

Between Being and Not Being

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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August 22, 2017

בין להיות ולא להיות

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

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מנחה: פרופ' לינדה זיסקוויט

2 באוגוסט 2017

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Aims and General Description

My thesis will be a collection of poetry in varying styles and form that explores the relationship between the artist experience and the poetic experience, largely focusing on the spaces and gaps required in both. My project will include ekphrastic poems, as well as an exploration of my own personal experience learning to paint and sculpt. The focus on the 'what is not' that is so significant in art will also manifest in a reflection on my experiences with my grandfather who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, transforming into a man who, in many ways, is not. Having grown up in an Orthodox Jewish community in New Jersey, my project will be heavily infused with and influenced by Jewish and biblical themes.

Conceptual Background

In the courtyard of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, just twenty minutes from my childhood home, stands a four piece Matisse relief of a woman's back. The pieces are each life sized and are erected one after the other along the courtyard's wall. The instinct is to accept the backs from right to left—from the most undefined, almost shapeless structure, to the most life-like, intricate, and familiar. This would be the journey of formation—exploring the curves and breaks in the human body through a process of discovery. The reliefs, of course, are numbered from left to right—from the most convincing, accessible, directed, to a structure that,

standing alone, would resemble little more than the trunk of an overgrown tree. Matisse's Back Series is not about the process of progression. It is the process of destruction. Of unforming. With the same expertise that Matisse uses to create an overwhelming depiction of a woman's back, bent in precise movement, defined with an immense intensity, he *undefines*. It is the process of losing that which is familiar by which Matisse forces the observer to accept a new sense of self, of contour.

The compulsion to create through destruction, or, said otherwise, to create destruction, is not unique to Matisse. In an interview about his artistic process, the contemporary British painter Frank Auerbach describes how his first manipulation of a canvas each morning is the process of scraping off the oils from the day before. It is on top of this destruction, *with* this destruction, that Auerbach continues to build and rebuild his canvas. Reaching further back, the ancient Mesopotamian societies would recite a prayer of praise and supplication before rebuilding a temple. This prayer did not refer to the act of building, but instead was a request for forgiveness for the destruction they must inflict on the temple structure that stood before. In other words, these ancient Mesopotamian prayers (arguably some of the first examples of poetic expression) embody the destruction that is inherent in the formation of beauty.

Similarly, there is loss in poetry. Not only in its content, but in its structure. By nature, poetry stands without context. Its characters are not rendered pages of development; its setting, its mood, its self, must be conjured in, quite literally, a limited space. And because of this limited space, words are lost, often punctuation that so naturally holds a sentence together is lost, replaced instead by breaks, by

spaces, by an unknowing. Through poetry, we take a structure that has been in the process of erection and formation since its birth, and create a destruction. It is in this chaos, this dismantling, that poetry is able to emerge as its own being; a tree standing in for a human back, a temple mounted on the base of rubble, a painting holding its depth only because the destruction of all of the formations that came before is echoed through each of its spaces.

It is this sense of creation through loss, of loss being creation itself, that I intend to explore in my poetry thesis. My thesis will experiment with the value of loss in both its form—how much loss can be contained in a structure (poem) that remains whole—and its content. I will do the latter by largely focusing on art in my poetry, engaging art both as a thematic device as well as a frame of response. This is similar to the way in which I relate to art as a whole; as both an observer, internalizing art as a receiver, as well as an artist, completely intertwined with and joined to the process of creation. My hope is that this duality will hold within it a breakage of what has been made by great artists, and the limits to what I feel I can become.

Beyond art in its most literal context, my thesis will engage with ‘what is through what is not’ by entering the space of loss’s formation in personal relationships. This section of my poetry will focus largely on the specific relationship between me and my grandfather who is currently suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. The sudden loss of an identity, loss of memory, of self (disturbingly similar to the way in which Matisse loses the defined self in his *Back Series*), holds within it a sense of recreation. There is an entire world around my

grandfather that forces one to not only witness and cope with a process of loss, but to also witness the recreation of a new being with each memory gone, and to wrestle with the reformation and rebuilding of one's own relationship with him. Who is he in his new identity? Who are we? Again a breakage, a weight in spaces that are endlessly stretched.

Literary Influence

My first experience with poetry—poetry that I identified as poetry—was a fast dive and deep love for Shel Silverstein. I was enchanted by the sing-song of it, the balance, the way the verses ran forward, then tied themselves closed in rhyme. I was a rigid and shy child, but Silverstein's poetry allowed me into a world of rampant and wild dance. Still, the dependable rhyme and witty endings offered a security that soothed the balloons of anxiety and fear learning to take shelter inside me.

Still today, the incessant movement of poetry lures me. When I first read Diane Wakoski's *Blue Monday*, the dance and the speed of it left me shaken for days.

You paint my body blue. On the balcony
In the softy muddy night, you paint me
With bat wings and the crystal
The crystal
The crystal
The crystal in your arm cuts away
The night, folds back ebony whale skin
And my face, the blue of new rifles,
And my neck, the blue of Egypt,

And my breasts, the blue of sand,
And my arms, bass-blue,
And my stomach, arsenic;

(*Blue Monday*, Wakoski)

I had learned to love repetition, as in Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* ("This is the place where the sidewalk ends... to where the sidewalk ends... to the place where the sidewalk ends."), but never has it left me so alarmed as in Wakoski's poetry. In Silverstein, the repetition taught me to live and relive in a familiar and recurring world. In Wakoski, the repetition unsettled and jarred me. Wakoski's dance was, and still is, for me an allowance to surge forward without restraint. If Silverstein constructs a world where the sidewalk ends, Wakoski swoops you off of your feet, gallops you towards the end of it, and leaves you breathless at the edge. There is an abyss at the end—an open space that becomes part of the poem itself.

This abyss has become, for me, the excitement (and—no less significant—terror) of poetry. Poetry allows—indeed requires—for the sidewalk to always be ending. I have found myself lost for months in the prose poems of Sabrina Orah Mark. In Mark's poetry, confined to a single block, I found myself searching for those open spaces. Instead of breakage, Mark creates a space of a large and looming loss.

When Walter B. discovered Beatrice that winter inside his chest, he began to suspect that something for Beatrice had never happened. Something, perhaps, like a name, he thought to himself, as he carried her. He carried her into the parlor. And he carried her into his bed. All winter he carried her, inside his chest, like a Beatrice without a name. When the spectacle came to town he carried her to the spectacle. And when the spectacle left town, he knew he would go on carrying her without the spectacle for a long time. All winter, he carried her. There were times he did not want to go on with this carrying. There were

times he wanted to tie around her neck a thin bundle of sticks and send her out. But something for Beatrice had never happened. Something like a name. And this was a world, thought Walter B., a world inside which a Beatrice could not live without a name. He studied his chest and marveled at its smallness. He could not, like this, go on. If he could find for Beatrice a name, thought Walter B., he could empty her out. If he could find for Beatrice a name, a name that would last, he could go on without her. A name like Poland. Or Abigail, for example. But first he would have to remove Beatrice from Beatrice. But how? How does a man, wondered Walter B., remove a Beatrice from a Beatrice so that he can find for her a name. A name that could empty his chest of a Beatrice. He hadn't meant to go on carrying her for this long. But he went on carrying her. He carried her inside his chest for a long, long time. He carried her until one day she was gone. And the space in his chest where he had once carried her grew large. He marveled at its largeness. And he knew he would go on carrying this largeness, this largeness that was once inside him a Beatrice, for a long, long time.

(The Name, Mark)

In a sense, Mark's poetry has become for me a box, or a piece of luggage, within which to carry along a loss, or losing. In the way in which Walter B. becomes a body to contain the 'goneness' of Beatrice, poetry has the ability to wrap itself around a space and capture or guard it.

In recent months, I have begun to conceptualize poetry as an act of museum-making—a way in which to store something behind glass panels. The ability to approach it, but not mar it. Poetry seems to have a sign above it: *Please do not touch*. If broken into, the spaces, breaks, losses, would ooze out and lose all shape.

Kim Thuy, in her poetic memoir of her experiences in the Vietnam War, writes that she has learned to carry with her only that which she can hold inside her body. This, for her, is a history, a collection of memories. Mark's poetry has become for me an emblem of how to shape poetry into my own body, in a way to preserve

the untouchable: old and lost loves, old and lost gods, a grandfather without memory.

I was recently watching a video from the 1950s of Dutch artist Karel Appel in his studio. His canvas stretches from floor to ceiling and Appel seems to be a small boy facing its massiveness. The large white emptiness and the way that Appel approaches it resembles David and Goliath. The moment Appel sets his brush to the canvas, he is already the champion. He enters the painting with a fury and dance like a battle. His entire body moves across the canvas in large, charged strokes, again and again and again. The physicality of it all, the movement in and out as if there is an entering to the painting and a pulling out from it, reminded me of first reading Natalie Diaz's work. It was exhausting. It was, I believe, my first experience of being violently pulled into an image, then, throughout the entirety of it, being jerked in every direction, following the image to its end:

He was calling in the bulls from the street.
They came like a dark river —
a blur of chest and hoof —
everything moving, under, splinter — hooked
their horns through the walls. Light hummed
the holes like yellow jackets. My mouth
was a nest torn empty.

Then, he was at the table.
Then, in the pig's jaws —
he was not hungry. He was stop.
He was bad apple. He was choking.

So I punched my fists against his stomach.
Mars flew out
and broke open or bloomed —

how many small red eyes shut in that husk?

He said, *Look. Look.* And they did.

He said, *Lift up your shirt.* And I did.

He slid his fork beneath my ribs —
Yes, he sang. A Jesus side wound.
It wouldn't stop bleeding.
He reached inside
and turned on the lamp —

I never knew I was also a lamp — until the light
fell out of me, dripped down my thigh, flew up in me,
caught in my throat like a canary.
Canaries really means dogs, he said.

He put on his shoes.
You started this with your mouth, he pointed.
Where are you going? I asked.
To ride the Ferris wheel, he answered,
and climbed inside me like a window.

(My Brother My Wound, Diaz)

In a sense, Diaz goes further than Appel. She rips open the canvas, walks inside it. If a poem is a museum, Diaz shatters the glass and uses the broken pieces to dig even further. This discovery of a violent sensuality in poetry and art has led me to use imagery as experience in my poems. Because of the physicality of them both, I have begun to experience the painting and sculpting process in much the same way that I do the writing—an entering of a movement and following it to its unexpected, jarring, and revealing moments.

Shape of Project

My project will consist of sixty poems. These poems will be loosely divided by three major themes: painting, sculpture, and loss in relationships, specifically the loss experienced through my paternal grandfather's loss of memory. The former two will include two different types of poems. I will be drawing on my *own* experience painting and sculpting, as well as exploring, as an outside observer, the works of other artists. In this way, art will find itself in my project both as a thematic device as well as an ekphrastic tool. While these themes will be apparent in the poems themselves, they will be interwoven with each other to form a picture of persistent movement and breakage throughout.

In this way, I aim to create a collection that is both whole and unwhole. In the process of sculpting, the sculptor is ultimately engaged in two actions. One is creative—placing clay on the form, an additive process, while the other is destructive—*removing*, often literally carving out, clay from the form. A sculpture as a successful and 'whole' piece of art cannot be formed without the removal of what was once part of its whole. What draws me to the art of sculpture is the requirement, the *necessity*, to dig out pieces of a whole—the bend of a torso, the space between the shoulder and the lower neck, a subtlety so small as the dip of an eyelid—until there is a movement exposed through the tension between being and not being. This is precisely the tension that I aim to capture in my project, or, put less ambitiously, become lost in.

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