

# **Talking to Stones**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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## **Introduction**

For as long as I can remember, I have kept journals, with breaks of longer or shorter duration. In the summer of 2000, I began to keep journals in a more organized fashion, influenced by my relocation from Israel to the United States a year earlier. Those journals evolved into disciplined “morning pages”: that is, “uncensored” writing as advocated by Julia Cameron in *The Artist's Way*. Adhering to Cameron's method, the journals (over 35 of them altogether) consist of mostly three-page entries on a nearly daily basis. Written over a 14-year period, their last entry is dated September 21, 2014.

In addition, in the summer of 1999, I began writing what I came to call “Paper Scraps.” A collection of fragmentary writing, the entries consist of miscellaneous thoughts, observations and musings captured in real time as I went about my daily life. Mostly brief prose fragments, “Paper Scraps” also includes some poetry.

Initially, I jotted the text down with a pen on literal scraps of paper, which periodically I would collect and transcribe to a computer document. In the spring of 2013, I began to type these real-time thoughts and observations directly into the Notes section of my iPhone, and from there paste them into my computer document. This is an open-ended project, although now less intensive than in the past. As of the drafting of this thesis proposal, the last “Paper Scraps” entry was on September 17, 2019.

A few years ago, I began to review my journals, extracting and tagging with keywords selected passages that seemed to hold particular value. I will continue doing so with the rest of my journals, thus obtaining a significant quantity of thematically tagged material. It is these personal journals, as well as “Paper Scraps,” that I will mine for the material of *Talking to Stones*.

**Aims and General Description**

This project will consist of a mélange of lyric poetry, prose poetry, lyric essay, and fragmentary writing in three parts that follow the themes of alienation, loss and recuperation.

It will be 40-60 pages long.

### Conceptual Background

To assist me in my project, I will turn to the rich tradition of poetry on alienation and loss. *Talking to Stones* will focus on alienation fueled by self-identifying as, and being tagged as, a Jew in America, an American in Israel, and an Israeli in America. It will address the experience of straddling two countries, the loss of place, and the search for anchor and home. My writing will also deal with loss of a loved one, and recuperation.

The poetry of Linda Gregg will serve as one of my models of poetry in which the pain of loss is conveyed through understated subtext, thereby achieving greater authenticity and power. For examples of poetry of alienation, I will turn to the lyric poetry of Derek Walcott, as well as the poems of Joseph Brodsky and Marie Howe. Howe's poem about her deceased brother, "What the Living Do," will serve as a model for effectively conveying the sense of loss, not by speaking to it directly, but rather by arriving at it aslant. At the same time, Howe's poem brings a "kind of consolation"(Spacey), which will be instructive when I address the theme of recuperation as well. I will also write under the influence of Carolyn Forché, especially her personal, lyric poetry that appears in *Blue Hour*, within which I am particularly drawn to her abecedarian, "On Earth."

As I reshape my journal entries, treating them as found objects, the hybrid lyric essay will offer much creative freedom. "A fascinating sub-genre that straddles the essay and the lyric poem" (Tall and D'Agata), the lyric essay will allow me to incorporate external documentation if deemed creatively meaningful. The nonlinear nature of the lyric essay makes it particularly suitable to the themes of my project, which are marked by a circling, a folding in on itself, a revisiting.

Themes of alienation and loss involve a complex interplay of subjective reality and factual truth that will find a suitable form in the prose poem. Stephen Fredman speaks of this genre's "reclaiming for poetry the domain of truth" (qtd. in Delville 263). At the same time,

with its "freedom from line breaks" (Kolosov 161), the prose poem lends itself to an associative flow of language that could amplify the themes of this project. A form that allows "making art of everydayness" (Szybist 174), as exemplified in Szybist's "Entrances & Exits," it is an appropriate vessel for material derived from journal entries written primarily on a morning commuter train into the city for a 9-to-5 job.

The prose poem's "self-proclaimed hybridity" (Delville 266), its ability to "hold the most motley and unlikely crowd" in Szybist's words (qtd. in Kolosov 161), will give me what Kolosov refers to as the "poetic space" to insert not just pieces of my source material "wholesale into the text" (161) but perhaps also to document events or places referenced by the journal entries, thereby adding a purportedly more factual layer to the text.

Michel Delville notes that the narrative category of prose poetry in the U.S. today "bears affinities with short narrative prose forms...such as...the dream narrative, the journal entry" and others (263). Symbolism-rich dream narratives can be powerful additions to the *mélange* of writing in my project. As I shape dream scenes from my journals into narrative prose poems, I will draw inspiration from Denise Levertov's "Uncertain Oneiromancy," in which, upon waking after "leading a blind man" in her dreams, the speaker is "wondering still / what in me he was, and who / the *I* was..." I might also be guided by the work of contemporary surrealist poets such as Sara Lefsyk and her recently published *We Are Hopelessly Small and Modern Birds*.

Fragmentary writing will also figure prominently in this project. Suitable in general for journal entries, where the narrative flow is broken by dates, this form is a particularly good fit for my own journal entries, where the extrinsically- imposed nature of textual breaks due to date changes is amplified by nearly complete adherence to the three-pages-per-day rule prescribed by Julia Cameron in *The Artist's Way*.

In terms of substance, fragmentary writing can underscore the emotional fracture inherent in alienation, while also serving the theme of loss and the breakdown in what one likes to (needs to) consider the natural order of the universe. Just as one can gain understanding and coherence by taking distance from distressing experiences, so this form itself can serve as a metaphor for a shattering and eventual integration and mending. Hinting at this eventual mending, fragmentary writing has been described as "work that accumulates fragments of text and presents them in a way that encourages introspection and contemplation" (Cunningham). The significance of this interplay between words and silence that exists in fragmentary writing has been noted by Jeanette Winterson, who in the very different context and literary genre of her autobiographical novel, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, wrote, "When we write we offer the silence as much as the story. Words are the part of silence that can be spoken" (8).

The lyric poem will also appear in my project. This form, notes Edward Hirsch in *A Poet's Glossary*, "has created a space for personal feeling. It has introduced a subjectivity and explored our capacity for human inwardness. The intimacy of lyric...asserts the value and primacy of the solitary voice, the individual feeling" (356). He adds, "Perhaps the asocial nature of the deepest feeling, the 'too muchness' of human emotion, is what creates the space for the lyric..." (357). The emotions at the core of my project thus make this an appropriate form for my writing, particularly in the section dealing with loss.

Epistolary poetry could also work well with this project, especially in the sections on alienation and loss. In Chahdortt Djavann's novel, *Comment peut-on être français*, an Iranian refugee in Paris writes letters to long-dead Montesquieu in a lonely attempt to improve her French language skills. The letters always come back, marked, "*N'habite pas à l'adresse indiquée. Retour à l'expéditeur*" (154), yet they give her the illusory comfort that she is not alone.

## **Shape of Project**

Section One will focus on alienation, the self *vis-a-vis* the other, in terms of the shifting perspective of a Jew in America, an American in Israel, and an Israeli in America. Fragmentary poetry and prose poems will predominate in this section. Largely drawn from my personal journals, this section will also include some "Paper Scraps" fragments, as deemed thematically relevant by highlighting the alien status of the observer *vis-a-vis* the surroundings.

Section Two will focus on loss of a loved one. As the most inward-looking section of the thesis, it will consist of lyric poetry, lyric essay, and fragmentary poetry.

Epistolary poetry may also appear in these two sections. Personal journal entries, which at inception may be regarded as letters to oneself, could be formed into epistolary poems addressed to an illusory or absent one (reminiscent of Djavann's novel), thus underscoring the themes, respectively, of alienation or loss. Such poems may be modeled after Emily Dickinson's letter poems.

Section Three will be characterized by the theme of recuperation. Reflective of a progression from alienation and loss, it will be the most outward-looking section. "Paper Scraps" material as well as journal-derived material that demonstrate an emergence from an alienated, elegiac perspective and that engage with the world will appear here. Writing that focuses on nature – primarily scenes from New England – will be included here. Many of the poems in this section will be in lyrical form.

Section Three will also include writing about the struggle toward creative expression through the written word. Certainly, this struggle cannot be removed completely from the sections on alienation and loss. Nor should it be, since it is precisely through the writing act that one grapples with those emotions and experiences. However, I choose to give this struggle the biggest stage in Section Three, since I perceive the very act of engaging in the



process of putting thoughts on paper as regenerative – and the desire and struggle to do so in the most expressive and creative way possible, as a powerful sign of recuperation.

All three sections will include hybrid forms, as I reshape my source material into poetic forms or insert bits of them, as is, into prose text. They may also include external documentation related to the subject matter.

My subject matter does not permit clear-cut separations, and a certain amount of intermingling of themes is inevitable, just as emotions do not consist of a single ingredient. Thus, for example, while Section Two will focus on loss relating to the loss of a loved one, Section One – on alienation – will also address loss, albeit in a different sense: loss of place and identity. In general, however, I will make as much of a distinction as possible among the sections according to predominating themes.

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