The Personal is Poetic: A Case for Poetry Therapy

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THE PERSONAL IS POETIC: A CASE FOR POETRY THERAPY

by

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ABSTRACT

“The Personal is Poetic: A Case for Poetry Therapy” explores and deconstructs the history, models, and therapeutic qualities of poetry therapy through an autoethnographic lens of loss and growth. Inspired by the passing of my mother and my foray into poetry as a form of therapeutic expression, I dive into the existing literature on therapeutic usages of poetry and illustrate its connections to my writing and personal experiences. I include narrative accounts of my experiences of grief, growth, and coming of age, as well as samples of my poetry chosen to illustrate principles, model components, and poetic devices related to poetry therapy.

I conclude the thesis with a look toward the future of poetry therapy. I discuss the necessity of further professionalization within the discipline in order to gain popularity and reach more individuals in need. Furthermore, I discuss my vision of poetry as a self-guided therapeutic tool and provide samples of two potential self-help mediums: poetry therapy as a physical workbook and through a website.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

DIVING INTO THE WRECK

I do not entirely remember my mother's favorite colors, or the way my mother and father treated each other, or the pure innocence of an earlier, unscarred youth. My memory is poor, or perhaps subconsciously repressed. Experiencing a traumatic event as a child can do that to you. My experiences left me examining life through a cracked window, distorting my worldviews before they even had the chance to truly form.

I was an eleven-year-old living in a little town on the Oregon Coast when my mother, Nemia, died. I thought myself mature for my age, but in reality, I was a baby; far too young to be so adult. If you asked me to, I could split my life into a sort of chaotic dichotomy: before and after my mother's death. The two sides of this dichotomy have never truly bonded together to make a complete narrative—they are separated by a black, impassable chasm. To the left of the chasm is my childhood, marked in my mind by my mother's late-stage ovarian cancer diagnosis, the tumultuous relationship between my parents, and my father's mental illness. The images are painful, but they remain surrounded by an effervescent halo of love and a lack of true loss. To the right of the chasm is everything else: grief, domestic drama, identity issues, coming of age, college, moving, moving forward, moving on.

_Am I one person and a mirror, or am I two people?_ In the decade that has elapsed since my mother passed away, I have found myself endlessly ruminating, grasping at frayed strings of recollection in order to resolve the gap between what I consider my "two
lives." Poetry, as a therapeutic art form, has become the primary medium through which I have begun to process these difficult emotions. I considered myself a good writer as a kid (one of my proudest childhood moments, in fact, was receiving straight sixes, the highest possible mark, on my state writing exam in the fourth grade). But it is only after my mother passed away that I discovered the cathartic value of writing.

I never underwent formal therapy following her death, though I imagine I probably should have. My adopted family offered the opportunity to attend therapy to me, but at the time, I did not feel comfortable with the idea of telling a stranger all about my problems and emotions. The sheer idea of it was (and, honestly, still is) terrifying. Yet to this day, almost eleven years since her passing, I struggle to talk at length about what happened without crying. I think this is because what happened to me felt so much bigger than a single great loss. After all, much of the trauma I experienced and carry with me did not stem directly from her death, but more from the way everything I knew in my life fell apart around it. Fundamental institutions and ideas—family, school, trust, culture, friendship—ended up shattered and redefined.

In order to understand her death, I must contextualize this introduction with some background on my family life and roles. My mother was my best friend. She was a kind-hearted, hard-working, and fiery Filipina immigrant, employed for most of her life in America as a hotel receptionist. She was well-loved by her friends and coworkers, marked by a sunny disposition and the sort of courageous spirit I can only one day hope to possess. She was diagnosed with stage 3 ovarian cancer when I was in the third grade. My father is an unmedicated, flighty paranoid schizophrenic. Though I love him regardless, he is often hard to love. I was their only child.
My dad did not live with us in the year or two leading up to my mother's passing. Ruled by the voices in his head, as well as some nomadic tendencies, he thought we had lived in Oregon for too long. He consequently uprooted himself to Texas while my mother and I remained at home. For the most part, he stayed away until the end of my mother's life. He and my mother were not in love; I can't remember them ever acting as though they were. Looking back, even during the best of times, they appeared more like roommates trying to raise a child together than a married couple. If I remember correctly, they legally separated at some point early on during my elementary school days.

When we all did live together, my father projected his pathological delusions upon my mother. They fought often. He was generally in no state to care for me as a co-parent, let alone on his own. Thankfully, my mother accounted for that in the initial creation of her will. She knew she was sick and needed to get her assets and directives in order. I believe she created this will in late 2007, about nine months before she passed away. She entrusted my care to the Nash family. One of their daughters, Marissa, had been my best friend for five years at that point. It all seemed like it would be okay, at least as far as my future living situation went. That is, until my biological extended family intervened.

Toward the end of her life, my mother did not have the greatest physical or mental capabilities. A chemotherapy-ravaged body and mind is indeed a shell of its formerly full self. The family members, including my grandfather and several aunts and uncles all from my father's side, did not believe it was right to allow me to live with anyone who was not family. They visited as my mother drew nearer to her death, like predatory birds descending upon a dying rabbit, and took advantage of her meager state. Under their
manipulation, my grandfather became the conservator of my mom's estate. They changed her will to state that I was to move to Canada and live with my cousin, his wife, and their children, whom I had met all of one time.

As a young child, one often feels as though they have no agency. They may be blind to the underlying intentions of others or resign themselves to what the adults in their lives have chosen for them. However, even at age eleven, I felt keenly aware of the injustice that was set to happen. I thought that my biological family's desires and changes were, to be frank, bullshit. Sure, as an only child used to getting things her way, I could be a bit of a brat. But this time, my attitude worked out for me. My way truly was the only sensible path. How did it make sense to uproot a child from their hometown in order to live with virtual strangers, all in the name of blood?

I threw a fit. I expressed my distaste for the plan to my father and my peers. The night that my mother died, I slept at Marissa’s house where Marissa, her sister, and her parents lived. The day after, we began to move some of my belongings into their home. They were more than willing to take me in and were planning to acquire custody of me upon my mother's passing, per her original will.

My biological family did not take well to my objections. Almost immediately following my mother's funeral, they began to express their disdain through action. My grandfather sold off all of the furniture and decorations in my family's house for a mere $600 without allowing me the chance to claim any of it. Some of these objects were very valuable to my mother and myself; sentimental and beautiful things practically given away to random buyers at a garage sale.
They withheld even the most inane items. When my father asked to have my television to bring to Marissa's home, they told him that he would have to buy it in order for them to give it to me. My father seemed to respect and understand my wishes and the support system I had in the form of my new family. He tried to help out. However, given his mental illness, he was not able to influence his family and make them change their minds.

Perhaps the worst indignity occurred when Marissa's family and I went to pick up my few remaining personal belongings and clothes. When we went to my former home, I found the silver box containing my mother's ashes at the bottom of a big, black garbage bag, as though her remains were just another ordinary item. I honestly think I cried more on that day than I did at her funeral. The memories of those days remain seared within me, vivid in their representation and simultaneously abstracted down to raw, devastating feelings. I sometimes see these scenes in the theater screen of my mind. But what really grabs at my heart is their thoughtlessness, their greed, their rendering of my mother to an object and me to a pawn.

A completely unnecessary court case ensued, wherein my grandfather used the money my mother had saved for me to pay for a lawyer in an effort to uphold her revised will. After months of preparation, our civil court date came to head. Marissa's family, who had become my new family, had worked so hard and spent so much money on their own lawyer to try and hold onto me. They accompanied me to our district court where I sat before a judge and talked about my life, my interests, and my desire to stay in Oregon and continue to grow up with my current set of peers.
From what I remember, the judge was impressed with my articulation and my stellar elementary school grades. He saw the support system I had in my new non-blood family, and how its strength exceeded that of any bond I held with my extended biological family members. He did not see a reason to exile me to Canada to live with my near-stranger cousin, when I had a new home opened to me by stable and loving parents with whom I was already familiar. He understood my perspective and saw through others' false, flimsy, and constricting definitions of family. I am, to this day, so thankful for his understanding. I don't know who I would have become if he had made a different decision. My adopted parents raised me well; they and my adopted siblings love me as if we are all related through blood. This love is what matters and is what I am grateful for above all else.

With this verdict, my biological family left Oregon and finally left me alone. I find it astounding how it took a long-winded legal intervention for them to allow me to live my life the way I desired. For this and many other reasons, I remain embittered toward them. As I said, my mother saved a fair amount of money throughout her life, intending to leave it to me. Yet a year or two after the court case settlement, I received a check in the mail for something like $3—what was left of her savings after my grandfather's exorbitant lawyer fees. A check, no letter, no apology, nothing; it read like another slap in the face. Accordingly, I tore it up and threw it in the garbage.

I did not know the root causes of their cruelty. I did not know why my mother had to die, or why my father had to be mentally ill and refuse to get any treatment. I felt uncomfortable with the way I was known at school, the girl stained with death at such a young age. Fragile. Grieving. I saw people's sympathies as shallow and empty, the
endless repetition of "she is in a better place now" serving only to add insult to the most acute of all injuries. I did not understand a single goddamn thing about my life circumstances at that point. This complete collapse is the state where my writing came from. My need to write stems from a place of confusion and adversity. It is a lifelong effort to soothe the hurt child that still resides within my adult self.

When I first began writing, I did not do much deep diving. I wrote fanfiction about my favorite TV shows and book series. My friends and I created and joined role play forums, where we wrote character biographies and pretended to be magicians, Harry Potter characters, or students at a boarding school. I remember detailing the lighthearted little aspects of growing up—my crushes, my friends, my dreams—as I tried my hand at journaling. I feel like my immersion in these genres helped develop my identity as a writer and passion for writing. However, writing never seemed so essential to my understanding of life until I began writing poetry. It is at that point that I learned to truly process my experiences and feelings through the medium of writing.

During the transition between middle and high school, I dealt with a period of extremely low self-esteem about my body. For context: in the eighth grade, I weighed about thirty pounds more than I do now. I was also four or five inches shorter than I am now. I felt awkward, a fat kid who constantly compared herself to her more graceful, lithe, and pretty peers. In an effort to express the way I felt, I began to write poems about my weight and my looks. I wish I had access to these older poems, but I ripped them up because I didn't want my family to know I hated my appearance. This is the first space in which my writing meant something to me, where I felt better, validated, and relieved after I scribbled down some words onto a page. Even if these poems were ephemeral in
their existence, written in secret and disposed of shortly after their creation, the simple act of writing seemed to ease the burden of my negative thoughts.

It is toward the latter half of my high school career that my relationship with poetry grew to the degree it is at now. I took several creative writing and poetry classes, exploring my interest in writing beyond the realm of English and Journalism classrooms. I expanded the realm of my subject matter, beginning to write poems of uncertainty, existential angst, coming of age, and love (or, more accurately, infatuation). Perhaps most importantly, I began to write about my mother, my father, and my experiences of loss and traumatic grief. Poetry seemed to be the perfect medium to express and process my often-turbulent feelings surrounding these life events. It is the only hobby of mine that has stuck with me through each and every one of my adolescent and young adult phases—my shifting interests, big changes, all of the ways in which I have tried on personalities, futures, and worldviews as I have grown.

Despite our long-term bond, I had never quite known what it was that drew me to poetry. What qualities make poetry cathartic and soothing? Why do other people turn to poetry as a form of expression in times of need? Is there a science behind the therapeutic nature of writing? It took me years to begin pondering these questions. Until then, I had taken my affinity for poetry at face value. I liked it and that is what mattered to me. This foundation remains the same, but in the past year, I decided that I wanted to learn more about poetry as a therapeutic process. I wanted to better understand myself, my personal experiences, and my relationship with poetry.

This thesis is, therefore, an exercise in understanding. It is an experimental synthesis, combining extensive secondary research with personal, narrative prose and
poetry. For each section of the literature review on poetry therapy and its related topics, a personal narrative and some relevant poems will follow. Most of my early poems are lost to the ether, because that is how life works when one is a child and doesn’t want their poetry shared with the world. However, I have access to almost everything I have written since I was sixteen. In these six years, I have created one hundred-plus poems documenting some of the most formative times of my life in all of their tenderness and tragedy.

Within the confines of these pages, I essentially view my poetic experiences through the lens of the literature—framing myself as my own case study—and meditate upon what elements and patterns I find congruent between the two. I examine whether my personal experiences align with the research and case studies shown in the literature, and in turn, utilize my experiences to suggest future research recommendations like poetry as self-help. The two forms of material enter a sort of cyclical or dialectic conversation with one another, as I use my subjective life and poems to interpret the literature and vice versa.

To close out my introduction, I would like to share two stanzas from Adrienne Rich's poem, "Diving into the Wreck." Rich is one of my favorite poets, and the following are some of my favorite lines in all of poetry.

"I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed
the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunterm  

(Rich 52-70).

Poetry is diving into the wreck. It is digging into memory; it is taking a pen to the head and the heart; it is an attempt to bridge the chasm within our memories and maybe even build that bridge ourselves.

As Rich states, "The words are purposes, the words are maps." I like this line so much because it seems to encompass the nature of poetry therapy: the words we read and create give our lives meaning and purpose, but they also guide us like maps toward our inner truths. Creating and representing our lives through art may seem like simple storytelling or word-weaving, but it is more than that.

Exploring the wreck of a personal tragedy ourselves is a critical means of getting past old narratives or others' perspectives on our life events. We re-enter a past conversation with ourselves, in order to change our own perspectives and find greater meaning. We come to terms with "the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth." We are able to see the event for what it was and what it means to us now. We begin to understand.

With the power of words, I have begun to dive; so on I will continue. I hope I can
only begin to explain what these words mean to me, and how they have been and may be used to help others cope with emotions, trauma, and difficult life events.
METHODOLOGY

In order to capture the history and current state of poetry therapy, I conducted an in-depth literature review on the discipline as well as related therapies and concepts. For my literature review, I primarily utilized online journal databases and scholarly search engines like Google Scholar and the University of Maine Library OneSearch. A sample of specific search terms used include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&quot;poetry therapy&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;therapeutic writing&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;poetry and trauma&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;narrative therapy&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;narrative structure&quot;</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;focused expressive writing&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;writing and healing&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;group healing&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;writing self-help&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;poetry classroom&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;poetry self-help&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;therapeutic qualities writing&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;catharsis&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;bibliotherapy&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;metaphor poetry&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;trauma narrative&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;emotional disclosure&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;poetry group&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;writing therapy&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;poetry children&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The literature review yielded about 100 usable, highly relevant, and peer-reviewed articles and books. I read all of these articles and books and have about eighty of them logged in a spreadsheet detailing each entry's author, title, description, and year of publishing. I decided to look at poetry therapy from a very wide scope, in order to include its history, its models, and some discussion on several of the literary and therapeutic qualities inherent to poetry (like metaphor). I chose to utilize articles that provided definitions for poetry therapy principles, models, and characteristics, and find case studies within articles that illustrated and legitimized these definitions.
The main limitation of my curated body of research is the fact that so many of the articles that I read came from one journal, the *Journal of Poetry Therapy*. This journal is the only dedicated journal for the discipline of poetry therapy, so I imagine it is only natural for many of the academic and research articles to have originated from it. I tried my best to find and include articles from other journals as well and believe that, ultimately, I achieved a good balance as far as the variety of articles referenced within the literature review.

After conducting the literature review, I needed to find a way to structure the body of my thesis. Originally, I planned to split the thesis exactly in two: one section of literature review and one section of narrative and poetry samples. However, after some guidance from my advisor and committee, I decided to integrate the two different forms of writing together in a more cohesive manner. Therefore, each major section of the literature review is followed by a section of narrative, commentary, and poetry samples. In doing this, I created a better flow within my thesis and ensured that readers would be able to immediately view connections between my experiences and the literature.

These personal sections follow the tradition of autoethnography. Autoethnography is defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand [a broader] experience" (Ellis et al. 273). Autoethnography is generally associated with analyzing cultural experiences. Though every individual’s experiences are unique and personal, they can be analyzed as part of the larger cultures of grief and creative expression, as well as the intersection of the two.
Autoethnography utilizes the inner (the personal) in order to better understand the outer (the broad, cultural contexts) and vice versa. As such, I chose each of the included poems in order to illustrate principles, model components, and poetic devices related to poetry therapy; as well as to share my own life experiences, poetic style, and the subject matter I gravitate toward.

The thesis concludes with a look forward to the future of poetry therapy. I include discussion on some gaps in the literature and the discipline's need for professionalization and standardization. I also share my own vision for what the future development of poetry therapy could look like: poetry as a form of self-help.
CHAPTER 1

FOUNDATIONS OF POETRY THERAPY

A Brief Introduction

No official, explicit, or discipline-wide definition of poetry therapy exists. However, for the purposes of this thesis, poetry therapy may be thought of as "the intentional use of poetry...for healing and personal growth" (McCardle and Byrt 521). This thesis will explore poetry therapy from a broad perspective, exploring its foundations and models, its therapeutic qualities, and its future as a discipline and therapeutic medium.

Planting the Seeds of Poetry Therapy: Jack L. Leedy and Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders

The establishment of poetry therapy as a discipline and practice occurred in 1969, with the publication of researcher Jack J. Leedy's anthology Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders. At the time, Leedy worked as a therapist, psychiatrist, and the director of the Poetry Therapy Center in New York City. Within his introduction to Poetry Therapy, he draws direct reference to Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalytic thought. Freud attributed the first discoveries of the healing power of poetry to the Greek poets, stating that they were the "first to salvage from the whirlpool of their emotions the deepest truths to which we others have to force our way, ceaselessly groping among torturing uncertainties" (Leedy 11).
Poetry therapy transformed this ancient Greek notion—one of poetry as a means of healing and soul-searching—into a more concrete therapeutic practice. Leedy's *Poetry Therapy* collects articles and case studies on the use of poetry therapy from over a dozen different mental health and social work professionals. Together, they represent the authors of a then-radically new discipline. In one included article, aptly titled "The Principles of Poetry Therapy," Leedy lays out what he views as the key aspects of poetry therapy. They are as follows:

1. The Isoprinciple
2. The Poetry Therapist
3. Therapeutic Implications
4. The Poetry Therapy Group
5. Therapeutic Poets and Poetry

Borrowed from music therapy, the isoprinciple states that the poetry used in reading-focused poetry therapy should match the mood or "mental tempo" of the patient (Leedy 67). He provides suggestions of poems he sees as appropriate for use with depressed patients. They are somber poems tinged with a certain hope or optimism, so as to validate and universalize the patient's feelings without evoking further pessimism or destructive thoughts.

He seems to suggest that reading poems with a regular rhythmic structure is more helpful to patients than poems with a less conventional structure or pattern. He states that "poems with regular rhythms, those that most nearly approximate the beat of the human
heart, affect many patients deeply" (Leedy 72). Leedy's mention of the human heartbeat brings to mind iambic pentameter. Within an iambic pentameter line, each pair of syllables (known as a foot) begins with an unstressed syllable and is followed by a stressed syllable, creating a "da DUM" rhythm reminiscent of a heartbeat. However, Leedy does not go on to state why he believes that the rhythmic connection to the human heartbeat is important.

With the isoprinciple and poem selections in mind, Leedy then shares his vision for the role of the poetry therapist. At the time of publication, no professional organization or association for poetry therapy existed. Leedy states that poetry therapists should act as co-therapists, working alongside a licensed psychotherapist in group settings.

Leedy asserts that poetry has a multitude of therapeutic implications. He views poetry as a way to "encourage patients to explore their feelings, to feel more deeply, to extend their emotional range yet to discover patterns, also, of control and fulfillment" (Leedy 70). Poems provide the "shortest emotional distance between two points," perhaps referencing the general brevity of poems in comparison to other literary mediums and the emotional power that is able to be conveyed in these short pieces.

Moving onto his section on group poetry therapy, Leedy introduces the idea of patients writing their own poetry rather than focusing strictly on reading and discussing existing poems. He notes that "during periods of crisis, or when patterns of behavior or feelings are changing...or when new insights are discovered...patients often write poems" (Leedy 71). His idea, even only as a minuscule reference within the larger article, feels anticipatory of the discipline's later development. The written creation of poetry and
sharing of original poems—rather than the strict reading, oration, and memorization of poems—goes on to become the primary focus of modern poetry therapy, as well as the primary interest of this thesis.

The principles set by Leedy feel simple enough. They were not driven by prior scientific research, as evident from his lack of in-text citation or reference to other articles. Instead, they were supported by his own experiences, case studies, and patient interactions as a therapist and psychiatrist, coupled with a dash of intuition and insight into the fundamental nature of poetry a la the Greek tradition.

The term ‘art therapy’ was coined in 1942 by an artist named Adrian Hill (Hogan 25). Hill spent much of his time drawing and painting while recovering from tuberculosis in the 1940s. He went on to utilize artistic exercises with his own patients, a practice documented in his 1945 book, Art Versus Illness. This suggests that the idea of integrating art into therapy was not completely foreign in Leedy's time. However, art therapy as a general term focuses on the creation of visual artwork and images rather than any form of writing. Therefore, Leedy's principles planted the earliest seeds for poetry therapy and introduced it to the world as a budding discipline both connected to other expressive arts therapies yet entirely its own.

Lending Scientific Legitimacy to Writing’s Healing Power:

James Pennebaker and the Focused Expressive Writing Paradigm

Much of the scientific and psychological legitimacy attributed to poetry therapy began with the entrance of an entirely different form of therapeutic writing: focused expressive writing (FEW). Between the initial beginnings of poetry therapy and the
Introduction of the FEW paradigm in 1986, all of the prominent literature on poetry therapy consisted of case studies on individuals and groups reading, writing, and/or sharing poetry. No experimental studies on poetry therapy or other forms of therapeutic writing had been done, until social psychologist and researcher James Pennebaker entered the discipline.

Pennebaker pioneered the FEW paradigm, a laboratory writing technique created in order to measure the physical and psychological effects of expressive writing, specifically in the contexts of confronting trauma and difficult emotions. In a FEW study, participants are generally assigned to one of either two groups: the control group, wherein participants are asked to write about mundane, superficial topics such as how they use their time or how they organize their room; and the experimental group, wherein participants are given a variation on the following prompt:

"For the next 3 days, I would like for you to write about your very deepest thoughts and feelings about an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives, to your past, your present, or your future, or to who you have been, who you would like to be, or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or on different topics each day. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don't worry about spelling, sentence structure, or grammar. The only rule is that once you begin writing, continue to do so until your time is up" ("Writing About Emotional Experiences" 162).

During the study, participants meet once per day for three to five consecutive days. They are asked to write for between fifteen and thirty minutes each day during the sessions. The writing period allowed participants to disclose any emotional experience or
set of experiences they wanted to express. Pennebaker notes that "lost loves, deaths, incidents of sexual and physical abuse, and tragic failures are common themes in all of the studies" conducted between 1986 and 1997 ("Writing About Emotional Experiences" 162). This does not refer to a single, eleven-year long study. Pennebaker wrote "Writing About Emotional Experiences" in 1997 as a reflection of the growth of FEW during the previous decade, so the article looks back on all of the FEW-related studies that took place between 1986 and 1997.

The structure of the paradigm is basic and allows for customization across studies. Researchers may choose to look at pre-study states and post-study outcomes for any number of variables, in order to measure the effects of FEW on said variables. The measures of pre-study states and post-study outcomes related to mental and emotional health appear to come primarily through participant self-reporting. Some prominent FEW studies have examined expressive writing and its effects on distress, negative affect, or depression (Greenberg and Stone, 1992; Rime, 1995) and PTSD symptoms (Smyth et al., 2008, Lange et al., 2003; Sloan et al., 2001). Most of the aforementioned studies found statistically significant results on the reduction of symptoms.

Despite the controlled, experimental environment in which FEW studies traditionally take place, one study suggests that FEW may be able to be effective in a self-help context. Major FEW researcher and bio-behavioral health professor Joshua Smyth and his co-researcher Rebecca Helm conducted a case study on a patient named Mary, who experienced extensive sexual abuse as a child and domestic abuse in her adult relationships (Smyth and Helm, 2003). Mary went through traditional psychotherapy and tried attending a support group for battered women within her community. However, she
found both experiences to be negative overall. She felt uncomfortable and did not want to disclose her history and trauma to others in such settings.

As a part of the case study, Mary completed a self-help FEW workbook, following the traditional experimental structure in her own space for three days. After the three days of writing, Mary said that she felt "more peaceful than she had in years," (Smyth and Helm 233). In a checkup six weeks later, Mary reported improved sleep and mood, as well as a reduction in her anxiety and physical distress. This study shows that writing has the potential to be used by participants outside of a traditional clinical environment. However, more research is necessary in order to strengthen the usage of FEW as self-help.

Why does focused expressive writing produce positive effects in many participants? Initially, Pennebaker theorized that writing produced beneficial effects through the reduction of the "negative influences of inhibition" (qtd. in Smyth and Helm 230). He believed that, due to personal and external constraints (ie: social stigma), people generally felt unable to disclose their thoughts and feelings concerning trauma. However, little research has been found to support this hypothesis. Instead, researchers have come to believe that FEW helps structure and organize participants' thoughts and feelings regarding their traumatic or negative event. The creation of a more cohesive narrative may be what is fundamental to the "healing" powers of FEW and of writing at large (Smyth et al., 2001). This idea of narrative creation and structuring will be explored further and applied to the idea of poetry therapy in this thesis, within the chapter titled "Narrative Formation and Structuring."
Focused expressive writing is the paradigm that laid out much of the experimental framework and scientific legitimacy needed by the poetry therapy and expressive arts therapy disciplines in their earlier years. Pennebaker and other early researchers utilizing FEW in their experimental studies were pioneers in showcasing the beneficial effects of writing—providing solid evidence of the supposed writing cure.

**Personal Narrative and Commentary**

The early principles of poetry therapy do not speak directly to my own experiences with poetry and its therapeutic benefits. As shown in the literature, poetry therapy used to focus on the reading and discussion of poetry, rather than its creation. From my own experiences, reading poetry can be a great way to introduce individuals to poetic devices and principles, but it can be bogged down when instructors or practitioners focus too much on the original author's intended meaning. This emphasis on already-written poems and idea of a singularly correct meaning can turn people off from poetry altogether. For example, the traditional way of teaching Shakespeare and old poets, where teachers may focus on what the author meant by the usage of the color blue, can lead students to dislike poetry forever.

A great way to integrate the reading and writing of poetry together without an explicit focus on the author and their intended meaning is to share a poem and encourage individuals to write their own poem afterwards. Their poem can either be related to, inspired by, or in response to the original poem.

In the first creative writing class I ever took, during my junior year of high school (2013-2014) back in Oregon, I remember reading "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy
"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost. Frost is a classic and commonly studied poet, with his "The Road Not Taken" poem among the most quoted poems in America. Instead of doing a line-by-line analysis of the poem, my teacher encouraged us to write an interpretation of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" as we related to it. In response to Frost, I wrote this poem:

**WINTER**

i am a strange one,
in the sense that i push myself,
not to succeed and thrive, oh no,
but to harsher extremes.
it's almost as if i pride myself
on my perpetual sleep deprivation,
on how much caffeine that i consume,
on how little that i care
about all these things i do.

oh yes, i pride myself
as apathy consumes me true.
this is the winter of my life
and it's turning my lips blue.

My response poem is, at best, tangentially related to Frost's original poem. The original poem is a simple narrative, sharing the experiences of a traveler as they happen upon a lovely winter scene. The traveler is inclined to stay, but as they write, they acknowledge their obligation: "But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep" (Frost 14-16). My teenage brain took the poem, changed the peaceful winter setting into one of desolation, and made it all about me.

Even though my poem lacks a direct connection to Frost's original poem or meaning, I like how my creative writing teacher used his poem to prompt our own writing. She did not create boundaries or restrictions on what we could write about. She
just let us students run in whatever directions our minds took us. This is something I loved about her and her teaching style. Her openness and lack of judgment regarding the content of the poems helped forge a close-knit community of writers, where we each grew comfortable sharing our writing with her and with each other.

In responding to "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," I found a sense of emotional expression and insight, discussing the apathy and sort of numb emotionality I felt during that period of my life. To me, this combination of reading and writing seems superior in a therapeutic sense to the simple reading and discussion of pre-existing poetry. It makes poetry much more approachable and accessible as a form of expression, without pushing individuals away with literary analysis and forcing singularly correct poetic interpretations upon them.

Before beginning my thesis research, I had never heard of the practice of focused expressive writing (FEW). The significant outcomes found in the literature are fascinating and promising, but I am unsure how I feel about it due to the constraints placed upon participants. For example, requiring participants to write for the entire allotted period of time seems rather strict to me. How is this regulated? What happens if the participant runs out of things to say, or worse, is negatively triggered by the act of writing about a deeply important, emotional issue? Sometimes it is necessary to step away from a piece of writing in order to calm down, but it does not seem like that is a consideration included in the FEW experimental paradigm.

However, the positive progression shared in the case study about Mary is fascinating. Hearing about a domestic violence survivor who was able to find some semblance of personal peace and acceptance through writing was very heartwarming. I
related to her in the sense that we are both individuals who sought a unique alternative to traditional forms of therapy. Furthermore, the usage of FEW in a self-help, workbook-based fashion seems promising. The case’s positive outcome may point to the feasibility of other forms of expressive arts therapy workbooks. I thought that it would be interesting to see what contents are typically within a FEW workbook, in order to inform what a poetry therapy workbook could look like.

Unfortunately, I could only access a book on the theory of FEW that includes some writing exercises, rather than a full workbook. This book, *Opening Up by Writing It Down*, was created by James Pennebaker himself alongside one of his contemporaries, Joshua Smyth, who was the principal researcher on the case study about Mary. The book contains ten chapters, primarily discussing the research and benefits behind FEW. Each chapter contains one or two inset boxes with FEW-related prompts for readers to test out.

One primary difference I found between the book's prompts and the standard prompt provided in the literature review was the flexibility afforded to readers within the book.

For example, in the book's instructions for the traditional FEW exercise, the prompt encourages writers to simply "stop writing or change topics" (Pennebaker and Smyth 167) if they find they are getting upset during writing. Furthermore, it discusses different approaches to expressive writing. For example, writers may feel like they would not benefit from writing about a deeply difficult or traumatic event, as is the norm for FEW. However, the book provides alternative perspectives a writer may take on for an expressive writing exercise, such as:
1. Cognitive processing: "thoughts and feelings with an attempt to derive more understanding and insight regarding an event"

2. Benefit finding: "identify an event and then focus on the positive aspects of the experience...how you have grown or changed as a person due to the event and how you might be better equipped to meet future challenges"

3. Best possible future self: "think about your life in the future and write about this life as if you have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals"

(Pennebaker and Smyth 163)

I feel like the variety of prompts provided makes FEW more accessible and approachable for all readers and writers compared to the original prompt, especially in a self-help context. Furthermore, some of the prompts seem to align with other forms of therapeutic writing I found during my literature review, such as future-oriented writing and strengths-based writing. It is interesting to see the intersections found between the different iterations of therapeutic writing.

The role of one's environment is also important to consider. Many people may be uncomfortable writing as a part of a laboratory or scientific study, such as in the FEW experimental studies I discussed. However, these same people may still find the paradigm helpful if they are able to write on their own terms within an environment that is more comfortable for them.

As for the psychological mechanics behind the positive benefits of FEW, I see some merit in Pennebaker's early theory of inhibition. It surprised me to learn that it
gained little to no traction from further scientific research. It can be difficult to express emotions, especially regarding difficult or traumatic events. Speaking from a personal perspective, I know I do not like to dive deep and discuss my past experiences at length with others. I fear making them uncomfortable or burdening them with my emotions. Worse, I feel like people may see me as someone dwelling on the past or someone worth pitying.

When emotional expression to friends or family feels inhibited by real or imagined stigma, it is extremely helpful to have some other outlet. Between a person and their journal, notebook, or computer, there is privacy and no potential judgment, nor any opportunity for the medium to "talk back." There is only a space to express the things they have been hiding within themselves. This is purely anecdotal, yet it feels almost inherently connected to therapeutic qualities of writing. It will be interesting to see if future research on FEW or other forms of therapeutic writing will revisit the theory of inhibition. It certainly rings true to me.
CHAPTER 2

MODELS OF POETRY THERAPY

Introduction

Much has changed from the early days of poetry therapy, where Leedy's poetry therapy principles and Pennebaker's focused expressive writing paradigm emerged. One major point of growth for the discipline has been the development of a number of poetry and writing-focused therapeutic models.

Two major models of poetry therapy exist: Nicholas Mazza's RES model of poetry therapy and the broader Hynes and Hynes-Berry model of bibliotherapy. Therapists may decide to utilize elements of one, both, or neither model while planning activities for their patients, since there are no discipline-wide standards for therapeutic models. Both models have been directly referenced and used primarily in the context of guided settings (as opposed to self-help or self-directed usage), whether that be in individual, clinical spaces (Kloser, 2013; Connolly Baker and Mazza, 2004; Furman, 2003) or in group spaces and outreach programs (Olson-McBride and Page, 2012; Mazza, 2012; Stepakoff, 2009; Mazza, 2007; Mazza, 2018).

Mazza's RES Model

Nicholas Mazza's RES model of poetry therapy is a multi-dimensional clinical model for poetry therapy practice initially developed in 1999. Mazza is a key player in the poetry therapy discipline, as a prolific researcher, president of the National
As societion of Poetry Therapy (NAPT), and founder-editor of the NAPT's *Journal of Poetry Therapy*. Despite the RES model's predominant development for use in poetry therapy, the model and its components may be applied to other expressive arts therapies such as drama therapy and music therapy. The model consists of three separate components: the receptive/prescriptive component (R/P), the expressive/creative component (E/C), and the symbolic/ceremonial component (S/C)

The following model visualization shares the three RES components.

Fig. 2.1: Visualization of RES model of poetry therapy

(Mazza and Hayton 58)

Essentially, the large oval is split into three parts, and each part is representative of one component of the RES model (receptive/prescriptive; expressive/creative; and symbolic/ceremonial). Each part contains the mediums of expression used in conjunction
with each specific RES component. For example, the expressive/creative component may include the creation of lyrics and songs; journals, diaries, and blogs; letters; poetry; or other forms of client expression depending on what form of expressive art therapy is being used.

Overlaid on top of the three parts are circles representing different forms of expressive arts therapies. A key explaining which letters represent what form of therapy is located to the left of the diagram. The circles enclose the specific mediums or techniques that the form of therapy generally uses for each RES component. For example, the poetry therapy circles call for "existing poetry" to be used in the receptive/prescriptive component; "client poetry" to be created in the expressive/creative component; and "performance and recitation" as the expressive methods for the symbolic/ceremonial component. Different forms of expressive arts therapy may share some of the same mediums of expression (e.g., poetry therapy, drama therapy, and music therapy all utilize performance and recitation).

The receptive/prescriptive (R/P) component of poetry therapy calls for introducing existing poetry into therapeutic contexts (Mazza and Hayton 53). The poem or poems may be chosen in order to fulfill any different number of purposes like validating feelings, sharing a sense of universality, creating a positive group space, or encouraging self-disclosure. This component seems to be the most directly connected to Jack Leedy's original conceptions of what poetry therapy should be, as was envisioned back in 1969.

The expressive/creative (E/C) component of poetry therapy occurs when patients or participants express themselves and create their own poems in either a clinical or
community-based setting. Ideas for poems may come directly and spontaneously from the individual’s mind. Otherwise, therapists and poetry therapy facilitators may encourage expression and creation through the use of pre-existing poems or literary works, specific prompts, or specific forms. Common forms and techniques used during the E/C component of poetry therapy include:

1. Prestructured poetic stems: prompting participant writing with starting lines such as, "When I am alone…" or "Hope is…" in order to encourage writing about a specific theme or idea.

2. Cluster poem creation: involves "free associating (similar to brainstorming) one-word images and feelings related to a central word (e.g., trauma)" ("Poetry and Trauma" 4).

3. Sensory poem creation: involves creating a poem based on the five (or more) senses, such as sound, touch, taste, and smell. An example prompt may include stems like: "Grief is like… it sounds like…it feels like…” The poems utilize metaphor in order to make sense of the theme or concept at hand.

4. Acrostic poetry: involves creating a poem about a theme, where the first letter of each line spells out a particular word. For example, someone may use the name of a lost loved one in order to express their feelings through acrostic.

5. Collaborative poetry: involves creating a poem as a group, wherein each group member contributes one or more lines to a poem about a central theme. Collaborative poetry creation may involve prompts or may occur organically.
6. Dyadic poetry: occurs when a pair (parent-child, partner-partner, etc.) is asked to develop a two-line poem (a dyad) about a subject, their relationship, or a specific shared event. ("Poetry and Trauma" 4-6).

These prompts are useful in encouraging participants to write, especially when they may not have the inspiration or immediate idea to write on their own. Furthermore, the group poems contribute to "promoting interpersonal relations, advancing group cohesion, engaging in problem solving, and instilling hope" ("Poetry and Trauma" 5).

The symbolic/ceremonial component (S/C) of poetry therapy involves the usage of "metaphors, rituals, and storytelling in a clinical or community activity" (Connolly Baker and Mazza 144). In the specific case of poetry therapy, this component generally includes the performance and recitation of poetry. As much as writing poetry can be healing, sharing one's poems may ignite further therapeutic benefits for participants.

Autoethnographic researcher Tass Holmes said it well: "In reading aloud or sharing a poem, incorporating pauses, phrasing, breathing and voicing or intonation of speech, the spoken word framework permits a sense of relief, through releasing these ‘secret’ feelings, allowing emotional components of life experience to be comprehended by a willing audience" (6-7). Within her ethnographic study, Holmes joined a poetry and song-writing group in rural Victoria, Australia where participants formed a community and bonded over themes of motherhood, sexual identity, the desire to love and be loved, and overcoming grief and loss.
Sharing these personal but universal experiences allows participants to find validation and acceptance among their peers (Holmes 12). This is important for both group and individual healing. Whether derived or arising from lived experience, poetry is able to "encapsulate the shared nature of that raw experience, giving it a capacity to allow emotions and feeling to cross ethnic boundaries, physical borders, cultures, and time' [and create] accessible understanding" (Holmes 8). Wherever the origin of these experiences, it appears that sharing poetry in a community group may "facilitate profound growth and healing for...participants, including those who have suffered seldom-discussed personal traumas" (Holmes 14).

Hynes and Hynes-Berry Bibliotherapeutic Process

Though Mazza's RES model may be viewed as the primary model for poetry therapy, the Hynes and Hynes-Berry bibliotherapy model acts as an important predecessor to modern poetry therapy. Published in 1986, Arleen McCarty Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry's book Bibliotherapy - The Interactive Process: A Handbook laid out a blueprint for the bibliotherapeutic process. Though they are often used synonymously, bibliotherapy is a broader form of expressive arts therapy than poetry therapy. It considers all forms of literature—poems, novels, short stories, passages from texts, etc.—as potential tools in the therapeutic process.

Contrary to the RES model, where its components are not steps so much as they are separate but integrable approaches, the Hynes and Hynes-Berry bibliotherapeutic model illustrates a seemingly sequential, linear process. Furthermore, the Hynes and Hynes-Berry model seems to focus primarily on reading literature as a therapeutic
process, rather than writing and sharing one's original creations (as is the emphasis in the E/C and S/C components of Mazza's RES model). The steps are as follows:

1. Recognition
   a. The process begins with "something in the material that engages the participant" (Hynes and Hynes-Berry 44). They see something of themselves in the work, identifying with the story, narrative, or the emotions expressed within it. This recognition can be immediate, or require some further exploration and probing by the therapist or facilitator.

2. Examination
   a. This step is viewed as an intensification of the first (Hynes and Hynes-Berry 49). After the participant experiences some recognition of feeling-response, they must dive deeper and examine their reactions for themselves. Their initial feelings eventually emerge into some kind of cognitive awareness of why they feel the way they feel.

3. Juxtaposition
   a. As a participant examines their recognition, "an additional impression of the subject may emerge" (Hynes and Hynes-Berry 50). Examination leads to juxtaposition, where a participant puts "side by side, for the purposes of comparison and contrast, two impressions of an object or experience" (50). This leads to them examining their initial reaction further. They may see that they truly do believe in their initial feeling, or end up invalidating it and believing in another viewpoint or feeling.
4. Application to Self

a. After a participant's feelings and concepts surrounding a therapeutic text are recognized, examined, and juxtaposed, they must be applied to their own life. They must evaluate how "their attitudes and behaviors are affected by their new viewpoints" (Hynes and Hynes-Berry 53) and integrate the insights as reference points for response or action.

In order to illustrate how these pieces work together, I will describe a case wherein a bibliotherapy group reads a short story about a character who struggles with loneliness and isolation. An individual participant may initially react with hesitancy. They may recognize themselves within this character but do not know why or how to express this recognition. Upon further examination, they may realize what it is that causes them to identify with this character and why they do not want to express their feelings (e.g., fear of vulnerability). However, if other participants seem to be comfortable expressing their experiences of loneliness and isolation, the individual may juxtapose themselves with others and realize the validity of their feelings. They may apply this realization to their life as a self-soothing technique and move forward with the knowledge that it is, in fact, normal to feel lonely and isolated and that expressing such feelings is valid and important.
Other Therapeutic and Healing Models

With these two models in mind, many have gone on to create their own models for practicing poetry therapy, such as researcher and writing teacher Reinekke Lengelle. Lengelle's model, known as the "transformation-through-writing model," employs multiple forms of writing and expression, including poetry.

The model follows a basic structure:

![Fig. 2.2: Visualization of transformation-through-writing model](Lengelle and Meijers 58)

The model is cyclical, wherein a patient or participant begins the process at the boundary experience stage. Initially, they are burdened with the weight of a situation, event, or attitude (referred to as a SEA). The participant creates and internalizes their initial interpretation and perspective on the SEA, or their "first story." If the interpretation is negative and senselessly reiterated in the participant's mind, it can result in feelings of suffering and being stuck (Lengelle and Meijers 59). However, through engaging in a
dialogue with oneself, the participant may undergo a fundamental transformation regarding their SEA. They may achieve the ultimate aim of the transformation-through-writing process: working "toward a more life-giving perspective," developing what is referred to in Fig. 2 as a "second story" (Lengelle and Meijers 59).

Within the transformational space, four steps occur: sensing, sifting, focusing, and understanding. When in the first step of sensing, participants gather information about their experience from various sources and explore their feelings about this information. This step relates to the receptive/prescriptive component of Mazza's model, as it often includes exploration through pre-existing poems or stories in order to "provide entry points for the [participant] and...help validate and universalize the victim’s feelings” (qtd. in Lengelle and Meijers 62).

After sensing, a participant moves on to sifting, where they begin to process their feelings regarding their experience. From their processing emerges new concepts and constructs surrounding the SEA. This is where participant writing generally comes into play, moving on to the most expressive/creative component of Mazza’s model.

Following sifting, the participant enters the focusing stage. During focusing, these concepts and constructs become more nuanced and tangible for the participant, perhaps through reflecting on poems they have written in the two prior stages.

Finally, from the focusing stage comes the understanding stage. Participants have clearer views on their particular SEA, and are able to understand "the who, what, where, when, how, and ‘why’ of what has happened" (Lengelle and Meijers 64-65). What once were confused and undeveloped fragments of feeling and memory are now the making of a "second story," where perspective, acceptance, and meaning are found. The second
story should become embedded into the participant's mind, in order to combat the suffering borne from their initial emotions and reactions (the first story). This embedding serves to provide them a more meaningful, integrated, and long-lasting perspective on their SEA.

The transformation-through-writing model is a closed cycle rather than an open circle due to the fact that one may need to go through this process several times (or indefinitely) in order to create and maintain the second story regarding their SEA. Due to the potential need for continued cycling, participants must maintain a dialogue with themselves. For many people, this dialogue is ongoing. This does not mean the transformation-through-writing process is not working. It just must be repeated in order to maintain one's new perspective.

**Personal Narrative and Commentary**

The three discussed poetry therapy models all appear to have their own benefits, and some seem nested within one another. For example, through engaging in poetry therapy or bibliotherapy, we may undergo the transformation-through-writing process described in Lengelle's model. Or maybe, when a participant reads a poem for bibliotherapeutic purposes and applies it to a personal experience or circumstance, they may become inspired and utilize one of the techniques discussed for the expressive/creative component of poetry therapy to make their own poem.

However, difficult events and traumas are not so easily represented and resolved. The models go beyond an approach of "fix it and forget it." Each model illustrates that
using poetry as a form of healing is an ongoing (and perhaps, neverending) process, because healing itself is an ongoing process.

The intertwined and ongoing natures of these models are applicable to the ways I have engaged with and written poetry in my own life. For example, I created this poem in late 2016. It was inspired by Woody Guthrie but written about my relationship with my father:

**THIS MACHINE KILLS**
papa played guthrie in the car every day for ten years…

made me the one i am today but i don’t know if he can tell. i think we lost connection in texas, california, arizona, lost something that maybe never fully formed between the schizophrenic mind or the heart of a little girl resentful of being bathed in loss and firestorms and loved only in distance.

but we are past that now. i accept the affect inherent in our conversations. i forgive all that you forget. i dream of seeing you behind the voices. i push death away.

we rolled on, we rolled on, we roll on.

Woody Guthrie was a staple artist in my father's music collection, alongside musicians like Bob Marley and Bob Dylan. I think the messages and values spread in their music, ideas like human rights, democracy, anti-authoritarianism, and the Common Good, really influenced me from a young age. They were political, radical, protesting the injustice of the state of the world around them. Anyone who knows me closely knows that I have some of the same energy and ideals that as they did.

Long past the days of listening to music with my dad, I found a Woody Guthrie song titled "Roll On, Columbia, Roll On." The song, written about the hydroelectric
power projects created on the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest, stuck with me. Its title and hook remained in my mind and took on a different, almost mantra-like meaning. Inspired by the song and the idea of "rolling on," and reminded of my father's love for Guthrie, I decided to make a poem about the two.

The poem discusses my complicated relationship with my father. Growing up, I was always closer to my mother and took her side on everything. Therefore, due to the conflicts between he and my mom, his untreated mental illness, and his fractured presence in my life, my father and I never developed a very close bond. I resented him for that for a while. However, as I have grown, I have tried to understand him more. I have come to understand his actions as pathological. They did not stem from a place of cruel intention; but instead, were side effects of his untreated mental illness. I have come to accept that we will never have a traditional, neurotypical father-daughter relationship, if such a thing even exists. I have decided that, despite the complications, I will do what I can to speak with him and love him for who he is. I will try and roll on.

As I re-read this poem with the context of the poetry therapy models in mind, I saw a lot of bibliotherapeutic and transformation-through-writing principles within it. I interacted with a piece of art, saw something of myself and my life experiences in it, and applied it to myself. The fact that the piece of art was a song, rather than a poem or written story, does not seem to change the bibliotherapeutic process at hand. The song was able to facilitate a deeper, personal dialogue both within myself and with myself.

From there, I used my personal application of the song, combined with my memories of my father and his love of Guthrie, to create a poem and engage with the transformation-through-writing process. I acknowledge the historical causes of our
disconnected relationship in the second stanza, but reframe the relationship through a mindset of acceptance in the third stanza. This creation of a "second story," as discussed in the transformation-through-writing model, is something I strive to achieve through my poetry. I seek to change my own perspective and make my pre-existing thoughts more positive, affirming, and meaningful.

This next poem is similar, through its inspiration by external media and reclamation of meaning through the creation of a second story. I wrote it at the end of this past summer, and it has grown to be a personal favorite of mine:

**THE LAST ASIAN GIRL IN NEW ENGLAND**

i read “crying in h-mart” and i cry too—michelle’s words resonate into these empty corners of my heart, the ones where she once lived and bloomed. but now i am without a mother (long passed) making lumpia and shrimp pancit in the kitchen with the gaudy flower walls and the catholic prayer plaque hanging above the sink. the palpable scent of these foods is not with me; the way she cooked is not with me. i ate chicken adobo alone at some hole-in-the-wall filipino diner in seattle three years ago and that is the closest i have come to feeling her arms around me in a decade. i spent the rest of the day wondering if i could cook like that. when i got home, i never tried.

i watch “crazy rich asians” and i fall in love too—with a world where everyone is your aunty and you call them so. the bright colors and romance keep my heart joyful in the theater but when i drop my friends off and go home, i cry my eyes out and think of the kind of culture (in all of its good and bad) that i missed out on due to her passing. i think of the dynamic: single mother and daughter. against the world. i cry more.

i now live in a city that is 95% white, with families whose roots sprawl back through generations across our state.
i am out shopping; on campus; at work; in a coffee shop. someone asks me, with a curious eye, “what are you?”

i think they mean well but i feel their gaze on me like i am some other, but not obviously other-enough. i am: what? i say to them: “i know, i look slightly not white, right? i’m half filipino.” it is a routine by now. i say it with a laugh, as though my identity is a comedic bit.

but sometimes, i hesitate. i hesitate because i feel like a fraud. i hesitate because it is worse when they do not take this fact at face value—when they ask me about my family, or the country, its food, its people. i have little to say when that happens. because the only connection i had to being this self they see me as—the half-white, half-asian, daughter of an immigrant mother, between two cultures but belonging in full to neither—died over ten years ago. i have no heritage. all that remains is my face and complexion and a string of memories fraught and frayed by loss.

i see asian representation in the world and i love it and i want to identify with it. but, at the same time, it makes me hurt. because i see my mother’s absence in everyone, and am reminded of how little i am in touch with the country and culture that created her. i am driven desperate, desperate with a longing to touch this part of my roots again, searching for something i do not now have.

as i hurt, i think back as far as i can into my youth. i see her, i think: her and her long, straight, beautiful black hair (pre-cancer, pre-everything), smiling. singing some unknown song in tagalog as she cooks and cleans. she is radiant, and her love spindles out of the home in one million directions.
through the window i see myself.  
a little girl with wild dark curls,  
picking weeds and flowers in the yard,  
squishing her too-wide curse of a filipino nose,  
blinking happily into the sun.  
pre-loss,  
pre-everything, the picture of innocence,  
before mama calls me in for dinner.

this moment replays in my head.  
after it all, i think i finally feel okay. because  
i remember her. as long as i remember her,  
i am not this undefined half-person. i am not  
lesser than, a fraction undeserving of  
recognition.

i am whole.

One day this past summer, I went to see the movie Crazy Rich Asians with a  
couple of my friends. I loved the movie so much—it was enchanting. But after we hung  
out, when I got home and sat down alone on my couch, I found myself brought to tears. I  
loved the film, yes, but it made me miss my mother. It also reminded me of an article I  
had read the week prior, "Crying in H-Mart" by Michelle Zauner, who is a musical idol  
of mine. She is a half-Korean woman who wrote about the loss of her own mother and  
how she struggled to maintain a connection to her Korean heritage after her mother's  
death. Her writing evoked thoughts of my own negligible connection to my Asian  
heritage and my confused cultural identity. I cried and cried and cried.

After I had no tears left to cry, I wrote this poem. I wrote it with an unstoppable  
émotional intensity I had not felt in months, the absolute need to write a poem in order to  
get all of my thoughts out of my brain. I felt so good after I wrote it, as if by releasing  
these emotions through both the acts of crying and writing, I found a semblance of peace.
Though I did not begin the poem with the goal of changing my perspective and establishing a second story, when I re-read it, I noticed a shift to a second story that occurs in the seventh stanza and progresses until the end of the poem. I come to terms with the fact that I am not connected to my mother's Filipino background anymore. However, this does not mean that I am not allowed to call myself Filipino or Asian. I am not missing half of myself. I remember her; through her memory, I am able to feel whole in my cultural identity.

Most of my more therapeutic poems are deeply personal and singularly connected to my own experiences. When I share them with others, they are able to like and appreciate my writing and sympathize with my emotions, but they may not be able to relate to the content within the poems. Sharing these poems is still important, because I may be able to provide insight and food for thought to readers. However, other times, I try to create more universally relatable poems that still provide a personal sense of catharsis and comfort. I found myself writing a lot of these poems toward the end of my high school career.

During my senior year of high school, I enrolled in a poetry class. My family had moved from Oregon to Maine that previous summer. I was a new kid in a new high school, and thought that I could make some friends (or, at the very least, some acquaintances) through a shared interest in poetry. What I did not expect was one of the most intensely fulfilling creative environments I have ever experienced. I can't say exactly what it was—maybe it was serendipity, maybe lightning in a bottle, maybe all of the personalities in the room connecting and creating together and developing a radical
sense of honesty. But I loved that class and the community built within it more than any class I have ever taken, both in high school and college.

I think about it a lot, how I entrusted these near-strangers with some of my most personal stories and emotions and how we consequently transformed from near-strangers to close confidants. It connects a lot to the symbolic and ceremonial processes discussed in Mazza's poetry therapy model. As discussed in Holmes' 2018 study, in speaking out loud, we were able to verbalize our internal state and achieve a sense of relief. Through the simple act of sharing and releasing our hidden feelings surrounding difficult life events, we were able to validate one another. We were able to find comfort and support in the things we thought we had to go through alone.

The following untitled poem is one that I penned toward the end of my senior year, as I looked ahead to college and changes and the infinitely exciting and terrifying possibilities of adulthood. It is, again, inspired by piece of art/external media (the song "Tonight, Tonight" by the Smashing Pumpkins), as my last two poems were.

“time is never time at all, you can never ever leave without leaving a piece of youth...”

the ink that spilled looked black at the time but stained our skin with pastel clouds with a backwards nostalgia of moments both dreaded and dreamed of, now lost

the future sings in her uncertain tone trilling through the chords and chorus accented by the surreal awareness that we can never go back to last year or last week, or fifteen months ago, or the days that seemed to mark the beginning of our lives
we traversed through a time warp
one in which we grew up on accident

we stumble forward with all our hearts
and look behind us with confused eyes

we feel deeply and mercilessly,
seeking recognition of the “good times”
before they are dead in our histories

“… and our lives are forever changed
we will never be the same”

Since we were in a classroom, we did not explicitly use any poetry therapy models or discuss poetry as a direct form of therapy. We did not utilize any of the expressive or creative forms discussed in Mazza's therapy model. I do not believe we used explicit prompts at all, beyond general themes or external images and media. For example, we were given a postcard with a painting or photograph on it and asked to write a poem inspired by the card. However, looking back, I realize how the classroom really became an informal therapeutic space for us all. We were able to be vulnerable with one another. I feel like, in the larger institutional context of high school, having an open space to be ourselves and share our identities and experiences without judgment mattered so much to each of us.

I remember sharing this poem when we were going around the room and reading new poems we had written. I think this poem struck a chord with my peers in my class. All of us were juniors and seniors. We were kids on the precipice of adulthood, anticipating everything that comes along with it, both excited and scared. My poem seemed to encompass these feelings in a concise, easily readable, and relatable package.
Reading my personal thoughts, desires, and fears surrounding growing up led to a discussion on how we all were feeling about the future. It was an amazing feeling, realizing my poem was able to speak to others and illustrate both my own thoughts as well as a greater, collective experience.

As I said, most of my poems I had shared before were very much about myself and my own experiences. This poem is grounded in the personal, but its subject matter renders the message and disclosed feelings universal. It is interesting to contrast the differences of therapeutic outcomes that occur depending on whether the poem I share is relatable or relatively unrelatable. Most people have not had a parent die at a young age. Most people do not have a mentally ill parent. But most people my age can understand what it feels like to be scared of growing up and desperate to hold onto good memories and feelings of youthful indestructibility.

I consider both forms of poetry to be healing. The disclosure of intimate, unique experiences may not yield responses of "I know how you feel; that happened to me too" very often. However, in my opinion, poems of this nature are not any less valuable to share in a symbolic/ceremonial space. I find it healing and relieving to release these feelings even if no one can relate to them. On the other hand, Mazza's model of poetry therapy discusses symbolic/ceremonial spaces primarily in the context of participants validating and finding commonalities with one another. Therefore, creating and sharing poems that express personal thoughts but through the context of more relatable, universal experiences (eg: growing up, finding yourself, falling in or out of love, etc.) may help individuals achieve the validation and acceptance we crave.
CHAPTER 3

THERAPEUTIC QUALITIES OF POETRY

Introduction

Poets have implicitly and explicitly espoused the therapeutic value of poetry for centuries. As English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, famously stated: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Voigt, "William Wordsworth 101"). But one may ask: what particular qualities make interacting with poetry—through either its reading or creation—a therapeutic practice? Some ideas that may be considered include catharsis, metaphor and image, group cohesion, universalizing feeling, and the creation and attribution of narrative control. Though these individual characteristics are applicable to a number of writing genres and therapeutic mediums, poetry is the ideal medium to bring them all together.

Poetic Catharsis

Expressing oneself through writing can be an important therapeutic tool as it relates to catharsis. Catharsis, for therapeutic purposes, can be defined as "the purging of the emotions or relieving of emotional tensions, especially through certain kinds of art, as tragedy or music" ("Catharsis"). Researcher Gillie Bolton claims that patients may feel more comfortable engaging in cathartic release through writing, rather than through speech or a conversational dialogue. As she states, "a piece of paper is much more
private: it can't answer back, interrupt, embarrass, or worst of all - remember" (Bolton 120). It is for this reason that many find writing poetry cathartic and stress-relieving as an outlet for emotional release (Philipp, 1999). It may allow patients to find their words and clarify their emotions on paper before sharing them with someone else.

Furthermore, poetry may be an especially cathartic form of writing due to its open-ended nature. Poetry's openness and lack of rigid structure has often been touted as a negative therapeutic aspect, as will be discussed in the following chapter of this thesis. However, as Leedy stated in his book, *Poetry Therapy*, poetry may be seen as the "shortest emotional distance between two points" (70). Due to its open-ended nature, participants can use poetry to get straight to the point with their meaning or be indirect in arriving at their desired expression. Their poem may be brief or long. There is no need to create character, setting, or plot, as is necessary in other literary genres. Without the constructs often found in other forms of writing, participants may feel more readily able to express themselves. They may also be comforted by the fact that "there is no 'good work' or 'bad work…'" in the context of poetry therapy. Their poetry is not judged on its literary merit. Instead, "there is only what each person creates out of himself for himself" (Leedy and Rapp 145).

Poetry fulfills "the human need to symbolize or represent, via external form, emotions, and images that have been purely internal" (Stepakoff 108). This sense of "externalization" is a key element of catharsis. Some of the key purposes of externalization, specifically within narrative and poetry therapy, are to "separate the person from the problem, permit the problem to be viewed from a variety of perspectives and contexts, and to foster client agency over the problem" (Keeling and Bermudez 406).
Bringing one's internal state into the outside world, whether through writing or other forms of expression, is what makes many feel a sense of release from repressed or hidden feelings.

**Metaphor and Imagery**

Metaphor may be defined as "a compressed analogy," or a figure of speech that "involves a transfer of meaning from the word that properly possesses it to another word which belongs to some shared category of meaning" (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 83). Conceptions of what constitutes metaphor may include similes, which are similar to metaphors in their comparison of objects, terms, or ideas; except for the fact that metaphors "require the reader to do the work of constructing a logic of categories and analogies" (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 83). Similes are generally more explicit in their comparison than metaphors.

Imagery in writing such as poetry utilizes perceptive, sensory, and figurative language in order to develop a mental image in the reader's mind. The experience of reading imagery-heavy writing can be thought of as "quasi-perceptual...it resembles perceptual experience, but occurs in the absence of the appropriate external stimuli" (Thomas 1). With a rich image, readers may be able to almost see, taste, smell, or feel whatever the writer is trying to explicate. Image and metaphor often integrate into one another, though it is important to recognize them as separate concepts. Both metaphor and image are intrinsic to the art of creating poetry; they also form some of the foundational therapeutic aspects for the discipline.
Metaphors are more commonly used in poetry therapy than in any other form of expressive arts therapy (Mazza and Hayton 57). They "can be used in therapeutic settings to help clients elaborate their emotions and explore meanings" (Springer 69) and "open the windows in the mind onto seemingly inexplicable matters" (Bolton 99). For example, someone may feel anxious and trapped and have trouble explicating their feelings to their therapist, or perhaps even identifying the feelings themselves. They may use the metaphor, "I feel like a weight is laying on my chest and crushing me." The sensory image of the weight reads as heavy, as a force trapping the client; while the state of being crushed may open up a further discussion of what is causing them to feel that way (perhaps anxiety or a low, depressive state).

The use of metaphor in writing or emotional disclosure may initially create a distance (between themselves and the emotion) that makes a client feel more comfortable expressing themselves (Mazza, 2012; Wissman and Wiseman, 2011). It is from this initial acknowledgment and disclosure that emotions may be properly translated into discussable topics. This translation may be viewed as a "bridge" from a client's internal self to the external world. Researchers Teresa Legowski & Keith Brownlee echo this notion in an article on metaphor within narrative and poetry therapy: "Metaphor provides a bridge. It gives the externalized concept an image…about which the client can then converse. Thus, metaphor easily affords itself to the telling of the person’s story" (25).

Furthermore, through creating imagery-rich poems, "clients can become more aware of thought processes and mental images" (Springer 70). The images that they may have held inside of their heads are expressed in writing, promoting a sense of self-understanding. In the context of group poetry therapy, imagery is thought to be a feature
imperative to stimulating "participants' own sensory recollections" (Stepakoff 107).

Providing images, as is inherent to poetry as a medium, can allow participants an illustrative glimpse into one another's minds. This may advance group discussion and participants' understandings of one another.

**Group Cohesion and Universalizing Feeling**

Much of the research done on poetry therapy and its therapeutic bases center around group poetry therapy and therapeutic writing groups. Writing poetry on one's own and sharing it with a therapist or other professional can be helpful for one's internal dialogue and processing. However, for many, it is the group element that can be the most beneficial and effective for healing. This may occur through an expressive/creative process, such as collaborative poetry writing; or a symbolic/ceremonial process, through performing and sharing poetry.

What is it about group poetry therapy that makes it an effective component of the healing process? Collaborative poetry therapy, as is often done in group work, is shown to advance group cohesion (Golden, 2000; Mazza & Price, 1985; Mazza, 2007). An early study conducted by Lucien Buck and Aaron Kramer found that poetry can be "a means of stimulating group development toward increasing directness of expression" (57). The researchers brought together two different groups, college students and patients from a nearby state inpatient mental health facility. The researchers facilitated weekly meetups and began to develop trust and communication between the two groups through poetry writing and sharing.
Groups may be proud of the poem or poems they created collectively, as was shown in Mazza's "Word from the HeART" study on a poetry group done with homeless adults living in emergency housing. The poetry group loved one of their poems so much that they "set the poem in calligraphy" and had it framed in order to hang it in the entryway of their homes, as a sort of symbolic legacy to their group's time together ("Words from the HeART" 208). The act of collectively making art can help bring people closer together and give them a sense of pride.

In the specific context of poetry therapy, collectively creating poetry "empower[s] group members by lending voice to their concerns, strengths, and abilities" ("Words from the HeART" 208). Individuals each contribute their own piece to the greater end result constructed by the larger group. This sense of contribution can have great implications for many groups, especially a group of homeless individuals who may feel displaced and powerless in the broader context of their current lives.

Furthermore, the group environment can encourage emotional disclosure and create a sense of universalization. Researchers Leah Olson-McBride and Timothy Page argue that "self-disclosure on the part of one individual benefits not only the individual, but the group because it often leads to meaningful self-disclosure on the part of other group members" (132). This is an important process. The disclosure chain reaction that may occur can help group members feel less alone in their experiences and encourage them to open up. This idea of universalization of feeling has been argued to similar ends in other studies on poetry therapy and healing through writing (Mazza et al., 1987; Hunter and Sanderson, 2007; Lengelle and Meijers, 2009; Holmes, 2018).
Providing a Sense of Control

Writing has been shown to make events and emotions more manageable for the individual going through them. Writing is able to transform intangible things, like feelings, and make them more concrete and comprehensible; this act provides an element of control to the writer (Mazza, 1979; Mazza, 2003). Wissman and Wiseman, in their 2011 article "That's my worst nightmare: poetry and trauma in the middle school classroom," further explore this concept of "narrative control." They describe narrative control as "a way of using language to claim the right to name their own experience and to shape their own understanding of traumatic situations and experiences" (Wissman and Wiseman 243).

In the detailed case studies, Wissman and Wiseman share their experiences researching and facilitating poetry in a middle school classroom through a community-based poetry workshop (case study #1) and a digital poetry project (case study #2). The article provides a particular focus on the poetic works of two female students, Sherie and Hayley, both of whom utilized their poetry as a space to express the trauma of sexual abuse and domestic unrest.

Oftentimes, experiencing a traumatic event can leave people—especially children and teenagers—feeling powerless and disenfranchised. For both Sherie and Hayley, they were "witnesses to, and unwilling participants in, situations where they had little to no power to shape an outcome or to protect themselves from the results of adult behaviours around them" (Wissman and Wiseman 243). In other words, they had no sense of agency. Through "claiming a poetic space," (Wissman and Wiseman 243) and sharing their interpretations of their experiences through poetic devices like metaphor and image, these
students were able to establish some semblance of control over their trauma and find validation from their peers. They were supported by a teaching pedagogy that emphasized student agency and cultivated the sharing of student lived experiences, fundamentally based off the work of landmark educator and writer Paulo Freire.

Freire was a pioneer advocate for critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Critical literacy may be defined as a process "whereby a person becomes empowered to be able to unveil and decode the ideological dimensions of texts, institutions, social practices and cultural forms" (Mayo 363). In a classroom whose teacher follows a pedagogy that emphasizes critical literacy, students are empowered and given the space and tools necessary to better understand the world around them.

Freire, in his discussion of pedagogy, argues that naming the world is a first step in changing the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Poetry provides one means by which individuals can "name their world." For example, in finding narrative control, Sherie and Haley were able to name their worlds—and the traumatic experiences within them. This process can manifest feelings of meaning and empowerment, especially within the unfortunate broader context of a world that often silences victims of trauma.

**A Note on Timing**

Despite the numerous positive qualities of therapeutic writing and poetry therapy, it is important to take a patient or participant’s current state and mindset into account before encouraging them to create their own poetry. Researcher Louise DeSalvo warns against "encouraging people to write when they are in crisis or experiencing intense emotions including unmanageable anxiety, depression or grief" (qtd. in Baker and Mazza...
Crisis, in this context, may be defined as “an upset in a steady state...a disruption...in a person’s...usual pattern of functioning” (qtd. in Schwietert 190).

Writing in an active crisis state may magnify a patient's negative emotions and push them further into crisis. However, this does not mean that poetry cannot be used following other forms of crisis intervention. Poetry may become useful once the individual has calmed from their active crisis and begun to process their feelings.

In her 2004 article, researcher Julie A. Schwietert shares two case studies from a day treatment facility for HIV-afflicted adults. Patients regularly experienced personal and treatment-related crises. One patient, Wilberto, worked with Schwietert in order to deal with anxiety and anger surrounding his new job as a typing specialist. Wilberto entered the clinic in a panic with a desire to quit his job after the first day. He felt overwhelmed and presented a crisis state. Rather than sit down with Wilberto and prompt him to write a poem, Schwietert asked him to describe his first day in more detail. Wilberto began to open up about his past experiences in the realm of work and how he had managed his anger in the past.

After processing Wilberto's emotions and helping him calm down, Schwietert sensed that Wilberto needed "an object upon which he could center his attention and energy when angry" in order to help him manage his anger and emotions. She believed that the object "would need to take on the symbolic significance of a talisman, and would be more powerful if it were an object he created" (191). This object came in the form of a co-created "calm-down" poem, intended to serve as a mantra for Wilberto to read and revisit when he is angry.
Wilberto decided to keep his job and showed notable improvements in the cognitive, behavioral, and affective spheres over the following four months. Though the timing of the poetic intervention is important, Wilberto's reaction and growth show that poetry can be used as a part of crisis intervention. As Mazza claims, "in poetry therapy, the poem serves as an external object that allows clients an element of protection by an ability to engage or distance themselves from the content with which they emotionally identify" ("Poetry and Trauma" 3). The creation of poetry after crisis and usage of poems as external objects may help manage and diffuse potential future crises.

**Personal Narrative and Commentary**

As I look back on a lot of my poems, I see so many of the discussed therapeutic qualities represented within my writing. I tried to choose the poems in this section in order to share examples of each of the different qualities discussed in the literature review. The following poems range from the dark and the self-questioning to the positive, but they all represent a therapeutic output.

The following untitled poem was published on my blog back in October 2018. It is about a biological family member and their recent attempts to reconnect with me:

i am destined to make myself miserable,  
but i prefer that over your feigned cordiality.

decade-old resentment bares its jagged teeth  
upon my heart whenever i see your phone number—
number sans name, mind you, because  
the hurt child who lives inside of me  
ever wants to give you back your humanity.

it is not you i hate, i think,  
but maybe what you represent. or what you
stood by and let happen all those years ago.
you and the rest of our biological family, drinking
a blood much thinner than water.

some images from those days
will never leave me, like finding the box
containing my mother’s ashes at
the bottom of a garbage bag, piled in
with the rest of my belongings. her whole
body, rendered to nothing, an object,
just as you viewed me.

i will never give you back
your humanity because you let them
take mine when i was so young.
i will never allow you the mental relief
of explicit forgiveness. some say life
is too short to hold grudges, but
i will nourish the few i hang onto.

to erase them is to
erase history.

Ever since members of my biological family members badly hurt me after my
mother died, I have harbored a deep-seated resentment for them. I primarily resent them
for the way that they treated me and tried to undermine my agency and ability to control
my own future. This poem is an attempt at taking back control over the situation. When I
read about the concept of narrative control, something lit up in my heart: this was it. This
is the concept that draws me so readily to poetry. We cannot control how others treat us,
or what they do to us, but we can reclaim and write the narrative of our futures and our
interpretations of the traumatic event. We can choose our reactions and how we want to
express ourselves.

I choose not to forgive my biological family members for what they did. It is
hard, because I know how forgiveness is morally elevated within our society. Individuals
who are victimized or hurt are often pushed to forgive the person who victimized them, in order to "let go" and heal. This emphasis on forgiveness makes it seem like one must forgive in order to move on and find peace. However, I disagree. Forgiveness is not always necessary. Forgiveness is not always deserved. Furthermore, forgiveness is not always healthy, especially if it feels forced or pressured. It should be up to the individual whether they choose to forgive the person or people who hurt them.

I feel like some things in life are unforgivable. Consequently, I feel justified in moving on to live my best possible life without forgiving the people who hurt me. By expressing this decision through my poem, I felt powerful. I claimed my space and shared my truth. I may not have been able to change the past; nothing could ever change the way they treated me and my adopted family or sold off all of my precious belongings. But writing this poem acted both as an exercise in establishing narrative control and a form of catharsis. I wrote this poem after I received an upsetting text from this family member. Instead of responding to them, engaging in conversation, and potentially getting even more upset, I decided to put down my phone. I made sense of my reaction, processed my feelings, and "purged" them through getting them out on paper. This helped me calm down and return to a sense of stasis.

I tend to rely heavily on metaphor and imagery when writing, because I feel like they convey the feeling or circumstance I am trying to convey without being super explicit (and, in turn, unpoetic). This next piece is a prime example of an imagery and metaphor-heavy poem. It is intended to look at identity, and the way in which we try on identities like masks from a dress-up box.
DRESS-UP BOX
mother gave me a box of masks
silken, gaudy, black, and blue
which one to wear? who are you?
what are you to call yourself?

it is complicated.

i want to belong everywhere
and to everyone but by doing that, i
end up becoming a no-body. a girl
with a pallid, formless face
cutting doors into my bones
to manically consume the marrow
of every new experience. wounds,
strung up like twinkling lights;
and to my words, the same.

i am no studied predecessor,
no gilded woman glowing in
the space between gates
so who am i to call myself a
writer, poet, artist, creator, being
an identity forged into lead and silk
that may only be grasped at in vain by
the gossamer hands of a play-pretend
blank slate doll. ages old. devoured
forgotten. and revived: a reminder
to put on my face.

If I were to bind myself to a trope or archetype, it would be that of the artist. I
always have liked to think of myself as an artist. The sort of personality traits and quirks
commonly associated with the artist identity—dreamy, emotional, eccentric, possessing
an eye and appreciation for beauty in the world, etc.—have always felt like my own.

However, at the same time, I find it hard to describe or hold onto my own
identity, who I am, and what I want. I want to fit in everywhere, as I discuss in the third
stanza; but in my eternal quest to fit in and feel like I belong everywhere, I have
oftentimes lost sight of who I am. I juggle many adaptations of myself and exercise them depending on who I am with or where I am. This is normal; we all have to do this. No one would act the same way around their friends as they would, say, during a conversation with their boss. But sometimes it is hard to cope with, and it leaves me with a disturbing feeling of "performing" within my own life.

In these times, I feel like a blank slate, a non-person unable to mentally retrieve the long-lasting traits and interests that define me. I reflect back to others what they want, or who I imagine they see me as. I put on masks, I put on my face, I do what I can to establish and maintain my "performance." This poem is intended to describe this feeling through the usage of metaphor and imagery. Unlike many of the previous poems I have shared in this thesis, this poem does not come to establish a "second story," or a changed perspective on the subject at hand. It is just intended to illustrate my personal experience, in hopes that maybe someone is able to relate to it.

Referring back to the literature, I found the case study on Wilberto and poetry as post-crisis intervention extremely interesting. Poetry, as we have discussed, externalizes the internal and makes feelings more tangible and easily understandable for those going through a difficult time. However, I never had previously thought of the idea of creating a poem as a mantra to revisit in times of distress. This conceptualization of poem as object, analogous to a lucky rabbit's foot or other talisman, is beautiful to me. I looked through my old poems and could not find a single one that I wrote that seemed to fit this mold, except perhaps this untitled one:

often i am reminded of how
even if it seems like there is
a hole in the sky, an unbridgeable
expanse between star and star,  
there is still something there.

This poem, as only a single stanza, is very brief. Regardless, it is somewhat inspirational for me. If I remember correctly, this was not written in an act of post-crisis intervention. It was, instead, written in a moment of clarity and calmness. I took an astronomy class last spring, and one night, we watched a presentation at the Emera Astronomy Center on the vastness of the universe. It was weird and humbling, as is any time we see ourselves as extremely small. But I found one thing I learned very soothing: there are so many stars, asteroids, meteors, little particles, whatever, floating around in the universe that even when the sky looks empty, they're all up there taking up space. This same idea can be applied to human beings. When we feel empty and hollow, there is still something (hope, love, ambition, some life-giving spark) inside of us. Reminding ourselves of this can be comforting and provide some solace during dark times.

Even though the poem was not written as a mantra, it is brief enough to be one. Maybe writing it down and keeping it somewhere accessible, like my wallet or purse, could be helpful on days I am feeling down. In the future, I would like to try my hand at creating a poem specifically for the purpose of revisiting during times of distress or gloominess. I think it sounds like a very worthwhile practice, and one more unique way that poetry may be used in a therapeutic sense.
CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVE FORMATION & STRUCTURING

Narrative and Narrative Creation

For the purposes of this thesis, narrative will be defined as "the representation of an event or a series of events" (Abbott 12). This definition takes the idea of narrative and all of its attached preconceived notions down to their bare bones. In its purest form, narrative is storytelling. Creating, internalizing, and expressing narratives are some of the most fundamental human functions, ones we engage in every day. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, author H. Porter Abbott puts it simply: "As soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is a good chance we are engaged in narrative discourse" (Abbott 1). With this perspective in mind, saying something like, "I went to the store. I bought bread," is enough to be its own self-contained narrative.

From the basic definition and idea of narrative, our complex life stories bloom. As such, narrative formation and structuring are considered some of the most important aspects of writing and healing, especially in the context of trauma and difficult life events. Traumatic memories are thought to be "more disorganized than other [non-traumatic] memories" (Smyth et al. 162) and are often initially felt through fragments of sensation, emotion, and image. They tend to lack the linguistic component necessary to integrate into one's life narrative or be effectively communicated or organized (Smyth and Pennebaker, 1999). It has been shown that "the ability to write a coherent story after experiencing traumatic events is positively correlated with better recovery and coping"
(Tuval-Maschiach et al. 281). Therefore, writing about trauma or the feelings and ideas surrounding a traumatic event may be one way to narrativize and give meaning to a formerly intangible, torturous specter.

The creation of narrative and its connection to coping and healing may differ from person to person. It is a process filtered through and mediated by individual personalities, culture, and situational aspects. Despite these differences, it is theorized that three primary factors are found in effective coping, all of which are inherent to the process of narrative creation.

1. Continuity and coherence
   a. Understanding a traumatic event and integrating it into one's life narrative allows for a better sense of continuity "at both the level of general life-trajectory and the specific, concrete trauma" (Tuval-Maschiach 282).

2. Creation of meaning
   a. Trauma often makes people see less meaning in the world (Janoff-Bullman, 1985). The coping process allows traumatized individuals the space to ask questions like, "Why did this happen to me?" "What happened to me?" and "What can I learn from this event?"

3. Self-evaluation
   a. The way in which individuals evaluate themselves and their connection to the traumatic event may affect the ways in which they cope. They may judge themselves upon several dimensions, including degree of control, feelings of guilt or responsibility, and being active or passive in the
It is through these coping processes that individuals may benefit by creating narratives, both mental and written, regarding their traumatic experience. They may be able to build a better sense of continuity and coherence, create a subjective interpretation of meaning surrounding the experience, and come to terms with how they connect themselves to the traumatizing experience.

**Does This Mean Some Poetry is *Not* Therapeutic?**

What does this emphasis on narrative formation and structuring mean for poetry therapy? Despite the extensive literature praising poetry as a formal and informal therapeutic medium, some researchers have argued that writing poetry may negatively impact the mental health of the writer.

Researcher James Kaufman created two impactful articles discussing potential downsides to writing poetry. Kaufman theorizes that poetry may not provide a positive outcome for a writer due to its relative lack of narrative structure. As he purports, "Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) found that the formation of a narrative was essential for mental and physical benefits. Many poems do not have narratives; most stories and plays do" (Kaufman and Baer 275). This is true for many poets: poetry is not as directly associated with narrative expression as are stories, plays, or other forms of writing like journaling. Kaufman later argues that the deeply introspective nature of poetry may also lead to excess rumination, especially for women. Kaufman dubs this the "Sylvia Plath effect." Women are more drawn to rumination as a form of emotional regulation, in
contrast to men, who tend to try and distract themselves when they feel down (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999). Furthermore, self-reflective rumination has become associated with both creative interests and behavior and depression (Verhaeghen et al., 2005).

In essence, Kaufman and his colleagues believe that "writing that is fragmented" (Kaufman and Sexton 268), as poetry often is, may be unhelpful or even harmful to the writer. Retelling a traumatic or difficult event in a story-like, highly narrative fashion, as is the norm in focused expressive writing, makes the event "more manageable and easier to store away in memory" (qtd. in Kaufman and Sexton 274). Without this key element at play, the creation of more experimental and unstructured poetry—such as poetry totally lacking a narrative or sense of storytelling—may not achieve the same positive outcomes associated with narrative-focused writing like FEW.

However, one must take into account the fact that a wide range of poetic forms exists. Though Kaufman's claims do have their own validity, they do not wholly discount the therapeutic qualities of poetry nor the positive outcomes found for many groups and individuals. In modern times, poetry is conflated with lyric, and contemporary narrative theory is "almost silent about poetry" (McHale 11). Lyric poetry is one major form of poetry, defined as a poem that "expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet" ("Lyric | Poetry") and generally utilizes the first-person pronoun. It is this focus on internal, subjective thoughts and feelings that makes many believe that poetry is not "narrative," or representative of events.
In his conception of the lyric, G.W.F. Hegel believed that the lyric poet "absorbs into himself the entire world of objects and circumstances, and stamps them with his own inner consciousness" (Houlgate). With this definition in mind, I argue that poems, even lyric poems, can contain narrative representation of an event or events. If the lyric poet absorbs the external world and expresses it, filtered through their own subjective feelings and emotions, who is to say that their feelings are not either grounded in or reacting to concrete narratives, stories, and experiences? A single poem may, therefore, represent and integrate both emotions and events.

I consider myself a "confessional poet," or perhaps a neo-confessional poet. The school of confessional poetry is generally associated with a number of late 1950's to 1960's poets, like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. Confessional poetry is "an autobiographical mode of verse that reveals the poet’s personal problems with unusual frankness" (Baldick). It emerged as a shocking new form of vulnerability in a time where personal distresses were generally kept private.

Despite some societal progress, I feel like so many external influences continue to pressure individuals to remain refined, under control, and emotionally repressed at all times. I do not think this is a healthy state to aspire toward. I have grown more unabashed and unashamed in sharing my personal experiences through writing as I have become a young adult. I seek to embrace my emotions, my out of control states, the gross and messy parts of myself that I once tried to hide in a poisonous pursuit of perfectionism. I hope that my writing may encourage others to do the same.
In turn, my poetry is almost always autobiographical and deeply connected to my personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings. However, some of my poems are more narrative in their confessional style, while others are more abstract in their representation. Take these two poems for example, "Palmer Has Nothing on Me" and "Invisibility/Invincibility."

**PALMER HAS NOTHING ON ME**
feel free to tell me you love me at any time, at all times.

or just show it
in the bags under your eyes and shaking hands, the nervous grins in my direction and the lungs on fire and the blue lights too. i think

i want everyone to love me forever and i don’t know why. i am shameless in spreading my own heart like a fan closed to open, black and etched with the triptych flowers of my childhood home.

i long to remain delirious with affection: heavy with the remnants of persons past and present.

drinking poison is no different

**INVISIBILITY/INVINCIBILITY**
i turned on my brights in the winter fog on stillwater

just to see what it felt like to be in a cloud.

every drive home (alone, in the dark) is a solicitation to the universe: see me and light me up. i am yours more in my solitude than in any other state, tonight especially.
i cannot see more than five feet
in front of my own face but most people
can’t do that anyways. so i hazard
my trust to nature and move slowly.

right now i only exist in
the immeasurable amount
of moments between points A and B
and this is terrifying but it is meant
to be. i sigh and inhale; the thick air
of this busted-up maine back road
migrates to my lungs

and the fog clears
and i am alive.

"Palmer Has Nothing on Me" is intended to be a more abstract poem; it is
something I created in high school about a boy who I dated for a brief period of time,
written after we had broken up. The second stanza is pure image: all images that I
associated with him, our relationship, and who I was in that time. The third and fourth
stanzas are more internal and emotional, grappling with that teenage state of being
"addicted to love," (a la the Robert Palmer song and poem title inspiration). The poem
concludes with a realization: I cannot make everyone love me. It is toxic to try and do so,
much like drinking poison.

"Invisibility/Invincibility" is a more narrative poem than "Palmer Has Nothing on
Me." I wrote it during my freshman year of college, when I spent most of my nights
working closing shifts at my retail job. I have always thought of my nightly drive home
as a very peaceful, reflective, and almost ritualistic space, where I take the back road
(Stillwater Avenue) from Bangor to home. My car is oftentimes the only vehicle on the
road at that time of night. Somehow it is comforting to exist like that, traveling in a space
with no one else around. Whether I have a fine day at work or a rough, exhausting one,
that drive home is enough to ground me back to life. I can't count how many times I have taken Stillwater over these past four years, to all three of the places I have lived throughout college.

The poem represents a linear narration of one particularly foggy drive home and begins with an extremely clear, narrative line: "i turned on my brights in the winter fog / on stillwater." I intended to illustrate the feelings of peace, solitude, and a certain "oneness" with the universe that occurred to me in these quiet moments spent on Stillwater Avenue.

Despite the differences in narrativity and meaning, writing both poems provided similarly therapeutic outcomes. The more abstract poem still shares images of my subjective experiences in the world, if in a somewhat inexplicable way. The more narrative poem still discusses emotion, feelings, and more abstract "lyrical" concepts. Both seem to create an arc, with conclusions provided for the experiences discussed within each poem. This, to me, shows that poems need not be explicitly narrative in order to create some sense of narrativity.

Despite this, I agree with the general consensus of the research, especially when considering poems with an extreme lack of structure. If I create a poem that is too abstract and vague, without any connection to a specific real-life experience, it does not leave me with a sense of catharsis. This following poem was written in late 2017, during a pretty dreary period of winter. It is untitled.

head is stuffed with cotton;
body disassembled and
weighted with rocks.
silence turns to matter,
a solid state, and with it
i am heavy. it feels cold
and rough on my chest.

i have come to learn:
no matter where i am,
trouble will find me.

During this time, I was studying abroad in Ireland. I thought that traveling abroad and immersing myself in what was, essentially, a new life, would relieve me of some of my internal troubles. However, I found that this was not the case. The day I wrote that poem, nothing bad really happened to me. I just was feeling a little blue, as I do sometimes. Yet somehow I concluded that the internal is inescapable: that "no matter where I am / trouble will find me."

I like some of the images in the poem, but it certainly is fragmented and not grounded in a real narratable experience. I feel like writing it only magnified my negative state and led to endless rumination about my feelings, much like Kaufman suggested it would. It contains none of the three elements of coping. It just provides a metaphor for how I felt in the moment, without trying to come to a new conclusion, reframe my mindset, or clarify the cause of my negative thoughts. Therefore, no sense of catharsis or change in perspective occurred as a result of writing the poem.

In my opinion, poetry does not need to be written in an explicitly narrative form in order to yield some therapeutic benefits. However, it does need to be grounded in the world of "objects and circumstances" to some degree, as Hegel theorized, and connected to the author's feelings about an event or experience. My most therapeutic writing occurs when I enter into the writing process with the intent of productive emotional processing.
Otherwise, without a purpose or structure, writing poetry may lead to excessive rumination without any emotional or mental payoff.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The Future of Poetry Therapy

Despite its growing body of literature and number of practitioners, poetry therapy is a relatively young discipline in terms of arts-based therapies. It is almost fifty years old, yet is still finding its footing in terms of models, professionalization, and standard disciplinary definitions and practices. It has been thought that "defining and clarifying the major types of expressive and therapeutic uses of literature, and the terms used, is a necessary precursor to further research in this field" and that "further research is needed to evaluate the value and clinical effectiveness of specific methods and interventions" (McCardle 522).

I wholeheartedly agree that it is necessary for poetry therapy to become further professionalized in order to be taken seriously as a form of therapeutic treatment and enter mainstream awareness. This idea of professionalization may include more standardization of definitions and practice, further quantitative and in-depth lab studies on clinical outcomes, and the creation of master's degrees or widely-recognized licensing programs in order to become a licensed poetry therapist. These approaches could lend poetry therapy the legitimacy required to reach more individuals in need.

Certain steps have been taken in this direction. The discipline does have a national organization, the National Association of Poetry Therapy (NAPT), intended to represent poets and therapists who use poetry in their practice. Another organization, the
International Federation of Biblio/Poetry Therapy, grants credentials to interested professionals who would like to become a Certified Applied Poetry Facilitator (CAPF), Certified Poetry Therapist (CPT), or Registered Poetry Therapist (PTR). However, their network of previously certified or registered professionals is considerably small, and there is no mention of whether states recognize their certifications or licensure.

Art therapy and its disciplinary requirements could be a good model for poetry therapy to follow. As shared on the American Art Therapy Association website, all individuals who want to become licensed art therapists must graduate from an approved and/or accredited art therapy graduate program and apply for certification as an art therapist with the Art Therapy Credentials Board. Along with national credentials, eleven states require art therapists to obtain further state professional licensing.

Consequently, due to the current lack of professionalization and the relatively low-key, underrepresented state of poetry therapy, some substantial gaps in the literature exist. One such gap occurs in the context of poetry as self-help.

**A Vision of Poetry as Self-Help**

We know that famous writers have espoused the therapeutic qualities of writing poetry for centuries. However, I am interested in learning how we may empower all individuals—even those who may not consider themselves writers—to express their feelings through words and encourage them to engage with poetry writing as a means of expression. This is what I see as a future path for poetry therapy, one that may become especially useful in reaching individuals who are unwilling or unable to engage in traditional therapeutic settings.
When searching for "poetry as self-help" on Google, I found articles about reading poetry as a form of self-help and inspiration. Several YouTubers, bloggers, and websites shared their recommendations on poetry collections and books to read as a form of self-care, but little attention was paid to poetry writing for similar purposes. Likewise, in my extensive literature review, I found only one article that focused heavily on poetry writing as self-directed help. Almost all other articles focused on poetry therapy as it is utilized in individual therapeutic settings, facilitated group settings, school counseling, or literature or writing classrooms.

The article, "From destruction to creation, from silence to speech: Poetry therapy principles and practices for working with suicide grief" by researcher and Maine-based therapist Shanee Stepakoff, discusses poetry therapy techniques in a fashion aligned with Mazza's RES model. Stepakoff shares examples of suicide grief survivors who use poetry therapy as a form of "auto-poetic healing" (108) in independent settings.

However, I did find several articles on focused expressive writing (FEW) as a self-help writing technique. The technology and mediums found in the FEW studies, like self-help workbooks (Smyth and Helm, 2003) or online counseling and websites (Wright, 2002; Lange et al., 2003), could be transferable to poetry and become helpful means of bringing poetry therapy to the masses. It is easy to imagine a self-guided poetry workbook, where a reader may be given writing exercises to guide introspection and emotional processing as well as prompts or pre-structured elements to form poems.

One author, Cynthia Blomquist Gustavson, created a series of poetry writing-focused workbooks that inform my vision of what a poetry workbook could look like. Each of the four workbooks is specialized to suit the needs of individual readers, whether
they are dealing with chronic pain or eating disorders, need spiritual counsel and
guidance, or are interested in self-discovery and healing. I accessed one of her books, "In-
Versing Your Life: A Poetry Workbook for Self-Discovery and Healing" through
Amazon Kindle in order to evaluate the structure and contents of the text. It was

Gustavson and her connection to poetry therapy seem to speak to and align with
my own. As she writes in the book's introduction:

"We turn to poetry at times when our conventional ways of explaining experience
no longer work. Poetry expresses the ambiguous, the contradictory, and most
importantly, unconscious aspects of experience. It has the ability to uncover our
hidden feelings, enabling us to reach new understandings. Sometimes a poetic
metaphor or an image allows us to hold in tension those things that we do not
fully understand" (1).

The workbook facilitates both the reading and writing of poetry. From what I can
tell, all of the poems included in the book are written by Gustavson herself. I imagine the
book's creation may have even been a therapeutic process for her. This is an interesting
but perhaps questionable choice due to the book's intended focus on the reader's creation
of their own poems.

The book is divided into four sections, each addressing a different category of
feelings and experiences. The sections are intended to examine feelings from the reader's
past, present, relationships, and future. Each section contains a number of unique feelings
and experiences; and each feeling or experience has a poem from the author and some
form of guidance for the reader, in order to prompt them to write a poem of their own.
Gustavson utilizes many familiar poetry therapy prompting techniques like sentence
stems, titles, sensory poems, and phrase repetition.
I like Gustavson's book as an example of a poetry workbook, but I think more could be done with the idea. I do not know if I necessarily agree with the amount of her poetry that is included in the workbook. It is a hard line to toe. The poems don't serve as direct examples of her prompts; they just convey similar feelings. So, while the poems may be useful for inspiration, I feel like the reader may unconsciously try too much to emulate or reflect the author's poems after reading them. This is especially true since the writing prompts are provided after each of the author's poems, rather than before them. For example, during the middle of the book, Gustavson shares a poem titled "Someone's Fishing at the Bottom of the Dam."

He could have walked upstream
and tossed his bait
into tranquil, easy waters

but he aims for fish who live
in turbulence, who swim between
the falls' frothing bubbles and eddies.

Above the dam water lies flat—
painted in blues, green, root beer—
a smooth platter for loons and gulls

but in the great gush of falling
those colors fuse into white—
splashing into upward risings

then fall again to bump and seethe,
foam and thunder,
protesting gravity's pull.

I would not choose to be the fisher
in the turbulence below the dam,
I prefer the taste of trout who live in peace;

but he knows these fish are easier to catch—
the ones who have fallen and who swim
within the circles of bright, white water"
(41).

Gustavson follows her poem with a writing prompt, provided for the feeling of "vulnerability." She asks:

"Do you sometimes feel as if you might be that fish at the bottom of the dam, living in turbulence, feeling as though you might get caught by that fisherman's hook any day? When we are vulnerable, for whatever reason, we feel as though our pain is transparent and sense that we might be easily victimized. What makes us vulnerable? Is there a way to escape the turbulence? Who is the fisherman in this poem? Can vulnerability lead to growth? Write about your own experiences as a vulnerable human being; entitle your poem 'Bright White Circles of Water'
(42).

I feel like the heavy reliance on external poetry, as well as the order (poem then prompt) may inhibit the reader-writer's own individual creative experience, processing, and expression. If the workbook looked more like a guided journal, with lots of space to write as well as prompts to ease readers into their own writing process, it may end up being more beneficial for the intended purpose of therapeutic expression. If the workbook author feels the need to include their own poetry within the book, perhaps it may be better placed within an appendix or concluding chapter for readers to refer to if they wish.

The figure on the following page is a mock example of what I envision a workbook page to look like, where the reader is given an emotion or concept, an idea for a poem, and plenty of space for writing. The example emotion is hope, because it's something we all need.
When we go through difficult experiences, it can be hard to feel hopeful. In order to heal from our experiences, we must build resilience and seek hope for the future. This hope doesn’t have to be big or life-changing, it can be something as simple as wishing for a sunny day.

Think about something you have hope for, and begin a poem using this line: ‘In my heart, this hope I hold...’

Fig. 5.1: Poetry workbook page mockup

I can also see self-guided poetry therapy manifesting through another medium—that of digital space. I like the idea of a poetry therapy website, with different pages or
sections explaining the various therapeutic properties of writing poetry, as well as a
guided writing section with prompts for visitors.

Fig. 5.2: Poetry therapy website homepage mockup
Another great element of a poetry therapy website could be a forum, where website readers can share their poems they created if they feel comfortable doing so. Sharing one's own poems or commenting on and relating with others' work creates a sort of informal, digital symbolic/ceremonial space. Many similar spaces exist on the internet, like the /r/OCPoetry community on Reddit. However, the primary use for these spaces is feedback and criticism on users' poetry, rather than emotional disclosure or support. This hypothetical forum would focus solely on the content and experiences shared within each user's poetry, rather than the poem's quality or literary merit.

If a space like this were to become an active community of users, it may create a sense of belonging and universality of experience for the members similar to a traditional, in-person writing group. This informal, digital space may be more comfortable for individuals to engage in due to the inherent anonymity of the internet. It also may be more accessible, since it would not require any money and anyone with an internet access could engage in the community from anywhere around the world.

From a personal perspective, I think that the application of poetry writing as self-help is crucial to the discipline's expansion and proliferation into a more mainstream form of expressive arts therapy. I myself have never felt comfortable with the idea of traditional therapeutic settings, or discussing my issues in facilitated group spaces. I don't really know why; I suppose the idea just never sat well with me. This is an issue with which I constantly grapple. It stirs up a sort of self-contradiction: I am of the camp that believes most people could benefit from therapy, but I have yet to bring myself to go.

I feel like I am not alone in this confusing mindset, and it is something that many others deal with as well. I guess I just do not do well with what I perceive as structured or
seemingly contrived spaces of vulnerability and disclosure, a la traditional therapeutic settings. Instead, I prefer to express myself, my emotions, and my past on my own terms when I feel comfortable doing so. As such, I have found some semblance of healing and peace through writing and sharing my poetry in more independent and informal settings. I have shared my poems in classes and with friends, and even read in public events. Each of these little instances, even if they only last for a few minutes, feels like a space wherein I can speak and share my truth.

Furthermore, when I write poems (even ones I do not share with others), many of the therapeutic principles and qualities of poetry therapy are at play in my creative and emotional process. The therapeutic qualities, the models, the potential prompts, and other components of poetry therapy do not cease to exist outside of a guided, formal setting.

So many people have circumstances that limit them from attending formal therapy. These include local access, time, and money, not to mention one's willingness to go to therapy whatsoever. One may feel like their problems are not severe enough to warrant going to therapy; they may not want to take resources away from someone who "really needs it;" or they may just feel uncomfortable with the idea of formal therapy as a whole. I feel like the mental health community acknowledges these limiting factors. But in order to truly address them, there must be resources and materials created to circumvent such personal obstacles—resources like self-guided poetry writing workbooks or websites.

Independent and self-guided poetry writing is one valuable tool of the many therapeutic forms of expression. I am sure there are many others out there like myself, and even more individuals who have a poetic capacity and a need for emotional
expression but are just not aware of it yet. They too may benefit from the therapeutic usage of poetry, and find a voice by which they may begin to grow and heal. These are the people we need to reach—the ones to whom we must extend a hand and a pencil, pen, or maybe a keyboard.


Keeling, Margaret L., and Maria Bermudez. "Externalizing problems through art and writing: Experiences of process and helpfulness." *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2006, pp. 405-419.


Kim Crowley was born in Coral Springs, Florida and raised in Newport, Oregon before moving with her family to the Bath, Maine area during the summer of 2014. Kim graduated from Morse High School in Bath in 2015 and decided to attend the University of Maine after concluding that Maine wasn't so bad after all.

During her time at the University of Maine, Kim majored in English with a concentration in Professional & Technical Writing and a minor in Marketing. She was lucky enough to find herself in a number of serendipitous circumstances and opportunities throughout college. She studied abroad in Cork, Ireland during Fall 2017; presented at two National College Honors Council Conferences; graduated from the Maine NEW Leadership Institute; and interned at the University of Maine Mandela Washington Fellowship Program and Partners for Peace.

Most recently, Kim became one of two inaugural McGillicuddy Humanities Center undergraduate student fellows, where she was able to share her thesis research and love of poetry with the UMaine community. Following graduation, Kim will begin a job with the University of Maine Honors College. She also plans to continue writing and sharing poetry, in hopes of eventually publishing a collection of her work.