



Maria Hardin

Sick Story

I wax and wane but not with the moon. This ebb and flow affects my artistic practice. Throughout the course of this program, I have been experimenting with the artists' novel as a sick methodology, and, through this experimentation, developing an *écriture malade*. Days, months, years—time blurs. "Sick Story" is a culmination of some of these experiments. It is a micro artists' novel made up of prose poems. It consists of a myriad of texts that have been written over the course of this program as well as writing that only appears here. There is an intentional incompleteness because healing is ongoing.

If linear healing narratives are meaningless in the face of chronic illness, then what is the shape of a sick story? To explore this question I borrowed from the American poet and artist Bernadette Mayer's first book *Story*, published in 1968. In *Story*, Mayer wrote a list of all the narrative forms she could recall and used them as mini chapters. Woven throughout the manuscript, Mayer included everything from Italian folk tales to a sponge cake recipe to texts on coral reefs and 19th century etiquette. This collage technique plays with formal ideas of narrative time. Her methodology reminds me of Ursula K Le Guin's carrier bag theory of fiction. "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" posits that the shape of a narrative is not an arrow, or the masculine climax, but a bag. Mayer's tossed all that she was interested into the bag of her story and then gave it form.

The typeface used in "Sick Story", DM Sans, is the same typeface used by Karolinska Hospital.

Anecdote

Like a fever, whenever I'm on prednisone I develop a case of anxiety so intense that leaving the house to perform even the most mundane of tasks becomes a challenge. My doctor said to give my anxiety a name. I called her Mai Ivfjäll. She became my sick avatar. My poet other. The me in public: me but not me. From 2016–2020 I attended writing workshops, published, and made art as Mai. Then I went into remission, tapered off steroids and fantasied about killing her off. I imagined all the ways I might do so: setting on fire everything she had ever written, creating a website called maiivfjaell.rip, deleting all her social media accounts, or just disappearing. Unable to decide, I put her in limbo and began publishing again as my real self or the closest to whatever that might be.

But now I'm sinking back into the slime of sick time and with it prednisone and a plethora of pills healthy people have never heard of. Do I awaken Mai or face this new bout of anxiety and timelessness as myself?

Profile

In my artistic practice, I tend to my sickness as though to a newborn. I'm isolated like a young mother but my baby is the void.

Life Story

An article in the National Library of Medicine emphasizes the importance, and current lack, of a shared vocabulary for chronic disease. What then of health? What does healing mean for someone who will always be sick? We need a new word.

Scenario

My days in bed stretch on and on. Time cascades in on itself forming something I cannot grasp. When I encounter doctors I have to mold time into a narrative. I keep lists of my symptoms in the same files where I write poems. It all blends together.

Saga

A tunnel of radiance begins outside of my apartment door and stretches out surrounding me as I walk through the world. An unreal girl in an unreal city I disassociate all over town. I dress myself in all white to signal that I'm not really here but there is no one to read my secret language.

Some days, before leaving my apartment the tunnel collapses into a blackhole. I imagine my walk down the stairs, around the corner, past the cafe and on towards the subway and it's just too much.

Love Story

As life's desire drains out of me I become intoxicated by words. I gorge myself on the baroque-ness, the broke-ness, of twisted syntax and iambic pentameter. I ask X what happens to desire? What if my appetite for the written word is the next to go?

Fiction

Everything I could write and don't write. Everything I keep writing. Each letter a step towards death. In Swedish, I create my subtle body. In English, I'm just this sick animal. The walls of my hospital room, at the New Karolinska, are a shade called dove blue. The window fittings are raw pine. The room is filled with neon orange details: a little stool, a cotton blanket, the extension cord connecting my bed to electricity, my vintage silk robe. Nurses surround me, cooing.

The future, once a vast landscape, shrinks. The past vanishes—smudged out by illness and medication. I wander in an endless now.

Lie

“You are young. You will heal.”

Report

This is a fiction. This is not a fiction.

Writing leaks out of me like a sap. Words are glutinous—they fill my mouth, choking me.

Western

The stardust cowgirl doesn't want to die. She just wants to delete herself forever.

Article

A value in my heart is too high. It might mean that my heart is effected by my disease. Soon, I will take an MRI that will reveal what is happening in this broken machine. While I wait, I make a meme from a stock image of brunette white women sitting on a sofa hugging a giant Chuli vase and gazing lovingly into its abyss. Above the women's head I write *me* and inside the vase I write *poetry, death, & Sephora*.

Bedside Reading

I'm reading Olga Ravn's *The White Rose*. It has nothing to do with my memories and everything to do with now: illness and roses and time and death. *Your rose consents to be overcome by my hand's abyss* (a misremembered line of Danish incorrectly translated into English).

White rose anus my heart—I repeat it like a prayer read from The Book of Saint Olga.

O-L-G-A, my blood is infused with your scrit.

Is translation a eucharist? I eat white roses until *desire leaks out of me like milk of lime*.

Reminiscences

My earliest poems were always about Split: the blue crescent moon over her third eye, her weathered skin, her altar, her prophecies.

Trapped in the ambergris of my mind is a back deck covered in pine straw and strewn beer bottles overflowing with cigarette butts. There is a makeshift altar against a lattice fence. There are crystals, feathers, sage, a deer skull, and dried roses.

There were no roses then, yet I fill my memories with them until Split's altar becomes Edith Södergran's "Rose Altar".

Novel

Language is an empty cavern. I can't see the walls, but I know that they separate me from eternity. As I write eternity my brains swims and my heart palpitates. What am I when I write? Am I dead like Clarice Lispector when I'm not writing? All these notes just form a pendulum that swings between *I exist* and *Do I exist*.

Thumbnail Sketch

After four years of learning the ebb and flow of chronic sickness, she had become a professional patient. She thought of her sickness as another career. She dressed up for her hospital visits, flirted with her nurses, and reassured them when they couldn't find a vein. She was good at her job but hadn't always

been so. It had taken years to get a diagnosis. Over time, she learned how to inspire a perfect balance of empathy and pity. She became the tragedienne the healthcare system needed her to be. She learned that in order to get proper care people needed to feel a little sorry for her—but not too sorry. Too sorry and they stopped seeing her as human.

Tale

Isolated in my apartment, I imagine that I am the Lady of Shal-lot stuck in her tower and gazing down into Camelot.

It is only through death that she leaves her tower.

This will not be my story.

Description

To be chronically sick is to live in contradiction. To be chronically sick is to live as a poem.

Light Reading

This is a sci-fi story. This is kitchen sink realism.

Confessions

When the Spirit Museum sends me emails, I first think that a museum of cosmic light beings are communicating with me from beyond the veil.

Dime Novel

Are we ever really healthy? Aren't we all just wavering between bodily, emotional, and psychic pains. Health is that rare moment of equilibrium.

There is only this moment. This moment. This moment.

Narrative Poem

Moodbored

the secret language
of flowers
is like
the secret language
of girls taking selfies
all the things we do
because we don't trust
that we are real
i wanted this to be a nature poem
but i never go outside
touch my hand to the wall
press my face against it
imagine sinking in
as molecules will
if given enough time
i'll never have enough time
checking off the names
of writers
i grow older than
sylvia plath
edith södergran
simone weil
when will i be a name
on another girl's list

Myth

The Lady of Shalott weaves cat fur, crystals, text messages, methotrexate, green smoothies, blown veins, spring snow, falling hair and the natal charts of everyone she's ever met into a tapestry like some kind of climax.

The Lady of Shalott swallows pills, injects chemicals, scrolls through TikTok and waits—growing half-sick of simulacra.

She tries to transform her solitude from a quarantine into a temple but she's just too lonely.

Thriller

Bored, the Lady of Shalott takes a fluttering buzzing aching Past out of her rib-cage. She holds its shivering body in her hands. The Past tells her she is monstrous. The Past tells her she is fragile. The Past calls her once wild and then whispers self care. So, the Lady of Shallot snaps the Past's thin neck and sets it on the ground to run around like a dying chicken.

Case History

I'm waiting for a doctor, I'm waiting for a nurse, waiting for an infusion to start, waiting for an infusion to end, waiting on answers, growing bored, looking at slime gifs, saying slime of time, repeating slime of time as a mantra, writing, thinking about writing when I'm not writing, and hoping that my fingers can type without too much pain.

Allegory

The logic of a poem is internal. It is a logic unto itself that reveals as it conceals. It unfolds as the poem unfurls.

Journal

Sinking into the timelessness of the hospital I dress in language like a prize pony. I have been here an hour. I have been here a lifetime. I perform patient as a performance of patience. I'm a malfunctioning cyborg. I'm a baited lamb. I'm a lamented bam. I'm babbling trying to remember my lines.

Parable

A person is not static, they are a becoming (paraphrased from the The Way of Tarot).

Bedtime Story

Maria needs a blood test.

Maria leaves her apartment and walks to the subway.

Maria has done this journey enough times to know that she will encounter four Marias.

While Maria is waiting on the platform she sees someone with a backpack that says Maria, the second Maria—an unexpected Maria. The moment feels unreal.

Maria takes the subway to Mariatorget, the third Maria, and rides the escalator up towards Maria Prästgårdsgatan, the fourth Maria.

Maria walks towards a building called MARIA, the fifth Maria.

Maria enters a building called MARIA.

Maria rides the elevator to the third floor, takes a mirror selfie, exits the elevator, and enters Maria Lab, the sixth Maria.

Maria takes a number and waits.

Maria's number is called so Maria enters a room.

In the room Maria is not a Maria.

In the room Maria is a Carin.

A nurse looks for a vein.

Carin's veins are hard to find: they roll away, break apart, and when found don't offer up any blood.

A nurse asks about Carin's necklace. "Who is the M?"

"The M is me. My name is Maria."

The secret Maria is no longer hidden behind a family name that was never meant to be spoken.

"My name is Maria, too." The seventh Maria says.

Maria shows Maria how to use her tattoos as a map to find a vein.

Maria bottles Maria's blood.

Maria says "see you soon."

Maria heads home.

Maria wonders if she will see her neighbor, an eighth Maria.

Maria does not.

Legend

Saturn is rising in the 8th house as roses bloom all-over her skin: petal explosions awakened by new meds (the side effects leave her languid).

The Lady of Shalott's body makes finely tuned machines sing with the sound of wind rushing through elms. Healthy bodies are silent. The world mistakes this for holiness but she knows that hush is a lull. The Lady of Shalott longs for the hurricane, the howling stones, the other bodies that were never meant to survive.

The sickness slowly unravels her sex. She is tempted to weave the threads into the tapestry. Instead, she twines her sex onto a spool that she keeps in her sock drawer. One day, maybe, she can sew sex back into her body.

Fable

In her isolation, time becomes viscous. It fills her room like honey. It oozes over her, bewildering the present moment. She is certain only of nostalgia. If she spooned honey-time into her mouth, would she eventually eat herself backwards into those other days?

History

All those years I didn't write.

All those years I didn't write. Was it because I was trying to find my voice in a new language? I flicker between multiple realities. Two selves. Many selves. What is true? *Nothing is true, everything is living* wrote Édouard Glissant but maybe I'm already dead? It has taken a decade, in this other land, to become the me that was.

Romance

When I arrived at the hospital, I pulled *L'étoile*. I was devastated by a mistranslation. I thought the card meant the toil: the Sisyphean work of chronic sickness. But it is the star! A card of healing, emptying and giving. It is mine. My healing card.

I'm awestruck by the face on the star's torso. Her breasts are eyes, her belly button a mouth. She is so similar to the tattoo on my inner arm. If healing is an endless emptying, must I lose myself to become whole again?

Script

"Listen to the sounds of your body. What is happening in this moment?"

"Where is your breath?"

"Breathe."

Piece

Hospital Sculpture N° 1: Explaining Joseph Beuys' Hare to Joseph Beuys' Hair

Buy a lock of Joseph Beuys' hair on eBay.
Save your butter packet from breakfast.
Throughout the day, ask for a cup of tea, each time saving the honey packet (you will need three).

Ask a lover to deliver the lock of hair to your hospital window by drone.

If you have no lover, ask a pigeon.

If your hospital windows are sealed, sneak downstairs into the courtyard for a "smoke" to retrieve the package of hair.

Once the nurses have left you alone for the evening, peel the lids off of the honey and butter packets. Discard the lids in the nearest trash can.

Google image search hare on an iPad.

Place the open honey packets in the form of a triangle on top of the iPad.

Place the butter in the center of the triangle.

Unpack the eBay package.

Unwrap Joseph Beuys' hair from the bubble wrap and place it in the butter.

Place the sculpture on the nearest table.

Take a sleeping pill.

Go to sleep.

Real Life Story

I wake at dawn to take my pills. I try to keep my mind empty of language until I can begin writing. In the beginning, I swallowed each pill individually. As the amount increased, the ritual became tedious.

Now, I take them all at once like a shot. I fantasize that my pills are nourishment—my futuristic breakfast—but they offer nothing other than a promise of health.

As my CK values fall, my leukocytes plummet. The medicine that is saving me from my self is making me porous. I'm becoming an open wound to the world. Infections can slip in and there is no defense. I'm allergic to the language of war that surrounds autoimmune disease. I cannot heal until I find a new vocabulary for being in the world.

Fabrication

How to be the me that was Mai. This time around I'm scared to give myself to the permeability. There were times in the past cycles of sickness when I felt myself dissolving into the landscape. Now, I want to be singular and whole.

Account

The emptiness of days after I take certain medications. I try to transform my isolation into a writing practice, but who wants to read the words *I am blank* repeated across so many pages? I long for the soylent green future. Feed me like the sow that I am as I linger in the muck of my existence and try to catch hold of the lingering threads of sleep; they dissolve in the wetness of my mind before I can reach a keyboard.

Yarn

Virginia Woolf wrote the title *Melymbrosia* and never explained where it came from or what it meant. Melancholy and ambrosia—I linger in the sticky sweetness of it.

I put rose oil on my pulse points. Roses waft over me. Rose oil fills my hospital room. Rose oil drowns out the other patients. Drowns me. This is perfect way to go under.

Exposé

Maybe we all carry obsessive phrases that echo in our interiority like prayers. Should we let these phrases go? I constantly fantasize about writing my secret psalms into a book and then setting it on fire. But perhaps those phrases carry me through life? In my vision, I perform the rite wearing a lace morphsuit in a clearing surrounded by mossy stones. Along with the book I burn roses.

Treatment

I'm being infused with Immunoglobulin. My selves dissolve into the landscape. I'm no one. I'm everyone.

Even with a tube extending from my hand, and the sounds of the machine (Braun Infusomat Space), and the foam hospital bed against my back, I feel as if I'm in a performance of a sick girl. Is it an internalized ableism that keeps me at a distance? Or, is this a survival mechanism?

Epic

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: *Death is not even in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, the eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in the ways our visual fields have no limits.* I thought this timelessness was a burden, but now I know it is a devotion.

Joke

"You don't look sick."

Chronicle

Should I write the schedule of nurses that come in and out of my room?

Science Fiction

Soon I will be underwater again. I am laying on a long narrow plank. There is an ergonomic pillow under my head. My arms are raised above my head. I am in the room of the Healthineers. A blue and gray machine plugs into my arm. The Healthineer calls the machine Little Boy Blue. They hum as they press Little Boy Blue's buttons and triple check the connection tubes. My feet point towards the ring of Soma Confidence. Soon I will be transported. How many times have I entered Soma Confidence searching for a healthy body? There was a time when people entered Soma Confidence to have their bodies scanned for abnormalities and disease. Now consciousness is sent out across parallel universes until a healthy version of your body is found. Once the body is confirmed healthy by the Healthineers it is brought back via a tesseract.

I am spooky action at a distance. Tendrils of my consciousness stretch out into all possible universes. Soma Confidence follows these tendrils.

Old Wives' Tale

"Are you sick because of your tattoos?" "Are you sick because you are vegan?" "You are probably sick because you weren't raw vegan." "Have you tried oxygen therapy?" "My neighbor's cousin healed himself with red light therapy." "Are you avoiding gluten, sugar, salt, fat, and nightshades?" "You should exercise more." "You should eat fish. They are full of omega 3." "You shouldn't eat fist. They are full of mercury." "You should eat raw liver." "Fruit is actually very unhealthy—have you tried keto?"

Memoir

Pulling at the hem of time. Unraveling myself in the process. "There is no health," you whisper; "only living. My sick sick rose."

Diary

I've been teaching myself the *Way of Tarot* as a way to pass the time. I sometimes think of my sickness as a punishment—brought on by a sadomasochistic longing to be broken. Am I, as Alejandro Jodorowsky puts it, *a marvelous substance inside a sick container?*

My fear of death is transformed into a living death. Jodorowsky asks *are we really so ephemeral?* I repeat this question to myself as I smear The Ordinary Buffet Serum into my skin. It feels like cum.

Why do I pretend this is more than a diary? How can a spectre write anything?

Rumor

I've long believed my life to form a looping pattern of repeated symbols and themes. I've tried to ignore this since I learned my mother was dying. I called it a manifestation of my anxiety but maybe there is something here that I shouldn't forget.

Grief complicates everything. It seeps into all my porous openings. It renders me prostate on the bed.

Annals

How to summarize the past six years into a relatable narrative?

Why summarize the past six years into a relatable narrative?
I'm always telling stories. My life is endlessly on loop.

Detective Story

I develop ways of compensating. I puzzle together and re-ar-range whatever isn't lost in the haze of the present moment. I take notes constantly as if I'm attending a never-ending symposium on the phenomenology of sick girls.

Fairy Tale

It is time for the MRI. M is escorted into a room that looks like the set of 2001 Space Odyssey.

She is told to lay down on a plank.

Her tattoos are now a map that shows the nurses where to find a vein. A nurse inserts a needle into her left arm. "Right in between *Strange* and *Powers*."

The plank lifts into the air. "Breathe in and hold your breath." A ring encircles her body. "Exhale." She has forgotten how to breathe. "Breathe like normal." Should she exhale through her mouth or her nose? She oscillates. The machine begins to whir. It is the same sound as Ulrika Sparre's sound piece *Cosmic Energy Pillar*.

"We are going to insert a contrast liquid now. You might feel warm. You might feel like you have to pee." A flood of warmth becomes a school of jellyfish oscillating through her blood. M can smell the ocean in the back of her throat. Her heart is a hummingbird trying to escape the cage of her body.

Her cells pull apart until she becomes the school of jellyfish.

She is a mass of expansion and contraction. "Breathe in. Breathe out. Hold your breath." The whirl crescendos. The school congeals until she is a singular jellyfish. A limp and transparent blob on the plank, they can see all her inner workings.

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Thank you to the choir visible and invisible.

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