

Sometime after he said the word *pause*, I went mad and landed in the hospital. He did not say *I don't ever want to see you again* or *It's over*, but after thirty years of marriage *pause* was enough to turn me into a lunatic whose thoughts burst, ricocheted, and careened into one another like popcorn kernels in a microwave bag. I made this sorry observation as I lay on my bed in the South Unit, so heavy with Haldol I hated to move. The nasty rhythmical voices had grown softer, but they hadn't disappeared, and when I closed my eyes I saw cartoon characters racing across pink hills and disappearing into blue forests. In the end, Dr. P. diagnosed me with Brief Psychotic Disorder, also known as Brief Reactive Psychosis, which means that you are genuinely crazy but not for long. If it goes on for more than one month, you need another label. Apparently, there's often a trigger or, in psychiatric parlance, "a stressor," for this particular form of derangement. In my case, it was Boris or, rather, the fact that there was no Boris, that Boris was having his pause. They kept me locked up for a

week and a half, and then they let me go. I was an outpatient for a while before I found Dr. S., with her low musical voice, restrained smile, and good ear for poetry. She propped me up—still props me up, in fact.

I don't like to remember the madwoman. She shamed me. For a long time, I was reluctant to look at what she had written in a black-and-white notebook during her stay on the ward. I knew what was scrawled on the outside in handwriting that looked nothing like mine, *Brain shards*, but I wouldn't open it. I was afraid of her, you see. When my girl came to visit, Daisy hid her unease. I don't know exactly what she saw, but I can guess: a woman gaunt from not eating, still confused, her body wooden from drugs, a person who couldn't respond appropriately to her daughter's words, who couldn't hold her own child. And then, when she left, I heard her moan to the nurse, the noise of a sob in her throat: "It's like it's not my mom." I was lost to myself then, but to recall that sentence now is an agony. I do not forgive myself.

The Pause was French with limp but shiny brown hair. She had significant breasts that were real, not manufactured, narrow rectangular glasses, and an excellent mind. She was young, of course, twenty years younger than I was, and my suspicion is that Boris had lusted after his colleague for some time before he lunged at her significant regions. I have pictured it over and over. Boris, snow-white locks falling onto his forehead as he grips the bosom of said Pause near the cages of genetically modified rats. I always see it in the lab, although this is probably wrong. The two of them

were rarely alone there, and the “team” would have noticed noisy grappling in their midst. Perhaps they took refuge in a toilet stall, my Boris pounding away at his fellow scientist, his eyes moving upward in their sockets as he neared explosion. I knew all about it. I had seen his eyes roll thousands of times. The banality of the story—the fact that it is repeated every day ad nauseam by men who discover all at once or gradually that what IS does not HAVE TO BE and then act to free themselves from the aging women who have taken care of them and their children for years—does not mute the misery, jealousy, and humiliation that comes over those left behind. Women scorned. I wailed and shrieked and beat the wall with my fists. I frightened him. He wanted peace, to be left alone to go his own way with the well-mannered neuroscientist of his dreams, a woman with whom he had no past, no freighted pains, no grief, and no conflict. And yet he said *pause*, not *stop*, to keep the narrative open, in case he changed his mind. A cruel crack of hope. Boris, the Wall. Boris, who never shouts. Boris shaking his head on the sofa, looking discomfited. Boris, the rat man who married a poet in 1979. Boris, why did you leave me?

I had to get out of the apartment because being there hurt. The rooms and furniture, the sounds from the street, the light that shone into my study, the toothbrushes in the small rack, the bedroom closet with its missing knob—each had become like a bone that ached, a joint or rib or vertebrae in an articulated anatomy of shared memory, and each familiar thing, leaden with the accumulated meanings of time, seemed to weigh in my own body, and I found I could not bear them. And so I left Brooklyn and went home for the summer to the backwater town on what used to be

the prairie in Minnesota, out where I had grown up. Dr. S. was not against it. We would have telephone sessions once a week except during August, when she took her usual vacation. The University had been “understanding” about my crack-up, and I would return to teaching in September. This was to be the Yawn between Crazy Winter and Sane Fall, an uneventful hollow to fill with poems. I would spend time with my mother and put flowers on my father’s grave. My sister and Daisy would come for visits, and I had been hired to teach a poetry class for kids at the local Arts Guild. “Award-Winning Home-Grown Poet Offers Workshop” ran a headline in the *Bonden News*. The Doris P. Zimmer Award for Poetry is an obscure prize that dropped down on my head from nowhere, offered exclusively to a woman whose work falls under the rubric “experimental.” I had accepted this dubious honor and the check that accompanied it graciously but with private reservations only to find that ANY prize is better than none, that the term “award-winning” offers a useful, if purely decorative gloss on the poet who lives in a world that knows nothing of poems. As John Ashbery once said, “Being a famous poet is the not the same thing as being famous.” And I am not a famous poet.

I rented a small house at the edge of town not far from my mother’s apartment in a building exclusively for the old and the very old. My mother lived in the independent zone. Despite arthritis and various other complaints, including occasional bursts of dangerously high blood pressure, she was remarkably spry and clear-headed at eighty-seven. The complex included two other distinct zones—for those who needed help, “assisted living,” and the “care center,” the end of the line. My father had

died there six years earlier and, although I had once felt a tug to return and look at the place again, I had gotten no farther than the entryway before I turned around and fled from the paternal ghost.

“I haven’t told anybody here about your stay in the hospital,” my mother said in an anxious voice, her intense green eyes holding mine. “No one has to know.”

*I shall forget the drop of Anguish
that scalds me now—that scalds me now!*

Emily Dickinson No. #193 to the rescue. Address: Amherst.

Lines and phrases winged their way into my head all summer long. “If a thought without a thinker comes along,” Wilfred Bion said, “it may be what is a ‘stray thought’ or it could be a thought with the owner’s name and address upon it, or it could be a ‘wild thought.’ The problem, should such a thing come along, is what to do with it.”

