Veritas & Vanitas
A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

The Ohio State University at Marion
2002
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life With Paul</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurie Wise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakespeare It Ain’t</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonas Shamel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Static Free AM in an FM World</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shellie Shirk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ll Only Come Here Seeking Peace</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn M. Young</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceans of Thought</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany Hussey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Snow Is Falling Faintly through the Universe</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron Cook</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brand New Ending</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paul and I met just as the party was ending. He was charismatic, blond haired, self assured, bedecked in necklaces and bracelets, with an earlobe full of diamond studs. “I want Demi Moore’s part in Ghost, so I can have Patrick Swayze creep up behind me while I’m makin’ pots in the middle of the night,” he quipped as he entered the room.

“You mean smoking pot in the middle of the night, don’t ya,” I shot back. He had a quick wit, and laughter tumbled out of him in response to my barbed sense of humor. We sparred back and forth about life in small town Marion, President George Bush and the Gulf War, the rainforest, stretch pants, big hair, and Bette Midler. Someone put a Taylor Dayne cassette on - “Love will lead you baaa ack to me,” he shrieked.

“Do not quit your day job,” I warned.
“Don’t worry. As much as the music and theater world want me, I could never give up crankin’ out heads.”
“I’ll pass on that one.”

All the really good hairstylists were dead or dying, we both agreed. I noticed that Paul had a rash across his face and that slightly haunted look to his eyes that I had come to know intimately since caring for patients with AIDS at a Cleveland hospital from where I had recently relocated. This observation had little effect on me at the time; I was having too much fun living in the moment.

I don’t think you could find two people from more disparate backgrounds. Paul grew up on the west side of Marion in a dilapidated, gray shingled house. He knew little
of his father and had a rather tumultuous relationship with his stepfather. As a child he was rather fay in appearance, and it was his grandmother who remarked when he was only two, “That boy’s gonna be gay.” This also seemed to be the consensus of Paul’s classmates, who tormented and taunted him from grade school to his junior year in high school, at which time the physical abuse became so intolerable that he dropped out and ran off to Columbus to find shelter in anonymity.

I grew up in the middle class neighborhood of Euclid; one of two children born to an upper class Bostonian (my mother) and a tool and die maker (my father). I led a rather sheltered, albeit open minded life, which revolved around school, the YWCA, Girl Scouts, and church. The only time I ever got into trouble was when my girlfriend and I took all of the toilet paper out of the girl’s restroom at Upson Elementary School. We thought this was hilarious, the principal did not, my mother did, but pretended not to. Nevertheless, my formative years were light years away from Paul’s.

I saw Paul again three months later. Our friend Jeff, held a yearly Christmas Eve open house, at which time he decorated his home to the hilt and invited over his closest friends and family for a sumptuous feast; Jeff was a consummate cook. Paul and I curled up on a couch in the rec room and picked up our friendship where we left off.

“Oh, I was wild child, Mona.” Paul always called me Mona when he was talking about his “escapades.” I never figured out why. Every time I asked, he just grinned, and the gleam in his eye spoke of mischief. “The first four months after I left home, I lived in the Greyhound bus station, and kept all my worldly goods in a locker there. I was used to being a loner and I was what you call street smart, so I learned the ropes quickly.” As he went on with his “tales of the city,” he nestled further into the couch while
letting out a weary sigh, a look of pleasure and sadness in his eyes.

"I'll never forget the first time I wandered into a gay bar. It took me weeks to get up the courage, but Mona, once I was there, I knew I had found home. Not only could I let it all hang out, but people liked me. I was the popular one, you know." Paul laughed, pleased with himself.

"You couldn't have been more than sixteen!"
"I was sixteen," he grinned.
"How the hell did you get into bars if you were only sixteen?"

"The owner liked me, you know, in 'that way,' he whispered with a limp wrist gesture.

It was hard for me to imagine the life he spoke of, but as he sat there with that faraway look in his eyes, I was sad for the child in him that was ridiculed, taunted and chased by hatred to a bus station in a city of shallow people that accepted him only to prey on him. We looked at one another in that moment of reflection. "I wish I had stayed in school," he said wistfully. "But I just couldn't stand the abuse. I'd like to finish high school. You could help me Mona, you are so damn smart," he drawled as he tugged at a piece of my hair. "I'll bet you're a great nurse." His eyes seemed focused on a point in the future, and I thought he might say more. Instead, he took a long, languid drag on his cigarette and snuggled closer. I think Paul looked to me for a way out of a life without much substance. I took his hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. How many hands have I reached for over the years? My mother's, my father's, my husband's, the soft tiny hands of my children, frail, cold hands of the elderly I have cared for, hands that tremble with fear, hands that lose their grasp as the life drains out of them and into my soul. I think it is my lot in life to reach for hands; Paul knew that.
That spring the war in the Gulf escalated. Paul was fighting a war of his own. I was working the 3–11 shift at the local hospital one night when I received a phone call from him. He seemed depressed and had a lot of questions about his disease and the medications he took. He was looking for someone to talk to about the stark reality of living with AIDS. Most of his friends wanted to skim the surface of his life with AIDS and offer him support in the form of hope for a cure or miracle, but they never, never said the “D” word in front of him. Paul was at the point where he needed to talk about death and his feelings of fear.

“I know I might not make it out of this alive, and I need to talk about that, but everyone stops me and says I shouldn’t give up hope, that a cure will be found. I hope they’re right, but I need to talk about the possibility of that cure not reaching me in time.”

“I can understand that,” I told him.

“You’re a nurse, you’re used to dealing with death. I feel like I can talk to you without worrying about making you nervous or causing you pain.”

I had become fond of Paul and hoped he was right. The cold, gray winter months since Christmas had taken their toll on Paul emotionally as well as physically. I thought he needed a focus, a goal. People need a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and since quitting his job as a hairstylist, Paul had become bored and depressed. I wondered if Paul would like to volunteer with me at the Columbus AIDS Task Force. Since moving to Marion, I had become a speaker for the task force, an agency that educates the public about AIDS, as well as offering persons living with AIDS, financial aid and support groups. I thought Paul could speak about what it’s like to live with AIDS. I would present the facts and clinical portion of the presentation, and he could round it out with his own testimony.
Getting Paul involved in the Columbus AIDS Task Force was not going to be easy. By June of 1991, Paul had taken to his bed awaiting his impending death. Ravaged by continuous diarrhea and fatigue, he had given up and was awaiting death. Having seen many patients close to death or “coming into the homestretch” as we sometimes refer to it, I did not feel that Paul was that “close.” Instead, I felt he was suffering from some of the horrible side effects of this disease, which could be controlled. He had become a victim of the depression and social stigma of AIDS.

It was on a beautiful sunny day in June that I went over to Paul’s apartment at the request of his companion Randy, who was worried about Paul’s withdrawal. I knocked on the screen door. No answer. I knocked several times before I heard a rather hearty “Go Fuck yourself.” There seemed to be an awful lot of energy behind that dying voice.

“It’s me,” I yelled back.

“Go away, leave me alone.”

“Well, that’s better,” I thought. It was at that point I realized I had something to work with. Being a nurse, I knew just what to do in a situation like this, based on years of education and training. I cut through the screen door with a pair of nail clippers, stepped across all the dirty paper plates, magazines, and clothes, and found my way back to the gloomy bedroom where with drapes shut tight against the sunshine, I found a rather smelly, disheveled, foul mouthed Paul.

After I patiently waited for the use of “Fuck” to die down, I made my professional assessment of Paul’s physical and emotional well being.

“You smell like shit, and what’s worse, your hair looks like shit. You’ve been trying to die for over a month now, and quite frankly, we’re all getting a little tired of it. So quit your whiny ass behavior and get up and take a
shower so we can go to lunch.”

“You’re fuckin crazy, woman. I can’t eat.”

“Ok, then you can watch me eat.” With that, I mustered up my best professional technique, whipped back the covers, and dragged him out onto the floor where he landed with a thud.

“All right, all right, I’m going,” he hissed. “Pushy bitch,” he muttered, giving me a sideways glance laced with the hint of a grin.

An hour later we were seated at a local restaurant, close to the apartment in case of a fecal emergency, sipping iced teas. We talked for hours. We talked of treatments he could pursue, and clinics he might attend, to ensure that everything was being done. We talked about not getting out of this alive, of wills, power of attorneys for health care, and no codes. Then I told him of my work with the Columbus AIDS Task Force, and how I needed someone, I needed him, to come with me to lecture to students, nurses, and factory workers about AIDS, how to protect oneself from the virus, what it’s like to live with AIDS, and how to deal with a relative or loved one with AIDS. I saw a faint glimmer of interest in his eyes, which he tried to suppress, but it was too late.

I drove a blue Ford Fairmont station wagon in those days, which Paul referred to as “The AIDSmobile.” That car took us all over the state of Ohio, as we lectured and attended conferences and health fairs representing the Columbus AIDS Task Force. The AIDSmobile traveled as far south as Cincinnati and as far north as Cleveland to educate the public about AIDS, compassion, and tolerance. When Paul spoke to audiences, he didn’t hold back. He bared his soul and took a beating for it, at times, from those who called him a fag while quoting scriptures.

“I used to be rather wild,” he would say, tossing his head. “You know, the party boy. But I’m here to tell you
there is a price to pay, and if I could prevent just one person from getting this disease, I would feel my life was not in vain. It’s better and safer to get to know someone before you have sex. I didn’t care if I knew someone or not. I was always looking through a haze of drugs and alcohol, so everyone looked good,” he said with a disillusioned giggle. “It’s too late for me, but through education we can save others, and spread the word, not the virus.” Paul spoke of his life, which as he put it, “revolves around my favorite fixture, the toilet.” And “I have to take so many pills, that I write the schedule down on an index card. Some days I can’t keep the pills down because I’m so nauseated. On those days I feel like the virus gets a point, and I lose two points.” Paul became stronger physically and this newfound purpose in his life gave him energy even as the virus silently destroyed his body.

I asked Paul what it was that worked in getting him back into life, and he told me it was when I said I needed him. He told me that when one is dealing with a terminal illness, what one wants more than anything is to climb back up to normalcy. He hated pity, those sad looks friends gave him, and the hatred in the eyes of strangers. He hated having to quit a job that defined him. He hated the shame of having to apply for welfare at the age of 36, when he had always prided himself on being self-sufficient. It was the idea that people needed him, that he still had something to offer to the world, that gave him the strength to re-enter it.

By November, Paul was feeling good about himself, having developed a more positive self image since lecturing. Unfortunately his disease was progressing and he was finding that even walking short distances caused him to be short of breath. Also, his sight was failing as a virus known as CMV had stolen much of his vision. He had episodes of confusion and had lost a tremendous amount of weight. His
face became gaunt and had a gray cast to it. He looked into the mirror and gasped, "How can you love a corpse like me?"

"I still see the Paul I met at a birthday party so many months ago."

He kissed me: "Liar. I don't know, Mona. I feel like I've turned a corner, and I'm goin' to meet my maker."

Neither Paul nor I were exactly religious zealots, as I hadn't been to church since I was sixteen and Paul had never attended. I believed in God, and we had conversed regularly since as far back as I could remember. As a child, my prayers were for the most part self centered – "Please, God, can I have a bike?" or "Oh, God, make him notice me!" As an adult, my prayers were less materialistic and more about others: "Please, God, don't let him/her suffer. Give me strength to deal with this," and the bargaining, "God, don't let this lump be cancer, and I promise I'll never swear again." Paul, on the other hand, spent most of his life wondering where God was.

He once told me, "I sure could have used a little divine intervention when the football jocks were holding me down beating the shit out of me."

As many people do when faced with death, he figured he better get his bases covered by acknowledging the presence of God. I do believe that Paul was genuinely searching for a sense of peace and the unconditional love that I promised him he would find if he explored his spiritual side. As usual, once Paul decided to do something, he had to do it right now. He had found an old Bible, started to read it, then one day announced he was going to get baptized. We called Pastor Chuck, a local minister who worked with the Marion AIDS Task Force, and whom Paul and I had both come to know and love for his warmth and genuine caring for all "God’s children." With his help, we arranged what Paul referred to as his "come to Jesus
meeting.” Paul was baptized on a Sunday in April of 1992, in his one and only “Sunday-go-to-meeting suit.” Paul, Randy and I, entered a church we had never set foot in before. A congregation of strangers loomed before us. I wondered what they were thinking. We must have been quite a strange trio: Paul gaunt and weak, leaning heavily on Randy and myself as we walked him to the first pew, short tempered and mumbling “What the hell are we doing, walking all the way to heaven?” The congregation stood for the opening hymn, followed by a blessedly short sermon. Pastor Chuck announced that Paul was there to be baptized, which must have pleased the congregation judging from the amens and hallelujahs that echoed throughout. He motioned us up to the baptismal font, where as Paul put it, “I got my head wet.” After the ceremony an elderly male parishioner who also suffered from near blindness, lovingly and tearfully presented Paul with a large print Bible. As Paul began to cry, they reached for one another across a chasm of societal differences and embraced.

After the service, the congregation came and welcomed Paul and offered him kind words and their love. I thought it sad and ironic that he finally found acceptance as he stood dying in a church vestibule.

“God damn, my ass hurts. What were those benches made out of, wood?”

“Jesus Christ, Paul, you can’t swear in church.”

“Now I can. I can get forgiven.”

“Don’t push your luck,” I advised.

Paul died in June of 1992, as he had wanted in his apartment with all his Marilyn memorabilia around him, in the arms of his lover, and with his friend by his side. His death, unlike his life, was calm and peaceful. I stoically bore the self-contained judgment of the squad who picked up his lifeless body, and the contempt in the eyes of all those Randy and I came into contact with during the next few
days. I held up during the funeral, a pillar of strength for family and friends to lean on. I was “the nurse.” I knew what I was getting into the day I saw him at a birthday party. I had years of experience and training in dealing with death and loss. I should be just fine. “But who takes care of the caretaker?” I wondered. The nurse gave way to a loving friend long ago. Now I was the grieving family.

After the funeral, after the get-together of friends and family, I went home and roamed aimlessly about, grief eating away at me until there was nothing left but emptiness. I wandered into my garden where my gaze rested upon the jaunty yellow head of a day lily waving in the breeze, reminding me of a blond haired boy, then I let my tears rain down upon the flowers, telling them of the pain of the loss of my friend, but in their wisdom, they already knew.
Although this may come as a shock to all seven of my faithful readers, there have been many loves in my life. I love those rat-tails that only kids named Cody wear, Internet porn, Hollywood Squares, and the WNBA. I also love farting in the shower to exploit all its acoustic capabilities. Of course I cannot forget the shear joy I get when listening to elderly couple’s conversations as they painstakingly decide to buy clear or colored plastic wrap. All of these are very dear to my heart; without them, I fail to exist. Rest assured that I have not lost my edge. I still devoutly worship and seek out human sacrifices for the almighty prince of darkness and unclean spirits, David Schwimmer. I still try to make at least one person cry per day. I still donate my old copies of Hustler to local elementary schools. And I still manufacture pipe bombs in my basement with tender, loving care. I am sharing this because I am about to embark on a new chapter in my life and I feel like boring everyone with the mundane details. I have found a love that transcends everything else. This love can move the tallest mountain, part the widest sea, and get me to put the toilet seat down.

Love is a complex thing. Most common emotions that men experience are like single-celled organisms. I hungry. Me want beer. Why are my pants tight all of a sudden? I can order a pizza to satiate myself. Anger can be expressed easily by hitting someone or by stringing together obscenities. Chanting the mantra, “Get up, you pussy” temporarily cures depression. These emotions can be turned off like a faucet, unlike love. You can purge yourself night and day on the overwhelming urge to be next
to the other person, but it is never enough. Rational thought fades as that golden voice is heard. People do things that they would never consider doing had they not been under such a hypnotic state. A man may find himself going to a bridal expo instead of a monster truck rally. What might normally be just a walking pair of boobs is suddenly transformed into a living, breathing human being. Dare I mention cunnilingus? Emotions become magnified by ten thousand. O.J. Simpson loved his ex-wife so much that the only way he knew how to express his emotions was by brutally murdering her. I’m not committed enough to my fiancé to stab her 106 times, but I know that I love her. I can say this without hesitating. The fear that many males feel about blasphemous words such as love, commitment, devotion, and marriage may stem from not being able to fully understand what love is.

Shakespeare had the whole thing down cold. His sonnets must have moistened many a panty (or did they wear burlap) in his day. He was like the Barry White of the 16th century. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day,” has fallen by the wayside to “damn you got a nice little muffin ass!” Did he really understand what love was, or was he just faking it because it was his job? He couldn’t have been too athletic due to his occupation. He was British, so his teeth were like baked beans if he even had any. Gone were the days of Bam-Bam clubbing Pebbles to incapacitate her. Therefore he had to have some sort of gimmick for the ladies. One of the greatest writers in Western history could be responsible for the evolution of love to the form that we are familiar with today. Perhaps we could all learn a thing or two from his works. What those things are I wish I knew because I’m dumbfounded.

It could have been easy for me early on. Looking at pictures from my youth, I can’t help but wonder what
kind of chemical imbalance in my brain caused me to become the adult I did. When I was in first grade, I looked like a child actor before the Smack habit. I remember a few notes being passed my way. Even though I was hailed as the best reader in all grades K-5 and I excelled in such areas as phonics and story time, one of the most popular girls in Miss Zimmerman’s 1st grade class, Michelle Parsons, wanted a visit from Dr. Love. “Do you love me? Check yes or no.” I responded in kind in the authoritative third person, “Jonas says yes!” Life was getting better. We passed notes back and forth in class until Miss Zimmerman, no relation to Bob Dylan, caught us. Five-year-olds weren’t having kids back in the 80s, so passing notes was still considered a serious offense. We both faced hard time with no chance of parole until after second recess. The academic reputation of our class had to be protected, so the wart-nosed scourge of the Indian Valley North school district ignored my involvement. Michelle took the fall. I escaped unscathed that day, but my future with the lovely ladies on the playgrounds of Midvale Elementary was in serious jeopardy.

This incident was just the beginning of my troubles. For some reason I thought that it would look really cool if I spiked my hair and grew one of those rat-tails I mentioned before. I like to refer to it as a mini mullet. Instead of looking like a cute child actor, I began to look like some kid from the trailer park. To the “normal” child, especially the girls who were prone to being repulsed by us boys, I was becoming a pariah of sorts. At birth I weighed nine pounds. Over the course of seven years, I must have gained another fifteen. This was all taking place during the Ethiopia famine, which did not help matters much. Had it not been for my cousins who ran the playground like pint-sized wise guys, my ass would have been ground chuck for years to come. They may have been La Cosa Nostra de
la Escuela, but they weren’t pimps.

This complete failure with the opposite sex continued throughout my adolescent years. I weighed fifty pounds soaking wet, and my mini-mullet had been replaced by a more updated Flock of Seagulls haircut. I was a flaming band geek. When not butchering any sense of rhythm I may have possessed, I toked up with the half-dirties. This in turn made me a quarter-dirty. To review, I was a skinny ass Flock of Seagulls hair wearing flaming band geek stoner quarter dirty.

Even if I was a normal kid, the situation in high school was never in my favor. The girls in my grade always dated the upperclassmen. The older ones were getting pregnant by twenty-somethings named Jeff who worked at Whirlpool and kicked ass as a hobby. My only choice was to prey on the females in the grades below me. Since all the slutty girls were being passed around by the jocks and the normal ones were smart enough to avoid me, I felt it was necessary to go approach the psychotic girls.

The most memorable one was the Jehovah’s Witness I dated who failed to mention her beliefs to me. I continually spent money that I didn’t have on gifts that she was not even supposed to accept. For months I skimped on lunches, did extra chores around the house, and cut down on my drug purchases to buy things for her. I admit to cheating on her. In my defense, I was sixteen at the time and had maintained a constant erection for four years. I figured that all of the stupid crap I was buying her would appease her wounded heart. Instead, she opted for vengeance. While a mentally stable person would simply break off the relationship after confronting me, she cunningly pretended that nothing was wrong. While I continued spending money, she pursued a more meaningful relationship with some other poor sucker. Then her rich friend started to like me, but was not permitted to date me be-
cause I had dated one of her friends. I guess the whole cheating thing didn’t help my case either, but where were her sense of morals when she was dating two guys? I had just gotten ripped off for buying all that crap for holidays that my ex did not even celebrate. It was supposed to even out, damnit! Incidentally, my ex started dating one of my best friends shortly after the dust had settled.

I cannot omit the girl I dated my junior year of high school. I will be the first to admit that I was not the most social creature, but this girl was so ass backwards, that the only three things she said to me were the following:

Me: Hi! How are you doing?
*Her*: (sighs) I’m tired.
Me: Okay...uh how did you do on your Geometry test fifth period?
*Her*: uhhhhh...I dunno
Me: I’m sure you did well. You wanna go see a movie Friday night?
*Her*: (agitated) Yeah, I guess.

She broke up with me.

It happened my senior year at Meijer. I was pushing carts while receiving dirty looks from the elderly for being young on a Friday night. A hillbilly couple we store employees refer to as Brother/Sister/Husband/Wife meandered by; the smell of cat pee and Basic cigarettes filled the air. The automatic door struggled to open, and she walked into my life. The two of us exchanged idle small talk. Even though my stomach was in knots, I performed this ritual flawlessly. My first thought was that she had a great rack. This thought continued for countless days and nights. I had never thought about a single pair of boobs, or person for that matter, for such an extended period of time. Like Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*, I was struck by a big
fucking lightening bolt. The hair never did grow back on my left arm.

Standing together we look like Andre the Giant and Little Tokyo. Still, she could easily beat me up and take my lunch money. (And believe me, she’s tried!) In our relationship, she is the risk taker, capable of jumping out of an airplane naked on national television. I might consider riding a moped without a helmet. In a social setting, she has this bubbly personality that could charm the pants off a corpse. I, on the other hand, do my best Rain Man in public. She is the model of natural beauty and borders on perfection; I am mistaken for her retarded brother. Considering all the above is true, I cannot help but wonder why anyone that has so much going for her would even give me the time of day, much less agree to marry me. Without me, she could have her pick of normal, more attractive men with gobs of money.

There is no question that I feel a sense of loyalty to this woman. (Dogs are loyal, too, and look where they lick.) Most of the clothes that I wear that aren’t riddled with holes are picked or purchased by her. I couldn’t use a fork much less walk upright if it were not for her. There is an attraction between the two of us, though I suspect that she has cataracts. I don’t get it. I have never beaten her, but I would never win boyfriend of the year. Infidelity no longer exists in my vocabulary, but I revel in the idea of polygamy. What would cause a sweet and caring person to gravitate toward a brooding, self-absorbed one? Pity? Are my parents bribing her?

Thinking about this led to more questions. I have succeeded in college with only half the effort that most students put forth, yet I am not smart enough to simplify things by just being happy. If things weren’t complicated, then I might realize how shallow and meaningless my life really is. Sometimes I wonder if I am just merely in love
with her kind acts and not the person herself. Or am I in love with the notion of being in love, like that moron Orsinio in *Twelfth Night*? As cynical as I have become, I am not certain if I am capable of loving *at all*. Whenever I do something I know is hurting her, I have this sort of out of body experience. I can see myself being a jerk, but can do nothing about it. This astounds me that she can even stand to be in the same room with me since I am such a sarcastic asshole. Pile all of this on top of the impending marriage, and one can see why my stomach has ulcers the size of grapefruits.

I readily enjoy the fact that there is someone special in my life besides the voices in my head. In all seriousness, I am ecstatic about spending the rest of my life with this woman. Just the fact that someone isn’t repulsed by my presence gives me the strength of ten flying squirrels. Obviously she sees something in me, or there would be no us. There must be something beyond my rigid exterior that is attractive to another human being. I have never met anyone like her, nor will ever meet anyone like her. She would rather drink beer and eat pizza at home instead of going to some smoky, b.o. smelling, lame ass excuse for a club where high school girls on ecstasy dance around in circles, pretending to be lesbians and no-necked, pencil-dicked frat boys try to prove their ultimate worth to the world by picking fights with guys like me. There’s something about the repetitive boom-chic drum machine going at 240 bpm, overused funk samples, and cheesy synthesizers that make us both vomit. She enjoys cooking for me, wrestling, and the car chases in *Ronin* for crying out loud! She is the only one that listens to me rant about how the government installs microchips inside the brains of minivan drivers, causing them to drive erratically in order raise insurance rates. She is excited at the prospect of getting a 1/3-carat diamond engagement ring. As I am writing this, I
can see why my family refers to her as my “imaginary friend.” When the world shreds my body and mind to kibble, she comes to the rescue with her legendary backrubs. I can always count on being fed to the point of bursting. Her smile doubles the normal size of her head when I show up at her door, which always makes me forget the bullshit in my life. Through the chaos of the universe, two polar opposites have locked together to form an unbreakable bond. Shakespeare may have been able to explain this phenomenon in a beautiful sonnet that would have lived on through the ages, but I have some advantages over him. I’ve taken Astronomy and I have all my teeth!
Halfway between Cleveland and Columbus, my family lived in a geographical dead zone for most radio signals. The most powerful radio frequency came from CKLW, an AM station out of Detroit/Windsor. This station had a strong, clear, and crisp signal, without any of the static people today associate with AM. It played the best blend of Motown and Rock-n-Roll. AM was king of the airwaves; my family radio didn’t even have an FM dial.

Our radio was located in the kitchen; it sat high and proud atop the freezer section of the white Frigidaire. Its stocky white, rectangular, plastic case was often coated with a thin covering of cooking grease and dust, grime that was only visible when you start to remove it. The radio’s tuning bar was long, clear, and plastic. It slid over raised gold embossed numbers, lit by gold backlighting. The radio had one giant speaker on its topside. In the early seventies, its design was modern, state of the art. Today, it would be called retro. My life was uncomplicated with a radio that played only one station. If someone tried to turn the dial, the frequencies would whistle and wail in protest.

It may have only had one speaker, but the radio provided all the background noise of my family’s daily life. Not a day went by in my house without someone turning the radio on. If my parents didn’t turn it on, my brother or I would slide a high-backed chair from the end of the kitchen table and stand on the avocado plastic upholstered seat to reach the top of the Frigidaire. My memory still feels the thick heavy snap made by its knob when I turned it clockwise, bringing the radio to life. Nearly everyday after school the radio’s music would accompany my homework ritual.
loved to watch my mom stand at the kitchen sink, singing and rinsing dishes, swaying and drying them. My dad’s laughter at a DJ’s joke or my brother and I singing the wrong words to a song together are gifts from the radio. On the weekends, as I did my household chores, the ones designed by my parents to teach me responsibility, time passed more quickly thanks to listening to tunes playing through the radio’s topside mono speaker. There wasn’t a generation gap with music in my house when it came from the radio. We all seemed tuned into the same sounds and enjoyed the shared tempo of laughing and living as we listened to the radio together. I expected it to always be there, playing, and blending into my life--just life television’s After School Specials and my Barbie’s.

As the years of childhood passed, music changed, and there were new sounds and songs that weren’t available on our family radio. One Saturday evening, while loafing in our bedrooms, my brother and I were summoned by our parents downstairs to our family room to see a surprise they had for us. Surprises were rare and special in my house; we ran down the stairs, pushing and pulling at each other, both of us trying to be the first to hit the last step. The family room, once two small rooms with painted cement floors and cement block walls, had previously been used as storage and playrooms for our arsenal of toys and Playskool houses, castles, and barns. My parents had recently transformed the two rooms into one large room, resembling a nineteen-seventies designers showcase, with paneled walls and a sandstone floor to ceiling fireplace. Thick piled rust colored carpet covered the floor, and two brown plaid recliner rockers sat side by side. To add to the
decor, my parents had purchased three new floor to ceiling bookshelves. On one of them sat our surprise: a new Panasonic stereo, complete with a smoke tinted hinged plastic top covering its sleek matte gray turntable. It looked so modern, like something I had only seen in the Sears catalog. The front of the stereo was matte silver. The on/off switch was a shiny silver lever with a triangular end that smoothly flipped up and down. The knobs were round and extended forward an inch from its surface.

My brother and I edged our way past our parents for a closer look. I ran my hand along the top of the stereo, and then touched the many knobs one by one. Although round in appearance, each knob actually had small angles etched all the way around the edges to give the user a sense of power and control. The silver angles, besides being functional, were sleek and shiny—giving the design a sexy appearance. I liked the way the knobs felt under my fingers. Expensively intricate and grownup. Our stereo had a tuning knob that was extra large but shaped the same as the smaller knobs. It was sensitive to the touch and when I rocked it back and forth with my fingertips, the tuning needle moved smooth and silent inside its tinted window. I enjoyed the sensation of hearing a station tune in crystal clear. The tuner was sensitive and attracted more frequencies than I was used to from our white radio. It didn’t have an amber back light; instead, the entire front lit up and featured little colored squares when it locked onto a station in stereo. The stereo illuminated my imagination and seduced me into a completely new world of FM.

Located to the left of the knobs were the stereo’s extra feature’s: a cassette player and control levers for balancing the speakers and adjusting treble and bass. The only cassette player I had ever operated belonged to my grandparents. My grandpa used it to tape himself playing bluegrass music on his fiddle. My grandpa’s recorder was
big, bulky, portable, and black, its buttons were thick plastic and difficult to push. The stereo’s cassette player was different; its front window panel was smoky but transparent, so you could watch the spindles of the cassette move when a tape was playing. Again, its control buttons were matte silver, and when I pushed the eject button, the door fell forward, magically silent, slow and smooth. The huge speakers with simulated wood grain sides felt spongy when you touched their black fronted surface.

My dad put a Bob Seger album on the turntable while instructing us on each step involved with placing the needle on a record’s chosen track and reminded us to not break the arm that held the needle, to not drop the needle into place, and never, ever, pull or push the needle across the album surface. My brother and I stood side by side, still and hypnotized by the stereo. We nodded our heads in awe and swore we would never abuse the needle. “Katmandu” sprang to life; Seger’s voice belted out rock and roll, backed up by a beat that seemed to soak through my chest as the bass came booming out of the spongy speakers. I had heard this song a hundred times, but it never sounded like this when it escaped our kitchen radio’s mono speaker. There were layers to the music, noises, and notes that were new to me.

Now that we owned a stereo, it quickly became part of my daily routine. As soon as my brother and I got home from school, we would race downstairs to the family room where one of us would flip the cool metal lever that turned it on. We didn’t go into the kitchen after school any more to stand on a chair and reach the radio. Instead, we would take turns picking which album we wanted to listen to or spin the huge silver tuning knob as fast as we could, exploring our new FM world, listening to the different stations fly by as the needle passed each frequency inside the illuminated dial.
Over time, the family stereo began to have power over the way I listened to music. It didn’t just play in the background of my daily life anymore. Since the stereo was located downstairs in the family room, the music could only be heard there. Many times it played so loud it drove the family out of the room and I began to listen to music alone. All the new FM stations were influencing my musical tastes; instead of listening to the lone CKLW that came in clearly on the kitchen radio, I discovered I liked the rock on Q-FM 96 out of Columbus, Ohio; this was the station everyone at my high school said, “Only pot smoking partiers listen to.” The first time I adjusted the stereo’s big round tuning dial to this station I heard the DJ say, “You’re partying with WLVQ FM 96!” I felt like I was really getting away with something forbidden. It became my favorite station, and I learned all the songs. My parents didn’t know the words to the songs I listened to anymore, and I really didn’t want to know the words to their music. One late teenage night, I was listening to Springsteen’s “Darkness on the Edge of Town” when my dad came into the family room to ask me to turn the stereo down because the bass was reverberating into my parents bedroom above the family room ceiling. My dad left the room saying, “I don’t know what you see in that music anyway. Whoever that guy is, he sure can’t sing.”

You are so old, I thought to myself, as I rolled my eyes and reluctantly adjusted the shiny silver volume knob. You don’t understand my kind of music.

The difference of musical opinions didn’t stop with my parents; eventually my brother and I began to argue over whose favorite songs would be played on the stereo.
Being four years older, allowed me to assume I made the rules, and my rule gave my music priority. When we got home from school, we still raced each other down the stairs to the family room. Only now the pushing and shoving was real, and the winner determined who would have control over the music for the afternoon. Often, I found myself enforcing the *big sister* rule to get my way, making sure it was not my bother’s music on the stereo; eventually we just stopped listening together. I began to replace him with my girlfriends. They would help me take possession of the stereo and tune him out.

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When I was about seven years old, my uncle and his girlfriend gave me a musical jewelry box for Christmas. It looked like a typical jewelry box a thousand other little girls owned. It was small and slightly rectangular. The outside was mostly white except for the drawings of flowers and ribbons that were cheaply stamped onto the thin coating of fake leather that covered the box. The box came with a tiny gold key tied to a pink velvet ribbon. The key fit the cheap lock located on the front of the lid; it had a swirly textured gold clasp that swung up and down on a hinge and looked ornate to a seven year old. When I lifted the lid of the jewelry box, a little ballerina with a real white lace tutu popped up and started to pirouette to the music. My jewelry box played a melody in light soft tones, one of those happy pretty minuets that no one knows the name of but always recognizes. The inside of the box was lined with stiff pink velvet and had a little diamond shaped mirror glued behind the ballerina on the inside of the lid. At seven, I thought this box was the most beautiful thing I owned.

I took the box home and put it in a place of honor
on the left side of my vanity table inside my bedroom. I quickly filled the box with all of the Avon jewelry my mom had given me for birthdays and holidays along side my uncles Viet Nam medals. He had quietly placed those commendations of lost innocence in my hand while we sat together in the backseat of my dad’s 1965 pale yellow Chevy Impala convertible during the ride home from the airport on the same day he returned from his tour of duty as a U.S. Marine. For years, the jewelry box sat there on my bedroom vanity, important and used. As I grew older, I began to keep my real jewelry in other containers, funky plastic dishes, and decorated boxes that fit my teenage idea of cool. The function of the ballerina box was reduced to holding pieces of jewelry that had only sentimental value, like my charm bracelet, my Girl Scout pins, and my uncle’s medals, and I had moved the box from my vanity table to make room for perfume, makeup, and hot rollers.

Eventually, my jewelry box ended up on a bookshelf in my room where it collected dust and blended into the décor of old dolls, stuffed animals, and volumes of Nancy Drew mysteries, Golden Books, and a collection of fairy tales that were hidden behind my music albums, candles, pictures of friends, and other teenage paraphernalia. The week after I graduated from high school, I decided I was too old for all of those immature items to be part of my room anymore. I went into my room, put a Van Halen album on my bedroom stereo, cranked up the volume to drown out the AC/DC playing down the hall on my brother’s bedroom boom box, and started packing things up and throwing away items that represented moments of pleasure and accomplishment from my childhood.

Someone had given me a “grown-up” jewelry box as a graduation present. It was wooden and made with drawers and side compartments and looked expensive. I emptied the contents of my old jewelry box and began to
carelessly discard most of the pieces inside. They had been unworn for years, and I, in my infinite eighteen-year-old wisdom, knew I would never wear them again. Plastic bracelets, earrings, old notes from old boyfriends, my first mood ring, and my Girl Scout pins hit the bottom of the trash can with pings and thuds. I barely heard them fall. When I finished, I looked at my empty little musical jewelry box, I lifted the lid and allowed the sad little ballerina, who by this time had a small tear in her faded lace tutu, to take a spin. Struggling to hear the soft tones of the minuet over the Van Halen, I looked at the box for a long time, and then suddenly, I snapped the lid shut, closed the clasp, and through the box in the trash.

The wooden back porch screened door of the farmhouse slammed behind me as I walked into my grandparent's kitchen. As an eighteen year old adult, this was the one place I knew I could find a balance between the AM and FM parts of my world. Somehow I knew things stayed the same at Grandparent's houses, and I could be myself there, no judgment. The familiar smell of my grandma's baking bread and her lemon oil furniture polish always surrounded me when I entered the house. Grandpa was sitting on a wooden kitchen chair, turned sideways, facing the old white General Electric stove and kitchen window. His work boot feet were spread wide to help his patched denim knees support his plaid flannel elbows as he rested his balding head in his hands. He was listening to the local AM radio station's broadcast of the River Valley Vikings high school boy's basketball game on the kitchen radio. He looked up at me when I walked in; he grinned, and put his finger to his lips, warning me the game's score.
was close. I winked and gave thumbs up while I pulled out a chair from the kitchen table. He reached for the cold bottle of Pepsi sitting next to him on the kitchen table. He took a long swig and motioned with the bottle towards the old white Frigidaire sitting in the corner of the kitchen, its rounded door safeguarding sixteen ounce glass bottles of the coldest pop I ever drank in my life. I knew this was the signal for me to get my own cold bottle of Pepsi to drink while we listened to the ballgame together.

The Vikings were winning when I sat down at the kitchen table, pop in hand. We didn’t talk. We didn’t need to. My grandpa and I had spent dozens of games like this, just enjoying each other as the radio played. While I listened, I studied the kitchen calendar. My grandpa received a free calendar every Christmas from the local Land Mark Grain Elevator for selling them his corn and soybean crop. My grandma always hung the calendar on the wall behind the kitchen table; this month’s picture was a simple white church with a tall steeple nestled in a snowy village somewhere in New England.

The game was getting closer; my eyes took a sharp turn towards my grandpa’s radio sitting on the kitchen table, as if I would really see the game’s action playing there. As the radio entered my vision, I choked on the pop in my mouth, causing it to up my nose, as my eyes encountered my old kitchen radio. The sound of the game faded away. I stared at the radio. I had forgotten it. I just assumed it was still sitting in the house on the top of the Frigidaire even though no one ever turned it on. Now, here it was sitting at a jaunty angle on my grandpa’s kitchen table. I realized my mom must have given the white radio to my grandparents; it was strange seeing it in someone else’s house. I looked at the rectangular radio, its case was clean and shinny—all the grim had been removed—and the little amber AM dial was glowing. The radio looked brand new, sitting there in my
grandparent’s house, where time stood still, and things never changed.

Slowly, the sound of the game came back to me, my grandpa was laughing at my reaction to what he thought was a too large drink of pop. I laughed with him. The Vikings were winning, and the radio kept playing, clear, and static free, and outside the kitchen window the sky was glowing gra. The wind was blowing the snow covering the brown yard of winter. The setting sun shot waves of candle light across the dormant cornfields, and my grandpa’s old dog Mike was barking at a gray rabbit running across the deep drifts forming in the barnyard.
Shawn M. Young

I'LL ONLY COME HERE SEEKING PEACE

So many years I stood among the thoughts and tears of those I served. Among my own I was alone through my own doing. All the years I walked unknown behind the faces I assumed. Powerless to clear your mind of what you'd suffered.

They fall again.
They fall again.

—Ronan Harris

"People enjoy this."
"No. I don't. I don't like any of it." The voices surrounded me and repeated. It was blue and drab. I was floating carelessly above a house. The house was painted black. My brother was on the roof. The grass was not grass but dirt, and colored green. The chimney was bellowing out red fiery smoke.

"Come Down! The shingles are hot! I can't hold on anymore, my body is warm!"
I started to scream. The scream was not me, it was someone else, and I could hear it in the distance. It continued to get closer. A strange voice. Vibrato, high, painful. I lay in slumber; it was early, so early that the birds weren't singing. A pitiful, high pitched, voice ricocheted up
the stairs; its shrillness pierced my soul like a bullet to my head. "Shawn! It’s over, your father... he’s dead!" I struggled to come to my senses. My eyes fluttered as I reached to pull the night’s blankets off of my weathered numb body. “Okay...” My voice stumbled forth, extremely blasé, raspy from smoking and with little emotion. I slowly came to and rolled out of bed. I could hear my tiny grandmother standing at the bottom of the stairs. I unlocked the shiny brass bolt that shut me off from the rest of the world and emerged with squinty eyes, arm up shielding myself from the light. Her eyes were dripping with tears, and her sobs were the only noise I could hear coming from the downstairs. “Over?” I questioned. “Yeah, it’s true. Are you coming down?” Why would she think I wouldn’t come down? Was I going to sit in my room and forget what she had just so eloquently rendered?

The stairs felt like hard air as I made my way down to the bottom landing. I peered around the corner to see who had made themselves comfortable in our new found pyre. I wouldn’t want to stand face to face with a multitude of strangers, glancing blankly into my heart as I divulged my feelings of being a simple human. When I was much younger in mind and body, I would come down the stairs (stairs that at that time felt more like carpeted hunks of rise over run) and see a family gripped in this world of shit and hell. There they were, taking up what precious space was left in the room and waiting for the inevitable to happen, and wishing, but not hoping, it would be over and they could all go on with their lives. They would look at me and say nothing, but they didn’t need to. I knew what they all felt, and my sympathy (or was it empathy?) ran deep, so deep that I wished sometimes that I didn’t have any feelings. Death was always in the air, and my heart was always on my sleeve, and I couldn’t control it. Strange eyes would burn into my soul and somehow tear me down for being
what I was—a fragile human. Thoughts would race out of control, and emotions would run high as we attempted to supercede any human feelings we had. “How can something so real be so fake?” I would ask myself. The answer that was given was nothing I ever wanted to hear. The answer was more like the reality I dared not to face. This is undoubtedly the ever so complex paradox that filled my head through those blackened days of mourning and wanton eyes of contempt.

I had a trouble with feeling. Feeling—lost and regained. The trouble with feeling is that I can’t control its subversive underwelling of translucent ionic filled batholiths, converted into a tour de force of indescribable human instinct and emotional fortitude overwhelming my textile like cranium with traffic oriented magnums asking me if I can come out and play, and not taking no for an answer and when my silver tongue whipped an exposed ass till red red kroovy trickles arduously down a bee-lined trail awaiting the green shag carpet where it joins my gray, slowly turning blue, brain that often will “punk me out” and assfuck me like I was wearing an orange jumpsuit and shackled to a bench, trying, like a captured slave, to procure my freedom and dance in an elated state towards my goal in the far reaches of a twisted, blind, arcane, perverse, mind forever surrounded in a pigment most commonly associated with the black art—one of which I will often search for when confronted with terror or fear—creating a troubled, worthless, benign, existence thrown away and compacted in a mechanical device purchased on a shadowy wet day from a place that gives two shits if I ever existed and if I attempt to rise above the establishment that we have adopted in our human world, and dubbed as death, I will be shot down like a bird by hunters holding an AR-15 semi automatic gas powered carbine drilled weapon used to hunt shameless animals doing nothing but living in a world created by and
ran by a group of self-terminating beings known as humans. “Breathe...you can do it.”

Truth be told, someone was dying, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. But how can someone die who was already dead? “A travesty,” one person said. I hardly agree. More like “fitting” for someone who didn’t know they were alive in the first place. What is this that takes us? I met him one rainy day, clouds black as night, water like tears from the gods. He, on his pale horse, traversed the land in search of one I know. Claws reaching out, arms like sticks of everlasting power, feelings gone and forgotten. As fire shot from his steed’s snout, I knew the time had come—De...deat...DEATH! Swirling, twirling, reeling all around us. He spoke to me...This is the story he told me, he made me promise I would tell you, he says you will never know when he will be waiting outside your door, for you or someone you love. Let it all go!

Death surrounds me. Death is severe. Death is it. Death is the “end.” Death doesn’t care. Death is happiness. Death hates the living. Death fucks us. Death consumes us. Death takes from us. Death pushes our noses in shit. Death is a vehicle. Death cries for us. Death satiates us. Death surrounds us. We are death. My mind swells with death. My mind is swimming around in a vomit filled bowl. Floating in death, the very same death I had found in my house. The pungent, stagnant, rancid, proverbial death which I learned to accept so many times before. “It floats when it’s dead. Flush it down the toilet.” “Shawn! It’s over, your father...he’s dead!” As I said: When someone dies, they only die when they know they are actually alive. When you are already “dead,” you can’t die.

“Oh bury me noooo-ooot, on the lone prairieeee...” My father was singing along to my Johnny Cash album. “Sounds good dad. Maybe you should look into that,” I would say to him with bright staring eyes,
knowing full well that singing for a living would be the farthest task my father could ever complete. He couldn’t even leave our house to go out and cut the grass or play with me in the yard. He hadn’t had a job for many years. His condition had “eaten away” at his brain (the very same brain I had inherited from his genes, and it frightened me) to the point that his world was often blended with what we take for granted as “the real world.” The many nights of battling with imaginary demons and looking under his bed for blood thirsty monsters that would try and bite his tortoise like toes were long gone by this time. No longer would the air be filled with song, nor would it be seething with vibrato sounding epithets of a mad man. No, life was coming to a stand still, and as trouble and darkness reared its ugly head into my riotous existence, I smiled on the inside to keep from crying on the outside.

The shower was warm, my heart was cold. I stood under the de-pressurized water and thought a bit. I thought about what makes a man. Then I started thinking of my father, and the water was so piping hot. This “new” morning would bring something to our family and to each of our individual lives like nothing else could have ever brought. I turned off the water and continued with the morning ritual. But, for some time afterwards, I pondered about that shower. My pressure was gone. So many times I stood with vacant thoughts under the weak water procured in my father’s blood. So many hours of my life spent in transient thoughts while water consumed my every movement. No shower would vaguely feel the same.

“What a fucked up thing to happen,” my brother Randy said in his crude and decidedly scratchy voice as I sat on the couch in my living room, knowing that my father was but a few feet away, lifeless and cold. I looked at Randy and nodded. My mother walked out of the cryptically hollow room with her arms folded and her eyes like
those of a deer; headlights transposed in front of her as she awaited her OWN certain death. She made her way to the telephone that sat solemn in a little room off to my right and began to call various people, some with whom I had never spoken and others I saw at least once a year at our annual Christmas bash at my Grandmother’s intrepidly soporific home. I sat as composed as a corpse as I listened to my heart beat irregularly inside my chest, glancing calmly about the room, seeing ghosts of the past make their way across the blue matte carpet surrounding my family. No one had an answer. We were all alone in a room full of people. Our feelings were syncretically fugitive; our eyes glazed over by the imaginary light that seeped out from under the sepulcher. Solitary, secluded, deserted, remote, separate, lonely, isolated, sequestered, alone. My heart fell out through my chest. I lost it.

A little fat man came knocking at our front door. I briskly ran to the door and pulled it open. I felt the urge of telling him to “come in” in my best baritone Lurch voice, but decided against the fun and peered at him through my dewy grass colored eyes. “Hello,” he said as I glared at his roundness, knowing all along that he was some kind of mortician or coroner, “I am Mr. Allen from Hughes Al…” I quickly cut him off and proclaimed, “We have been expecting you.” He made his way into the living room, which was a little ironic in the truest sense of the word. My mother, who was shaken and a little troubled, appeared from around the corner and said hello to the little man. Although I sat motionless on the slightly worn couch, my mother fluttered around as if she were a worker bee. She had a knack for not showing her feelings, and this “situation” was nothing different. All I had wanted was for her to break down and give in to the feelings that I know encompassed her every thought. Why could she not even at the least attempt it?
She continued to push on. She beckoned him to follow, and like the good little doggie that was doing his job for treats, he followed. Into the kitchen they strolled like two kids. It seemed as if they were about to do something wrong. They looked around as they calmly walked into the other room and disappeared into the darkness around the corner. They took care of actions I cared to have no part in. They “arranged” to have this and that done; many things I am sure my fearless mother would despise to do in any other situation, but knew it was required.

Shortly after Mr. Allen left, other strange people made their way onto our porch and ultimately into my house. They were from the dead man’s side of the family—aunts I had not seen in so many years I had lost count, and Grandparents I hadn’t seen for so long that they had no idea of my name or “which one I was.” My mom must have reluctantly called them earlier in the day, when she was feeling compassionate. They were invited to witness their dead brother and son before he was to be sacrificed to the gods of fire.

“Ohhh, dear god, how could you do this?” One of the women cried out. With the snap of a finger, I thought: Fuck you for even asking. If I could snap your neck instead of my finger for such a blatant comment towards something of which you have no knowledge, I would. My mother had been keeping her distance from them, for they had shunned her and my father (and my whole fucking family, for that matter) many years ago for a reason that was unfounded and childish. This distance would prevent her from berating or physically accosting them. I guess my understanding of it was my mother (being ever so godlike) maintained the ability, behind my back of course, to cause people to lose their minds and forget who they really were. Or so it goes. My grandparents would blame my “witch” of a mother for “cursing” my able bodied and minded, brutish, intelligent,
handsome, energetic, outgoing, funny, charismatic, father with an affliction, that science has proven to be caused by a force that cannot be controlled or prevented, so that one can only be sustained by pumping oneself with a multitude of drugs from many different genres of medicine and hoping and wishing that what had just been ingested would “make the pain” go away, oh yes, my mother what a woman to purposely afflict someone with that grace. Maybe if I were more like my estranged grandparents, I would believe in the more formidable Jesus Christ and pray to a false prophet daily, but I am not, and no matter what they would have said to me, if I saw them burning in the streets, I’d put them out...with gasoline. However, that day was slowly turning into a comedy of epic proportion, or at least that was what Shakespeare or Dante would say.

The crash that came from the porch was loud and disturbing yet had a good sound to it, a goodness I can’t describe. I leaped to my feet and strafed around to see out the curtain blanketed window, just in time to see my eldest and most caring brother, Lonnie, lifting one of my father’s sisters from the wooden slatted porch flooring, helping her regain her steadiness and good sense of security. I chuckled to myself, and wished she had fallen and hurt more than her pride, Randy agreed. But sadly, she had fallen as a result of all the years she had to take care of my fallibly incoherent father when he was in and out of his psychosis, and for the past 14 years and three months had been pushing herself to the limits to make sure my dad’s shitbag had been changed and he wasn’t drifting out of consciousness when he was supposed to be awake, and she had to hold our family together when tragedy struck on a daily basis, while my father was running through the house screaming that “the FBI has my location and God isn’t gonna like it that I don’t have my space suit on.” Yeah, she had really been there for us and our family. No, this was the first time I had even seen
her in seven fucking years! And she faints on my front porch because she can’t believe that her brother is dead? What a sad little woman, what a sad bloodline, what an absolutely deceptive nature to put forth, “we care, we love you, we love your father,” sure you do lady, sure you have those feelings when you can walk away and leave all behind that is unfavorable and painful, good for you that you have no feelings inside your ever so evil heart, and the wreath of barbs you wear for our sins, I am sure, will save your soul when the apocalypse finally arrives. In all actuality my mother was the cohesive bond in our family. She would ultimately hold our family together in death as well as in life. No matter the situation, she would provide that which my brothers and I needed to survive this “travesty.” As for that “family” member, she had come and gone just like so many others that day; I have lost many of them in my memories and don’t care to find them.

“...And a pack of Camels while you’re out, honey,” my father would quip while planted in his favorite shitty chair, a chair that had been scarred and bruised from many years of being abused by cigarettes. A chair that my dear and loving mother refused to discard for the very obvious reason: Why buy a new chair? You would think my father would have recognized every time he planted himself in that chair, ‘Maybe that’s what cigarettes are doing to my body.’ He had become one with that chair, in the Zen Buddhist sense of the meaning, and while time had passed, he had lost every friend, every sense of wellness, every happy thought, every grasp of reality, and every last bit of his health. He would never quit his only addiction until he had given in to death. No plea, no sweet gibe, nothing, could keep my father wayward of his “reliable buddy.” Those cigarettes never left his side, they never got mad at him, and they always gave him the comfort he longed for. His understanding of life was his cigarettes and his two pots of coffee
a day. The cigarette he struggled with all of his might to suck down only days before his death was one of his last requests. I can never figure out why he clung so boldly and wholeheartedly onto the one thing that was killing him, but I forgive him for being a weak human, just as I am.

The belt I was being hit with was smooth, yet left cuts on my arms like I was being hit with a kitchen knife. Over and over again the blows came, the wielder was in a rage of contempt, and apparently, I was the target. I sat on the stairs I had strolled down only a day earlier and stared languidly as my mother blindly struck me continually, all the while profanity spewing from her agape little mouth. After someone dies, one’s temper becomes a road flare: once it is set off, not even water can put it out, and she was demonstrating that to me without prejudice. I can’t even begin to tell you why she was hitting me, but I can almost guess (without being too presumptuous) it was because of my 16 year old attitude, and it was that attitude that had gotten the best of me and of her (I probably had said something along the lines of being glad my father was finally dead, but not meaning it). It was that I didn’t know how to express my feelings when I was living during that age, and telling someone, especially my mother that I was glad my father was through suffering was quite the task and could ignite tempers. Soon, she was finished striking me, and dropped the belt on the bottom landing of the stairs. She was in tears, and gave me one last glance as she made her way towards the front door. I quietly closed my eyes, and began to feel the tears well up under my lids, but I never cried, in fact I hadn’t cried in either of these horrific days. I had not meant to perplex my mother so badly that she would strike me. I vowed to ‘leave and never come back’ as I heard the door slam. She left, maybe she heard me, and maybe she didn’t, I never asked her. Time moves on, as they say.

“Fuck You! You don’t even fucking care!” I
yawped violently at my brother Randy when he told me he wasn’t going to attend the “funeral” or service that they were having for our deceased loved one. In my mind I had pictured him coming with us. However, his exterior was feral and his attitude towards all things was at the least apathetic, so I could not conceivably fathom what his major plight was with exonerating his final meeting with our father. He glared in my general direction with his tyrannically evil eyes from the edge of the front entrance to our living room, I was frightened of what he was capable of doing with his abnormal power. He was like this dog I was too afraid to get near when I walked home from elementary school. All of my friends and I would meander through this small rocky alley filled with potholes and surrounded on either side with chain-link fences. The dog was always chained to a small post in front of its dog house. We always feared that the vicious barking canine, with the cold tyrannical eyes (like my brother) would break free and charge our small preteen frames.

However, my dear brother was neither tied to a post nor guarded behind a fence and was making his way towards me. I stood my ground. He gave me one last look, and just as if some outside force pressed the slow motion button on the remote control of life. THUD! He hit me in stomach! The vision of him rearing back with closed fists and thrusting forward with all of his bodily might seemed to take forever as I watched. I doubled over and felt the pain surge through my gut like I had been hit with the likes of a cannon ball and almost immediately after the initial percussive strike my half closed eyes began to water. Was it tears of pain or of trauma? After a few seconds, I realized that it surely wasn’t the hit. It wasn’t the pain that made me cry, it was the fact that it felt like my sad and lowly definition of family was literally falling apart, right down to the last thread of cohesion.
I sat down on the couch and bawled my face flushed because the blood was rushing upward from my delicate heart, and the salty tears formed and streamed down my face like a spigot that was left on. The mucous from the back of my throat was beginning to make its way towards the front of my agape mouth. I was a wretched sight, and by all accounts, no one remembers any of this.

As I sat in suspended animation, I cried, and cried and cried some more, thinking that the tears would quit soon. But to no avail, I cried for everything that was wrong with my life at that moment, I cried for my mother enduring relentless turmoil, I cried because my brother didn’t seem to care. I was even making up reasons to cry. What a crying shame, I thought. I looked up to see my mother making her way to me. I quickly glanced at her hands to make sure she didn’t have a leather strap. She sat down beside me and put her arms around me. I quickly buried my face in her warm shoulder and continued to exorcise myself of all of the demons that had filled my brain. My mother’s smell took me back to a time when I was more innocent and the world consisted of my house and my side of the street, my friends, my walled up family, my one pet dog, my brothers. Things flew by so rapidly I hadn’t one moment to fully understand or even grasp what was indeed going on. Glorious, an irreplaceable fragrance, the smell of my mother made me feel consoled and comfortable. I needed my mother more than I had ever needed anything in the whole world, and because of the place I was in right then, nothing could have been more welcome.

“He was a good man,” the idiot representative from the church puked out of his cavernous piehole. “He was someone you could confide in.” Did he even know my father? “Some would even say he was a saint.” Now I know he didn’t know him. Who the hell was this revolting portly man in a purple evangelist suit with red sequins
spattered about? I would later find out he was hired because he was free, and that was only because my mother had promised to attend the church he was pastor of—even though we had never attended church and had no plans to start. I guess you would call him a pro bono preacher, although he looked more like television evangelist Benny Hinn. “Send us some money,” I figured he would say next, but it didn’t happen. He yammered on some more about a man he didn’t know, as I squirmed around in my seat in the front row of the funeral home seats and watched the cold April rain fall from the sky. My thoughts began to swim in the puddles on the road. I felt my pupils dilate and my vision get fuzzy. “He loved everyone.” The rain mesmerized me. “Look at a-ll, oooffft…” No more. I was in my world. I thought of the day prior.

“Hello sir,” said I. “Guess what. My father, you know how he has been sick. Well, he has finally died.” The looks on their faces were enough to laugh at. I felt the corner of my dry chapped mouth begin to twitch frantically as if I had Tourette’s Syndrome.

“We’re sorry Shawn…If there is anything we can do, let us know. We can help,” Yeah you can, you can go fuck yourself, I thought.

“Sure, sure,” I fired back. “How about you can see me later. Actually, it might be a while, so I’ll see you when I can get back.” The only perk about someone dying is that you can get out of school like you have a contagious disease or you have a gun. I know it isn’t something to be proud of, but I wanted something out of all of this fucking shit, goddamnit. The principal and vice-principal of my high school stood with their arms at their sides and stared at me as I waved goodbye to them and retreated to my waiting vehicle. I had parked right in the very front of the school. In fact I parked in the loading zone, yeah fuck you! I know someone who died, and I am important. My father, although
very dead, was actually not dead. I had never dealt with something quite of this magnitude in my previous years and didn’t understand what “dead” actually meant. “Ahhh, God! Save him!” Hearing some strange woman in the back of the room struck me out of my torrid little thoughts and memories of yesterday. I blinked frantically, and sharply glanced about my surroundings.

My eldest brother, Lonnie (who shared my father’s name), was strategically placed beside me like we were chess pieces, and my mother was on my other side. So, in a Freudian/Structuralism approach, that would have made me the king, my mother the queen, and my brother Lonnie, the bishop. I, of course, holding all of the residual power, or what little there was left, in the family. The chances of my father sitting in my seat would have been nil, so I had taken over—in theory. The rest of the room was peppered with various family I didn’t know very well, and kinfolk from down south that I didn’t even know existed. I needed a drink; “will this ever end?”

“Hello,” she said to me. “You must be Lonnie’s boy.” I thought to myself for a moment and attempted to conjure up something clever, but I drew a blank. “Yeah, one of ‘em.” Was my witty attempt. “Well, you resemble him.” Resemble coming from the Northern meaning would not have been so flattering. However, when someone from down south tells you that you resemble someone, they mean it in the truest essence of the word, the idea of it was I couldn’t have looked anymore like him then I already did. “Hey Janet,” the woman squawked with a twang, “don’t he resemble Lonnie?” “Oh, good god,” she blurted out (with a cigarette dangling from her mouth) trying not to be too sacrilegious as we stood in the atrium of the wonderfully glorious cathedral of Hugh's Allen Funeral Home, “just like him!” “Your name Shawn?” I glanced down to my chest to see if I was wearing a name tag: “Yeah.” She shook her
head in approval. I have never managed to remember who these women were. I don’t even remember their names. What I do remember, however, is that they made me feel closer to my father than I had ever felt. Sometimes, I felt as if I never knew my father. He was not himself by the time I had realized I was even alive. He was this hollow shell that resided in our house and mumbled incoherently sometimes, fearful of the smallest things. He never fulfilled the archetype of a father, and I clutched onto anything that could possibly link me to his “real” self.

It had been about six months since all of the preceding had taken place. We were adamantly trying to get on with our miniscule little lives. Then “it” happened: My father’s ashes had been placed in a shitty decrepit cardboard box, and placed under my mother’s bed. (My mother told me later that she had once run her fingers through his ashes and screamed and cried; it must have been one of the saddest sights I could have imagined.) So, the time had come to “dispose” of or spread them, traditionally speaking, and I wanted no part in that ritual. I had paid my last respects a long time ago, and I wasn’t about to go back to that “place” everyone hates when someone dies. I had “moved on” and I would be damned if I was going back there to revisit the feelings that had run my life for so long.

“No mom, I don’t want to,” I made sure to be very clear as to why, and proceeded to explain my dilemma to her about not wanting to relive the pain of the past or even see his ashes for that matter, and she nodded and seemed to understand why I declined. “That’s fine. Me and Randy will go.”

I had no problem with this, considering Randy had not gone to the “funeral,” and I am sure needed to get that off of his chest. Who was I to witness that absolution of his soul?
It was the day after when I saw my mother. "How'd it go," I asked. "Well," she said, "We went to Ricky's grave and dumped them on the ground over the top." Ricky was one of my brothers whom I had never met. He had died before I was born, and my mother had figured my father would like to be close to his son in death. I agreed, and she began to smirk. "What is it mom?" I asked her.

"Your brother is a nut,"
"No shit," I said, as matter of factly as I could.
"He decided to give dad his last cigarette and put it out in the ashes." What could be more perfect, I thought. The only way Randy ever knew how to express his feelings was with actions that were unexplainable to the rest of the world. Why would dad care? After all, he was dead, and did he ever love his cigarettes. Sometimes it seemed as if he loved them more than his own family, and since they would take his life, I'm sure his last request (if he had been conscious and could actually speak) would have been those beautifully tragic Camels that he would walk a mile for, not the companionship of his grieving family. But, he was fallible and weak and I forgive him for that.
I remember the first time I saw the ocean. It was after that painful summer my father lost his battle against cancer. That March when he died, my world spun off its axis and shattered. One minute I was living life to its fullest, going to work and college and parties, and the next minute I was two again, lost in the clothing racks at the department store searching for a familiar face. My family had always been my security blanket, my unfailing stable foundation of dependability, but most of all it was home; the one place in the world where I felt loved and sheltered from the storms of life.

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I spent my twenty-second year juggling college, work, and visits between the hospital and the home that wasn’t quite home anymore. For an entire year I had watched my dad, the person who rocked me to sleep until I grew too big for his lap and held my hand when I was scared, go through a hell no one could ever justly describe. When I first found out he was sick, there were nights when I would stop at home and watch my mom, a forty-five-year-old woman who had dated my dad since she was fifteen, learn from the home health nurses how to clean the gaping wound left from a twelve hour surgery so he could be at home. During the long days at the hospital, I witnessed over and over again the expressive denial on my sister’s face, trying to blind herself from the fact that our father was dying; I listened as she prayed for him to see her graduate so he could be proud of her one last time. I
looked into my grandfather’s gray eyes, saw the grief and
the unwanted remembrance of having already had to bury a
daughter, a wife, and possibly all too soon his youngest son.
I often flashed back to my own memories of my grand­
mother, bedridden, hallucinating from the morphine, taking
sharp breaths in pain from the breast cancer that spread so
vigorously, and I kept repeating in my mind “there’s just no
way I can go through this again.”

I spent many restless nights looking at the fragile
frame of a man consumed by cancer, yellow from jaundice
with black rings surrounding his hollow eyes, and wondered
when that fateful day would come. I watched the months
pass, weeks in and out of the hospital, the way it took all his
energy to try to make it through an entire day at work,
starting off in the morning filled with pride and coming home
in the afternoon defeated by the disease. My mother’s
stern voice was always ringing in my ear, telling me I
couldn’t cry because it would hurt him too much to see it.
I’ll never forget the day I sat in the lobby and listened like a
man stuck inside a well to the doctor explain that “it” could
be any day now, his voice in my ear so muffled and distant.
The same day, I watched two young candy-stripers walk
into my father’s room to give him water and come running
out shrieking to each other how his eyes were open, how it
was “so gross,” how he looked like “something from a
horror movie”. My heart sank, and all I could do was pray
he was too far gone to hear them.

I stood on the bleached wet sand, felt it cake to my
feet, squish between my toes. I looked out at the glistening
surf with its meshed blues that created a dark navy line
separating the waters from the horizon. I was astonished; it
took my thoughts and my breath away. The water was
aqua glass. I could see the sandy floor, the silver fish gleaming across. My heart pounded with excitement as I took that first exuberating step. As I waded further and looked back to shore, I felt as though I were a glass marble in a pool of diamonds, small and fragile, and thought to myself “even here I’m lost.”

The aftermath of my father’s death completely shattered the foundations that once supported me. My safe haven was now an apparition in the light. All that was left was the smell of his musk on the wind and an overpowering sense of emptiness—an unfinished western draped over the arm of his favorite chair marking the page that will never be read, the engraved pocket knife I gave him for Christmas sitting on the stand at his bedside...emptiness. My mom became bitter, sad, mad at the world. The loneliness made her sullen, sulky, unwilling to let go, unwilling even to begin to grieve. I thought I was strong, that I’d get through it—knew I had to, that my father wouldn’t have wanted me to be miserable, but as the days passed his death was always pushing from the back of my mind. I spent nights alone in my apartment crying myself to sleep. I felt lonely and sad, and nothing seemed worthwhile anymore. All too soon, depression strapped itself to the bed it had made in my soul. There was nothing I could do to make it go away. There was no way to bring my dad back; there was no way to find home.

Something broke inside me; it was a break I thought would never heal. Depression took me down a road I never knew existed. My world became foreign—cold and unfeeling. It was as if I were trapped inside my own body, peering out through my own eyes, with no voice and an exhausted energy that wouldn’t have permitted me
to scream even if I could have. All I could do was cry, all the time, everywhere. I’d lay in bed and cry, lock myself in the bathroom at work and the tears would race down my cheeks; I’d even cry in my car. I was drowning in quicksand and there was no one to keep me from suffocating. I literally felt like I couldn’t breathe. Thoughts spun circles round and round in my head with no end; I couldn’t even reason with my own mind, and eventually it just became too much to take.

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I sat on the beach all day. Thoughts flooded my mind and after awhile even those aqua waters couldn’t take away the sadness that was welling back up within me. I looked out across the waves, sifting the white sand between my fingers, wondering if the gaping hole I felt inside would ever begin to heal. I watched as a father splashed in the sun with his small daughter, tossing her up in the air and catching her before she went under those clear Caribbean waters. God, how I wanted someone to catch me; now more than ever I missed my father—missed my home.

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I can clearly remember when it all came crashing down on me. I walked into work that morning to open the store, and the early rays of sunlight that peeked in from a tiny rectangular window created an eerie soft light in the room. I looked around at the dusky gloom that painted itself on the walls and the floor and realized I was all alone. In one brief second I was overwhelmed by a feeling of terrifying loneliness. The memory of watching my father take his dying breath flooded back to me in a turbulent tide of shock and pain. I started to cry, deep sobbing breaths, huge wet tears. My legs trembled so fiercely they gave and
sent me crashing to the floor, where I sat, arms wrapped around my knees rocking forward and back until my boss arrived and sent me home.

Somehow I thought having a nervous breakdown would magically make things better. Unfortunately, that's not how it works. It's like falling from a cliff and expecting to just stand up and walk away from it unscathed; it just doesn't happen that way. The night I considered taking my life I lined up all of the anti-depressants I could find, in rows down my coffee table, and spent an hour wondering which ones and how many it would take to actually kill me. If I was going to do it, I wanted to do it right so that I didn't end up being a burden to my family. I stared at the pills for another hour, my mind blank and my glass of water warm. I picked up the phone and called a friend. I was so lost and confused by then that the conversation is still too sketchy to recall. When I ask her what I said that night on the phone, she just gives me a strange look, almost sickened and angry at the same time and says, “Let's not go there. I'm just glad I talked you back to your senses.” And I guess it's not that I really wanted to die... I just needed my mind to hold its breath for awhile so I could catch up.

At dusk, on the ship, we set sail across that majestic expanse of brilliance. Across shimmering fish, pink translucent jellies, the sparkling glimmers of sun rays skimming amid soft white-capped waves. I leaned on the burnt umber wood of the smooth rail, inhaled the salt and the sea on the wind. I pulled the bright white deck chair across the sun bleached wooden floor and slid my feet between the rails, hung them off the side of the ship and watched the waters race below. I stared out across the miles of Caribbean water to the sun sinking slowly from the horizon,
engulfed by the deep end of the ocean; felt it warm my skin like the Cayman waters had earlier that morning. I exhaled for the first time in a long time. I closed my eyes and let the movement of the ship, the rocking of the waves and sounds of the Caribbean soothe the chaos and the hurt that had been raging inside of me for so long. Imagined myself as a child again, rocking in my father’s large arms, humming his soft lullaby, singing me to sleep.

I hated the way I felt. Hated depression, nervous breakdowns, cancer, suicidal thoughts. It got to the point where I just wanted to evaporate, turn my bones to liquid and wash away in the rain, to be anywhere, nowhere, somewhere other than where I was— who I was. I lost my home, lost myself...yet was always reminded of what had changed in my life. Each time I stepped out of my apartment there was always someone who felt the need to “console” me, to ask how my mom was taking “it” or explain how they wouldn’t have been able to go on if something like that ever happened to them. Constant, continual reminders. Even my dreams would paint the tragedies in my life and plaster them, billboard style in lights to my mind. If I wasn’t in the midst of a nightmare, re-living the sight of my mother as she bent over my father’s body in agonizing tears, I was waking to the emptiness that surrounded me after dreams so vivid I could feel my father’s callused hands in mine.

I tried everything I knew to relieve the way I felt. I took anti-depressants, tried to exercise, worked, talked with friends. I even went to a psychiatrist, whose idea of treatment was to take a higher dosage of anti-depressants that were thirty dollars a pill and turned me into a vomiting zombie, whose only advice was to keep myself busy. I’m
not sure exactly what made me choose to get away for awhile instead of taking what I deem now to be really poor advice, but whatever it was I’m glad it happened.

*I decided to take a cruise, to see the ocean, and on that cruise I had fallen asleep dreaming of being reunited with my father. I traveled guilt free back in time—to a safer, less painful place where I could remember him the way I wanted to remember him; laughing, loving, healthy. Even in my dream I knew reality would come and he would have to leave again, but this time it didn’t matter. When I awoke, the raven sky was above me and my clothes were damp with sea-mist. My skin was sticky and my feet had pins of sleep. The storms within me had grown calm, like the waters of a windless night. I spent the next few days as close to the ocean as I could get and re-lived the Caribbean sounds infused with the soft voice of my father’s lullaby each morning and each night. The sun shone brightly, the weight pressing my head and my heart was lifted, and for the first time I could smile without feeling guilty. Those days seemed to pass too quickly though. The boat docked back in port and grudgingly I walked the ship one last time, running my hand across the smooth rail, looking past the bay to the ocean I may never see again—having gained great respect for those Caribbean waters, and having learned that sometimes you have to leave home, in order to find it.*
The sky is dark and the snow is heavy. Winter is always a bad time of year for me; I hate driving in the snow, ice, and cold weather. My car is always half frozen, and most of the time it takes at least ten minutes to defrost the first thick layer of ice from the windshields. Fucking power outage. I am going to be late for work because my alarm clock did not go off on time. Out of frustration, I jump in my half-defrosted car and push the limits of the law, as well as nature. The fields of frozen dirt and the pastures full of cows, sheep, and chickens pass by quickly. Every time I passed a giant farmhouse, I looked in my rearview mirror and watched the houses quickly shrink into the distance. Snow continued to fall onto my overheated hood as the tires attempt to grip the tiny pebbles that were frozen into the road. The rubber tires quickly began to quit gripping the asphalt, and I started to slide. I end up in a ditch in the middle of nowhere. I am such a dumb ass! Why do I always run into these problems? I use my cell phone to call work to tell them the reasons for me being late, but I can’t reach a signal. The reason I bought a damn cell phone was just for this reason.

The sky is dark, and it’s showering the earth with thick, cloudy snow. For some reason, I can’t get anything down on paper that I like; everything I write seems to be totally unorganized and choppy with no sense of purpose or direction. I can’t really put my finger on why, but I am
pretty sure it has something to do with my lack of experience in creative writing. When it comes to academic writing, I usually have no problem whipping out papers left and right. It’s not like I haven’t been trying, because I have; I write three or four papers a week for various classes. Nevertheless, lately I can’t even write a check without second guessing myself. What is it about writing this quarter that has made me so confused?

The sky resembles matte slate, and the snow is heavy and wet. Here I am, in the middle of nowhere, without a phone on this God forsaken little country road. What the hell am I going to do? I have two choices: I could sit here in the freezing cold and wait for someone to drive by, or I could start walking towards the nearest house. I began to walk as my tennis shoes crunched and crackled in the snow. It didn’t take me long to realize there were no houses in sight. SHIT, THIS SUCKS! I was freezing, and I didn’t have a clue about what I was going to do. I continued to walk, but I was starting to doubt my choice; my thin tennis shoes were doing no justice to my feet. My thin red jacket was doing nothing but letting the wind right through to my body; my ears were icicles and my fingers were like frozen fish sticks. That damn alarm clock! This was the time in my life when I wished I had more patience. “I don’t have time for this. I need to find a house with a phone --- NOW!” I am late, DAMNIT!

The dark sky is overwhelmed with thick sheets of wet snow. My struggles could be due to an overload of writing; however, I don’t think that is the case. I’ve always been able to juggle numerous writing tasks. Actually, I think it’s because of the different genres in which I am being
asked to write. In one class I am being told to write correctly about British literature, which I understand; in another class, I am being told to write in strict academic prose, which is my strength. It’s this third class, with which I have had no previous experience. I am struggling to get something called “reflection” into something called “creative nonfiction.” *Why is my education failing me? Why can’t I figure this out? What the hell am I going to do?* I have two choices: I could sit here in front of the computer screen and stare, or I could start writing and stop worrying about the reflection and the genre. I told myself to just free-write and see what comes up. I still couldn’t get the gist of reflection. I didn’t know what I was doing wrong. I never had this much of a problem writing before; if my papers weren’t good enough the first time, I revised them without getting frustrated. I made revisions-global and structural—and my papers came together with neat, flowing rhythm. The end of the quarter is approaching quickly, and I still don’t get it. I don’t have time for this. *THINK! Think about what you know.*

The sky is completely covered in darkness, and the snow is unwilling to let up. It’s cold, and I don’t know where the nearest house is located. I continued to walk, even though my shoes resemble small ice blocks; it seemed like an endless journey. This was like no other walk I had taken before; this was a walk of survival. *Stop thinking and follow your instincts.* There still isn’t a house in sight, no sign of human life on this road. Where the hell am I now? I was tired, cold, and frustrated with what seemed to be an endless walk into nowhere. I made one last attempt to make a call on my cell phone, but all I heard was beep-beep-beep. *DAMNIT TO HELL!* I heaved the little metallic phone across the small stone road into the frozen
tundra of the adjacent field. This is pointless. I don’t even know where I am right now or where I am going. I begin to push onward with great determination, failing to notice the small red barn to my left and the old dirty farmer on his tractor plowing piles and piles of wet snow out of his lot. I continued, hoping I would find someone willing to help.

The sky is darker than before and the snow, wind, and my frustration is relentless. Maybe I am trying too hard to get it correct the first time around; any writer knows that will never happen. I have always been good at revising papers and listening to feedback; maybe I just don’t get it anymore. No, that can’t be, I am ready to graduate college with a degree in English. Why I am I struggling to write so much now? I need to step back and try to remember what got me here today; yes, I can write a summary, response, analysis, fiction, poetry, or any other genre. With that much confidence in myself, why I am struggling to write a simple essay? Is it that I am burned out with writing? Is it just that I really don’t know as much as I would like to think I do? Or is it that writing is a fine art with which even the best writers struggle?

The sky is dark but tinted with a light shade of blue, and the snow has slowed a bit. I finally see a house in the distance; its faint image resembles a blurry watercolor picture. It’s about time— my toes are numb. I jog the remaining distance to the giant white farmhouse. My frozen toes remind me that I had walked at least two miles in the blistering cold. I knocked on the door, and an older gentleman opened the door and said, “I don’t want to buy anything.” I replied laughing, “Sir, I am not selling anything. Could I please use your phone to call work and maybe a
tow truck?” He looked at me with a puzzled look, laughed for a second, and then slammed the oak door in my face. I thought he was joking, but he wasn't; this man was serious. I quickly turned and started to walk away, but not without a few parting shots: “You old son of a bitch-- go straight to hell!” I hurried off his farm lot, afraid of what this old farmer might do with his Daniel Boone musket. Pissed and even more frustrated, I continued to walk, but this time, with certain determination, I cursed and yelled along the way.

The sky was clearing, but a dark snow cloud has moved in from the west. I know how much work writing takes; I realize that a writer can’t just sit down at a desk or computer and produce the perfect piece the first time around. If they could, they would probably cease to write--the process, the act of writing would lose meaning to them. I know writing is something that even the best professors and students continue to struggle with every day of their lives. Often as a writer, when I come to a point in my writing when I hit a block, I began to doubt my writing ability as a whole. Constantly, I find myself getting lost inside the content of my thoughts, which makes it hard to accept throwing something out of the original text. The fact that I began to panic in my writing forces me to enter a writing block. Once I enter a writing block I tend to close off all possibilities of listening to other people. Basically, I decide not to change any of the original text, even if people are telling me to change the content because it’s not working I write something that I think is reflective, suddenly I am told it’s not and it needs to be thrown out. When a writer has to throw something out, and figure how to replace the original words, it becomes tricky. Playing around with creative nonfiction pieces are frustrating, because I like what I have put into the piece. Why should I change that.
I like it there; isn’t that reflection anyway? I have been getting lost in my own words and not hearing what other people have been saying. I need to sit back and pay attention to other people’s feedback. Overcoming doubt is a key for me; I have figured out that once I get past doubting my abilities as a writer, I can successfully construct a text that is worth reading.

The sky is clearing and the sun is starting to shine. I am still walking, not exactly sure when this walk will finally halt. I have no phone due to my angry pitching arm. I am hungry, cold, and really pissed off at winter. Off in the distance, I hear something that I can’t quite make out. I haven’t heard anything along the walk except the sound of snow blowing and my lips cursing. I look down the road, in the opposite way I am walking. I see something coming at me. Is it the old man coming after me? A red, flair side Ford Ranger is coming towards me, I jump into the middle of the road and wave the woman down. Amazingly enough, she stopped. I quickly told her my situation; she smiled and said, “No problem, I can help you, here’s my cell phone, call whoever you would like. Jump in and warm up!” I didn’t argue with the warming up part, but I explained how the cell phone wasn’t going to work on this country road in the middle on nowhere. She replied, “Well give me the number and I’ll try.” I laughed, “Alright, but it won’t work.” She dialed the number, paused for a moment, and said, “Here, it’s ringing.” UNREAL! Why is it working now? My boss laughed and asked me if I was all right. Finally, the end, it’s over. My rescuer stayed with me until the tow truck arrived. For the entire thirty-five minutes we waited, the young woman and I warmed up to the sounds of Axel Rose singing Sweet November Rain. The tow truck company finally arrived and pulled my little car out of the ditch in two
minutes, and I was on my way.

It’s a beautiful day-- the sky is clear and the sun is shining brighter than ever before. It’s finals week and every paper that I revise adds a little more stress to my life. I have three portfolios due at the end of finals week, and my entire grade for each class depends on my revisions that I put into the portfolios. The feeling that I have at the end of each quarter is an overwhelming one; however, I also gain a good feeling of completion. It feels good to put so much time and energy into a piece of writing, but it feels even better when a writer finally decides it’s finished. The quarter has been chaotic, but now I have finished all of my writing tasks and I feel a sense of closure to my writing.
A Brand New Ending

The sun peeked at us through gathering rain clouds as Ashley, Amy and I listened to the car radio and conversed about the approaching thunderstorm. Ashley once again amused us with her endless convictions that this time there would definitely be a tornado and “can we please go over to Grandma’s house since we don’t have a basement?” For the hundredth time, I inwardly cursed my ex for allowing our 10-year old daughter to watch Twister.

“Well, I hope Jason is able to get home without getting caught in the storm,” I said, expecting that by now my husband was on his way home from his parents’ house, three hours away.

The clanging bells and flashing red lights signaled that a train was coming, further delaying our trip home, and increasing Ashley’s fear of being out in the storm.

Out of nowhere, I felt a tingling sensation rush from the top of my head, down my face, and into my neck. I felt dizzy, my heart began to race, and my hands sweated against the steering wheel as I gripped it in complete and total fear.

Stupid train. Hurry up! I need to go home. I need Jason. Oh, God, what is wrong with me?

Trying to remain calm, I said, “Girls, Mommy’s not feeling well. When we get home, you’ll have to get your own supper. I think I need to lie down.”

Innocent eyes peered at me, not understanding the complete metamorphosis of the mother who just moments ago laughingly teased Ashley that a tornado wouldn’t be coming to our house because one had already hit her room, and it wouldn’t be very likely that it would hit the same spot twice.
Finally, the train was gone. I needed to concentrate. I needed to get us home in one piece. I tried to convince myself that this would pass. Irrational fear wouldn’t let me think reasonably. Why did Jason have to go away this weekend? Why won’t this guy in front of me drive any faster? “At is wrong with me? Am I having a stroke? Am I going to die? Good, we’re home. Put the car in park. Why won’t this feeling go away? Just hurry and get in the house. I have to get inside.

I was out of breath, trembling, not understanding what could be the matter with me. I couldn’t get focused. I tried to lie down; I couldn’t. I felt that if I were still, I would pass out. I needed to keep moving, keep moving, don’t stop, pace the floor. The girls were scared — I could see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices.

“Mommy, what’s wrong?”

“I just don’t feel good. Maybe I’ll take a bath. That should help me feel better. Will you come up and check on me in a few minutes?”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, I’ll be all right, but if something should happen, call Uncle Dan and have him come over. OK?” I couldn’t remember if my brother was on duty today or not, but if they couldn’t reach him at home, I knew they would know to call him at the fire department.

I didn’t want to scare them, but I was completely beside myself at this point. As the tub filled with water, I undressed and washed my face with cold water, trying not to think about this terror that had taken over my mind.

I climbed into the tub and submerged myself in the steaming comfort. But I couldn’t do it. I had to get out, run, escape. What is wrong with me? Why won’t this go away? I’m only 32 years old. I don’t want to die. Barely grabbing a towel to cover myself, I ran downstairs, soaking the carpet behind me.
“Ashley, call Uncle Dan. I need to go to the hospital.”

Both of them were crying. “Mommy, please, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” I said too harshly. “Just call Uncle Dan.”

I somehow found strength to go back upstairs and find some shorts and a t-shirt to cover myself before my brother came over. It didn’t take him long to get there.

He walked in without knocking. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I had this weird sensation in my head and I got dizzy, my heart is racing and I can’t breathe. I just don’t feel good.”

My brother is the essence of calm. That’s what makes him great at his job as a firefighter. Without a hint of worry in his voice, he told me to sit down as he took my pulse.

“You just need to calm down. You’re hyperventilating. Everything’s going to be fine. Why don’t you try to lie down for a little while and then see how you feel.” Dan stayed with me while I lay on the couch until Jason got home.

Oh no, do I have to go through this again? Everything’s going well. Why? Why now?

My life as a normal person changed forever when I was twenty-three. I had just spent the day with a group of friends at Kings Island in Cincinnati, Ohio. It had been a great day at the amusement park: lots of laughs, lots of rides. It was late and we were ready to go home. As I started to get into the van to drive all of us home, I was suddenly overcome with this feeling of dread, like I was going to die. My heart was racing, I was sweating, and I felt
like if I closed my eyes, I would never wake up again. It was so intense that I could not drive. I was paralyzed with fear and felt like I was going to lose control. Someone offered to drive for me. I spent most of the hour-long drive with my head in my hands or sipping on a Coke, trying to tell myself to stay calm. The intensity of the fear gradually subsided, but my anxiety did not. All I wanted was to go home; somehow I knew it would all be better if I could just go home.

The next day I woke up feeling completely fine. I was so embarrassed about the night before. I couldn’t begin to imagine what had come over me. I had never felt that way before. I went to my friend, apologized, and thanked her for driving home, and I made up some excuse of “I think I have a touch of the flu.” I didn’t have a clue what had happened to me, but I knew I didn’t want anyone else to know about it. A few weeks later, this horrible fear overwhelmed me again while I was at Friendly’s eating dessert with some friends. I was too frightened to drive myself home. Again, I made some excuse of coming down with something, but I knew there was something dreadfully wrong with me.

One of my friends called my husband to come to pick me up. Gene came and got me, but I could tell that he thought I was nuts.

“What’s wrong with you? You look fine to me.” I tried to explain it to him, hoping for some reassurance that everything was going to be okay. I needed him to hold me tight and tell me he would take care of me, that he wouldn’t let anything happen to me, but his only response was silence.

I knew I needed to see the doctor, but I was scared. Each time this happened, I felt like I was going to pass out or lose control. My heart would race and I was short of breath. I just knew it was a brain tumor or heart
problem. What if I was going to die?

On the day of my doctor’s appointment, I was nervous, trying to mentally prepare myself for the worst possible news. I hated going to the doctor anyway, and now I didn’t know what to expect.

Dr. Ginn asked me what was going on. I tried to explain my symptoms: racing heart, breaking out into a sweat, feeling of dread like something terrible is going to happen, shortness of breath, and feeling like I am losing control.

He didn’t seem particularly concerned. “Are you under any stress right now?”

I thought about it for a couple of seconds and with a nervous laugh said, “Oh, you know how it is, with the kids and all, things are a little hectic.”

“I thought you didn’t look like your normal cheerful self.”

I kept my mouth shut, but I felt like saying, “Do people usually look cheerful when they think they’re going to die?”

He went on to explain his diagnosis. “Sometimes when people are under stress, the chemicals in their brain become unbalanced and that can cause anxiety. It’s treated with medication and the symptoms, like feeling you are having a heart attack, will go away in a couple of months.”

He assured me that I was not “mental” and that this was just a physical problem caused by the stress in my life. He prescribed the medication, and I went home relieved. I was better in a couple of months.

My marriage problems were a constant source of pain. I really did want to make our marriage work. I grew up knowing that marriage is sacred and meant to last “til
death do us part.” I didn’t want to be a statistic; I had made a commitment to love and cherish for better or worse. I had the kids to think about. We had just had our second baby. We needed to make it work, at least for them. But Gene was just so different from the person I had married. He spent so much time away from home with his job that I felt like a single mother. When he was at home, I really tried to make him happy. I kept the house clean and cooked meals, I took good care of the kids and didn’t let myself go after having them. I tried to give him a stress-free life by taking care of the bills and all the household responsibilities. I let him know I appreciated how hard he worked for our family. But something was wrong. He didn’t want to be with me or talk to me about anything. He sat in front of the TV and tuned me out. He became emotionally abusive and had even hit me a few times. He told me I was worthless and ugly and that I was a horrible mother. When I talked about going back to school, he said it was impossible. “We can’t afford it, and who would take care of the kids?” I tried to talk to him about how lonely I felt and how we needed to work out our problems before it was too late, but he wouldn’t listen to me. I loved Gene. We tried counseling, but when the marriage counselor told him things he needed to change about himself, he quit going.

I felt trapped. I couldn’t bring myself to tell my parents or my friends about the struggles I was going through. I was too ashamed. No one knew this horrible, ugly secret but me. I didn’t like the person I had become. I was building up walls of bitterness and resentment. I had given up college and my dreams to be with this man. And what did I have to show for it? Nothing but wasted time, a shattered self-image, and a horrible marriage. I tried to ride out the storm, but I was drowning. I finally called it quits.
I wish I could say that having panic disorder is like chicken pox, and it goes away after a couple of weeks, and you never get it again. I've only found that panic disorder is manageable. I know that it could probably hit me again sometime without warning. Although I know there are 3 million other Americans who have it, I don't tell anyone I have it; I'm too embarrassed. It makes me feel like I am too weak to handle my life.

They say that people who tend to get this disorder are perfectionists and high achievers. The fact that I have failed at some of the most important things to me, like my marriage and my education, eats at me. I live with so much regret over bad choices. I think about how my kids need their dad, but he doesn't even give them the time of day, and I regret the day I ever met him. I only hope I can get them through their teenage years without too many scars that stem from having divorced parents.

I think about how going back to school now places a hardship on my family. My kids need me at home to help them with their homework, to talk to when they need advice, to just cook them a decent meal once in a while.

I think about how many years I have wasted working jobs that suck when my real desire is to make a difference in the world. The "if only's" run through my mind like a screaming child that refuses to be consoled.

As part of the progression of panic disorder, I started to become a little agoraphobic. People who have it are afraid to be in public because it would be horrible to have a panic attack in front of someone. They feel as if they are going to lose control. Fortunately for me, work was a
safe place so I could go there, but I refused to go anywhere else without Jason. I would get dizzy in the grocery store. There were times I had to come home from social events because I was afraid. Eventually, I stopped accepting invitations altogether. I was completely dependent on my husband to sustain me throughout this period. He was so supportive, giving up basketball and tennis and any other “male bonding” times so I wouldn’t be alone. He could see in my eyes when I was afraid, and he would gently tell me, “you’re ok, don’t panic.” Sometimes he would laugh at me to break the tension and tell me “yes, you are dying. Make sure your life insurance is paid so the girls and I will be rich when you’re gone.” He knew that in order to help me get over the panic attack, he had to get my mind off of myself and on to something else. Sometimes he had to reassure me over and over and over again that I was fine, and that the doctors had not missed anything in their diagnosis.

But after a while, he began to get sick of feeling like a dog on a leash. He had no life anymore. I knew he loved me, yet I was afraid that if I couldn’t get myself together, he might end up leaving me, and I didn’t want this marriage to go down the tubes, too. I couldn’t live like this anymore. My life was in shambles. I was a shell of the person I once was and the person I wanted to be again. I wanted my old life back, but I could barely leave the house. I am a private person, even with my family and friends, so I don’t share the real me with just anybody. But I began to realize that nothing else had helped me get better - the medication did not work this time - it made me worse. When I was taking it, everything was in slow motion, and I had a heightened sense of my surroundings. It made me dizzy and zapped what little energy I still had.

I had to find some way to get better. My doctor had no other answers for me. Maybe I needed to stop shutting everyone out and quit burying my pain, even though
sometimes it was easier than dealing with it. I thought that after the divorce, all my problems would go away, but instead, all the regrets of my life were piled up inside of me like a heap of trash, and the stench of it was ruining my life. I had built up walls around my heart that even Jason’s love could not penetrate. He was patient with me when I shut him out or when I wouldn’t talk to him. He tried to let it go when I snapped at him or got mad for petty reasons. I just couldn’t respond to the love that he was trying to give me. It hurt too much to care, so I had become an unemotional, unfeeling, and unapproachable person.

The frequency and intensity of my panic attacks were beginning to be unbearable. The day finally came when I thought, “This is it. I’m going crazy, I’m losing it.” I was at the end of my strength, and as the ungodly terror took hold of me once again, I ran up to Jason, tears streaming down my face and desperation in my voice.

“I need you, and I need to talk ... now. I can’t live like this anymore. I’m dying, not physically, but on the inside.”

My words rushed out, because if I stopped to think about what I was saying, I would lose my nerve and never finish. I told him everything, everything I had done wrong, about the guilt I carried over putting my kids and family through a painful divorce, about how the abuse I had suffered at the hands of my ex-husband had scarred me more deeply than I realized, how I regretted that I never finished college and now I didn’t see any way of finishing my education, how I had never had a decent relationship with a guy and I couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me, and how I felt I never lived up to my father’s expectations; I had so many things planned for my life, but nothing had turned out the way it was supposed to. I began breaking down the walls that I had built up for years around my heart. As I opened up and told him every single thing that
ate at me, the walls of hurt and remorse began to crumble.

"Look at all this crap. Look at all the mistakes I’ve made. I’m a failure. I hate myself. Look at me, I can’t even leave the freakin’ house. Why do you even want to be with me?"

Jason let me talk. He sat there, sometimes looking at me, and at other times with his head down, soaking it all in.

At that moment, I realized for the first time in my life what love is, and he was sitting right there across from me. He knew every bad thing I had ever done, and yet he loved me. He accepted me for who I was, who I am, and who I wanted to be.

"Why didn’t you tell me this stuff before?" he asked.

"I couldn’t. I didn’t think it mattered anyway. The past is the past. I didn’t want to think about it anymore."

The thing is, it did matter, and I had to deal with it in order to move on. When I started to let it all go, a load was lifted from me that I could not carry anymore. Incredibly, I felt so much better that afternoon, and then an amazing thing began to happen to me over the next few weeks. I gradually started getting better, almost without realizing it. I began venturing out on my own, first to the grocery store, and then to restaurants. I soon began working out again at the gym, and I took up running. The exercise really helped me begin to feel better. Jason was finally able to have a life again. He didn’t have to say no when his friends asked him to go see a game, and he was back to playing sports two to three times a week. Most importantly, there were no more panic attacks. One night it dawned on me that things were better, and I said to Jason, “I haven’t had a panic attack for two weeks.”

“I know,” he said with a grin, “I think you’ll live.”
It’s been three years since I was freed from my prison, and I am no longer afraid. I don’t even think about panic disorder anymore. It took me getting to the lowest point of my life to realize that I wasn’t eternally destined to live a second-rate life. I had the strength to change my life and be the person I wanted to be. I came to understand that although I couldn’t start my life over and change the past, I could start from here and make a brand new ending.