Still Life: Growing Up with Death - A Visual Memoir

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York
STILL LIFE
GROWING UP WITH DEATH
A VISUAL MEMOIR

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

STILL LIFE
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This capstone is a multidimensional visual narrative project that incorporates heuristic methodology to illustrate complicated grief that emerged from early childhood loss. The memoir’s intention is to exemplify grief as a complex and mutable composite response to the death of my mother. One objective of this capstone is to understand melancholy, commonly associated with mental illness or symptomatic of depression, as an aesthetic emotion as well as a conduit for philosophical reflection. I use non-verbal approaches to the genre of a memoir by incorporating my photography to epitomize art as a powerful means to comprehend the totality of loss: as visual evidence. I use text in an allusive rather than discursive way, thereby shifting perceptions of loss, grief and melancholy on to the viewer. In this way, the project portrays loss as an elegiac honoring of the deceased while also enacting recovery for the bereaved. I ask the viewer to think about the photograph contrarily, paying particular attention to time. The photograph is not just an image but offers temporal shifts; the past is the viewer’s present and the present is the subject’s future.

This capstone project envisions autobiographical art as articulating the intricacies of profound loss, and that artistic narratives have a place within scholarship. I hope that my visual memoir offers insight into life writing, thanatology studies, and children’s resourceful engagement with the totality of death. The paper and project delineates the fluidity of loss and posits grief as a gift that allows for profound self-expression and the ability to share that knowledge with others. This capstone is digitalized on the internet. The completed memoir project is hosted at https://lbr2000.wixsite.com/rothrosencapstone
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Carrie Hintz, not only for guidance and expertise for this capstone project, but also for introducing me to the magic and splendor of children’s literature.
Dedication

I dedicate this capstone to the mothers who exist in the void of absence and to the adult children who wear their grief with grace.

Sorrow prepares you for joy. It violently sweeps everything out of your house, so that new joy can find space to enter. It shakes the yellow leaves from the bough of your heart, so that fresh, green leaves can grow in their place. It pulls up the rotten roots, so that new roots hidden beneath have room to grow. Whatever sorrow shakes from your heart, far better things will take their place. – Rumi

Time it was, and what a time it was, it was
A time of innocence, A time of confidences
Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph
Preserve your memories; They're all that's left you – "Bookends" Simon & Garfunkel
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The Curse

Raise your hand if you want to talk about death. Anyone? Why is my hand always the only hand that’s raised? Death is a part of me like life is a part of me; they co-parent me. These words, life and death, are not just words to me, they are teachers. In my family death is alive and well. The “curse” as my grandmother referred to it, began in 1930 with my great grandfather Abe (“Papa”). Papa was driving around his neighborhood in Harlem, New York City when a little boy ran out into the street. Papa’s car hit the little boy just eight-years old. It was an accident. As the mother of the eight-year old boy sat on the street cradling her dying son, she cursed Papa, “may you one day know such grief!” A few years later Abe’s eight-year old son Malcolm (my grandmother’s youngest brother) drowned in the Hudson River. It was a freak accident. Years later Abe’s granddaughter, my mother, died. She was twenty-five. It was sudden. Six years after that my Uncle Marty, my mother’s brother, overdosed on drugs. He was twenty-seven. So yes, I live(d) among the dead. During family gatherings, the absence of people was evident. The empty spaces were tangible. Our homes were choked with the departed. I thought it was normal.

Historically death was a part of the quotidian life of a society and it was a given people became sick and died at home. Children were in the home and while certain rituals may have been performed, the children were not segregated from the deceased. Before hospitals and funeral homes, this was commonplace. Industrialization and medicine revolutionized mortality by eradicating disease and the reformists fought and won, establishing regulations in public policies. In 2015 a survey illustrated that a large percentage of adults did not have a last will and testament. They have either put it off or pretend it’s not going to happen to them or a combination of the two.¹ Openly discussing death is frowned upon. Death or talking about the dead is a taboo subject² that instantly leads to inquisitiveness and trepidation.

¹ In a 2015 Harris Poll survey, 64% of Americas did not have a will. Out of the 64% 27% said that there wasn’t a need to make one now and 15% said they don’t need a will. The 64% stating they “do not have a will” isn’t because they don’t have the time, it’s because they do not want to think about their mortality, people "don't like to think about death. . .” (Reeves “Plan ahead: 64% of”).

² The taboo on the dead includes the taboo against touching of the dead and those surrounding them; the taboo against mourners of the dead; and the taboo against anything associated with the dead.
In the nineteenth century, psychiatrists, sociologists and philosophers had peculiar theories why death was a taboo subject; some feared the dead returning as ghosts, which in turn created ceremonies to ward off the ghosts. Some feared men becoming demons or some thought that the dead were angry at having to have suffered the ultimate disgrace of dying (Freud 37). Taboo or not, death is the great unknown and that’s a frightening notion. Knowing about death is like knowing how every movie ends before it even begins. Once you become aware of death it’s seen everywhere. It is, as Foucault stated, an “invisible truth, visible secret” (Foucault 149). Instead I had to keep this knowledge to myself. Grief accompanies the bereaved everywhere; it sleeps, eats and makes decisions with and for you. Eventually it becomes embedded in you so you don’t differentiate between where you end and where grief begins.

In the movie *Rabbit Hole*, based on a play by David Lindsay-Abaire, there’s an exchange between the characters; Nat, played by Dianne Wiest and her daughter Becca played by Nicole Kidman. The movie revolves around significant deaths that both women experienced; Becca just lost her young son, and Nat lost Becca’s brother many years before. Here Nicole’s character is clearing her son’s clothes from the basement in the midst of overwhelming grief. In this profound scene she begs her mother to tell her it gets easier:

**Becca:** Does it ever go away?

**Nat:** No. I don’t think it does. Not for me it hasn’t. And it’s going on eleven years. It changes, though. I don’t know how... The weight of it, I guess. At some point it becomes bearable. It turns into something you can crawl out from under and carry around like a brick in your pocket. And, you even forget it for a while. But then you reach in for whatever reason and there it is. Oh, right, **that.** Which could be awful, but not all the time. It’s kind of, not that you like it exactly but it’s what you’ve got instead of your son. And so, you carry it around. No, it doesn’t go away. Which is....

[long pause]

**Becca:** Which is what?”
This exchange is a near perfect example of living with the omnipresence of grief. Over the years I've attempted to balance living with grief; however grief shape shifts, and its weight continuously fluctuates, more often than not, sloping the balance to its side. When a person dies suddenly in medias res, the response to the loss evolves differently than an anticipated death. For the bereaved recovery from the experience of unexpected death, particularly during childhood, sometimes never happens. Ken Moses, a leading bereavement psychologist, offers an explanation: “that any life loss shatters one's dreams. The irrevocable loss of a parent or any beloved is heartbreaking at any age but for a child, losing a primary caregiver—especially the mother, especially when young—can be the most difficult grief to heal, because the child's entire life picture has drastically shifted” (Di Ciacco 21). This type of loss is embedded into the child as both a compass and as an anchor; now everything will be perceived through the shadowy lens of grief.

As of 2002 about 4% of American youth experience this loss before their fifteenth birthday (Samide 192). Children three through ten, through no fault of their own, do not understand the finality and the universality of death. Children three through five typically respond by regressing instead of grieving, i.e., wetting the bed and self-soothing. Even by ages six or seven, children still cannot fully absorb these situations (Carey 2). Magical thinking, a phenomenon that emerges from the persistent feeling that the child caused the death, has been observed in the five through seven-year old group. The children also imagine reuniting with the deceased parent. Other observers noted a lack of socialization skills and therefore some children become quiet and contemplative. Some had disorganized thoughts or obsessive thinking about death and the safety of their caregivers. Some children had abnormal fears of abandonment and as well as fear being sick (Samide 192). The totality of a first loss can become more intricate as the child grows and builds upon this main interaction with grief (Adams & Deveau, 207).

A Star is Born

As I write this I remember something: standing in our little kitchen after my mother’s death. I know this interaction must have occurred a few days after her death because she is nowhere in my

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3 I was so moved by Lindsay-Abaire’s mediation on grief, I emailed him to share how moved I was by his profound words and that I had never heard grief articulated so accurately.
memory, but there are many people I know and do not know, roaming around my apartment with balled-up tissues in their hands and crying, lots of crying. My three older female cousins, whom I adored, stood in front of me while I looked up to them and they each took turns explaining how to clasp my hands (one cousin demonstrated, she bent over and held her hands and formed a triangle and then closed her eyes) and pray. I don’t think I knew what praying meant, but I knew that if my cousins were telling me something, it was special. They all nodded in agreement that my mother was now living on a star; the first star to appear in the sky would contain my mother. I don’t think this scared me or comforted me, but the thought persisted. As I write this the scene I start to remember that I used to star gaze. I believed or at least I pictured my mother standing on a star. I suppose this was magical thinking. To this day, at fifty, I instinctively look up at the sky for that first star.

During the early days of this new life, I overheard and misunderstood a lot of things. Certainly, these misunderstandings settled in the deep crevices of my amygdala. The vernacular I heard, which was an entirely novel set of lexes; “death,” “dead,” “died,” and “heaven.” together with the wails from my grandmother, father, and other family members. I must have naturally known not to say anything in fear that this would make these adults upset. Therefore, the adults observed my unresponsive reaction to my mother’s death as exhibiting “normal” behavior. My “normal” behavior meant that there wasn’t any reason to ask me questions or have me see a therapist. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross stated that “children dealing with grief have been notoriously treated, by not treating it” (Kübler-Ross 170). And I was fine for a long time after. I thought this is what happens to mothers. They leave. Of course, that’s where I veered.

The Intersection of Photography, Mother Loss and Memoir

Hippolyte Bayard decided to use a photograph of a posed corpse to protest the French government’s refusal to recognize his aesthetic innovations; Andre Bazin described photography as a “form of embalming life” in his influential essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (Bazin 4). Susan Sontag likened to “the indexicality [sic] of the photograph to a death mask,” writing “all photographs are memento mori that enable participation in another’s mortality” (7). While researching the

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4 Hippolyte Bayard (20 January 1801 – 14 May 1887) French photographer and historian of photography; one of the inventors that propelled the technology of the photographic process, (inventing the direct positive paper prints in the camera) and in 1839 first to hold a public exhibition of photographs. He disputes that Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot invented photography, as he claims it was him.
art of photography, Barthes’ *Camera Lucida, and The Mourning Diary* emerged as seminal books in the field. Roland Barthes was a French social and literary critic, and the leading structuralist thinker of the 20th Century. He made profound connections between death and photography:

> All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know they are agents of Death. This is the way in which our time assumes Death… For Death must be somewhere in society; if it is no longer (or less intently) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death. Life / Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print (Barthes 192).

Barthes wrote this in the midst of mourning his mother’s death. Many art critics thought his monograph was too melancholic in tone. Barthes described photography as “a tautology, repetition, the French grammatical term future anterior, or simply, ‘That has been.’ According to Barthes, photography is representational of something that has already occurred, “whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.” (Ironstone, “Roland Barthes: Understanding Texts”). His loss occurred when he was in his sixties and his mother in her eighties. Yet, he still grieved as a child. Apparently, they lived together and he was her only connection to the outside world. It was through this intense and complicated dynamic between him and his mother that he explored photography and death. (Barthes 107). His recording of his mourning is so emotionally beautiful; I can understand why critics would think it was melancholic.
In my mid-twenties I came across Hope Edelman's newly published book, *Motherless Daughters: the Legacy of Loss*. It was the first time I had ever seen those two words, *Motherless Daughters*, together. It was a quite a revelation. This incident coincidently occurred during a difficult time in my life (divorce, single motherhood, and responsibility to another human), and it set in motion a series of events that would initiate a shift in how I perceived myself and mother loss. I attended a reading by Ms. Edelman and was overcome with a very new feeling. It was the awareness of my true self, a sense of belonging. I felt validated. Since finding this group of motherless daughters, I began intense introspection and finally started asking about my mother. It was during this awakening that I first displayed a photograph of my mother in my house. I had not considered this before because I felt lost and I did not want to explain to anyone who asked: “who’s that lady?” I was always concerned that some random discussion would lead to parents, a subject I dreaded. I wasn’t sure I could answer questions about my mother, my loss and what followed, without crying. I developed a shield, like a force field, that would be triggered by certain subjects. I also learned how to tell my story without feeling. I perfected my responses; I knew how and when to pause and let the receiver digest what I was sharing. I contained my grief. I watched as my friends grew old with their mothers, I watched as their relationships matured into friendships, and watched their mothers becoming grandmothers. I heard their mother-daughter dynamics; I listened to their sadness when confronted with a mother’s diagnosis. I’ve gone to funerals of friends’ mothers that lived complete lives. I’ve sat and cried for and with them. Honestly, part of me was instantaneously envious and irritated; these friends, who I love dearly, don’t have a clue what it is like to not have a mother. On those days that I mourn openly and publically for friends, I mourn for me, for the four-year old. Secretly, I will admit, I want to shout, “See, this has been my wail since I was a child!”

When I participated in the motherless forums, I felt liberated; it felt primal, like an awakening. I can only imagine this feeling is what an alcoholic feels when finally admitting to an AA group he’s one of them. I found a community. This validation of being with my “own kind” helped me to accept my identity

5 Hope Edelman, *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss*. Her book is a collection of synthesized research on maternal loss with interviews as seen through the eyes of surviving daughters. She wrote the book in response to the loss of her own mother at seventeen.

6 The term marginalization in this instance is completely subjective. For me, by finding a community of women, who fit this specific niche, gave the category of motherless daughters’ legitimacy. As far as I know, there is no known objective marginalization of motherless daughters. Obviously, there are no laws
and forge ahead with my life with the title of “motherless daughter,” not as an albatross but as a badge of courage. It felt like someone pulled me out of a fog. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, often children do not have the vocabulary or the cognitive understanding to cope with emotions that cause tremendous stress. In the process of researching her book, Edelman noted that motherless daughters shared a common vocabulary. In trying to convey the emotional toll of the experience of mother loss, the lexicon that was unmistakably distinct were the words “void,” “hole” “fear,” “lost,” “alone,” “empty,” “hopeless,” “failure,” and “scared.” Hearing and reading interviews that expressed words and sentiments regarding emptiness, or experiences that showed that grief doesn’t disappear, gave me a sense of comfort. Others out there are feeling the same (Edelman 28). The words and sentiments may seem simplistic and cliché to outsiders, but to me, these statements felt like the universe winked at me.

Petrified in Amber

The thought of my mother not being remembered made me—and continues to make me—sad. If you are not remembered, did you ever really exist? I wanted her to be known, yet how do I tell her story without any memories; not knowing my mother has made me question myself. Who are you at any given moment? We know that identity is fluid and continually evolving; what we display to others may be different than our perception of ourselves. At twenty-five, my mother was still a caterpillar, she had not transformed. She had yet to go into her metamorphosis, her chrysalis never formed, her butterfly never emerged. I think of my twenty-five-year-old self, how young I was, how I thought I knew who I was, and now how much that has changed me. What comes to mind is the stillness of my mother, as if she is petrified in amber like a fossil, an inactive form. This persistent thought essentially conceived my project’s name and focus. The Tate Museum List of Art Terms notes that “the subject matter of a still life painting or sculpture is anything that does not move or is dead” (“Tate”). In this definition, two components connect to my idea of still life: (1) a scene that has no movement, usually containing inanimate objects; or (2) the subject matter can be dead. Regarding of my project, still life as an art form represents the use of photography in my memoir as well as still life as in representative of the dead, naturally connects to the state of my mother. The next interpretation is still life as in there is still life to live. From this angle, I

that prevent me or encourage me to apply or consistently deny this status of any privileges, such as occur within a level of socio-economic class, religion, age or race.
consider that I remain alive and must keep on living even though my mother has died or is dead. Another interpretation could be one of assuming guilt for living while my mother remains dead. Another angle considers still life as in the lack of movement, the deep introspection of a meditative state. The three angles in conjunction form a trinity: three connected corners of mother loss. Each angle can work independently but together they reinforce the profound, intricate consequences of mother loss.

**No Memory, New Mother**

Compounding the sudden loss of my mother was my father’s hasty remarriage a year and a half after my mother’s death. Research states that it’s not uncommon for widowers to remarry within two years after the death of a spouse, especially when there are young children in need of caretaking (Haryanto & Moutinho 225). The coupling of mother loss and an unloving, abusive stepmother created more fractures in my life. These circumstances compelled me to develop a capstone about mother loss. In this way I force memory and then my mother exist(ed). In *Moments of Being*, Virginia Woolf wrote about her the loss of her mother: “the tragedy of her death was not that it made one, now and then and very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal, and us solemn, and self-conscious. We were made to act parts that we did not feel; to fumble for words that we did not know. It obscured, it dulled” (Woolf 105). It is my filial duty to share with whoever will listen that she once was here. These are the questions that planted the seeds for this capstone.

I have relied (apologies to Tennessee Williams) on the kindness of strangers to lend me their memories. But their memories were limited because my mother was so young and had limited experiences. At four, the age I was when my mother died suddenly, I wasn’t cognizant of the reality of her

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7 The San Diego Widowhood Project was a prospective study in which 249 widows and 101 widowers who were identified through San Diego County death certificates completed detailed questionnaires 2, 7, 13, 19, and 25 months after their spouses’ deaths. The main outcome measures for this study were marital and romance status, attitudes toward romance at several time points, demographic predictors of romance status, and self-reported measures of psychological well-being. By 25 months after the spouse’s death 61% of men and 19% of women were either remarried or involved in a new romance. Women expressed more negative feelings about forming new romantic relationships. Younger age was a predictor of becoming involved in a new romance for women, and higher monthly income and level of education were predictors for men. Greater psychological well-being was highly correlated with being remarried or in a new romance 25 months after the spouse's death. It may be helpful for family, friends, and therapists to know that dating and remarriage are common and appear to be highly adaptive behaviors among the recently bereaved. (Schneider DS, Sledge PA et al. 1996)

8 However, for this project, I do not focus on issues with my stepmother.
death, or even aware that she had “died,” a word that did not translate to my four-year-old self. Soon all my unconscious interactions, connections, and memories of my mother, would amount to non-retrievable memories. Children’s memory has been debated for several decades. When do memories form, and what memories remain? Most research states that rapid growth in many developmental areas emerges during the preschool period. During this time children’s intellectual abilities become more apparent; they are building on symbolic thought, benchmarks that demonstrate their understanding of language, symbols, and improved imaginative play. During this period they are usually limited to one focus. By observing these skills, researchers can peek into how they are creating memories, by classifying, reasoning, and resolving issues (“Language and Literacy”). Regarding episodic memories a six-year-old, for instance, can remember events from before her first birthday, but by adolescence, she has probably forgotten that celebration. In other words, young children can likely make long-term-like memories, but these memories typically fade after a certain age or stage of brain development. Memories made in later childhood and beyond are more likely to stick because of the young brain, especially the hippocampus and the frontoparietal regions, undergoes important developmental changes that improve our ability to bind, store and recall events. (Anthony NP)

**Understanding Grief, Depression, Melancholy**

What is grief? Every perturbation is a misery, but grief is a cruel torment, a domineering passion: as in old Rome, when the Dictator was created, all inferior magistracies ceased, when grief appears, all other passions vanish. It dries up the bones, saith Solomon, makes them hollow-ey'd, pale and lean, furrow-faced, to have dead looks, wrinkled brows, shrieveled cheeks, dry bodies, and quite perverts their temperature that are mis-affected with it. —Robert Burton 1651 (Burton qtd. in Archer 1)
Grief Spectrum

Grief comes in many flavors. Grief is defined as the primarily emotional/affective process of reacting to the loss of a loved one. Normal reactions to grief are disbelief, anxiety, stress, mourning, depression and finally recovery (nih.gov PDQ). Grief reactions can also be viewed as abnormal, traumatic, pathologic, or complicated. Although no consensus has been reached, diagnostic criteria for Complicated Grief (“CG”) have been proposed. While grief can be devastating considering it can affect your entire life and the lives of your family, most statistics find that people move through grief and recover intact. The average person has adequate coping skills and enough of a support system that they find a way back to a normal life style. That being said, there is a significant minority (as of 2012) that does not fare well as the majority, around 7% of bereaved people. These minorities cannot seem to climb out of the devastation and continue as bereft as when the death occurred, perpetuating a continuous cycle of painful emotions. This type of interaction with grief would be considered CG: healing and returning to a normal way of life remains an ongoing challenge (Shear 120).

As it sounds, anticipatory grief is triggered by an anticipated or expected loss; this type of grief happens before the actual loss. While grief is still difficult, anticipatory grief offers some permission to prepare yourself, family and friends for the death by being able to “say goodbye” to the dying. Grief changes when it becomes complicated grief. Since normal and anticipatory grief has been defined and observed, anything that falls outside of those categories presents differently. Interestingly, one sign of CG is “minimal reaction,” which means that the person doesn’t exhibit many of the common signs or patterns of normal grieving. CG also includes Chronic Grief. Chronic grief has some of the same symptoms as depression and anxiety and even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (“PTSD”).

To Cope or Not to Cope

Several factors can affect how a child will cope with grief, I have listed the questions and in parentheses are my personal answers: The child's age and stage of development (4 years old); the child's personality (average 4 year old, perhaps a bit shy); the child's previous experiences with death (none, not even a pet); the child's relationship with the deceased (primary caregiver, mother); the cause of death (sudden, unexpected); the way the child acts and communicates within the family (typical 4 year old communication); how stable the family life is after the loss (not stable, father remarried, no interaction with
maternal side); how the child continues to be cared for (new woman became my mother, new routine, new environment, new family members); whether the child is given the chance to share and express feelings and memories (none, no photographs or maternal family members, no discussions); how the surviving parent copes with stress (not great, remarried) (nih.gov PDQ). Bereaved children develop with a distressed feeling and “are troubles by lost opportunities to complete unfinished business. Most commonly, they long to share anticipated experiences, realize hopes and aspirations for accomplishing something together, utter unspoken words of love and affection, and say goodbyes” (Attig 50).

Researchers have also found correlation among other factors; such as gender, type of deaths (anticipated, sudden, illness, accident) personalities; religious beliefs, the age of the bereaved at the time the death occurred and availability of support (nih.gov PDQ). Some people conflate grief and depression. Depression and grief are intimately linked. They are not the same. Both seem to imbue sadness and both cause disruption, but the similarity ends there. Depression is a mental disorder. Grief is not. Bereaved people are sad because they miss a person they love, a person who added light and color and warmth to their world. They feel like the light has been turned off and they aren’t sure how to turn it on again. Depressed people are sad because they see themselves and the world as fundamentally flawed, inadequate, or worthless. A natural reaction is less intense and produces a quicker return to normal activity; next would be a reaction that lingers longer with the addition of mental suffering and a greater time to return to normal. Finally, the most challenging of the reactions interferes with the physicality of a person.

Memoirs & Myths

Three motherless daughters who became writers; Virginia Woolf lost her mother, Julia Stephen, in 1895 when she was thirteen. Julia died suddenly — influenza turned to rheumatic fever, and in short order she was gone. Charlotte Brontë lost her mother, Maria Branwell, at five, and Mary Shelley lost her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft at eleven days old. Shelley’s Frankenstein has numerous characters with dead, absent, or substitute mothers. Dr. Victor Frankenstein’s own mother is an orphan, rescued by his father. So too is Elizabeth; when Caroline Frankenstein dies, Elizabeth is substitute mother to the children. Justine is another rescued orphan, her birth having caused the death of her mother (Mary Shelley’s birth caused Mary Wollstonecraft’s death), and William dies in her care. The mother is also
absent in the de Lacey family (“Absent mothers”). Each one of these writers had the shadow of grief follow them as well. If you read the following work through the lens of mother loss and you will be able to see how these motherless daughters incorporated parts of their grief within their fiction. (See; Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Shelley’s *Frankenstein*).

Woolf said she was left with a distraught father and a roomful of grieving siblings. She wrote about how she encouraged her father to grieve while she could not: “It was part of their ‘duty’ as children to encourage their father to talk and vent his grief, while they inhabited a ‘stifling’ silence: ‘One had always to think whether what one was about to say was the right thing to say” (Woolf qtd. in Anderson 109). George Perec, a French novelist, filmmaker, and essayist, was a member of an avant-garde literary group *Oulipo* whose aim was to create new structures and patterns that would enable writers to construct work in “word play.” Perec’s parents both died horrific deaths; his father died as a soldier early in the Second World War, and his mother was murdered in the Holocaust. Perec’s book, *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, is a unique, personal account of his childhood. The book is based on the premise of what he called “doubleness” (Perec 105-06).

Perec writes alternating stories divided by chapters in his novel. He tried to retrieve childhood moments, (“I have no childhood memories”) but finds he cannot, so he surrenders to reconstruct the events of his childhood, the best he can by recalling his “make-believe world,” which he called Tierra del Fuego or *W*. The book is two separate stories, but they connect as the stories unfold. Early on he states, “when I was thirteen I made up a story … [It] was called W and it was, in a way, if not the story of my childhood, then at least a story of my childhood” (Perec 6). The stories are intense and the reader has to pay attention to clues along the way. Perec is filled with sadness, and it comes through in various areas

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9 While this is a fiction and representative of the death of Woolf’s mother, an autobiographic account can be found in Woolf’s narrative “A Sketch of the Past” In *Moments of Being*.

10 The founding members of Oulipo represented a range of intellectual pursuits, including writers, university professors, mathematicians, engineers, and “pataphysicians”: This group included; Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp, Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, François Le Lionnais, Oskar Pastior, Jean Lescure and Jacques Roubaud.

11 Doubleness is a play on the French letter W (double-ve in the original French) a pun on the phrase “double life”. The French rendition of the letter is not ‘double-u’ but ‘double-v’, which carries much more weight, both allegorical and punning (double-vie or double life for example). This necessitates a foreword by the translator and makes the reader feel less bad about missing other subtleties. Even so, it is clear that Perec is one of those writers with whom the book you have just read seems to be his masterpiece; which drives you off to read the others; and so on.
He is tormented by not remembering. He rectifies this by incorporating the reality of historical facts of World War II; he slips in his truth writing:

"[R]emembering is a task because it is painful, not just for the child of European Jews in the 1930s, but for any child of its parents" (42). Most evident of his pain from parental loss comes with these exquisite lines:

I write: I write because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life (Ibid).

Into the Sorrow Comes Solace

As for myself, I’m a functioning “griever.” It’s the place where I dwell, and it’s a space I will never move from, in fear I will lose the slightest connection I have with my mother. As Barthes wrote in Mourning Diary “I live in my suffering and that makes me happy. Anything that keeps me from living in my suffering is unbearable to me” (173). My experience with grief instilled a need for introspection and curiosity. Grief insisted that I examine parts of life no one except monks and philosophers seem interested in: the existence of a higher power, my desire to listen to the misfits, and befriend the marginalized. I was learning to find comfort in sorrow. I wanted to express these various moods as a testimony of the sum of loss. This notion of obtaining solace in the midst of grieving has been neglected in the overall research of bereavement. Dennis Klass, in his work on the subject, believes that there is an inherent bias in bereavement research, not uncommon with the societal obsession with being happy or at least in “pursuit of happiness.” Klass believes that if we do not consider staying within the atmosphere of sorrow, those grieving will have many more challenges ahead (Klass 597). He argues that a profound and enduring sense of “sadness, emptiness, what the existential philosophers call “nothingness and what psychiatrists call depression is common in short- and long-term bereavement and that into the sorrow element in survivors’ ongoing psychic lives after a significant death. Indeed sorrow is the defining characteristic of grief and consolation historically has been its betterment" (597). To push aside sorrow,
to remove it entirely from the bereaved psyche, could be detrimental to the bereaved because it isn’t truthful; the truth lies in learning to co-exist with sorrow. The hope is in the integration of solace within sorrow.

Absence as Presence

In his book, *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre relates a story to emphasize the premise of absence (or as he referred to it as Nothingness) as a presence. In the story, Sartre was late for a lunch date and enters a café in hopes of locating his friend, Pierre. As he is searching the crowd, the café and the people there, he is struck by a feeling of “fullness of being.” What Sartre discovers is Pierre’s absence or what he referred to as his “nothingness” which becomes the only “thing he is intent on finding.” In the scene Sartre describes Pierre’s absence forms into an “existence”, therefore claiming that absence has a presence in the world, and it is as tangible and significant as its opposite (Sartre 42). In the Tao Te Ching Lao Tzu explains the concept of absence or “that which is not” by perceiving it as a definite continuum. Every space, even voids, offers potential. To keep my mother with me, I must stay in the presence of loss or acknowledge that emptiness as being full. Tzu’s poem is expressed as:

> The hub of the wheel is the empty space to which the spokes connect. The vessel or bowl is essentially an empty space, but it makes containment. Similarly a room gets its usefulness from being empty.¹² (Tzu Ch.11)

Similarly:

> When we [in the West] draw a circle, we consider it to be zero, nothingness.

But in India and many other Asian countries, a circle means totality, wholeness. The meaning is the opposite. So “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.” (qtd. in Thich Nhat Hanh *The Fullness of Emptiness*)

The Pathos of Photography

I live in a dualistic world of realism and fantasy. On one side, there was the living, and on the other, there were the dead. For me to know anything about my mother or to prove and bear witness that she was once here on earth, I had to create her existence. I did so by allocating two spaces for her; alive and present and deceased and absent; both spaces, as Sartre defined it, were representative of

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¹² Chapter 11 Tao Te Ching (Daodejing) Classic Book (Ching) about the Tao (Way, Nature, Pattern, Process) and Te (Virtue, Potency, Power, Integrity, Wise Person) By Lao Tzu (Laozi).
“nothingness”; in this way she is/was synchronized and therefore she exist(ed)s. The process of conjuring my mother into existence reminded me of why I fell in love with photography. There is a holistic spirituality to the process of photography, a divine nature. From darkness emerges light, and an image is formed. It has, as Sontag wrote, “a built in pathos.” It is both magical and mystical. Photography was both my passport into a world as well as a barrier to this world. I was at home in the darkroom. It was everything I needed. It was dark, warm and silent; it was my private enchanted space that created magic. Photography became my language; my drug: it anesthetized me and electrified me. In this art, I slipped into the territory of transmutability. Capturing someone or something before it transmutes into its next incarnation is and will always be a mystical experience.

Figure 2 Once Was

Photographs have a duality; tethering us to earth while permitting us to travel to another reality, a way to be simultaneously present and absent (Archer 22). A photograph holds both a quasi-presence and a symbol of absence (Sontag 20). My photographs were communicating in the language of inquiry, of questioning why, of turning ordinary things into extended parts of my emotional self. Photography was the way I perceived life. Finding images was reasonably easy for me because I had trained myself—or
the world had trained me—to see differently. Inanimate objects spoke to me; I would notice discarded things, the cast-offs, the isolated, the lonely, and the sad. Chairs spoke to me the most, tossed umbrellas too, absences in public places, the crumbling of a façade, doors that had dispositions, windows roared with the need to be seen, flocks of birds would fly around my head, shadows emerged on sidewalks, puddles filled with muted leaves, empty shoes, wires against a blue dusk sky and the backs of people, always the backs of people as they walked away from me. There is an inherent intimate connection to remembrance; be it family, friends, moments, events, something you reach for but cannot grasp. There is an invisible time/space bridge that bonds subject to the viewer.

Figure 3 Death Comes To An Umbrella

Painters, musicians, writers, poets, and an assortment of artists have always mitigated such complicated emotions within their work. In fact much of the vocabulary that conveys grief and aspects of melancholia have been found in the art world. In 1914 British psychologist A.F. Shand maintained that
such ‘laws’ were exemplified in fine arts and literature. Art was the most accurate communication tool to illustrate complex, interlaced, multifaceted emotions without having to make others uncomfortable. Much later on, as psychology gained its stability, Shand’s explanation seemed preordained, much of his “findings” were later proven by contemporary research. (Archer 14) Marc Chagall grieved so for his wife, he channeled his grief by painting\(^{13}\) (“Marc Chagall”). Artists have found ways to convey difficult subjects, such as grief, depression, sadness, and illness. Much has been written on the emotion of melancholy as an aesthetic emotion, which defines it quite differently than anywhere near the aspect of depression. More importantly since the public has access to artistic works, they are able to understand difficult concepts and also see how others interpret such feelings. All of these interconnected realms serve the greater good of society and allow for dialogue to begin. Art allows people to communicate without the use of words. As Proust said, “Happiness is beneficial for the body, but it is grief that develops the powers of the mind” (“The Guermantes Way”). Happiness never and still doesn’t work for me, it’s too ephemeral, unlike grief, that sticks around, did develop the powers of my mind, my creativity and ways of seeing things. Somehow art translates grief into bits our brains intuitively understands. Nevertheless humans are adaptable creatures and they create ways to cope. Art may not completely capture every aspect of the grief or the process but it allows for that energy to convert into another form that speaks to the souls of our beings.

In some way, it was almost similar to what Gabriel García Márquez referred to as magical realism. I took inventory of my work, and collectively a theme emerged. I gravitate towards ordinary street scenes. However, because I automatically observe the world through the lens of grief, I have instantaneously altered the scene, thereby changing a benign scene into a melancholy interpretation. More significant was the realization that I was grieving through my art. While it may sound overtly

\(^{13}\) The couple married on July 25th, 1915. For almost 30 years, they were an inseparable duo – it said that Chagall would never “sign off” on a painting’s completion without her input. So when Bella died in 1945 from a viral infection, it was as if the author’s world came to a halt. He stopped painting entirely for nine months. His mourning ultimately found expression in his craft, with paintings like “Around Her” immortalizing their love in his tender brushstrokes. In “Around Her” and “The Wedding Candles” Chagall depicts his late wife as well as himself (“Marc Chagall”).
depressing, the overall emotions tied to these photos are more melancholic, or saudade,\textsuperscript{14} as there is an inherent beauty to them, despite the subject matter. Melancholy is the distilled part of grief that remains from the loss, and now after experiencing complicated grief for some time, you notice melancholia everywhere. Unknowingly, you now have exchanged glasses and from this point forward you perceive life through profound sadness that has awakened a secret knowledge, everything has an inherent beauty.

**Grief as Catalyst**

In his 2013 book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and The Art of Battling Giants*, Malcolm Gladwell writes about the demands of loss and grief on children. Some people rise to their fullest potential because of such devastation, like parental loss in childhood. Gladwell discusses what at first appeared to be an anomaly. In the 1960's, a psychologist named Marvin Eisenstadt interviewed people who he labeled as “creatives”— essentially a group of visionaries; artists and entrepreneurs — to find commonalities\textsuperscript{15}. Upon reviewing his data, he noticed a strange parallel among the group: a significant number of the “creatives” had lost a parent in childhood. He thought this was a quirk but still piqued his interest. He remembered coming across similar information in other psychological literature. In the 1950s, Anne Roe, the science historian, had found similarities among biologists;\textsuperscript{16} oddly many also had at least one parent who died while they were young. This observation was made again within an informal survey of famous poets and writers like Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Swift, Edward Gibbon, and Thackeray. Again, over half had lost a father or mother before the age of fifteen. Eisenstadt knew that there was something more to be analyzed—this was no longer a mere coincidence—and he decided to embark on a more ambitious project. At one point he had 699 candidates, and after numerous trips to various libraries and other biographical resources and ten years of research, he had a sufficient sampling of useable biographical information on 573 eminent people, and a quarter had lost at least one parent before the age of ten. By age fifteen, 34.5 percent had had at least one parent and at twenty, 45 percent (Gladwell).

\textsuperscript{14} *Saudade* is a feeling of longing, melancholy, or nostalgia that is supposedly characteristic of the Portuguese or Brazilian temperament. Germans use the word, *Sehnsucht*, Japanese use the phrase *Mono no aware* “the pathos of things.”

\textsuperscript{15} For more information on Eisenstadt’s original study, see, J. Marvin Eisenstadt, “Parental Loss and Genius,” *American Psychologist*, 33, 1978, 21 1-223.

While Eisenstadt worked on his findings, historian Lucille Iremonger was involved in a similar research project regarding the history of England’s prime ministers. While her focus for her particular research was not parental loss in childhood, she noticed, among her data, a quirky fact that sixty-seven percent of Prime Ministers had lost a parent before the age of sixteen. Again this is echoed among American presidents, beginning with George Washington and going all the way up to Barack Obama. A total of “twelve presidents; George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Andrew Johnson, Rutherford Hayes, James Garfield, Grover Cleveland, Herbert Hoover, Gerald Ford, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama — lost their fathers while they were young” (Ibid). Gladwell wrote: “the idea that some people could be successful without parents is a very threatening concept because the common idea is that parents help you. Parents are essential to your life.” Eisenstadt agreed (Ibid). Gladwell cites psychologist Dean Simonton who was interested in why some gifted children fail. Simonton reasons, it boils down to that they “inherited an excessive amount of psychological health” (Ibid). He believed that these “gifted” children are too conservative, submissive and unoriginal to take risks. Gifted children seem to arise from particularly reassuring families, concluding that the opposite may be true with prodigies; they seem to be a product of combative environments” (Ibid).

Gladwell also brings up an account of Andre Trocmé: a French Huguenot pastor turned war hero. During World War II Trocmé saved many Jews by hiding them among the people in his village. At the time of the events, Trocmé was a local Huguenot pastor. His daughter recounts the story; her father stood up to the Nazis by stating “we must do this without giving up, and without being cowardly” and was honest with the German police when they came for the Jews. He said, “we feel obliged to tell you that there are among us a certain number of Jews” (Gladwell). Gladwell believes Trocmé became courageous because of the tragedy he suffered during childhood. While in the back seat of his parent’s car with his brothers and a cousin, ten-year-old Trocmé watched as his father drove and his mother shouted about driving too fast, his mother fearing, what turned out to be true, an accident. All survived the crash except for his mother. He saw her thirty feet from the car, lifeless. Many years later he wrote a letter to his deceased mother essentially stating that nothing will ever compare to the horror and abject sorrow of seeing your mother die in front of you, not even confronting Nazis:

17 For more information on Iremonger’s original work see, Iremonger, Lucille. The fiery chariot: a study of British Prime Ministers and the search for love. Secker & Warburg, 1970.
If I have been a fatalist, and have been a pessimistic child who awaits death every day, and who almost seeks it out, if I have opened myself slowly and late to happiness, and if I am still a somber man, incapable of laughing whole-heartedly, if it's because you left me that June 24th upon that road. "But if I have believed in eternal realities ... if I have thrust myself toward them, it is also because I was alone, because you were no longer there to be my God, to fill my heart with your abundant and dominating life" (Trocmé qtd. in Gladwell).

It seems that perhaps this encounter with death at such an early age instilled a strength that possessed him for the rest of his life and in turn affected the lives of others in a positive way. Gladwell surmises: “It was not the privileged and the fortunate who took in the Jews in France. It was the marginal and the damaged, which should remind us that there are real limits to what evil and misfortune can accomplish. If you take away the gift of reading, you create the gift of listening” (Gladwell).
COURSEWORK

The majority of my courses were selected from the History, Women & Gender, and English Departments. The array of material included ethnic enclaves in New York City, the slave trade, the suffrage movement, the evolution of motherhood, the female bildungsroman or künstlerroman, liminality, the birth of psychiatry, hysteria and asylums, women writers and children’s literature. Together these eclectic groups of courses allowed me to expand my fund of knowledge and make for a well-rounded foundation that supported my track. These courses ultimately built upon each other eventually constructing the backbone of my capstone. As an artist, memoirist and melancholic soul, I found myself viewing the coursework through the way I perceived everything: through the lens of loss. The work of the following people resonated with me: Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Charlotte Gilman Perkins, Vita Sackville West, Gabriel García Márquez, William Faulkner, Freud’s Case Study “Dora,” Siri Hustvedt, Louisa May Alcott, Fredrika Bremer and Yoshiya Nobuko.

Courses Through The Lens of Grief

I connected to the fragmentation of New York City where the city was divided and subdivided into ethnic enclaves but still had to function as a whole. The fact that landscapes can be fragmented and the whole was analogous to how I perceived myself, the total of my fragmented parts. Jacob Riis’ How The Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York (1890), allowed me to explore the emergence of photojournalism early in my studies, whereby Riis documented with a quasi-ethnologic method the tenement housing in New York City in the 1880s. This work inspired reforms of working-class housing, both immediately after publication as well as making a lasting impact in today’s society. I saw photography as a facilitator that conveyed emotion, substance and the strength to revolutionize policy.

Riis’ work, along with other progressives of the era, established laws in housing, public health, women, and children. This was a testament that photography was a powerful tool that communicated vast amounts of information through image and that the images not only gave the audience specific information but did so in a nonverbal manner.

Like George Perec’s Childhood or W, Audre Lorde’s Zami: a New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography is a creative method of writing a memoir. Based on her autobiographical memories she blends exploration of self, using the term “biomythography”. In this way she discloses that she is
combining aspects of her within the framework of history, biography, and myth. Lorde’s underlying issues also pertain to her identity. As a Black, gay woman coming of age during a difficult era in the US, she had to navigate difficult waters. Because her identity was more pronounced (i.e. skin, appearance) she could not escape being labeled as such and thus, I believe she created or attached a mythological aspect to her being. However, this same pain created the writer and Poet Laureate. While significant themes such as race, lesbianism, and politics did not connect directly to me, the overall basis of being an “outsider” and being “marginalized” did resonate with me. Although not a protected class, I identified as a motherless daughter. Finally, Lorde’s work left me with a question that I often think about; is there something intrinsic when recalling the past that identifies our memories as made-up, creative or a construct of the two and thereby creating a partial myth? In Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Prose*, Walker introduced me to narratives that were about unsung heroes and the importance of role models, especially if you feel different. By being able to emulate these role models you create yourself in the image you want: you reconstruct your story. She expressly emphasized that the absence of role models is what can lead a community to become fragmented. Charlotte Gilman Perkins’ *The Yellow Wallpaper*, written in 1892 about the treatment of women and postpartum depression, was another critical text. Perkins infused parts of her narrative within this short story. She insisted she did not want to “drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (Gilman “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper”). The notion that Gilman Perkins had to navigate gender, motherhood and her career—areas that women are still dealing with in the 21st century—was fascinating and frightening.

Eugene Gendlin, an experiential phenomenologist, wrote *Felt Writing*, another text that influenced me. His most substantial work came out of the research about positive transformation in psychotherapy. Gendlin believed that clients who managed to obtain positive change did so because they listen to the “felt sense” of their bodies, their bodies’ intuitive nature. I first used this method in the course “Composing Memoir in the Digital Age.” I produced my first narrative digital project using this technique, which I’ve included in my capstone project. This class was extremely cathartic and allowed me to explore grief in creative ways.

I reread Gabriel García Marquez’s, one hundred *Years of Solitude* in a course on the Global South. García Márquez incorporated magical realism, a genre that originated out of the folklore of central
and South America. Like photography, the village of Macondo was a world at odds with temporality. García Márquez infused the past in the present; it was a part of the otherness of the Buendia clan. This novel had multiple themes; however, the idea of the dead among the living was a prevalent theme. The characters in this story are present even if they are absent; they are alive and portrayed as ghosts. The author, character, and reader accept the premise of the dead participating in the lives of those who are living. This trope is typical of the storytelling in Central and South America and well as the American South, particularly with William Faulkner’s landscape and characters. The most significant take away from this novel is the differing views of the characters, and that there is no separation from time as past, present and future converge. Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* created a novel told by several narrators about the death of the mother and wife Addie Bundren. While some chapters depict Addie as alive and some as dead, we can see the novel describing the dead among the living.

In my children’s literature class I found parallels between my coming of age journey and the fictional lives the writers created for their characters. On a fundamental level, this literature offers a duality that other genres don’t necessarily demonstrate. The first being that the literature for children is being created by adults; the second is the adult must tap into or imagine the mind of a child. This perspective offers the reader the ability to connect to in two temporal constructs simultaneously. The most obviously is the idea that children’s literature straddles binaries of before and after, past and present, struggle and triumph, past and present and innocence and cynical. This ability adds a fullness as well as a melancholy (here more of a nostalgia) that is unique among this genre. That a reader can read the classic literature as a child and understand it and then revisit the same work as an adult and perceive the story on another level. Third, that the concept of pictures, illustration and otherwise, stimulate the reader sometimes more so than text, confirms the use of art mediating text as an important part of storytelling. The course is centered on Louisa May Alcott and her classic novel *Little Women*. While this book was written over a century and a half ago, it still remains contemporary and pertinent. The timing of both Alcott’s writing and the setting in *Little Women* offered insight to the era of early 19th Century literature, fusing historical facts into stories as well as how her own life unfolded. America was asserting a new idea of freedom. On the larger scale, there were significant and small revolutions taking place; a country divided; Civil War, suffrage movement and people compelled to speak out about the rights of those enslaved and become
abolitionists. On a smaller level but just as important, women were coming together creating new roles and pushing back on traditional roles. Alcott was raised by a unique family, ties transcendentalist writers like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Close reading of Little Women clarified autobiographical correlations between Louisa May Alcott and her characters that she based on her family, the pain she experienced with the death of her sister; and paid homage to her sister with the portrayal of Elizabeth March. Alcott’s work Little Women created an imaginary world for many little girls to aspire to be a March girl, and reassure girls that it was okay to be a tomboy, like Jo. Certainly, this novel changed the trajectory for many women and inspired women writers to come.
METHODOLOGY

For this project, I reviewed materials from various written sources to gain a better understanding of producing a visual memoir. Primary sources included my writing from journals, coursework and my creative work. Several autobiographies, particularly regarding loss or trauma, were recognized. I also reviewed nontraditional memoirs; memoirs that either substituted art for text or used art as representational of the author’s memory; - such as photo essays, assemblages, and photojournalism and mixed media memoirs. Secondary data from a variety of sources such as scholarly journals, best practices in memoir writing and theoretical concepts were synthesized, discussed and distilled for application into the capstone project. Much of the secondary data was found in scholarly articles on writing memoir, books on autobiography, particularly on theory and technique. I found that grief, loss, and melancholy overlapped in items. To understand the holistic features of grief, I drew upon interdisciplinary fields to convey the enormity of this subject matter. Archer’s book *The Nature of Grief: The Evolution and Psychology of Reactions to Loss* provided this paper with scientific background from an evolutionary and anthropological standpoint. Other books came from an assortment of individual memoirs on various topics from mother loss (see Barthes, Perec, Woolf) to other familial loss (see Didion, Lewis) to memoirs on life and career (Karr and Sontag), to psychological articles on childhood loss and an array of supplemental materials from poetry to fiction. To add a level of emotional understanding that is not possible with traditional research methods, I used an autoethnography approach to reveal how parental loss during early childhood created the person I am today. I attempted to move beyond an academic analysis of the experience of mother loss to reflecting as “life as lived” (Ellis & Berger 173). The extensive bibliography assisted in synthesizing material on several aspects of this project.

Interactive Memoir

According to reports generated by the Nielsen Norman Group, consumers of website material prefer to scan the website for concise, objective matter\(^\text{18}\). Additionally, because of conciseness, scannability, and objectivity inherent in website content and its architecture, the activity reduces the user’s cognitive load, which results in faster, more efficient processing of information. Because of this

\(^{18}\) Since 1998 Nielsen Norman Group has been a leading voice in the user experience field: conducting groundbreaking research, evaluating interfaces of all shapes and sizes, and guiding critical design decisions to improve the bottom line. https://www.nngroup.com/articles/website-reading/.
phenomenon, this memoir has been formatted to flow similarly. To expect the readers ("users") to access this memoir comparable to a traditional book, would be erroneous, as this is the method used with internet content. Therefore this memoir has been created with the interactive navigation in mind over a more direct method of consumption. In creating a capstone project that deconstructs my narrative but also offers a holistic experience for readers, one solution would be to mimic the fragmentation of my memory of my mother and early childhood. Permitting the users to navigate the website in or out of chronological order lets them peer into different parts of my narrative and the juxtaposition of people, places and things, just as I had dealt with growing up and moving through my grief. However, my memoir material can be retrieved and appreciated either chronologically or randomly.

My design objective was to construct each page as a "stand-alone" essay or artwork that also could be accessed as if reading a traditional book that is sequential. In either option, the user will be satisfied that they viewed the contents in its entirety. Therefore there aren’t any particular “rules” that the user should consider for best intake. Ideally, users would click on each tab by accessing the menu bar. At the bottom of each page, there are two buttons, one button labeled “next” (see Fig. 18 Appendix) and the other button labeled “menu.” By clicking the “next” button, the order of the material will be consecutive and sequential; by clicking the “menu” button, the user will be rerouted to the homepage where they can choose the pages to access. Along with these navigational tools, there are also embedded links that the user should explore. These links offer various supplementary materials that support the subject of the page. If the user chooses to click on an embedded hyperlink, to return to my website, they need only to click a back arrow on their too bar tab (or right click on the mouse) and can resume the last page visited.
LIMITATIONS

The articles and materials on grieving and children or childhood parental loss seem in the aggregate to be slightly outdated. Most all articles cited material from 1945 to 1960 through 1980 when interest picks up. Then there was a lull until studies on collective loss and grieving after the September 11th terrorist attacks. There are areas of research such as death studies, grief, and mourning within the lives of children that need to be revised and updated with emerging scholarship. Attention should focus on expanding the theories that Dennis Klass hypothesized in 2013 in his article, “Sorrow and Solace: Neglected Areas in Bereavement Research” (614). Perhaps further research that builds on Klass’ theories regarding the duality of mourning and recovery should be added to the corpus of grief studies. Research that seems to be counterintuitive could serve as the disrupter that attracts innovative inquiry into this multilayered subject.

There are many subgenres within memoir and autobiography that due to time constraints, I could not investigate. There is significant scholarship regarding loss and grief’s connection to gender and race, as well as on writers outside academia whose work warrants inclusion to the canonical corpus. If I had more time and broader scope, I would have liked to review and included the motherless trope in children’s literature and philosophical perspectives from Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, and Foucault.
CONCLUSION

I realized over the course of constructing this paper and memoir that death and photographs are the only genuinely static aspects of this writing. Each time I revised my memoir or autobiographical work; I consciously omitted and reconstructed parts of my narrative thereby slightly altering my story. I wonder how such restructuring changes the truth in memoir. Barthes writes: “Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image” (Barthes 152). Through the act of writing, he – or ‘I’ – is also on the inside, pleasurably surrounding himself with the words and images. Barthes can escape from the ‘image-repertoire’ in the space of work; words themselves, freed from their known place – their pigeon-holes – and attached to desire, can take the place of transitional objects” (Anderson 69). Maybe that is what drew me towards photography, the idea of permanence. Things stay; they don’t leave or change.

I examined how early unconscious grief from the loss resonated throughout my life. The inherent challenge with my narrative is not having any coherent or significant (if any) memories of my mother and not having the lexicon to express the depth of sorrow. Thus, a substantial aim of this capstone project was just that notion: not being able to convey loss through the universal language of words. When I began this capstone, I perceived myself as being fragmented. I saw my mother as fragmented too, a facsimile of someone she may have become. I stitched together bits of stories. I used remnants of yellowing photographs; a shopping list (see figures 18 & 19); a piece of jewelry salvaged, a mini dress that hung in her closet, to create my mother and in this way, I created myself, thus created a whole from out of two halves. I revisited the trajectory my life took, the people who came upon my path, the obstacles put in my way, the self-placed barriers to keep me from moving forward, the two-steps forward-one step back dance. Life is not linear. Certain parts of our being have to adhere to the laws of nature. We cannot get around the sequence of biological changes, but everything else is luck, random experiences, strange journeys, intuitive action over logical and mystery. Death is an eternal fight, we need to accept it, and it seems counter-intuitive. We are alive now, isn’t that enough? Joan Didion wrote in her memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking* “I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive to keep them with us. I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes the point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead ” (Didion 225).
During the conceptualization stage, I had many epiphanies, one of which was the realization that my photography, an art I have been practicing for years, has also been my teacher and has been the conduit for much of my psychological angst. I wanted to convey that my mother’s death made her static like a photograph. However she resides on the time/space continuum; on the enigmatic temporality; my present as my past and she forever remains in my history, but she is also present, just like the temporality of a photograph. Through the lens of grief, my mother has become my final photograph, time consuming work of art. I return to the darkroom to perfect the image.

I grew up with death. I learned to navigate my life while under this cloak of loss. Heavy hearts surrounded me in various stages of grief. I’m not sure who I would be without grief as my mentor. If you dwell on it often or for a long time, you will find that there’s a gift in grief. Like playing a Beatles song backward, there’s a flip side to grief, a secret passage. However, to get to it, you must go through grief, not around or over or under, but right through, like an arrow piercing through the sky. Once you find that secret, there’s no turning back. Grief is transformative.
Salvaged

Figure 4 Salvaged from my mother’s wallet: A shopping list.

Figure 5 Salvaged from my baby book: a note from my mother to my future self.
FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS:

The Autobiography, Memoir and Biography track in the Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies program did not have many core courses. There were not enough academic courses in its track; there wasn't an available annotated bibliography to consult when doing such a project, there wasn't enough theses or capstones to ask for examples. It seemed to be the least developed track, and it proved to be frustrating. As an older student with a full-time job, a family with a young child and an assortment of responsibilities, I entered the graduate program with a full plate, making selecting courses even more challenging. It was vital that I expand my course search from other masters and doctoral programs to support my track and focus.

I could have worked on this project for years. It was vital that I had a deadline or else I probably would have revised and reconsidered. Regarding grief and death studies, there’s an argument to be made that this material should be part of any curricula and as early as possible and continued throughout the upper and university levels. Considerations of death should not be based on fear. Providing children with information on the topic should be considered as if discussing any other subject matter in school. We learn earth science, economics, and Shakespeare, but death and dying remain closeted. Schools should have open discussions with their students and even hold assemblies for parents to attend. I’m confident that children know that death is not taboo, that one should be able to speak aloud their grief to facilitate recovery.
Saudade: A Selection of my Work:

Figure 6 Leaves in Rapture

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19 All Photography listed is my work from 2016-2017. One Photograph of my mother and me ("Where did you go?") was taken in 1967 by my father, Ron Roth, but I manipulated it with text.
Figure 7 Elegy for a Dress
Figure 8 Shadow Pietà
Figure 9 Sky Filled With Emptiness
Figure 10 Listening
Figure 11 Waiting On
Figure 12 Limitless
Figure 13 Love is an Empty Playground
Figure 14 For Rent and Sorrow
Figure 15 Wallflowers
I will not mark your death on a date
for every day is a year
or a minute too late.

Figure 16 The Heart Remembers Anyway
Figure 17 An Empty Sermon
Figure 18 Boardwalk Requiem
Figure 19 Through a Windshield, Darkly
Figure 20 Symmetry of Nothingness
This Self-Portrait Grid (series) was created for this white paper. Due to space, I created a grid; however the original work, each square is its own portrait.
Figure 22 Where Did You Go?

Where did you go?

where now bib grew

21 Photo by Ron Roth art manipulation by L. Roth-Rosen
everyone except me had a mother even if they hated her they still had a mother

Figure 23 Splitting The Ego
Arrow 1= title
Arrow 2 = menu
Arrow 3= constant video clip;
Arrow 4= page story
Arrow 5= still image may be activated by clicking on
Arrow 6= 2 buttons, Next page button; menu button
Arrow 7 = Audio or video
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