Section One:

To a hypochondriac, dreams are vivid.

The American Dream: Oprah daily at four. Pay attention to the commercials. They tell you what you want. Check. I would like to have a wardrobe like Oprah.

Or.

I could lease the new Pontiac, Whatever.

Or.

That whirlpool Jacuzzi would look good on the new deck. Check.

Or...

Everybody in talk show audiences dresses up like they are the ones being interviewed. Like they are Maya Angelou, or Tom Cruise, or...whoever. I hope I wouldn’t go shopping to sit in O’s audience. Maybe I would.

Why am I like this?

Do aspiring authors pray to the altar of Oprah’s Book Club? They do these days.

Advice follows:

If you go see a talk show, make sure your make up is perfect. And if the camera pans over you, smile just like your life is perfect. Get your teeth capped. Check. Your teeth should be perfect. Could you imagine if you were on national TV and you didn’t look thin And pretty And rich And...

Check.

Wouldn’t that be horrible? My teeth are yellowish.
Watch the de-evolution of America and its Dream everyday at four. Tell all your friends and remember Zevon said “It’s hard to be somebody, and it’s tough not to fall apart.”

Check.

To a hypochondriac, everything’s immediate. Everything’s right now. Tomorrow is as distant as the uneven cement between old red bricks in Charleston’s historic district, frozen gray and pustular. The burning sun is stopped in its path.

Not that it moved to begin with or anything.

I make “to do” lists. I call them “too due” lists because sometimes they rule me and I teach English and such wit is expected of English Lecturers.

Self-loathing is not expected of English Lecturers.

Check.

I have little crumpled, labeled pieces of paper that tell me different things: Go to store. Clean bathroom. Mow grass. Go by bank...check. Print off lecture notes...check. Go by church...check. Douse self in gasoline...check. Pick up toilet paper...check. Walk dogs...check. Check all four dogs for fleas...check. Light self and jump off building in the middle of downtown at about twelve-fifteen p.m. Check. Pick up cat food...check. Be sure to catch fire before jumping for maximum effect.

Check.

Use your mind and determination to make your fat and grease sizzle and pop on the asphalt for maximum effect.

Check.
Nothing lets me know how quickly life can suck like a list.

Have billions of years of human evolution come to this...come to lists?

Has it all come to Wal-Mart late at night because it is less crowded?

Check.

To saving for retirement and self-loathing?

I’ve never found anyone just like me, or even remotely close like me. I don’t know if I’d want to.

I bet no one does. Late at night I lie on my car and watch the skies for UFOs. I am certain they’re out there.

Beam me up, whoever.

This is true. Does that matter to you?

A poet said there’s a hell of a universe next door. I’d like to go and see. Our sun has another five billion years of hydrogen fuel left before it gets really white and tiny and then goes nova.

Plenty of time.

In a snow globe, heavy snow is always warm and inviting. See the plastic trees and the cabin full of family warmth and closeness? See the precisely uniform snowflakes? Out in the woods, in real snowstorms it is cold, and hungry, and bitter. People in snow globes never get their faces chewed off by wolves.

Section Two:

Hypochondriacs know a mole is never just a mole. It’s lurking melanoma or a simply cherry angina just a few
hours from metastasizing. That red spot in your mouth? It’s soft tissue cancer or an oral manifestation of AIDS. If you’re a hypochondriac, you need a fine and patient doctor. You’ll probably become good friends with said doctor. Sudden inexplicable muscle soreness with no obvious causality? Why that’s internal bleeding, bone cancer, or something rarer, more elusive, able to elude the normal physician’s battery of tests...you probably need to seek a specialist. As one of this club, you’ll know the PDR is the *Physician’s Desk Reference*; you will have the latest copy and know how to use it.

Can you imagine living like this, having this horrible companion called Hypochondria? I did for years. It permeates you, makes you learn which mirrors are best for specific examination angles. It makes you write in the second person.

It’s a terrible, persistent lover.

It whispers at night, bent on your possession, bent on owning your life. And if you’re like me, you know it has its claws deep in you and you’re determined to rip it off, regardless of what hunks and chunks of you come off in the bargain.

Check.

So.

A strange result of this Hypochondrium is that is has made me less fearful. Most hypochondriacs are obsessively cautious, but some, like me, develop reckless habits. I’ll explain.

It is amazing the number of masks even an honest man wears.
Confession number one: I live far more recklessly than my loved ones know.

So is it dying that a hypochondriac is afraid of? Not for me. I’m not afraid of death, per se; I’m afraid of a slow, drawn-out, cowardly death sneaking up with dull weapons of hospital beds, nursing homes, and debilitating disease. I want it to walk up out of the blue and rip me to pieces under a brilliant sun, a radiant dying star.

That’s what we are anyway, beacons in the void plodding toward novae, or supernovae if we’re really special, looking for a place and some people to hold close to us along the long, dark way. Our brightest moment is our doom.

Radiant dying stars.

Listen.

For me, it’s the slow leak of hydrogen with plenty of time to contemplate and regret and think that keeps me up at night, not premature annihilation. This mindset, coupled with a stubborn independent streak is a potent recipe for a reckless hypochondriac.

Consider: I wrote this first page while driving about 85 miles-per-hour in heavy interstate traffic while listening to blaring opera. Not a safe, responsible driving decision. Have you ever tried to write with one hand, drive with the other, and watch the road and your words at the same time?

Wait.

Let me back up.

I am much better than I used to be. What I mean by better is that I take far less chances than I used to. But I still yield to the compulsion more often than anyone knows, more
often than your typical bookish-looking college English instructors do.

That’s my job.

Consider the first two sentences of the most recent piece of fiction I am working on: “The early sun found me with the butcher knife in my hand and my head in the oven. It was a bad night, last night.”

I teach English.

So, is this simply a nod to Plath (whom I do not care for), or would any psychotherapists like to take a shot at those two sentences?

My students (most of them) love me.

What would a graduate program in psychology tell me about the knife and the oven? Does this mean something is wrong with me? Are they archetypes dealing with my dead father, the Good Reverend? Something lurking in the old Id or Ego waiting to burst forth with fangs bared?

I’m not sure if my boss likes me.

I’ll let you know how the story turns out. Maybe someone will publish it, but probably not. I keep getting “not what we’re looking for” or “superfluous violence with no real underlying meaning.” How am I supposed to provide real underlying meaning? Don’t these editors know that’s what I’m looking for?

I’m not sure how long I’ll keep my job.

To a hypochondriac, patterns appear from chaos.

Prolonged worry over a non-existent impending death coupled with the absolute fear of a lingering, prolonged death leads to a reckless life, or at least some reckless hobbies.
Mike Jaynes

Trust me.

*Full time University*

*Lecturers are supposed to know some things.*

It also lead me to a complete inability to be startled at all when I look down while driving, drift into oncoming traffic, look up and jerk the wheel back just in the knick. Most people, like you, react with a gasp (at least), or a curse, or even a need to pull over to the side of the road to catch their breath.

Not me.

I experience neither the slightest twitch nor increased pulse. I have the detached air of an android. You’d think I’d studied Tai Chi Chuan for decades.

*My students write essays to Intelligent Beings.*

Perhaps some receptor center deep in my brain meat classifies the situation as possible swift death, which negates the slow future disease and forever repeating nursing home days. So the brain fails to elicit the services of dendrites and neurons to create the typical –normal- fear response. I employ neither fight nor flight nor fright. I am not startled (most of the time). I catalog the situation and go about my drive, happy in the long slanting sunlight.

*How can I be a teacher when I know nothing?*

Consider:

Near traffic fatalities, rock climbing and reckless mountain biking doesn’t scare me, but a weird spot in the mouth brings me to my knees. Panic. It’s embarrassing to admit. That’s why I live alone in my head. You can’t come in,
but I’ll check and recheck the spot fifty times in the mirror over the course of the night. I don’t know what I’m looking for. I know I’m selfish. I hope I don’t keep running off people I love. What do I look for in the pink lining of the cheek and gums? I jump out of airplanes.

*I thought of my professors as such wise creatures*

To a hypochondriac, *selfish* is a relative term.

Stop.

Don’t get me wrong. My inner core, my sanctum *sanitarium*, is both turbulent and tranquil, so don’t think the turbulence is all there is to me.

I am happy more often than I am sad. And just like you my life will be brief. I refuse not to live it.

Listen

Live is a transitive verb, both an action and a four-letter word

*Were they as confused as I am?*

What writer alive today needs the painful therapy of writing to deal with the good stuff? If you have underlying meaning, why do this in the first place?

*Were they as lonely?*

Hesse said one can learn a lot from a river.

I said the best thing about summer in the south is the fireflies. But that’s another essay that may or may not matter to you.

In the winking magic of fireflies, it’s easy to forget that today the television showed me how a Mexican pig farmer got his ten foot transport truck stuck under a nine foot
bridge and the police came and freed the terrified, cramped pigs from their underpass. The pigs were jammed together in the crates and shook as the Jaws of Life cut the top of the truck off. Pedestrians cheered as the panic-stricken pigs and their death wagon were freed from the underpass. The announcer told me the pigs made it safely to the slaughterhouse.

I always have glowing student evaluations except for the one or two I really piss off.

The pigs made it safely to the slaughterhouse.

Gandhi said you can tell how advanced a society is by how it treats its animals.

Check.

It’s really strange, they are always phosphorescent.

The pigs made it safely to the slaughterhouse.

I always wear jeans and tee shirts to teach and I hope my boss is okay with that.

Deep in the woods, in the South, in the summer, it’s easy to forget that we live in a world where people will cheer as pigs are safely released from the bridge and sent on their way to the slaughterhouse. Fireflies remind me that there is good in the world, but it may or may not be found in humanity.

The pigs made it safely to the slaughterhouse.

If that’s not a feasible defense against hypochondria, what is?

My students wonder why I sometimes scream in class. Some of them understand.
Mike Jaynes

Maybe they’ve had a night that they woke up after with a butcher knife in their hand and their head in the oven.

Section Last:
I had a list of other confessions, but I think I’m done. There was confession number eight: Rich people annoy me. And Confession number six: I’m often lonely. And Confession number twelve: Thomas Pynchon’s really a spotlight hound.

Maybe next time.
I decided Confession Number Sixteen was far too embarrassing to admit.
Maybe next time.
I hope a cure for hypochondria is found...a cure other than death, that is.

If I could choose my own death, I’d pick the Gulf of Mexico. Think about it. A cool jeweled death far from crowds to entertain, students to teach, people and animals to disappoint, societies to better, roles to play and early warning signs of diseases to detect. It would be relaxing far way, down among the superior saltwater world and its brilliant silent colors, fading to gray the deeper I sank. Imagine drifting down, slowly spiraling among the wise silent fish with gently moving mouths and the forever flow of the mighty Gulf Stream.

I could think of worse ways.
Like how Silas Evans died. Now there’s a great person.

And I’m in too many pieces to concentrate…too many pieces to be great.