



Jonathan Chou //

MULLEN HOSPITAL		Page 1	
No.	8847	Name	[REDACTED]
Admitted,	Sept. 30, 1901.	IS	
Locality,	Hyde Park, Mass.	Residence,	Boston, Mass.
Names and Address of Parents, [REDACTED]			
Civil condition,	Married	Occupation,	Librarian
Age,	35	Height,	
Weight,		Complexion,	
Predisposing Causes: Constitutionally eccentric?			
Heredit.,			
Previous diseases or injuries, Lead poisoning; crops of carbuncles.			
Habits, Good			
Education, etc., Harvard College			
Exciting Causes: Overwork?			
How admitted,	Committed	No. of admissions to this hospital,	First
Former case numbers with condition on discharge,			
Other hospitals, None			
No. of attack,	First	Duration, 2 years	Whole duration of insanity, 2 years
Diagnosis on admission, Fixed Ideas.			
Diagnosis on discharge, " " Fixed ideas.			
Discharged,	Jan. 14, 1902	IS	Condition, Improved.
Readmitted,		IS	No.
Cause of death,			
Autopsy,			
Physicians' certificate, The patient said: He admitted that he is constantly afraid that he will be contaminated by dirt, and that he becomes excited about it, that he requires his wife to wash her hands after touching many things,			

## His Wife (No. 8847)

History from wife.

The water came in through painted rain pipes. It was not paint but a daub of lard on his wife's dress. She didn't remove it after all.<sup>1</sup> Things didn't go smoothly. Furniture had to be wiped off. Elix. Iron Phos. Quin. & Strych. Smash the puppies. Played golf in the forenoon.

He insisted she had touched his toast with her fork. He saw a dob [sic] of paint on it. After his nightly massage he would take a hot water bath, never using soap. He is said to have insisted on going out on the hall in his bed-clothes, and struck his wife quite violently.<sup>2</sup> No scars on body. The keys, penknives, and other trinkets had to be put into boiling water. The right hand was never used.

A valid argument would have as much effect as water on a duck's back.<sup>3</sup> He has in this way used a number of towels per day. He does not take any tea, coffee, or milk at any time, only water. She had made him promise on the day following the marriage never to put her in a hospital. No normal man would lean against a pole marked "Paint."

They had lain in a dirty railroad station in Maine. The heads were dirty and as these heads would reach to about the face level he had had them carried away from the body. His excitement was of that range which might be associated with strong indignation. He objected strenuously.

It was not the idea of paint, but the actual smell of it that nauseated him. The negroes, the unclean streets, etc. all seemed to upset him very much. If he had money he would make us cringe.<sup>4</sup>

“

One Sunday an ice cream freezer was brought in. He had really been entrapped into a marriage with her. Cool and collected, perfectly clear, alert and wary. This was true evasion rather than any lack of insight. His wife was deliberately careless in packing his grip for the trip out here. He developed a big carbuncle on the wrist and with it severe chills and fever. On that very morning he had called attention to some dirt on her hands.

The first intimation of this trouble was his falling across the bed one night. He slept poorly and told his wife that wall-paper designs kept constantly coming into his head. Whereas before he would have abused her he kept his mouth shut and objected in no way. He was first asked his reason for concealment at preceding talk. He admitted the drop of oil incident. He admitted the golf clubs. He admitted washing off the keys, etc. The toast incident.

It is stated that he gave up his position voluntarily. When asked how he was he replied, smooth. He should have milk when he didn't need it. A leaf falling on him from a tree caused him great anxiety. When she left his eyes were red as if he had been crying. He is said to have had some difficulty in drying the paint on the floor.

There is no family in the U.S. where there is more talk on insanity than in that family. How trying she and her people are. He would shy out like a horse away from them. It is stated that from that time his nails have never grown far beyond the quick. Why not then is it not a matter of training?

“

That's just the point. The person who realizes the malady realizes the control between will and impulse. I am not going to have you assume, nor will I admit, that I have ideas. I admit simply that I have certain habits in preference to others. It was all under my will even then. You will not report my language. I will not repeat it if you never heard it.

It is only a matter of form. Every sense became sensitive. The laundry had to be handled at the corners very carefully.

<sup>1</sup> Hysterical insanity. Nervously broken. Run down (Dr. Little).

<sup>2</sup> It might be mentioned that his wife is a "chump" (Dr. Hoch).

<sup>3</sup> His attitude of defense was present before he came here, possibly through a lack of tact in his wife in handling him (Dr. Cowles).

<sup>4</sup> I think his domestic difficulties are of some importance. I am going to see Dr. Cowles about it (Dr. Cooley).

—

*Author's Note: "His Wife (No. 8847)" is an original prose poem written using found sentences taken from the medical record of a patient who was committed to McLean Hospital in 1901 with a diagnosis of "Fixed Ideas." Reading through the typed and handwritten notes left behind by the patient's doctors and nurses, I was struck by the portrayal of the patient's wife, who appears throughout the record but whose voice and version of events are all but absent. Where she does appear, she is a victim, either being abused by the patient or maligned by his doctors for her incompetence in managing his behavior at home. She is never quoted directly. Not even her name is recorded. With each reading, I became more acutely aware of her absence, haunted by the empty space of her silence. Who was "his wife"? What might she have said, using what syntax, which words—what might her language have sounded like—if her silence could speak? If we, living today, could hear her language, what impact would it have on us?*

*"His Wife (No. 8847)" is my attempt not to speak on her behalf, the subaltern's, but to use the potentialities of prose poetry to perform what literary scholar and cultural historian Saidiya Hartman calls a "critical fabulation" (11):*

*By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis "what happened when" and by exploiting the "transparency of sources" as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe "the resistance of the object," if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutter and oaths and cries of the commodity. (11)*

*In writing "His Wife (No. 8847)," I wanted to ask the questions: Is it possible by "disordering" (9) the syntax of the medical record to bring to the surface of discourse "the grammar of violence" (4) and the "fictions of history"? Can her absence be written—not filled in, but the fleeting presence of a beyond felt? To what extent can the experience of ambiguity, dissonance, and uncertainty (as to what is being said, who is speaking, and "what happened when") be clarifying in its own way and service the writing of a counter-history (where "history" refers to both the medical history as well as the medical record as historical archive)? Finally, in relation to her, who am "I," from what position(s) do I write, and why?*

*Perhaps what we do hear behind her silence is the sad irony that doctors and nurses endeavoring to help one person's life made disposable another's. What do we learn from retelling this history of violence? As readers and writers? As healthcare providers? Hartman writes,*

*For me, narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence. As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a free state, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing. (4)*

*I am implicated by her absence. If on the surface “His Wife (No. 8847)” is about two forms of historical violence against women, “social and corporeal” (12), as “a history of the present,” it is also about those lives that are made disposable today by the institutions and discourses of medicine. As a poet and a physician, what is my ethical responsibility to those whom I speak for, whose voices I transmit onto the page and thereby into the future?*

#### Works Cited

Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1-14.

Medical Record No. 8847. Sept. 1901-Jan. 1902. McLean Hospital.

Cover image: “Splattered white paint 2.” Wikimedia Commons.