



Elizabeth Kirschner

THE RED LINE

Early morn and my eyes are like gun slits,
swollen almost shut from the non-stop torrential
weeping I did last night. Too much brain pain.
Brain pain that knocks me off my feet,
sometimes escalating at the speed of light until
I'm hit with a bout of psychosis. Called
"episodes" as if they were a popular TV series, I

go far away from the world and into one where wolves are devouring
my brains or demons are throttling me, choking me halfway to death.

These states of psychic intensity are what have landed me for the past
five years in the psych ward behind the red line that's six feet in front of
the locked door that only visitors can cross, not patients. Red line like a
goal one must get into in order to win the game. Red line from which I
watched my then husband cross and go through the locked door, his
shirt a small sail, his posture like that of a wounded God.

My first grand entrance into the psych ward coincided with my first
psychic break. I went from being in a state of what I call classical despair,
as though it were an art form, into the hellish belief that I was a dust
baby, blown hither and yon, then switched in a moment long enough for
my demons to snap their fingers, into the violent schema wherein I was
wrestling with God in piss and shit in a sewer hole with the lid shut
tight.

That first incident, over five years ago, happened on my son's eleventh
birthday. In delirium, I argued with my husband, told him I needed to
make the birthday dinner and bake the cake before I would go anywhere.
The kitchen knife held a strange allure, something to cut and be cut with,
but off I went to the ER, a crazed Madam, a loony-tunes mother and wife.

I had been in just about every emergency room in Boston prior to that
December day where the light was so severely cold it felt shrill. Seizures
brought me there, seizures which I experienced countless times for four
long years before they stopped and the madness erupted. And now, for

over five years, the psychotic breaks have occurred, volcanic in nature, way too many times, some of which landed me back in the ER or the psych ward.

The lock-up, the nuthouse. So just what is life like behind the red line? Surely it merits being called an inferno. Surely it's like living in a void slit in the side of time. It is a kind of incarceration where all the patients are players in a tragedy of Shakespearean proportion. It's a haunted tunnel in which one hears anonymous screams or a wax museum, each of us rigid with pain. The "us" being a community of dying souls—the demented, tormented thrust into hell holes that are gaping wounds, the only comfort being that there is an "us." None of us are alone—one patient walks the hallways hours on end, another caves into the lair of despair, still another talks out loud to no one, making elaborate plans—when to get one's hair done or buy tickets to go to symphony—this "us" is a "we" and thus we share a huge common denominator; we are all touched in the head, a little kooky, or most politely, a bit too eccentric to exist anywhere else except behind the red line.

It's just one more way of being devastated. That my first hospitalization occurred on my beloved son's birthday is a heartbreak I will carry until I die. O how I longed to be back in the maternity ward laboring to give birth instead of wanting to create my own demise. How many times have I crowned on the cusp of death wherein the only word I can muster and master is die? I want to orchestrate my own death, I have written or said far too often, my only motto: annihilate the violated because my brand of madness is the result of severe childhood abuse committed by both of my parents. Abuse I buried in a cavern so deep I lived in a coma of unconsciousness that exploded into concussions of consciousness that came not prior to, but after my initial hospitalization. This much I know: abuse is taboo and I have been thoroughly schooled in the drama of trauma and know, as well, what it's like to be was partially dead in the head for almost five decades.

That day in December I was, of course, in the ER for hours moving in and out of psychosis. Monkeys walked out of walls, a den of lions was ensnared beneath my bed which I told my biologist husband to tell them to go away. He did so, calmly, firmly, but imagine his terror at seeing his

Elizabeth gone completely out of her mind.

Late that night I was finally admitted after being given a neurological test, one that I knew by rote from the seizure years. Then came the body check, the patting up and down like a cop searching for weapons. Off came my wedding ring, my good earrings. My hastily packed bag was thoroughly checked for sharps, cords, anything that could do me in even though I was already done in.

I had to wait for hours for my bedtime meds, was put on a new one called Risperadol which was meant to be "psychic glue." I was just another Humpty Dumpty fallen from the wall and all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put me back together again, but the new med did. Eons later, I'm now on three times as much of Risperadol and take three tabs of it whenever I have a psychic break and must wait while literally screaming my bloody head off until the drug kicks in. Once I was in a state so severe and prolonged, I downed a dozen tabs, landed in the psych ward again because I had taken an accidental overdose.

The first time I was admitted, voluntarily, I was given a private room, much to my relief. I cried myself to sleep in the wee hours while clutching my son's favorite teddy bear. This bear has come with me every time I've been hospitalized as a kind of surrogate son. That son, as well as my doctor and dog keep me on, however precariously, on terra firma, that is until the next quake of madness hits me putting me once again on the verge of psychic extinction.

In the unit, the keepers and the kept are separated by a tidal abyss. The keepers check the kept every ten minutes round the clock, hand out the meds and make sure they're taken, take one's pulse and temperature every morning, have the keys that might let one free, but are used to lock the locked up ones in the shower where razors are verboten. They guard the halls and every morning, precisely at 4:00 a.m., I would awaken, pace the small stretch of hallway between my room and the guards until the community room opened at 6:00. Then I could go make tea, quietly pad back to bed in the flannel nightgown I wore morning, noon and night, and read the mythic Aeneid in mythic madness.

The first morning I was there, I paced around the bed, then ended standing up on it, terrified, because I was sure the floor was swarming with poison insects whose bites could kill me. My Dantesque hell realm of insanity has put me in a minefield because I never know when I might land on a one and be blown away in pain so acute my only wish is a death wish.

Life among the deranged has had an equalizing effect. I often saw my agony reflected in someone else's eyes such that I wanted to give that fellow sufferer a hug, but no touching was allowed in the unit. There are rules to be followed, a very strict list. If a rule was broken, one was sent, like a naughty child, to his or her room for very long time-outs. One man, a tailor, was never allowed to leave his room. He stood in the doorway during all his waking hours like a broken scarecrow and once I was scolded for talking with him. Upon my release, I gave him the rest of my paper and a pencil that I had scribbled fragments of poems on so he could draw suits and dresses. His look of gratitude was so profound I only wanted to sob.

In the lock-up the kept are kept busy by their keepers. One is not allowed was not allowed to stay in bed all day. In the morning we were counted before we could eat breakfast, then we went to groups all day and finally gather in the community room come evening to go round the circle and report one positive thing that had happened that day.

I remember crying a lot. I remember hiding quarters in a sock so I could make calls out on one of the two phones on the ward. I remember staring out the suicide-proof window in my room longing to fall to the pavement below. I was haunted by all the other half-mad, self-destructive poets—Lowell, Sexton, Berryman, Plath—and felt a sort of camaraderie with their ghosts. I felt that same camaraderie with the other patients. We were in it together, all taken out of the world because we were suicidal, crazed, debilitated—in short, not fit for society.

We had our own society. We were colleagues passing each other in the hallway, working together in groups, telling each other the specifics of whatever form of mental illness that kept us behind the red line. Mine was, is Borderline Personality Disorder, a diagnosis I didn't know until

after my release, one that came out of a survey test hundreds of questions long that I took soon after my arrival. It is a mood disorder, biologically-based that's exacerbated by childhood trauma. One, two years after my first hospitalization, I remembered the primitive, primary trauma, that is, of my mother whacking the back of my head with a baseball bat when I was three or four years old. I remember hitting the floor which had black and white tiles like a chessboard, me the pawn, she the ruthless queen holding me in checkmate. Years after that, while in an episode of great intensity, I recalled how my father decapitated my life-size doll in my playhouse, then told me that's what would happen to me if I didn't comply with him. These memories and other assorted, horrific ones, buried deeper than deep, are what made my childhood blocked out with blackouts and are what lead me to life behind the red line.

Being suicidal is what kept me in the lock-up. It is a holding tank, a halfway house between life and death, a hang out for lost souls, broken people, a cuckoo limbo. If I know what it's like to be kept, then Somerville-based poet, Doug Holder, who has worked at a psychiatric hospital in the Boston area for years, knows what it's like to be a keeper, or more kindly, a caregiver. Hence we share a particular knowledge, the flipped sides of a single coin and plan to give readings together, thus creating a dialogue, a crucial one about what it's like to be at either end of the spectrum of life in the unit.

That I survived my childhood is a miracle. That God has put a pen in my hand is another one. I have written in line after line about the hellish dimensions of my illness and of life in the unit. I should have used red ink, blood-red, to ink the lines that have resulted in two collections of poetry. The first, *My Life as a Doll*, brought out by Autumn House Press in May '08, is my survivor's tale, a memoir in verse about my mother's violence. The second book, not yet out but someday, one day will be, also by Autumn House is titled *The Fire Bones* and it chronicles my father's sexual abuse. It is meant to be the companion book to *My Life as a Doll*.

Red lines then as scaffolding for my particular horror story. Yesterday, in the strangest of places—a car dealership—there was a huge poster that read, "Thou Shalt Seek the Red Line." Eerie to find it there, to ponder its meaning, yet a vision soon came to me while walking by the sea of a red

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line encircling the earth with the whole human race, hand-in-hand, toeing it. Every one of us is susceptible to life behind that red line, many have crossed it either as the kept, the keepers or their loved ones and have felt just how universal suffering is. Let's stand together then on the red line, linked by the beautiful ruins of our common humanity, by the faithful failings of flesh and by the brutal truths that tutor us until we break open and earn our angel wings so we can take flight from fright, lift up and lift off as free spirits in the grace that transforms us from being lost to that of being found.