

עיצוב:אנגלית (ארצות הברית)

### **Separate Dreamers**

A Thesis Proposal in Creative Writing Department of English Literature and Linguistics

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### **חולמים נפרדים**

הצעת מחקר לתזה בכתיבה יוצרת המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

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## Introduction

In high school English we used Perrine's *Sound and Sense* as an introduction to poetry. Flipping through the book I discovered Carolyn Forché's prose poem "The Colonel," (267) and I was hooked. Forché's quiet, authoritative tone and direct speaking voice woke me up to a vastly different kind of poetry than what I had been studying in class. The idea that poetry could mirror everyday language and newspaper reporting, but, through super-condensed language, communicate a raw, emotional power, was new to me.

I started playing with this power in high school, a bit more in college with a private teacher. I was always told I was a "good writer," but the idea of seriously committing myself to writing, especially something like poetry, did not seem possible. There were more pressing obligations like finding work and a partner, then having kids and raising them, in what would turn out to be a completely different country than the one I grew up in, far from my parents.

As Grace Paley put it in her story "Wants":

My ex-husband followed me to the Books Returned desk. He interrupted the librarian, who had more to tell. In many ways, he said, as I look back, I attribute the dissolution of our marriage to the fact that you never invited the Bertrams to dinner.

That's possible, I said. But really, if you remember: first, my father was sick that Friday, then the children were born, then I had those Tuesday-night meetings, then the war began. Then we didn't seem to know them anymore. But you're right. I should have had them to dinner (129).

As for Paley's iconic alter ego, Faith, 20 years passed for me in what felt like the time it takes to read a sentence. My oldest daughter is now seventeen, even though it feels like yesterday I got stuck in our home bathtub during her labor. Now that my kids are more independent, I have time to take myself seriously. This is a new experience and one I'm still trying to grasp. "Separate Dreamers" will be my attempt to process the different seasons of my womanhood and how I got to where I am today.



**Aims and General Description**

This project will consist of lyric poems, free verse poems, documentary poems, and lyric essays on the theme of transitioning from childhood to motherhood to adulthood. I will focus on navigating the hazards of being female and smart/ too smart/ not smart enough; and on putting the shared familial pain of the Holocaust to rest. The thesis will be approximately 48-60 pages.

### Conceptual Background

I bought my copy of Alice Munro's *Selected Stories* around 1997. The battered book I continue to read to this day is showing its age. The pages are yellowed, the spine is so cracked its hard to read what's printed on it and the cover is slowly disintegrating from the corners. My husband likes to make fun of me that it's the only book I read. For many years that seemed to be true—it was hard to leave her world of girls and women in the Canadian countryside and cities behind for other pastures. Her ability to capture the searing transitional moments between adolescence and young adulthood, from a single to a married woman, from naiveté to mature understanding has helped me to navigate these moments in my own life.

One theme from her stories that resonates for me and that I would like to incorporate into my writing is the idea of girls and women who are smart/too smart/ not smart enough. One passage from the story "The Progress of Love" highlights this tension:

I thought I was so clever. But I wasn't clever enough to understand the simplest thing. I didn't even understand that examinations made no difference in my case. I wouldn't be going to high school. How could I? That was before there were school buses; you had to board in town. My parents didn't have the money. And they didn't think of my life going in that direction, the high school direction. They thought that I would stay at home and help my mother, maybe hire out to help women in the neighborhood who were sick or having a baby (329).

The narrator in this passage is fully present in her world of school girlhood, where summer is bursting, the sun is shining, and she has all the answers. She has fully mastered this world, and, from her varnished seat in the high school taking her final exams, her future seems clear. In the moment, she doesn't see how money and the power of her parents' expectations can so completely reshape her life. Only looking back with adult eyes does she realize how foolish her assumptions were. This moment between not knowing and knowing, between clever and foolish, between power and powerlessness, is pure in its heartbreak. This is the true passage to adulthood, fraught with a blissful ignorance, perilous despite the shining sun and honeysuckle.

In my poetry, I have started to explore this transitional moment between not knowing and knowing the painful truths about how family expectations, traditions and stories that shaped us as

children affects how we will navigate the larger world as we mature. Like a camera aperture, the world looks so big as it opens up on the cusp of adolescence, but then grows smaller as family expectations, religious traditions, and adult responsibilities close the shutter. This tension between the lack and the existence of knowledge about how we find our own places in the world as we balance our family history is something that still haunts my own life. I plan to more fully explore this theme in my thesis.

In addition to these themes that I plan to employ in my thesis, I will also be looking to both refine and stretch my writing style. Forché's direct, unsparing tone, which she used throughout her book *The Country Between Us* has been a major influence for me, particularly the poems "For the Stranger" (46) and "City Walk-Up, Winter 1969" (50). The final lines from the former are probably my favorite couplet of poetry and a good example of this tone: "We have, each of us, nothing./ We will give it to each other." The arrow-like simplicity of the emotion and language always hurts my heart when I read it.

Forché's candid tone can also be found in Louise Glück's early book *The House on Marshland*, but Glück's lines are about a quarter of the size, and her focus is inward, as we see in "Gretel in Darkness" (5) :

This is the world we wanted.  
All who would have seen us dead  
are dead. I hear the witch's cry  
break in the moonlight through a sheet  
of sugar: God rewards.  
Her tongue shrivels into gas . . .

Glück's clipped, declarative sentences in the first stanza set the stage for Gretel's midnight meditation about her current relationship with her brother and father in light of their shared brush with death. The repetition of "dead/are dead" will be echoed in later phrases in the poem: "bars the door/ bars harm", "it is real, real". The short lines and repetition create a sense of urgency in the poem, which is matched by her internal reflection on her and her brother's encounter with the witch and its aftermath.

The central feature of this encounter for Gretel is that she murdered the witch to save her brother—but this doesn't seem to matter to anyone else anymore. Later in the poem she declares how "[n]o one remembers." She, as the female, is the repository of memory: "far from women's arms/ and memory of women." This is contrasted with men like her father who are most concerned with physical safety and well-being: "... in our father's hut/we sleep, are never hungry... My father bars the door, bars harm/ from this house, and it is years."

The fulcrum of this stanza turns on the phrase "Why do I not forget?" which is planted right between women's arms and her father barring the door. The memory is haunting her. This is her true self and is a form of existential reflection, which is echoed by the question in the last stanza: "Am I alone?" These two questions bookend Gretel's grappling with her own trauma while maintaining her connection with her family. I would like to make use of this theme and emulate this style in my own work.

Drawing on these poems and stories and other sources of inspiration and influence, I hope that this thesis will provide a new perspective on the age-old themes of transition between selves and worlds, gaining true understanding and knowledge over time, and managing the weight of memory and pain that is thoughtlessly passed down through families.

### **Shape of Project**

The thesis will consist of 48-60 pages of poems divided into three sections: Childhood, Motherhood and Adulthood. I have chosen this order because I have only recently reached the stage of forming myself as an adult after I've finished the heavy lifting of my children's early years.

This work will be composed of short and longer lyric poems and prose poems. As the thesis will be largely autobiographical, the lyric genre is most suitable, since lyric poems are often a brief window into discrete personal moments belonging to a narrator, directly expressing thoughts and emotions about that moment (Ramazani 428). My goal is to share emotional experiences in a form that can be felt deeply by the reader.

### **Childhood**

This section will be comprised of short lyric poems that describe, narrate and reflect on foundational childhood experiences. As short lyric poems are direct expressions of emotion, with no editorializing or analysis, this an appropriate mode for this section, as it echoes the simplicity of a child's experience of the world. An exemplar is my poem "Dover Road," in which I articulate the feelings of loneliness and isolation I experienced as a small child when confronted with ten empty summer days at my Holocaust survivor grandparents' house. In this poem, the lyric form helps me transmit the immediacy of these childhood memories through specific images. As the poem's images unfold, the reader experiences the memories and the emotions that reverberate for me many decades later and miles away from when and where they happened.

Sarah Wetzel's poems "Someone Else's Dog" (33) and "Drought" (35) from *The Davids Inside David* model how an image in the present launches a chain of associations that leads back to a point of significance in the past. For example, in "Drought", waiting for a train reminds the speaker of rain, which reminds her of how she "waited for my father/to step from a plane" back from the war. (and "Dog"? I would like to further explore how images and memory support and extend each other in lyric poetry.



## **Motherhood**

In this section I will examine my experience of motherhood through fictionalized and actual autobiography, in both short and long lyric forms. Combining fact and fiction adds a depth to my writing by giving me permission to stray from the facts of my own history in order to reach certain emotional truths. My poem "I Dream of Icarus's Mother" combines biography and fiction. The use of fictionalized details in this poem allows me to explore emotional ideas and lyrical styles that would be hampered by strict adherence to fact.

Rachel Zucker's *Sound Machine* is a model for in its use of fictionalized autobiography and of looser forms of lyric and prose poetry. Her long poem "In the End" (102) is a spiral that uses different repeating forms such as Yiddish curses and phrases like "Who is making you?" and "We are not there yet". The spiraling form mirrors the uncertainty and struggle of a mother trying to shed her role as a mother in order to write and whether the cost is worth the struggle.

Inherited Holocaust trauma and its effect on my relationships with both my mother and children will also be a theme in this section, which will include my poem "January 1975", in which I reflect on how this trauma was passed on to me through the womb and how it can be passed on to my own daughters.

Karen Alkalay-Gut will be my model for Holocaust-related poetry, especially in her use of photographs as a poetic frame as she does in the piece "Old Photo" (63), where Alkalay-Gut describes each member of the photo, what happened to them or how they died. Rather than end with death, the author reflects on how her family continues to live in the picture in the line "Here they are now, each one now looking at you/each from their own complete world".

## **Adulthood**

The poems in this section will focus on how I am forming my adult identity as I bring together my roles of child, daughter and mother. This culmination of identity will be reflected in the weaving together of both short lyric and prose poems. The prose poem form will be useful in this

section as it lends itself to the blending of frames, which works well with the blending of roles and experiences that result in a fully formed adult identity. The lyric poem also achieves this blending of realities with its emotional intensity built on images, symbols, metaphor, meter and rhythm.

Carolyn Forché's prose poem, "This Is Their Fault" (48) from her first book *Gathering the Tribes* models for me how to blend the frames of motherhood, childhood and adulthood. The prose poem allows Forché to move between layered realities—her present reality as a young woman cleaning and baking bread in her mother's kitchen, her past as a younger child awakening to her sexuality and her memory of the dysfunctional neighbor family for whom she cooked, baked and cleaned. The prose poem lets the thoughts reel off in a stream of consciousness from images, to memories, to reflection and back again, all piled into neat rectangular stanzas to form a whole persona and artwork.

My lyric poem "Separate Dreamers" will be a central part of this section. Images of the sea, the use of short stanzas and the repetition of the lines "Last night after I stopped crying" and "We're all dreamers/ we don't know who we are" frame the give-and-take between husband and wife. Each stanza is a snapshot of the different ways the couple uses to resolve differences and maintain their bond, in the face of the concluding insight that "we are separate dreamers and separate people." In addition to this poem, I would like to further explore this theme of maintaining a separate identity in a bonded relationship in other poems in this section.

Through the modes of both lyric and prose poems I hope to share the process of how I am weaving together disparate elements of my adult identity.

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