
Message on the Bulletin Board

Andrea White

Abstract

This short fictional piece highlights the voices of psychiatric inpatients, as they are coming to a collective consciousness and reckoning with their oppression, loss of social status, and confinement. Also examined is the absence of true therapeutic support, the prohibition against friendships, and the lack of agency psychiatric patients have. The piece can be understood as a critique from the inside, from patients who recognize themselves as an oppressed class. Many of the issues described are from the author's direct observations as a psychiatric patient. **Content warning:** mention of sexual assault, psychiatric violence, police violence.

Keywords

psychiatric survivors, mad studies, disability studies, collectivity, manifesto, fiction

We considered a hunger strike but the young girls with eating disorders were too frail for that, and as angry as we are, we don't want to hurt ourselves.

Isn't that the very thing we've been accused of? Hurting ourselves for drama and attention? Or else we are not hurting ourselves enough to merit any care.

The response is barely a nod or sometimes a card with a hastily scribbled number.

We have had it with your two-way mirrors, medication checks, your ridiculous puzzle games, and questionnaires. Some of us have master's degrees for god's sake. And while we don't understand it, we don't think wearing a hijab is pathological or makes a tiny woman from Syria a terrorist. We submit you are the terrorists, with your million-dollar homes and deep, full leather handbags. Who the hell taught you that empathy is about fake nods of concern as you type type type on your laptop? We are not the mental patients of yesteryear oozing Chlorpromazine and Haldol. We know this is wrong. We learned that we have rights, but you had the audacity to punish our leader who merely pointed this out to us. The very least you can do is stop treating us like infants. The only thing childlike about us is our vulnerability, which you choose to ignore.

One of us lost our disability payments because the chief asshole decided we had a personality problem, not a mood problem (forgive the language but we feel this level of anger is appropriate). We wonder if a personality can ever be disordered, but if it can, surely yours is. Why else would you delight in your ugly, soft-souled nursing shoes and the whoosh of your key fob in the art room. Pipe cleaners? Really? What's next, macaroni and ziti? We want some classical music and some books. We have laughed to the point of, yes, appropriate tears over this.

We nodded in compliance when you said "Walking on Sunshine" by Katrina and the Waves was a more appropriate song to have as a personal anthem. What was wrong with Sarah McLachlan? She is Canadian after all. What is in your music collection? We don't like the way you see us as outside of humanity. Whose idea was it

to put the piano next to the phones? I mean, no one wants to hear manic musical improvisations while trying to talk to loved ones. We do have them, you know. We cannot be reduced like fractions to a common denominator or a fragment of our beautiful complex selves. We do not consider it therapeutic to water the chief asshole's palm tree. That is what you offer for mental stimulation. Oh, and by the way, you aren't fooling anyone by calling ECT "treatment." We know what it is, and we see slices of ourselves seared and our memories scorched three mornings a week. We don't think *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was far off the mark.

You take from us and offer the mantle of mental patient in return. We all regret falling for the cozy representations of after-school specials, where a wise and kind therapist helps us on the path to self-determination. The only paths you have for us are social assistance and a bed-sitting room with mice in Parkdale. We won't be writing memoirs *Under the Tuscan Sun*. We will be lucky to catch the streetcar to the lake. We find you to be fake and false and utterly disinterested in our actual lives. We tallied up 15 university degrees, 78 years of paid work, 19 children, 7 grandchildren and many aborted identities among us.

You do not see us for who we are. You have reduced us to a mass of human suffering. And we see you recoil at our pain, our ill-fitting clothes, and demands to have forms completed. *We see you*. We remember when one of us stood up at a community meeting and asked if our pain was how you paid for your wife's gaudy gold rings. We remember when our lesbian friend was told to buy high heels and dresses and masturbate in front of the doctor. She won a settlement. We know there are those among your ranks who are like us, but because of luck and money, they never found themselves on the other side of the prescription pad. We know, and we know you know we know, and like some slapstick skit, we all pretend it's not happening.

We think this is dramatic irony.

One of us is a writer and she will reveal what you did. The nurses are not off the hook either.

You think we want to hear about your wedding plans and your tacky dress? We have been transformed into bad seeds, told to be grateful, and expected to be an audience for the ordinary life that our diagnoses deny us. Screw you and your boyfriend in the oil patch. We don't care how many nights you must sleep alone to get that fancy house in the Annex. Our dreams are of a lock on our door, and a washer and dryer in the building.

We know your tricks and reject the selfish offer to become your lapdog and sing a scripted song of gratitude to solicit donations for this bloated monolith of a mental hospital. We are lucky to be given a day-old muffin for our troubles while you pat yourself on the back for being progressive.

As for security guards, we find you too loathsome to address directly. You who get your thrills stripping trauma victims and throwing them in seclusion, who snickered when the nurse explained that this is where we go when we are BAD. You, you are bad. We wish you pain and suffering and a reckoning where you are powerless. We won't be helping you so if you are ever at the supermarket and find your tacky pickup has been keyed—remember—we are everywhere and unless the drugs have done damage to us—we are invisible. We deserve this cloak of sanity since we have been denied so much already. We no longer believe in the promise of society and many of us used to think it was cute to try and forget we were middle class. Now we would give anything not to have to shop at the Sally Ann.

Poverty is an accessory of mental illness.

We are told not to talk, not to fraternize. We reject your interference in our right to associate—we happen to know about the books our people publish. Our observations are not novel. We have kin. We do not recognize you. You betrayed humanity when you labelled and sedated us, when you said we were not like you, and that we do not need privacy. Our friends sobbed with shock at the conditions here. One even called the minister of health about the shit and piss coating the floor and walls of the toilets. We will not be stopping

to let you cross the street, we will not let our children befriend yours. We will never forget.

We twitch and quake and drool and scuff and teeter and clench and you pretend it has nothing to do with the medication. We know better. We are tired of your dismissals and your prescription repeats. We find it a cruel irony that the flexible community treatment team fires any patient that forgets to call every two weeks. We are not violent, you are violent. We are amazed that we aren't violent, given the pain we suffer. Many of us lost everything because we phoned a distress line. Some of us were gunned down by police who could not listen to us. We doubt you would bother to read this. You only know how to filter us through your clinical gaze and overlook us. We have realized that those who go along with your plan die young and swiftly. We reject your labels and will craft our lives our way.

We want to live, and we want to love. We will not be like you, with a wizened heart unable to grasp us as part of you. We are the parts of you that you cannot recognize. Here we are persisting beneath blankets of benzodiazepines and behind curtains of anti-psychotics. We can live without you, but you need us because not being us is how you define yourself, how you prop yourself up. We are backstage changing things up. Enough with the rehearsals. We have seen you and we know that without our charts to cosset you, you are naked and nothing. We will not be clothing you with our misery anymore. Why don't you try mindfulness or take a walk? And if that does not work, call a crisis line. We remind you that there may be long waiting times. We recommend you take a deep breath.

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Author Biography

Andrea Jane White is a PhD student and SSHRC scholar at the University of Victoria. Originally from Newfoundland she spent 8 years in Toronto and now lives on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen people, also known as the Songhees, and Esquimalt First Nations. Her work has appeared in *Asylum Magazine*, and she has been involved in mad pride organizing. She has lived experience of involuntary psychiatric treatment and is working to create peer-led alternatives to conventional care.