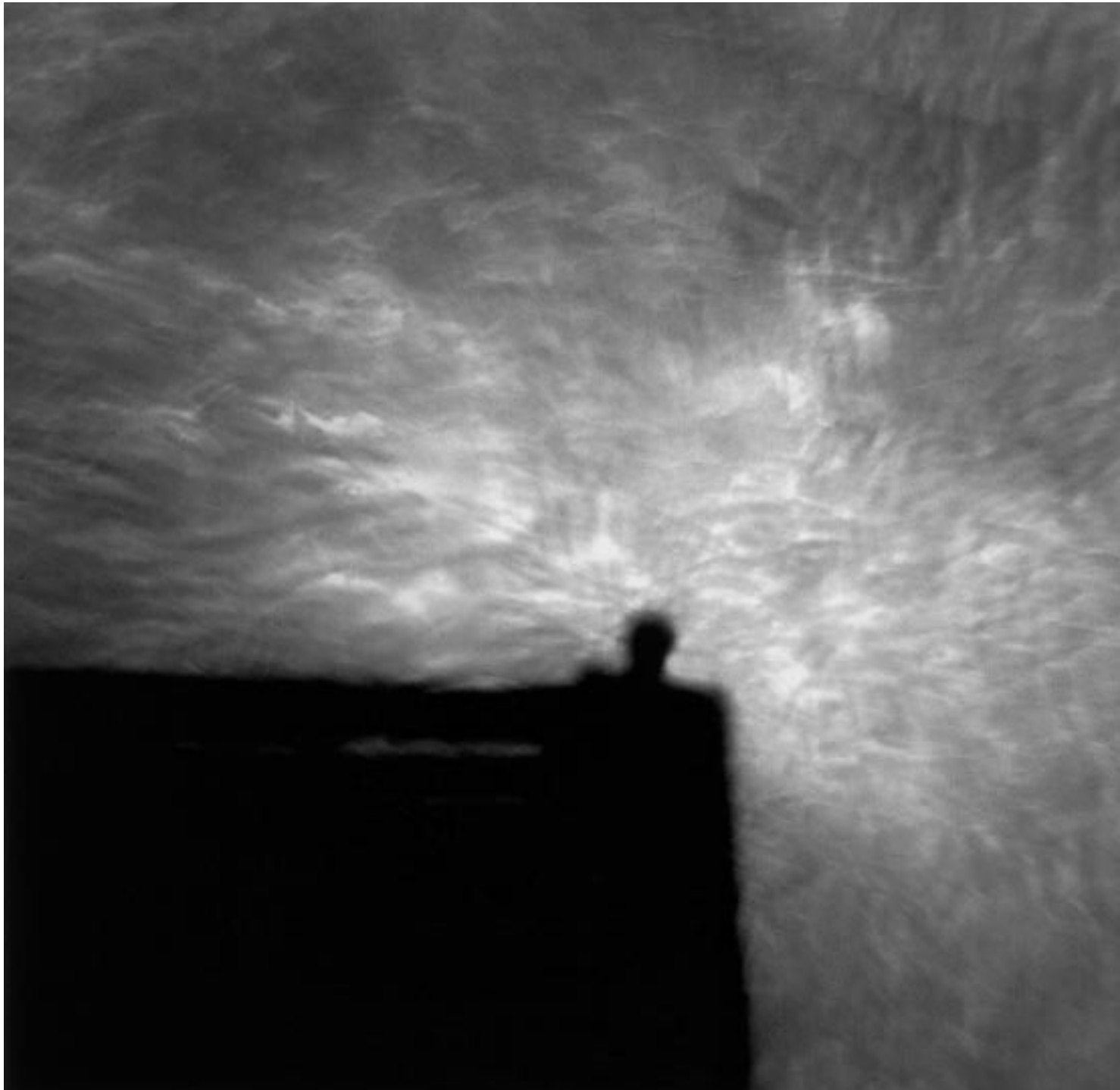


# THE MADNESS

MARY SPALDING



# EQUATION



COLE THOMPSON

*Over and over again, the world displays a regular irregularity.*  
— James Gleick, *Chaos*

**WHEN** your child goes mad, you begin to question everything you once thought to be true. Even if you've been a questioning person all your life, as I have, the things you took for granted — or, as my college English students often write, “for granite” — no longer lie rock-hard in your palm, but shift and slip away like sand.

Jason, my twenty-five-year-old son, moved from New York City to Chicago last January. I'd arranged for him to stay in a friend's vacant basement condo while he looked for a job and a place to live. Both Jason and I were full of hope that he would finally be able to have a quiet, independent, satisfying life. Chicago seemed perfect: fairly affordable, with plenty of free activities and great public transportation. A decent job, a small place of his own — those goals were modest enough. And Jason had just graduated with an associate's degree in art; what better city for an art lover?

Jason had also recently suffered a heartbreak. He'd fallen in love with Max, with whom he'd been friends for more than a year, but Max hadn't felt the same way, and the friendship had ended. I knew Jason was depressed, and I hurt for him, but what young person hasn't gone through the pain of rejection? I didn't see his depression as a sign of something worse to come.

Once Jason was in Chicago, his world opened up again; he saw that his happiness did not depend on one person. He called me daily, sounding joyful — sometimes a bit too joyful. I tried not to think about his strange behavior a year earlier, when he'd become manic and briefly psychotic, and I'd had to bring him to the emergency room. Although he'd been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I believed it to be an isolated incident, a result of staying up four nights without sleep. His regular doctor, too, had questioned the diagnosis.

In Chicago Jason's shyness disappeared, and the flamboyant side of his personality emerged; he began going to nightclubs, dancing under the strobe lights, and having 3 A.M. breakfasts with people he'd just met. He decided to call Max to let him know that he was having a great time and had made peace with what had happened between them.

But Jason hadn't expected to hear the hurt in Max's voice. My son was shocked to realize that he might have inflicted pain as well. After the call, Jason just couldn't stay in the condo. He walked toward the lake, three blocks east, fighting the strong wind blowing in from its shores. When he got to the beach, no

one was there. It was eleven o'clock and so cold that icicles had frozen horizontally off the pier's iron rail. Despite the wind and the temperature, Jason walked to the end of the pier, fifty feet from shore, and stood there. His tears froze on his cheeks while he begged God to help Max feel better, to take away any pain that Jason might have caused. He wanted more than anything else to see his friend in person right then. This desire eclipsed all other thought.

As Jason looked out over the water, the sky to his right appeared lit with multicolored lightning. The storm clouds glowed yellow, green, and blue, and the lake beneath them thrashed and burned with fire. But to his left the water seemed calm and serene, full of loving energy. In the distance along the shore, the buildings of downtown Chicago glistened like the Emerald City, and Jason felt a great love for them. For him the buildings were alive, the living products of human intelligence. The world, he suddenly understood, was simply that: pure intelligence, and he was both the creator and the created.

In the distance over the lake he saw a plane heading toward the city. Suddenly the sky was filled with planes, swirling around, shooting past his ears, spinning toward earth. At first he was frightened, but then he understood that these brilliant spirals were new spirits being sent to earth from heaven. God, he realized, constantly sent us new people to love.

A loud voice told him, "Jason, you are all-powerful! You can part these waters! You can walk across Lake Michigan!" Once he had crossed the lake, he would keep walking all the way to New York City. He *had* to see Max. He had to make amends. He inched toward the concrete edge of the pier and looked down at the bright green, pulsating water, so full of life, so mesmerizing in its beauty. The waves became hands beckoning to him, welcoming him like a mother's arms.

Just as he was about to step off the pier, another voice said to the first, "Wait! He's still in his human form! He can't do it yet!" Upon hearing this, Jason turned and made his way back to the condo, where he called me and told me everything he'd just experienced.

"Jason," I said, "listen to *that* voice, the one that understands you're still human. OK?"

After we'd hung up, I immediately made a train reservation from Maryland to Chicago. (I didn't have the money for an emergency plane ticket.) Just before I left my house, Jason called on his cellphone from the basement of the John Hancock Building. He was in a bathroom stall, sobbing. "I can't get out of here," he said. "I can't move."

He'd paid to go to the observation deck of the building because he'd been convinced that he would find Max there. He'd felt that he could literally *make* Max appear. Of course, when Max hadn't been there, it had been doubly devastating: his friend had not come, and Jason did not have the power he'd believed he had. In despair he'd made his way to the basement, where he was now hiding in a stall. As we talked, he grew calmer, and then his tone of voice changed to one of sheer awe. "Whoa," he said, like someone on an acid trip. (He assured me he hadn't taken any drugs.) "The walls are turning red and orange. The colors are shifting all over the place."

I thought of calling the police, and I should have, but I wasn't sure what I would have said to them, or what they'd have done to Jason. I felt confused and helpless. My son was eight hundred miles away and in deep trouble. "I'm on my way, Jason," I said. "Just get on the el and get back to your place. I'm coming. I'm taking the train. I'll be there tomorrow morning." The train to Chicago was an overnight ride.

"Wow," he said. "You'll be on a train, and I'll be on a train. Are you dead, too?"

**MY** train arrived in Chicago two hours late. At the station I frantically made my way to a pay phone, but Jason didn't answer his cell. Jason always answered his cell. Panicking, I dialed his father's number (we're divorced) and spoke to his stepmother. Jason had called from the police station earlier that morning; he'd been arrested in the middle of the night. I was distressed but relieved. At least he was safe.

When I got to the police station, however, I learned that they had freed Jason at 1:30 that morning. Having nowhere else to look for him, I took a taxi to the condo where he was staying. As my cab neared the building, I saw the flashing lights of more than one police car. My first thought was that Jason had killed himself. I rushed from the taxi as soon as it stopped. A woman on the curb was flailing her arms and describing to a police officer how someone had "terrorized" the building all night and flooded the basement. When I interrupted to ask where that person was, the officer pointed to a police car. Another officer opened the car door, and I slid in beside my son, who was wearing only shorts and a T-shirt in the freezing weather. He smiled beatifically at me. "I knew you'd be here," he said, and he reached out a finger and brushed my cheek. His eyes tracked oddly, as if he were seeing my face in more than just three dimensions. "You're all golden white," he said. "Your aura is golden white."

The police brought us to a psychiatric hospital, where a petite woman with a pen and paper asked Jason questions. Jason stood and paced and acted out what had happened to him the night before with such drama that the intake worker asked whether he'd ever been in the theater. My shy, socially phobic son showed an astounding vocabulary, words I'd never heard him use, and his conversation was fluid, even brilliant. But a question as simple as "What's your name?" could confound him.

"Jehovah," he finally replied, then jumped up from his seat. "But we don't pronounce it that way here in the spirit realm. It's Yeeeeeeeeooooowwwah."

The sound he made was more screech than word, truly a language from another plane of existence. The woman looked to me for help, but I was counting on *her* to help *me*. "OK," she said, "what's your name in *this* realm?"

Jason paced the room, trying to find the answer, then mispronounced his own name.

"Who is the president of the United States?" the young woman asked.

Jason shot me an amused look, as if remembering how I

felt about the outcome of the 2004 election. "Satan," he replied with a giggle.

The three of us burst out laughing. The woman, struggling to maintain her professional demeanor, continued: "OK, but what is his name in *this* world?"

Jason promptly answered, "George W. Bush."

I was proud of my son at that moment. Maybe he wasn't lost forever. At least he had his politics right.

*Nature is constrained. Disorder is channeled, it seems, into patterns with some underlying theme.*

— James Gleick

**THE** moments of levity were all too brief, and the severity of Jason's condition would immediately come back to me. He was utterly convinced of the reality of his current experience. Where had my son's personality, his very identity, gone?

The next day, with Jason admitted to a state hospital, I visited the church he had attended his first Sunday alone in Chicago. It was a congregation of the United Church of Christ, the church I'd grown up in, and I'd recommended it to him because of its openness to gays and lesbians. Jason had once talked about going to divinity school, which I'd thought would be a great choice for him. I'd always believed he had a spiritual gift.

At the church I sat in the pew, gazing at the intricate woodwork and the stained-glass window. As a little girl, I'd gone to church every Sunday and reveled in the stories of miracles and God's love. My mother eventually had stopped taking me and years later told me she'd decided that it was "all a fairy tale." I'd come to the same conclusion, but I still felt attracted to the mystery that religion represented. Right now I needed to be in church, among caring people.

After the service, as I walked back to the train, I stopped in a used-book store and headed straight for the psychology section. I wanted to understand madness, to know where Jason's psyche was now and how it might be retrieved. Scanning the titles, I kept coming back to one: *The Seduction of Madness*, by Edward Podvoll. The book jacket said that Podvoll's therapeutic approach eschewed medication. Though I liked the idea of natural healing, Jason's illness was so severe that I felt only drugs could help him now. But the jacket also said the author's approach was related to Buddhist thought, which appealed to me. I bought the book, along with a couple of others. Then I rode the train to Jason's hospital.

I signed in at the visitors' desk and was admitted through locked doors to a ward where I found Jason dressed in papery blue hospital pants, just finishing his dinner. We hugged. Jason seemed happy. The food was delicious, he said; he had never eaten so well. "We're in the holding cell for heaven," he explained. Moments later he told me he was in his elementary school. The building did, in fact, look very much like that school. The school had been called C.T. Reed, and the hospital's name was Chicago-Read. Many of Jason's misim-

pressions made an odd kind of sense. His thoughts took wild leaps of free association, like those of a person who is dreaming; one thing reminded him of another, and immediately it became that other thing, and the story line in his head shifted to incorporate this new development. Jason seemed to be dreaming awake. The psychologist Carl Jung believed that our dream states connect us to the "collective unconscious," a sort of universal mind shared by all humans. I wondered whether Jason's dreamlike psychosis could also be a connection to this universal unconscious.

I understood how realistic dreams could seem: The night my mother had died, after I'd finally fallen asleep, something had suddenly woken me. I lay still, my head on the pillow, and my mother, looking as earthly as ever, appeared and walked toward me. She came to my bedside, touched the mattress, and said, "Don't worry about me. I'm fine." It was exactly what my mother would have said, if she'd been alive.

In the days that followed, I wanted to believe I'd had a visitation from the beyond. Sometimes I convinced myself I had. The problem was that beneath such romanticism lay a hard core of realism — a legacy from my engineer father. I could explain the vision in a more mundane way: perhaps I had been so distraught after my mother's death that whatever locked gate separates dream and reality had been jarred open, and my mind had conjured her image and made it appear real. As much as I wanted to believe the spiritual explanation for my mother's visit, I had to accept that it was much more likely my own mind had created it.

Even so, the experience left me wondering how the gate between those two states of mind could become unlatched. I had plenty of time to ponder this question during the week and a half Jason was hospitalized. There was little to distract me at the condo, which was nearly empty of furniture and had no TV, no radio, no Internet. Two huge fans, left there by the water-damage company to dry out the cement foundation after the flood Jason had caused, gave the living room a noisy, industrial atmosphere. I slept on a few blankets and pillows that I spread in a dry corner (Jason's mattress had been soaked in the flood) and spent most of my time reading and thinking, trying to understand what had happened to my son.

My long daily commute to the hospital also gave me plenty of time to think. I'd wonder what today's visit would be like, and whether Jason would show signs of improvement. But that was too frightening, so I'd fall back on the larger questions: What causes a mind to turn from sanity to madness? What is the relationship of the mind to reality? What *is* reality?

*(end of excerpt)*