

QUALIA: A PERSONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

by

Zachary Charles Poston

HONORS THESIS

Submitted to Texas State University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
graduation in the Honors College
May 2021

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ABSTRACT

Schizophrenia is a complex mental disorder which affects nearly 1% of the population. This thesis is an ethnography and memoir over the life of Zachary Poston, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at nineteen years of age. This work uses a literary memoir, poetry, and art made both in and out of psychotic states. Though this memoir will not give answers or a conclusion, it will give a perspective into the unique life schizophrenia forces upon a person and the challenges and experiences that come with it.

“Zachary reported that he began having paranoid thoughts around the age of sixteen to include a fear of being murdered, while also seeing shadows, and having other hallucinatory experiences. He had previously been diagnosed with obsessional thoughts and actions, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, and an Unspecified Psychosis.”

- Zackery Tedder, Austin PRC; “Psychological Evaluation”

I do hope that one thing taken into consideration throughout this memoir’s reading is that most of it was written in an active state of psychosis. So, for better or worse, much of the content is accented with the thoughts of another inside my own head (despite what I thought, there was never another mind within my own. However, please humor the previous Zach and his ramblings). This memoir is a personal ethnography of my experience with schizophrenia, inspired by Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*. For my unique experiences, I purposefully split the sections into different venues of representation. I hope that the varying channels will show different perspectives on my schizophrenic experience.

The literary memoir is first in order to show my story through the most common and accustomed form already known to the genre of autobiographies. A poetry section highlights work I wrote while in a state of active psychosis as well as the poetry I have written since my mind has been clearer. Finally, visual art will be illustrated to show what I cannot explain in words.

Literary Memoir

“His profile indicates a lack of internal cohesion wherein basic intentions and interaction with others tend toward ill-defined motivation. He frequently wavers unpredictably in his behaviors and relationships, seeming to respond more readily to transient inner cues than a realistic sense of others and their circumstances. The inner template on which he relies for understanding and interpreting reality is likely to be compromised, and his sense of psychic coherence is often precarious.”

Historia

Before anything, I remembered walls and ceilings. I remember how they would morph in and shift around the room when I was ten. I remember how the ceiling would fold into a labyrinth with racers hoping to escape in time. Before voices and sights, I remember those arcane walls as a child, and the wails to my parents.

My childhood was much like any other of my station. I was born in a quaint and cutely town: Brenham, Texas. I’m sure you’ve never heard of it, but if you’ve ever tasted Blue Bell Ice Cream, that’s where it comes from. I never had much trouble making friend with others. In fact, my trouble always came from how well I was at doing so. I would get sent home with a teacher’s note for talking too much or playing around too often, even once for laughing too loudly. It was always easy to fit my mold, but anytime I strayed I remember the names. “Delusional” and “crazy” are the ones that typically come to mind when I told them of wanting to change the world.

Of course, until the age of ten I was “normal.” However, once the horizon shifted and my height grew (however little it did), things began to rearrange. As most children my age would sleep and dream, I would stay up all night to escape from my night terrors. I would hold myself awake until my body succumbed to fatigue. After falling asleep, without fail I would find terror, but it wasn’t the typical nightmares children my age had.

Every night the same men would come into my home and kill me. Every night they found a new way to kill or torture me. In every dream I felt the sense of them coming, and the despair knowing I couldn't escape it. The doors, the windows, the walls, the ceilings, they would come from everywhere. I still feel how powerless I felt then. Looking back, I can't see their faces, but I remember their sensations. It's more a sense that exists now that has moved from those dreams into the real world. When people began to walk beside me, I felt them holstering a knife or waiting to strangle me. That fear of death switched from a dream into a reality. After speaking with numerous psychiatrists and therapists (and after being handed around by each and every one of them), I have come to the conclusion that those dreams were a produce of my OCD, a manifestation of my fear.

These years also saw the birth of obsessive tendencies. I would walk through doors until they felt right or I would replace a cup until it situated itself properly. I would only close my eyes when the computer light flashed off or I would count everything in my room again and again until it finally felt right. Never would I touch anything in a public bathroom lest the filth I saw would manifest itself unto what touched it (this trait, I am okay with. Have you *seen* public school bathrooms?). Of course, these traits seem minute in comparison to what I previously discussed, but they were the beginning of a long process of accumulation: of countless obsessional acts which would transpose themselves into vicious cycles of torment.

With my nightmares and obsessions, paranoia began to grow. Every creak in my home would make me scream, every shadow would make me whimper. I couldn't hold myself back from any sensation. Every sensory experience began to overwhelm me. I began to sleep on the couch in my parents room every night because of this. To be

completely honest, I reasoned that if my dreams and fears became real, I could at least be with my parents when they happened. I still feel bad for my cat, who would begin to sleep in solitude after I left her in my bed all alone.

After six months of sleeping on my parents' couch, they decided to take me to a therapist. After the couch became smaller and smaller, I agreed. We spoke for months, but few of the terrors ever stopped. The therapist decided I had anxiety and obsessional-compulsive disorder tendencies, but nothing was dire. Many children are anxious and peculiar; I was no different. At the very least, that's how she felt.

Over the years my obsessions developed but were still manageable. It wasn't until sixteen when intrusive thoughts began. Intrusive thoughts are ideas or thoughts which pop into your head and play on repeat. Seldom it is that they can ever be ignored or that you can ever distract yourself from them. At the time, it seemed completely logical to believe what I did and to think why I did. I thought the intrusive thoughts were coming from another person inside of me. They weren't controlling me making me say things, but they were just trapped in there with my own conscience thinking alongside me. What they did do though, was tell me awful things. I remember thoughts, visions, that I'm still ashamed of saying. I remember going to the store and, at the sight of every elderly man, every mother, every child, hearing someone tell me to do something awful to them. Writing this, I have learned that they are a part of obsessive-compulsive disorder, but in at this time I was too naive to know.

The thoughts would develop over the years, becoming more and more gruesome. I grew to accept certain ways to torture myself. The more the thought came into my mind, the more I could tolerate it. Though I still collapse in pain and fear of when it comes to

life, I have countless more ways of putting myself through torture. The pain becomes so real that I can genuinely feel it coursing through my body and I cannot quite grasp which reality I am in: the one in which *you* are or the one in which the torture is happening. At the time, one of the worst parts was not knowing whether or not I truly wanted it to happen.

Over the years “they” manifested more in my body and physical features. The voice in my head began to see out of my right eye. Of course, physically others couldn’t tell, but I could see “them” inside of me. My pupil would grow larger when whatever was inside of me began to see through it. Even now, I feel them straining that eye. Closing the left eye and opening the right only made them more present. When I needed to focus more or shut his voice out when I was in class, I would close my right eye. Sometimes I would need to hold my hand over it as well. They began to take over my left hand as well. I remember restraining my hand as I walked back from campus as it spazzed out of my control. I remember holding it down when it came into contact with scissors or knives. I remember them punching me over and over again at night until my arm would become numb before even my face, but all I could do was hope they didn’t go anywhere worse. Even now, their presence still lingers. I’d like to think I’ve made a lot of progress since I first became aware of everything, but it’s still a struggle to overcome the thought that I really am alone in my head, that they are not real. I fear that in writing this, they are being made more real.

Being so paranoid and afraid of this being though made much else of life difficult. My memory was heavily impaired. I would eat and then get upset and accuse others of eating the food I just had twenty minutes ago. I would forget I was in class or forget

where I was. I couldn't even recognize what side of the door I was on when I closed it behind me. My mind became so tormented by my thoughts that I couldn't remember who I was in the present. Sometimes I would literally lose time itself. I remember once transferring my consciousness to a past Zach, and began to play video games while I was, in the present, on a ride back from hanging out with friends. If this is difficult to understand, it may help to know that it is even *more* difficult to write it—so there.

The hallucinations became more real around nineteen as well. Looking around, I began to notice in my classes a halo around everyone's head, or I could see atoms within the walls. I would see chalkboards create mouths and speak or men with tall hats walk around my room. I can't explain the random and strange occurrences that my hallucinations brought, but they were never as serious as they are for others. I could often, though, see the "they" that occupied my mind. They would be against the wall, waiting for me to finish my homework or be waiting for my when I turned the lights of. My pillows would have faces, and when I couldn't *face* them (pun-intended) and turned around, I would see the same face in the ceiling.

With these hallucinations came delusions. I don't know how to say this without sound *completely* crazy, but for a solid part of my teenage years, I genuinely thought I was a reincarnate of Napoleon Bonaparte. For why, I cannot tell. But, I can tell you that my interest in political science and my majoring in it were due to this reason in no small part. Believing you are a reincarnate of a conqueror does little to help your relations with others. I told someone else once, and I told them I was going to reconquer Europe, and they called me a lunatic. They were only *slightly* off, but still, a technicality.

It was at nineteen, my current age, when I first sought help. My friend and I were

discussing psychedelics-another day in the life of Zachary Charles Poston. My friend told me to be sure I was in a good mental space before even *thinking* of doing something, and that was when something struck. Some inner presence called and I felt compelled to spend my whole night doing research. What does it mean to be in a “good mental space?” What even is mental health? What kind of state was I in? Of course, this was probably a sign that something was amiss. We met later that week and I confessed to some of the more gruesome aspects of my condition. I confessed to having bouts of internalized self-torture and a lack of empathy towards others. I told him about the methods of torture I succumbed to every night and the vision of them appearing every time I closed my eyes. I could imagine the ways in which I could hurt myself when I fell asleep at all times. He seemed, let’s say, worried *enough*. I sought help.

I began to seek psychological help through the university first. However, each therapist and psychiatrist I met referred me to another. They decided that, after four transfers, I should seek help outside of the university system. See, school help is designed for treatable, eight-week problems that can be managed. I seemed to defy that principle a tiny bit. I thanked them enough for the recommendation.

Outside of the system, I sought an expert on issues of psychosis, obsessional tendencies, and anxiousness: Zachary Tedder. He played it cool when we first met but asked that I return in less than three days. We took multiple examinations, including an IQ test, an MCMI-IV, and an MMPI (which appears in this thesis) to survey my mental state. He wasn’t surprised by the results. My case was a bit atypical for the examinations, but the data came out pretty conclusively. His suspicion was to become official. My fear was to become real.

La Vida Cotidiana

Since my diagnosis, I have become “better” (as much as I can, I suppose) with therapy and medication. The news that I can probably never come off of medication is... scary, to say the least, but at least I know that “they,” the concept of another person inside myself, can be dealt with. My daily life with medication has taken some getting used to. I am much more tired than before, like there is a layer of molasses around my body with every step. A couple of weeks ago I was tired of it. I wanted to feel how I used to.

Of course, the interesting part of getting better is you forget how bad you used to feel. I took for granted everything that the medication had done to uplift my life. I went off my medication for a couple of weeks, just to test if I was being honest or somehow lying to myself. That night, after a couple of weeks of being off meds, I saw hands reaching out of my window and another ethereal presence by the door. It again began.

Back on them fully, I won't try that again for a while. I can, if barely, recognize that this isn't just some figment of my imagination. Though some things are still difficult to make sense of, I'm coming around to making peace with them. I've ranked high on numerous examinations for PTSD. I don't quite know where that comes from, but perhaps imagining torturing myself and dissecting every piece of flesh and ripping apart every limb of your body wears on your mind after three years.

The worst of all my symptoms are still my intrusive thoughts. This is mainly because many of the other “positive symptoms” (hallucinations, voices, etc. Think of positive as *adding* something to your experience) can be diluted with the help of my medication. However, the intrusive and repetitive thoughts of mutilating myself seldom leave my conscience. As said prior, I *have* learned to live with it, but the feeling of

collapsing when a particularly gruesome one occurs still strikes at times. When I am alone, I can usually curl myself into a ball and try to protect all my organs and extremities from what I might do to myself, however in public this is a bit taboo. Particularly vulnerable parts of the body trigger me more than others. Teeth, eyes, genitalia, and others, even when I just see those of others, trigger the thoughts of ripping or pulling or breaking mine off. Sometimes its hard to look at people in public because the sensations become too much. The feeling of it happening is too real and I can't tell whether or not it's really happening.

This fear of mutilation manifests in other situations. It's hard to shower because of this. When closing my eyes to apply shampoo, all I can imagine are scissors waiting to strike and slice me in places I cannot protect.

Other people trigger other things inside me as well. Any time I see some deviating from the "average" human, something awakens in me. I want to collapse in grief and cry out every tear I can for their sake. When I see an animal, I don't know how to respond other than tears. For why, I do not know.

Though my hallucinations have diminished, I'm still scared that they will return in full force again someday. My periphery always picks up things it shouldn't. Writing this now, I see a net catching butterflies. I am inside of a building at a desk. I sometimes hear a whistle or call, a sneeze or a whimper, but looking around, I'm all alone.

Paranoia is, as expected, still present, but less focused. I can walk on a sidewalk without hiding behind bushes when I see someone else. I no longer feel that everyone is holding a knife in their hand, but it's still hard to look some people in the eyes sometimes without my mind alerting me that they're not real or that they're a terminator sent back to

hurt me. It's hard not to look over my shoulder nor check no one is trailing me at every moment.

Some of the “negative symptoms” I face mostly deal with the social sphere. It's hard to encourage myself to with people when I often simply feel superior to them. Most of my friends I feel are quite dumb, but I know this is only because they are not educated in the one niche topic I find interesting, but this logic just doesn't apply when I'm around them for some reason. My narcissism makes me feel better connected with my teachers than my peers. The relationships I foster with my teachers are fantastic, as they are finally happy a student has an intellectual appetite for their niche topic.

I don't care much for my experiences. I know everyone says that they make you who you are and be proud of them, but I'd rather not fear the dark at the age of nineteen. I'd rather not fear mutilating myself when I go to sleep at night. I'd rather not fear that the voices inside my head would be the ones to wake up in the morning. I'd rather not have to face this fear at all moments of my life, but life moves forward. All I can do is keep moving and stay the pace. All I can do is continue.

Poetry:

“Zachary’s MCMI-IV profile is characterized by isolative tendencies, egocentricity, an inflated sense of self-importance, and an intense mistrust of others.”

“His presentation is one of self-created absurdity and incoherence, the result of a concerted effort to undo the remnants of his cognitive clarity and emotional balance.”

I wrote this poetry in the summer of 2020. I was taking a couple Spanish classes and felt that I could better express myself without limitations through the Spanish language rather than English. My English responses are simply reflections I have come upon since taking medication and lessening my psychotic features.

The Summer of '20

Ellos dicen que no vamos a ser conocidos,
pero serás,
adentro mi alma sin muerte.

Para ser humano
Es sentir todo

The gold laced clouds streaked the sky
As warming rays danced upon my hair.
Wet forms upon my brow in sitting,
And wondering how to write.
My gaze trickled and fell from the sun's immortal shine,
Even as he passes from my sight, he awaits me and my time.

Un hombre sin rostro
en sueño encuentro.
Sin voz ni mirada,
espero que él salga.
“¿Por qué me visitas?”
Le grité al forastero
“Porque soy un gitano,
encajado en tu cuerpo”
“¿Por qué?”
Le pregunté al niño,
“porque soy tú,” me dijo,
“cuando era un niño.”

¡Por favor me contestan!

Sin rostro ni hueco tú,

con todo espíritu,

ronda mi conciencia.

Un dolor no afiado

pero duele lo mismo

En ti todo cree.

Pero como puedo creer en ti,

sin ningún crecimiento,

¿en mí?

Las palabras que lees,

¿Son de mi o de ti?

¿Quién es el criado?

¿Las palabras o mí?

“¿Eres tú?” pido,

Pero a mí me gustaría sentir

si existieras

dentro de mí.

Mis memorias de ser un niño

se rompen,

como el vidrio

de un vaso caído.

¿Y qué las memorias sostengan?

Eran las memorias un montón de flores

que se basan en sentimientos

falsos, pasados y olvidados.

Como me gustaría sentir

como el niño que era.

¡Contéstame por favor!

Qué sólo mi alma se quede

Sentando en un mundo sin amor

Divertido por mente y cuerpo

¡Contéstame de nuevo!

No por qué existo yo, pero

¿Por qué me sufro?

¿Por qué me dividió entre la infinidad y lo real?

Mis llamas se quedan descontentados
Como el viento detrás de las hojas caídas
En un desierto me siento
y espero por mi agua

¡Qué temo la muerte!
Sin palabras ni sentidas
Se parece aún más un esclavo
¡y yo por la muerte!
No quiero partir de esta vida,
Pero guiarme antes de los restos
La única casa más peor que la muerte eternal
Es la vida más allá de tu tiempo.

Un cuerpo como hueco
Una sociedad como castigo
En que vivimos

Mi corazón
se divide entre dos partes

Una en la realidad
y la otra en la infinidad.

¿Puedo amar de nuevo?
Llama mi alma para alguien
que no existe, y si le encuentro
¿le debo seguir? Si contesto la llamada,
¿aún podría continuar yo?

Mi alma llora
Pero mis ojos
Se quedan desnudos.
Se tormenta la mente mía.

Pero mis palabras
son placidas y vacías.

Mi vida continua.

Pero yo
no puedo hacer lo mismo.

Interim

Moonlight glistens soft,
Dancing on his manifest
Sat idle aside.

Post-Psychosis

Existence dances
To the ballads of Bécquer
Rhythm without feel

Sitting by a tree
I see an apple falling.
I take a deep breath.

Ever present.
Coiled around Eden's post,
Time passes us by.

Splash sounds the puddle.

His steps sound alongside mine

Shadows intertwined.

The rain taps a log

Somewhere in the world it calls

But here it sits still

The cold winter air

Bristles lightly on my coat.

My fire embers.

My desk sits lonely

Books scattered about the room

The A.C. turns cold

Art:

“He may lose touch with reality at times, twisting and magnifying the incidental remarks of others into critical insults and purposeful slanders. At other times, he may attempt to reconstruct reality to suit his unfulfilled and grandiose aspirations... his desire to provoke fear and intimidate others is deeply felt and stems from a long-standing need to overcome his inner weakness and to vindicate real or imagined past injustices.”

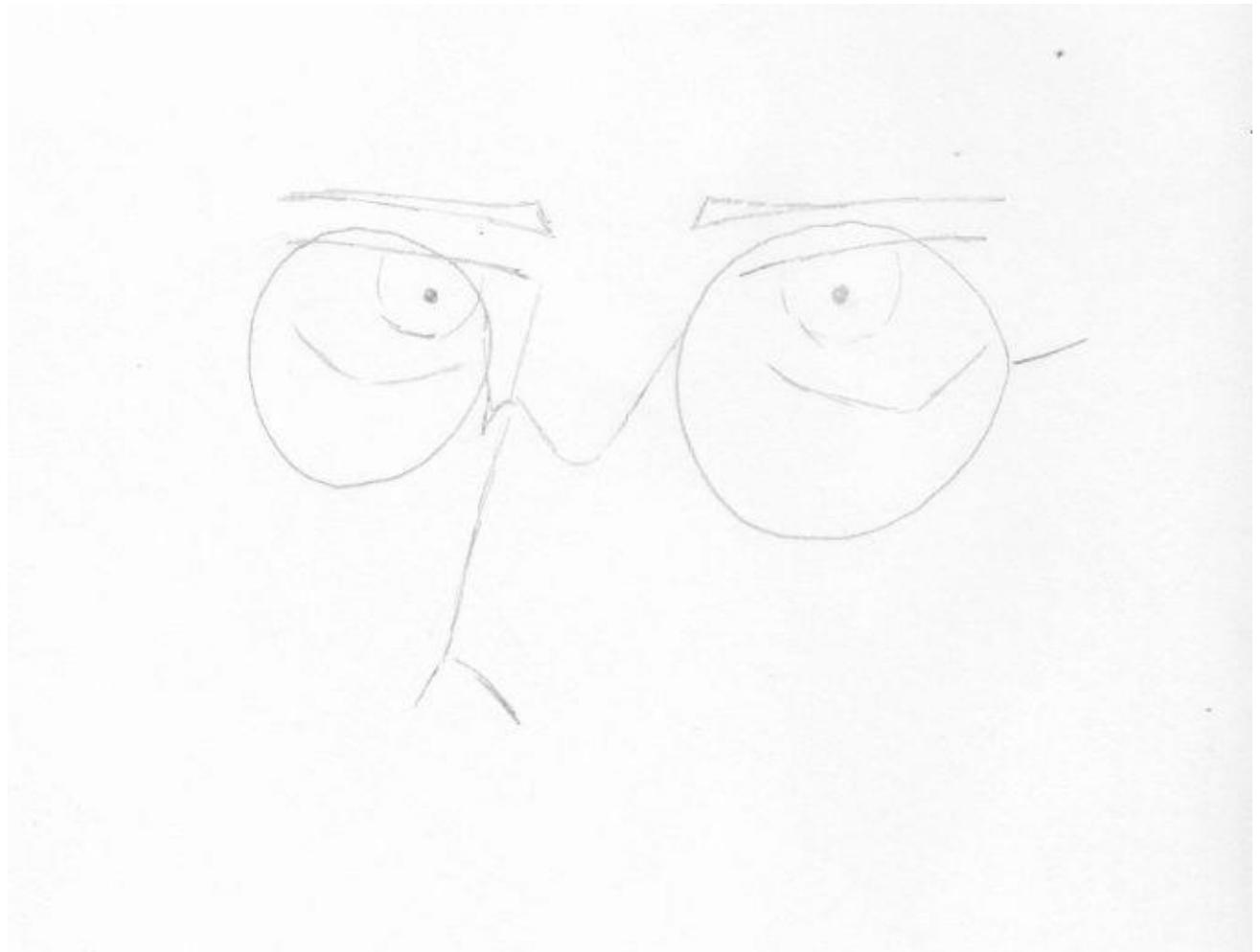
This art was created throughout, and sometimes before, the tenure of this thesis.

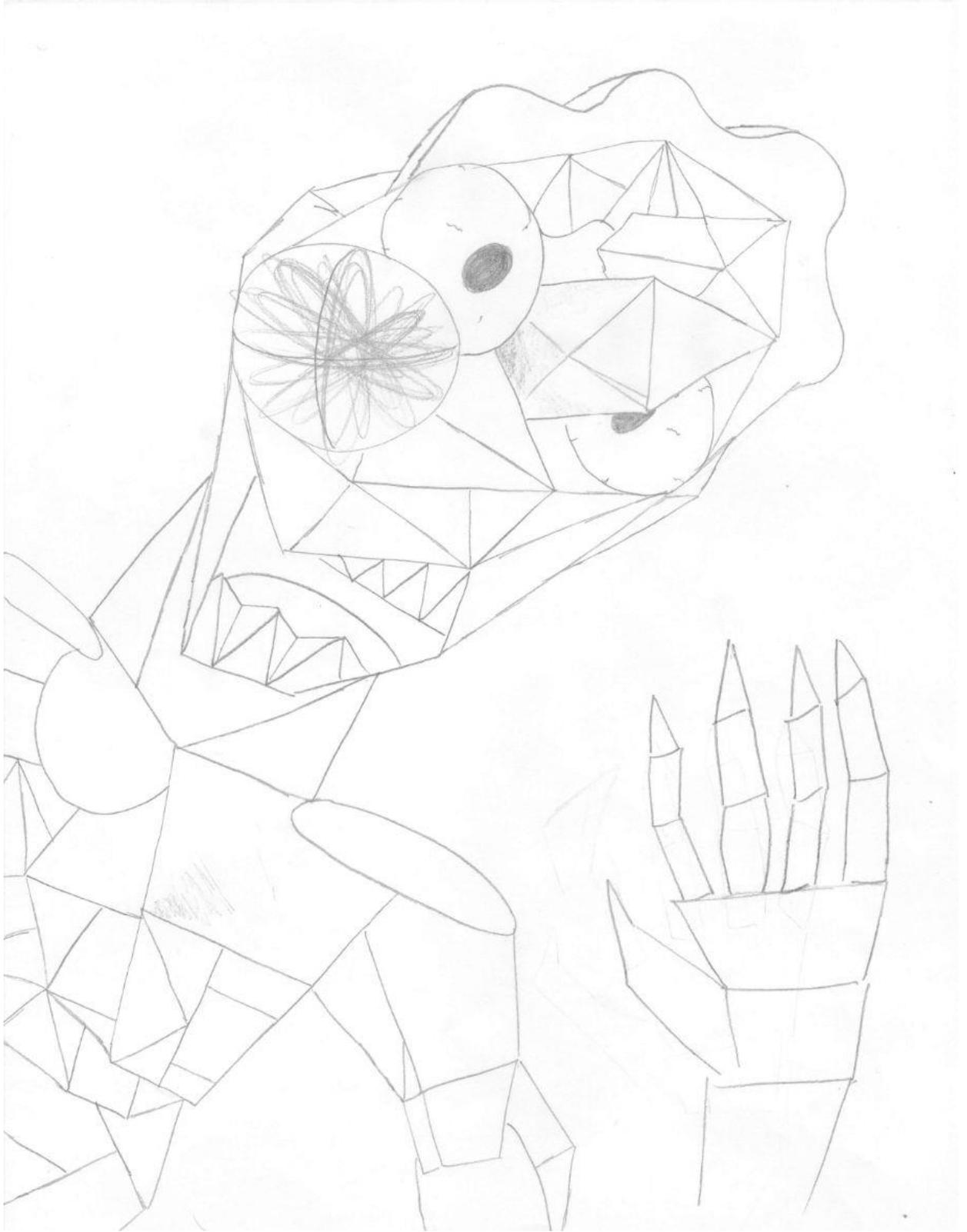
Much of it was drawn whilst writing or collecting poetry for this thesis, so some of it was created while in a state of psychosis and represents some of the visions or hallucinations I experienced and others not so much. I hope for this section to represent what I missed in writing.



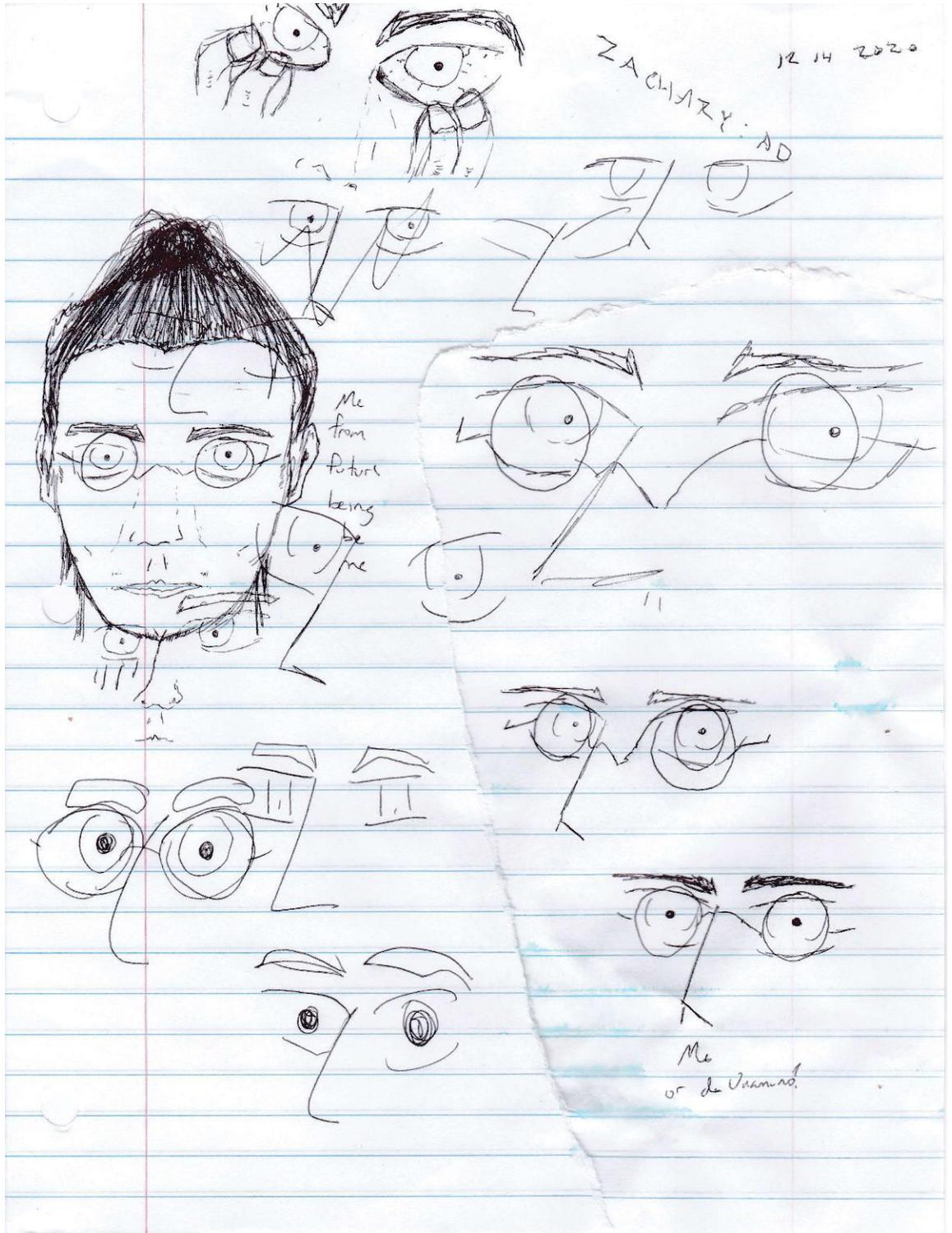


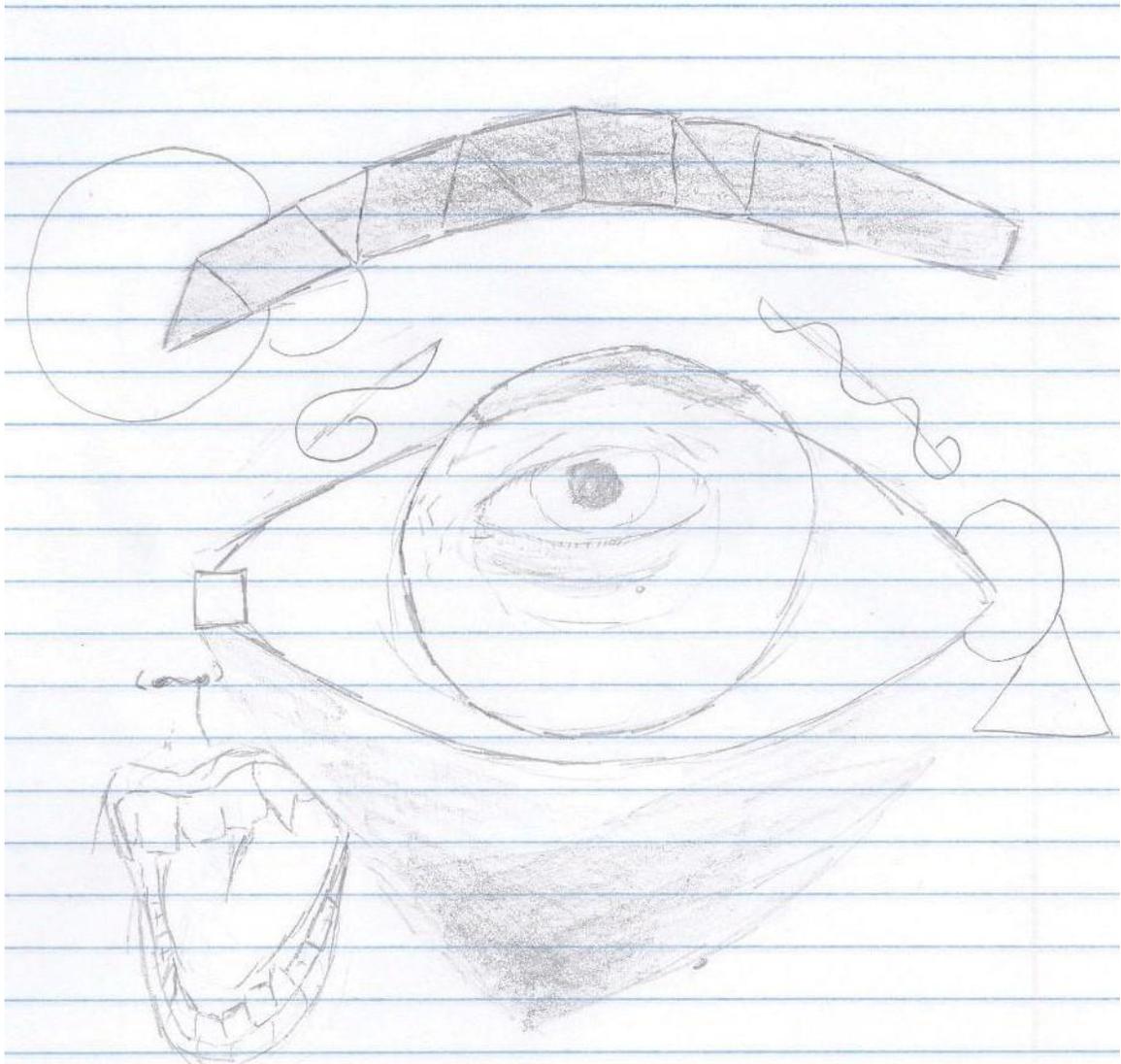












“Zachary’s profile suggests the presence of an active psychosis indicative of paranoid schizophrenia. Hallucinations, delusions, and extreme suspiciousness are common. He may present with a blunted affect, and may be shy, introverted, and socially withdrawn. Alcohol use may lead to aggressive behaviors. He may have some impacted memory and concentration abilities at times. He may have difficulty in handling his responsibilities of everyday life which may require psychiatric hospitalization.”

“Therefore, the following diagnoses are given at this time: Schizoaffective Disorder, Depressive Type, Continuous, Severe; and Generalized Anxiety Disorder.”