It's been almost a year since last May--the month I graduated college and

sprang into "adult life" at jet-engine speed. I was admitted to grad

school, landed a full-time government job with a salary and benefits, and

even moved into a sweet Williamsburg apartment right down the street from

Barcade. The four weeks after I graduated were spent floating around in the

rainbow, ecstatic aura of cloud-nine. Granted, my job wasn't the perfect

fit, my apartment was small and I felt like I didn't deserve any of it.

None of that mattered though, because it was still better than anything I

had ever dreamed of. After all, I didn't spend college laboring away on the

path to an MBA and financial security. I was just an aspiring poet with a

passion for games and the internet. Why should I be lucky enough to start

supporting myself right out of college? I guess this made me a little

anxious, and I went on that post-college self-deprecation spree that I

think most of us experience. Looking back on it, I was too hard on myself.

Much of my summer felt like a storybook fantasy spent watching a lot of

anime late at night with Emmett, and waking up to get pie and work on poems

and video games. It went on like this, all bright and fun for months. Late

summer came and I started to feel more anxious. I couldn't explain the

feeling to you as clear as I'd like to. It felt like I'd been rolled up

comfortably into a cloud, but suddenly that cloud was raining and I was

falling out too. My stomach would drop suddenly like I was on a

rollercoaster--but I was really just sitting at my desk at work in the calm

morning. I had never felt so off balance. I'd seen some of my friends

struggle with anxiety and recognized that I may be experiencing that

too--but it didn't make any sense. I had always been so stable, despite a

weird family situation and tumultuous youth. I really believed that

struggling through a lifetime of divorced parents, food stamps and my

brothers autism diagnosis had made me a stronger person. I thought I had

the emotional stability of a tank, so why was I suddenly tearing at the

seams?

I was getting really worried--my anxiety was heightening and I spent every

night feeling asthma like a metal clamp on my lungs. I hadn't had asthma so

consistently since childhood. Everything in my body was beginning to make

less and less sense. I was constantly tired and would leave work feeling

like I had jumped ship and been swallowed by a wave. I started crying so

much that it really did feel like I'd drown in my own disintegrating body.

I tried finding a helpful doctor. I went to a pulmonologist who put me on

Singulair, which only managed to make me feel even more depressed. It got

so bad that I would cry myself into a stupor, hiding in the bathroom at

work for hours. It wasn't just my asthma--I stopped taking the Singulair

and the asthma went away. I continued to feel like a husk of myself. I

didn't understand--I was a recent graduate with a great job and an awesome

social life. My boyfriend was supportive and I even started to get along

with my parents again. But still, my chest felt sore and I lost my

appetite. Eating became physically painful and it felt like I couldn't

swallow past the lump in my throat. I tried to see a cardiologist, who told

me I was fine. I asked my primary care doctor, who told me I was fine. She

referred me to a psychologist for anxiety. I found a psychologist and he

brushed me off like a gnat. I didn't understand why nobody could help me--I

knew there was something wrong.

I felt so small. I had always maintained a regular weight, and sometimes

would even gain a few pounds. Suddenly my pants went down two sizes without

explanation. Anxiety, everyone said. Nina, you need to get it together.

Everything is so good for you right now, don't you understand? To be

honest, I knew everything was great but I couldn't shake the feeling of

hopelessness. When your body feels like a black hole that's sucking your

entire life into an unknown catastrophe, it's hard to think about anything

else. I started to feel afraid for my job, my relationship, my life and my

entire future.

During the course of this, I found solace in only two things--video games

and the internet. As silly as it may sound--games, the games community

online, twitter and gchat were the thread that held me back from the edge

of crippling aloneness. I say "aloneness", because I don't quite mean

loneliness. I still had a wonderful boyfriend and supportive friends, but

there's something about illness that makes one feel alone despite the

physical presence and kindness of those around you. Having games and the

internet to keep my mind engaged really went a long way in maintaining my

shred of stability. I have Emmett and Diego to thank for that--watching

them finish their game over the summer and tagging along with them to any

and all NYC games events really invigorated me. It got me into a computer

science MA program and gave me the hope that I may one day too be able to

make a game. I began to remember that I had a future, as dim as it seemed.

Cut to February--I'm sitting on my couch, eating pasta. I'm stressed out

because my landlord is being slow about cleaning the mold out of our

bathroom. I finish eating and it feels like someone punched me in the chest

and I spiral into a panic attack. I call my mom and cry and keep asking her

if I'm going to die. Emmett comes over and I ask him if I'm going to die. I

curl up on the couch and keep asking over and over if I'm going to die. I

tell myself I can't ever eat a single scrap of food again, because it's too

painful and scary. The next day I began my hunt for a therapist, because I

knew that starving myself wasn't a desirable outcome. I also decided to

seek out the help of a gastroenterologist, because I could only manage

small meals before my stomach felt like an acidic bucket.

One could argue that finding a gastroenterologist saved my life. He got

straight down to business and told me that an endoscopy was the only way to

tell what was going on in my stomach. After much hesitation, I went through

with it. Afterwards, I was one of the few unlucky to get really sick in the

aftermath of the procedure, and I actually regretted going through with it.

But, when a doctor suggests a real exam like that, you take it, because

it's the only way to know the truth. A week later I went in to see the

doctor about my results.

My anxiety had been at its worst that month, and I was truly exhausted. My

entire body felt brittle. I sat down with the doctor and actually convinced

myself that he would tell me that nothing was wrong, and that I was just

crazy. Over the past 6 months, I had been told by so many doctors that my

symptoms were due to anxiety and panic attacks, that I started to believe

it. My doctor told me that I wasn't crazy--the endoscopy showed that I had

a rare disease called Eosinophilic Esophagitis. I honestly can't tell you

if I was relieved or devastated. The disease matched all of my symptoms--I

wasn't crazy.

I left the doctor's office and felt like my head was stuck inside of a huge

bell. The cars driving by sounded far away and everything was draped in a

watery gauze. Dazed, I walked in the general direction of work. I stood on

the sidewalk and cried in the middle of Chinatown, totally disoriented. I

knew I wasn't going to die, but the fact that my disease may never heal and

had been little researched was too much to handle. In fact, the only known

treatment is steroid inhaler therapy, which I was familiar with because I

had taken it for my asthma. It's a potentially dangerous method, because

you have to swallow the normally inhaled medication. I repeated these facts

to myself over and over and over. I kept thinking about how happy and

healthy I'd been merely a year ago.

You may think that I'm being dramatic. That I really do have an anxiety

disorder and that my disease isn't a "big deal." I wondered if I was

overreacting, and then I tried to eat a piece of bread--my chest started to

throb and I left in the middle of class, considering a trip to the ER.

Turns out, being sick is a big deal. I wandered around outside my school

until I gave up and rode the subway home, hood pulled down over my face.

After more conversations with my doctor, and multiple allergy tests, the

picture began to take shape. It turns out that the mold my landlord failed

to properly clean up had taken its toll on my entire body. I took an

allergy test, because Eosinophilic Esophagitis is usually caused by food

allergies. I learned that one of my worst allergies is to mold. My doctor

said that there's no way of telling for sure what causes the disease, but

my exposure to mold is the only thing that makes sense. I don't have any

other severe food allergies, or allergies in general. My body was absorbing

that mold for months, and my body was fighting it to the last. I began to

realize that my inexplicable anxiety attacks were explicable. My body was

so assaulted by allergies that it was pushed to its limits. Pain manifests

itself in many ways, both physical and mental. My physical and mental

reactions were there for a reason--the mold. I reminded myself again: I am

not crazy.

Today is my last day on a regimen of medications, prescribed to keep me

from choking. My doctors say that only time will tell if this will be

enough to heal my esophagus. Even with the medication, it continues to be a

struggle to eat. I go to a therapist once a week to fend off the eating

disorder that I've developed--the fear of food that I've been enduring for

the last 6 months was not without consequence.

However, against all odds, I just returned from an incredible week spent at

GDC. While I was there, I did manage to feel normal. I ran around, goofed

off, met new friends and talked to a lot of people about the games I'm

passionate about. It was refreshing--knowing that I still have the ability

to share my passions and interest with other people is empowering. I'm

doing my best to maintain these goals and dreams despite the struggle with

my health. GDC, my school, and the entire games community has impressed

upon me the importance of working hard towards creative fulfillment. I

decided that I'm going to make a narrative game based on the last year of

my life. I guess I'll probably go all Sylvia Plath, and make it sort of a

confessional exploration. I'm not entirely sure yet, but I'm really excited

to get started on the project. The importance of a creative outlet that

makes you feel excited is undeniable. Even just writing this essay feels

like a step in the right direction. If I gained anything from the last six

months, it's that you can't give up--especially when you feel like

everything in your life, even your own body, is crumbling like a leaf. You

need to seize every bit of inspiration bubbling up inside of you, and you

have to fly with it forward as hard and as fast as you can.