

2021 Poetry Contest

Successes and Struggles With Mental Health



MindPath Care Centers

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Published by: MindPath Care Centers

Text Design by: Trent Brown

Cover Design by: Ciara Pagels

A CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

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FROM FINAL JUDGE
DR. VENKATA JONNALAGADDA:



Foreword

For a long time it was believed that mental illness did not exist. We could not “test for it.” There were no x-rays or labs. We were simply going on what individuals shared as their experience and empathically we tried to help. Now we have swabs and labs, imaging studies and physical-neurological examinations. We have tests. We have science supporting the diseases of mental illness and substance use disorder. With modern psychiatric medicine, we know the stigma of flawed human character is false.

However, the heralds came long before the science and it was through Art that mental illness and substance use disorder found a means of expression. The composer of the most globally recognized piece of music, the 5th Symphony in C Minor, Ludwig Von Beethoven had bipolar disorder. The painter of *The Scream*, Edvard Munch struggled with both severe anxiety and alcohol use disorder. And there were many more; including some of the greatest writers, lyricists and poets, such as Charles Dickens, Syd Barrett, and Sylvia Plath who gifted us with timeless masterpieces.

The poems shared in this publication are submissions from six individuals daring to reveal themselves through a creative outlet. It is a gift to each of us, in these short lines, to derive true understanding of the human experience. To know their struggles, grief, and learn from their journeys and insights. Poetry is uncomfortable, consoling, and always brave. Poetry offers an outlet of expression when communication through talking – “What to say? How to say it?” – fails us.

As a psychiatrist and a poet, along with my colleagues at MindPath Care Centers, we hope this offering is the first of many. Receiving nearly 70 submissions made this a wonderful way to celebrate the journey we walk with our patients. We recognize, as do these poets, that mental illness, substance use disorder and the recovery journey are lifelong. The strength of the support system is as necessary for success as the medications and the treatments. It is our honor to walk this journey with each, and every one of you.

-Venkata Jonnalagadda, MD DFAPA DFAACAP

Humble supporter of healing and Art.

the newest museum exhibition

by Lianza Reyes

does not have a description or date stamp.
it is not even marked on the brochure. there is nothing
on the label, other than its title, self-study,
and its caption, in small typed letters:
come back every day for a year to understand.
in the exhibit sits a chair facing a mirror on the wall.
is this how arbitrary modern art has become?
it's a scam, obviously.
but i sit. i've been walking in the gallery for hours.
i look into the mirror. all i see is my hair tied high
away from my face, eyebrows filled in,
eyeliner sharp, and red lipstick brightening my face.
the mirror reflects me. as i always am.

but i return.
the newest museum exhibition
is still empty when i charge into the gallery
on the opening minute of the weekend
going here with nowhere else to go.
i sit in chair and
stare at the mirror.

no one remotely comes near me. i hate this exhibit,
but it's the only place that came into my mind to go,
after weeks of free-falling into space,
wishing myself out of existence and failing.
the mirror reflects me.
matted hair falling on my back,
eyeliner smudged, the remainder from last night.
lipstick off-center. but is it who i always am?
is this who i always will be?

i return again.
the chair almost seems familiar to me now,
and no one around notices me stare into the mirror.
with my face void of any lipstick, or eyeliner,
just the dark circles under my eyes
pronouncing themselves, and pillowmarks
on my cheekbones. the heart in my left chest chamber
is healing from a brokenness that bears
down weight in my posture.
is this who i am? or has it changed?

return every day for a year.
in new weather conditions, new haircuts,
new sweaters, with new companions coming with me,
losses, or wins, new friends, new loves,
i look to the mirror and try to crack its code,
why do i continue to return even if it makes no sense?
the mirror returns what i presume is myself,
of that moment.

and one day, when i crawl back into the chair to sit
i sniffle while staring at the mirror
and realize that every day for the past two weeks,
i have arrived here with tears on my face and a weight
in my chest. the mirror is witness to the patterns
of my grief, rage, and joy. it has seen more to me,
more than i realize i see myself.

i'm beginning to understand
the exhibit's title, *self-study*, meaning to study
the waves and storms that brew
within the confines of my physical being.

that to which i bear witness to how i rise from the ground
and fall down on my knees. i am the artist of this exhibit.
and so is the person who sits in this chair after me,
and the one after that, and the one after that.
this exhibit is proving to me that nothing
in life, people or things or places,
are ever truly permanent
except myself. that i am the only one
who remains as i try to keep myself held on together.
and i manage to do it,
for when i see the tears flow down my eyes
in the exhibit's mirror, i wipe them away.
when i feel good, i smile in the reflection.
on day three-six-five i sit down on the chair
to look once more at the artwork that i consider myself
in the mirror to be.
learning i am a constant work in progress.
learning that change is imminent.
learning that i am growing with the change.
learning i must study myself to understand how i change.
learning that i am the best exhibit in the museum.

because the artistry in my entire being,
like the mirror, constantly changes.
and being the artist i am,
i will weather the changes as they occur,
creating them into colors i
brandish on my new skin, turning them into badges
instead of thorns. and all of the audience that passes
will see, like i am the newest museum exhibition.



The Design of a Fearful Mind

by Isabella Dawley

Just breathe,
In...one...two...three...
Out...four...five...six...
It will get better.
Tell yourself it will get better,
It will get better,
Over and over again.
Maybe if you believe it, it'll happen.
It will happen.

No one's staring at you,
Stop overthinking it.
But, you feel the stares, the judgement, the degrading
looks
You feel them, physically, crawling up and down the sides
of your body.
You feel the stares gaze deep into your rib cage,
Clenching on to your lungs:
Holding them tighter and tighter every second.
No one's laughing at you,
Stop overthinking it.

But you feel each release of their breath
As they let out sounds of laughter,
translated into demeaning criticism.
You feel every single one,
all the hateful mockery and ridicule
Form in the pit of your stomach,
As if each one merged to form some sort of parasite.
A parasite that overwhelms and eats away at you—
Preying on your vulnerability.

Just breathe,
In...one...two...three...
Out...four...five...six...
It will get better.
Tell yourself it will get better,
It will get better,
Over and over again.
Maybe if you believe it, it'll happen.
It will happen.

Why do you still do this?
I thought you were better now.
You did get better, you are better.
So why are you still scared?
Why do you care so much about everyone else's opinions?
I don't know.
Yes, you do.
It's more than just overthinking it and you know that.
I know.

It's the trail of thoughts,
the questions that you answer on your own,
The answers that you can't even prove to be true.
The questions that normal people
don't even get the opportunity to answer.
No opportunity to answer when
the question was never formed in their mind.
They don't exist in the minds of others,
They aren't designed in their minds
the way they've been carefully sculpted in yours.

So why do they find their way into your mind?

I don't know.

I believe you this time, you actually don't know.

I know.

I'm just going to go home,

I can't do this today.

You're going to have to get over it at some point,

Stop avoiding it.

I'm not avoiding it.

You're avoiding it and you know it.

I know.

Good, now understand that no one is looking at you,

No one is laughing at you,

No one is judging you.

But what if-

Just breathe,
In...one...two...three...
Out...four...five...six...
It will get better.
You can tell yourself it will get better,
It will get better,
As many times as you need.
Maybe then, you'll realize it never will.
It never will.

The Only Way Is Through

by Alexandra Campbell

I seem normal,
blandly average,
another in the crowd,
but when looking at my mind,

a double take
double take

from chaos to distortions, and dark thoughts,
my manic madness
and buried suicide plots
,logic and reality foolishly take breaks,
leaving me with wreckage of their absentee mistakes.

Mostly I'm level,
I keep my life contained but

I'm bipolar

which messes with my head,
one day I'm a goddess,
the next I wish I'm dead,
emotions dragged through muck
add to my feeling impossibly stuck,
it can sneak up, and if I don't catch it in time-f*#¥
I'll talk too quick
I'll think too quick
I'll act too quick

my actions
becoming
a smattering
of insanity bits

the boundaries between reality and fantasy
fade and blend,
I get lost inside my head,

but I'm lucky,
I have family and friends
who know what to do,
who to call,
what needs to be said,
when they see the signs instead,

regardless,

back at baseline,
the damage is done,
my crazy enjoyed
wrecking my world

just for fun,
again.
It's scarier not to remember,
to have lost chunks of time,
only returning as cringe-filled flashes in my mind.
I'm angry,
I'm ashamed,
I did all I could do,

sometimes with bipolar



you just get screwed the only way is through



**Four of the Nicest Things Other People
Have Done for Me**

by Owen Auman

My older brother,
Who never hugged me,
Wrapped me in his zip-up hoodie
When he saw me shaking in the hospital
The day after I tried to kill myself

The first birthday cake with my chosen name,
At a surprise birthday party
That wasn't really a surprise
Because they knew too much attention
might freak me out

The first time the scars on my chest and
The topography of my body weren't an issue
And the tactile feelings were all my brain could process
Until he called me his boy

Walking three feet in front of me
He stopped, turned around and asked,
"Can I hold you?"
So I picked him up and
Carried him the rest of the way to the car



The Away Goal

by Elisa Mora

The cliff was the perfect place to retreat when we felt we
were losing grip on the city scene; in silence we would sit
at the edge of the cliff letting nature speak

Gradually feeling its speech relieve the pain and stress we
received from the places where we worked and lived

Was it the rhythm in the birds singing, the whispers from
the wind, the creaking from the trees below or the
imaginary roar of the lion beyond?

It certainly was the silence for us all; until the day he
flipped the script on this ritual, turning the cliff to ground
zero.

Over the years, I witnessed him play the role of the
strongest in the pack when they needed him and the weak-
est in the clan when he needed him

They said; “When the troubled crown is too heavy, some-
thing must kill a man. If it’s not good vibes and the fun, it
certainly is stress from the tribe and clan”

And on this day my dad was the man; the cliff was his
grandstand to free fall and he never made a comeback.

Since that day, I have been chasing the one away goal, a role I never asked for from the word go nevertheless the system bestowed on me like a golden job

Similarities drawn from any sport, life and death interchangeably claimed the home or away spot without asking me the distinguished host which I felt comfortable in the most

Anytime life was the home team, it felt like it was a dream too good to be for me and death was lurking somewhere in the night awaiting its turn to consume me

On the other hand, with death as the home team; drowning in the bathtub looked easy, sleeping for an hour came after so much difficulty and being around people was a situation I dreaded being in

Simply because I have been standing on the edge of that cliff physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally, continuously questioning my role in his untimely death

Could I have changed anything to make him stay alive for one more day? Was this the way this story was supposed to end?

Maybe one day I will appreciate the edge of the cliff
as just a podium to witness animals leap, trees swing,
birds sing and nature in its full bliss instead of a
sanatorium that I made it seem

I will stand with open arms and scream I am finally free
from the stress that gives me major grief and I'm a
step near to what they call eternal peace

I will not dial her number to seek relief from my state of
distress; but be comfortable of speaking about life and
death like my grandmother Beth

And will tell myself when it comes to death
the natural way is how we all go;
though the Elijah way will be a sight to behold

But for now I choose to keep working on myself
to ensure the away goal is reduced to a goalless draw.



Shadows Between Buildings

by Wilson R.M. Taylor

The crevices of memory emerge
in unconscious actions right before they shatter—
reaching for a key no longer there
to fit into a lock long since removed.

I am me, stored somewhere,
boxed in,
paying homage to the whisperers,
the controlled-substance saints
destroying themselves in alleyways
when the world seems too concrete.
How do I remain?

This is the cry of a citizen:
an anonymous, incongruous
being, shaped by the sinuous infinity between
moments, immortal, jaded
and naive;
somehow,
somehow,

against all odds, because
spiderwebs remain like echoes on the air,
this life continues, a loss of ages
past, and this is it
and this is *it*.





Thanks for Reading!

