

You by me: writing depression

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You by Me: Writing Depression

Stephen Carruthers & Fiona Stirling

I have agreed to write an essay about mental illness with a stranger—with you.

We email back and forth. Our conversation fires up, hesitates, falters. We circle the soft ground between us, stepping into the centre a little more each day (when we can bear it). We want so badly to get this writing right.

I say: ‘when I go for a walk, sometimes, all I can do is put one foot in front of the other.’ You smile and say: ‘one word in front of the other. But where do we go?’

We say: ‘we want to wander through the subject of mental illness, setting no beginning, middle and end. Wander into those dark woods and see where we find ourselves.’

See where I find myself with you.

What I want:

I want to question the definitions—in dictionaries, in medical textbooks—that petrify and fix these bloody awful things. I want to scream at the world that this is complicated and messy and inconsistent and difficult. So often I think one way about it and then I think another and that is what inconsistent means. But that word doesn’t convey what it is to find out that I disagree with myself. I want the reassurance that you feel some of these things too. I want to learn from what you might write and find some common ground. I want to learn from what I might write, discover what I feel and what I felt. I want to learn from being made to write, from being responsible to someone for staying on this journey together. I want a sense that all of this might *mean* something. No easy fix, but I guess I want hope.

That is why we need to work hard to write about this...

... work hard... share understanding... share hidden stories... work harder

Maybe if I am not alone in the struggle to find the words that never come easy...
None of this is easy. Maybe the world needs this. Maybe I need this.

We agree to wander out—out of our minds, out of our comfort, out of our individual experience. Unguided, we will walk through whatever might be formed in this in-between. Invite chaos into order. Confront that which has swallowed us before.

We agree to sink and drift, with purpose, into our past. Into now.

The first thing you asked me: ‘so what is your diagnosis?’

Diagnosis (noun):

the identification of the nature of an illness or problem
synonyms: identification, recognition, discovery, whatthefuck?

Depression (noun):

the act of depressing;
the state of being depressed.
sadness; gloom; dejection;
shit you’ve got a problem.

For years we believed that there is something fundamentally wrong with us. Everyone has their struggles, but what if we *are* more awful, more pathetic, more useless. We talk about those memories and yet we *know* that there was happiness too. How can you be wrong in the head when you remember smiling, laughing, dancing? How can you be darkness when you know you were not like this all the time?

you were like this all the time

In the beginning, the cruelest trick depression plays on you is that you don't know that you are suffering from it. You just think that this is what life is like. The darkness.

you deserve to feel like this

Already, this writing feels too risky. Laying out these words—my thoughts—with you. It's like undressing. An emotional thoracotomy; cracking open my chest to judgement, disappointment, shame. I hear a whispering that my insides are rotten.

you're rotten

I don't even want to tell *you* my diagnosis. And *you* are my... what?

Co-writer?

Companion?

We're digging deeper into this subject, into each other. So let's be... canaries. Keep singing underground until the air becomes too toxic.

You change direction. Ask me about the first person I reached out to. My English teacher. She had the exuberance of a humming bird, flitting around the classroom chirping lines of poetry and encouragement, always smiling. She took her pupils seriously. She had a lightness of being.

I hoped if I sat down in front of her she would help me find the words.

Rehearsal:

‘There’s something I’m a bit worried about.’
‘Miss, I think I need to tell you something.’

She pulled over a chair. She smiled, and listened.

What I didn’t say:

‘I’ve been feeling quite low for some time now.’
‘I’ve been cutting myself and I don’t really know why.’
‘I’ve begun to have thoughts about killing myself.’

What I didn’t say:

‘I’m worried I will never stop feeling like this.’
‘The thing is I’m faulty. It is pretty clear to me that I’m faulty.’

you’re fucked

She tried to respond but her words slipped and stalled. Her words had never done that before. I wanted to be saved. It was only much later that I understood that she couldn’t do that.

She passed me on to someone else, just as she was meant to.
I never spoke to her about my mental health again.

‘The trouble with trying to redefine depression,’ you say, ‘is that defining and defining is just thoroughly depressing’.

I laugh and tell you about a Sam Kriss essay I read years ago. He reviewed the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, one of the guides used by doctors and health professionals for clinical diagnosis, as if it was a piece of fiction:

‘As you read, you slowly grow aware that the book’s real object of fascination isn’t the various sicknesses described in its pages, but the sickness inherent in their arrangement.’

Nearly 1000 pages desperately defining boxes for humans to exist within.
He asks: ‘Who, after all, would want to compile an exhaustive list of mental illnesses?’
You say: People want doctors and psychiatrists to have power, to provide an answer, but they don’t fucking know either.

About 6 or 7 years ago my problems were getting too much to bear.

there is something very wrong with you

I’m not really sure what shifted.

you’ve always known that there is something very wrong with you

When I spoke to my GP it was actually a relief. I sat in her office and she was patient, reassuring. I sobbed in her office, that time, other times too. It was awful and a relief. She listened about the stresses of my job, the pain of dark winters, about my Dad, about my breakup...

She listened and she asked, ‘so do you feel depressed?’

so do you?

She got me to fill in a form.

Over the last week:

I have felt terribly alone and isolated.

☑ sometimes.

I have felt totally lacking in energy and enthusiasm.

☑ most or all of the time.

I have felt like crying.

☑ often.

(There is a moment when it feels like I could be filling in just any form...)

Talking to people has felt too much for me.

☑ most or all of the time.

Tension and anxiety have prevented me doing important things.

☑ often.

I have felt despairing and hopeless. I have felt panic or terror.

☑ most or all of the time.

☑ most or all of the time.

I have thought about hurting myself.

☑ most or all of the time.

I have made plans to end my life...

you're in a real fucking mess now, aren't you?

My diagnosis was depression. To be honest I have been given a bunch of labels over the years. Depression, anxiety, yadda yadda. I'm sure there are plenty more in my medical notes I am not aware of, theories about who I am according to various checklists. For many years, it seemed really important to 'know'. Like that could steer me to the right treatment, steer me to well-being. Steer a broken ship to shore. I wanted to learn everything I could about these words. If I knew what was wrong with me, then I could beat it; if I knew what was wrong with me, maybe I could be fixed.

A threshold concept: something that once learned cannot be unlearned.

you *are* broken and you'll never be fixed

So what is depression to you?

A one-sentence story:

A tired, sick wee kid, who can't understand what it is that is making them feel bad, who doesn't know when, or even if they are ever going to get better, so they try to go on holiday from themselves by sleeping in the spare room.

Another:

tired tired tired can't cope can't ever cope

Another:

Goblins hopping, trashing my mind, making sure the only memories I can hold onto are the ones about how I have failed/been failed; how I'm terrible/had terrible done to me.

It all comes down to storytelling—what story have we told ourselves about our lives? What story will we tell ourselves about who we are?

We've been telling each other our stories for months now. Listening. Reflecting. Questioning. Provoking. We have taken comfort in our similarities, and our differences. We have discovered rambling in a dark wood is easier when you have someone meeting you in there. So many times you would say, I would say: 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm just rambling here.' And you would say, I would say: 'No, no, keep on keeping on—you're taking us somewhere really interesting.'

This essay would be formed, we imagined, from telling our stories in turn. We would maintain our separate selves, fastidiously mark out you and me. Once we began it was clear something was lost in translation. The ebb and flow of us together. The moments we most wanted to represent stubbornly refused to emerge on the page.

In *A field guide to getting lost*, Rebecca Solnit asks, ‘Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark... how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?’

‘We’ made the decision to become ‘I’. We offered up our individual stories, so well-defined in our personal landscapes, and began to bend and blend, breaking the boundaries between me and you—building something new. A space where unknowns might creep forth.

It was uncomfortable, frightening. At first I was distant and careful with my words, feeling a need to maintain control. If you are told over and over that your thinking is faulty, how do you begin to trust it? How do you trust yourself to contribute to a writing experiment? To contribute to anything?

I was talking about the worst things in my life.

And I had to start by trusting you.

Crisis (noun):

A time of intense difficulty or danger.

A time when a difficult or important decision must be made.

like you can even make a decision. Fuck.

Rock bottom. Beneath it all, being reformed like the rock itself: erupting, crumbling, shifting.

I erupt from the flat which has become a place of despair, where I have begun to contemplate things I have never contemplated before. Like old biscuit crumbs in a corner I wait to be swept away. I know if I stop moving my life will take leave of me, right here and now. I wander and pace Waverley station as I wait for my connection, clutching a Cornish pastie far too tightly, unable to eat it. Cold pastry flakes off my fingers and onto the platform like brown, greasy flakes of snow.

you're broken, you know that don't you? nothing that can fix you, nothing left to be fixed...
where do you think you're running to?

It takes an hour-and-a-half to get home. To my parents' home. I feel some sort of relief at being back, even if it is a home I haven't lived in since I was 17. My old bed. Rolling the duvet round my fully clothed, shoed body, trying to feel nothing but the blanket.

And then things get worse. And worse.

Irrationally, relentlessly, painfully, I sob, giving in to the despair. I begin to stop: washing my body, changing my clothes, making sense. Mum is worried. She wants to know what I want.

I say: 'I want Help. Don't I? Help?'

I say: 'Just nobody touch me, I'll only sink. I can't breathe.'

I say: 'What do I want? A lifeboat, a rescue copter, a parachute. A blade.'

I say: 'Fuckfuckfuck.'

She wants to know what she can do. (She'll do anything.) But she's out of her depth here. She's never had to deal with something like this before; the closest she's got is the great aunt who lost her mind that we all joke about at the holidays, but we only laugh because we're all so fucking scared that losing minds might be in our blood.

She says: 'I'm calling a doctor'.

Mum doesn't drive, but she could see I wasn't going to manage to walk myself to the GP. She called a neighbour because his car was in his driveway. Byron is the kind of guy who gives her a lift to the cattery when she goes on her holidays. Byron comes into the house and sees me sitting there and I can tell by his expression that he is shocked at how dreadful I look. (Zombie. That was the word he tells me later—zombie.)

I take some pills. Too many pills.

I'm in the back of a cab, a nurse either side of me. They bring me to a waiting room for clinical assessment and I'm ok with that, I think, because I have always been good at assessments. I pass the Generalised Anxiety Disorder and Patient Health Questionnaires with flying colours. My madness is exceptional.

'What symptoms have you been experiencing?'

'SadnessSadnesSadneSadnsSadnSadSaS.

Myfingersaredulltheydon'tgraspthingsanymore.

IfItrytosmilethereisarippingsoundinginmychest.Breathingfeelslikethelastofmerushingout.'

'How long have you been feeling like this?'

'Onemillionyears.'

'Have you been admitted to a psychiatric ward before?'

Festive orange and black streamers hang low in the doorways. Halloween. The nurses are adorned with devil horns and halos. A patient, interpreting the nurses as demons, is losing her shit. She bangs on the metal grating of the windows and flips over a chair:

'I WILL BURN THIS FUCKING PLACE TO THE GROUND!'

What I want to tell myself:

You're a good person. You have a family and friends that love you. Being here is just a blip, you're going to get better.

What I actually tell myself:

'You're nothing. Nothing.
You're a blackholedressedasaperson
and when everyone finds out you've been here
they'll know how much you're broken.
Beyondrepair.'

things will be better if you just cease to exist

I accept a cigarette. Smoking gives my breath meaning and something to burn myself with.

Patients surprise me with their kindness.

I am reminded of an idea I had for a book to write while living in Siberia. Tough, lonely days of being the only foreigner in small-town provincial Russia far far away from anything. I was lonely. People seemed suspicious and unfriendly, but once you broke past that initial reserve, they would do absolutely anything for you. I wanted to write 'The Book of Kindnesses', a sort of record of the everyday nice things that people did. The cashier who stopped me buying horse salami by neighing. The internet café girl who smiled every time I went in there. The isolation made me aware of how important these acts of kindnesses were.

I will write that book one day.

We all watch Bargain Hunt. Both nurses and patients, united in spotting treasure. It's actually... nice, which is more than I deserve for not getting better faster. The woman from the bed next to mine throws a blanket across my shoulders. I think of it as a shield, huddle further into the couch. For the first time in, well, longer than I care to remember before this moment, I feel safe. But I will never really be safe until I stop trying to destroy myself. The television is knocked to the side by nursing staff wrestling a man with a sharp to the floor. This place is chaos.

just like you

Just like me.

~~I try to hang myself~~

The psychiatrist asks how I'm feeling. I want to reach over and pull her into the woods to wander through this essay with us; take her by the hand so she can follow every, single, step.

What do I want to do when I write about mental illness with you?

I want to be able to answer that question.

In this Anthology Stephanie Bishop writes about (re)learning how to play the cello, having to position her body in a new way to get where she wanted to be. I try an experiment to help me wander out, positioning my body in a way it had never been before. I climb under my desk at work. Get down on my hands and knees to inch under, a little animal seeking hibernation between computer cables and carpet tiles. I curl my legs by my side, balance my laptop on my chest, and stuff a coat beneath my head for support. My hip aches against the hard floor. I think, 'Let it hold the unpleasantness of this work so I don't have to support it anywhere else.' When I am finished I crawl back into the world with a stiff spine and two dead legs to shake back to life. I take a breath, acknowledge I am free from that little space, even though it still exists. I know I am able to wander out, and wander back again. There are many spaces for me to dwell.

The trick is remembering the way.

Can you remember the way?

Healing (noun):

the process of becoming sound or healthy again.

At the end of his book on depression, *Lost Connections*, Johann Hari writes, ‘I am really wary of ending this book with a simple cry of “I did it, and you can too.”’

He says: ‘That wouldn’t be honest.’

He says: ‘I was able to make these changes because I am really fortunate.’

He knows.

Because when I am reading his book and finding much to think on in a calm and thoughtful way, much that makes sense, much that is in its own way *hopeful*, I also find myself thinking—but I just want to be better.

I just want to be better.

you’re never going to

you’re nev—

The seduction of the story—the book, the narrative—is its form: a beginning, middle and end. There will be an end to this. There must be an end. *I did it and you can too*. Of course you did Johann. There is honesty in saying that.

Question:

How on earth do I write about healing when at the moment things are this bad?

There is a part of me that can’t face returning to our discussions about coping. Because I am not. I am falling off a precipice in my own home.

My therapist is at pains to remind me that I am coping. Sometimes I need reminding what coping is. Getting up. Going to work. I have been worse. Maybe this is exactly the right time to be writing about healing. To be reminded what it is.

you're scared for fuck's sake

Just what is it that I am scared of reading? Of writing?

The hardest thing in revisiting conversations about coping is suspecting I am not. The fear of never getting back, wherever 'back' is. I have been worse.

And now I am worse again.

After five weeks of feeling like I am sinking in very dark waters, I click out of it, just for an evening. I have been for a run. (Me running!) I say to a friend on the phone that it's funny because it's really difficult to keep a handle on what it is that is different. After weeks of not feeling normal, this will do. And I can't get a handle on why this evening I might feel different. So where does *that* get me? Still powerless? Still going to sink?

From what I understand of it, narrative memory behaves in strange ways. It averages things out. What I remember is five weeks of sinking. What I remember is pain. How do you remember fleeting relief in the face of that?

It is important to remember moments of relief. It is important to write about them.

I remember:

my first meeting back with my tutor on a Masters after taking a few months off due to my mental health. I was still pretty convinced that I wasn't going to manage to make it back and finish the course.

I remember:

telling my tutor I had no idea how much I was going to be able to handle. I told her that my only priority, the only thing I knew for certain, was that I needed to go for a walk every day. I told her if anything else was going to follow, it had to follow that.

I remember:

Tears running down my cheeks as she accepted my distress without judgement as she let the shame hanging out of my body hit the floor and fade away.

I remember:

My neighbour telling me, one foot in front of the other. Walk with me if you like, you don't have to say anything if you don't want to. One foot in front of the other.

It saved me, him telling me that. In a profound way I do believe that he saved me that time. It was surprising discovery—one much harder to admit to my depressed self—to realise that I saved me too.

I put one foot in front of the other. It was me.

It never is just one thing that saves you.

Last winter, on my walks, I discovered splashing my face with cold water from a stream. It is even better if you do it from a waterfall. The intensity of cold is something that momentarily makes it hard to breathe. In the rain your hands won't dry, it runs down your coat sleeves, your extremities freezing, unpleasant. But it makes you feel really, really alive.

My walks evolve. I notice trees. I take pictures of them. I observe them. The Japanese call it *Shinrin Yoku*—forest bathing. Doctors prescribe it as treatment.

Water evolves. In the last few weeks, at home, at work, I've found that even splashing my face with water from the tap helps. Cold water.

Life evolves. Live again moments. These tiny things, holding it all back.

I was once encouraged to map my thoughts/feelings/behaviours on to a traffic light system. When all was well I was green; when it was starting to tilt I was orange. When it was bad, when it had all gone to hell, I was red.

It is about noticing.

A list of things to notice:

The lightness dissipating; everything I carry around heavyheavyheavy.

Humour replaced by irritation and impatience.

Retreating from the world

not leaving the house not socialising notnotnot

Physical pain when with other people

anactualache.

Being unable to discover daftness, wonder, magic, silliness.

Forgettingtolaugh.

you haven't laughed in days now. Ha.

Resist the gravitational pull into the red. It tells me that if I just give in, if I just indulge the darkness and let go—become untethered from the world—it will be some sort of relief. There are days when darkness terrifies me.

When I am shattered and I want more than anything to lie in bed and let it pass but the shitshitshit destroys me. I want oblivion. I *crave* oblivion.

We both know what oblivion is. A full stop. It's there in the other stuff: the drinking yourself into nothing, the pills to take away the pain, the sex or the wanking, the glued to your phone as you sit on the shitter and descend down yet another internet rabbit hole, the check for updates and the losing yourself.

you're losing

The TV. The manic cleaning. Even the exercise. All the things we do to distract ourselves from ourselves andandand

I feel like I'm rambling. You tell me again you think our most interesting ideas have come up when one of us has wandered off, beaten a new path. We all worry so much about being normal, or being not-normal. Maybe we need to reclaim these oblivions.

The good oblivion! Oblivion-lite! Oblivion without the calories of regret!

A walk. Meditation sometimes. Lost in music. A good book. Exercise even!

Sitting and watching something stupid all night on Netflix.

what the fuck are you doing, wasting your life?

Must let go of these value judgements.

Good or bad, oblivion is just what people need sometimes. Is that what is scary about it? Knowing we need it? Letting go, when we truly can, is just the thing.

A space to feel okay would be good. You ask me 'what place have you carved for yourself in the world?' I don't want to answer. My mind shutters, my heart constricts. I am scared that I have failed. I am scared I haven't done so many things I should have done.

Therapy has me asking myself why I ask these questions so directly. About what I should do.

should... should... should...

Maybe I have started to carve out a space. Maybe there is somewhere, just outside of myself, where I can write. That is something that feels important to me.

I try to make sense of depression. I actually write about it. In the past I couldn't even try, though it leaked out in my work, and felt like the badbadbad thing trying its best to sabotage me. I would like to be 'content me' all of the time. But 'depressed me' is me too. And that part of me needs recognition. Walt Whitman was right - 'I am large, I contain multitudes.'

Depression does not define me—apart from when things are bad and its shadow whispers out like an echo—but I am comfortable saying (now) that it is part of me. I don't think I can change that. Nor, strangely enough, do I think I would want to.

you stupid fuck,
of course, you would change that

Ask me again. You might get a different answer.

You remind me how hard it is to write about mental health, to capture these loops and spirals, and endless contradictions. These moments are butterflies and wasps flitting between our fingers, calling themselves reality. And sometimes they land effortlessly on the page. That might just be enough.

The very act of writing, of addressing depression and relief seems optimistic.

you... feel... hope?!

What is hope but an ongoing belief in your own ability to adjust? To know that sometimes you will find yourself out of sorts—sometimes frequently or even dramatically—but you can live with that, find succour in your resources, run through your own checklist of things you know you can use to keep things ticking over.

I usually manage to go for a walk when I am not feeling great. The more insidious way of me failing myself is not taking that walk when things seem mostly okay. It doesn't matter so much, if I'm feeling okay, does it? Miss a day ... or two ... or three....

you do it to yourself'

you always do

I like walking. And I need to listen to myself. I will listen to myself.

'Look at that,' you say. 'A beginning, middle and a resolution starting to emerge. Closure.' I see it too. A need to make this essay story-shaped.

But—

I'm struggling again. I can't quite explain... an absence of feeling—a hollowing out—andandand a weight of feeling too much. How can both exist concurrently? How can I feel like I'm drowning and falling through the air at the same time?

I thought I'd figured this out.

you thought you'd figured this out! yeah right!

When am I 'normal' sad, and when am I depressed? What is stress at work, and what is anxiety? I thought my traffic light system, the water, the walks helped, but the illness has shape shifted. The body of it swerved. Darkness returns. It seepsseepsseeps through, and tips the balance again. The world is too much. There were no warning bells this time.

I can't open the mail. Can't open bills and letters and bank statements. They pile up. I miss important things, little things, then I fuck up again. More examples that prove how useless I am. I'm not even opening your emails about this essay.

The piles keep a-piling, the guilt keeps a-guilting.

It's going to keep happening, isn't it?

Whenever I think I know these deep, dark woods, they change, punching all the air from my guts.

I whisper:

you do it to yourself. that's what really hurts

We will all experience things in life that are 'like' mental illness.

We will all experience things in life that are 'like' joy.

you think you can be happy again?

I think maybe I can be happy again.

But even as I write this, even as I cut and paste, move the hope around the page to see if I can find a place where it might work, I really really don't believe it.

You tell me you can't work on this essay any more. You are off work again. You can't do any of this any more again. You have to put your energy into just breathing again. And I understand. Fuck, do I understand.

There is a frustration at realising that no amount of edits will make this essay feel right for either of us. That what we anticipate and intend can't truly be reconciled with what we end up with. This is life. This is depression. This is writing. In our attempts to

become lost, to find the unknown, we have seen precisely how afraid we are of losing control, of letting the chaos in.

Questions to ask ourselves:

What if, when we get lost again (because we will get lost again), we try to remember that we're not as lost as we were before?

What if we accept this imperfect edge inside (and between) us, spanning recovery and chaos?

What if this has never been a straight path at all? What if we're a circle, you and I?

I write a message to you just weeks after thinking I was done with this all. I write:

'Thanks for taking over on the essay.

Thanks for telling me that I didn't even have to open the document if I didn't feel up to it.

Thanks for reminding me that what we have done already is enough.

I felt able to open it again today. I read what we wrote. At least I felt able to do that.'

What we wanted:

We wanted to question the definitions—in dictionaries, in medical textbooks—that render the bloody awful things so fixed, so unshifting. We wanted to scream at the world that it is complicated and messy and inconsistent and really really awful.

We wanted to engage with what inconsistent means, and... *rage*... at our inability to convey that we cannot even agree to disagree with ourselves. And we wanted reassurance. That you and me felt some of these things too.

you feel it all the fucking time

We wanted to learn from writing. We wanted to stay on this journey together.
We wanted a sense that all of this might *mean* something. Because there is no end to
this messy, complicated business.

We wanted hope. Oh god yes, we wanted hope.

That is why we need to work hard.

work hard...

share understanding...

share stories...

smile ...

I smile at you. You smile at me. If we are not alone in the struggle to find these words
that never come easy, then maybe we will find these words. (None of this is easy.)

Maybe the world needs this. Maybe we need this.

'You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.'