

Hi, my name is Jonathan Penton, and I'd like to welcome you to WRITING RESILIENCE: A READING BY NEURODIVERSE WRITERS. This reading was conceived, created, and organized by Larissa Shmailo. Unfortunately, a week before the Conference, Larissa encountered some unexpected health problems, and is unable to attend. We miss her, and are grateful to her for setting up this reading.

This reading features writers affected by trauma, addiction, and/or mental illness. Panelists will present their stories to empower themselves and others who have these stigmatized disabilities. Panelists will come out as neurodiverse as they inspire their listeners with their literary memoirs; audience members, including the neurotypical, will be able to identify with their struggles, triumphs, and resilience. The panel will demonstrate that mentally ill does not mean mentally weak.

I'd like to introduce my fellow readers. **Anna Fridlis** graduated from the New School with a nonfiction MFA in '14 and has been teaching at her alma mater since. She is currently on academic leave to work on her memoir about immigration, trauma, family and identity. Anna also edits for *Seventh Wave Mag* and runs an online kids writing camp. She'll be reading part of her longer piece, "The Black Hole, the Void, the Door and the Cacophony." The full text of the piece is available on the AWP's web site, as part of this reading's outline, or I have a few large-print copies here if you'd like to grab one.

Sandra Kleven is publisher at Cirque Journal and Press, partnering with founding editor, Michael Burwell. Cirque was created to publish the best work of writers in Alaska and the Pacific NW. Kleven is the author of four books, most recently, *Defiance Street: Poems and Other Writing*. She'll be reading "Positively Bush Street."

Meg Tuite is author of four story collections and five chapbooks. She won the Twin Antlers Poetry award for her poetry collection, *Bare Bulbs Swinging*. She is fiction ed. of *Bending Genres*, associate ed. of *Narrative Mag*. She teaches writing retreats and online classes hosted by *Bending Genres*. She'll be reading "The Grip of a Girl's Legs."

Again, I'm **Jonathan Penton**, and I edit the journal *Unlikely Stories* and its print arm, *Unlikely Books*. I am the Technical Director for the New Orleans Poetry Festival and *Rigorous*, and have worked in management and technical roles for a

number of arts organizations. My most recent chapbook of poetry is *Backstories*. I'll be reading an untitled piece of memoir.

Finally, we'll read the presentation that **Larissa Shmailo** prepared. Larissa is a poet, translator, novelist, and writing coach. She is leader of the workshop Writing Resilience for writers affected by trauma, addiction, and/or mental illness. She is the original English-language translator of the avant-garde opera *Victory over the Sun* by Alexei Kruchenykh. Her memoir is called "Fitness."

All of these works are available in full by downloading this panel's outline from the AWP web site.

The Black Hole, the Void, the Door and the Cacophony

by Anna Fridlis

I started my summer break with a bright hope for my fall sabbatical from university teaching: to draft a significant chunk of the memoir I haven't been writing for the last seven years, since graduating from my MFA in Creative Nonfiction in 2014. I started the memoir then as my MFA thesis, though instead of focusing on my own life at the time, I dove headfirst into my maternal grandparents' youthful journey to Sakhalin Island, where they were sent on work assignment as newlyweds by the Soviet state in the mid- 1950s. I suppose I started there because of a desire to "start at the beginning," which for me was the origin story of my family as I knew it for most of my childhood— the story of Mama, Baba and Deda.

I figured during my MFA that I would eventually get to my own life story after exploring Baba, Deda and Mama's, because mine didn't seem to invite or even allow a head-on approach. Frustratingly, I could not explain my life coherently, even to myself. Memories of my childhood, adolescence and young adulthood seemed to have been atomized and recombined in alien ways, as though they have journeyed through and emerged on the other side of a black hole, as though they belonged to someone else.

I was always trying to write about the black hole, but its gravity swallowed all of my words and imagination, so I couldn't seem to make sense of it all. Whenever I tried, I would end up getting sucked back inside it, lured by the need to name what was happening to me in something other than metaphor. I realized I could not write from inside it, but I also couldn't find a lasting way out. I did not even understand what it was in any other terms— only the metaphor could capture the experience in language.

Writing a memoir when experiences, perceptions and memories are so difficult to pinpoint and set into context and narrative is like setting out on a journey only to find oneself right back at the beginning over and over again, but with less energy and less hope than before. At the same time, my sense was that until I could articulate what had happened to me, what was still happening to me, I would always be stuck here.

When the black hole swallowed my relationship with Mom and my entire US-based extended family three years into my post-MFA writing drought, I was left to make sense of a story that seemed to have come to its natural conclusion. I thought — well, now I can write it — I no longer have to worry about how my writing will impact those family relationships and can just focus on myself. But I couldn't. My throat clenched tighter than ever and writing wouldn't come — only tears, rage, and grief. The special fountain pen that Baba, who had since passed away, had gifted me a decade earlier as a college graduation present had disappeared, and so did any strength and hope for writing my story.

Urgent health matters kept my attention away from writing as I grappled with a new diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis against the backdrop of ongoing financial stress and the voluntary but excruciating loss of my family. Years went by in a kind of holding pattern, as I struggled to stay employed while managing chronic pain with copious NSAIDs, worrying how I would make it through each subway ride with its jerky train movements pulling on my joints and unruly crowds squeezing me into shapes my body couldn't hold. There was no room in my life for anything other than surviving.

2020 brought everything to a head. In February, I started a new anxiety medication for the first time in 16 years after my old standby had seriously declined in efficacy. Unfortunately, the new drug was a bad match for my chemistry and I descended into the worst condition since my teens, when I thought the black hole was immigration and blamed all of my pain and confusion on the tug of war between two cultures, each of which wanted to claim me in my entirety. March brought Covid to NYC, sending everyone into lockdown. Classes transitioned to online delivery, and I along with the entire faculty of my university were retrained for this format. Though the change was drastic and difficult, because of my declining condition on the new medication, I was privately grateful not to have to leave the house.

This return to the netherworld for the three months I spent on the wrong treatment and then weaning myself off of it prompted an inner reckoning. I saw clearly that no one was coming to rescue me, as in my teen fantasies and visions the first time I descended. Back then, I imagined as I wandered in secondhand

evening wear the ornate, pristine halls and gardens of wealthy DC homes and embassies where my pianist mother accompanied at concerts and I turned the pages for her, that someone might see me — see the sadness and hurt in my eyes that my mother could not. The gaze of a handsome man, like in all the fairy tales, would come to rest on me, a long-suffering Cinderella, righting somehow the wrongs of my life, siphoning that sadness like poison out of my mouth with his lips.

Now in my 30s, and already paired to a wonderful, caring partner in spite of all of my worst fears of being too broken for a healthy relationship, I understood that being loved and seen was not a vaccine against suffering. The damage, such as it was, had already been done, and no amount of fierce loving would ensure that I never felt so horrid again.

It was up to me — a matter of life and death — to find a way out of this place, to find the resources that would make it possible, to trust the love and support that were there for me from my partner, his family and my friends. Ironically, if Covid had not created the space and time for me to rest, reflect, and research, I would never have been able to get to this important insight. I needed the interruption to my routine of barely hanging on — a break from constantly pushing myself to squeeze out the last dregs of my energy to keep my job — so that I could glimpse the sadness and hurt in my own eyes and refuse to look away.

It didn't happen all at once, but little by little I started to understand. I changed medications again, and luckily started to feel better. I restarted therapy after a financially imposed break, made an appointment with my rheumatologist after a 3-year pause to begin treatment, and started following up on other long-neglected medical concerns, which added up to my feeling better physically. I returned to meditation after a decade-long hiatus and began spending more time walking the park across the street from home as the warmth of spring beckoned and the stay home order was lifted. The black veil too began to lift, just a little, but I knew there was so much more work to be done, that I would have to commit to caring for myself differently this time, like it was my job, my most important job. Like I wished that Mom could have decades ago.

Building on starting meditation and therapy again and getting on the right medication for both my anxiety and arthritis, I started reading up more online about what might connect all of these issues together. Over the course of my research, I came to understand more and more deeply that what I had been looking for was right in front of me all this time. The black hole had a name in the literature of psychology. It was called complex trauma. And my most recent brush with it prompted me to finally walk away from my family, though it started long ago, in the earliest of childhood. Trauma explained the fragmentation, the shame, the memory issues, the confusion, the inflammation and aggression of my immune system which expressed itself as arthritis. It explained my reliance on metaphor — language ceases to exist in trauma states or becomes meaningless, broken down into sounds and rhythms, textures and colors and images, sensations and emotions swimming together in a turbulent primordial soup from which something living has the potential to emerge but which lacks the coherence of life itself.

On some level I had known what the black hole was since my teens, but I had been raised to thoroughly mistrust my own experience and perceptions by a family shaped by Soviet oppression but unwilling to examine its dysfunction. Now everything I read kept confirming my experience — what I felt made perfect sense when looked at through the lens of complex trauma. The black hole had felt so dangerous because it fed on light and was therefore invisible. Now it was as though I had access to astronomical blueprints that proved its existence by its effect on me — the symptoms it created in my nervous system that otherwise had no coherent explanation.

I applied for sabbatical armed with new knowledge, but still far from certain in my success. Would the writing come now that I had this validation in my instincts? It didn't seem so straightforward, but I knew I was ready to try again.

This was my first ever sabbatical — a privilege I could not believe I had been granted in the way that any good fortune feels suspect to one knocked down once, twice, thrice too many times. I'd saved up money from an extra class I taught in the pandemic fall of 2020 so that I could take not only fall 2021 to write but also the summer preceding it to focus on bolstering my nervous system. As that time approached, I felt the familiar lump in my throat that accompanies a foray into my

psyche. Of course, avoiding those forays was equally useless in protecting me from the pain and confusion of separation from the self — just because it was not staring me in the face did not mean I was ever really free of the shame and sense of brokenness I felt particularly sharply when examining my fractures.

As soon as I approached to look at myself more closely, the cacophony of voices in my head demanding that I get with the program and write, dammit, blaming me for failing, pushing, pulling, and stretching me into unnatural shapes and postures, would go dead silent. Like the observer effect, but with my inner world. Just as I readied the lassoes of my intellect, of words, to grasp my inner experiences, as soon as they saw me coming, seemingly before I even took a step toward them, they would transform into clouds of smoke and dissipate, leaving me disoriented and defeated in a void from which I could perceive nothing but the shadows of my shame and failure blocking out all the light of the world.

In my research I found an online class I could take to help address the impact of trauma on my nervous system that caused such great swells and surges of panic and such swooping swings into deadening depression in my body. I wanted to learn how to ride the dangerously powerful waves of feeling and sensation without getting sucked back into the singularity. The course lasted most of the summer and I learned a lot about the functioning of the nervous system and how it can stay stuck in a protective response after an event or series of events that prove too much for the organism to handle.

Like many other course participants, I realized I had been stuck in a protective nervous state for decades and learned that the path to a regulated, healthy system is non-linear, requiring patient self-exploration and the daily practice of deeply multilayered self-care for the rest of my life. I learned breathing, journaling and movement practices that help settle the body and mind and improve communication and energy flow between them. Though incredibly helpful, I could see that my new skills were unlikely to result in the sweeping nervous system healing I needed to help me finish the draft of my memoir by the end of the year. Still, having acquired a beginner's toolkit for my nervous system by the last week of August, I was all set to start my draft on September 1st. Miraculously, that was also the week I discovering while searching for something else altogether Baba's

fountain pen lodged in the cushions of the couch where I had looked frantically many times before but never found it.

Writing went smoothly all of September. I got to 20,000 words of my memoir and celebrated a budding almost daily writing practice. But then something shifted and October came and went with only a handful of pages written, pages that bothered and displeased me like naughty children, refusing to listen and follow instructions. I felt lost again, even with my new emotional self-care toolbox, and entirely daunted by my task.

In November, I told myself I would pick back up again after a month of soul searching. I did start writing again, but what came out was this essay— not my memoir. This feels like a kind of failure and a kind of success.

I only realized that the term complex trauma had anything to do with me less than two years ago, and every month I learn something new, something that opens new doors inside of me. This essay was started the day after a 75 minute online Internal Family Systems workshop. IFS is a therapy modality based on the phenomenon of internal fragmentation that develops as a result of complex trauma. According to IFS, the parts of me that need me to write and the parts that are terrified of trusting and trusting my own truth with others are in a constant battle. I asked the teacher about the void I faced when I sat down to write — how when I tried to access my parts, the voices inside of me, everything went dead and I felt entirely cut off from myself.

“The void,” she said, “Hmm, sounds like a protector part.”

“You mean the void is not an absence but a part itself?” I clarified.

“What do you think it’s trying to protect you from?”

I considered the question. The one thing the void spared me was the confusion of all of the voices inside talking, yelling, screaming over each other and paralyzing me in self doubt. By keeping the voices at bay, the void was shielding me from suffering.

“The cacophony,” I answered after a moment.

And with that the void became a door and I walked through it.

Positively Bush Street

by Sandra Kleven

The sky cracked its poems in naked wonder. Bob Dylan.

Someone took over a five-story hotel in the Filmore/Bush district of San Francisco and started renting cheap rooms to hippies. They named it, cutely, “The Greta Garbo Home for Wayward Girls (and boys also).” Over a hundred old hotel rooms all rented to folks in the scene. Sort of glorious/sordid.

Plenty of room at the Hotel California

My son and I stayed in the front desk area, behind the counter where guests once checked in. It was boarded up to enclose the space. An office, just behind, made it a two-room suite. A door in the back opened to the opposite hallway. The boy slept in a bookcase laid flat, with the shelves removed. A crib mattress finished it off comfortably. I called it a boat-bed so the child would like it.

These were our digs in the center of this weird place.

The child is Michael-Peter, sometimes Misha-Pisha, or even Pickle-Meter and referenced in writing as M-P. Born in my teens, his dad was a boy I hardly knew, conceived the very year birth control pills hit the market. One unexpected but highly fertile coupling brought forth a child.

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### ***...Livin' it up***

Sunday afternoon at the hotel. This guy drives his motorcycle up a makeshift wooden ramp into the lobby – a large, empty, L-shaped space. Sundays were as dull there as anywhere and I can still hear the roar of this Harley breaking the peace. We residents were all smiles, all “cool man” over this grand entrance. Nobody asked why. Almost everything was groovy.

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Old New York

Charlie had left me in New York after taking up with a poet. We were all at dinner one night and she must have looked good to him. When returning from a trip, I

discovered her framed 8 x 10 photo in his underwear drawer. This new thing moved fast. He showed me the poem she wrote summing up the situation. Roughly, "Our hero wipes sweat from beaded brow, as he jumps from bed to bed, from unwed mother to unwed wife." And wife, she would be. More of a match, likely.

To me Charlie was the golden one. Our run at life had been amazing – but it was reaching the end. We stopped believing. I could feel it.

This – San Francisco - was where I ended up. I got myself a new boyfriend. Donny. Tall, nicely built, impressing with a memorably large *member*.

Such a lovely place

Donny was a child in his enthusiasm for LSD mysticism. On the roof of that hotel one night, tripping on acid, he tells me, "I was standing like this. I was an ancient chief...I called out, challenging the storm and... the clouds obeyed me!"

Not thinking for a minute that he might have been hallucinating on the stuff. No, Donny controls the clouds and I said, "Groovy."

He was nice, cheerful. We started to call him Daddy Donny. Once while Donny slept, I decorated his appendage with psychedelic designs. Used a black Sharpee. On waking, he liked it. Donny was like that.

The drugs of this scene were pot, acid, and speed. One very young pot dealer chalked his prices on the curbside wall of the hotel. That's how free we felt.

On the pavement thinking about the government

I was having trouble with pot first in Seattle with some heavy paranoia and then, this, back in San Francisco: We were walking on the sidewalk back to the hotel. Summer, daytime. I am not sure where we took the hits, but approaching the corner, my eyes went blind. Truly blinded on my feet. Not black, but white, a whiteout. I was not afraid or panicked, I just reached for my companion to say, "I can't see." I stood there. A minute passed. Then, slowly, my vision returned.

No more pot. Nada. Not good for me

When seated with others and a joint comes around, I'd say, "No, I'm drinking wine. I don't mix my trips." You had to be careful. It is sort of a test. If you pass up a joint, you look like a narc.

These vagabond shoes, are longing to stray

Here's the thing. I wanted a boyfriend to replace the one I lost to the slender, dark-haired poet. Charlie had been a good choice – impressive to friends and parents. Exeter, Harvard and Columbia. Charlie was a National Merit Scholar. Donny, the well-endowed day-tripper would not do.

Charlie was hard to lose. Our relationship had depth, developed over months of daily letters. This is what I did during my junior year of high school: I wrote to Charlie at Harvard; Adams Hall. He responded with adoring words and invitations toward the radical, as in Paul Krasner and *The Realist* and EF Stone's rag. He sent me a burgundy sweatshirt with Harvard's Veritas emblem.

Bothell High School, a fighting Cougar, 17 years old – but I took to all of this right away. Got me reading Lawrence Darrell's, *The Alexandria Quartet*, and Norman Mailer.

I was in high school messing around with somebody else and I'd be pregnant before Charlie met me in person. That didn't matter to him, he dropped out of Harvard and joined me in Seattle. He stood by me in the birthing room, as I bore down to deliver the baby. But he left me in New York, and I was now in San Francisco getting over him. We were broke all the time. Michael-Peter and I needed somebody reliable. Plus maybe a job?

But here's the thing. We lived in the moment. Therefore, I had no goals. Goals leave the moment for the future. I was getting tired of the present moment. Like Janice Joplin said, roughly, "It's all the same damn day." I was seeing cracks in the edifice of cool.

Some dance to remember, some dance to forget

As noted, I needed money, so I started go-go dancing in North Beach. I was hired the moment I walked in. I asked, "Don't you want to see me dance?"

The guy said "You breathe, don't you?"

This slick world of bars and dancers was not the hippie world. In one place, girls costumed in feathers danced inside birdcages suspended near the ceiling.

I danced topless in one place for a couple nights. The naked vibe was different from the art modeling, I'd done in New York.

Ya' know, people don't grasp this anymore, but the hippy world held a lot of integrity. Consider, should a person wake a sleeping man to feed him. Which was the better choice? This was discussed, sides taken. "Let him sleep," I said. Keep the food warm.

The scene was changing, too. We spent less time opposing the Asian war and more time sauntering around Panhandle Park, tripping out in costumes. But then we were the Beautiful People – for a while longer.

This could be Heaven...

I was reaching the end of my buy-in to all this groovy stuff when some people came around describing a bloody wreck they saw high on Acid.

"It was amazing. Everyone was killed. It was so transcendent. Beautiful!"

Well, I do get that at a certain level death means nothing. But that's not where we live.

Met this sweet guy about to take off cross-country with his girlfriend. They had a cool bike for the long ride. He called himself, Superspade. I waved them off.

Days later someone said, "Do you remember that guy, Superspade? Yeah, I remembered. "They killed him. Drug deal gone wrong." Said something about a cliff.

Not good. Not my scene. I was done. I wasn't gonna ride that pony down.

The second night, that I was dancing topless, they had me try a bikini bottom made of white rabbit fur. No top needed. I danced on a raised platform near a far wall. Customers settled down to drinks and dinner; topless dancers on platforms were set among them, the flashiest in the center of the room.

I was uneasy viewing a world I knew nothing of. I was just 21 and had never been a customer in a bar... and, here, I was the entertainment.

Later, in the dressing room, when I took off that white rabbit skin bikini bottom, it was stained with unexpected menstrual blood. I set it aside and got out of there. I quit.

You can check-out any time you like...

Flights to Seattle were \$99 and the boy flew free. Not only that, the new Dylan album was titled, "Bringing It All Back Home. I could definitely do that. I would bring the revolution home.

At summer's end, I was back in Seattle, Washington where every bar was hiring go-go girls. Glorified cocktail waitresses, really. Take orders, deliver, cross the room to climb a one-step stage and dance to a few hits. I got a job back in my hometown northeast of Seattle.

Costumed in a black push-up bra with gold fringe, black fishnet stockings and essentially dancer briefs fringed in gold, I looked great. One photo survives.

Dancing there didn't carry the menace of San Francisco. My Mom could watch Michael-Peter in the evening and put him to bed. I could watch him in the daytime. Dancing brought good tips - great for a single mom.

I am married to a house carpenter and find him a nice young man

Then, someone I knew from school showed up – a guy I had cared about in the past. That first night, he said he would come back and drive me home when I got off – but he didn't show until the next day.

He fell asleep the night before. Was sorry. We crammed my Honda motorcycle into the back seat of his car. Fate intervened. We inadvertently broke off the brake lever rendering it undriveable. So, he started driving me to work and back, daily.

Then, Donny showed up. Scared me really; how his appearance crashed disparate worlds together. I told him I was with somebody.

"Good-bye, Donny," I said, as he boarded the south bound bus. No kiss. Made it final.

You could say I married the boy back home. That's pretty much what I did. A Valentine wedding. The bride was lovely.

The revolution would be televised.

Untitled

by Jonathan Penton

When Larissa invited me to be part of this reading, I was all in, completely enthusiastic. When it was accepted, I was devastated. I was convinced that I was unqualified, that my own struggles with mental illness were unworthy of an audience, whereas there were people out there who were legitimately suffering, while I derived social profit off my own pretention. These thoughts paralyzed me, leaving me unable to do anything but contemplate suicide for the better part of a week. Eventually, I realized the irony in being suicidal because you don't consider yourself sufficiently mentally ill, and while this realization of irony didn't lessen my symptoms, it did give me a bit of perspective.

I knew there was something wrong when I was very young. Up until recently, I have always cried hysterically when faced with the slightest stressor. My manic periods have always been characterized by rage, rather than euphoria, and my rages have always been intense and largely unpredictable, mostly directed at authority figures. By the time I was twenty, I had a name for these behavioral patterns. Self-diagnosis with bipolar disorder is, and was, ridiculously easy, and delightfully easy to romanticize, and I had access to the DSM-IV, and a wide variety of professional and layperson's psychotherapeutic texts.

I had these resources, but as a young, romantic radical, I both saw through them and misunderstood them. I recognized that the bulk of psychiatric and psychotherapeutic literature was geared toward making patients more productive cogs in a malevolent machine. I mistook this for a function of therapy, rather than a function of capitalism. I concluded that psychiatry couldn't help me; that it would actively harm me by making me socially docile. So I made a decision: I would eschew psychiatric drugs, and only take drugs that would enhance my rebellion, and make me a *less* productive member of society.

That philosophy didn't work. I was never able to adequately or effectively self-medicate. So I did what a lot of bipolar people do: I went to a psychiatrist, got my obvious diagnosis confirmed, lied to him about how high I was getting, and was prescribed medication, which I took irregularly and illogically. Every time I found myself in unbearable pain, I would call my psychiatrist, who would up my dosage. I frankly don't know why I did this, since I never took the full amount I was prescribed. Eventually, though, I was prescribed the antipsychotic zyprexa.

On zyprexa, I would sleep for at least twelve hours. That sleep brought me the most involved, cinematic, and dare I say insightful dreams that I have ever had before or since. I quickly found that I could acquire the medication, in plain brown packages, from Canadian post office boxes. At that point, I felt I no longer needed a psychiatrist. I dropped the antidepressants, fired up the bong, and slept and slept—letting zyprexa and its visions take me wherever it wanted to go. Zyprexa was the socially divergent drug I had been looking for.

It was nice. But it didn't help. My mania was coming under control, but my lows were getting lower, which is what happens when you try to cover them up with drugs, but avoid therapy. One week in El Paso, there was a series of dumpster arsons, and I became increasingly certain I was the perpetrator. There wasn't any physical evidence of this, but I did have a can of gasoline, and I did dream of self-immolation.

So I checked myself into the psych ward, not for the first time, and not for the last. They kept both zyprexa and weed well away from me, and offered me a new cocktail of antidepressants and antipsychotics, which also did not work. But the experience sobered me in a way other hospitalizations had not. Shortly thereafter, I turned 30, and came to the realization I was not a famous writer, or even a respected editor, and not on my way to becoming one. The situation called for change.

Mine is a story of values. Mine is a story of discovering authentic values in a society that solely values avarice. This is about deciding what to value when your efforts are permanently hobbled, when you are disabled in a society that values productivity for its own sake, morality as a money-making scheme, and introspection not at all. This is about determining a value system in a society so thoroughly capitalist that I can speak of acquiring social profit from the story I'm telling here today.

For most of my thirties, I was not living in major metropolitan areas. Although I have marketable skills, I have difficulty adapting to office environments, and my income is thus well below average. So like so many Americans with mental illness, I found myself out of resources. Whereas I had spent my twenties unwilling to seriously pursue psychiatric assistance, in my thirties I was, due to location and income, unable to.

My partner and I moved to New Orleans in the summer of 2016, when I was forty-one. By that time, I found myself incapable of functioning in normal

interactions where Trump supporters were present. You remember: as Trump normalized fascism on a national stage, cops and so-called “lone wolfs” publicly murdered protestors and left-wing dissidents. Myself, I began to have extended, detailed fantasies of vengeance, in which I systematically murdered cops and fascists.

At the same time, my suicidal mutterings and fantasies became more frequent, and more pronounced. I have mentioned that I sometimes spend days thinking of nothing but reasons I should kill myself. For months in 2016 and 2017, I thought of little else.

So I sought to resume psychiatric and psychotherapeutic treatment. Treatment options were more available in New Orleans than in my previous domiciles. I now take my meds, every day. I go to therapy every other week, which is an essential part of my treatment.

I am not OK. My mental illness is disabling. One sometimes hears disabled people say they are grateful for their disability, because it has made them a more sensitive and insightful person. I can’t speak for anyone’s experience but my own, but I emphatically state I wish I no longer suffered from bipolar disorder, not because I am ashamed, but because I am in pain. I have no idea what a “me” without this disorder would be like, but I’d be delighted to find out.

But I am the least toxic I’ve ever been. My violent fantasies are sharply diminished. I am more capable of compassion and less given to paranoia. I am more patient with the minor annoyances of daily life and more competent at handling stressors. I am kinder to abrasive people and fascists, and less abrasive myself.

I still don’t want to integrate into society. I work hard to produce the things I want to create, but I do not want to be “productive” in the capitalist sense. I want to be in less pain, and have always sought that. But, thanks to a determined and focused approach to psychiatric and psychotherapeutic self-improvement, I’m causing less pain to others, as well. That’s the best definition of resilience I’ve got.

The Grip of a Girl's Legs

by Meg Tuite

The girl's cut into us before, so we must be cautious, slippery and set down the script beneath razors, black-outs, speed, any drugs that grapple to keep us unhinged.

Terror warps the lifetime above us. Our multiple angles must be written under the skin below the dermis floating among veins, arteries, muscles and bones. A savage place where only the blood can censor us.

We take her places she won't go. Wrap ourselves around bodies of people she no longer remembers, nor cares to acknowledge. Lurch forward into rooms and announce ourselves even when the rest of the girl resists, an earthquake inside her, the stretch of lava burning through, breaking down her cells into quantum fear that is in process of working up its own formula, imprinting a deeper story, another journal.

Our tale begins as a tadpole. We are fused together inside the womb of a woman who is barely breathing from the conquest of grief that encompasses her. The girl's mother has bone cancer and only a few months to live. We encase in a fluid of violence and numb-draining tears. We exercise and thrash ourselves through thick water that attempts to annihilate us.

Despite the woman's imprisonment we start to paddle and become a pair. We remind the world of our imminent arrival by kicking as much as we can. Sometimes the mother laughs when we poke around under her globular belly. And yes, we survive. We wobble, straddle, stagger, weave and fall.

That doesn't end once we long-limb run, jump, leap and battle wounds. The girl capsizes herself with alcohol, Black Beauties, angel dust, sex with strangers, and slicing. Darkness barely discusses her. Blood covers our kneecaps one night from smacking into a lamppost. We buckle under her when she passes out. The next morning someone scrapes her off the ice and to the hospital while screeching gulls batter inside the girl's head. Too late for stitches. We bear the pain, the scars.

The girl's suicide can't find its way. She jumps buildings. We bear down to keep from cascading down the side onto the cement far below. Arms above us grip the edge of the building as we search for a protruding brick to hold our weight.

Tired veins start to cry. If we aren't allowed to run unrestrained, blood will pool, valves will weaken and venous walls will stretch, become floppy. Varicose veins strain against the surface of our skin, torture and dilate. So, rebellion is beginning. We force the girl to move where she doesn't want. Plunge her, legs first, into anxiety.

She is burdened with thoughts of lunacy. Matricide carries craziness in its blood. Dad slaps the words till Mom swallows her female whole. Things might or might not have happened to the girl. It is too far back to reach and she refuses to try. She hears voices she shouldn't recognize. She is constipated by new situations. Her vocal cords abandon her when she is asked to speak.

We drive her to the university. She shuffles down the hall to registration. There is no stopping us. We sit in front of a computer. No budging until she makes the right choice. Hands and arms are working with us. This is a case of survival and all limbs are on to her. Once she types in the buttons, we walk her to the window to seal the deal. She pulls out her wallet with gritted teeth. Hands the woman behind the glass window her student ID.

"Speech class," the woman says.

The girl opens her mouth, nods, and imagines running away. Computations are made and we are on our way out of the building. She will make each and every class.

We rev up the engine. The girl is ready for the closest liquor store. She doesn't know where next is, but we do.

Enough with the pills. The razors. The black-outs. We know what it's like to be stuck in erasure. Realize we are going down. Poison builds inside us. Sharp objects nullify us. The girl lays in bed. She doesn't move. We cramp her feet, sometimes her calves. We spasm into restless leg syndrome. Force her to get up.

She can barely stagger to the medicine cabinet. Instead, she puts on pants and gets dressed. She opens the phone book and her finger traces a line, stops at a name. It's her psychiatrist.

We run her to the car again. She finds this absurd and smirks. We are lighter in step. We even make her skip, just for the hell of it. The girl is shocked by what floods over her. Bathes her in a strange flutter of light.

We know what it is. We record the movements. Something she hasn't felt since before we were a tadpole. Relief.

Fitness

by Larissa Shmailo

FITNESS

The definition of *fitness* in genetics is to reproduce successfully. I have no genetic fitness. I did once: my genetic material was carried by my sister's daughter, my godchild and niece, Irene, whom I raised and let down. She committed suicide at the age of 35. She was a psychiatrist who knew pharmacology well and a determined individual who said that if she were to kill herself, she would do it so that no one would know. And, so she did.

As a young woman, I seemed to want to get pregnant pretty badly. I had many boyfriends and did not use birth control. Mentally ill and quite alcoholic, I had three abortions, two by a kind brilliant father and one by either of two men, a pockmarked writer or a mediocre bassist. It never occurred to me to tell the kind brilliant father, with whom I had a long-term relationship, about the pregnancies; my mother said he would not want to know and I accepted that. It turned out she was right.

I had a complete nervous breakdown at the time of my third abortion, with a vivid hallucination of a brown, curly-headed fetus, the subject of my poem "Abortion Hallucination":

Abortion Hallucination

A vision of a snake with glowing red eyes
formed by the light of garbage trucks and screeching new cars
driven by men who had once bought me dinner
then hated me when I didn't want to fuck them twice.

Carlight passing late at night on a street of an ugly
precinct lying deceiving the unwary who think it leads home

It is late so dark it is almost light that time of night when
the light hits the metal and the glass of summer windows left ajar
make me want something someone I don't know who

The metal gate to the yard refracts this message via Queens boys who
drive too fast too late at night refracts this message to the window where
I watch from the couch

In the corner of the basement where my father used to lie I

Watch, interested, as the snake
grows larger and more menacing I am
taken slightly aback but remember him remember that I like
handling snakes and smile
and as always he softens grows smaller
becomes a hippopotamus I have won again I have stared him down
made him warm
and the Nile gives up its life to me
animals carnivorous and calm come home to me
two by two

I watch for the longest time
until the largest fills the window with his face
black as light
Agnus Dei

for this man's baby for this man's baby for this man's baby
came the flood.

I contented myself with being my niece's crazy aunt, and she idolized me as a child.
Later, as she saw my feet of clay, the hero worship ended and she became more
distant, going about med school and being married and becoming rich. Around then,
in my thirties, sober and functioning on a successful med combo, I saw I might have
the chance not to totally wreck a poor child's life. I had an intense desire to have a
child. The problem was that I would need to come off my teratogenic medications.
I tried: I was stark raving mad for three years until I finally gave the idea up.

I became more committed and involved as a poet and sublimated my reproductive instincts. And there was still my niece, brilliant and successful. Until the call in the middle of the night in October sixteen years ago from my sister: “Lora, Irene is dead.” Dead. I was sober and I couldn’t smoke, but my sister and I hit every IHOPS in the suburbs of San Francisco, eating ourselves into a coma during the funeral and the wake. I gained 50 pounds that autumn.

My pen doesn’t flow for Irene – the ink drips slowly and meagerly, like clotted blood. I am aware that I am not her mother and don’t have a mother’s right to grieve. But I can still feel her tiny hands pulling on the hairs of my arms as I cradled her infant form to sleep, can remember baptizing her, remember telling her the plot of *Hamlet* when she was five, watching her read *all* of Dickens (why Dickens?), hearing her call out “help me, Mama!” during a brutal depression, seeing the cut marks on her teenaged wrists.

Aerial View of the Rockies

The gods like to trace their fingers in the world;
like leaves from a primordial tree, landforms
bare their veins. Clever of her to suicide this way
leaving no one but me to know. Impassive as
the dead face she wanted no one to see, clouds
hide rigor in the lines, purposeful or not, below.
In winter, sunrise looks like sunset in this distant
land, soon to be nearer, nearer, soon.

Near the end of her life, my mother, given to bursts of anger, carefully prepared and delivered a measured speech to me and my sister, to each of us separately. She quietly and sincerely stated that if she had it to do over, she would not have had children. It was important to her that her daughters know this. I thought for a moment that perhaps she was consoling me for my childlessness, but that would have been another woman, not my Mama.

I have no nuclear family now – Mama, Papa, my sister Tamara, and my niece and godchild Irene are dead. I quickly sold the family home last year, but am haunted by it in my dreams. And I have no fitness, no genetic material except my cousins’

daughters, bright, pretty, too distant for me to care. I have buried everyone, and have no one to bury me; I counted on Irene for that, and she would have done me proud. But I suppose when the time comes, I won't be in the condition to mind.