

The Memory Thief: Aging, the Feminine, and Relationship in Surreal Poetry and Programmatic Piano Composition.

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My mother and I have always been close. She was the quintessential good mother who baked cookies instead of buying them, who listened to your story about some bad deed *you may or may not have done* **without** freaking out, who would gun the avocado green 1973 Buick Electrolux with the 455 cubic inch v8 engine at that dip in the road at the back of the neighborhood to send the car up in the air because it made you squeal, and who would type your school essays even when you gave them to her after dinner the night before they were due.

As I got older and needed less mother and more mentor, she mothered like a big sister. I would tell her the important thoughts and feelings and dreams I had like we were friends. If she were not my mother, I would want to be her friend. She was the kind of person who would listen without judgment as evidenced by all my friends and peers at school confiding in her rather than their own parents. My mother always gave me the advice that I needed to hear and that I would be able to use. She was the first person I would call with my exciting news and with my not so good news, because she was the best listener, as if somehow, she had the PhD in Personal Relationships and not me. We developed and fostered a relationship that has been fundamental in crafting who I am, what I value, and how I want to treat people around me, which means always leading with kindness and level-headedness and being nonjudgmental.

Now, though, I must tell you that I feel as if I have failed her and my memories of her mothering. At some point, the relationship between us shifted and our roles changed, which often happens as we age (Shawler, 2004). Not living near

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her meant that every visit I noticed the decline from the previous visit that was not perceptible to my younger brother who lives 20 miles from her until she became so disabled because of arthritis and was unable (and I suspect unwilling) to get out of bed. She suffers from mild dementia, and her world has shrunk to one room in the house she shares with my father—a hospital bed set in front of the television in the family room. During the past few years, I’ve been mourning the relationship we had, and I feel cheated because I don’t think that we ever outgrew the need for mothering. There were weeks where we would talk multiple days and sometimes, multiple times during the day (always by landline as my mother does not like cell phones or computers). We don’t have the kinds of conversations we used to have. And now? I don’t want to call her, because she doesn’t feel like home anymore. This is why I feel as if I have failed us and our relationship. I have not figured out how to make sense of the relational change, to accept aging, and to forgive her or myself.

In this paper, I discuss *The Memory Thief*, which is a poetic musical composition that explores the feminine in relationship to aging, dementia, and mother-daughter relationships. It is a series of 5 ekphrastic surreal prose poems that I crafted and set to surreal piano compositions I wrote for each poem. I argue that representing a story of aging, memory, and close relationships using surrealist devices manifests the tensions between youth and older age, feminine strength and beauty, mother and daughter, and memory and forgetting. The juxtaposition and intermingling of sound and text and image create programmatic music, and the relationship between the text and music unravels and twists memory into a new aesthetic moment.

Creating The Memory Thief

Working on *The Memory Thief* and re-reading an essay that neuroscientist Ida Momennejad wrote about the grief around their mother’s stroke, dementia, and death, is helping me re-story my current situation—the finale if you will—in the mother-daughter relationship. I have Momennejad’s (2024) description of grief on repeat in my mind track:

Before my mother’s stroke, I believed that time was linear, an arrow that only moved in one direction. In my research, I approached memory as a subject of empirical observation, a quantifiable entity. But through the lens of grief, the arrow of time splintered into a constellation of scattered, moving points. Grief teleported my mind to pasts where my mother was the star

around which our family revolved, and to possible futures with or without her.

Grief makes us time travelers. (para. 10-11)

The Memory Thief connects narrative and storytelling in the humanities and the social sciences as I bring together research and practice in the fields of personal relationships, poetry, and music. This is a story based on my experiences of a mother-daughter relationship in middle age. Art Bochner (2012) writes about autoethnography and the power of story in social science for getting at the truth of life's challenges.

Like most social science inquiry, the kind of social science writing I favor aspires to truth, but these truths are not literal truths; they're emotional, dialogic, and collaborative truths. Autoethnographies are not intended to be received, but rather to be encountered, conversed with, and appreciated. My concern is not with better science but with better living and thus I am not so much aiming for some goal called 'Truth' as for an enlarged capacity to deal with life's challenges and contingencies. (p. 161)

The Memory Thief is a kind of performative narrative autoethnography, though it is not a straightforward, linear, or pretty tale. It explores the contours of memory and aging mirroring the disjointed and often befuddling process. If as Momenejad (2024) wrote "Grief makes us time travelers," then this piece narrates the surreal journey I've been on for the past few years. May I suggest that all of us are time travelers in our close relationships. My composition takes you on a voyage through the lifecourse of a mother-daughter relationship. I perform my role as daughter grounding this performance in "participatory, intimate, precarious, and embodied" ways that are rooted in "circumstance, situational identities, and historical process," because "the (auto)ethnographer's body is anchored in time and place" (Denzin, 2018, p. 51).

The poems in *The Memory Thief* are ekphrastic surreal prose poems written in response to images. Two of the images are photos of my mother, two images are surreal paintings by women artists, and one image is an AI generated image of the Crone. Ekphrasis refers to writing that describes an artwork. "Poetry that imitates, describes, critiques, dramatizes, reflects upon, or otherwise responds to a work of nonliterary art, especially the visual (Drury, 2006, p. 84). Prose poems look like prose but function like poetry using image and language. I chose prose poetry because the ambiguous line between poetry and prose is reflective of the interplay between music and text in this project. Writing from the images was a

way into feelings and articulating inarticulable experiences that reside in the unconscious, sense making of aging and changes in the mother-daughter relationship.

The piano pieces are also a type of ekphrasis given I used the poems to write the music. The challenge I gave myself was turning my words into notes, transforming my lines into musical phrases, crafting a poem into a key signature, and transubstantiating the dynamics on the page into dynamics for the ear. These piano pieces are the first composing that I have ever done. I'm not a great piano player; I never could play by ear or improvise. However, I could argue that I'm competent as I can sight read well. And during the COVID-19 lockdowns, I learned to play Chopin's Nocturne in C minor, which is one of my favorite keys. [I insert a parenthetical here for you to remember the key of C minor.] I find that the minor melancholic key signatures speak to my ideas of middle-age as nostalgic embodied memory (Faulkner, 2024).

I took piano lessons as a child until I was a teen. I didn't enjoy lessons as my first piano teacher was the old-school church organist who personified stodgy pedagogy or what is known as the mechanistic school of pedagogy (Laor, 2016). For example, she would smack my knuckles when I played wrong notes. To learn music the idea was, as Loar (2016) described, for students to "carefully analyze and classify the various tightly linked components involved in piano playing and then meticulously practice each one separately" (p. 6). The second teacher I had was better, though she wanted me to study music theory, which was like having to eat liver for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I find it ironic that I make a living using theory as a communication professor who studies personal relationships. I quit lessons sometime when I became involved in every variation of band in high school and did not play piano after that until about 7 years ago when my fingers itched to touch the keys again. I began lessons as an adult student and discovered that music is a language imprinted in my body. Muscle memory is real.

I have written poetry my entire life and find it to be the art form that I go to when I am trying to make sense of emotion and difficult experiences (Faulkner, 2020). Recently, I wondered what poetry and music could do and be together and how the combination could push the limits of language and the concept of the page. What could music+poetry+image do for poetic inquiry—the use of poetry as/in/for social research (Faulkner, 2020)? I wanted to collaborate with a pianist and write poetry in response to their music, but I never could find anyone to work with. Dr. Sandy Coursey, my current piano teacher, urged me to just compose my

own music and introduced me to Eve Beglarian, a contemporary American composer and performer who has been working on a multimedia series of text/music/visuals since 2001 titled *The Book of Days*.¹ In the series, Beglarian writes music and creates videos to accompany existing text, such as poetry. This is what I wanted to do; except I would use my own poetry.

My summer 2024 piano goal was to compose a piece of music in response to one of my poems. I had just written three surreal prose poems that had images ripe for picking out notes on the keyboard. This was the beginning of *The Memory Thief*, though I didn't know it at the time. I intended to write one piece, but where and how do you start when you are an amateur? I needed to get serious about music theory and study the circle of 5ths if I was going to learn to compose. I thought that *real composers* were those that had digested music theory and could regurgitate key signatures, intervals, and scales in their sleep. I wasn't confident. Remember that I was a bad music theory student and most likely a mediocre piano performer. This was not helping me begin, and the summer was heating up. It was already July, and I had not written a note. Sandy and I had many conversations about women composers and pianists and the lack of respect they receive. It then struck me that what I needed was to give myself permission to just do it. So, I sat down *without* my theory books and composed the first piece, which is now the last piece in the composition. I liked it and enjoyed the process of composing and translating my poetry into music, so I planned to write two more pieces. My compositional process was this: I would begin with the sound of a key signature to see if it reflected the mood of the poem. Then I recited lines of poems as I sat at the keyboard, pencil and staff paper beside me, tapping out phrases, translating the sound and meaning of phrases into music. This process of composing by hand emphasized my experiences as a learner and performer and is part of the intuitive creative process. I did not sit down knowing how I was going to compose, rather I sat down with the poem in my ear; my personal experiences and feelings and immediate judgment was my intuitive guide. I was engaging in a process of word painting or text or tone painting, which is "a musical depiction of words in text. The music tries to imitate the emotion, action, or natural sounds as described in the text." (n.d., OnMusic Dictionary). I wrote the third piece in two days when I was sick with COVID during the first week of August. This piece was in the key of C minor like that Chopin prelude I learned during COVID lockdowns [This is where I remind you that this key has appeared again, so good for you for paying

¹ <https://evbvd.com/bookofdays/>

attention]. In fact, all the pieces were in minor keys to reflect the melancholy and surreal images in the poems. I did it. I had composed three original piano pieces or movements as I did see them as connected.

I only conceived of the three pieces I had composed as part of the larger music-poetry project in December 2024. In January and February of 2025, I wrote the opening two poems and composed music for them. I recorded myself playing and narrating the pieces in the garageband app. But I found that something was missing. The composition needed the images with it, so I took the images I used to write the ekphrastic poems and the recording I made of me performing the pieces to create a film of *The Memory Thief* using iMovie. I chose to create a film because I wanted to see what could happen with the music, the narration, and the images. I believe that the film adds to the audience's experience by using visuals to represent the mood of the music and poetry.

The Relationship between Memory and Love

I. If the heart is a muscle, then love must be memory.

Repeated refrains of the past play across my mother's face and knot in her hands. She can't make her fingers grasp a needle or a book anymore, but she can unravel the present into strands of what was. The memories of who we were are wound in a skein of yarn that I muscle up the hill only to have fall at my feet. My impatience is a boulder that I carry into the eternity of our connection. She directs her dealings from a hospital bed marooned in the family room of memory. This must be love as we perform mother and daughter, again and again, memorizing the outcome, willing the present to be somewhere else, trying to replicate the remembered versions of ourselves.

II. Grief makes us time travelers.

My mother and I take a trip without oxygen masks, incinerate our roles in the fire of aging. We forget to suit up in flame retardant apparel, so we do drills by reflex: Stop. Drop. and Roll. As if falling can extinguish the burn of stolen memories. Mnemosyne turned into a thief and pickpocketed us. Now we don't know what time it is or where the emergency exit is. One of us starts screaming as the other walks through the flames. Who is supposed to do what? And when? And why? Mother grieves what is. Daughter grieves what was.



Image 1: Composing the Music Thief

When composing the first two movements, I asked myself: What is memory? Is it cognition? Where does it reside? Perhaps it resides in the body and not just the mind. And if it is in the body, then maybe memory is an action? We often hear that love is an action, so I thought about this relationship between love and memory. I titled the first movement in the composition “*If the heart is a muscle, then love must be memory*” because that line popped into my mind as I posed the questions about memory. In my relational communication classes, I often talk about relationship processes as actions rather than cognitions. The idea of memory as activated responses speaks to my experience of being a daughter at this point in life. The body influences the mind according to the theory of embodied cognition, which is “the interplay between perception, action, and the environment on cognitive processes and representations” (Fincher-Kiefer, 2019, p. 144). Presenting memories of my mother and our relationship in poetry and music helps me see the world through a lens and a language I have known from a young age. Corness

(2008) suggests that listening to and performing music is an embodied understanding and Evans (2010) writes that

music expresses aspects of the forms of our embodied experience, forms that exhibit our natural physical state in its musculosensory reality... in muscular agency with its characteristic dynamic tensions...and no less in that sense of memory and identity that works alchemically upon sequence and repetition in music. (p. 886)

The use of poetry and music speaks to embodied practice. I have talked about this relationship in the past: "Our poetic inquiry represents knowing through embodied practice. Writing poetry is an embodied practice of letting go to the (im)possible" (Faulkner, 2024). When composing the piano pieces, I found the process to be one of letting go of the academic part of me that likes to have a plan and a path, and I focused on creation, not the final product. Morton Feldman, who was an American composer and important figure in 20th century classical music, wrote about visual ideas in music and aesthetic connections between visual artists and pianists (Feldman, 2000). One idea I take from his work is the importance of focusing on process in composition. Amy Beal (2014) discusses this in an essay about Feldman's style:

The immediate, "physical" art Feldman came to know from the Abstract Expressionist painters developed out of the radical insight that process itself could serve as subject matter. He saw that "process" need not mean only a method or system by which one composed, but also the physical act itself of composing, the spontaneous creative act of an artist: something that avoided a system...Feldman repeatedly said that he composed by listening, waiting, and watching (that is, through intuitive processes), and that he did not plan, sketch, or revise. (p. 231)

The atmosphere that a composition created was more important than any formal element.

Programmatic Surreal Piano Music

The series of poems and accompanying piano pieces are programmatic and narrative, even though the narrative is not linear or written in a realist style. Programmatic music tells a story, it is instrumental music that is a vehicle for narration and carries extramusical meaning such as from a story or poem (Kregor, 2015). This style of music is often contrasted with so-called abstract music where the artist is interested in abstractions of sound. Whether a specific meaning is intrinsic to music is debatable. Kregor (2015) writes:

Program music is not just music. Rather, it is music plus a title, a poem, a person – that is, something extrinsic to the music itself. Thus, the decision for the analyst and listener becomes whether to accept that extrinsic element as part of the work’s identity and, by extension, how then to involve it in the search for a work’s meaning. (p. 2)

The piano compositions are surreal as well, so I label *The Memory Thief* to be programmatic surreal music.

“Surrealism is a style in art and literature in which ideas, images, and objects are combined in a strange way, like in a dream.” Surreal poetry can be characterized as fantastical, irrational, dream-like, and composed by the unconscious mind. Ginger Ayla in the Poetry Lab writes that “In a surreal poem, we’re elsewhere, floating in space. We’re in the poet’s mind, the great beyond, or the ether. Or maybe we’re right here at home, but the math isn’t math-ing” (n.d., para. 3). A surreal poem has a surreal premise, uses fragmented narrative, makes associative leaps, and seems like a stream of consciousness.

Surreal music is similar in the exploration of the subconscious mind. It is characterized by unexpected juxtapositions, nonlinear compositions, and unconventional harmonies (Paddison, 1993). Erik Satie is thought of as a surreal composer as his compositions were innovative and unconventional, contained playful and absurd elements, and he gave many pieces whimsical titles, such as “Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear.” I have always been drawn to Satie’s music, because some of it is melancholic, but most of all, it is fun to play. And reading the scores is even more fun. But here I am, talking about a male composer, so let me put my work into conversation with some women composers. Earlier, I mentioned Eve Beglarian who is absolutely an inspiration for my composition.

My piano teacher, Sandy, also introduced me to the British composer Elizabeth Lutyens who was born in London in 1906 by saying that “Lutyens is the Sylvia Plath of music” (Coursey, personal conversation, March 7, 2025). This was all I needed to dive into her work, as I love Plath. I had read *The Bell Jar* as a junior in college and spent many hours with her poetry feeling the melancholic nostalgia and angst that I have always enjoyed in art. Lutyens was called “12 tone Lizzie” which is not a compliment, though she was highly regarded for her adaptation of the Schoenbergian serial technique. In the 1940s and 1950s she wrote incidental music for a number of poetry readings and also wrote a piece titled “The Ring of Bone” with lines inspired by Samuel Becket’s prose poem of the same name. Her son Conrad Clark said “Her love of poetry was a source of many lyrical pieces as well as a very strong sense of drama” (Lutyens Trust, n.d.). Lutyens

also wrote music for horror films as a way to make money and support her family. She did not consider her film scores to be as good as her concert pieces, but evidently liked the moniker “Horror Queen,” which matched the green nail polish she usually wore (Huckvale, 2008). All of this along with reports that she was described as being acerbic are reasons I admire Lutyens and found her to be an inspiration for my project.

Ephemeral Objects

—after *Untitled* (1951) by Gertrude Abercrombie

Inside the crystal ball she tethers herself to a cream-colored cat, listens to its papier-mâché heart beat under a full moon. But maybe that sound just past the end of the frame is her own heart, strips of paper glued into a conundrum: How can she dance in a full length dress the shade of the inside of her cheek? Should she kick the black chair that holds the door closed? The door painted white with destination. Her shadow holds a cage for the bird the cat killed two years ago, because she shouldn't love with abandon when behind her back she crosses her fingers against the mystery of lost objects.

The Life Cycle of a Fairy Tale Princess

—after *The Ferryman's Yard* (1977) by Leonor Fini

You swim in an umbilical pool filled with lily pads and the bones of cast-off princesses. Your friend touches a lily pad with the tip of her finger as if it were a test, but the answer is always somewhere just past the horizon. You rearrange the furniture in your mind hoping for a change, willing eternity to stop. But there you are gasping for air, and the ferryman always crashes your boat the moment you find a path. You weave wreaths of jelly fish in your hair, imagine the sting of tentacles to be the ethereal silk of a veil, the caress of some prince who will leave you the moment your hair turns white with the effort of saving yourself.

Surreal music and poetry mirror my experience of navigating the mother-daughter relationship through aging, ability, and dementia. Because surreal music and poetry subvert reality and juxtapose fragments of memory and experience, it reflects the feeling of relationship changes. It shows how disorienting making sense of impossibilities can be. It allows my anger and frustration an outlet. The

music and poetry work together—each enhances and transforms the other. What I wrote I translated into the rhythm and sound of the keyboard. And the music tells the stories in the poems in another dimension. Figuring out what the words I wrote sounded like, what they felt like moving from my mind to lips to fingertips. The piano music in the final three movements sounds eerie and more surreal compared to the first two pieces. I wanted it to be like Lutyens’s music composed for horror films. The music narrates more than the poems in these pieces like a silent film.

I believe that the music and poems together are a kind of post-language. Don’t think of the poetry and the music as separate entities. They are interwoven and if undone they lose part of the meaning, think of a strand of yarn versus a knit sweater. One critique of language is that it cannot mirror reality or be the experience you want to describe, there are limits to representation as “working with words is a fool’s mission” (Pelias, 2014, p. 129). So, what happens when we use music and language together? How can music expand the capabilities of language to re-present experience? If listening to music and poetry is a type of experience, what happens when they are intertwined? *The Memory Thief* mitigates some limitations of language and music to become a new aesthetic experience, it can have us think and be in a different moment than hearing a poem or hearing a piano piece separately. I have made the argument that poetry can be an experience (Faulkner, 2022). Programmatic music tells us that music can be a story, be a narrative. I think it follows that the combination of poetry and music is a narrative experience greater than any one art form. The use of music and poetry boils the topics down to the essence of the experience. It is a phenomenological experience that audiences can relate to as universal, they can be transported into the moment for the period of time that they experience the composition.

And maybe we can see a different side of aging and dementia. Relational Dialectics Theory has us see how the discourses in our relationships interanimate and how some are dominant and others are subordinate and how this can influence our understandings of relationships, our roles in them, and our identities (Suter & Norwood, 2017). In *The Music Thief*, you see how discourses of aging, the feminine, and the mother-daughter relationship tell the story of my relationship with my mother. The dominant discourse marks aging, especially for women, as something to be feared and something that may ruin relationships and notions of femininity, whereas the performance of *The Music Thief* shows a marginal discourse of aging and dementia as a different kind of logic that creates new relationships by interanimating the present with the past. What I hope you also see is how

this telling allows for more nuance in the story, makes sense of the unintelligible, and becomes an engaging way to talk about difficult things in close relationships. This project emphasizes the fact that art is a way to show possibilities, to critique systems that are not working for us, and transform dominant discourses into new aesthetic moments with fresh and different meanings.

Sundowners

—after The Crone

My mother fell down a hole into the past, so the Crone took her legs and colored in the white of arthritis. Her limbs branch out and root into a different timeline. All her leaves have fallen off and crumbled into the dust of memory. She can't unetch, undo, and scrape off the lines that spread in crystal shadows across her face, but she can see the secret cats that roam the hallways in the hospital. She wonders why the workers outside can cut grass in a parking lot, how she went to the ER and woke up in her living room. My mother tells the doctor that I'm her wife Grace, as if a daughter can turn into someone better. Only she can see in this delirium how fog makes the magic in the world manifest.



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