



IMAG

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on the relationship between joy and mental illness

每天我都記念我的神經病

Carol Zou

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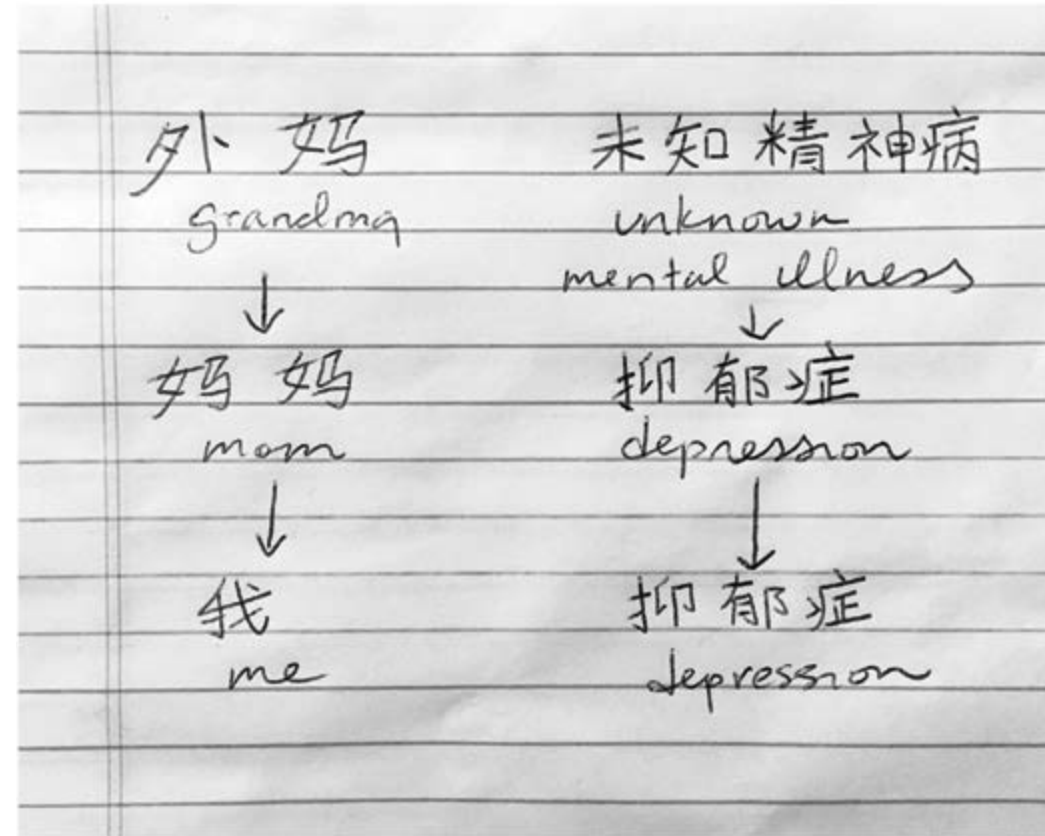
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Carol Zou is an artist, writer, educator, and cultural organizer who has worked for over a decade on the relationship between arts, culture, community, and activism. Her work has spanned various collaborative modes with: Yarn Bombing Los Angeles, Michelada Think Tank, Trans. lation Vickery Meadow, Asian Arts Initiative, U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, Imagining America, American Monument, and currently as the Enterprise Community Partners Rose Fellow with Little Tokyo Service Center. She believes that we are most free when we help others get free.



preface:

i have managed post-traumatic stress disorder for the entirety of my adult life, so perhaps i know something about mental illness. i have felt the water of intergenerational trauma undo my body like a recurring tidal wave, so perhaps i know something about mental illness. but i am also still alive, so perhaps i know something about joy.



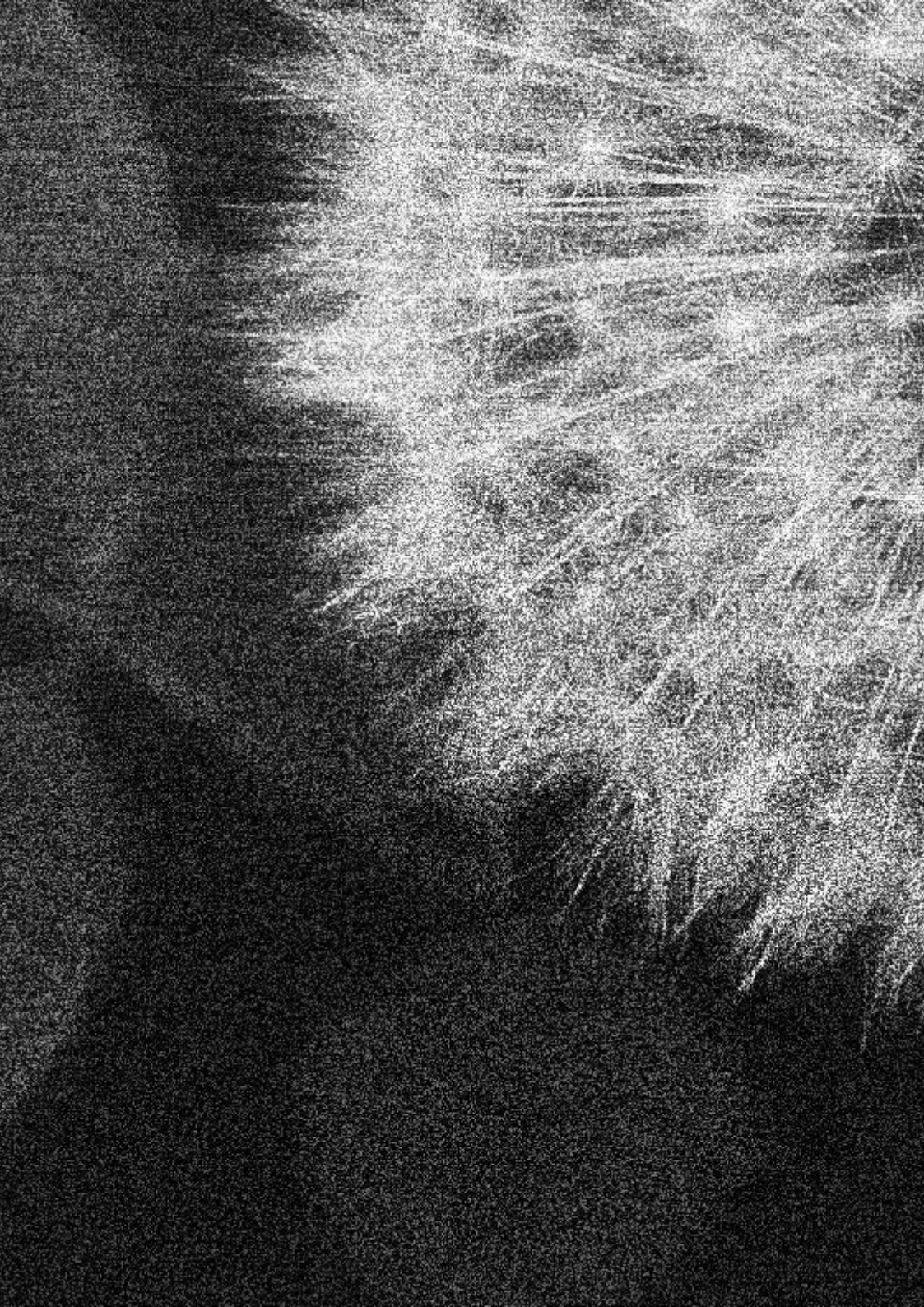
I.

mental illness feels like something eating away at you day by day. mental illness has been with you so long it is starting to feel like a friend, or at the very least, a security blanket that is faded and full of holes, and that you know you should give up but feel naked doing so. your body has been heavy with the weight of this uninvited security blanket for so long—are you truly ready to stand up without it? perhaps the way that you have learned to deal with mental illness is to hold its hand while keeping a safe distance. mental illness feels like self-doubt about the way in which you chemically relate to this world. there is a chronic window shade between your conscious memories and the world. you mistrust your perceptions.

mental illness teaches you how to be kind, how to hear others who similarly suffer, but more importantly how to receive them. mental illness teaches you the value of silence, which is never truly silent, but instead is a holographic shade of pensiveness, understanding, and resignation. mental illness makes you feel like a stranger; this is how you know you are mentally ill. mental illness' favorite location is absconding. mental illness is not public; when we pass someone who is mentally ill in public, we respond with revulsion. the feeling begins as revulsion at them, then it becomes revulsion at ourselves, and finally it settles into revulsion at the ways in which our body politic does not care for our bodies. we think if we don't see it, it doesn't exist; mental illness is a shadow. sometimes mental illness makes you feel like a shadow, and sometimes you wonder if others can love a shadow, or if their affections are only reserved for those who do not feel like a ghost. for you sadly suspect others around you are more alive.

mental illness is knowing that the veneer of everyday life routinely peels away into abysses. mental illness is bedridden, and bed is a kind place. mental illness makes no sharp movements for fear of relapse; mental illness is forever allocating the good days and weathering the bad days. sometimes mental illness feels like ice cubes in the pit of your stomach and sometimes mental illness feels like trying to hang on to a rollercoaster with your fingernails. mental illness lives in your body like a permanently scared animal, ready to run.

lately i've felt a desire to look at electronic scans of my brain, and to understand just how much of it is damaged. or maybe it's not damaged after all, and i would have to find another justification for my personality defects. symptoms of brain damage that i found out five years after the fact while collating informational packets on teen dating violence: impulsiveness, memory loss, increased risk taking. all the bad decisions, the personality defects, are suddenly viewed through a retroactive filter that wonders if you do, in fact, have a death drive. does it terrify you to have a death drive, or does it simply make life a little bit more exciting? there is a permanent sense of something missing, parts of your brain that have been removed by an ice cream scoop: your life on a permanent delay, your brain misfiring in brief, brilliant, abortive sparks like fireworks in the night or an overheating hard drive. biology class would term it as axons not touching their dendrites. axons not touching their dendrites.

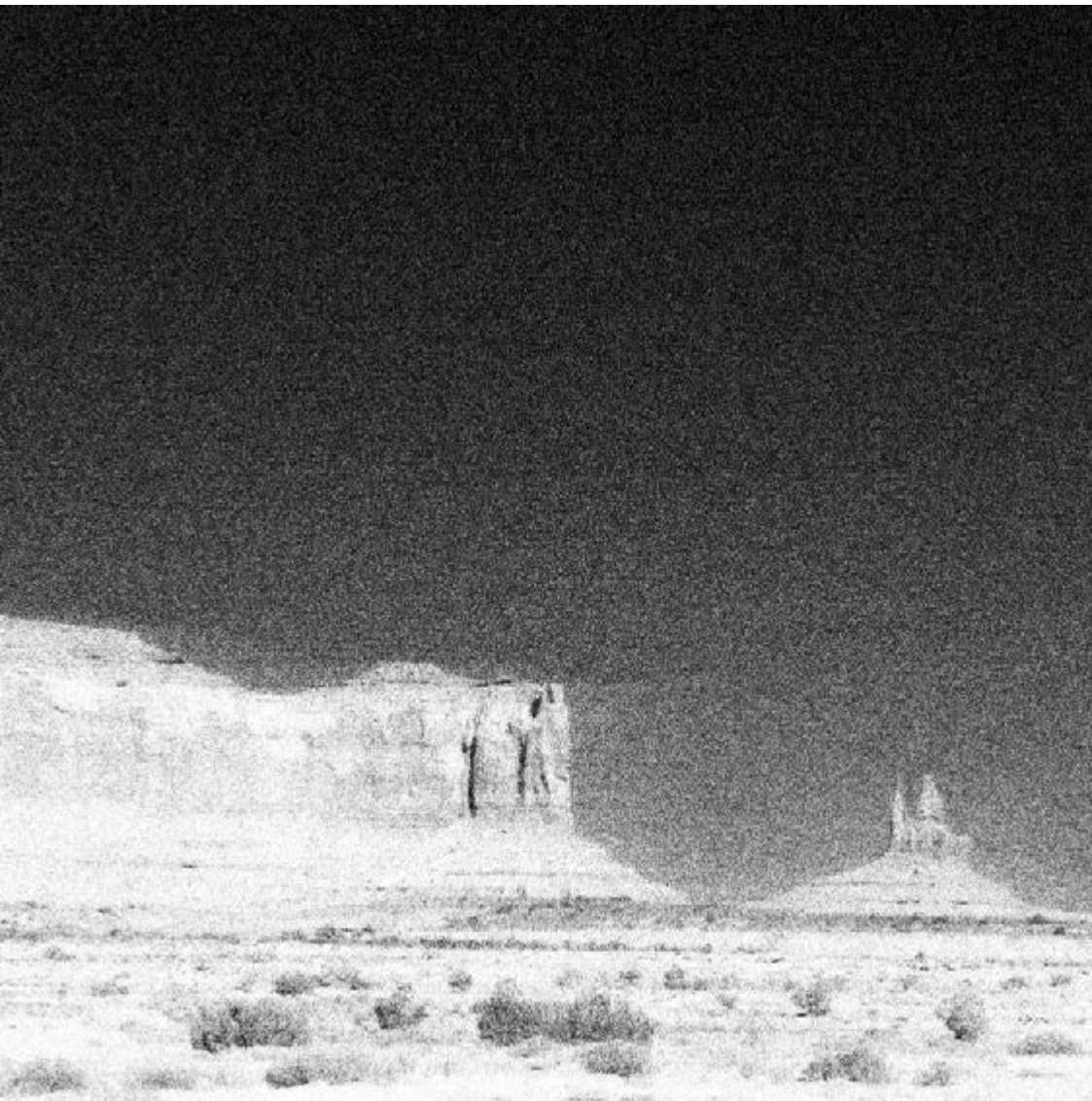


II.

joy feels like those brief moments when you forget that you are mentally ill. joy is the dance floor, joy is loud music, joy is overwhelming your senses so that your brain is no longer shorting out in anxious overdrive but rather is subjugated to sensorial expression. your body, this joyous organ so capable of regeneration, so unconcerned with thought. melody rearranges molecules—and so you are convinced that perhaps for the length of a pop song, the trouble in your brain too can be rearranged. joy is breathing. joy is permissible screaming. joy is axons touching their dendrites.

joy becomes political when you know what it's like to go for periods without feeling joy, which is akin to a body going for periods without love, touch, water. joy is deliberate when everyone around you has very few reasons to be joyful. joy is a response to futility; joy is laughter when there is in fact nothing to laugh at. joy says you will not give up; joy is your last resort and your last stand. joy is both a deliberate, precise forgetting of that which makes your body heavy, and joy is also a firm avowal and defiance. joy is running into your dear friend despair and deciding that it will not take you today. joy is quiet victory. joy is your heart stretching out so large that the thin mud fortress you have carefully sculpted around it cracks for a brief second. joy is your secret weapon, and you harbor a worn sympathy for those who do not know mental illness, but more importantly, also do not know joy.

joy in these configurations is fleeting, precious, a winking glint of sunlight before receding into the fog of everyday ache. joy is a firefly, and those of us who are used to it, know where to look and how to catch it. joy carries you through the way that a drop of water on your tongue carries you to the next waystation, at which point we again find it incumbent to repeat our rituals of conjuring joy and manifesting water.



III.

do you wonder if alternate realities exist, and do you long for them? i often ask myself this: if, out of all the different strands of temporal possibility, would i choose the one that doesn't feel like a permanent head wound? to say no is to be accused of fetishizing debility. to say yes is to treat yourself like one big regret. sometimes i would like to stand up and sing, unclouded. but i also know that on the other side of mental illness is resilience, empathy, and meeting others who are on a similar journey across the infinite chasm. i write this text as a love letter and a mirror, a way of meeting you, seeing you, and in that moment of recognition may we both find temporary solace. solace is that place beside the ocean, beneath the sunrise. the ocean is the mental illness and the sun is the joy, and i am the bird that flies in between.

