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A Month of Fine

1

I'm at a poetry reading. I know these people. I'm one of them. Together we make a deceptively healthy mess of tragic artists. There is always wine, ensuring we grow bolder with each intermission. "How are you?" I get a cheek-kiss from one, and then the other. "I'm good, thanks." And during the next break, after the next wine, I'll be able to say, "I'm really good, thanks," even though I'm usually a 2 on the Beaufort Wind Scale—*Light breeze: wind is felt on the face; leaves rustle; wind vanes move* ¹—and today I think I might be a 3.

Oh, feeling a bit off after grocery shopping, those shelves really spin me out, I'm good for the first ten minutes but then it hits me: the walls are breathing in and out and the cans shift with the inhale / exhale, sound comes from a tunnel in a dream, you know the kind of dream that wakes you up because you know it's a dream and you don't want to be dreaming it anymore? and walking to the end of the aisle is all tunnel-like too and it's way too long, the tunnel, so yeah, I was pretty anxious at Foodland but at the same time, I mean, we're a big family and I hadn't even made it to the muesli bar section, so I motored through, albeit wonky, what else could I do? Anyway, I'm not really sure how I'm doing right now.

No. Not at a poetry reading. Yes with my husband or children, and even that is very occasionally; once with a brother-in-law on Grand Final Day, who swigged from his beer in response; sometimes with friends, but rarely, rarely; never at a poetry reading. It's a chaos narrative I'd be purging, with few pauses and a lot of conjunctions, and writers—people—generally like order. *Chaos is what can never be told; it is the hole in the telling. Thus in the most hurried "and then" telling, chaos is the ultimate muteness that forces speech to go faster and faster, trying to catch the suffering in words.*² Does anyone have time for suffering during a glass-of-red intermission?

Repetition, like vertigo, is also chaos, so maybe I need to work with that constructively. I want to talk about my frazzled nerves because driving my children to school is sometimes particularly tough. I should get up on stage and read this poem:

I am fine between the steering wheel and the seat
in the smashed glass of my body
in the radio station that shouldn't be on
in my eyes' flick from gauge to street
in my slow motion, in the chaos of speed
in the dog's deconstructed bark, his window-
whine and scramble, fine in the rumble of tyres
fine in the rear view mirror of my mind's crash
under the hot (fine) hood and the tremble
of engine I'm fine in the roar of backseat
children these fine fifteen hundred metres.

2

I email my book club to say I'm feeling *Ménièresy*. They have heard me sum up the illness before so they understand this new adverb, and because they favour literary fiction, they probably appreciate it. I tell them when I feel this way I'm horrendously insecure in social situations. "I'm afraid I'd be no good tonight."

One woman replies straight away with "It's too bad book club can't be a letting-go occasion for you," something of the nature, and I think *yes*. Yes, because I just told them how I feel so now there's no need to judge me for being quiet and less bubbly (bubble-less). Now that I don't have to hide how I'm feeling, maybe I'll actually *feel* social. And I love these girls. We meet three or four times a year, have been doing so for more than a decade. And these girls love me.

I dress up and feel nervous. I feel strong and weak all at once. I take public transport—the train and the tram—because I'm too sick to drive and it's too windy for me to ride my bike (wind is a "silly thing" I need to avoid, like catching a ball, walking across a bridge, watching my children jump on the trampoline, driving through hills or driving too long). But the tram doesn't drop me off in front of the restaurant so I have to walk five blocks (in the wind) because busses make me feel worse. I'm thinking this is all too difficult and I shouldn't be out, should've asked

someone for a ride, but then I'd already burdened them with the woe-is-me email, could I have sent another asking for help? Things are getting chaotic.

I blame the stupid cold. It's the same with hormones, too, or any other state of disarray. Whether I am sniffly or headachy or pregnant or ovulating, my bodily changes, no matter how accustomed to them I would think I've become, have always played havoc on my illness. Whatever changes my body feels, my illness feels, as well:

Pregnancy

the bloodless months babies only
apostrophes entrenched & needy
so much energy in the forming
the sound rushing around
my inner ear as their bodies surfed
on waves too common & too strong
the morning sickness all day long
but amplified by disease squatting
like I was giving birth the altar
my loo spinning while I slept too.

Breastfeeding

when my babies came no blood
for months then faintly its return
a modest uterus bowing to breasts
I floated in stillness milky & sedated
on duty & love the quiet waters
growing sons & daughters & waves
consuming themselves in awe.

Menstruating

now I am bleeding inside me
walls are peeling their swollen cells
it is well known traumatically so
that just as fever consumes or mucus
makes riverways out of passageways
sickness begets robust waves:

blood is the same this is my body
in April this is my body in May.

At the restaurant, one friend says, “I thought you just had a cold. I didn’t think you had Ménière’s again.” If she means I’m not bed-ridden with the spinning and the vomiting so I must not have Ménière’s, she is right, and wrong. Even I’ve been known to say, “The Ménière’s has come back,” when I’m bed-ridden with the spinning and the vomiting for weeks or months or the better part of a year—as if it had ever really gone away, as if it’s not post-modern: the *modernist sick role is you are sick or well / postmodernist is you are sick and then you are well and then the two merge.*³

It is also a numbers game: bed-ridden with the spinning and the vomiting is a 9. No one ever says “10”; what would “10” even mean? The Beaufort Wind Scale goes to 12, *widespread destruction* ⁴, which I’ve known, or think I’ve known. Two weeks ago I’d say I was a 2, because I don’t recall any traumas, even tiny ones. Since the cold’s come on, I’ve been a 4, maybe 5—it’s hard to distinguish between those middle numbers; I answer according to my mood. A 4 on the Beaufort Wind Scale is a *moderate breeze: wind raises dust and loose paper; small branches move.*⁵ 5 is a *fresh breeze: small trees sway; waves form on lakes,*⁶ so I’m a 5. Or a 4. Wind is difficult to measure. *Wind like pain, is difficult to capture. The poor windsock is always striving, and always falling short.*⁷ “I’m fine,” I say, embracing the triumph narrative. I posit an internal intact self that remains strong even in the face of semi-traumatic events. I do this because now I feel ridiculous about the email, dramatic, over-reactive, and it would be so much easier if I was triumphant rather than chaotic, or, even worse, *depressive*. And now, no matter how much I love the book and want to talk about it, I won’t because I am insecure in this social situation. I knew that this would happen. I will be no good tonight.

3

I’m at a conference on Life Writing. Illness narratives have become a part of my life so I need to be here, to present my stance on writing them as poetry and to listen to what other people think about representing trauma. The papers generate sparks in my head; ideas are bouncing off the walls of my brain, creativity trying to punch its way through my skin. Of course I’m exhausted. Inspiration is hard work. It’s why I’m suddenly feeling the wind on my face. It starts at my right temple and moves down to the left side of my chin. Each arm becomes an alleyway of breezes. I

mistake my torso for a quiet but potent vent. My groin and legs feel it the most, so I'd better not stand up.

I must stand up; it's time for lunch. A man sees me struggling with my bag hanging on the back of my chair. The chair almost falls. I trip over my shoes. He can't see my disease and I feel him thinking I'm just a little clumsy, maybe absent-minded, maybe ditzy. "Are you OK?" He is smiling. Perhaps it's a joke. I am a bloopers outtake. "I'm fine," I say, and I make myself fine because the quicker I can get through this interaction the quicker I can grab a sandwich and biscuit and sit back down in an empty room, pretending I'm reading over my paper, pretending that I'm fine. Not a 3, having just been a 2, not a gentle breeze, having just been a light one; not noticing the leaves and small twigs in constant motion nor the light flags in Victoria Square extended.

tepid baths, weak tea, drizzled mist, water-fine
cream walls, old sock, undershirt

fine like drab, fine like faded, bland meat
sort of pudgy, smudged outlines, under-rated

mumble-fine, soap-fine, plains-fine
whine-fine, whine-fine, whine

It's unsettled me—the bag and the man and now appearing anti-social or ill-at-ease (which I am), eating my lunch alone. But this is why I'm here, to explore these thoughts and to say that writing illness narratives is important—for me and for the man. Maybe these people will listen to my paper and the man will understand the issue with my bag, the three women I know-but-don't-know who are only five steps away from me will understand why I'm not standing and talking with them. Maybe they'll get that when I'm writing about illness, I'm telling the truth: no, I'm not fine. *Over the long course of chronic disorder... texts shape and even create experience*,⁸ so because I won't tell you how the shopping went for me at the beginning of the month, I'll write about it. It's part of living with my illness. And I'll want you to hear my words or read my words so you'll know I am not fine; you'll know that *we* are not fine. As a community of chronically ill people, a "remission society"⁹ of "you're-so-brave" when really "we're-just-tired", we are not fine at all.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.almanac.com/content/how-measure-wind-speed-beaufort-wind-force-scale>
- 2 Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. The University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London. 1995. 101-102.
- 3 Ibid., 9.
- 4 <http://www.almanac.com/content/how-measure-wind-speed-beaufort-wind-force-scale>
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Biss, Eula. 'The Pain Scale'. *Seneca Review*. Vol. 35, Issue 1. 2005. 10.
- 8 Kleinman, Arthur M.D. *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, healing and the human condition*. Basic Books, Inc. New York, 1988. 49.
- 9 Frank, 8.