

**How to Get There**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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### Introduction

For me, poetry has always been an expression of self, of keeping an emotional past or present alive. As such, my poetry draws heavily from my own life as well as from my natural inclination to write about the nature of specific places around me. The poems in my thesis touch on many of my personal experiences, relationships, and traumas. Prominent among these experiences are my relationship with my maternal grandmother, with whom I lived in New York while she was suffering from Alzheimer's disease, as well as unhealthy romantic relationships throughout my years in New York, and finally, my decision to move to Israel in pursuit of another romantic relationship. The difficulty of navigating a new country while trying to maintain some aspect of the life left behind also plays a formative role. These experiences and relationships have spurred me to think more about memory, movement, and place – themes that have laid the groundwork for this thesis.

### Aims and General Description

My thesis project will consist of a collection of personal “I” poems that touch on my chosen themes of memory and place. The project will be divided into two main sections, each dedicated to one set of opposing forces charging those themes. The first section, about memory, will be comprised of poetry about remembering and forgetting. The second section, about location, will discuss movement and confinement. These two sets of opposing forces will be examined through the lens of place, namely the formative sites in my life – specifically, New York City and Israel.

I aim to use a unified lyrical form and consistently confessional tone throughout the project to serve as a counterbalance to these irreconcilable sentiments. While the poems in each section are intended to be in conversation with each other, together these works should produce a feeling of fragmentation. The conflicting ideas found in the poems will produce a sense of mixed emotions in each section. Neither remembering nor forgetting brings satisfaction; neither ceaseless movement nor total confinement brings a sense of completion.

### Conceptual Background

As a poet who writes in an autobiographical, confessional style, I am drawn to poets who write very personally and are able to bare themselves on the page. I emulate poets such as Anne Sexton, Dahlia Ravikovitch, and Frank O'Hara who are, as I perceive it, extremely open in their work. However, that openness can come in numerous ways. For instance, Ravikovitch and Sexton's work is quite rooted in trauma, while O'Hara's openness is often expressed through humor and self-deprecation. If I think more closely, I believe that each of these poets is able not only to scratch beneath the surface of their emotional states, but to break those surfaces open. They are unafraid to reach a personal place that most people would prefer not to enter. In poetry they are unabashedly and fully themselves, calling on the reader to feel and experience and confront life with them.

Anne Sexton, a highly-regarded member of the Confessional School of Poetry which emerged in the United States in the 1950s, was influential in developing my writing in this type of lyric poetry. Her themes of personal relationships and trauma matched my own. *Love Poems*, in particular, contained many poems that directly related relationships to my thematic concerns. For instance, in the first verse of her poem "The Nude Swim," Sexton writes, "On the southwest side of Capri / we found a little unknown grotto / where no people were and we / entered it completely / and let our bodies lose all / their loneliness," thereby intertwining memory, place, and emotion, to evoke a highly specific mood of secrecy and nostalgia. And she does so with complete honesty and vulnerability – two characteristics I aim to practice in my writing.

The text that initially drew me to the concept of place, and its effect on the body and psyche, was Dahlia Ravikovitch's poem, "Deep Calleth Unto Deep." Ravikovitch writes "In Jerusalem I had my day of roses....I came there young and returned, years later, / like a stray thing. / Alone in somebody's house." She conjures up images of Jerusalem, all the while intertwining those images with

poignant emotional moments – feelings of loneliness and loss. Because it is grounded in specific details and images, her poetry has the ability to cut deeply inside, but her words also contain an overwhelming strength that is rooted in the concrete evocation of place. In my work, I aim to achieve this effect by utilizing the places and memories that have had a personal impact on me and infusing them with subtle but unabashed displays of emotion.

Also tremendously influential for me in exploring the use of place in poetry was Frank O'Hara. The poetry of O'Hara, considered one of the premier New York School poets, drips with the richness and vibrancy of New York City. His descriptions of avenues, people, buildings, and so much else all form New York into a character – a living, breathing element of the poem. It has been my goal throughout this project to achieve this poetic quality, to ensure that every place I write about is alive and a source of meaning. Because living in New York City had such a profound influence on my life, O'Hara's poetry, which seeps into every element of the city and is often exceedingly personal, was instrumental to my finding the voice to transfer my New York stories to the page. He wrote “What is happening to me...goes into my poems” and it is this statement that I have hoped to imitate.

Although *From unincorporated Territory [Saina]* by Craig Santos Perez is stylistically very different from what I envision my thesis project to be, Perez's meditations on place, memory, and movement were tremendously important in allowing me to think of these themes in new ways. In this book, Perez investigates Chamorro culture and language, through exploring the history of the island of Guam. Place and the memory of it become interwoven both through the testimony of his grandmother as well as his own historical research and knowledge. Being an immigrant also impacts the way Perez connects to his ancestral homeland, Guam. There are times he appears to feel chained to the stifled culture, while at other times, through descriptions of nature, he expresses a sense of movement and freedom. I have taken up these themes in my own work. Through my persistence in writing about New York City, despite having moved away, I meditate on the way place infiltrates our memory, and how we

can feel confined to a place despite no longer being close to it. Conversely, in my writing about Israel, I often touch on attempts to escape from or forget the past, even as new memories and new movements are formed.

In tracing other stylistic and structural influences, I turn to *Persons Unknown* by Jake Adam York. This book consists of lyrical and naturalistic poetry, divided into two sections that relate to the same locations and concerns but which take place in different time periods. My thesis project will be similarly divided into two sections, which, while separated by theme, are connected through location. It is my goal that the two sections of my project will be in conversation with each other, just as York's two sections are. In addition, York's lyrical style creates an anchor to the harsh and painful topic of his book, while still allowing the gorgeousness of the language to roam free. His work, particularly in the second section, is a beautiful blend of the lyrical and confessional, as he attempts to come to terms with his own place as a White man who grew up in the South, after the Civil Rights era. This blend of lyricism and confessionalism, as well as the tangible presence of the confusion and hardship associated with (unsuccessfully) attempting to bridge one's internal tensions are important aspects I aim to emulate in my own work.

### Shape of the Project

This project will consist of approximately 50 poems divided into two separate, but related, sections. These two sections will each be comprised of a set of opposing concepts or forces, with both sets examined through the lens of formative places in my life. Specifically, New York City and Israel will be present in both sections and will play roles in these counteracting concepts. By juxtaposing remembering and forgetting with movement and confinement, it is my goal that this poetry will explore how dislocation from, and movement within, a place reflect how the past recedes from the present. The use of these themes should create a visible tension which will then emerge to the reader. The feeling of impossibility at bridging this tension subsequently yields a sense of yearning and incompleteness, and it is to this difficult and unsatisfying place that I want to bring the poetry of my thesis collection.

The first section, *Memory/forgetting*, will encapsulate several different ways we are forced (or force ourselves) to remember and forget. Poems in this second will deal with ideas of unavoidable loss of memory, such as dementia, but also intentional or purposeful forgetting, such as of negative or painful memories. However, within these poems, the desire to forget and be free of the familiar past, may often be countered by an inverse desire for intimacy or a moment of nostalgia, thereby demonstrating the elasticity of my own feelings with regard to memory. These poems will develop the theme of place through regular mention of specific locations, people, details, or events, associated with New York City and Israel, that I, at different times, have felt compelled to remember and/or forget. The contradictory struggle for remembering and forgetting, for familiarity and distance, will feed into my thesis's main concern of yearning for something unreachable.

The second section, *Movement/confinement*, will explore what it means to be in a state of momentum, of inertia, and what it is like to feel or be in these two extremes at the same time. This section will focus on the complex modes of escape or being trapped that can be found both within



ourselves and in relation to a specific place. Movement and confinement can be expressed in such mundane activities as being stuck in traffic on a highway, or taking a walk all over a city. The motion or lack of motion in each of these instances, as expressed in my poetry, contributes to, or signifies, a greater emotional state, and often an unfulfilled desire. The attempt to modify the state of movement (or confinement) that one is in stems from a sense of incompleteness, and can create an unsatisfying hunger. Thus, the idea of being caught between two opposing modes or emotions also plays heavily in this section of the thesis.

These autobiographical poems will be written in a consistent lyrical confessional form, as a counterbalance to the thematic tension running through the work. The poems will be written in the first person and focus on my confidential traumas, relationships and emotions. Many of the poems are also written in a nostalgic voice. Although penned in free verse, the poems will as a whole contain such craft elements as metaphor, simile, and enjambment. Because of the personal nature of most of the work, writing in the confessional form, which openly addresses private experiences, will allow me to fully capture the experiences at hand. I will be forced to express the deep emotions of the subject matter without being able to hide behind any mask or cover.

Overall, this work seeks to capture what it means to be in an unsteady position, to live in flux. In this thesis, I hope to make the case for the feeling of wanting to be in another place, of belonging somewhere else. Or, in other words, what it means to be caught between opposing desires or forces, pushed and pulled in two directions. Whether it be New York or Israel, neither place entirely feels to me like home; neither place is completely fulfilling. That sense of disjuncture creates a sense of yearning in both places, and the disorienting feeling that I belong in the other place. That cycle of yearning, the impossibility of bridging such an ache, leading to an even stronger yearning, may be the emotional crux of my work.

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