

THE MIRROR: A BOOK OF POEMS DEALING WITH DEPRESSION,
ANXIETY, AND IDENTITY, WITH THEMES OF SELF-REFLECTION AND CHANGE.

by

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ABSTRACT

Jake Clerico. *The Mirror: A Book of Poems Dealing with Depression, Anxiety, and Identity, with Themes of Self-Reflection and Change.*

(Under the direction of Professor Christopher Davis)

This book came from the first poem I ever wrote, entitled “Mirrors.” While nearly a decade has passed since I wrote the poem, I find it still relevant to my work as a poet today. Through multiple writing classes, I discovered that my poetry had changed in style. I also noticed that it often revolved around my mental health issues, or things that had contributed to those issues. Thus, I decided that, for my thesis, I would put together an entire collection. The idea was that it would follow a path from the beginnings and triggers of my mental health issues, down into the depths of depression and anxiety, and through to the other side, where lay the resultant identity crisis. Much of the book grapples with severe depression and suicidal thoughts, mostly in the middle portion. The final portion of the collection works through struggles with identity and how one may find it or come to terms with its indefinite nature.

DEDICATION

To Parker Gates Hudson. Not a day will go by where I do not miss you. Thank you for all that
you did for your friends.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

For my creative thesis, I wrote a book of poetry entitled “The Mirror.” The book centers around overarching themes of self-reflection and change. It also provides a deep look into depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and impostor’s syndrome. The theme of change follows not only how I have changed as a person, but also as a writer. The book begins with the first poem I ever wrote, entitled “Mirrors,” and from there follows a path from poem to poem that exhibits a change in style. However, it also follows changes in mental health. While the book starts in a relatively stable place, the poems take on a darker tone the further in one reads. They take a hard look at what it’s like to struggle with mental health issues, reading somewhat like a downward spiral. After several poems take the reader on a path downwards, they begin to work their way back up. These following poems exhibit both changes in style and in mental state. They also become more introspective and reflective. It ends with a poem entitled “The Mirror” as a bookend to the project.

The themes represented in this book are very important to me both as a person and as a writer. I feel that it is impossible to separate mental health from writing, and it has always been a contributing factor to my work. When I am happy, I write poetry. When I am depressed, I write poetry. When I struggle with suicidal thoughts, I write poetry. It provides me with a way to really examine what I am feeling at the time. Because of this, I can comfortably say that each depiction of mental health is realistic. I did not want to shy away from these issues, as I feel they are immensely important more so today than ever. Not only that, but to exclude these experiences and emotions from a project centered around self-reflection and change would be to its detriment.

Some of these poems (“The Fall,” “If Only I Had Answers,” and “Beneath the Mask,” to name a few) were written for poetry classes. They are a major part of my decision on the themes of my thesis. “The Fall” depicts a downward spiral into depression, but the speaker manages to stop themselves and pull back up at the end. The poem’s placement in the book signals a movement upward out of depression, both for the book itself and for the speaker. “If Only I Had Answers” is centered around self-identity, impostor syndrome, and general mental health. I consider it one of the most important poems I’ve ever written, as it grapples with who I am both as a person and as a writer. “Beneath the Mask” is purely reflective, with the speaker asking questions about their own reflection in the mirror. It was born from the phenomenon where one stares at themselves in the mirror for so long that they begin to disassociate.

The first poem in the book, “Mirrors,” is not only the first poem I’ve ever written, but it is also thematically relevant. The poem is about a man at the end of his life reflecting on past events; his childhood, young adulthood, and time just before his passing. It serves as an introduction to the book, where I do something similar to the man in the poem. The following couple of poems introduce events in my life that have contributed to where I am now, both my mental state and just who I am as a person.

My first really enjoyable experiences with poetry came from the film *Dead Poets Society*. It got me interested in Transcendental writers like Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman especially. When I wrote “Mirrors,” I wrote it mimicking the style and rhyme scheme of Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!” It was a poem I loved and wanted to imitate it in some way at the time. Whitman’s influence can be found again in the poem “Song to Myself,” named after his poem “Song of Myself.” While the two aren’t similar in form (I still struggle with long-form poetry), I wanted to echo the idea.

Many of my poems, I've been told, are somewhat reminiscent of Emily Dickinson, in that they are somewhat simple. I don't say that in a negative way, nor a positive way, just that we both say things clearly. The reader doesn't always have to think *too* hard to understand what either of us is saying, though there may still be a further meaning behind the surface level words. I also, like her (in some poems at least), use common meter fairly often, though my rhyme scheme is tighter. In my earlier years of writing poetry, I wanted to follow the rules, to keep a strict rhythm and rhyme scheme. However, after taking some classes and exploring further into poetry, I began breaking from these rules. This can be seen not only in free-verse poems like "The Lost" and "Beneath the Mask," but also in poems that didn't have a traditional rhyme scheme, or blended rhythm and rhyme with free-verse, such as "The Game of Bullets." These poems show growth and change, not only in my writing style, but also in my own sense of self.

I would be lying if I said that the direction of this thesis and the form it took was not inspired in some way by Bo Burnham's "Inside," the comedy special released on Netflix last year. The special follows Burnham's own descent into deeper depression as he works on his comedy special, stuck in a tiny room during the Covid-19 pandemic. I watched this special several times, it felt so relatable, so honest. I do not know if it was a conscious decision on my part to push my thesis in this direction, but thoughts of that creative work turning into a downward spiral were always on my mind. I wanted to create something that, like "Inside," wasn't afraid to tackle mental health issues head on.

Another enormous inspiration in my work has been Sylvia Plath, as shown in my thesis by the poem "Branching of Path and Tree." It is a direct reference to the fig tree that her character Esther talks about in *The Bell Jar*. In reading her collection, *Ariel*, I found this sort of unwillingness to shy away from difficult topics. That collection in particular contains fairly

violent language and imagery. As someone who also struggles with depression, I feel a certain connection to Sylvia Plath.

As important as this project has been for me, I cannot deny that I ran into some problems on the way. For one, it is difficult to just create a poem out of nothing. I do not often read poetry and I typically do not do it for inspiration. I want my poetry to come from me, not from someone else. This means that I have to come up with ideas for poems that fit the theme of the collection. Sometimes, that happens out of nowhere. For instance, the poem “Noise” was one I wrote as soon as I got home from work one day, because I had the phrase “thoughts erratic like static” repeating in my head over and over, which is how the poem starts. I jotted down some notes at work and built on them when I came home. The poem “If Only I Had Answers,” was built from a quote that I ended up using as an epigraph. Some of the poems, like “This Nightmare,” and “Until the Dawn,” were written while I was in a deep pit of depression. They were born from how I was feeling at the time and are therefore dark, painful, and erratic. But the poem “Desire,” was one that gave me more trouble. It wasn’t due to the poem itself, but rather my emotional state at the time of writing it. The poem is more about a lack of desire than anything else, a lack of motivation. I had to force myself to sit down and write it, because at the time I didn’t *want* to write anything, but I knew that I had to. Working through this on the page ended up helping me. The other main difficulty of writing the poem was that I had to put myself into the mindset of being depressed to do it. I always struggle with depression, but at the time of writing “Desire,” I was doing fairly well. Things were, and have been, stable for me. Putting myself in that headspace was not an enjoyable experience, but by the time I was done, I felt it had been worth it.

Another obstacle to writing my thesis was simply deciding when it is finished. Even now, with it finished and approved, I still feel as though I can do more. It feels incomplete, as though there is more I can do to build up the connective tissue of the overarching narrative. I wanted to create something dynamic, I wanted each poem to take the reader to a different place and for them to be carried along from poem to poem until the end. In this dissatisfaction, I wrote “Incomplete.” The first third of the poem has the speaker wondering when they will be satisfied with their work. They grapple with their own need for perfection and high expectations. Then, another speaker breaks in. My hope is that readers will assume the second speaker is just another form of the first, breaking into his thoughts to argue. The second speaker tells the first to let it go and rest. They offer encouragement but also a sort of chastisement. This poem mimics the inner dialogue I had been having with myself and putting it onto the page allowed me to accept that maybe the project was indeed finished.

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Mirrors

A man walks into a room

A room with many mirrors

Each mirror shows a different image

Images of different years

He sees himself as a young man

First meeting the love of his life

He sees himself years later

Kneeling at the grave of his wife

He sees himself as a young boy

Crying in his room

He sees himself as an old man

Rapidly nearing his doom

He looks into one final mirror

And sees what might have been

If none of it had happened

And he was none of those men

1917 Wexford Meadows Ln

“Gimme everything you got,

Just drop it on the ground”

Is what he first hears and

When he turns around

A gun’s been drawn,

It’s pointed at his face.

He says “no fucking way,”

As his heart starts to race

The kid with the gun, his

Hand won’t stop wavering,

He’s not prepared, too

Scared to be savoring

His moment of power

Over someone else,

He's glad at this hour

He's not by himself

His friend comes behind

The victim of tonight

"You don't wanna die,"

But shit, yeah he might

The thought of this moment's

Been hard on his mind,

Cause deep inside he's

Struggled to find

A reason to keep

Himself moving on,

No desire to wake up

To face another dawn

Then rage sparks up

Somewhere in his chest

A third guy showed up

To take all the rest

Of the things in his car

His iPod and phone

So there's three of them

And he's here alone.

In the heat of the moment

He can't imagine death

He wants to survive

And takes a deep breath.

He drops his cash on the ground

And the keys to his car

Which they all jump in

But don't get very far.

They can't get it started

Don't know about the clutch

In hindsight a comfort

In present not much

He starts shouting for help

Anything, anyone, needs

Someone to hear him

Something has to be done

They get out of the car,

Sky's split with the crack

Of a gunshot, a warning

For him to stay back

They take all his things

And run off in the night

And he stands there, helpless

Feet frozen in fright.

.

.

.

And now it haunts him,

Still eats him alive

He wonders if it was

Worth it to survive

The fear and feeling

Of being someone's prey

Five minutes of trauma

Still carried to the day

There's no moving on

No forgetting that night.

No convincing himself

That he had the will to fight.

An experience like that

Will leave a dark stain.

He can never return

To Wexford Meadows Lane.

Bullet

A man pulls a gun from the drawer

The last option he seems to have left

A burden to his family, a weight

He looks in the mirror and feels nothing but hate

He has to do something, to leave something behind

This must be the only way

They'll understand why he had to go

Maybe not now, but one day they'll know

So he puts the gun in his mouth

Closes his eyes, sees his two daughters and son

His finger on the trigger, aching to pull it

And then... bullet.

A young man takes a gun from the cabinet

His girlfriend didn't notice the key

He hopes she doesn't blame herself for it

He hopes that she won't have to see

The pain is just too much to bear

And darkness has crept into his heart

Maybe he could go back and fix it

But he wouldn't know where to start

He knows friends and family will miss him

But that's not enough to get through it

He puts the gun against his head, pulls the trigger

And then... bullet

A boy holds a gun in his hands

Like his father and friend did before

His apartment is a cluttered mess

With dog toys and clothes on the floor

It seems to mirror how he feels

Jumbled, mixed up and wrong

He's tried his best to clean it up

But can he even hold on for that long?

He puts the gun into his mouth

You're stronger than this, don't do it

His finger wavers on the trigger, trying to pull

But then...

264 Crowell Dr SW

The initial knife-twist from the stab
In your gut as your wrist falls limp at
The words you just heard and your phone
Hits the ground with an echoing crack while
You fail to call forward the voice that you lack
Blood flows searing hot
In a sickening swoop and like fresh
Raindrops on a mid-July roof
It signals the coming of something
Much bigger, the explosion that comes
When you pull the trigger the hammer
Flies forward smashes the nail of
Your thumb and you spit out a curse
As you fail to contain all the rage
You bottled inside turn the page on
The book of your friend that just died

Six lines ago one more with the boom

And you have to go get your things

From that room as you zoom in your

Car along 85 and remember the last time

You saw him alive had he shown to you

Then that he needed help or could you

Have known that he'd kill himself so

You scream at yourself

For not seeing the signs as you fly by

The exit and swerve through the lines

To make the next turn past Concord

To discord the dashboard is flashing

You're smashing your fist on the

Wheel it's all you can do not to let

Yourself feel all the guilt that you built

With sticks bricks and stone you know

It's your fault you left him alone

To see to minutia of day to day

Life that thing that he hated
That made him feel jaded and then
With a flash it all dissipated the
Dick in the Chevy has just cut
You off you lay on your horn scream
So loud you cough there's blood
On your hand but can it be real
Or is it your mind just starting to feel
Through all of the pain you don't
Want to take in hope maybe you'll
Die and see him again but the blood
Disappears and hope flies away too
Was that a red light that you just blew through?

It wasn't. A sigh of relief.
And then gritted teeth.
I have to go in. I have to feel grief.

Heavy

I struggle to walk forward

The path is laid out before me

Clear as day, easy to follow

But it weighs on me, heavy

I look behind me, the road I've walked

Long and winding, I've come so far

I know I can make it if I keep going on.

But it weighs on me, heavy

There must be more to life than this

More than the struggle and fight

Simply to keep moving forward,

To stay alive. But I don't see it.

I don't see the reason, the purpose

And it weighs on me, heavy

Five hundred miles and five hundred more

Only to find myself on death's door

The thousand miles, the single step

Just to one day die, a feast for crows

Or put in the ground, a meal for worms

Or to be burned and scattered, poisoning the sky

poisoning the earth, pain for those who watched it happen

Pain for me, pain for you. That's what life is about.

We live to die, to see loved ones die, to see dreams die.

To see the world die.

And it weighs on me, heavy.

What if I throw away my shot, Mr. Hamilton?

Mr. Miranda. Why does anyone need a legacy?

Why does anyone need to leave a mark on the world?

The only mark we've left is pain.

The only mark I'll leave is pain. Sorrow. Or perhaps

No mark at all.

But who cares? All of us apparently. Because we want
To leave something behind so that we'll be remembered
But why? Why be remembered when remembrance brings pain?
And yet I want it. Selfishness. Narcissism. These things are
Inherent to who I am, to who we are.
The path laid out before me is the one that leads me
To remembrance. To the mark I want to leave on the world.
Right now, the only mark I want to leave is crimson.
Spreading, soaking through the carpet, a stain
Unable to be removed to where it won't be forgotten.
Where I won't be forgotten.
But that only brings pain, suffering to those who have to
Experience it. I've experienced it. Twice. Why should they have
To endure it? Because of my own selfishness. Because
My pain, no, not my pain, my nothingness, my feelings of
Failure.
Loneliness.
Sorrow.

Emptiness.

They were too much to bear.

And it weighs on me, heavy.

And so I bear them.

I continue to walk forward in hopes that I'll find

Purpose.

A reason to continue beyond a desire to save

Others from pain. So they will not have to

Bear the weight. Maybe at the end of the path I'll find

Happiness.

Along the way I may find someone and gain

Camaraderie.

But even if I make it to the end of this path I've laid out

Even if consider myself a

Success.

The thoughts that fill my brain, combative and volatile,

Working against one another and working against me,

They tell me that success is subjective, that I live at the expense of another.

And it weighs on me, heavy.

Desire

Do you ever come home

Looking for something to do

Something to take your mind off

The day you just went through?

You sit at your computer

Or relax in your bed

Reply to all the messages

You left on read?

You open a game

Or pick up a book

But when it's sitting in your face

All you do is look

At the screen or the page

Unable to start something

Your desires fade away

And shrivel up to nothing?

Your motivation is gone

You can't find your drive

Hovering on the point

Between dead and alive

Because the things you once loved

And thought you enjoyed

Have become just another

Task to avoid.

I find myself here

Inside of this place

Countless things to do

Staring me in the face

I can't bring myself to

Play, read, or write

I can feel the war inside me

The ongoing fight

Between lack of desire

And knowing what I need

The ever-present danger

Of failing to heed

The wisdom that I've learned

About my own mind

I know I can't let myself

Fall so far behind

But what was once a bowl

To collect all my dreams

Has now become a sieve

Where everything seems

To slip right through

And fall from my fingers

No remaining drive

No hope that still lingers

I'm losing sense of self

Losing sight of the end

The road's gone too far

I can't see around the bend

And because I can't see

The finish line anymore

I'd rather go home

And close and lock the door

This is called depression.

When I not only lose

Desire to accomplish my goals

But also to do the things

That once distracted me from them.

Distracted me from life

And the world at large.

Not only can I not push

Forward, I can't even find

A way around. I can't lose

Myself in a game or a show or

A book because I've already

Lost myself in the pit of my own

Mind. I start to question the point.

I start to wonder if it was all

Worth it. Does pleasure even exist?

Have I conditioned myself to

Expect a rush of endorphins when

I load up a game or open a book?

If so, the conditioning is wearing off.

The rope that tethers me to what

I want is wearing thin, and so

Am I. The world seems darker now.

Not black yet, but grey. Did someone

Turn off the saturation?

What happened to the bright colors?

What happened to the hope?

Where did it all go?

Someone, please turn the sun

Back on. Or the moon at least.

Something to help drive off

The fading light.

What's happening to me?

Where has my desire gone?

This Nightmare

I have to wake up

I'm stuck here in stasis

A pain in my chest

The weight holding me down

I've been sleeping for years

In a trance, trapped and scared

I've gotten no rest

And I have to wake up from this nightmare

I scream and I scream

But I don't make a sound

The water fills up my lungs

As I struggle and drown

It's pulling me deeper

Dragging me down

And I have to wake up from this nightmare

The air is oppressive

Like summer in the south

It's humid and heavy

But I'm dry in the mouth

The fear has set in

I can't find a way out

And I have to wake up from this nightmare

I look to my left

And I look to my right

But my eyes cannot see

There is no source of light

My world has been plunged

Into inky black night

And I have to wake up from this nightmare

And then I see it

As though a god heard my cry

The path to salvation

In front of my eyes

I grasp it so tight

And hold it up high

My way to wake up from this nightmare

I thumb back the hammer

And the click hurts my ears

Then comes the rushing

Of all of my fears

I've tried to avoid this

For so many years

But I have to wake up from this nightmare

The Game of Bullets

I can feel it getting worse.

The itching, the goddamned itching

It won't go away

Like ants crawling in my skin all day

I try to claw them out but they're here to stay

The game of bullets isn't one I want to play

The rules go pull the trigger or leave it be

One way or another it's the death of me

But only one way is for eternity

But that's the only way out I see

Yet if I stay in I can find myself

The one that died or someone else?

And is it weak for me to ask for help

Or am I just afraid to see their eyes

At the very moment they realize

That I've let go of my clever disguise
And shown the world it's all been lies
That I'm not alright, I've lost the fight
I've not been able to make it through the night
I only live through spite, but soon I might
Take a dive and hold on tight

I've never been able to let go.
Even though I know it hurts me so,
Like on a burning stove my hand clamps down
And I cannot move, I can't pull away
I can hear my flesh sizzle, smell it cook
It makes me want to throw up
But I can't let go, I can't let go
No matter how much it's hurting me
It's killing me, a poison that I won't spit out
The pain is at a 10 but I refuse to shout
Toxic, parasitic, leeching, GET OUT

You've taken enough, when will you be satisfied?

When will I be satisfied?

When will this masochism end, why do I

Want to hurt myself?

Why am I content to live

In chains of my own creation

Maybe because breaking the chains

Is the only thing that keeps me going...

But if I break the chains,

Do I break myself as well?

Or perhaps they're not chains,

Merely a container, a box I've put myself in

A cocoon that releases something beautiful

The true realization of self that comes

With the struggle of breaking free

Or maybe that's all a fantasy,

A hopeful dreamworld designed by me

An escapist mind that makes me see
My struggle as a challenge to overcome
That will be worth it when said and done
But in the end I'm only one
Man. And I can't see the way forward
The game of bullets is calling me
To the bottom of the barrel.
I can only hope I win this time,
But I don't know what winning is.

Until the Dawn

I used to be louder

Than the voices in my head

Until I went to bed

And listened to what they said

“You’ve been misled,

Paint the bedspread red

You’d be better off dead”

So with the fan up high and the tv on

I woke up in the quiet at the break of dawn

My head was clear and the voices gone

I made my way through the day

No thought of what they’d say

Until the sky turned grey

But time has passed and I’m different now

No longer brash and bold,

I've quieted down.

I keep my voice to myself

And yet theirs are still loud

The inside of my head

Is a concert crowd

In every way but one:

I hear them so clear,

It's as though they've put

A speaker to my ear

And reverberations shake

A once steady brain,

A heart and soul

That took too much pain.

I drown the voices out

Audio and visual stimulation

I drown my sorrows out

Constant inebriation

The thoughts come quick

Flurries of blows from the foes
Who know my fears and woes
I can hardly keep up
I can barely hold on
I never know if I'll make it to the dawn
My fingers are slipping
My conscious is drifting
Each day that I steal
Is a purposeless grifting.
Because what's the point of tomorrow?
If it's filled with such noise.
I'm not a child anymore
I can't play with my toys
And hope that the fun will make it go away
Hope that distraction will get me through the day
Inevitably I'm gonna have to pay
The price for my theft, a whole 25 years
26? 27? When does the end draw near?

Or will I carry on, turn old and grey?

And if I reach that age,

What will the voices say?

Because their words haven't changed

Their song remains the same

They still scream for me

To rip, kill, or maim

And I'm not yet ready to be bloody and dead

Not yet ready to be found lifeless on my bed

I don't believe yet that I'm too far gone

I'm still here, still standing, still strong

Still got enough will to fight until the dawn.

The Fall

I've often thought about falling

Not the normal kind, you know

The kind where you slip or trip and take a dip

Face first towards the ground

Or the kind where maybe you roll

A little too far towards the side of the bed

And then BOOM, you hit the floor and wake up

Your side hurting from its meeting with the carpet or linoleum

No, I mean a different kind of falling

More like where you lose your grip

Just enough to tumble into open space

Breathless, breakneck speeds, hurtling towards the earth

Your heart drops to your stomach, but

You can still feel it beating there, faster and faster

As you realize there's no way to stop yourself,

You've gone down too far and there's nothing to hold onto

No way to save yourself from hitting the ground

They call it a downward spiral

Everything just gets worse and worse

There's no way to stop it, it just happens without your consent

No one reaches out their hand to help, and if they did

They're too high up to matter

Sooner or later it becomes hopeless

You're fighting an unseeable force with no weakness

The air doesn't care if you don't wanna fall

And the ground doesn't really wanna be friends

You can't fight gravity and you can't fight yourself

This isn't one of those dreams where you wake up

Right at the perfect moment, just as you're inches from the dirt

Your extremities tingling, reveling in their ability to move

You breathe a sigh of relief as you look up at your bedroom ceiling

We got through it that time, but what about tomorrow?

I wish this were one of those dreams, wish this wasn't a nightmare

An endless plummet where you can't wake up

You try your hardest to scream, to snap out of it

But your voice is gone, you're trapped inside yourself

It's your fault you ended up here, you just weren't good enough

The voice that's in your head won't **shut up**

It's unforgiving, it hates you for existing

You try to tell yourself it's wrong, but who are you talking to?

Other than the voice that's already decided your fate

Just close your eyes and let go, it'll be over soon

No. I've never been a fan of falling

But I'm not into giving up either

Somehow I'll wake up from this and

Overcome myself to spite myself

Raging against an unseen force that wants me dead

Grabbing onto the nearest rocky outcropping

Even if it shreds my fingers and rips my arm out of socket

Even if I have to spend days, weeks, months climbing back

Back up to the top, where I can stand the victor

Defying gravity, overcoming even myself

Simply so I can breathe again.

So I survive the fall.

Inside the Depressed Mind

Did you know it only takes

Five pounds of pressure to

Pull the trigger on a gun?

A human being can drown in

Less than sixty seconds

Sylvia Plath stuck her head

In the oven.

You know it isn't that easy.

Less than 120mg of strychnine

Is lethal to humans.

You can overdose on nearly any

What's your point?

And? Where are you going

with this?

This again? I thought we'd

gotten past this.

I know, but...

Please stop.

Someone will be around.

Drug. If no one is around...

Will they?

Well...

That's what I thought.

Wait...

One step off a ledge. One

Don't.

Jump into oncoming traffic.

A running car and a blocked up

Garage.

Don't what?

Don't... Y'know. Kill
yourself.

Who said I was going to?

Well, it just sounds like...

Even if I did, why shouldn't

You know why.

I?

Yeah?

Well... yeah. People would

be upset. They would-

What people?

Friends. Family. People who

love you. They'd be hurt.

Oh I see, I should keep suffering

Because people will be hurt if I don't.

I mean, when you put it—

But they don't know what it's like do they?

To have these voices in your head. To have to feel

the desire to seek out any of these means,

even to not have the desire but just to *think* about them.

To think about how easy it would be. How simple, how quick.

I just...

But yeah. Think about them. They don't feel like a waste of space

Or time or effort or emotion. They don't wake up in the morning and think

About how much easier it would've been if they'd never woken up. They don't

Experience it, live it, *feel* the crawling underneath their skin, the dull ache in their stomach,

The screaming inside their head that tells them the world would be so much better if—PLEASE

stop...

I don't

wanna

listen

anymore...

So what if they

Don't get it? So

What if they don't

Have to feel this way?

This isn't about them.

But you said...

I KNOW what I said. I don't

Care. And neither do you. But this

Isn't about you. It's about me. My life.

My head, my heart. You don't get to control

How I feel. You don't get to dictate whether I live

Or die. You're not even real. Just a personification of everything

That's wrong with me. I'm taking back control. You don't have a say anymore.

Wait, don't ... Get out of my head. I can get through this without you. I don't need your voice,

don't need your suggestions or thoughts. I am more than what is wrong with me. I am more than

the darkest places of my mind, than my worst experiences.

I am more than you.

Noise

Thoughts erratic like static

Playing in my brain

Each one a new noise

Added to the cacophony

The symphony, disoriented in its sound

The rhythm off, each beat misplaced.

Like a group of poets that can't

Get the rhyme right, can't match the time

Like a mime who doesn't mime

But instead screams "I'M TRAPPED IN A BOX"

And locks himself away.

They chase each other

Through my head like a carousel

Horse chasing cat chasing dog

Chasing fish chasing lion

Chasing what? What's next after lion?

Tigers? Bears? Oh my, I think I may

Have gone off the rails

As what fails to come to mind is the next line.

A shiver runs down my spine when I see

I can't find the words to match the sounds,

Can't turn static into language,

Can't hit the beats.

But I don't cease to stop trying.

I have to decipher the nonsense.

The endless noise, its volume raising,

My brain abraising. I'm tired.

But I can't sleep because

Even when they slow down

New thoughts creep in. I can't win.

I can't quiet them so I live with them.

I listen. I stop and think.

I focus on the noise,

Taking it apart and putting it back together

In a way that somehow makes sense.

I guess that's what poetry is.

What I Said

Sometimes I look back and think

I think about how far I've come

Since I was the boy asking God why.

Why did he let my father die?

Why did he let me, let others suffer?

Why was I the way I was, the way I am.

I know why, I don't need an answer.

I am who I am because I chose to be

I didn't need a God guiding me

I didn't need anyone saving me

I am who I am and I am me.

For every right I've made, I've made two wrongs

But every wrong I've made has made me strong

And maybe that's a self-serving mindset

Maybe that's a masochistic view

But I didn't come here to be judged by you

I didn't write this to be approved

I wrote what I wrote because it's what I do.

Perhaps that's hypocritical.

I wrote this knowing it would be read.

But when all is done and I am dead

I'll have said what I wanted and said what I said.

Normal

Why can't I be normal?

I've said it a thousand times

And yet I think I've come to find

That normal is a lie

There's no such thing as normal

We all have different lives

The same environment where one suffers

Is where another one thrives

But what about feeling normal?

Feeling happy, not in pain

I've wished for this for all my life

But those wishes have been in vain

Normal isn't a state of mind

Not a goal one can achieve

There's no one place, no normal space

At least not that I believe

My life has been so different

From theirs or hers or his

So why do we crave normality

Without knowing what it is?

Instead of being normal

We should seek out who we are

No matter where the journey takes us

No distance is too far

I think I'm done with normal

I'm done not being me

Done looking deep into the mirror

And hating what I see

The people always looking back

Deep down they know the truth

Normal just does not exist

And we are living proof

Insecure

I've been thinking a lot

about my insecurities

The insults that many people

chose to aim at me

The things that stuck with me

For twenty odd years

Words that tend to trigger

My anxieties and fears

Told that I've got dumbo ears

Or my nose is too large

I'm fat, overweight

The size of a shipping barge

They say I'm too nerdy

I read too many books

I listen to music

That causes strange looks

Socially awkward

Out of place and inept

I just don't fit in

I guess I should've kept

To myself, stayed at home

Never tried to make a friend

Diminish myself

All so I can blend

Into the crowd and be one of them

Break myself down

And lose who I am

Or fall in and drown

Go away, disappear

I'm not the person

They want around here

I grow out my hair

To hide my ears from view

I can't look in the mirror

Now my nose seems huge

I push my body hard

I try to lose weight

So I can fit into

The clothes they create

I listen to their music

Though I can't stand the sound

The words meaningless

The instruments stripped down

Like me. To their simplest versions
The very essence of a basic person
A blank canvas on which they can paint
But they can't create, they only taint
My own self-image, I only feel hate
When I see my reflection
I'm disgusted, irate.
Because I became who they want me to be
And in the process, I'm no longer me
I gave away my everything
For acceptance that didn't mean anything

Only now have I discovered who I am.
But their words still echo in my head.
I still feel pangs of self-hatred
And existential dread.

But I won't change myself

To fit an image of a boring

Worthless, hateful,

Unforgiving person.

Who can't accept a child that

Just didn't want to be alone.

The Lost

Who knows where to go?

Or even what to do?

How do we get from point A to B?

From here to there, or anywhere.

I want to know, want you to tell me.

Why is it so dark? Not outside. Not even inside.

Well, yes, inside. Inside my head.

It's not a void, not a chasm, not heaven nor hell.

It is merely, dark. Like a forest at night, shrouded in fog.

The fog seeps in, drifting downward.

It blurs my surroundings and limits my already

Obscured vision. My eyes had grown accustomed to darkness.

But the fog... Why the fog? A creature stumbling around

In the dark, struggling not to trip over a tree root

Or a rock sticking up from the ground. That's one thing.

But the fog shrouds all. I can no longer see my hand
In front of my face, much less the path that I was told to take.
Much less the dangers and hazards I'd find on the way.
It even masks my voice as I cry out for help. I can hear
The echoes of footsteps nearby. But are they close? Or
Are their sounds merely being carried along this dense,
Damnable fog? And if they do come from far away,
Why does my voice not carry? Why does it not go an inch
Beyond my lips? The fog clings to me like a cloak.
It keeps me from view, while also hindering my view.
There are others here, but it does not want me to see them.
It does not want me to reach out for help. It only wants
To let me know that help is available, but that I cannot
Receive it. Are they too surrounded by this fog? Are they
Too wrapped in it, arms crossed and pinned to their sides
As though by a straight jacket? Do they hear my footsteps
But find that their voices die once the words leave their mouths?
Are they, like me, stumbling their way through, trying to

Follow a path that someone else told them to take?

We are the lost. Those who cannot find their way.

Those whose vision is obscured by darkness and fog.

Those hoping, begging to find a way out so that we may see

Light and clear sky. Even if we only saw the stars and the moon

We would smile, knowing that we made it to a better place.

I write this now to the lost who travel alongside me.

Find me, reach out your hand and take one of mine.

We can stumble together, a line of blind leading the blind.

But at least in our blindness, we can stand and walk together.

Because no matter how dense the fog, we are merely the lost.

Not the alone.

Song to Myself

How long can I go without saying this?

Without speaking to you, reaching out my hand?

I know you need the help, the reassurance

You've done nothing wrong and yet it seems

The world has asked you to be so strong

You poor child... Poor self-deprecating creature

You practice self-hate and bring yourself down

Don't you know? The only one who can keep you

From success, from achieving your goals, in the end

Is you.

I know what you've been through, know the things

You've had to do. Know the burden placed on you

Not by the world or anyone else

You put that burden on yourself

And I get it, I see it. It still hasn't changed

I do the same to this very day, I sabotage my happiness

I set my goals too high. I act as if I'm not a human

But a god up in the sky. You are not infallible.

Nor, my friend, am I. We are simple mortal things.

We live and then we die.

I know what you want. Know what you need.

I know you want to be seen as good. To have someone

Tell you that they're proud.

Maybe even jealous? Envious? You want that

Place of love and respect. But how can you expect love

If you can't even love yourself?

I know. It's cliché, they say it all the time.

Of course someone can love you without you loving yourself,

But the most important person in this world

The one whose love matters most,

Is you.

When it comes down to it, I still feel you here.

The child crying out for help in silence.

Reaching out his hand, hoping someone will take it.

It's time for me to look back, to reach back.

To tell you that it's okay, that we're okay.

That, maybe it doesn't get better, or get easier,

But it's ours. It's our life to make of it as we will.

And we will make it. You will make it. Because the time has come

For me to see that the person still there inside my heart

Is you.

Fate

Watching from the outside

Looking in and wondering

If to make my presence known

Or stay hidden from view.

They weave thread with thread

The fabric of fate, the world

Comes together by the

Movement of their hands

I can see it, but I'm too far

I inch closer, I want to examine

Each piece of cloth, each string

The strings that tie us together

That decide the outcome of my life.

And yet I am not here simply

To see what fate has in store.

I want to see it, yes, but I must
Unweave it. Erase what they've done
And change my own course
Change the path my life has
Taken and is yet to take.
The threads of fate will not bind me.
The sisters will not consign me
To a life ruled by an outside force.
The force must be my own. It must
Come from within. I must alter
My own fate, snip the threads that
Attach me to another. The ones
Who fate has decided will cause
Suffering in my life. They are
Free to live their own, but they
Will not dictate mine.

For too long have I lived

With the question of whether
Or not my choices are merely
The outcomes of the decisions
Of three women who see the web of time.
Chance encounters, random events
That derail my life. They too have
Been predetermined. I will not
Be predetermined anymore. Will
Not surrender my life to a woven cloth.
The threads of fate may bind me,
But the winds of fate blow strong.
They guide me to a future yet unknown,
Yet unwoven. The first step is to cut the cords
And let the wind blow them away.

If Only I Had Answers

*It's time for you to look inward and begin asking yourself the big questions. Who are you? And
what do you want? – Uncle Iroh*

Who am I?

If I could answer you I would

But I often question even myself

The things I've done, people I've hurt

The lies I tell to those I desert

The face that I wear to hide what's inside

The unassuming gait that hides shattered pride

False smiles so bright they can't see the pain

And words that I choose so as not to sound vain

Strip all that away, tell me what do you find?

Save a fragmented soul with a scattered mind

I let it all out across the whole page

My pain and my fears and sorrows and rage

I lose myself amidst the forced rhyme

To steady my brain, I make it keep time

But sooner or later the well will run dry

No words to write down and no tears to cry

The music will fade and I'll sit here alone

The cursor blinking

.

.

.

What do I want?

That's much more simple

To be happy

To be free

And a decent rhyme for alone

Beneath the Mask

Sometimes I look at myself in the mirror

I stand there for a few minutes, just staring

After a while, I start to wonder who I'm seeing

The face becomes unrecognizable

Features growing less and less familiar

Until I'm looking a stranger in the eye.

His hair is long and disheveled, a messy

Straw colored mop on top of his head.

His skin is by no means perfect,

Covered in acne and scars, blemished and flawed.

But it's his eyes that stand out to me. Bright blue,

Crystallized, almost kaleidoscopic with hints of green.

They stare back at me, piercing me, laying my secrets bare.

I can see back into them, I see the pain beneath them,

The fear, the anger and self-hatred, all bubbling

Behind a calm, quiet exterior.

Why does he hide beneath that mask?
Why pretend to be someone he's not?
How does he keep that calm demeanor, that
Unwavering nonplussed face? How does he
Go about pretending not to be in pain, and how does no
One else see it like I do? To me, it's etched on his
Face, in every feature, every imperfection.
Yet he doesn't speak it into existence. What is his goal?
What does he hope to accomplish by this? I can see it
In his walk. Shoulders and head hung low as if bearing
The weight of the world. When did he assume such a
Burden? When did he get it into his head that, not only
Did he have to bear his own pain, but the pain of others
As well? Why does he wear that bright smile, so blinding
That no one can see what he's hiding beneath it,
Beneath the mask that he wears so casually, never
Taking it off, even when he's alone. Who does he hope

To fool? Himself as well? Does he believe that,
If he fools the world well enough, he'll be able to deceive
Himself?

Why don't you take off the mask?
Let it fall to the floor and shatter
Let the pieces scatter across the tile
Sliding under the sink and the bathroom rug
Becoming crushed to dust under the feet of
Countless people over countless years
And let it blow away in the wind.
Stop hiding from the world, stop hiding from me.
Take off the mask and reveal the true self beneath.
Show them who you are and what you can do.
There's no need to lie to yourself anymore.
I am with you.
I am beneath the mask.

Reflect

What if there was no mirror?

No piece of glass, no reflective surface?

What if it shattered? What if I broke it?

What if I refused to obsess over my

Reflection anymore? What if I refused

To look inward? Is that for better?

Or for worse? Inevitably,

I have to question whether or not

This is all worth it. Just as I

Question who I am and what I do,

Just as I reflect on the things in my life,

I too must reflect on my reflecting.

Pretentious, no? Christ, even

The way I say it is pretentious.

Who am I pretending to be?

No, not who, what? What am I

Pretending to be? And why
Am I pretending to be it?
If this whole venture
This entire project, this book
Was about discovering who I am
And being that person, why
Can I not be him? Why can I
Not be what I am? Someone
Stop me, I'm getting carried away
In the current of my own thoughts
The riptide is pulling me, grabbing
Me by the ankle and yanking me down
Under the waters of uncertainty.
Doubt pours in through my nose
And mouth, into my lungs
Choking me. Drowning me.
I can't breathe the sweet air
Of self-actualization. I cannot

Taste confidence, cannot smell

Assuredness in myself, my ability.

My very being.

I only taste fear, not of failure.

But of success.

I do not deserve it, do not deserve

To get what I want. I only deserve

The fate of Sisyphus, constantly

Pushing the boulder up the hill

Only to find it rolling back down

As it nears the top. But it does

Not roll back down due to some

Will of the gods. No. It rolls

Back down because I falter.

I see the crest of the hill, see its peak,

See success rising to meet me.

And I falter. I let go. I let the boulder

Roll back down. I feel like it's not enough

I need to struggle more, need to cry,
Sweat, and bleed more. It's not enough
I'm not enough, not yet. I have not
Made it to the place I must be in to
Succeed. I have to be ready to
Die for it, both literally
And metaphorically. I have to
Be ready to lose everything just
To push the boulder to the top of the hill.

What is this about? Is it just
Another moment in my life where
I stumble at the finish line?
Or is this me, finally taking the time
To sit and think and write about what
Has been stopping me from pushing
Myself, pushing my potential to its
Fullest extent? I have to know. Knowing

Is where comfort lies, where safety waits.

And yet I feel as though I'll never know.

I simply have to take the leap.

And hope that I've realized my limitations.

And that I can overcome them.

My limitation, the only real limitation that matters...

Is myself. But how can I overcome me?

I know all my own tricks. I know my habits.

I know what is comfortable, what will make

Me happy. I can feel the worst parts of myself

Calling to me. They sing a lovely siren song

Their sweet crooning meant to lull me back to a

Place of complacency. Unlike the crew of Odysseus

My ears have not been stopped up with wax.

I have to hear every tender word, every

Bitter truth that they make taste so very sweet.

I have not been tied to the mast of my ship.

The only things that keep me from leaping

Into the water and dying on the sharp rocks
Of self-sabotage, being feasted upon by my
Own insecurities, are the better parts of me.
They hold me back. They press me down. They cannot
Stop me from hearing the song, but they can
Stop me from listening to it. They balance
Out the negative thoughts. They make me get up
Every day, sit down, and write.

In the end, who I am and what I am are the same.
I am the amalgamation of my successes and failures.
I am a human being who craves success, but fears it.
I write not because I want to, but because I have to
To survive. It is what I do. It is ingrained into my very
Skin. Stitched into the clothes that I wear.
It is the soap that I wash myself with, the coffee
That I drink every morning. The air around
Me is filled with language. And my hands

Are itching to put it to page.

I cannot shatter the mirror.

Without the mirror, I would not be here.

Incomplete

How long will it take

For me to find a sense of

Completion? How long

Do I have to work at something,

To work on something before I'm

Satisfied with the result? Can I

Ever be truly satisfied? Or must

I continue to strive for some

Contrived idea of perfection? Some

Semblance of seeing a project come

To its absolute fruition, the vision I

Had in my brain when I started?

Is it within the realm of possibility

That I feel like I've finished something?

Or will I constantly live with this

Feeling of leaving something unfinished?

“Just a couple more” I say to myself,

“A couple more lines,” or “a couple

More poems.” “It isn’t finished yet,

It isn’t perfect enough.”

Give it a rest. You’ve done

Your best, as I can attest

Because I’ve been here

Since the beginning. There’s

No finish line, no winning. This

Is not a video game, you don’t have

To find every item, collect every

Trophy. You don’t have to be perfect.

Your standards are too high, impassable

By any human being. When will you be

Satisfied? Is it not enough that you’ve

Come this far? That you’ve worked so hard

And raised the bar? That you pushed past

The point of exhaustion and stress,
Worked through every second of duress?
Take a rest. You accept no less than the best
But you can't seem to find a definition
In your mind, you think you're behind
But in the end you've come further
Than we ever dreamed. Even when it seemed
Impossible to succeed, you chased what
You wanted, forewent every need.
Even I admired that insatiable greed
To take back your life and hold it
In your hands, but there comes a point
Where you can't meet the demands
You place on yourself, they're holding
You back, you chastise yourself for the
Qualities you lack and ignore the
Ones that are already yours,
Ignoring stepping stones for closed

And locked doors. Accept what you have

And accept that's it's done, the war

Isn't over but the battle is won.

You don't need to stand up and fight

Every day, instead you can look in

The mirror and say:

It's finished. We made it.

And let that be the end.

Branching of Path and Tree

Inspired by Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar

How many times have I seen the path

Laid out before me? It splits, branching

Out into several smaller paths, more specific,

More focused in destination.

Some take me where I want to go.

Some take me where I need to go.

And yet some take me where I

Am told that I must go...

The indecision, irresolution reminds me of the fig tree she spoke of.

All these choices, so many options and I want

To take them all. I want love, I want to be happy,

I want to be successful, whatever that means. Why do

I have to choose only one? I know that once I set

My feet to one path, one branch, the others will close

Up, collapse. Or maybe I will be barred from returning

By some invisible wall. Fog. Darkness.

The longer I wait, the more treacherous they grow.

As her figs, marriage, respected professor, poet,

grew black and plopped to the ground,

My paths are ever beset with greater danger.

Soon they will be impassable. Soon I

Will have nowhere to go. I cannot go back.

And I cannot stay here, staring at the fig tree—no,

The path. Not a tree. But wait... Which holds truer for me?

Why am I always walking?

Walking in circles. Unable to choose a destination

Or a road to lead me there. Split between desires,

Wishing I had eight extra sets of legs

So that I could split myself between the paths.

Extra hands to take all the figs. I cannot deny, Ms. Plath,

They are all too similar to your own. And, like you,

I stand here, wanting to take all of them, yet none of them.

Forge my own path? Grow my own tree?

Maybe.

But those only resemble more choices.

Choices that I can't force myself to make.

The Mirror

Looking inward, looking out, looking back.

It sees me. Sees my every action, my

Every movement. It sees my mind.

Can read my thoughts.

The mirror...

It echoes them

Turns them back on me

Echoes my insecurities, amplified

Off its reflective surface, like sound,

Like light. But I cannot destroy it, it remains

Unbreakable, impossible for me to shatter, to

Scatter the pieces, collect them into

Trash bags and toss them into the

Nearest dumpster. No, it

Is a part of me.

The mirror...

Were I to break or to hide

Every one in my home, to cover

Them and keep them obscured from

View, it would accomplish nothing. It would

Prove a futile effort. The mirror is not real.

It does not live in the outside world.

It is inside of me. It is a part of

Me, living as I live, tied to

The essence

Of my soul.

As essential to my life

As air. As breathing. We, the

Mirror and I coexist. If I die, so does

The mirror. If it disappears, I go with it.

Without its reflection, without the proof

It offers me, the proof that I am alive,

I cannot be alive. I can see my

Hands. I can see my feet.

I perceive the

Actions they

All make, the things they

Do. But only the mirror reflects

Me. Who I am. What I think of myself.

Through it, I can hear the song. The song

Of my heart, song of myself, song of my

Soul. I hope to the gods that you hear

It too. That my words on the page,

Though only a faint echo of

The mirror

Are able to

Reach you and bring along

The music that I hear. I pray that

You are able to see me for who I am.

Not for my failures as a human being, please

Don't see me by my mistakes, innumerable

And infinite. Rather I hope that this

Small fragment of the mirror

Allows you to know

Me. To see

Me as I do.

With all my faults,

All my failings yes but all

That I have achieved as well. All that

I have survived, despite every moment of doubt

Every dark time where I wanted to give up. The

Mirror did not let me. It did not give

Me a choice. It knew that I

Had to go on. That

I could still do

More. And will.

What is the mirror?

Nothing more than the truest

Reflection of myself. My heart. My

Soul. And I cannot survive without the reflection.