

THE GIANT WHO GOES WITH ME WHEREVER I GO: OF PANIC  
AND ITS PAINS, WITH A POSTSCRIPT ON  
PSYCHOPHARMACOLOGY

Michael Blumenthal\*

. . . the powerful  
are always lied to since the weak are always  
driven by panic.

—Louise Gluck, “Matins”

She [Elizabeth Bishop] is, of course, deeply aware that ever so often the world is bound to shake, and not only with the thunder of waves, but also with the thunder of war or earthquake or the merciless death of a parent or the untimely and guilt-inducing suicide of a beloved friend, In such circumstances, panic is a natural enough reaction, a reflex impulse to escape from the scene altogether. And yet since one cannot escape one’s times or one’s destiny, such panic has to be controlled, and to control it is to set limits, to map a defined space within which one will operate.

—Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*

*Santa Clara, California, May, 2001.* “My giant goes with me wherever I go . . . “ Emerson writes in his famous essay, “Self-Reliance,” and mine—my panic—has been with me virtually all my life, my most loyal friend and companion. It has, of course—as does all too much in a man’s (and, perhaps, a woman’s) life—probably to do with my mother:

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay was written in Marseille, France during the winter of 2002. The condition it describes, albeit gratefully now behind me, is one that afflicts, or has afflicted, many of those I know, my closest friends among them. I no longer suffer the affliction, but my empathy for those who endure it, and my desire to document the affliction, serve as reason to now publish the essay.

my absent mother, my ailing mother, my dying mother, my dead and unsuccessfully mourned mother.

When she tried, already dying, to drop me off at elementary school, I would cling, in a state of utter bereavement, to her dress until, finally, the principal was summoned to separate us and drag me away. And, in that scene, a cameo of my life to come: a man unable to separate, and, therefore, hardly able to live. A man unable to buy a round-trip ticket to anywhere, given the likelihood that he would be unable to endure to the return date. A man whose wound—if, indeed, like Philoctetes, it has been a part of his strength—has also been his curse, and sometimes, even, his undoing. And is still—even at the age of fifty-two and father to an eleven-year-old boy himself—his curse now.

My spirit sags, for it tires of this perpetually re-enacted drama: the drama of unsuccessful separation, the grief of failed mourning. A man whose every capacity, whose every opportunity (and there have been many) has been nipped in the bud by a childhood pain he could neither control, nor—in the intervening 40-plus years—has been able to master.

I have glimpsed, so often, the potential peace that lies on the other side of this pain. I have known it—alas, in moments only . . . but I have known it. “Because there’s nothing as composing as composing,” I remember a writer I once knew inscribing a book to a friend. And I, too, have known these moments of composure—in writing a poem; in making love to a woman; in feeling a sense of surrender to the beauty, and divine power, of nature; in swimming or skiing down a mountain; in being at one with body, water, wind, sun, and snow.

And this is the greatest cost of panic and anxiety: the loss of one’s appreciation—and appetite—for the beauty, the wonder, the humor, the strangeness of the world, when one is in its grip. The mania of wanting only one thing: for the anxiety, and its accompanying panic, to be stilled. “*Love calls us to the things of this world,*” St. Augustine, reinterpreted by the poet Richard Wilbur, informs us. And this, above all, is the tragedy of panic: that it calls us *away* from those things, that it informs all our choices with the lowest common denominator of concerns: our own fragile and deeply jeopardized sense of well-being.

Such a wonderful state, that peace of equanimity, that composure of being composed. *But why has it so rarely been mine?* And where, I wonder, is the line between self-knowledge and self-pity—between understanding and exploiting one’s own ambiguous fate—crossed?

And yet what is wisdom, if it is not a condition attained by achieving a certain distance from oneself? And what is panic, if it is not the *inability* to attain that distance? Panic-stricken, I am mired in a

selfhood of the most dubious kind: a selfhood that fears for its very survival. I am small, endangered, desiring only one, life-constricting thing: safety. In a state of calm, I feel adventuresome, open to the universe, its possibilities, its potential surprises. I am, as Whitman put it, *large*: I contain multitudes.

“Time present time past and time future,” T.S. Eliot writes in *The Four Quartets*, “are all contained in time present.” Panic, however, destroys any such potential wisdom: Time past is annihilated in a haze of anxiety; time present is a cauldron of dread and pain; time future is a bottomless pit just a half step in any direction beyond time present. Or let me put it metaphorically: You have returned home to find your house ablaze. All your previous concerns are reduced to one: *to put out the fire*. But, this time, what is being consumed in the flames is not merely a house: it is your very soul.

There have been all too many such conflagrations in my life:

*Bali, January, 1982*: I am staying in the village of Peliatan, near Ubud, where I have been living with a family of Balinese dancers and musicians. I have a month’s round-trip ticket from Washington, with just four days to go before my return flight. Then it happens: Contemplating a woman I had met just before leaving Washington, who I am anxious (as opposed to eager) to see again, contemplating my perpetually ill parents, contemplating my own, ever-jeopardized sense of self, I am seized by a sense of panic: I *must* get home. I must get home *now*.

Externally, there is no urgency whatsoever about this: Nothing particular awaits me, no one is waiting who cannot endure four more days of doing so. Yet nothing “out there” is the point: the point is entirely “*in here*”—it is in my perpetually endangered-feeling sense of self. And now, caught in this state of anxiety and panic; there is no other recourse: the self wants something that will pass, even temporarily, as safety, something that will pass for home. Money be damned—and at the additional cost of more than \$1,000—I exchange my return ticket for one the next day. I go “home,” where, the next day, some new anxiety will surely get the better of me again . . . and does.

*Cambridge, Massachusetts, July, 1983*: I am married, but my brand-new marriage—entered into in anxiety, endured in anxiety, about to end in anxiety—is already in trouble: My wife has stayed behind in Washington, while I’ve gone on to begin my new job in Cambridge, trying to “figure it out.” She has a summer internship at the Library of Congress, and one night, rather late, I call her at her D.C. apartment, only to find she’s not in. Then it begins, the panic and the sense of endangerment: She is out with someone else. She is *sleeping* with someone else. I am about to be abandoned once again.

Once the panic sets in, there is no stopping it, for the results of panic, as its dictionary definition suggests, are “groundless, pandemic, contagious, or extravagant efforts to secure safety” or, if not safety, at least relief. At about two in the morning, I take the extraordinary step of calling the boyfriend of an ex-girlfriend of mine (one I unceremoniously dumped), who lives in the same building, waking him up and asking him to *please* go check up on my wife, as I am “worried” about her. (It is, of course, only *myself* I am worried about: Panic is *always*, in its truest sense, panic about the self.) My wife, it turns out, has—miraculously enough—*not* been sleeping out . . . she has merely unplugged the phone to discourage crank calls she has been getting of late. When, finally, she calls me at 3:00 A.M., my panic, momentarily, subsides: I am safe, at least for now.

*An airplane, any airplane, headed anywhere.* The stewards and stewardesses begin serving the meal, rolling their cart to the front of the aisle. I am, say, seated in seat #18E, about midway down the length of the plane. I’m a bit hungry, but nothing terribly serious. But hunger isn’t the point: *panic* is. Anxiously, I begin craning my neck, wondering *when*, finally, they are going to get to me. Will they *ever* get to me? I begin to worry, then to panic. Will there *ever* be enough to nourish me in this, my perpetually jeopardized inner state? Will I ever genuinely be *fed*?

Panic, when it strikes, goes deep, resonates far. Our panicked hero may have wanted to divorce his wife from the very moment of their marriage, but—besieged by panic—there is nothing on this earth he more desperately wants than to stay married. (He wants it far more desperately, in fact, than does the man who is deeply, but calmly, in love.) Indentured for twenty years to a job he hates, if a panic should overtake him on the day he finally has the courage to quit, he will—with a feeling of relief bordering on salvation itself—gladly sign on for another fifty years . . . till death, or the end of his panic, does him part. (Worse yet, besieged by panic, he may well try to flee the very wife he loves, the very job he has always wanted, and adores.)

But it is calm one desires—peace, the ability to focus on one’s more interesting thoughts, and on the things of this world, to dream interesting dreams. So, what, then, is this panic *about*? What is it that feels so jeopardized in its wake? What is the panic-stricken person *really* worried about?

I’ll tell you what he is worried about: He is worried about *his very being*. He is worried about nothing less than *his entire existence*. In a state of panic, he feels jeopardized to his very core, he loses all his volition as a free agent. He is a one-dimensional man, and his one mission is relief from pain, relief from the panic that is his temporary

hell. And, for the panic to end, there is nothing—I repeat, *nothing*—he won't do, no price he won't pay, no friend he won't betray, no place he won't go, no plans he won't change.

And what of my own dubious fate? From where, I wonder, does my own panic derive? Here's one possible narrative:

At the age of eight days, a certain infant was taken—for reasons he has forever speculated on, and elsewhere attempted to recount—from the bosom of his biological mother, and adopted by his biological aunt and uncle, the former of whom had just undergone a radical mastectomy. He doesn't (now, as a fifty-something year old man) remember the event, at least, he doesn't consciously "remember" it. But he can imagine what that eight-day-old child—taken from the milk-producing, warm breast of his natural mother and given to a woman who not only could produce no milk, but who had only one breast at which to console him—might have felt: *He might have felt panic . . . a terrible panic, an inconsolable panic, a panic which—had he not been a helpless infant—he would have given anything on this earth to quell.*

That boy was me—as is, now, that man . . . panic-stricken still. And what will cure that panic, what will bring relief? In all likelihood, *nothing*. For W.H. Auden was probably right, in that

The one unnecessary grief  
Is the vain craving for relief,  
When to the suffering we could bear  
We add intolerable fear . . .

For the panic-stricken one, and all who share his unenviable fate, is left merely patrolling

The landscape of his will and need  
Where he is sovereign indeed,  
The state created by his acts  
Where he patrols the forest tracts  
Planted in childhood, farms the belt  
Of doings memorised and felt,  
And even if he find it hell  
May neither leave it nor rebel

— W.H. Auden, "New Year's Letter, (1940)"

Beyond the temporary balm, perhaps, of a Valium or a Paxil, the solace our panic-stricken hero seeks is one that—as Wallace Stevens

posited in “Sunday Morning”—“can come / Only in silent shadows and in dreams.”

For my brothers and sisters in this suffering, I would suggest, there remains a faint sliver of hope: that the same dark gods who tore us from that living breast will provide us with something equally warm—something safe—to rest our weary heads against; that somewhere, on the other side of panic, lies the solace of a soul, a hand, a comfort that can never be taken away, a heart not entirely beyond repair.

*Marseille, September, 2002.* The view from the third floor bedroom window of my apartment in Marseille is not, despite its pastel hues, a particularly inspiring one. Just across the series of stone patios on which I would die were I to fall—or jump—is a rather dilapidated, low-income building, inhabited mostly by African immigrants, whose laundry hangs colorfully in the mistral-inspired fall breeze to dry. The courtyards below are pocked by the duff and detritus of floating garbage and discarded clothing. Only the slab of usually blue sky between the two buildings suggests a ray of optimistic hope, a world worth looking upwards into.

The fuel that propelled me here to Marseille was not gasoline—it was panic. The attack began when I arrived at the apartment I had rented, sight unseen, in Paris in August of 2001, only to find, *not* the consoling possibility of a new home, but a complete disaster—dilapidated plastic furniture in every nook and cranny, a labyrinth-like maze of tiny, uninhabitable rooms, random electrical wires running in every direction, leaky antiquated plumbing, windows that seemed to bang open and shut randomly, as in a scene from *The Shining*.

After two days of weeping and panic-stricken phone calls to any and everyone I thought might be able to console me, I woke on the morning of the third day, threw my belongings into the trunk of my car, and headed in a beeline Southeast towards Marseille and the consoling presence of my wife and son. Across the street from them, with the generous, and ever-forgiving help of my wife, I found another apartment.

Still shaken by the results of yet another panic-fueled “decision,” I would lean out my bedroom window to open and close the shutters those first few mornings and evenings, debating as to whether my “vain craving for relief” might not best be satisfied simply by leaning a bit further and allowing my “too too solid flesh” not to melt, but simply to achieve its final resting place, and an infinitely longed-for tranquility, against the beckoning stone below. Forty-odd years of panic, it seemed to me, had been more than enough. I wanted relief—at any price, and by any means. But what lay below, for some reason—be it lack of

courage, or simply a reservoir of still-enduring hope—did not quite seem the solution I so desperately desired.

\* \* \* \*

I had always resisted—perhaps out of a naïve, somewhat Emersonian, faith in “nature’s way,” perhaps out of a certain Puritan and Freudian conviction that both the ailment, and its potential cure, were derived from *within*—the use of anti-depressants as a way out of my misery. I had, all my life, been notoriously sensitive to “chemical” intrusions of all kinds—caffeine, alcohol, hallucinogenics, even a uninhaled, Clintonesque toke of marijuana. A single glass of red wine—how utterly unfashionable for one living in France!— is still enough to give me a resounding headache and render my entire night sleepless.

The two previous stabs I had made at relief through psychopharmaceuticals—a brief flirtation with Prozac in Budapest, and two weeks under the influence of another SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) called Celexa in Texas—had both left me with a kind of “buzzy” feeling in my brain, and feeling rather “outside” my normal self. Many of my closest friends’ encomiums notwithstanding, I remained thoroughly unconvinced of the merits of better living through chemistry.

And yet, somehow, I had now reached the limit of the suffering I could—or, at least, wanted to—bear. On the recommendation of Marseille’s only English-speaking psychoanalyst, I made an appointment to see Dr. Sylvie Perez, a psychiatrist and psychopharmacologist at Marseille’s military hospital in the 14th District. Dr. Perez, a sympathetic and attentive listener, indulged my rather inept French description of my accumulated woes and travails, along with my hesitancy about drugs, smiling patiently and shaking her head. “There is something that I think might work for you,” she finally said, “and which I have prescribed for other patients with panic and anxiety problems, with quite a bit of success.”

“*Je suis prêt à essayer tout ce que vous me suggererez,*” I replied in broken French . . . “I’ll try anything you suggest.”

“*Deroxat, 20 mg.*,” the kindly doctor wrote on her white prescription pad, tearing off the sheet and handing it to me. “Let’s try this for four weeks or so, and see how you feel.”

\* \* \* \*

The main therapeutic ingredient in the drug commonly known in France as Deroxat is paroxetine, a potent and selective inhibitor of the neuronal re-uptake of serotonin that belongs to the group of

psychopharmaceuticals commonly known as SSRIs, which includes Prozac, Paxil, Celexa, Zoloft, and Luvox. Since it was first reviewed as an antidepressant in 1991, Deroxat (paroxetine) has been studied in several disorders with a presumed serotonergic component, including obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and—blessedly—panic. In short term clinical trials with patients suffering from OCD or panic, paroxetine was shown to be significantly more effective than a placebo, as has also been the case with depression.

In my own case, within several days of first taking Deroxat, I felt a small, but most welcome, decrease in the level of my anxiety, the onset of a stage almost approaching calm. Aside from that, I felt no different from my “former” self—still thinking rather obsessively about sex (“We think obsessively about sex,” my old friend, the poet Howard Nemerov, memorably remarked, “except during the act, when the mind tends to wander.”), still dwelling somewhat on the insecurities of my present and future, still trying, as best I could, to honorably fulfill my writerly vocation. But the bottom line is this: *I felt calmer*. And if poetry, as Wallace Stevens suggested, is “the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice,” this small but profound alteration in my daily condition—*I felt calmer*—more than sufficed.

Three months later, and I feel calmer still. Not perfectly, mind you (and I am aware that the state I would have achieved by jumping from my third-story window is the only condition of undeniable human perfection), but better . . . much better. Which, for one who has spent his life more or less ricocheting between states of anxiety and panic, is more than enough to make him descend to his knees before whatever god—spiritual or chemical—there may be. For it occurs to me that this, too—this “artificial” intrusion into the normal workings of my body and psyche—this, too, may be God’s work, after all.

“You must change your life,” writes Rilke, and I—albeit with a bit of “outside” help—finally changed mine. It may, indeed, be “better living through chemistry,” but the bottom line is that that’s *exactly* what it is: Better living.

Now, when I rise in the morning and gaze out my bedroom window, it is not the stones below, and the potentially premature tragedy they could make of my life, I look upon, but the potentially redeeming, and forward-looking, patch of Provençal blue above. Less eager now are the ghosts and demons of a childhood I have long struggled with, but have never quite been able to conquer. Rather than dwell upon those depressingly beautiful lines from Auden’s “New Year’s Letter,” it is now these lines from W.B. Yeats’ “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” I tend to recall:

I am content to follow to its source  
Every event in action or in thought;  
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!  
When such as I cast out remorse  
So great a sweetness flows into the breast  
We must laugh and we must sing,  
We are blest by everything,  
Everything we look upon is blest.

Thanks to the small, oval-shaped white pill I swallow every night, I, too, am now able to “cast out remorse” and feel, once more, “blest by everything.” And when I walk out at night beneath the Provençal sky, the only thing that trembles, gratefully, are the stars.