



NUTS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CREATIVE NONFICTION IMAGINATION OF MAD-AFFIRMING DANCE SPACES

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Abstract: The following fairy tale is the creative output from an arts-based autoethnographic inquiry created in partial fulfillment for my Master of Arts degree. Inspired by the doctoral work of Lindsay Eales (2018), my main research objective was to challenge, (re)imagine, and transform conventional dance spaces into spaces that were more accessible for Mad bodyminds. I used artistic processes such as painting, dancing, and journaling to examine my own experiences of madness within and outside of dance spaces. I then took my findings and began writing an autoethnographic creative nonfiction piece in the form of a whimsical fairy tale that sought to deconstruct my personal experiences and reconnect them to other Mad works and texts. In doing so, my fairy tale is not only an imagination of the Mad-affirming dance spaces I wish were available to me throughout my dance career, it is an invitation to imagine Mad-affirming worlds beyond.

Keywords: Mad studies; Mad activism; autoethnography; fairytale; creative nonfiction

Nuts¹

*“It is my contention that reality is a performative, relational, and interpretive practice.”
(Harpin, 2018, p. 110)*

Once upon a time, in a land near, near to here, there lived a baby squirrel. Baby squirrel lived a simple life, doing all the activities that baby squirrels ought to be doing, like organizing acorns and burying all their nuts underground.

Baby squirrel lived in the small village of Oakerville, home to squirrels, mice, and all other small rodents alike. Oakerville was a quiet and proper little village, one where residents always followed the rules, and everything was in its place. The grass was always neatly trimmed, fallen leaves were routinely raked, and picket fences were painted the crispest white. Every rodent in Oakerville always looked their best, with freshly groomed tails and manicured paws—nobody would dare leave their burrow without trimming their whiskers! Inhabitants of Oakerville were friendly and polite and always acted on their best behaviour. All in all, Oakerville was a pleasant place to live and baby squirrel was quite content to be there.

One of the things that Oakerville was known for, other than its tidiness, was its ballet school.² Every critter in Oakerville grew up attending Miss Maple’s Ballet Academy and receiving what was known as the best education in the entire forest. Beyond receiving forest-renowned ballet training, students would learn valuable life skills by taking classes tailored towards developing into upstanding and presentable Oakerville citizens. Some of the most important classes each student was required to take included Manners 101, Developing Social Competency, Grooming and Keeping Up Appearances, and Oakerville Etiquette.³ It was expected that each rodent would arrive to school on time, with neatly combed fur and perfectly brushed teeth, equipped with everything they needed for their long day of learning and dancing. Following Miss Maple’s rules were necessary measures each rodent was expected to uphold to ensure Oakerville remained well-adjusted and free of disorder. After all, one bad nut could spoil a bunch.

Every school day began in the dance studio with a ballet warm-up. Students would arrange themselves alongside the wooden barres located around the edges of the studio and wait for Miss Maple to arrive. Each rodent would stand still in their respective spot at the barre with their eyes straight ahead, bellies held in, tails tucked under, arms by their sides, and feet in first position.⁴

Baby squirrel squirmed as they tried to position themselves correctly, but adjusting one part of their body seemed to cause another to move out of place.

*Come on tail, stay down!
No belly, you need to stay sucked in.
Turn your feet out more . . .
And remember to breathe.
Take a deep breath in . . . no, not that deep, look at how your belly ballooned!
Keep your chin up!*

Baby squirrel could hear the footsteps of Miss Maple approaching the studio as they struggled to correct their posture. Just as baby squirrel tried to turn their feet out just a little bit more, they could feel a shooting pain move up through their knee and collapsed to the floor.

THUD!

Nobody blinked or turned their head to see if baby squirrel was okay. Each rodent remained completely motionless.

Did they even notice?

Miss Maple opened the studio door and immediately stared at baby squirrel, still a mess on the floor.

Get up! Get up!

Baby squirrel scrambled to stand up and regain a sense of composure. They slicked back their tousled fur and stiffened into proper form. Maybe this wasn't as bad as they thought?

But it was.

Miss Maple slowly walked towards baby squirrel, each footstep sending tremors through the floorboards. Baby squirrel could feel their heart beating in their throat and tried to swallow it back down to where it belonged. Miss Maple stood beside baby squirrel and slowly scanned their body from head to toe. Baby squirrel remained still, their eyes looking straight ahead at the back of baby mouse's head. Miss Maple reached out her paw towards baby squirrel's tail and plucked out a stray hair. Baby squirrel tried not to flinch. Miss Maple did one more scan of baby squirrel's body and walked away without saying a word.⁵

"Let us begin," Miss Maple said to the class.

Each rodent stood a little taller as they waited for the music to begin. Baby squirrel felt like they were the smallest in the room.

“*Plié* one ... two ... up, three... four ... and down ... two ... up three ... four ... *grand plié* down ... two ... three ... four ... come up five ... six ... seven ... eight ...”

The students all moved in time with Miss Maple’s cueing, the whole classroom bobbing up and down, and up and down together.⁶ Once pliés were finished, the students moved on to *tendus*, *dégagés*, *développés*, and *grand battements*.

“Lovely focus, baby mouse,” Miss Maple praised.

“Excellent posture, baby chipmunk.”

“Beautiful feet, baby bunny.”

Baby squirrel was having trouble focusing on the exercises after their encounter with Miss Maple. Why was it so hard for them to be a well-adjusted ballet dancer? No matter how hard they tried, they could never get it right. Their fur wouldn’t stay put, or their posture wouldn’t stay straight; something always seemed to be wrong with baby squirrel.

“Alright, everyone, last exercise before I see you off to Mr. Elmwood for the rest of the morning. *Adagio*. Ready... and...”

The pianist struck the first chord as each critter placed their right paw on the barre. Everyone’s left arm passed through first position and opened to second in time with the music, with chins lifted and tails tucked under. The soft, soothing melody began pouring out of the piano as baby squirrel lifted their left foot to *retiré*.

Keep growing, supporting leg, don’t drop into the hip.

Baby squirrel visualized their right leg growing deeper and deeper into the ground, like the roots of the biggest oak tree in the forest. They could start to feel magic budding in the soil, the same magic that helped tree roots dig deeper and tree trunks grow taller.⁷

Baby squirrel! Stop imagining this here! You’re going to get in trouble.

This magic helped branch baby squirrel's left leg into a *développé devant* and sprout leaves past their tiny toes. Baby squirrel never felt this big before. They slowly gathered their leg back into *retiré* for the *développé derrière*, their root system further expanding to compensate for the change in weight distribution.

Cut down this tree! You're not paying attention!

But the tree was strong.

Next came the *panché*. Baby squirrel took a deep inhale and paused for the slightest moment to give their breath time to reach beyond the soles of their feet. As they exhaled, they began to tip forward and stretch their left branch-leg higher behind them.

Baby squirrel finally gave in. The tree was too strong to cut down.

*Well, okay.
I guess this is okay if nobody knows.
Nice and steady, little tree.*

Their roots buried deeper and deeper underground, twisting and knotting to create an even stronger system. Baby squirrel lightly touched the earth with their paw to feel the warmth of the soil and . . .

"Baby squirrel! Open your eyes!"

The music came to a halt. Baby squirrel snapped back to attention, embarrassed to be called out in front of the class.

Miss Maple walked over to baby squirrel and crossed her arms.

"Baby squirrel," Miss Maple sighed, "how many times do I need to tell you to keep your eyes open during ballet class?"

Baby squirrel didn't dare say anything. It was more than a few times.

"What on earth were you thinking about?"

Baby squirrel remained silent.

Miss Maple started to get frustrated.

“Baby squirrel, are you trying to escape? Is this class not good enough for you? Is there somewhere better you would rather be? Need I remind you that this ballet academy is the top school in the forest, and the second best in all the land?”

“No, ma’am. This class is not too good for me, and I am not trying to escape,” baby squirrel replied, meekly. “I just ...”

Baby squirrel paused.

“You just what?” Miss Maple retorted.

“I ... I guess I just ... I didn’t even know that my eyes were closed is all, Miss Maple, because I was a tree and my roots were growing deeper into the ground so that I could lift out of my supporting leg, like you always say, but also help anchor me to the ground, and I guess I must have had my eyes closed but I swear I didn’t mean to but my leg felt like it was so high because it was a tree branch and my toes were leaves and I think that was one of the best times I’ve ever done this exercise before because I wasn’t really me, you know, I was a tree, and I felt really strong and like I could have grown six thousand times bigger and my arm-branches grew too which is why I must have accidentally touched the floor, but I promise, Miss Maple, I didn’t even know my eyes were closed.”⁸

Miss Maple stood stunned. The whole class was staring at baby squirrel in disbelief.

“You ... you were a tree?”

Baby squirrel stood frozen. Miss Maple tried to stifle her laughter. Everyone else was whispering to each other.

“Baby squirrel, that has to be the most irrational, illogical, nutty thing I have ever heard of.”⁹

The whole classroom now erupted with laughter. Baby squirrel’s fuzzy cheeks grew hot.

“Oh, baby squirrel. Do you know what you sound like when you say silly things like that? You sound like ... like ... like, a dysfunctional ... like a contemporary dancer!”

Baby squirrel’s eyes started burning. The laughter in the classroom grew louder.

“Baby squirrel,” Miss Maple began with a serious tone, “ballet dancers never say such outlandish things, and certainly never in such a disorderly way. Oakerville citizens are to conduct themselves in respectable, palatable, and ordinary ways at all times.¹⁰ If you want to go ahead and spew out nonsense like I have heard from other contemporary delinquents, Oakerville is not a place for you. Understood?”

Baby squirrel sheepishly nodded.

“And now, what is this about being a tree? We are ballet dancers, not props or parts of a set. Trees are inanimate objects, for goodness sakes! Why would you want to be a tree when you are something far more evolved as a rodent?¹¹ ‘Becoming’ a tree is something abstracted and irrational, things we would expect contemporary dancers to embody. And what do we say about contemporary dancers, class?”

“THEY’RE NUTS!”

Baby squirrel was the only rodent in the room who remained silent. They were not sure if their silence was by choice or not.¹²

“And finally,” Miss Maple continued, “ballet dancers must have their eyes open! Ballet is about poise, elegance, and precision. There is no room for us to exhibit such dysfunctional behavior if we are to do exactly as the syllabus says and become upstanding Oakerville citizens! That’s what you want to be, isn’t it, baby squirrel? To become an upstanding Oakerville citizen?”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied baby squirrel.

“Very good. Now, do you understand how all of these things—the way you speak, the irrational stories you tell, and the way you conduct yourself in class—may make me believe that you are not developing into a well-adjusted ballet dancer or Oakerville citizen?”¹³

Baby squirrel nodded again.

“And do you also understand that if you were to become something as flawed and broken as a contemporary dancer, there would be no place for you here in Oakerville?”

“Yes, ma’am,” baby squirrel repeated.

“Who here knows why contemporary dancers cannot function in Oakerville?” Baby rat shot their tiny paw high into the air. They were always trying to become the teacher’s pet.

“Because they are delinquents! They are always off in their own worlds and do things that are simply unruly. They dance with their feet flexed, they wiggle around on the floor like vermin, they dance to strange sounds rather than to music, and they never keep up their appearance.¹⁴ They simply ruin Oakerville’s reputation by being so unpredictable and never following simple rules! Oakerville is known for its tidiness, its order, and the beautiful ballet dancers that graduate from Miss Maple’s Academy. Ballet represents everything that Oakerville believes in, and these contemporary vermin are like a bunch of bad nuts—they will ruin everything about Oakerville!”¹⁵

Baby squirrel’s eyes widened.

Am I like this?

“Very good, baby rat,” Miss Maple praised.

Miss Maple turned to face baby squirrel, who was doing everything they could to stop their legs from trembling.

“Baby squirrel,” Miss Maple began, “this isn’t the first time you have been demonstrating such defective and unsightly behavior. I think that it would be best for everybody if you went to talk to our guidance counsellor.¹⁶ Perhaps she can get to the bottom of things and figure out what’s wrong with you.”¹⁷

Baby squirrel began to collect their things. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion.

“Have fun with the guidance counsellor, baby squirrel,” baby rat mocked. “Be sure to tell my mom I say hi.”

The whole classroom laughed again. Baby squirrel quickly wiped the tears from their eyes and scurried out of the studio.

Baby squirrel cautiously approached the hallway leading to Ms. Rat’s office. The walls were stark and bare, and the floor felt hard and cold. Each step baby squirrel took sent chills up their spine and seemed to take them farther away from where they were supposed to be going.¹⁸ While baby squirrel had seen Ms. Rat in passing, they didn’t

know all that much about her. Baby squirrel tentatively knocked three times on Ms. Rat's dark door and waited. Footsteps started approaching from inside and Ms. Rat opened the door.

Ms. Rat looked just like baby squirrel remembered, with large brown eyes and silky grey fur. Her claws were perfectly polished, and her whiskers were neatly trimmed. "Hello, baby squirrel," Ms. Rat spoke. She stepped aside and motioned for baby squirrel to enter. "Please come in."

Baby squirrel hesitantly entered the office and took a seat on the twiggy chair across from Ms. Rat's desk. It was a rather ordinary office, looking no different than any other office in Oakerville, with white walls and darkly coloured furniture. The only personal thing in Ms. Rat's office that baby squirrel noticed was a photo of Ms. Rat's family perched on the corner of her desk. The picture must have been relatively recent, as baby rat still looked the same as they did today. Baby squirrel noticed that baby rat's beady eyes and sharp nose matched those of Mr. Rat, while Ms. Rat's features appeared a lot softer. Although Ms. Rat's proper posture mirrored the posture of baby rat and Mr. Rat, there was something familiar about the look in Ms. Rat's eyes that made her look different from the rest of her family.

*No, baby squirrel, stop letting your eyes wander!
When will you learn?!*

Baby squirrel immediately fixated their eyes straight ahead towards Ms. Rat.

"So, baby squirrel," Ms. Rat began as she pulled out a file from her desk. Her voice was soft and steady. "I would like to hear from you, in your own words, what brings you into my office today."

Baby squirrel took a deep breath. "Well," they began, "I guess I have been doing some rather, um ... improper things lately."

"Would you mind telling me what some of these things are?" Ms. Rat asked as she sat across from baby squirrel. "What happened today in your classes?"

"Well, in ballet warm-up this morning I was closing my eyes during some of the exercises at the barre," baby squirrel said shyly. "I didn't even really think it would be a big deal, and it just felt like something I needed to do," they continued.

"In what way?" Ms. Rat questioned.

Baby squirrel paused. “Well ... it helps me sometimes to think that I’m like a tree, I guess, and when I close my eyes, I can feel the roots in my feet and my trunk growing taller, and ... I ... I know this sounds nuts.”

“Was this the first time you tried dancing with your eyes closed?” Ms. Rat inquired.

“In class it is,” baby squirrel replied. “But ... but at home I sometimes ... no, never mind. It’s just silly stuff.”

Ms. Rat looked directly into baby squirrel’s eyes, but not in the same way that Miss Maple did. Baby squirrel felt safe with Ms. Rat, which was rather odd since baby squirrel had really only just met her . . . and since she was baby rat’s mom.

“Baby squirrel, I want you to know that you can trust me” Ms. Rat assured. “No matter how silly you think you sound, I would really love to hear what you have to say.”

Baby squirrel liked Ms. Rat a lot. She was different than the other rodents in Oakerville.¹⁹ Baby squirrel took a few moments to gather their words before answering. “Well, sometimes when I am at home and nobody is around,” they began, “I like to listen to other types of music and move with my eyes closed.”

“What do you mean by ‘other types of music,’ baby squirrel?” Ms. Rat asked.

“What I mean is ... I sometimes listen to music that Miss Maple doesn’t like us to listen to, you know, like music that isn’t ballet music,” baby squirrel remarked. “And then my body just starts dancing, but not in the way Miss Maple wants us to dance, because I like to roll around on the floor a lot and move in ways that I’ve never been taught to move before—almost like I’m playing—and I imagine I’m in the forest somewhere and I don’t care about what I look like because I know nobody will ever see it, and to be honest, Ms. Rat, I don’t even really know what it looks like because at home I dance with my eyes closed and it’s something that just kind of pours out of me, you know, and I can really feel myself being like a tree and it makes me feel, and I can’t really stop it even though I’ve tried, Ms. Rat, I promise that I’ve tried to stop it, but the more I try to forget it the stronger the urge to dance this way becomes and it feels so good when I do it.”

Baby squirrel took a big breath. Baby squirrel had never told this stuff to anyone before, but once they started talking to Ms. Rat they couldn’t stop.

“So, I guess ... I guess I thought that if I closed my eyes during ballet warm-up, I might be able to feel the same way I feel when I’m dancing at home by myself. Because I’m not that good at ballet, Ms. Rat. I try really, really hard to be good at ballet, and I seem to get by okay most of the time and do exactly what Miss Maple wants us to do. But sometimes it’s too hard. And so I think about dancing in my room by myself and of the forest and of the trees and hoped today that I could make it through class without anyone seeing how hard it has been for me.”

Baby squirrel finally took a breath to take a sip of dew water that Ms. Rat had set on the table. That was the most talking they’d done in a long time.

Ms. Rat sat contemplatively for a few moments before she started to scribble something down onto a strip of bark. She handed the bark to baby squirrel.

The Old Mushroom Cap
Tonight, 8pm

“I think it would be really helpful for you to meet me here tonight, baby squirrel,” Ms. Rat said with a smile.

Baby squirrel nodded.

“Very good,” Ms. Rat replied as she stood up from her chair. Baby squirrel collected their things and started walking towards the door.

“I guess ... I guess I will see you tonight then,” baby squirrel said in parting.

“Yes, I will see you tonight, baby squirrel. Thank you for stopping by,” she replied, “and baby squirrel?”

Baby squirrel turned around with wide eyes.

“Don’t be afraid,” Ms. Rat assured. “I am only doing this to help you. Everything will be fine, I promise.”

As eight o’clock approached, baby squirrel began journeying towards The Old Mushroom Cap. As they approached, a pungent smell grew stronger and stronger, and the landscape became less and less familiar.

*Look at all of those yellow dandelions!
And creeping thistles!*

Is that a white clover?!

Baby squirrel had heard and read about these flowers before, but they would never be found contaminating Oakerville soil. “These are all weeds²⁰ and would completely take over and ruin Oakerville’s reputation,” Miss Maple would say. “They are a disgrace and must be eradicated before they spread everywhere!”²¹

*How strange, baby squirrel thought as they examined a cluster of wild violets.
How could we destroy something so beautiful?*

Baby squirrel continued through the bush along the path to The Old Mushroom Cap. As they approached, they could see Ms. Rat waiting.

“Good evening, baby squirrel,” Ms. Rat said with a warm smile on her face. “I’m so glad you decided to join us.”

“Us?” baby squirrel remarked. They didn’t see any signs of other rodents—nobody really came down this way.

Ms. Rat chuckled and squeezed baby squirrel’s arm.

“Follow me this way, I want to introduce you to everyone.”

She began scurrying towards the tall grass behind The Cap. Baby squirrel had to run to keep up.

“Where ... are we ... going?” baby squirrel asked in between breaths. Ms. Rat sure could scurry quickly.

“You’ll see!” she called over her shoulder.

Before long, Ms. Rat came to an abrupt halt and started uncovering a secret door beneath a bed of black soil. Baby squirrel’s eyes widened.

“Woah!” baby squirrel exclaimed with excitement, “A secret door!”

“Shhhhhh,” Ms. Rat replied as she continued dusting off the door with her tail. A rusty combination lock was exposed, and Ms. Rat began spinning the dial.

22 – 01 – 15
C L I C K !

Ms. Rat pried the door open, revealing a long dark chute going straight underground.

“Wow!” baby squirrel exclaimed, “Are we going down there?!”

“We sure are, baby squirrel,” Ms. Rat answered as she approached the chute. “Follow meeeeeeeee . . .” Ms. Rat’s voice echoed as she jumped down into the chute. Baby squirrel promptly followed.

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!” baby squirrel squealed with glee. They came to land on a soft bed of squishy moss in a room unlike any room they had seen before

“Welcome to the Underground,”²² Ms. Rat said warmly, as baby squirrel stepped off the mossy bed. The dirt beneath their feet was rich and warm, the most fertile soil baby squirrel had ever felt. The walls and ceiling of the Underground were composed of twisty tree roots that wove in and out of each other, making them almost impossible to distinguish between. Art was hanging on the tree roots, but it was not the type of art that baby squirrel was used to seeing.

“Ms. Rat,” baby squirrel began, “what happened to those paintings?”

Ms. Rat looked at baby squirrel with a quizzical look on her face.

“What do you mean, baby squirrel?”

“Like, how come they don’t look like anything?” baby squirrel continued. “Did they get left out in the rain and turn all splotchy and weird?”

Ms. Rat smiled. “What do you see in the painting, baby squirrel?”

“What am I supposed to see?” baby squirrel asked.

“That’s not what I asked, baby squirrel,” Ms. Rat chuckled. “What do *you* see?”²³

Baby squirrel kept staring at the painting. They’d never been asked what they see in a painting before. The paintings baby squirrel learned about in Art History class were very life-like and looked like how things are supposed to look. Flowers looked like flowers, trees looked like trees . . . but this? This didn’t look like anything at all. At least, not like anything that was real in the world. Baby squirrel walked a little closer to the painting. Perhaps they were missing something?

As baby squirrel continued their examination they started getting lost in the colours. Shades of pinks, blues, yellows, and greens were smeared across the canvas with brushstrokes of different sizes. They overlapped, mixed, and fit perfectly together in a very unusual and surprising way. The paint was thick and textured, mountains and canyons spread across the canvas' landscape. It reminded baby squirrel of the tree roots surrounding them in the Underground.

How can a painting contain so much life?²⁴

"Baby squirrel?"

Baby squirrel immediately snapped out of their daydream. Hopefully they weren't in it for very long . . .

"Do you see something?" Ms. Rat earnestly inquired.

Baby squirrel remained quiet.

What do I say that won't make me sound more nuts than I already seem?

"Um ... no, ma'am," baby squirrel replied, "I just see some colours smeared around the canvas."

Ms. Rat sighed, and her eyes looked sad. Did she know that baby squirrel saw something? Did she know that baby squirrel felt something?²⁵

"Very well, then," she said.

They both stood quietly for a few moments until the sound of soft drumming broke the silence. Baby squirrel's ears perked. Where was the drumming coming from?

Ms. Rat looked over at baby squirrel and smiled. "Follow me," she called as she began scurrying towards a tunnel.

Baby squirrel approached the passageway and paused.

How am I supposed to fit?

"Um, Ms. Rat?" baby squirrel called. Ms. Rat had already disappeared into the darkness. "I don't think I can fit in here."

Baby squirrel heard some scuttling from inside the tunnel, followed promptly by Ms. Rat's reappearance. She was covered in dirt with pebbles tangled in her now messy fur. Baby squirrel giggled upon seeing Ms. Rat in such a state. Oakerville citizens could never look out of place.

"You need to crawl, baby squirrel!" Ms. Rat responded.

"And get all dirty?" baby squirrel asked.

Ms. Rat smiled; her eyes were sparkling. "It's really okay to be dirty, baby squirrel," she calmly reassured. "We are allowed to be messy every now and then." She paused. "Actually, we are allowed to be messy whenever we want!"

Baby squirrel was still uncertain. For their whole life, they were taught that they must always look presentable. And presentable had a very particular look to it. Neatly trimmed whiskers, shiny coats . . . every citizen in Oakerville was expected to be in tip-top shape no matter the occasion. Miss Maple would have a field day if she ever found out that baby squirrel was about to crawl through a dark, dirty tunnel and matt up their fur. Baby squirrel was never allowed to crawl, as it was something considered to be beneath Oakerville citizens. Upstanding citizens don't crawl! What baby squirrel was about to do went against everything they had been taught was right.

Yet there was a part of baby squirrel, perhaps a part much larger than baby squirrel would have liked to admit, that was excited to wiggle their way through the dirt. Something about it made baby squirrel feel . . . well, they weren't entirely sure. But they couldn't ignore the warmth they felt spread across their belly or the tingle in their paws.

Baby squirrel was ready.

Baby squirrel laid down on their belly at the entrance of the tunnel and felt the soft dirt press into their chest. Ms. Rat had already turned around and must have been halfway through the tunnel at this point but, for some reason, baby squirrel wasn't worried about catching up. Baby squirrel moved slowly through the tunnel, discovering that they had to twist and bend their tiny body in unusual ways to continue through. Baby squirrel loved moving this way. Dirt cascaded from above baby squirrel's head and dusted across their eyelashes, causing them to feel heavy and weighted. They took this as a sign to close their eyes and let their body morph on its own and follow the twists and turns of the tunnel by feeling.

The percussive and rhythmic sounds of the drumming grew louder and louder the longer baby squirrel crawled. They could also begin to hear voices echoing through the

tunnel. Baby squirrel must be close! Sure enough, after a few more crawls forward, baby squirrel began to feel a warm light spread across their face and the walls around them expand. Baby squirrel stood up as they rubbed off the dirt from their eyelids. When they finally opened their eyes, they couldn't believe what they saw.

The room itself looked like the art room baby squirrel was just in, with tree roots sticking out from the walls and dark soil beneath their feet. Rodents of all kinds were filling the room with dance, but it wasn't the type of dance baby squirrel was used to seeing. There were no barres along the perimeter of the room, or mirrors spread across the walls. Rodents weren't lined up in rows and there was no instructor leading a class. Instead, rodents were randomly scattered throughout the space. The lighting in the room was soft and dim, distorted shadows painted across the walls. The shadows danced alongside each rodent in what was the most enchanting *pas de deux* baby squirrel had ever seen. Except it wasn't really a *pas de deux*—*pas de deux* were meticulously choreographed and arranged, each movement a careful calculation led by one partner and performed onto the other. This was much different. This felt more real to baby squirrel. The movement was messy and unrefined, with no clear leader between rodent or shadow.²⁶ Both danced with flexed feet and explored the movement of their bodies from all levels: jumping, standing, crawling, sitting, and even rolling. Some danced with their eyes open, while most danced with their eyes closed.²⁷

Ms. Rat glanced down at baby squirrel. Baby squirrel was lightly tapping their left foot to the beat of the drumming. Ms. Rat smiled—baby squirrel probably had no idea they were doing this. “Well,” she began, “what do you think?”

Baby squirrel looked up at Ms. Rat with wide eyes and excitement beaming through their smile. “This is AMAZING,” baby squirrel began. “Will this place help fix me, Ms. Rat?”²⁸

Ms. Rat laughed. “And what is it that needs fixing, baby squirrel?”

Baby squirrel paused. “Well ... with everything that's happened with Miss Maple. Does this place sort of get all of the nuttiness out of me so that I can be normal back in Oakerville?”

Ms. Rat looked at baby squirrel and squeezed their arm, reassuringly.

“Not exactly, baby squirrel,” Ms. Rat replied.

Baby squirrel was confused. “Well ... what is the point of this place then?”²⁹

Ms. Rat smiled softly at baby squirrel and gestured for them to hold her paw.

“Let’s take a walk and chat. Are you comfortable with that?”

Baby squirrel nodded again. With their hand in hers they began to explore the Underground together.

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ENDNOTES

1. This fairy tale was created in partial fulfillment for my Master of Arts (Smorschok, 2020). Written as an (auto)ethnographic creative nonfiction, “a type of creative analytic practice . . . that tells a story which is grounded in research data . . . real events . . . people’s lived experiences . . . and draws on literary conventions” (Smith et al., 2015, p. 59), this tale is a (re)creation of stories and literature shaped by Mad experience. I use terms such as Mad and madness with pride, reclamation, and political purpose to reflect my alliance with Mad communities—communities “who share a common concern about how people . . . defined as Mad within dominant culture are . . . treated, particularly under the current psy regime known as the ‘mental health system’” (Diamond, 2013, p. 64). Although my fairy tale is fictitious in nature, its themes and messages are rooted in both experience and literature, referenced through strategically placed endnotes connecting the worlds of art, Mad experience, and politics. This tale deconstructs my experiences with pathologized mental illness and, as autoethnography does, posits these experiences against larger social and cultural phenomena (Ellis, 2004). In doing so, seemingly personal narratives become political informants.

Personal autoethnographic archives served as the genesis of my research. I generated these archives through dance, music composition, poetry, and journaling, all of which invited a sensorial engagement with madness (Eales, 2018). I originally crafted prompts to guide these engagements, but this formalization felt inorganic and forced. Most of my autoethnographic inquiry was triggered by events or situations happening in real-time (e.g., a doctor’s appointment, a conversation with a friend, a billboard advert I drove past), sparking a particular memory, experience, or feeling that warranted more unpacking. Throughout this generative process, there were periods of artistic stagnation interwoven with outpourings of art that were unpredictable and disorganized. In this way, I began to realize how my creative processes (un)ironically mirrored processes of my nonnormative mind: disordered, paradoxical, confusing, sometimes unappealing, and messy (Eales, 2018). Engaging with artistic creation simultaneously engaged me more deeply with Mad knowledge(s) and aesthetic(s).

2. Beyond the mirroring of art and madness, my autoethnographic inquiry revealed congruencies between my experiences with madness and my experiences with dance. Growing up as a competitive dancer, I became acutely aware of how my body failed to meet normative and desirable balletic standards (most of which are experienced by baby squirrel within this tale). As I was conducting my master’s research, I began to realize how this narrative of physical defectiveness mirrored the perpetual narrative of psychological defectiveness I felt for my non-normative mind. This realization connected seemingly separate chapters of my life into a space of familiarity. It made me realize how intimately madness has been woven into my own stories and how it continues to shape the world(s) I encounter and inhabit.

3. “Passing as normal is a requisite for sustaining relationships” (Voronka, 2019, p. 572). This notion of passing as “normal” is something with which I am intimately familiar, having learned from a young age to keep certain (read: distressing) inner experiences to myself to avoid embarrassment, shame, and disconnection from loved ones.

4. “The soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning into the automatism of habit” (Foucault, 1979, p. 135). While Foucault may have been referencing the disciplinary techniques utilized to create docility and obedience within the army, scholars have found these same techniques to be present within ballet contexts (Alterowitz, 2014; Clark & Markula, 2017; Dyer, 2009; Green, 2003; Pickard, 2012).

5. “The space reserved by society for insanity would now be haunted by those who were ‘from the other side’ and who represented both the prestige of the authority that confines and the rigor of the reason that judges” (Foucault, 1988, p. 251). Miss Maple represents that authority figure *from the other side* of insanity (i.e., those who are “normal”) who upholds normative standards and judges whether such standards are met by others. This creates the narrative of “us vs. them.”

6. “Ritualized dance training practices like performing a series of nonvarying exercises, codified techniques, or repertory dance works could be seen to reflect values such as . . . acknowledging the knowledge of authorities and experts, and achieving consistent and repeatable . . . results” (Dyer, 2009, p. 117). In many ways, this directly parallels some of my earlier experiences of psychiatrization, in which psychiatric “experts” must be obeyed and followed unquestionably. They were assumed to be the experts of my body/mind experience, with little to no regard of my voice. I have a salient memory of medical professionals at a hospital refusing to contact the psychiatrist on-call

that evening (who was the same psychiatrist I had been seeing for months leading up to this particular incident and developed a trusting relationship with) because they “didn’t want to wake the poor guy up” for my suicidality. As Fernandez (1981) writes, “since physicians were the only therapists who could claim expertise in medical treatment, their claim to expertise in moral treatment became more acceptable” (p. 242).

7. “‘Psychosis’ might be defined as a loss of touch with reality by scientists, but for those who experience it, it is a reality which can be magical” (Netchitailova, 2019, p. 1510).

8. “[There] is a ‘medical’ narrative of madness as illness. But there are other ways of decoding insanity . . . for example, of madness as the ‘price of genius,’ . . . or of the mad [*sic*] as touched by the gods... and/or ‘more in touch with nature’” (Maitland, 2001, p. 72).

9. “To speak ‘logically’ becomes a requirement if you wish to speak at all . . . [and] to speak outside the fairly limited framework of ‘logical’ syntax [*is*] regarded as a [symptom] of mental illness” (Maitland, 2001, p. 78-79).

10. “Madness is a threat to good order and to [one’s sense of self] as human and rational. Madness is dangerous” (Maitland, 2001, p. 75).

11. In the 1920’s, mentally ill individuals were described as “‘mentally dead’ and ‘on an intellectual level which we only encounter way down in the animal kingdom’” (Torrey & Yolken, 2010, p. 27).

12. “The failure to use logic ‘properly’, or to speak appropriately, is then deemed to be yet another symptom that renders whatever [the Mad] wish to say even less audible. The mad are silenced” (Maitland, 2001, p. 79). When expressing my own mind, I have regularly encountered phrases such as “how could you think such things,” “you’re being crazy,” “that makes no sense,” among others—even when I have been asked to speak up. This consistent gaslighting taught me, from a very young age, to remain silent and distrust my own body-mind sensations (e.g., a racing heart and unrelenting sense of doom in “seemingly” benign and nonthreatening conditions).

13. “Jones et al. proceed to identify six dimensions of stigma . . . [the degree to which someone can] conceal their condition, . . . whether the stigmatizing condition is reversible over time, . . . the extent to which a mark strains or obstructs interpersonal interactions, . . . the extent to which a mark elicits an instinctive and affective reaction of disgust, . . . how the condition came into being, . . . [and] the feelings of danger or threat that the mark induces in others” (Jones et al., 1984, as cited in Link et al., 2004, p. 512).

14. “Stigma takes place when the mark links the identified person via attributional processes to undesirable characteristics that discredit him or her in the eyes of others” (Link et al., 2004, p. 512).

15. Eugenics within the context of psychiatry and mental illness has a devastating history. “Although the Nazi genocide of Jews during World War II is well known, the concurrent Nazi genocide of psychiatric patients is much less widely known. An attempt was made to estimate the number of individuals with schizophrenia who were sterilized and murdered by the Nazis and to assess the effect on the subsequent prevalence and incidence of this disease. It is estimated that between 220,000 and 269,500 individuals with schizophrenia were sterilized or killed. This total represents between 73% and 100% of all individuals with schizophrenia living in Germany between 1939 and 1945. . . . Nazi genocide of psychiatric patients was the greatest criminal act in the history of psychiatry. It was also based on what are now known to be erroneous genetic theories and had no apparent long-term effect on the subsequent incidence of schizophrenia” (Torrey & Yolken, 2010, p. 26).

16. Baby squirrel’s experience is outside the boundaries of Oakerville normativity, and, within the context of the medical model, is thusly viewed as inherently wrong and unwanted. As such, their unusual experience of reality is considered lesser than the dominant discourse and must be treated or “corrected” to maintain good order (Maitland, 2001). As Harpin (2018) states, “some realities are more equal than others” (p. 110).

17. “Madness provokes very strong feelings of unease” (Maitland, 2001, p. 75) to the point where “one can be detained and forcibly treated for experiencing certain perceptual phenomena” (Harpin, 2018, p. 110).

18. This description of the hallway is a metaphor I use to reference psychiatric hospitals. I chose to use the phrase “farther away from where they were supposed to be going” for its double meaning: the dread one can feel seeking

“help” from someone who will likely not understand them and/or paint them as broken, and a critique of forcible inpatient programs or other treatment practices. What are the costs? Are such measures necessary?

19. Ms. Rat represents the psychiatric professionals who were/are proponents of the antipsychiatry movement (Cooper, 1967, 1980; Laing, 1998). Antipsychiatry can be described as “a social movement that question[s] not only the legal privilege of psychiatrists to detain and treat individuals with mental disorders, especially in a compulsory manner, but also the increasing ‘medicalization’ of madness” (Berlim et al., 2003, p. 61). As Harpin (2018) writes, antipsychiatry activists view Mad experiences to be “meaningful and can offer insight rather than being simply a ‘neuro chemical glitch to which the only proper response is medical, pharmaceutical treatments’” (p. 111). I have had the pleasure of encountering medical professionals who have been an incredible blessing for my sense of care and overall wellness. While I would not identify them as antipsychiatry, their witnessing and holistic approach to patient-centered care is in stark contrast to the sterility and patronization of normative biomedical approaches to mental health.

20. Eugenicists have often compared the Mad and disabled (often called degenerates) to weeds—they are “unsightly” and must be eradicated (i.e., “weeded out”) to prevent their “defectiveness” from spreading (Bobbitt, 1909; Mottier & Gerodetti, 2007; O’Brien, 2011; Richardson, 1973).

21. “Hitler was interested in these ideas [of killing patients in psychiatric hospitals] and is said to have discussed a program to kill chronic mental patients in 1933, shortly after assuming the chancellorship. He said that ‘it is right that the worthless lives of such creatures should be ended’” (Torrey & Yolken, 2010, p. 27).

22. “People are fascinated by madness, by what it hides. The art world is the world where madness belongs, where it should belong: in the narrative of the ‘unknown’, of the unexplored” (Netchitailova, 2019, p. 1510).

23. “Engaging playfully . . . and artistically with our own [Mad] subjectivities can be an important mode of resistance to dominant knowledges and power relations” (Eales, 2018, p. 8).

24. “Unlike the modern diagnoses, art gives us the possibility to explore, to venture into different views and interpretations. It gives us stories and a narrative behind . . . The art and painters . . . always explored and continue to explore the remaining mystery of ‘madness.’ They paint us stories and possibilities of different interpretations. As human beings, we always want ‘stories,’ we want more detail of real human life, hiding behind the increasing number of diagnoses” (Netchitailova, 2019, p. 1514).

25. “Art could be rescued from the exclusive world of formalism or decorative artifice, and applied instead to the real and pressing problems of people—including their wild or ‘unauthorised’ forms of consciousness” (Henzell, 1997, p. 180).

26. During a particularly intense panic attack, someone suggested I try to “dance it out.” This led me to a very interesting experience of moving with and alongside my shadow. Seeing my shadow allowed me to, in a way, see my mind; shadow dancing helped me find my ground again. I was able to see what I was experiencing and embody it through multiple senses. I found the core of my movement originated from two particularly interesting spaces: my mind moving my body, and my body moving through my mind. Having a visual and kinesthetic experience immediately helped to settle and understand the distress I was experiencing in a surprising way.

27. “Mad art as an invitation . . . to disrupt the biomedical gaze” (Reid et al., 2019, p. 256). Within the context of this story, ballet is akin to the biomedical gaze, while more contemporary/improv type dance is akin to Mad art. The dancing present in the Underground disrupts the rigidity and normativity of Miss Maple’s Academy and Oakerville as a whole.

28. “When mad art is relegated to the therapeutic realm, understood only as a benevolent force in the lives of mad people, it is decontextualized and positioned as apolitical” (Reid et al., 2019, p. 257).

29. The Underground is the counter narrative to the medical model. In the Underground, baby squirrel confronts their internalized oppression: their own feelings of brokenness projected onto them from their peers and teachers. As Chamberlin (1978) writes, “not only have others thought of [mental patients] in this stereotyped way [of being akin to monsters], we have believed it ourselves” (p. xi). The Underground is baby squirrel’s first exposure to an alternate

world where they are finally given permission to be themselves without hesitation. This mirrors my own experiences of coming to know Mad studies.