

When the Chrysalis Cracks

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

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Introduction

One morning I awake to the realization that my life has changed. When did this happen? Where was I when all this was going on? I remember Jane Kenyon's words in "The Pear": "It happens subtly, as when a pear / spoils from the inside out, / and you may not be aware / until things have gone too far."

My husband — my life-partner and best friend for over fifty-seven years — has been diagnosed with an inoperable benign brain tumor, a meningioma. At first the situation appeared manageable, with minimal impact, but gradually the ripples have grown stronger, thrashing us from side to side. Today we are inhabiting a new world of continual medical supervision, limited possibilities, and heightened vulnerability.

I am stepping into this new world in the eight decade of my life. This is an age that anyway brings a slew of challenges. It is naturally a time for reflection, and I find I am dwelling on issues such as loss, separation, aging, change; especially change: How every stage of life demands the readiness to change.

While all this is happening, I am living a dream come true. Fifty years after graduating with a B.Sc. (Anatomy) degree from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, I am participating in The Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Program in Creative Writing. It is a good decision. I feel enriched, strengthened, and better equipped to cope.

When the chrysalis cracks and a young butterfly emerges, a new stage of life begins. We humans don't have as obvious a sign indicating transition, but we do have another way to communicate change — and that is through language.

Aims and General Description

The project will be comprised of forty to fifty autobiographical poems presented in three separate sections depicting my childhood in the countryside of South Africa; the Holocaust in Europe in which my paternal grandparents and aunt were murdered in the village of Birzh, Lithuania; and the present in Israel.

Most of the poems will be lyrical, combining retrospection with optimistic hope and anticipation. Some will be researched documentary poems recording historical facts and including photographs and other relevant material. Pastoral poetry will depict the rural influence of my childhood.

Conceptual Background

The thesis sweeps across the globe from South Africa to Europe to Israel, traversing the span of a human lifetime. And yet, it is all as one. The words differ, and still remain the same. Time and space become suspended, and so it is fitting that I turn to the lyric form, which emphasizes the essential emotion. What I feel and what I write follow me from childhood right to the present. In the words of writer-philosopher William Gass, “The true alchemists do not change lead into gold; they change the world into words.”

The topics of my thesis — memories, aging, loss, mortality, change — are pivotal life experiences that affect us all and have been in the topics of the first lyric poems. My challenge, now, is to find the words to describe my personal reality in a fresh compelling way. The poetry of Jane Kenyon, Donald Hall, Louise Gluck and Olga Kirsch has greatly influenced my understanding of the lyric and its expression of emotional intensity. I notice that, for them, the bigger the topic, the fewer the words. The effective use of economy of language is the one overriding lesson I learn from their work. Another is to keep the writing honest and straightforward, uncomplicated by intricate metaphors. These writers deal with overwhelming themes like loss, illness, and death by focusing on a single metaphor in a poem or by using a single image in a line.

Jane Kenyon’s poems are delicate, precise, and crafted with great tenderness and compassion. She writes mainly in short sentences, using startling images and interesting line breaks. For example, from “The Blue Bowl”: “..... a robin / burbles from a dripping bush / like the neighbor who means well / but always says the wrong thing.” The language is deceptively simple. I picture her words as drops, one following the other, falling cleanly, soundlessly into a pond. This is an effect I try to emulate in my writing, eliminating superfluous adjectives and adverbs. Her tendency to write less rather than more (as in the poem “Otherwise”), adds an element of anticipation and mystery. She

calls her writing “the inside of one person speaking to the inside of another” and her subjects — coping with illness, connecting with nature, reminiscing about the past — serve as models for my own work.

In his prose and poetry, Donald Hall (Kenyon’s husband) revels in his natural surroundings at Eagle Pond Farm in New Hampshire. His writing in the pastoral genre is rich and layered, drawing on natural images to enhance the stories he is telling. This is an approach I will try to capture when writing about my childhood in the South African countryside. In his poem “The Ship Pounding”, Hall compares the hospital where Jane Kenyon was treated for leukemia to a ship. The short sharp sentences (most no more than six words) and his masterful command of enjambment create a powerful picture and story. I intend to use this technique of a single metaphorical image in my own poems about aging.

Louise Gluck’s lyric poetry is raw and real. She writes from a place of pain, without embellishment. I feel that this forthright style melds fact with emotion and emphasizes intensity of feeling. For example, from the poem “Metamorphosis”: “My father has forgotten me / in the excitement of dying. / Like a child who will not eat, / he takes no notice of anything.” This is a style I wish to emulate, especially when writing poems set in the present in Section Three of the project.

The Book of Sitrya by Olga Kirsch is one of the most beautiful collections of lyrical/confessional poetry I have read. Kirsch (a relative) was a South African-born Afrikaans-language poet who wrote little in English and continued writing in Afrikaans even after she emigrated to Israel in 1948. This collection of poems was written after the death of her granddaughter Sitrya at the age of ten from a rare syndrome. The anguish, the longing, the pain that emanate from these sparse poems is overwhelming. It teaches me that when dealing with great emotion, economy of language is most effective. I will use this model in a series of poems questioning the changes in our marriage wrought by my husband’s illness.

Maybe because they happened so long ago and are enveloped in a rosy haze, my memories of childhood are cased in a dreamlike state that suits the style of Sandy Florian's *Boxing the Compass*. Florian's language is rich in the use of alliteration and assonance. It flows and twists and loops over end stops, creating the hypnotic rhythm I want to emulate when writing of this time. I will substitute earth for Florian's powerful water-related metaphors, as illustrated in: "She gnashes and flails and tosses about in having submerged herself with the weight of dreams in a wishing well that sparkles and glints, with its blinks and its winks and its lullaby words, under ocean tides that recede and swell, under ocean tides that swell and recede, on this rotating Earth of desert and dearth" (75).

In dealing with the Holocaust, I am faced with the struggle of rendering an immense historical event that has been treated in countless films, novels, poems, and other art forms, in a fresh light. Layli Long Soldier's documentary poem "38" offers an interesting model. In this poem Long Soldier narrates the tale of the hanging of thirty-eight men of the Dakota tribe after the Sioux Uprising, a revolt resulting from misunderstanding and misinterpretation of a treaty. She writes in an officious manner reminiscent of a bureaucratic edict, a style that obscures the brutality of the facts. The poem opens with the words, "Here, the sentence will be respected." and so the narrative continues, giving equal weight to every sentence. The language is deliberate and impassive and the effect very strong. This emphasizes further what I learn from Kirsch's poetry (economy of language) and from Kenyon's (the power of understatement). My opening poem in Section Two, the Holocaust, will be based on this style as it creates the chilling impact I want to achieve. I will continue to base poems in this section on Long Soldier's work.

In her collection *Whereas*, Layli Long Soldier experiments with different formats like shaping, exaggerated white space and varying alignments on the page. In my opinion this tool creates variety and effective ways to relay a message, and I plan to do the same in this thesis.

Shape of Project

This project will consist of forty to fifty autobiographical poems of various styles and lengths, presented in three different sections: Childhood in South Africa, Holocaust in Europe, and the Present in Israel.

Section One will cover the 1950s and 1960s: my childhood memories of growing up in the farming village of Vrede in the South African countryside. These poems will reflect a happy pastoral childhood, in spite of the reigning apartheid system causing untold misery to the colored population (while affecting the mindset and spirit of other races as well) and of being indelibly stamped as a Jew in the midst of a white Afrikaans Protestant majority. Being Jewish meant being different. My Lithuanian father was the immigrant in Vrede and very obviously different from everyone else. Those were the days in South Africa when every individual fitted into a “box”, when every person was labelled. Poems from this period will reflect the perception of being an outsider, not quite part of the social milieu.

The natural world plays a central role in grounding my writing and this is especially evident in the poems set in Vrede, where so many hours of the day were spent outdoors. Many of the poems will include references to elements of nature in the tradition of poets like Robert Frost, Emily Dickenson, William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, Jane Kenyon and others. Most of the poems in this section will be of a lyrical and/or pastoral form that best expresses country life. Some will be documentary poems in the style of Martha Collins and C.D. Wright, recording actual events that influenced my childhood. Photographs and other documentary evidence will be included where relevant.

Section Two, the Holocaust, details the story of my Lithuanian-born father, who left Europe before the war and never spoke about his home and family. I grew up realizing he was “foreign” but

not knowing where he came from and who and what he left behind. Most of my knowledge stems from two photographs my mother gave me after his death in 1975: one taken upon his departure from the village of Birzh in 1929 and the other a portrait taken in 1935 of his parents and sister, my grandparents Moshe and Dvora Lifshitz and aunt, Ida Lifshitz, whom I never knew. Any information I have about them and the life and death of the Jews of Birzh I have uncovered myself, and I will continue to research as this project unfolds. In spite of the lack of communication and the geographical detachment from Europe, the annihilation of the Lifshitz branch of our family has always been a defining element in my life. The poems in Section Two will bear witness to Moshe, Dvora, and Ida. This will be the first time they will be remembered in writing.

Most of the writing in this section will be in the style of documentary poetry, recording factual events and including documentary evidence. There will also be some lyrical poems about the Holocaust in general, not specifically pertaining to my family. The majority of the poems will be written in modern free verse form that gives rein to spontaneous expression.

The last part of the project, Section Three, will include poems set in the present time in Israel that portray the new reality of our lives after my husband was diagnosed with a meningioma in 2017. These poems will dwell on the experience of loss and transition, ill health and restricted opportunities. They will attempt to analyze the changes that we and our relationship have undergone. However, these reflections will not only be sad or pessimistic. It is true that change often brings loss but it can also herald the promise of different.

The lyric genre will prevail in Section Three, in free verse that attempts to convey the confusion, helplessness and unpreparedness we are experiencing as we venture into new uncharted territory. I am drawn particularly to the simplicity and intensity of the haiku form conveying an image in only seventeen syllables. I plan to introduce poems in haiku format throughout this thesis.

At the center of the emotional maelstrom encompassing all three sections of this project lies the ultimate realization — life is what it is. One can be spared a lot of anguish by simply accepting this. There is a certain abandon in coming to terms with what the philosopher Dr. Alfred Painter calls the “isness” of life, and that is the state I hope to reach at the end of this journey.

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