by Danica Marie Allen

"The most beautiful things are those that madness prompts and reason writes." Andre Gide, Journals, 1894

Oh, Mr. Gide, this writer must disagree. Given my writing habits, it would be fair to argue that the most profoundly life-altering things are those that reason prompts and madness writes. Case in point: it is early March 1998, at sometime between too late to go to bed and a second wind. A ten-page philosophical essay is due in two days. The work started tonight, right after the X-Files. At this point in my education, it has become easier to accept that grades aren't everything, but someone deep inside still wants that A. You would think that whomever that grade obsessed freak is, she would learn to stop procrastinating. This presently non-existent essay will count for over half of my course grade.

The essay is for a seminar on theology. By trying to critique Saint Thomas Aquinas' angelology from a modern continental/French feminist position, I have probably reached too far. For the love of Pete, the premise is basically saying that we should rely on angels to help solve our practical problems! Yes, angels! I have, at this very moment, a killer opening sentence: "When one thinks of angels in modern America, she is likely to envision a commercialized Hollywood projection of an artist's rendition of a literary representation of a long-deceased prophet's metaphorical expression of an experience that most likely did not easily lend itself to articulation." And, to follow that up (can that be followed up?) four pages of crap that I just realized I don't believe in.

To take a break from the computer, I drink a beer, and run downstairs in my Winnie-the-Pooh nightgown. My thick green polar fleece socks make it easy to slide quietly through the dormitory. In the hallway there is another dedicated student (or is he just coming home from partying?) walking alone, to his room. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, I brace for the cold of the clear night air. As I am propping the door open, lighting a cigarette and looking up at the lights of the dorm rooms, I realize that only three lights remain. The last time out here, there were more. A tingly and vaguely frightening chill rises up from the very backs of my heels and makes me clench my teeth and shoulders. Frustration moves from somewhere deep within my gut and slowly up to my tear ducts. Taking a long drag off the cigarette, I try to sort through my thoughts. Pace. Finish the cigarette. Turn to go back inside. While I'm closing the door, one of the remaining lights goes out, leaving two.
Walking back up the stairs, I shiver and think of who might be awake to offer a reality check. Mom will be asleep and my best friend JoAnn and I aren't getting along right now. She's most likely not home, and it's too late to call her anyway. Back in my apartment, I avoid the computer. The refrigerator has exactly four beers left in it. The Marlboro package holds precisely seven cigarettes. The four pages still suck. They are so elementary that they will be insulting. Doing philosophy is the one thing that I seem to be able to do really well. For example, I am attempting to do some pretty hefty mind work: "As a philosophical experiment, I would like to assert that angels should once again be brought to the foreground and seriously considered as possible agents, which through our limited understanding of them, can assist us in solving some of the main issues of our age."

For six years, in the military, I did technical work, and philosophy was only a hobby. But now, after leaving the Air Force, herein my identity resides: dormitory hall director (which entails counselor, cop, and clergy), writer and philosopher. I would have to admit that the part of me who wants the A is one of those control freaks, defined by her work. At this stage in my writing/philosophizing career, I really want some kind of validation—is the work any good? Can I really do this? Or, am I kidding myself? I just really want to be able to do this! To really do it, not just to be given an A. Lately, A papers seem to come to easily. I want to feel like it was more than decently written—which is what A seems to mean. At least that's the impression I have been getting in most of my classes.

Returning to the paper, wanting to hit my computer, I throw books instead. Every time I reread the words that I have strung together, I begin to feel more irritable. "Humanity is fundamentally wrapped up in its own facticity, its finitude and of being an object for others, while living-in-the-world as an embodied subject." What the hell is that? Where, exactly, does something like that come from? What does that have to do with angels? There is some important connection that I am failing to make. The next few lines are painful to produce. My embodied subject literally aches from fear, lack of understanding, and the repetitive grasping motions that my mind keeps making. What is it? What is it that I can say?

Yanking open the top drawer of my desk, I find a blue pen. After rummaging, I find a red one too. The printer takes for-freaking-ever to produce a hard copy. The stuff that makes some kind of sense gets a blue line, the crap gets a red one. The paper is now the colors of the American flag, after it has been bled upon. The only blue is that first sentence. There are no stars. Delete everything! Except the first sentence. The screen glows. A chill creeps in between my shoulder blades as I begin to cry. There are no more ideas! Fear and loneliness envelope and isolate—making me desperate for human company.

After putting on sweat pants under my pajamas, I close the door to my study to block out the light. One more beer, one cigarette, and then just check to see if his room is unlocked. There are still two lights. My new
boyfriend's room is on the fifth floor. I am on the
ground floor, and so is our relationship.
He will think that I am psychotic. He will run
as fast as he can. The room is locked. De-
sceding the stairs, I cry more of those acidic,
painful tears that can only be born of frustra-
tion. At this point, I would prefer tears of
sadness. The sheer lack of tangible brilliance
becomes overwhelming. —Supposed to be
able to do this—have pulled it out so many
times before—can’t believe he locked his
room! I begin to hyperventilate.

Tears are supposed to have some
power of relief. They carry toxins out of you,
or something like that. My tears are just warm
and they make my eyelids feel sticky and sore.
There is no relief here. The toxins are still
present, making my skin hypersensitive.
Everything about this night is tortured. One
more cigarette. Only one light left on. Who
lives there?—Will he or she outlast me?—Is she
even studying?—I am terribly pathetic to be
thinking about her.

I go inside and find a little red card in
my telephone numbers jar.

"Crisis-Line, How may I help you?"

"I just need to talk, I have to figure
out a way to get through this night..."

"You’ll have to slow down, honey,
what’s your name?"

Struggling to speak, I manage to say,
"Dani."

"Well, what’s the matter, Dani?"

I don’t dare tell her that there are 33
Tylenol in bathroom, or that there are only
those stupid pink Daisy disposable razors in
the cabinet. So I inform her that I am a hall
director (someone who takes care of freshmen
for God’s sake!), that I myself have told people
to call Crisis-Line, but that I just can’t get a
hold of friends right now to talk about what’s
bothering me, which is that this paper is due in
two days. Does she know any coping strate-
gies? Can she think of ways for me to stop
thinking of not being, (finally, something
philosophical!)

"How long have you been awake?"

"Since five."

"This evening?"

"No."

"I think that you should take a deep
breath and try to take a nap. The paper will
look better in the morning."

"I cannot take a nap!"

"At least try to take a few deep
breaths."

"Thanks, I feel better,"
But I don’t. After hanging up, now crying even harder, I throw myself on the futon and kick the mattress and scream, “Ahhh! #*&%*$#,” into the pillows. The doubts that I feel about the validity of the work are resting just below my collarbone in a pool of toxic insecurity. Screaming, I hope, will force the pool to overflow, to dissipate. I use the little pillows like boxing gloves and beat on the wall. Imagining that I must look pretty stupid, I begin to calm down a little, finally coming to rest in my big chair.

Sitting in the chair, my legs curl up under me. I am embarrassed but ever more afraid. While crying some more, I compulsively knead the pillows. The living room is too damn small. Getting up, I take nine steps forward and turn, nine steps back, plopping back down into the chair. The idea that I had reasoned out for the paper has gotten lost in the painful madness of the learning process. To create while in crisis is exhausting—at last, I sleep.

Three weeks after that night when I called the crisis line I read my professor’s final comments on the paper. The first sentence remains. The rest of the paper materialized in a coffee coated haze on the following night. Was my madness in control, or my reason? Tortured artists and academics have never appealed to me, and I don’t profess to be either, but somewhere during that painful night, in a place between madness and reason, I eventually found what Michael Myers labeled “sophistication and grace.” Next to these messily scribbled comments was an “A [+].” I wasn’t certain whether I should thank Dr. Myers, or kill him. I felt like a fraud, like somehow he saw some other paper, not mine. I can’t help but think that a very destructive behavior pattern is being strongly reinforced, totally validated. It scares me to think that all my future writing will have to cost as much as this piece did. Precisely why should the girl inside the last lighted window stop procrastinating? Why should she worry about me?