

Justyna Sempruch

voicing the invisibility of silence

a narrative of postpartum depression

not me somebody else should be writing what i have to say not me because there is no me in this story i have been losing myself in pregnancy in birth and then in something that i have underestimated until it broke me down the postpartum i thought that it would no longer be possible to say it i have lost myself because previously i must have thought that there was me before i became pregnant

postpartum post motherhood equals separation from the warmth of the whole body missing the other body motherhood means concentrating on what has been left leftovers pain and lack *my bones are aching muscles hurt eyes are red left side of my face is not moving my left eye won't close my body is turning into the body of a mother thinner and thinner* there was a mother in me that was not mother and it/she wanted to lose weight but instead the weight was losing her milk was dropping like tears spilling all over *and the baby is beautiful a tiny most amazing jewel i have ever imagined i have to be careful somebody could steal it from me but it is not mine* somehow it had become autonomous growing separately from her body the body of mother sleeping and healthy *i am not healthy my body is weak my mind refuses to rest and enjoy maybe tomorrow i won't be able to walk they will have to put me into a wheel chair and i won't be able to stand it* there was fear growing inside me overwhelming fear of dying i imagined and they believed it was true

i did not want to believe that it was a depression what is a depression a sort of a headache that puts you into sleep *i wish i had a depression but no i have multiple sclerosis* pregnancy the last month bell's palsy he said i am sorry it will take you a couple of weeks to recover not quite uncommon three percent of my patients had it unfortunately we don't know much about it can be related to the hormonal changes in your body and then the little it was there much earlier than i thought *maybe i can not bear it any longer maybe it is trying to help the little it is*

trying to help me it is coming out of me slowly the whole night long while i was pushing the eye on the paralyzed side of my face wanted to come out like the baby my husband stood beside me horrified and fascinated he was pushing my eye back inside and watching the baby coming out out out my body was a hysterical spectacle of the abject on the outside inside there was just pain terrible and important a very exclusive kind of pain i saw the little it in the morning and i was very calm the mother already loved it so much and i wanted to love it

*i have been recovering well but i had not seen it i had not seen my previous body i was in a different shape only half of the face was mine wretched in front of the mirror i promised myself if i could have my smile back if i could i would never again complain *but only half of my smile is there no matter how hard i smile having my face back means happiness i demand from life right now with the most amazing boy sleeping in the transparent tube beside me all bundled up in white and cream and a little bit of blue a tiny creature in a terrarium that i can watch from a safe distance but also touch if i wish**

*we were alone in vancouver a strange transient city with people who listened but who never talked suspended between sadness and joy amazement and nostalgia wariness and pride up and down every hour different our place in there became claustrophobic my body refused to heal *is it me who takes care of my son or is it him who takes care of me* both afraid and curious we have been taking care of each other*

no we do not belong here it is a foreign territory too much water and those wooden constructions all over and my water did not break the clouds and the moisture makes me believe that the city is there for the plants the plants are growing all over the place living on the rain and living on people living on the mother in me living on my husband and the little it the plants are huge and live by absorbing the water that is there for them exclusively plants are important

*but not my body my body separated from me and i demand explanation you have a post-partum depression it is obvious i could prescribe you some anti-depressants but you have to stop breast-feeding no i had to go away there were many doctors in vancouver but they could not speak there were plants in their offices and drapes took away all the light *i am so afraid to breathe it is the mother in me who breathes she also watches the baby breathe and then she holds it tight my hands are aching in the night when i feed the baby and feel my breasts swollen and disfigured i start to hate my husband* he woke up with me and slept nevertheless he was trying to help and he did not he read a newspaper i decided to hate him the same kind of hate i developed for the city *somewhere else i would be able to love him again now i love the baby it never hurts it is easy* all that was hurting me was because of me the weakness the loneliness the mother the unprepared condition of motherhood my husband was lonely too but at least he had his body all the time the body was his*

*go back to europe back home where is that home that was no longer ours but perhaps i could occupy myself with something else refocus my mind on making it ours *only that i must know what is happening to me to my body too many small**

pains indicators of a disaster phone calls to nurses inquires questions uncertainty hysteria and then that general practitioner in whistler exceptionally good they said hardly ever mistaken in his diagnoses consulted in serious matters only next day we drove to whistler *why is there no space for joy in me why is the whole body occupied by fear that i have to mask every day i try i try to enjoy restaurants hot tubs wine affections and above all i try to enjoy my child but then my child is being admired almost by everybody especially women* women who also immediately and wordless commented on my body the same insane disordered body how could this body make a good impression if any of them looked into my eyes they would have noticed but no they would have not they were watching the mother in me moving towards the child if i could tell them that i was so afraid it would never be back the body they thought they saw preoccupied with pain counting every single one hoping that perhaps they come only when i think they would and the mother pretended the pleasure of being while i speculated upon death each time i felt pleasure my brain felt the emptiness i imagined must have been there when you cannot feel the pleasure *the lack of pleasure is imagined much stronger than real all over me falling into sleep with a headache is like falling into death* but each time i heard my child crying i was back in life the body of mother was working well it woke up regularly sometimes even before the baby it produced milk successfully and fed the baby it never collapsed it never stopped giving

maybe because it was not afraid of giving it was me who was afraid when the doctor finally examined my body i had all the answers ready i said all he wanted to know *i won't tell him anything he seems he made up his mind he knows* i knew too but i was afraid to know well i think you have multiple sclerosis—*falling down falling down down deep deep how deep deep down falling* please calm down obviously you don't know much about multiple sclerosis *falling down deep down* we have to test you to be sure MRI is most accurate but there is a waiting list three to four weeks *no no waiting i cannot wait i have to know* there is a private center they will test you within 48 hours i could call them right now it took them 4 days and it was expensive but i had to stop falling down the reason whatever it was i needed my body to live with the money everything was quicker but it did not change much i was awaiting my sentence i actually wanted to have MS in order to finalize the pain and to start the treatment

i saw neurologist only after the MRI results were available we sat there my husband and me in front of yet another person waiting for the confirmation of the diagnosis you know the results don't you no I don't there are no traces of MS in your brain the results are negative i did not believe i was suspicious *maybe these are not my results why the pain what then is the pain about* for the next half a year of my life i had MS i breathed MS lived MS and i was becoming a mother i was joining the mother healing the split within and *i thought i would not be able to say it i thought writing was like ordering thoughts thoughts that i have been collecting for too long to remember their clues* but writing about depression is not ordering and collecting rather it is a suspension of disorder a moment frozen in chaos grasped and left untouched writing about depression writing with a

desperate hope of breaking through the invisibility of silence

Author's afterword

I gave birth to Julian in Vancouver on the 28 of February 1999, two weeks before the due date and one week before the oral exam for my PhD candidacy examinations. At the day of submitting my last exam paper I was diagnosed with Bell's palsy, a partial paralysis of the face, possibly due to hormonal changes. Thus, the growing sensation of horror that I had repeatedly experienced in the last trimester of my pregnancy reached its climax. I was torn between hysterical despair and a vague desire for the baby. But the next few days changed everything. There were suddenly three of us, Sebastian, Julian and me. I felt happy, my face soon recovered and apparently all was well. Two months past, I started to observe strange weaknesses in my body; I could no longer concentrate on reading and watched too many "wrong" movies, especially "Go Now," mistakenly recommended as a comedy but actually showing a tragic life-story of multiple sclerosis. Furthermore, it ended with an extra commercial with a young mother who cannot pick up her crying baby from the floor. She's had it. *Everybody can get it, you can get it, so please contribute to the Canadian MS Society.* The pains grew but I denied the thought of the depression because a depression could not make me feel so bad.