

# **Shattered Wholeness**

**A Creative Honors Thesis/BFA Senior Project**

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### *Introduction*

*Shattered Wholeness* is a collection of stories about brokenness. While it is a work mainly about my life, it is really a work about all lives. I have included pieces from several writing courses in several genres, as well as including new pieces produced during and after my own *broken* experience. My story is woven in among the kinds of stories that happen every day— unmet expectations, the deterioration of mental and physical health, relationships that fail to thrive. Originally I had planned to arrange the pieces thematically: broken hearts, broken dreams, broken relationships, broken trust, and so on. Then I realized that nearly any story about brokenness includes any number of such “themes,” that what is more important is what these stories tell together. Whether it be told through the vehicle of poetry or prose, fact or fiction, brokenness is an experience common to all.

This collection does indeed tell my personal story, but it also tells my educational story. Because this work was both a BFA Senior Project and an Honors Creative Thesis, I chose to present myself through a variety of genres. I am not a single-genre writer. I neither studied nor wrote in a single genre during my pursuit of the BFA degree. In their book *Multiple Genres, Multiple Voices*, Cheryl L. Johnson and Jayne A. Moneysmith explain that this type of work “create[s] an argument that explores alternative perspectives by using multiple genres written from different points of view.... Students bolster their argument with research that is reflected within these genres, creating an organic whole, though that ‘whole’ may not be linear. By combining an array of voices with the rigor of scholarship, the [multigenre work] offers a fresh and powerful approach....”<sup>1</sup> Tom Romano is another contemporary exploring the multigenre work. In 1995 he published *Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres*, a story of his life, his love of writing, his passion for teaching. In 2000 he published *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers*, another work

targeted at using multigenre writing in classrooms.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately I discovered Mr. Romano at the very end of this project; had I known of him earlier I would have obtained and pored over his work. Tom Romano is also referenced in *Multiple Genres, Multiple Voices*.

While it is much more common to write and to find writers in a single genre, I deliberately chose *not* to take a traditional “academic” approach to this thesis, because that type of writing does not present the whole picture of who I am as a student and as a writer. Instead, I hope that I have presented the culmination of my BFA training by creating a cohesive whole out of several individual pieces. I literally struggled for nearly four years with “what to write about”—that is, with what this thesis should be. Now I am convinced that it was not ready to become *anything* during those years, because I was not yet ready to write it. While I regret not having finished it according to a “normal” undergraduate schedule, I do not regret the additional lessons learned nor the opportunities to write about them that came afterward. Finally, in the May of 2006, a full seven—yes, seven—years after beginning as a freshman at Bemidji State University, it is with great pleasure and not a little trepidation that I present to you *Shattered Wholeness*. Read on.

## Preface

Probably the biggest benefit of hardship is the *raw story material*. If one struggles to communicate and connect with one's spouse, it doesn't take much stretch of the imagination to create a short story about an emotionally unavailable boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse, or parent; or perhaps about an abusive one. If one loses one's job, it doesn't take much more research to create a compelling piece on the ups and downs of job-hunting and interviewing. Tough times are what provide us some of the best writing prompts.

Beyond that, tough times also provide us some of the best opportunities to learn and grow. If we were never faced with challenging circumstances, how would we learn about trust, perseverance, indeed even about the nature of ourselves? It is in hardship that we come face to face with the deepest pieces of ourselves, seeing what we like and don't like about what we're really "made of" inside, and hopefully learning what we need to change in the process.

Though I've rarely—okay, *never*—been excited about the difficult circumstances in my life, I've almost always appreciated what came out afterward. New perspective on life and about what's important. New perspective on who I am becoming and who I'd rather become. New perspective on the relationships I have and the ones I need to mend, rebuild or restore. New perspective of me. It is as though "tough times" are the mirrors that show us who we really are, not just who we think we are. We learn how we hold up—or don't—under pressure. We learn how we react to those who push us to the edges of our sanities. We learn how "civilized" we actually are. We learn, for instance, that we use sarcasm as a means to cover up hurt. We learn that we close up instead of opening up when we're feeling threatened. We learn that we've repressed our emotions for so long we've forgotten what it feels like to cry, get angry, or even be moved by something or someone else. We

learn that hurting back is not the best way to redeem a situation when we've been hurt. We learn that it doesn't feel particularly good to "win" a fight. It is in these moments when we are able to get glimpses into the selfishness, the bitterness, the impatience, the utter maliciousness of our own hearts. And instead of feeling sorry for ourselves for whatever difficult thing we're facing, we have the opportunity to grow into less selfish, less bitter, more patient, more kind beings. Yes it is important that things are resolved, wrongs righted, issues dealt with properly. But we shouldn't miss the rare openings we have to take a good hard look at our own failings and make strides in repairing the broken-down pieces of ourselves. The following pages are glimpses into these broken places, only fragments of a much larger theme, hopefully creating a picture—a shattered whole—of what it is to be human: that is, to be broken, and after, to heal.

## Part I: Shattered

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall...*

**Pasting on a Crestwhitened Smile**

Hid behind the confidence  
of \$60.00 haircuts  
of squared shoulders and freshly ironed  
Dollar bills

The best parts of me I liked  
the parts that smiled in pictures and  
laughed out loud  
Center of attention

Sick  
of pushing  
forward but  
waking up  
the same  
Sick of  
being sick  
of being sick.

My teeth weren't even that white anyway



**Only the dying**

*Resting, she finally slept*

*The old memories*

*Spoiled*

i wanted to  
soar but you wouldn't  
let me  
i think that day you grew  
up faster—  
i am  
heat  
i left  
you behind  
to pick up  
what i  
threw away  
we  
melt but i won't  
feel it

*She sat alone among the others*

*She was high school in the 80s*

*There is no rebirth*

### Essay #3

I entered Bemidji State University in the fall of 1998, an already-declared English Education Major. I've since become much less confident of that aspiration. Teaching is something I've always wanted to do, and I never gave much thought as to exactly *why* I wanted to do it until fairly recently. Some of the *Why* still isn't clear, and since much of the *How* is completely mysterious, that doesn't leave me with much confidence in myself. When I think about going into life and teaching, sometimes I can see myself doing it and sometimes I can't. The times when I can, I feel excited about my coursework; I participate more eagerly in class activities and great rush out of doing my homework. The times I can't, I am terrified. I doubt myself, doubt whether I should be taking the classes I am, wonder if somehow I've missed something important about myself the entire length of my undergraduate career.

I like learning. I always have. I like to do good work. I push myself because I like to succeed; I love to read and write. Until recently, I thought I would love to be a teacher. I'm less sure of that right now. I know that I love English. I just don't know whether or not I'm actually cut out to be a teacher. I've never contemplated before this year how difficult and how massive a job is teaching. I know it isn't easy, but often I am rather intimidated by the simple *idea* of teaching, by how huge the responsibility is, and by the sheer heaviness of the implications that are carried along with teaching. I've wondered whether I'd be better off teaching university-level classes. I'm not sure. I've pondered going into writing in some capacity instead and foregoing teaching entirely, at least for a time. Perhaps I'm simply over-stressed right now and I'll want to teach again by next semester. I'm going ahead with

this major anyway. I'm just really not very excited about it at the present time. Were I to think about it long enough, I'm fairly certain that I could convince myself right out of teaching altogether. That is a troubling thought.

I believe that much of my current dilemma lies in the simple truth that I'm not one hundred percent convinced that I really *want* to teach. Perhaps I've been too long in the college classroom, but I like it there. It's safe. Going out into the world and teaching others is not safe. I would be comfortable with the plan to go on to grad school, because being a student is something I know about. I've been a student since I was five years old. I don't want to put on a new identity; I'm comfortable with the one I have. It's a major shift becoming something else, *someone* else. But I mostly likely will. I must become someone else—it is time.

What makes teaching great and makes it terrifying is the exact same thing—it is an ongoing practice of *provocations*. As John Rouse explains in his book by the same name, “a teacher is one who gives not instruction, but provocation, so that a learner, startled into making an assertion, begins an individual movement toward some yet uncertain goal.”<sup>3</sup> I want to be that to students; it is a great thing to aspire to, and it does terrify me at the same time. Where there is huge potential for success, there is also huge potential for failure. I want to be on the successful side—to get out of the way, more or less—and provoke my students into discovering themselves. What a great thing that would be. And how terrified I remain.

**Give you up**

I don't want to  
Because  
I want to  
Be for you  
Be great for you  
Be something, anyway

Because  
I don't want  
To  
Be nothing  
And when  
You are something great  
You are  
Something

I don't want to  
Give up  
On you  
I don't want you  
To give up  
You are something

You won't give me up—  
Won't be anything  
But great  
Don't give up

I don't want you

*go ahead*

i don't care  
if you think you're  
invincible  
or not.

i know the real you,  
the you who smiles grandly  
to her audience and then  
walks out of the spotlight and  
shudders  
silently.

i hope you get  
caught in your own game. i hope  
you fall, walking away from us  
like you always do. i hope you  
never see the greatness in me,  
or the pain either.  
on second thought, i won't let you.

### What to Write About

When I think about the kind of journaling I did in elementary and high school; I'm not overly impressed. Well, perhaps I should qualify that a little: I'm not impressed with how I wrote, what I wrote about, and how often I wrote. At least some of my teachers, to their credit, actually *had* their students journaling. The content was, after all, up to us. Maybe what wasn't satisfying about the journals was how seriously I took them, or rather, how seriously I didn't take them. I think that's because I didn't know what they could do for me. I remember just writing about the day, what we'd done in class, and maybe a couple times I talked about who I had a crush on. I don't remember ever using journaling to respond to some idea in class, to reflect on a discussion, to explore my ideas of a piece of literature, or even just deal with what was going on inside me. Part of that might've been because I was too immature in third or fourth grade to be adequately aware of what was going on inside me, but I tend to think that might just be a poor excuse. I think my teachers could've taught us about journals more; specifically, how we could *use* them, because I think we had the potential to do great things with them.

Words can be what help us deal with our emotions, our thoughts, our ideas. I think young people should know that when we're at our most raw, words can be the just-right salve for those wounds. I think that's what I appreciate about writing: that I can sit down with a pen or paper (or maybe a keyboard and a monitor) and try to make sense of the world, or at least of *my* world. I do it a lot now. I'm not sure when I began this practice, but it has since become a major component with my "dealing with stuff" phases. Take this following passage as an example:

My mom called me this morning. She wanted to know whether I was coming home this weekend to attend a graduate banquet for my younger brother. She also wanted to tell me that our dog died. I guess I don't know if *died* is the appropriate word to use in this case: our dog was hit—no, *run over*—by one of those fuel oil trucks (they look like enormous propane tanks with wheels) three days ago. And left, still alive, but damaged far beyond repair in the middle of the road, where he was attempting to drag himself into the ditch. A neighbor whom my mom had never met was also driving that afternoon and he saw it happen—or he passed the truck and then came upon the dog—and came to our house to inquire whether we owned a large brown dog and to let us know what had happened. He told my mom that he was going to go to his house to get "something to finish him off with," because he was obviously dying but still suffering. But he'd wanted to let us know first. My mom instead gave him one of our guns and told him to go ahead. Later my stepdad went out to bury him. The driver of the truck never contacted us, never stopped, never checked to see if the animal was dead.

There are several things that are sick about this situation. First, my mom runs a daycare, and had it been a warmer day, she would've taken the children outside shortly after the incident, which would've meant the kids would've seen the dog out there on the road, his back-half crushed and bleeding and leaking organs in his attempt to get off the road. The parents of these children would have also had to drive around the mess of the dog in the road to pull into our driveway to pick up their children. Had the neighbor not been in his car that day at that time, the dog would have continued to die miserably until someone had noticed it later.

What of the truck driver? I know that fuel oil trucks are large, but they're not so large as to not notice running over the hindquarters of an adult Lab-Chesapeake mix. Or to see the dog. What of the dog? Perhaps it was stupid of the dog to run near the truck, but how fast was the truck going? The driver hit the dog right at a corner and an intersection on a dirt road. How difficult is it to swerve? Maybe not particularly easy in a truck that size, but what about stopping to see what happened to the animal? Or to stop to inform someone? There are two houses there—it isn't like the driver had an overwhelming task of figuring out to whom the dog likely belonged.

What sense is there in any of this situation? Probably none. A family gets a puppy. The puppy grows into a dog. One day the dog runs out toward a large truck. The truck runs over the dog. The dog is still alive but will never recover. The truck drives away. The dog is shot in the head by a compassionate stranger to end its suffering. The dog is buried by the family. The end of the story.

I really have no idea where to go from there in this passage, but that doesn't really matter. I *can't* make sense of it, but it probably helped that I wrote it. I know I'm probably harboring some irrational anger toward the driver; after all, I wasn't there. What do I know of what actually happened? Still, I had to write about it. It was paralyzing me from moving elsewhere in my writing.

That's what writing is about, at least in part. Dealing with those raw edges of ourselves, smoothing them down a little, quenching the flames inside. It's satisfying to write scathing words to some anonymous driver of a fuel oil truck. Who cares that I don't know him or her? Who cares that I wasn't there to see what happened? I can make that person out to be the unseen evil one, and that assuages my pain a little. I think that's constructive. I think it would be deconstructive to send hate mail to this driver (if I ever



found out who it was) or to spread nasty rumors about him or her or about the company, or to sabotage the truck in some way. Okay, those last few suggestions are probably a bit beyond what someone might do to avenge the death of a dog, but you never know. What if I didn't have other outlets? What if I couldn't deal with the pain in writing? It doesn't matter that I might never know what happened; it matters that I could express myself. It doesn't even matter whether anyone else ever reads or hears what I wrote about it (although in this case, you have already), because what was important was that it had *purpose*—it was for *me*. Not all writing has to be that way or will be that way, but I'd sure like to see more of it taking place in classrooms and elsewhere.

So that's my plan: to use journals and journaling as a way to *get at* stuff below the surface. (I have used italics a *lot* in this piece.) I didn't do it enough in high school, especially, and with all that was going on in my life then, it probably would've helped. The other great thing about getting all the raw stuff out is just that—it's out then, and that leaves space for other things to go in—or for other things to come out behind it. No wonder students can't explore deep things in writing like teachers and parents dream they will—they're still stuck on why he's having those feelings toward that guy or why her parents are getting a divorce or why he didn't make the basketball team or why she agreed to have sex with him last week or why his dad beats his mom or why he raped his girlfriend or why she keeps shooting up or why his voice hasn't changed yet or why she has the smallest breasts in the whole school or why he is still scared of the dark or why her dog got run over by a fuel oil truck on Wednesday. They can't move on until they deal with what's right in front. And journals will be one way we get at those things. I want to empower those I can to do that. Or at least I'll try until my voice is hoarse from talking about it, pushing them further,

deeper. And I need a great closing sentence, but I'm not sure I'm going to find one. So I'll just stop here.

*Accusation*

Troubled  
Is what I am  
And was and what I'll be  
Tomorrow, because you left me  
Alone.

*Key of F*

I tried to sing songs  
of soul and of spring and

all I smelled was  
not new,

not even the evergreens who  
never die.

but here I am  
and what else is there except grass?

wind.  
dirt.

dirty.  
I heard no music.

## Old Chums

Her name was MaryAnn and I should've known from the outset to avoid her. Just the name, *MaryAnn*, implied trouble, that prissy quality you would do well to stay away from. She was my best—and worst—friend when we were eight. We were the two shortest girls in the third grade, we weighed the same, and we both had long brown hair.

MaryAnn's was longer than mine. During recess the boys would chase and corner us, and we'd defend ourselves by kicking them in the shins. We also got them to push us on the swings, but that was I think mostly because MaryAnn was one of the Early Bloomers in our class and all the boys wanted to "go out" with her because they probably thought they'd get a chance to do Something with her—maybe they didn't even know what exactly, but there was Something to be done. I never said that to her, of course. I was terrified to be her enemy as much as I was afraid to be her friend sometimes. MaryAnn was a control freak. She pouted when she didn't get her way, she held petty grudges over my head, and she talked behind my back when she was mad at me. I don't even remember any of the reasons why she ever got angry with me, but I do remember that it got to the point of ridiculous: I would lose track over the weekend whether or not we had ended the week as friends. She was the embodiment of manipulation.

I heard a few years ago that she'd gotten pregnant during our last year of high school—she, the prim and proper one—and I'd guess she has two or three kids by now and she probably got married to some bulky, tired, bored-looking man whom she can push around and who has a chronic beer-and-Corn-Nuts-and-Monday-Night-Football problem. She might've gotten as far as two towns over from our hometown, and she's probably working as a snotty bank teller or an accountant or maybe one of those annoying personnel

people in a department store you get sent with your complaints to and who smile at you with that sickening smile that is obviously masking pity or contempt—you can never be quite sure which—and tell you that they're very sorry, but without your receipt of purchase and your latest credit card statement and your social security number along with a certified copy of your birth certificate and copies filled out in triplicate documenting your last four visits to this business, they really can't do anything for you today. But maybe you could come back another time.

*are you gone*

father: too busy, too bland,  
*what about the thrown-away parts?*

he left

## Why My Parents Got Divorced

When I was a little girl (three or four?), I remember my daddy coming home after a full day of work, grading dirt roads for Cass County. He would come through the door, were I'd run to give him a hug; he'd lift me up and hug and kiss me, and my mom would come over to do the same.

My father was a hard-working man. He worked every weekday for the county and then he'd come home to attend to our farm: we raised beef cattle and crops, about a half-time operation. He also kept very busy helping various friends and neighbors with random tasks, and in the winter months, he made extra money plowing driveways. My dad was a product of his time, growing up in (the end of) an era when men and boys took care of "outside work," and women and girls did the "inside work." Men didn't show their emotions: they took care of their family by being good providers. It was women's work to raise the children. *His* father had never cooked or cleaned or even set the table; that was his wife's job. I think my father carried most of these attitudes about men and women's roles into his marriage, even though in the early days of the farm my mom helped drive tractor and rake hay in the fields. I was in the first year of my life, and I would take naps in the cab, right behind her seat as she drove. Thus my mom took on more roles, but my father did not.

I remember that they argued a lot. I was probably somewhere between five and ten years old at this time, and what I remember is them yelling at night, when we (my younger brother and I) had gone to bed and they were still up watching TV. It was simply a normal experience for me, that they yelled at each other.



Then it was July, and I had recently turned eleven. I really had no idea that my mom was as at the end of her rope as she was. Divorce had never entered my mind. Ever. I was familiar with the concept by this time, since my father had been married once before he married my mother and I had an older half-brother who visited us. But simply because my parents argued didn't cause me to think they'd ever get divorced. We were all involved in the Baptist church in Pillager. We were part of the potlucks every Sunday during the winter, attending the late afternoon service afterward. My dad and I sang special music together. We went to the church picnics and to family camp. On the outside, we looked like a pretty "together" family.

What I didn't know, mostly because I had never experienced anything different, was that daddies are supposed to help raise the kids. They're supposed to play with their children and help the mommies tuck them in at night. They're supposed to say bedtime prayers with their kids—it's not just the mommy's job. They're supposed to hug and kiss their kids all the time—not just when they're little. They're supposed to *be* there and be involved in the lives of their children.

To my father's credit, he did do some of these things. I remember that he helped me build a log cabin model for a school project once—it was a really cool project. He probably taught me things about the cows and the crops, and I really did love to sing with him. I just don't remember when I stopped running to the door to hug him when he got home from work. He wasn't a terrible father; he just wasn't as involved as my mom (or as his children) needed him to be. His father hadn't provided this kind of example, and so he didn't know how to be different.

My mom was also young; she married my father when she was twenty, and I came along a year and a half later. She hadn't had a good example of marriage in her own family

and had lived as a pretty rebellious teenager with her father, an alcoholic. When she met my dad, she quit doing a lot of things she had been doing: smoking and partying among them. She became a "nice" girl and started raising a "nice" family, and it *was* sincere, but I think she still lived with some of the unresolved messiness underneath. I think some days her role just got to be too much.

What I also didn't know for many, many years is that both of my parents had cheated on each other somewhere along the way. I think they both knew it or suspected it, but it was never out in the open. It just helped to further break down the already wounded relationship.

My parents had apparently gone in to talk to their pastor several times about their problems, and he had recommended they go to a counselor for some help, but my father refused, and my mom of course couldn't go alone for marriage counseling. She had developed a chronic cough as a result of the stress she was living under, and one day she finally decided she'd had enough. And we moved out.

I never thought it was my fault. That seemed to be the (stereo)typical response of children when their parents got divorced, and I had seen it or heard about it enough in movies or TV or somewhere to the point that I almost thought I *should* think it was my fault, just to fit in with the popular culture. But I never did. I knew my parents both loved me, and I knew that they fought a lot. That was it for me. There was of course a lot I didn't understand, but that was the reasoning I accepted at the time. I began to deal with the rest of the complexities later in life.

For many years, I had cried only once over my parents' divorce. Actually, until I was eighteen, I think this was true. This was a time of great change in my mom, and as I saw her soften and grow, I began to deal with the divorce more: it was finally "safe" to. I

realized I had harbored a lot of anger toward my mother for moving out on my dad, even though I thought I understood it and was “okay” with it. That anger was a shield for all of the hurt underneath that I had never dealt with. I had to learn to forgive my mother and learn to trust her again. I had to learn how to grieve a loss I had pushed down so deeply I didn’t even know it was there for nearly eight years. One day a few years ago I was talking with my mom about her marriage to my dad, and she admitted to me that if she had tried a little harder (i.e., if she would have actually managed to get him to counseling with her), they probably could have made it. But she had finally given up. Hearing that tiny fragment of hope for their marriage, even though I was (and am) convinced they are both in better places now, really cut through me. It was as though for one moment I could see the alternate ending to the story, one where my parents made it happily ever after, after all; and in that moment I realized how much as an eleven-year-old I had wanted my parents to stay together, no matter how much I had managed to convince myself otherwise. It was a significant moment.

In the last five years, I have written several pieces on that topic of my parents’ divorce and the numerous happenings thereafter. Each time, I think I understand a little more, I grieve a little more, and I heal a little more. Thus far, none of those pieces have compared to what I have written today in terms of dealing with my own sorrow and grief over their relationship and what their divorce did to me. I found myself today with frequent tears as I wrote, needing to stop more than once and walk completely away from the screen to simply remember and to cry for this loss. I find myself living in that interesting space of realizing how much I really did want my parents to make it and not completely understanding why they had to get divorced—why *my* parents didn’t make it when others did—and also thanking God for what healing has happened in all of our lives since then. It

is why I have such a sensitive spot in my heart for those in difficult family situations, and it's probably why I push myself and those I love the most too hard toward perfection. I will probably never understand exactly why my parents got divorced, just as I'll never know exactly why I have experienced many of the things I have in my life. It is an uncomfortable comfort. I live today, understanding that all kinds of brokenness can be healed, no matter how big it is and no matter how long it takes you to finally realize you *need* to heal. And so I go on from there.

*Almost Twenty-three*

We are two and three, and then nine and ten;  
Girl and Boy,  
A 4.0 and *who the hell cares*,  
Beethoven and Guns N' Roses.

You smile, twice.

I think  
Both times you are playing your Gibson,  
Your eyes betray—  
I wonder: *do you blame me?*

One day you go away, not angry—  
Void.  
“Out of dust we Become”  
And then we become ash.

Too soon, too  
Late  
One year and a half, precisely.  
(You were always older)  
So how come I'm the oldest now?

---

*For Ashley Justin Stuckey, 11/19/79-1/4/02*

### Words, Words, Words

Throughout our educational career (and beyond, I suspect), there are times when we write even though we really don't feel like it. Usually we write because that has been assigned. At very rare and special times, we write because there are words that are welling up inside us and there is no other way to get them out. Sometimes what we write is only for us to see. Sometimes we write because we need others to read it. Sometimes what we write is bland, sometimes it's passionate, sometimes it's poetic, and sometimes it's breathtaking. Other times it just feels like words.

I think if I were to analyze my experience in high school with writing, I would say that I certainly was something that I sometimes didn't want to do, it was something that usually had been assigned, and it was often rather bland. I know that it was rarely something that had been welling up inside me just waiting to burst out. On the other hand, it *was* something that, on occasion, I really *needed* others to read, and I know that in those times, it was also passionate. Very often though, it felt like only words. Some of this cannot be helped; in the long journey (the unending journey?) to discovering who we are as a writer, there are going to be rough parts, dull parts, and fortunately, parts that shine. The point is that I *wrote*.

When we write we learn about ourselves. Even when we're not writing about ourselves *per se*, our writing style gives us clues about who we are. We learn while writing a research paper, for example, that we're not really as interested in alcoholism in Minnesota as we thought we would be. We learn when we write narratives that our best friend stabbing us in the back when we were ten still affects the way we feel about her. When

we're still trying desperately to figure out who we are and what we really do like or dislike, what we believe in or don't, and who we should trust and who we shouldn't, writing forces us to work some of these things out—forces us to struggle with them—and even when we don't feel like we really know anything about ourselves, in our writing there is evidence about who we are becoming.

Students need to write because they need to see themselves. They need to have arguments with themselves on paper; they need to argue with others through their writing; and they need to work out parts of themselves, sometimes easily, sometimes not. Students need to see that writing can become a means through which to vent anger, frustration, confusion, and whatever else there is that needs to be vented. If, throughout the time that I'm teaching, that becomes a reality to even one student who would have otherwise taken his or her issues out hurtfully on someone else, then I've taught something of worth. I know that writing is not going to magically solve the problems of society, but it is my conviction that it could at least provide a safe way out once in a while for a few.

I think my writing voice would have developed more fully in high school, had I not been spending so much time writing to my teachers and instead had had more time to write for me. Writing what I thought the teacher wanted (and often *did* want, if the grades were any indication) produced stiff, lifeless prose. It did very little for me outside of honing some of my formatting skills. It should not be this way. When I'm teaching writing classes, I want students to realize there is something welling up inside them that just *has* to come out on paper, that they cannot bear to keep locked up. I want them to take even one step closer to becoming "independently powerful writers."<sup>4</sup> (Christensen, n.p.). A bit lofty? So what?

And so we will write in my classrooms. We will write about what interests us, we will write about ourselves, we will write in reaction to what is going on in class, we will

write fiction and poetry and drama and autobiography and biography and the point is, we will write. No student is going to get out of my class never having formed an opinion about his or her own writing, not having realized that there is something out there called "voice," that words can create *meaning*, that writing makes you powerful. They will know it, and they will be better writers because of it. Oh yes, they will write.



no

my uncle is one year older than I am  
he's a half-uncle, if you want to get technical—  
and he can't walk  
anymore  
or ride motorcycle  
or work on his drags  
or put in new exhaust systems  
and rotate the tires

and he especially can't ride three-wheelers  
out in the fields the day before easter  
in colorado and hit something half-buried there  
in the gravelandcactus ground and fly over the handlebars  
and wake up in colorado springs in a halo and an iv drip

cause that's who he is  
perpetual mechanic  
tall, skinny, sarcastic and childish, usually—  
but he lives for cars  
and trucks  
and bigger motors  
and better air filters  
and new spark plug sets

so I guess it wasn't him  
must've been a mistake

Or  
a miscalculation

maybe

## Into the Unknown

"No."

"You can't just say 'No' to a question like that!"

"I damn well can. I just did."

"I thought we were above playing stupid little games with each other. I thought you were more mature than that. I thought you really cared about me. That you loved me."

"Did I ever *say* that? Don't put words in my mouth."

"How can you do this to me? Don't the last five months mean *anything* to you? What about last week? Last *night*???"

"Where are you going with all this?"

"I can't believe you! After all we've gone through! All of the things I've shared with you! The parts of our lives we've lived together! That night on the pier? New Year's Eve? I don't think—" Click.

*Daytime TV sucks. Where do they dig up the people who write this garbage? Honestly. Sigh and shake head. No one would ever believe any of it would actually happen. What a crock. Roll over on couch and try to fall asleep. Recall conversation painfully similar to stupid soap opera. Shut eyes tightly to avoid crying. Screw him. You didn't need him. You're fine. Look at how fine you are. Yeah, you're real peachy, aren't you? You're crying over daytime television. Roll back over and sit up. This is stupid. Get a hold of yourself. Read a book or go jogging or something. You'll go crazy otherwise. Standing, shake shoulders resolutely. Decide to go jogging. In the bedroom, dig out jogging clothes from bottom of laundry basket. You haven't gone jogging in over two weeks. And your clothes are disgusting. You'll have to wash them if you still want to go. Decide jogging isn't worth it. Resume search for distracting activity. Come to the general*

conclusion that reading will not work. *You'll just keep drifting off and thinking about him and then where will you be?* Look around bedroom for ideas. Hate him for making you this way. Wish for phone to ring. Walk into kitchen, open fridge. Consider cleaning fridge; determine it's too much hassle. Select strawberry-banana yogurt instead and close door of fridge. Get spoon from drawer and open yogurt. Walk to kitchen table and begin eating yogurt. Realize strawberry-banana is your least favorite. *You only bought it because he liked it. You thought he'd appreciate the gesture. But he barely noticed. And now he's gone and all you have to show for it is this disgusting yogurt.* Finish yogurt without ceremony and throw away empty container. Look around kitchen for new activity. *You never needed him anyway. A man who likes strawberry-banana yogurt—that should've told you something right there.* Realize lameness of logic. Leave kitchen. Walk back down hallway toward bedroom. Stop instead at bathroom. Decide to clean bathroom. Amass supplies and start in on the sink. *He wasn't worth all the time you invested in him. Everyone else knew that—your mom said it, your sister said it, even his brother said it. The brother really should've tipped you off, you know that?* Scrub angrily at toothpaste in sink. Finish sink and move on to shower. Hold breath and spray furiously into shower; back away and let fumes settle. *Why didn't you give up on him sooner? What were you trying to prove, anyway? That love could conquer anything? Not if it's only one-way.* Fight back tears again. Scowl furiously at grout and begin attacking with the rag. Realize “mind-consuming activity” is leaving way too much time for thinking; notice phone has not rung. Stand back to admire work in shower; turn around and look uncertainly at toilet. Try to recall last time it was cleaned. *Probably about two weeks ago, huh? Right before he came over. For the last time. You loved to clean everything for him; you wanted him to see what a tidy wife you could make. Fool.*

Mope around for remainder of the day; after supper consisting of toast and strawberry-banana yogurt, run head under faucet in kitchen, dress for work. Frown at haggard reflection in mirror in bedroom, realize tips will be sparse tonight. Wish desperately for phone to ring. *Yeah, right. Who's completely over him??* Prevent tears from falling. Again. Tell self he's not worth it. Again.

Fall exhausted into bed in wee hours of morning, don't bother taking off work uniform. Note absence of flashing Message light on answering machine. Finally allow tears. Saturate pillow with saline and snot. Cry until there are no more tears; resolutely decide to take back life, turn pillow over and sleep deeply.

Wake up Saturday morning to ringing phone.

Decide to let machine answer.

Decide at the last second to answer; spring from bed during fourth ring.

Arrive too late; pick up dead receiver.

Tell self aloud: "it was just a telemarketer." Wonder if there is more yogurt in the fridge. Discover there is. Walk into living room and collapse onto couch; turn on television. Drape legs over armrest. Yawn. *You know, Strawberry-Banana really isn't that bad. You could get used to it; you've eaten it three times in the last two days. It's not disgusting, anyway. And really, you're glad you cleaned the bathroom so thoroughly yesterday. It definitely needed it. You don't mind so much keeping house. If only....* Squeeze eyes shut and place fingers at temples. Remind self of vow made only last night. Say repeatedly in head: "I am taking my life back. I AM taking my life back. I'm taking my life back, damn it!"

Pretend to believe it.

During Spaghettios lunch, begin reading cheap romance novel from high school days while sitting on couch. Engross self in someone else's world. Jump, startled, when phone rings. Rush to kitchen to answer it.

"Hello?" Attempt to obscure breathlessness.

"Trish?" Wait wordlessly. "Hey babe, it's me."

Swallow hard. "Hi."

"How have you been lately? Man...it's like time has just raced by, isn't it? So what have you been up to?"

"Not much. Work I guess."

"Oh yeah? Me too. Man I've been busy! You wouldn't believe all the business the shop's had, especially since the snow last week. People are idiots out there. Yeah...it's sure been busy. So how's the Tempo runnin'?"

"Okay. The defrost still isn't working right."

"Oh yeah, I was going to fix that, huh? Hey, I think I could get to it next week sometime if you want to bring it in."

Hesitate only for a split-second. "Yeah, I think I might have some time next week."

"Babe?"

"Yeah?"

"I've really missed you." Clench jaw; look at ceiling.

Whisper, "Me too."

"Uh...so, could I come over tonight? I could grab a pizza and a twelve-pack and maybe we could talk or something. It's been hell without you, babe, it really has."

"For me too." Fight to keep voice steady.

“Okay, so I’ll see you around seven or something? Man...I’ve just missed you so much. Talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay.”

Click.

Burst into tears. *He must love you. He didn’t say it, but he said he missed you—that he really missed you. He wants to come over and work things out. Didn’t he say that too? The last two weeks? Well, sure they were hard but you made it through. Maybe you were overly sensitive. You probably read into his words when he said he needed some space. It really hasn’t been that bad, has it? And now he wants to make it up to you anyway. He’s really a caring guy underneath it all.* Smile wanly. Spend rest of the afternoon vacuuming and dusting. Take shower and put on sexy underwear; choose tightest jeans and red v-necked shirt. Apply too much eye shadow and mascara for the occasion. Turn only table lamps on, search for romantic CD, settle for soundtrack from *Dirty Dancing*, lounge on couch, and pretend to read romance novel while waiting. Stand up and unbolt door. Arrange and rearrange self on couch. Practice looking nonchalant. Take several deep breaths and close eyes momentarily to focus thoughts.

Jerk head up when hearing knock on door; compose self and yell: “It’s open!”

“Hey babe. I brought a supreme pizza for my supreme woman.” *You hate supreme. After eight months together, doesn’t he even know what kind of pizza you like?* “Hey—and could you put the rest of these in the fridge?”

“Sure.” Walk mechanically into kitchen and perform task. Return to living room.

“I had a couple pieces on the way over so I’m not really hungry anymore. I knew you wouldn’t mind if I got a head start.” Look at him and paste on a smile. *It’s okay. He doesn’t mean to be insensitive. He’s just nervous. You both are, right? Give the guy a break—at least he’s trying.*

"Yeah, that's fine. I'm not really hungry anyway right now."

"Great. So, do you really want to talk now? Cause the game's gonna be on in like a half-hour and we could talk afterwards or something too."

"Um...whichever you want; either way is fine." *Yeah right.*

"Cool. Man, that's why I like you. You're so easy-going. And sexy, too." *Why does his grin have to give you butterflies? Aren't you mad at him? Didn't you want to tell him how much he's hurt you? How you can't just be available at his bidding all the time? That you need a real commitment?* "Alright, then, let's watch the game first. I think it's on channel 23. The pre-game is probably already started."

Sit thoroughly bored through game. Remind self of important issues to discuss afterward. Wish for more resolve. *So why did you put on this particular shirt, then?*

After game, look up expectantly. *This is it. Here's where you show him what you're really thinking.* "So what did you think of the game? Were they playing well?" *Chicken.*

"It was great. Say, want to run to the kitchen for me? I'm parched."

Stand. Hide disappointment. *He's not any different. He hasn't changed one bit, has he? Come on, lay down the law!*

Return to position on couch. Hand over beer. "Great, thanks." *At least he said 'thank you,' right? Okay, here's your chance.*

"We need to get some thing straight." *Great. Keep going.* "Um...I...." *I'm not your little plaything! I need you to commit! I need to be respected!* "I...really missed you." *Nice job. Way to tell him.*

"Yeah, me too. Man...it was torture without you. I'm so glad we're together again."

"Uh yeah. It's great." *Uh huh. When exactly did we get back together?*

"So, is there anything else?"

*Yes! Yes there is! There's a lot!* "No, not really I guess. Just wanted to tell you that."

"Hey great. That's sweet. But if I remember right, you can be pretty naughty too. I think we should see if there's still a bad girl under that cute exterior." All self to be seduced into bedroom. Feel resolve slip away. Awaken several hours later feeling ridiculous. Get up quietly, dress, pack overnight bag. *You can get the rest of the stuff later. The landlord should let you out of the lease a couple months early; you've always paid everything right on time, right?* Go into kitchen and call a taxi. Open freezer door and locate stash of money. *You could go stay with your sister out in Washington until you find a place for yourself. You've always wanted to visit her anyway. You just need to get away from him. He's so bad for you.* Stand resolutely in kitchen. Look at counters. *Man, didn't you just clean these yesterday? The landlord really wouldn't be too happy about the condition of this place, would he? And the floor—you skipped the floor. Look at all the dirt. Maybe you should just wait until tomorrow afternoon. There are still flights to Washington tomorrow. And that way you could go talk to Mr. Barton and explain everything and why you need to leave now. Bite lip. But what if you don't go tomorrow? What if you stay here?*

Walk into living room. Realize door is still unbolted. Open door. Hear idle of taxi on street. Look toward sound. Look back at apartment. Blink. Stare at money in hand. Notice romance novel lying on floor. Think about leaving for Washington. Think about staying. *Take a step. Which way are you going? Come on. Make up your mind. Are you leaving or are you staying? Stepping outside or back in? Take a step. Pause. Make up mind.*

Take the step.



### 32 Reasons

Out of control

Feels like

Falling from the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor—31<sup>st</sup> if you take into account they always skip 13—

Feels like

Are you crazy or just too tired to figure it out?

Feels like

Why aren't there ever 32 days in a month?

Feels like you don't care

Feels like

32 games of Solitaire in a row, keeping stats

Feels like

Got all the lint off that red sweater—you know—the one with the cuffed sleeves?

Feels like alone

Feels like maybe

You could fix it tomorrow someday

Anyway.

And why can't I see  
It see the end see progress  
See the problem the root the cause

See the next step see  
Myself see what I want, what  
I dream of instead of every shade of gray.

I just want the map  
Why can't I have that? I promise  
I won't spill my coffee on it or tear it or fold it the wrong way

Just for a minute or two—  
Thirty seconds, even—  
It'd help so much—really—

I promise

I mean, if you're driving *and* navigating,  
What am I supposed to do?

## A Stone Stairway

The last time I was there, it rained. I remember walking under the gate and thinking, *this is going to be my third visit to one of these places, so how can it still feel so unreal?* It wasn't a very hard rain; it was just constant, relentless, and cold. We didn't pay for a tour, because some of us had been there before: we knew the route, we knew the system, we knew all too well how it worked.

No one talked much. We filed in and out of one trimly-built red brick building after the other—blocks, they call them—plodding up the stairs, in the door and to each room's exhibit, quietly looking at pictures and reading captions, making our way around the first floor and then the second, then plodding back down the stairs and out the door again toward the next. A system. A routine.

I took a few pictures, but because it was raining, I kept my camera in my backpack for most of the morning. Besides, how does one really know what to capture? People at home were not going to understand it all even with the pictures and captions and guidebooks I would bring back. I don't even understand it all, and I was there.

I had remembered many of the exhibits from my first visit—the room full of shoes, the one full of suitcases, the eyeglasses, hairbrushes, pots and pans, prosthetic limbs, and of course the hair. No one can forget the hair. I had remembered the pictures too; hallways covered in prisoner's pictures of men, women, and that entire display about children. It's peculiar though; I was expecting to see those faces, but they still startled me. *These people lived here*, I kept thinking, *real people*. *No, probably many of them simply existed here*. There were just too many faces to digest in one visit, or two, or perhaps ever, and these had only been taken up until 1943: after that, they were simply tattooed.

The block I had remembered in particular was Block 11. The "Death Block." In the basement of Block 11 are prisoner's cells. There are different types—most are standard cells, some are completely dark with limited ventilation, and others only allow for standing room—but the cells are not what had stood out so vividly in my mind. It was the stairs. The stairs are made of stone and lead from the ground floor to the basement in Block 11. It is through those stairs, beginning with the first time I walked down them two years earlier, that I have begun to be able to understand the whole camp better. Just the fact that they were made of stone was not what struck me; there were stone stairways leading into the ground floor of every single block from the outside. What struck me was that those stone stairs had been so *used* that two unmistakable depressions had been worn into each stair—one from going up, and the other from going down. How many people does it take to wear down stone? While I allowed that there have been many tours through Block 11 since the closing of the camp, it was on the stairway where it all became real for me at last: *prisoners went down these stone stairs. The steps that I am walking down. There were millions of souls here.*

I did not cry during this visit. Despite the return to the stairway, I came to the point where I could take in but could not really react anymore: my senses felt dull and became increasingly numb with each successive exhibit, and I realized they also had with each successive visit to this camp. There was simply too much.

It is not really an ugly place—the grass was green and full that mid-July, slender trees line the roads, the matching buildings stand uniformly in neat rows and in perfect symmetry—and then you see the seemingly endless barbed wire and the watch towers and the gallows and the execution wall and the Krematoria chimneys and that gate with those awful words: *Arbeit macht frei*. Freedom for whom? Freedom from what?

I wonder how many people lost their faith in God at KL Auschwitz-Birkenau. I wonder how many people lost their faith in humanity there. I wonder how many people gave up hope. I wonder how many people stopped living and started simply existing. I wonder how many people cried themselves to sleep every night. I wonder how many people waited and waited for the rest of the world to do something, to step in, to stop the hurt, the pain, to stop the suffering, to stop the hate, the lunacy, the madness, the sheer insanity that went on there. I wonder how many more people stopped waiting and just died. I wonder why people are so fascinated with the Holocaust, with the Concentration Camps, with the horror of it all. I wonder why I am.

There is a short movie you can watch in the museum at Auschwitz. They tell you in the movie that the reason this camp has been preserved is to teach future generations about the kinds of things human beings are capable of; and more importantly, to ensure that something like it will never happen again. I think about the worn stairs leading to the basement of Block 11 and hope it is indeed true.

## Part II: Wholeness

*I would like to beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even knowing it, live your way into the answer . —Rainer Maria Rilke*

*sometimes.*

art is  
writing out pain

B L E E D I N G I T

onto paper  
so the words can heal  
but sometimes they  
don't  
and then

it is only raw,  
not really art at all—  
a few rash sentences scribbled in haste  
before  
the tears blur the page

but if the blurs dry,  
they might make art

*Home*

I walk across the yard  
out into June  
breezes,

swing up with both legs,  
climb through leaves, grasp branches, pull  
with arms and push with legs and I see sky

through the green and bark ceiling.  
At last my place, my space to  
rest against.

Safe to think or sing or shout or  
cry or disappear  
for a few minutes

and hours, anonymous  
among the buds, the leaves,  
the occasional  
ant.



## Untitled

I didn't go into teaching because I loved children or students. I went into teaching because I was a "smart kid", because I was good at school, because I "got it" and wanted to show others how to "get it" too. I didn't go into teaching to do all those lofty things I heard other prospective teachers saying: to change the lives of young people, to influence the next generation, to make a real difference in the world; I just wanted to teach. When I finally got around to sorting it all out, I realized I went into teaching because I was a good student, a good learner: I was good at subject matter. It wasn't about students and it wasn't because I envisioned myself entertaining and funny and one of those people in whom everyone wanted to confide. I just wanted to inspire the love of learning I had in others' lives.

So I went to college and declared my major. I'm not exactly sure to whom I *declared* it, because I just wrote it down on my application, but there it was, on every transcript and related "official" document for the next five years: *Secondary Education, English*. And there began my college career: English classes and Education classes. I was on my way to becoming a teacher.

Somewhere in the midst of my sophomore year, my advisor sat talking to me about my forward progress. She said something that really stuck, and it could have been a big turning point in my plans, had I done something in response to it right away. She said, "Kas, why do you want to be a teacher? Is it because of the students, or because of the subject matter? Because if it's about the students, then go with it. But if it's only because of the subject matter, teaching isn't the place for you." I answered, somewhat knocked off-center, "I think it's some of both." Deep inside me somewhere I knew it was more about the subject matter and less (or very little) about the students, but I resisted it, convincing

myself that this was the path I'd chosen and I'd better finish it—and besides, it was what I'd *always* wanted to do...right? What else was there, anyway, for someone who studied English but not to be a teacher? I continued to take as many English electives as I could squeeze in, especially writing courses, finally deciding to add an emphasis in Writing to my growing degree. Growing because I couldn't just have a BS in English Secondary Education. I had added a minor in German and then another minor in Psychology, probably because something inside me wasn't satisfied with "just teaching."

Then in the spring semester of my junior year, I decided to "squeeze in" yet another component to my continually widening education. I added the newly adopted program called a BFA in Writing to my portfolio of aspirations, deciding it was worth it to add one more semester to what was already going to be four-and-a-half years in college, to round out the whole thing to five. In a few of my English courses designed for up-and-coming English teachers, I had the opportunity to think and write a *lot* about being a teacher, and many of my essays in that time were filled with uncertainties. I was unsure about my desire to teach. I was uncertain about whether I'd like it, whether I'd enjoy the school system, whether I'd be able to connect with students. I knew, by this time, that I really loved writing. While some of these misgivings were normal for someone looking into the face of a new and large change of life, some of them were something beyond that, glimpses into my real passions and desires that were still only whispers in the depths of me.

I wish I would have been brave enough to follow my heart at that time. I wish I would have stopped listening to the practical voices around me and inside my head, assuring me I "could always write" on the side, that teaching was a more stable job than writing, that almost no one can make it as a writer, that I'd gotten this far anyway, and a degree is a degree. Instead, I did what anyone scared of failing would do: I failed to finish

my degree. I failed to show up for classes. I failed to tell anyone what was going on inside me. I failed to admit to myself that I was failing, that I was depressed, that after nearly five years of college, I really had no idea what I “wanted” to do with my life, except that I wanted writing to be part of it.

I walked through graduation that spring, fooling myself into believing first that I could catch up on my incomplete coursework during the last two months of the school year, and when that didn't work, during the summer, and when that didn't work, during the fall semester of the next school year. I lost all motivation to finish the assignments, a new and confusing addition to my otherwise very devoted life of academia. School—and doing well at it—was all I had known since the age of five. I retreated into myself, sleeping long hours into the morning and staying up late into the night, desperately distracting myself with any activity that would allow me to avoid thinking about school and my degree: game after game of solitaire, *The Price is Right*, crocheting a blanket, rereading novels, checking email, reorganizing all of the folders and documents on my hard drive. But I did not write. Up until the “crash,” I had been keeping a regular journal, but after May of that year, I wrote very rarely. A scant entry in September, one entry from October, another in late November, and so on. I felt no passion to undertake my one true passion, and it was killing me slowly.

Until January. January was when I fell apart. Finally. I was sitting at my computer, attempting to journal electronically in the hope that it would push me to write more, with stilted success. I suddenly rushed up from the chair, bolting halfway across the room and landing in a heap on the floor. I burst into tears, wailing into the void *What do you want from me?!!* I spent some time there, miserable on the carpet, miserable for myself and miserable for the world I couldn't seem to connect with. I was *broken*, and I was admitting it to myself at last.

When you finally hit bottom, you have two choices: give up or get up. As I write this I marvel that suicide actually never crossed my mind as an option, because I probably was in a low enough state at the time for it to seem the only way out. So for me, the only choice was to get up. In the days that followed, I started talking about my struggles, my confusion, my *failures* to nearly whoever would give me the time to sit them down. I had lost all sense of shame, because I had no shred of pride left in me. My long drought in writing was also finally broken, and the first piece I wrote that early January was over ten pages long, detailing my struggle and silence over the previous months and years. I sent out an abbreviated version to friends over email, boldly proclaiming that I—yes I, the “perfect” student—had failed miserably, and moreover, I still had no clear idea what was coming next for me. I still had no specific career path; however, I knew I wanted to write.

Over the next fifteen months, I got a job (two, actually, for a time), got married, enrolled in a fall semester night class to work toward finishing my revised degree (just a BFA instead of a BS *and* a BFA), began actually working on my BFA Senior Project/Honors Creative Thesis, got promoted at work, wrote some more, and slowly learned how to have dignity in the midst of admitting failure and defeat and brokenness. I mended. I am mending. I've been facing my demons one after the other, fearing re-failure, re-defeat, re-brokenness each step of the way. Finishing this project—indeed, finishing this degree—has been one of the most difficult healing processes I've experienced in my life. Worse than my dog being run over. Worse than working through my parents' two divorces and three remarriages. Worse than coming to terms with my cousin's death and my uncle's paralyzing accident. Worse than anything I'd want to wish on anyone—almost. Almost because of the amazingness of mending. I am wiser, more secure, more open, more giving today because of my yesterdays. If we never broke, we'd never experience any of the

## Yearning

I have something to say.

My biggest fear is failure. Failure to do the things I'm supposed to do, failure to complete my degree, failure to matter, failure to do the things I long to do, failure to have something important to say.

Why do I fear failure? I fear that which I cannot control. I fear not knowing who I am if I am not an Achiever. I fear that I don't matter.

I want to matter. We all want to matter. We all want to do things that matter. We all want to have something important to say.

It paralyzes me from writing: I am so afraid of doing the very thing I love the most, because I am so afraid that it's fantasy, a pipe dream, a wish, a folly, and that it will fail. That I will fail. And I don't know what will happen if that does; I will not know myself. What happens when you come to the end of yourself? What if there is nothing after that? I am afraid that I will learn that I am not a writer at all, just a student with a few A's. What do A's matter in life? Life is not a series of papers, grades, semesters, exams. Life doesn't care about GPAs.

Once I wanted to be a teacher. Or I thought I did. I failed at that dream. Maybe it wasn't a dream at all, because it did not burn in me the way wanting to write does. Do we all dream this way? I am afraid that I am an average writer. Average writers pass their classes just fine. They rarely go on to *become* writers. The deepest part of my being cries out this fear even as it tries to suppress it; I cannot accept that I may just be good enough at writing. I want to be great. I want to WRITE.

And I am afraid that I am really not all that talented at all. And I wonder, *why do I have this deep desire to write? Do others dream this way? Do they eat and sleep writing this way? Do their hearts stir upon hearing a beautifully constructed phrase, sentence, paragraph?*

But I feel it so deeply it aches.

*The Aftermath*

Bodies  
Lying twisted  
And tangled. The silence  
Shattered: one last shot. Perfection  
Ruined.

*When I die*

I will dream  
In blue.

I'll fly  
In blue  
Fields, flowers overhead.

I shall lie  
In fields of sun  
Flowers, waving.  
*You will not cry.*



## Assassin

My next-door neighbor, Mrs. Parks, is driving me insane. I'm not kidding. That woman should be in an institution. Do you know what she did? Well, lots of things actually. For one, she found the phone line leading into my apartment and she cut it! For no reason! I was on the phone with Evelyn and we were right in the middle of discussing whether or not Lorainne's hair color was really natural as she kept insisting or if she'd gotten it highlighted and tinted to hide her grays. Everyone knows her mom was completely gray at that age. So there we are, minding our own business, and suddenly the line goes dead. I thought Evelyn had hung up on me for no reason! Boy was I mad. And guess what else she's done? She used a drill to make holes in the wall between our apartments! All the way through the sheetrock and the insulation and my new wood paneling! I came home from work—I'm a secretary at the middle school—right, so...I came home from work one day and there were five holes right through the wall! And now I can see right into her kitchen. I think that was about two weeks ago. I really don't know if she used a drill, I guess, but what else would you use? I can't believe no one else in the building heard anything...maybe they were all at work too. Why wasn't Mrs. Parks at work? All I ever see he do is gather up all the heels of her bread and put on her big straw hat and go down to the pond in the park to feed the ducks. She's crazy! Who wears straw hats in autumn? Everyone knows you only wear straw hats in the summer. They keep your face from getting burned. No one needs to keep their faces out of the sun in autumn. The woman is crazy.

But I haven't told you the worst of it yet. About a week ago I heard her talking on the phone to somebody after supper. She had her TV on really loud but I could still hear

her. She started laughing. I know she was laughing at me! Laughing because she cut my phone line and now I can't call Janie and because she made holes in my new wood paneling, but I had the last laugh because I could hear her through those holes. She tried to plug them with some newsprint, as if she thought I wouldn't notice the holes in my wall, but I could still hear her. I could hear that evil laugh. I think she might be plotting to kill me! Tomorrow is Saturday and I'm going to the hardware store on the corner to buy a new lock. A really big one that closes with a padlock. That woman is not going to get near me because I'm ready for her. I know all her secrets.

\* \* \* \*

Guess what she did today? She must've hired someone to assassinate me, because I got home from the hardware store and I was just sitting down for lunch when there was a knock on the door. I was already suspicious; I knew that Mrs. Parks was planning something so I crept very quietly and very slowly to the door and then I carefully peeked out the peephole and I saw a man standing there wearing a jacket that I think said Burton Telephone Co. I was way too smart for that. No way was that man getting into my apartment to kill me. Who would be so stupid to try to pretend they were from the telephone company, anyway? No one would ever fall for that. Why would someone from the telephone company come to my apartment for no reason? I never called them. I just crept back to the kitchen and finished my lunch and finally heard him walk away.

And then this evening there was another knock on the door. This time when I looked out there was a man dressed like a police officer. I'm sure it was the same man as before. He was just trying a different scheme. Well, it didn't work the second time, either. He started pounding really loudly on the door and shouting *I know you're there!*—as if that

would make me open the door, so I just opened the window onto the fire escape and climbed down behind our apartments and hid in the courtyard and now I'm trying to decide whether I should climb back up the fire escape or whether I should just go in the building the normal way. He might still be there. It's a good thing I bought that big lock. I waited a really long time but I know that assassins are sneaky and clever, although his one might not be so clever because he tried the same thing twice and it didn't work either time. I think I'll just climb up the fire escape again and then I'll look into my apartment and make sure he didn't get in anyway.

\* \* \* \*

Well, I'm still alive this morning. I stayed awake all night, though, just in case that assassin would try to come back. But he didn't. He must've given up for the night because neither of his plans worked yesterday. I know where he is, though. Both he and crazy Mrs. Parks are so stupid they forgot that there are holes in the wall and this morning after breakfast I heard her speaking to a man in there who was asking her all kinds of questions about me. She lied and told him that I made the holes in the wall and that I cut my own phone line and then had started yelling at her in the corridor one day about it for no reason. Like I told you, the woman is crazy! I think she was just trying to impress the assassin or something. It doesn't matter, though, because I have a plan. I'm going to kill her first. I don't need to hire an assassin. I'm smart enough to do it on my own. This afternoon when she comes back from feeding her ducks, I'll be waiting in her apartment. It's a good thing I knew where she hid her extra key underneath her car and I made a copy of it last week. She won't even know what hit her. And if the assassin is there with her, I can kill him too. I'm a good shot. I'll probably shoot him first because I know he's got a gun with him.

\* \* \* \*

I couldn't find the key. It was lying on the kitchen table yesterday. I bet that assassin took it. I was sure I had locked the padlock but I must've forgotten. That's okay. I can just drill through the wall until I make a hole big enough to climb through. No one will hear me because it's Sunday morning and everyone's gone to church or shopping or to visit relatives. Then I can hide there in the kitchen until crazy Mrs. Parks and her precious assassin come in to get a glass of wine and then they'll be dead before they know what hit them. Except I must've forgotten where I hid my gun. I thought it was in the bottom drawer of my dresser...well, that's okay. I can still make the hole in the wall and then I'll go out and buy another gun. Or maybe I could just hide behind the door and hit them with the drill. It's pretty heavy.

\* \* \* \*

Well, it didn't go exactly as I planned it yesterday. I was making the hole in the wall and it was taking a lot longer than I thought it would and right in the middle of it all suddenly the assassin burst through the door with three other men and two of them were dressed the same way as the assassin—like police officers—and the third man had a long white jacket and I guess the assassin wasn't an assassin at all. He is a kidnapper. They kidnapped me and brought me to this place with bars on all the windows just like a prison except kidnappers don't own prisons and that man in the white jacket is in charge of all the people they've kidnapped and he's got lots of other people in jackets and blue outfits helping him and they keep trying to give me poison but I'm too smart for them. I won't drink their poison. I'm just going to pretend that I do until I can figure out a way to escape and capture

Mrs. Parks. Just look what she did to me! She's crazy. Someone should lock her up for good.

*Doppelgänger*

I don't think I should just stand around  
I just stand there, off to one side  
Just let yes mean yes and no mean no  
I can't teach you how to grow up,  
But I actually care.  
Maybe if you find out, you can clue me in, too,  
How to make good decisions—  
But what do you want from me?  
Enough. Simply move forward.  
I guess I'll never be enough.

*So go ahead, go on, stumble if you must  
For once.  
To figure out the best path,  
Waiting for you to make up your mind,  
And watching and thinking and talking  
And always  
"What do you want from yourself?"  
You might not believe this,  
But I'm waiting for you to return  
From your PreMidLife Crisis someday.*

When you finally hit bottom, you have two choices: give up or get up. As I write this I marvel that suicide actually never crossed my mind as an option, because I probably was in a low enough state at the time for it to seem the only way out. So for me, the only choice was to get up. In the days that followed, I started talking about my struggles, my confusion, my *failures* to nearly whoever would give me the time to sit them down. I had lost all sense of shame, because I had no shred of pride left in me. My long drought in writing was also finally broken, and the first piece I wrote that early January was over ten pages long, detailing my struggle and silence over the previous months and years. I sent out an abbreviated version to friends over email, boldly proclaiming that I—yes I, the “perfect” student—had failed miserably, and moreover, I still had no clear idea what was coming next for me. I still had no specific career path; however, I knew I wanted to write.

Over the next fifteen months, I got a job (two, actually, for a time), got married, enrolled in a fall semester night class to work toward finishing my revised degree (just a BFA instead of a BS *and* a BFA), began actually working on my BFA Senior Project/Honors Creative Thesis, got promoted at work, wrote some more, and slowly learned how to have dignity in the midst of admitting failure and defeat and brokenness. I mended. I am mending. I’ve been facing my demons one after the other, fearing re-failure, re-defeat, re-brokenness each step of the way. Finishing this project—indeed, finishing this degree—has been one of the most difficult healing processes I’ve experienced in my life. Worse than my dog being run over. Worse than working through my parents’ two divorces and three remarriages. Worse than coming to terms with my cousin’s death and my uncle’s paralyzing accident. Worse than anything I’d want to wish on anyone—almost. Almost because of the amazingness of mending. I am wiser, more secure, more open, more giving today because of my yesterdays. If we never broke, we’d never experience any of the

wonderful things that come out of us as a result. And that is something worth writing about.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Johnson, Cheryl L. and Jayne A. Moneysmith. Multiple Genres, Multiple Voices: Teaching Argument in Composition and Literature. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2005.
- <sup>2</sup> See <http://books.heinemann.com/products/0362.aspx> and <http://books.heinemann.com/products/0478.aspx> for details.
- <sup>3</sup> Rouse, John. Provocations: The Story of Mrs. M. Illinois: NCTE, 1993.
- <sup>4</sup> Christensen, Mark. "Lecture on Teachers That Make It." Bemidji State University. Hagg-Sauer Hall, Bemidji. 24 Sept. 2001.

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