

Karen Hudes

Diode

Estación. Ida y vuelta, by Rosa Chacel, was a novel I found in a bookstore in Seville. “*Ida y vuelta*” means a roundtrip ticket, and it’s what you ask for at the station when the teller says, “*Dime.*” (“Tell me.”)

I adopted some of the Spanish directness that spring, in the way I ordered a glass of beer or described a bar covered in patterned tiles (“*Qué alucinante!*”). Back in high school, a friend complained I always said a movie was “good,” instead of “great” or “amazing.” No longer!

When my older brother and sister flew in to visit, they were impressed with the directions I gave the cab driver. “You do better in Spanish than English,” my brother said, and it made me a little sad about returning.

I walked home from class over the river, passing the orange trees, eating plump green olives from a newspaper cone. The courses we took, despite being in Spanish, had a breezy, forgiving air.

It had been a long time since I’d really felt at ease with a friend. But I had a good friend there. I admired her—she could talk to anyone, even about soccer with strangers on the bus. But I also really trusted her. She listened, and she was curious about obscure topics, and just made everyone comfortable. That may have been all I needed.

The only real pressure as summer approached, in 1993, was to come up with a subject for my senior thesis by the fall. After reading *The Sheltering Sky*, I began thinking about female characters following signs to—where? And by the end, their realities disintegrating.

I'd read *The Crying of Lot 49* twice before, and saw some parallels between the two books. Still I didn't know how I'd fill 100 pages. I could probably fit what I had to say onto five. The 17th-century poet Basho said everything in three lines.

A still pond

A frog jumps in

The sound of water

Earlier in college, a group of us played a surrealist game, a variation on exquisite corpse. You were handed a piece of paper with a sentence written at the top, then wrote the opposite of that sentence below it, folded the paper down so only your sentence could be seen, and passed it to the next person. After the papers went all around the circle we unfolded them and read them aloud. The ending of the last line I remember: “when I walk on your mirrored ceiling.”

A few guys from my first-year dorm, two years before Spain:

Tim, in his room upstairs, always looked as if he came in from fall air. A shine to his brown eyes, his hair full, slightly long and dark. Lighting a cigarette. Though not blonde, a lion. He always got the joke in advance. Being closer to him would have solved everything.

Matt, lanky and dirty blonde, was wearing a flannel shirt. I called it burgundy, but he said it wasn't burgundy, it was maroon, and maroon and navy were friends.

Jason and I played that old game at the circular red booth in the snack bar. Sitting behind him, I slipped my arms beneath his armpits and acted out his hands. Shaved his face with a bagel. It was fun.

One time I walked up the stairs to my room on the third floor, and when I came out of the stairwell the hall was dark, a group of people were talking all the way at the other end. When I began walking toward them, Matt flipped on the light switch. Instead of the hallway lighting up all at once, the lights along the ceiling turned on sequentially from his end to mine. When the light reached me I stumbled back as if thrown by a force field. He turned the lights off and I advanced in the dark, beginning to run, then he flipped the switch back on, the light moved toward me, and I stumbled back again as it approached. It went dark again, I charged, and I ran till I reached the end of the hall and we all laughed.

About Tim, how did it happen that one night we lay on the floor in the dark, listening to music, even talking about the excitement of postponing a kiss?

In one of our last conversations, sitting against different walls, he said you didn't really get to know people by talking. You got to know them by taking walks, doing things together. We had just never done that. The school year was almost over and I left his room.

It was around that time I saw Matt lying on the green reading *Gravity's Rainbow*. ("The green," ha. A place for people who have it.) He told me about the scene where this guy visits an old lady's house and she offers him a jar of dusty candies, with these over-the-top, sort of menacing British names. He loved it, and talked about the author as if they were both on the same tier, two men who had figured out a lot, even though Pynchon had gone further.

That's how I heard of Thomas Pynchon, and why I read *The Crying of Lot 49*, home from Brown for the summer in Queens. I got into the head trip of it, the code-finding, the language that skewed everything just a bit off.

Still, due to factors completely unrelated to the novel, and actually that ran counter to how I felt after finishing it, by August, I had very little sense of myself, or my attractiveness, what to say, or who I would hang out with that fall.

Riding the subway with my sister, she told me who I looked like, a name she said with frustration and a bit of revulsion. A depressed roommate she once had.

She said this as if she herself hadn't done something that summer that hurt, something I'll get to later.

At home I woke up in the dark every day, but didn't notice. As little kids, my sister and I had shared a room in our apartment, divided by two bookshelves, which left a few feet open at the top and the side. (She had the window, I had the door to the hallway.) Sometimes we each performed in the space between our rooms to make each other laugh. At night we whispered stories to each other from our beds. I said, "Let's talk about colors."

Then, when I was in fifth grade, my parents had a paneled wall built in the bookshelves' place, a rec-room-style wall with "knotty pine" panels and a plain wooden door. Rather than dividing the window between us evenly this time, as I'd pictured it, the wall went up in the same direction, but now shut out all the light to my room. When I first saw it, running all the way up to the ceiling, I looked at my mother. There must have been a crease between my eyes. She tilted her head, with a sympathetic look, somewhat sympathetic, to say I needed to accept it. And she would point out later, they made my room the bigger one.

I can only think of a few instances of direct meanness, during childhood, from my sister. One was a time I looked at her with the crease between my eyebrows. Maybe I found something unfair. She pointed at the crease, the contracted muscle, the confusion, the need, the pathetic look, and said, in a hard way, “Don’t do that.”

I haven’t learned. Sometimes, the way someone looks at me, I know I’m doing it and it’s too late.

Another time I was asking my parents how to bring light into my room, full-spectrum light. What prompted her remark exactly? She told me not to be a baby.

* * *

My father drove me back to school in the fall, starting my sophomore year. My sister, on her way to visit a family friend’s house, took the front seat. I rode in back with my stuff, and worried to her about the looks of my cassette and CD player. “It’s fine,” she said, looking out the window. “If you were just more confident.” It was only that summer she’d started saying things like that.

When I opened the door to my new dorm room the afternoon light was gray. The room was cold. An overhang on the second floor caused an afternoon shadow.

Over the next weeks, walking around campus, I looked at people talking, deeply involved with each other, or chatting and laughing. I didn’t know how they had so much to talk about. I couldn’t think of a thing.

After class I threw myself into bed in the dark, like a wet bathing suit in the hamper.

Even my body had changed. My period stopped for three months.

At lunch in the dining hall I saw Matt carrying his tray. When I looked up again he was walking in the other direction.

Later that fall, he gave me a birthday card. In it, he wrote my “paradox,” roughly: you’re driving down the road, with a stretch of beach to one side, and a field of flowers on the other. The steering wheel is broken, but the brakes work fine.

I clung to what I could. By the middle of November, despite being raised to be nice, to care about the feelings of others or what I guessed they might be, developing a late-blooming sense of contempt for anyone who didn’t get me provided some relief. (The function of contempt, when self-preservation is at stake, is really underrated.) Halogen lamps were new. When I brought one back to the dorm and it lit up the room, I became a little hopeful. Then, before Thanksgiving, I wrote the paper.

It was the final project for the most meaningful class I took in college, taught by Meera Viswanathan. The subject was travel, the “journey” in literature. We read tales of religious pilgrimage, exploration, ecstasy, Henry Miller’s *The Colossus of Maroussi*. And we talked about moving from the known to the unknown, through the liminal state that was neither one.

The assignment was to write about the journey in a novel we’d read on our own, and I picked *The Crying of Lot 49*. Rereading it, the discoveries I made at each step, each sentence, thrilled me.

In the book, Oedipa Maas sets out to execute the will of her dead ex-boyfriend, Pierce Inverarity. As she begins her quest, she finds that the sign of a muted horn keeps appearing (first as bathroom graffiti, later as a lapel pin, and on and on), leading to more clues, possibly to a secret society working to subvert the U.S. Postal Service and form their own system of underground communication. Or it may be a different conspiracy altogether. Along the way, Oedipa’s psychiatrist goes insane and other connections go haywire, or simply vanish. She arrives at one last destination, awaiting the answer.

I relished calling the Tupperware party in the first line a “celebration of containment” and moving from there to, in Pynchon’s words, the “circuit card” landscape of a Northern California city, “a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning,” away from “insulation ... the absence of an intensity.”

in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding.

While sorting out Inverarity’s story, becoming acquainted with his milieu, and attempting to do as his name suggests (puncture untruth?), Oedipa begins an unlayering, at one point embodied by a game of strip poker. But as the layers fall away, the conduits to what she seeks disappear as well. The threshold keeps moving out of reach, crossing over becomes impossible, the truth recedes infinitely.

Oedipa wondered if at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold.

From beginning to end, messages become scrambled (“What’s is a potsmaster?” “Guy in the scullery”), the reappearing image of the muted horn multiplies in its leads, dream and waking life blur.

An awareness of energy surfaces throughout the book. How it powers, transfers, devolves into entropy. And the perpetual motion machine Maxwell's Demon, purported to operate through receiving a "staggering set of energies" in the form of communication.

There's something in Pynchon, the gags, the goofiness, Mike Fallopian, the warship "the Disgruntled." Words such as "oubliette" appear offhand, a tucked-away attic. From the same root for "oblivion," a forgotten place.

Meanings diverging, suggesting how far the mind could go if it followed signs to their sources (if such things exist) instead of stopping where it normally does.

Despite the impossibility of "knowing," there's a delight in maintaining irresolution: the liminal becomes sublime. Even in the throes of paranoia, Oedipa speculates that she may have stumbled onto, as Pynchon writes, "a secret richness ... maybe even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life."

I stayed up all night finishing the essay, sweat a little, the fever broke. Once I handed it in, I had nothing left to do besides pack to go home for Thanksgiving. That night I went to a party at a friend's dorm, drank wine, felt at ease. Put a hand on Matt's shoulder as I told a story and he smiled. Maybe it's unusual that I remember that, but it hadn't happened in a long time. I felt who I was.

Thanksgiving weekend in New York I walked into the Meadowsweet Herbal Apothecary on East 4th Street, a long, narrow shop that smelled of sap and budding and decomposing things. It was owned by a silver-haired woman with an elfin voice, who sat at the tall counter lined with tiny dram bottles. I had an idea that night for a piece of jewelry to make, and came back the next day.

At the wooden shelves in back, I scooped dried rose buds, marigold blossoms, hibiscus, sage and soft curls of maidenhair fern from glass canisters into brown paper bags, bought a book on the magical powers of herbs, picked up slender dram bottles and cute half drams. Then teeny corks from the brewing supply shop a few blocks away. (So many musky, hoppy places in the East Village.)

At home, I took one of the bottles and wrapped stainless steel wire around the threaded top, bending the middle of the wire to start. Then, with pliers, I twisted the two ends and arched the twirled wire over the cork, tucking the metal tips into the bottom of it. I filled the bottle with a love mixture of pink and red petals and leaves, then sealed it with the cork, pulled a shiny black rayon cord through the wire loop, knotted the cord, and wore my amulet to land low, falling just below my chest.

January my sister and I saw a movie in the Village, then went to a late-night diner. Things had mostly returned to normal between us. My French toast came, and some of the syrup spilled on the bacon. I was so happy taking a bite, buzzed on the combination and generally feeling alive again. I asked her to try it and she said no. Then I urged her to try it and she still refused. Actually she was getting a little irritated. In the past it might have upset me, that after everything she wouldn't just give me that, trying the bacon with syrup. But I laughed to myself, admiring how different I was from her. It was so rare to revel in that, our separateness, my own person.

Back at school from winter break, I went to a party at the Spanish house where a band was playing. I wore a vintage top (a mustard-colored corduroy button-down with a mallard duck pattern) and the amulet over it. Matt was there with two friends visiting him from other schools. We danced a little. The three of them were tripping, but his style was to do that low-key.

After I got back to my dorm in the rain, I heard a knock on the window, Matt and his buddies. I let them in and we all hung out in my room listening to music, the Stones' *Let It Bleed*, and Matt and I sat on the floor talking. We discussed the benefits of being a witch, which Matt felt he would be if he were a woman, since it was subversive and sexy. Only a week before, appreciating how I'd lifted myself from the depths, he'd called me an "artist of the mind."

Then I had something to show them.

We all gathered at the halogen lamp, which stood to the right of my desk. I pointed to the window at the left-hand wall.

As I turned the light all the way up, our pale reflections appeared in the glass.

I slowly turned the knob to dim the light, fading the reflections to nothing, revealing the night outside. The stretch of lawn to the wrought-iron fence came into view as the light poured out the window, the streetlights sharpened, turning the exterior brighter than the dark, quiet room in which we now stood. It really did feel like something falling, the darkness.

I told Matt that when I turned off the lamp I always looked for the point when the light balanced on either side of the window, before the room faded out and the outside lit up.

"Do it again," he said.

I turned the knob all the way on till it clicked, the room fully brightened, and our reflections appeared, then I began turning it down.

"Slower," he said.

I turned the control very slowly, lowering it until the light dissipated.

When I ran into him the next day, he told me I kept them sane.

* * *

The following year, *Don Quijote* was the required course in Seville. Insanely modern, to go mad reading books. The post-modern version might be to go mad reading *signs*. Or, what about entering the liminal space?

We had an attractive professor, Luis, who taught the class in his living room. One day when I nearly repeated his question back to him as the answer, he said, “*Esta chica es verdaderamente inteligente.*” I have to say that when he gave me a lift home after happy hour on the last day of class, it was ego-boosting, both electrifying and calming. As he dropped me off and leaned over to kiss my cheek, he closed his eyes. I leaned back and looked at him as if I caught him and, a little stunned, savored it.

When he opened his eyes, he said with humor, and not meanness, “*Afuera contigo.*” Outside with you.

Traveling with my sister the summer before college, I read *Perfume, Love in the Time of Cholera* and *Bonfire of the Vanities* on train rides. The *Bonfire of the Vanities* paperback was browned, hardened and falling apart, maybe it had gotten soaked. By the end, a page would drop to the floor after you turned it. We pretended that was how reading was done, to nonchalantly turn the page and let it fall.

* * *

Language says the mind comes alive with the sun: enlightenment, brilliance, brightness. Beauty and intelligence sparkle. Lucid and hallucinatory.

Coming back to New York after my semester in Spain set it all rolling.

That’s sort of how I see it now. Not an up and down, but a slipperiness of self, a soap bubble of a self, an inevitable burst.

I felt together in Seville. And I'd wanted to start my senior year feeling the same way. But I wasn't going to. Who I was never stuck. The same unsureness, the same hesitancy, the same embarrassing, involuntary deference began to come back that summer. Anxious as before, that I wouldn't have enough to say. Trying to hold it in, trying to break out of it, walking into a turning fan.

I might sound consumed by myself, but to me, everyone else appeared enormous. Something came naturally to them, a definition, a surface that I could not reliably locate, and it was what you needed to exist.

My siblings' visit to Spain had gone well, months before. But now the comfort I'd once shared with my sister failed again. And so much rested on that.

As a teenager she went to art school, painted album covers on the backs of denim jackets (Def Leppard, *Pyromania*, on mine). She built a pinball machine we actually played from a cardboard box with various working parts. She was tough and funny, wore a leather jacket, loved Joan Jett, was universally admired, respected and sought after.

She didn't actually go out that much, though. The occasional rock club. I didn't realize at the time how much, out in the world, she performed. She wasn't showy. It looked so natural, instinctual, and made everyone feel good.

We stayed home watching *Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island*.

She was herself with me, and the only person I ever felt really myself with. Despite my loneliness in high school, my bond with my sister at home made up for that.

The summer after my first year at college, something had gone wrong. My sister went to stay with her friend in New Orleans, where Tim lived, and I gave her his number. During the

spring I'd told her about him many times, the talks we had, the book he bought for me, and then just friendship.

They all went out to dinner, went bowling (her friend covertly walked out wearing a pair of bowling shoes, and left her own behind), swam in his family's pool at night. Then my sister told me on the phone that they had another night out planned. I had to eat dinner with my parents after that and talk about nothing.

She made a confession to me when she returned home, about what happened between them before she left. She didn't mean to. She was sorry. After awhile, when I was still crying, she tried to keep telling me about her trip.

When I'd come back during my fall semester to visit in October, I still felt blank, walking with her in Washington Square Park. "You used to be fun," she said.

I had no words for it. There was a piece of myself I'd surrendered for her a long time ago. Because of that surrender, perhaps, I didn't attract Tim and she did. And neither the surrender nor the wall nor anything else would be repaid, only punished. Ultimately, in her life, she didn't even want to be with men.

After I revived at the end of the term, writing the *Lot 49* paper and making the amulet, then went home for winter break, she told me she had a dream, worrying. She gave me a mandolin she brought back from Mexico. I didn't mention how she'd treated me. I wanted things to go back to how they were, now that I felt better.

* * *

August after the semester in Spain, all I focused on was my senior thesis and going back to school. I made notes about *The Sheltering Sky*, which follows the couple Port and Kit, wealthy, detached Americans traveling through the Sahara after World War II, sleeping and wak-

ing as if sharing a dream. “Patterns of language” obscuring the truth; Kit’s “system of omens;” language and consciousness changing everything they touch. Some things only visible indirectly. The notes of lute music, as Paul Bowles writes, “like watching the smoke of a cigarette curl and unfold in untroubled air.”

Kit has an awakening, flushed with a joy that feels endless, then departs at night with a caravan, before, months down the line, she cracks. (If she’s based on his wife, Jane Bowles, then why is Paul so cruel to her in her fate?) The sky always a fragile buffer from the intensity of the sun, or the void, or infinity.

“A rift across the heavens that let the faint white light through.”

Alongside *The Crying of Lot 49*, I’d find the links in the women’s journeys, their reading of clues, barriers falling, losing connections as well, while seeking meaning. Both venturing out in the wake of the death of a man to find themselves alone among men. A circle, a U-turn at the end, is this the movement of the story, or words, or the universe? Completely different tones, one hypercharged the other somnambulant, both passing through dream states, remnants of conquest, subversions rumbling. The authors perhaps acknowledging that they themselves are obsolete and women must take it from here ... and yet somehow abandoning them.

My sister and I went out for drinks with her friend Maria, who was bold and arty and quick-witted.

I don’t remember what I was talking about. My sister looked at me and said, “But I wouldn’t say it slowly.”

Then she looked off. Maria giggled.

Among all my doubts, it never occurred to me the speed at which I talked and whether it was slower than other people. After everything, knowing I'd be going back to school with this in my head, as if I hadn't grown in Spain, come into my own. Worse now because of her instead of better. To see her looking at me from the outside, anticipating my rejection ... I never told her how it set me off, just that one line.

I thought being confident was not caring what other people thought.

That was what she'd said in the car up to school, "If only you were more confident ..."

"But I wouldn't say it slowly."

Pot was always unpredictable. Laughter, intense flavors, revelatory thoughts, trouble swallowing, fast heart rate, paranoia. But I did have a bit of it saved at home, and though I had never smoked it alone, I did that a few times in those last weeks.

My sister was staying in an apartment under the Brooklyn Bridge where a friend of hers grew up, and I was sleeping over occasionally.

I brought materials: large iridescent red beads and smaller iridescent green beads, and I wanted to bead a fruit that I would wear around my neck, to go back to school. The beads created the effect of a ripe berry.

One afternoon, standing in the sun on the rooftop by myself, as a movie crew on the street set up for a car crash, I had my big ideas.

In *The Sheltering Sky*, the heat overwhelms, decimates, desiccates. The desert. And in *Lot 49*, the story keeps coming back to the energy.

Oscar Wilde said the aim of life was to find expression, and art gave us beautiful forms to realize that energy.

I felt aware of both the light of the sun and the discomfort of the sun. The pulse of blood through my eyelids, which would happen as long as my heart kept beating. Living was just a little uncomfortable every moment, because your heartbeat stimulated you out of a brief stillness and that stimulation was just the mildest recurring shock.

Didn't the pulses also stimulate thoughts, feelings with each small charge? Then, to ignore the pain, your body dulled its senses, leading you to feel less happiness too. It just kept you in the middle.

But if you released the energy stored up physically, you could release some of the painful charges, too. Channel them instead of suppressing them—suppressing caused the pain. And once you're not holding back the pain, you're not holding back the happiness either, the full energy inside, and it flows. That's when you fully feel and express who you are.

So to become yourself was about the energy, and the books were about the energy and they were helping to guide me.

What happened, then, if your energy was blocked? And isn't that happening throughout *Sheltering Sky* and *Lot 49*? A blocking and unblocking of energy (the circuits, the message, the light) equating to a blocking and unblocking of truth?

“The shifting colors that played on the sky from behind the earth before the rising of the sun.”

“Never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold.”

“Pierce the fine fabric of the sheltering sky ...”

Whereas in the past I might have approached a sparkling and come back down, this time I was moving forward into knowing something all the clues pointed to, feelings flowed through. Kafka's quotation before the last chapter: *From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached.* So simple, energy. It's so big and so obvious—the sun!—it almost slips through your fingers talking about it.

My thesis was aligning. As in an adventure story, two light beams converged at the sacred sculpture, passed through the eye and struck the hidden lock that opened the door.

The word “eye” itself may even be winking at you.

It's the nature of language that objects and words so easily transpose, the fabric separating them is so fine ...

I wrote quite a bit, went to bed, woke up at 4am and wanted to return to the roof. In the past I would have waited till the next day, that was the problem. Always holding myself back. Now I followed my impulses.

The air was cool up there. City lights, the bridge. A dark roof with jutting columns that could conceal a robber or a creature. I imagined who could jump out, but made a game out of staying. I had to stay, be strong. Follow what I wanted and stay till I knew nothing would jump out, because I was going to learn something out in the night.

I looked up and saw three stars. The rest of the galaxy couldn't be seen, due to the light projected from earth. The darkness, rather than blocking, acted as a gateway. Why not have lightness when it was light, and darkness when it was dark? Now all the billions of stars couldn't reach us.

At Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Israel, you walk into a dark, silent room and gaze up at all the stars.

It could be when you died you became a star in the sky. Your light survived, your only way to communicate. And so humans on earth needed to pay attention.

My mother's sister Stella, who had been so mean to her as a kid, had heard voices, spent time in hospitals and homes. They were the children of immigrants in the Bronx. While my mother tested into good schools and became a teacher, married a nice accountant (my dad), and played word puzzles with her kids, the few times I met Stella, she was heavy, slow and sad. She was brittle and she smoked. Apparently, as a girl, she was the family beauty.

Looking up, it was Stella, as a faint star.

In the future, after I went as far as I could and came back, I knew our family would need to talk about Stella. About her suffering, and my mother's, which we rarely saw, except when she abruptly hung up the phone and returned to the dinner table.

Once, my mom told us, after there had been a fire in her family's first apartment, they moved to a new place. Stella chose her own room first, but they changed rooms twice again, after Stella suspected my mother had gotten the better one.

Now that I had identified the star, when I looked elsewhere across the roof, across the water, at a train passing beneath the Manhattan Bridge, and then looked back to the sky, I returned to it. The star was still there.

I could watch it till it faded into the morning. As the sun rose, each time I looked away I looked back up to see it paler, more merged with the light, so little contrast, but still there. Could I catch the point just as it disappeared?

I watched and watched. The star dissolved into the light. But I still knew where it was, hidden.

Having followed the star into the daylight, I knew I had crossed over and went back to bed. And after I slept, the atmosphere recharged and I understood myself to be the protagonist all along. I saw *The Crying of Lot 49* with new awareness, as my handbook for decoding the world.

A question that I didn't ask then—was Pynchon testing if a novel had the power to drive you insane? Or was he tempted to? Did he plant a control in his work to pull someone back from the brink? But you could never trust that it would work.

His short story “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” puts it out there in all its moral suspicion. When the main character whispers “Wendigo” to the man he's talking to at a party, knowing it will trigger madness, he then walks out of the house to the sound of gunfire.

By the way, is Virginia Woolf a real name? Or is it the virgin and wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, two opposing figures magnetized to each other?

Kit and Port. Are rich people's names also nouns?

I glowed that day, wasn't speaking of it yet, just looking like someone who knew about a surprise party. Feelings took on a religious tenor, no longer even feelings, they were so invulnerable.

I walked across the Brooklyn Bridge to meet a friend, fully basking in the summer sun on a passage over water, the archetypal threshold, then, at dinner, alluded to something major happening without spilling everything. I also paid attention. My friend, and everything he said, felt vivid and meaningful, I saw his beauty without jealousy and I listened well.

Liberation from jealousy! And doubt! Despite my grandiosity, messianic burgeonings, a well of appreciation for others also flowed.

Back at the apartment under the bridge I had a lot to say, knowing that I'd go back to school with nothing stopping my conversation. But that didn't please my sister either, because it would turn people off. Written in my journal, she said, "You attack me with your ideas." It didn't faze me.

I took the subway home to Queens, buoyant.

The ad on the train for *Elle* magazine.

Fashion

makes anything possible

suddenly you slip something on

and say something you've never said before

People look at you in a different way,

and surprise, it's still

Yourself

To see that right then.

I held my bursting feeling. I had the reflex to know that believing what I was starting to believe sounded outlandish and I couldn't tell my parents. I didn't know how I'd face them so lit up.

How did I arrive home from the train station? Did I take the bus?

I turned the corner in the hall, walked into my room, put my bag down, and turned the switch on the standing lamp next to my bed.

At the first turn, a faint light came on. Second click and then a third. Weak light just in the corner of the lamp, the room dim.

Outrage for the child me. Who held back anger about it from the start, couldn't even feel it and forgot it. Who dulled her instincts, gave up what every living being thrives on (light!) and reflected the dimmed energy back to the world. Why did my parents put me in that room, just like putting a child in a basement?

Furious, crying at my parents. So many words about the hurt of that room. Don't plants need light? Don't children need light? What does it do to a person to grow up in the dark?

(If I'd known at the time, I would have added that tenement walls were made illegal in New York City in 1879; a room in which a person didn't have a window, the overcrowding of an apartment, was not fit for human life.)

What kind of daughter did they want, what could they have wanted for me? Why didn't they want a daughter who wanted the light, felt she deserved it, who didn't even need to want it because it came to her? A daughter who would shine.

My father hugged me. "God, I'm sorry."

He drove me to buy a halogen lamp (and it may sound as if I was accustomed to screaming for what I wanted, but I never did). By the time we were driving home I felt clear and calm and eager for the future. The stuff had emptied out that had blocked me my whole life. I was ringing inside.

I told my father the world was like a dream, and if you became aware of the dream, you could change it. As we were getting out of the car he said he didn't see where it got you, to see the world as a dream.

When we arrived home my mom was on the phone with my sister and handed it to me. My sister asked me why I was scaring Mom. She added, with a bit of annoyance, now they were talking about taking the wall down. I asked her if she thought someone who grew up in a room painted black would be different than someone in a room painted white, and she said yes.

We assembled the halogen lamp. As it did for my dorm room, it lit my bedroom to a full, completely new brightness.

After I had been angrier at my parents than I'd ever been—actually I'd rarely felt angry at them at all (what a sense of self required for anger! what a ready defense!)—something released. I was freed of a concern for their feelings, and felt free in general, and even more expansive. I'd never felt I could talk for hours, have so much to say, but I did just that, sitting in a chair in the living room while my parents sat on the couch.

Maybe people going unhinged act in a selfish way. When else was I so selfish? Couldn't I have an hour or two? Some people talk for many paragraphs, even pages, at a time, and they're listened to as if they're giving instead of taking, and that's what I felt and did.

I don't remember what I said, it must have been about literature and energy, and how energy changes from sunlight to the body to language in a continuing flow. But even though my mother was shaken, my father listened. He told me he couldn't believe his own daughter was speaking this way, had these ideas. He was looking down and I knew it affected him. The kinds of talks I had in college, the arguments I built in my papers, weren't what we normally talked about.

So I believe that I broke things down in a logical way and was absolutely right. And it might be, too, that my father had never seen me speak so fluidly, with such assurance, so centered in my perceptions, so aware of this very moment, with the power to move him.

My parents had plans to leave for their trip to Cape Cod the next morning, and while my mother worried about whether they should leave, my father believed I needed space from them. That's what I wanted.

I went to sleep in the bed on the other side of the wall, the bed by the window, and woke up in the sunshine. Looking outside, the world opened up to me.

I wrote a sentence on my bedroom wall in three separate parts in three separate places, because eventually I would fill the wall and had to leave the clues, that was urgent, but you also needed the near impossibility of deciphering it all because resolving was the end. I didn't only know it but felt it, the need to slow its culmination.

"The mutability of thresholds / makes any change / possible." Broken into three and written in diagonal fragments on the wall.

In mystical Judaism, the cosmos shattered before we came into being, the shattering brought about the universe, and it's our task to put it back together. (What happens then?)

The act of storytelling might be an act of postponement. Scheherazade wove the tale of the 1001 Arabian nights to escape death.

The horn—apocalyptic call?—in *The Crying of Lot 49* is muted.

God broke one language into all the languages so people would fail to build the Tower of Babel to heaven.

And so, with ascending comes the sense of a threat. An intelligence has left the clues, scrambled them, and you're tasked with detecting and following and documenting them. And the more you uncover the more you yourself must both express and break up the truth, because it's calling to be found, it's compelled to be traceable, but to find it is to die.

Writing the densest book packed with references no single person will ever decipher, even tucking away a reference to your coffee that morning that no other person could ever know (but might!) is one way to do it.

A literal doorstep.

But you could even achieve it in a masterful haiku. Three lines that resonate forever, never completely graspable, a tuning fork that's never touched.

My dad believed that his father stayed away for so long as an army doctor because he wasn't ready to be a father. My grandfather, who died before I was born, never hugged my father. And while my father didn't hug my brother—as adults they've always shaken hands—he hugged his daughters. Sometimes as I sat doing my homework in the living room, my dad would kiss me on top of the head and say, "I love you." My parents had my brother, then my sister, whom my brother was mean to, and then me.

When we were little, the three of us played a game called FOOTB, First One Off the Bed, or "footbuh." We all used to watch TV after school on our parents' bed, and then that turned into pushing each other to fall onto the carpet, and whoever was left at the end won.

My sister and I always teamed up to throw my brother off first, then my sister would throw me off.

Years later I laughed when I told a boyfriend of mine about it, but he said it gave him chills.

My brother and I talked on the phone, and we had the most personal talk I've ever had with him, before or since. When he was little our parents were more strict, and he listened to them. Our father wanted him to be quiet in public, and he was, he kept to himself. But Dad preferred our sister.

I often saw my brother as a little left out. Left out from the family, and especially from my sister and me. But maybe he saw me as left out in a different way.

I wanted the family to get therapy.

On the phone, my brother told me he always believed the Pink Floyd lyric, "Mama's gonna put all her fears into you."

Nearly a decade later at his house, I watched my mother holding my baby niece. "Don't cry, no crying," she said. "We don't like sad, we like happy." I went home and bawled.

My thoughts on the roof held true. If you couldn't express your pain you couldn't express your joy. Either they'd both get withheld or you'd spill everything at once.

At the end of World War II, my grandfather was part of the army sent to liberate the concentration camps. He photographed what he found. My grandmother later burned the pictures.

But they didn't disappear, because everything goes somewhere. Nothing escapes the rule, energy is neither created nor destroyed. She burned them into us.

The last dinner I made, I watched TV from the couch, *The Simpsons*. Grandpa Simpson said that in his day the nickels had bumblebees on them and you'd pay with "two bees," and he

wore an onion on his belt because it was the style at the time. No matter how far out I went, I knew I'd be safe because I got the Simpsons.

I took my journal everywhere in the house to put down every thought that kept coming. Once, when I couldn't find it, I believed the universe may have taken it back, to keep it from revealing what was inside. And then I found it. I remained tethered enough to know I'd just slipped into believing something that didn't make sense.

A book covered in silky dark blue fabric with embroidered Chinese images (branches, blossoms, a temple). Opening it now I see the rush of ideas I anticipated, as well as a surprising orderliness. It may have been a highly orderly state, no traffic jams at all. But I can also see the repetitiveness, the push to reach the next level, to transcend. The handwriting condenses as the pages start to run out. By the end the print becomes tinier and tinier, to fit the pages I have left, so minute and crowded it's unreadable.

I was sleeping naked. Then I wrapped myself in a sheet, like the ancient orators and goddesses.

I'll note that the great philosophers in their togas talked to the pigeons if no one else gathered. If you depend on others to listen before you talk, or sing, where does that leave you?

And I wanted to be all the elements: air, fire, earth and water. Unwrapped and wafted the sheet like wings so the fabric rode in waves, and I jumped. Higher next time, suspended for a moment in the air.

"Rain" isn't the most famous Madonna song, but the video looks the way rain sounds, the word rain. In close-up, she gazes gently right into your eyes, her eyes aquatic blue, her hair glossy black, the images fluid, and, meanwhile, the artifice all around her on display.

One thing stirs its opposite, and so “No Rain” was released at the same time. An odd name for a song. It’s also about sadness, the misfit bumblebee girl, object of derision, who finally finds her friends when the gates open to the bumblebee world.

“Runaway Train” ... this is, yet again, a sad song about not fitting in, soothing in its chords. The singer looked so close, trembling as he sang, as if he were coming a bit undone himself. “I can go where no one else can go, I know what no one else knows...”

It’s a very literal video about runaway teens. Though when I watch it online now, it’s followed by a weight-loss ad. How dare they do that to the girls seeking it out? My teenage outrage all over again.

“Everything seems cut and dry, day and night, earth and sky, somehow I just don’t believe it ...”

And commercials. Blue skies, Clear Eyes solution.

If 49 was screeching before it reached 50, a Levi’s ad solved the riddle: leap over zero to 501 on the other side.

Relentless promos for the “MTV Video Music Awards.” It was telling me where the announcement would take place and I must be there.

Later, with its pulsing visual distortions, “Insane in the Brain” (“going insane, got no brain”) was disturbing to say the least.

The science of this state, I’m venturing, is the sheer volume of oxygen that you’re burning to feed the fire.

(Carried, I’m guessing, by expanded blood vessels. It’s all about physical expansions and contractions.)

The psychic core is to follow your impulses.

But it turns scary. Maybe it turned when I lay in the empty bathtub. My knees closed together and then fell against the sides. As I lay there, my body fell into the shapes it took as if rolling in a slow kaleidoscope. I began to feel that unconsciously I was following the steps to unlock a combination. Then, lying back against the end of the tub, I saw the ~~+~~x eyes of the faucets. A long crack through the bathroom tile, as if the silver eyes and faucet trunk were an elephant charging through the wall. I jumped out of the tub.

I knew there was no elephant charging the wall. I mostly knew.

It grew dark in the living room, with just the TV on, and I was thirsty.

Forgetting to eat and drink turned into a game of not eating and drinking because I needed to prove I would survive the Holocaust. The image of my grandmother burning the black-and-white photos into our memories didn't appear for nothing. The books weren't written after World War II for nothing. And I would survive by becoming so still and small and able to slip through the gaps in a fence I would not be seen.

The glass water bottle I took out of the fridge, four-sided with rounded edges, had a tapering neck with a mottled texture for gripping. Sitting on the floor of the living room in the dark, I turned the fogged glass in my hands, watching the blue light of the TV shift through the bottle as I tipped the waves back and forth. Why is the light from TVs so blue? It changes abruptly as it moves through the water.

Seeing the connections among things may not be hallucinating. Remembering the conversation I had with Matt before I left for Spain, when he said I could live my own "lucid dream," with a wink—that may not be hallucinating either.

But quietly, he and I sat cross-legged facing each other, looking at the flickering bottle. We both knew it could be a magical object.

“I mean, you could drink it if you want,” he said.

It was so like him to be a guy hanging out, to casually say you could take the pedestrian option, but knowing that if you did you weren't really living. You were stopping short, and hadn't you done that for too long?

The friend taking you on a nighttime walk, who eggs you on, who always survives a jump from a high wall without a scratch.

I touched the bottle to my forehead to let it drink.

Soon I was dry as a stick of wood. Lying down I raised my hands above me, rubbing them together faster and faster. Clapped my hot hands and rubbed them faster faster faster faster faster faster till they made a blue spark.

Later my mind was not on my body at all when I stretched my arm up and back, but a ray of heat inside my head followed the path of my hand, surprising me. Dehydrated as the rest of me, maybe my head could feel the subtlest charge.

That was never taught in school: how you physically move, from thought to action. Really how it works. The direction from mind to hand doesn't flow through the arm—it radiates from the brain like a vector to a point on the body, and moving the vectors creates motion. It's something Leonardo da Vinci might have drawn if he'd thought of it. I discovered it, though, through the senses, in a personal state of deprivation that would be unethical for a scientist to reproduce, and I stand by it.

Matt and Jason were hiking together that summer. Even though their trip was technically over, maybe they needed to be rescued, the way I might need to be rescued. They may have been stranded at the top of a mountain. I sent a great bird to swoop down to pick them up in her claws and fly them down to the ground.

In the dark, on the carpet, I lay on the floor wrapped in the sheet, facing away from the television, still in the game in which I needed to survive, and I would survive when someone said I could eat.

The messages from the TV shifted to become more grave, speaking to people who could not sleep. Under the sheet over my face, I heard again and again about a diet formula, my fat was melting away, and when I touched my forearm it was skinny, and the skin was tight around my collarbone and ribs.

After all this I had been tricked and was dissolving. My head was hollowing. I had to stay awake or I might die.

I replayed strums of “Runaway Train” to calm myself. I passed through.

Then early daylight. When a car door shut and the engine vroomed, I was safe. But on the show *Rude Awakening*, which pretended to be clever but was just loud, the videos became a taunt, they didn’t answer what they’d promised to, and though Matt implied I shouldn’t drink from the bottle he wasn’t coming back and perhaps had just been conducting an experiment, it was cruel.

How do ecstatic states turn so monstrous, to pull any trick on you in order to grow?

A little girl knocked on the apartment door and when I opened it a crack her mother yelled at her to get away from that door, but I believe that little knock saved me, too.

When my sister called I told her I needed her to say I could take food from the fridge so I could eat. She asked me what was going on, and then told me she was taking a car over.

After I got off the phone and drank some water and scooped some yogurt from a container with my hand, I felt cross-eyed, something had messed up. If you think about it too much don't your eyes feel stuck together? Probably my eyes were fine but if you pay too much attention to blinking they *are* stuck together in a sense. Or when I began to rehydrate, of course the water re-plumped my eyes, not to mention my mouth, ears, brain and heart.

I called Jason from the phone next to my parents' bed, wrapped the curly cord around my neck to help keep me in place, I must have been talking about how Matt was conducting an experiment.

(Earlier that week when I talked to Jason I had been so happy, I told him I was sending him a gift. I said something like it was a gift he's sending himself, and he couldn't wait. I was probably closer to his normal, energetic state, actually, and I didn't tell him everything.)

I raged in Jason's ear and told him not to say anything, I just couldn't even take the intrusion of someone saying something right now I was so sensitive and it might throw me again so he had to just listen. I found out later that he was just about to leave for a dentist appointment, so thank you, Jason.

My sister arrived and sat on the bed massaging my shoulders, crying. Not only did I order Jason not to speak, but when my sister lifted her hands from my shoulders something pendulummed in me like a Matterhorn ride and I screamed that she couldn't suddenly lift her hands.

(This isn't all a metaphor, it was a jarring feeling in my body. If someone presses down on you, your weightedness changes. Your center of gravity moves, responding to the source of pressure, and when the pressure suddenly releases, the equal force that meets it goes into free

fall. It's not something you'd feel normally, only in an exposed, receptive state. Newborn babies understand.)

I calmed down enough to release the phone and my sister talked to Jason. She was very quiet. "I know," she said. Another long pause. "I know." Jason, I believe, said he guessed I wasn't coming back to school. Softly again, "I can't imagine it."

This was the same day my parents were arriving home from Cape Cod. (I had managed to contain myself in my phone calls with them that week, though my mother dreamed that I was lost and had gone to Canada.) By that time I was in my own bed under my blanket. My father asked me to put on some clothes.

My mom was going to call an ambulance but I roared that a siren would throw me over the edge and my sister got her to stop.

A little later, my sister and I sat in the doorway of our rooms, having a conversation in low light. I felt calm and drained, and could have stayed there for a long time. With her head down, she said, "I know that I need you," and it flooded through me. Peacefulness. The light was soft and gray.

"And right now," she said, slowly, "I need you to put on your shoes, so we can go to the hospital."

In the car I knew where we were going, but I didn't really believe it, because it was actually the destination.

I remember a room in which a doctor checked on me who was movie-star handsome, even my mother and sister acknowledged it to each other, so handsome it seemed to confirm the movie I was in.

I was handed a pill that I didn't want to take, with a cup of water, and was told I could go behind the curtain and take my time and take it, but then I got very involved in reading the marks on the wall and what they meant.

From the other side of the curtain the nurse let me know I needed to go ahead and take the pill, but I needed more time. The curtain opened and I gave my mother a demonic look, then I wrapped myself around her so they wouldn't take me, but they did manage to pull me away and a piece of furniture unfolded while I fell onto it face down and they pulled down my pants and gave me a shot.

I don't remember what happened after. My parents kept them from putting me in, I guess, a straitjacket, but as the staff was taking me I was pulling and fighting them. I wanted both of my parents with me. My father told me later I was very strong. Another patient said when I came in I was wild.

At some point I was in a bed, someone was trying to feed me soup and being sort of jokey about it. I didn't open my eyes, I was aware of people but it scared me to look at a face. When I first woke up in the dark I was strapped in. I couldn't get up to pee and so I peed where I was. The steady pressure of the straps was a relief, though.

There were pictures of me with my parents on the wall.

When I opened my eyes in the daytime I saw a nurse standing above me. She had a roundish face, brown eyes, she looked a little surprised in a serious way but her eyes were warm. And then in the doorway, Mr. Ferdinand with dreadlocks said it's ok, everything's cool.

Another day: The colorful clock in the social room, all black, its dial overlaid with iridescent fields of color in curving shapes. When I passed it with my sister and brother and said, "I like that clock," they laughed a little. They knew. Apparently I didn't remember the hours I stood

and stared at it from the hallway. It turned out a former patient had made it and donated it to the hospital.

The three of us held hands, as they both walked on either side of me, and we talked about *The Simpsons*, “it was the style at the time,” then walked out the door to the backyard. People often used the hour when the backyard opened to smoke, and Mr. Ferdinand stood outside the door with a lighter for their cigarettes.

We sat at a picnic table. I looked at the ID bracelet around my wrist, and my sister and I agreed that it was kind of cool. An artist’s badge. My brother told me when I was waking up I asked for a beaded red claw to wear around my neck.

The purpose of a mental hospital is to guard yourself, others, and themselves from death, murder and ruin of other sorts. So it will always steer toward the viability of the body over the self.

They asked me to count down from 100 by sevens. When I got down to 16, 9, 2 the doctor nodded and began to speak but I needed to pass zero and finished with “negative 5.” My dad appreciated that.

My sister told me the nurse asked what was important to me right now as I struggled with a button at the bottom of my cardigan. I said it was important to me to close this button. My sister put her head between her knees to keep from fainting and I rubbed her back. “She needs to do this,” I said.

They asked me if I felt entitled to something, and my sister told me I said yes and she was glad that I said yes.

Later, I wanted to talk about what I experienced that past week but the doctors didn't listen to it. The studies, they told me, said that patients recovered better without talking about it. They left the room, as if they decided what was real.

I found it unfair and wrong to prevent me from expressing it, for them to ignore it, and to have me store things inside all over again. There must have been a way, with someone who listened, to heal while talking it through. And even to realize (ok, like Mucho Maas repeating "rich, chocolaty goodness"), the boring places it might take you if you didn't come back.

My roommate's name was Angela, whereas my roommate freshman year had been Angel. Angela, who was Greek, had an appealing air, a little hard and vivacious. "I was stone in love with him," I remember her saying.

She also believed that she was a queen. And, come to think of it, that she was from outer space. But unless she spoke of it you wouldn't know.

When my sister visited, she brought me a *Sassy* magazine, which was an escape. There was a scent in a purple bottle, in the "We Try It" section, that I'd wear when I got home.

"Did she find her crown yet?" she asked about Angela.

"Hey, we don't know—"

"Right," she said, "we don't know."

At night, the hall outside the window of my door lit up like an aquarium.

Because I was majoring in Comparative Literature, and regretted skipping over the books required for English, I asked my parents for a copy of *The Canterbury Tales*. With the difficult language and my vision going blurry due to the drugs the doctors were still gauging (including one for side effects, and one for the side effects of that), I read just a little bit at a time.

In the prologue to his tale, speaking of souls in the afterlife, the Pardoner says, “They can go blackberrying for all I care.”

Afterwards I flipped through the Sylvia Plath collection *Crossing the Water*, which I’d bought on a modest spree, and stopped at one of the poems. “Blackberrying.”

When my Russian psychiatrist (whom I liked—she wore hot pink ballet flats and told me Nabokov was happy in his personal life) sat down with me, I told her what I’d discovered, joyful for the first time in weeks.

“Karen,” she said, “let’s talk about real world things.”

She could have admitted it was remarkable. That would have been real.

The other patients didn’t expect from me what seemed to be expected elsewhere. It was less stressful in some ways than college, where strong opinions reigned.

But the medication flattened me. Reinforced everything I’d tried to free myself from.

Despite being grateful at the time that I went crazy in the 1990s rather than an earlier era, I’ll never know what would have happened if I were given time to eat and drink, patience to sleep and recover, come back to myself.

And interest in why I would overthrow a burden, and how I did it. They fixated on the overthrowing as the problem.

Here’s what I think:

I had a ton of things bottled up since I was a baby, and an explosion was inevitable. It’s not necessarily an unusual condition for something that needs to explode, to explode. All it takes is sensitivity, pain and repression. A body under pressure did what it needed to do.

The wall was real. It was also a metaphor. And it was proof.

In Spain I expanded. When I came home I contracted, then broke through.

There is a particular anger. The anger of awakening to deserving more.

The explanation from the doctors, a “chemical imbalance,” gave everyone a pass. No one talked to us about having family therapy. When the energy first coursed through me, I saw the truth that our family needed to talk, but once I became the sick person, the idea died.

That’s something no one said either, that this state may have exposed something true. That you took an extraordinary trip with the power of your mind.

I see what happened as a rush into my intellect, turning into a waking dream, a migrating dream, and I was left alone to discard it while having my system altered, instead of receiving help, choosing the help I wanted, to make an honest repair. To integrate it back to myself, to possess it.

What emerged needed to emerge. The stabilizers held it in place.

I wonder if an expansion followed by a contraction precedes any radical break. If the aftermath hadn’t cordoned off everything I experienced on the rooftop—which my body granted me as relief, whose loss I would mourn, without receiving room to mourn, or recognition there was anything to mourn or crave—I would like to have understood what happened. Even to study, in cross-disciplinary fashion, the flow of energy through literature, the voice, the universe, the body, and the mind. And the capacity to modulate, which I desired.

Atmospheric forces (family, culture, language, rooms and cities) channel suddenly through the individual, the release point of a larger, pressured system. At the moment of crisis, all attention goes to the diode.

There is definitely something unhingedness likes. It doesn't seek the antidote, that's for sure, just more and more of itself. Why does it devour? Why not just enough for a pleasurable high?

Before it takes over, it bathes you in a remedy. Some people learn to ride the wave.

From the beginning of my journal:

It's all a matter of energy in different incarnations

A still pond

A frog jumps in

The sound of water

The mystery – the “leap” is that initial burst of energy from out of nowhere then it transfers to water → waves of sound → perception

And also ... just sitting there in nature ... a frog jumps into a pond.

Home from the hospital, my familiar, mundane distresses came back. I cried to my parents about—even now it's taboo to write—not being liked. My mother assured me that people liked me, which didn't help. My father told me I got a lot of love growing up, which made me sound ungrateful.

My sister had so many friends, and they came to her. My mother said I didn't need to compare myself to her, that she was not the norm.

My father said, he guessed, she was magnetic. No help again.

Hadn't I clinched that for her? By needing her? If you walk into a town with only two barbers, the logic puzzle goes, should you go to the one with a neat haircut or a choppy, messy one?

"But you can analyze literature," my father added, with wonder. And yet it wasn't enough. Not if it was too hidden to attract love. Not unless it grew to become your entire self (which, to my credit, I had attempted to do).

My advisor, Meera, who taught the travel literature course, once suggested I take a public speaking class. "Show the world how brilliant you are," she said. One of those compliments that makes you feel worse.

What would the world be if my school had offered a Public Quiet class? How to be at peace with yourself, without words, in the company of others.

I did see Matt once, after I was out of the hospital for a few months and settling into the new identity of having a disorder. There had been a poster in the hospital, "People with mental illness enrich our lives," with photos of Virginia Woolf and other troubled writers and thinkers. Matt—not to provoke, and not necessarily to comfort, but since he knew everyone else was pushing the other way—let me know that some of the ideas I'd had in August were backed up by Stephen Hawking. When I told him how I'd stopped sleeping and eating before I went to the hospital, he asked, they didn't just give you some food? Sleep? And I shrugged and told him

more about the illness. But, you don't see what happened as part of yourself? I shook my head no.

* * *

When I returned to school, no one on the faculty insisted I write a senior thesis, and I graduated. The following year, when I had a job and a boyfriend, I slowly went off medication and felt fine.

An Oscar Wilde fairy tale stays with me. Once the village creates a harbor for mermaids, the mermaids swim away.

My friend Jason had a best friend, Vijay, in high school. Before college, they had traveled to India together, and that set Jason on his life's path. I met Vijay when we all went to Lollapalooza in 1991. He was a witty guy, but I noticed a stiffness in his shoulders and arms, even when he smoked. This was at the same time I had all sorts of problems myself.

A few years after we graduated, Vijay, who had been going to grad school in literature, was hospitalized. While he was doing research, he believed that William Blake had been talking to him through his poems.

Vijay was released from the hospital, still believing the things he had been imagining, or perhaps perceiving quite clearly while taking too much to heart. His grad school was admitting him back to continue with his findings. It all sounded like a disaster, and that's how it turned out. After returning to his studies, he broke down and went back to the hospital, then home to stay. Later he jumped off a bridge in Buffalo.

I believed all these years that he didn't intend to die, that he had been acting under a delusion. But now I see it differently. Jason told me last night about the note he left behind for his family. "He felt he could no longer share himself with himself," Vijay's brother had said.

At the time, only months before, Vijay told Jason to read *The Crying of Lot 49*. It was all in there.

In my twenties I never found myself in the same danger, just the sadness. A kind, insightful therapist helped me, though even she would interrupt when I reminisced about being elated.

After avoiding meds for years, but feeling miserable long after a breakup, I decided not to deny myself. An antidepressant in the mix had once made a big difference. I went to a psychiatrist who took my insurance, recommended by a friend of mine who had once worked in his office.

I told him my history, and oddly he prescribed an antidepressant by itself. But I didn't worry about it right then, and apparently neither did he.

The next morning, after I took it, my heartbeat kicked in, "ka-chunk." And the sense of inflating began, the thirsted-for energy, all inside my own protective bubble.

Something's missed in the popular conceptions of "manic." (Recent crossword clue: "frenzied." How about, "the sensation of drinking a tall glass of water for the mind"?) The calm, the safety, the inner stillness that allows the flow. The early feeling is secured by ground under your feet, endless ground holding you within an insulation. Taut surface of a blown-up balloon.

You feel like a bed made to precision, a quarter could bounce off you.

Even as my happiness increased with the drug, my lower half felt cut off, my genitals disconnected from my awareness. Numbing and strange, as if my spinal fluid had been redirected.

I began taking it on a Thursday in August. Friday night I lay down after work to read a short story in a collection I was loving, "Orchid" in *Because They Wanted To* by Mary Gaitskill.

I have to say, the confluences. The confluences! It's honey to confluences, this state.

Moving between the present and the past, the story revolves around the seductiveness of Patrick, back when he and the main character, Margot, lived in a house together in college, and the tenuousness of their communication when they run into each other over a decade later.

They stood and talked for several moments, each moment a triangular wedge that started small, widened, and reached a set limit.

The writing rippled through me.

A critique of psychopharmacology permeates the story. Margot, a social worker who's in turmoil herself, recognizes the intensity, the aliveness, of a suicidal girl. *Margot met her eye and held her.* Patrick, a "psychopharm" whose sister has been in and out of hospitals, lives a more detached life.

"If it isn't a mental illness," said Margot, "why do you treat it with medicine?" ...
Her sarcastic thoughts were very loud, but he didn't hear them ...

By the end, it knocked me out, my heart rapidly beating, on fire.

I left my apartment to go to a rooftop party a few blocks away, where I didn't know anyone. A note on the window of the building's entrance said the party had been shut down. It was a buzz-in door and when someone left I went in anyway, got in the elevator but why was I going and I came back down. As I was leaving, two guys were waiting outside to come in, going to the same party. I told them it was called off, but I hadn't gone up to the roof myself.

So I went back into the building with them and we took the elevator up together. They were both photographers. One of the guys was a little wiry and cute, and other taller and more solid and handsome. When the wiry guy got a little too close to me in the elevator, the taller one pulled him back by his backpack.

We saw there was no party, left the building and went to a bar. That never happened—to randomly meet people and then go have an adventure. I felt both exuberant and free of sexual desire, and apparently that was irresistible to both of them, because they began competing over me. What a thrilling night, thanks to the drug-induced state ...

Even though the humor of the wiry one was more my style, he became obnoxious. I called them good cop/bad cop. The taller one lived in my neighborhood, and before parting ways we exchanged numbers.

And that is the joke of sexual attraction, and of men's supposed difficulty having all the sex they want and women's supposed ease, because otherwise most of my life I felt so full of desire, and when desire left me I became intoxicating.

I met my sister for brunch the next day, I wanted to tell her about the night before. And then as I started talking about the Gaitskill story, the tears came. She looked around at the other tables to see who was looking. I felt a little bad, but also grateful to open my whole heart to a piece of writing. Even in my infatuation with *The Sheltering Sky* and *Lot 49*, they never made me cry.

At work the next week, speaking in an editorial meeting, I moved someone with my passionate argument. A tear came to his eye. At lunch, talking with my friend, whom I'd told about

the drug, whatever it was that used to block me had dissolved. I floated. Some people held court like this all the time.

But I was growing more physically uncomfortable, and disappointed knowing the good part couldn't last. Angry that actually, I'd probably been given a dose large enough for a despondent man rather than a gradual one for a petite woman who'd once flipped out, or the wrong prescription altogether. I halved the pill, but the speed of my heart didn't go down, it was beating all the time, even as I tried to fall asleep. Still cut off sexually, like a cyborg.

I ate food to weigh me down. A meatball parm hero.

I called the psychiatrist about what to do. And at the end of the call, when I let him know I was angry, he told me I had a "weird system" and hung up.

Sleeping just a couple hours a night even after stopping the drug, I only fell asleep after I broke a sweat. So I started bundling up. Constantly thirsty, my heart still going, I was gulping down Gatorade and glasses of water. Brought a hairdryer under the covers to heat me up after a sleepless night and it struck me that something was really wrong now, with the dryer roaring and my heart going and my head light on a hot day in August. I called my sister and we took a cab to Beth Israel Hospital. She called our parents and they arrived there too.

Speaking to the nurse, I described what happened with a lot of care not to appear crazy. My unusual physical sensations, I thought, might sound mental. I agreed to receive an injection and started to get sleepy. The doctors found that my salt had fallen to such a dangerously low level I might have slipped into a coma.

The next day I told them about the story "Orchid." Actually several professionals were brought in, women and men, to hear my experience from years ago till now. I may have been

seen as an intelligent, articulate and interesting case. In fact, I wonder if any of them read the story afterwards.

(Months later, by the way, I sent a complaint about the “weird system” doctor to the New York State psychiatric board. They reviewed it, and no action was taken.)

Released the next morning, my uplifted feeling lasted for weeks. The guy from the night at the bar, also named Matt, left a message—it worked out very well that my stay in the hospital caused a delay in responding to him.

Even years later, while we remained friends and occasional lovers, the magic around the outrageously slim timing of meeting him in the doorway still glowed. Not only because of the friendship it sparked, but a sense that it would open a path to the party or the work or the incident that would lead me to my love.

* * *

The beams of sunlight radiating through me nearly 30 years ago were treasures I held in a private place, as if, under pressure, they’d glitter when I finally spilled them. Now they warm me inside. The space between my eyebrows relaxes. Whenever I embrace myself on the rooftop, I feel powerful.

What came to me then feels absolutely central now. While it needed to fade, as a psychedelic trip fades, I don’t believe the hospital’s approach, the verbal, physical and chemical shutting down of its channel, kept me safe. It took me years of questioning and doubting to finally say it, but I know what happened was wrong. While I passed as being “fine,” it kept me from becoming whole.

Last year I began editing the work of a therapist who cofounded a community-driven health center for people living with HIV and AIDS in Portland, Oregon, in the late 1980s. She

never could have done it without breaking from the tradition of “clinician knows best,” guided by a belief that we all have inner wisdom, and that wisdom helps us heal. And I wondered what could have been, in the aftermath of my crisis, if someone had been with me to honor my own interpretation of my experience, and affirm the value of its meaning. To trust my inner wisdom to heal.

Even after writing most of this piece, it’s a comfort to find new scholarship about the role of heightened states that appear to break with reality, but can provide the individual with new vision and purpose, depending how the experience resolves within its context. And that’s just a continuation of philosophical, scientific and spiritual perspectives going back millennia, as well as more recent, growing conversations, alive with first-person knowledge.

Medicine is always a resource, but for the professions behind it: where is a reckoning with the past? Or the present? Personal autonomy matters. An essay in *The Lancet Psychiatry* bears the headline, “No safety without emotional safety.” A call for reform, not from the 1960s or the ’70s, but January 2023.

I’m moved again by the ideas that immersed me that summer. The mind is so deeply reflected in the dynamics of nature, in the expressions of waves surrounding and coursing through us. Lightning that balances electricity in the skies, water that wants to flow where it flows, crashing against dams that will, one day, fail. And especially, water that wants to rest underground, nourishing its habitats.

The need to control is the source of so much ruin.

I was heartened to watch a talk by a conservator at the Chester Beatty museum in Dublin, who spoke about preserving illuminated manuscripts. Modern approaches are cautious, “minimally interventive,” she emphasized, and tailored to the needs of each particular book.

In order to repair any serious damage, “we first need to understand why it occurred,” she said. “There is no point conserving pigments if the conditions that caused or exacerbated the problems in the first place are not addressed.”

Something touched me, the logic of the *why* coming first. The humility needed to care for something precious.

Considering the lives of materials, I arrive again at the human relationship to elemental systems. We’re as subject to physics as everything else. Thoughts and emotions and rules are made of energy, too.

A layer of gold leaf shines when burnished, but lapis will turn gray and crumble. Imagine calling the mineral itself the cause of the break. It happens to people all the time.

Maybe we need to let go of the very first things we learned. Become a lover of ancient manuscripts, listening to pages of ochre, malachite, and lampblack, cinnabar and ultramarine.

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Karen Hudes is a writer and editor whose work has appeared in Tin House, the New York Times, New York Magazine, The Awl and The Hairpin, among others. She attended the Byrdcliffe Arts Colony as a writer in residence in 2022, and also leads group writing sessions and film discussions, with an interest in supporting the creativity of people who have experienced pivotal mental states.

Additional references for this piece include: “The Decay of Lying” and “The Fisherman and His Soul” by Oscar Wilde, “Pivotal mental states” by Ari Brouwer (Aeon), the work of psychologist Lusijah Marx, and a presentation by conservator Kristine Rose-Beers.