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A Mind Spread Out on the Ground

He took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose the way men in movies do whenever they encounter a particularly vexing woman.

"I'm really confused. You need to give me something here. What's making you depressed?"

His reaction made me think briefly of residential schools, though at the time I couldn't understand why. Maybe it was the fact that he operated his therapy sessions out of a church. That certainly didn't help. I wasn't sure what to say. Can a metaphor or simile truly capture it? It was definitely heavy, but could I really compare it to a weight? Weight in and of itself is not devastating; depression is. At times it made me short of breath and at times it had the potential to be deadly, but was it really like drowning? At least with drowning others could see the flailing limbs and splashing water and know you needed help. Depression could slip in entirely unnoticed and dress itself up as normalcy so when it finally took hold others would be so surprised they wouldn't know how to pull you away. They'd stand there staring—good-intentioned but helpless. Empathetic, perhaps, but mute. Or, in the case of this particularly unqualified therapist, angry and accusing. Not that I necessarily blame them. I've done the same thing.

My family of seven lived in a two bedroom trailer on our rez—my sister and I in the smaller room, my three younger brothers in the master bedroom. My parents had no bedroom, no bed. They slept in the living room on the couch and recliner. As one may assume of such circum-

stances, privacy was precious, if it existed at all. Doors never stayed closed for long; at any moment someone could barrel in unannounced. This meant there was no place for my mother to hide her illness.

She'd been diagnosed and re-diagnosed many times. Postpartum depression, manic depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia. Most recently, my mother's been officially diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorder or schizoaffective disorder, depending on which doctor you talk to. None of these phrases gave her relief. In fact, they often seemed to hurt her, turning every feeling she had into yet another symptom of yet another disease.

What these words meant to my siblings and I was our mother's health was on a timer. We didn't know when it would go off, but when it did, our happy, playful, hilarious mother would disappear behind a curtain and another would emerge: alternatively angry and mournful, wired and lethargic. When she was depressed she'd become almost entirely silent. She'd lie on our brother's bottom bunk and blink at us, her soft limp limbs spilling onto the stained, slate-coloured carpet. I'd sit on the floor beside her, smooth her hair—bottle red with grey moving in like a slow tide—and ask her what was wrong. She'd stay silent but her face would transform. Damp, swollen, violet, as if the words she couldn't say were bubbling beneath her skin, burning her up from the inside.

Terminology is tricky. Initially, depression was known as "melancholia," a word that first brought to my mind a field of blue cornflower and golden hay. Its trochaic metre gave it an inherent poeticism, an ingrained elegance. It was delicate, feminine. Hamlet's doomed lover Ophelia definitely did not suffer from depression. When she floated down that river, decked in garlands, stones in her pockets, she was in the throes of *melancholia*.

The term first appeared in Mesopotamian texts in the second century B.C.E. At the time, they considered melancholia a form of demonic possession. They weren't alone: ancient Babylonian, Chinese, and Egyptian civilizations all attributed mental illness to demons overpowering the spiritually weak. Exorcism—which often entailed beatings, restraint, and starvation—was the only known "cure." Even during the Renaissance, when thinking about depression began to reflect the more progressive views of early Greek physician Hippocrates, a heavily Christian Europe had another way to describe those with mental illness: witches. They were "cured" by burning at the stake. Sometimes, as part of their trial, suspected witches underwent an ordeal by water. They were tied to a rope and thrown over a boat. If they sank they'd be pulled back to a safety of sorts; their inno-

cence proven, but their illness unchecked. If they floated, like Ophelia, they were considered a witch and summarily executed.

My quite Catholic mother believes demonic possession is a real danger. She pretty much used the 1973 film *The Exorcist* as an instructional video for my siblings and me. It was mostly effective. I played with an Ouija board only once, reluctantly, and though I remained firmly in control of my body, I still try to avoid the game (and pictures of Linda Blair) at all costs. I know demonic possession is impossible, probably, but it still scares me more than I'd like to admit.

So when my mother told me she was hearing "demonic voices" and thought she needed an exorcism last year, I was legitimately terrified. Not because I thought she was actually possessed—she didn't mention anything about floating above her bed and her voice sounded totally normal. I was scared of how scared she must be. She actually believed demons were real and could take control of the spiritually weak. If she thought she was being overtaken by these demons, logic would dictate that *she* was spiritually weak. As if her depressed mind didn't have enough to guilt her with.

She wouldn't tell me what the voices were saying to her. She just reiterated over and over that she was a sinner, that she had impure thoughts, that she hadn't been going to church enough. None of this seemed to me like enough reason to call in an exorcist.

Evidently her priest down in Florida disagreed. He said it did, indeed, sound like she was in the midst of a spiritual battle, that she should contact the church about sending an exorcist right away. Though he himself was part of the Catholic Church, he never offered any assistance with her "spiritual battle," never offered to bring in an exorcist to slay her inner demon. He just gave her his half-baked opinion like a torch and watched as she caught flame.

As far as analogies go, comparing depression to a demon is actually a pretty good one. Both overtake your faculties, leaving you disconnected and disembodied. Both change you so abruptly even your loved ones barely recognize you. Both whisper evil words and malformed truths. Both scare most people shitless.

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According to Diane Purkiss's *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, European colonists widely considered Indigenous peoples to be devil-worshippers. In fact, during the infamous Salem witch trials, the people of the Sagamore tribe were

blamed—described by early Puritan minister and mastermind of the witch trials, Cotton Mather, as "horrid sorcerers, and hellish conjurors … [who] conversed with Demons." One person on trial claimed to have attended a black mass with the *Sagamore Indians*. Mercy Short, another accused witch, took it one step further: she claimed the Devil himself was an *Indian*, describing him as "not of a Negro, but of a tawney, or an Indian colour."

This literal demonizing of Indigenous people was a natural extension of the tactics used to move colonization along. In 1494 the Treaty of Todesillas declared non-Christian lands could be colonized under the Papal Doctrine of Discovery. Since the entire "New World" was apparently peopled by "devil-worshippers," this essentially gave Christian monarchs the right to claim all the land they wanted, regardless of the Indigenous people already living on it. It was such a tantalizing, seemingly guilt-free justification for genocide, even U.S. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson decided to adopt it as official policy in 1792—and we all know how much Americans wanted to distinguish themselves from Europe at the time.

The Discovery Doctrine is still cited in court cases today whenever Canada or the U.S. want to shut up Indigenous tribes who complain. In an attempt to stop this lazy, racist rationale, a delegation of Indigenous people went to Rome recently to ask the church to rescind these Papal bulls. Kahnawake Mohawk Kenneth Deer says after hearing their concerns, Pope Francis simply looked him in the eye and said, "I'll pray for you."

"Can you imagine going to a funeral every day, maybe even two, for five to ten years?" the chief asks. He's giving a decolonization presentation, talking about the way colonization has affected our people following contact. Smallpox, tuberculosis, even the common cold hit our communities particularly hard. Then, on top of that, we had wars to contend with—some against the French, some against the British, some against either or neither or both. Back then death was all you could see, smell, taste or hear. Death was all you could feel.

"What does that type of mourning, pain and loss do to you?" he asks. We reflect on our own losses, our own mourning, our own pain. We say nothing.

After a moment he answers himself. "It creates numbness."

Numbness is often how people describe their experience of depression.

I was sixteen when I wrote my first suicide note. I was alone in my room, for once. It was cold; the fire in our wood-burning stove must

have gone out. I was huddled beneath the unzipped sleeping bag I used as a comforter. I was listening to the only modern rock station my ancient radio could pick up. The songs washed over me. My brothers laughing, crashing and crying washed over me. My mother half-heartedly yelling at them while she watched a movie with my sister washed over me. My father's absence washed over me.

Even though the trailer was full I was alone. I was alone and I felt nothing and it hurt so much. More than grief, more than anger. I just wanted it to end.

Tears fell on the paper faster than I could write. It was hard to read in parts. I didn't care. As long as it reassured my family they shouldn't blame themselves it would do the trick.

I looked at the knife I'd smuggled from the kitchen, pressed its edge to my wrist. Nothing happened. The blade was too dull. I'd have to stab hard and slash deep just to break the skin. I was crying so hard.

I re-read my note. I looked back at the knife. Even though it could hardly peel a potato it scared me more than the void I felt.

I laid back down, disgusted with myself and my lack of resolve. I tried to listen to the radio. I couldn't hear anything.

Though suicide was quite rare for Onkwehon:we pre-contact, after contact and the subsequent effects of colonialism, it has ballooned so much that, as of 2013, suicide and self-inflicted injuries are the leading cause of death for Native people under the age of forty-four. Suicide and depression rates for our people are twice the national average. For Native youth ages from fifteen to twenty-four, the suicide rate is five to seven times the national average. Suicide attempts among Native peoples are about five to seven times the national average, depending on gender. For LGBT2S Onkwehon:we no data exists.

Interestingly, the Centre for Suicide Prevention have found lower rates of depression and suicide amongst those communities that exhibit "cultural continuity." This includes self-government, land control, control over education and cultural activities, and command of police, fire and health services. In other words, the less Canada maintains its historical role as the abusive father, micromanaging and undermining First Nations at every turn, the better off the people are.

Lower instances of suicide were also found in communities where over fifty per cent of the people spoke their Indigenous language. This probably isn't much of a surprise to an Indigenous person. We know our cultures have meaning and worth, that that culture lives and breathes inside our languages.

Canada knew that, too, which is why they fought so hard to make us forget them.

There are two scientific designations for depression. The droller, more scientific term for melancholia is 'endogenous depression.' In contrast to exogenous, or reactive, depression—which stems from a major event such as divorce, job loss, or death in the family—melancholic depression has no apparent outside cause. In other words, it comes out of the blue. This is a rather ridiculous way of putting it when you consider depression itself is sometimes referred to as "the blues." The blues coming out of the blue. Go figure.

I've heard one person translate a Mohawk phrase for depression to, roughly, "his mind fell to the ground." I ask my sister about this. She's been studying Mohawk for the past three years and is practically fluent. She's raising her daughter to be the same. They're the first members of our family to speak the language since priests beat it of our paternal grandfather a handful of decades ago.

"Wake'nikonhra'kwenhtará:'on," she says. "It's not quite 'fell to the ground.' It's more like, 'His mind is…'" She pauses. She repeats the word in Mohawk. Slows it down. Considers what English words in her arsenal can best approximate the phrase. "'His mind is…'" She moves her hands around, palms down, as if doing a large, messy finger painting. "Literally stretched or sprawled out on the ground. It's all over."

She explains there's another phrase, too. Wake'nikonhrèn:ton. It means, "The mind is suspended." Both of these indicate an inability to concentrate. That's one of the signs of depression. I know because I've checked it off in the copy of *Mind Over Mood* I took out from the library. It says I'm currently 32/57 depressed, or fifty-six percent. Not the worst. At least I'm not considering suicide. Suicidal thoughts is number ten on the checklist.

There is nothing in the book about the importance of culture, nothing about intergenerational trauma, racism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, transphobia. As if depression doesn't "see" petty things like race or gender or sexual orientation.

"We're all just people, man," melancholia mutters, pushing its dreads aside as it passes me a joint.

I've heard people say that when you learn a people's language, you learn their culture. It tells you how they think of the world, how they experience it. That's why translation is so difficult—you have to take one way of seeing the world and translate it to another, while still piecing the words together so they make sense.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about the fact that there is no Mohawk word to differentiate between reactive and melancholic depression. No scientific jargon to legitimize and pathologize. Just wake'nikonhrèn:ton, and wake'nikonhra'kwenhtará:'on. A mind hanging by a thread, and a mind spread out on the ground. A before and an after. What does that mean about our culture?

Though the two phrases differ in severity, perhaps, when you think about it, they're referring to the same thing. Maybe all words for those feelings are—endogenous, exogenous, depression, melancholia. All in their own way describe a person in pain that needs help to heal.

Is there a language of depression? I'm not sure. Depression often seems to me like the exact opposite of language. It takes your tongue, your thoughts, your self-worth, and leaves an empty vessel. Not that different from colonialism, actually.

In fact, the *Mind Over Mood* Depression Inventory checklist could double as an inventory for the effects of colonialism on our people. Sad or depressed mood? Check. Feelings of guilt? Check. Irritable mood? Considering how fast my dad's side of the family are to yell, check. Finding it harder than usual to do things? Well, Canada tried to eradicate our entire way of being, then forced us to take on their values and wondered why we couldn't cope. Definite check. Low self-esteem, self-critical thoughts, tiredness or loss of energy, difficulty making decisions, seeing the future as hopeless, recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts? Check, check, check.

And if colonialism is like depression, and the Onkwehon:we suffering from it are witches, then I guess it shouldn't surprise anyone that our treatment has always been the same: to light us on fire and let us burn.

I know now why that therapist in that church reminded me of residential schools. When I think of that man sitting across from me, chastising me for not saying the right words, the words that made it easy for him to understand me and cure me, I think of how my grandparents and great-grandparents felt when priests and nuns did the same to them. The difference is that therapist was trying to cure me of being depressed; those priests and nuns were trying to cure my ancestors of being Indian. In some ways they succeeded. In many they did not.

Both depression and colonialism have stolen my language in different ways. I know this. I feel it inside me even as I struggle to explain it. But that does not mean I have to accept it. I struggle against colonialism the same way I struggle against depression—telling myself I'm not worthless, that I'm not a failure, that things will get better.

Our Haudenosaunee condolence ceremony was originally created by Hiawatha to help a person in mourning after a death. Whoever is

conducting the condolence recites the Requickening Address as they offer the grieving person three strands of wampum, one at a time.

One: soft, white deer cloth is used to wipe the tears from their eyes so they can see the beauty of creation again.

Two: a soft feather is used to remove the dust from their ears so they can hear the kind words of those around them.

Three: water, the original medicine, is used to wash away the dust settled in their throat, keeping them from speaking, from breathing, from reconnecting with the world outside their grief.

I know this is supposed to be a ceremony for people with reactive depression caused by a death. As far as I know there is no condolence ceremony for those Onkwehon:we suffering from melancholia—those who are, in effect, mourning themselves. There's no collective condolence ceremony for our people, either—those who need help to see our beauty and hear our songs and speak our language.

But maybe, one day, there can be.

Things that were stolen once can be stolen back.