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Speaking with Psychosis

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The Prairies Always See You: Speaking with Psychosis

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The isolation room is compact—I can almost reach the walls if I stretch out my arms. A corrugated metal grid covers the entire back wall; the front wall is glass. I focus on the side walls, their stretch of beige, how the glossy paint exaggerates the unevenness of the surface. The flatness is uninterrupted by poster or painting. The beige feels close, ominous—the evidence of something gone, a mirror with no reflection, a face with no features. I can find no other clues as to how I have arrived here or why I'm being detained. I am wearing beige cotton pajamas, hospital pajamas. The medical staff had forced me to take off my top and my pants, my bra and underwear, and then they took all my clothing away. Now I match the walls. I could disappear. I'd been allowed one phone call and I wasted it on a mental health advocate who told me, firmly, quickly, that I can refuse to talk, as if my only chance at liberty could be found in one more form of erasure. On the other side of the glass doors, I can see no one, but I do hear the nurses declare the data of other patients, and some of the noise ricochets with my own story, shards of details that are not mine but that fit—the names of places, the names of symptoms. My thoughts hit against the beige walls and slide down them.

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And then I find a bond, in the stark isolation that is a psychiatric segregation unit, and this one intuitive choice is what I want to explore in this piece of writing that will remain as small as the room. I look at the wall and remember a reassuring sentence from a conversation the day before on the phone with a friend. I did not use the word *psychosis* when I spoke to this friend, but instead I said that my mind was *awry.* He repeated this word, and it seemed right, how I could share its meaning with him, this vocabulary of my choosing, my perspective off-kilter, cockeyed, shards of my mind turning within a kaleidoscope. I was surprised that he was speaking with me at all. I have grown used to another's discomfort when my words betray the errors of my mind. I have grown accustomed to stiff faces, expedient statements, and swift departures. But he stayed on the phone and found something to trust in my skittering dialogue, how I'd crack open one comment and veer in a new direction, still somehow reaching him, or he'd interrupt to reach me.

How am I doing? It was his question, voiced as if his halted attempts had a technique that could be appraised and as if I was the one in the position to judge.

This is helpful, I said. I meant both the connection and the words, how they were still working somehow even as I moved them too quickly. I relished the respectful way the question positioned me, when the madwoman is so often assumed to possess no insight. I could feel the value in my perspective, my own ability to assess what kinds of speech eased my fluster. But where to go from here? I knew he was from the Prairies and so I told him that the Prairies made me feel vulnerable, singular, how I could sense the force of my verticality in the flatness.

He responded slowly, but with ease—and he said he was telling me what had been told to him, his gift already a gift—*the Prairies always see you.*

I could imagine standing in the beige wheat fields and finding solace in them, held by a gaze of the ground.

He was nowhere near me as I stood facing the beige walls, and then when I sat on the foam mattress on the metal bed, but I recalled his vivid assertion. *The Prairies always see you*. I had always been a child of the woods—mountain greens, somber firs, generous branches sieving light, rain a relentless syncopation, the smell of pine opening my chest, wide trunks offering a place to hide. Nothing within the segregation room oriented my mind to my geography, but I could borrow someone else's. I could feel seen—by the walls, by this friend, by language itself.

Psychiatrists have never asked me about such a shift, when within the confusion of my mental corridors some fulcrum enables me to find my way. I talk to psychiatrists in my beige pajamas, once I am out of segregation but still within the locked ward, and then I talk to them when I am wearing the ordinary grace of clothing in the months that follow forced hospitalization. We review doses of medication and their various benefits and side effects, each time the dogged discussion of the pills as if only drugs can provide treatment for a troubled mind. Our meetings rarely consider the psychotic experience that led to medical capture, and I have never been asked to recount what kinds of therapeutic discoveries I might have made while deep within a threshold state.

We speak of *triggers*—those stressors that lead to psychotic symptoms. But what of the potential triggers that lead in the other direction? What might be their pattern, their form?

I want to pause at the wall, in that instant when I could have experienced psychic dissolution, separated from anyone who could have guided me back into some sense of shared reality, when I am left bereft of any clue as to what that reality might be, and instead I recalled one sentence that offered a kind of accompaniment. I want to stay with my friend's offering, its specific structure and use, how I borrowed it and why. In that room of segregation, in that state of isolated terror, I was able to recall that my friend had shared with me what had been shared with him, that I was being introduced into a relay of seeing. I returned to some kind of human connection even or possibly because I could comprehend its absence. I was not surrendering to psychotic belief but, rather, negotiating its cusp. I did not look at the wall and suddenly feel myself within an expanse of wheat. I did not hear my friend's voice. The experience involved no hallucination, visual or auditory, and I did not escape into a delusionary conviction that the wall magically peered at me like an animate thing. I knew that I was alone and that the wall was beige, flat, unresponsive, yet that I could muster some sense of witnessing from my environment, just as my friend had been taught to do from his. The thinking involved returning to memory, and therefore to loss, to what was not in the room. I was reckoning with the objective blankness of a wall at the same time as I relished what my mind could make of it. When no human could see my body, when no loved one could witness my state, I found myself oriented by what the wall could represent, by what it could let me imagine. I was soothed not by psychotic plenitude but, rather, by the creative propulsion of an *as if*.

In one of his more well-known theories, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan suggests we become psychically organized as a self when we capture

our reflection in a mirror (*Écrits* 75). The mother holds the infant in front of its reflection, and at some point it jubilantly recognizes its own shape. Yet this recognition is a misrecognition: the infant cannot yet control its limbs and does not yet experience its own body as a distinct unity even as it is enticed by this gestalt, just out of reach. Lacan asserts that this developmental stage is not only a temporal event but a paradigm of human psychic structure: we continue to need our mirrors, to search for our reflections whether in glass or in photographs or in the faces of other people, and yet we never quite match what we behold. We are bound then to a paranoiac knowledge, and Lacan uses this specific term "paranoiac," suggesting that delusion is not foreign to healthy human subjectivity but an inherent part of it.

In the depths of my psychotic states, I have picked up the blue foil of a candy wrapper and pocketed it as a secret sign; I have watched the swoop of a bird and known immediately that the shape in the sky communicated with me in a way no one else could understand. The world became a mirror, an intimate revelation. For some people who experience psychosis, the direction is reversed—internal voices seem to come from outside, inner speech a frightening elsewhere, a foreign chorus. Some people can experience their own bodies as alien, a foot not continuous with a leg but disjunctive, attached only as a ruse.

I have turned to Lacan not to assert that these extreme states are banal and expected human experiences but, rather, to consider how they correspond at least in structure with the mirroring that we all encounter, every day, as we confirm who we are by finding ourselves where we are not. Can we risk offering our own knowledge of mirroring, as a form of guidance, when we speak to someone in a psychotic state? Can this guidance engage with psychotic thinking without merging with it? My friend drew on his subjective experience with the Prairies. He communicated how another's words articulated a private yet shared feeling. Our conversation therefore involved multiple mirrors: the one between myself and my friend, between my friend and the other speaker, and between this speaker and my friend and the landscape. I was not being situated in an unmediated relationship with a surface but invited to join the mediation. And so, when I needed it most, I was able to find the Prairies reflected in a wall.

Without this solace, I might have panicked in that segregation unit, where no one was a steadying presence, where I was denied another human face. Had it not been for the verbal connection to a prairie memory, I might have scanned the room and located not a single object that could remind me of who I was and then looked down at the muted colour of my

pajamas and found myself absent. I am a woman with a stubborn aesthetic: I consistently wear shades of blues—aqua and turquoise and seafoam, the colours of the ocean or the sky, as if such largeness could be my mirror, the place where I find my body. Who was I suddenly in these beige garments that recalled prison garb? Who was I locked away? Without anyone to calm me, I might have begun to fall deeper into disarray like I have done before when the hospital doors shut. Without the psychic leverage of a helpful phrase, my delirium might have worsened, and would have been found disconcerting, threatening, captured by the disciplinary interpretive crescendo that is carceral care. My mind and body would have been met with force. In other psychiatric admissions, the nurses have signaled for the security guards, and these men, who are trained to work in shopping malls, have tied me to that metal bed, binding my ankles and wrists in four-point restraints.

Without the psychic leverage of a helpful phrase, my delirium might have worsened.

And here I was, years later, desperate again in locked seclusion. I stood in the space created by beige walls, alone, trying to understand my position, and the four hooks waited on either side of the mattress, blue rectangles empty, ready—for the straps, and then my ankles and wrists, the prone diagonals of my limbs. It could all have happened once more.

But on this occasion, I nodded at the walls. I see you. You see me.

I am grateful to have heard of the Prairies, basket of my ignorance. My friend had not named the crops. He had not specified the colours. I could not find this place on a map. Did he mean grasslands? Or corrugated fields of wheat? Or those patchwork squares of canola yellow I have flown over or driven past, distance or speed turning detail into blur? His landscape could ripple green, swaying almost white in sunlight, dark blue to black in the shade, pockets of deep glistening brown when the rain finally pelted the earth. His landscape would hold smells and sounds I did not know, and stories, his own experiences or perhaps those of his friend, a childhood and adolescence of games and triumphs and taunts, and meanings that are beyond stories, familial and spiritual roots that the land braces and does not betray. If I sensed that intricate texture in his voice, all I could see in my mind's eye was that beige, alive and stretching into the distance toward a horizon no one could touch. I turned to the wall and glimpsed that kind of freedom.

Yet I was in an isolation unit—I could know that too, as I thought of elsewhere. I recognized this reduction of my circumstances. Nothing in that stark square indicated I was in Vancouver, British Columbia, far from the Prairies, but I had begun to piece together my place. My thoughts eddied and sedimented: outside, it would be raining and the trees would be

blocking the sky. Inside, the wall was only plaster and paint. Here I stood, here I sat, and the walls reminded me of a flat stretch of land—that was it; that was enough, beige invoking beige, entrapment gesturing toward a possible expanse that reflected my living body, here, in the moment. I would be all right.

I experienced a gestalt while grasping the torque of metaphor. During other psychotic episodes, I have not been able to achieve this dual awareness in which I felt seen while I conceptualized the structure of the seeing. Instead, the object and the fantasy would become intrinsically bound. In the decade previous to this particular admission to the Vancouver segregation unit, I was living in the UK, renting a damp medieval flat, dumbwaiter in the bathroom, chandelier in the bedroom, and I once stayed up all night walking around my flat giving interviews to the CBC. But my actually being seen and heard was just hallucination's game. I stood alone, articulating my knowledge to the abiding darkness of my apartment, the only illumination: the red light above the stove. To me this light represented an entire radio studio and the surrounding hush of attention. All I possessed were hours of black and crimson and my own voice, arms gesturing into a void. Yet in my psychotic imaginings, the show was on the air. The host awaited my answers. The audience listened. I paced back and forth past the coffee table, elaborating my points, nodding occasionally toward the red light, its eye steady and radiant and loyal.

Whereas I grasped that the beige wall was not in fact a vehicle of observation, my red light had merged with my psychic fantasy. My performance was not evidence of creative play but surrender to delusion. The shape of this specific delusion is not uncommon in psychosis, not surprising my frantic narratives of surveillance through technological means; the camera in the ceiling, the chip in the brain. When I have heard patients describe their own beliefs, I sense their yearning to be significant but also something more fundamental, primal, a longing to be visually held and so to sense the edge of the self as it is created through the eyes of another, even if those eyes are powered by inanimate electric charge.

My internal muse had propelled me out of my apartment, in search of something only madness promised, and so I walked from my living room to the public library where the police soon captured my body with theirs, batons bopping at their hips. The police questioned me at the station in the aggressive and belligerent manner you interrogate a suspected criminal, and the three of them grew increasingly impatient with my incongruent claims. They threw me to the ground, handcuffed me, jamming metal into

a body that would succumb to force in a way that my unfurling sentences would not. They dropped me off at the psychiatric hospital.

In the medieval town where I lived, psychiatric patients are not first admitted to a separate emergency isolation unit but instead are dumped straight into a collective space, rambunctious clamour of voices inside the double locked doors, and so my delusions soon found company. When I was released from the handcuffs, I skidded my socked feet to the TV room of the crowded ward, the sofa's plaid lumps as desolate as the leftovers from a garage sale, one corner of the floor piled with the flash of *The Daily Mail*, royalty's composed faces the inversion of our disheveled, forgotten state. The patients gazed at the boom-flicker of the television. *You are in the way of the TV!* That glowing box gave us the daily measure of our value. The volume blasted the room full of shame as *Jerry Springer* told of infidelity and incest, adult children waiting to come on stage to declare their truths. Patients were not allowed to lie down on the sofa, but the drugs made us slouch, legs and arms limp, just our heads upright as the light from the screen pulsed over slack mouths.

"I am in a movie," one patient confided as she swiveled her hips to sit closer to mine. "It has Tom Cruise in it."

Another patient proclaimed to me that I was Frasier, from the sitcom, not genuinely a patient but someone undercover in celebutante solidarity, and then she announced to the others that she had discovered who I was, the news of my role quickening the room to excitement the way one fixed bulb in a dark and broken stream of Christmas lights can suddenly turn them all aglow. If I existed as a character within the television series, perhaps we would all be seen by the camera. We would all be human. Outside the psych ward, the world continued without us.

I grasped that I was not Frasier but sensed my sudden responsibility to be this figure for these strangers who were now my community in this place of banging radiators and duct-taped windows. The room became a cacophony of star turns.

In his later work, Lacan adds a second mirror to his discussion of the mirror stage, this developmental experience that continues to structure our days. The two mirrors, one concave and one flat, interplay together—the emphasis here on this relation between reflective surfaces and how the eye is tricked by it (*Seminar I* 124). In the diagram to illustrate his thinking, a bouquet of flowers hangs upside down, beneath a table, and its image is inverted by the mirrors' interplay so that the bouquet appears upright, placed securely in a vase. The flowers are not in the vase, but because of the coordinating mirrors, the eye in the diagram sees them as so. The upright,

contained bouquet is a fiction. The optical vectors, their connections, are the source of a mirage.

One can translate this diagram to an embodied circumstance by considering that an infant in front of a reflection is not just in relation to its own image but in relation to the adult who is holding the child and who is witnessing the child's dyadic revelation. The infant interacts with the adult who confirms the child's imagistic discoveries. No infant holds itself to the mirror. It relies on the adult's engagement, that looking back and forth, finding significance in the glass and then searching for the child to do the same. Our relationships with our reflections are structured through the other's desire, a multi-mediated process of human correspondence.

When I was in the UK psych ward, one patient showed me photographs of a pop star on her phone, told me he loved her, reciting the song lyrics that declared this secret love. The screen of the phone showed his face together with the stark fluorescent light of the psych ward ceiling, both existing for a moment on the same plane. I accepted the force of this patient's fiction, unsure how to find solid ground beyond it. She tapped the phone along to the music and my brain felt clumsy, numb, and thick, my doubts caught in her chimera of being loved. Neither of us could articulate that we were the ones to want another's gaze, that the fantasy illustrated not adoration but its absence. I had plucked dandelions from the tired and tiny lawn we were allowed to occupy, the fading grass bound by concrete walls and littered with cigarette butts, and I had placed each dandelion in plastic cups and handed these offerings to patients, and from their exclamations I deduced that I was no longer *Frasier* to them but perhaps a beloved sister or a fairy godmother or a maiden in a pageant or just a fellow ward in our interminable capture, the dandelions bending at their stems, finally wilting until the blooms sunk back into the water.

If the Lacanian flowers are not in the vase, but appear so through the relay of mirrors, then how do we distinguish between healthy, enabling delusion—the necessary organizing fantasy that helps us develop the sense of our own psychic and corporeal container and the complex interiority held by it—and the delusion involved in the tricks that our minds were playing in that psych ward, the tricks we perfected day and night as we shared our exuberant kindness? How exactly do you help someone develop the capacity, from within madness, to negotiate a delusion's contours? How define the moment when such finding occurs? I don't believe any doctor can establish a fixed boundary between psychosis and what might be called stable human subjectivity, just as no solid border demarcates our delusions from our fantasies, our refusal of lack and our working with and through it,

but I know I felt a visceral difference between the moments I tried to give and receive assurances in that run-down psych ward and the moments I would feel myself mediated years later by the imagistic statement gifted to me by my Prairies friend, the stillness. Does this difference have to do with my being able to sense the effect of the mirrors, their placement? Or my parsing of my own creative potential to transform what was blank? Or did both my friend and I grasp the psychological equivalent of the invisible diagonals that stretched between reflections—how my friend's statement was a citation, not uniquely his, and therefore never uniquely mine? When the psychiatric patients and I spoke together, we were doing our best to affirm and to soothe each other. Yet we became caught in the echoing chamber of want. We did not know then how to address how this want had caught us, how to articulate that we were the ones left wanting. We often could not see each other, especially not when each presence was fodder to continued delusion. Elated, we used each other, bodies propped quickly within a game of our undoing, the whole room a psychic pool table, whack of ball against ball.

Yet we became caught in the echoing chamber of want.

In contrast to our discordant chorus, there is the meticulous arrangement of mirror to mirror, flower to vase, eye to mirror to the floating effect, each reflected petal as sure somehow as the real ones. These components are all precise, all intricately relational, not here the elated and flailing confusions of an infant but the organizing mind of an adult, situated within a social, symbolized world, formed as a self by being split from it, capable of simultaneously seeing an illusion created by reflection and identifying that it is one. Any careless adjustment and the image won't keep. When you look at Lacan's diagram, you can grasp how much depends on placement. You realize how still you'd have to stay.

My relationship with Lacan's diagram has for years been intimate, the kind forged when you are young and first determining what will be your chosen map of the world. Perhaps I have never had a solid sense of what is within me and what is without: I have long been intrigued by theories that give me a language for all that is insecure. I came to read Lacan independent of any lesson or guide. As I turned pages without confidence that I was grasping the meaning of the expansive yet cryptic text, my curiosity was piqued not just by the psychology but by the affective quiver induced by reading his prose. I had not yet experienced psychosis, but perhaps these were preparatory hours in how to negotiate its confusions: after a day with these dense paragraphs, language seemed to have loosened its referential grip. I began to read aloud the work, feeling the resonance of its textures, encountering the language as one would a riddle or a state-

ment in a dream. I would follow one assertion and then find the meaning inverted. I would dwell with an analogy or metaphor, enjoying the poetic layers of a text that didn't move in a straight line. When I have taught Lacan, I've tried to explicate his theories while I also gesture toward what resists explication. I have borrowed a concave mirror from the physics department and lugged it across campus to set it up in the classroom, quite sure I would be unable to reproduce the promised effect but pleased that I could at least make the students see the materiality of the mirrors, their shape and their arrangement in relation to each other and to the flowers that I had taped upside down. We could focus on the physicality of the thing, the art of the thing, spending time not just with the analysis but with the base component parts.

In that medieval apartment with the red light above the stove, I once tried to build my own version of these parts, composing objects in relation to each other on the floor. I did not have a concave mirror, but I had a pale green teacup. I did not have a flat mirror, but I knew that a piece of cardboard packaging would do. I had a red elastic band. I had acorns I'd collected in a bowl. Orange peels—these too could be tools. I placed each item carefully so that their angles could bounce off each other. I balanced books on their spines, hard covers open like double doors. As I descended into the spiraling mental vertigo that even during that long night I recognized as psychosis, and although I had no skill to stop its course, I diagramed vectors of light or language or longing, gathering items on a flat surface so that these objects could communicate what words could not.

Whenever I make these displays, I believe my eyes are not the only ones to see the arrangement. I invent a watching presence, a beloved and loving presence, someone to understand what the objects mean.

Every one of my psychotic states has involved some aspect of this invention of a watching presence. But when I stood at the beige wall, instead of entering further into this fantasy until it collapsed into delusion, I was able to establish my bearings in a room where I knew I was alone.

The power of that decisive moment is most evident when compared with a more complete arc of other episodes, those years when I entered a plot when I had little awareness that I was the one writing it. After my time in the UK, I was living in Toronto, and my symptoms began to reappear, delirium soon as thick as the summer heat, my mind cluttered and clattering. I walked to my doctor's office, making sure first to lock my apartment that held not just all my possessions but the diagrams I'd made with them, the tin can and the candlestick, the cushion and the running shoe. Inside the waiting room, I once again felt the presence of cameras. Were

they in the ceiling? My belief did not solidify into anything so technically specific—not here the beaming red light of my kitchen. I could not see any devices, only sense their power as I succumbed to a visceral knowledge of being watched, a hunch not unwelcomed. The eyes, I could tell, were benevolent: my friends stood on the other side of the camera, my beloved among them. I scanned the seats and the table and the information board that had looked authentic when I had arrived, although I now could tell that all the objects of this waiting room had been arranged specifically for me. I needed to identify and decipher the code. The hardcover book with the giant print, the cover torn off—did it not tell of romance that had been ripped from my days? And *Little Red Riding Hood*—was that story not a warning of what could happen or a message about what had already happened to a child who had made the mistake of trusting someone garbed in a robe of care? Was some benevolent, unseen consciousness attending through these planted pages to my liminal state? The glossy magazines invoked those of the psych ward—and these were my beloved's way of telling me he knew of that extended entrapment, those days I had quickly folded and tucked away so I could return to school. A pregnant woman entered the room, and then another—bellies bulbous and taut, arms wrapped protectively around what I would never hold. I began to laugh because they were actors, weren't they? I grew surer: these performers were hired by my friends and my beloved to create this simulacrum of my life, my grief. It was too late for me to have children of my own, but I could have two pregnant women sitting so near, one beside me and one across, wishes caught in a funhouse mirror, my own slim body less substantial, but connected, interdependent, rounded in theirs. The vibrancy of a day increased, and these women's bodies reflected my pain back to me, and the cameras would hold their shapes. Here, the lesson. My beloved would see my life, shattered, whole.

When I left the doctor's office, the Toronto street glinted noisy and crowded, buses and streetcars emitting exhaust like the street's own sooty breath, and I passed homeless people who muttered to themselves the way I was muttering to myself. I could feel the hovering presence of my beloved as I walked past storefronts that he had orchestrated, somehow—a turquoise book, a turquoise dress—each display like a wink. I needed to find the wedding where he would be waiting, as a groom waits, as a groom watches, his eyes finding the bride. I knew ours wouldn't be a traditional wedding because I had to meet a friend at Shoppers Drug Mart and she would show me the way, rag-tag through the summer city streets, heat reflecting off metal and glass, and coins in a paper cup, and empty bags

What distinguishes my experience in segregation to this delirium in the store is that at the wall I knew I was creating a sustaining interpretation of it.

lying crumpled as hope, and around a corner there'd be a book launch or a party or a protest or some other robust gathering that would become a wedding. When I walked through the drug store, all the products gave me clues about how to find this event. But I did not need these beauty products any more than I needed a white dress. My beloved had chosen me, as I am. Through the overhead speakers, Sarah McLachlan told me I'm in the arms of an angel, and my beloved had picked out this song, for this moment, and I read *sane* in *sanitary* and I begin to laugh because he would understand the joke.

Spend all that time waiting for a second chance, for a break that will make it okay.

He was there, somewhere—eyes in the ceiling or in these packages or maybe gazing through the window bright with sun. My laughter was not alone.

Place these two scenes next to each other: first, a woman spins in a Shoppers Drug Mart, toothpaste and shampoo and lipstick and her ebullient words to a beloved no one else can see. And then the sadder scene, the quieter scene, some years later: a woman stands still in a psychiatric segregation unit, staring at a beige wall, saying not a word. In both these scenes, she is a solitaire. In both, she displays recognizable attributes of madness. We have all walked past someone speaking with great determination to an intimate who is not there. And when a patient stands still, facing a wall, in a locked space, in beige pajamas, there is little doubt to the nursing and psychiatric staff that her mind should not be trusted. But inside that troubled psyche where madness sometimes harbours its logics, these scenes in fact are evidence of two diverging mental states. On that heated afternoon chasing a wedding in Toronto—like my night performing to the red light in my UK flat—I possessed no distance from the fantasy's lure. I sincerely believed my groom was waiting for me, at some ad hoc and unconventional wedding that the stereo speakers in a drug store could announce. What distinguishes my experience in segregation to this delirium in the store is that at the wall I knew I was creating a sustaining interpretation of it. I could recall the recent past with my friend on the phone, just as I could imagine a future in which I might one day tell this friend about the soothing effect of his speech. He did not become an imaginary eye behind a camera. He was no spectral groom hovering in a drug store aisle. His sentence enabled me to see an image, and to see the seeing. The encounter with that beige wall felt neither sane nor insane but something in between, an intermediate realm I name poetry. I could feel observed without believing that the wall possessed eyes.

It would perhaps be no accident that my friend is a poet, although our conversation brimmed full of accidents, beginning with the chance of my phoning him that vulnerable day, then the haphazard journey our dialogue would take before we turned to the synchronistic talk of the Prairies, his statement like a line that closes a poem, that jolt of rightness and surprise. There was no way to predict when I first called him what I would hear; he had no comprehension of the specifically romantic fantasy of my previous delusions, that invisible but oddly reliable beloved who mysteriously returns over and over again to wait and to watch, and my friend would not know that I'd soon be caught in a lonely and frightening circumstance where I would encounter a surface that glinted flat and beige and blank. My helpful friend possessed no medical expertise in diagnosis, nor had he undergone training in crisis intervention. He hadn't offered the Prairies' mysterious ocular powers as a psychological treatment. He had simply done his best to follow my bouncing speech without yoking it too tightly to reason. He had spoken back in words that did and didn't make sense. And his chance statement acted as a pivotal catalyst, invoking past longings while enabling me to accept a solitude unaltered by the comfort of fixed delusion.

The Prairies always see you. I have focused here on the Prairies and their strange powers of seeing, but the *always* of my friend's statement also provided its reassurance, the security of a constant truth. As did the *you*, a pronoun not bound to my friend or to his friend or to me, but open, as wide as the land. The statement could be directed to another and then another still, the way song lyrics or the lines of a poem resonate to each listener or reader, catching us in our moments, words and syntax unchanged, beacon unchanging and yet becoming our own.

This statement would leverage an initial shift away from psychotic delusion, whereas our echoing dialogue together in the psych ward did not seem to realize this ameliorative purpose. An element of neutrality informs my friend's statement, the unmarked space and the sturdiness of *always* and the impersonal *you.* I could not co-opt it as uniquely mine, and in fact what sustained me was perhaps the very relationality of the teaching, the friend remaining distinct from my fray but aligning himself with me just as he had once been structured through speech by his own friend. He too possessed solitude that needed steadying. The Prairies reached out with absence—no one breathing near—and yet in that uninterrupted enormity, one could be witnessed and feel it. With the ballast of this configuration, my own agency became crystalline, my mind pivoting with and through a Prairies encounter as I tolerated my separation from it. Alone, I did not

fall into a cascade of need within a phantasmagoria of mirrors, but I saw what was wanting, experienced it, so elemental, now, here, at the wall. I knew how I could answer.

When I invoke the possibility of a guide, I mean the innate worth of even this kind of tentative, serendipitous, creative exchange, my new orientation made possible by an instant of connection on the phone. I suggest taking that chance. I hope for such discoveries to occur, in dialogue, for those of us whose minds veer. What if we were to greet psychotic speech with the gathering poetry of sensuous things? Could you hear a word and turn it in the light? Could you risk the accidental ways that associations sometimes meet? Could you speak of what has held you, what has been offered you, the coordinates that have made you feel seen? We are none of us so securely ourselves that we do not need the glance of the world.

Those patients who announced to me their movies and their pop stars, their microchips and hidden cameras—the observed and therefore valuable scenes of their lives—all deserved guides who could listen and speak in unexpected ways, who could think on fantasy's edge. By this I mean an intuitive process, collaborative, one that may pause to speak of the process itself. I mean responding to madness with an intimate mirror and naming it as such, not just introducing a prop but sharing some element of how you understand it. Purple gowns, and apple trees, a grandfather's silver lighter, a red stick-shift truck, a blunt haircut in a gleaming salon—in psych wards I have been privileged to hear a litany of items, each privately symbolic, each in some way a looking glass, and I know now that it's possible to work with the specificity of the object while also offering my own perspective, thereby providing another angle, a structuring angle, the one that turns the looking glass into a flower in an optical illusion, the sustaining illusion you come to recognize as itself. I know too I can name my own objects—the colour turquoise or the sea's lapping of the shore or how sunshine falls through cedar boughs—and I can say on an afternoon like today I look through the window at the hop of a robin and feel my breath syncopate with this hop. We can speak with madness without entering its grip. We might not be able to teach the gift of lyrical and spontaneous response—that accidental play of words that enables a psychotic person both to feel seen and to see the seeing, to witness the very poetry of a struggling mind—but we could begin to try.

How am I doing?

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