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Thesis Preface

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preface

*Woke up, I'm in the in-between honey*  
*One foot out and I know the weight is coming*  
*--Bleachers*

I was a few weeks into my first semester and feeling a little overwhelmed and inadequate compared to the talent I saw in my peers. I was probably the youngest and fresh out of undergrad with little sense of who I was as a writer. I was taking Johnny's poetry course where the culminating project was a long-form poem, and I was stuck trying to force a failed concept. I was driving to the second day of the writer's conference when the song *Goodmorning* written by Jack Antonoff popped up in my playlist.

The concept of the song is about the moment right when you wake up and you're in this in-between state where you are aware of the world existing around you, but the weight of your life and existence within that world has not settled in yet. The album *Gone Now* which this song comes from is heavily inspired by childhood nostalgia and the conflicting nature of growing up.

This narrative began forming in my head of this woman with dementia existing in this in-between stage where she is aware there is life around her, but unable to fully step into and participate. The idea of the foggy disintegrating memory stuck with me and I began to wonder how I could convey this concept on the page. I felt just talking about this topic was not enough, but wondered if I could write it in a way that readers could experience the sensation of

memory loss. Thus, the initial idea of fading text was conceived and my obsession with experimenting with form began. I started working on the first draft of *diminishing*.

The first idea I had was to create this reoccurring poem where the text would fade out as her memory decayed. This initial concept was well-received by the majority in workshops and has made its way into the final project. Another key factor of the initial poem was these pieces made up of dialogue between the speaker and her family. I had crafted this narrative in my head surrounding this central character, and in the beginning, the best way for me to get her thoughts and frustrations out was to have her interacting with other characters. But this felt very external and as the piece moved to a more interior experimental piece the dialogue got put aside.

In that first class, I was in the very early stages of experimenting graphically and was more focused on the visual effect of the form than on the finesse of the language. I was proud of the end result, which was about twenty pages, but I definitely recognized that the poem needed refinement. However, it felt complete to me at the time and I put it aside to continue with the coursework of other classes.

When it came time to pick a thesis topic, I was a little lost. I think most probably come in expecting to write a novel or some significant piece of work like that, but I did not feel as though I was going to produce a superb novel that would be worth the time and effort. I felt drawn towards something more creative and getting back into experimenting. I pulled *diminishing* back out and thought about how I could extend the poem into a full-length piece without exhausting the topic and look like I was trying too hard with the forms. After a month of meditating on it and doing some research, I came up with the idea of these five separate “acts” that would come together to depict the entirety of this woman’s life through her memory processes. I knew each act would stand apart and have unique forms and purposes while ultimately serving the greater

thread of memory loss. By showing the initial memories being created and manipulated, their eventual decay would be even more emotionally impactful.

I had dozens of ideas for forms and shapes and special effects that now litter a well-loved sketchbook. What I quickly realized was that just because it looked cool in my personal mental space did not mean it would look good or even work on a two-dimensional page. I never felt limited when creating this poem in Word. I knew how to manipulate different effects in the program to do anything I wanted. But I knew I had to limit myself within the context of what would best serve the poem. Every page could be new and different and there are thousands of options available, but then the form would be reduced to a gimmick. I really focused on making sure that there was a clear intention behind the form. I did not want random line breaks and words scattered across the page with no purpose as seems to be the current trend. The form had to visually represent what was happening to the speaker as if it was a tool she was using to get her experience across. Therefore, the visuals told as much of a story as the words did, and they both are in this marriage. There is clear unison between the form, the text, and the narrative on the page where they all service each other rather than one aspect taking the lead.

I also knew my poetic voice needed to be stronger. While playing with the form was easier for me, I really worked on heightening the language of this poem from what it originally was. I still wanted it to be accessible and not layered in too many metaphors to understand. I think the form took care of that aspect. But I wanted to make sure that while the language was simple, it was still elegant in execution. I wrote a lot of this out loud which I had never done before. At the beginning, I saw this as a visual poem and thought that the sound of it did not matter as it was not meant to be delivered orally. But I began to push myself to put more focus

into the weight of each word on the page. This is something I continually need to work on and consciously think about.

This project is a single, narrative poem which was sometimes a challenge. But I focused on creating a narrative within the piece. I framed each act around a season, starting with winter, then spring, summer, fall, and ending with revisiting winter in a mirrored way. I made sure there was a definitive beginning, middle, and end and mixed in the high points and the low points, making sure the poem had plenty of movement as well as little pauses when needed. I was fortunate enough to take Johnny's poetry course again at the same time I was working on this, and the feedback I received in the workshops was extremely valuable and pushed this poem as far as it went. I knew the poem was going to consist of the five acts, and Johnny's course was structured around five consecutive submissions, so rather than writing twenty lines at a time, I wrote each act within the time frame of two weeks, which to be honest turned into two hours as I am a certified professional procrastinator. I set aside the draft I already had of *diminishing* and decided to work up to that final act in order starting with *emergence*.

With *emergence*, I knew I wanted to mirror the ending I had already created to provide a sense of foreshadowing and a circular narrative. However, the effect of the faded text needed to invoke the opposite emotions. Instead of the sense of loss, I needed to create a reversed sense of anticipation, like the fresh, light feeling of an inhale before the release of the exhale. To accomplish all of this, I decided to pull the poem that had sparked the whole idea of this piece and introduce it from the beginning. But rather than using the faded text and reoccurring nature to mimic melting snow, I used the same technique to create the effect of falling snow as if the memory is slowly falling into place. Winter was a major source of inspiration for the original

piece, so I returned to that space with this first act, but I focused on capturing that light that glints off the snow instead of using the obvious death motif that is often associated with the season.

*emergence* needed to provide a glimpse into the direction of the piece while not overwhelming the reader with too much experimentation from the beginning. I recognized that I needed to ease into the more complex forms, so as the reader progressed through the narrative, they would be more open to and adept at interpreting the intention of the graphic design elements.

Keeping this in mind, I began pulling together the palette that I would later mold and manipulate into the varying memory processes of future acts. Nothing is a memory yet, so I focused on blocks of high-impact imagery that encompassed all the senses and were highly accessible to a range of readers. These blocks were heavily influenced by the 60's because it was a decade of radical change and where ideas exploded in multiple directions resulting in a high-conflict, high-textured era that intrigued me. I also did not want to start too far back because I delved into this project keeping in mind the children of those with dementia. This project is not for those suffering from memory loss, but for those directly affected to experience what that could look like which meant the 60's was that sweet spot to begin with. The blocks needed vibrancy and texture and were shaped around familiar memories of childhood like going to school, eating ice cream, and home life. I also made sure to focus on the sound of these blocks in particular, which was not something I had put much thought into originally. I had thought this was a visual poem not meant to be read aloud, but I started to experiment with how the words sounded and felt in the mouth being verbalized.

The inspiration behind *encoding* came from research into how the mind creates and processes memory. This poem is not meant to be a medical or scientific document but bringing

in those terms in specific moments give the piece grounding moments of reality within the experiment. “Encoding” is the first process of memory where information is perceived and translated into a construct that can then be stored away in the brain. So, keeping with the spirit of building up this palatte of memory, where *emergence* is heavy blocks of dense but generic imagery, the experiences in *encoding* are more particular and zoomed in on specific, tangible moments. It mimics the flashes of memory that invades our thought-processes. The memories have lost a bit of their density in the encoding process as the extraneous is filtered out.

The first form introduced was inspired by the coding process as these memories are being filtered and converted for storage. I also incorporated the faded text here again for cohesion and familiarity and to also give the impression of words slotting into place as these moments are being processed. Each piece in this form carries the narrative of the speaker growing up. These are the highlights that flash through her mind when reminiscing about her own childhood, and while there is still a 60s undertone, it is beginning to fade out in the conversion process. Each of these poems are able to be read and reread in whatever order the reader chooses to mimic how these little flashes we get have no concrete order and have become separated from time in our memory. These are the little moments that are steeped in nostalgia and triggered by the wind carrying a certain smell or hearing an old song that takes you back.

The second form introduced in *encoding* that becomes familiar for the rest of the poem was inspired by brain synapses which store and carry our memories. These are more detailed and mimic the block structure from *emergence*, but the memories are now secured and protected in the brain. I also had the intention of showing how one memory then triggers another and all these moments become interwoven in the mind. I kept the repeating “encoding” to connect it to the previous form and keep up the sense of it being actively written in these synapses.

The narrative of *encoding* was difficult to figure out in the beginning. I knew I wanted to cover this woman's whole life but was keenly aware of the limited space I had to do this. In *emergence*, the speaker is in her very early years of childhood throughout the entire act, so I needed to pick up the pace here which I felt worked well with the nature of coding and the forms I had created. It gave this section a sense of urgency, like the speaker was rushing through life like a child who does not want to wait to grow up.

This was the point I also began to think about story structure within each of these acts and the narrative arc when they all came together as a whole. I decided to frame the whole piece like a traditional play with the first two acts providing the rising action, the third act being the climactic moment, then the falling action in the final two acts. Each act on their own needed to have a sense of building up to something and a climactic moment to keep the narrative going and the reader engaged. In *emergence*, the reoccurring poem that gradually faded in provided that anticipation and climax when it was finally fully complete. *Encoding* had such an intense urgency and feeling of life while maintaining a youthful and innocent outlook as I tried to channel a springtime atmosphere in this act. The pinnacle moment needed to be muted, providing a pause and a shedding of the speaker's innocence. Ending it on the loss of the mother provided a hint of foreshadowing, but it also forces the reader to pause and take a brief moment before moving on to the next act. It also forces the speaker to slow down and start recognizing the moments that need to be cherished and held onto. From this point on, the memories hold more weight and have a heightened sense of purpose.

*Recalling* is the most climactic act of the poem, and it was also a peak moment for me through the process of writing this piece. I pushed the visual experiment the furthest in this

section and every page has its own distinct graphic form. This section came extremely easy to me and my sketchbook had pages full of drawings and notes.

Like *encoding*, “recalling” is the scientific term for the third and final memory process where the encoded information is retrieved from where it is stored. At this point, I had been consciously trying to track my own memory patterns and was piecing together how to visually convey the abstract concept of memory. I became fascinated with how memories become altered with factors like time, emotion, revelation, and external forces such as “social contagions”. These alterations begin to build up tension and are a precursor to the eventual loss of these memories altogether.

Having left off with the quiet moment of the mother’s death, I wanted to start this act off with closing up that moment so the piece could successfully move on. The opening poem deals with the speaker’s grief. The faded text is the memory of the physical funeral event that was held. While experimenting, I knew I had to keep a cohesive thread through all of the forms, so the text is in a simple block familiar to previous forms and easily read. The text of the physical memory is also faded to highlight the time passed and distance the speaker now has from that event. Layered over this single block of texts are smaller blocks of solid black text that detail the immediate thoughts now that grief has settled. Though the memory of the funeral and all those emotions will eventually slip away and fade with time, the three small blocks show the lingering affects this loss has on the speaker.

This funeral scene is a direct mirror to the wedding scene that comes a few pages later. I came up with this idea watching my own wedding video and realizing how many details I had already forgotten even though it had only been a year. The faded text is the physical encoded event that took place which consists of many of the same details and images from the funeral.

The black text layered and tilted over the faded text is what I call the “ghost of the memory”. It is what the speaker is able now to recall from her wedding. Many of the details are gone, but some details she still remembers vividly depending on how important that aspect of the day was to her. I wanted it to seem like the memory was being lifted from the event in the visual form. I remember when I got feedback on this piece in the workshop, several people said they were frustrated because they wanted to read the underneath layer which was the intention. I wanted people to feel a bit frustrated that they could not read everything just as the speaker would be frustrated with losing these details. We want to remember everything, but that is not how it works.

I discovered that memories can often merge within the mind and make up one single experience from fragments of multiple events. I used the layered blocks to show this effect on page 39. The two faded blocks are separate moments, but they are overlaid by the block of black text made up with scraps of both these memories. This one also has this sense of loss to me and sparked a few ideas for the next two acts.

Another one of these layered pieces worth noting is on page 31. The faded text are lines pulled from *encoding* overlaid with slightly darker text that is similar to what is underneath, but there has been a role reversal. Where the faded text is the speaker’s childhood memories, the darker text is her memories as a mother and how these new memories with her own children are similar but not exact. As she settles into motherhood, her childhood memories are replaced with her children’s memories as they take precedence in her mind.

While I was heavily inspired by how memories change and are altered, I also wanted to play with the the difference between what is stored and what is actually available to be recalled and what memories are become ingrained within the human psyche. I broke out of the boundary

of the page a bit for this concept. Page 35 is meant to be printed on the back of page 34, so that the flipping of the page reveals the whole piece. The first part, “Keeping Little Snapshots...” is this simple little piece about trying to hold on to memories. But when the page is flipped, the rest is revealed and it becomes clear that these words were the beginnings of these other memories that were underneath the whole time. The first page is the fragments of these memories that are recalled by the speaker, but the next page shows the rest that is stored away, but maybe not immediately accessible.

Another use of the double page is with the first reoccurring memory. I split the poem down the middle and put it between two pages meant to be printed side by side. I had written the final line “margins of memory” initially thinking about the fringes of memory that everything lies between. But here, I put the poem in the center margin to show that this is an integral memory for the speaker that is deeply rooted in her soul. It exists in the center of her rather than on the fringes. This was also a way to bring this piece back up as a reminder to the reader of how important this memory is, so that when it fades away in the end, it hits with full impact.

In my research, I kept coming across people asking why they remember all the bad, awkward, and embarrassing moments that they would rather forget. These memories seem to constantly pop up with no context and no invitation. I identified with these people completely and wanted to include this weird aspect of memory. So, I created another reoccurring poem but this time with flashes of painful or embarrassing moments that interject themselves between the others. I also imitated the appearance of the synapse pieces from encoding but kept the encasing to a minimum, so it was clear these were quick flashes that triggered each other but were no moments the speaker wanted to dwell upon. These pieces additionally served the poem by providing a sense of movement in a section that had seemed blocky to me.

The last two pages of *recalling* not only are the culmination of this act, but the first experience of pure memory loss rather than replacement or alteration. Keeping with the seasonal theme, I was inspired by the constant summer adventures and the youthful misconception that time is unlimited. So, this final piece of *recalling* was inspired by summer-day memories that are being blown away like dandelion seeds. This is the first instance of memories visibly disappearing, and the dandelion seed imagery kept merging into a person blowing out birthday candles in my mind. I wanted it to be obvious that the speaker was entering the later years of her life, and the idea of birthday candles and wishes being used in this context seemed morbid to me. This is the moment the speaker is admitting to aging and wishing she could perhaps go back and see the faded text that she can no longer access. These pages end the third act but feel like an interlude to me as the decay inevitably approaches.

There is a definite tonal shift in *focus* that happened naturally. This fourth act is more subdued and requires more effort on the reader's part to make out everything which forces them to slow down and acknowledge the weight of what is happening. The inspiration for this act came from the idea of a camera lens out of focus or a poor eyeglass prescription, so I wanted the visuals to be blurred or fuzzy. I also channeled the fall season and how the shifting colors of leaves and their eventual decline can leave trees looking fragmented. The speaker is at the cusp of memory decline, so her memory is foggy and fragmented and starting to disintegrate.

This opening piece in *focus* was the last piece I wrote for this poem. I had noticed how every time someone talks about missing someone, it is the memories with the person they miss the most. So, I wanted to channel that nostalgic energy to set the tone for this act. But I did not want to just focus on the memories the speaker is able to recall, but the memories that maybe dies with the person, like memories from when the speaker is too young to remember or from

before the speaker was born. I also wanted to highlight memories with a notable absence that should have been a shared memory with the person, but never were. With the final line, I wanted there to be a small turn. I wanted that little moment of pain as the speaker feels a pang of guilt for the time she let pass without thinking of this person, whether this is voluntary or not, because a person dies a second death when they are forgotten. I want the reader to start thinking about how a person is made of all these memories both within them and surrounding them in those they know. So, what happens when these memories start to disappear, and how much does a person vanish with them? Not only is the reader about to see the speaker's memories begin to fade away, but they will watch the speaker herself fade away with them.

Next is the fragmentation before the total decay. I brought back on of the large blocks of text from *emergence* and wanted to show how the complete memory is there, just misshapen. It may seem like there are holes, but upon further study, the entire piece is still there, but starting to fade. I also wanted to provide hints of the dementia through physical traits such as misplacing items. On page 47, I want the reader to have to look closely and figure out along with the speaker what is missing or misplaced. Then there is the fogginess of memory. The text is there, but blurred or hidden, so it takes some effort to piece together. I want readers at this point to start to feel this experience for themselves and feel a bit disoriented and frustrated with the speaker.

While writing *focus*, I started thinking about the balance of my poem in terms of imagery and rhetoric. Most of what I had written had been strong images of physical memories with little lines scattered throughout of rhetoric and reflection. But I started thinking about the emotional impact of the piece and the moments that were needed to give this piece a foundation and a shape. There needed to be moments of reflection not just pertaining to specific memories, but about the experience itself where the speaker could interject some reasoning. I was in a hotel

room in Portland for AWP and was looking out to the city, but everything was diffused by a sheer curtain covering the window. This curtain inspired the “white out” form I introduce this section but also sparked the idea for page 51. The memories within a person with dementia are still they, they are just inaccessible. They are unable to be recalled. They are hidden under this blanket of dust that they cannot wipe away.

The final piece of *focus* on page 52 is made entirely from found text from pamphlets, articles, videos, and websites about dementia. When researching the topic, I was overwhelmed by how cold all these materials were. There was bullet-pointed list after bullet-pointed list of all the things that would go wrong at every stage. And what separated these sources from those that deal with cancer and other illnesses is that there was no hope. There were small band aids one could use to mask certain symptoms, but there was no fix to anything. It felt like a giant mass of hopelessness, and I could not imagine what it must feel like to read all these condemning lists and knowing this is my fate and how much of a burden I would involuntarily become. They also seemed so physically exterior. These were lists of all the things only others would notice, but nothing about the interior of the sufferer at all. I could not find any materials dealing with how this disease would emotionally affect the victim. Everything was so centered around what friends and family would now have to deal with. So, I took these texts and piled them all together into this mountain information and used the fading to show how mentally overwhelmed the speaker becomes as it continues to pile on. By the end, she is hopeless and unwilling and unable to continue to process this diagnosis she has now received, and this abandoned sense of self will permeate the final act.

Returning, finally, to *diminishing*, I actually threw out most of what I had written in the original. I kept the idea of the reoccurring poem that gradually fades out as it really is the heart of

the piece. The fading out now has a more significant impact thanks to the lead up of the previous acts. Also, when I had originally created this piece, I was more concerned with the overall effect rather than the words and how it read. I definitely worked and reworked this piece and made sure there was an intentionality in the fading. I wanted it to still tell a story even with pieces missing. This is definitely the piece I spent the most time editing.

I threw out most of the dialogue pieces I had included in the initial draft of *diminishing*. Early in the process, I had thought I would have dialogue throughout the whole poem, but this idea quickly faded away on its own. I realized I wanted this to be about the speaker, and by adding additional voices, she could get lost. Her voice was coming off childish in the end compared to the voices of characters with no mental illness, and I did not want to minimize her internal experience or her identity in any way. So, I kept the piece largely inside her own mind. I did however keep a few small portions of the dialogue that I felt highlighted her experience rather than diminish it. These are just little whispers to verbalize her forgetfulness, but there is a level of sophistication maintained.

Most of the other pieces are pulled from previous sections. My speaker is no longer able to encode new memories, so it would not make sense to introduce any new imagery. Page 60 is also familiar as it mimics a similar poem from *recalling*. The faded text is the disappearing memories of taking care of her children, and it is overlaid by slightly darker text depicting another role reversal. This time, the speaker is the one being taken care of by her children. There is a very circular nature in the dialogue between page 60 and page 31 as her role fluctuates between being a caretaker and being taken care of. My goal though was to keep a weight to this piece. Again, I was aware that she could easily come off as childish and I want my speaker to maintain her sense of dignity at least within herself because it is easy for caretakers to view the

elderly in the same light as a child which, in my opinion, unjustly diminishes them. So, I wanted to show that there is a struggle with this dynamic and highlight the effects of aging. I also understand that taking on the role of a caretaker can be a thankless job, but not at the fault of the speaker. These people are slowly becoming foreign to her, and the trust built in developing relationships is fading away as well. All those years she has spent falling into a deeper sense of love and understanding with those around her is now reversed. It is not that she no longer loves her family, it is that she has forgotten all those fundamental memories that make up a relationship, therefore she has forgotten her love for these people.

Another new piece I incorporated into *diminishing* was the “ghost” piece on page 64. I was caught up with this image of a diminished, elderly person who looked more like a ghost that was stuck lingering and haunting their life rather than being able to move on. the speaker is haunted by the life continuing around her, and she also feels stuck inside this shell. But at the same time, she recognizes she is also haunting her family who view her as a diminished version of herself and long for person she used to be, though she cannot remember who that is. I think this piece really speaks for itself and is one that a reader can get something new from every time they revisit it.

The final piece of the poem is reminiscent of a similar piece I ended on in the original draft, however, it has been completely reimagined into what it is today. The speaker deserves more than inevitably fading away. She deserves her moment to reclaim her voice and directly address her diagnosis and treatment. So many stories focus on or are told by family members and caretakers rather than the actual person suffering from dementia, so I needed to give the speaker her moment to claim her experience as her own. Her end is not to be dictated by anyone but her. But even then, this is in fact the end, so once she has said her piece, the words begin to drop off

as her ability to communicate is taken from her. The text fragments and fades into a light blue, then to white as a way to mimic tears or the melting snow. This is another piece that I believe truly speaks for itself and is the finale this poem deserves.

The editing process was not really that much of a process. Most of what is in the final manuscript existed in that same form in the original draft. A few words were maybe replaced, or small sections rewritten, but not much was changed as far as the language goes. There were a number of pieces from *emergence*, *encoding*, and *recalling* that were removed entirely because they no longer served the poem. I did rework the fading of the reoccurring poem many times to get it to its final state, but it is still very close to the original. I also added a few poems that were more rhetoric driven than an image or a memory just to round out the poem where I felt it needed something a little extra. But most of the original pieces are fully intact in the final product.

One final discovery I made late in the process was that this was not solely a visual poem. Every week Johnny forced me to read my submission in the workshop, and I fought and complained because I thought this project did not exist in that oral space. But I did begin to think about the bigger picture, and were this to get picked up, a publisher would most likely expect me to be able to give some sort of reading. The problem I ran into was how to verbally express the visual form I had on the page where just reading the text was either not enough or impossible. I started recording myself reading the different pieces of the poem and layering those pieces on top of each other to mimic the page. I also used basic sound effects and manipulation when necessary to tell the same story in the audible space. In class, I would read the primary text of each piece with the layered recordings as if it were a performance. I received overwhelmingly positive feedback which made me realize I had been trying to limit the poem to the visual form

when it does exist off the page as well. I hope to be able to professionally record the entire poem and use those recordings in future live readings.

I now realize that I have overstepped my page limit and in a smaller font than Johnny prefers which is intentional as he would complain about the extensive 22 pages that this document takes up in 14-point font. Now that I have exhausted this project, I would like to end in gratitude. Thank you for allowing me to do this project. I know many are initially turned off by experimentation and would never have put so much energy into this with me. Members of my own family have admitted that they do not understand this poem and do not wish to read it. You could have forced me into something perhaps more commercially accepted and I could have produced another mediocre piece of literature with no clear focus as to where my career would go, as if I even had a chance at a career in writing at all. Thank you for encouraging creativity and experimenting, and thank you for giving me the space to create this piece that I am truly proud of which everyone knows is rare for me. I am leaving with so many ideas for this experimental poetry genre I have stumbled into, and am already working on something new that I am extremely excited about. But I am also leaving with a smidge of confidence (just a smidge though) that I never had before and the willpower to continue to pursue this passion.