

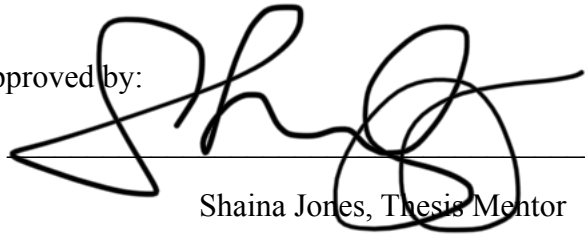
Existentialism and Mental Health Through Poetry

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Elon College Fellows Program

By Joey Schwartz

May 11th, 2026

Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Shaina Jones', written over a horizontal line.

Shaina Jones, Thesis Mentor

5/11/26



ELON COLLEGE FELLOWS
PASSION ♦ CURIOSITY ♦ RESPONSIBILITY

An Overview

This chapbook of poems was born from both the fear and the desire to be perceived in the truest, rawest form of self. Young adulthood is filled with constant movement and change, yet conversations and media tend to focus only on the visible milestones and external plot points of these years. Far less attention is given to the internal, invisible turbulence that unfolds beneath the surface. For those navigating mental health struggles, it can often feel as though the world fixates on event-based problems while overlooking the emotions that are born within the psyche and seep into the cracks of everyday life, making it difficult to show up in the way the world expects. I wrote and compiled these poems as a means to give voice to the words that echo loudly within my mind but too often fall deaf on the ears of the world.

Stain

How do I strip myself bare—
scrub and peel away
what I've become;
Amnesiate my cells,
unclog them of dirt and grime and time
I want to be new, revirginized,
white, powdery,
freshly-
 fallen
 snow.

How do I rebel
against my scars?
To pick only gives them pigment.
To surrender and watch
them sink like ink
into skin—
somehow worse.

I miss the warm mush
of utero.
I miss screaming and
 not making a sound.

Why can't I wipe life

off of my face

like chocolate 'round my mouth?

Why does everything feel

like a stain?

Messy

Midday baths

Because I can

Drench in bubbles and black soap

And when I emerge

invite grime back upon my skin

Because I can

Always bathe again

Cut my own bangs

Chopped and diced

Bits

of

blonde

on the floor and bathroom countertop

And it will grow out

come summertime

Because I can

Surrender and swallow

Grease, carbs, and calories

Until I cannot breathe

And my stomach will work

Overnight while I silently

Sleep, and I will awake

With a clean slate

Give Me a Moment

Today I require nothing

Is asked of me

Let me be new

I do not know why we are all acting

like experts,

I cannot remember signing up.

But I am here, so dammit

give me a moment

I am in my sheets

as I walk through the streets

I am rolled up in dirt and dreams

and half-awakenedness

I drink water and watch

it drop right through my skin

I wonder if you can see the puddle

I bite my cheek until it bleeds

so I can taste what it means

to be alive

It is funny, I laugh,

as I watch my words
blend with air, blend with void
once they hop from brain to throat
and jump
 from
 lip.

I worry about love often
What if someone reaches to touch me
and realizes
that their hand glides right through

How do I trick
the world into believing
I am solid matter?
How can someone fall in love
With a container scared of its filling?

Do not worry—
I am aware of the irony
I was better at being
when I was a baby
I believe I was meant to be
Something simple
Like the branch of a tree
Or running water in a creek

Awareness is a cancer

To know what you are

And not want it

Is prison

Most days I wish it away

until I remember it keeps me here,

writing.

Overdue Balloons

In the corner of my room
On March 9th my mom sent fruit—
In a basket, around the plastic
they were tied in a loop—
For my birthday, I was turning twenty-two

Snip-snapped the strings
Like bubbles, they floated to the ceiling
They huddle like they are in a meeting
I said I would take them down
Once I had the feeling

Now we are three weeks into April
And I am still not able
To stretch on tippy toe
Grab them by their string ankles
I let them stay,
I wish I could say
It is only because I love birthdays

But between the balloons and me
There is a sea
Of quicksand, a slap of the hand
A deep red fire, ten-thousand miles
And ten-thousand piles

Of clothes, and voices crawling
Like spiders up my bones
And out my mouth
So wide it cannot even make a sound
So many they are taking me down

Today is different in my room
The balloons have folded like I knew
They would one day, eventually
I heard a flutter from one
And then another
They have caught the disease of time
And I let them get it
They are starting to sink
And I am starting to think
That even as they utter their suffering
Breaths, I will let
Them do the work for me
One day they will be settled to the ground
And I still may never throw them out

Soft Animal

Mary Oliver said it best:

“You do not have to be good”,

she wrote,

“You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves”

Like a cat lies its head in sunlit patches

I will rest where I must

I will let the echoes from the rest of the world

Muffle into feathery static

As I be what my body is—

Sewn from bones, blood

Stuffed with lungs, hunger

And hymns of heredity

How fucking freeing is that?

To say no to something you hate

Or to let yourself fall

in love and accepting that it will hurt one day

To decide you will sleep instead of continuing to bear the day

Wipe off your makeup and let skin be skin

To let the wild geese fly home, where they have always been bound

Because even wild things have roots, instincts,

flesh,

blood.

I will pay attention to my pull

To center, I will follow her

Blindfolded, 'cross rivers, valleys, and hills

Like the wild geese

Who do not ponder their precision,

Their exactness,

The curvature of their wings,

Or their goodness

Toothpaste

Packing a bag for your house—
Never done this before
And if I forget my own toothpaste
I guess I will use yours

I should be smiling
But somehow there's ice in
my stomach
I will pack the car anyway,
Say it's the weather
or something

Your embrace warms me
enough to ensure
that I'll stick around
A bandaid, a blanket, a boy
who makes me forget
some of myself

It is hard to make sense
of something when you are in it
the blur is addictive
but I have been sitting for too long
between something nice and
realistic

I do not want to be the bad guy

but I cannot help it that your story of us

Is not mine

An Ode to My First Wrinkles

Last week I got into my car to grab groceries, and
I looked into my rearview mirror
The one that is meant for seeing the cars behind you
But instead I used it to remember my face
And I noticed two parallel lines
Sitting right where I furrow my brows

So the day has finally come, I thought
The day I find my first wrinkles
The stains on my face, like involuntary tattoos
Like when your uncle says,
“Don’t make that face, or it’ll get stuck like that”
But this time it actually did

I have worried so much just in twenty-two years
That my anxiety has been carved
Right where it exists
Like the silhouette of toes on old flip flops
Or a seat print on your favorite couch cushion
I can buy new flip flops and cushions
But I cannot buy a new face

I have been thinking much about
How I wish I could go back in time
And stop furrowing my brows

Undo the tattoo
I wish I took seriously the notion
That anxiety ages you
But like most other things, I follow my body's impulses
Until I am shown that they are wrong
Like picking scabs—
It is my favorite pastime
Until I scar

Or letting my shoulders
Move to the whim
Of their gravitational pull
Until my back and neck start screaming

There is a bubble of young
That you can hide in
Until you realize that you are, absolutely
Moving towards death,
Just as everything is

I have been thinking about
What I would do differently if I could start again
Which I hate, because this thought,
In and of itself, is a surefire indicator
Of aging—
I've heard my mother say this many times before

I wish I fell in love when I was young
Instead of watching from my window
I will never be seventeen again

Broken Glass

I hobble on one leg,
bleeding warm
blood on cold tile
It is so obvious that I am the perpetrator

I bought the glass straw
So I could save the sea
but I scarred my sole
Because good isn't good enough

Where is the wave of peace that was 'sposed to
Wash over me once I have done all the right things?
It was supposed to arrive, but it's late
And I am waiting at the station endlessly for my train
To the town where the people who buy glass straws go
The town for the people who smile at strangers
Give up their spot in line for the elderly
and their ear for those who need it
Who read recycling rules,
Peel off stickers on peanut butter jars
And rinse glass clean
Those who throw their last bit of change
In the empty tip jar
And buy jewelry from the one-woman business

My softness is fertile soil

for seeds of suffering

I do not know how to push

Against my own human nature

No matter how bloody the tile may be

I will not quit what I am

Laundry

There is so much
and I cannot tell
if it is my job to make something
of any of it

There's that turtle
I saw on the sidewalk today
shell—cracked and covered
in blood
the hot September sun
beating down
on it relentlessly
giving light to a thing
that doesn't need it anymore

Those windows in my building
As the darkness sheds light
on what's inside
Like a thousand little suns
illuminating
a thousand little solar systems
Each one a different universe,
a different story

There's the sound—

The heavy one
When I first wake up in the morning
Like the hum of an AC
In my cranium
The one that doesn't go away
until I have filled my mind
with louder sounds

Every day I am sickened
with a disease I contracted from no one
Every day I am bruised
by things that do not touch me
I am the softest peach

I cannot save the turtle on the sidewalk—
it is dead
And I have got laundry to do

New Duvet

Sometimes you need to buy new bedding
even though you have only had your comforter for a year

It does the trick, you're just
sick of it

And your roommate—

Who has worn the same clothes

since she was fifteen and

shops at Hospice Thrift

for silverware—

will probably judge you

She just doesn't know what's hiding— what's
haunting

You in the fabric of this

damn duvet

It has seen too much of me so

It's got to go

And

Maybe that's what I do to it all?

My friends who have seen

my snot and tears and

Did not know what to do with it
An entity, a creature
grew and grew
between us, and it all got sticky

I could see me stained on their face,
Like unwanted leftovers from a meal
Or the mushy stuff on their shoes
They drag into the house
They couldn't tell where I ended
And they began

I have lived long enough to know
to set them free
My friend Lily from high school who
I'm "never free to grab coffee with anymore"
It's a favor!
I am doing you a favor, Lily
I wish I could tell you this,
I wish you knew how much
I love you, Lily

Now—
I must set this duvet free from me
I am sick of myself,
 my sweat, my cells, my breath
sewn into the thing I see the most

So I will just get a new one

Favorite Colors

Paint over you with blue
Like I paint over old nail polish

It is superficial,
haven't you considered
We have only been seeing
what we choose to

I am a feather in the wind
Warm weather, even softer skin
and I can do no wrong

except I can

You are an island in the eye of
stormy waters: safe, a shore
and you can do no wrong

you can do no wrong

The more we try to convince
ourselves that we are lovers
We will keep painting each other
our favorite colors

Autonomy

I resent my body for what it requires of me

Do you ever think about how

You have to find a way to eat

Three meals a day, everyday, for the rest of your life?

I resent my poor eyesight that I did not ask for but
the world asks me to pay for lenses regardless

I resent the bumps on my arms
that nothing will get rid of

I resent that feeling of thirst at three in the morning
The one which wakes you up with a gasp
And a craving for something iced
Or the red gatorade handed to you on a soccer bench
In mid-August when you were twelve

I resent my education for
turning what I love into an endless task

I used to hide in the laundry room, falling asleep under
Piles and piles of clothes so my mother couldn't find me
Before school in the morning
I did not care that I would be late

I did not care at all

I resent what I cannot escape

I resent that I was born into a body that does not feel like mine

I Would Be Most Ill-suited for Motherhood

Now it is summer
and I am numb.

barefeet on concrete
I step out into dark spring air
Dialing familiar numbers

to fill my stomach,
to fill the stillness

Sunday night, some day
in May
I stay in and stir
a pot of something sweet

sweet becomes salt
as tears
stream down

the pot grows hotter
boils over
another thing spoiled

born a sculptor
equipped with rotten fingershands

on the potter's wheel

alas, what is the point

in it all

if my womb is a prison

my breasts full of poison

my arms, thin

and pulsating

with blood

that spills so willingly

Tracing Paper

April sixth is approaching
and my grandmother's
been sleeping for more hours
than not

My father says he's only reached the halfway mark
of his time here
"There is so much left..." he says.

Sometimes I cut vegetables
And have a hard time picturing
The same hands cutting cauliflower
In 50 years

When I belly laugh on the couch
In a rare moment of body
I look around like
I am watching a movie frame that will end
when the film runs out

The veil like tracing paper
my limbs, lead
pressed up like art for the other side

April sixth is approaching

and they all join me at the edge
where my namesake, my ancestor
—though that word feels too much like dust—
appears
to be pressed right up against us,
running his ashen fingers over our
outlines

He welcomed death
like an old friend
like an identical twin
he had not seen in years

My mother exercises for her figure
My father exercises for longevity
My grandmother is exercising free will before it runs out
and I am still here, pressed up
against the tracing paper

Birthday Party

It is a funny thing—celebrating your birthday

When you have wanted to kill yourself

To wake to the flood of text messages

From the people who would have come to your funeral

When there are balloons in your room

A cake in the fridge homemade

By friends who remembered your favorite flavor

Who put your slice on the floral plate—

The one they know you choose

Over the white ones every day

I do not know

If that fact makes me want to stay here more

or less

Knowing that maybe I mean more

To everyone else around me

Than I do to myself

I wish I could break off pieces of it,

Hand them out, one for everyone

Put them on plates,

like slices of my birthday cake

If everyone wants to keep this cake alive so bad
Then maybe they should keep it in their own damn fridge
It is not a bad idea, really
Some parts may serve good
Carved by the delicate palms of my parents, friends,
and some just by the wind
Maybe they ought to stay
It is not all rotten
When in the right fridge

Piano Hands

I'm scared my grandmother is going to die
Before I can text her back
She's always messaging me
And I don't know how to keep saying the same things

"I love you, I miss you,
I can't wait to see you"
Without it sounding like this fragile egg in my hands
That's bound to crack if i don't keep up with these spells

She cried last time she said goodbye to me
And I thought she might have had a premonition
Of her own death
Happening before I'd see her again

Or maybe it was my own
I lie awake at night thinking of how stupid
Our bodies are
One wrong move and *poof*, we're gone

The amount of times I've almost stuck a fork
In my toaster
Or thought to turn on the garbage disposal
With my hand still inside of it

Not because I necessarily want to
But rather because I need to know
If it's really so easy
To destroy what I've been building for 21 years

For about five of those years I had trouble
Looking down at my hands as I played the piano
Because I couldn't fathom the thought
That theymy hands could grow wrinkled and old

I do not fear growing older--
I fear that I won't make it that long
To see past the cliff
Of what I am now

I once stirred a pot of soup
And thought the same thing
Threw the ladle on the tile
floor; took a walk to calm myself down

And sleep is getting dangerously close
To waking state
Been having dreams that know how badly
I desire to escape to them

They've been pulling me in tighter
Wrapping me in moss, in lucidity

When I leave they kiss me on the forehead
And whisper *come back tomorrow*

And then I'm doomed all day
To the thought of my cells evaporating
Into the abyss
Into the elseness

My boyfriend is warm
He is earthlife, he is here
He is Sunday football and 9-to-5
He drinks rum on holidays and watches Quentin Tarantino

He holds me close to him
And I feel his sunlight tickling my skin
Teasing it, like it knows once it leaves
I'm back to ice

I admire am in love with what who he thinks I am
I fantasize about the person who
Dances around his mind
Disguised as me

I get off to the thought
That I get to be his warmth
Even if I'm just
A heating lamp. Even if I'm not quite the sun

He can't hear the scream
In my head
That's the beauty of the mind
I can howl and smile at the same time

A good vice is getting harder to find
And honestly I can't tell the difference
Between the ones that are good or me
And the ones that are bad

There's ashwagandha, lexapro, kale smoothies
Waking up at the same time everyday
"What if you logged your feelings?"
Running hands over ice cold water

Running hands over hot water
A glass of wine with homework
Two glasses of wine with homework
Wasn't my grandfather an alcoholic?

There's a gummy and a movie and
I'll just do what I have to do tomorrow
Talk to your friends about it
Hahahaha

EFT, CBT,

REBT, DBT, ACT

MBCT, ERP

Go for a run, go for a walk,

meditate in the morning

meditate at night

make a list of all the things you're *grateful for*

A man's touch, a bed that's not yours

Singing on a stage so often that

People think you're doing great and

If they keep telling me that, will it become true?

One shot of tequila before a gig

Two shots of tequila before a gig

Two and a half

Is it scary if we get to three?

My mom's leftover xanax

From her plane anxiety

Rebecca's hydroxyzine

Finally the doctor gives me propranolol

Doesn't work in the slightest

One cup of coffee in the morning

Maybe another at 2

Maybe another at 6?

Nothing's working
so what if the problem is too big
like a black hole
and the problem is me

And what if piano hands are just
hands that can't grow old
because they were doomed from the start
to just make sounds of pleading, begging, screaming
until they die?

Belly of the Whale

I told my grandmother once
As she wiped tears from my cheeks
That I like it here
She cocked her head,
Concerned, confused

You see,
I will sit down in its darkness
Feel around its floors, its walls
Acquaint my lungs with its air
Make it my home
Build myself a fire
 Befriend the beast

Learn its calls, its songs
Harmonize with them
Hang up paintings,
Sweep, mop, and shine
Tickle its skin
Make shelves from its ribs

And one day,
It will grow sick of me
It will feel that I have run out
Of things to do

It will release me,

Out into the sea

Where I will swim, with new strength

Sewn from its belly

Monday's Morning Pages

Today I am proud of myself

For stretching in the morning

The backs of my knees yawning after their long stillness

All sprawled out on the carpet

For putting gas in my car

And paying for it too

Even though I hate driving,

For braiding my hair last night

So that I would wince a little less

Upon looking in the mirror in the morning

For drinking green tea instead of coffee

So that ducking under the bar of 4pm

Might not leave me falling to my knees

For cleaning my dirty dishes

And my roommate's too

So that we will both have fresh pans for a homemade dinner

For answering messages

Old ones and new

Watering the roots of my relationships

For getting in the shower
Even without strength for soap
Water was enough today

For slowing down my breath
After noticing its shortness
Holding hand to heart and counting 1, 2, 3, 4...

For getting out of bed at all
Stripping myself from sheets
Like dried wax from legs

For doing it all
Resisting resistance
Honoring my cells' desire
To keep this machine going
As hard as they work to turn my morning toast into ATP
I will work just as hard
To count down from ten
And get myself out of this bed

Stardust

The chances of being born are roughly one in four-hundred trillion—I do not think I can conceptualize the absolute rarity of my form. It is a phenomenon so big and small, that I can either float on top of it or drown in its vastness. Today I choose to float, to be carried by my rarity. I choose to grow wings planted on the soil of everything that has come before me, and flutter into the atmosphere of everything that will come from me. I am stardust, I am the oxygen from the trees in my yard, I am my mother's legs and the eyes of an ancestor who perhaps I do not know the name of. I am the wrinkles 'round my mouth that I will one day have, I am the children I have not conceived yet, I am the adopted quirks of friends I will meet traveling some years into my twenties. I often look into mirrors and desire so strongly to unzip this skin, climb out, and be back with the fabric from which I came from. But I already am. I am the same stuff as the bumblebee who fell dead after it stung the sole of my foot, and the flower it pollinated hours before. My name is just four letters; it may as well be everyone's. Separation is a thin veil; I am pulling its loose threads lately just to find that there is nothing inside.

I Buy Pink for My Kitchen Now

I remember when a year was a *year*
My fat was in my face and not on my waist
No one tells you that
one day you wake up on a plateau
and realize you've been here for a while,
— because last January was the same color as this one,
wasn't it?
It folded into spring, did a somersault
and landed here on this morning

There are only so many ways to dye
And cut your hair until you can't
make your own metamorphosis anymore
Maybe my grown out roots are just fine
And driving is not so scary after all,
So long as you follow the rules
That boy really was just a boy, wasn't he?
I've started reaching my hand through the veil,
Wiping off old tears from years ago
I laugh. I laugh with her. I laugh *at* her a little too

And I have been thinking
Having one favorite color doesn't really make sense,
Does it?
Why can't it depend on what you are that day—

What you want to be,
What you want *not* to be?
I buy pink for my kitchen now
It makes me think of Rebecca

Maybe to be in love is not to be on fire
But rather it is bare feet on grass
Hands under running water
Linen on skin

I stretch and stretch, and wonder...
What is the thing, after all this time,
That has kept me the same?
What is the glue that holds
My liver with my ghosts,
What keeps my veins wrapped
around my memories

I am my mother's eyes and dysregulation,
My father's pink skin and patience,
And I am something foreign that I cannot figure out

Now I like tomatoes and beans,
I can drink my coffee black,
And blue is a beautiful favorite color to have
But dammit, sometimes it's sad
And that tangerine peeking through the clouds

On your drive home feels like hope

Sometimes you have to pick yourself up

By the straps, and choose orange

Because it is good for you