

UNTITLED

Sheldon Stump, award winner

“ . . . In nameless, shapeless God found I my rest,
Though for my solace I built God a breast.”

Anna Wickham
(1884-1947)

On the days that I am blue, navy blue, so dark, I worry
that I might not be able to stop myself from tearing apart
a cardboard crate, stolen from my neighbor's trash heap,
upon which I scrawl some demented message and parade around
embarrassing those who know me, those who see me, those
who drive by looking straight ahead as though there were no
be-crazed woman protesting

protesting what?

the mother after mother after mother (who got me here) who,
baffled beyond words, took care, confused, took the advice,
followed the prescription, took death, at last, took death.
I read history and weep.

I read about Charlotte Perkins Gilman, about Emma Goldman,
about Kate Chopin, about Anna Wickham, about Emma Lazarus
who, in her poem, “The New Colossus,” wrote the words that
ended up at the Statue of Liberty's feet

Why is Liberty a woman to be defiled by wars, by men's need
to control and capture and grow fat and diseased?

“ . . . Your huddled masses yearning to breath free . . . ”
right there in her own country, such subtle cruelty to
women who

just wanted a voice

just wanted something more

than to be silenced

to be pinched

to be coy

to be mother, wife, keeper of all that is holy and pure

A blue day and I witness casualties of the same sorts that
bespatter history books (well, what they call *women's*
history books—men's history always called, just: history.)
Throughout the 1800's, opiated tonics efficiently rendered
the shrillest of the shrill, shrill no more. Quiet—what
did they think? Why wasn't I told earlier? How can
neurasthenia and nervous prostration be the women's
diseases of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when
women were just being how they were *forced* to be? Didn't
anyone notice and scream out? And, *just now being heard*.

Historians ignoring shrillness stifled voice.

It is a self-evident truth that people see to it that
things of *value* stick around, are preserved. Why wasn't I
told earlier?

1985 and a friend writes in a letter after two years of
marriage and one daughter: We are seeing a marriage
counselor. I can't hack this bull anymore. I don't want to
feel like this, you know?

1985 and a different friend in a letter after eleven years of marriage and two sons: The medication I'm on has made all the difference in the world. My lows aren't as low and my highs aren't as high. In fact, I just got my period and *wasn't*, repeat *wasn't*, CRAZY! Yikes—Wooooo! Wowsy Bowsy! Life just doesn't seem as difficult.

Journal entry 1981: I fear that John and I may not be able to pull off this joint custody arrangement. I often feel that my motives for wanting to share my son's upbringing with his father may be selfish. My family met with me last Sunday and my sister chewed me out for my "negligence" in considering "giving up" my child. Both my father and sister said, "He's best with his mother. He needs you. You are more important than his father." I don't believe that I have an inborn corner on the parenting market.

"Did the conflicting patterns imposed on women in the 1800's (and still today)—'belle of the ball' versus housewife and producer of children—contribute to, or indeed even account for the destruction of her marriage?"¹

"What does he look like?"

"He's a brunette."

"And her [Gilman's] fears that marriage might incapacitate her for her 'work in the world' would prove to be true, for her as for most women in society."²

On her marriage: ". . . something was going wrong from the first." As she describes it, "A sort of gray fog drifted across my mind, a cloud that grew and darkened . . . Absolute incapacity. Absolute misery."³

Be-crazed.

Be-saddened.

Betrayed.

NOTES

1 Elaine R. Hedges, Afterword, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1973), p. 42.

2 Ibid., p. 45.

3 Charlotte Perkins Gilman as quoted in Elaine R. Hedges, Afterword, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1973), p. 45-46.