

Autoethnographic Poetry: Embodying Bipolarism in Mania Variations II

Description

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Photography by **The Atlanta Dance Photographer**

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The following journal entry opened a two-year interdisciplinary process that resulted in both a series of poems and a dance work titled “Embodying Bipolarism in Mania Variations II”. I unplugged my finger from a memory dam and dove into my family’s relationship with bi-polar disorder. I chose an autoethnographic approach to shed light on the fact that discussions around mental health are never about just one person or my family alone. Americans often either talk at mental health awareness or allude to mental health issues, but never just sit with it or attempt to soak in its stories.

This kind of trauma spans generations and is rooted in tensions held within the body. I chose self-reflective poetry and dance as the site for unpacking bi-polar disorder’s natural viscera. The depressive and manic states are deeply embodied experiences. As a daughter of a parent who self-medicated and remained professionally untreated and undiagnosed, I witnessed this disorder’s intense waxing and waning. I chose to embody both sides of growing up alongside this disorder and braced for the splitting and splintering. I empathized with depressive states that were an adagio compared to the acerbic mania that left me out of breath and hot-faced.

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Untitled Entry: 1/24/18…you’re the tiny dancer occupying the backseat just wishing to be at the sign that marks the dance studio’s front entrance, holding in that crunch in the gut that warns we might tip, roll over the median, rage-less wheels, no tracks in the asphalt just the cloud of exhaust arcing through the air like forgotten astral fall-out…

At first, I was petrified to scribe this duplicity at all, fearful that by taking on the mania and the melancholy as my own, interpreting it through my words and my body, I might awaken some terrible monster that would wrap itself around me like tightening fascia. So, I caged it inside a block of text. I relied on the mania poems to tame the demons before tangling them with the dancing body.

I transcribed the autoethnographic poetry both physically and literally on arms, legs, and faces. mania variations II debuted as a *choreopoem*—part spoken word, part movement. The first iteration was a trio with me at the helm as the orator. The second iteration was a duet. Two dances played backwards and forwards by both bodies, simultaneously. This multiplicity, a quantum entanglement, illustrates just how messy autoethnographic excavation can become. It is just as messy as this thing called “life” or “memory” or “family” or “lineage” or “health” and it is to that end that I practice the act of making at all. I called out the demons one by one and named them; I gave them precise blocking and ultimately, I controlled where they stood, breathed, and bourréed. I gave them an entrance, and a stage, and then I sent them away.

there is no conclusion

I want to write a softer hue,
imbue the space with mighty millennial pink,
blush the world for comfort.

I want to write a rosy epilogue,
massage inflamed spite, and rouge it into a doll,
dead-eyed and glowing from inside a staged snow globe.

I want to write in rarefied riddles,
table the issues, let them flush in protest.
Let them fester as they redden, ruddy.

I want to write awakening.
I want to write agitation.
I want to write inflammation.

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I want to hand over the definition:

a mental disorder marked by alternating periods

of elation

and
depression.

I want to topple that transparency, cloak it in
Crayola red, scrub over the picture of two egg people, holding
hands, only one egg is cracked. That egg believes *you can't beat crazy*.

That there is

war time and peace time.

That there are

no gods and no governments.

That we

live at the center of a snow globe.

That there are

deep-sea vampires, and cords wound
‘round the jugular vein.

That some concrete steps disassemble spontaneously.

That they can surf on cumulus, but I can’t rewrite the past.

I can’t rewrite the crazy because it’s calcified in the gutter.

I can’t rewrite the crazy like forgotten astral fallout.

I can’t rewrite the crazy because they don’t even remember.

I want to write the end.

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Pas de II.

everything now surrounds but nothing can
touch

shattered swells by broken gulfs
waves ripple ruptured drums

but the warm sea won't water me

I'm calcified in the gutter
eclipsed

by the retrograded Leo's rage

holding that crunch in the gut,
no tracks on the asphalt
just the exhaust cloud arcing through the air

like forgotten astral fall out.

nickel in the back of larynx

metallic fingernails

a clump of tangled cords

eyebrows knit, chin slip, molar grind

spitfire roman candlelight

The Maniac

never takes a breath between never rewrites only forward trudge ahead

go go **go**

there's a guitar shaped hole in the wall there's a phone shaped hole in the wall there's a you shaped hole in my wall where I pinned you up next to the crumbling, sticky posters next to the shattered glass frames next to the fuzzy fake ivy, dust moths, clumps of greyish brown cottontails next to the long wood table where you saw the arc of the O'Doul's fly where you saw it make contact with the punch bowl that would have sat there on new year's eve had this been **a different world** a different world a world you colored in crayon on manila walls a world you constructed when you were very small and the world didn't seem quite as frightening as it does now when you didn't understand that you cannot take **Crayola red** and make a perfect picture of two **egg people** holding hands because one egg has the other pinned against the wall pinned to the mattress pinned to the spot where someone asks you to call for help and you can't really understand who to call or where help would come from unless it was Saturday morning and a cartoon superhuman **darkened** the window above the pinning as its happening you can see the figure descending you can see them gently prying apart the oil and the water the acme cannon and the lighter fluid the anvil with a shadow that darkens blackens widens as it falls closer to the wall closer to the glass table you were asked to babysit holding a stacked deck the man swaying on top of the deck swinging from the basketball pole swaying as he condemns every neighbor who didn't realize that no gods no governments no one can stop the drum drum drumming no one can patch that no tacky tape no wet cement there's handprint sized holes at the base of the pole there's handprint sized holes there's handprint sized holes because you see **the maniac** never takes a breath between never rewrites only forward trudge ahead **go go go** there's a guitar shaped hole in the wall there's a phone shaped hole in the wall there's a you shaped hole in my wall where I pinned you

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up next to the crumbling, sticky posters next to the shattered glass frames next to the fuzzy fake ivy, dust moths, clumps of greyish brown cottontails next to the long wood table where you saw the arc of the O'Doul's fly where you saw it make contact with the punch bowl that would have sat there on new year's eve had this been a different world a different world a world you colored in crayon on manila walls a world you constructed when you were very small and the world didn't seem quite as frightening as it does now when you didn't understand that you cannot take Crayola red and make a perfect picture of two egg people holding hands because one egg has the other **pinned** against the wall pinned to the mattress **pinned** to the spot where someone asks you to call for **help** and you can't really understand who to call or where help would come from unless it was Saturday morning and a cartoon superhuman darkened the window above the pinning as its happening you can see the figure descending you can see them gently prying apart the oil and the water the acme cannon and the lighter fluid the anvil with a shadow that **darkens blackens widens** as it falls closer to the wall closer to the glass table you were asked to babysit holding a stacked deck the man swaying on top of the deck swinging from the basketball pole swaying as he condemns every neighbor who didn't realize that **no gods** no governments no one can stop the **drum** drum drumming no one can patch that no tacky tape no wet cement there's handprint sized holes at the base of the pole there's handprint sized holes

There's no one way to be whole.

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MANIA
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MANIA
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Photography by **Simon Gentry**

The Melancholic

And now, I'm coming down from that high.

And now, I'm speaking in complete sentences again

and now, I'm dragging you all down with me to the depths.

Draw the comforter around my head, the stench
of another martyr crucifying themselves in their bathrobe, in their bedsheets.

I'll trace the popcorn ceiling; I'll find a way back up.
I'll light another, I'll find another, I'll have another.

With this gathering I'll grow heat, tinder for flaming lunacy.
The moon splashed with burgundy.

A sprite to sit on the edge of the world with,
de-winged,

sputtering.

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Credits

Photography by **Simon Gentry**

- Pictured: Poetica dance artists **Meg Gourley (left)** & **Sydney Burrows (right, bottom)**
- **Atlanta Field Day**, The Field NYC, May 5, 2018.

Photography by **The Atlanta Dance Photographer**

- Pictured: Poetica dance artists **Sydney Burrows (left) & Meg Gourley (right)**
- **FEMMEfest** at the B Complex, February 19-21, 2019

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