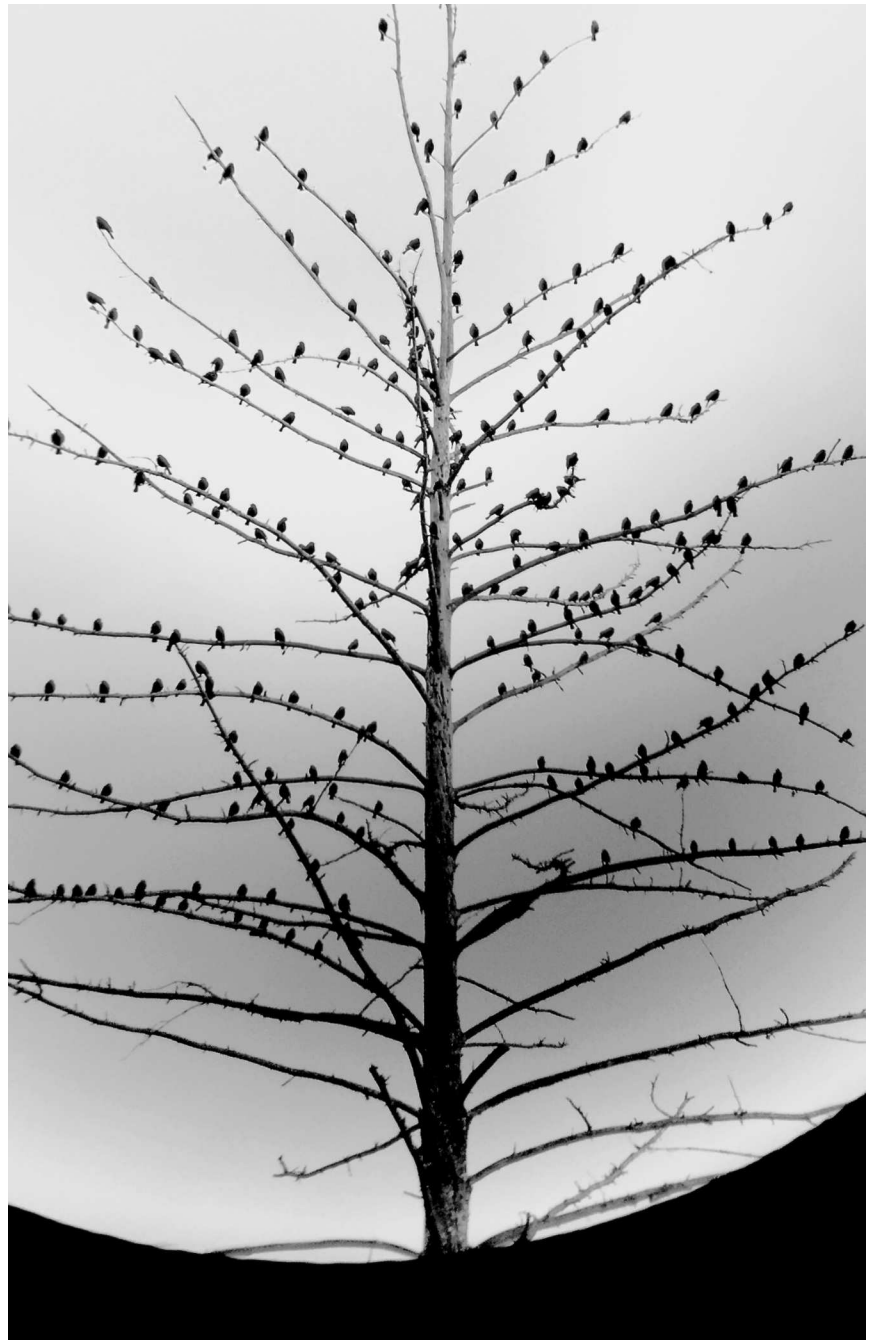
belief that the wind is communicative to a neurochemical error, I am equally unwilling to resign my emotional states solely to the past. In all truth, there is no way to neatly sum up why I entered a psychiatric hospital in 2004. It all happened on the tail end of 24 years—that's 756,864,000 seconds—of being alive. And who could possibly understand such an expanse?

What is important to me now is to take full responsibility for what I do, to know that there are storylines that glimpse truth, and to learn and experiment with living in ways that are intuitively authentic. And since intuition and authenticity grows, there is no endpoint, no enlightenment, no final solution to or ultimate recovery from suffering.

And thank God, for what a liberation it is to know that—just like you—I am plainly human: irreducible to theoretical constructs, unfathomable in my fullness, aching and celebrating with pain and love, moving in all directions at once, complex and stacked, an imperfect being and a sliver of God's perfection.

Alas, it's a diagnosis that works for me.

~





STRANGER



In front of me an old woman with cherry lipstick and a clipboard asks questions about sexual abuse, but my mind is through the square window on the door behind her. In that room I see a steel bed surrounded by emptiness. On top of it lay leather straps uneven in width where they're wearing thin. Each strap has a set of holes to fasten the buckles tight, and I can see quite clearly that the ones nearest the end are circles while the ones furthest away have stretched into ovals.

Do you need more time to think about it? she asks, gently.

No.

No, you don't need more time, or no, you weren't sexually abused?

For a moment I am in that steel bed. Then I come back to her.

No. I wasn't abused.

Tonight will be a Haldol night. The newly minted nurse will say, *This is going to make you feel better*, and I will duly reply, *Ok, anything*. She will tell me to lean forward over the table and pull up my gown. I will feel cold air crawl like fingers around my torso. She will tell me it's going to feel like a prick, but only for a moment. I will feel the skin on my ass cinch around the needle. The tranquilizer will swim out the chute in a billowing yellow cloud. She will announce, *Good job*, jerking back.

I awake twenty-two hours later.

No one visited my dreams last night because there was no space in that blackness. All that was was an outside, an outline of a creature whose inside was less than asleep, less than comatose, less than dead: it was missing. Except in cursive

notes on the other side of a clipboard, from which this simulacrum gets made.

What I notice first upon flicking back on is disembodiment. I see limbs hanging but they are not me. My sense of self is a headache banging against the walls of my skull, and that's all. At some point I capture intention again, and with it the structure of thinking—though no thoughts—and from that, attention. Now I place this attention on my left shoulder. It tingles, brought back to life. Then my elbow, down to my wrist, and finally into my hand to unclench, but there is a delay between the command and action. I sense I am living a half-second behind time.

Next comes sound. I hear the space around my body, then the space of the room, and with that I know there is separation between

us two. There is a ping—a steady reverberation that clarifies into water dripping from the bathroom sink, and a nervous hum that rattles from some appliance I cannot place. The light overhead perhaps? Maybe it's the bugs frying in its case.

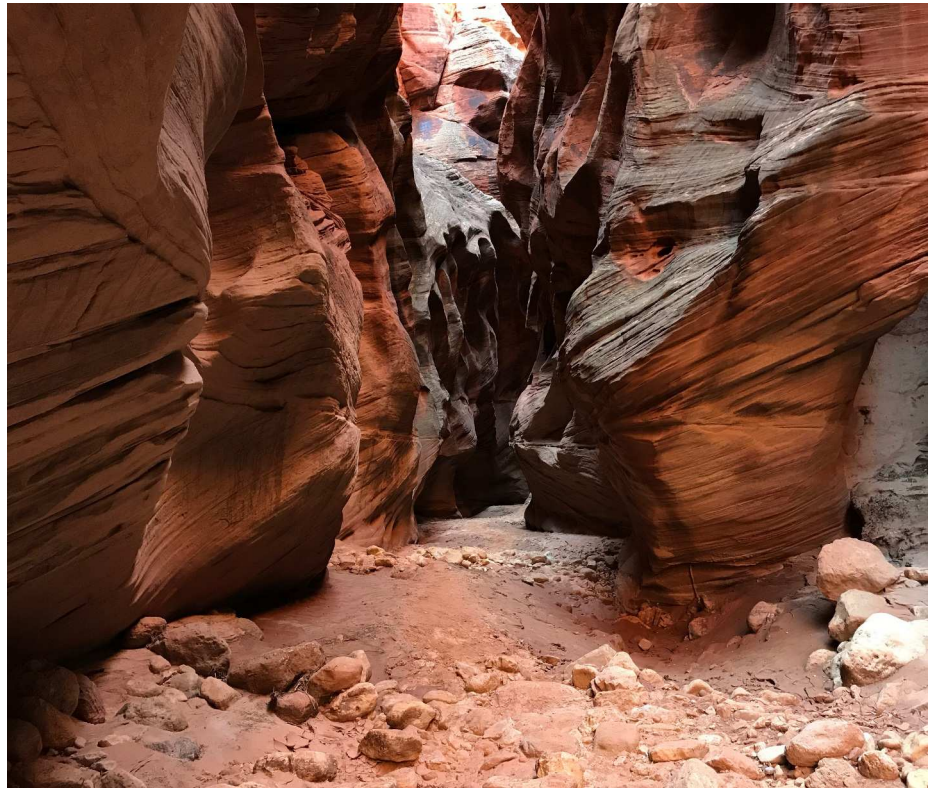
The other side of the window is blue, either dusk or dawn, so I wait to see if it lightens or darkens. Fade in, fade out, fade in, see black, and out, and in, still black, it's out, wake up, come in, wake up, I'm out, I'm waking up at night, at night, at night I'm waking up at night and my ass is bruised, the world was blue, my ass is bruised and the world was blue and now is black and I'm waking up at night because the world was blue and now is black and my ass is bruised, *I was injected*.

A wave of panic flutters my chest. Thousands of ants crawl up my calves, trace my lips; they circle my ankles and burn my ears, climb my spine, sting my dick; they chew each root of each hair. I have to stand up and shake them off, but I can't put together enough instructions to coordinate my whole body moving. So I lay instead in akathisia.

The door creaks as the psych tech peeks in, but once he notices I'm awake it swings hard and he struts to my bedside.

Looks like you wet the bed. We're gonna need to change those sheets.

He has a beard not unlike mine though cut closer. He never looks me in the eye. He pays his attention to objects in the room. He has to make sure everything is in order. In the bathroom he notices the dripping water, so he



turns the hot knob on then off, cold knob on then off, then repeats twice, each time looking a little angrier that the contraption won't stop leaking. He sighs aloud in bewilderment, *Huh*, but I also hear him secretly whisper, *Fucking pipes*. He peels back the shower curtain hastily, as if to get it over with in case there really is a decomposing body draining down the center hole and clogging those pipes.

*

Across the dinner table a hungry man stares at me. Gray curls tumble down his forehead and eclipse the top halves of his lazy, bloodhound eyes. He is purring.

Are you gonna eat that or just drool all over it cause I'll eat it if you ain't gonna?

Even sitting, I can tell he is mighty. Perhaps seven feet tall,

big enough that anything he says sounds hostile. Now I don't know where I've been, but I must have been there awhile because the fish is skeletal on his plate and pristine on mine. Except for a swirl of drool that has fallen onto my lemon dressing, yet to blend. People say you should live in the present, but I wonder sometimes if they understand what it's really like to live moment-to-moment. To find yourself arriving suddenly to the experience of a place without any imprint from the minutes before.

Well? he asks.

I hear fluorescent lights buzzing.

You can have it, I say, my words echoing. I am still a half-second behind time and—as if on a bad phone call—it takes me that long to hear what I say. Excited, the hound stretches both arms across the table and picks up my plate.

He lifts it above his head, holds that posture for a moment of dramatic tension, then tilts the plate downwards so the fish slides off into his mouth. He smacks loudly as he chews, licking his teeth between bites. When he finishes, he abruptly stands and knocks his chair over backwards. He pants, until suddenly—as if the fish sunk in his stomach leaped up his throat and popped its eyes through his own—he spots coffee, at which point he puppeteers his arms and legs through a stilted walk (that only meds can make) towards the steaming pot of black magic. He leaves behind his plate, and with it even the memory of having eaten, for every moment here is independent of the next, discontinuous, puzzle pieces that promise a big picture but when you go to connect them their edges don't match.

Haley is swimming in the ocean next to me. I know she is there, but each time I swivel my head she disappears. I can only glimpse her in the periphery. There are eels chasing us. My hand is taken into Haley's so that our arms swimming together make a water mill, and this propels us faster into the horizon until suddenly the horizon is moving towards us. As it nears, the whole scene—ocean, eels, us—flattens and we lose our dimensionality. Now we are white stick figures on a black canvas, the last drops of squeezed-out ocean sweating down the canvas face.

I am shaken awake by the bearded psych tech. My empty dinner plate is across the table waiting for whatever patient is on clean-up. A crust of drool dries on my chin. The ants are in a flurry, they must be hungry. My thighs twitch, my hands rise without command, my

toes cramp backwards and I've bitten my cheeks, yes I bit them again. I taste like blood.

Dinner's up. Let's get you to group.



*

There are times when the big thoughts bring me comfort. When I remember that to reach the edge of the universe, you have to travel 187,000 miles every second for 14.5 billion years. That there's so much out there kicking and screaming and collapsing into spheres that no way a speck of humans pushing shopping carts matters a god damn. You believe seas part, I believe mirrors watch, our heads spin, the Earth spins, you can't see what spins if you're spinning too, but nothing really spins because nothing ever moves,

for to reach one point from another you must first cross a point halfway in-between, but to reach that halfway point, you must also cross a halfway point between it and your starting point, and to reach that you must first reach another halfway point and so on and so on until the only logical conclusion is that nothing ever moves because there is no indivisible space. There are always halways in-between. But now is no time for big thoughts—*only baby steps Steven*, and that is why I am at Stabilization on Haldol: I am halfway between alive and dead, and no one knows which direction to move me.

*

Three days later I am at Treatment. Here the walls are further apart, the air has more space to breathe, the floors squeak a little less and the mattresses are wrapped in cotton instead of plastic. But mostly it smells different. Yes, I smell institution—the detergent on the linens, the pink handsoap, the stale paper in self-help books; but it's nothing like the rotten scent—the chemical humidity—that hangs in Stabilization, one I swear thickens each time a patient sucks it in and coughs it out.

There is also sunlight in this wing, albeit dulled through the frosted windows. And high ceilings with skylights that create the ambience of an airport. One feels less like a sick person in here and more like a customer. Which isn't to say you're treated like one—or at least that if you are, it's as a customer attempting to return an unreturnable item...forever.

I am standing in the grand central

room. In the middle is the employee headquarters, a large octagon marked off by waist-high countertops. Inside are open-air stations and filing cabinets that the employees fiddle with endlessly, always bending over and gesturing to one another with the resentment of being watched (*Why is everything always setup in the patient's favor?* they groan). There is no glass like at convenience stores, but those countertops are just a hair longer than striking distance.

Medtime. A voice over the intercom drops from the sky, *Medications. Line up for medications.* We heed the call and gather single file. If aliens invaded at this moment and this was the first image they saw—thirty of our fumbled bodies aligned before two clean creatures dressed in white, our cheeks watched closely as we swig back plastic shot glasses—what would they see?

Mine are vanilla hexagon, lip-stick red tube, two faded bluejean circles, and an unabashedly golden egg. Call them Lithium, Abilify, Effexor, and Ativan. In one fell swoop they are me. It's in the moment that I swallow that I feel hope. Though I can't get out now, I did in fact check in to this place, and this is why right here: I talked to my doctor, I read the pamphlets, I aced the quizzes on pfeifer.com, and I'm here to collect on their wager that flowing white robes in lime green fields are a balanced chemical away. That's what a particular kind of desperation will do.

Now it's time to smoke. The pack I checked in has been traded for coffee and excuses to loiter in the smoking cage. Everyone knows

the employees keep a stash behind the counter, but you have to sway them into giving up such leverage. Fortunately, at this time of day, coffee has kicked me into a formidable charmer (the brochures call this *Rapid Cycling*). I look for a vulnerable employee who must have kids my age and therefore cannot possibly say No (they call this *Manipulation*). Back and forth yackity yack, a flash of devilish smile, she hands me two cigarettes—reluctantly, telling me these will be my last, then launches into sermons about tobacco and mental health that are also posted in bold fonts on the bulletin board (and in those brochures).

The doorway between the hospital and the smoking cage marks two worlds. On the inside I am notes in cursive. On the outside I am a friend. We congregate, six of us men—the women have to smoke in a separate cage—something about tobacco calling back a rite of camaraderie. Here we laugh.

There is Brian, who looks just like a cat, a groomed cat. He talks like one would too, in aesthetically pleasing tones and circuitous phrases, as if everything he discussed was a piece of art. He is here because he drinks way too much and wants to die during binges. Just like Alan, who is eyeing the copy of *Cat's Cradle* in my hand, is here because he smoked crack and lost everything. For my part, I am here because I think too much.

That's a very good book, Alan says, pointing. I think he's one part impressed because I'm too young to read good books and one part eager to find in that young-ness hope.

Brian gossips about the hound who ate my fish. *He was my roommate on Stabe for Christ's sake. So here I am detoxing and nearly dying, and next to me snoring all night is this ghoulis creature who not infrequently talks in his sleep. God!*

What did he say? I ask.

He said, and now Brian puts on a Frankenstein face and comes towards me, *I'm going to eat your lobotomized brains you schizoid fool!* We all laugh. Even in here we think others are crazier.

The cage is made of coated steel fencing like you find around a baseball field. It is shaped into a dome so there are no edges to climb over. What you see through the diamonds are more brick buildings, a vast lawn that is half-dead half-alive, and in the distance a few pine trees. But there's sunlight everywhere, which makes me sweat.

Alan asks, *Hey kid, what are you gonna do when you get outta here?* I have these kinds of answers rehearsed: *Gonna stay clean, take my meds, try and get a job, find a routine.*

Stay away from women, he reminds me. Maybe he saw me last night in the phone booth dialing over and over. Maybe he heard me leaving messages, saying Haley's name sternly at first, then desperately, then chaotically.

You know what the problem with this place is? asks Brian. *The problem is—and here I want to qualify that I am in fact sober and therefore,* he holds up one finger and pauses to accentuate what's coming, *entitled to my opinion.* And now he takes a deep breath. *We all just need to get*



laid.

Ain't that the truth, says an otherwise silent guy leaning against the cage.

We just need to fuck it out! Brian smiles big at his own discovery. Then he starts thrusting his hips, *Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it out!* He hops around, thrusting wildly, the whole lot of us entranced and laughing riotously. *What do you gents think about that?* he asks, then sucks a long drag.

My meds have kicked in. I'm frustrated that in their haze I cannot find a response sly enough to meet his energy. But at least there are no more ants running up and down my ribs. Just the tingle

of hilarity.

*

I am having trouble leaving the mirror. I hear laughter behind it. There are men sitting behind the mirror laughing at me as I piss. I want to see them. I feel around the mirror's edge for a space where I can peek behind but find nothing. Near the end of my trace I hit a burr and cut my fingertip. Now I'm sucking my index finger and the men are laughing at me and calling me faggot. They record me on videotape so they can broadcast it to the whole world of people who have it together and think small-ly of these behaviors.

There's a firm knock on the door.

Are you okay? enters a muffled woman's voice.

Just a minute.

Pause.

Group can't start without you.

Even though I can't see her, I can feel her waiting on the other side. So I wrap my bleeding finger in toilet paper and stick it in my pocket.

*

We face forward in rows of six, a parade of humpty dumpties without shoelaces (you could hang yourself). Up front in her lone chair, Angela observes, one leg tight over the other. Her pointy glasses look like teardrops turned sideways and her red hair slits

back into a knot. I keep thinking she and I must have something in common because we're both so young, but I can't get around her nametag. This is *Angela: Psychiatric Technician*, and there ends the story.

On one side of her a table displays a basket of plastic fruit. Pineapple, Lemon, Pear. On the other a good patient holds a poster of cartoon faces showing different expressions, each one with the name of an emotion written below. Happy, Sad, Mad. It's called *My Feelings*.

At the strike of the hour she begins. *Say your name, how you feel, and whether you accomplished your goal for the day.*

We start with Henry, whose is still as dead. She calls his name four times before his feet shuffle, and when they do, their friction against the floor polish fills the room with squeaks. He looks down at the commotion, a tub of drool from behind his bottom lip spilling over. Moments later it touches the floor in an uninterrupted line, and I wonder then whether all the polish is made of our drool.

Angela's eyelids catch a rhythm, snapping at half-second intervals and in sets of six. Her lips purse. Now she repeats the instructions, this time with such slowness it's as if the words taste bad. *Henry, say your name, how you feel, and if you met your goal.*

His head never rises. *I'm Henry. I—I feel good. My—my—my goal today was to get—um—a—better, ma'am. That's right.*

We all wait in tense silence, a few coughs, a few wisps. A faint voice

from over the intercom communicates in nurse code.

Angela's tick-tock blinks continue, until finally she comments, *Good is not a feeling. Good is a judgement. Henry, which of these faces best describes how you feel this evening? Any joy I had from that cigarette break is crushed.*

Henry looks up. His eyes widen. He's seen this poster for months but still it's foreign. He mutters to himself a few times, then answers, *Joyous*. Not a moment's reflection, Angela scratches on the other side of the clipboard, then darts her eyes to the next-in-line, at Marge, who is eagerly smacking gum and ready for showtime.

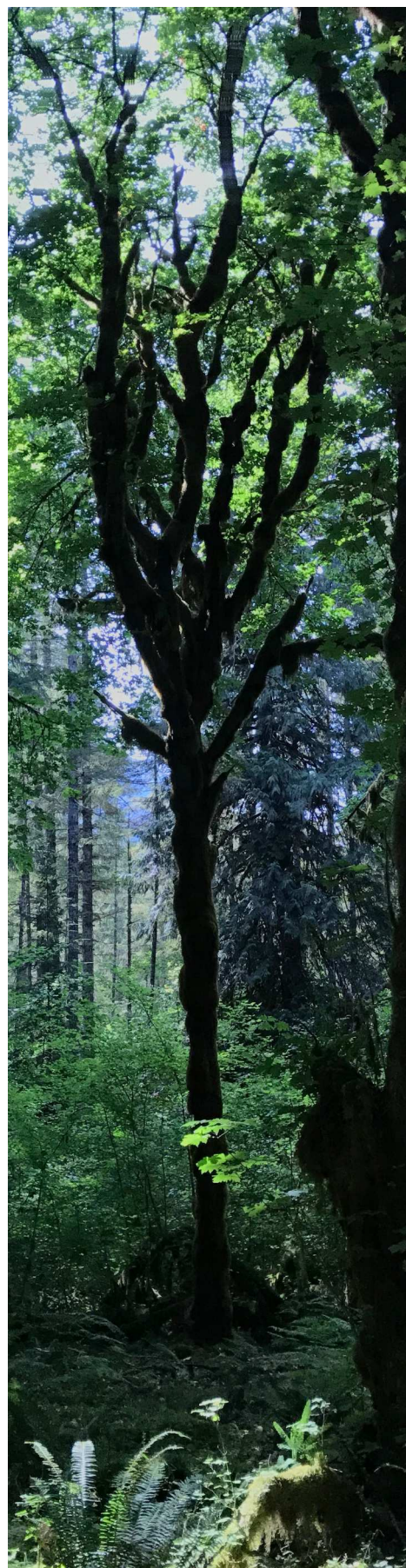
Name's Marge. Feeling hopeful and proud this evening. What does that one say? Oh yeah, and enthusiastic, yes ma'am! My goal today was to be one more day away from drugs (she says drugs with a prolonged emphasis on the ug) so I can get back my kids and treat my mental illness that's been holding me back all my life making me do stupid things... She goes on like this forever.

At my turn I hesitate. Angela asks the good patient to bring the poster closer to me. *This is the list of feelings. If you can't read them, point to a face.* I don't see homicidal on the list.

Here is my chance to stand my ground. Perhaps earn another diagnosis in my defense of what I will later come to understand as the opposite of this place: ambivalence. Instead I point to the face called Guilty.

*

The next morning I awake elated.



No, electrified. The new drugs have pumped me full of hope. If it feels this good to be normal, then I'm committed.

As I walk down the hall for coffee, I smile big at the employees. One says, *Good morning, Mr. Morgan. Everything alright?* It doesn't matter if you're up or down, either one elicits the same investigation.

I'm wonderful.

Just before the breakfast room, I spot Brian, the cat man, in a chair. His head is collapsed into his

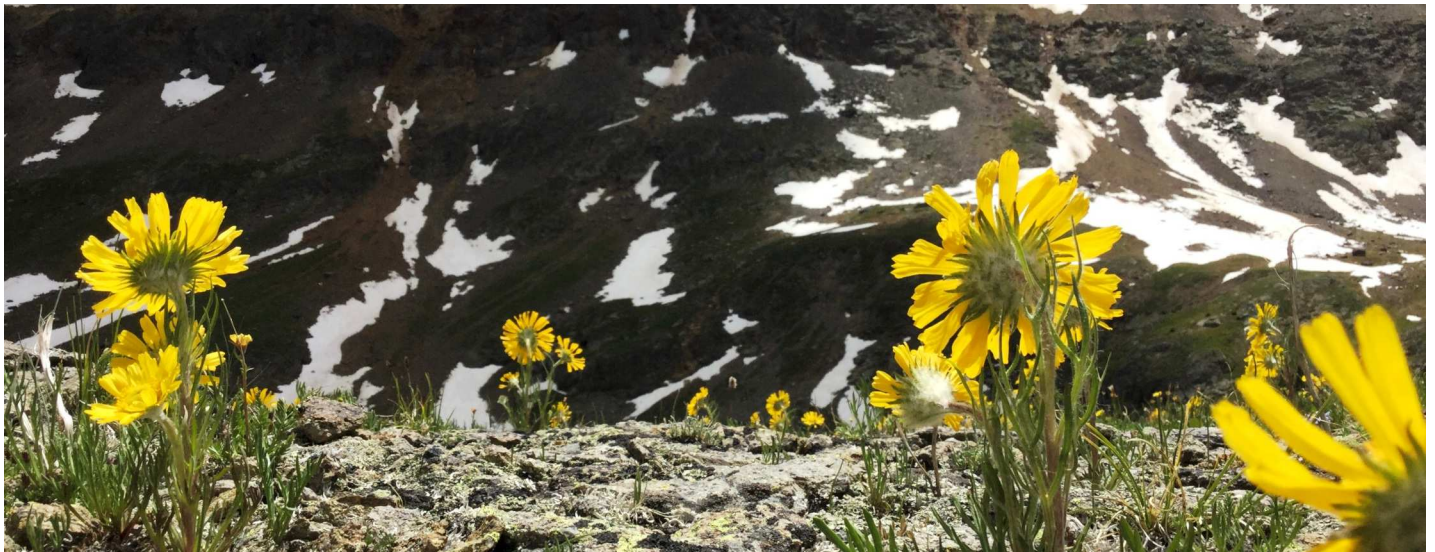
Listen, I'm gonna tell you something. You're young enough that you might not care.

He puts his hand on my knee for comfort, and I can feel his hand trembling. Then he backs it off a few inches and holds it there, contemplating whether to keep touching my knee or not. He decides not.

I had sex with my daughter.

He looks right into me with those distraught blue eyes. His mouth hangs open, panicked.

recently electrocuted and crooked glasses like he forgot to straighten them thereafter. I am dazed and stop. He strikes the lowest note so hard that its tone shifts in the air. Everything in the room shakes. Then he begins, his range locked into dark, throaty notes. With one finger he bangs hard and direct, punching at single keys for minutes on end. He shifts chromatically—one step up, and it's too tense. His right hand grasps for five-fingered landscapes that make no sense. I have no idea if he knows what he's doing or if he's just choking this ivory like it's



hands. He is still. I ask him, *Hey man, wanna smoke?* He doesn't move, so I wonder if I have the right guy. *Brian?*

Now he sighs and looks up. His eyes are torn, though it doesn't look like he's been crying.

Will you sit down? he asks, desperately.

I take the empty chair next to him. *What's going on, man. Are you depressed?*

No, no, it's not that. Ok.

For the first time, I realize what this place is. A place for people with too many secrets. We are punished or punishers or both at the same time, all driven mad by secrecy. This is our real commonality, not some vague notion of an ill mind. The polysyllabic words tattooed onto us by psychiatrists are just curtains over raw skin.

I stand up, wordless, and walk off. Pass through a room where a young man is to play piano. He has frazzled hair like he was

a stranger he wants to hear squeal.

From the corner, an old man kicks off his stool and firms up his stature, ready to dance. He extends his left arm around a partner no one can see, his right hand on her hip, then starts waltzing a two-step out-of-sync with all but his memory. The bass tones crescendo from wild to rabid. All direction lost, but still our old man dances with a farmer's smile—*work is done, now we make love*—while I moan for the sensibility of structure. Now I

want to be normal, I want to be normal, I will eat shapes because they have beginnings and ends and edges and insides and there's formulas to know their every move like written music, like normal music, mapped out, always on a staff—because on a staff, there's only so many places you can go.

The last sound pings. The highest note has been struck. Neither complements nor contradicts all that preceded. Instead it bleeds through the rubbery side of my elbow. I have torn my skin. I try to slip out for a cigarette but someone shouts, *You're bleeding all over the place!* And this attracts the employees with vampiric speed.

*

One spins a cocoon around my forearm while another clips my nails. It feels good to be touched, even as an object.

One more time and we're putting on the glove.

*

At some point, if you're lucky, you realize that the only way out is to lie. The person most important to lie to is the psychiatrist. But since you only see him for ten minutes once a week, it's imperative that you also lie to your fellow inmates, and the employees. Lying comes in two forms: one, you must say things like *I am hopeful* and *I want to stay on my meds* and *This place has made me much better*. Two, you must deny your feelings any expression. They must be stored away with all the other secrets. In other words, you must behave. I have been a good patient (*No more smiling inappropriately* my notes will say), and now it's time to see

the psychiatrist.

We meet in tiny box room. He is Indian, and his accent along with the gentle way he speaks lends him a certain kind of authority.

Steven, Bipolar Disorder is a serious brain disease. You're going to be managing this for the rest of your life. The medications are most important, but there are other lifestyle changes that only you can make. He counts off his fingers as he makes a list: Diet. Eat enough vegetables and whole grains. Exercise. At least thirty minutes a day. Routine. You have to make a schedule for yourself everyday and keep to it. Sobriety. If you don't do these things, I'm afraid for you.

What are you afraid of?

That you will get lost in mental illness forever.

I am worse off than before I came here. The only marked change is that whereas before I knew I was going to kill myself, now I'm so fucked up I won't even be able to muster the energy for that.

I'm committed to getting well. I'm feeling hopeful, too. I'm not gonna go off my meds anymore and I'm gonna stay sober and get a job.

The doctor is frozen, chin resting in the palm of his hand. He assesses the situation. He is doubtful, but the monologue in his head must be convincing him otherwise. Because he responds, *Good. And good luck to you out there.*

And just like that I am free.

*

On a gravel road between tall pines. A thunderstorm has just passed and the forest is drooped in wet yellow light. With the windows down the perfume of moss whiffs in and out my throat and reminds me of vanilla ice cream. Not the kind served to patients, but something richer, something known between lovers.

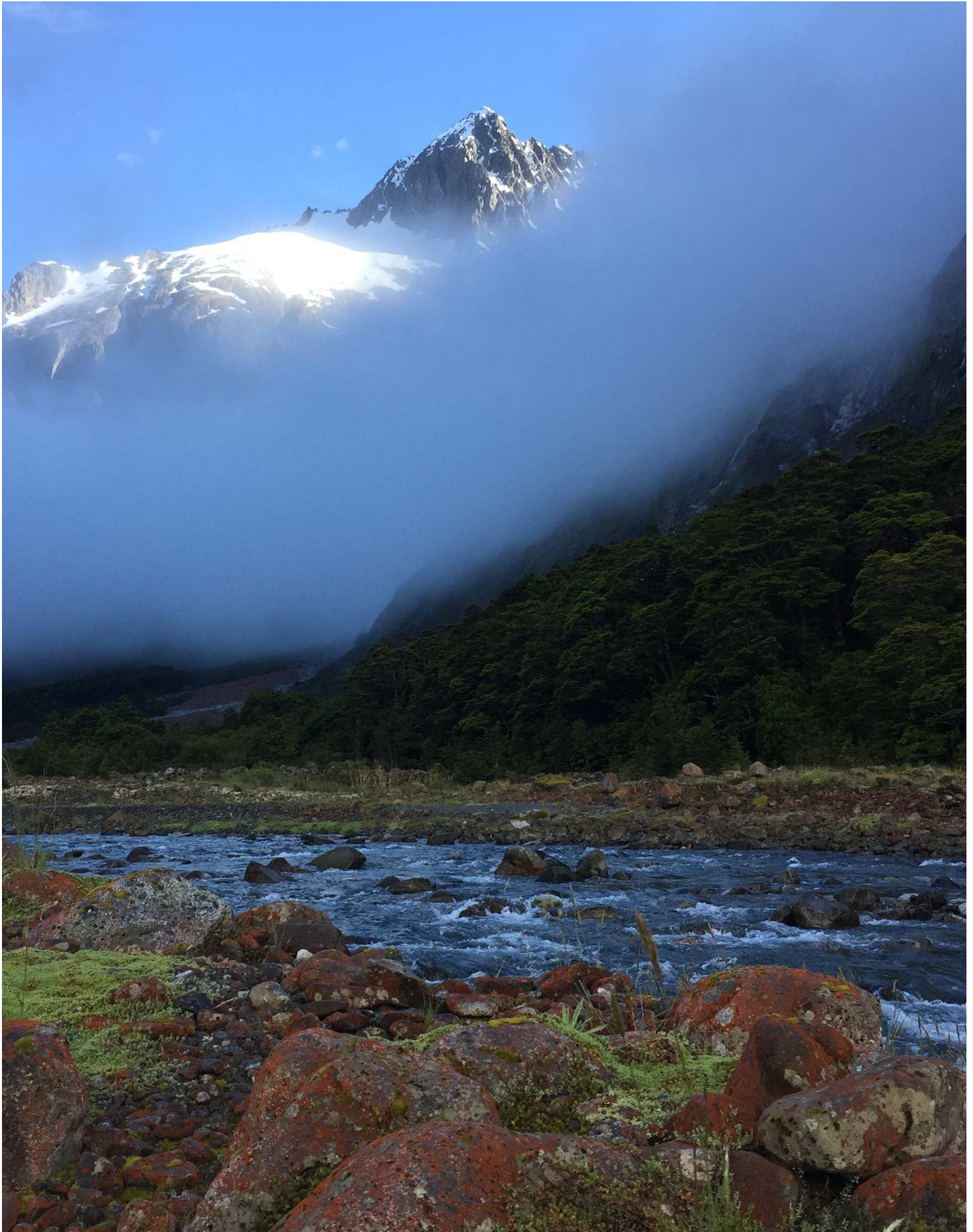
Ten miles, ten years, behind me is the mental hospital. Just ahead is the river, the same running water where I played as a child.

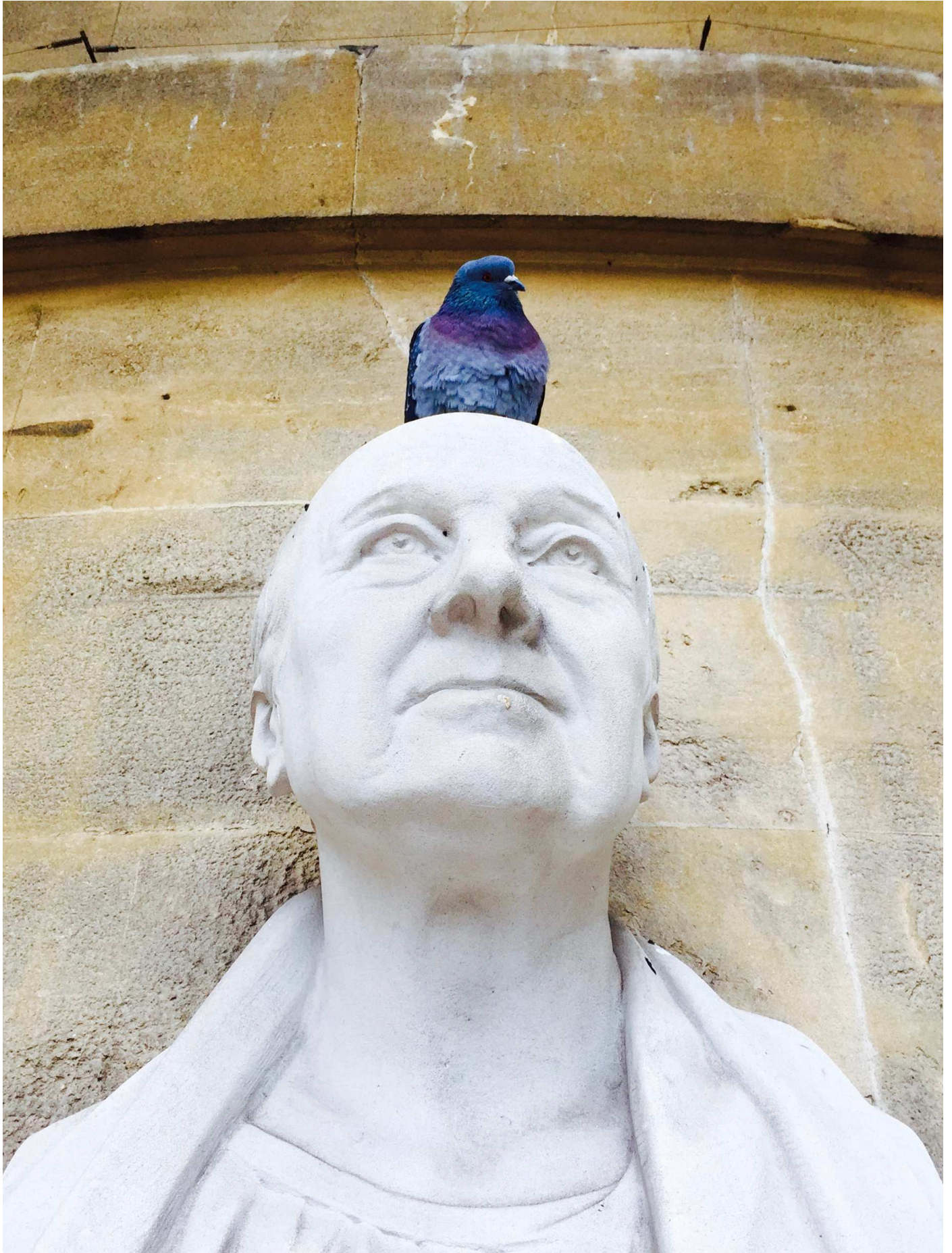
When I step out the car I find my bare foot in an ant hill. They sting, but I can move away. So I do.

It is a perfect, moody, June day. I am nude. On the river reflects my figure, the treetops, a swirling blackbird. If you were looking from above, you would see a mammal shape his hands towards you, then you would see him leap. There would be ripples of chains left on the surface, a man disappearing underneath.

~







TO SEE AN ATOM



I left the American South with a Jesus on my shoulder. My new world, a leftist college out West, did not take so kindly. Beliefs that earned me friends and community at home now left me terribly alone. School did not help. Liberal arts classes exposed histories I could not reconcile with Christian legitimacy. For the first time, I doubted my religion, yet relinquishing Jesus meant betrayal —risking Hell, so I languished instead in a freeze. *To think freely; or obey.*

For six months I despaired in suicidal bewilderment. I kept it all secret. Then one night I ate mushrooms. Having ingested psychoactive plants plenty before, I knew the lay of the land, but this trip came on unusually strong. After listening to the mandatory *Dark Side of the Moon*, I lay down.

Moments later, a flood of dreams overcame me, dreams I had long forgotten. Each one I inhabited with all my senses, re-experiencing how I originally felt. Previously indecipherable, they were here linked together, and as a whole made sense. Just as I grasped their significance, I entered outer space. Floating, I saw Earth, a perfect sphere spinning. All my anxieties dissipated, replaced with ethereal lightness, and for a blessed few seconds, I *understood*.

Upon re-entering my body, the first thing I noticed was an alarm clock. I said out loud, heresy, *That's God*. Same to the poster, to the concrete wall, to the bedframe.

The next morning I threw away my statue of Jesus.

A week later, hungover with guilt, I worried whether my experience

was real or a drug-induced stupor. I approached my philosophy of religion professor, who had just lectured on mystical experiences, and asked his judgement, handing him great power. His answer:

Sometimes you need a microscope to see an atom.

His validation, even trust, legitimized my experience, casting it from purgatory into meaningful narrative. I told no one else, took no pride. I thought no more on it; thoughts were useless explorers of such terrain. But in having shaken loose my worldview, I became someone else, someone freer.

*

Now imagine if I had first told this experience to a typical psychiatrist. Perhaps an assessment of my drug use would have followed (heavy);

perhaps an analysis of sleep patterns, family history of mental illness, and previous experiences of altered states (all abnormal). Surely if I had revealed that my grandiose vision happened after six months of suicidal obsession—a phase endured twice before, they would have worried, maybe diagnosed. I know this: there would have been no talk of seeing atoms. Maybe serotonin though. Vulnerable, I would have walked away believing that in the worst case I was an addict or mentally ill, and in the best, my experience was a self-inflicted brain convulsion, meaningless.

*

What I saw at nineteen was Gaia, the name James Lovelock gives to the super organism that is planet Earth. Gaia is a conscious being

who emerges from the sum of all life, much like we emerge from the sum of organs and blood and bacteria. In both instances, our actions and beingness cannot be explained by describing then adding our individual parts together. Something new, known as emergent phenomena, is born from their relational confluence.

Gaia is, in my embellishment, intelligent, acting in ways that nudge—not determine—things on the ground, albeit in ways impossible to comprehend. At a minimum, she enjoys surviving, growing lifeforms that create diverse systems which make her resilient against inputs and keeps her metabolism—er, climate—relatively stable. Gaia does not dictate the actions of those constituent beings that together give her rise, just as we do not

consciously control our livers. Yet her behavior does impact those beings, who in turn impact her, just like flooding our liver with alcohol changes its function, in turn changing our consciousness, in turn changing the world, in turn changing us. The relationship between emergent phenomena and their parts is one seamless dance. Everything co-evolves as one.

Most scientists will now accept that Earth systems work together in profound ways to protect an evolving homeostasis. But few will speak of intelligence, let alone meaning. They are wrong.

I was shown Gaia at the height of existential malaise, when my waking state was at impasse. Mushrooms amplified my senses such that I could receive new



insights, and from there I shed old ways and began anew. Was my body truly in outer space? It does not matter. Growth does not require physical coordinates. Metaphor or not, I made meaning, and meaning grows Gaia.

*

Of course, Gaia, as a concept, is nothing new. Many past and present indigenous people have long traditions of beliefs and behaviors that reflect a holistic understanding of a living, creative, relational Earth. For several hundred thousand years before the advent of agriculture, when all people were hunter-gatherers living close to wild, I imagine everyone understood this reality.

The difference between how many of us live today and how all people lived for eons is not a matter of natural or unnatural—there is no unnatural, as everything comes from nature, including television. The difference is now we live surrounded by dead things. Take a look around: curtain, table, coffee cup, pen, computer, lights, bathroom, sink, clothes, air conditioning, whatever...all dead. We used to be surrounded by a living world. Not just us, but other animals and plants, which is why they are revolting.

That Gaia arose as a novel concept in science, maker of hard truth, reflects not its ingenuity, but the depravity of mainstream Western consciousness to salute the big wild. Only in a society starved of meaning and perception and surrounded by inanimate matter does claiming Earth as an intelligent creature become news.

*



So what does a theory of mind look like in a culture of dead things?

It begins with isolation: *I think, therefore I am*. I am a mind with a body, and operate as an independent entity in a world of other independent objects and subjects. I am a personality who relates to objects and subjects, not a relational confluence. *You* and *I* can relate, but only as separate entities. As such, *I* am responsible for making decisions about my behavior towards other objects and subjects. Those decisions should be rational, or else the mind that drives them is *off*. Historically, from a European perspective, *off* was primitive, barbaric, sinful, bewitched; nowadays, immoral or medically sick. Yet no innate rationality or irrationality exists; humans have successfully lived in a huge variety of contradicting arrangements. What is rational, *on*, is a political determination, based on keeping particular economic and power relations in

order.

For instance, if we take the perspective of a river, or her Salmon, or old growth forests on her banks, a dam blocking that river's flow is genocidal. I do not use the word lightly: a dam destroys entire populations of beings. I believe it perfectly rational to assume that rivers, salmon, and old growth forests belong to the Earth no more or less than humans, serving vital functions in maintaining the health of Gaia, and should therefore be cultivated instead of assaulted. Rationally, I believe human beings can survive with rivers, salmon, and old growth forests in tact—as we did for hundreds of thousands of years; clearly an evidenced-based practice. So, a rational decision would be to remove the dam. Blow it up, go to jail. Against our economics maintaining a particular structure of power, I would be making an irrational, immoral, *off* choice.

Another example: a starving person with no money can be jailed if he walks into a grocery store and eats the abundant food on the shelf. A child can be punished for standing up in a boring class and walking into the forest for relief. An excited person can be locked in a cage for removing all their clothes because they want to feel air. A neighbor can be fined for drinking from a river across invisible property boundaries because she is thirsty for real water.

Such actions are irrational only in context. That context, hidden by theories of morality and instituted by invisible laws, is today a dualistic materialism—subject/object—worldview that emphasizes parts and translates living beings into resources. When you take that approach—that Earth is to be used instead of treated like kin, you do reap a temporary bounty from killing her living organisms and converting them to machines. You make superior weapons and hoard endless food, which leads to more breeding, necessary ingredients for conquering others and subordinating Earth, for awhile. Seduced by such power, you are likely to harden the reductionistic beliefs that grant it: mandate curriculums that study parts; build an economics that separates then appraises lifeforms; praise religions that emphasize the individual with dominion over the planet; reward an intellectualism of memorized facts, particularly those that manipulate nature; farm until the soil dries, then spike it with fertilizer and plant it with rows of lab crops. You are likely to create a psychology of self; a deterministic psychiatry ruled by cause and effect; and a philosophy of detached reason and rationality.

All entirely unnecessary for surviving the wild—and antithetical to understanding it, yet indispensable for maintaining a dualistic materialism. It comes at a cost.

Of course, I paint with broad strokes. Dualistic materialism has produced some good for some people, especially juxtaposed against other epochs of the last ten thousand years. I certainly benefit. Still, the best of those benefits—the increase in human rights as a political concept for large-scale societies, has paradoxically come at the expense of wild nature and exploited people. The very idea that seven billion humans are entitled to endless breeding, food, shelter, and long life is a crisis for the planet: from where else will these limitless rights be actualized but a limited planet?

It is in this economic and political context—the one that treats human beings as individual subjects; maintains rights and privileges for some people and none for others, including other species; delineates property; perceives Earth as bounty—that rationality is determined. *Irrational*, then, is to think and behave non-linearly as a non-subject, to perceive more than parts, to feel plants as subjects not objects, to tune into connections and forces that cannot be measured in a lab.

We have a word for that.

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I am weary of iterating the term, solidifying it. The most benevolent translation of psychosis—*increase in psyche*, with psyche

being the Greek term for *animating spirit*, is lovely, but love and psychiatry are at odds, so it has lost a bit of luster in their hands.

Several problems surround the concept. One, what we call psychosis is culturally determined, often so different between two individuals, even in the same culture, that the concept itself fails as a common descriptor. Two, wielding it uniformly produces a homogenous response that silences the diverse voices of people actually having the experiences—and includes the trapdoor, circuitous logic of *lacking insight* applied by professionals to experiencers with a differing view. Three, while I can speak of having so-called psychotic experiences, I have never been labeled that way (I was the convenient *Bipolar Part II*), and those experiences never impacted such that I could have been tarred with more insidious psychiatric diagnoses. In other words, my lived experience is limited, therefore my perspective.

Despite my weariness and limitations, Gaia suggests an ecological function of mind—a reason why mind, in all its variations, exists—that I am compelled to explore. Here I have many allies, purveyors of unusual states of consciousness...unless and until it comes packaged in a person diagnosed with mental illness, at which point they defer to the authorities. Those authorities, psychiatrists, write off psychosis as the eruption of a purposeless disease, the edge where a meaningful mind stops. Arguing their case, they might reference dementia as a parallel: surely dementia is not purposeful in and of itself, as it clearly reflects

biological aberration. While the billion dollar hunt for genes and molecules and neurochemicals correlated to psychosis continues without many touchdowns, even if there were a particular biology of psychosis, calling it a disease will be a judgement call made in a particular political and economic context. For unlike dementia, or most other diseases, psychosis shows up in every culture we have looked, past and present. A universal experience is not a disease. It is a trait.

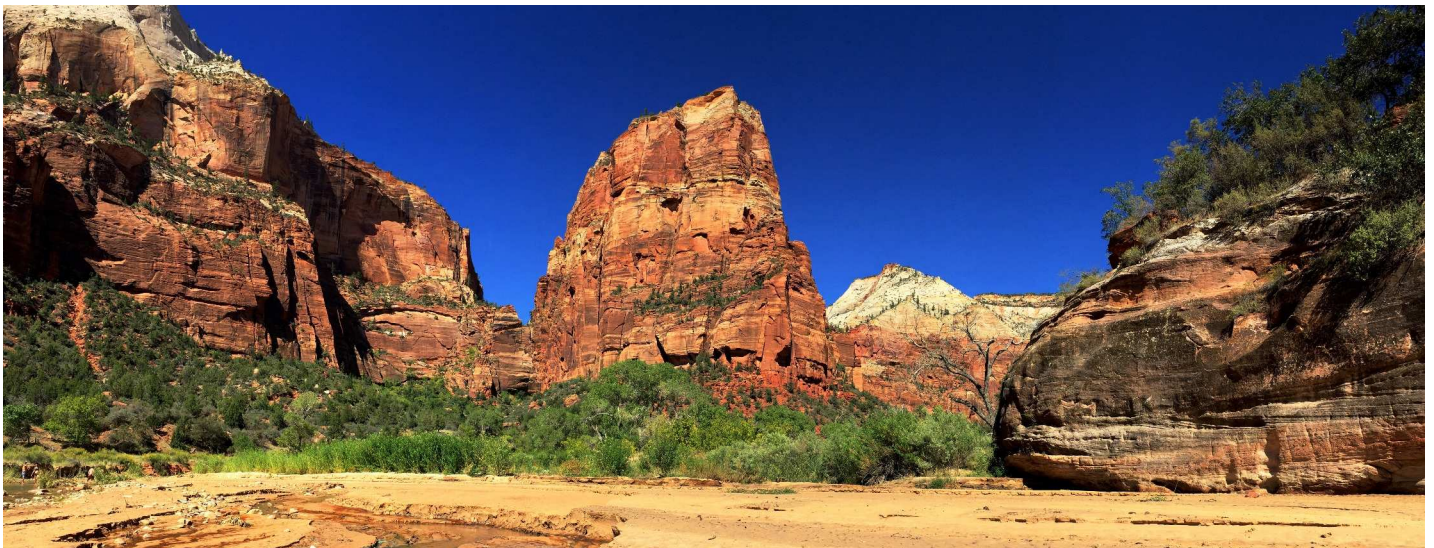
At base, that trait is an

belief. Which is not to say that unusual beliefs never appear when senses are amplified. They do: it can be hard to interpret all that information pouring in, especially without allies or guides. Sometimes confusion ensues. But an unusual mind against a frame of industrialized rationalism is not an illness. Sometimes it is that freedom we trade for modern sanity.

Many paths arrive at an increase in psyche. Perhaps after being harmed, I open my senses to stay alert and better read situations, a

keeping me awake too long. Perhaps I am learning freedom, or maybe I am in fact designated to perceive larger intelligences. Maybe all at once.

Calling the end result a disease, in any case, presumes no purpose, which fits neatly with the dualistic materialism worldview that thinks of organs, like the brain, as collections of parts that can break. Gone is the notion that a brain might have its own emergent self-intelligence, that different brain states may be its way of carefully evolving. Not compensating,



amplification of the senses—an *increase in psyche*, wherein more information than usual reaches consciousness. Some psychiatrists might agree, with the caveat that content matters. Yet judging some beliefs as delusional against others as objective reality fails every conceivable test of legitimacy. Belief is faith—our brains do not present the real world, and people of all stripes believe wild, irrational things: virgin births, good dams, evolution as competition. So either we are all psychotic, or the term must be extricated from

skill to survive one circumstance that overwhelms in another. Perhaps I disengage from feelings and keep secrets until my senses burst. Perhaps I develop relationships with immaterial beings for connection, or perhaps I can no longer take poverty, racism, and hate and tap instead into unadulterated joy. Perhaps I chase art or inquiry past their accepted limits. And maybe I am having an allergic reaction, or flooding my serotonin receptors with LSD or state-sanctioned medicine, or bacteria in my gut is

which presumes a holistic state of rationalism as baseline, but literally pushing towards something new, independent of will.

And there is a more convincing reason we should doubt psychosis as disease: you can eat plants to induce it. Animals do. So do other plants. Intentionally. Foods for psychosis exist in a huge variety of ecosystems and have so for millions of years, long before humans, performing vital functions for that system's health



and evolution. Psychosis-inducing plants would be neither ubiquitous nor lasting if they or the states they produced were an aberration or disease. Nature selected—rather, designed—this state of consciousness to survive, everywhere.

Of course, one might argue psychosis is different from altered states produced by plants, and let them argue. Having smelled colors, heard ghosts, believed strange messages such as cutting off my left arm would stop me seeing red, been possessed by animal spirits, hallucinated, grown ecstatic, glimpsed Gaia, chatted with cartoons, and been overwhelmed by persistent paranoia and fear as well as giddiness when under the influence of LSD, a modified fungus, I cannot distinguish how such plant-induced experiences differ from what psychiatrists call psychosis, except the latter sometimes lasts longer. Involuntarily or by induction, the state of being—amplification of the senses—is similar, if not the same.

So why does Earth contain plants that produce an increase in psyche? Perhaps, as Stephen Harrod Buhner argues in *Plant Intelligence and the Imaginal Realm*, to depattern habits such that innovative forms of existence may be trialed. Not just for humans, but all lifeforms ingesting them. Buhner illustrates how psilocybin mushrooms, as one example, are found in grasslands on six continents distributing psychoactive compounds through exquisite root and mycelial networks to increase plasticity, resilience, and innovation in their neighborhoods. In other words, these mushrooms, as propellers of

learning, increase knowledge in the whole system. That, and they break down dead matter so new life may arise. Is it too far a leap to assume they affect us similarly? And if those amplified senses produced by psychoactive plants are similar to those involuntarily experienced, is it too far a leap to assume that whatever the cause, the ecological function of both is to see, hear, feel, know differently in order to grow intelligence?

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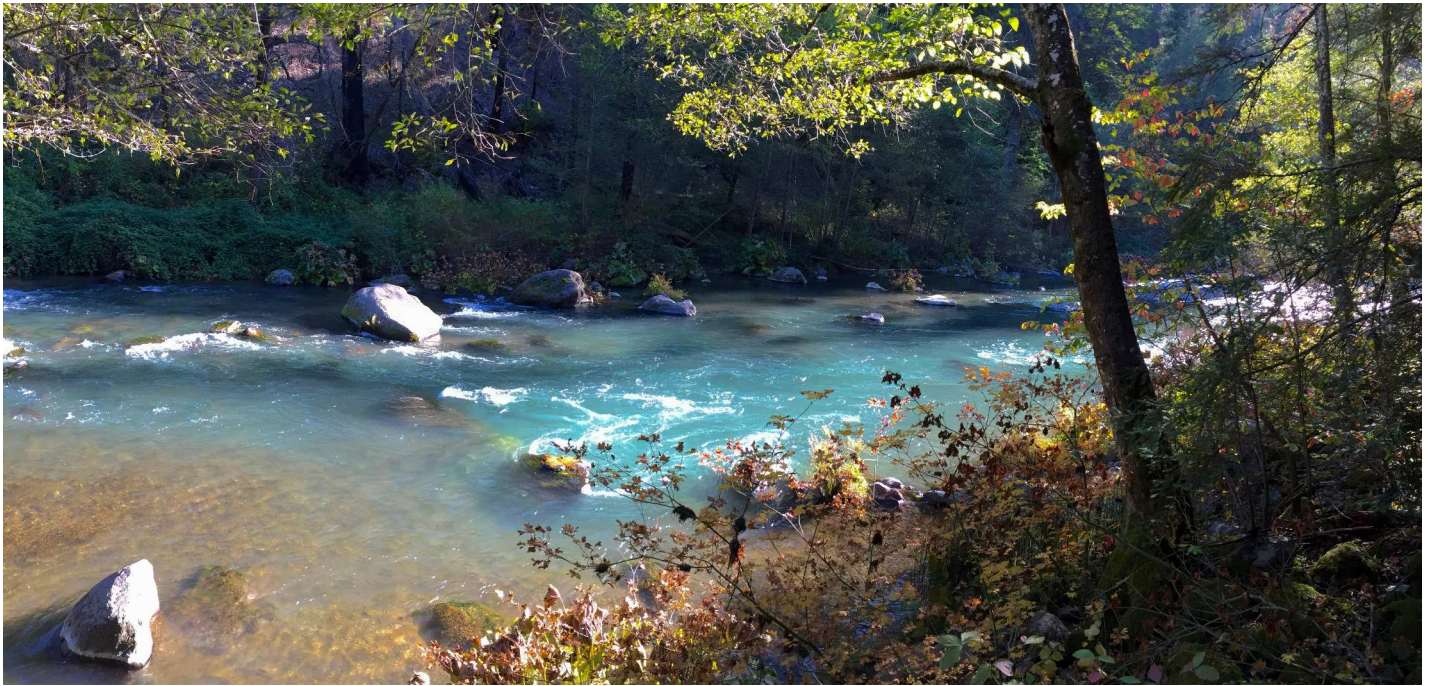
No being is conscious of it, but brains and bodies utilize processes known as sensory gating to siphon the mass of information hitting senses into a narrative that is coherent with a cultural or environmental context. As a result, ordinary consciousness perceives minuscule of what really exists. A Juniper tree has far more to see, hear, smell, taste, feel, intuit, and communicate than my capabilities. If I had eight eyes like a spider, or antennae like a bat, or stomata like a plant, I would understand the Juniper quite differently, yet never fully. Consciousness is by reduction, so no combination of senses knows the breadth of a being.

But amplified senses get closer. Less sensory gating, less filtering, correlates with more perception, and is a double-edged sword. A musician who pays close attention to sound will overtime reshape their brain, open their gates, so they literally hear more of the world. For myself, enhanced sonic perception means I can wail a Hendrix solo (sort of), yet that same reduction in filters allows the sounds of airplanes flying twenty thousand feet overhead to enter consciousness. Find me wearing

noise-cancelling headphones in the wilderness.

That is the trade-off of amplified senses. They cannot easily be honed to perceive more information in one instance and none in another. They are, as the Icarus Project rightly names, dangerous gifts. By focusing exclusively on the first half of that dichotomy, *danger*—which is flamed by our practice of exporting fear, we too often squander their *gifting* potential to open new angles of knowledge, shake loose paradigms of selfhood and culture, expose secrets, create power and meaning, perceive more reality and thus contribute to evolution.

Lest I be accused of romanticizing, we need not revere psychosis to situate it as an evolutionary trait. Locating amplified senses as part of Gaia's DNA, however, we might seek less to move an individual back to their *baseline* and instead to move the culture's forward, which in turn might present more opportunities for people experiencing such states to have connection—that magical ingredient of the good life. For at what cost do we head the opposite of romance, towards a reason and rationality inseparable from industrialization? Reason, for all its political enlightenment, is inadequate for grasping people, let alone Gaia. Reason is how dominant culture desiccates meaning from a living world and replaces it with disinterested mathematics. Reason is why we curtail mind, designating parts as ill and waging war against their hosts. The results are in, and dismal. Perhaps a little more romance—the flirtation with potentiality—is just what the doctor needs to order.



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Six years after my out-of-body experience I had another period of psychic increase. The intervening years had been hard: I had been psychiatrically hospitalized three times. I took up meditating. After eight months of daily practice, one evening I drove home from the bookstore and hallucinated a wise man sitting on a rock. I had the sense that the evening meditation would be important.

As I rose from my zafu, I became a snake, then an elephant. I picked up my cat with my teeth on the back of her neck. I said to the ceiling fan, That's god. I watched myself disappear in a mirror, a void inside a golden outline. And I ate an apple—succulent and fresh, as for the first time.

The next morning I awoke with new sight. I saw colors around people, electricity in objects, patterns everywhere. I

communicated with animals and they communicated with me, sometimes in my language, sometimes in theirs. The experience lasted for several months, then faded.

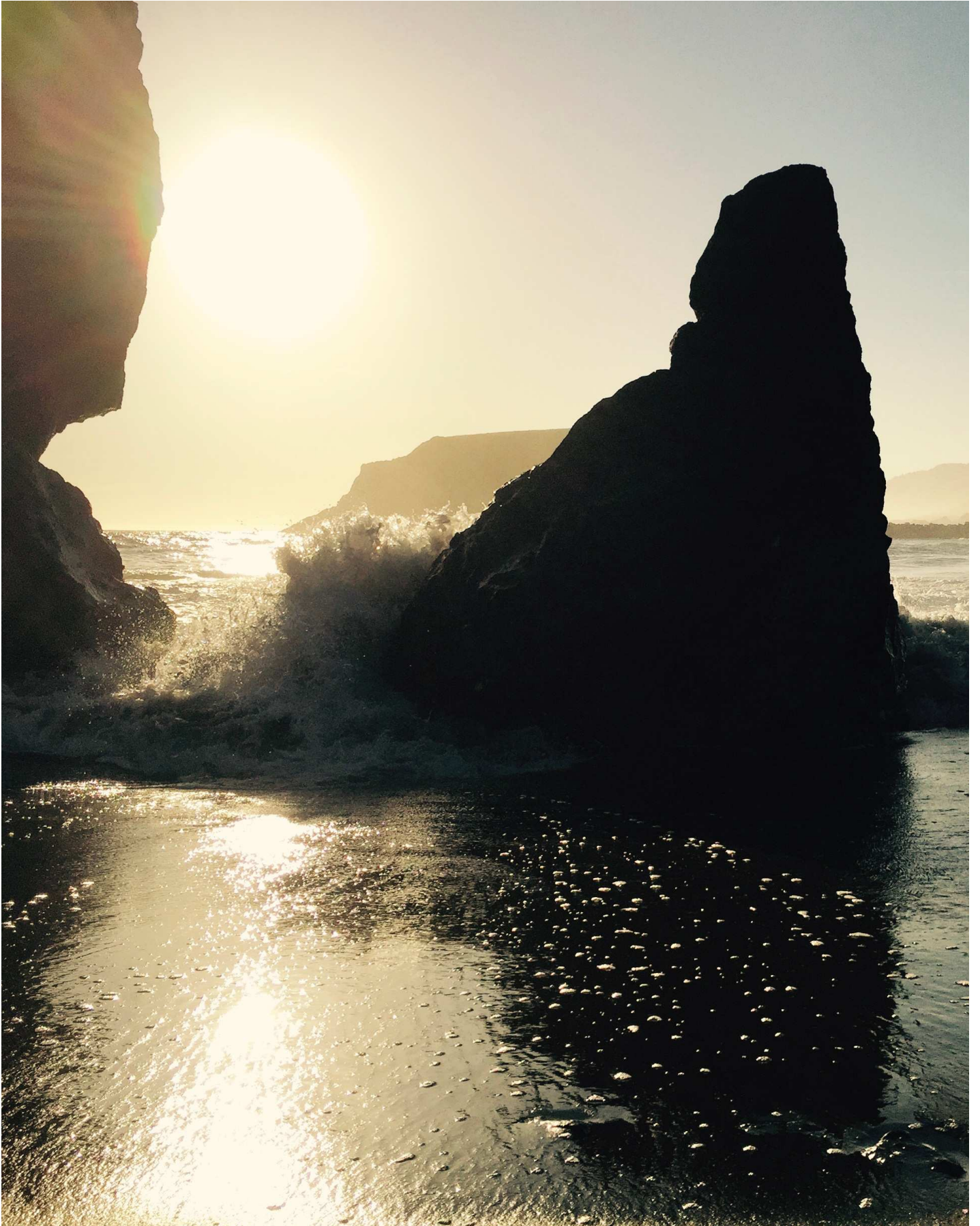
During that time, I changed once again. On a whim I moved from Atlanta to Vermont, where I spent the next eight years in small communities acclimating to the rhythms of Earth. I often spent more time outdoors than indoors (*in doors*, what a phrase!). The connections I made to Earth grounded my psyche, tethering my ethereal longings—my nostalgia for wildness—to a planet full of living beings. I learned that I belong to Earth; Earth made me, my unwavering home. I learned that I am actually a host of trillions of other lifeforms, and that Gaia hosts me. A part inside a whole and a whole inside a part. A relational confluence behaving in an invisible political context that forces me to cut those

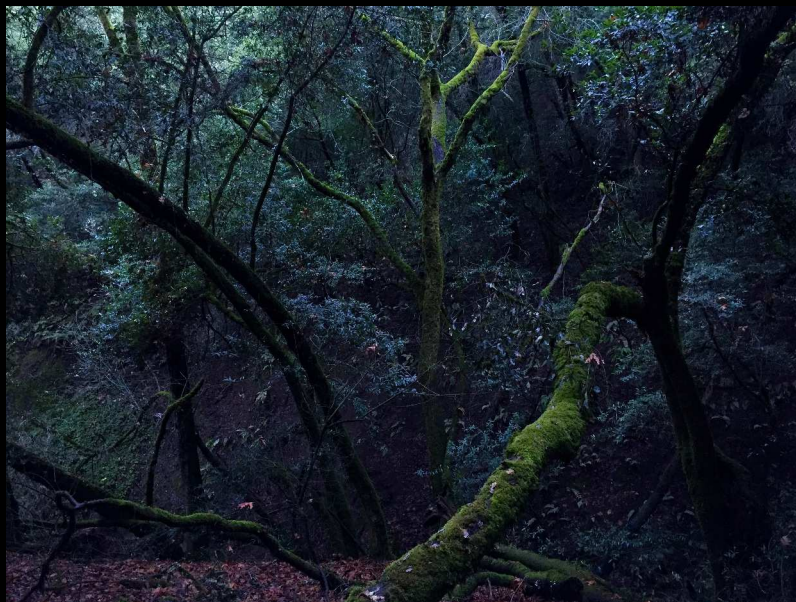
relationships off. My longing will always be to reconnect.

I will never transcend my privileged, reasoned worldview, despite what plenty of New Age, self-help, and religious books proclaim is possible. But I can learn something new, from which I might trial new ways of being with Earth. Perhaps Gaia would appreciate that now that dominant culture is wrecking millions of years of evolution and intelligence. If so, I am not convinced we can reason and rationalize our way there, as such positivist orientations to a living world are the wrecking balls. To break down old forms of being—to clear the way like mushrooms in a grassrange, we need new eyes, ears, tongues, hearts, microscopes and macroscopes.

Where will these be found?

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