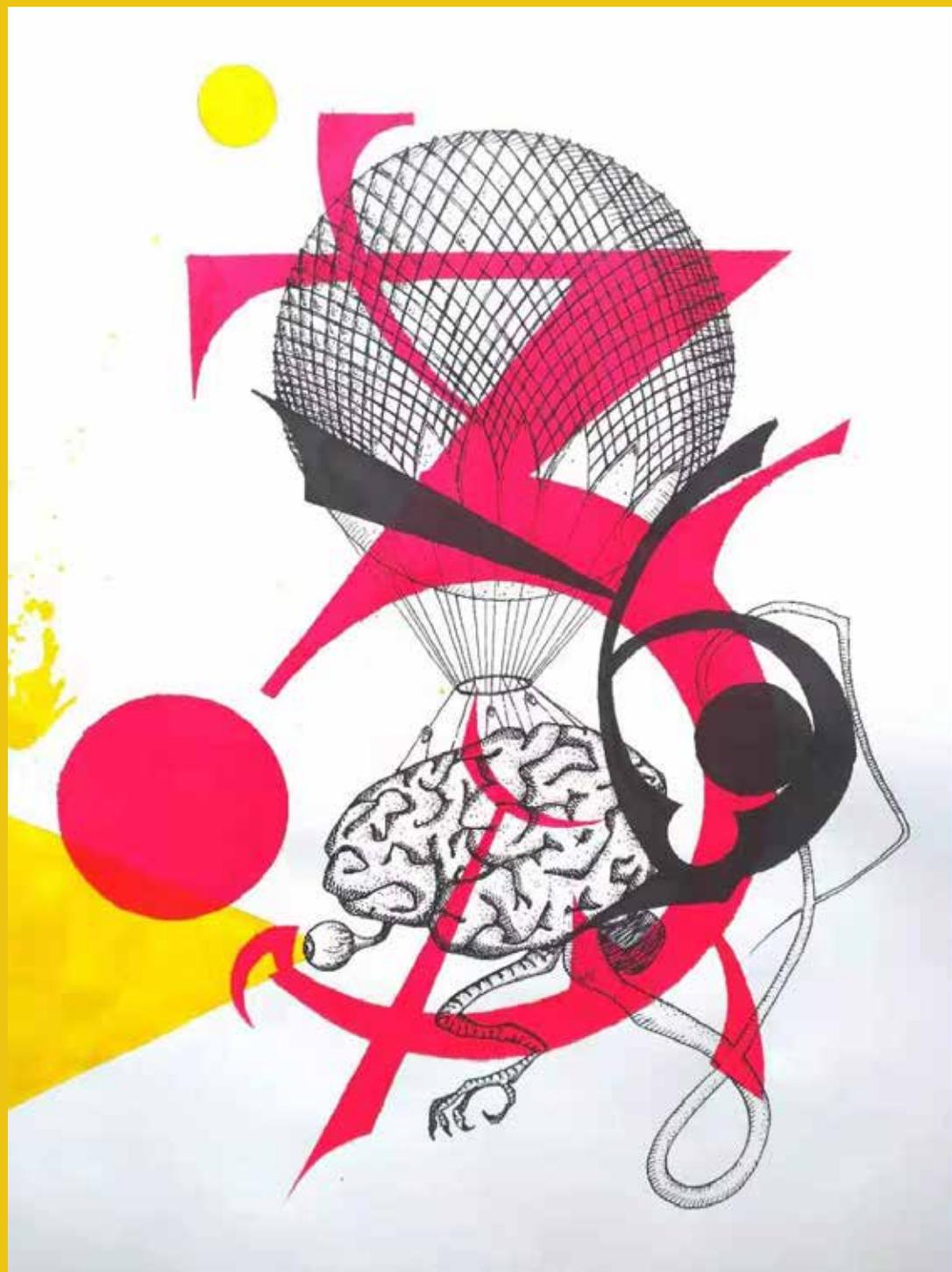


Into the Exclusion Zone



Poems by Nemo Sum
Illustrations by John Medaille
Foreword by Dr T.S. MacQueen



Forward

In my clinical work, people have repeatedly expressed to me the dark loneliness of depression. They have talked to me about the feeling of being surrounded by blackness and being unable to see either in front or behind, of seeing no escape. They have spoken about how isolated they felt, how desperate, and how alone. They have talked about the guilt they experience at being unable to find any hope and the pain they feel in bringing this darkness into the lives of those they love. They have also told me again and again that they first started seeing recovery as a possibility when they were able to connect, however tenuously, with other people who had felt the same way. Knowing that they were not alone helped them to muster enough faith and energy to begin to seek treatment.

This book is one person's attempt to break through the loneliness of depression and speak to the person in pain. It is intended as a companion and a resource for those suffering from chronic illnesses, particularly for those suffering from clinical depression. The author, Nemo, uses the medium of poetry to help identify recurring feelings and drag them into the light where they might be easier to manage. The act of writing and sharing these poems helps Nemo explain what depression feels like to him, and it helps him connect with others for mutual encouragement and support. He uses poetry as a tool to feel more in control of his illness, and being able to go back and revisit poems helps to remind him that he has made progress and that things can continue to get better. Sharing these poems is a way to break away from the traditional discourse surrounding mood disorders and honor the value of simply being present with others when they are in pain.

Clinical depression is a frequently misunderstood illness. It is not sadness, grieving, or melancholy related to life events. It is mood disorder in which a person suffers from recurring feelings of hopelessness, despair, guilt, apathy, and, of course, depression. It is a disease in which these feelings appear to arise out of nowhere, for no reason, and, often, in complete opposition to what objectively appears to be a pretty good life. A person with clinical depression may not be able to be happy because they have a great life in the same way person with muscular dystrophy may not be able to go for a run because they live near a great park. The disorder is present regardless of the environment. That is what makes it a disorder. The system is not working as intended.

The book is divided into three parts, and each section reflects a different part of Nemo's ongoing recovery process. He invites the reader to join him on a journey that is not yet over, recognizing the value in simply reaching out to others without needing to have all the answers. The poems are hand written, allowing for the possibility of imperfections in order for readers to connect more fully with the material.

In Part 1, the poems join the reader in the dark loneliness of despair. They express the disconnected sense of self, the feelings of worthlessness, the darkness, and the isolation, and they pin these experiences on the page where they can be better seen and understood. Nemo often uses these poems to stand up to the voice that tells him that no one understands, and that he is alone.

Part 2 is a collection of poems that express the struggle to reach out to others, the terror of allowing yourself to hope, and the fear that comes with recognizing that the path to recovery is thorny and poorly marked. There is no "right way" to move forward, and progress can sometimes feel like being tossed around underwater with no idea which way is up. If fighting through the crushing weight of depression feels confusing, exhausting, and frustrating, that is very reasonable. Nemo often uses these poems to stand up to the voice that tells him that the pain of his disease is his own fault because he is doing it wrong.

Part 3 is a collection of poems about transformation. They express the tenuous confidence that comes with being able to look back and see how far you have come. These poems are about recognizing your own worth, honoring your own needs and desires, and finding your place in the world. They are about both the freedom of moving away from depression and the fear of falling back into the hole of despair. These poems recognize the truth that things can get better even while living with chronic illness. Nemo often uses the poems in this section to help him to stand up to the voice that tells him that there is no hope, that nothing will ever change, and that there is no point in trying.

Chronic illness takes an enormous toll on sufferers, but it also affects family relationships and puts great strain on social support systems. Depression is a bully. It makes people feel like no one understands them, no one wants to be around them, and no one really cares about them. It makes people feel like a burden to others. It makes people not want to reach out for help and risk spreading their misery to those around them. Depression pushes people away. It isolates, and it makes sufferers feel that the disease is their fault and that there is no way out. Depression can be invisible, overwhelming, and terminal.

Often, people who suffer from chronic illnesses feel isolated. They are on the fringes of society where they may be tolerated, or even accommodated, but are less often included in the story of what it means to be a successful person – a person whose inherent worth is of value to society.

A chronic illness can be managed, it may improve, and, sometimes, it may even go into remission. Any recovery is iterative, with symptoms waxing and waning as individuals learn to cope with a body that refuses to function properly. Often, recovery is lonely, frustrating, and exhausting, and it involves a daily battle to manage symptoms while knowing that progress can be murky and improvements can feel precarious.

Both Nemo and I hope that these poems can be used as a tool to reach people and be present with them in their suffering while also offering hope. It is a way for one person to hold out their hand and say, "You are not alone! I am with you. I have been there, and this is how I have started to get out of that hole. Let's climb together."

T. Shontelle MacQueen, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist

Please Note: This book does not provide treatment for depression, and it is not intended to replace any treatment. Readers who identify with these poems and find them helpful are strongly encouraged to use this book as a tool in coordination with their medical providers and treatment team.

I'm not happy,
Or if I'm happy
I don't know it.

My mother told me
That I'm bad,
And I don't deserve to be happy.

So I'm not happy,
Or if I'm happy
I don't know it.

Please forgive me
If I don't
Clap my hands.

Shame hisses
You're wrong,
You've failed,
And they hate you
For being you.



I want to drink of hope,
But I end up choking on fear.

Sometimes
I feel like I can't stop
Being broken.
Not even
For a day.



Tear drops like rain drops
Falling down through empty space
Splash into puddles.

Flung
Heels over head
No direction
Only velocity
And the violence
Of being
Flung.

The woman on the phone
Was starting to sound upset,
So when she put me on hold
To find a supervisor,
I hung up.

I stood in the silence
And wondered
How she couldn't see the threat.
I'm not afraid of the voices
Who tell me to make a plan
Or write a letter;
I hate making plans
And I love writing letters.

I'm afraid of the voice
That whispered
When I was just a boy
That I could end the suffering
With what was in the kitchen drawer.
For a few minutes
That day
The pain had a place
Where it would stop.
I'm scared of the voice I hear
When I'm driving and crying
That tells me it will all be over
With a hard turn
Into the median.

I'm afraid of the voice
That spoke to me
On one particularly dark day
And convinced me that
I could never be free
Except in its embrace.

It scared me badly enough
That I called the suicide
help line

To talk to a woman
Who couldn't understand
Why I was asking for help
When I didn't have a plan.

My mind
Finds my imperfections
And plays with them endlessly
Like my tongue
Finding a piece of meat
Lodged painfully between my teeth.



I once fought
Mighty dragons
And brought them to ruin.
Now I tremble
At the sound
Of distant thunder.

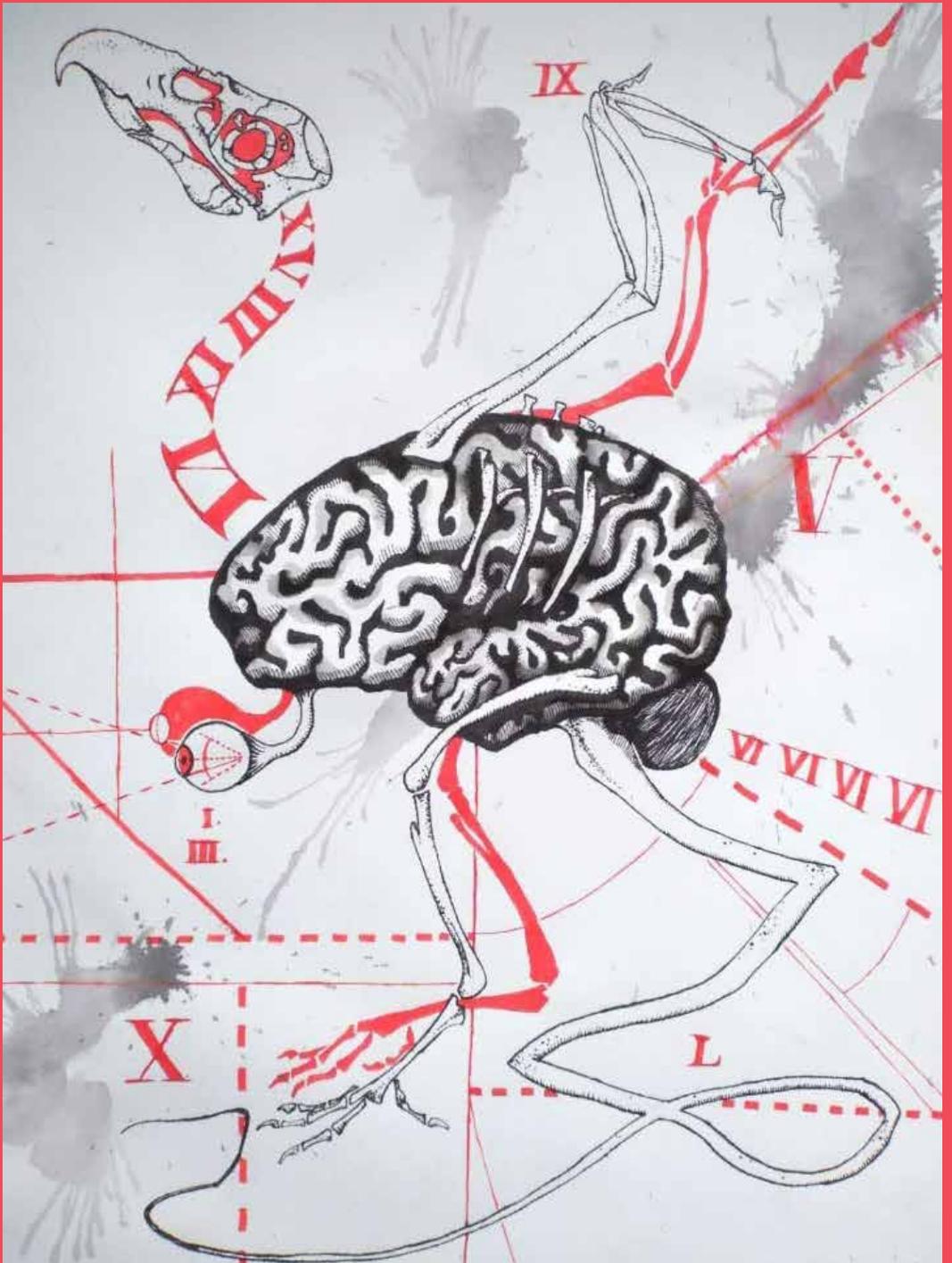
I am my Rat
My Cage.

I am the one who administers the poison,
and
Carefully watches me writhe,
Scrawling observations
On scraps of memory.

I am the one who cleans up the corpses.
I am the one who takes pleasure
In a job well done.

I am the one who will return
To do it again
Tomorrow.

Part 2



There is no shelter
From this storm.
There is no place
To rest your weary soul.
These winds do not relent.
This rain will not subside.
Embrace the storm.
Know that it is you.
There is no shelter
From this storm.

Do you know where the wild
things are?

I ate them.

I went to where they were.

They rolled their eyes

And gnashed their teeth.

I held them down

And I devoured them.

The wild things.

They tasted like scared children

And night terrors.

Beware the archivists
Who would take what you create
And squirrel it away
Where it is safe
And only they can touch
And only they can see.
Beware the Speakers of the Rules
Who would tell you what you do
Is wrong
And not proper,
Their reality so fragile
That you could bring it down
With your infractions.

How can you
Love a tempest?
How can you be tender
In howling winds?
How long can you stand
In the driving rain
Before you have to retreat
To the comfort
Of your true home
Far away
From the storm.

I guess we're going to
Find out how much I can do
With this wooden sword.



I am going to Break.
Soon.

I am not sure
If it will be Down
Out or Through.

Soon,

I am going to Burn.

If it will be Out
Down or

More Brightly than ever before,
I am not sure.

I was blasted
With cosmic rays.
When I woke,
My eyes glowed
And I could make
Everyone in my life
Happy.

If I let go
And fell back
Would I feel the shoulders
Of the friends I have made
On my journey,
Or would I fall
Into the emptiness
Of my shame?

Waking Up

Out of the hiss and crack
Of the dumpster fire of my mind,
I rise.

The Garbage Phoenix
Resplendent

Why do you stretch your broken
wings to the red sky?

Ain't You Shamed?

A hundred paces or two
Into the Exclusion Zone
I found a flower blooming,
Delicate blue
And yellow petals
Waving to and fro
In the gentle wind.
It seemed so calm
And certain of itself,
Unaware of the
Subtle resonance
Of the explosion
That killed our family.
I could not help but wonder
What else I might find alive.

Part 3



Mr Grief has come
For your extraction.
He will pull and tug
On that nasty pain
You've been holding onto.
Putting his boots
Squarely on your chest,
In the midst of the smell
Of the chemicals
Used to clean hospital beds
And mortuary slabs,

He'll dig his heels
Into your shoulders
On either side
Of your broken heart
And strain
Until there's a splash
Of blood
And puss
And tears,
And it has come free.

I crawl to the top
Of this pile of dead
And dying thoughts
And howl
Into the darkness
I Will Not Be Taken!



Fear me
For I draw my power
From the dust
And the wind.

I'm the Paper Warrior
And I fight the Wind.
No matter how many times
I get blown down,
I get back up
To be blown down again.
I don't think of myself
As weak,
Maybe brave.
Determined.
I hope that I am not a fool

To keep fighting,
But it's possible.
I am the Paper Warrior
And I fight the wind.

Depression came by today
With my bridle
To remind me to put it on
And to let me know
How disappointed
She is in me
For not wearing it.



The sun and moon fell from my sky
Leaving it empty.
I closed my eyes and screamed.
Expecting to face the darkness,
I opened them again to find
The sky washed in stars.

The last dragon slayer
Paused
Watching the smoke
From the last dragon
Swirl into the air
And wondered
Who he would be
Tomorrow.

This is not about
Who I am supposed to be,
should be,
could be.

This is not about
Who I am expected to be,
need to be,
can be.

Not even about who I want to be.
This is about the audacity
Of being me.

The War
Of Me on Me
Has come to an end.
The great guns are silent
And pointed outward
For a change.
The voices who insist
The fighting should go on
Are the only enemy left.
Should I celebrate?
Would it be a memorial
Or a parade?



It is my sincere hope that you will find comfort and catharsis and purpose in these poems. As much as it helped me to write them, the true miracle started happening when I shared them. I found that my signal box wasn't empty after all. I hope that you will find a way to let your voice into the world, to bring others to

your light, as we together fight back the darkness for another day.

I am truly blessed to have so many stars in my sky.

Thank you to Angela and Andrea for helping me have a friend in a truly dark chapter of my life.

Thank you, Scott, for being my champion and my friend and for doing all the layout work.

Thank you, Elizabeth, for helping me find the right words and being brave enough to make the right cuts.

Thank you to Shane and Jah for holding space and making me feel welcome from the very beginning. You have helped me find a purpose in all this pain.

Thank you to all the Guerilla Poets for taking me in, and supporting me, and giving me something really good to be a part of.

Thank you to all the amazing poets that make up the Charlotte scene. You are amazing and I am so proud to share space or stage with you.

Thank you to each and every person who has had the courage to share their vision with me.

Thank you to everyone who has had the courage to share your tears with me.

Thank you to my children, Aiden and Nia, for being awesome.

Lastly, despite the clear conflict of interest, I want to thank my wife, my muse, my love, Shontelle, for being the working half of this partnership so often recently. You inspire me.

Reviews

Jah Smalls

There's an audacity and responsibility we have as writers. Somewhere in its heartbeat there's a thing called vulnerability. It's heavy and oft-times beyond fathom BRAVO

Shane Manier

The power of Nemo's poetry is showcased in this collection by his vulnerability, message and resilience regarding his illness. These poems are the voice of the journey many in America face alone, but alone no more. The importance in continuing the conversation of mental health is dire, and Nemo does an outstanding job as a poet who is telling his journey. These poems will comfort, empower and show light for healing if you are in the dark.

Jay Ward

This collection by Nemo Sum provides texture we're not used to seeing in books of poetry; art matching the aesthetic of separate poems that run together into one longer poem with its own arc. Nemo drops the reader into a battlefield where we are compelled to help 'fight back the darkness.' Into the Exclusion Zone is not only a compendium memorializing that fight, but a signed and bound document, a promise to keep fighting, to always keep fighting. A bold and necessary work.

Special thanks to John Medaille, illustrator extraordinaire.



Nemo
Sum

