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Essay by Jane McCafferty

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but who can distinguish

one human voice

amid such choruses of desire?

— Lucille Clifton

When I talk to someone “crazy” out there on the street—someone unwashed in a big coat who’s been unleashed from their own sanity—I’ll sometimes see my mother’s face flashing behind them like a light. Before I know it, I’m imagining a history for the person. It’s a kind of practice I’ve developed on behalf of my mother as a way to remind myself not to dismiss people. I might see them as a child, seated at a school desk, raising their hand. Or I try to see them as a newborn.

How surprised they must have been, how betrayed they must have felt, when their illness, whatever it was, drew a curtain over one world and opened up another. I imagine their exhausted loved ones, far-flung, scarred, sorry, just trying to go forward. And then I usually try to talk to the person, making eye contact. I've learned that sometimes you can see through to what's essential in a human being, even when their mind's gone haywire. Look a person in the eye, and unless they've been entirely shattered, you'll often get a glimpse of a soul who's watching, who knows the self on display in the big coat is just one self among many.

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The last time I visited my mother in a psychiatric hospital, she had that look in her eye for more than a few moments. It was almost a conspiratorial wink, though I didn't want in on the conspiracy. It said she understood, if only for a moment, that the whole story about her having just given birth at 78 to Irish triplets who were being cared for by nurses on the fifth floor wasn't really true—even as, in her mania, she believed it and planned a most ornate christening with the triplets in pink lace gowns, a five-foot high cake, her favorite priest performing the baptism, and everyone, of course, invited—the nature of her mania being always to include as many as possible, including people she barely knew. She might come up with the name of someone she sat beside at a basketball game fifteen years ago and insist we find him and extend the invitation.

Miss Evelyn, the African American woman from Baltimore who was her roommate, sat nodding, like a member of a congregation listening to a beloved preacher. *Mmmm hmmm. Got that right. Mmmm hmmm.* Miss Evelyn was in her sixties, with silver glasses and a kind, inquisitive face. It was difficult to see what her illness was—probably she'd been drugged into submission, but the two of them were a team, living for weeks together in that unkempt hospital room, having horrible hospital meals (small clumps of mush and meatloaf, all of which they were vocal about appreciating) at a tiny table, sharing utensils, eating food off each other's plates (an image that would have horrified my hyper-hygienic mother when in her "right mind"), their bare knees touching underneath like blank faces. As they talked, their eyes locked. Theirs was a brand of wild intimacy. I envied it. It highlighted for me my own separateness, my careful friendships, the distance I maintained with other humans. What friend would I sit with this way, knees touching, eyes searching?

I was stationed in a different world, observing them. They loved spending time together and had each other's backs, as Miss Evelyn said. There was a good feeling in that room, though if you judged it through a conventional lens, you wouldn't notice. But it knocked me into a state of wonder. It wasn't hard to see my mother on what amounted to an island I could only visit as a mystified tourist. I'd probably been a mystified tourist since my infancy, when my mother, having given birth to me, crashed into a devastating depression; I had to be handed to others so she could go to the hospital for months.

A few years ago, my friend's husband, a psychologist, said that they've quantified how depression in the face of a mother regarding her infant is in essence a kind of imprinting. The infant wants, above all, to be born into communion. In the face of a severely depressed mother, the infant discovers the face as a wall, as rejection, and turns inward. Being with my mother when she wasn't well was an old, familiar experience for me—lit by the feeling that she was ultimately unknowable, unreachable, and someone from whom I needed protection.

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Part of me was always glad my mother found a way to cast off the shackles of her ordinary consciousness. My mother's manic episodes began in her late teens in the early 1950s. This was the beginning of a long walk in and out of radical peaks and valleys, both of which would require hospitalizations.

In some of her episodes, she believed she was pregnant with Jesus.

I remember getting the call with this news when she was nearing sixty. "There's been a miracle," she whispered. In a slightly louder voice I recognized as already altered: "I'm pregnant."

"You *can't* be pregnant." A light shot through me like the headlight of a train I knew I couldn't stop.

“But I am! I’m pregnant with You Know Who.”

Unfortunately, I did know who.

“How could that possibly be true?” I said, chills running across my shoulders, my body on high alert, the landscape of my sunlit bedroom shifting, and my face growing hot.

She was calling me from an outdoor shower. She had to make the call there so my father, who was in the cottage, wouldn’t hear. “You know he’s a worrier.” (A terrific understatement.) He wasn’t ready to hear the news, she said, but he would be when she was “further along.” It was a miracle like the one that happened to Mary.

I paced in my room, with a mixture of fear and excitement, as if some of her mania was being transferred to me. At the same time, I felt fiercely protective of her, as I have all my life, and so felt strong and ready to battle enemies she was sure to inspire. The cold eyes of strangers. Or the nurse from the state hospital on the phone one night who described my mother as “dancing like a crazy motherfucker”—even after they’d shot her full of Thorazine—because she was wildly walking up and down the hall, shouting at people. While I understand the nurse might have been new or burned-out, hearing this hurt like a punch to the gut. I thought of all she didn’t know about my mother, who was not some crazy motherfucker, but my mother.

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I sat down on my bed, leaning back on a pillow, listening. “Maybe you forgot to take your meds, Mom?”

“Jesus Christ, how can you say something so stupid, you know I never forget to take my goddamn meds!”

She was ushering in the Christ child, but this didn’t mean she couldn’t cuss. And it was true: Sometimes, the meds weren’t strong enough and needed to be adjusted. But she was not “non-compliant.” She felt grateful for her Lithium, for the way it allowed her to live a so-called normal life most of the time. Without Lithium and devotion from family, most especially my father, she would have ended up homeless.

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Those conversations about the coming birth of Jesus were strangely easy for me to enter, in part because I felt, when she was rising into a manic state, she was more *herself*. Or rather that she was allowed to access a part of herself that heavy medication stamped out. True, medication saved her life and allowed her to be, on the surface, a conventional mother in a suburb who packed great school lunches, worked part-time jobs through the years as a teacher or librarian, in a bridal shop, once behind the counter in a breakfast place—an often brilliantly funny woman who we called “the human jukebox” because she knew the lyrics to hundreds of songs by heart. Before she married, she’d worked for Catholic Charities and volunteered as a teacher in a women’s prison.

Her great charm came shining through when she was in public. She was adored out there for her warmth and high spirits.

But she carried a deep frustration under her skin that often became anger, and I always wondered if the source of this was partly the straitjacket of all that medication. The price she had to pay for being normal. When she went into the hospital during my childhood, we were told she “needed a rest.” But even at five years old, I sensed there was more to it than that, and for years my prized possession was the leather turtle purse she sewed me in Arts and Crafts at the state hospital. I wore it around my neck as if it contained the heart of a story nobody would tell me. Every night, I got down on my knees, my mother beside me, and prayed for three doctors: Doctor Melker, Doctor Boudre, and Doctor Anstrieher. All three psychiatrists my mother adored and depended on, though I didn’t know that at the time. I can’t even recall if I thought it was odd to pray for three doctors every night.

And really, what could a small child be told that made any sense?

One of my earliest memories is riding in the backseat of a car with her at the wheel, crying with joy—telling me how

happy she was, how beautiful life was. I was three or four years old. She wanted me to see her and kept turning from the road, asking me if I was happy, too. I don't remember what I said. I remember feeling alone. The atmosphere of the car was charged with something I couldn't name. I don't know if I felt I was in danger. I don't know if my memory of holding on to the ledge of the door is invented. I do remember looking ahead, through the front windshield, out at the road, trying to see what it was she saw.

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When I was older, a young adult, and her Lithium stopped working, when she was rising toward that familiar state of ecstatic joy, her voice became, to my ears, more real, more embodied. A rich, expansive undertone entered her speech. I felt her telling me the story of her miraculous pregnancy was the only way she could translate a mysterious ecstasy that allowed her to feel a deep love for everyone, for existence itself. There is a stage in mania that seems identical to a mystic's understanding of everything being ultimately connected, of intense and inexplicable joy being at the very foundation of what is. I've seen that in her face many times.

But where a mystic rises toward divine union, a truly manic person usually rises toward danger. She'd get on the phone and ask people, "What do you need? What do you want most of all that you can't have? Because I'm going to get it for you. A car? New furniture? A trip around the world? You deserve it!" (My father learned quickly to hide the credit cards.) She'd call lawyers and a judge she was friends with in order to sue a man who'd sold her a bad pair of shoes forty years ago. If she got in a car, she'd drive it as fast as she could.

When you tried to tell her no, you can't drive or leave the house, and no, you're not carrying triplets, twins, or Jesus, calling her out like that brought on rage. When she got to that state, she had to be committed, because, as we had seen too many times, she'd get higher and higher, wilder, full of oddly brilliant (and sometimes very funny) rapid-fire speech and strength, and then, if she weren't brought down slowly with chemical cocktails, crash-land into paralyzing darkness. Obliterating depression.

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Once, a few years ago, I found about forty photographs she'd taken with throwaway cameras. They were all of the most ordinary things in the ordinary house. A chair, the floor, a couch, the door, a blanket, a lamp. She had taken them in a recent manic state. She had looked one day at a chair she'd lived with for thirty-odd years, suddenly apprehending its illumined essence, its impossible beauty, something that had been waiting for years to be seen.

I imagined her rushing around those rooms with her cameras, trying to capture it all. The quotidian, miraculous stuff of life. Seeing the gap between what I imagined she'd seen and what she'd been able to capture, was heartbreaking. The loneliness of those fiery perceptions—of anyone's perceptions, really. These impossible translations we're all trying to make, each one of us on a spectrum of mental health and illness, most of us haunted by all we'll never find a way to communicate—even to ourselves.

The pictures also reminded me of how asleep we often are to our landscapes, to the present as it breathes in the days of our lives. How mania—at least her kind of mania, before it was full-blown and required police to usher her into the back of a cop car so as to escort her into a hospital—resembles enlightenment. Who wouldn't want to wake in the morning and feel their heart break for the beauty of the wooden desk chair by the window? Writing that, I feel the mystery conjured by the words; the image gathers light. *Wooden desk chair by the window in the morning*. The thing itself. What good poetry can deliver. But too often, I'm dulled to familiar trees, faces, my very own breath. There's a price to pay for the kind of culturally induced sanity that is a prerequisite for efficiency, the mind that keeps the wheel turning.

I used to wish we could bottle whatever it was she felt when she was manic, but not yet dangerous. And now, at eighty, it seems this is where she's landed. After her kidneys began to fail six years ago, she had to go off Lithium. My brother figured out some new medications for her. She's in the state that resembles a mystic much of the time now—a mystic with dementia coming to obliterate her, slowly, in stages. She sings everyone's praises, names every particular good thing that happens, despite her utter dependence on others for eating, bathing, using the bathroom. She is grateful for that beautiful bowl of rice pudding her neighbor brought her. She weeps with love at the mention of my father or any of

her old friends, especially the dead ones. But she doesn't follow those emotions into a story of loss. She comes right back to the present. Praises a cloud sliding by the window. If I ask her what she wants for dinner, it's like I'm asking her what she wants to do in ten years. She's wedded to the moments as they come.

So, who is she? Who are we, if tinkering with brain chemistry can change us so radically? Are we anybody? Are we a potential crowd? Right now, I can see my mother's familiar soul shining in her face, despite the devastation to mind and body, so I'd argue yes, we're souls, we're carrying our souls forward. We're mysteries.

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Some people will luck into a genetic pool where ordinary consciousness is never threatened. Their selves will seem stable entities, unless they look harder and come to understand that nobody and nothing is "stable," that we are all at the mercy of a universe where everything changes. Some people will be better at believing in their constructed identities. Loyal to the story of who they are, chemistries balanced, their identities will seem more coherent. I envy that substantial crowd, but really, is there any such thing as a coherent human being, when you really look hard? I think on some level we all know there isn't, which is part of why we feel so uncomfortable about those whose incoherency is so flagrantly on display.

I had a lot of mothers. The blue-eyed beauty who sang and inspired lifelong friendships and devotion from family. The one on the couch, laid low, telling me she couldn't wait to die. The storytelling comedian. The one with the temper I feared. The one who tried to usher Jesus in again. The one who made us excellent meals, made sure we had clothes, drove my brother to hockey practice, picked me up from school even when her back was bad. And now the eighty-year-old with Parkinson's dementia who needs 24-7 care. Her short-term memory's been blasted, and now, some pieces of long-term memory are starting to fade. Another self will be ushered in soon enough.

I wish my mother had not suffered so terribly from this illness. I wish I'd never been that child hearing her say she'd rather have a limb sawed off than endure another serious depression. This was much too high a cost for those states of joy where she seemed, strangely, most herself. But when I'm saying I wish she had no mental illness, it's almost like saying I wish she'd been a different person, which is almost like saying I wish I didn't exist. Which has sometimes, but not often, been true.

Publishing Information

- Epigraph lines are from Lucille Clifton's poem "[Sorrows](#) [5]," *Poetry*, September 2007 (also in her book *Voices*, BOA Editions, 2008).

Art Information

- "Vineyard Haven" (paper and glue on window glass) © Kim Triedman; used by permission.



Jane McCafferty writes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. She is the author of two novels (HarperCollins) and two books of short stories (HarperCollins and University of Pittsburgh Press, later reissued by Carnegie Mellon Press). Her work has received many awards, including an NEA, the Pushcart Prize for both fiction and essay, the Drue Heinz Award, a Book Sense award, and the Great Lakes New Writers Award. She teaches a variety of writing courses at Carnegie Mellon University and is cofounder of the Pittsburgh Memoir project, for which she facilitates writing workshops for people in the community.

Of her winning essay, Jane writes in a recent email:

Stigma around mental illness keeps people isolated and ashamed in their silences.? *Talking Writing* did us a real service by inviting people to tell their stories. I've never written about my mother, in part because I was afraid I needed to protect her and to protect my family. I see now that the urge to protect is all wrapped up in shame and fear. My mother is an incredibly strong, fascinating, big-hearted human being, and now, almost a year after I wrote this essay, she's gone onto embodying yet another personality—this one, despite some dementia, is even more magnetic, present, and appreciative than she was last year. How much this is chemistry, and how much the expression of the most recent stop on her soul's journey, we'll never know.

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