Luis Gonzalez, Beloved Father and Husband

Tara Betts

The day my stone was planted here as a stiff marble shrub no one could move, Belinda fell on her knees, hugged it like my shoulders that first time we danced snug as the dress on her waist. Belinda, my pretty Azucar. It's funny I called her that, and I end up deep in dirt, 22 with daughters and Nena Azucar alone because I couldn't reach the insulin to thin out the shocks dancing in my blood. Needles hid, jeered behind the kitchen drawer that always got stuck. My eyes fluttered at the flurry of rainbow specks. Sweat gave me a new skin, like the first night with Belinda. Be pretty sugar. I insisted, promised that I was her living tattoo, permanent. The kitchen tile I laid turns faint, then blacker than her inky hair. She will be home soon. The checkered floor disappeared while I waited for the sweet jingling of keys opening our door. Azucar, my pretty sugar, please come home soon. She was only thirty minutes late.

The Origin of Fear

Inez Holger

I could have told Moira Blum, the girl in my dorm who believed in astral projection and traveled to other planets on weekends, the one with the frizzy hair and dreamy eyes, but she would have just congratulated me. I thought of telling Candy Weiland, who always said “Hey” to me, the girl who let me know on day one of college: “This here Kentucky—it’s God’s country.” She’s the size of a jockey and swears she’ll own a horse farm some day. “My granpappy’s got some land and a passel of horses,” she’d say, twirling her mane of hair into a bun. Always reminding me, “It’s a chignon.” It was her or Moira and neither would do. Just how do you explain to anyone, even friendly girls with chignons, that something wispy and curling is crawling beneath your skin?

As if those invisible intruders weren’t enough, I could not understand my clock anymore. Little arrows pointed to numbers, like three and five, or eleven and six, and I had a vague feeling I should do something, but I had no idea what. Go to class, go to bed, go to eat? But to get to class I had to go down the stairs, and the stairs were revolving the way they do in spy flicks after the hero gets poisoned. Everything in his line of vision swirls around until he passes out and hits the floor, but I didn’t pass out. I groped for the floor with my foot and clung to the handrail. Everywhere I went, whether to class or to bed, a ruckus throbbed in my head. Shadowy images of helpless victims in guillotines snapped in my mind. And my spring term papers were due.

After a phone call home, after my mother groaned, “Oh God, where have we gone wrong?” I shuffled to the university health clinic without a word to Moira or Candy. I had no specific fears or expectations about the outcome, only the same fierce anxiety which had settled in me, back in the fall, right before red leaves spiraled down to the ground.

The psychiatrist summed up my entire future within minutes. After tapping her finger down the page of symptoms, she glanced at me then began to write. “You’ll have to take pills the rest of your life,” she said, without looking up, “and you’ll spend a lot of time here.” What did she mean by here? Kentucky?
“Miss Frechette…” She kept scribbling in her chart as she spoke. I could hear the scratching of her pen, the tap of periods at the end of sentences. The walls of her small office were bare, so I had nothing to do but listen. “We are going to go upstairs…right now…Okay?” Her voice had gotten slow and loud, shifted up a tone I think, as if I had suddenly morphed into a kindergartner, a slow one at that.

“Um, what’s the matter with me?”

“Well.” She placed my chart on her knees and leaned forward. “It’s as if your body…is making its own LSD…which means…”

Which meant, I can tell you now, I hovered over a great divide, a fault line cracked open by some unseen stress. That vaulting abyss you see in movies where trees and dinosaurs fall in and ricochet off the walls or foolish humans hurtle down with hands reaching for the sweet, blue sky. Where orange-black lava bubbles down at the core of the earth and you hope those poor people die fast. But I did not know this as I stared at the black ringlets on the doctor’s head. I only knew there are some things you should tell your parents; abyss or not, I wanted to call home. Florida, where juicy navels dangled from trees.

No one knew how the clinic absorbed me, whole, like a phagocyte engulfing an invader. I had walked out of my dorm like I did every day and then disappeared into the psychiatric ward, past two sets of locked steel doors. Red bandana pulled snug over my ash brown hair, tan desert boots on my feet. Gone from campus, vanished, vamoose, without a trace. Moira was probably used to this. I wasn’t.

“It’s better if you don’t talk to anyone at first,” said the third-floor nurse, as she took away my fringed leather pouch and checked my jeans pockets. “For seventy-two hours. It helps you to get adjusted to being here.”

That word again. I turned to look down the hall, lit with caged overhead lights. The nurse insinuated that I had found a new home here, a locale of sorts, where I would live a life with slightly different rules. Like the difference between magnetic north, which you have to compensate for all the time, and true north, firmly established on every traveler’s map. Geographers call this variance ‘declination’ and if you do not compensate for it, you’ll get lost. A body making its own LSD gets lost, or at least stuck on the stairwell. Until the reckless chemical production in my body stopped, I’d live with a constant deviation from what is true, but with medication, perhaps one day I’d safely find my way anywhere on earth I wanted to go. Here, in the meantime, they’d feed me and wash my clothes and eventually let me talk on the phone.

An aide led me to my new room where a small woman lay on a bed, face toward the ceiling with eyes open, bandages on her neck. She neither moved nor glanced my way. I stared at my new surroundings: bare walls, steel beds, white sheets, and a stiff body. What was this place? Swirling flecks of dust drifted in the light from a window partitioned by iron bars. Iron, like at the earth’s core. I sensed desolation ahead, maybe like the first time a Jew discovered a swastika on a synagogue wall.

I had known fear as a child, experienced its sudden grasps, like the day I found myself far from shore on a fast diminishing sandbar, watching water churn in around me. Fear took hold of me, shook me like a German Shepherd does a Chihuahua, and left me with a scar that gets achy whenever the tide comes in. That fear taught me to use caution, which comes in handy around forests, bodies of water, and spirited friends. I knew fear again, when my mother had open heart surgery. A throbbing, persistent fear that stayed until she went into recovery, and then rejoined me whenever I saw the bulging seam down her chest. This fear reminded me of mortality, which comes in handy around empty bottles of liquor, bodies of water, and spirited friends. I knew fear when my brother physically fought with my father and my mother, which caused nausea and a surge of panic in me. Fear of such skirmishes taught me to seek peace, a wise move in a testy world. And around spirited friends.

The fear that seeped in during the spring in Kentucky though, differed from all others in my life. They paled in comparison. They made sense, mostly, but this one blew the doors off my tidy soul, barged in, and became a resident. Even with senses all awry and feelings numbed, fear grabbed me hard at the shoulders when I realized I could no longer find my way home. Not even in God’s country.

From what I can figure, illness came before the fear settled in. A psychiatrist might disagree and tell you instead about family-of-origin issues and all sorts of childhood psychological dysfunctions, which you will find true if you examine my history, but you also have to know this: somewhere along the panhandle of Florida, between Pensacola
and Yulee, my cortex thinned. The sheath of membrane protecting my brain function got skimpy somehow, and left me wide open for deranged thinking. At least that’s one of the latest theories about what happens to brains like mine.

I’m pretty sure the thinning began the year I got sent home from school for wearing culottes. Around the time I walked the open hallways of Amos P. Godby High School in the sticky Florida air, trying to fit in with either the brainy clique or the hippie clique. Well before I left for college to major in philosophy. Well before my synapses twitched with paranoid schizophrenia, manic depression, and psychosis. I could give you all the defining characteristics of this gumbo of diagnoses, the “if you have seven or more of these symptoms, see a doctor immediately” lists, but you only need to know this: my frontal lobe punk’d me.

I’ve heard the limbic system and hypothalamus somehow got involved too, but no one knows for sure what started all the trouble: a virus while in the womb, the effects of marijuana, or a rogue gene on chromosome 22. All I remember is a gradual change in how I perceived the world around me, while at the same time my interior world went dark. So dark my hands trembled. Eleventh grade.

I am afraid. Of myself. Not one person around me thinks I have any reason to live in fear two decades after my first hospitalization at college, but not one person around me has had a dungeon in her head. I have not told them about the years of free-floating anxiety, depersonalization, borderline personality, and dissociative disorder. I definitely have not told them about my roommate.

Eighteen months after my first hospitalization, I lived in an apartment with a quiet, plump girl who went to school with me. She paid her own way; voc rehab paid mine. I don’t remember her name, just that she had freckles, but the rest of the memory goes like this: She knows nothing about my guillotines or that my pills are not vitamins. Even though she spills Frosted Flakes on the floor every morning and does not clean them up, I still do not want to obey the voice telling me to kill her.

I have swirling, drooling sleep thanks to medication, but for some reason my eyelids pop open in the middle of the night. My body feels pumped with air, à la Michelin Man. In the darkness, a voice speaks, a male voice I think.

“Kill her. Get a knife and stab her now.”
tired and the gland in my neck is swollen. My potential employer raises an eyebrow and wants to know if I am seeing a psychiatrist. I fear speaking the truth.

I am afraid. Of my genes. That my great aunt died in a mental hospital. That I see depression, obsession, and alcoholism everywhere I look down the family tree. My brother, who is older, has lived a tormented life, a magnified version of mine. He calls on the phone, wailing, paranoid, asking what is wrong with his mind. “I feel like an alien,” he says, desperate to feel normal. He has crashed his car and rammed his head through a tree, abused drugs and alcohol, strangled people, and set animals and buildings on fire. Self-medicating, he says. Dulling the anguish. He has crossed the line of normal behavior and I shudder, knowing I stand only one foot away from doing the same. The doctor tells me that if I have children, they run a strong risk of developing schizophrenia. I married, between hallucinations, and had two sons after my mental health improved. Was I a fool? The idea they could suffer like this makes my stomach churn. Every time they go through a period of sadness I wonder, “Is this it?” and I can barely breathe.

I am afraid. Of the cures. I try to stay positive about the fact that the worst remedies ran their course before I became mentally ill: cutting holes in the head to let demons out, blistering the scalp with mustard powder, drowning therapy, the spinning cage (100 revolutions a minute), surgical removal of abdominal organs, and induced convulsions so severe that bones fractured and teeth fell out. No one performs lobotomies anymore or induces insulin shock, but I am not thrilled about electroconvulsive therapy. A police Taser hits a torso with .002 to .03 amps of electricity, and shock therapy hits a skull with up to 1.6 amps. The history of “help” intensifies my paranoia.

What about the pills? Aren’t they worth an extra twenty-five pounds of weight, relentless restlessness, grogginess, insomnia, and complete lack of motivation? What could be so bad about a pill that helps you cope, gets you smiling again, keeps you from the seductive thoughts of suicide? I grope to explain to you what losing a sense of self feels like as much as I grope to explain how a banana tastes. Part of your personality gets amputated by your drug and no matter how much better you cope, you want your self back, even if it’s morose and takes a ridiculous amount of effort to get along with. Could I have my self and feel better, please?

I am afraid. Of not trying the cures. I could hurt myself, again. I could hurt someone else. I could lose my mind, all threads of logic and reason unspun from their spool, leaving me in an endless, bumbling roll of thought. I’ve dropped spools on the floor before, so I know what it’s like, holding on to a slim tail of thread, trying to jerk the bobbin back, watching the wooden wheel bounce around all hinky dink and roll so fast, you can’t catch up until it whacks into a wall and recoils into a dead stop.

I can only see two unmedicated choices before me: I could wake up every morning in gouging misery for the rest of my life or I could “go over the edge” one day and never come back to any semblance of sane living at all. Animalia. Forever pacing. Forever begging. Forever separated from my husband and children.

The options bring me to Stage IV ‘find-a-cure obsession’ because the alternative looks pretty bad. So I try other cures: orthomolecular psychiatry and mega-vitamin therapy, homeopathy, cow hormones, St. John’s wort, candida diets, sugar-free diets, anti-inflammatory diets, prostaglandins/lecithin/DHEA or whatever the health food store says will work, shots for brain allergies, acupuncture, inner healing, and counseling.

While in counseling, I am afraid to give the wrong answer to the inevitable question: “On a scale of 1 to 10, how depressed would you say you are right now?” If I say five, am I giving the right answer? Maybe I really am a six or a four. This morning it was four, this afternoon six. Five sounds good. But five could mean a stronger pill and I can’t sleep at all with what I’m on now. Seven. But I feel too shaky for seven. My head doesn’t stop talking and without a strong pill I might go down the tubes. Five point five. Six? I now fear making decisions in any realm of my life.

I am afraid. Of a relapse. No one uses the word cured with schizophrenia. They say recovered, the same term used with alcoholics, who live forever liable to slide into another round of clinking ice and sweaty glasses. Cancer patients use the term remission. They reach the five-year marker and shout “Hallelujah.” Depression, murky as it is in cause and course,
does not have a word of its own to finalize its suspicious, halting end. I
guess depressed people get over it, or gradually get better.

I gradually recovered. At the time of my diagnosis, prospects
for a restored life were dim (“you’ll spend a lot of time here, dear”),
but now, about half of schizophrenics recover when certain factors
are present: early treatment, cognitive therapy, permanent housing,
supportive relationships, and the good ol’ inborn trait of persistence. It
just so happens I was born persistent, very persistent—ask my husband.
Whether by accident or by mercy from heaven, however you choose
to phrase it, all the other markers needed for recovery also fell into
place. The most critical factor was marriage to a solid, persevering man
who bravely walked down the aisle with me, though he knew that I still
hallucinated.

A new theory which might open the door to an actual cure for
schizophrenia bases its hope on the Neanderthals, who supposedly never
suffered mental illness. Theoretically, their big brains had a short time to
mature, which shortened the years needed for schizophrenia to develop.
As man evolved, brain development changed and environmental factors
had plenty of time to get involved and wreak havoc. Remove the toxic,
hectic environmental factors, new experts say, and you might eliminate
the cause of mental illness. Live a Stone-Age lifestyle.

Neanderthals might have avoided schizophrenia, but I bet they
still had a chunk of fear to deal with—from thundering mammoths to
sizzling tar pits to hordes of marauders with spears. Fear is inevitable,
whenever you’re born, a helpful tool around danger, but disastrous when
it takes up residence in your soul. It bullied its way into mine, collateral
damage from a mental war.

_We have nothing to fear but fear itself._ Those words from a man encased
in the collateral damage of polio. Terror of fear, he said, “paralyzes
needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” That’s another way of
saying fear will keep you permanently stuck at home in your nightie with
the curtains closed if you don’t watch out. He was right, but what’s an
ex-schizophrenic to do with all that leftover fear?

I have chosen to do many things while very afraid. Even though my
chest still tightens and I want to turn around and run home, I stand up
to the resident bully and walk on by, shaky legs and all. I plan on wearing
him out.

Since those crumbling days in Kentucky, I have ended up doing
much more than my real or imagined limitations allowed. I’ve held jobs,
done volunteer work, led women’s retreats, been a mime, a clown, a
mother, and a friend. Recovered, cured, healed, in remission, wrongly
diagnosed—put it any way you like—I have learned to factor in my
deviations wherever I go.

Last year, I pushed past fear to fly to Costa Rica and gathered my
courage to zip-glide across deep ravines. But, on the same vacation, while
snorkeling in a rocky cove, I was pulled toward the ocean by a powerful
undertow. Choking on water and sinking with exhaustion, I was sure
that I was dying. Unlike my imagined fears of an unraveled mind or of
tormented children, the fear of actual, conscious death jack-hammered
any urge to retreat. Grasping onto outcroppings of stone, I advanced
inches at a time, pulling forward with each wave that rolled toward the
beach. I clung to the stones as each wave retreated, as its undertow
sucked all un tethered creatures out to sea.

By a barren shimmering beach, at the heaving change of the tide, my
feet finally dug into the shore. The howler monkeys sat silent in the trees
as I trudged up the crest back to my car and my family on the other side.
I was shaken, for sure, but as I got to the top of the crest, _there_, far, far
from my Florida home, I knew I was in God’s country.