

Some days, I just lose it. Lose perspective, lose my goals, lose the never-ending battle that makes me so tired. It's hard to keep everything straight when your mind is driven to distort everything around you...when your mind is dedicated to making reality slightly askew. But I can always keep a hold of hope...hope in knowing that tomorrow it will get better, hope in knowing that my work isn't in vain, and hope in knowing that whatever state my mind has worked itself into is just temporary. Things always get better...even if I find myself in the bottom of an empty pit before that happens. When I was a little baby, not even two years old, my mom went to the bathroom for a few minutes while I played with my toys in the living room. When she got out she saw that I'd carefully taken off all of the pictures from the wall and had hammered in the nails with my toy hammer. She caught me standing on top of the couch trying to reach up high for one last nail that needed to be pounded in. I looked back at her and with a few baby grunts I indicated to her that I needed some help with the final nail. Sometimes mental illness feels like being back to my not-even-two-year-old-self...I've gotten most of the nails pounded in, but I need help with the very last one. I can't do this without family, I can't do this without friends, and I can't do this without God. This is a team effort. Without the aforementioned people I wouldn't be standing here today talking with you.

I'm sometimes amazed that it's only been six years since I was diagnosed...when I look back on it, it feels like a lifetime and I feel like I've completely changed in that lifetime. My best friend, Addie, often times comments on how we've remained such good friends for nearly 10 years because we haven't really changed all that much. I want to disagree with her because of how much I feel I've changed since I was first diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. But then I remember what she really means by that. Sure the superficial parts of us have changed – our hobbies have changed, our relationships have changed, our music tastes are certainly different. But at the very core of our beings, we're largely the same: she still has an unbreakable will to go and try new things and challenge herself, and I still have the same tenacious attitude which has proved so valuable in my fight with mental illness. If those six years have changed me, it's only changed me for the better; it's only solidified my drive to be as happy and healthy as possible. But it wasn't always like that, terrible things had to happen to me before I started fighting, I had to stare death in the face before I accepted the reality presented to me.

It all started in high school, though no one knew it at the time. People blamed it on the fact that I was coming from a small school of 50 kids to an enormous school of nearly 2000 kids. People blamed it on test anxiety. People blamed it on simple laziness on my part. No one even gave a thought to my brain developing a mental illness...teenagers go through so much during high school that it's only natural they sometimes rebel against the status quo. I used to be the kind of student that would get

good grades, who always did their homework and always took responsibility for the assignments given to me; high school changed all of that. The truth of the matter is that my brain was beginning to malfunction.

It makes sense looking back on it...my diagnosis makes sense. During high school I found myself unable to read my text books. I'd read them and by the time I got to class I had forgotten everything that I'd read. I remember sitting at the kitchen table with my Dad doing chemistry homework. We'd read through a section, do the problems, but by the time we got to the next section and I was asked to recall the information from the previous section it was like I hadn't even read anything. It was frustrating and infuriating. I was accustomed to being the smartest kid in the class, the kid with all of the answers – the kid who had the textbook basically memorized. And now, through no fault of my own, I was reduced to being the kid that never did any work. I was failing tests but doing remarkably well on papers. It was all so confusing.

Eventually, I stopped reading altogether...I stopped doing most of my homework. I've no idea how I ended up passing my classes, I suspect my teachers were being generous to me because they suspected that something was wrong. There was a huge stop-gap though. I was doing terribly in all of my classes; but, by the time I had to take my IB exams I managed, without hardly studying at all, to pass most of my tests with some of the highest grades in my class. On my IB oral (where I had to talk critically about a Robert Frost poem for 30 minutes) I scored the highest grade in the country...I got a D in Literature. It just didn't make sense and I wasn't sure what to do with myself: how was I going to get through college? How was I going to hold down a job? I wasn't able to hack it in the real world and I was incredibly worried about my future.

My Mom has a mantra, she says it so often that I sometimes get sick of hearing it: "God has a plan." She always tells me that when I call late at night...when I'm freaking out because of the voices in my head or the terrible hallucinations that plague me. But, like most things mothers repeat over and over again until their kids are sick of hearing it, she's absolutely right. And when I look back at my life, at those initial fears of not knowing what I was going to do with myself, I can see that it's been perfectly designed and that I'm exactly where I need to be. It all started with art.

My favorite class in high school was my 3d animation class...it was the first class that exposed me to art in a way that I felt as though I could actually do it. I love computers, my Dad introduced me to computers when I was barely able to walk and he and I have been sharing the same passion for as long as I can remember. As a kid, I was always one to draw pictures...and I loved doing it, but I never felt as though I was good enough. Computers came a lot easier to me, so I focused most of my childhood

on messing around with computers. 3d animation provided me with a computer to sit down in front of as well as a creative project to focus my mind on. It was the perfect match at the time. My experience in that class led me to start experimenting with Photoshop and I started drawing pictures. They were terrible and I was quite embarrassed of them, but there was a spark that had ignited a flame within me...my need to create.

So when it came time to decide what to do in college I knew immediately that art was what I was going to do. The journey of applying to art school took me from 3d animation to painting...almost polar opposites of one another; but the transition was perfectly suited to me. I say that this particular mini journey was part of a perfectly designed plan because art is so crucial to my survival these days. Without painting I don't know what I would do with myself. I still futz around with computers and I really love doing so...but painting has a special place in my heart. If I hadn't set my heart on going to an art school in Chicago, I wouldn't have gone to a portfolio review where the advisor suggested I try real painting. And it was only when I'd tried real painting that I fell in love with making art.

So where to start? Haven't I already started? At this point in my story I just think that I'm some kind of idiot. It's fortunate for me that I've never thought too highly of my grades. I've never associated grades with learning. I've always been more focused on what I'm learning as opposed to what my grade is. I think that's just another part of this perfect design; because I would have been a lot worse off if my grades were that important to me. It's also important to note that it was quite fortunate for me that art schools care more about what kind of artwork you can create than what kind of grades you got in math class. Art school in Chicago didn't last long and I eventually found myself at Bethany Lutheran College; the same college where my parents met.

Bethany was a wonderful place and an awful place at the same time. I've always been a bit of a radical person and not at all well-suited for life with a bunch of conservative Christians. I still am a Christian but my version of Christianity and Bethany's version don't always mesh well together. It was at Bethany that I became a member of my first artist community...we called ourselves the Gully's because our studios were in the basement of the dormitory named Gullixson. My experience in Chicago was one of competition...everyone was competing with everyone else to make the most controversial paintings, to be the best painter in the school. Bethany was much different – we helped each other out, we gave each other suggestions and checked in on one another to make sure that we were all working on our projects. It was wonderful and I ended my first semester at Bethany positively ecstatic to come back after the summer to do it all over again. That summer proved to be the end of it all however.

I'd been dating a girl named Malia at Bethany. She lived in Minnesota and I lived in Colorado, so the summer was going to prove to be a little rough as long distance relationships usually prove to be. It started out just fine, but gradually I became more and more angsty. I started getting paranoid about her text messages and phone calls – were they really her? How could I be sure that it was her on the other line? Couldn't it just be someone pretending to be Malia to gain my trust and then exploit it? So I broke up with her...I didn't give an explanation; I think that I just stopped responding to her phone calls and text messages. The summer got worse and worse – I only completed one painting. Things started getting electric...a funny hiss was around me all the time. I didn't feel like myself. My parents urged me to stay behind in Colorado and not to go back to Bethany...but I wanted to make things right with Malia and I didn't want to acknowledge that things were getting bad.

Denial can be a powerful thing and so was the kind of laser like focus I had to make things right with Malia. I wasn't acknowledging the problems I was having, I thought that if I just made things right with Malia everything would be okay. So I went back to Bethany for my final semester. In the midst of trying to make things right with Malia she agreed to go with me to a play that the college was putting on and it was there that I had what I remember was my first psychotic episode. Psychotic episodes in public are always embarrassing...I always seem to get caught up, thinking inside my head as I watch everyone around me react to the things that I'm doing without really having control over them, wanting to just have a quiet corner to be psychotic in. It's when I'm the most vulnerable; it's when I do things that I can't control. I'm still there for the most part – I just don't have control over my body or my head. I'm still up there in my head just watching as these things happen to me...I have no power and no influence on what psychosis is directing me to do. It's that conscious part of me that feels all of the pain. It's like all of my senses are overloading at the same time – I hear more vividly, I see more vividly and I feel more vividly. It's the kind of vivid where nightmares exist...I see terrible things: people's faces start to fall apart, exposing the flesh beneath their skin, they gradually fall apart around me until they're just a pile of bones somehow still animated. Reality gets totally distorted. Lately, in my hallucinations, I've been trapped in this hallway; trying to walk down to the safety of the exit door but the doors on the sides of the hallway open up and these terrible masked creatures pull me into the room and push me down yet another hallway and I seem to be stuck doing that for hours. I've spent an entire lifetime psychotic it seems...which is good because it's become familiar territory, but also awful because no matter how familiar I am with the content of the psychotic episode it always seems to be frightening in a way that I don't have words to describe.

In the theater, Malia was watching the play and I was getting more and more

uncomfortable. Voices in my head, which I'm quite used to at this point but were brand new to me back then, were commenting on the play...whispering what was going to happen next and saying very derogatory things about Malia and me. I told people around me to be quiet...they weren't saying anything. Eventually there was this huge monster – half dragon, half boar that came out of the side of the stage and looked directly at me. He smiled in a way so as to suggest that he'd been looking for me and was pleased to find me because of all of the terrible things he was going to do. So I did the only reasonable thing I could think of doing – I got out of the theater as fast as I could. I didn't know what to do and was looking for the best route of escape when Malia came out of the theater...calm as can be. There were no screams from the audience like I was expecting, there were just the voices laughing at me; they were having fun with me...they'd turned me into a fool. This wasn't going to be the last time they'd turn me into a fool, this wasn't going to be the last time I made a fool of myself because of the voices in my head.

I didn't explain what had happened to Malia, I didn't want to frighten her...it still didn't make sense to me. When you first hear voices, when you first start hallucinating there's no rational part of your brain that can say “okay, that's just psychosis...it wasn't real and you're going to be okay.” In fact, it's taken years of therapy and an amount of discipline I never knew I had in order to be able to think rationally when something completely irrational is going on. Because the voices are so convincing, and because the hallucinations seem so real you can't help but trust that they're real, especially when you have no idea what's going on. Malia and I agreed to go and get some food. We went to the grocery store and started picking out things that looked good and then headed back to her apartment to start cooking. She told me to just relax and make myself at home while she cooked...but the people in my head saw that as just another opportunity to take advantage of me, to turn me into a fool. They started telling me that she was trying to poison me, that she was putting things into the food that I'm allergic to, that she was going to kill me. So I did the only thing that made sense. I started to pack my things to get the heck out of there. She protested, saying that she was only trying to help me...I think that she was just as scared as I was – she didn't know what had happened to me and she was just trying to take care of me. That was the last time I really talked to Malia, the rest of the semester I avoided her...partly out of paranoia and partly out of embarrassment.

I'd been seeing a therapist near-by, in downtown Mankato, where I was going to school. I saw her once a week and had started telling her about the strange things that were happening to me. One week, after all this stuff with the play and Malia had happened...she sat me down and told me that she thought I had schizoaffective disorder. She explained that it was like having schizophrenia and bipolar disorder at the

same time and that I was going to need to take medication to treat it, she told me that she had a psychiatrist lined up for me to start seeing and get medication from. I didn't take the news well. I remember a rush of panic going over me as soon as she told me, but I don't think I realized the full weight of the diagnosis. I had no idea how much it was going to change my life, I had no idea that I was going to have to redefine my definitions of 'success' and 'healthy' and 'normal'. I had had a pretty bad experience with Western medicine leading up to this. I wanted to go to my Naturopath and get treatment from him...I wanted to wait out the semester and see what Dr. Schor could do for me because I trusted Naturopathic medicine more than I trusted Western medicine.

I called my Mom on my way home from my therapist. I told her what I'd been diagnosed with, I relayed the very basic explanation I'd received. My mom wanted to fly out to Minnesota immediately and take me home to be safe with her and my dad. I told her that I didn't think that was necessary, that I was going to be fine...that it wasn't that big of a deal, that it was just a minor thing. I was wrong.

I think that dealing with a mental illness is largely about attitude. In the beginning, my attitude was to ignore what was going on with me...to just survive my psychotic episodes and try to go on living as I had been before. I had a very bad attitude. My illness takes discipline and it requires me to be vigilant to the needs of my brain and body 24 hours a day, every day of my life. I wasn't being proactive about my treatment. I wasn't researching what schizoaffective disorder actually is, I wasn't trying to do everything in my power to figure out what's wrong with me and how I could best treat it. And, because of that, I laid the groundwork for a truly miserable semester. All I really remember from the rest of my semester at Bethany was that I would sometimes suddenly come to in the middle of class...with papers written...when the last thing I remembered was sitting down in front of my computer to write said paper. I remember sitting on the floor of my dorm and drawing picture after picture and writing poem after poem as I tried to deal with the monsters in my head. Most of all, I remember how other kids treated me. There were some kids who liked to bang on the door of my dorm room at all hours of the night, threatening to hurt me, taunting me by saying they were the voices in my head. It's so sad that some people's immediate reactions aren't to try to help someone with a mental illness but rather to exploit it to make them feel even worse.

After the semester was over I agreed to move back to Denver and start seeing a psychiatrist. Dr. Carlson is one of the most patient and wonderful doctors I've ever had the privilege of working with and his patience and non-judgmental attitude as I struggled with coming to terms with my illness is a big reason that I eventually turned my life around and started to get healthy. But this story isn't a story where I just start seeing a

psychiatrist and take my pills and start leading a healthy life, this isn't a story where the worst of my suffering is some idiot banging on my door in the middle of the night. I had to hit the bottom of a black pit, I had to lose nearly everything that was dear to me before I finally woke up and changed my attitude, before I finally started figuring out what it is that I can do to make me feel better.

When I got back to Denver I was living with my parents and did most of my suffering alone in my room. The semester started slowly but eventually I met a girl named Brit whom I started dating. She exposed me to a community of radical Christians who thought a lot like I did. I started going to church with Brit and everything felt good with that community. They had a weekly vegan dinner and they accommodated my gluten allergy so I was able to share food with people who were quickly becoming my friends and I found myself in love with the culture I was being presented with, I also found myself in love with Brit. Things were looking good, I was in a good environment...which went a long way toward making me feel better and made me healthier than I had been at Bethany. But instead of realizing that the environment I was in was so crucial to my success as a person with a mental illness I took it as meaning that my illness was behind me. Brit and I had a discussion about my condition and I explained to her that I didn't really know what was going to happen to me because of it. But she accepted me as I am and she became the first person I was comfortable being psychotic in front of, she became the only person who could touch me while I was psychotic.

But pills were still a great difficulty for me. Pills felt like losing. Pills are absolutely miserable to take. They make me tired and lethargic, they make me lose my balance occasionally, they make me so tired in fact that it's become the norm for me not to be able to get up before 11am on any given day. Pills make my mind fuzzy, I'm unable to think as clearly as I had been able to, they make me feel less human and less able to connect with people. I'm on pills right now that will occasionally paralyze me when I wake up – I'll wake up and be unable to move for about half an hour. The first time it happened it frightened me more than I've ever been frightened before. But it passed...I forced myself to move and the relief I felt at being able to move again was palpable. The same pills will also give me seizures from time to time...I'll feel them coming so I have to catch myself while I fall to the ground and I blank out for a period of time before coming to again and resuming my life. Taking medicine has been one of the biggest struggles I've had with this illness.

I'm thankful that Dr. Carlson didn't just write me off, for the first couple of years I was getting treatment he would ask me how a particular drug regimen was going and I'd tell him that I'd stopped taking the pills – they were mimicking aspects of the illness

itself and made me feel worse instead of better. It wasn't just a realization on my part that led me to start taking my pills consistently – it wasn't just hitting the very bottom that made me pull myself together. It was also the simple piece of information that it can take a very long time of trying different combinations of medicine before we would find the combination that works best for me. And that was absolutely true in my case, it took a good three years of me taking pills consistently and being critical of my treatment until Dr. Carlson finally found the right combination of drugs. It can be hard to wait that long, it can be so frustrating to deal with that many years of terrible side effects and a high level of difficulty in just functioning before you find a combination that works as well as it can work. It's not to say that I'm side effect free, it's not to say that the pills are easy to take, and it's not to say that I don't still get sick frequently. Pills are just one part of the equation of treatment, they're crucial, but there were many other aspects that I needed to be disciplined at before I started seeing any improvement.

Because I wasn't taking my pills and because I wasn't doing healthy things for myself, 2009 was a very terrible year for me. I ended up in the hospital twice within weeks of each other, I had to go to Intensive Outpatient Therapy and I eventually ended up needing electro convulsive therapy. I faced death many times that year...I was so terribly depressed that I just didn't see the point of it anymore. I couldn't feel feelings, I was just barely able to meet the definition of human. Brit and I were supposed to be getting married soon and I couldn't muster the excitement that I thought I should be feeling. I'd had to drop out of every semester of college that I'd tried since I moved back to Denver because my head just wasn't cooperating. Everything that I'd loved doing just didn't feel right anymore. It was hard to paint and read, it was hard to draw, I couldn't write, I couldn't work on computers or do my homework...I felt as though I'd completed my life, I felt as though there was no end to the psychosis, no end to the black pit that I had fallen into. I couldn't feel love, or companionship. I couldn't connect with anyone that I loved and I found myself so lost in a miasmatic mist that there was certainly nothing that anyone or anything could do to get me out of that place. So I felt as though all I was left with was to kill myself. I don't really remember the details anymore...I do remember that Brit found me before anything bad happened to me and that she saved my life. As one of my doctors would later put it: suicide had become an existential imperative. Suicide had become this vague sort of inevitable path. A path that I seemed to be marching down steadily. Drastic measures were needed to get me off of that path.

The question of suicide is always such a tricky one...it's heavy. The weight of having it on your mind can be crippling. It gets to be much more than just an obsessive thought, it seemed to be the motivation behind everything. But I knew I couldn't do it, I knew that it wasn't an option. Even so; somehow, in some kind of psychotic daze I tried to do it and I'm eternally grateful to Brit that she found me and stopped me from



completing it. I can't imagine what it did to my family, especially to my parents. I felt so guilty for even trying in the first place and I vowed that I would do everything in my power to prevent myself from doing it. Part of the vow happened to be hospitalizations, and IOP, and eventually ECT.

I have such mixed feelings toward ECT, even over three years after stopping it. I believe that it saved my life and I'm pretty sure that I would do it again if I had to. But I don't want to be in a position to have to do it again. So in addition to my vow to do everything in my power to not kill myself came a vow to never have to get ECT again. I realize that it's very likely that I'll have to get it again at some point so the vow is less of a stubborn refusal to ever get it again and more of a promise to myself that I'll do everything in my power to stay as healthy as I possibly can. ECT tore my life apart...I lost nearly everything and I've had to spend the last three years working to get as much back as I can. Given that they're shooting enough electricity through your brain to give you seizures there are some nasty side effects. The worst of them being memory loss. While I can remember exactly what it's like to actually get ECT – I remember the rooms where it happened, I remember the music Dr. Guerra listened to, I remember getting the IVs, and I remember the weight of the ECT paddles on my shoulder – I don't remember much of anything else. I don't remember Thanksgiving, Christmas, or my Birthday which happened during ECT. I don't remember all of 2009 or a good three quarters of 2010. They're just gone...little snippets have come back and I've asked a lot of questions about what happened during that time period; so I have a good idea of what I was going through. But as for personally remembering it...almost nothing is there. I've forgotten a good portion of my teens through my early twenties. And while it's been three years since I've had ECT, my memory is still very poor. One of the reasons that I'm reading this paper tonight instead of just talking to you is because my memory isn't good enough to memorize this speech or to remember everything that's happened to me in one sitting.

Because of ECT, I forgot how to paint, I forgot how to draw, I forgot how to fix computers. My love for music was gone, I couldn't read books, and there was a certain spark in me that was just gone. One of the worst parts was that, during treatment, Brit left me. I don't remember it at all...I don't know why she left me. What I do know is that when I started getting ECT she distanced herself from me. I was getting ECT (which means general anesthesia and a lot of recovery time) three times a week for 6 months and then once a week for about a month or so before I finally called it quits. It's essentially like recovering from surgery every other day of the week and it takes a lot out of you. I really shouldn't have been out of the house doing normal things...I should have been at home recovering from the brain trauma. But Brit wanted me to come out to Denver instead of her coming out to Aurora. So I did. And it became quite miserable. My

parents offered to pick her up whenever she wanted so that she could be with me, but she didn't want to. I'd like to think that I'd realize that she wasn't being very accommodating of my needs given what I was going through...but I wasn't in my right mind. She eventually told me that she didn't want me to touch her – no kisses, no hugs, no holding hands. My fiancée didn't want me to be close to her when I desperately needed human contact from someone who loved me. So one day she met me for coffee and broke up with me. And all I could think to do was ask her if she wanted to go and get lunch with me.

It was shortly after that that I decided to end my treatment. I felt as though I'd lost everything and that I was done with ECT. I had no apartment, no job, no fiancée. Everything seemed to be gone. Because of that, I sank into what I thought was the deepest depression I've been through. I didn't even have the routine of going to ECT consistently. I didn't get out very much, I couldn't ride my bike...there really wasn't much I could do besides sleep in as late as possible, watch movies that were being repeated on television, and sit on my laptop waiting for someone to appear online so I could talk to them. The only things I had to look forward to throughout the day was when my dad came home for lunch and when my mom came home from work at about 4pm. Sometimes I would go to the grocery store with my mom or run an errand with her to the bank and that was the only time that I was able to get out. There was a weekly dinner with my friends that I continued to go to during that time. But I had missed going for about 6 months and by the time I came back it had changed drastically and I felt out of place going there. There were also the weekly doctors' appointments, but it's not really a fun social activity to go and talk to a therapist or a psychiatrist about my problems. Oftentimes it proved to be quite stressful. But I was getting better. Even when my dad came home for lunch and found me on the back porch crying – that was improvement. I hadn't been able to cry before...and now I could actually express emotion. It was a painful improvement, but improvement nonetheless.

There was really nothing to look forward to...my friends didn't come and visit me. Mostly because I think it was uncomfortable for them to come and visit me...it wasn't like I'd had any kind of normal surgery. I wasn't recovering from having my wisdom teeth removed or something simple like that. I'd had a very complicated procedure done to my brain and it was going to take a while for my brain to recover from that much trauma. I was desperate for any human contact and I seemed to be getting worse. I had to start sleeping in the bathroom of my parent's bedroom because that was the only place that I felt safe...everywhere else in the house I felt like something was trying to come get me and do horrible things to me. But my parents' have a lock on their door so I felt safe going in there. I spent quite a while sleeping in my parents' bathroom, which probably made things quite awkward for them in the morning as they had to step around me

while doing their morning routines. But my parents are amazing people and very willing to accommodate even my most bizarre needs and I never heard a word of complaint out of them. Reading has been one of my joys for the longest time...I have a book collection of over 350 books and I'm adding to the collection whenever I have spare money to spend. But, during this time, I couldn't read at all. I couldn't make sense of the words on the page and I couldn't follow the plots of novels very well. So my dad agreed to read to me every night before I went to bed. I'd lay down on my mat in their bathroom and listen to him as he sat awkwardly on the floor reading Kurt Vonnegut (my favorite author) to me before I fell asleep. Being that I'm also bipolar I tend to be most active at night, so I could sit and listen for a long time and I remember several occasions when he actually fell asleep, mid-sentence, reading to me.

I imagine that my parents lost a lot of sleep during that time and I'm thankful to them for never complaining about that lack of sleep. They never ever gave me the impression that I was putting them out, or that I was being a burden. I know that my entire family would rather me not have a mental illness...that no one wants me to go through the bizarre and terrible things that happen to me so frequently. But they're so ridiculously accommodating of my needs. My mom told me frequently when I was growing up that "it's a joy to serve" and she, my dad, and my sister really live that every day. There are many things that are important in the treatment of a mental illness...but every book on schizophrenia that I've read and every doctor that I've spoken to has really emphasized that a good support system is crucial to successfully living with my illness. And they're definitely right. I know that I can always count on my parents to do whatever they can to make me feel better. I can call them anytime, day or night, and they'll answer the phone to talk to me. I can ask them to pick me up to take me back to their place and they're happy to do it. I know that they'll always help pay for my medicine and my treatment because without their help there'd be no way I could afford to get the treatment and medication that I need.

My psychiatrist likes to talk to me about avoiding high "EE" environments. The EE stands for expressed emotion. I'm like a sponge when it comes to people's energy...I feed off of negative and positive energy and being around the wrong person can really drive me to psychosis quite quickly. Yelling at me can really change my mood...even if it's excited yelling. So one thing my psychiatrist tells me is that I need to avoid people who are high "EE" and he tells my parents to try to be as low "EE" as possible. My parents are wonderful at it, they've never yelled at me...even in the midst of my stupidity in not taking my pills or doing unhealthy things. They don't panic when I get psychotic and approach my state in a very pragmatic and useful way. In a sense...they're the opposite of me; while I go around absorbing everyone else's drama and problems and high "EE" states of mind, they deny their right to panic and are as calm and rational as

they can be. If they were any other way I would be a lot worse off. If I didn't have the sister that I have I probably wouldn't be speaking to her right now. She was the first target of my paranoia. I don't remember specifics, but at one point I was truly paranoid of her and doubtful of her intentions. She lives in Wisconsin and has lived away from Colorado going to school or working as a teacher since I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. She visits for summers and Christmases so I do get to see her. But most of our contact has been over the phone and seeing as how the inside of my head is occupied most of the time with voices, phone conversations can be difficult. So I started suspecting Rachel of just being another voice in my head...I stopped wanting to talk to her on the phone and I spent a good long while not really talking to her at all and instead suspecting that she may be plotting against me. I didn't know what to make of her...I distrusted her, I resented her. Most of all, I didn't understand her; especially with ECT having wiped out so much of my memory. I don't have too many memories of her when we were kids. But my sister is just like my parents...extremely forgiving and extremely accommodating and when I finally got over my paranoia about her we were able to start talking and reconnecting and I've enjoyed getting to know my sister again.

But I'm still at the point in my story where there is nothing to look forward to, nothing to be happy about, nothing to be thankful for. I had nothing in my life, so it seemed, and the future seemed so bleak. It was so daunting to look at my studio and know that I'd forgotten how to paint and draw...I'd spent years trying to figure out how to draw and paint, I'd invested a lot of time into perfecting my style and that style of drawing and painting just didn't seem to work. I have an unfinished painting that I call my "ECT Painting", it was a painting that I started working on in the Fall of 2009, shortly before I started ECT and I tried working with it a little bit after I was done with ECT. But the colors I wanted to use, the brush strokes I wanted to make...the whole painting itself just seems disjointed. The painting doesn't make sense, I started that painting as one person and was trying to finish it as a completely different person. It was especially frustrating because the painting I'd completed before starting the "ECT Painting" was one of my best...it was a painting where I felt as though I'd finally learned how to paint...that I'd broken through a barrier that was holding me back. I'd finally been able to start painting instead of just practicing and now I was right back where I'd started when I was 18. Sometimes starting over, knowing how much work it will take to get back to your previous point, is more daunting than it is to start in the first place. Computers also didn't have that same allure that they'd had before. I had this really nice computer sitting in the basement waiting for me to do all kinds of things with and I had no desire to go and use it. That avenue of my life seemed to be dead. I was stuck in the mud and I needed something to pull me out of it.

In the late Spring of 2010 I made a rare visit to Pablo's, my favorite coffee shop,

when one of the baristas, whose computer I'd saved from certain doom on several occasions, asked me if I wouldn't mind taking a look at his girlfriend's computer. It wouldn't power on...you pressed the power button and nothing would happen. She had a final project for college due in a little while and the paper was on that computer and it was the only computer that she had available to her. I've always been one to help when I can, and that has most frequently come in the form of helping people with their broken computers. I agreed to try to fix it without really thinking of the fact that I didn't know what I was doing. I was so used to having the capacity to fix anything that I didn't stop to think about how I'd forgotten how to fix computers. I picked up the computer from him the next day and brought it to my workbench and let the panic spread over me. I tried to turn it on and nothing happened. I tried a different AC adapter and nothing happened. So I opened it up...and suddenly things started coming back to me. I recognized the different components and what they did. I looked at the power inverter and noticed that something was funny with it. So I started futzing around with it; I cleaned it with rubbing alcohol and q-tips and I soldered one of the wires back into place. I put the inverter board back in the computer, hit the power switch and the thing turned on. I'd raised the computer from the dead and the wave of joy that came over me was unmatched by anything I'd felt for nearly a year and half.

That's all it took, I was back to my tenacious self...I was back to my unstoppable force of stubborn focus on mastering a skill set. I started messing around with my computers in the basement. My dad and I would have lengthy conversations where I'd tell him about the latest video cards and what was different about them compared to older generations, or we'd talk about CPUs...or any component really. I just talked and talked his ear off about it and I'm sure everyone was glad that I was talking about something for a change. I'd gotten this one little bright spot in an otherwise bleak existence and I was holding onto it for dear life. That was how I got my foot in the door, so to speak, and I was using everything at my disposal to try and open that door.

School seemed like an obvious direction to go. I was going to take it slow, one class at a time, until I had a degree in Computer Science. I was going to take it a class at a time and ease myself into the routine of going to school. I was only going to take afternoon or evening classes because it was next to impossible for me to get up in the morning and be functional. I ended up with a 98% in the class, but more importantly, the class had started me drawing again.

After my class got out I would ride my bike down to Pablo's where I would wait for my mom to pick me up after she got done with work. I had about three hours to kill and since I was so used to going to a coffee shop to draw when I wasn't meeting someone I figured that I'd bring my sketchbook along and start drawing again. It wasn't a matter of

having to use substantial willpower to get myself to draw again, even though the task was still daunting. It was just a matter of putting me in the right environment so that I wanted to draw. A coffee shop is the perfect place for that as I've spent countless hours drinking coffee and drawing pictures. On my first day of going to Pablo's I ran into my old friend, Joe. Joe introduced me to Helios who was sitting at the good table at Pablo's drawing away. Helios is an interesting character. He's perpetually on the verge of homelessness and makes up for it by hitchhiking all over the country and staying with friends or squatting in abandoned buildings. He has all kinds of stories about his adventures and he likes to illustrate many of them in his quirky comic book style of drawing. He was spending another summer in Denver and really liked going to Pablo's as they would frequently give him free coffee. I told Helios a bit about my situation (which was a rare thing for me to tell a stranger since I've historically been pretty secretive about my condition) and he decided to help me relearn how to draw. So we spent our afternoons, twice a week, drawing at Pablo's and sharing our favorite music with each other. He gave me lots of pointers and good critique.

My style had changed dramatically, and it was because of ECT. Pre-ECT artwork is colorful, cartoon-y, and even happy. I used bright colors and bold shapes and had created this kind of whimsical world where I could go and live in. Post-ECT artwork is the exact opposite. It's much more subtle, the subject matter is dark and foreboding, the world that I create gives most people the creeps and people don't really seem to like it as much as the Pre-ECT artwork. But my style change is important. I think that I spent a lot of time trying to escape the reality of my situation. I'd come across the demons that haunt me in everyday life and I would look the other way, I wouldn't stand up to them, I didn't try to understand them...I tried as much as I could to deny their very existence. Post-ECT artwork has a purpose. I paint my hallucinations, I paint the voices in my head...I try to show the world what psychosis looks like. And, in doing so, I face the creatures that haunt me. The figures in my paintings are what I see in real life. I was once so terrified of them that it crippled me; I felt powerless against them, they had me in their grips and I wasn't even fighting for my freedom. But when I started to draw them and then to paint them, their grip loosened.

I had a psychotic episode a number of months ago that held me in its grip for a number of weeks. During the psychotic episode I was laying on my bed, trying to sleep and this thing would push me over to the side, trying to knock me off the bed. I would look over to my right, across the room and there were three creatures with masks (the same creatures I always see) sitting in chairs. The two creatures on the outside were gesturing like they were talking with each other, but I couldn't hear them. The creature in the middle had these haunting, glowing eyes, that came from the darkness of its mask and was staring right at me...poised in such a way that it looked like it was going to get

up at any second and do something terrible to me. I would get to the edge of the bed where I was about to fall off and onto the ground when I would suddenly find myself in the middle of the bed again. After the psychotic episode was over I had nightmares about it, I was terrified that the whole thing would happen again, I was also terrified that the whole thing had been real – that there really were three of those creatures in my bedroom plotting my demise and a fourth one that laid in bed next to me and pushed me off the bed while I slept. The whole business was crippling until I finally started sketching the whole thing. I started work on 12' by 6' painting of the whole ordeal – every imperfection of their grotesque bodies is rendered as painfully close to how I saw it as I'm able to. It might seem counter-intuitive; it might seem that if I'm going to deal with my psychotic episodes then I need to distance myself from them as much as possible. But the whole shift in my artwork, the shift to painting my psychotic episodes has led me to a realization about what they are and how to handle them.

Psychosis digs deep down, to the very depths of the subconscious and pulls out what truly frightens you. Psychosis manipulates your brain into thinking that these terrible things are really true...that you're in real danger. It distorts the whole of your perception of reality and keeps you in a vice-like grip until you finally collapse from exhaustion. But when I get close to my psychosis...when I objectify it like it objectifies me, when I try to understand it it loses its power. I wrestle with psychosis – I wrestle with the irrationality of it, I refuse to let it do the things it used to do to me and I use all my might to deny it its grip on my spirit. I can't quite explain it in words...but the paintings that I've done of my psychosis, the countless drawings of the figures and distortions that I see, have all served to allow me to understand what it is. I'm fighting psychosis with everything I have. I'm armed with a paint brush, I'm armed with a pencil, and I'm armed with the understanding that objectifying my psychosis, turning psychosis into an object, a literal object, empowers me to face them.

After the summer was over I was elated with how much my life had improved. I felt as though everything was over and I could resume my normal life. I had an improved attitude towards treatment. I was finally taking my pills. I messed up a lot at first by forgetting to take them on time, by forgetting to take them at all sometimes. But it wasn't a pill rebellion. I knew that the little pills weren't the complete answer to my improvement...I had done research on the effectiveness of the medication and I thought I had a pretty good idea of what to expect when it came to taking them. I haven't had a pill rebellion since. People have asked me what it finally took for me to start taking my pills. I think that it was largely just an attitude shift. I had to experience day after day, year after year of feeling completely miserable...I had to hit the bottom of the pit that is my ability to keep it together before I started swallowing all twenty some pills every day at the appropriate times. My attitude had to change, and no one could change my

attitude but me. I had to realize that pills weren't the complete answer, I had to realize that taking the pills came with certain restrictions on my life – I had to understand that they would make me very tired, that they would make my brain fuzzy, and that they would make it harder to do a lot of things I took for granted. I also had to realize that some of those things would taper off...the pills would attenuate and things would get better after about 6 weeks of taking them consistently. The most important thing I had to realize, though, was that I wasn't taking the ideal combination of medicine. Dr. Carlson wouldn't be able to perform any tests to see what combination of pills would work best...he would have to turn me into a living experiment and we would have to try combination after combination of drug regimens in order to find one that worked for me. And even after we found one that would work for me, it would have to be adjusted as my brain chemistry changed and the illness fought back for control over me.

I started the fall 2010 semester at Metro State as a computer science major. I was full of ideas of getting a doctorate in computer science and doing break through work in the biomedical field. I was going to own a huge house and make enough money that I could pay off my medical debt and in that huge house I was going to live with my parents who wouldn't have to worry about a thing as they spent their retirement doing exactly what they wanted to be doing. It was a lot of pressure to put on myself.

Computer science was frustrating, not just because it's one of those things that you learn by doing as opposed to reading and not just because my professor wasn't exactly the most inspired educator. I was doing fine at first by learning the material by myself and coming to ask questions when I got stuck. I did about half of the semester just fine and I was beginning to think that my dream might just become a reality. But, shortly before our first exam I started writing programs oddly. Shortly before the first exam I would read my text book and not remember a single thing...I would read the assigned chapters over and over and over again and nothing would stick. I became stressed out. Stressed from the horror of realizing that I was just repeating everything all over again. And stressed from the realization that my dream, which I'd banked on like it was an inevitability, was crumbling before me. And as that dream crumbled all I could do was look down at my feet and see myself drop back into that pit, right back where I was shortly after ECT.

I had such precious little time in my happy space, I had so little time where I had a future and hopes and dreams, I'd had such little time to experience what it was like to be as normal as I can hope to be. I had to drop out of school. With the exception of that one wonderful math class I'd taken during the summer, I've had to drop out of every semester of college I've taken since I moved back to Denver in 2008. The reality was devastating to me, the floor fell out from beneath me and I began my rapid descent to



the bottom of the pit. But we were better prepared this time.

First, there was a practical matter – I can't work and I can't go to school. I'm not very good at handling everyday stresses, they turn me into a puddle. And when I'm a puddle I'm susceptible to all kinds of miseries. It's not good for me to be a puddle – that's when I get hospitalized, that's when I get ECT, that's when I get suicidal. Everyone has to have money, there's rent and groceries, phone bills, and birthday presents to spend money on. I needed money too. I was miserable at my parents' house in Aurora because it was difficult to see my friends...seeing my friends improves my mental health and I try to do everything and anything that will improve my mental health. One thing that was going to drastically improve my mental health was being as independent as possible...was being as normal as possible. That kind of stuff, the kind of stuff that most everyone takes for granted, isn't possible without a job. I can't work. So my therapist suggested that I apply for disability.

I hated the idea of applying for disability, it felt like failing; it felt like giving up. I'm not a quitter and I don't like failing. I had a rotten attitude about it. I think that I had the same attitude that most people have about disability. I thought that if I was on disability I was just a freeloader...that I was just taking advantage of the government and being a drain on everyone. I felt as though I wouldn't be contributing to society. I think that I also feared what's only inevitable when you're on disability – that people will judge you in exactly that way. Just telling my therapist and my family that I wanted to apply for disability was a huge difficulty.

During the time I was weighing my options and realizing that I didn't really have any, I was terribly sick. I was having terrible psychotic episodes every night and I hadn't yet figured out that if I just drew them or painted them that a lot of the pain would go away. There were voices in my head telling me to kill myself, telling me that I was worthless and that I had no talent. I was becoming cripplingly depressed. I had to give up on going to my grandma's house for Christmas – I was too sick. There was little hope for me. But I was clawing at the walls on my way down to the bottom of the pit and my doctors were trying everything they could. Finally, my therapist suggested that I get help elsewhere. Not in the sense that she didn't want to help me anymore, but in the sense that a different kind of therapist could do a world of good for me. I was going to see a Cognitive and Behavioral Therapist. A CBT, like the title suggests, focuses on taking negative behaviors or conditions and modifying them with different behaviors.

Chris, my CBT, and I spent a few months meeting every week and trying different techniques to help me deal with my illness. She first worked on what sensations I feel before I get psychotic, what it felt like to be depressed, and how much the voices in my

head affected me. We worked on grounding techniques to ease my worsening anxiety, we set up a system to make sure that I took my pills on time every day. She helped me work on ways to deny the voices in my head and developed strategies to prevent psychosis. I can't stress enough how empowering it felt to suddenly be given all of these tools to help me fight my illness. Just knowing that I could actually do something about how I was feeling helped slow my rapid descent and doing those things started to lift me back toward the surface. With her help I discovered the electric chills that I get before I go psychotic, I was able to identify the rising feeling in my chest, the certain kind of weightlessness that I feel before I become so depressed that I'm suicidal. I learned that daily exercise, fresh air, and sunlight are crucial to helping my mood as well as staving off psychosis. I learned grounding techniques to help with the anxiety of being psychotic. I learned that certain smells help me feel better, I learned that coffee is a good thing to get when I start feeling bad because of how well it grounds me. I learned that I need to balance my life with the proper amount of social activity and the proper amount of alone time. I've been doing it long enough that I can somewhat predict when I need to have social contact and when I need to be alone and am able to balance my schedule accordingly. With Chris's help I learned to harness the power of my art and direct it toward making me feel better. I improved by leaps and bounds and soon I could see the surface and I knew I was going to be okay. But all of this stuff, all of these various tools, are nothing compared to the best tool I have for improving my mental health.

Her name is Kerrin and she's my dog.

I'd come up with the idea of getting a dog a while before I got Kerrin. I remember mentioning it to my dad when he picked me up from the train station one night after church. My mom thought it was a good idea but my dad thought it was a terrible idea. He'd had unpleasant experiences with dogs when he was growing up...mainly that he'd had all of the responsibility of cleaning up after dogs without any of the fun of getting to hang out with them. I think that he saw me getting a dog as just being a repeat of the same situation. And so he said no, it wasn't going to happen. Fast forward to my time with my CBT, Chris, and the subject was brought up again. Chris thought it was a fabulous idea as she'd seen how much good animals can be for people with mental illnesses. So I brought it up again, and my dad said no again. I was back to seeing Amy, my original therapist, and she and I were working on developing a strategy to convince my dad that a dog would be a huge benefit for me. But, it just took one little near-psychotic episode for my dad to realize the power of a friendly animal whom I love.

On our walks through my parents' neighborhood, my dad and I had befriended a cat whom I named Milton. Milton is one of the coolest cats I've ever met. He would

come sauntering over to us, meowing up a storm, and then let my dad and I take turns petting him as he switched off between rubbing up against our legs. We both loved Milton and started planning the routes of our walks so that we would pass by Milton's house. We went to the store and got cat treats for Milton, we came up with stories about Milton not being outside because he's watching the game on TV or because he was having a barbecue in the back yard. Milton even tried to follow us home one night. Anyways, one night my dad and I went for a walk. At some point during the walk it was pretty clear that I wasn't doing very well; I'd become non-verbal and it was looking like I was going to have a bad psychotic episode before we managed to get home. We passed by Milton's house and Milton happened to be outside. He started meowing up a storm and came strolling over to me and I perked up almost immediately. It was like someone just hit a button and stopped psychosis from getting a hold of me. That's all it took to convince my dad that a dog was perfect for me, and so we started searching for a dog.

Kerrin has not disappointed. Not even close. Since I've gotten her, the number of really bad psychotic episodes I've had has been dramatically reduced. Now I can count how many times it's happened on one hand in the two years since I got her. Medicine can't do that, all the CBT tricks in the world can't do that, all of the most disciplined, most thoughtful living in the world can't do that...but my dog can do that. Kerrin has been the most significant thing to ever happen to me, especially since I was diagnosed. She has this preternatural awareness of how I'm doing, when she senses that I'm not doing well she asks to get on my lap...and then she just cuddles with me. And just having contact with another living thing...whose weight I can feel and whose fur I can stroke...is incredibly helpful. Tactile things have always had a huge effect on me and petting Kerrin's fur has become a great source of comfort to me. She gets me on a schedule to make sure that I go for a walk every day. We play together which makes me feel less alone and more connected. We cuddle while I'm listening to music or reading. And she sleeps with me every night, right next to me or at the foot of the bed.

Kerrin is also good at keeping me safe. She's incredibly protective of me. There have been some Saturdays (when I don't walk with my dad) where I start dissociating during our walk. I think that Kerrin knows when I'm not connected. Because, when that happens, she takes command of the walk and has always led me safely home. A few months ago I was walking down the street with Kerrin when it was dark out and someone jumped out of an alley brandishing a ski pole like a weapon and yelling at me. Kerrin barked the most vicious bark I've ever heard in my life and started jumping at him and he ran away. While I don't think that he could've done much with a ski pole and while I'm pretty sure that he was just drunk and messing around with me, it solidified in my mind the loyalty and love Kerrin has for me. She always wants me to be safe. And

that's important, to know that my Kerrin is motivated to keep me out of harm's way; because I can apply that logic to psychosis. If I'm experiencing something terribly frightening and Kerrin is just lying there not doing anything about it, then I know that everything is okay and that what I'm experiencing isn't real. That's a great comfort to have in the midst of all the chaos that I'm presented with.

It's not to say that everything is perfect now, however. I'm not a fixed man. I still go through psychosis on a weekly basis...the psychosis isn't as crippling as it was before, but it still often merits a phone call to my parents and sometimes I have to go back to sleep at their place. I also still get suicidal and I still get terribly depressed. I get anxious, I get manic and I have a hard time sometimes. Compared to the Chris of two years ago I'm remarkably better. And a lot of it had to do with an attitude shift. I can't do this by myself...if I was left to my own devices, if I was all alone I'd be at the same place I was two years ago. I'd be at the bottom of the pit, wondering why I don't just end it all. The most important element to being as healthy as possible when you have a mental illness is the support system. My support system is my family – my Dad, my Mom, and Rachel; my support system is the friends I have who will stick with me, my support system is God and knowing that He works for the benefit of those who love Him. My support system is Kerrin and her unconditional love for me. My support system goes on – there's painting and drawing, fixing computers, writing, giving speeches like I am tonight, listening to good music, drinking coffee, enjoying a root beer, on and on. I've learned tons of little tricks to help me stave off this terrible thing I've been given. But the main parts of my support system are the people (and dog) who love me.

Sometimes, all the support in the world doesn't work. Sometimes, all of the discipline and routine and walks and cuddles with Kerrin don't help in the struggle against psychosis, depression, and mania. In late April, I was informed that I had to leave my house. So I had less than a month to find a new place and move into it, and that's been incredibly stressful. I found a place about two weeks later and moved in as soon as I could, but it's been a hard adjustment. I have to get acquainted with new smells and sounds, I have to get used to living in a place all by myself, and I have to come up with a new routine for my daily activities. I really took my routine at my old place for granted, I had such an excellent system of what I did when I woke up – how I took my pills, how I adjusted myself to being awake, how Kerrin and I would spend the morning sitting outside while I drank my coffee and she chased squirrels. It's easy to assume that certain things that have helped me will always be there. This was also a point made very clear to me when my best friend, Addie, told me that she was moving to California, that she would be there for quite a while, and that it was uncertain where she would end up after her time in California was up. Stress isn't good for mental illness...any kind of stress. I've had a hard time adjusting to my new apartment and I've

had an ever harder time coming to terms with the fact that such an important person in my life is now a thousand miles away.

I want to be happy for her. And I know, consciously, that it's a good move for her. But it's been a difficult transition for my subconscious. There have been numerous calls to my parents, my dad has had to take time off work to come over to be with me as I struggle with coming to terms with this. I've had to spend more time at my parents' house in Aurora in order to be safe and start to relax. It's so easy to get used to things being a certain way and assuming that nothing is going to change and that everything will always be stable. Stability is good for me but that doesn't mean that anyone can ensure that the stability I've come to rely on will always be there.

We don't understand a whole lot about the brain – it remains this enigmatic symbol of the limitations of current scientific technology. We know that mental illness can be genetic, we can see certain patterns of difference between the brain activity of a healthy person and the brain activity of a person with a mental illness. Not even 60 years ago, they were calling mental illness a “malformation of character” like it was a person's own fault for having a mental illness. There have been terrible treatments for mental illness such as insulin shock. Research on mental illness is woefully underfunded and there's still a huge stigma surrounding people with mental illness. I have to fight not only my own brain but also the wealth of misinformation that exists about mental illness. When I was first diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder I had no idea what it was. It was only once I started researching my illness and asking questions about it that I was able to understand what it's all about. My self-education about schizoaffective disorder has gone a long ways toward enabling me to find effective treatment. There's a fine line between not accepting mediocre treatment and knowing that no treatment is completely effective. I still hear voices, I hallucinate everyday, and I still have rapid mood swings. But I've developed powerful tools to help me deal with it. I've come to terms with how my life is going to be – I've had to redefine what it means for me to be successful, I've had to redefine what my participation in society is going to look like, I've had to accept certain realities about the dysphoric reality I'm presented with. Life is completely different for me than it was before I developed this illness. I've hit rock bottom and I know that I'll most likely hit the bottom again. It's exhausting, it takes a lot out of me and some days I just have to accept the fact that I got out of bed and managed to go for a walk. Life isn't easy.

I deal with my illness well, I'm more functional than a lot of other people are with similar illnesses. I have a place of my own in a city I love, I have supportive family and friends who understand my limitations and accept that I have to live differently than other people. I have a ton of time to be able to paint and write about my experiences, I

have time to sit in coffee shops and relax, I'm able to spend as much time as I can with Kerrin, I'm blessed with opportunities to speak in front of groups about my experiences like I am tonight. There are advantages and disadvantages to everyone's life style and I know that I can't dwell on the negative. If I dwell on the negative I start falling into that same pit that I've been in too many times to count. If I dwell on the negative I lose perspective on things and stop taking care of myself. Sometimes I just lose it, lose hope, lose perspective, lose my grip on reality. But it's not losing...it's just the way that it is. It's not like losing a game of chess where the end is a finality. There's always the hope of another game and there's always the hope of another day. I have to keep a firm grip on hope, on knowing that the illness just ebbs and flows like a river.

I've always been pro-logic. Not to say that I'm always good at it. Not to say it's worked out particularly well at every turn in my life. Logic seems to work against me sometimes...logic seems to replace reality with far scarier schemas of thought, I've learned to just let go of logic. If you're on stage, performing a song, and you think too hard about the notes you're playing, you're going to miss a note. In those instances, and in instances of love or guile, you'll find yourself a failure...you'll find yourself without the talent you thought you had. Logic is solid, inflexible, and unwilling to accommodate. Logic will try to take the accidental, unintended moments of beauty and turn them into frightening escapades.

I had my first foray into the world of non-logic when my dad taught me how to ride a bike. It doesn't make sense, logic can't reason you into balancing on two wheels. Logic is fearful of hurting itself when it knows the fall onto the concrete will scrape and bruise your flesh. So my dad took me to the grass where logic knew falling down would hurt less. And knowing that, logic stopped bugging me; my dad told me to not think about it. So I didn't...and I rode my bike all the way down the hill.

Years later, many years later, I discovered painting. The same rule applies. I thought too much at first, I was overwhelmed. The paintings weren't beautiful – the paintings were unsuccessful. But the more I painted, the less I thought about it and the more my natural proclivity for color and shape came to the surface. I realized, after years of painting, that painting is performance. Psychosis is also performance.

During psychosis, I used to try to reason with myself. I'd try to convince myself that the creatures really *were* real. That I had no choice but to fear them. But logic was telling me that there were no creatures...logic was alarmed at the creatures' presence. I tried to be pro-logic. But, psychosis is the anti-thesis of logic. Psychosis is performance – a denial of the parts of your brain that tell you to be fearful; to run, to survive. A denial of the parts of the brain that try to tell you that something is very wrong. In performing

psychosis, I've learned to just experience it without judgment, to try to find it interesting. The logic of my brain is still pounding at my heart – getting me ready to fight or getting me ready to fly. I must deny logic its right to frighten me. I must deny logic its right to defy my experiences. Instead I must embrace a simple, child-like, faith. Faith in knowing that God will protect me, faith in knowing that it will soon end, and faith in knowing that, despite how frightened I am at that moment, this experience will help me grow; help me share this with others and help me perform a painting that will compensate, in whatever unfair fashion, for the nightmares I live with every day.