

Setting the Wire
A Memoir of Postpartum Psychosis

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The first thing I must tell you is that with psychosis there is no *I*. Or rather, what it's like to waver in one's oneness such that in writing prose, it is actually more accurate to remove the pronoun altogether. A state of mind with no edges, a boundaryless territory where perception is a wild screaming cinema of thought, sound and image, each presenting its own degree of menace. Like wild monkeys, the shadows of fuchsia plants projected on a living room wall, a knife laid out on a bread board in preparation for lunch, a red flannel blanket stretched out over my husband Roger asleep on the couch, red checkered napkins on the dining room table, a blood bath, a warning, a siren from the street. ♦

Four fives and a four, four fives and a four, four fives and a four. Pacing the halls of the psychiatric ward at night, I bang my fists on the doors of other patient's rooms. I shout: *I need to go home! (I need to go home! I need to go home! I need to go home!)* As I round the corner of the nurses' station, a stocky male nurse blocks my path. A flock of orderlies descends. Thick forearms brace my body from behind and hands grasp each of my limbs lifting me from the ground. My back arches in resistance, and I scream as I'm hauled to a white padded room. Once inside, they set my body on a mattress at the center and bolt the door behind them. I leap up and press my face against the 12"x12" window, like a child on a car door, pounding my fists and wailing until I have no energy left and my body falls limp to the floor. I ache with a loneliness that transcends the fear of being alone, and then I release. I assume a fetal position and suck my thumb.

This will become a memory that I'm ashamed to remember. ♦

A single bead of water landing on the grate of a drain, a consistent staccato sound, *tuh, tuh, tuh*, the beat of a tongue flicking across the roof of a mouth. The air in the psychiatric ward's shower room is humid and thick.

I run my finger against the nipple of my left breast and peel yellow crust from its edge. I rub the coarse paste between my thumb and index finger and hold it to my nose. Recognizing the scent of sour breast milk, I scream out for my baby: *SOOO-FEEEE!* My scream is guttural and reverberates against the tile. I'm startled by my own voice.

A young female nursing aid steps toward me in the shower stall and the rubber soles of her shoes suction against the floor. Her eyes widen and she leans her torso back as she aims a jet of warm water against my legs. I hover in the corner but she comes closer, cooing, *I'm only here to help you. You need to bathe. You need to bathe.* I dodge the pulsing stream. There's now a second nurse and I know that I'm outnumbered. *Get away from me!* I scream, insulted by their care.

They aim the water from two directions and it runs down my back and torso and along my groin and pelvis. *She hasn't showered since she got here,* one says to the other. My hands press against the jets of water and ripple against the pressure. I emit deep involuntary wails. I growl. One nurse tilts my head back and the other sends water cascading through my matted hair. And then I'm no longer there. I move into the not remembering, the silence, the space, the inarticulable.

From deep within, I emerge outside myself. I am an observer. The woman I see has not slept in five days. Her brain is loaded with medications, but they yield no rest. Her eyes are wild and her muscles tense. The nurses help her to stand and towel her dry. They dress her. She wears oversized red yoga pants from pregnancy, a nursing bra with snaps at the center to allow easy access to the nipples that have now gone dry, and a blue velvet shirt that is her mother's. When her arm grazes the tip of her ear, for a moment she is eight, nuzzling her mother's white cashmere sweater, numbing the pain of her parents' divorce. When her husband returns to the hospital to hold her at night, two bodies pressed together on a cold linoleum floor, she is an infant. But there is no baby here, only the one she has become, and the sweet one who appears in a car seat for visits. And there is no mother, only the one she longs to be and her own longed-for mother, now just a voice in the walls. ♦

When I wake from a nightmare recently, my blue ribbed camisole soaked in perspiration, the white cotton sheet beneath me now wet, I pull the fabric of my shirt up and over my head leaving it to drop in a wet ball. My moist torso, now exposed, is cold in the late night air. I seek comfort and want more sleep so I replace the garment with whatever top I can grab most easily from my dresser without turning on the lights and without putting on my glasses. I do this with the haste of a woman who is hunted yet without the benefit of full vision. In the bathroom, I sit on the toilet and then stare back through the door into our bedroom where Roger sleeps in a fog of sepia. I'm uncertain whether to lock the door or to prop it open. I cannot locate the source of danger. The thumbprint. The stain. ♦

At a beach on Great Lake Huron where I had spent summers with my father growing up, a friend from a neighboring camp asks me, *Was there something that caused your illness?* She asks this as we search for the raised patterns of fossils along the shore's gray limestone rocks. There is the sound of our water sandals rubbing against shale as her words disperse in the wind. I study the question, rummage my mind. What correlate? What antecedent? Was it something in the mineral vein of the rock? Some minor rupture resulting in a fault line? We stop to run our fingers along the spiral ridges of a petrified shell.

My brain had a seizure when the umbilical cord was cut. This I do say. *From that moment, I couldn't sleep. It was the onset of mania.* I speak with the flatness of a woman who cannot make full contact with the demon standing just behind the words, but also to provide reassurance to the concerned and academic eyes that face me and my perception that we have now, collectively, locked in on an explanation that suitably strips its meaning of any associated shame. I have momentarily anaesthetized the question. And yet I've underestimated my listener. She asks for more detail. *How many days did it last?*

Are we speaking in geologic time? ♦

I could treat her on an outpatient basis but we would need to meet every day. The psychiatrist says this to Roger and to a black leather couch upon which sits a new mother with lactating breasts. The world is infinite subtext and the waiting room a lineup of crazies.

The car ride: a fitful race along the I-5 corridor of downtown Seattle, gears shifting, pressure building. A father-in-law in the driver's seat, a burgundy Volvo 244, a mother-in-law seated beside him, a box to be opened along the way—a distraction? Roger riding in the backseat, our new daughter Sophie in the infant car seat at the center. They are outside the viewfinder, perhaps the silhouette of Roger against the passenger window. There is the matter of the return address on the package, a natural fibers company in Maine mistaken for a nuclear waste facility. The new mother is on the prowl for toxicity. She must protect her offspring from the dangers of the wild. *What!?* the mother-in-law in the front seat turns her head to the back seat and acknowledges exasperation. *Sarah, it's a present. It's from the Allens.* Two worlds slapping against each other. Crack. For a moment, there is entry. The new mother opens the package for the baby who is at this moment outside the frame. A slate blue knit cap, benign.

The new mother sniffs out madness in the waiting area of the psychiatrist whose office is in a neighboring wing to her OB/GYN's practice in a downtown Seattle medical facility. The room is a wash of white, clinical, peopled with the kind of patients who do not bathe. Those who stare off into space and apply makeup to lips and eyes that, while near the body part, are not lined up. This is how the waiting room appears to her anyway.

There is relief as she steps into an adjoining room so that she might nurse the baby. Ahh, a mothering function, aided by the closing of a door, the shrinking of the universe, contact with Sophie. Moist lips, the pressure of suckling. The mind: pulling, pulling, pulling.

Tugging, tugging. Back into the white space of the room. A nurse and a clipboard. The white noise of conversation. Shoulders against a wall. A name is called: *Sarah*. This will be the moment. The time has come for the woman whose shoulders rest against the wall to be whisked away, hospitalized, taken down a long white corridor, stolen from the father, the baby, the in-laws, removed. The terror of wanting what is needed.

But instead the outline of a man, C.W., MD, seated by a window with bookshelves behind him, he says, *I could treat her on an outpatient basis but we would need to meet every day.* The new mother sees his lips moving but there is no associated sound. She hears nothing after the prescription of an antipsychotic, which will allow her for the first time to sleep an entire day but precludes the possibility of breastfeeding. At home, sleep comes, heavy and drugged, a necessary syrup to stop the mind from ungluing. ♦

Fingers pressed against a wallet, the rushed opening of a zipper around its perimeter, chasing through cards assembled in the lining to find the business card of a therapist seen some years before during graduate training in psychotherapy at Northwestern. At home, in the room she shares with her husband, a call is made. *He wants me to take an antipsychotic!* she cries into the phone.

I'd like to see you in a facility with other mothers, her former therapist tells her and Roger, her husband, who is on the line for support.

(At present, I can move no closer to this material. All I can say is that I was unwilling to sacrifice the breast.) ♦

I want to tell you that a shard is precious and not only a fragment of something broken but also a testament to it.

The worst thing that ever happened to me was not madness but loss. ♦