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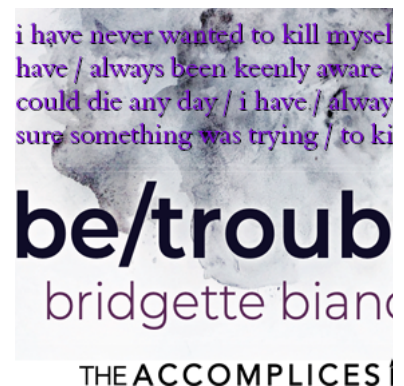
THE TALKING CURE: OF ZOMBIES, WOLVES, GIRLS, AND HOLES

written by Guest Contributor February 25, 2019



I recently shared an illustration on Facebook from the comic strip *Verbal Vomit* by the brilliant Hannah Hillam. In the drawing, there are two images—one marked: “Ten Years Ago” and one marked: “Now.” In the first, a young woman who shouts, “What is Happening???” is being consumed by an eight-legged, glassy-eyed, fierce-toothed monster marked “Mental Illness.” In the second, the same woman is eating a spoonful of soup while the same monster is tapping on her shoulder. The woman’s word bubble offers a casual, “Oh, hey, buddy, what’s up,” as she stares at her cell phone.

When I saw it, I said out loud, “Yeah. Exactly.” Hillam’s monster is my zombie.



cute and the zombie-monster, even when familiar, is good at holding you down, choking you, plastering you to the couch, and eating everything that matters. It devours:

hours, weeks, months, years,

love, friendship, epiphany,

success, creativity, calm.

I think about mental illness in the same way I think about sexual assault. I live with mental illness and in the aftermath of sexual assault. They're not twins, but they're sisters—the repercussions of the latter influencing the former. About them both, I find myself repeating: *Others have it worse than me. It hasn't killed me. It hasn't made me try to kill myself. I mean, not REALLY. Except for maybe that one time, but I'm not dead. So, I know it's not that bad. I'm very privileged, actually.*

It could be so much worse. I'm still alive. After all, I'm still alive.

These are the diagnoses that psychotherapists and prescribing doctors have written on my forms over the years: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). I almost forgot about Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa, because those zombie-monsters have been asleep for about 15 years now. I gave up puking because as I got older I started to care about my teeth, the dentist is expensive, and I no longer have a gag reflex.

I am also a high-functioning adult. I have written books. I ran a literary non-profit for 14 years and helped scores of other people write their books. I own property. I have travelled all over the world. I went to grad school. I am in a stable loving relationship. I have cats. I feed my cats every day. I scoop poop out of my cats' litter box every other day. My cats are healthy. I seem entirely fine, don't I? I look pretty great in this leopard skin coat, don't I? I've learned to cope with all of these diagnoses and acronyms.

We continue to live in what Bell Hooks labels “the imperialist, capitalist, white supremacist patriarchy” and, in particular, women with mental illness are expected to suck it up and figure it out. Eat soup, text back, nurse the baby, cook meals, take out the garbage, go to work, be reticent, and be pretty the whole damn time. I have carefully crafted my life so that sometimes, I can hold it all together and appear healthy, but, sometimes (more often than not) I'm under the covers hiding from the zombie.

I cancel professional appointments and dates with friends every week, because my anxiety is so bad that I can't leave the house or share space with another human (GAD). Just this week, I cancelled a meeting with my boss; a happy hour where I was excited to discuss sex worker rights with a woman I deeply admire; a card reading with a tarot client; and there is that friend who is in town only until tomorrow. Yes, there are always things to take care of that make good excuses. But mostly, I cancel commitments because I'm under a blanket

BY JANICE LEE, SEP 7 2021

Imagine a Death embodies a vast, preternal and intensely intimate terrain... sentence sentence, her rhapsodic fearlessness and logic not only reflects and withstands, it back... The result is the greatest work to one of America's most elemental voices: death-defiers, a kind of lamp that breaks dark.

– **Blake Butler**, author of *Ali*

RECENT COMMENTS

Fin Sorrel this is bummer, you guys hold the t online culture (regarding the underground lit together for me and probably many others
ENTROPY IS SAYING FAREWELL · December

Marie Very sorry to hear this—Entropy has pu so many great pieces and interviews. Huge th everyone involved for their hard work.
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Tiffany Thank you for all your work these year really made an impact. Happy trails to everyo The Final Where to Submit: December, Januar February 2021-22 · December 7, 2021

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about the reason for my cancelling. That no, that cock and bull story, that fairytale is the only thing keeping me from a shame spiral that would bind me for days. My ego tells me that it is better to be the strong girl who just does not have the time because of all the other very important vagaries in my life, rather than the victim who is “suffering” or “surviving” or “living with.”

I cannot relax in public if I don't have my back to a wall (PTSD). I always try to rush first into a restaurant to find the seat that is protected, or if possible, I arrive before anyone else, so that I can find a seat that feels safe. If I don't get there first and get that seat, heart pounds in my throat, jumps at every sound, prayer: *my dearest beloved service industry kin, please do not break a glass for the next hour or so, please*, biting the inside of my cheek and tinny blood covers the taste of every bite of food that is all mush and squish. I can't relax, and I can't truly engage other than appropriate head nods and occasional eye contact that help me fake it. I will not remember the conversation. I will be having a private conversation with my zombie: *Just get through it. I can do it. Don't be ridiculous. Don't give in to this. Just get through it. I need to learn how to do this. Fuck victimhood.*

There have been times that until a friend came over to drag me out of bed and forced me to shower, I stayed there for days (MDD). It is gross. I am gross. It smells just as bad as you imagine.

I cannot visit county fairs or historical reenactments because the sound of a gunshot makes me puddle on the floor, rock, and become incapable of reasonable thought (PTSD). I've had to pull over while driving, so I don't crash my car because of impulsive suicidal thoughts (MDD). I smoke cigarettes, another shame inducing habit, to cope with anxiety attacks (GAD). There are times I can't make love to the woman I love because being touched triggers a panic attack (PTSD). I am often late because it can take me a long time to leave the house (OCD).

It could be worse. I'm still alive. After all, I'm still alive.

When I was fifteen-years-old, a close friend of mine was going through much the same things I was going through and coping in much the same ways: eating disorders, cutting, and other forms of trying to control THE BODY. She was institutionalized. It scared the fuck out of me, and I got better at hiding. I visited her several times a week at the looney bin to be a support to her, but also to keep myself out of there. I studied that place. I knew what mental illness looked like, and I learned how to still my shaking, hungry hands. I was never admitted, but I had an escape plan just in case.

I don't think I'm a writer because of mental illness, but I do think writing is an important zombie-fighting weapon. I do not think I could have survived my self-hatred and my shame without my own writing and other women's writing.

In the short story “The Girl Who Cried Wolf” Rebecca Brown writes about wolves that only the narrator can see. They bite off the narrator's hand and chunks of her calves. She screams, mutters, pleads for help from anyone nearby to get her away from these wolves who are consuming her. Brown writes: “She felt like she was

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was an excuse but she was past caring.”

Sometimes I long for these visible wounds. Sometimes I’m grateful that I learned how to sustain these wounds and hide them when I was young. On the one hand, no one would shame me for missing that reading, that meeting, that lecture, that year of my niece’s life if a wolf had bit off half of my leg. No one would expect me to turn in that essay on time, submit that conference proposal, write back to their thoughtful email if I were suddenly down a hand.

On the other hand, can you imagine a job interview where I was entirely honest? Why yes, Mr. Future-Employer-of-Me, there will be times when I leave a meeting shaking faking a need for a bathroom break because a visitor to the office, a client perhaps, has a similar timber in his voice to my father and all I can hear is the ringing in my ears after a gunshot and all I can picture is smoke from invisible cigarettes curling up from his Marlboro Reds and now client is father and father is client and I feel hands around my neck and I will try to manage a squeaked out “excuse me” and a wan smile as I escape to the bathroom to remember how to breathe.

Kristen Stone writes about a girl who wets the bed: “Sandy tenses up her muscles in fury. She thinks about peeing on the carpet, on her mother’s pillow, her father’s toothbrush, in his vodka, in his car—but she settles on peeing in the backyard, like puppies do, like a fast, sneaking rabbit. After they leave her alone for the night she pushes up the window and climbs out, squatting in the grass, lifting up her nightgown, hot spray of urine on her inner thighs, the blades of grass sharp and stiff with poison against her bare feet.”

We find ways to cope, don’t we? When I was a little girl, I would sneak out of the bedroom window, climb down off of the air conditioner, hop onto the folding chair and, step barefoot onto the damp ground under the mulberry tree. I would talk to the full moon telling her my fears and my secrets. I would offer her one of my mother’s ripped up Eve Light 120’s and pee on the small pile of tobacco before returning to bed. It is the rituals that help us survive.

Danielle Pafunda: “How have I fallen into this hole? Why have I fallen into this hole? Were this hole avoidable, would I have avoided it? If this hole were not bedecked with dried roses and furs, would I have avoided it? Were this hole not located directly in front of my face whichever direction I turn, would I have avoided it? If this hole had fewer magnetic pulses taking place in concentric circles rippling up into my face descending down my body in a slick tube of interference, would I have walked in an impossible direction away from this hole? If this hole weren’t serving quite so much whiskey...” .

There are times when mental illness consumes me. Sometimes years, sometimes hours. I have resisted—clawing my bloodied nails and finger tips deep into the sides of the hole as it tries to pull me down. I know what is in that hole. There is no coming up from that hole. It’s all death and hungry ready-to-eat-me-up zombie-monsters.

I have found help in fanatically dieting; the instant gratification of a one-night stand, and another, and another; MDMA, Mushrooms, Acid; prescription pain killers; whiskey, wine, beer, vodka, tequila, rum; prescription psychotropics; weed, THC edibles, CBD lozenges; rowing, swimming, yoga; too much Netflix, hours and hours and hours of watching zombies and the women who kill them.

It is not easy to write about mental illness overtly. Women's "confessional" writing has been berated and buried for generations. They want us, especially when we are manic with bright-eyed longing for some sort of healing, but they do not want us to write about it. They will not publish it. So we bury these confessions in our stories in metaphors about wolves, girls, sisters, ghosts, tigers, witches. We bury them in bell jars published under some other woman's name and as dementors that are slain by a young wizard boy.

Or, we stay reticent.

There are no monsters.

There are no zombies.

That is not a hole.

That is not a wolf.

I'm fine. I can do this.

I'm still alive. After all, I'm still alive.

Kristen E. Nelson is a queer writer and performer, literary activist, LGBTQ+ activist, and community builder. She is the author of *the length of this gap* (Damaged Goods, August 2018) and two chapbooks: *sometimes I gets lost and is grateful for noises in the dark* (Dancing Girl, 2017) and *Write, Dad* (Unthinkable Creatures, 2012). Kristen is the founder of Casa Libre en la Solana, a non-profit writing center in Tucson, Arizona.

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THE TALKING CURE

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