

God's Children

Poems and Such

by Eric Cecil

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Also by Eric Cecil: *A-Train Blues*

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

— *for men and women who live with a mental illness*

...

Poet's Note —

I started *God's Children* in the summer of 2006. I struggled with my illness in the early spring, but that summer was golden and one poem led to the next and there were days when two or three poems were written. I wasn't manic or close to it; at night I slept like a baby.

I had a manuscript prepared by fall. I asked my mother to look it over for corrections and typos, but made no move to publish. I said to myself that if God wants this published He'll tell me. The manuscript sat until March, when I got a flier in the mail.

“Get your next project started.”

Well, okay.

I offer no solutions in *God's Children*, but love and goodwill. It is my hope that this collection of works will weaken the stigma of mental illness — a treatable condition with a biological component; an illness of the spirit.

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I sought my soul
But my soul I could not see.
I sought my God,
But my God eluded me.
I sought my brother,
And I found all three.

— *William Blake*

Part One



The Calling

I'm writing about the plight of the mentally ill because
my conscience drives me to do so and God encourages me
to seek the freedom and peace He promises, that is tied to His children.

Nothing would please me more than to write love poems
or poems about Kentucky Octobers.
I would like to pursue my dreams.
To go back to college.
To come home to love after a hard day of work.
I would like children of my own; to help them with homework.
To have a lawnmower and grass to cut.
I would like a garden to weed.
Simpler worries.
Less stress.

I write about a people with a spirit that is never defeated,
because God lives within us.
We are a beautiful people.
We win no rewards, go without praise
as we transform our suffering into compassion
and teach those who reach out to us about
unconditional love.
And we are oppressed for our own good.
We become slaves to a system of cutbacks.
So because our freedom as a human race is about family,
I have to fight,
my duty calls me to do so.
I have no other choice
and ask for God's direction
and wisdom.



Journal Entries

It's Sunday. I awakened at 5:00 p.m. What has happened to me? Ryann, Natalie and I partied into the morning. This has become routine. I need to break the cycle of staying out and waking up late. School is my major fear. I'm getting nowhere. Three of my four classes will not go toward my major, History. I can't wait until it's over. The summer will be good. Maybe spend a month in Louisville working at the golf course. I need to get away from Lexington.

The October Blues are here again, but I'm coping. I'm not alone. I think of you throughout this, Catsie. I am not able to comprehend the spiritual significance of your death. When you died you reunited with God while I was being molested on my sixth birthday. What is the spiritual significance? What is in store for me? What am I tested for? I can accomplish great things in my lifetime and feel writing and chess are the key. I'm gifted, but have not figured out how to better mankind.

Today was awful. I suffered, having stayed out late smoking and drinking. I'm useless. I found a receipt from when Robin stopped over and I cooked. I feel overwhelmingly sad. I have lost much. I'm underweight and my failure to work out has damaged my perception of self. I'm smoking and drinking again, this is the main problem. I went without a smoke today. I must stop drinking. It hurts me so much. How can I amount to anything, rise to my potential, if I drink at night and wake in the afternoon with a piercing headache and a sorrowful soul?

I'm reminded of the Elton John song, "Someone Saved My Life Tonight." Particularly the lyric, "We've all gone crazy lately." I spent yesterday on the brink of insanity. My mind rebelled. What have I done to my brain? I felt extremely dehydrated, my mind bleached driftwood. Yesterday marked the end of a slow decline, rock bottom. Now it is time to begin the slow ascent. There is no choice. To continue drinking is to accept a mind that cannot function. To drink is madness.

As the days toward graduation decrease, it's natural to take an inventory of losses and gains made in Lexington. I remember coming to the University of Kentucky full of expectation and hope. My expectations have not been fulfilled. There were times at UK when I felt perfectly happy. The Greg Page Apartment days were rich. I think of all the people there, now gone except for Beau. That year was the best; they've gotten lonelier since.

Congratulations, you have survived by simply believing and breathing. You've walked off the unit with a small piece of your sanity intact. The war is over, the earth is at peace, a rainbow fills the sky under tears and smiles. You're better they say, getting back to your old self — whoever that is. But day after day, the same set of frightened eyes, accompanied by that salesmanship smile, look back from the mirror prepared with new renderings of old lies: "You're fine, you're good..." God Almighty, I'm dying inside.

Depression and self-doubt creep over me. I can't shake the haunting memory of the road I've traveled. I feel an impending sense of doom. My creative energy is gone. When will it return? I think of God and the spiritual world. I feel deserted. I'm tired of facing life alone. Tears blur my vision. I didn't ask to be molested, to have my sister die, to have bipolar. I'm tired. If my medications don't straighten out, there's always suicide. God, I'm tired.

It's Saturday and my area is a mess. I clean, depressed. The weather vane spins beneath stark clouds of depression, battery acid from my brain eats at my wasting body. I have nothing left to give. My career as a poet is over.

The rain falls in slow rhythms, melodious, autumn dying into the darkness of winter, the light dimming, wind blowing, arriving out of nowhere like a child's death in a small town. Facing prison time, a calling from God is not a defense. My lawyer is working to get the charges dropped. I aim to leave this life, discard my painful memories collected like photographs, faded, bent, thrown away and forgotten.

I'm not as young as I once was. The definition of exercise is finding my car keys to head to the doctor's office or the pharmacy or to my mother's house to make sure I'm still loved. Dust has grown on the dreams I once desperately needed to dream. I'm afraid of what will be asked of me, what people will think, what they'll see.

I'm ostracized from society — cast off, sleazy, content to paint, study, write and smoke cigarettes — the machine still turns. I stare into the sunset. Through artist's eyes, old ideas morph into absurdities, nightmares into hope.

•••

The Credentials

When I graduated college I was caught up in writing and wasn't about to get a nine-to-five, so I went back to work the grounds at Harmony Landing Country Club in the summer of 2002.

I spent that summer obsessed with writing. I was filled with pain, hopelessness, bitterness and fear by October. I went back to Harmony Landing after I got out of the hospital in November and stayed there until December 31. Four months of depression and unemployment followed.

My uncle threw me a job at his produce and flower store in April. I look back with fond memories. I went to jail 10 months into recovery. I got out and another uncle called out of the blue and said he knew that a provider of mental health services was hiring.

I called and stopped by for an interview with my degree. My mental illness was an attraction for the first time. I was hired October 15, 2003 at eight dollars an hour for twenty hours a week. My title was Peer Advocate. My job was to go into Central State Hospital and give patients a survey to make sure they weren't physically or mentally abused by the police or by staff during the intake process. I had ten dollars for each person to buy them necessities: cigarettes, cokes, snicker bars, potato chips, socks, underwear, shoes, tee shirts, blue jeans, sweatpants, magazines, books, lipstick, lotion, hair gel, shampoo, fruit, brushes and combs, toothbrushes and toothpaste. I wrote a report for each person I saw.

I was told I would do well if I had compassion. I learned that I am a *consumer*, because I have a mental illness and utilize services to treat bipolar illness. *Consumer* is the politically correct term for someone with a mental illness. I've never talked to any *consumer* who likes the term.

I did the Peer Advocate job for four months and was offered to work thirty hours a week. My new title, in addition to Peer Advocate, was Olmstead Advocate. "Olmstead" refers to the Supreme Court decision which ruled that just because you have a mental illness, you don't have to live segregated based on a diagnosis in an institution when there are less restrictive housing options in the community. There is however no practical plan to implement Olmstead. Housing options are not available in the state of Kentucky to meet the needs.

I was initially assigned as an Olmstead Advocate to work with an individual with a history of hospitalizations who lives with paranoid schizophrenia. Before we got to know each other, we often bumped heads. He wanted his independence. Our friendship began when we learned to respect each other.

I was soon working forty hours a week with four other people. Then I was put in charge of Peer Reviews.

The State of Kentucky contracts to assess its fourteen regions to make sure the money disbursed to each region is actually spent as agreed. The work of Peer Reviews requires I interview family members, *consumers* and staff to get an idea of what works and what doesn't to recover from mental illness. Everyone needs money for transportation, housing and peer support. The overworked case managers are the glue of the system. I also visit what are called Therapeutic Rehabilitation Programs (TRP) where recovery skills are taught. I report to the state.

I began sharing my experience about seclusion and restraints when I started doing Peer Reviews. There is an effort in state hospitals to reduce and eliminate the use of seclusion and restraints. I'm part of a team that has traveled to Eastern State Hospital, Western State Hospital, Appalachian Regional Hospital, Kentucky Correctional Psychiatric Center and Central State Hospital. I've also presented to Our Lady of Peace (formally Caritas, where I was a patient) and to many *consumers* in Central State Hospital.

My first presentation, at Western State Hospital, was memorable. I was so nervous, I didn't sleep for days before; my hands were shaking when I got to the podium. The director of Central State Hospital heard me speak and awarded me Employee of the Bi-Month.

I was informed in June 2005 via letter that I had received the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) "Consumer of the Year" award for the state of Kentucky. There was a ceremony with dinner and dessert. My parents were there and my mother cried. When I was given the award, I thanked my parents for always walking me into and out of hospitals.



Introductions

Please don't invite me places
and put me in front
of a podium just because
I have a mental illness.
Don't say "This is Eric Cecil,
and we're delighted
to have him here
because he's a consumer."
Don't do me any favors
or give me breaks
simply because research
believes I have ten chromosomes
hotwired like a race car
that would like
to spin out of control.
I have more to offer
than a diagnosis
and stories of pain.
I'm a person when I pray for a society that fears me.
Why don't you call me "educated"?
I have ordinary hopes and dreams
like having a dog and a white picket fence.
Tell people
I like to read
and sometimes take
a cup of a hot decaf tea
with milk and a touch of sugar
after nine at night.
I have a routine and watch TV
from ten to eleven.
I live by my watch
so don't waste my time
with stories you heard

from a friend of a friend
of an ex-boyfriend
about the behavior of the mentally ill.
I prefer to bicycle
over a treadmill.
I'm a weekend night owl.
I like Van Gogh.
I have a sense of humor
and sometimes pretend
my cell phone is a light saber.
Introduce me as a good brother.
But don't introduce me as
a mental illness.

•••

Recovery

Broken by the sea,
deposited by waves,
sand rests
with rolled-over dreams,
until the salty air
lifts an individual grain
across sun-touched land.

•••

Hell

The mug shot at booking caught me with cornered eyes.
I was given a shower, spoke to a worker about my mental status,
and placed in a cell.
I had no idea where I was or why I was there.
My cellmate had tattoos and short-buzzed red hair.
I believed he was a demon.
He asked why I was arrested, and proceeded to give me legal advice.
For some reason he was taken from the cell.
I took off my orange jumpsuit while he was gone.
and jumped from the top bunk.
My cellmate came back,
saw me standing there naked
and howled.
The guard made me put on my jumpsuit
and took me to a cell of my own.
I hope to never forget that
everyone and everything
dear to me,
fell into cold memories.
My life was devoid of love.
In its place came delusions.
I believed there had been nuclear holocaust.
As I stared at the frame of the metal bunk bed,
I thought I was going to melt,
my eyelids and my skin
were going to flake and fall off.
And as those feelings became real
I grew accustomed to a concept
called forever.



Trust God

He talked of hitting bottom
and of finding God
open-armed there.
He was alone
house-sitting at
his mother's
with a bottle
of whiskey and a bag
of marijuana.
No amount of drink
and drug could kill
his loneliness.
Jazz played
but nothing could quiet the sound
of his imploding mind.
He looked around the dark house.
He asked,
“Where has everyone gone?”
They've moved on.

He stopped his car on his highway of certain death,
after a voice within spoke.
You don't have to run anymore.
God was there, but he needed
humility to see it.
He spoke of leaving
his third mental hospital,
of being broken mentally, spiritually.
He weighed one hundred eighteen pounds.
He was broke,
became unemployed and
unemployable.
His parents loved him
but couldn't trust him.

He was facing prison.
The depression was so great,
he moaned himself to sleep,
choking every night on shame.
But God was waiting.
His only untried option
against the pain
was to get down
on his knees and pray.

He observed that God
keeps bringing us
to this point.

He started praying
a prayer written by Thomas Merton
which concludes that God will never leave us
to face our perils alone.

He went back to jail.
They took his belt so he couldn't hang himself
and his shoes so he couldn't run.
He laid down on a blue paint-chipped metal bench
in a holding cell
and looked at the ceiling and the white concrete walls.
Despair brought hopelessness,
anxiety gave birth to fear.
They combined
fast and punishing
as wind and waves.
He got off the bench
and peered through the
small glass window.
He looked to the right of the door.
And there, written in pencil,
were the words,
Trust God.



Suicide

Pain is too small a word.
It's inadequate.
It doesn't do it justice.

Someone who has
never suffered
clinical depression
should drop to their knees
and thank God
they've been spared.

I cried.
I cursed.
I called for mercy
and would have
welcomed death.

I've never consciously tried suicide,
but it was on the table.
It had an allure.
It shined in darkness.
It whispered to me and I listened.
It became an attractive option.

I know the desperation of living
in a shrinking tunnel of light.
I know hopelessness.
I have compassion
for people who,
against their wishes
to stay healthy,
are driven to suicide.

There is a real chance
I'll become manic
against my desire to stay well.
I can't recognize and acknowledge
the onset of mania if I become psychotic.
I'll inevitably fall into pain if I live.
It has the power to convince me
the emptiness is permanent,
and my only relief is suicide.

For people who live with bipolar,
there is roughly a one-in-six chance of suicide.

That's Russian Roulette.

...

Medications

Medications need to be taken with love,
or relapse will occur.

The medications at our disposal are good,
but not that good.
They help provide the grace
to learn to live.

For bipolar, lithium (blood test required) is still the standard,
and 900 milligram is all my body can take.
At 1200 milligrams my hands shake,
and food that goes in solid comes out liquid.
Lithium alone is not enough.
I've tried.

One other medication works for me,
but I'm not giving it free advertising.

I've tried:

- Seroquel
- Tegretol (blood test required)
- Lamictal
- Thioridazine
- Zyprexa
- Risperdal
- Geodon
- Abilify
- Paxil
- Wellbutrin
- Prozac
- Celexa

The collective side-effects are not limited to:

- Weight gain
- Type-Two diabetes
- Hand tremors
- Insomnia
- Rash
- Fatal Rash
- Fatal blood disorders
- Decreased sex drive
- Increased need for sleep
- Increased thirst
- Increased urination
- Dry skin
- Sedation
- The list goes on.

Medications benefit only the brain.
The side-effects harm the spirit and body,
which in recovery are equal shareholders
in determining quality of life.

•••

Emancipation of the Soul (Alternate Take)

I blew out the candles after the lights went out and the song was sung and ate cake and ice cream laughing all over my face.

There were presents wrapped concealing toys and photographs taken as I proudly shredded into them, my brother right next to me and we played games with the neighborhood children.

My mother answered a phone call to learn my great-grandmother Catsie died suddenly. It was the last gift that she gave.

After our children's games ended, after I napped big bellied, my mother needed to find her mother and my father needed to be by his wife and it was decided my brother and sister would go along because they were old enough, but I had such a happy day and was so young death had not yet been explained, so I needed a sitter and he was not a family member and now I know he was something of a nightmare, but all bad dreams eventually see the light of day.

My personality change and rage was evidence; it flared boiling molten in public and it was more than an occasional tantrum, it was a dark winter furnace fury at home but my mother withstood its blaze; perplexed she would wrap me in her arms and carry me to my room while I kicked and screamed and cried and yelled, "I hate you, I wish you weren't my mother."

I started to behave when I escaped into reading, but then I turned my anger, which was someone else's violence, inward, and that's when I really started to hurt. I withdrew so slowly that withdrawal became part of my personality.

During the summer that I was 16, on vacation in Florida, we had dinner with him and his wife. He was a friend of my Dad and he continued to be far too long. I shook his hand when we met again and he looked confused and scared. It was the daze in his eyes and the tense of his face. We ate and left and that October I dropped out of high school.

I broke and fell and sank and drowned. I was a dusty husk with wind blowing through it. Once remembering and spilling tears my mother said, "You said Mom I'm losing myself." I had my fast glimpse of my sixth birthday and I can close my eyes and see the inside of his house except for the color of the carpets but I don't do that anymore.

Last summer, on a typical hot Kentucky day after I rd and care and counseling, he called my father at his office in town.

Eric and Zhen
2020-02-14 16:47:04



message and wanted to know if we could do dinner and James Baldwin once wrote, “the very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off.”

Chains of fear, eroded self-perception, irrational guilt; chains of shame and of anger tightened one last time and it was such a wonderful day with the sun blazing and the humidity. My father and I sat on the deck outside on a swing just swaying back and forth catching a slight wind of warm air.

I vowed not to fling accusations before I called which would lead to a circular argument; this man would not be calling upon me or my family again.

“Is Herb there?”

“Yes hold on. May I ask who’s calling?”

“This is Eric Cecil.” My voice was calm. I did not want my emotions to betray me.

“Hello, this is Herb.”

“This is Eric Cecil.”

“Oh, hi Eric. How have you been?”

The nerve to ask about my well-being awakened my rage that would momentarily be exorcised; it threatened to slice the cordless telephone line in half.

“I’m fine, but it has occurred to me that you and I need to talk. When I say this I am speaking on behalf of my father as well as myself. We don’t want to have anything to do with you. You are not to contact us again. We don’t want you to write or call.”

As cool as an October day, he said, “I was trying to call Dave Cecil, an old neighbor friend of mine.”

My voice pitched. “This is his son Eric.”

He sounded as if he had been told he had terminal cancer. “Ya’ll don’t want anything to do with us?”

“Yes that’s right.”

“Okay.”

Click. It took less than a minute. There was no “why,” because we both knew why.

•••

Stories

I.

Was that really me?
Nineteen, scarecrow thin
with my mind blowing in the wind,
roaming around the farmyard —
having abandoned a borrowed car,
sick in the sunlight,
bare-skinned
except for a sock —
through a field,
through a barn,
into the farmhouse,
frightening the lady
who lived there,
opening her refrigerator
for a box of juice.
I sat in her husband's recliner
until the policeman came,
covered me in a blanket,
and escorted me gently into the back of his car
to a holding cell,
where I lost more pieces of me.

I lived in the Cove Lake Apartments,
at twenty three
lonely,
bills always late,
empty beer bottles all over,
the ashtray overflowing onto the coffee table.
I was getting psychotic in the Y2K,
talking about the Middle East,
chess and world peace.

I had a plan,
but I had fallen into mania,
consumed with fantastic obsessive ideas
that gogogogogo,
they spinspaceinspinspin,
and my wonderful mind
stole the sleep from the night,
energized the euphoric day,
and I looked upon the world with sleepless eyes
from the psychiatrist's couch,
after being diagnosed.

II.

I am a son who calls home,
takes out his mother's garbage and recycling, and
has dinner with his Dad on Sunday nights.
The brother who can't describe
how much he cares for his brother.
The uncle who chases his niece
around the house
while she laughs, runs,
looks back and says, "Get me."
The grandson who stayed overnight
with Granny when Granddad passed.
The cousin who laughs
and jokes about
"stepping up to the plate."
The friend willing to help
and be helped.
I'm a person who sometimes struggles.
The advocate who believes in the recovery
of shattered dreams and broken lives.
And I remain
the poet who believes in miracles and love.

•••

Gratitude of the Day

I'm grateful
they stopped chaining us
to walls.

I'm grateful
they stopped exorcising the demons
because Satan isn't a friend of mine.

And I'm grateful
they stopped putting us
on trial
as witches
because
I don't know a single spell.

•••

Two Memories from the Cove Lake Apartments

I was flunking school, unable to get out of bed before one or two p.m.,
the phone and electric were occasionally getting shut off,
I checked my mail once every two or three weeks
and the landlord would put a reminder on my door
to let me know that the rent was really due this time,
when one day a preacher knocked on my door to tell me the good news.
Pride held my intelligence
beyond my intellect and in my infallible opinion,
evolution was solely responsible for creation
so I declared God didn't exist
and everything could be explained by science.
I didn't just casually mention this
but took forty-five minutes out of my day
to argue with a preacher who
was a radio man in Vietnam and
believed God had placed His hand on him
and guided him through war.

When I'm on my mountaintop
looking down at the world,
I come back to earth
by remembering I once denied God.

When I was manic, chess was the answer.
I didn't know that it made more sense to kill
men, women and children to settle problems between countries,
so I figured we could settle disputes on a chess board
instead of a battlefield and we could have peace.
All would be settled in a world chess tournament
and afterwards women could go home to men instead of ghosts—
this was right before I was diagnosed.
I couldn't sleep and got up during the night.
A part of me knew something was wrong
but didn't know what.
I was sliding.

I rolled a cigarette that night, turned out the lights,
sat down in the loveseat I had gotten out of the dumpster,
and in silence interrupted by the sound of time passing,
I begged God for sleep with tears rolling down my face.
I went back to bed and tossed and turned.
And you know, God answered that prayer,
just not that night.



A Few Bad Days

I've had only a few bad days,
I really have, it's true.
But it happens
those few bad days
get strung together
like minutes
that make up an hour
and those few bad days
turn into weeks
and I lose sleep over recurring thoughts
and I can exist with bloodshot eyes
for one two maybe three days
without sleep and go through
those nights with the Serenity Prayer
and shuffle through those days
carrying a rehearsed smile
but I eventually become a danger to myself
and others and that's when
a mental inquest warrant
comes into play and I go into the hospital
because I've crossed a line.
Like clockwork the mania will fade into depression,
as brilliant flowers wilt, lose their color and fall apart.
I plunge into depression six weeks later
and it will last for months.
And knowing that it's coming won't stop it because
I'm powerless over the chemicals
that run, collide and shout around in my mind.



It Just Seems Lately

It nearly pushed me over a short concrete ledge and perhaps it did. My spirit nearly died again. This time it wasn't the alcohol or drugs or the evening news. It was the medication. And I must say that those atypical anti-psychotics put a man down with the hangover and weight gain.

I tried to go monotherapy (just lithium) because the atypicals took the life in me. I would drag myself out of bed with burning around tired eyes that developed lines and seemed swollen in the morning. I've hated looking in the mirror. The side-effects of the "cure," not the illness, took my spirit and placed my inner light in a meat grinder, and every day I thought less of myself.

I would shower, dress, go to work like a ghost and zombie through the day. I couldn't sleep Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday taking lithium alone. I missed work Thursday to rest and crawled into work Friday after I got a little sleep from 25 milligrams of another atypical that gave me the same hangover. I didn't sleep Friday night from taking melatonin and valerian so I went back on the unnamed atypical that reportedly causes Type Two diabetes, slept, and awakened hung over. I felt like chaos. I called my doctor. He took me off the atypical and put me on an anti-convulsant. Today, I feel a little better.

I lost what I loved,
and that and hopeless pain is a definition of hell.

I lost that I'm a pretty good chess player.
I lost the ability to write.
I lost what it feels like to be healthy.
I lost that I really like listening to the blues.
I lost that I really like jazz.
I lost how to light the candles and burn the incense.
I lost my sense of humor.
I lost how to welcome the day.
It just seems lately I've been worried about surviving.



Send In The Clowns

I had a hard time sleeping
and that equates to having a bad day.
And when I have a really hard day
with my temper flaring and bloodshot eyes,
I go to work and stay home for the evening.
I'm getting off work at five
and have to stop at the post office
before I slide my apartment key home.
I won't read or exercise because I'm physically,
mentally and spiritually exhausted.
I plan to draw a hot bubble bath
and listen to Pat Martino's "We'll Be Together Again."
"Send In The Clowns" is just beautiful.
I'm going to change the music after my bath,
get something light and easy to eat
and probably watch a movie.
The goal is to make it to the end of the day,
which seems cruel and impossible.
I'm going to try to take the focus off the pain,
which in recovery is everything.
I'll take my medication as planned,
drink as much water as possible because hydration
is as important as the medications we take,
and relax into a low-stimulus environment.
I hate having these terrible days
that start as I open my eyes in the morning.
It's dreadful.
I watch the clock,
hoping that it's over.
But I have something to learn.
I'm going to lie on the couch, close my eyes
and inventory the last twenty-four hours
to find what needs to be tweaked,
what part of the routine faltered.

The problem will be addressed in prayer
and with speaking to another human being.

•••

Memories of Caritas

I was wearing a blue button-down and pressed slacks
with black dress shoes while I sat through a sixty-five-dollar-a-plate
banquet occasionally looking over to her table.
She was sitting down when I read her lips.
She stood, came over and introduced herself
as if I could ever forget.
I was in a conversation that I lost,
turned a shocked pale,
thinking...

Long dark wavy and curly hair,
big brown eyes,
and her smile...
She went back to her table after pleasantries.

When the banquet ended I walked to her,
tapped her on her arm and asked,
“How have things been?”

“I haven’t seen you since...”

I remember the time we spent together on the unit,
sitting at a table with a deck of cards
while her slender fingers taught me a game
I’d forgotten called “War”.
One day she announced
that she wanted to go outside.
She nearly cried.
That’s why my heart goes out to her —
she’s still struggling to go outside.



Non-Compliant

I was just floating along, life was a peach, no problem, especially after I had gone back to jail and served my time. I felt I had been through the fire. I was on Easy Street, then...

I got my blood checked to make sure the lithium didn't approach toxic levels. My psychiatrist also checked my thyroid and other things. One of the checks revealed that my triglyceride level was high.

I told my parents who panicked and said I was going to develop Type-Two diabetes. This was fear-based, and my part was that I let fear dictate my decision: I switched one of the two medications I was on. The descent into hell followed. It lasted more than a year.

I stuck with the first medication for about six months even though I never slept well. What eventually happened was that I had an anxiety attack in a meeting. I wanted — needed — to leave, but stayed in my chair.

I called my psychiatrist and we switched medications, switched and switched again.

I usually know within three days if a medication is going to work, the test being that if I don't sleep for three days, I'm not going to sleep and it's time for a change. The people who make the medication, and the people who don't take it, say give it two weeks. However if I don't sleep for five days I get scary, so two weeks is out of the question. Three days tells me all I need to know.

When I went for a new medication, my hopes rose. "This is it," I would think, "This will work. I'll feel functional. I'll have a life instead of an existence."

I spoke with a psychiatric nurse with bipolar about my condition. She said that just because I have a high triglyceride level doesn't mean I'm going to have Type-Two diabetes. That brought a moment of clarity. I called my psychiatrist to revert to what was working that first year of recovery.

It took time. I was taking the lowest dose the pharmaceutical company put out and the dose made mornings a chore. I cut the pill in half one day when I felt sedated. This is what concerned providers of mental health services and family members call being non-compliant.

I told my psychiatrist at my next appointment that I cut my dosage and felt good, had no side-effects or symptoms. "You know, Eric," he said, "a lot of people would benefit from taking that dose. They should make a smaller pill. I think some could take a quarter pill and it would benefit them."

•••

*In Recovery:
Clarification for Providers and Family Members*

The expert on my mind,
the expert on my body,
the expert on my spirit
is me.

You might look at the clothes,
but I own them,
I know what I look like naked.

•••

Goodwill

I might be getting a little old
and slightly out of style
and its been awhile
since I've been held
with any desire.
I pretty much gather dust.
Most people pass me by
or they look at my price tag
and set me down
because I've been broken
several times
and put back together again.
I'm rough around the edges
a little cracked in the finish
but I still have something to offer,
I can still hold water
and my flaws
have a story to be told.



Sick Thinking

I fall short as a poet.
I don't have a Rolodex of obscure ten-syllable words on my writing desk.
I'm not prolific enough
and I'm a failure when the profundities run out.
I don't consider myself
the smartest person in the room.
I wasn't at the top of my class.
I don't have a Master's degree
or a Ph.D.
My college GPA was 2.54.
I don't own many material things
or have a subscription to GQ.
I'm not always the hardest worker.
At times it takes a conscious effort to be giving and loving,
and sometimes I fake it.
I'm not worth it and let's face it,
I'm short and sort of stocky.
I shave my head to cover the male-pattern baldness.
I'm not the handsomest man,
it's not like women form a line,
at best I think I'm attractive,
but too often,
I'm not good enough,
or smart enough,
or wealthy enough.
Just not enough.
On the other hand...
my ego can't say
enough about my self; it falls all over me.
The spotlight is always on me.
I'm here to be entertained and praised.
I'm wiser than you can imagine,
and you would name a street and your son after me
if you knew how brilliant I really am.

And I can stare in the mirror for days
over the color of my eyes and my smooth skin.
I don't make much money,
but that's just because I choose not to.
My elitist snobbery thinks chasing the dollar
is as low an existence as one could choose.
I collect authors and poets on my bookshelf
like brokers collect stocks and bonds.
I write poem after poem
in an effort to be placed by the most brilliant.
It's a contest.
And these days I prefer to write them in one or two takes.
And this sick thinking,
in which I feel I have something to prove,
is what I live with,
is the reason why I ask God
every morning to direct my thinking,
and thank Him at night for doing so.



Gratitude Poem

I get irritable when I forget
about the day and restless,
ready to fix the past
when I think about relationships
that happened a little while back
and when I think about tomorrow
I fear success and cringe
at the thought of failure.

I need to remember that right now,
at this moment at six-thirty-seven
on a slow day,
that I have all I need.
I've been freely given
everything to get me through this day.

I have a roof
over my head;
I have heat,
while some go cold;
I have food in the refrigerator,
while some go hungry;
I have gas in the tank,
while some wait for the bus in the cold;
I have a little money in the bank,
and the bills are paid;
I have TV, color with cable;
I have a collection of DVDs —
I have a stereo;
I have unread books;
I have poetry living within.

I have plenty of things,
to the point I don't desire those things;
but I have what I need.

I have love and the gift of friendship.
I've been touched by people who
share their lives with mine.
Laughter has replaced sorrow.
Hope stands against depression.
Faith has stolen the spotlight from fear.

I've been remade out of broken pieces;
I have another chance.

I thank God,
for reminding me
that this is His day.
And I thank God
for what I don't have.

I'm not in trouble with the law.
I'm not in court pleading guilty.
I'm not in a mental hospital.
I'm not hurting people.
I'm not in a delusional hurtful relationship.
I'm not a collection of obsessions.
I'm not bringing fear to my parents' doorstep.
I'm not the person I was,
who accepted life as aimless pain.

I've been redeemed,
to be a brother to people who need a brother.

•••

Our Father

I.

When I fell
in shame and disgrace,
I landed in the heart
of our Father's grace.

When I felt
as if my spirit died,
I surrendered into
our Father's embrace.

When my world fell over like dominoes
and I faced my lies,
daylight broke from our Father's eyes.

When my back broke
and my faith faltered,
our Father carried me over
waters of death
and seas of impending pain.

He wipes away my tears
and heals my fears with hope
I hear through the mouths
of our brothers and sisters.

I was born free but became captive
within my mind until I offered our Father
my shackles and chains that haunted my days.

He set me free from the beast
that sleeps within me.

He's given me a day
of freedom to do His right,
which always glorifies love,
and spreads kindness.

My willingness steadies
to His readiness
for me to do His will.

II.

Our Father loves me,
not only as I am,
but for the mistakes I make
in the effort to do His will.

He hears me as

I thank Him for what He has extracted from me.

The fears, the selfishness, the ego, the pride, the jealousy, the lust.

I thank our Father for our brothers and sisters.

I confide that I fear my illness,
my medications and their side-effects.

I fear weight-gain and diabetes.

I give our Father all in prayer.

I trust our Father
as we go through the day.

III.

Our Father brought me here.

He's the clothes on my back,
the food in my cupboards,
the roof over my head,
the shelter in the storm.

He is responsible,
as I'm responsible;
for the actions I take
are the actions we take.

And when I'm wrong,

He waits with love
for my conscience to speak.

It guides me with a heavy heart
to forgiveness.

Our Father opens arms of reconciliation.

And a tear seeps from my eye.

IV.

Our Father feels me.
When I'm sleepless and tired
and my eyes boil water,
as I toss and turn,
our Father is with me.

When I'm helpless,
He offers aid.

I find His presence while I shuffle through the day.

•••

Plight

I try to sleep in the tick-tock of long nights but endless insomnia spills out of my eyes while I lose myself in cold darkness, in a bed filled with emptiness, tossing and turning, my vision filled with horror and grandiosity, my hope fading. I cry constantly, "Father, please help me," with sound and chaos streaming from my fast-talking mind, my demons screaming from chemical imbalances, misfires in my brain, voices and ideas set loose, non-stop good ideas, that want death, that prefer I die alone but will settle for slaying my beautiful spirit.

Father, please help me.

I live in the blind spot of society. I occasionally come in sight, then become an eyesore. The community turns an ugly eye of fear. My life melts in the summer heat as I trudge alone with ragged nerves that need love and patience. I look tired and frightened; I limp down lifeless dead-end streets, and suffer every night under black crashing waves that sway fading reality. I dream of better days as I fall upon sheets of last month's news and cardboard boxes amidst dead end alley stench.

Father, hear my song.

Father, lead me with your unconditional love when I walk into the street, oblivious, full blown symptomatic in shoes worn out from endless walking. I stop traffic, horns blare and loving people swear at my back. In my face, emotionally famished and confused, they fail to see the desperate need to be accepted while I dance on the pavement to the songs in my mind.

Father, hold me.

The torture of my spirit inevitably occurs prior to suicide or judicial intervention when Father's sunlight within wanes by my illness, my actions, by public ignorance and polite unkindness. I feel despair in black waters, blinded by

the surety of hopelessness; I feel out of place, unwelcome, unattractive, with pieces of normality and joy missing.

Father, I need you now.

Thoughts of suicide begin in self-absorbed isolation and start as a breeze before it turns into a hurricane. An unwanted embarrassed thought, accompanied by shame for thinking it. It changes into fantasies of a bath tub of warm water. It becomes a recurring daily thought. Suicide whispers, no one understands or loves me, that the pain will not end.

Father, save me.

I'm broken, my perception skewed, and my spirit worn out from awaking each day. I would rather not exist, depressed, in bed like a fallen hiker with a broken back, unable to move into the daylight of my life. My family and friends are gone. I'm surrounded by disparaging inner voices posing as truth.

Father, see me.

The police arrive with an ambulance after midnight wearing dark blue uniforms and cold black guns. I've become symptoms to the world. I'm taken for an evaluation and hospital lock-down to a loveless clinical room with doors that lock from the outside. I confront nightmares. I wait twelve, thirteen, fourteen hours for an overworked doctor who has seen me before. I'm issued a thin gown in a cold room and sleep shivering in a chair without a blanket or food. I'm shipped to another hospital, forgotten about. I was never really seen.

Father, love me.

I wear my red wristband on the unit and scream profanities to wake the moon. No one wants to touch or talk to me when my illness robs me of myself. And psychosis comes on like a terrible storm and delusion informs me that staff has slit my throat. When I feel blood running down my chest, Father loves me.

Father, comfort me.

I later walk through the unit having lost everything I care about. I wear my belongings on my back. I re-live my actions in my mind, ashamed and hopeless. I'm followed by staff on suicide watch. My dignity stripped, head down. I would give anything for a compliment, or to be thought of by my name and not by my diagnosis or symptoms.

Father, strengthen me.

I stabilize on medications I can't afford, leave the hospital in a fog, go back into the world delusional where I'm forced to lie that I have a mental illness and simultaneously accept that it is so. I'm called "crazy" because of my actions when I'm ill. And because of my medical history my thoughts when I'm well are not valid. I'm shot wary looks when I ask questions or I'm flat-out discriminated against

for having an illness beyond my will. I meet the expectations set forth by the powers-that-be, and apply for disability which includes incentives not to work, ensuring I'll spend most of my time alone, mind unoccupied, behind enemy lines with my obsessions, ready to relapse, in poverty, in slum housing, smoking cigarettes to pass the time.

Father, please help....

•••

Our Reality

We're laughed at,
stared at
and looked down upon.
We're called names —
“Crazy” —
and presumed to howl at the moon
every time it waxes full,
violent.
We are feared.

But we're long in the spirit.
We're laughter lighting the dark halls.
We're the lighthouse in the storm.
We journey on mended wings
that have flown over hopelessness.
We're sewn together by our love and laughter.
We shine like sunlit jewels.
We're angels of loyalty to God's will.
We take our season of suffering
for the sake of a higher plane of compassion.

Our names are taken.
We're dehumanized.
Shunned.
Neglected.
Used.
Abused.

Pointed at.
Snickered at.

Yet, we're the hope of a new day.
We're unconditional love in the midnight.
So dream with us.
Melt the winter of your beliefs
into the spring of our understanding.
We can be loved.
We can be touched.
We can laugh when we're supported.
Stand by us.

•••

Tooth Fairy Blues

I'm not innocent.
I'm not naïve.
I am not a saint.
I've seen things I shouldn't have seen.
I've done things I shouldn't have done.
I've been around the block once or twice.
I'm a grown man with suffering behind me.
And yet...
At one of the Therapeutic Rehabilitation Programs
I've visited,
there were colorings covering the walls.
I've heard staff talk to clients in a tone befitting children.
We're a poor people living in government-sponsored poverty.
We've been subjected
to sexual violence and homelessness.
We've been excommunicated
from our families and society.
But we are not children
that need to be treated like
we still believe in the Tooth Fairy.

•••

Shine

With another setback
through the same relapse,
can you be a brother?

With unkempt hair and stringy beards,
through a face of pain,
can you see the beginning of recovery?

In handcuffs and shackles,
through jail and court benches,
can you see our desire to be healthy?

In our warehouse clothes,
through our mumbles and moans,
can you hear affection coming from our souls?

With missing teeth,
through our list of profanities,
can you see our bond with Divinity?

Underfed or overweight,
through slang and broken English,
can you see the content face of mankind?

With unclipped yellow fingernails,
through bleach-white skin,
can you touch the laughter within?

With a diminished spirit
through leather restraints and jangling key-rings,
can you help heal misery?

Uninsured, ragged and poor,
through dwindling social services,
can you help spell *autonomy*?

With medication and education,
through tolerance and acceptance,
can you feel the shine of hopefulness?

With guidance and services,
through tears and shed delusions,
can you help with a resume for employment?

With a paycheck and checkbook,
through a budget,
can you help find an affordable apartment?

With laughter love,
through sweet grace from above,
we will recover.

•••

Thank You

Some of the problems with this system
are a result of people who get their jobs
through political appointments
and when one politician is voted out
a new administration comes in
with a new flux of people
which results in instability and insecurity
throughout.

With the constant changing of the guard —
and understand Kentucky
ranks 42nd of 50 in mental health services,
and that the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
gave Kentucky an “F” —
there is room for improvement.

Two strong facets of the system are:

- 1) the people
who work at Therapeutic Rehabilitation Programs (TRP); and
- 2) the work of case managers
who are typically underappreciated.
They listen out of love and encourage us
to find our better selves.

•••

What We Need

We don't need to hear about
the revolving re-admittances,
statistics on suicide
or homelessness.
We don't need to hear
how many of us are in jail.
We don't need to hear
family members share thoughts on our recovery.
We don't need to be
patronized behind a thin curtain of love.
We don't need PhDs
to explain Medicare and Medicaid policies to us.
We don't need to have our rights taken away
and placed under the care of a legal guardian.
We don't need to be called a Lost Cause.

We need to be stabilized
before we leave the hospital.
We need to hear about
evidence-based recovery practices.
We need to see
people who have recovered.
We need to see
consumers teaching in state hospitals.
We need to be loved enough
to find our own way in recovery.

We need to be told the truth.

We need to be able to understand the language of federal eligibility concerning work, medication access and services.

We need to be taught how to keep our rights, and be given legal advice in crisis.

Above all, we need to be reminded God loves us, and that miracles really do happen.

•••

Keep the Faith

I would agree
that we should
be locked behind
closed doors
to keep society safe,
except...
we're trying to get well,
we're not an evil people trying to get good
and we don't roam the streets
with foam at the mouth.

I would agree
with the paternalistic philosophy
that says we should have our families
care and make decisions for us,
except...
we're men and women.
Many of us don't have families left;
and what benefits the family member
doesn't necessarily benefit us.

I would agree
that we should rely
solely on God Almighty,
except...

we find miracles
in the medications
He provides.

I would agree
that we should
spend our days institutionalized,
and stand for the rest of our lives
in long lunch lines for a menu that stays
the same month after month after month,
except...
we recover,
we reach a point,
if we're allowed,
to make our own decisions,
to assimilate into society.

We hold jobs,
pay taxes,
buy cars,
acquire homes,
pursue education,
vote,
provide laughter,
bring joy to the lives of others,
and we love...

We realize our dreams when we find peace in the mirror.
We see our past, which was filled with shame, as our greatest strength.
We tell our brothers and sisters this is what we did.

It's dark and filled with unbearable pain,
but if you do such and such, it will change...
trust God, take action, keep the faith.



“Biological Brain Disorder”

When you have a heart attack
they don't throw you in jail,
and when you have cancer
you're usually surrounded
by loved ones at your bedside.
When you have a stroke
you don't have to keep it quiet
and people don't whisper about you,
or glance at you and look away.
When you have diabetes
the court system doesn't take away
your inalienable rights...

Groups partially funded by pharmaceutical companies,
say mental illness is like other illnesses because
it's unacceptable in our society to have a mental illness.
Family members have the American Dream shattered
when their sons and daughters have
“biological brain disorders.”
They think it's a one-dimensional “biological brain disorder,”
so take the medicine and everything will be fine.

Mental illness has a biological component.
But anyone who can simply explain it,
take away its pain by presenting it to the public
as a “biological brain disorder”
or can characterize it in a few words,
doesn't live with it.

Mental illness is a patient grind
capable of crumbling everything I've worked for.
It's the black hole that runs through my stomach.
It's the voice that says I'm not good enough, not smart enough.
It's good ideas that try to lead me to death.

It makes me feel overweight and ugly.
It's the reflection in the mirror that I look away from.
It's a perception clouded by unfounded fear.
It's unimaginable horror.
It's hopelessness and tears.
It's fear, chaos and death.
It's these things rolled into one, all at once and more.

It's more than a "biological brain disorder."

...

Education and Experience

It takes work to recover.
I thought
simply taking medication
and seeing a psychiatrist once a month
and a psychologist
would cut it,
but I had a long road
ahead of me.

Getting out of bed
before noon was progress
but eventually
I had to
learn not only
the name of my medications
but also their side effects;
and I learned
to offset their side effects.

For instance my psychiatrist
has prescribed Zyprexa...
on the bottle it reads
"Take at bedtime"
(it's crucial I have a bedtime),

but if I take it right before bed
I'll have a hangover the next day.
So to avoid the hangover
I take the medication at nine
so the sedative effect can wear off.
Lithium is a salt — it dries me out.
I can't hydrate
while I'm sleeping
so I take it in the morning
then drink the recommended 10-12 glasses of water
throughout the day.

•••

Recovery Attitude

I had to find
my part in my life
and stop blaming
other people for what happened to me.
I was a victim,
but victims don't recover, survivors do.
I found support groups because it's difficult to recover alone.
I needed to be nurtured by my own kind
to gain the acceptance
of myself
I desperately needed.
If we're going to have
any happiness
in our world,
we need to
find each other
and hold each other
and laugh
and cry together.



Honesty

I need a working relationship with a psychiatrist.

I have to be honest with myself first
if I'm experiencing escalating symptoms,
and then turn to my doctor.

I wear a mask,
and you will never know
the pain I carry.

I need to call my doctor for help
when I sense trouble.

He is on my cell phone
and I am free to call.

And the psychiatrist must play his part.

Most medications I've taken don't work well for me.

I can't tolerate missing days of sleep as I get older,
so I call my doctor and tell him
that we have to try something new.

And my doctor has to trust
and respect me on that call.



Spirituality

Recovery is incomplete
without God.

I will tell any mental health professional
that leaving God out of recovery
is like trying to make an apple pie
without apples.

In the hospital
they don't talk about God
as a resource for recovery
because many *consumers*
have religious grandiosity
so staff won't speak about matters of the Spirit.

To suggest that *consumers* have
a special relationship with God —
blasphemous to some —
is obvious to me.

I'm telling you straight:
to recover from a mental illness

it takes:

love

education

medication

and prayer

to bring about
a healthy relationship
with a loving God.



Prayer

On the streets, I call God

God.

In prayer, I call God

Father.

I pray on my knees

to humble myself.

I pray every day because

I depend on God every day.

My prayers are simple.

My constant prayer is that I ask God

to relieve my obsessions.

I ask God to direct my thinking.

I ask God for the truth.

I pray that I'm gentle, kind,

patient and tolerant.

Sometimes I ask God

to just let me rest in His presence.

If I have a spiritual defect that needs to be addressed,

I ask that it is removed.

Some days, spiritually, I do better than others.

I pray in the morning, the evening and at night.

I thank God at night for getting me through the day.

I pray for my family.

I pray for peace and contemplate what that means.

Prayers are always answered —

if I'm ready to accept the answer.

I see God's response with an open heart.

God sometimes says yes, not yet or

I have a better plan.

When He says not yet or I have a better plan,

it means that I have to work

for what I am asking,

and that begins with more prayer.



Hopes

I envision a future
for a person
beginning to show symptoms
of a mental illness,
without the stigma;
where we don't find ourselves isolated;
where we don't have to weave a cloth of lies
to hide our illness behind.

I dream for someone
facing hospitalization
that we continue to receive love and care
from hospital staff that are mindful
that we are capable of giving love and care.

I hope to see a day
when we leave the hospital
with a little more dignity
than we walked in with.

I have faith in a future
where we leave the hospital
to reassembled families;
and if there is no one
to go home to,

and if there is no home,

I hope a social worker
can find us safe, sanitary,
affordable and desegregated housing.

I look forward to the day when *consumers* are employed
in each of the Therapeutic Rehabilitation Programs
in the state of Kentucky so that we can teach
our brothers and sisters how to recover.

And I pray for a system in which a variety of *consumer* experience
is listened to rather than the one or two at the state level
who serve as the token presence.



We're Tired!

We're not seen as a sound investment and worthwhile
because many of us are disabled and can't work,
not because we're "crazy," or because we become ill,
but because the stigma of mental illness is never questioned.
We are expected to fail,
so why throw money for recovery initiatives
down the drain
when there are arenas to fund,
parks that need more benches,
prisons that need more walls?
In "fixing" the problem
you neglect the solution,
which begins by learning about us.
Are we adults in your eyes?
Or are we children who need to be pacified?
Have you talked with us, asked what we want out of life?
Do you know our pain is caused by
discrete talk and bewildered looks?
Do you know that "different" is unique and beautiful?
We require love, patience and funding for our recovery.
Oh God, sometimes we get tired that our human needs get lost
in the legislative shuffle.
We're tired! of fighting an up-hill battle on a downhill escalator.
We're tired! of waiting for a few dollars to trickle down.
We're tired! of being excluded from the American Dream.
We're tired! of being constantly portrayed on TV as violent.
We're tired! of being called "crazy."
We're tired....



Mentally Defective

I hate being called a *consumer*. It makes me want to curse, especially when family members call me a *consumer* — and I'm not talking about Mom and Dad because I'm not a *consumer*, I'm their son. I'm talking about when spokespersons for the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill or mental health care providers call me a *consumer*. I call them by their name after all and don't refer to them by a medical diagnosis or look at them differently for not having a mental illness. I am referred to as "mentally defective." It's my favorite, with my college degree hanging on the wall.

Today a provider asked me to speak to some family members solely because I'm a *consumer* — recovered. I replied that I couldn't because it was on a Sunday and I have a life on the weekends. I would have refused if I weren't busy because it gets demeaning to be put in front of a group of people like a circus attraction and share the same story which basically goes like this:

Something happened. I got sick. I had periods of growth and recovery. I got sick again and again until I hit bottom and found God amid the chaos and near death and when I found myself in a fetal position I took some suggestions not because I wanted to but because pain was a sufficient motivator to change and with medication, guidance, prayer, and meditation it is not unusual for people to recover.

That's the story.

I shouldn't give the impression recovering is easy, because I found it painful and uncomfortable; but I had a mustard seed of faith and an ounce of courage to take a long look at myself in the mirror to see what kind of person I am. I accepted I have a mental illness and took the medication not knowing anything about the side-effects. God was involved. The medication prescribed at twenty-three still works at thirty. I gained weight. I quit smoking and gained a little more; but I wanted to change so I started drinking water like an Olympic gold medal water drinker, and I got on the treadmill and started walking and now I'm running a mile and a half every third day, so the weight fell off and I do these things because I want to stay well and healthy so I can have as close to a normal life as possible which includes staying out of the hospital because when you're hospitalized you pretty much lose your right to be human because you become a *consumer* in the eyes of mental health providers.



Consumerism

I.

I was a person
before I was called a *consumer*.
I had fun being a person.
I told jokes and did impersonations.
I laughed and cursed at the same time.
I camped in summer fields blooming daisies
and played frisbee under the sun
with friends who are gone.
I wore hand-me-down tie-dye and philosophized
while I listened to Pink Floyd and said,
“far out man, groovy man, cool dude, right on, that’s hip.”
I listened to jazz long enough to love it when I was a person.
I fell into a number of unhealthy love relationships.
I learned heartache.
When I had a name,
I had questions about my life and sometimes
stared into the stars on tired nights so clear that I melted
my queries into the Milky Way.
I knew fleeting peace floating down the Ohio river
at dusk while the city of Louisville came alive
beneath darkening skies.
I cried, I carried caskets of people I loved on beautiful days in May,
with flowers blooming, while birds sang of life.
I went to college and graduated in a lenient amount of time.
I’ve learned that my job is what I do and not who I am.
I received the gift of self-love from my relationship with God.

II.

I was a child
before I was a *consumer*,
with green eyes and fine red hair,
with freckled skin that burned blood-red.

I clung to my parents and ran home to my mother,
crying after playing with honey bees.
My father taught me how to ride a bike
and when summer came
he always sang, “School’s out, school’s out,
teacher let the monkeys out.”
I sucked sliced Sunkist
orange halves while I sat on green grass
among the bumble bees at halftime
during soccer games played early on Saturdays.
And the orange juice that dribbled down my face,
I wiped away with my hand,
wiped my hands on my jersey and on my shorts
before I smiled into the sticky sun.
On the field, I chased the soccer ball
until I was out of breath, then chased it some more
like a down-steam river chases the ocean’s blue.
I took my direction from my brother
and we explored the woods after school beside the Ashley Court house.
We waded in the creek behind the house and made dams
with rocks and holed the leaks with weeds.
We got into mischief.
We threw dirt clods and snowballs at cars
until the police came and threatened to take us in.
We built forts in bushes with plywood and imagination,
our pockets stuffed with liberated candy
and baseball cards stolen from the gas station
when gas was under a dollar.

III.

Before I was a *consumer* or a person or a child,
I slept in the wind and womb of the universe.
I tossed with ocean waves
and froze on the mountain top
to smell a rose of hope.
I lived with God in the spring sunlight,
and helped birth flowers into warmth
by kissing blooms with morning mist.

I bathed in a rainbow
in a cloudy sky
filled with butterflies.
I dried in rain clouds
and fell
into green Kentucky fields.
I landed in the dreams of poets,
and died in the evening sunset
to be reborn
in the fog of morning.
I drifted with November wind,
and chased leaves in the starlight.

IV.

I became a *consumer* when,
in the eyes of power,
I became a nonexistent person without opinions or thoughts.
I've been told I'm incapable of working.
I am a statistic and politicians ask how much I cost,
and then tell me that the State can't afford that.
I've learned about tokenism as a *consumer*
and how to Uncle-Tom-smile at that condescending pitying smile
from highly educated people who look at me
like I'm going to break an expensive china plate
in a china shop where I shouldn't be in the first place.
I've learned that discrimination is an action,
and prejudice is a thought.
I understand that the stigma of having a mental illness
ultimately maintains the status quo of the system
governing people with mental illnesses.
And I've learned that low expectations
inherent in the status quo,
produce the low results,
that feeds the stigma,
that causes the thought,
that justifies discrimination,
which makes tokenism necessary.

•••

Similarities

My heart beats the same.
I bleed.
I breathe.
I cry the same salty tears.
I hunger.
I shiver in the cold and sweat in the heat.
My body tires.
My spirit fatigues.
I dream when I sleep.
And I need love like a flower needs water and sunlight.

•••

Political Power

I'm not so radical to believe
consumers can recover
without help from family organizations
because we need our families educated.
We need help from providers
because we sometimes need *non-consumer* vehicles
to help take us from crisis to miracle;
we need the medications from the pharmaceutical companies
despite there being multi-billion dollar businesses
who have the interests of their medications at heart;
we sometimes need that *non-consumer* aid.

However,
the problem occurs,
the animosity rises
when there are policy meetings without us,
when people who have no stake
in our lives make decisions
for us

without us,
besides sick or well
we are citizens;
we still have our civil rights
though we don't have our civil rights.

We still have the right to determine
what medications we take;
we still have a basic human right to determine
with our resources where we live;
we still have the right... to determine.

When we're sick,
we're beautiful nevertheless,
there is nothing to be ashamed with getting sick
but when we're sick, we need some help.
They want us to only use their services
short-term,
but when we get well,
an issue arises.

There's more money to be made
by being sick than by being well.
Providers get paid through our dependence
upon their services.

I apologize.
This poem is a little out of hand from what I originally intended.
I wanted to talk about
how *consumers*, family members and providers are in the same boat;
but this poem is trying to speak on its own,
it's really trying to say that
consumers
don't really have a problem with our minds
we have a problem with our political power.



The Truth About Consumer Unity

I was at a meeting and the commissioner of mental health was there.
Glib and polished, were he selling something I would buy it.
He stressed *consumer* unity.
I appreciated his sentiment.
We need unity
but don't have it
because the same dollar is out there
for everyone to fight over.
You can't tell *consumers*
not to be passionate;
this is our life.
So what happens is *consumer* organizations
lose focus about what they're established for.
They compete with each other,
and people get personal
and talk behind closed doors.
And that leads to hidden agendas
complete with plots and rumors.
What eventually happens
is the commissioner
gets in front of *consumers*
and asks why is everyone fighting?



Thursday Night Political Statement

I watch your innocent eyes,
that practiced look,
compassionate, concerned.
I notice however that your sincerity grows doubtful
with your disarming wide smile,
with your manicured handshake,
with your generic laughter
that aims to relax
your emotionless
lifeless announcement.
I'm not surprised.
But I look at you saddened,
my heart stops beating,
for a moment my breath goes cold
and stops rotten in my chest,
when you tell us
there's no new money in the budget
for the recovery
of the mentally ill.
Once again, we know our place in society.
We're not fools.
We get the leftovers like a starved dog
that pleads and whimpers,
begs the scraps
from the table to the floor.



The Truth About Funding

I feel I'm wasting away in this office, burdened by paperwork when there are daydreams to weave, fall sunshine outside, green grass to sit in, books to read, ragged blue jeans to wear and tennis shoes to kick around in.

I instead sit in a leather chair, or go to meeting after meeting surrounded by people blessed with sanity as a birthright.

I'm not bitter or envious, even though the experts have never experienced mental illness, have never been handcuffed or jailed, have never fallen into cold night and watched their dreams pass like shooting stars, have never been bereft of strength day after day.

They base policies dealing with people who live with mental illness on shrinking budgets, and we who have lived through death shake our heads discouraged.

I hope they do the best they can, most of the time; but in the state of Kentucky the budget for mental health services has flat lined for fifteen years while living expenses have gone up and more people enter the system.

The problem isn't funding. That's just an indicator of the color and temperature of people's hearts.



Abstract Thinkers

This is an opinion:

We're not getting anywhere

in changing the mental health system

into a recovery-oriented system of care.

I don't want to be the bearer of bad news,

but the system isn't going to change from the inside.

I was put on the spot on how to include *consumers*

in more meaningful roles in state hospitals

during a meeting with representatives from the federal government.

I suggested that when a state hospital accepts money

from the federal government,

a stipulation in the contract should require that a certain number of *consumers*

work for the state hospital so that patients can have access

to living examples of recovery.

The best way to get out of a black tunnel

is by following the light.

I saw looks go around the room like I had gone off my medication,

and they said, "No, we can't do that."

Then they asked how can we get *consumers*

into more meaningful roles in state hospitals.

•••

Defeat

I had a week off for the holidays. I slept past nine, drank Starbucks and stayed in Louisville. I watched football, visited with friends, played chess, worked out, jogged and finished reading Orwell's *Burmese Days* and started reading Capote's *In Cold Blood*. I wrote a poem I'm satisfied with. I took a bag of clothes to Goodwill. I got my house in order. I rented a few movies and saw the new Rocky Balboa. Stallone is ready for the Academy. "It ain't over 'til it's over."

Life is good. I didn't hear about a woman thrown down, injuring her wrist by the police on a mental inquest warrant. I didn't hear about a *consumer* going into seclusion and restraints and coming out with bruises.

I was taking some books to the used bookstore and one fell out on bipolar disorder. I causally flipped through some of its pages and stopped at one that listed the personality traits of someone with bipolar. My eyes watered. I realized it's absolutely pathetic that anyone can sum me up, nice and neat, to fit in a preconceived box.

Within this system there's little room for love. I'll never rise above the stigma.



Flashback

I hear footsteps coming closer.
Screaming, collapsing, trying to run,
too disillusioned to fight
as bolts are temporally opened
I'm thrown in a cracker-jack-baking-box.

Hands grab my limbs.
Suffocating from urine, the of smell death and the horror of being chained.
I'm bolted down, centered under a dim light.
I feel left for days on end, days on end.
My pale skin leaching,
falling to the carpet.
My eyes face a reality of garbled lies.
I call for God, but know that God is dead.

Mouth taped, kicking, flailing at the neo-Nazi
wearing disinfectant gloves.

He comes for me.
I'm taken to the shower room for a twenty-volt-electric bath,
wire scrubbed with a bleeding back,
brushed in formaldehyde,
rinsed in embalming fluid,
shaved with a rusty razor,
pain growing, growing, growing.

I'm taken back to the SECLUSION ROOM
where I drift through faces and generations of mankind.
My bones are fragile,
my breath is slow,
my skin is pale,
my freckles glow
and my eyes are closed.

I take in the hope of the dying world
and it flat-lines within me.
I slip further into the dark echoes
of the SECLUSION ROOM.

I open my eyes, tears fall as I grieve
the loss of my innocence.

•••

Advocate

I want to talk about the usage of seclusion and restraints. Seclusion is the practice of confining people in mental hospitals behind a locked door. Restraints mean that a person is strapped down to a bed in the seclusion room. The only difference in seclusion and restraints from the dark ages and now is that people are strapped to a bed in leather restraints rather than chained to a wall. It's a difficult topic. But I wouldn't be speaking here today if we didn't believe that seclusion and restraints is offensive to the humanity of an individual.

The policy on seclusion and restraint use is that they may be used only when a patient poses a threat to harm themselves or others. It can't be used if a patient curses at staff or refuses to do something. It's a judgment call. And I admire and respect the people who do the work in hospitals; it's a difficult job.

I was hospitalized when I was sixteen from mid-October to the first week in December. The first three weeks I was going into seclusion and restraints or coming out of them. I was later secluded when I was nineteen. At twenty-five, seclusion and restraints were not necessary because I had a credible diagnosis and a medication protocol that worked.

I believed that the seclusion room was my room until I spoke to my mother concerning my first hospitalization. She assured me that wasn't the case. But I believed it was. It's where my shoes and clothes were, it's where I slept. I have no memory of another room.

The carpet was a short-matte industrial brown. The bed was a plastic mattress. The walls were white concrete. The door was dark brown with a square window centered in the middle of it. There was a mirror like orb that I assumed was some type of monitoring device near the ceiling on the upper back wall. I step out of that seclusion room and find myself in a hall. There were two other seclusion rooms. There was a bathroom on the right. A window was at the end of

the hall looking over a playground. Some type of half-dollar sized red button was on the wall.

Now if I stand outside of the seclusion room and go right there was another door that led to the main part of the unit. You should have an idea about the traumatic nature of seclusion and restraints when you realize that the seclusion rooms were isolated from the rest of the unit. I can't remember much of those first three weeks, but I remember the seclusion room.

I speak only for myself because there might be someone who has fond memories of seclusion and restraints. But in seclusion and restraints, I turn my external agitation and internal violence inward to feed hallucinations and delusions that are coupled with indescribable fear. I believed I was in a concentration camp and one of the staff was Adolph Hitler and he was there to kill me. I believe in non-violence, but I struck a staff member when he was in the process of placing me in restraints.

People have two reactions to fear — flight or fight. If you're staff, you need to realize that when you have me cornered and I believe you're Adolph Hitler and you're going to kill me, I'm going to put up a fight.

The seclusion room and the use of restraints both sow and cultivate more fear which immediately leads to more agitation and violence.

There's the idea that the seclusion room and the use of restraints might be beneficial because it "contains violence." For the staff it contains violence. For patients not involved in the agitation it contains violence. But the literature misleads: Seclusion and restraints doesn't solve violence.

Imagine a firecracker, light it and throw it on the ground. You see it explode. Now take another firecracker and place it in a soda can. That explodes too. Just because you don't see it go off doesn't mean it didn't happen. When I'm placed in seclusion and restraints, an explosion — unseen -- takes place. It attacks the spirit. So violence and agitation isn't contained in the secluded and restrained, but diverted to the detriment of the personality.

Seclusion and restraints doesn't heal the internal issue. In the field of mental health, we should be as concerned about the spirit as we are about the mind. In a mental hospital, my spiritual being is already on life support. The last thing I need is more internal agitation and violence.

The feelings associated with seclusion and restraints are terror, bewilderment and abandonment. They stem from fear and confusion resulting from forceful handling. But humiliation is the end manifestation.

Imagine a grown man urinating on himself because he's strapped down, unable to get to a bathroom. Imagine being powerless over the escalating

symptoms of the illness you're getting treatment for, then left alone to deal with them. Imagine being left without any self-worth.

Using seclusion and restraints for a short duration of time is faulty application: In a psychotic state, time becomes skewed. It should be remembered that treatment teams in hospitals don't say, "I think it would be beneficial if Eric were secluded fifteen minutes this morning and restrained fifteen minutes this afternoon." Treatment teams don't say, "a little 'S' and 'R' would be good for Eric."

Seclusion and restraints is the most restrictive form of treatment, if it can be called "treatment." I would pick jail if I had a choice between jail and the seclusion room. I could sit at a table in jail, eat maybe, use a toilet and sink, splash a little water on my face. I could move around in jail. In seclusion, there is barely room to walk around the bed.

Is this a hospital or an institution? A hospital seems to have care and compassion built into the definition of the word. An institution sounds clinical, devoid of love. It carries the stigma of shame. Mental hospitals are institutions to the general public because of the use of seclusion and restraints.

The use of seclusion and restraints perpetuates the stigma of mental illness. The general public has latched on to the concept of "rubber rooms." Therefore the drive to eliminate the use of seclusion and restraints could serve as a catalyst for change. We have the opportunity to change the culture of the hospital and the attitude of the general public dealing with mental illness by treating patients in a non-violent manner.

My perception of seclusion and restraints when I was a patient hasn't changed a great deal. They are used as a tool to maintain the power of the staff. The staff must control the unit, and one of the ways this is done is by using seclusion and restraints as a punishment for unacceptable behavior.

The option to apply seclusion and restraints as a punishment — whether real or perceived — creates an environment of animosity between staff and patient. This makes communication difficult. Ultimately this causes incidents. The seclusion and restraint episode doesn't start when security is called. The agitation begins when a patient is isolated, trapped in his own head. That leads to seclusion and restraints, not with the manifestation of violence but when the patient can be communicated with. We need to offer patients an ear that listens and a shoulder to cry on. I've always befriended one or two staff to confide in. But communication is difficult in an atmosphere where seclusion and restraints is a threat.

I mentally deteriorated in the seclusion room. I went into seclusion wearing clothes and came out naked. I urinate on the walls. It brings out the inhumanities in me. The mentally ill have been dehumanized enough, but if you want to see

behavior seclusion and restraint produces, go to the dog pound. Some of those animals bark and frantically move around. Others know death is near and rest on their side, exhausted and panting. Both animals and humans are relieved when they get out of the cage.

Seclusion and restraints is also unjust. I graduated with a History degree from the University of Kentucky. Just laws and policies extend to all people. Everyone is subjected and held to the same laws and policies. But a minority of the population is subjected to the use of seclusion and restraints by a majority that never will experience the humiliation and trauma of being abandoned in the seclusion room.

I'm not suggesting staff experience this trauma. It sucks out self-love and leaves me filled with shame and fear. Self-confidence is replaced by insecurity and inferiority after seclusion and restraints. I'm diminished through the process of hospitalization and my smile becomes a distant memory.

I felt small and powerless. There was no post-counseling. No questionnaire was given asking if I understood why I was placed in seclusion and restraints. No one asked if I felt better.

The great fact about seclusion and restraints is that we continue to use them not knowing if it's harmful or helpful. We use them despite reports of staff injury and patient trauma and death. We use them with the knowledge that no one would ever voluntarily consent to spend an undetermined amount of time in seclusion and restraints. We use them despite hearing anguish behind locked doors as we deafen our ears to our own conscience.

I was told when I got sober a few years ago that "if nothing changes, nothing changes." I had to change. I was assured that I would drink or drug and then die if I didn't. If you leave here today and nothing changes in the hospital starting with the administration on down then I'll be back here in a year or so giving the same presentation. Begin the change that will diminish the stigma of having a mental illness. Begin the change that will take violent and coercive treatment out of the hospital. Facilitate healing.

I close with a quote from Gandhi. "We must be the change that we wish to see." If we want non-aggressive, non-violent patients, then we must be non-aggressive and non-violent in our attitudes and beliefs. If we want patients who are kind, then we must treat patients with kindness.

Are there any questions?



Untitled

It's what the angels sing,
it's what prophets dream,
it makes God King,
it's love.
It flickers the candle with hope,
it sounds trumpets and tolls bells,
it's a father's or mother's delight in a child's laughter,
it's love
with outstretched arms
for harmed children,
it's love
that answers cries and steadies hands,
it's love
that touches and holds,
it's love
that fills our shadow
so that we never walk alone.
It's the sun on my face,
the breeze in the air,
the blue in the sky,
the calm of the dawn,
the melody of morning songs,
it's love
in the crush of defeat
in the midnight of despair,
in the embattled heart,
guiding the lost soul,
casting light, lifting sorrow,
shielding pain,
it's love
that shares the umbrella during mournful rains,
that brings the sunlight of hope during the misery of dark days,
that turns nightmares to dreams and losses to gains,

it's love
that powers peaceful change,
that brings order to chaos,
that clothes the naked,
that feeds the hungry,
that shelters the homeless,
that gives precious time,
it's love
that's found in silence, contemplation and prayer,
it's love
that never stops or doubts,
that's found in jails and institutions,
it's love
that never leaves
with the seasons and never runs in judgment,
it's love
that makes
the jagged smooth,
the crooked straight,
the meaningless meaningful,
that breathes life into the lifeless,
it's love
that heals the stricken,
that rejoices for the weary
and sings for the broken hearted,
it's love
that finds joy in forgiveness,
it's love
that holds hands on the rocky road of life,
that gives affection in the moonlight,
that shares hopes and dreams in the tender lamplight,
it's love
soft and slow.



Pride

I once met a young woman at Highland Coffee for some conversation and we were standing in line to get a cup. I looked around at the aspiring artists and thought there's no one who can write like I can. I looked at that attractive young woman, and my pride swelled — even as, in the next moment-heartbeat-breath, I looked at her and thought, *How can she be here with me?*

It was that egotistical-maniac with an inferiority complex that tells me that while I'm the most interesting person to talk to, there's really no one who wants to listen.

And I have gotten a lot better... sort of.

I met my Dad and Uncle for dinner one night at Ernesto's and my uncle was wearing this ring he got from the Red Cross. "You know, Eric," he said, "you ought to go give blood." I live by the Spirit, so I went the next day.

I gave blood in college because I had an algebra teacher who accepted extra credit work only if you donated. I needed all the help I could get in that class, so I donated twice in one semester.

I thought I knew what to expect and I went into the Red Cross proud because I was doing community service and it made my head swell because sometimes I expect a parade and awards for doing things I ought to do.

They signed me into the system and directed me to one of the four dentist-type chairs, three of which were occupied by old-timer donors who looked pretty comfortable sipping their orange juice, squeezing their foam balls.

The woman who did the needle work asked which arm I preferred and feeling very John Wayne I said, "it doesn't matter to me."

She put the needle in and asked if I wanted anything to drink and I looked at the comfortable old-timers.

I'm twenty-nine and strong and said, "No thanks, I'm fine."

She looked at me peculiarly.

The blood was flowing and the woman looked at me again and asked if I was all right.

She asked again if I was all right.

Everything was fine, when suddenly I felt I was going to pass out, vomit and bleed out at the same time.

"This will pass," I thought, hot beads of perspiration rolling down my forehead. In a humble voice, I asked the woman for an orange juice.

The Red Cross swung into action.

They elevated my legs, put some cold wet napkins on my forehead, got me an orange juice, told me I looked pale while another woman came over to make sure I was okay.

When my bag was full they pulled the needle and escorted me to a chair where I ate raisins and crackers and drank more orange juice.

Yet another woman came over and commented on my bleach-white complexion.

My strength returned in fifteen minutes and I left.
I'll donate again and remember that the old-timers are old-timers for a reason.

•••

Peace

There's something
to be said
for midsummer
and sitting on a swing
nursing a glass of ice tea
watching
the daylight fade
protected from the
mosquitoes
by a wire screen.



Sunday Morning Rambling Blues

(War is a mental health issue.)

I look for the miracle during the day and at night I hope in the moon while the white mourning dove sits in pine trees above ages of blood-soaked ground.

Still cruel war with an insatiable greed for more loss and mourning. It loves pain. Mankind is lost in the battlefield against our brother.

I hate the subject of contagious war and focusing on the problem brings me despair like cold air brings sickness and death. I hope for an answer.

We can shed off spiritual sickness, those frazzled rags that hold us distant and cold. We'll change and step into a new wardrobe made of cotton grown from tears of joy in Heaven from our ancestors who converse holding flowers in the wind without domination or religion — clothes tailored by God's gentle hands, dipped in the rainbow from clouds intermingled with sunlight that kisses the earth with peace.

Through only God's grace will we mend our beleaguered soul from within. We will shed our dead skin of hate and violence to find the beauty that hides, that desires to be forgiven and freed from the ghosts of our misdeeds.

When can we sit down and honestly appraise the past with love and justice so that we can live in conjunction with God's greater love?

As a whole we've never loved the human race.

Let us set aside pride and ideologies to become childlike and agree on simple kindergarten theology.

We need a dialogue about what we do right, focus on what works, work together and over a glass of ice tea we'll be able to talk about the part we played in our chaos.

Nothing is really worthwhile, nothing will last unless we begin talking about love, because love is what we need to build the bridge of understanding to span from ignorance to knowledge, from pride to humility, from greed to generosity, from resentment to forgiveness, from fear to love, from inhumanity to humanity, from cruelty to compassion.

Let's talk about God, and start with what God is not before we start killing each other over what we think God is.

Whose God are we fighting over? Our God. What is ours?

We really need to turn off the talk shows that spread the disease of ignorance, the reality TV that spreads desire and greed, and the news shows that spread fear and fire. We need silence.

We will sit down as friends without secrets for coffee from South America, tea from the Far East, or coca from Africa, or share pastries from France or a good Southern breakfast, scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, biscuits and gravy, or chunks of fruit from around the world that would taste fine mixed up together, and we can talk about our problems that seem so overwhelming.

God is the solution.

I still have faith in the beauty of man.

We could sit at the table with honest intentions to work together on behalf of the third world poor and talk about ending half of the cause of war, that beast called the military industrial complex that eats up funds from the mental health system; all we seem to get back from military technological advances are higher taxes and dead bodies.

We've reached a point where only God can help us, guide us, a world community. Only God can lead us to a sunrise that touches a world absent from armed conflict and living in darkness...

On this gray September day with full-blown fall a breath away, in this golden moment of hope and emancipation from the past, I can hear the whistling just outside, a little song by the dove: War will end, sunlight will spring within our hearts, the heavens will ring, and God Almighty will sing that peace is king, now and forever.

...

The Way It Is

Truth frees the heart of the oppressed
and resurrects the conscience of the oppressor.

Forgiveness is the gift to the humble.

Gratitude is the cure for jealousy.

Non-violence is the guardian of justice.

Love is the means and the end.

Grace is the vehicle for the lost and the gratitude of the found.

Willingness is the key to the kingdom.

And we will find peace in service and self-sacrifice.

You can saturate the breathing soul
with the woes of the world
but I suggest
you take a few precious minutes of your day
to question what's really important
and pray and meditate.
After all,
if you believe in the unconditional love and grace
you witness,
it would be advantageous
to talk to God and listen for the answer.
In the frustration and despair of life
you fail to realize there is hope if you look beyond yourself.

You still find what you seek,
you're never alone,
there are multitudes working for peace,
people praying to God,
youth expressing angst through poems and songs.
People are standing up and putting the world on notice that
justice and love are two hands that only work together.
People would rather make love than war,
and there are some looking at what would benefit them
and deciding to pursue God's will,
which always benefits others.
God is listening,
God is acting,
God is working with mankind
as mankind allows,
and if you remember anything,
remember that just because God
doesn't share His plan with you,
that doesn't mean there's not a plan.



God's Children

I.

We're your brothers, sisters,
aunts and uncles.
We have sons and daughters of our own.
We have red curly hair,
brown straight hair,
blonde hair and dyed hair.
Some of us even have blue hair.
And some don't have hair
left worth speaking of.
We have blue
green
and brown eyes.
Some of us are Buddhist,
Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Jewish.
Some don't practice religion,
but have prayed, "God help me."
We have white
and brown
and yellow skin.
We have High School
Bachelor
Master's
and Doctorate degrees.
Or no degrees.
Some of us are overweight
and some are skinny.
Some smoke and some don't.
Some of us are gifted,
write poems or songs,
make quilts,
play musical instruments,
raise beautiful children.

We are blessed by a tremendous capacity for pain and suffering,
exceeded by our capacity to hope and love.
We laugh and cry in abundance.
We're a people who do the best we can
with what we've got, and what we have
we're willing to give.
We're a people who ask for acceptance
but often don't receive
tolerance or kindness or love in our community.
We have to remind people
that we are people
and have infinite worth
in the eyes of our Creator.

II.

The value of a society
isn't found in how many astronauts
we send into outer space
or by the height of a building
or by the achievements of science,
and it isn't found in how many cars roll off
the assembly line at Ford
or how many jobs
are added to the economy,
and the value of a healthy society doesn't come from the church
or found in the performance of athletes
and shouldn't be measured by a poll in Playboy magazine,
or measured by the weight of diamond-encrusted watches,
and we shouldn't evaluate our society
based on what a Hollywood celebrity
says about the latest fashions
or politics.

The merit of any society
is found in its treatment
of the sick and poor.

Unfortunately, the mentally ill
tend to be both.
Although we might be viewed
as Untouchables,
we hold a deeper compassion for mankind
in a society that needs to be uplifted.

If we ever become a spiritual community, country, world,
we will renew our relationship with God
by coming face to face with our mentally ill brothers and sisters.
When we reach out to help one of God's children
we're really reaching out to God.

•••

Dreams

In the skeptical laughter of my hopes
brothers stroll wearing cotton
birthed from the earth's fields
plucking long grass not yet hay
growing in a meadow
held in sway from a brisk wind
stirring ancient autumn leaves.
I sigh fulfilled leaving the
darkness behind
as I'm beckoned by God's children
echoing their footsteps with sound broken
by sparrows playing poignant jazz in
shedding tree limbs and by the sound of water
set eons ago around ice age rock.
I find a united world
in the vision of my dreams
living by the kindness of our loving Father
where days are spent
in the unending light of a sunrise
never before felt.

Part Two

As if it brings her closer, my gaze searches for her,
My heart searches for her, and she is not with me.

— *Pablo Neruda*



Broken Record Blues

It was the phone call...
I throw back the covers,
sleep falls out my eyes,
chill runs through my spine
as I look at the red digital clock —
a quarter past our time.
I reel to yesterday
and hide the hurt
and try to lie
that I don't miss her
and never thought
she was special.
I think back to the white house on Montmullin.
We had come from a party.
Waiting on the couch on the concrete stoop
were my roommates
and under the stars
she wore leather pants
and talked about going to Austin Powers in character.
I did an impersonation, in the middle of which
she threw her head back laughing,
pleased and...
I absolutely hate these
lonely nights
when I wake up and pick up
the pieces of a broken record
that will never see the light of day.
I haven't gotten back me,
and still miss her.

•••

Untitled II

I remember you,
but not as you were;
I see your face,
but not as you are.
You are my torture and hope,
pain and dreams,
delusion or reality.
I drift...
to see you again,
older, experienced,
weary of the world.
I wait for you,
youth fades.
I wish for you,
resting,
reading a book.
To distract you,
the touch of your skin.
To hold you, lazy fingers
through your hair.
To feel you exhale,
is to breathe.



Insanity

Setting aside
truth,
reasonableness,
and reality,
and I've been through a metamorphosis,
was young and immature
and just grateful to have someone
take in interest in me
and love
was really lust
plus I didn't know what I wanted out of life
or know what kind of person I am
or what qualities I admire
and she was older
looked beyond me
had no romantic feelings
and never fantasized about me
and despite we knew each other briefly years ago
and I actually knew little about her
and we probably have more differences today
except for a part of the past I try to forget,
and in the end she firmly walked away
and if honesty interjects
I was easily discarded
with barely an afterthought;
so taking this into account
 it's easy to see why
 she still has a hold of me.



Farewell to the Delusion

I'm cast in falling darkness, staring into life unknown,
standing alone in November evening cold.
I try in vain to feel spring and summer of different days,
the way I felt when you smiled at the best of me,
to remember the smell of lotion on your skin I longed for;
your eyes,
to stare calm, to belong...
to remember what it felt like to lose the morning in your arms
and the sound of your voice is gone.
I want nothing this lifetime
but to find you,
to talk to you,
to walk away with your hand,
to lay half-covered beside you.
I wish to stand free against the laws of time,
to fall in love for a grateful moment
with the misfortunes of the world shuffled aside.
In my grainy memory,
I feel sorrow.
In the insanity, in the end,
I gave pain,
a stain on your golden days.
In this sliding doorstep,
in the melodic wind chime howl,
I concede a thoughtful farewell now.
I accept God will never meet us again.
The wind blows over yet another cold day,
with the sun slowly falling
on wishful thinking and old daydreams.
I pray the familiar empty pain
will somehow change.



Future Reference

It's fine that you smile
like that when you see me.
I want to see you.
I want to hold you.
I want to love you
on your couch
except...
I'm not going to place my love
and spend my imagination
on your maybes
and your I'll-sees
and on your I'll-tries.
I'm not interested
in playing games.
I've heard that
it's not who's playing the game
but who's running it.
And I don't want to run anything,
because I'll look back
over a cup of coffee
with a regretful laugh
shaking my head saying,
"I shouldn't have done that,"
or "I shouldn't have said that,"
or worse,
"I shouldn't have written that."
Don't take this the wrong way
but since I'm so up front and perfectly honest
I might as well tell you I'm not
going to cross my fingers
and throw a grain of salt over my shoulder when
I hear you say, "I'll call" because
I don't have time for that.



Relationships

Self-knowledge is insufficient.
I freely admit that I helped
screw up relationships.
I didn't fall in love with beauty,
well... once or twice,
but I really fell in love on a hangover,
over a cup of coffee,
fed by a crumb of attention.

I fell in love,
and I don't believe
it was really love,
with women
who were kind enough to befriend me
who held me
clearly as friends until I stepped in,
starved, insecure with self-centered fear
that told me
I wouldn't get from them
what I wanted.

Not limited to,
but definitely found in,
my relationships
was that at virtually the same time,
I either held myself too high,
or thought of myself as too low.
I chased them away
by my words and actions.
Those relationships
that started off well
became toxic predictably
as rain in the spring
and chilly October days.

I would obsess over them
laying in bed,
constantly worried
about what they said.
What did she really mean?
What should I have said?
What should I have done?

My ultimate concern was
how I wanted them
to make me feel.

I was sick in the heart
and mind
and I lived in spiritual turmoil.
It hasn't gone entirely away,
but day by day
I pray for help
to have my obsessions relieved,
to be the person that God wants me to be,
to think of myself on an even plane.
I pray for sanity in my relationships.

“God help me,
please help me
with my perception,
with my fears,
with my selfishness
and self-centeredness.
Please help me
ready myself
for the love
that you will
bless me with.
Amen.”

•••

Wild Red Roses

I look at the snow on the ground, the trees without leaves, the cars going by on Westport Road. I think from afar, of her blue eyes as my thoughts travel into the distance through the cold night over snow-covered hills shooting through the stars and perhaps I'll never see her again, never offer her a handful of wild red roses.

I see her rise from the dawn and she yawns silhouetted by the morning light filled with second chances.

Wrinkles might grow around my eyes and mouth, seasons might disappear into age. Time may turn cruel, but I'll think of her and try to recall her smile, her straw blonde hair. She possessed the essential kindness I aspire to. I saw her one sunny spring day working with one of God's children and I slowed my thoughts and step. I stared. I may have even said "hi."

I got on my knees one morning and told God, "Father, I trust You, please don't let me screw this up."

She left, took another job. She took her smile, her eyes and kindness. I wish I knew more about her, and perhaps it's best I don't, but if the chance came again... I pray.



Seasons

There is only
so much time
I can spend
writing poems
before I feel
desire.

There are only
so many nights
I can spend
alone
before
I feel
longing.

And only
so many seasons
can pass
while I read books
in silence
about love
before I feel
lonely.



At the River

I sit down at the river with the sun falling,
the summer ends, fall advances as darkness
comes much earlier these days.
I think of you once more,
finishing healing,
hoping the truth ends my false hope,
easing my foolish pain.
The uncertainty is over;
your memory will never harm me again.
I'll never think of what might have been.
I mourn for the hours I spent in vain
hoping our paths would cross again.
I watch wind-blown waves
without hoping for a better past,
or worrying about preparing an apology.
I'm no longer looking back,
hoping to catch glances of your face
or hear words that you spoke
or smell the scent of unrequited love.



At Thirty

I surprised myself to wake at thirty,
having passed through the tree stumped meadow of death
still bearing fainting scars that I collected
in my star-searching twenties.
Nothing has gone as I've planned.
I find myself single, happily poor,
free and independent
without the one point nine children
or the suit and forgettable tie
to go along with a copy of the Wall Street Journal,
white-picket fence and mini-van.

I've watched hope for peace die
while politicians twisted the truth,
acted upon fear and neglected
the sick and poor.

There is little fight left in me.
The urge to change the world or speak out on injustices
extinguished in the dwindling days of my twenties.
Non-violence has become a sheepish truth,
an unattainable ideal and for many
an unrealistic attitude.

I look to the youth with the hopeful expectation of a sailor
searching for the New World.
I cringe, disappointed and smile;
not all is lost,
faithful,
I laugh at the thought of doomsday
and global holocaust.

So I sit at thirty wondering
what will come from my new decade?

Perhaps I'll grow conservative,
register Republican and finally fall into line.
Or I'll cast aside fear as I continue to heal
while carrying the pain of living.
I'll continue to be lost and found,
confused and guided,
comforted and lost again.

I'm willing to continue.

I praise God for what He has brought me,
for what He has taken away,
and for the people in my life,
whom I love very much.
I'm grateful that I can see His hand
throughout my life...
that He has allowed me
to be one of His children.