

ELIZABETH WILES

SENIOR CAPSTONE

Creative Writing and Social Action

Creative Project

Kent Leatham, “Story of Our Lives”

School of Humanities and Communication

Spring 2021



Courtesy of Skylar Wayte 2021

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Project Proposal

1. My name is Elizabeth Wiles and my concentration is Creative Writing and Social Action.

2. Project Description: I will be producing a collection of poetry about my journey in and through mental illness. The social action issue I am engaging in is mental health awareness.

3. Alignment with Common Theme: This capstone section's theme is that of storytelling and how it both improves and facilitates communication. My project will tell my story of mental illness, how I accepted it, how I used it to improve, and how I eventually grew to accept myself. Themes like this should be shared with the world. Mental health themes like what I am adapting in my project will prompt communication in areas of social action and self-improvement.

4. Purpose: I plan to spread awareness about mental illness to those who do not suffer from it. However, my project's primary purpose is to show that those afflicted by mental illness can use it to grow and become the best versions of themselves. Through writing, I was able to get to know the darkest parts of my mind and access them to create art. I want people to know that writing can be a healthy coping mechanism, and that mental illness can be a tool for growth.

5. Format Rationale: By compiling a collection of poetry, I can properly express the inconsistencies of mental illness. Even so, there are patterns in mental illness as well. I plan to show that by following a "crown poetry" format where the lines of each piece build into the next. As suggested, I am choosing to use "crown poetry" as a metaphor as well. A crown is something you wear. It is something you carry with you and it can get heavy. Mental illness is the same.

6. Capstone Title: "*Coronation: how my mental illness made me a writer*"

7. Working Summary: I will be taking my readers through my journey, but I will also be

serving as an example of how people suffering from mental illness can turn their pain and hardship into something beautiful. I want people to know that having a mental illness is a lifelong battle, but it is also an extension to which they can improve themselves.

8. Expectations: I expect to complete my capstone project, associated proposals as needed, the reflective essay, and my resume. I will do this in a timely and efficient manner, all the while maintaining the creativeness of my project's theme.

In addition, I have added another sub-portion of this capstone project. I have decided to compile an outline for my poetry collection before I begin writing it. This way, I will not stray from the theme and my work will flow steadily.

9. Specific Skills and Tools Required: The skills I have that qualify me for this project add up to my experience in writing. While I have been writing since I was able, I have been published in three different journals. The first time was when I was in high school, and a poem of mine was published in *Accomplished*. The other two times were in CSUMB's *In The Ords*. The most recent was in Spring 2020, where I was given the last page for winning the best poetry contest.

While being published serves as a great example of my capabilities to complete this collection, I would also like to point out my experience in editing. Writing can be hard, but editing your own writing can be even more difficult. I have taken four workshop classes here at CSUMB where I have developed the skills to write, edit, and organize this capstone. I also commit to reaching out for criticism when I need to.

I plan to primarily use Google Docs and Word for this project. With these platforms, I have the ability to input my creative pieces in my intended order and arrangement.

10. Next Step: To complete this project, my first step will be to submit this proposal. Once it is

approved, I will move on. Secondly, I will create the outline for my collection. Third, I will begin composing poetry and short creative nonfiction pieces. Fourth and once the collection is complete, I will complete the reflective essay and resume.

11. Timeline: I expect a decision on my proposal by the first week assigned. Then, I will create my collection outline by the end of February. I will spend the entirety of March creating and organizing the collection itself. In the beginning of April, I will start work on my reflective essay and resume. I expect to be finished and ready for presentation by May.

HEAVY
IS THE
HEAD

how my mental illness made me a writer

By Elizabeth Wiles

ADDRESS

I'll start where it all started,
but I'll never end where it began.

My attempts have been thwarted
but now I'll tell you who I am.

I speak to those who feel like me
and to those who want to know

what it's like to want to flee
but have nowhere to go.

To those who suffer in their minds,
in ways hard to understand,

there is solace you can find
with pen and paper in your hands.

I scribble down this address
to promise you one thing—

when you feel your mind's a mess,
is when you can spread your wings.

I learned this the hard way;
but I used to feel so numb.

I learned to write its dour sway,
without knowing where it came from.

DECREE

Without knowing where it came from,
it made its home in me.

Ever since I can remember,
this darkly somber entity

surrounded me like an aura
something most cannot see,

but it had burrowed deep inside
and I lived by its decree.

I obeyed each of its commands
like it sat upon a throne.

As the years passed by, I served it
feeling more and more alone.

Halls in my mind were darkening,
made of brim and brittle stone.

Every color was fading from
the tapestries I had sewn.

So I went to sleep each night
stuck in this modernity.

I woke accustomed to the pain,
and thought it was my destiny.

There were no other sensations
that weighed just as heavily.

This dismal essence would be
with me for eternity.

LIEGE

With me for eternity,
this pain runs fervently
like blood dimming red to grey.

It tells me that I'm fine,
but the smoke within in its eyes
makes it difficult to stray.

A way to make me listen
and ensure I will be with it
through each and every day.

Singes edges of my clothes
but I know that it knows,
its creed, I will obey.

It is a part of me,
my ruler and my liege,
but there's nothing more I hate

than this arrangement that we have.
To leave, I would be mad,
so I surrender to our fate.

CROWN

I surrender to our fate
but my boldness fluctuates

in a way that devastates.

Dangling at my side
is a burden I can hide

but it gets heavier each night.

I hold it in my fist
as its metal scrapes my wrist,

I have to fight it to exist.

It prompts me to the ledges
with blood along its edges,

I've tried to throw it in the hedges.

It soars through the air
but I turn and it's there

something I don't know how to wear.

With its gold-plated jewels,
the isolation that it fuels

makes me nothing but a fool.

My head is tilted down
when no one is around,

how can I wear this broken crown?

GOWN

How can I wear this broken crown
or this shimmering, torn gown?
Neither look like me...

How can I look into this mirror
and stare back at my veneer?
Neither look like me...

How can I listen to myself
cry and call for help
from who I'm meant to be...

How can I reach out of my mind
when all I do is hide
from who I'm meant to be...

How can I hold it in my hands
my fate and ruined plans?
Lost in this disease...

How can I write this here and now
when I still can't wear this crown?
Lost in this disease...

MOAT

lost in this disease
 nothing rhymes like it I want it to
now I know I have it
 memories are like a slough
of confusing nerves
 and never-ending blue

like an ocean
 as cold as it is deep
I swim to the shore
 but the sand is just as steep
and I am left to
 resow what I have reaped

so this is what it is
 not everyone feels this way
it took me quite a while
 making it back to the bay
flowing into the moats
 I'll try each and every day

VOW

I'll try each and every day
for people like me.

For those who are told
they are sick and then
left to deal with it

alone.

I'll think each and every night
about people like me.

About those who say
they are fine and then
are left to cry

alone.

I'll write for the rest of my life
to people like me.

To those who grow
from their worst only to
find what they're worth—

whole.

TREASON

whole
is not the opposite of broken.
broken
is not the opposite of whole.

they are derivatives. they are recurring
ever turning
in the mind.

loyalty
is not the opposite of treason.
treason
is not the opposite of loyalty.

they are adaptable. they are ambitions
mere oppositions
of the heart.

well
is not the opposite of sick.
but sick
is the opposite of well.

the mind betrays itself. the body follows.
until it hollows
out the soul.

whole. broken.
loyalty. treason.
well. sick.

mind is open
find a reason
to make it all

through.

REGNANT

Through
the castle of my mind,
I found you.

You were lost
in this place,
circling hallways,
barren corridors,
until it captured
your pain in a knot,
then fastened it
around your neck
so you could never escape.

But you fought,
you reached out
and I knew you
from my memories
of a distant past,
a chosen future,
a regnant will
to not let it
stop you from breathing.

Freed
just as the noose untied,
I found me.

ACCESSION

I found me
when I wasn't myself.

I was me
but felt like someone else.

Like a writer trapped
my pages worn
then scrapped

every part of me
I only lived
just to be

writing about hope
I couldn't feel
so I coped

all the wrong ways
but I lived and
I can say

now I write to deal,
to remember,
and to heal.

I found me
when I wasn't myself.

I am me,
and not anybody else.

CORONATION

I'm not anybody else
than who I see looking in the mirror.

I'm dressing up for *myself*
as the evening is growing nearer.

It will be full of starlight,
of twirling and twinkling gowns

At last, tonight is the night
I can wear my refurbished *crown*.

It's still a little broken
and a bit cracked beneath the stones

But this time, I have *chosen*
to finally sit upon my throne.

Because no one else can hold
these colored gems atop their head

You'll find in crests of *gold*
the treacherous path I tread.

I think of where I am now
writing down these lines.

Hear this, here and now
you can be the ruler of your mind!

Even if you're ill and *tired*
you can make it through these barren halls.

You can be who you desire
and tear down your strongest walls.

You can accept who you are
only then will you know yourself.

Remember every scar,
but forget being someone *else*.

No matter what I was
I will never be her *again*.

I will wear my crown because
I am proud of my now and *then*.

So I will tell my story
and I hope all those like me know

to wear your kingdom's glory
and to never *ever* let it go.

My mind was brokenhearted
throughout the tale of who I am.

I'll start where it all started,
but I'll never end where it *began*.

Reflective Essay

I found the process of composing “Heavy is the Head: how my mental illness made me a writer” was a more than fruitful experience. I was able to dive back into myself and reexamine the pride I have in who I am today. Even if it was not always easy, I believe my writing has only grown stronger during this process.

The aesthetics of my collection are what ties it all together. First and foremost, I chose to follow a format known as “crown poetry.” In this format, the last line of one poem becomes the first line of the next. This goes on until, finally, the last line of the last poem is the first line of the first. Using crown poetry supported the extended metaphor of royalty in my collection. Lastly, the lineation, white spaces, and individual formats of my poems evolve throughout the piece. While they start out very structured and in stereotypical poetic form, they eventually become more freeform and adaptable. This mirrors how growing up and through mental illness works, which is exactly the connection between content and form that I was intending.

The purpose of “Heavy is the Head” is to inspire those with mental illness. It is to let those suffering know that mental illness does not have to be cured; it just has to be controlled. If this is done successfully, a person’s mental illness can help them become someone they are happy with. The truth is, mental illness cannot be disposed of; it is impossible. However, once it is accepted, it can help someone become whole and content with all of who they are.

My audience is made quite clear in my collection. Oftentimes in my poems, I speak directly to them. This serves many purposes in craft and syntax, but the most important reason I chose to do this is to make certain my faith in my readers is expressed. I believe in them the way I have grown to believe in myself.

The process of writing “Heavy is the Head” was a bit rocky. I knew I wanted this project to be poetry, and I also knew that mental health is very important to me. So, I did both. My struggles fell into the categories of form and remembrance. At first, I did not have any poems connected via crown poetry. However, I went back and smoothed out the form to be consistent with the rest of the collection. I also had difficulty revisiting some hardships in my life. I have dealt with mental illness for as long as I can remember, and there are extremely dark times in my life that I do not often venture back into. However, this project called for me to revisit them. I did, and I am all the better for it.

The thematic, social, and historical context in “Heavy is the Head” is extremely relevant to my course’s theme of storytelling. Stories of mental illness need to be told to avoid further stigmatization. Common messages in mental health writing are either “it will get better,” which is never helpful or potentially triggering. I wanted a middle ground and rarely found one, so I wrote it from my own perspective and experience.

As I have indicated, the artistic tradition and history of mental health writing is scrappy. While there are many great writers who specialize in mental health topics, they are not easy to find. I was able to compose a cohesive collection of mental health poetry that followed a consistent plot of self-acceptance.

In reflection, I have to say that I will never forget a single aspect of this project. The initial idea, the brainstorming, the process, the editing, and the final product all gave me an immense amount of pride in how I have evolved as a writer. Not only that, “Heavy is the Head: how my mental illness made me a writer” gave me the opportunity to reflect on how I have grown as a person, which is something I grow prouder of every day.