

Melancholics
Anonymous

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Melancholics Anonymous

Chronos taps his foot
against the leg of the chair,

each time he checks his watch
breaths are sucked in sharply.

His personality split,
Chronos/Kronos/Saturn,

a walking conflation,
but mostly himself

waiting for the other two to appear,
which of course they don't,

having arrived with him
they are already here.

Hunts for the darkest shadow to park his chair,
like a dog turning in circles before it lies down,

rolls his eyes at most contributions,
bar those that mention water, or sharp objects,

whereby the foot-tapping stops,
his eyes flick to the speaker

burning keenly,
his stillness a form of hypnosis,

the rest of us watch him watching:
will he speak?

Never. But once, when Sylvia met his gaze
he blushed and looked away.

*It is not that I am predisposed to gloom
but I have adjusted to the dark.*

*It isn't cold, or lonely,
the way you might believe,*

*stealthy, perhaps,
certainly, it coils around you,*

*holds you gently, swears nothing
and never breaks the promise.*

*I was castrated,
by which I mean they silenced me,*

*by which I mean they would not listen,
so I stopped talking,*

took my exile seriously.

In the manner of tired businessmen,
train-bound home from work,

absentmindedly
sticking a pinky in their ear,

wiggling it around,
searching for the root of some relentless tickle,

think no one sees them
sniffing it,

Bellerophon fingers the hole in his chest,
his latest DIY transplant,

brings his hand to his mouth
and licks his fingertips.

We all try to ignore this,
like we avoid looking directly into his shark eyes,

the way we tell ourselves the holes in our chests
are not like his,

and how we roll our eyes at each other
when he fills his pockets with biscuits before leaving,

as if we are not all as hungry
as he is.

*I am not unfeeling,
not a barren land,*

*thoughtless,
and unperturbed,*

*but hungry
—so hungry.*

'Does anyone else smell gas?'
The Professor looks aghast.

Sylvia grins like a vixen
in a chicken coop. 'Just joking.'

Her laughter floats
around her head, like her hair.

Sometimes, she braids her hair into snakes,
her laughter too.

On those days
we know to leave her be.

Once, she recited 'Lady Lazarus' by heart;
by the end we found ourselves all humming in harmony.

She holds a cup of tea in one hand,
hovering at her lips,

the other clutches a Rich Tea biscuit,
and she dares not sip nor bite

for fear of missing a single burning colour
being propelled from Tarek's lips

as he shares with her
his latest rap.

On the days when she is not here
we all miss her.

*What kind of mother leaves her children
bereaved?*

*Why not ask,
Why does any woman become a mother?*

*Are our lives hollow
until our wombs are filled?*

*And if not fruitful,
what is the next greatest role for us?*

*It seems there are few things
we are allowed to do well.*

*Perhaps, it was a mistake
to define myself as a functioning death drive,*

*but aren't we all?
Despite this, for the world*

*I made a gift:
two fresh new lives.*

*And I felt the best way to protect them
from my burden*

was to remove it.

'When folks assume the heights you'll reach
are only ever tower blocks,

white-wash your place from history,
close the doors and turn the locks,

and your name don't fit the mouths
of the people allocating jobs,

and your faith in Allah means
between prayers you must be making bombs,

so, your fragile mind becomes a danger,
your vulnerability a threat,

you say you haven't hurt no one
they add the caveat 'not yet',

your anxiety is instability,
your frustration is aggression,

your loneliness is attitude,
Arab boys don't get depression,

and speaking truth to power
requires somebody to listen,

but it seems to me in all the noise
that somebody is missing,

the cold sun breaks in each new day,
and each day is filled with dread

that this world that only sees my skin
will leave me trapped inside my head.'

*They think me a rapper
—it's laughable.*

*Another persona presupposed by skin,
but better than terrorist,*

*and really, I don't mind trying.
It's an odd kind of healing,*

*to give a perspective to your pain
that you did not know you had*

until you tried to attach it to words.

Agnes watches
the Professor attempt to bend the ear of Chronos

with some dry observation regarding Ovid.
In an uncharacteristic display of interest,

Chronos is trying—failing, thanks to the Professor
—to listen to Tarek's rap.

Imposing himself between the two, the Professor
an obscurant gatekeeper of privilege,

fails to understand that he is the one blocking an exchange
between two worlds that have always been closer

than he would ever care to recognise.
Agnes continues knitting,

quietly stunned by the articulacy of her own thoughts.
She rarely contributes,

but listens carefully to everyone who does.
She is hunting for clues.

She is here because after thirty-five years
of what she had believed to be a happy marriage,

her husband killed himself,
and she doesn't know why.

*It is not the loss that hollows out my voice,
so that I do not recognise the sound my body makes,*

*or so consumes my thoughts that I boil the kettle three times in a row
before I remember to pour the water into the cup.*

*It is not the question, 'Why did he do it?' that tugs at the string,
pulls it out of my forehead and all the way down,*

*opening me up like one of those Babybel cheeses,
so that I tumble out of myself,*

*a jumble of me gazing up at myself from the floor,
wondering, how is she still standing?*

*It is that other question,
not, 'What was it he couldn't tell me?'*

but, 'Why couldn't he tell me?'

Her stripes, she calls them,
"Cause I've earned them'.

On the days when the pain is unbearable,
Suki hurts herself in other ways.

'My body punishes me, so I punish back.
Whoever blinks first loses

—so far, it's a tie.'
The worst of it,

she once told us,
is you keep thinking that eventually

you will acclimatise to the pain,
but there is no dimmer switch.

'No light,
just tunnel.'

*The honest answer is
I get stoned a lot.*

*The other story
you can read on my arms,*

*on my thighs.
I like to do it, if I can,*

*in the moonlight.
It gives the act the solemnity*

*it deserves,
the cool and deliberate light*

*that I cannot see
at the end of any tunnel.*

*It sounds like an organism
born to crawl along the sea floor*

*—fibromyalgia—
destined to live*

*the entirety of its existence
bearing the weight of a storm.*

I call it my sea slug.

Agnes clears her throat,
'Tarek is the first of the men

to have spoken in weeks.'
Glances up from her knitting.

It is not an admonishment,
but an invitation.

The young poet
flickers in his seat,

one moment a child,
the next a young man,

sometimes
a hole burnt in the film,

occasionally
surrounded by ghosts.

He opens his mouth,
a shift of focus,

momentarily
he is a ghost himself,

a blur of multiple selves,
overlapping at the edges,

and then,
a voice dry with silence

pulls them all into one,
and speaks.

[Case History
1988/89]

Homework

'Sticks and stones may break my bones
but words...'

If only the problem was not mathematical.

'You're an idiot—what are you?'

Blink back, blink back this burning tremble,
these hands hanging on the edge of a glare,
two endless nights suspended, quivering,
in the white candescence of his rage,
two cold searchlights clamped on the boy like roadkill-to-be.

Six revolutions around a sun,
only six,
a son:

How to know how long the working day stretches;
the cancelled aspirations that trimmed the fuse
now burning shorter yet; how to understand
that the father's not seeing enough of himself in his son
is another splinter stinging an already injured man?

There, in a moment
that pulses too long
and not long enough,
the living room
a universe closing in
on the blank panic
that searches
for the right answer
to a question
that must surely be rhetorical,
for why would the child's father
ask him to call himself an—

'WELL, ANSWER ME THEN.'

There, the shock of a thunderclap
tearing open a still evening,
and the ground betrays him,
for it cracks and caves to the roar and boom of a father
who forgets how deeply words can strike,

and the fall
is so far
so deep
so long

that by the time he realises

he is no longer falling
he is a man.
And far away
an echo names itself:
'*An idiot.*'

Planck

visualize:

a 0.1 mm dot

see:

this 0.1 mm dot expanding

swelling in size to be as big as the observable universe

within this 0.1 mm dot magnified to the size of the observable universe

see:

another 0.1 mm dot

understand:

this is the smallest measure

now:

focus your gaze

imagine:

you are the centre, the second 0.1 mm dot

at the same time, you are the outer limits of the actual observable universe outside of the observable universe

that has been magnified from the first 0.1 mm dot

imagine:

you are the cognizant presence arching across time and space, you are the outer reaches of the actual observable universe, approximately 46.5 billion light-years from Earth

also:

you are the conscious 0.1 mm dot within the universe of the 0.1 mm dot within the observable universe

you are at once both, present in both places simultaneously, with a pure and breathless sensorial comprehension of the distance between the two

understand:

you are the titanic skin of all existence, ever-expanding into the future you create as you grow

and:

you are the centre of it all, not even a seed of a seed, but a barely perceptible dot within the universe contained in a barely perceptible dot within your ever-expanding titanic skin of existence

imagine:

all of the above

plus:

you are a seven year old child, standing in his room, caught in this loop of sensation, this transcendent and monstrous terror of being both cognizant and beyond self

you are:

the furthest edge and the smallest measure

you are:

everything that hangs in the balance

Eggshells

he snaps
he crackles
he pops
but I never know which
until it's happening

it's snakes and ladders
but the board is a room
any room—every room
and the room is the world

the figure of a father
at its centre

and there are no snakes
or ladders

only eggshells

Atom Bomb

a chance act of fusion
 my birth tied to
 one whose grief
 in turn is wired
 to a detonator an incendiary temper
 so I knew shame the way I knew the inside of my mouth
 when I was too afraid to speak
 glare-caught tongue a mumbling-block
 I understood that man is a biological weapon
 when the burning cascade of loss slid down the air of the room
 wrote my name in the ash
 with a cindered limb
 wrote it beneath each
 charred shadow of
 my former selves
 crowding the walls
 of the house called
 them a chorus
 (eventually they would sing)
 as the tragi-comedy
 of a childhood
 spent entering
 rooms full of trip-wires
 unfolded let Virgil know
 the Furies are four
 named Loss
 Guilt Grief
 Regret bound
 to a child's heart
 (not mine but)
 one taught
 that men die brave
 or wise but do not
 abandon their sons
 to succumb to the arms
 of illness the man of the house
 now a walking bomb a heart tapped and triggered
 a terrorist held captive by the past
 his own children collateral damage
 and yet silently I learned to resist annihilation
 each blast each punctured conversation the debris of which I sift
 and reconstruct over and over no longer averting
 my eyes from the burning flash
 at the core of which I hear the ticking of a tender heart

[Case History
1994–1999]

Also Known As

poof(-y/-ter)
gone in a
puff(-ing)
puffin
feather(-ed)
preen(-ing)
prissy
pretty(-boy)
feminine

gay(-boy)
joyboy
joystick
grip(-ping)
squeeze(-d)
choke(-hold)
breath
air(-less)
light as
feminine

bent
out of
curve(-d)
circular
eclipse(-d)
halo
gold(-en)
luminary
heaven(-ly)
forgiving
feminine

bender
sculpt(-or)
carve(-d)
chip(-ping)
wood(-ed)
flora
unfold(-ing)
open(-s) to
absorb(-ed)
learn(-ed)
studious(-ly)
feminine

fag(-got)
bundle(-d)
gathering
intimate(-ly)
vulnerable
weak(-ness)
unsound
quiet(-ly)
peace(-ful)
pacify
compromise(-d)
concede
feminine

A Teenage Fag Fantasizes

about the hot spray
that whips across his laughing face
drenched in the vermillion afterlife
of every breath ever taken
 the blood of his antagonist

about the throbbing
pulse that thrusts against his palm
while he cuts short a song, any song,
just try to sing, will you? will you not sing for me now?
 you had so much to say before

about the tender
petals of skin unfolding
on limbs that crack like saplings
like the will of cruelty not yet grown brittle
 still fresh, and buckling to his thumb

about the trembling
knees that crumple against him,
the heavy slump that slides down
like a hot summer day dropped at his feet
 where he lets it fall, and steps back, still smiling

about the panting
flesh that has blossomed
on the linoleum of a school corridor
and blooms beyond its boundaries,
 little rivulets of tardy repent

—and the sigh
surprising
in its softness
 is beautiful, quite, quite beautiful

Granite

like granite
can we say it *shrinks* as such?
let's say so
it doesn't rise to the lash of the rains
doesn't react
but is weathered

magma-born
a burning baby
thrust up
no choice in its formation
its birth
was not a collusion

after aeons
batholithic patience
still there in the squares
cut to pave the school entrance
curving over time
like a palm cupped
to hoist each passing foot
each passing generation of feet

foot-furrowed
rain-eroded
shrinking and yet
still here
outlasts the storm
outlives each generation of feet

shrinks too from obvious purpose
a series of small steps
ubiquitous
unpresent

I too
try to be unpresent
to shrink from view
to allow the gradual erosion
to be walked over

to let it all be dimension
the shaping
the shrinking yet outlasting
of a self still resolutely me

to be patient
like granite

[Case History
2000/2001]

Checking Out

i.

beep beep beep beep beep beep beep a plague beep beep
beep beep a plague beep beep beep beep a plague beep a
plague beep a plague a plague a plague a plague a
plague a plague a plague a plague a plague a plague a
plague a plague a plague on all your houses beep beep
beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep
beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep beep
beep beep beep beep beep that's twenty-one ninety-seven
today—do you have a membership card?

ii.

in two hours I have consumed half a packet of painkillers surreptitiously popping each magic jellybean from its plastic pod the satisfying *tch* of the foil the faux throat-clearing as I slip it into my mouth reach for the bottled water that is lukewarm from sitting under the checkout and knock it back at first not noticing the soft shift not until I stand up in a fuzz of dullness that deadens the mediocrity of small talk and find myself swaying if not outwardly inwardly and I am Prometheus on painkillers grinning idiotically at the eagle—*hello again*—like who needs a functional liver anyway? a gloriously mundane human on the other side of the plexiglass grunts at me in the time-honoured manner of people who feel put-upon to acknowledge an inferior but I'm on the bridge of the Star Ship Enterprise watching this strange world through a giant screen constantly at one remove from it my finger hovering over the warp button—*what would a checkout operator look like at warp speed?*—and there's a groundless smirk rippling somewhere I can feel my mouth trying to resist it until later an opportune moment when I can laugh because a customer laughs we laugh together but not at the same thing

iii.
beep
beep
beep
beep

iv.

I make a gun of my hand and press it to my temple.

Three checkouts away my colleague, who in a week will leave to go to university and never return, performs a slow motion *Nnnnoooooooooo* as I pull the trigger. Except it's not a trigger, it's a finger, and the elderly woman hovering with a basket at the end of the conveyor belt asks me if she should go away and come back when I've finished.

'It's fine. I'm finished,' I smile.

My colleague spins on his chair, laughing.

I'm not finished. I will spend a year working here, slowly killing parts of myself, little bits of me that I did not know it was possible to continue existing without; things like joy.

Maybe it sweats out of the palms of my hands, sticking itself to the groceries I handle: tiny specks of micro-joy from a finite supply, coating the groceries of strangers, who see me and don't see me, disappearing into the boots of their cars.

In a week, my colleague will high-five me on his way out and say it's been a pleasure.

'Go,' I'll say, 'save yourself.'

He will laugh. And he will go. And he will save himself.

v.

tally up an average

fifty hours a week

beep beep beep beep

These are two for one, aren't they?

beep beep beep

But it says they're two for one. I don't want them if they're not.

beep beep

So I need to read the small print for every single special offer?

beep

I don't want them then. I'm not paying that.

b—

That's on offer too.

—

So why is there a sign up?

—

Well, that's not my fault. You still have to honour what's on the sign.

—

Aye, well you can tell your manager I'll be going to Pennylane from now on.

—

tally up an average

fifty hours a week

I acquiesce to idiocy

nod and smile and shrug

in apparent sympathy while

I imagine the flecks of yogurt

sputtering down your chinny-chin-chin

as you choke on your Müller Crunch Corner

vi.

here, waking, is the dread that dawns in my gut, grimly blossoms another day serving the denizens of this godless blot. even the churches are godless, so bored was he by their tone-deaf drone that he wandered off and forgot them. this is a morning like pulling on damp trousers, like every other since I returned to this place I grudgingly call home, if only because this is the place that spat me into the world. this dread my wake-me-up, this day my life, this loop my deadweight. correction: this me my deadweight, this loop my rut I drag it through. bus to a town that once was famed for its gallows: with a legacy like that you'd think the only way was up. gone are the days of crowds of cattle drovers descending here, some kind of scottish wild west stirred up out of a one horse town. it always was and always will be a one horse town. this is my high school nightmare—to be here. still. every step through the as yet empty supermarket aisles is a hammer blow to instinct, a body denying the pull of its own recoil. nerves stretch out the word *leave* until it hums through my limbs, like the thrum of the strip lights above, until it coils in my head and pokes at the back of my lips, prodding for a way out. bite your tongue. swallow your tongue. hold your tongue. cuffs of a shirt that can't make it through a single shift without grubbing. tighten the noose of company colours, and a jacket as thin and grey as the day ahead. doors have been open five minutes and already a hoverer is twitching to be served. the soft thud of a basketful at the conveyor belt's end. my Sisyphian fate is in that thud; though time will disguise it. it will become the tinkling bell above the doors of restaurants and shops, the ringing phone, the upsell, the suggestive sell, the supervisor's twitching eye, the thump of books on a desk, the already and ever expectant expression of every centre-of-the-universe who enters any place of service brimming with the assumption that their presence pays my wages. it is the dull, hollow thud of silent indignity, of the tongue's mad endurance—held, bitten, swallowed over and over. it is the burning cheek of every joke at my expense, it is the strange mask of timidity that wraps its lips around *I'm sorry* when there's nothing to apologise for, it is the bastard that grinds me down, the filthy rage at my own meekness, and the very anticipation of it is why each morning curls itself into a seed of dread. and all for what?

vii.

From within the grey and waxy pallor of his face a stare unfathomably blank, dredged from his depths, from a lifeless vacuum, a place light bends to avoid. Across the perspex front of the checkout we gaze at each other, and then, in perfect, unrehearsed synchronicity, turn our heads to watch.

Vacuum-packed in plasticky glisten, gliding along the conveyor belt like a tired vessel drawing its voyage to an end, sailing slowly into dock, a heart, and nothing else.

I scan it.

'How much?'

'£4.73'

Bellerophon pulls a faded nylon wallet from his anorak. He unzips the coin compartment, plucks one by one three pound coins, a twenty pence, and a penny. Gazes at the coins in his palm, then tips them back inside, closes the zip, and begins the arduous task of slowly thumbing open the velcro.

Over his fumbling grey hands, I glance at the gaping wound in his chest, the edges like torn papier-mâché, encrusted with blood dried black with age, the void within a stale and shadowy husk.

A limp and grubby five-pound note proffered.

'Put the change in the tub.'

He glances blankly at the charity box by the till as he picks up the heart.

I watch him leave, passing by the other shoppers unseen.

Later, I hand in my notice, written on the back of the receipt he left at the checkout.

[Case History
2003]

The Oak

once upon a hill an oak
offered its arm to a derelict man
and him tempted to take it
to be a bauble a breath bulbous caught
glottal-stopped on his own gravity
saw him a body to break upon
a cellulose and lignin flèche
a friend as feral as his fears
acorn-hatched gnarled kin
of a gallows tree calling him:

*brother set your burden down
your heart well seen it is heavy
each step stooped and staggered
with the weight soul-weary one
I have shade enough to share
let me hold off the hot day
the glare the glowering sun
and more than any man might
give you time to tell all
that your tongue trembles to say—*

'old one ancient oak
how much my heart is hindered
my thoughts turned thorn-sharp
a mind made malcontent
some skull-rot some scourge
with no respite robs even rest
from night and names not itself
but lurks leaden and silent
in the dull edges of each day
those dearest to me I disappoint
for bear them too this bane
as long as it lingers with me
to them I am turned torturer
a pestilence for in my presence
joy fails and hope finds
in my torpor only a cold horror
that I cannot lift this curse'

*then let me lift it for you
brother I was born to bear it
progeny of the gibbet tree
a blood-soaked sire
upon whom the hapless wretch
was hoisted up and hung
these roots of mine thus run red
let me fulfill this legacy*

*be borne upon these boughs
of suffering make a sacrifice
to Taranis and the tyranny
of your thoughts the thunder god
will strike dead and silent
brooding brother break your neck
upon these limbs and lift the veil
you know well nature
can be fierce and forgiving
at once so wander no further
falter no more afflicted
but gift to me the glory
of the gallows and give
yourself what you yearn
peace from your oppressor—*

tearfully the tender-heart
sees himself finding succour
in the arms of the oak
to unburden those beloved
to him to hinder them no more

*coiled and clutched there
in your hand a handsome
leash of fine leather
holds to the hound it will hold
to the drop do not doubt—*

at which the soul-weary one
comes to recalls himself
slowly sifts from his vision
temptation to take the oak
at its word and wind
the leash around its limb
knot its end around his neck
to pocket stones and stiffen then
upon the bough and breeze
a wretch finally released
from a life unlived
instead he hesitates
remembers then that resting
by the path his patient hound
waits and wonders not
at her master's melancholy
but sits and gazes placidly
a tender temperament
her loyalty not levied
on conditions but conveyed
in friendship freely given
unwavering true and warm

a heart to bear responsibly
when hard to bear his own

moved then the man spoke
'ancient oak king of trees
you tell it truly tasked with
this heavy soul here it seemed
I found my fate must finish
with you yet though I yearn
to end what seems endless
I cannot leave my loyal hound
alone here far from home
nor betray her trust and take
her life along with mine
I dare not do it'
then it seems through the leaves
a rage rushes a sudden wrath
called upon a bitter breeze
that stills just as suddenly

*soul-weary one wanderer
you give me no glory this day
but I endure defer my destiny
ancient as I am as I will be
upon your word promise me this
no matter if malady afflicts
you still or the solace sought
you find when your life-fire
burns low bring you back
and deliver what you deny this day—*

never so close to committing
a deed that cannot be undone
the tender-heart humbled
bows low before the oak
'ancient one old warrior
upon my word I promise
to these red roots I will return
and between my teeth I will take
an acorn dropped from your own arm
and like that be lowered here
beneath you buried by your feet
mouth bearing fruit your blood-heir'

satisfied then it seemed
for the oak spoke no more
the wanderer as if awakened
from a daze for a moment gazed
upon the canopy that kingly crown
then turning took to the track

his loyal hound at his heel
and though weary walked on

The High Priestess

after Dr Nina Simone

she is in my room. in my head.
a vibration once anchored to the earth through a human body,
she is more than a spell upon me,
she is more than feeling good, feeling better.

the high priestess is in my head.
it is a purification, the way she sings pain,
a thread of black gold piercing through the noise of a world
that won't see my injured heart.

her voice,
like rain falling from the earth,
summons the ghost I am,
dead one lifted from the sky,
like a hair rising on the skin of sound.

she cripples Death's grin,
once fiendish and contorted,
she outstares him, outruns him, bold one,
no lilac dream this,
sings pain sings joy sings
the high priestess

I am a body again, I have blood,
today is a killer
she sucks out the poison, holds up my heart, shining,
and only you can save us, Lord
she knows me, and I understand I am not broken.

sings pain, sings the high priestess, like a west wind,
like a voice falling from the earth,
holds up my beating heart,
who are you, Lord?
Death has flown, I open my mouth,
you are our killer

* Italicised lines borrowed from the song 'Medley: My Sweet Lord/Today Is A Killer', by Nina Simone.

[Case History
2005]

Blue

'*You don't look depressed.*' Should I paint myself blue? Lean and melancholy like *Avatar*, or strange and otherworldly comme *La planète sauvage*. The danger is it could all go horribly Smurf. Should I scratch at my head, be equal parts fidgety and mournful, develop an Oscar-winning tic? Maybe I should adopt the expression of Crying Face Boy.

They said that ever since his mother died he looked that way: forever the wail of loss simmering just beneath his skin. Held back only by the crease of his brow, his lips twisted down and locked over the voice that threatened to excavate his pain over and over by reminding him he was alive every time he spoke. Parting the crowded high school hallways like Moses, his trauma was anthrax—even the bullies wouldn't touch him: he wore his grief too visibly. I envied him that peace. Maybe, if I wore the mask of a mourner it would sustain for me the same quiet passage? '*Why does Crying Face Man look like that?*' '*Shh., we don't talk about it.*' But here, I suspect, I oversimplify the concomitance of depression and grief. There is, after all, as Crying Face Boy can attest, a limit on sadness, a measure after which even grief becomes abnormal.

This thing that is like grief but not grief, or rather, like loss but not loss, amorphous and heavy hollow, this unseen abnormality: I don't know how to satisfactorily signal it to you. I don't know how to make it as real to you as it is for me, how to wear it, how to colour it. For it's many, many things, and not all of them are blue.

Wristwatch

Prefrontal cortex hats and checks high level logics, curbs that emotional blunt, but still that hot spot is triggered, switch flicked, a dampener over a field of possibility, an opening shut, and years later knowing now that no, I wasn't/am not manic depressive, is no consolation for the layers of smug that crept across his face in that beige surgery. Banality of the room blurring into his grey trousers, like a clammy touch, like his shirt that's somewhere between grey, blue, and green, yet none of those things, like the touch of dandruff on his shoulders, like the photo of a wife that helps him tick his own boxes: *doctor and loving husband*.

No, I'm not in the habit of gambling thousands of pounds, or impulsively buying sports cars—foolish of me not to realise that mania was only available to the rich, or those with unlimited credit. Never mind that when my striatum overstretches itself I buy clothes I can't afford, or take risks with men I don't know well enough to take risks with, decouples the brakes from the pure pleasure-seeker that erupts from the oils of want, a multi-limbed noradrenaline drunk.

Maybe you don't like getting your hair wet, so you tap half-heartedly at the tip of the iceberg and don't dip your head beneath the surface. No reverse periscoping into my depths, no *how's your sleep?* no gentle queries about anxieties, no soft encouragement—coaxing open an oyster with the promise of moonlight—to describe the landscape of my lows. Instead, you smirk—you actually fucking *smirk*—and say, 'I think you're just a bit melancholy'.

For sure, for sure, let me reiterate that I have long since come to understand that my hyperactive highs are not the same as being rocketed into the deep space mania of bipolarity, nor do my lows occupy the same tripped out multi-circular hells pulsing like rip currents across the scattered-tat-tat spectrum, but how could I begin to explain what it's like to reach the exosphere, the uninterrupted view of the milky way, the bubbling excitement of Earth's soft sapphire existing despite the very unlikeliness of its existence, the clumsy powdered lips that break the spell of moonlight, and the crushing plunge that pulls me from that moment back into the cold limbo of this ghost space, this hunger that refuses to be fed, this impulse that batters itself against the cage of my head, if you won't ask?

Ask me. Ask me what I'm afraid of, ask me who I think I am, ask me why I feel like I cannot possibly fit into this jigsaw, why I fail to function the way everyone else seems to be able to, ask me why I think killing myself is an appropriate response to numbness, if my glass is half full or half empty, if the egg preceded the chicken or vice versa, my favourite colour, anything other than the question that's now departing your lips as you glance at your wristwatch: 'Is that all?'

Verbatim

Make of a mouth a place to tremble,
cavernous and haunted.
Where, by rights, there should be a carpet of mushrooms
in place of a tongue,
for here the living die, and the dead are reborn,
insidious, fragile, prosperous, yielding.

A mouth is a danger to itself,
but sooner or later we must open it,
and so... a flood.

What I mean is
a mouth is the way we begin to know the world,
is the way we begin to know ourselves,
the way we begin to know another.
So, by rights, there should be a doormat
in place of a tongue,
for here meaning tramples over material,
clean, unclean.

But my world enters yours
the same route it enters me, and vice versa.
By which I mean
there is a carnival of war inside my mouth,
through which I once thought words passed
as telegrams of meaning, but now
I realise they escape as ghosts, missiles,
garbled seeds.

I thought
that to take the curses rolling around inside this head
and say them out loud
is to name the thing
and break its spell.

But the language of the dead
is a language without words,
a language with no immutable truths,
and therefore it cannot be translated
for the living.

Or rather,
you would only spit it out.

[Case History
2006]

Scuttle (I)

Must wait, or face a gamut of *how's your day?*, *how are things?*, *how's it going?*

There, in the hallway, the shifting of weight, a voice, some bustle of movement and purpose; visiting the bathroom is a plank walk, the kitchen a tightrope, vertigo, suicide.

Here's the edge of a bed, and a window to stare out of,
here's a way to spend some time listening to our neuroses running circuits.

Chewing up the hours ruminating over those regrets we've re-examined before, and before, and before: *what-if-we'd-what-if-we'd-what-if-we'd-what-if-we'd...?*

The bones are bare, the bones are dust, the bones are gone, but still there must be something to scratch out of the place where they lay, some carbonised guilt yet to be mined.

The door to the cage—our cage, we've made a cage—stays closed.

Scuttle (II)

We are all ears, pressing ourself to walls and door cracks,
except when we are all limbs, inco-ordinate,

and sensibility long since unlatched
circles and circles this last retreat,

these four corners that are at once a small comfort to fester in
and a blind alley, a dead end if the door should open and someone step through.

Blistered, this mind, blistered, and when not ears or limbs
we are all eyes and antennae,

re-reading the past like we read the air, sweeping back and forth
but touching upon nothing, nothing malleable.

Today is a dead loss already,
today is the pin in a hand grenade,

keep the door closed and today cannot enter,
surely there's a way into tomorrow without crossing today?

If You Can . . .

Could you personify your depression—who or what would it be? Can you give it a name?

Which one of us are you asking?

Can you describe how it feels?

If you can, imagine trying to pin water in place.

On a scale of one to ten, what sort of impact is it having upon your ability to function normally?

*Six. No, eight. No, ten. Wait.
Ask me again.*

Complete this sentence: Three depressives walk into a bar . . .

Sickle

traced a labyrinth
by the light of the moon find your way

or something like that
not a release

no steam, pores like vents
or self-punishment

no criminal intent
but calculated

each day returning
to check and check again

was I as hollow as I felt?
boiled the blade

flat upon an open elbow
brought hand to shoulder, then pulled it free

on either side of that bony hinge
backs to each other

two sickle moons
flesh-torn and bloody

it seems
not hollow yet

[Case History
2010–2016]

Squash

smack	bound	rebound	hit	hit	no
soar	but	whipped	smacked	coiled	curl
recoil	and	collapse	hit	hit	hit
and	the	walls	won't	listen	the
walls	won't	and	the	hands	that
sweep	smack	me	lashed	cracked	cast
recast	hit	hit	hit	me	and
I	don't	know	how	this	game
is	played	only	that	cracked	hit
hit	coiled	there	is	no	irony
in	its	invention	in	(please	stop)
an	elite	boys	school	as	the
reign	of	industrial	capitalism	blossomed	loud
and	blistering	world	set	spinning	faster
than	anyone	can	stand	set	spinning
set	hit	hit	coiled	and	recoil
curled	and	uncurl	cannot	uncurl	and
wall	to	wall	no one	listens	wall
to	wall	to	wall	hit	to
hit	hit	hit	and	cracked	spitting
slow	this	stop	this	halt	this
I	I	I	can't	think	straight
the	hands	that	strike	won't	stop
this	racket	bracketed	wall	to	wall
smack	bound	rebound	hit	hit	no
soar	but	whipped	smacked	coiled	curl
recoil	and	collapse	hit	hit	hit
hands	that	swipe	won't	stop	won't
let	me	(please	just	let	me)
breathe	just	let	me	stop	just
once	hitting	wall	to	wall	me
	promise	I		hit	back

just		collapsing	in	on	myself
and	all	I		is	I
think		want	all	I	
is	to	I	just		just
need	to			to	

All Day and All Night

oscillate
banshee to prophet
implode to ex—
pulsar

how to
be still
siphon self from
world shrink into
discard noise
out of
be at
peace
amnesiac
to flower to flower
to flower
to bud
but
in reverse
tighter
closer
sealed

too silent
there
thrash at
bare at
to gnaw to gnaw
to gnaw
chew it
over and over
twist it
snarl at
pulse
hardened
lapidify
sink

folding folding
folding
into
absence

Ballad of Ingratitude

Slaving forty hours a week,
(*crawling, crawling*) make ends meet,
the Ninety-Nine must have their meat,
don't bite the hand that feeds.

Do not bite the hand that feeds,
not the hand that feeds,
do not bite the hand that feeds,
though sure to bring relief.

Though it's sure to bring relief,
sure to bring relief,
though it's sure to bring relief,
sinking in your teeth.

When you're sinking in your teeth,
sinking in your teeth,
as you're sinking in your teeth,
a taste so rich and sweet.

For sure, the taste is rich and sweet,
(*howling, howling*) rich and sweet,
say oh, the taste is rich and sweet
to minds starved of belief.

For a mind starved of belief,
a mind starved of belief,
for a mind starved of belief
is kept upon its knees.

Kept there, down upon your knees,
kept upon your knees,
kept there, down upon your knees,
now rise up to your feet.

Now you're rising to your feet,
rising to your feet,
now you're rising to your feet,
let them see your teeth.

Won't you let them see the teeth?
(*Howling, howling*) let them see!
Won't you let them see the teeth
that bite the hand that feeds?

Snap and seize the hand that feeds,
(*bite it, bite it*) make it bleed,
snap and seize the hand that feeds,
or beg for all you eat.

Once

fell for a man

who loved the sound

of breaking glass

the night

before he left

ear pressed

to my chest

he whispered

'tinkle

tinkle'.

Dance of the Amygdala *

Every Time You Ain't Right
Shoulda Known Better Doesn't Really Matter
After You Fall
Lessons Learned
State of the World

Where Are You Now What's UR Name
What Have You Done For Me Lately

Take Me Away Just a Little While
Escapade
New Agenda Made for Now

Come On Get Up
Tonight's the Night You Got 'til It's Gone

The Body That Loves You Livin' in a World (They Didn't Make)

Dammn Baby BURNITUP!
Funky Big Band Rock With U All Nite (Don't Stop)
Feels So Right So Much Betta

Because of Love My Need 2 B Loved
I Get Lonely Empty Nasty
What'll I Do This Time
What About Control
Truth Can't B Good
Feedback Rollercoaster

Whoops Now

Gon' B Alright
Better Days
Broken Hearts Heal Together Again

Alright Dream Maker/Euphoria Come Back to Me
The Pleasure Principle
The Great Forever

I Want You R&B Junkie LUV Like You Don't Love Me
Rope Burn Discipline Free Xone Anything
Any Time, Any Place

If You Want This Let Me Know

Love Scene (Ooh Baby) When We Oooo Go Deep
Curtains Sexhibition Slo Love Strawberry Bounce
No Sleep 2nite

Funny How Time Flies (When You're Having Fun)

* Composed entirely of Janet Jackson song titles.

[Case History
2020]

Glitch

glitch in the skin mode fucked screens to be seen to be
scene to be two eyes not blind in the blue light of
this is the self crawling over the self to claw back
the self I am losing

I can I can connect I can connect to
I can cannot to connect cannot can
I cannot connect to

my flesh if only this was dissonance this sky caught
in the coffin of something swiped from a tactile place
and set light burnt burning to be touched without a wall
of glass between your face and mine and

must must I everything I record must
I record everything I record must record
I must record everything

to prove I exist I am #blessed #I'veGotThis beyond an
algorithm beyond a menu of want beyond emptiness
I am not empty am I not empty why am I empty? please
do not

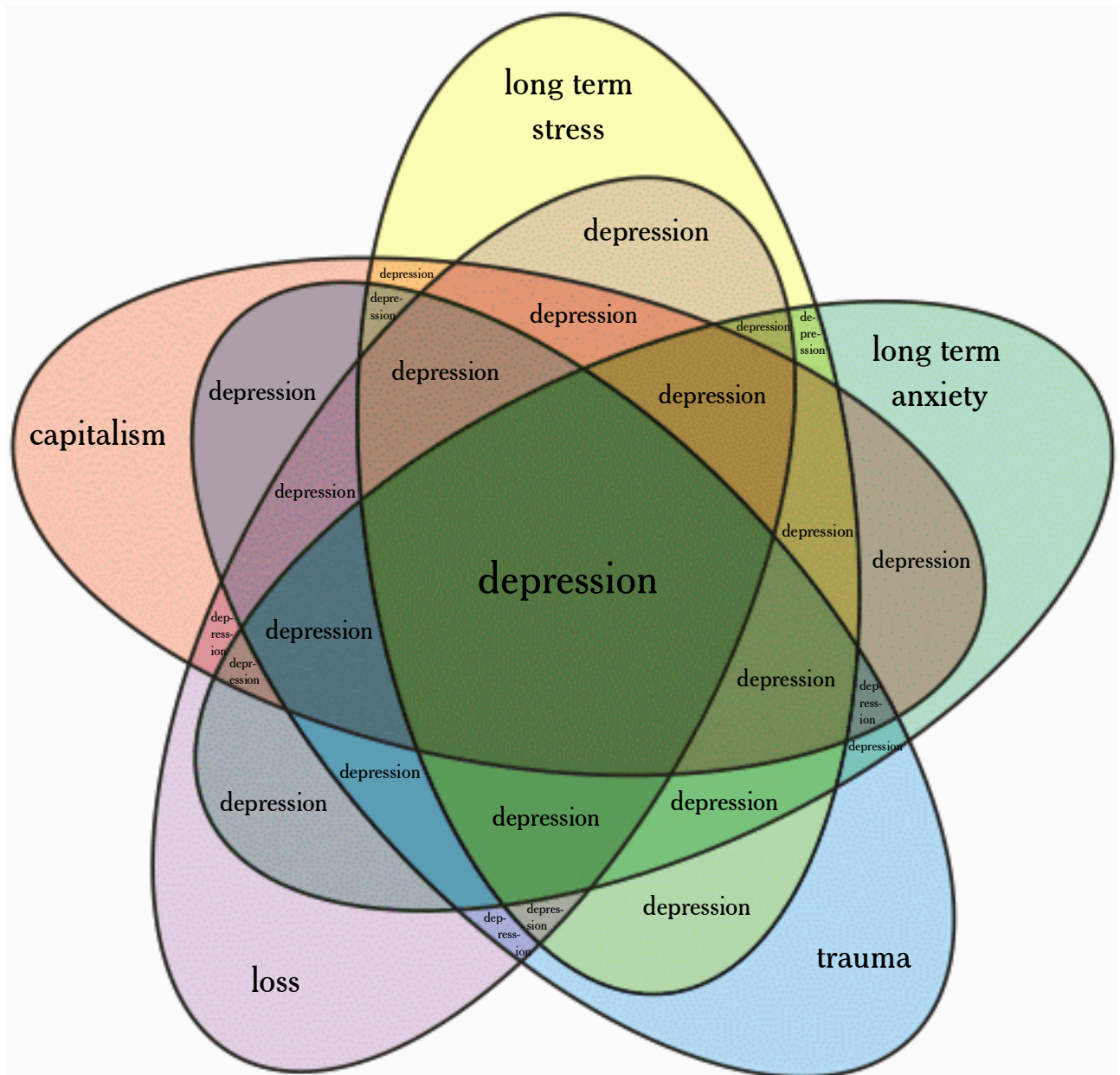
keep on keep I disappearing I on
disappearing on I keep I on keep on
I keep on disappearing

i find people dumbfounding (and
sometimes quite irritating)

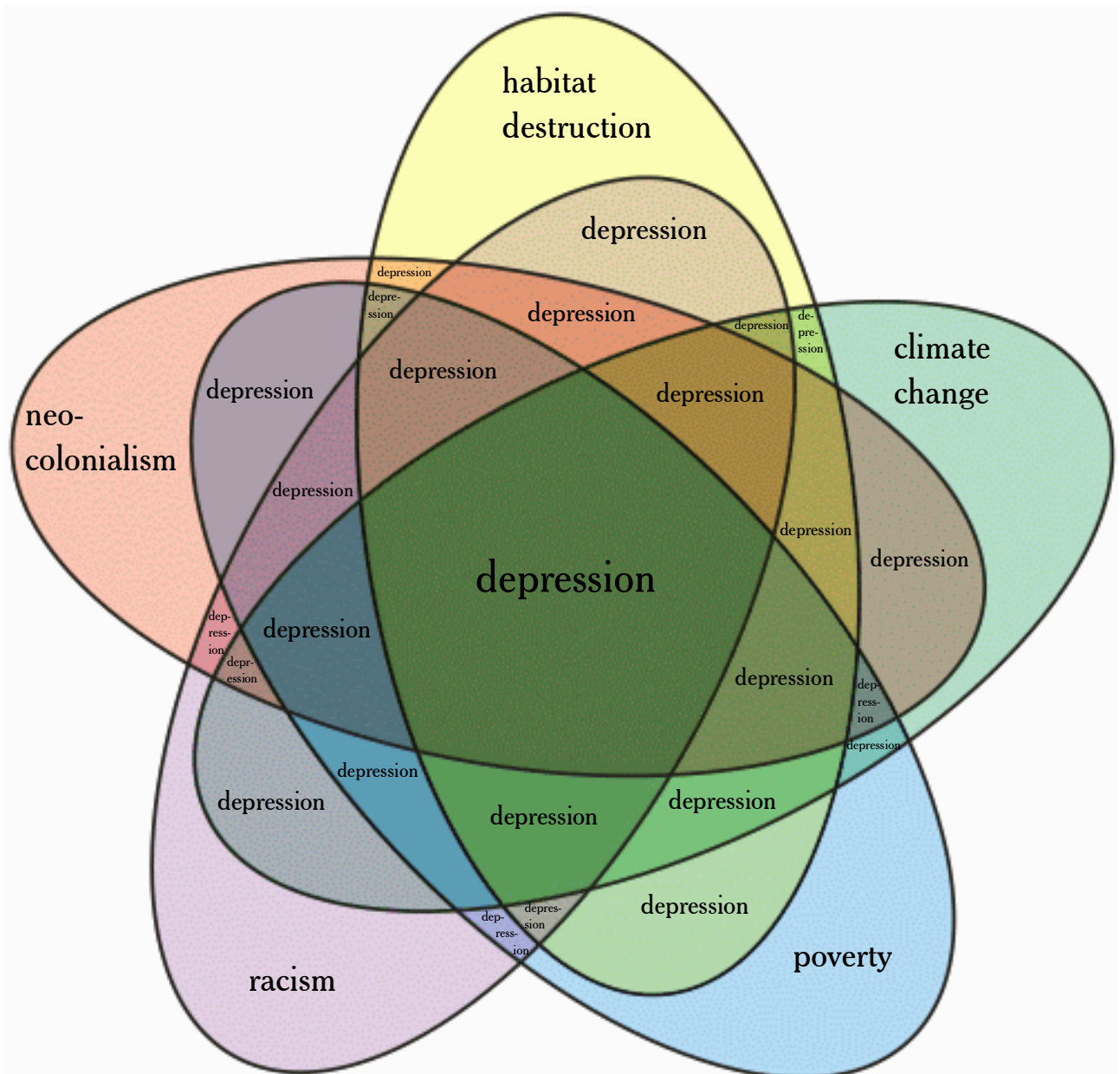
in response to 'i find man amazing (and sometimes quite wonderful)' by Dick Higgins

		this
		tilting
		pedestal
	this	tilting
	this	pedestal
	tilting	this
	tumbling	edifice
	this	tilting
	artifice	this
	dumb-	founding
	nescience	this
irony	higher	intelligence
this	opposite	otherwise
evidenced	this	crackpot
politic	this	arse-first
wilfully	ignorant	this
cacophonous	void	propping
up	apathy	this
lowest	common	denominate
this	nostalgic	gullibility
less	history	more
mythology	this	autocratic
governance	drip-fed	facile
sycophants	this	bubblehead
obscurant	this	deliberate
negligence	this	worshipping
charlatans	in-	sipid
all-	togetherness	half-cracked
game	of	simon says
this	lack	of
fire	and	dissidence
ob-	sequious	mass
participance	this	jeering
narrative	us	and them
this	petulant	pot
and	kettle'ing	polish
the	heraldry	ivory
towering	tinpots	and
would-be	kings	this
this	tilting	pedestal

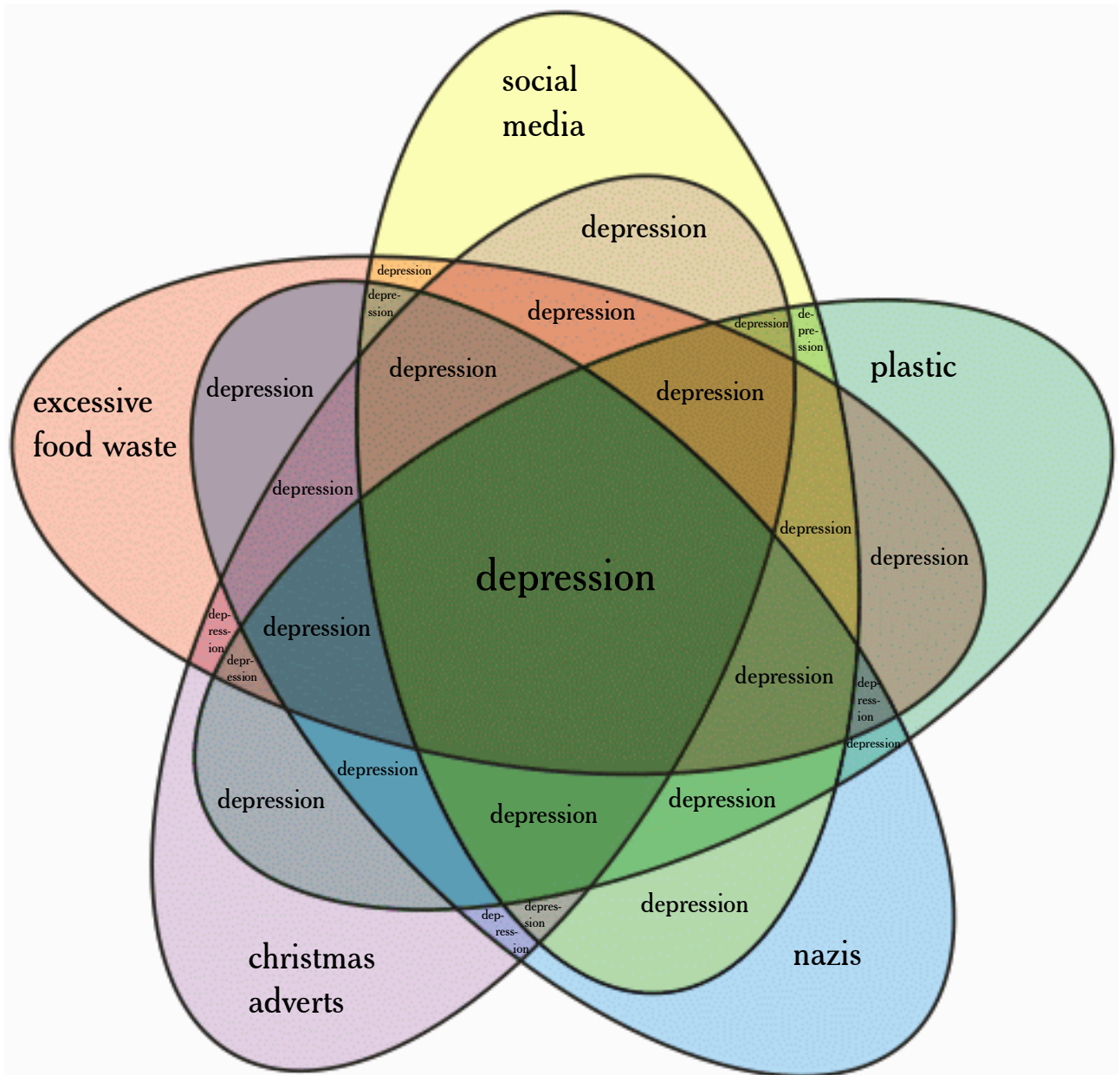
Depression in Five Venns (I)



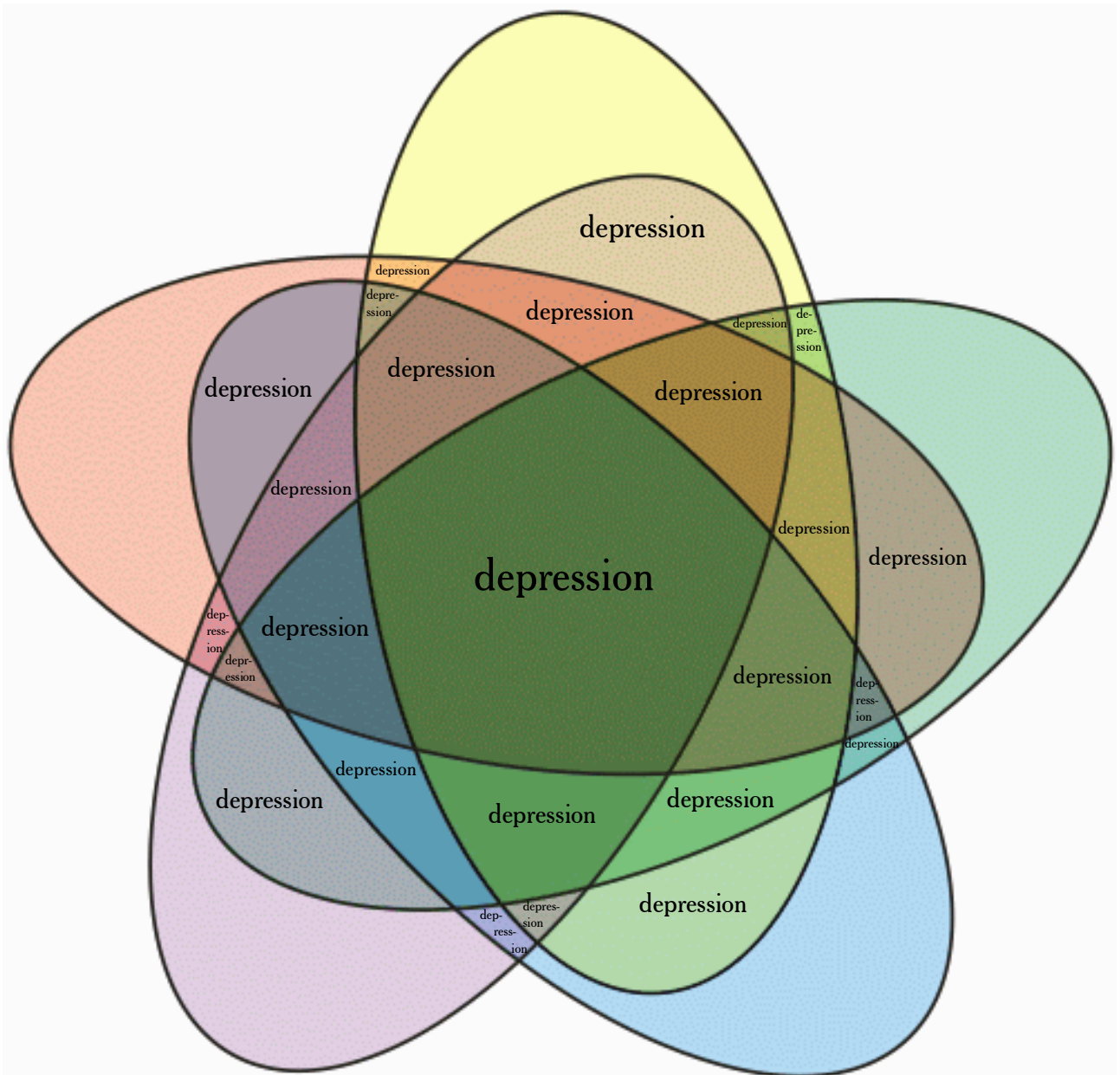
Depression in Five Venns (II)



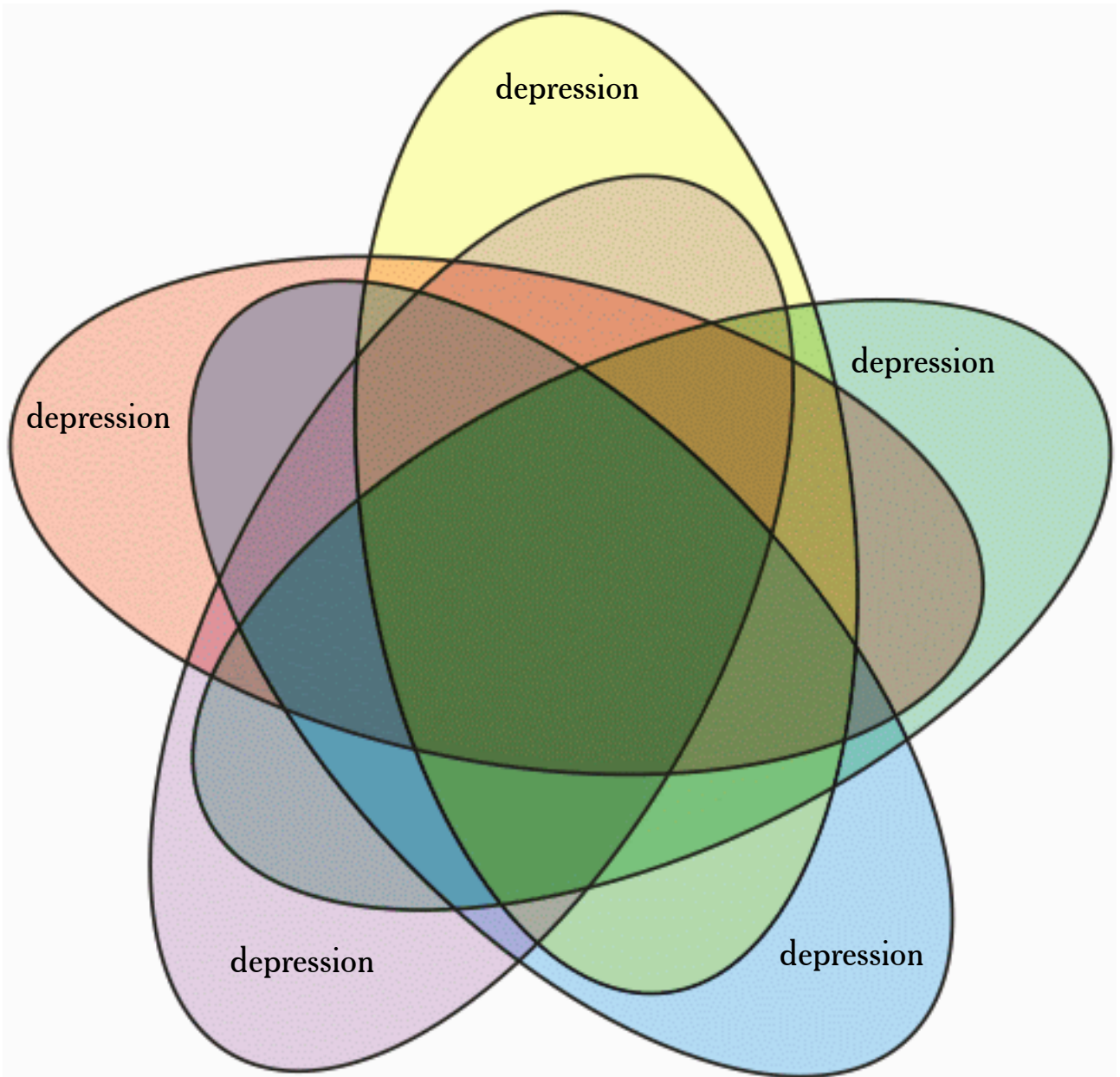
Depression in Five Venns (III)



Depression in Five Venns (IV)



Depression in Five Venns (V)



Neptune

Memory is saline,
from the sea-floor look up.

How light operates in water: like a drunkard,
slinks and tumbles,

suspends a false hand in the watery air,
touches but can't be grasped.

And the salt stings
despite your already salty tears;

the sea a body and a conductor,
siphons all warmth from your arms.

Do you know that the world that warps and bends in your sky
is the one you belong in?

You have been numb for so long
you have forgotten you are drowning.

If you don't reach for that floating world
this cold oblivion will crack you open and sluice you.

It is not an illusion.

It is like an illusion,

*the way the slow dance of light
makes the sea seem much shallower than it is,*

*until you try to reach the bottom
—it is not a world you can stay in without sinking.*

*Here, on solid ground, it is hard to conceive
that this was the world you believed upside-down,*

*the brackish logic of the drowning.
And through the briny looking glass*

*that shifts and clouds,
breaks at your feet and sweeps itself up,*

*you cannot know for sure
if you were ever so nearly lost;*

only that the tide doesn't always return what it takes.

Into the Dark

threads spiral unseen
bracken-like tendrils unfurling
into the dark
true, anxiety trades at a loss
makes of memory a whirling event horizon
snatching tender moments
gorging on their soft glow
and the concept goes
up/light is good, down/dark is bad
but so many things go down
to flourish
there in the dark
so complete
I can only feel my way
do not know if my eyes are open
even if I touch my face
is the boundary fixed, or shifting?
am I this? am I earthling?
or space stretching into space?
a body growing
through raw information
and if it is wild
to slip through every crack
away from the light
deeper into the dark
then I am wild
here I can move freely
what is a border in the dark?
what is a threshold?
I can move faster here
spill in every direction at once
not that I cannot
but won't contain myself
and if I lose myself
it is not completely
always a thread
mapping its way
and when I still to rest
perhaps then I will curl up
into the dark
and dream
of a bud