

{A note from the Headley Award Committee:

This year's Headley essay prize is awarded to 'The Savage Faculty', a personal reflective essay by St Jerome's student Nicholas Herring. The committee members were impressed by its courageous confrontation and creative articulation of a difficult issue which draws the reader into the subjective experience while at the same time moving beyond that to contest medical and popular attitudes towards mental illness.}

The Savage Faculty by Nicholas Herring

“The truth is like a strung-out pimp in the middle of a storm” – from Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*

The Oxford English Dictionary has no distinct entry for “nervous breakdown”. The compilers decided that it should fall under the larger umbrella of the less complicated “breakdown”. This is what you’ll see when you look for the definition:

1. **a.** The act of breaking and falling down; a ruinous downfall, a collapse. *lit.* and *fig.*
- b.** *esp.* A fracture or dislocation of machinery resulting in a stoppage. Hence *attrib.*, as in ***break-down gang, train.***
- c.** Of the animal functions, or health (*esp.* of the mental powers); *spec.* ***nervous breakdown.*** (a case of) neurasthenia; a vague term for any severe or incapacitating emotional disorder.

Not only does nervous breakdown appear beneath clumsiness in relation to gravity and the failure of machinery, but also the people behind the OED deem it a “vague term”. My qualm with the definition and its positioning is that a nervous breakdown, one that, as they define it, is incapacitating, can *never* be considered a vague term. Nervous breakdown is not simply a vague term but an entirely inaccurate term altogether. For the majority of people, when talk arises regarding mental illness or emotional disorders (which is really a feeble attempt to differentiate a disease from a deficiency), we get squeamish. We picture gothic

spires, immense iron gates, and chiaroscuro landscapes of incontinent people drooling on themselves pacing aimlessly about the lawns of some asylum. Or we picture Russell Crowe in *A Beautiful Mind*, hailed for its realistic depiction of schizophrenia (which is, according to the filmmakers, just like having a bunch of amiable imaginary friends), or we might picture Jack Nicholson's portrayal of Randall McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (which is, rather interestingly, not allowed to be shown on most psychiatric wards). No matter how many celebrities speak about such problems on daytime talk shows, or how many awareness parades are held in cities throughout the world, the infallible truth is that unless you've endured a breakdown, or a mental illness, you'll never know what it's actually like to be deemed mentally or emotionally unfit by society. Furthermore, you might consider yourself the most empathetic person in the world, but you'll never be able to empathize with a human who has or who tragically *hasn't* returned from the edge or pulled back the fabric of reality for a fleeting and hallucinatory instant.

Language fails us when we discuss mental illness. Our opinions are largely informed by the Hollywood movie machine that over the years has created an absurd dichotomy of the nervous individual. For example, these afflictions illuminate the thin line between madness and genius (see the aforementioned Aussie) or they are romanticized (to varying degrees) and cast as a somewhat liberating ailment rather than a self-destructive and miserable condition (see Mrs. Pitt in *Girl, Interrupted* or nearly any Jack Nicholson movie). The Bolano quote I used as an epigraph illuminates that truth is something difficult to comprehend. Or more to the point, something we can visualize but cannot relativize. For example, we might ask:

- Why is the pimp out in the middle of a storm?
- Why is this pimp strung out? Is it because of his work?
- Is he experiencing a moral predicament or a moral revelation?

As a society, we should spend more time investigating such notions, examining all the possibilities with a healthy degree of skepticism and humility rather than letting it outpace us. Abstractions are important even if they are completely unknowable and mental illness is the most important abstraction of all with regard to our individual capacities to empathize. The world, in my opinion, is sorely lacking in this currency.

Mental illness is such a singular and insulated occurrence that there is no universal experience. It is not like breaking a bone and then setting it. It is always different. It is always difficult. It is always beyond words. It is always an abstraction for those on the outside, observing a patient or a loved one in the throes of something terrifyingly incomprehensible. But what about that individual observing the outside from within? What do they see? If someone had asked me how to describe what enduring a nervous breakdown feels like I would have said that:

- It's a bit like skinning your knee, except the knee is now your brain (*six years ago*).
- It's a bit like riding in an elevator to the top of some infinite building only to have the cables severed three quarters of the way (*four years ago*).
- It's a bit like watching a planned detonation of some superfluous building. Everything goes from the inside with a kind of cool efficiency and only then can the façade crumble (*two years ago*).

The truth, or my strung-out pimp in the middle of a storm, is that the right words don't exist and more importantly, they will *never* exist. A nervous breakdown creeps up on you like your own shadow. Having said this, I would like to navigate the slipperiness of language and attempt to relay my experience.

In the summer of 2002 I managed to secure a job at a local printing shop. The money I earned was put towards my second year at a prestigious technical college. I was put on the night shift and I had a good time. I worked hard, doing the work required of two daytime operators by myself, and I prided myself on my abilities. One Sunday evening I was

underneath a stapling machine with some socket wrenches trying to repair it when my boss asked me if I was ok. I was a little stunned that he was asking me how I was doing so I said that I was tired from swimming earlier in the day. I then spent some time wondering why he had asked me what he did. Was it out of genuine concern? Did I look unhealthy? When I recall this moment I see myself feeling internally dislocated, as if my interior surface or being and my exterior one were slightly but severely askew. My memory constructs me as a blur and this couldn't be more accurate. I was a blur.

My first year away from home was intensely stressful. I felt wholly powerless, as if I was caught in the indiscriminate pandemonium of a tornado. I remember mounds of paperwork during a school application process that never seemed to end while *in* school. I remember the long lines for OSAP. I remember the stale air of residence. I remember feeling like my daily existence was akin to a hamster on a wheel or a lion doomed to an existence of jumping through fiery hoops.

My first semester was the definition of a disaster. I sweated a lot. I was socially paralyzed. I was so nervous speaking in classes that I developed the humiliating tick of faking a coughing fit to delay the act. I don't think I fooled anybody. I forged on because I really had no other plan. (I should note that I accepted the college's offer simply because I imagined my parents wanted me to go somewhere, even if this college was my last selection, my last resort.) It never occurred to me that I could quit and not be ashamed of a minor failure. More importantly, it never occurred to me that I could quit because what I was doing wasn't what I really wanted to be doing.

My second semester yielded slight improvements. I made some friends and we would have movie nights. However, I had the misfortune of becoming acquainted with a small Asian girl whose name eludes me. She was as fraught with insecurity as I was and I did

not like her company, although we shared it all the time. She had problems negotiating the English language. One day she told me that I was a homosexual. It was clear to me that we would never be friends. The only thing we had in common was a profound conflation of existential confusion and loneliness. It was odd to me at the time that a girl who was so unlikable should appear in so many of my sexual fantasies. Reflecting upon this pitiable fact allows me to understand it was because I was so painfully lonely that any form of physical human touch (in this case the most disagreeable) would have been desirable. I don't mean to assail her character (so don't get hung up on this) because the point I want to make is that loneliness can drive any of us to the parameters of our sensibilities.

After eight months of silent suffering I returned home, as I said, a blurred individual. I was happy to secure the job at the printing shop but the odd hours and lack of sunlight only propelled my retreat within to a fractured self.

After the summer I got an apartment near the college with two friends I had made (how I did this remains beyond me, the acquiring of friends that is). A girl I had eyed for most of first year lived two floors below and we became a couple, although the relationship was pretty fraught and unhealthy from the get-go due to my declining health. Between classes I would run back to the apartment and have cold showers to get all the sweat off my greasy skin. I lost interest in eating. My time was spent in my room with the shades drawn being consoled by Simon and Garfunkel records. I was lethargic. My creative drive was officially DOA. I spent most of my time aimlessly wandering the internet. I watched a lot of porn, but mostly I wanted to see if the actors were having any fun themselves. (I think they were having quite a bit of fun.) I developed another embarrassing tick, consciously inflecting my own speech with a hybrid Scottish-Irish accent. I was always conscious of when I affected the accent and I hated myself for doing it but I couldn't seem to stop.

Looking back, it seems rather obvious to me that I did so because I was profoundly unhappy with myself. I wanted to be someone else. I often felt like my body did not properly represent who I really was beneath. I disliked my porous and pimply skin. I disliked the way I looked even though I couldn't think of how I would like to look if I had the opportunity to appear differently. I developed psoriasis on my scalp that was humiliating. As you might observe, I had a plethora of reasons not to go out. So I would stay in citing stomach problems.

I lost so much weight that I consulted with a gastroenterologist. I had a colonoscopy performed and the doctors couldn't find anything amiss because there physically wasn't anything wrong. As to what was wrong, I could only explain my symptoms, and even then, we were all in the dark.

I began to neglect classes and had to explain to both professors and fellow peers that I was having "intestinal problems". I felt like all remnants of personal agency had been cleaved from me and that I was losing control of everything. And when I say everything I do indeed mean *everything*, most significantly, my understanding of reality.

Walking around the halls of school I would observe people passing by and when they smiled at me I would think: "I *did* that. I made them smile at me". My brain began to race frantically all the time and I found it immeasurably difficult to focus for any meaningful amount of time on one particular idea. I was occasionally burdened with the idea that I was a disciple of Jesus and that the world's fate may or may not rest in my hands and that it was my mission to discern the boundaries of my responsibility. I have never been a religious person but at the time this all made perfect sense to me. I couldn't distinguish that the illogical had suddenly become wholly logical because I was manic one second and depressed the next. I felt like I was brimming with the knowledge of what reality really was and yet I

couldn't verbally articulate this feeling that consumed me for periods of several days. (Even if I could have I would have been committed.) I felt powerful. I felt ashamed. I felt immortal. I felt dead.

During midterms I sat down to write an exam and my mind went blank. I recall writing things but my mind felt grainy, like a windswept beach in the winter. The image of sand scuttling across a barren and helpless landscape is the image that comes to mind when I recall that moment in class. But strangely, it isn't the image I see so much as the feeling, as if I was the earth and my being, my self, was the sand disseminated to and fro by a force of nature. This was the moment, for me, when I officially broke down, and that it was followed by a moment of instinctual self-preservation strikes me as both unbelievable and demonstrative of human resilience. Leaving class after the exam period had expired I was in a daze of physical and emotional exhaustion. I called my mother to inform her with an alarming lack of specificity that: "something was wrong". It's interesting to recall this moment of almost objective self-diagnosis because there were moments when the healthy sections of my mind would rebel and suppress the illogical and in this sense I really was a divided self. After my telephonic cry for help I lay on my bed and sobbed. My father was on his way.

I came home for a two-week rest. I saw my family doctor and repeated a process I would go on to copy for nearly two years: regurgitating my catalogue of symptoms. He handed me some sample packages of medication. I cannot recall what it was but the boxes did have lovely suns printed on them. I was taken aback by how quickly my doctor gave me these samples, with which I would: "take as directed and then report back on how I felt in a few days". I remember leaving his office replaying the few minutes I had to explain myself and I concluded that the samples were merely a means to an end for my doctor, or more

precisely, several sunshine boxes closer to a Caribbean cruise. I don't know if I was ever correct in this assumption, but what I would like to impart is that my engagement with the psychiatric rehabilitation process began with feelings of suspicion, of contempt, of betrayal.

One day I went for a walk downtown in the small village I live in. It was early November, the weather was cold and the air was sterile and hot in my nostrils. When I got home, walking down the long path of asphalt that constitutes our driveway, I saw my mother come running frantically up from the woods behind our house. She was in a panic because I had left and she had assumed I had headed for the river to do myself in. It was a jarring moment but one that illuminated for me how corrupted cultural ideas are regarding mental illness. I felt like I was inhabiting a scene from a movie. Perhaps my mother had envisioned me loading my pockets with stones and walking composedly into the submersion of the waves. I do not know for sure. But I asked myself where she might have received this idea and I found that this was the most likely possibility.

I soldiered on (in hindsight towards self-destruction) consumed by the notion of maintaining some sense of normalcy. I returned to school with an arsenal of medications. You name it, I've taken it. The ease with which I was switched from combinations of medicine was as alarming as the infrequency of my psychiatric consultations, whether it be with my ineffective and geriatric social worker (even though he tried astonishingly well to break through my own inability to express myself properly), or my designated psychiatrist, who happened to be an existentially solipsistic German. She had great one liners. One meeting she said: "Your couch reeks of depression" when addressing my familial situation. She was the most abominable and untimely poet I've ever met.

Where was this combination of reticence and incompetence to express myself coming from? Well, the seeds were planted on my initial meeting with my family doctor.

These were seeds of suspicion and they blossomed into a full-fledged pessimistic disdain for all those people who schooled themselves in sociological and psychological jargon so that they might help unfortunate souls like myself. I trusted no one. So I set about relishing the role I cast myself in: a very, *very* toned down version of Randall McMurphy. I was both the director and actor in my own movie and I saw my disorders as a means of liberation.

Over the course of the next year I was incarcerated for approximately seven months in numerous psychiatric wards across South Western Ontario. The first one I inhabited had a rule that all patients were to wear hospital assigned pajamas as a kind of implicit punishment for being there in the first place. It was only after a week of good behaviour that one was granted “civvys” or their normal clothes: sneakers with laces! jeans with belts! t-shirts with thread and buttons! I liked the comfort of wearing paper slippers and pajamas all day so I acted recklessly enough to remain on their watch-list but not so wildly as to be put in isolation (amiably referred to by the patient population as the “bubble room” due to the large plexi-glass bubble installed in the door so that nurses and doctors could safely observe those incontinent, slobbering primitives inside).

Some days we would do inane crafts in the common room. Other days we would have guest speakers (off-duty nurses) come in to lecture us on how unimportant dusting the house everyday was because modern science has shown that dust’s pinnacle of accumulation was only three days. It was all very insulting.

My assigned psychiatrist (the German poetess) asked me one day if I ever suffered from auditory hallucinations and stone-faced I answered that: “the shower head was often in the habit of communicating with me”. A total fabrication on my part, but I was enjoying both the debunking of psychiatry and the stimulating engagement with my imagination. However, I also realized that my deceptions would only keep me on the ward even longer.

Despite all the horrors of life on a psychiatric ward (for example, the late night admissions who howled and screamed for their kids until they were sedated) it was nice to just chill out and relax. I spent a week in the PICU reading *Sometimes a Great Notion*, all of Salinger's work, and watching the snow fall outside. Occasionally I was overcome with a sense of entrapment, or more precisely, a sense of the real scope of my situation, and I panicked, which was a reaction that required more sedation.

As for my journey to the edge, my peeling back of reality, this was only accomplished after three near fatal overdoses. I don't see them as "cries for help" but moments of painfully illogical despair. (Just thinking about these moments makes me anxious.) I wanted out, but from what I do not know. To do this I used the tools around me to escape. This sounds reckless (it certainly was) but I had been so low for so long that a little internal adventure seemed like a good test. The last, being the worst, was on a drug that attacked my heart (my psychiatrist was careful to point that this would happen when prescribing them) and as a consequence of the adrenaline surging through my body I was conscious for nearly the entire trip. Through the parted curtains of my ER berth I made out a white figure with a willowy beard pacing to and fro in the hallway of the hospital. It was God and he was waiting for me but suddenly I did not want to go. So I fought the most intensely concentrated battle of my life and it was all within the damaged circuitry of my brain. So *within* that language cannot communicate what I endured. I hauled abstractions at other abstractions and the campaign lasted nearly nine hours. During this time I heard one of the nurses (really an immobilized spectator) say that I had taken eight times the lethal amount. So if I lived it was miracle and if I didn't then I got what I obviously wanted.

Going to the edge of reality, for me, meant going to the innermost undiscovered regions of my mind and whatever this was (my memory necessarily fails me here, it's a pretty

painful moment to revisit), was enough. I *became* Bolano's strung-out pimp in the middle of a storm. I saw the truth and it was both a moral predicament and a moral truth. It was an abstraction of the grandest kind. Most importantly, it was all a drug-induced illusion. I did see God but I also know that I *didn't* see God. This statement explains why I'm a bad philosopher. I don't believe human beings are inherently rational (in fact we're all irrevocably irrational) and frankly, rationality is dreadfully dull.

The time I spent in various psychiatric wards was as horrible as the Hollywood machine makes it seem. The nurses, predominantly Eastern Europeans inhabiting a post-modernist interpretation of the witches from *Macbeth* enjoyed prescribing amateur diagnoses like "maybe you're just gay". The psychologists, whose dense and impressionistic application of makeup implied a kind of insomniac Dadaism, assigned odd tests combining blocks and elementary math to determine my mental state. The doctors, resembling malnourished arctic explorers, loved the sound of their voices and wielded their power carelessly. My current psychiatrist continues to assign me different disorders and symptoms whenever we meet. It's embarrassing and frustrating. I cannot blame my doctor but who should I blame? This is an immense and nearly unanswerable question. I think the answer has deep roots in our consumerist impulses. But first we need to find a more empathetic and less fearful linguistic schema to address our cultural inadequacies regarding mental illness.

As much as I understood the script before me, and as well as I performed, garnering critical reception (more pill combinations) I did not understand what was going on internally and externally. My sense of tongue-in-cheek sociological debunking was illusory and I became my own victim. The less pessimistic side of me wants to acknowledge that the various teams who supported me in various institutions did the best they could with what

they knew. Regardless of intentions, what cannot be disputed is that they were all ill equipped to encourage and foster my health. In the end, and this might sound like a cringe inducing cliché, only I could decide whether or not I stopped the self-destruction in order to buckle down and work on my cognitive behaviour. Ultimately, my boredom with the role freed me and this was a savage lesson from a savage faculty.