

DISORDERED: A COLLECTION OF POETRY

Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

In the College of Arts and Sciences

at Salem State University

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2014

Abstract

The basis for this chapbook of poetry (titled *Disordered*) was my experience with mental illnesses. There is a problem with lack of awareness of mental illness in writing communities and in other communities, as well as stigma surrounding these diseases. The title was chosen because I wanted to convey the idea that mental illness is something that is very difficult to deal with; however, it does not necessarily mean that you are disabled, a word that comes with a negative connotation. The project consists of fifteen poems along with a table of contents, artist's note, introduction, acknowledgements, notes, and reflection. It is broken down into three sections titled *Collapse/Relapse*, *Me/You*, and *Potential*. In my project, I wanted to portray people with mental illnesses as people similar to everyone else. However, I also wanted to show the unique problems that people with mental illnesses face. I feel that it is important to show both of these sides of people with mental illness, in order to get a full picture of what it is really like to have a mental illness. Writing in general helps me heal from my mental illnesses, and writing specifically about mental illness has helped me learn how to heal more effectively. My hope is that others will be able to relate to my writing and that it will bring about less stigma surrounding mental illness.

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An Artist's Note

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The project consists of fifteen poems along with a table of contents, artist's note, introduction, acknowledgements, notes, and reflection. It is broken down into three sections titled Collapse/Relapse, Me/You, and Potential.

In my project, I wanted to portray people with mental illnesses as people similar to everyone else. However, I also wanted to show the unique problems that people with mental illnesses face. I feel that it is important to show both of these sides of people with mental illness, in order to get a full picture of what it is really like to have a mental illness. Writing in general helps me heal from my mental illnesses, and writing specifically about mental illness has helped me learn how to heal more effectively. My hope is that others will be able to relate to my writing and that it will bring about less stigma surrounding mental illness.

Disordered: An Introduction

Warning: this is not a drill. You are currently being taken away on a stretcher, dazed. You can ask one of two questions: *where am I?* or *what did I do?* Which do you think is more important? Do you already know what you did? Or were you so out of it you thought pita crackers were whales?

Your heart beats quickly; quicker than ever before. Are you having a heart attack? A panic attack, an anxiety attack? What's the difference, anyway? Let's have a school lesson. You'll be here for five to seven days, anyway. You have plenty of time.

An anxiety attack is a feeling of intense anxiety, while a panic attack means you cannot move and you are likely hyperventilating, feeling hopeless, and feeling like you are going to die, the school teacher, who appeared seemingly out of nowhere, says this to you as the paramedics load you into the ambulance, like a package that's just a bit out of place—a can of sardines? Why would anyone order that through Amazon Prime?

The teacher points at the white board, which is sitting on the pavement, where she just wrote down the definition for you. You look puzzled. *Dazed.* That word again. Where are you?

Have you thought of which question to ask yet? Does it matter at this point to you?

They ask you questions like, *How many pills did you take?* Your answer: 500. Or maybe you said none. Which one is true? They tell you they will take your urine at the hospital regardless. It doesn't matter what you answer; it doesn't matter what you ask.

You just want to feel some sense of relief, a sense of closure, maybe? The straps are too tight and you are barely breathing as it is. What would the God of Happiness say? Maybe you hallucinate him, but you definitely hallucinate her ethereal body.

What triggered you? they ask. Well, isn't that a loaded question? Loaded with pills, guns; no—you're loaded with a sense of self-hatred and you're not completely sure why. *Dazed*. Have you thought of which question to ask yet? You *have* to ask one. If you don't, something horrible will happen. Quickly, they're pulling into the hospital.

You said something aloud. You say something about the dandelions rotting at home, and you must go back to revive them. *Revive yourself*, they say.

What triggered you? You looked into the bear's eyes, you were on the phone crying, you covered yourself silently, your grandmother died last year.

How many of these statements are lies? Is there any truth in them?

What makes you feel better? They ask about your *coping skills*. You lie again and say something like going on the internet, going for a walk. You haven't gone for a walk in years. You can't tell them what really helps you, they might snatch it from you like they snatch away your ability to not feel nauseous 24/7. *Medications are good*, they tell you. Yes, sometimes.

I guess I can tell you. You're not in the mental health field, right? If not, please read on. It's: *writing*. It helps you, somehow.

They unload you from the ambulance. You wait in the hospital for hours. (Please don't call an ambulance on a mentally unstable person; go with a crisis team.) They can't find a room for you. A bulky man watches you intently. They ask you to show them

where. You point to your cut marks, like this. You say: *I'm sorry, but, I really can't handle this.*

Depression and anxiety are like a fog. Did anyone ever tell you that when you first started showing symptoms? Your writing helps to dissipate the fog. It works, sometimes. But do you know what it never works for, at least in the moment? Hallucinations and dissociations.

When I hallucinate, I see large, dark shadow figures, and I'm not sure where they end or where they begin. But, more often than these shadow figures, I see small white figures out of the corners of my eyes. Even more often than these, however, I hear voices calling out my name or saying things I can't quite make out.

I dissociate and experience depersonalization almost 24/7. I feel disconnected from my body, my self. When I look in a mirror, I become afraid because what I see doesn't match up with what I understand to be inherently true. I don't feel like I have an "I," a self. The only way in which I connect to myself is through my voice (sometimes), my thoughts, and writing.

If writing helps me connect to these experiences, why doesn't it help in the moment, like it does with depression and anxiety? Depression and anxiety are very symptoms-based disorders, while having hallucinations and depersonalization indicates that there is something wrong with your brain on a deeper level.

I'm not fine with this, but I am. What would I do if I just woke up one day with no symptoms of any of these disorders I experience?

I would probably go crazy. (Crazier?)

When I write about hallucinations and dissociations, I often write from experience, but will tweak it slightly. Is this because it is too painful to look at the truth? No, I don't think so. It's boring to write poetry about exactly what you experience. You learn very little that way, mulling over your experiences again and again. If I change a detail, or two, or three, I see the event in a different manner. It makes the whole thing clearer to me.

By clarifying my experiences through writing, I am able to heal. I am able to better understand what's going on with me, and I can bring these new findings up to doctors and medical professionals to see if they can further my treatment options.

If I had to choose one part of my mental illness that I could make disappear, I would choose the dissociations, or depersonalization. It interferes with my life tremendously and though it can be awfully interesting, it's not practical nor is it comforting, like some of my other symptoms can be. I like to have something to hold onto, and depersonalization takes this very idea away because I can't completely comprehend the idea of being an "I." If "I" can't hold onto something, then it's just holding onto something in general, and that can get very lost very quickly.

Writing is the best medication I have encountered for my disorders, and my hope is that the more I pursue writing, the less these illnesses will affect me.

Please enjoy the following 15 poems in this chapbook titled *Disordered*. I have carefully selected the order in order to give you the best reading experience, and, hopefully, the best understanding of the mental illnesses that I experience.

We're not always disabled, but we're always disordered.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the people who have helped me to further my writing. First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Alexandria Peary who helped me not only in a poetry course I took with her, but also served as my honors thesis advisor. She helped learn how to publish, which has been tremendously helpful in bettering my writing. I am also thankful for other writing faculty at Salem State University, some of whom I have taken writing courses with, and some of whom I have not.

I am grateful for Salem State's Writers' Series Events, Red Skies, and Salem's own Massachusetts Poetry Festival.

I would also like to thank two people who consistently listen to my poetry and give me feedback: Ben, who is my boyfriend, and my mom.

I would like to thank North Shore Community College's writing club for getting me back into writing consistently. On those same lines, I am thankful for Salem State's Slam Poetry Team.

I would really like to stress how thankful I am for the medical help I have gotten since I was about three years old. I don't know where I would be without my therapists and psychiatrists. They have helped me open up enough to write about my experiences.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge those who have listened to or read any of my poetry. It means a lot.

Notes

- *Closure* uses lyrics from *Hurricane* by Bridgit Mendler, *Come Back... Be Here* by Taylor Swift, and *Hate To See Your Heart Break* by Paramore
- *Say Something* uses lyrics from *Say Something* by A Great Big World ft. Christina Aguilera
- *Schizo* uses lyrics from *Call Me Maybe* by Carly Rae Jepsen
- *What is Happiness?* uses a saying I once found in a fortune cookie
- *I* has been published in the Eunoia Review, forthcoming January 2015
- *I Taught You How to Stretch* has been published in the Golden Walkman Magazine, issue 1.3, March 2014

COLLAPSE/RELAPSE

Disordered

The dorm room is solidified
with obscured white light.
Heartbeat heard through the
drumming of the fingertips.
So tiny, so small.
Look at the teeth and see
how they must be white,
plaque-free, perfect.
It means everything,
and you wonder if you'll converse
perversely when no one else
is talking. The shock of it
never comes. It lingers
until you are obscured,
insignificant, with the white
light reaching over you,
forming a boundary,
seemingly into infinity.

Belle Hated

Belle hated how
the whole thing got
turned around. She never
thought it would get
this far. He had never
been a problem;
only a slight issue.

The way his unshaven
facial hair
looked in the moonlight
scared them.

The way he was *different*
scared them.

They called him The Beast.

He growled like one,

but he didn't mean to.

It had never been like this

before. The door

to his house was barricaded.

It showed how his mind

worked now. They chained up
his house like his mind
was chained up now,
unable to break free
of the death threats then worse
the dreams then worse
the hallucinations.

Afraid—insane—
He had *never* been sane,
yet Belle had loved him
all the same.

As he got worse, they
locked him up
and Belle lived by herself,
allowed to visit him
once a month.

He would be there for a year.

And the people started
rumors. He was dead.

He ran away.

He was *really* a beast.

She couldn't stand the rumors.

If he had been there, he would

have told it to her, like this:

Drink tea and eat crumpets

like you normally do,

don't forget the crumpets please

and invite in guests day in and day out—

The madness was building and they

thought she had *gone* insane.

But she had really always been

that way, waiting to burst forth

until a beast triggered her.

Closure

There's no word for closure
in Spanish. Si me dejas...
es que no soy de paz—
I'm not alone with you.
I'm never alone with you,
or myself, or my fat black
cat. She licks herself. Isn't
that odd when actually thought
about? *Every time he smiles*
I let him in, everything is fine when...
I can't stop counting. Count
the numbers on the computer
screen until my fingers turn
icicle turn upside down. *This is when*
the feeling sinks in, I don't want
to miss you like this. Like an ice
storm flying through
the treetops of New York,
I'm bound to find the Rabbit
someday. *I hate to see your eyes*
get darker as they close, but I've

been there before. Her sister never
wanted anything more than to
read her a book, *the door*
in the ground closes silently.

ships like vines

a daydream of being picked up
by ships not made here.

a touch from the vines
that act like *their* hands
on my way to school.

the vines do not attack me. soothing,
they grab lightly at my shirt sleeve
all the way there,
reminding me I want to be
taken away from here.

not here, this country, this city.
but here, this earth.

and when insanity comes sometimes,
I forget the reality of the vines
and instead I dwell on the reality
of pretend.

Say Something

she yells at the cats, telling

them to *come here*

She yells at my brother,

bothering the neighbors

bothering the neighbors

she's bothering the neighbors!

(do I really care that much?)

she tells me *I want to listen to your poem*

I tried to youtube it

mom, it was on iTunes

I'm feeling vulnerable

she says *Let's freeze the orange*

You can pick the ice off

I wanna go crawl into the

fetal position, make the three

voices go away.

say something I'm giving up on you

you're the one that I love

and I'm saying goodbye

I want to go back into a program.

For people like me.

Not exactly like me.

I'm worse

She says *You're better than before*

Mumma.

I scream from the shower.

The voices start there, almost always.

She says *What's wrong?*

Waits on the toilet seat

for me to be finished.

and anywhere I would have followed you

say something I'm giving up on you

say something—

I'm giving up on *me*

She says *You have resilience*

I say *I have you*

ME/YOU

I

I'm feeling better now.

You don't have to worry
anymore. I know the dandelions
are a mess, they're all moldy
and the vase is probably ruined.

I wasn't feeling well.

They went to waste.

I'm feeling better now, though.

Can you make it stop? She
came to me the other night,
crying. Her figure standing
above my bed, first hallucination
in weeks. They're like dough.
Moldable. I can mold them into
whatever I'd like. Only sometimes.

Sometimes I feel pretty.

But mostly my messy Bessie bun
is tied up, like the Ferris Wheel
was tied up with duct tape.

I'm not safe. Ever.

Sometimes I don't put
antibacterial cream on after cutting.
She came to me the other night.

During my shamanic journeying.

I said hi. We exchanged glances
and a kiss. I miss her.

I'm not well. Can it please continue?

It's the only way I know how
to function. Like a button on the TV

remote, I'm unwired. Sometimes
too wired, typing away until my
fingertips bleed. And I like the blood.

They came to me in the shower.

Scratched my chest, deep.

I couldn't sleep that night,
or maybe I slept deeply?

She came to me and I was scared.

Wired, I like being scared. I hate horror.

She came to me when I was like that.

Bare. Naked. Masturbating.

The towel's hanging up and I always

think it's a ghost. Can I see ghosts

or are they all hallucinations?

I want them to stop,

to keep going, go, go, go.

I'm nothing without them.

My bun's a mess. Do I

look pretty enough yet?

She came to me last night.

Sat on my chest. Said don't

talk. I rarely talk. I talk when I

have something important to say.

She came to me last night.

She came on me? No,

that happened when I was two

or three. See that tree over there?

That's called nature.

It's sentient. Unlike me.

It called up and said "you're doomed."

I told it to go fuck itself.

I feel angry, punched the bed
until I turned tomato. And I can
pretend I'm people and I feel
myself shape-shifting into them.
Is that normal?

When she came to me, I screamed.

Bashed my head into the bookcase
in the hallway.

But, hey, don't worry.

I won't do anything stupid.

I won't cut deep, I won't

kill myself, punch myself.

She came back and I want it all to go.

They came back and I want them to stay.

I'm a paper cut flowing blood from my chakras (blocked, gush out) and I can't ever hold a napkin over it it has to flow.

Depersonalization

My self is slowly detaching
from my body. Or, maybe,
it's already gone.

I can't recognize myself
when I look in the mirror
anymore. Her hair is poofy

brown with a little bit
of red in it. Its eyes
are almonds and her nose
is pointed. Her lips are downturned,
her ears perfect. The acne scars
are red like the heart she
apparently has.

Consciousness, now.

But it is different from
what I see in my brain-image.

Does she sometimes know
she's actually a being?

Mostly I'm not her or it or self
or me or body or anything I
can comprehend.

I am something else entirely:

I am a pear-shaped soul
in a soulless Pandora's box.

Schizo

I feel better after writing,
but I wish I'd feel better after
doing something easier.
Maybe it would be easier
if I were an easier person to be around.

I know people hate me

(schizo schizo)

I know my writing is subpar
which sounds like sub parmesan
(I spelled that wrong the first time)

Let's Eat

and make a mess of ourselves
until our fairytale fantasies
burst out of our oversized
stomachs (they're just imaginary)
and our dragon friends
pull off their leashes

They're Real

(schizo schizo)

I'm telling you: it's the truth.

pennies and diamonds for a kiss

(schizo schizo)

I'm going to feel better after this.

Teddy**1.**

Mom, do you remember

when I used to have those dreams?

The ones where my body parts would

fall off at the touch of a handle?

Or what about when I saw and heard things

that weren't really there? Like the witches'

heads and the voices calling out my name

Do you remember

that, mom? Mom, my p-doc

says it's different; he says it's worse than before.

Schizoaffective disorder, he says.

Hallucinations.

Anxiety and depression.

Dissociations.

Delusions.

Suicidal thoughts, he says.

Mom, are you listening?

I'm getting worse.

2.

I don't remember who
gave Teddy to me. Teddy
was fuzzy when I was little,
but he's tattered now,
with just a little fluff
on his brown bottom. I named
him Teddy when I was
two. I was not very
original then; I too
had a cat named Kitty.
But Kitty died when she
(or maybe Kitty was a he?)
went insane.

Mom, are you listening?

Teddy never died; in fact
he's quite alive
in my dreams. His concrete
stare is haunting and in
my dreams he multiplies,
terrifies me, but never talks.

He has a death-stare smile
and unmoving moving limbs,
and I'm afraid of something more.

I never know which Teddy
is real and which is not, but
waking up I do sometimes. I'm
scared of the bugs that might
live in the hole in his neck, the
one my mom never knew how to sew.

Mom, are you listening?

Sometimes I turn him on
his stomach so I won't
have to look at the ghosts I
can see in his eyes. He never talks
but when I swear I see him
breathing, I cover him up with
a fuzzy purple blanket.

And sometimes he makes a noise
like rattled racked breathing
outside of my dreams and maybe
sometimes he whispers my name.

But I can't get rid of him, mom.

Mom, are you listening?

It's getting worse.

she said

she said: you're
not working hard
enough. is this
working hard
enough for you?

Arms displayed,
sprawled out,
origami tattoos.

I'm used. I'm used
to this. My PTSD
sends shadows
after me. I catch
them with my
net, like this.

Am I well enough
for this?

Then: abscond-
ed, gone. I want
them. My OCD
sends lists.

She said:

They're not

numbered. I can't

handle this.

My GAD and depre-

ssion send ticks. My

head snaps, like this.

My GAD and depre-

ssion send fantasies.

She said: catch them

with your net, like this.

Am I strong enough

for this?

Am I good enough

for this?

My GAD and

depression, OCD,

PTSD, GAD, My

Schizoaffective

Disorder sends this:

a monster with eyes

falling out of its ears

and cut marks up

my arms like this.

I can't handle this.

500 pills

500 pills pop out of her like
her collarbones protrude. Their jagged
edges that smooth-surfaced pills couldn't hide.
She hides behind the nurse, behind the doctor
when I come to see her. "She'll be out in no time,"
they say. She couldn't say much at all.
She stares out the window, through the door
when I come and see her.
She laughs at her shadow.
Tells me I'm not good enough, I'm a bitch.
Well, let me tell her something let me tell
let me tell her something she'll want to hear.
Dear, we'll never be nothing. We'll
always be nothing.

Whales

I ate a pita chip and swore
it was a whale. Scared that
the whales were coming to
get me, I ate more, I ate more,
chomping their stupid heads off.
I shook like I was out in my
color guard uniform in December,
from high school (I was never high
in school, and I swear I wasn't high
that night). My mom asked if my
delusions were induced by something
else. I was having a fucking panic
attack, mom, and the whales
were everywhere, threatening
to invade my dreams. Reader,
do you think I'm not serious?
This is probably the most serious
poem I've written for this whole book—
I was angry because I couldn't get
the blankets to fit right, couldn't

get the heat on, couldn't eat enough,
swore I was dying, swore a lot, cried
a lot, I was really fucking cold—
I'm rambling.

But everything in this poem is a
hundred percent true and everything
else I write is half make-believe.

I want you to believe me, reader.

But will you believe me when I say

I shake uncontrollably, know my death

is going to happen within the next

few minutes, and feel my heart exploding?

Maybe not, but maybe.

I Taught You How to Stretch

I taught you how to stretch
so you could get your breathing
under control. I showed you
how to slowly slide your legs
from the crisscrossed position
your face was always in, and place
them out in front of you, creating
a tranquil sanctuary if only
for a minute. You taught me
how to sleep; you said you
couldn't get to bed until I was
"fast asleep," the moon as distant
as the horizon of my death.

And you taught me that life is awful
minus the chocolates, Tuesday night
TV, and sometimes babies.

When my uncle told me to hug you one
more time, the night I left Florida,
the last night I ever saw you,
(When you told me, when you taught me
that I was your "favorite person in

the whole world")
I obliged, thanking him silently
and vowing to never get
too angry with him again, like
the time he was so high he refused
to call you a cab to get back from
the airport that night
I don't remember
if you talked with Ben or Alex or not,
but I know you met Jaiden and that means
a lot, even if you didn't know it, telling us we
looked "... pretty," smiling because you loved me,
Jaiden in her orange tux
for her junior prom.
You didn't like
bisexuals.
I taught you to like bisexuals.
That night
I taught you how to stretch,
slowly placing your legs out in front
of you, slowly sleeping forever,
not waking until 5am

on the dot when I would pat your back
and you cried out for your mother then
and later when you were really dying.
Did you know you were dying then,
when I pounded your back, hoping you'd
be okay, knowing you'd be okay, the days
and nights of that spring break when uncle
Billy died like you did? That was the only
week we both didn't sleep until
way past dawn.

POTENTIAL

Mostly Good Hallucinations

forget what I taught you, she said

the walls are too thin here

I've loved before but I've never loved

like this. Her kiss took me by coincidence;

uncertainty envelops (had it been real?)

The floating shapes beside me, within me,

in the room call out my name,

Jessica, kill yourself

She surprises me each time we touch.

Her body ethereal. Her mind's enough.

What is Happiness?

A Jeopardy game.

Write benefits in dust,

injuries in marble.

“Then, go” the Japanese

God of Happiness tells me.

Where? I don't reply.

Grasp, quickly,

like knowing.

Reflection

I guess I'm lucky that my original idea for this project has not changed too drastically. Originally, I had wanted to create a chapbook about mental illness, and that's exactly what I did create. But some things were different from what I had intended in the beginning. I wanted my chapbook to total about twenty to thirty poems. I wrote a total of fifteen. I remember being worried about this, worried that I hadn't done enough. However, after speaking with my Honors Seminar professor, Dr. Kim Poitevin, she assured me that the honors program was looking for quality over quantity. I have spent a significant amount of time revising and "perfecting" these poems, and though I originally intended to have double the amount, I am happy that I have a fewer number of poems that have quality instead of a larger number of poems that do not.

I can be somewhat of a perfectionist. But I have realized that you can't perfect a poem. It's always going to need revising, always going to be able to be looked at from a different angle. I guess publishing helped me realize that. When I published my poem "I Taught You How to Stretch" in the *Golden Walkman Magazine*, I thought that was it, that it was in its final form. However, I revised it two more times after publication for the form it's in for this chapbook. But that doesn't mean it won't be revised again in the future.

I read a lot over the summer, which is when I read most of my reading list for this project. I read books like *Articulations: The Body and Illness in Poetry* edited by Jon Mukand; Eduardo C. Corral's *Slow Lightning*; Alexandria Peary's *Control Bird Alt Delete*; *Poets on Prozac: Mental Illness, Treatment and the Creative Process* edited by Richard

M. Berlin, M.D.; *If I Played My Life* edited by Kate Goldsmith; *We Mad Climb Shaky Ladders* by Pamela Spiro Wagner; Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems*; *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain* by Alice W. Flaherty; and *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises From Poets Who Teach* edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell.

I found that the books that spoke to me the most were the two regarding schizophrenia and Eduardo C. Corral's *Slow Lightning*, which has to be my favorite collection of poetry of all time. The two books about schizophrenia were *If I Played My Life* and *We Mad Climb Shaky Ladders*. I think I was most interested in those because I had recently been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, which is similar to schizophrenia, though not as "severe." *If I Played My Life* especially struck me because the poems were written by people with severe schizophrenia *who were not poets*. This was key for me because the poems really captured the essence of the disease without much flowery language. I wanted to do something similar, but I also wanted my poems to reflect my growing love for poetry and what I have learned about what makes good poetry. *Slow Lightning* is an amazing book. It combines both Spanish and English, which I was interested in because I was a Spanish minor. It has the essence of good poetry, meaning it really makes you feel something. That is something else I wanted to do with my poetry, to make my readers feel something, feel inspired, by what I was writing.

Working with Professor Alexandria Peary was a lot of fun and helped me grow as a writer. I came to her office every two weeks and she would give me her honest feedback about the poems I brought in for that week. It really helped me that she did

not sugarcoat her opinions because I was able to improve my poems through this method of feedback. Her feedback has also helped me learn how to edit my own poetry, which will be useful for my future in an MFA program and beyond.

Thank you to all of the people who have taken the time to read this chapbook.

After all, who is a poet without her readers?