*Setting the Wire: A Memoir of Postpartum Psychosis*, by Sarah C. Townsend rev. by Emma Garcia

The Lettered Streets Press

Sarah C. Townsend is an essayist and clinical psychologist debuting her experience as a new mother suffering with mental illness in her first book *Setting the Wire*. Townsend’s book focuses on the dissociation of herself from her body slowly before and after the birth of her new baby, Sophie. Townsend elegantly gives us close range details about her childhood and her relationship with her father, who also had a mental illness. The branches of past and present come together and in the end and we get to see how she came to the life she is living now in her new redefined future. She begins her book by telling us what we already know and what we expect at the end, that she is a mother who loves her daughter, but is battling with postpartum psychosis. She shows us through action verbs and vivid imagery, and even though she is mentally ill, it doesn’t make her any less of a mother. She writes:

“I’ll never leave you. I’ll never leave you. I’ll never leave you. I repeat these

words with a rhythm of a birth contraction, like the ocean breaking along the shore.

Sophie suckles late into the night until her lips slide open and the weight of her body

gives way to sleep. But the repetition and reasurances can’t stave off my departure.

Altered brain chemistry pushes me outside of myself like a rip tide even as I fight to

come closer to shore. I can’t sleep. I’m leaving.”

She aches for her child, to provide and to protect her baby from delusional harm, while making trips to see a psychiatrist, doctor, and the mental ward. Townsend’s wandering mind always comes back to Sophie. In a way, Townsend was more of a mother to her child than any woman out there. Her entire book is heavily built upon its tone of need, sorrow, and nostalgia. It brings about the humanness that is still present despite the mental illness and Townsend brings about this reality in her raw and moving book.

With a constant feeling of inadequacy, she writes about “[her] badness” and her feeling that “there is no mother” in her because whoever this person is, is an animal and not a mother with a child. She bluntly explains her animal like qualities of being in the mental ward and doesn’t shy away from the disturbing details:

“They aim the water from two directions and it runs down my back and torso and

along my groin and pelvis. *She hasn’t showered since she got here*, one says to the other.

My hands press against the jets of water and ripple against the pressure. I emit deep

involuntary wails. I growl. One nurse tilts my head back and the other sends water

cascading through my matted hair. And then I’m not longer there. I move into the not

remembering, the silence, the space, the inarticulable.”

Townsend enlightens us with these horrifyingly intriguing details that are too taboo by society to talk about but that doesn’t scare her. Townsend tethers us to the present time of her looking back at these memories showing us that she still battles with mental illness but has a better way of coping with it. She gives us raw images of her wishing for a different outcome, of not wanting to have lived that life, of anguish, desperation, and regret. Townsend moves us with her wishes tethering us emotionally as we overlook the blessing we have of sanity.

Townsend distinguishes the tone of sanity with the facts and feeling of insanity. She compares her situation with Philippe Petit walk across the World Trade Center (WTC) in his documentary *Man on Wire*. Petit performed a highwire stunt in 1974 on top of the WTC, surprising everyone in his daredevil act. He even lay down on the wire and smiled but never fell. Townsend sees herself as Petit walking across the fine line from insanity to sanity. She craves to be normal again, but on her walk across the tightrope she falls metaphorically deeper into this dark pit. This moment is touching: as she flawlessly compares *Man on Wire* to her own *Setting the Wire*.

Some extended metaphors are difficult to maintain and forgotten as the story moves on, but not with Townsend. She silently carries this wire with her throughout her life from her childhood till now and is finally ready to set it and walk across. This implicit feeling creates a strong central tone of anticipation encouraging readers to read on until the end to see how she makes her own daredevil walk from the brink of insanity to sanity.

Readers should pick up Townsend’s book and not set it down until it is finished. She will captivate and move the reader's senses making them feel a part of her body and mind. The pain, agony, and triumph will encourage readers that anything is possible and will not be influenced completely until this book is read from end to end.