look into my eyes
a poetic narrative of mental illness experienced by four students at Duke University

Julia L. Sargis

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Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

Thesis Advisor
Chris Sims, Undergraduate Education Director at the Center for Documentary Studies,
      Associate Professor of the Practice at the Sanford School of Public Policy

Honors Committee
Shambhavi Kaul, Associate Professor of the Practice of Art, Art History, and Visual
      Studies
Susie Post-Rust, Lecturing Fellow in Documentary Studies

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this thesis is dedicated to anyone who feels like they are their own worst enemy.

you are not your conscience,

you are not your thoughts,

you are not your illness.

INTRODUCTION

I started writing these poems in the spring of my senior year at Duke, but I would like to say that the beginnings of this project took place when I first moved into my house on 9th street with three other girls from school. We, for the most part, knew or knew of each other from social events or classes in the former half of college, but were more or less thrown into a living situation as our campus pushed upperclassmen away during the middle stages of the ever-worsening COVID-19 pandemic. The first weeks were spent openly and honestly trying to figure out how best four girls could live together with our current limits: limited knowledge of each other's living habits, limited ability to leave the house and interact with other people, limited mental capacity to process anything more than what was already going on, especially with the increasing workload of the incoming semester. And so we had interventions. Usually over dinner or after dinner a couple times per week we would share how we were doing with school or social lives, what we needed from each other, and how our mental health was that week. And, honestly, it was usually pretty bad.

Of the four of us housemates, none of us had been fortunate enough to live unscathed by the indiscriminate and relentless effects of mental illness. One of us had lived with anxiety and what she used to think was situational depression, but later realized was a "constant sadness" looming over her mental state for as long as she could remember. One was diagnosed with debilitating OCD at age seven and had been dealing with that and the anxiety and depression that came with it for years. One experienced depression in high school which was exacerbated intensely in college, manifesting into a severe eating disorder and later anorexia soon after finishing her first year. One had general anxiety since she was a toddler, and a similar experience with depression that intensified so much in college that she became suicidal not two months into starting university. We all had been medicated at some point or were currently medicated for these issues. And we were all continuously experiencing the effects of our respective illnesses each day.

But we were also growing so much. We were learning how to navigate healing, both on our own and together as we took hopeful steps of progress or relapsed temporarily into old behaviors. In everything we did, we may have been fighting something in our minds, but the individual growth was undeniably present.

When asked to choose a topic for my final project in documentary studies, I knew this process of pain and growth so powerfully represented by the members of my house was what I wanted to document. This experience with mental health, is, unfortunately,

extremely common at Duke and other universities across the United States and across the world. Our environment demands that we produce great outputs constantly while also navigating a crucially developmental and transitional time in our early adulthood; amidst this transition we are then tasked with figuring out how to exist as our ever-changing "selves" as we traverse the unsteady social landscape of a competitive university. Whether or not one is lucky enough to find success in satisfying these demands, the effects on preexisting mental health conditions and the creation of new ones are unavoidable. I wanted to narrate this shared struggle and how it can take so much energy from the human body, leaving us with sometimes the bare minimum ability to still somehow attempt to achieve academic, professional, and personal success.

I study environmental science, and the environment has been and remains a primary passion of my academic and creative endeavors. This project is something new for me, as I attempt to document via poetry the trials of mental illness in the context of four college students in one house just off the east campus of Duke University. Through interviews with my three housemates, I have compiled a collection of 15 poems that examine four distinct yet unquestionably intertwined stages of mental health: upbringing, referring to one's childhood and the events or experiences that influenced the development of mental health issues; diagnosis, exploring the feelings around the time leading up to, during, or directly after being formally diagnosed with a mental disorder; therapy, expressing the difficulties and confusion that go into opening up to others about one's deepest feelings, and how it is sometimes, but not always, a relieving act; and growth, what we all strive toward as we seek to understand, accept, and move forward in our own mental health journeys.

Each poem is constructed using only words directly spoken to me, the interviewer, by my interviewees in response to my questions about their experiences with mental health. This limits the intervention of my perspective in their stories, as well as establishes room for the audience to explore the temporal and emotional depth of their experiences without adulteration by my words. The poems are presented with salient quotes pulled directly from interview responses in the form of a short book. My hope is that they may resonate with students and others in similar circumstances of mental hardship and enlighten those who may not personally relate but can learn from new human perspectives.

GUIDING THEORIES AND SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

"Arbitrary" rules

A professor once told me that the process of creating art involves imparting a set of arbitrary rules on oneself and following those rules until you have created something concrete. He told me this in response to my coming to him, expressing how lost I was on one of the important assignments of the class because I had so many ideas in my head, and *how could I possibly begin to choose what to make when everything and anything could be good?* His advice guided me with that project and has continued to guide me since in my creative ventures.

I put a set of "arbitrary" rules on myself in the creation of this poetry narrative. One of the primary rules was that I would not use any words beyond what was found in the responses of my interviewees to questions asked about their experience with mental health. I put "arbitrary" in quotations because although it was not imperative to the construction of this project, it was not a completely random choice; in fact, it was informed by a few sources of inspiration, either experienced in the process of ideating the work or from prior teachings that have stuck with me into present time.

The value in recycling materials

"Recycled Cinema" with Shambhavi Kaul was a course that influenced my ideas of what a "new" creation could be, and how recycling previous works, documents, films, and other objects of creation can transform the limits of one's "original" work. A quote stuck with me about this practice of recycling preexisting work instead of creating brand-new "originals" in efforts to amass one's artistic property: "the idea of originality is arrogant and wasteful."[1] Just as buying unused clothing seems wasteful while second-hand options are plentiful in so many areas, I am drawn to the belief that recycling creative material has similar benefits, in addition to being convenient and cost-efficient. Beyond this economically savvy challenge, I found that working with recycled words from transcribed interviews provided a certain set of effects and commentaries that enhanced the meaning of my project.

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[1] Prelinger, Rick. "On the Virtues of Preexisting Material." *Contents Magazine*, no. 5 (2013).

Under Professor Kaul's guidance, we worked with audio and visual archives to create new works which effectively entered the archival footage into a new realm of contemplation. This was accomplished (or attempted) either by recontextualizing the footage to bring into question the original intentions of its creation, or by creating a temporal disparity between the archival and the new in order to invoke an acknowledgment of a past-present dynamic, described by Jaimie Baron as the "archive effect." Baron defines this effect as "a function of the relationship between different elements of the same text, between a document placed within a new textual context" achieved via the appropriation of audiovisual documents.[2]

While I was responsible for the creation of my own "archival" material, with little temporal disparity between the capturing and production of word passages and the creation of poetry from those passages, I posit that the same effect can be felt through my work. By repurposing words of my transcribed interviews, and therefore of my interviewee's lived experiences, I endowed them with a new meaning that carries direct content and thematic essences of the original "document." The result is an immediate translation of an experience that I had with each of my interviewees, yet one that allows the reader to ponder the space between not only the transcription of words and their rearrangement into lines and stanzas, but also between the lived experiences and their recounting in response to my questions. There exists, therefore, a temporal disparity between lived experience, verbal translation, poetic rearrangement, and reading/listening experience that is untouched by addition of my own words, giving depth of time to these stories which as we know developed years ago in each person's early life. This may be different from the temporal disparity that Baron illustrates, since the "archival document" which I am referencing was created by me not a week before starting to transform it into poetry. However, I assert that my project carries its own unique version of temporal disparity: I had culminated decades of lived experience into a 20-minute interview and a handful of poems. The archive is the experience—its repurposing gives it realized depth.

In expressing the depth of these pasts, their literary consumption is also infused with nostalgic melancholy as we realize how much time has been lost in the subjects' seemingly vain struggle to improve their mental health. Baron explains the nostalgia that comes with experiencing archival documents, saying we invest them not only with "the authority of the 'real' past, but also with the feeling of loss…the production of temporal disparity forces us to recognize that the past is irretrievable even as its traces are visible."[3] Although the experiences with mental health were recounted in present time, I hope to achieve a sort of clarity into their moments of happening by preserving the words

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[2] Baron, Jaimie. "The Archive Effect: Archival Footage as an Experience of Reception." *Projections* 6, no. 2 (2012): 102–20. https://doi.org/10.3167/proj.2012.060207.
[3] Baron, "The Archive Effect."

used to recount them, emphasizing the years passed in the turmoil of each individual mind.

By using only the words of those interviewed, I also endow a kind of "authority as evidence," as Baron describes it, of the experience with mental health that goes beyond my own personal experiences.[4] This is something that answered one of my first hesitations with this project, which was the fear of misrepresenting the stories of those I interviewed by the intervention of my own voice or narrative. However I may have tried to limit the permeation of my bias into the poems which represent people other than myself, I recognize that once I establish myself as the medium between their words and my audience, it is inevitable that the fullness of my encounter with my interviewees will be transformed, narrowed, or otherwise altered in some way. Such is the presence of Baron's concept of *intentional disparity*, or the alteration of intentions of the primary source as it is used and presented in another media setting—my interviewees' intentions were to respond to my questions, not to write poems about their firsthand experiences recounted in these responses; these, as they were informed, were my intentions. Therefore, their words, once transformed in both style and context, took on a new intention as they were abstracted from their prose meaning and presented as something else entirely to an audience beyond myself. Historian Carolyn Steedman claims that the historian who uses the archive "always reads the fragmented traces of *something else*," and is therefore subject to interpreting an experience, event, or other historical happening that goes beyond the scope of their own work as well as the strategies employed to incorporate it into their work.[5] The interpretation, whether confined to the inner boundaries of the interpreter's mind or expressed outwardly to a larger audience that will, in turn, create its own interpretations, will never be fully accurate or representative of the original piece. According to Steedman, the historian, or, in this case, myself, will always, in some sense, steal or "misuse" the archived object. Although I may have knowledge of my interviewees' lived experiences that is greater than most if not all of those who will be in contact with my poems, my recontextualization of their words into new expressions will indeed render new meanings of these experiences, especially to an audience that lacks this information that I have of my friends and their mental health. In the perspective of experimental filmmaker Standish Lawder, such recontextualization and redefinition of intent fundamentally changes the effects of cinematic pieces:

> Stripped of its original context, the shot becomes veiled with layers of speculation, subjective evocation and poetic ambiguity. Questions of intentionality and meaning become slippery. The true significance of the *a priori*

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[4] Baron, "The Archive Effect."
[5] Steedman, Carolyn. *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*. Manchester University Press, 2001.

original image hovers just off-screen; we cannot be certain exactly *why* it was filmed. Yet *what* was filmed remains firmly fixed, only now surrounded by a thousand possible new whys. (Lawder, 1992)

Indeed, my recycling of my interviewees' words maintains the originality of their stories to an extent, since, literally, nothing I say is something that they have not said; *what was recorded remains firmly fixed*. Yet there exist both dangers and opportunities in repurposing their stories, in that not only may my poetic choices convolute the story that was to be told, but interpretations of intentions and content are infinite as they are presented in such a new language; *what was recorded is now surrounded by a thousand possible new whys*. Such is the risk that I accepted when initiating this project. But isn't every documentarian taking a risk when attempting to tell another's story?

Blackout poetry

Described thus far is my reasoning for the *content* of my poems; I will now attempt to tell the development of their *form* over the course of this semester.

Our documentary studies capstone class, lead by my thesis advisor Chris Sims, took many "field trips" into the triangle area during the developmental period of our final projects to give us examples of local documentary work that could serve as inspiration for our own. One of these trips proved to be successful in its goal for me personally, as I did indeed walk away from it inspired, even confident in the medium in which I wanted to express my final project/thesis work. On February 8th, we made a visit to Horse & Buggy Press and Friends on Broad Street, whose establishment sits a five-minute walk from the house I have been living in Durham for two years, yet I had no idea existed (and I go out into Durham way more than the average Duke student, trust me). We were allowed to walk through the gallery/printing press/collaborative publishers' space/mixed-media archive and engage with the art on walls, in bookshelves, on tables. In a large tool-cabinet-esque set of drawers I found pages torn out of books, what looked like classic novels with dense serif prose stamped onto yellowed pages. But instead of lengthy sentences in a Dickens type voice, I found myself presented with only a handful of words on each page. The rest of the words were crossed out, scribbled through, or blacked out completely (see Figure 1). Struck by the simplicity of the style, I also found myself searching each page for more, more words, more meaning. This captivated me as I realized that if these words were just presented as a "regular" poem, a couple lines on a blank page, I might not have been as interested or impressed by them. But seeing that they were chosen from a certain set of words, that their order was confined to the order in which they were originally written, and yet they still carried meaning perhaps beyond that of all the words on the page, they were intriguing to me. It left me wondering what was between the spaces, and then I realized that the blacked-out words could therefore have

been anything. There existed infinite words in between those visible, infinite meanings within that presented. It gave a new definition to "reading between the lines."
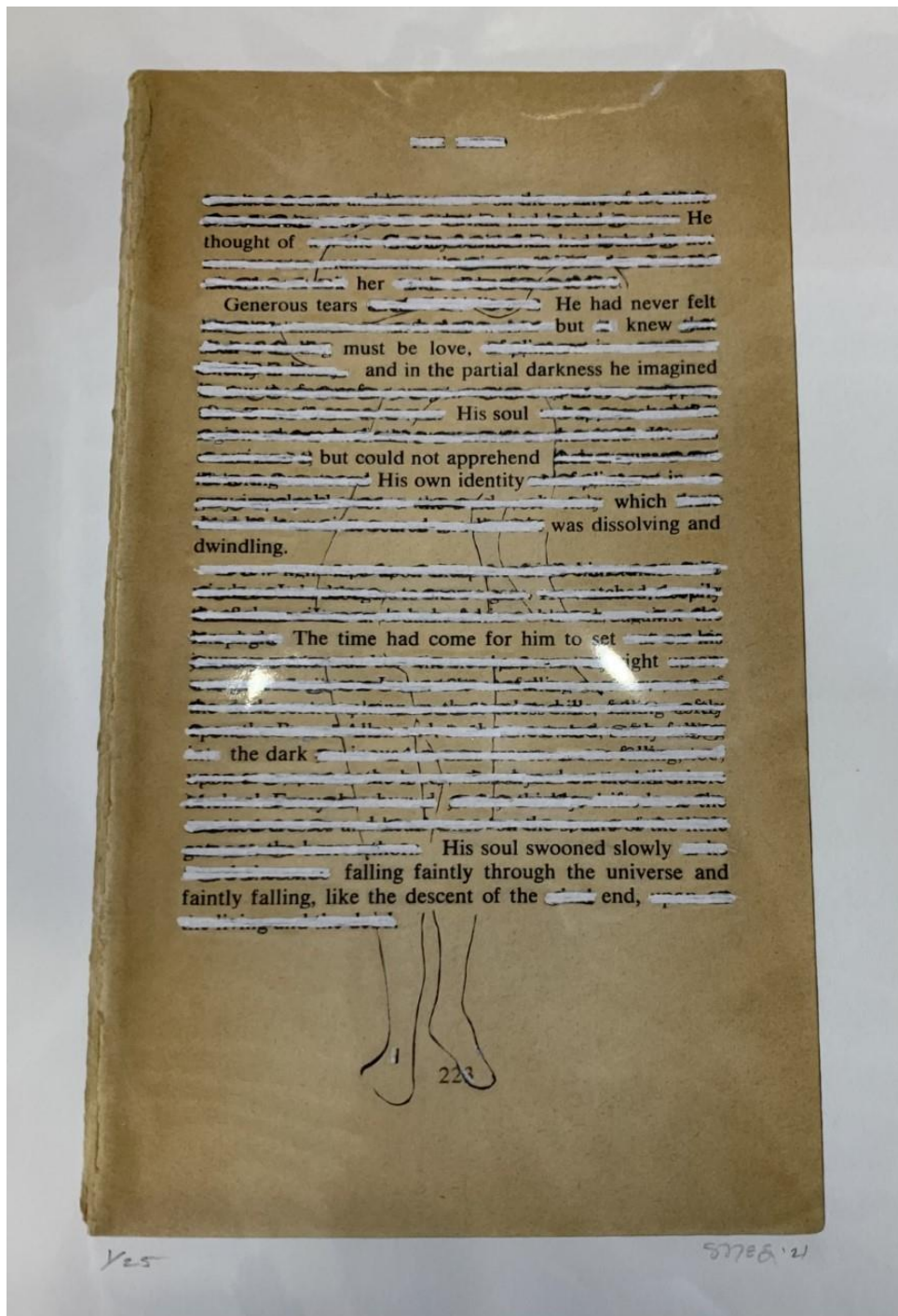

Figure 1. Photograph of a blackout poem from the Horse & Buggy Press and Friends gallery in Durham, North Carolina. Artist unknown. Accessed February 8th, 2022.

Although my poems strayed from this style, it was this trip and this discovery that was the impetus for their creation, as they were initially blackout poems that transitioned into free verse as I developed them. I will further describe the methodology of my project in the following section, including how this transition was brought about.

METHODS

Interviews: Interviewees, questions, and transcription

Upon realizing the desired topic of my final documentary project, I began brainstorming whose story I would like to include in my research and subsequent narration. I thought of people at Duke with whom I had established a personal relationship to be able to talk about mental health, and who of these people might be willing and able to share a bit about their experiences. At first, I considered, and even contacted, three other people outside of my immediate "best friends" (the girls with whom I share a living space), but after further consideration, and execution of three in-depth, meaningful interviews, I decided it would be more than sufficient to limit the scope of my project to these three people. Since they are those with whom I am emotionally closest at this school, to achieve a certain depth and vulnerability with my poetry I decided to limit my subjects to them alone.[*]

I then began to formulate my interview questions based on a vague outline of what topics I wanted the project to cover specifically. The following were criteria that I had in mind while conceiving my questions, which later informed the four sections of my poetic narrative:

- I wanted to explore the developmental stages of mental illness, and how internal and/or environmental factors during childhood affect our experience with mental health into adulthood. This was in part informed by experiential knowledge, as I struggled with severe anxiety throughout my youth, affected but not caused by environmental factors. Stomach aches due to augmented worries and constant

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[*] I realize that in making this decision I am actively excluding many different identities from the subjects of my project. All four of us identify as cisgender females and exist in a similar social space due to our proximity to each other as housemates and friends, and this project is therefore in no way intended to represent all identities of students at Duke or beyond. It is instead meant to give insight into the experience of four students that may be related to by those of different identities, because mental health, although experienced uniquely by everyone, is an overwhelmingly universal concept.

"what ifs," as my parents called them, were a defining part of my childhood, and were early signs of an anxiety disorder that persisted through high school and recently and gradually alleviated. Incented in part by this knowledge, as well as learning the importance of childhood trauma and brain chemistry in the development of psychological function in a psychology class my freshman year, I was interested in how this manifested in my interviewee's formative journeys.

- Having been diagnosed with depression and ADD in high school and college, respectively, I have insight into the complex feelings that can evolve around the process and result of diagnosis. While I believe that a label, in many contexts, provides a sort of clarity for oneself and ability to communicate to others an idea that may otherwise be obscure or unidentifiable by one's own theorized words, I also believe they minimize an experience to a set of preconceptions and stereotypes that surround said label. I also view mental disorders as having a widely variant spectrum of expressions, so that one person's experience with a particular disorder may be vastly different from another's and from the widely accepted preconceptions of the disorder. With all this in mind, I wanted to explore with my project the duality of relief and confusion that comes with being diagnosed with a mental disorder.

- The idea of opening a conversation with others about one's mental health can be just as scary as dealing with it alone. I know this because, in recent years especially, I have struggled to open up to friends and family about mental health issues for reasons I am still working to define. Commonly, people do not open up for fear of appearing weak or otherwise being perceived "differently" by peers; there exists an intense stigma, which is especially gendered and racialized, around mental health that discourages people from sharing about it. However, I and many I know have found that it can be beneficial to work through anxieties, depressive thoughts, "spirals," etc. with trusted counterparts as a means of re-orienting one's perspective to more realistic truths that exist outside of one's mind. Thus exists a frustrating dichotomy, an all-too-common fear of an act that could greatly benefit the individual's mental health. I wanted to explore how my interviewees have experienced this, and to what extent opening to friends, family, therapists, or other trusted individuals has affected their journey.

- As mentioned in my introduction, a part of mental health on which it is imperative to focus is growth. Without belief in one's ability to change and grow beyond, or grow with, the illness that can be so defining to one's lived experience, it is so easy to slip into the depths of its grasp and lose hope in achieving that elusive idea of "betterment." And whether it be in a positive or negative direction, we are always growing as we process and form knowledge around new experiences; growth is an irrefutable part of our everyday struggle with mental health. Although I am not a fan of resolution or "happy endings," I found it necessary to

include the more hopeful aspect of mental illness as it is expressed through my interviewees, because when a problem is presented as stagnant and hopeless, any attempts at progress are automatically discouraged. This effect does not align with the goals of this project.

After generating a list of questions that I thought would accomplish these narrative goals, I conducted interviews with each of my housemates in my bedroom. I asked for the consent of each interviewee to record audio of our conversation; I informed each that I would not be using full statements from their responses, rather individual words or phrases to create abstractions via poetry; and I asked each for consent to use their words in this manner. I then recorded our conversation on the "Voice Memos" app on my iPhone. As the conversation progressed, I sometimes strayed from my written questions to follow what I felt would be most natural to the direction of the conversation while still maintaining the themes I had aimed to touch on.

I then transcribed the interviews into Microsoft Word documents on my computer, including phrases such as "like," "um," and other colloquial interjections in case they could be useful in my poetry.

Poems

As I was first inspired by the blackout poems I came across at Horse & Buggy, my initial methodology was to create poems by choosing certain "key words" and building around them, blacking out words in between that were not to be included. My "arbitrary rules" at this point included limiting each poem to one response to one question from one interviewee, with the ability to duplicate the response only to create a new poem, not to serve as a continuation for the first; and limiting the arrangement of the words themselves to the order in which they were spoken in the response. This process involved reading over each response and underlining words I found integral to the story that was told in each, for example words such as "conversation" or "dismissed" in the poem "certain situations." I would then skim the poem in search of subsequent words that could add meaning to those first chosen; what conversation, and what did the conversation do? What was dismissed, and who was doing the dismissing? "my home…just dismissed…those things." Such was the process of creation for my first draft of a poem, illustrated in Figure 2.

What is your experience with mental health?

When I was raised, mental health wasn't a conversation that happened in **my home,** it was just like everybody gets sad and everybody goes through difficult things, and so the signs that I showed as a kid that could have been interpreted as possible gateways to mental health issues were **just dismissed** as things that I would grow out of and then obviously I did not grow out of **those things.** And I think for the most part I just have anxiety which then in **certain situations** becomes situational depression but that's **not** like and **underlying** thing that I struggle with, **but** anxiety is like its own **debilitating** thing. And I'm very type A, and quantitative, **and obsessive,** so **certain situations** or people or hopes bring out those tendencies in me. but I also think that generally every stage of my life I get better and happier because I'm better at choosing to **surround** myself with people and things that are good for **me.** and I think that society as a whole is very similar to my childhood in that it dismisses mental health issues as hard times. Which like it's true that everybody has hard times but not being able to **get out of bed** or be yourself or **function** are not things that should be normalized or stigmatized.

Figure 2. Preliminary draft of a blackout poem created from an interviewee's transcribed response to the question: "What is your experience with mental health?"

After further work I became frustrated with my limitations, in that I felt that the poems were becoming too thematically repetitive, and that I did not have enough material to construct a dynamic narrative piece. Therefore, I decided to expand my practice and build free verse poems from the words I selected, giving myself the ability to play with repetition, rhythm, line breaks, and presentation. I worked through each of my interviewee's responses in this manner, otherwise maintaining the limitation of one response per poem, only combining multiple short responses from the same subject once to create a poem. In this way I kept intact individual voices, allowing for stronger narratives to come through the words instead of attempting to combine experiences to elucidate a certain theme. This freedom did allow me to interject my voice more directly by rearranging the chronology of each response in a way that I couldn't have with blackout poetry, possibly altering the effects of their previously "untouched" presentation. However, I found it more crucially allowed me to articulate many of the intricacies of my themes with stylistic choices that still preserved the integrity of the original story. Pauses became moments of self-doubting hesitation; repetition absorbed the reader into anxious thought patterns and cycles of recurring hopelessness; run-on lines felt like intimate expressions of pent-up emotion; short breaks signified confidence in one's thought-out decisions. In this way, I sacrificed one of my rules in favor of a

practice that was more practical yet enhanced the communicative power of my pieces, while still maintaining an authenticity, purity, and depth of my subjects' stories.

I then formatted the poems into a presentable layout, using Adobe InDesign to create a digestible book from the poems in my now messy Word document. I added full quotes from the interviews that I felt spoke to the topics presented in accompaniment of the poems.

REFLECTION

Given the nature of this project, I did not find it relevant or necessary to include a traditional "Results" section in this paper. I will, however, expand on my personal "findings" and reflections derived from the process of interviewing and representing my peers through poetry.

Upbringing

Across all responses from those interviewed, there existed a process of learning within the family unit about how to conceptualize and treat mental health as it presented itself. Common responses expressed that parents or families did not "have the language" to address mental health issues in the household, leaving children to bear the responsibility of initiating the conversation about something they themselves were still struggling to understand. One interviewee stated that signs that she showed as a child "could have been interpreted as possible gateways to mental health issues" but were "dismissed" as behaviors or tendencies that she would eventually grow out of. Within all responses was evidence that these signs of anxiety, OCD, and other mental health disorders were not recognized as "mental health," which in turn could create a household environment that further exacerbates such issues or perpetuates the common belief that the behaviors are the fault of the child, when they are responses to cues generated by mental processes that can be out of their personal control.

Although this was a trend I expected while I was writing my interview questions, it is still disheartening to witness how mental health can be overlooked at such a crucially developmental time in one's life. The four of us are fortunate to now have a living environment that is open and expressive about mental health, but this project has drawn me to consider the privilege that lies in this. I often consider, while reflecting on my personal situation, that many people our age and older either do not have people that they trust to express their internal struggles or have still not identified the language to be able to initiate a conversation in the first place. I hope that if this is the case for anyone who

encounters this work, they may find comfort in knowing that their experience is shared by many.

Diagnosis

Although one interviewee was diagnosed with a mental disorder before she had the cognitive function and experiential knowledge to understand the social implications of the diagnosis, two others affirmed that they had mixed feelings when they received a label for their mental processes. One expressed that there existed times where she was thankful to have a word to explain what was going on in her head, yet others where she recognized it as useless because it did nothing to change the situation at hand. This was echoed by another response that expressed that the relief that came with understanding a mental disorder and the implications of having one came with its own set of anxieties, as she was then presented with a daunting set of "solutions" that she had to undertake to "fix" her brain. This involved reorienting the entire framework of her mentality and knowing that she had depression made it seem incredibly difficult to overcome the barriers that come with it. While scientific classification of mental health disorders is necessary for research and communication, my subjects supported the notion that this classification can cause just as much confusion as it does clarity for those dealing with the illnesses in their daily lives.

Therapy

The trials of opening one's mind to others to seek help were explored in the responses of my interviewees. One expressed that she didn't want people to treat her differently when she tried to get help with managing her depressive thoughts, and that she felt like a "downer" when she reached out to those she trusted. Another said that due to her lack of faith in the permanence of people in her life, she was very selective about who she opened up to. One interviewee also expressed that she felt pressure to feel better after someone tried to help her through what she was dealing with, so that that person could feel good about themselves having accomplished the problem she presented. All of these, combined with lived experiences of getting criticized or "burned" by others over the course of years of attempts to open up, have deterred my subjects from further seeking help.

Another common experience was that since these problems are something that are dealt with constantly, it does not make sense to talk about them all the time as well, so it is better to limit oneself to not talking at all. When depression is at its most debilitating, thoughts can be relentlessly negative, and sharing that with someone else at any point may seem like it would be putting an immense burden on that person. However, this can lead to a cycle of not seeking help and further convincing oneself that what one is thinking is reality. In times where one releases some of this mental strife to others, it can

be beneficial to redefining that reality and learning ways to cope with irrational or negative thoughts. Upon interaction with these poems, I hope my audience is able to realize or remember that although seeking help may at some times feel difficult, if not impossible, its benefits oftentimes outweigh the discomfort that go into its initiation.

Growth

This is where responses tended to vary most. Growth looks different to each of my interviewees in terms of how they express it in words. One common theme, however, is that growth is not linear. With every bit of progress made in the direction of self-betterment or reconciliation with mental illness, there is always some amount of backtracking in the form of a relapse, a shift in behaviors, or simply a bad day. The idea of growth is scary. Oftentimes those with mental health disorders are so accustomed to the way things are that the idea of changing is not something they even consciously want, because it is such an uncomfortable process. "I miss the comfort in being sad" – a Nirvana lyric that has come up in my mind many times over the years when thinking about the irony in being attached to one's mental illness. When one suffers from depression, being depressed is a habit; when one suffers from anxiety, overthinking is a normalcy; when one suffers from OCD, obsession is a necessity. Breaking these patterns is intentionally making oneself uncomfortable, and that takes very high levels of motivation (which can be impossibly difficult to foster when that which you are trying to combat drains you of your motivation in the first place), and, to some extent, self-deception.

Once this "hill" is overcome, however, the rewards, albeit inconsistent, are beautiful. Acceptance is the starting point to progress in dealing with mental health, which was reflected by each interviewee's articulation of the concept of growth. As mentioned before, I am not a fan of resolution. But an interesting thing about mental health, I believe, is that there is no such thing as resolution, instead a constant process of learning to accept and come to peace with the illnesses, disorders, issues, that have, at many points, defined us.

If I have one final hope for the effects of this work, it is that those it touches continue to grow in whatever way that resonates with them. I know how it feels to want to be stuck in it, to be sucked in so far by your thoughts that they become who you are, and their abandonment would mean abandonment of yourself. But growth is the only thing we have left to do in moments like those, and with that you find new reasons to continue.

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