

NEW BOOKS

By Dan Piepenbring

Because I've written about government conspiracies, I sometimes hear from crazy people. "Only the intervention of AI can stop Man from creating Hell cybernetically," one wrote recently. "It would be better to have AI either remake us or end us as a species." Tough, but fair. I read such screeds with great interest. Sometimes I'll google my correspondents, looking for signs of their decline, the lives they led before illness consumed them. As a recreational drug user with a robust knowledge of the CIA's mind-control program, I worry, a bit romantically (i.e., grandiosely), that I might join their ranks someday. Insanity captivates me, but only, of course, from afar. How easy it is to leer at the guy on Instagram who claims that the "Satellite Men" have been "damaging my teeth for over twenty-two years." And how easy it would be, were I to encounter him on the street, to walk briskly, urgently away.

Would I still be able to face someone like that if I couldn't gawk at or ignore him—if he were inescapably close? In **THE COMPLICATIONS: ON GOING INSANE IN AMERICA** (HarperOne, \$29.99), Emmett Rensin reflects on the ironies and humiliations of losing one's mind in a nation that dehumanizes even its "normal" citizens. In an aside, he writes of Malcolm Tate, a schizophrenic man whose sister shot him dead on the side of the road after he went off his meds and threatened to kill his infant niece. "It's a sad story, but if Malcolm Tate had lived, he'd just be another pain in the ass, wearing out the patience of his friends and family," Ren-

sin writes, "another frightening lunatic tolerated from a distance." He can talk this way because he's a lunatic, too, tired of seeing his condition treated with kid gloves. Efforts to destigmatize mental illness, well-intentioned though they may be, have brought relief neither to the insane nor to those charged with their care, Rensin believes. They are academic exercises, more concerned with doctrinaire politesse (don't call them nuts; call them *biopsychosocialpoliticalbodymind impaired*) than with solutions. "I do not suffer mainly from stigma. I suffer from blunted affect and pressured speech, delusions of reference and violent moods and diminishing cognitive function," he writes. "I am not mainly invested in being Accepted as Valid, but in staying well enough to stay free and employed."

Rensin, now in his thirties, was eight when he first noticed fissures in his psychology. He feared a colony of ants would pour from the showerhead and suffocate him, "swishing under my tongue" and "cascading down my windpipe." Since then, he's threatened suicide; punched his best friend in the face; attempted to carve out one of his lymph nodes with a butter knife; crashed his car under direct orders from God; hidden in the closet from the withering gaze of his cat; broken into the home of



a near-stranger to recover a lost scarf; and become convinced that his roommate was observing him on a series of monitors, a conceit not dissimilar to that of the movie *Sliver*. He once wore the same pair of black jeans for months, so I trust him when he says he stinks. The voices in his head sometimes sound "like the din of background chatter in a restaurant run through a ham radio," and at his worst, he feels like a figment of other people's imaginations. But his symptoms most often present as those of a run-of-the-mill asshole, which is what everyone seemed to assume he was at first. "The problem with teenage boys," an early therapist told him, "is that no matter what's wrong with them ... they're sullen and pissed off all of the time."

About those therapists: He's burned through some two dozen of them over the years, and he wouldn't wish their hours of talk on anyone, especially anyone sane. "I go because I have to," he writes. "But the sort of person who