



Writing Without Shelter

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Creative writing is a privileged discourse. Not writing, per se, but creative writing.

When I was a little girl in the early 1980s, I decided we needed a bomb shelter.

Think of time as linear and the future is always ahead. We fix our eyes on it anxiously, as though riding a long, steep escalator, watching the back of a stranger far ahead of us arrive at our destination before we do.

There remains a persistent, unproductive, and violent gap between our physical reality and our way of thinking, living, and writing.

Have we interrogated creative writing? Otherwise, can we know its future? How does the language of the phrase operate? Who are the people and institutions invested in this term? May we have a show of hands, please?

We needed a big hole and I knew we could dig one in the back yard. Outside of that, I had no idea how to build a bomb shelter. Anyone in my family who didn't like the idea of a bomb shelter could think of it as a tornado shelter, a cellar, or clubhouse, but it must be below ground, secure, and well-stocked with canned food, water, candles—everything that would see us into the future and through the end of the world.

In spiritual psychology, the future moves differently, loops back to meet us face-to-face in the present. Rather than catching up to the future, our task is to recognize the future and act when it appears. That moment of recognition is erotic; to act signals a willingness to change, to be otherwise.

Covered in a patchwork of weeds and exposed dirt, how much damage could I, my sister, and our friends do to the yard? We went into the garage, grabbed shovels taller than we were, and began to dig, turning up Cheyenne's thin scrim of topsoil, waking up colonies of maggots as we went.

We humans tend to think of ourselves as in the world—perhaps it would even be more accurate to say “on top of” the world. Set apart, as though a buffer exists between us and the earth—the earth and us. That buffer is a kind of privilege. It could also be a kind of affect, a way of distancing ourselves from

unity of desire and production.”¹ Our writing is a place, like the earth, where desire and production are effectively mixed. The earth is, as Deleuze effectively mixed. The earth is, as Deleuze and Guattari go on to say, “the surface on which the whole process of production is inscribed, on which the forces and means of labor are recorded, and the agents and the products distributed.” Writing, as a product of imagination born of desire and made possible by the body, grants us and the world additional dimension.

Creative writing has enough room for everything and everyone we must hold, we just need to make it do so.

Turn.

We imagine ourselves moving across and above the earth’s soil and oceans, impervious until nature’s floods or flus bring black mold into our houses or keep us home from work. The world—nature, cultures, art, taste, hegemonies, histories, desire, social structure, governments, and any and all things from screwdrivers to willow bark—dwells in us somatically and psychologically. At all times, we are in the world. Sitting on my futon? Yes. Cuddling my smartphone? Yes. Walking past the frozen food cases in the supermarket, the air around me is simply a less dense extension of the earth’s crust.

My parents neither encouraged nor discouraged me.

Creative writing exists within a discourse, which we know because its terminology has been normalized and a web of institutions gives that terminology authority.² Creative writing itself is an accepted term meant to point toward the literary, writing outside of the technical or professional. The way creative writers are taught to talk about writing through MFA programs or courses in creative writing requires gaining another dialect that often involves repressing our mother tongue. “Craft” has become a placeholder for an entire methodological approach to engaging with poetry and prose. Nothing against methodology, but we accept these modes of analysis without question, without attending to all of the ways they leave us wanting, the ways they have been, are, or may be bankrupt for writers of color, women, writers who grew up poor, are poor and working class, queer—i.e., anyone outside of the dominant cultural and economic position. Creative writing has its myths—the workshop, for instance—and an archive consisting of anything we feel guilty not to have read. Nearly all of those texts we should have read are in English or are English translations in which we gloss over the translator’s name and labor. What is that aggressive monolingualism, if not evidence of a privileged discourse? “Behind the visible

1. Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. New York: Penguin, 2009. 140-141. Print.

2. I want to question the discipline of Creative Writing in the manner Foucault interrogates history, as subject and methodology, in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Though Foucault later revised some of his thinking presented *Archeology*, I still find valuable the way he highlights the fissures and disfluencies history and the study of history contain, despite being presented as a seamless class of knowledge arrived at through a clear and logical method.

façade of the system,” Foucault writes, “one posits the rich uncertainty of disorder; and beneath the thin surface of discourse, the whole mass of a largely silent development (devenir): a ‘presystematic’ that is not of the order of the system; a ‘prediscursive’ that belongs to an essential silence.”³ Continually we remind one another of the rich cache of experience and writing outside of the system. Understanding that creative writing is not above or below other forms of writing or discourse, we listen for the silence.

Creative writing is not above or below other forms of writing.

I did not like to think of dirty, creepy things squirming next to what would be the walls of our shelter, but I did not like to think of what would happen when Cheyenne was bombed and we were fried like flies in a bug zapper because we hadn’t thought ahead.

The future of creative writing and the future of the world are intertwined, equally beautiful and precarious. A decade or ten from now, the shape of the novel, the subjects that preoccupy writers, language (including those languages that dominate), the professionalization and specialization of creative writing through the MFA and PhD, meaning-making through words, the status given to poets and writers, the very meaning of those roles—all will depend, as it has in the past, on what beckons most urgently in our world.

The kind of future—creative, generative, wildly imaginative, and empathetic—that concerns me here is inevitably a wounded future.

Writing that ignores the world’s call, that ignores the future as it moves toward us, has serious limitations. It may entertain the reader or provide some relief for the author, but it cannot help us reckon with what it means to live now ... and now ... and now, because that writing will not allow itself to be entered without cynicism or irony. It refuses to show the inherent wound that comes from being brought into the world, from being made. Wounds mark the site of an exchange between the world and us, and art and writing document that exchange. Göransson describes translation as a “wound through which media enter into a textual body. The wound of translation unsettles stable ideas of language, productive ideas of literature.”⁴ The in and out, out and in of material that occurs through this wound space adds to our unsettling fears about ourselves, our writing, and the world.⁵ Outside of translation, this influx/flux also exists for the writer willing to pierce their language, their literature, with doubt.

Below us, the maggots’ pearlescent bodies writhed in the dirt until we cut them in half with the tips of our shovels.

3. Foucault, Michele. *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage Books-Random House, 76. Print.

4. Göransson, Johannes. “Translation Wounds.” New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2012. Electronic.

5. Ibid.

grow frustrated and fearful, where the text is less than smooth. Writing that is honest and unsure, daring in its willingness to transfer material between the inside and outside, bears a wound exquisite in its vulnerability. Gayatri Spivak writes that “the task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay.”⁶ What is this act, what is this love, if not one of vulnerability? Facilitation and fray demand delicate handling; holding at bay one’s agency or audience requires flexible strength, resolve. The translator’s or writer’s task hasn’t been attempted, I would argue, if one leaves a project unmarked.

Stones and rocks met the shovels as we tried to dig deeper in earth so dry and yet compact it would not yield. My sister pulled out the garden hose and we wet the ground, convinced that would make the dirt softer, easier to work with. The water hardly soaked through. We shoveled off the earth’s muddy top hat. If the adults around us failed to see the future, I would not.

We spot the colonizing text as it positions itself as an authority, no matter how small or grand the world it describes. Nothing of the world is as real as what the text has to say, and the text seeks applause for being such as it is, for demanding—no matter its subject—that we cosign on its version of reality. It might ask us to act as though Eritreans have not been packed like pickles into boats. As though massive asteroids will always miss the earth. As though the raspberry red, pumpkin, and gold autumn leaves waving from Maine’s deciduous trees are not beauty and cause enough to fall to our knees in gratitude.

A lot of us are aesthetically starved. Despite regular binges on image, sound, text, image, text, soundtext, soundimage, textsound, etc. No matter how finely wrought, writing that ignores the future coming toward it is like a painted egg with its innards pushed out through a pin-sized hole. An elaborate, fragile surface that, once cracked, has no real nourishment to give.

At our elementary school, the principal made us march in the halls in circular fashion. We hid under our desks during tornado drills. Snippets of the evening news—tensions with the Soviet Union, life a decade after the end of the Vietnam War, airplane hijackings—stuck to me like homespun shame. Massive white missiles guarded the east entrance to F. E. Warren Air Force Base. All of it meant we had ways to kill them and they had ways to kill us. I didn’t even know who they were and no one could tell me about us.

My desire for the future of creative writing: That writers would recognize the need to write from a “peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet,”⁷ and that this need would drive us to write, read, and translate from languages other than English. To recognize that our “peculiar crossroads” is very likely to involve land—from poppy fields and plantain growing through sidewalk cracks to a shifting sense

6. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “The Politics of Translation.” *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. New York: Routledge, 2012. 312-330. Print.

7. O’Connor, Flannery. “The Regional Writer.” *Mystery and Manners*. Eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970. 51-59. Print.

of boundaries and nations—no matter the scale of our work. It would necessitate that we interrogate our own positions.

After a few days, we had made a wide, shallow gash in the backyard. My sister and our friends left and I was digging alone.

Imagine the reader moving towards us. Of course there will be a multiplicity of readers in the future, but for now imagine one. Who are they? Does the text we offer them indicate that we have imagined their existence, the lands they come from? Could they speak languages other than those we speak? How different and various are their bodies, their genders, their ways of loving other bodies?

Digging, in my mind, I saw President Reagan on television, the way he would cup his hand over his ear and shake his head when reporters asked him questions. His not responding was a lie, I knew. He was a lie, or everything he touched was a lie. Did that make me and the bomb shelter a lie, too?

When the text lacks nourishment, its gestures are so weak it can hardly leave a mark.

At the edge of a devastated garden we stand. Lines of poetry, lyric passages of prose—the garden needs these as much as it needs weeds pulled or glass sifted from its overgrown beds. What can grow here? What is already living? Amaranth, lambs' quarters, tree of heaven weaving itself through the chain link fence, a story bruised but intact by the compost heap. Can we wait before putting words inside and around this place, before deciding what kind of literature it needs? How can we avoid standing in the way of what anything written or non-written wants to be?

I thought I was building a bomb shelter in the ground, but really I was building the bomb shelter within myself. At first it was the balm for all of my fears, but then I learned shelters only provided a temporary fix. No one could stay cocooned in the shelter forever; at some point, we would have eaten all of the canned peaches and shared the last glass of Tang. Then we would have to come out and face a devastated planet. We would have to face each other.

Creative writing cannot seal itself off from the world, cannot hold too exclusively to its imagined community of writers and readers. Its future is too magical, too messy and natural for that. To say—

which is also “to write” and whatever that may come to mean—what we need and will need to say continues to require plusieurs langues, plusieurs discourses in order for us to enter unsteady spaces with courage. Those spaces put our subjectivity and identity at risk, put our texts in a place of productive uncertainty. In those spaces we find the dramas clamoring for our attention are cilia on cells as well as the mass migrations of displaced peoples. Like love, like desire, the scale before us is microscopic and vast.

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