

normal people
make Prozac jokes
and laugh at Lithium
while all around them
others hide their shame
fidget uncomfortably
chuckle half-heartedly
and hope their medicine bottle
is hidden
and safe

tell my story
fragments of a dream
I was young once
safe from prying eyes
I lived in terror
years of pretending
the act of forgetting
a constant struggle
not to look too closely
my secrets are heavy
moods mystifying
swallow the shame
just let it be
it dawned on me
it wasn't normal

envision alternate endings
something cataclysmic
turn it into a story

this is my truth
there is a deeper wound somewhere
that isn't mental illness
or a dead butterfly
or a romantic adventure

this disease thrives on shame
keep silent
shame thrives on silence
afraid
if anyone found out
the truth frightens

- a) affective disorder
- b) behavior
- c) capricious
- d) downward spiral
- e) euphoria
- f) fluctuations
- g) grandiosity
- h) hopeless
- i) impulsivity
- j) jarring
- k) karma (because no other k word came to mind)
- l) lethargic
- m) mixed state
- n) nature
- o) outburst
- p) personality
- q) quiet
- r) remorseful
- s) suicidal
- t) talkative
- u) undulating
- v) vacillating
- w) warning signs
- x) extravagant
- y) yelling
- z) zealous

I didn't choose
a life of extremes
the ultimate war
it's overwhelming
knocking me off balance
beyond my abilities to handle

you talk about death
people always mean well
pull yourself up by your bootstraps
get over it
think how much you'll
hurt your loved ones
you're just looking for attention
it's all in your head
they consider it therapeutic
people mean well
even when it's hurtful

Q: Why?

A: Wrong question. Next.

Q: Who?

A: Me. And many others.

Q: What?

A: A mad carousel.

Q: Which?

A: Manic.

Q: When?

A: Too much now. Too little then.

Q: Where?

A: Wherever.

Q: How?

A: Quickly. And slow motion.

black and white
everything and nothing
thunder and lightning
a freak electrical storm
a long miserable week
whole seasons go by
weathering the bipolar storms

tumbling into depression
it all came flooding back
the call of the Monster

decay around me
I hated every moment
it was grotesque

friendships fell
to the wayside
canceled plans
I was isolated
lonely
depressed
frozen
couldn't pick up the phone
empty daylight hours

I couldn't remember
a topic worth discussing
between daybreak and dusk
when depressed

no one was there
when doom entered
there was no shelter
this was no gesture
this was the Monster
there's no scarier beast
it demands surrender
in the fight with myself

That day was dark and lonely. The darkness became darker as the day progressed. By evening, the loneliness was eternal.

That day I grieved for lost relationships, for lost hope, for lost futures, for lost days, for lost joy.

That day all hope was gone, the future endless and empty, joy unreachable.

That day I decided life wasn't worth it.

That day I had a plan.

That day a part of me knew to reach out. Help told me to get myself to the Emergency Room or police would come to my door.

That day I drove into the city, tempted at each turn to drive off an embankment or into a semi-truck. The only thing stopping me was not wanting to risk hurting someone else in my downward spiral.

That day I learned what the inside of a psychiatric unit looks like.

That day I landed somewhere safe.

Future days would prove more difficult.

I never knew when
regular misery
would go chemically wrong

all I remember is the pain
of this existence
all I remember is this moment
bone-tired

I can't get over it
grief burns like hell

this isn't narcissism
this is crisis

I could barely function
at the end of the world
crept back into bed
pretended to sleep
I'm sick of living
the illusion of normalcy

I was ill
no interest in food
empty of passions, desires
when did I eat last?

pain is a useful distraction

medications
tone down reactions
at times I feel overmedicated
struggling against the stupor
I am so tired

my brain chemistry
tortured me
something had to be done

terminally weary
it goes on and on
forever
this was genuine despair
driven to extremes
death wasn't the easy way
death was the only way

secretly suicidal
in danger of drowning
the relentless pressure
despair about life
to hell with dignity
I'll be damned
at the top of my lungs

I was manic
full of energy
accelerated speech
I was depressed
thoroughly numb
sensitive to criticism
unfathomable despair
a mixed state
I'd better just sit here

I turn the corner
a sudden shift of mood
I'm on the road to mania
again

Lyssa – the goddess of rage, frenzy, and rabies.

Evidently the Ancient Greeks saw something similar to mania and compared it to a mad dog with rabies. Lyssa had a desire not to hurt others with her powers, but greater gods would send her to do their bidding, overriding her better natures. Her mother was Nyx who was born of Chaos. It all rings a bit true.

I square my shoulders
I am untouchable
I've never felt so sharp
and clear
I've never felt so manic
in all my life
lucky girl

so wickedly delicious
it's chaotic, unpredictable
you go
and keep going
your speech is laced with
profanity and innuendo
the best parts of being manic
this radical shift of mood
unwelcomed, unwanted
then come the terrors
of being happy
the seizure of mania
anger into action
drumbeats
driving you mad
the manic whirlwind
a visceral experience
room spinning
pressured speech
manic intentions seem innocent
whirling too fast
suicidal impulses
with the energy to act
right now, this instant
right now

mania is compatible
with a hint of darkness

the anger building up
everything is annoying
edgy and restless
bleak
I feel strange
afraid of sleep
desperate
I don't give a damn
I hate myself

crabby and irritable
more and more agitated
utterly hopeless
I wasn't sleepy
this was torture
I hated the world

this is fair warning
stay out of my way
hadn't planned on being manic
what a horrible thing
something loathsome
vicious
hands still shaking
still quivering
inflamed my mood
my feverish imagination
terrible, dangerous things
using my utmost control
no one knew
the life-and-death
struggle I faced

the search for sanity
spiraling into hysteria
completely beyond my capabilities
I can't breathe
ask me where it hurts
you're just exhausted
you're getting better
you're not depressed
you're too tired
the anger grew in me
lives aren't nice and neat
I'm not well

constant aching loneliness
nobody sees me
increasingly miserable
suicidal
there was no one else
my body and mind rebelled
mania is so brutally strong
Biblical anger
brought down on my own head
do it or else
it would mean the end

the dead of winter
might tempt you out your door
to lie down and sleep forever

I wonder if the body
feels the cold
of the grave

God help me

on high alert
guarding against dangers
known and unknown
guarding against triggers
into a spiral path
leading to the hospital
or worse
the next time
to the hospital
may be the last time
to the hospital
“Do you have a plan?”
“Are there any guns in the house?”
“Are you alone?”
I think, of course I’m alone.
That’s why I’m calling a stranger
in the middle of the night.

I'd forgotten
how to sleep
hadn't slept in days
I was fully conscious
overly conscious
I wanted numb
all I could think of
was death
a dance with the devil
I staggered
I slipped
it set me off without warning
a psychotic break
the most severe mania
of my life
it was all too much
taking handful after handful
keep taking the pills
swallowing more and more
couldn't stop
keep taking the pills
until the pain gave way to
drugged oblivion

something was wrong here
straps bound me to the bed
I was still alive

Text: I can't stop crying. I may cry forever. Help!

Text: No, I don't know what you can do. Come over and just sit with me?

Text: I know you don't know what to say. You don't have to say anything at all. Just be here.

Text: Oh, okay. Sorry. I didn't know you were busy. You're the third person I've called. Everyone's busy. Talk to you later.

Text:

Visitor's Text: "Why didn't she reach out for help? She knows we would've been there for her."

actively suicidal
we can't take off
your restraints yet
your conduct speaks
for itself
hyperbolic
acutely manic
fidgeting
grandiosity

I entered the New Year
in a mental hospital
a psych ward
Private Access Only
the door opened
I hesitated
I wanted to be alone
in the darkness

fig. 1

I thought the hallways would be cold and sterile. Unpadded tile floors. Echoing with footsteps and wheeled meal carts. Tile would make it easier to clean. Instead, the halls were warm and quiet. Dark carpet (to hide stains?) and the soft shuffle shuffle shuffle of patients doing their laps of the ward in their non-skid hospital slipper socks.

fig. 2

The front desk holds the list of unwelcome visitors. I find myself thankful I made my list. The person I least want to see shows up as a visitor. Why? To gloat over my breakdown? To shame me? To apologize? To make up? I'll never know. But even just the thought of seeing them sent me into a panic attack and a need for meds.

fig. 3

The lunchroom is the hub of patient life. Coffee. Snacks. Puzzles. Every jigsaw puzzle is missing at least one piece. It's almost a form of torture. Do they do it on purpose to test our ability to handle stress? My puzzle partner has OCD and the end of the puzzle sends her to her room shaking. This can't be therapeutic. But there it is.

fig. 4

Occupational therapy is called arts-and-crafts or "going to camp" by the patients. We're going to decorate light switch covers. The man next to me starts to cry quietly. "Are you okay?" I whisper. He wipes his eyes and whispers back, "I'm homeless. Where am I going to put a light switch cover?" I feel a snuffle of my own coming on and give him a quick sideways hug. The therapist says loudly, "No touching the other patients!" Oops. In trouble for being compassionate. Everyone looks at us like we'd been making out in art class.

I don't belong here
I'm not one of them
it's unsettling
I am one of them

the patients seemed to grow more somber
as the night loomed darker and the
nurses wandered from room to
room doling out pills and patience
and warnings and reminding everyone
that bedtime was in an hour so we
needed to start winding down whatever
we were doing which reminded all of us
of our mothers fathers grandparents
older siblings preparing our younger
selves for bedtime as we discovered
that a psychiatric hospital stay is very
much like a return to childhood where
doors can be locked and toys taken
from grasping hands and snacks available
but only if you've behaved yourself and
other people cook for you and you have
to make your bed before school begins
and classes are required and arts and crafts
frustrated everyone until later when they
realized it was something to do that got
their minds off ending their lives because even
boring activities can be a distraction from
the abyss and you're glad another day's over
and you can curl up in bed with your pillow
and blanket and hopefully sleep soundly
rather than waking up screaming like the
night before when your sleeping self had a
glimpse of reality and the abyss the void
the monster loomed once more

how terrified I'd been
a very long time
so frightened
a safe and effective level
to take the edge off the panic
starting to feel the effects
able to answer the phone
maintain some sense of dignity
it was close but
I found my footing

I know from experience how to pack a bag for a suicidal hospital stay so I keep a packed bag (no straps, strings, belts) and leave it in my car “just in case” because my therapist may decide I’m not safe and need to check in to the psych ward (again) where there will be laundry facilities so I’ll only need to pack enough clothes for two or three days since doing laundry will be somewhat therapeutic

so I pack

- two or three t-shirts, comfortable
- sweat pants or leggings, can double as jammies with a t-shirt
- no cords
- no belts
- no strings
- slip-on shoes, no shoelaces
- hairbrush and/or comb
- blank journal, not wire-bound
- several pens
- warm sweater or hoody, no strings
- slippers
- socks
- phone and charger, will be kept at the front desk
- travel-size toiletries, they’ll have shampoo but no conditioner
- toothbrush/toothpaste
- a soft blanket, for wrapping up in when the anxiety kicks in or my roommate starts screaming at 3am and the sleeping meds aren’t working and they won’t give out more
- a stuffed toy or soft pillow, for hugging while crying myself to sleep

my therapist asks, “What do you mean that you’re packed for the hospital? How do you pack ahead for a psych hospital stay?”

I will show him this list at my next appointment

I look harmless enough
suicide watch is over
I closed my eyes
some things can't be fixed
waves of fear
fear of being found out

no one sends flowers
unless you end up in the hospital
aspiration pneumonia, you say
they nod and pat your hand
pneumonia is a known
pneumonia is a sickness with get well cards and flowers
aspiration pneumonia, you repeat
what did you aspirate?
vomit
vomit from a lethal dose of whiskey and pills
saved by the vomit
the sideways glances
the judgements return
oh, you have "bad" pneumonia
judgement pneumonia
no-room-for-well-wishes pneumonia
you-did-this-to-yourself-and-deserve-to-suffer pneumonia
the momentary compassion flickers out
they take back the flowers and their well wishes
they abandoned you and your demons
until a day when you are smiling again
trapped again
stranded, alone
once again facing
full-metal empty

don't get angry with me
yes, I was suffering
plunged into despair
daydreaming about death
I continued all the way down
acting on my fantasies
committing acts of desperation
all I'd wanted was oblivion

beyond comforting platitudes
my friends meant well
everybody gets the blues
pull up by your bootstraps
won't feel this way forever
you can lick this
pretending works pretty well
fake it til you make it
never quite the right words
I pulled away
I started to cry
keep my condition secret
it sucks from your life

she proved her friendship
just in time
by not offering advice

I was so ashamed
I am still ashamed
perhaps I will always be ashamed

a lifetime riding a slow-motion roller coaster the hills and valleys so far between and gradual I couldn't even feel the shifts

on top of the world ambitious happy driven energetic
 always the thought
 this is perfect
 I'll feel like this forever

a slow gradual swing until

the depths of despair depressed lethargic unhappy crying hopeless
 always the thought
 this is hell
 I'll feel like this forever

a slow gradual swing until

the top of the world again
 the depths of despair
 top of the world
 the despair

I thought everyone lived like this

this wasn't a daily occurrence this was cyclical almost seasonal sometimes I'd have the thought "Oh, it's 'that' again." but I never knew what "that" was but now to have a label for "that" is freeing
 it's not just "that weird thing"
 it's a thing
 it's a real thing
 and it's treatable
 and there's hope
 there are still happy times sad times energetic times lazy times but they're normal
 happy and sad
 not that "thing" anymore

bi·po·lar

[bī'pōlər]

ADJECTIVE

bi-polar (adjective)

having or involving two related opposites, poles, or extremities.

relating to or occurring in both polar regions of the Earth.

(of psychological diagnosis) characterized by both manic and depressive episodes.

(of a person) diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

(of a nerve cell) having two axons, one on either side of the cell body.

(of a transistor or other electronic device) using both electrons and holes as charge carriers.