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ALL HANDS BURY THE DEAD

Summer Qabazard

169 Pages

All Hands Bury the Dead is a collection of poetry, salted with creative non-fiction, and images exploring trauma, memory, time, nostalgia, mental health, and love in the backgrounds of the Gulf War in Kuwait (1990-1991), domestic violence, relationships, and academia. The dissertation includes a critical preface that theorizes how racist, sexist, and otherwise harmful ideologies can be reproduced in and supported through the uncritical application of theory to practice. The dissertation also includes a pedagogical chapter that explores assumptions about the innateness of creative writing ability.

ALL HANDS BURY THE DEAD

SUMMER QABAZARD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

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ALL HANDS BURY THE DEAD

SUMMER QABAZARD

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CHAPTER I

AGAINST A NOMADIC POETICS

Critical Preface

The development of the ideas and arguments presented in this dissertation was inspired largely by my experiences as a multicultural, multi-ethnic female raised mainly in Kuwait. My mother is a British Caucasian and my father is a Kuwaiti of Persian descent. As a person of mixed ancestry, I often find myself pulled between Western and Eastern perspectives. While I identify strongly with my British family and was educated in British and American schools and universities, I was raised almost entirely in Kuwait, immersed in a culture that is, in many ways, radically different from Western culture. Although this liminal position has often been alienating, it has also afforded me the perspective to more easily see contradictions and faulty assumptions that each culture takes for granted. My experiences as a female in Kuwait have allowed me to become especially critical of the privilege of the Western academic subject position and the frequent blindness of academic discourse to realities of non-white and non-Western people, especially women and girls.

I have found that Western people often have trouble truly comprehending the degree to which females outside the Western world are punished and controlled for simply having female bodies. While misogyny and gender violence are worldwide problems, the daily treatment of females is radically different in the Middle East than it is in Western countries like the United States. As a female in Kuwait, I had to struggle constantly against various cultural, legal, and religious forms of oppression intended to

keep females physically and mentally pacified so that I could obtain the same level of simple, everyday autonomy enjoyed by Western women. It is this experience of growing up in a social environment that endeavored so strongly to silence and erase me because of my gender that has led me to be hypercritical of similar kinds of erasure in poetry.

Introduction

In a recent article in the *Lana Turner Journal*, poet Cathy Park Hong brings attention to the racist and exclusionary nature of the American avant-garde tradition while also critiquing the current avant-garde movement and its critics for their failure to move beyond tokenism and simplistic views of race. According to Hong's assessment, the American avant-garde has continually "usurped without proper acknowledgement" poetic innovations in form and language developed by poets of color while simultaneously barring those poets from inclusion in the avant-garde by characterizing them as "derivative of their white contemporaries." Hong attributes this treatment of poets of color to the acceptance of white supremacy on the part of poets and critics (both knowingly and unknowingly). She dubs the phenomenon of racism in the avant-garde its "delusion of whiteness," a term she develops using James Baldwin's writings on the delusion of white supremacy. Drawing on Baldwin, Hong explains that the avant-garde's "delusion of whiteness" is the:

> specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like voice to alter conditions forged in history. The avant-

> garde's "delusion of whiteness" is the luxurious opinion that anyone can be "post-identity" and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently harassed, surveilled, profiled, or deported for whom [sic] they are. (Hong "Delusions")

Essentially, Hong's article accuses the avant-garde of working from racist assumptions about human subjectivity that stem from the uncritical acceptance of whiteness as a universal state.

In response to Hong's indictment of the avant-garde, poetry scholar Dorothy Wang points out that there is still a larger conversation that needs to take place between "poets and critics of all races and ethnicities" about the many "assumptions, suppositions, and concepts that constitute the foundations of our republic of poetry—and the ideologies and power structures that keep them in place" ("From Jim-Crow"). Although Hong's indictment of the avant-garde has brought attention to the blatant exclusionary actions of the contemporary avant-garde writers and their major supporters, such as Kenneth Goldsmith and Marjorie Perloff, what is needed now is a more systematic examination of the assumptions that underlie the ideologies we use to produce and critique all literature.

This project aims to contribute to this larger conversation about the assumptions that underlie the study and production of poetry by examining how deeply embedded racist logic and assumptions are in Western institutions and how those biases move through and are reinscribed in literature. In order to do this, I will focus on the philosophical concept of the nomad as it is developed by philosophers Gilles Deleuze

and Felix Guattari and its subsequent adoption into a poetic mode of production by poet Pierre Joris. Firstly, I will examine Deleuze and Guattari's nomad figure and explore how this figure, as the authors define it, is built from faulty colonialist, white supremacist, and masculinist logic. Drawing on several of Deleuze and Guattari's major critics, including Caren Kaplan, Igne Boer, and Christopher Miller, I will illustrate how the authors rely on an orientalized view of non-Western nomadic people as free-roaming warmakers in order to build a theoretical mode of cognition meant specifically for use by Western subjects against the Western capitalist state. I then turn to the "nomadic poetics" that Joris proposes in his book *A Nomad Poetics* in order to illustrate how Joris reproduces this faulty, discriminatory logic in his poetics through his heavy reliance on the theory of Deleuze and Guattari. Finally, I end with a close examination of the work of the self-described post/anti-colonial British-Punjabi emigrant writer Bhanu Kapil in order to illustrate how this writer is using her creative work to critique the colonialist and white supremacist ideologies that are present in traditional forms of literature such as poetry and the novel.

An Introduction to Pierre Joris's Nomadic Poetics

In 2003, poet Joris published a collection of his own critical writings on the topic of poetic composition under the title *A Nomad Poetics*. Throughout the various manifesto-like essays that make up the book, Joris explores and defines a "nomadic" poetics that crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries in an effort to combat the creative stagnation he sees in contemporary avant-garde poetry. Drawing inspiration from a wide range of theoretical and poetic writings, including the work of Deleuze and Guattari (and

their English translator Massumi), as well as poet Paul Celan and the Situationist Movement, Joris attempts to create a poetics that is flexible and rebellious enough to challenge political and creative stagnation in poetry.

Superficially, Joris's nomadic poetics seems like a strategy for producing innovative and politically-engaged poetic work that resists sameness in poetry. He repeatedly emphasizes, for example, the need for poets to be continually observant of language and to resist the urge to claim a language or to view it as a home and reminds us that all languages should be considered "foreign" insofar as language is a representation of thought and not thought itself (45). He also is highly supportive of translation and promotes wider translation practices to move language from one context to another, drawing from his translations of Celan and ancient Arabian odes to support his point. A close examination of the poetics put forth in the book suggests that although Joris intends to produce innovative, paradigm shifting work, his poetics, as expressed in *A Nomad Poetics*, is not as inherently innovative or rebellious as intended. In the process of formulating his nomadic poetics, Joris repeatedly turns to Deleuze and Guattari's flawed concept of the nomad and in doing so, he reproduces some of the issues of their concept into his nomadic poetics.

Although this project is the first to my knowledge to systematically critique Joris's poetics as it is defined in *A Nomad Poetics*, British poet Adrian Clarke has previously been critical of Joris's work. Soon after Joris published the first version of his essay, "Notes Toward a Nomadic Poetics," in the journal *Spanner*, Clarke published an open letter in response to the poetics, critiquing the concept of the nomad as used by Joris

and arguing that it produces an ethically faulty poetic strategy. This letter, published in the literary journal *Open Letter* several months after the initial publication of Joris's poetics, focuses on how Joris constructs and defines his nomad. Clarke seems to pick up on the valorization of movement and exile that Joris imports to his poetics from Deleuze and Guattari.

Clarke's letter, titled "Nomads & The Demon," details his skepticism of the ways Joris celebrates the creative power of movement without considering the realities of movement that is forced on the disadvantaged. This focus on a sanitized understanding of movement leaves Clarke concerned that Joris's poetics is ethically unaccountable and politically complacent. He argues that Joris's nomadic poetics risks uncritical submission to forces that "require our mobility, adaptability and lack of attachment for their own inimical ends" and that the "flight through languages" advocated by Joris "risks a refusal of any real engagement with the coercions inscribed in our pluralized and unstable language(s) of daily use" (65). In his analysis of Clarke's concerns, David Kennedy argues that Clarke's concerns can be reduced to one question: "does the figurative reading and writing practice of a nomad poetics risk becoming a literal walking away from political problems that are on one's doorstep?" ("Review"). Clarke is concerned that the nomadic poet's constant march forward puts the poet in a position to ignore immediate issues in favor of reaching ahead. Clarke seems to suspect that the affinity of the nomadic poetics for movement puts it in danger of "vampiric assimilation of the other in service of a single line of argument" ("Review"). Clarke is concerned that a

nomadic poetics will subsume the other in a self-serving gesture that helps it keep remaking itself rather than working to preserve the unique qualities of the other.

Clarke is also suspicious of Joris's praise of cyberpoetics. Although he is not entirely opposed to the use of internet to accomplish acts of resistance, Clarke is wary of how easily the internet can be used as a mechanism of control and how that might interfere with emancipatory projects, writing: "We know all too well the Free Market has ways of making censorship redundant" (66). Although this criticism is perhaps simplistic – Joris had previously acknowledged that the internet was originally created for military operations — Clarke is right to be wary of uncritically celebrating cyberpoetics (137). Joris's praise of cyberpoetics and the possibility of multiplicity and nomadic wanderings it provides does not engage with the fact that this particular "nomadic" space is a privileged space where certain peoples have significantly more presence and control than others.

The Underlying Assumptions of Deleuze and Guattari's Nomad

The concept of the nomad, on which Joris bases his poetics, is initially developed by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, the second book in the series *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. In this volume, Deleuze and Guattari develop the figure of the nomad, who is meant to represent a theoretical mode of relating to the world that is fluid and non-hierarchical so as to produce a maximum of possibilities. It is this figure and its so-called "nomadic subjectivity" that Joris uses to form the basis of his poetic statement. This conception of the subject as nomadic is meant to subvert the notions of the self as "author/itative, unified, or controllable" as a means of resistance

against the hierarchy and homogenizing forces of the state (Gasner 167). In this alternative view of the subject, nomadic subjects can be thought of as constantly shifting collections of possibility.

As a figure that is intended to resist hierarchy and regulation, the nomad certainly makes for an attractive model in the effort to subvert fixed modes of thinking and mechanisms of regulation and control, and several well-known scholars such as Brian Massumi, Rosi Braidotti, and Paul Patton have praised it as such. The concept has also garnered a significant amount of criticism for its perceived romanticization of exile or homelessness and reductive colonialist views of non-Western spaces and subjectivities as being open to occupation by the Western subject.

In her book, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, women's studies scholar Caren Kaplan explores how discourses of travel and displacement link modernism and postmodernism and the fraught politics of this discourse, paying special attention to the concept of the nomad and its development and its use by Deleuze and Guattari. Kaplan explores metaphors of travel and displacement (exile) as they are used in poststructuralist theory in an effort to argue that this body of theory, of which Deleuze and Guattari are contributors, ignores "the politics of displacement in general and the history of Euro-American imperialism...in favor of mystified notions of exile and nomadism" (23). She also criticizes Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the nomad, concluding that the authors construct an "ahistorical modernist aesthetics" and engage in "Euro-centric cultural appropriations" that must be interrogated if the nomad as a concept is to be of any real use (24). Kaplan argues that

Deleuze and Guattari's "metaphorical mapping of space can be read within the context of Euro-American discourses of modernism" which emphasize the "benefits of distance and the valorization of displacement" at the expense of ignoring the real material conditions of people who are displaced against their will (86).

Kaplan explains that Deleuze and Guattari's process of "becoming-minor," which is a process a nomadic subject undergoes to decenter identity is "a utopian process of letting go of privileged identities and practices" which "requires emulating the ways and modes of modernity's 'others.'" Essentially, Kaplan is suggesting that Deleuze and Guattari's nomad figure, who is able to navigate between identity poles, is reliant on the existence of a privileged Western subject position and the ability to move away from that pole. It could be argued then that the nomad is simply a privileged Western subject who engages with the various othered subject positions (colonized and otherwise subjugated peoples) in a process of assuming their position and identity. Kaplan calls this process "a kind of theoretical tourism" that produces "sites of escape and decolonization for the colonizer" (88).

Igne Boer supplements Kaplan's critique of Deleuze and Guattari's modernism by evaluating their depiction of the desert. Boer argues that the authors' use of the desert to represent smooth space (space without markers of possession or hierarchy) relies on colonialist and orientalist conceptions of the desert as unclaimed and uninhabited space. Native peoples and their societal systems are completely erased from the space. As Boer aptly states, "it is only from the outside that the desert seems empty" (137). According to Boer, Deleuze and Guattari, from their position as European intellectuals,

are unable to contemplate the existence of boundaries in this seemingly free space because it does not have the markers of ownership and control that fit with Western understandings of space.

In addition to working from orientalized views of non-Western spaces and peoples, Christopher Miller argues that Deleuze and Guattari also repeatedly engage in questionable anthropological representation of real peoples in order to build their theoretical nomad. According to Miller, the concept of the nomad, which Deleuze and Guattari portray as purely theoretical, is explained and justified using a generalized depiction of nomadic life that the authors support with non-theoretical examples of real-life nomadic peoples from across the globe. This is troubling for two reasons. Firstly, by utilizing real human societies to support their theoretical concept, Deleuze and Guattari homogenize unique groups of people under their conception of nomadism, in the process making "sweeping statements about the nature of societies around the world" (Miller 10). Secondly, in order to make these generalizations about nomadic life, Deleuze and Guattari overwhelmingly turn to Western academic sources for information about nomadic peoples. As Miller explains, some of these academic sources have strong ties to Western colonialist aims[1] and only thirteen of these sources (by Miller's count) are actually "explicitly concerned with real nomads" (10).

Scholars who praise Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the nomad generally ignore Deleuze and Guattari's questionable representational practices, although some

[1] To illustrate Deleuze and Guattari's use of ethically questionable ethnographic material, Miller examines one source text in particular: *Les Sociétés Secrètes des Hommes-Léopards* by P.E. Joset, a Belgian government official. The text relies heavily on indirect sources (mainly from colonial archives) and presents several sensational stories about murders supposedly committed by the secret society. Miller explains that due to this, the text functions as a mechanism of colonial control.

have chosen to defend the scholars' use of anthropological sources. Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey defend Deleuze and Guattari's use of anthropological sources, writing that "it is hard to see how else a scholar outside an indigenous community can gain even a partial access to indigenous epistemology and ways of life" without turning to ethnographic studies. While it is true that an outsider would need to use anthropological source material to learn about an inaccessible group of people, this does not absolve the scholars of the responsibility of evaluating the text for biases or for the fact that using this information to build generalized representations of real people is ethically fraught.

Patton chooses to defend Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the nomad by claiming it is historically grounded, asserting that: "historically, as well as conceptually, nomads have a particular affinity with the line of flight, since it is along lines of technological flight that they invent new weapons to oppose those of the State" ("Conceptual Politics" 66). Patton, who is noticeably a philosophy scholar and not an anthropologist, seems to be guilty of engaging in the same generalizing representation of nomadic peoples as Deleuze and Guattari in his statement. Even though Patton attempts to situate his argument in "history," he neither names a specific group of people as an example nor does he name a reputable source to support his claim to historical precedent. Who exactly are these "historical" nomads that Patton is using to make his argument of historical precedent and how does he know about their relationship to the world? In addition to carelessly generalizing many distinct peoples into a vague authority-resisting stereotype, Patton also connects nomads with violence.

Because Patton is speaking "historically, as well as conceptually," he is implying that the ongoing technological development of weapons (and by extension violence) are part of the nature of the nomad.

Anthropologist Stephen Muecke is also a proponent of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the nomad, and he too seems unconcerned with questionable use of real people to represent a theoretical model. He proposes that Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of nomad thought "enables us to take on board the concept of 'nomad' without having recourse to anthropological definitions" ("The Discourse of Nomadology" 1164). Muecke's claim to a representation-free concept of the nomad is naïve considering his position as an anthropologist, especially considering Miller's exploration of Deleuze and Guattari's use of anthropological sources. Kaplan is similarly not impressed by Muecke's claim, and addresses it specifically in *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, asking: "how 'we' can 'take on board' such charged metaphors and figures as the nomad without accounting for them as sites of colonial discourses, as spaces constructed by specific power relations by theorists who do not usually position themselves self-reflexively within the field of those very social forces" (91).

The Adoption of the Nomad in Pierre Joris's *A Nomadic Poetics*

Before launching more deeply into my criticisms of Joris, and his theoretical predecessors Deleuze and Guattari, it is important to understand that although this project aims to expose harmful assumptions in Joris's poetics, this project does not intend to imply that Joris is racist or that he is necessarily conscious of his role in

reinscribing harmful ideology. Where it could be argued that some avant-gardists, such as Goldsmith are intentionally and unapologetically promoting white supremacist agendas[2], the same cannot be said of Joris. Through his collaborative editorial work with Jerome Rothenberg, Jeffrey C. Robinson, and Habib Tengour on the *Poems for the Millennium* series, Joris has intentionally attempted to decenter the study of poetry from its Western focus by revisioning poetic movements as global exercises. Together, these editors have introduced American readers to poets from often ignored parts of the world such as the Caribbean, the far East, and Northern Africa (the Maghreb) as well as critically connecting this poetry to corresponding work by European and American authors to form a worldwide continuum of poetry. Joris is also a vocal proponent of translation and frequently produces translations between the several languages in which he is fluent (English, French, and German) including completing translations of the Francophone poetry of his Algerian-French collaborator Tengour into English.

However, I am not absolving Joris of his responsibility for his role in reinscribing flawed assumptions about race and gender by pointing out his personal and professional attention to traditionally unexamined poets. Good intentions are not an excuse for damaging behavior or speech. As Claudia Rankine stated recently in her keynote speech at Association of Writers and Writing Program's 2016 conference: "unintentionally discriminating is as bad as intentionally discriminating because the

[2] See the various reactions to Kenneth Goldsmith's March 2015 performance at the *Interrupt Conference* at Brown University during which Goldsmith read a "remixed" version of the state-produced autopsy report of Michael Brown while standing in front of a projected photograph of Brown: "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw" by C.A. Conrad, "Why Are People So Invested in Goldsmith or, Is Colonialist Poetry Easy?" by Amy King, "On Hearing a White Man Co-Opt the Body of Michael Brown" by Rin Johnson, and "Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show" by Ken Chen among many others.

result is the same." Rather than trying to defend Joris by acknowledging his good intentions toward diasporic and postcolonial poets, I am instead utilizing Joris to illustrate how easy it is for assumptions about race and gender to remain unacknowledged and be repeatedly reinscribed, even by those who do not intend to perpetuate these ideologies.

Following Deleuze and Guattari's lead, Joris envisions his nomadic poetics as a form of resistance that ignores imposed conventions of genre and language that work to control, and in many cases homogenize, artistic production. Joris's main article, "Notes Toward a Nomadic Poetics," which does the bulk of the work in defining Joris's nomadic poetics, opens with a statement that seems to directly channel Deleuze and Guattari:

> The days of anything static, form, content state are over. The past century has shown that anything not involved in continuous transformation hardens and dies. All revolutions have done just that: those that tried to deal with the state as much as those that tried to deal with the state of poetry. (6)

The equivalence between the state and the state of poetry in this statement as well as the mention of revolution alludes to the necessity of political and ethical engagement through poetry. This initial statement forcefully declares Joris's intent to build a poetics that is politically revolutionary (both to the politics of the state and the politics of poetry).

In the first essay of *A Nomad Poetics*, originally published in 1999, Joris contemplates the state of avant-garde poetry at the end of the twentieth century, building his case for a major change in the way poetry is undertaken. Joris criticizes the "collage & cut-up avant-gardes" for simply rearranging and rewriting the words of

mainstream sources rather than producing their own material (4). Although he is critical of collage and cut-up, Joris acknowledges that these practices have served to "cut the time lines" and has "taught us a new history," but, using Deleuze and Guattari's language, he asserts that these aesthetic practices are essentially "a rearrangement of arborescent structures." This statement is a reference to Deleuze and Guattari's use of trees as a metaphor to represent hierarchical thinking that is chronological and pointed toward a pinnacle or end point. In Joris's assessment, collage and cut-up simply reproduces hierarchy instead of critiquing it: "trees as always already roots / trunk / branches, even when cut and rearranged, say branches / trunk / roots" (4).

To avoid reproducing mainstream thought, Joris proposes that what is now needed is a "nomadic poetics" which utilizes "rhizomatic" modes of production (5). The concept of the rhizome is taken from Deleuze and Guattari and is meant to illustrate how the nomad relates to space because the rhizome branches out horizontally in many directions simultaneously. The rhizome is meant to represent a lack of exact origin and the possibility of endless points of connection made through a constant movement through space. Joris's nomadic poetics, then, follows this same basic idea as Deleuze and Guattari: the nomad as a figure that is constantly moving forward and expanding, resisting outside efforts to impede its physical and intellectual movements. While Joris intends for such a poetics to be liberatory and innovative, his attempt ultimately fails. Not only do this intense desire to somehow be free of the burdens of one's culture and language sound empty and juvenile, but it also reproduces much of the flawed logic put forth by Deleuze and Guattari.

Following Deleuze and Guattari's lead, Joris frames his poetics as an act of rebellion. In order to evoke this rebellious tone, Joris repeatedly turns to violent images, utilizing both his own images of violence and other images used by Deleuze and Guattari (such as their concept of the "war machine") to explain how the nomad poet resists the control of hierarchical forces and their ability to reinforce sameness. In "Toward a Nomadic Poetics," the book's main essay, Joris declares that his poetics "is a war machine" and that the nomad poet or "noet" stands in opposition to forces of sameness (26). Joris explains that the "no" in noet "stands for play, for no-saying & guerrilla war techniques" (30). The ease with which Joris (and Deleuze and Guattari before him) utilize metaphorical violence to explain what the nomad does is troubling. The violence may be metaphorical, but this metaphorical violence is predicated on the existence of real brutality that is experienced by real people. Not only is violence invoked here, but it is listed together with the concept of play. To list these concepts together as if they were similar in some way is inappropriate.

The ease with which Joris turns warfare, especially the often civilian-focused tactics of guerrilla warfare, into a metaphor illustrates a significant amount of privilege on his part. While the concept of guerilla warfare — with its hit-and-run tactics that allow small forces to oppose larger (state-funded) forces — might seem heroic in theory, the reality tends to be anything but heroic. Born in the relative safety of a post-World War II Europe, Joris has been fortunate enough to never experience a full-scale foreign invasion or a domestic war.

Speaking as someone whose homeland was destroyed by the Gulf War and is now under threat by radical Islamic insurgents[3], I find it especially inappropriate and callous to turn the terrifying inhumanity of war into a metaphor for what poetry should or can do. I am especially disturbed by how Joris valorizes the concept of guerilla warfare, a form of war that is often directed specifically at those who are most vulnerable. Joris is almost certainly aware of this fact, considering that guerilla war movements across the world have long engaged in attacks specifically targeted toward women and children. One of the many "guerrilla war techniques" employed by the Iraqi army as it retreated out of Kuwait was to bury landmines disguised as toys for the express purpose of killing children long after the actual invasion had ended.

Joris's excessive references to violence bely the underlying masculine bias in the nomad, which is further supported by Joris's characterization of the nomad and the tone with which he presents this characterization. In addition to focusing so heavily on physical conflict, Joris also makes a passing remark about male bodies and power. When speaking of the censoring and controlling power of large institutions on artistic innovation, for example, Joris invokes the image of male castration, calling these people/organizations "ball-cutters" (3). This easy association between censorship and castration in connection with poetry falsely equates creative power and maleness.

Joris's turn to traditional violent masculinity is unsurprising based on his adoption of the genre of the manifesto. As Hong writes in her critique of the avant-garde,

[3] On June 26, 2015, a suicide bomber (guerilla soldier) attacked Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq Mosque in Kuwait City, Kuwait, killing 27 people and injuring 227 others. This attack took place while worshipers were attending Friday afternoon prayers during the Islamic Holy month of Ramadan. Due to the importance of this prayer, the mosque was crowded with over 2,000 worshipers, some of them children.

manifestos have traditionally “assumed a tone of masculine and expansionist militancy, enforcing an aggressive divide and conquer framework to grab the reader’s attention.” Joris’s embrace of traditional masculinity in conjunction with the nomad is troubling since it not only genders the nomad figure, but it also suggests that the nomad, as a male inclined toward violent rebellion, is entitled to move and take what he wants. If a nomadic poetics is “always on the move, always changing, morphing, moving through languages, cultures, terrains, times without stopping” then the masculine nomad poet is seemingly entitled to go out and take what he wants, by force if necessary (26). This is certainly a fraught notion for a poetics, especially a poetics that claims to subvert mechanisms of control.

In a self-proclaimed “nomadic translation” of an ancient Arabic ode included in his *A Nomad Poetics*, Joris provides an example of how this masculine nomadic poetics approaches translation, illustrating its fraught nature. This ode, written by the female poet Al Khirniq, receives an extensive makeover from Joris before being printed. Rather than translate the lines directly, Joris explains that he imposes his own will on the piece, choosing to “lop off the rhetoric” in a “haiku-esque” fashion and arranging the lines into three step stanzas inspired by William Carlos Williams. Joris explains that he makes these choices because the high rhetoric of ancient Arabic poetry is “so alien” to contemporary American readers that it would be considered “inadmissible” (53). While Joris may have applied his nomadic technique intending to render the ode more palatable to a modern American audience, his assessment that the ode would be “inadmissible” in its original state is presumptuous. More important than his presumption

to know what an American audience needs to appreciate the poem is the degree to which he alters the original. Joris (a white European man) fundamentally alters poetry written by a non-white, non-European woman in order to use it for his own purposes. In our socio-historical context, where white Western men have repeatedly taken control of the productive power of women and non-whites for their own benefit, Joris's actions are in need of serious interrogation. Although Joris may not have intended any harm in his decisions as translator, such a free approach to translation, could easily result in careless cultural appropriation.

The troublesome nature of Joris's adoption of the nomad is exemplified by his examination of the "nomadic" life of pre-Islamic Bedouin poet Ibn Tarafah. Tarafah is meant to exemplify the nomadic for Joris, but a close reading of Tarafah's story shows how that as an example of nomadism, Tarafah works to further the underlying masculine nature of the nomad figure with all its violence and entitlement. Joris admires Tarafah for his rebellious nature and praises him for his deliberate attempts to subvert the power wielded over him, writing: "in Tarafah we witness the clash of the nomadic war-machine, its poetic line of flight & attack in this case, with the hierarchical sedentary orders of king & governor." While Joris's phrasing here may make Tarafah appear to be some sort of emancipatory hero who resisted the power of the establishment, Joris's praise ignores the fact that Tarafah's actions were disruptive to more than just the "hierarchical sedentary orders of king & governor" (51).

In Joris's retelling of Tarafah's story, he valorizes the ancient poet's free roaming and rebellious life, while ignoring the fact that Tarafah's "nomadic" movements negatively impacted the people around him:

> As soon as he was old enough, Tarafah took to women, wine & gambling. He got so crazy his scandalized tribe kicked him out. So he took to the road with his camel, erring from country to country.... he divided his time between raiding livestock & women of other tribes, & stopping in oases to meditate on the meaning of life. After a disastrous attempt to reintegrate his tribe he went back to his nomadic-bohemian ways, now adding poetry to his activities. He became known as a poet, a sha'ir—literally, "one who knows." (52)

According to Joris's description, Tarafah is the "nomad's nomad" and he presents Tarafah as prime example of what the nomad poet should be, but a close reading of Joris's account of Tarafah's life reveals that Joris's support for this particular nomad is ethically dubious and reinforces the negative attributes he has written into his nomadic poetics (52). This "nomad" that Joris sees as a praiseworthy example is essentially a roaming partier who does whatever he wants regardless of how it may impact the people around him. It is important to note that Tarafah did not choose to be a nomad; he was exiled from his tribe. The fact that Tarafah "took to women, wine & gambling" suggests that his tribe were justified in their decision to remove him as it is likely that his behavior was putting others at risk (52).

Still, Joris seems to find Tarafah's exile admirable rather than a cause for concern. Joris describes Tarafah's behavior as "crazy" and the tribe that exiled Tarafah

as “scandalized” (52). To describe his behavior as crazy gives it a playful edge that glosses over the fact that Tarafah’s actions may have actually harmed people in the tribe. Joris’s choice to describe Tarafah’s tribe as scandalized then turns a negative light on the tribe, as this term is generally used to denote those who are too old fashioned or conservative to appreciate that which they find offensive.

Essentially, Joris treats Tarafah’s exile as a praiseworthy example of the male journey: Tarafah heads off into the wilderness with his camel, getting into trouble and pondering life, subsequently becoming a poet or as Joris describes him “a *sha’ir* – literally, ‘one who knows’” because of his adventures (52). It seems of little consequence to Joris that on his way to becoming a poet, Tarafah spent his time wreaking havoc on other tribes since the poet’s “nomadic-bohemian ways” challenged the hierarchical power and order of the sedentary way of life. Tarafah’s misdeeds and the suffering they caused are utterly dismissed by Joris, including Tarafah’s “raiding” of women. Women are noticeably listed after livestock in Joris’s account of Tarafah (“he divided his time between raiding livestock & women of other tribes”), which further dismisses the seriousness of Tarafah’s actions.

Tarafah’s nomadic wanderings are thus not the heroic rebellious actions that Joris wants them to be, but rather the violent, self-directed exploits of an entitled adolescent male. Tarafah’s nomadic lifestyle certainly did disrupt the hierarchical order and subvert the power of sedentary rulers, but this disruption came at a real material cost for the innocent people around him. As the symbolic nomad poet, Tarafah

represents the ultimately flawed nature of Joris's nomadic poetics: the nomad can cause harm to others in his constant effort to disrupt the hierarchy.

The Works of Bhanu Kapil

In response to Joris's poetic reproduction of colonialist and masculinist ideals, I turn to an examination of Kapil's collective works. Kapil's works serve as an example of a poetic project aimed at preventing the reinscription of discrimination in the production of literature. Kapil's work is simultaneously a substantive critique of how literature, specifically the novel, can work to reinforce colonial and racist ideologies as well as an example of what an anticolonial, anti-racist literature might be. Through an examination of Kapil's work, we can see how harmful, discriminatory ideology is reinforced by the very art forms we attempt to use to fight against it.

In her most recent book, *Ban en Banlieues*, Kapil continues her career-long struggle to produce writing that challenges the hegemonic tendencies of literature and the critical establishment that goes along with it. In this piece, Kapil specifically explores the novel form in order to expose this capacity of the novel to reproduce colonialist and sexist ideology. Kapil focuses specifically on the impact of narrative, illustrating how narrative can act as a colonizing force to which characters and plot are subservient.

Ban en Banlieue is a collection of poetic writings, some autobiographic, that loosely follow a character named Ban, a school-aged immigrant girl living in a predominantly immigrant neighborhood on the outskirts of London that is about to be the scene of a violent race riot. Ban is on the way home from school when she hears the sound of breaking glass in the distance. Unsure of whether the sounds of violence are

coming from her home or from the action on the street, Ban decides to lie down on the sidewalk.

In an interview with Rowland Saifi of *HTMLGIANT*, Kapil explains that because narrative-based literature like the novel requires a progression toward an end, she, as writer, would have to make choices for Ban and there are consequences to that choice:

> In a literature, how do you write a traumatic narrative without coding for aftermath: the act of narration itself?... in a literature, what would happen to the girl? Would it be a choice: to walk home (into what?) or away from home, towards the riot proper? I think, in order to create a movement, there would have to be a choice that I represented somehow, as a writer: I would have to choose the direction and track that, as a narrative activity.

Kapil is uncomfortable writing a narrative for Ban because to write the narrative is to choose to engage with the violence that would come as a consequence of the choice. For this to be "a literature," the girl needs to make a choice to move either toward her home or toward the riot, each choice with its own "aftermath."

Rather than trying to present a coherent narrative for Ban and be forced into writing the violence (and those who commit it) into existence, Kapil instead opts to present the audience with an experience of Ban that is not narrative, but rather presented in the form of disparate images and bodily feelings. Kapil explains that instead of writing a story about a girl who wandered into a race riot, she wants to "document the forces a body comes to bear or withstand, not through the articulation of those forces but, rather, their impressions" ("Unfold"). By trying to capture the

“impressions” of the violence and discrimination directed against Ban, Kapil keeps the focus on Ban and her bodily experience.

This is not Kapil’s first criticism of the narrative form and its ability to control the flow of information. In her book *Schizophrene*, the predecessor of *Ban en Banlieue*, Kapil investigates how images can act as a method of communication that is personal and bodily. In this book, Kapil presents the reader with an image of violence that she knows secondhand from her mother, meditating on the ability of the image to convey information without being bound to narrative:

> My mother’s mother put a hand over my mother’s mouth, but my mother saw, peeking between the slats of the cart, row after row of women tied to the border trees. “Their stomachs were cut out,” said my mother. This story, which really wasn’t a story but an image, was repeated to me at many bedtimes of my own childhood. *Sometimes I think it was not an image at all but a way of conveying information*. (40; emphasis added)

This small image of violence against women set during the partition of India and Pakistan is able to communicate a complex set of circumstances with minimum words. Rather than attempt to tell the story of how the women ended up mutilated and tied to trees, which would require engagement with narrative and the possibility of diminishing the experiences of those who were tortured, Kapil presents us with a visceral image. By presenting this as an image rather than a story, Kapil keeps the focus on these women and their suffering.

To convey this in a narrative form risks diminishing the suffering of these women because it would require a context, and it is this context that has the potential to erase the women. The historical context of this particular image is the partition of the British Indian Empire into separate Hindu and Muslim states. During this conflict, women were abducted from their homes and, after enduring rape and other horrors, their dead bodies were used to mark the border between India and Pakistan. Not only were the women's bodies used to as physical markers of the border between two territories, but they were also systematically mutilated in order to make their bodies into symbols of the undesirableness of their respective community. These women were literally reduced to objects of symbolic interaction between Hindu and Muslim men, and to present the women in a narrative that draws on this historical context would risk reducing them once again to symbolic objects. By utilizing only the image of the women's bodies, Kapil can focus attention specifically on the experience of women, both the women who were murdered as well as her grandmother and mother who survived this time of violence and fear.

In addition to exploring how the novel interacts with ideology at the narrative level, Kapil illustrates how harmful ideology can be underwritten at the level of the sentence through the use of grammar and syntax. In two short scenes describing the malicious exploits of Stephen Whitby, a young white supremacist neighbor from her childhood, Kapil employs a novelistic narrative style that is noticeably different from the nonlinear writing style found in the rest of the book. A close examination of these scenes show that through careful grammatical and syntactical choices, Kapil produces

sentences that objectify and subjugate the non-white people she writes about in her narrative.

In the first scene, Kapil describes Whitby's ritual of sneaking over to her neighbors' houses early in the morning to empty their milk bottles and refill them with his own urine. Although this scene works to illustrate the climate of overt racism that existed during her childhood, a careful reading reveals how Kapil has constructed the narrative to mirror Whitby's dehumanizing actions at the level of the sentence. To describe Whitby's actions, Kapil writes: "With regularity, he'd empty out the milk bottles *of our* Gujrati and Kenyan neighbors" (59; emphasis added). The immigrant families who receive Whitby's urine are rendered objects of a possessive prepositional phrase rather than as subjects able to possess. It is important to note that this arrangement makes for an easier to read line than if I rearrange the sentence to place the immigrant families in the possessive position: "With regularity, he'd empty out our Gujrati and Kenyan neighbors' milk bottles." The fact that the original sentence is more aesthetically pleasing suggests a connection between the dominant discourse of narrative and the objectification of people.

In the second scene, Kapil once again employs a novelistic narrative to illustrate how the form can subtly reinforce subjugating ideologies, this time presenting a more violent and disturbing scene:

> Once, a man was beating his wife. Stephen Whitby climbed over the wall and banged his head on the window. He spat at the window then thumped it with his

hand, screaming: “You fucking Paki!” He screamed: “Go back home, you bleeding animal!” The man stopped beating his wife, then resumed. (59)

Although the racism and violence depicted in this paragraph initially demand the reader’s attention, an analysis of the scene at sentence level reveals that both the violence and the racism of this passage are underwritten by the use of narrative. There is a familiar racist and sexist hierarchy present in this passage. While there are three people in the scene, only Whitby (the white male) is a complete and grammatical subject: he can speak, he can act, and he has a full name. Compared to Whitby, the immigrant man in the passage has only partial subjectivity. While the immigrant man is capable of action (violence) and the possession of an object (his wife), he is only generally referred to as a man. He neither has a name nor any other subjective identifiers[4]. The man’s lack of identity mirrors the tendency of non-white people to be viewed and treated as an undifferentiated, indistinguishable mass. The third person, the wife, is completely denied subjectivity. She is referred to only through patriarchal marriage conventions and as the possession of the immigrant man, rendering her a grammatical object and nothing more.

The grammatical invisibility of the woman as a subject in this narrative is further reinforced by the words that Whitby speaks. Although Whitby is watching the scene of domestic violence unfold, the woman is seemingly invisible to him. Whitby’s insults are noticeably singular (“You fucking Paki!” and “you bleeding animal!”), and due to the construction of the sentence, can only be directed at the man since he is the only other

[4] Although Whitby uses the slur “Paki” (a shortened form of the demonym Pakistani) to describe the man, this should not be considered an identity marker. In the United Kingdom, this slur is used indiscriminately against people of Asian descent, regardless of ethnic or racial origin.

grammatical subject. The immigrant woman is invisible, both in the eyes of Whitby and in the narrative itself.

In order to complement this exploration of the novel at the level of the sentence, Kapil also explores the traditional physical composition of the novel (beginning at the front, end at the back). The text as a whole is broken down into different pieces. There are larger sections, which are marked with headers, and some sections are broken down further into subsections marked with their own headers and sometimes numbers.

The supplementary texts that usually make up the front and back matter of a traditional novel, such as the dedication, acknowledgements, and epigraphs, are given special prominence in *Ban en Banlieue*. Rather than existing as separate entities that are extraneous to the body proper, these writings are an integral part of the work as a whole and contribute to the context and meaning of the book. The contents page, for example, is expanded in *Ban en Banlieue* to be more than a single page displaying the names of the sections in the order that they appear in the book. Each section header is placed on its own page has an accompanying piece of prose that adds context, images or explanation to the section it represents. In another important departure from the traditional contents page, Kapil includes a section header and explanatory for a portion of the book that no longer exists. The contents page also contains “deleted epigraphs” as well as a dedication page and a list of the various installations and performances that Kapil completed while in the process of writing her “failed” novel. Kapil’s decision to place these supplementary texts into the contents section suggests that they are truly part of the main text, even if they do not appear in the final, published version.

In the second-to-last section of *Ban en Banlieue* titled “END-NOTES,” Kapil thanks the many people, places, and experiences that contributed to her process of making the book. Even though the title of this section and its placement after the main text suggests that it is extraneous, these notes are indeed a vital part of the experience of the work. The sheer size of the section belies its importance. At twenty-two pages total, it contributes notably to the mass of the book, which itself is only 109 pages altogether. Statistically speaking, this section constitutes an entire fifth of the whole piece, an undoubtedly significant portion. These “END-NOTES” provide resistance against the pervasive view of the writer as lone genius. This sizeable list of shout-outs to the various people (and their respective institutions) that contributed (no matter how marginally or tangentially) to the production of Kapil’s project illustrate that writing is indeed a highly social act. While the bulk of the actual composing may take place when the writer is physically alone, Kapil makes it obvious that the writer relies on social and textual interactions with other human beings.

In addition to providing evidence of the social nature of composing, this section also contains important autobiographical details about Kapil’s experiences as a brown girl in the suburbs of London as well as snippets of the various theoretical concepts that influence the work. These notes may be at the end chronologically speaking, but that does not mean they should be read last as they provide critical insight into Kapil’s creation of the work. Kapil’s decision to place this section after the main text seems like another act of resistance against literatures beginning to end march. By providing these details at the back of the book instead of the front, Kapil seems to be inviting the reader

(who has been conditioned to read from front to back) to return to the main text and re-experience it with a fresh perspective.

Conclusion

Conversations about the various assumptions that underwrite how we produce and talk about poetry and other forms of creative writing have only just begun to receive mainstream academic attention. While many poets and critics of color have been informally talking about and writing about white bias in the avant-garde and its effects on the production and critical reception of poetry for years, this topic has only recently gotten traction in the scholarly world as a legitimate area of concern. While this recent interest seems to have been sparked by Hong's forcefully worded article calling out the racism of the avant-garde, her argument is hardly new. As Daniel Borzutzky points out in his response to Hong on the Poetry Foundation's Harriet blog, it is an argument that poets have been making in "various forms for decades" and not just about the avant-garde, but all of mainstream poetry as well. The conversation has finally begun to happen consistently at a formal level.

This project has aimed to contribute to this initial state of the conversation by examining how easily negative ideologies can be reinscribed in literature. If nothing else, this project has illustrated that poetry needs to engage in a more widespread critical evaluation of how discriminatory ideologies may be supported through current artistic practice and criticism.

CHAPTER II

CROSSING PEDAGOGICAL BOUNDARIES

Introduction

In 2009, Steve Healy wrote the following criticism of the field of creative writing in *The Writer's Chronicle*: "What has been missing from the impressive success story of Creative Writing is an equally strong attention to its pedagogy and theory; in other words, the field has tended to avoid thinking about how it teaches and what assumptions it has about language and literature" (30). Thankfully, the field has begun to address Healy's criticism. Many creative writing instructors have begun to contemplate and theorize their teaching practices. The teaching of writing is no longer overwhelmingly characterized as a "burden distinct from writing" and is instead increasingly embraced as a rewarding and worthwhile vocation worthy of serious scholarly attention (Ritter and Vanderslice xiii). This change in attitude toward teaching in creative writing has inspired a sharp rise in the number of large and small-scale publications on the topic of creative writing pedagogy. This growth has been especially strong in journal publications. Established creative writing journals such as *Poets & Writers* as well as the abovementioned *Writer's Chronicle* have begun dedicating more space in their publications to pedagogy-focused articles, and journals specifically dedicated to creative writing pedagogy such as *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* have flourished.

While this shift to embrace the teaching of creative writing has inspired many instructors to revise and share teaching techniques, the theoretical depth of this

discussion remains limited. As Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice observe, much early writing on the subject of creative writing pedagogy focuses on "practical lesson plans for 'how to' teach creative writing," which has resulted in a wealth of writing detailing a variety of approaches to teaching creative writing (xiii). Unfortunately, essays on the teaching of creative writing tend to "sidestep scholarship," leading Ritter and Vanderslice to conclude that "[m]ost of these [essays] are 'stories' – literally lore—rather than contextualized discussions of teaching as a profession or analyses that relate theories of writing to theories of teaching" (xiv). Creative writing teachers are thus relying on an "accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs [about] how writing is done, learned, and taught" to support their teaching choices rather than engaging with established, research-based theories of teaching (North 22). Additionally, Diane Donnelly observes that there is a general "lack of empirical data and investigative studies into creative writing's teaching praxes," which she argues results in a lack of "tangible evidence that affirms our teaching methods improve student writing" (Donnelly 19, 16).

In his book *The Future for Creative Writing*, creative writing scholar Graeme Harper observes that because the teaching of creative writing has focused heavily on "the end of practice (i.e., with the finished artifacts) and then worked its way backward exploring how to write creatively," teaching methods have been shaped and refined based on what appears to "best produce the kinds of results that the completed artifacts represent" (58). In this backtracking approach, the quality of the work that students produce is the only indicator of the success or failure of a certain technique. Although

the quality of the finished product illustrates a student's ability to engage in a successful production process, it is impossible to know for certain how or why a student was able to successfully produce the product. A successful product proves only that the student has the ability to produce a successful product, but not how or why the student learned. The teaching technique may have been a factor in the student's success, but there is no actual evidence to support this conclusion. Therefore, teaching methods devised by this system end up being based heavily on assumptions about how and why certain techniques produce positive results in a majority of students. Consequently, the field knows relatively little about why and how popular teaching techniques tend to produce the results they do or how these techniques might be further improved.

This lack of knowledge about the hows and whys of creative writing pedagogy make it difficult to have deep theoretical discussions. Without any evidence to prove the advantages and disadvantages of their teaching methods, instructors have to make pedagogical decisions based on what seems to produce the best results. Harper argues that it will be difficult for the field to challenge its assumptions about teaching without first learning more about the nature of creative writing and the processes that are part of its production. According to Harper, it is "simpler to focus on the objects that emerge from creative writing than the actions that constitute it if we do not have enough empirical and theoretical knowledge, and therefore understanding, of how creative writing happens, and how it might be best supported" (*Future* 62). What the field is lacking most, then, is an understanding of the actions and cognitive processes that result in the production of creative texts.

In response to these criticisms of creative writing pedagogy, many in the field have begun to engage with pedagogical theory from composition studies to inform new pedagogical development in creative writing in order to add theoretical backing to popular assumptions about how creative writing is learned. In a recent edited collection, *Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century*, instructors present pedagogies for teaching creative writing that are adapted from or inspired by established composition pedagogies in an effort to produce alternative pedagogies founded on researched theories of writing instruction. In the introduction to this collection, editors Alexandria Peary and Tom C. Hunley admit that composition studies is simply a starting point in the continuing evolution of creative writing pedagogy, arguing that the next step should be to "use these established pedagogies to initiate brand-new ones — as composition studies has done in a flurry over the past thirty-five years" (3). While Peary and Hunley's call to initiate new pedagogies is apt, we might need to look past composition studies in order to accomplish the task of investigating and critiquing the assumptions that underlie the conventional lore of creative writing. While borrowing from composition studies has potential to inform creative writing pedagogy in some ways, these two fields hold different views on the nature of writing.

Although our fields are related and there is plenty that creative writing instructors can learn about the teaching of writing from composition studies, our circumstances and educational goals are quite different. Due to the role composition studies has as the sole provider of comprehensive writing instruction, research in this field is mainly concerned with how to prepare students to write in a wide range of academic and workplace

settings, focusing on research-based expositional writing; recent research in composition studies tends to investigate topics relevant to this goal, such as the teaching of transferable writing skills. Such information is of limited use to creative writing instructors focused on helping students produce highly imaginative texts. Because of this difference in focus between composition and creative writing, issues of importance to creative writing may be overlooked through an overreliance on composition pedagogy.

Instead of borrowing from composition pedagogy, creative writing pedagogy should begin considering what insight disciplines outside of the English Department may be able to provide. One issue that creative writing cannot rely on composition theory to understand is the concept of talent and its relationship to the production of quality creative texts. Talent is not a focal point for composition studies in the same way it is for creative writing because the goal of writing instruction in composition is to help all students improve their overall capacity to write rather than helping students master a particular form of writing. This is not to say that composition scholars are uninterested in the relationship between talent and writing, but rather talent is a peripheral concern to composition studies since the presence or lack of talent in individual students does not detract from the goal of improving each student's capacity to write.

Many creative writing instructors seem to work from the belief that talent is an essential, yet unteachable quality of a successful creative writer. Ron McFarland, for example, has famously stated that "desire, drive, talent, vision, and craft" are the five essentials of a "serious writer," with craft being the only essential that can be taught

(34). McFarland's statement rests on the assumption that the other essentials (desire, drive, talent, and vision) cannot be taught, though McFarland admits that instructors may be able to "stimulate" the other essentials, though how exactly this is done remains unexplained. McFarland is not alone in advocating this position. The Iowa Writer's Workshop holds a similar viewpoint that "talent can be fostered" which is strongly advocated on their program website, though they too make no mention of how exactly this is accomplished.

Even though talent is often mentioned in the discussion of the teaching of writing, it has so far remained a mysterious and mostly unexamined phenomenon. In an effort to collect information about what practicing creative writers believe about teaching writing, Jason Wirtz conducted interviews with five instructors teaching at a several different universities and colleges. As a result of these interviews, Wirtz found that all five of the instructors shared the opinion that the "lower-order concerns of craft are entirely teachable but the highest-order concerns," such as talent, "do not operate under the same set of rules" (71). Talent is not seen as something that is teachable by these instructors. One of the poets interviewed by Wirtz, Diane Wakoski, elaborates about the perceived unteachable nature of talent, stating that: "sometimes the person with truly bad education has more talent for writing poetry than the person with the good education so there is something to this talent thing" (70). Wakoski makes the assumption that because there are students with bad educations who can still write well, innate abilities are behind a student's ability to write creatively. While her assumption

may seem valid given what she could observe in these circumstances, perhaps there are other invisible variables at work here as well.

Statements like these show that while talent is an area of concern for creative writing instructors, we know relatively little about it, and what we do know comes mostly from casual observations and circulated lore rather than methodical research. If we believe that talent is an essential quality of a creative writer, we need to know more about what it is and how it operates, not just whether or not it can be taught. We need to have a deeper understanding of the nature of talent itself, and in order to reach this understanding, there are certain questions that need answering, such as: How does talent function? What is the relationship between talent and the ability to write creatively? Can talent be fostered? And if so, what practices best accomplish this?

We cannot continue to simply ignore these questions and continue to rely on unsubstantiated beliefs about the relationship between talent and writing. Our understanding of what talent is and how it works directly affects classroom practices, which in turn affect the quality of education that our students receive. Without investigating our assumptions about writing, we may unintentionally negatively impact student development. Therefore, it is ethically imperative that we investigate our assumptions about the nature of writing and how it develops. To begin lines of inquiry into the various lore-based assumptions that support much of creative writing pedagogy, such as assumptions about talent, it may be productive to look past composition studies to the other bodies of knowledge connected to the teaching of creative writing,

especially disciplines that study cognition and learning such as the fields of neuroscience and psychology.

This project is meant to serve as an introductory step in this process of exploring what other disciplines might be able to teach us about our own by looking specifically at how psychological understandings of creativity can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between talent and writing ability. The following sections present an exploration of how knowledge, practices, and methodologies from other disciplines might be used to inform further pedagogical development in the teaching of creative writing. In the first section, I explore recent developments in the field of psychology that are concerned with talent and creativity. This includes an examination of the current understanding of how creativity arises in the individual and what environmental factors promote or impede that development[5]. Following my examination of the psychology of creativity, I demonstrate how this knowledge could inform a critical analysis of pedagogical practices in creative writing. I first draw on theories of creativity from the field of psychology in order to examine the growing trend in creative writing pedagogy that advocates the teaching of research skills to creative writing students. I then use information from the study of creativity to critique and revise my own personal teaching methods to illustrate how instructors may be able to individually utilize this information.

[5] I specifically focus on talent and its connection to creative ability here, but this is not the only line of inquiry that might be productive. Our understanding of other elements of creative writing such as those mentioned by McFarland might also be exploded through further exploration. Instructor Rosanne Bane has consulted neurology, for example, utilizing that field's knowledge of fight or flight responses to examine the phenomenon of writer's block.

An Introduction to the Psychology of Creativity

While plenty of creative writing instructors believe that talent is largely responsible for the differences in the creative ability of students, there are reasons to suspect that this belief is in need of critical evaluation. Teresa M. Amabile, a pioneering researcher in the field of creativity studies, questions definitions of talent and the assumption that talent can be observed in others. Using information collected through a series of interviews with accomplished author John Irving, as well as textual analysis of his autobiographical writings, Amabile examines how Irving defied expectations of what talented writers look like. As a young adult, Irving did not fit the stereotypical model of a talented writer who shows an obvious affinity for language. Irving struggled constantly with reading and writing due to his undiagnosed and untreated dyslexia, and as a result of his condition, he presented as a failing student. Even though Irving dedicated many more hours to reading and writing than his peers, he performed poorly in school, barely managing to pass a few of his courses. Because of Irving's struggles as a student, Amabile argues that: “it is doubtful that anyone would have identified [Irving] as a ‘gifted and talented’ child in any domain, least of all writing” (“Beyond Talent” 334).

Amabile’s investigation of Irving highlights the fact that our field’s understanding of the connection between talent and creativity is based on assumptions about the observability of talent, what serves as evidence of talent (or lack of talent), and the idea that talent is a major contributing factor to an individual’s ability to write creatively. Experienced creative writers often assume that they are able to discern talent in novices, but this assumption may not necessarily be true. Because the concept of talent

is so undefined, there is little consensus about what exactly serves as evidence of talent. As Amabile argues in her article, experienced writers may not immediately recognize the creative potential of novice writers like the young Irving due to their lack of technical skills. Students who do not display skills that are considered evidence of talent may easily be overlooked in favor of students who do display these skills.

Recent research in the field of psychology reveals that talent and creative ability have a complicated and generally misunderstood relationship. Over the course of the last thirty years, research in psychology has increasingly supported the theory that individual creative ability is domain-specific, and that creativity in a given domain (such as writing) arises through the interaction of knowledge, skills, and modes of cognition, which is further influenced by internal and external motivators. This theory of creativity suggests that an individual's potential for creativity in a given subject area is dependent on how much that person knows about the subject, and this ability to be creative can fluctuate due to influences from the social environment. Therefore, innate ability (i.e. talent) is not necessarily the major contributing factor to an individual's creative potential in a given domain. Rather, the creative potential of an individual in a given domain is subject to the individual's knowledge and skills in the domain and the surrounding social conditions. This makes the creative writing course a potentially critical point of influence on the development of young writers.

Even though the field of psychology has discovered plenty of information about the relationship between talent and creative ability, this information has yet to make much impact outside of the sciences. The traditional belief that creativity is linked to

innate individual abilities (talent) is still a commonly-held belief that continues to inform opinions about who can be creative and how to promote creativity in education. According to creativity researchers, Teresa M. Amabile and Julianna Pillemer, this traditional view of creativity has remained strong due to widely circulated psychological research from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. During this time, well-known researchers in psychology worked from the viewpoint that creativity was "a quality of the person" and that "most people lack that quality; people who possess the quality—geniuses—are different from everyone else, in talent and personality" (3). Due to this focus on "genius," much of the research from this time period consisted of comparisons between highly successful creators and their less successful peers, rather than focusing on how creativity functions in the general population. In Amabile and Pillemer's opinion, this early psychological research "served to reinforce the impression—and, indeed, the *belief* among laypersons and scholars—that creativity depends on special qualities of unusual persons" (Amabile and Pillemer 4, emphasis in original). Although the field of psychology has built a wealth of understanding of creativity since the 1970s and has rather unanimously declared that creativity is the result of the complex interaction of knowledge, skills, and motivation, the belief that "individual creativity depends primarily on talent" remains widespread (Amabile 333).

If we choose to accept psychology's view that an individual's creative potential is not dependent on innate abilities, but instead arises from the interaction of knowledge, skills, and motivation, this could have a major impact on how we approach the teaching of creative writing. The understanding of creativity as domain-specific and highly

dependent on the accumulation of knowledge both legitimizes the continued existence of creative writing courses and supports approaches to teaching creative writing that emphasize the learning of specific disciplinary knowledge and skills. In the following sections, I explore how psychological theories of creativity could be used to inform our field's understanding of the workings of creativity and how that information could be used to further refine creative writing pedagogy. First, I provide a detailed overview of current psychological understandings of creativity, exploring theories of how creativity arises and the social factors that support or impede creativity. I then explore how this information may be of use to evaluate approaches to teaching.

An Overview of Creativity Research

Creativity researchers John Baer and Tracey Garrett explain that creative thinking is commonly misunderstood as being the same as divergent thinking. The researchers argue that laypeople often "readily associate creativity with divergent thinking (coming up with many possible ideas in response to an open-ended prompt)" while associating "convergent thinking (finding a single correct or best answer to a problem) and/or evaluative thinking" with conventional or non-creative thinking. Unfortunately, this view treats creative thinking as separate from conventional thinking when they are in fact interdependent. Baer and Garrett explain that because "judgment, evaluation, skills, and knowledge all play important roles" in creative thinking, the ability to be creative relies on a person's ability to engage in convergent, divergent, and, evaluative modes of thinking in a given domain (7).

Therefore, in order to develop creative (non-conventional) solutions to a given problem, a person must possess enough “domain-relevant skills” to be able to properly evaluate the problem and recognize conventional solutions to the problem before they can engage in creative (divergent) thinking. Amabile explains that domain-relevant skills include “everything that the individual knows and can do in the particular domain in question” such as their knowledge about the domain as well as any technical skills they need to work required to work with ideas and objects in the domain (Amabile 333). The learning of domain-relevant skills is thus necessary in order for individual to engage in creative thinking in a particular domain.

Amabile explains that the development of domain relevant skills depends on “the individual’s learning from, exposure to, and experience in the domain” which includes both formal and informal sources of education (333-4). The relationship between domain-relative skills and creative potential suggests that the explicit teaching of creative writing skills and content should be a major component of creative writing courses. This is especially true for introductory-level courses, where students are likely to have limited experience working in the domain.

While domain-relevant skills and knowledge may serve as the essential foundations of creative potential, Amabile’s research has shown that an individual’s source(s) of motivation to engage in a given task largely determines “what the individual will do and how it will be done” (Amabile 334). According to the Intrinsic Motivation Principle of Creativity developed by Amabile, motivation to complete tasks can be intrinsic (e.g., the individual finds the task interesting, enjoyable, or satisfying) or

extrinsic (e.g., reward or threat of punishment) and that "the intrinsically motivated state is conductive to creativity, whereas the extrinsically motivated state is detrimental" (Amabile and Pillemer 7). Therefore, an individual's ability to think creatively in response to a given problem is influenced by what is motivating the individual to address the problem.

Further complicating matters is the fact that intrinsic and extrinsic motivators can be experienced simultaneously. For example, creative writing students are often intrinsically motivated to write, but instructors often need to utilize extrinsic motivators like grades to make sure students engage in a sufficient amount of writing. According to research summarized by Baer and Garrett, intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation have an oppositional relationship. When experienced simultaneously, extrinsic motivation "tends to drive out intrinsic motivation," resulting in a reduced ability to think creatively about the task even when intrinsic motivation exists ("Teaching for Creativity" 14). Not only does extrinsic motivation tend to override the creative benefits of intrinsic motivation, but if students are "fed a steady diet of those extrinsic constraints, [their] intrinsic motivation and creativity are likely to suffer long-term negative consequences" ("Rewards" 280). Baer explains the dangers of over-reliance on extrinsic motivation in writing instruction, stating:

> Many students enjoy writing and find it personally meaningful—that is they find it intrinsically motivating—and there is a real danger that evaluating *everything* they write will lead to a long-term lessening of that intrinsic motivation…. unrelenting evaluation may turn something that is intrinsically interesting and engaging and

meaningful to students into something that is just work. (179, emphasis in original)

This phenomenon of students losing their intrinsic interest in writing may be familiar to those who have taught composition courses. As a first-year writing instructor, I heard from a significant number of students that they had lost their love of writing by the time they entered my course. Many stated that they had enjoyed writing when they were younger, but no longer did, or, if they still enjoyed writing, they only enjoyed specific kinds of writing that they considered non-academic, such as tweeting or blogging. While this shift in attitude toward writing may be due to a number of factors, the overwhelming amount of testing and assessment leveraged against student writers during their primary and secondary education is probably not helping students maintain their intrinsic motivation to write.

Due to the possible negative consequences of extrinsic motivation on creativity and personal motivation, it is important for instructors concerned with creating classroom conditions conducive to creativity to think carefully about how their teaching practices might affect students' potential for creativity in writing. Such a concept is especially relevant to the creative writing classroom, where a significant portion of extrinsic motivation comes from public evaluation, which Beth A. Hennessey describes as "the most deleterious extrinsic constraint of all" (336). The tension between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation puts the instructor in a difficult position policy-wise. While extrinsic motivation is often necessary to get students to complete tasks that help them

learn disciplinary knowledge or provide practice in key skills, over-reliance on extrinsic motivators can easily damage intrinsic motivation.

Although it may seem like rewards (such as grades) and evaluative measures (such as feedback) are enemies of creativity that need to be avoided, there is evidence to suggest that the reality is more nuanced. According to Amabile, the effects of extrinsic motivators like feedback can vary based on "factors in the social environment" such as how and when these motivators are introduced (335). Amabile and Pillemer note that: "the specific form and presentation of extrinsic motivators can dramatically affect the impact of social-environmental influences...on intrinsic motivation and creativity" (Amabile and Pillemer 8). It is the student's perception of the extrinsic motivator that determines the degree to which their intrinsic motivation is affected. When evaluative practices are structured in a hierarchical fashion, where a person of authority or knowledge tells "a novice what he or she *should* be doing," the feedback can easily be perceived as controlling and critical which negatively affects intrinsic motivation and creativity (Baer and McKool 282, emphasis mine). This can happen even if the feedback is generally positive or kindly phrased. In contrast, feedback can also be interpreted by the student as supportive and non-controlling when hierarchy is altered, such as through allowing students to participate in the evaluation process. Even slight participation in the evaluative process encourages students to perceive feedback as empowering rather than controlling. When interpreted as empowering, feedback "does not reduce intrinsic motivation or cause even a short-term decline in creativity" (Baer and McKool 282). Therefore, structuring evaluation so that the student feels like an active participant in a

process of improvement rather than a recipient of criticism help mitigate the negative effects of extrinsic motivation on creative potential. John Baer and Sharon S. McKool suggest that simply allowing students the opportunity to express their concerns and goals during the evaluation process may be enough to make students feel empowered. (282).

In addition to thoughtfully structuring extrinsic motivators to avoid unnecessary negative effects on creativity, Baer and Garrett also recommend that instructors attempt to stimulate students' intrinsic motivation whenever possible. They suggest that something as simple as regularly allowing students time to engage in writing free from evaluation (both positive and negative) can help stimulate the creativity ("Rewards" 280-1). By incorporating non-evaluated and unstructured writing time into the course, instructors provide students with the opportunity to engage in self-directed, un-graded writing similar to the kind of writing they might engage in outside of class for fun or personal fulfillment.

Some creative writing instructors may be skeptical of the importance of balancing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in classrooms full of adult learners who have elected to be in the course. Our students are much more likely to have personal interest in writing, more so than their cohorts in a mandatory first-year writing course. While it may seem reasonable to assume that creative writing students may be more intrinsically motivated, research suggests that neither personal interest nor age seem to mitigate the negative effects of the extrinsic motivation on creativity. According to Hennessey, the impact of rewards and evaluation on creativity "is so robust that it has been found to occur across

the entire lifespan, with preschoolers and seasoned professionals experiencing the same negative consequences" (336). Adults may have more experience completing tasks to obtain rewards or avoid punishment, but this experience does not mitigate the negative effects to creativity.

This psychological understanding of creativity has relevance to all levels of creative writing instruction, but is particularly useful in further discussions of novice writers and the pedagogical development of undergraduate teaching, especially for introductory classrooms. The psychological study of creativity has shown that a student's individual creative potential is dependent on several factors, including the amount of knowledge and experience the student has about the topic. Consequently, a student's degree of creative ability is not reliably observable or quantifiable as it can change significantly over time as students gain more experience. Students who initially produce subpar work may markedly improve over time, especially when supplied with an education in fundamental writing skills and knowledge paired with conditions that foster intrinsic motivation to engage in writing. While tenacious students have always been able to push through less than ideal situations to succeed, these situations delay their progress as well as discourage the less tenacious from even trying. Careful consideration of the knowledge provided to us by psychological research of creativity may help us further refine our pedagogies to be more conducive to stimulating intrinsic motivation and creativity.

Implications for Creative Writing Pedagogy

If the goal of teaching of creative writing is to provide the best possible support to students seeking to improve their creative writing abilities, we must make use of all the information available to best understand what creativity is and how to foster it in the classroom. The psychological understanding of creativity could be used to evaluate and in some cases amend current teaching practices in order to make them more conducive to stimulating creativity. Craft, for example, is often cited as the one truly teachable aspect of creative writing and the practice of teaching craft is the major focus of most creative writing pedagogy. In the previously mentioned quote from McFarland, he cites craft as one of his essentials of a successful writer, as do the poetry instructors interviewed by Wirtz, among many others. Unfortunately, similar to many other common teaching beliefs in creative writing, the effectiveness of teaching craft is based on assumptions formed through a combination of lore and personal experience.

Previously unsubstantiated statements about the importance of teaching craft gain extra power when considered in conjunction with psychological research on creativity. No longer an assumption based on handed-down wisdom and casual observation, this belief is substantiated by evidence provided by research in psychology. With the added perspective provided by psychology, instructors can further interrogate how and why they teach craft. Because of this, the psychology of creativity has the potential to offer both critical insights into current pedagogical practices in creative writing as well as help shape further development.

In the following subsections, I demonstrate how the psychology of creativity could be applied to critically investigate current developments in the field of creative writing. In the first section, I utilize theories of creativity to critically examine the viability of a growing movement in creative writing pedagogy that advocates the explicit teaching of research practices in the creative writing classroom. This pedagogical approach, which is advocated by Patrick Bizzaro, Graeme Harper, and Joseph M. Rein (among others), aims to teach students how to utilize research to support the production of creative texts. To supplement this larger pedagogical discussion, I also utilize creativity research in a narrower sense to critique and revise my own classroom practices in order to illustrate how individual instructors may engage in a self-evaluation of their teaching using information about creativity provided by psychology.

Teaching Creative Writing Research

Harper has written extensively about the ways in which creative writers engage in research and how these practices differ from the research practices utilized in other disciplines. In his article, “Research in Creative Writing,” Harper explains that creative writing research is a complex process that utilizes both traditional academic research methods, such as consulting primary sources material, as well as more informal methods of collecting information, such as the mining of personal experiences and emotions. According to Harper, creative writing research draws on “personal experience, the personally historical, the biographical...the emotive, the dispositional and the psychological” as well as interacting with “foundations of knowledge in a vast

range of fields" and engaging in "formal, structural and stylistic research" (*Teaching Creative Writing* 162).

Rein, drawing on the definition of creative writing research presented by Harper, defines two major approaches to engaging in creative writing research, which he calls "experiential" research and "traditional" creative research. Experiential research, as the name suggests, is inquiry through experience where the researchers participate in different roles and activities in an attempt to find inspiration for their writing. "Traditional" research includes "reading textbooks, examining primary source material, and scanning recent journals" as well as critically examining existing creative works for insight into how established writers have used different genres and writing processes to achieve their artistic goals (97). Creative writing research is thus the act of drawing on any and all information and experiences that are available to the writer during the process of composition.

By defining creative writing research practices, Harper helps dispel mythicized notions of creative writing research that view research as a passive endeavor accomplished through the having of experiences. The oft-repeated (but un-attributable) phrase "write what you know" reflects the prevalent belief that personal experience is the major source of inspiration. Using an example of writing advice given by Hazel Smith in her writing textbook, *The Writing Experiment*, Rein illustrates that this emphasis on experience positions more formal kinds of research as unimportant to creative writing:

reading the newspaper, watching the television, surfing the Internet, and talking

> to friends – as well as familiarising yourself with cultural theory and activity across the arts – can stimulate creative writing. In other words an active engagement with all aspects of the world around you should lead to a plethora of ideas for creative work. (xii)

Rein argues that Smith's statement "brings experiential research to the fore" and "defines it as omnipresent, routine, and entrenched in the everyday" while dismissing the role that formal research practices (which Smith terms as "familiarising yourself") plays in writing by setting it off from the main sentence with long dashes as if it were a secondary thought. This view demeans the creative process by discounting the role that traditional research practices play in the production of creative texts and "falsely implies that traditional research methods cannot inspire writers in ways experiential research can" (Rein 98).

While Harper's work has thoughtfully defined creative writing research and positioned research as integral to the production of imaginative texts, the topic of research remains relatively unacknowledged by pedagogical approaches to teaching creative writing. Patrick Bizzaro, who has also advocated for teaching research skills to creative writing students, states that he "suspect[s] few creative-writing programs systematically teach such research skills" (307). Although Bizzaro made this statement over a decade ago, creative writing research remains relatively unacknowledged in the classroom. If research is acknowledged in the classroom, it is generally mentioned in passing and not formally taught. In a recent article proposing strategies for teaching creative writing research in the classroom, creative writing pedagogue Joseph M. Rein

reiterates Bizzaro earlier statement, explaining that in his experience “instructors often overlook creative research as an important lesson, applauding it when it appears but never deliberately bringing it into the classroom” (96).

It is unfortunate that research-focused pedagogy has so far failed to become a major approach to the teaching of creative writing considering the information provided by psychology about the nature of creativity. As Baer and Garrett explain, having knowledge about a specific domain like writing is “essential to serious thinking” in that domain and that in order for students to improve their creative ability in that domain “students must acquire an understanding of much factual content about that domain as well as a variety of domain-specific cognitive skills” (Baer and Garrett 9). Engaging students in the kinds of research practices that professional writers utilize while working on their creative texts will provide students with the opportunity to practice searching for information and incorporating that information into the production of imaginative texts.

Rein explores the differences between how his students use research in his creative writing courses versus how they use research in their composition courses in his article, writing that:

> Composition students use research to support their statements with professional opinions, building credibility through a community of voices. In contrast, my creative writing students use research to enhance, enliven and round out their already-existing craft-based elements. (97)

Rein’s comment points out the essential generic difference between academic expository writing and creative writing: the visibility of research in the text. Expository

texts interact directly with source materials so that readers are able to see and trace the supporting research, while creative texts indirectly interact with sources so that research is not visible to the reader.

Because creative texts utilize research differently than expository texts, engaging in creative writing research in the classroom allows students the opportunity to practice applying research to the production of texts in a way that is likely uncommon for them. Due to the emphasis in education on perfecting academic expository writing, students may not have much, if any, experience using source material in the indirect, invisible way that is needed in a creative text. Due to their previous experiences with expository writing, students may struggle to appropriately incorporate that research into their creative texts. In Rein's experiences teaching creative writing research, students often draw on their experiences with research in expository situations when first introduced to research in the creative writing classroom. This leads students to produce "report-like stories" or otherwise incorporate research in their creative texts in a manner that detracts from the artistic quality (100). This tendency to fall back on expository writing skills that Rein has observed illustrates that creative writing students could benefit from engaging in structured research activities that help them understand that research is applied differently in creative writing than it is in composition.

In order to illustrate how an instructor might make creative writing research a focal point in the classroom, I will briefly examine a creative writing research assignment developed by Rein in which he asks students to engage in both experiential research and traditional research practices in the process of producing a character-focused short

story. In Rein's opinion, the process of character development is the perfect craft issue to introduce students to the concept of creative writing research and the idea that "creative research can enhance stories" because the creation of rich characters requires specific knowledge about the lived experiences of others (98). The advice about character building that Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, and Ned Stuckey-French give to writers in their book, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, illustrates the need for students to be able to endow characters with specific, realistic detail:

> if you set out to write a typical character you're likely to produce a caricature, because people are typical only in the generalized qualities that lump them together. Typical is the most provincial adjective in the writer's vocabulary, signaling that you're writing only for those who share your assumptions. (128)

Students trying to write to create characters solely from personal experiences may struggle to move beyond generalizations and stereotypes. Incorporating research practices into character creation helps students avoid creating stereotypes by providing students with a deeper understanding their characters' social groups.

Rein's research-based character-building assignment is completed in several stages. To begin, Rein directs students to read Louise Erdrich's "The Butcher's Wife." During class discussion, Rein draws the students' attention to a few key passages in order to help students see how Erdrich uses details and phrasing connected to the characters' professions, social roles, and interests to create rich character descriptions. Following this in-class discussion of Erdrich's piece, Rein then asks students to engage in different forms of research about an occupation or hobby that interests them.

Students first search for an article about their topic and then examine it for “common terms, jargon, speech patterns, [and] character traits” that are associated with the chosen topic. After familiarizing themselves with the topic in this manner, students then interview one person who has significant experience with their chosen topic. When students have completed both of these research steps, Rein then instructs students to draft a story utilizing the knowledge they have gained on their topic to build a strong character.

Rein’s assignment illustrates how easily research practices could be introduced into existing classroom practices. Character-driven short stories are popular creative texts for students to practice in the classroom and it is not uncommon for instructors to direct students to use an example of published work, like Erdrich’s, as a model for students to emulate. This procedure could be adapted to explore other elements of craft beyond character, such as setting, as well as providing the opportunity for students to engage in other research practices, such as ethnography and observation. This assignment could also serve as the basis of a course and be repeated over the course of the semester, covering different material and research practices each time.

Using Creativity Studies to Critique Course Structure and Assessment

While some instructors may not be prepared to engage in major theoretical discussions of creative writing pedagogy, they still may find it useful to draw on outside knowledge to inform their personal teaching practices. Instructors do not necessarily need to invest large amounts of time reading outside of the discipline in order to begin critiquing and revising their own teaching practices. While the crafting of a major

theoretical discussion requires a significant time investment, this is not necessary for instructors who simply want to work to find information that might help them improve the effectiveness of their own practices. A little reading may be all that is necessary for instructors to begin investigating their own classroom practices. Instructors who have limited time to devote to pedagogical issues due to the structuring of their department and the publishing requirements of tenure may find the practice of reading outside the discipline a manageable step toward better theorizing what they do in the classroom.

In order to illustrate how this process of self-evaluation might proceed, I will first outline and discuss my original classroom practices before utilizing the knowledge I have gained from creativity research to amend my own practices in an attempt to create a course that is better designed to stimulate students' intrinsic motivation to write, and therefore their creativity ability. Drawing on the insight into creativity and motivation provided by Amabile, Baer and Garrett, Hennessey, and others, I will evaluate teaching and assessment strategies I have previously employed in my classroom and suggest possible changes to these practices in accordance with the information I have discussed.

Before engaging in this informed self-evaluation of my teaching practices, I would like to acknowledge the fact that my approach to teaching developed from my experiences as a graduate student in creative writing courses as well as my knowledge of writing pedagogy, much like the practices of many other instructors. As a graduate student with a teaching assistantship, I was initially trained to teach first-year composition and spent my first years as a teacher in a composition classroom. My

approach to teaching was also heavily influenced by my experiences as a creative writing student. Many of the techniques and assignments that I used were adopted from the practices of instructors whose methods seemed to be able to get results from students.

Originally, my approach to teaching introductory creative writing relied on getting students to write as much as possible so that they could produce plenty of drafts on which they could receive my feedback and feedback from their classmates. In order to accomplish this, I structured the course so that it had three major assignments. Firstly, students were expected to keep a notebook specifically for the course where they could respond to writing prompts, record ideas, make notes and generally experiment with writing. At the end of the semester, students were expected to turn in a fully filled out notebook as part of their final grade. In addition to informal daily writing in the notebook, students were also required to turn in a draft of creative work each week which I would add feedback to before returning it the following week. This practice was meant to get students to produce a collection of drafts in order to prepare them for the workshop sessions that served as the third major assignment.

This original version of the course was writing-heavy and used a variety of techniques to motivate students to complete their writing tasks and provide them with feedback about the quality of their work. Both the weekly draft assignment and the pieces that student turned in for workshop received feedback along with a letter grade to indicate quality. The writer's notebook, by contrast, was a completion-only assignment, receiving neither feedback nor a quality-based grade. The insight into creativity provided

by psychological research has caused me to rethink this original approach to using feedback and assessment in my course. Based on this knowledge, I decided I should provide more time for students to write without feedback or quality-based grades. While many of my students did show improvement by the end of the semester in the original course, the knowledge about creativity that I gained from my readings in psychology did make me wonder whether I could make the course even more productive for my students.

In consideration of Baer and Garrett's suggestion that students be allowed plenty of time to engage in intrinsically motivating tasks without evaluation, I have revised the earlier version of my course in order to remove unnecessary instances of extrinsic motivation (such as grades and feedback) in an attempt to maximize opportunities for students to engage with writing free from evaluation. I have not completely removed these extrinsic motivators, but rather I have altered when and how they are utilized in the course in an attempt to make the course more conducive to stimulating students' intrinsic motivation to write. I have also attempted to shift the context of evaluation so that students play a more active role in the process in an attempt to lessen the likelihood that they will interpret my comments and suggestions as controlling, as advocated by Amabile and Baer and Garrett.

The weekly draft assignment seemed like a perfect assignment to revise to achieve these ends. Not only do the students spend a significant amount of time working on it over the course of the semester, but also the assignment is already a relatively low-stakes task. In the original version of this course, the weekly draft

accounted for a significant portion of the writing students engaged in, and as such, served as major source of feedback. For this assignment, students submit at least one page of new creative work every week. In the original version of this course, I would collect these drafts at the end of the last class each week and return them the following week with feedback and a grade. My decision to structure the assignment in such a manner rested on what I had learned and experienced about how feedback helps writers improve. Feedback was a large part of the creative writing courses I took as a student and was supported by common knowledge in the field that linked improvement to feedback. The workshop itself is built on the belief that feedback from others can help a writer improve.

In order to follow Baer and Garrett's suggestion that students be allowed plenty of time to engage in tasks without evaluation, I decided to revise the original weekly assignment from an evaluated and graded task into a simple completion-based task, turning evaluation into an option instead of an inevitability. In this revised version of the weekly draft assignment, students can still receive feedback on this assignment, if they desire it, but I will not automatically provide feedback on every draft. To request feedback, students simply write the word "feedback" at the top of the paper when they turn it in, and I provide them with critical comments and suggestions before returning it. Providing students with the option to choose which pieces of work get subjected to criticism alters the context of evaluation so that students are participants in the process of evaluation rather than recipients of a grade, thereby increasing the likelihood that this assignment will aid intrinsic motivation and creativity. Without the threat of evaluation,

students may be less likely to worry about producing something “good” and be more likely to experiment with new techniques since there is neither a grade penalty for producing a mediocre draft nor the threat of critical feedback.

This optional feedback system also provides students with the opportunity to practice self-evaluation and the art of abandoning unworkable drafts, two important writerly skills. Not automatically providing feedback introduces students to the idea that not every draft is workable and that it is okay to discard what is not working. Knowing when to abandon a failed draft is an important skill for all writers to practice. Some introductory creative writing students may be unaccustomed to abandoning drafts due to their many years of experience with writing within the confines of the educational system. Because students are generally limited in the amount of time they can spend on any one writing assignment, abandoning a draft in order to start fresh is not an attractive (or feasible) option in most cases.

Suggesting that students be allowed more control over the evaluation and feedback they receive may make some instructors nervous. Decreasing the amount of feedback students receive from the instructor seems counterintuitive and perhaps even lazy. Feedback is an important part of the process learning any new skill, and can be especially important in the learning of writing skills, since it is often difficult for novice writers to recognize and correct weaknesses in their writing. Because feedback is so important to the process of learning how to write, it is possible that giving students the power to decide when they receive feedback could potentially put some students at an educational disadvantage. Insecure or nervous students may avoid asking for feedback

due to a fear of evaluation. One possible solution to this scenario is to require that students receive feedback on a certain number of weekly drafts over the course of the semester. This rule would ensure that all the students receive a standard minimum amount of feedback without stripping the students of their power. After meeting the minimum, students could still ask for more feedback if they want it, but they would not be required to do so. Because this method would still allow students to retain the ability to choose, it is unlikely that this restriction would impact the ability of the assignment to stimulate intrinsic motivation. A standard minimum would also make it easier to compare the progress of individual students and make it easier to conduct research, such as comparing results from different sections.

Although it was not my original intent, this process has the added benefit of making the process of grading more streamlined, which may work to improve the quality and depth of the feedback I can provide to each individual. Because I plan to offer feedback on weekly drafts only when asked, I do not have to invest time commenting on drafts that students have no intention of revising, and I can use the time that would normally be devoted to throwaway drafts to provide more detailed feedback to the students who have turned in pieces they want to revise. With the ability to devote more time to drafts that students are invested in, I might be able to also pick up on what students value about their own writing based on which drafts they ask for feedback on.

Of course this does not mean I would completely ignore drafts that do not request feedback. It is important to read every draft submitted, not only because students invested their time to complete the assignment, but also because these drafts may

potentially provide insight into how students are interpreting and utilizing class material. In the absence of mandatory evaluation, students may feel more comfortable experimenting with the unfamiliar genres or crafting techniques covered in class. By observing their experimentations, I can see which individuals are taking up class material and how they are applying it. More importantly, some students may be unable to recognize when a draft has potential and therefore fail to ask for feedback. Doubt, insecurity, and inexperience may cause students to discount the potential of their own work. By carefully reading every weekly draft, I can watch for drafts that students have prematurely discarded and offer a short positive comment (written or verbal) expressing the potential of the piece to hopefully increase the student's confidence.

One downside of this optional feedback system is that there is a chance that students will only seriously engage with the minimum number of drafts and turn in hastily thrown together pieces for the rest. With creative writing's reputation as an "easy A" course, it is almost certain that there will be students who try to take advantage of this system to do the minimum amount of work. Fortunately, I do not believe that many students will actually take advantage of this system on a regular basis. Even though the course has the reputation of being easy, it is still an elective that must be chosen, and in general, students who enroll in the course seem to have enrolled because they have an interest in creative writing. Students might turn in a few messy drafts when they are overwhelmed, but I predict students will generally want to write. It is also possible that a student who starts out reluctantly may discover a latent love of writing through being allowed the relatively rare freedom to write freely without worrying about grades. While it

may be difficult to accept that some students might get away with abusing this system, it is better to focus on the potential benefits this system provides to students who want to improve their writing rather than trying to prevent a small minority from abusing the freedom this system provides.

Although I have not yet systematically tested this new approach to teaching introductory writing, based on what I have learned about creativity from psychology, this revised approach seems likely to positively impact students. Even if students do not show immediate and obvious improvement, I suspect that this approach will strengthen students' intrinsic motivation for writing and in return allow them to write more creatively. This approach may also, in the long term, provide positive experiences to keep students writing in spite of constraints and obstacles that might otherwise dissuade them from writing.

Conclusion

By advocating the incorporation of scientific understandings of mental processes into further pedagogical development, I am not suggesting that we necessarily model further development in our discipline after the sciences. As Anna Leahy has argued, composition studies is already heavily aligned with social science methodology, and we shouldn't necessarily follow their lead in this regard ("Conversation"). Rather, we should consider the possibilities for pedagogical growth that may be achieved by examining the knowledge and perspectives of related disciplines and choose not to align ourselves too closely with any one field. Psychology is just one of many different disciplines that may be able to offer avenues of growth for creative writing. While I have focused on

psychological research of creativity and the possible impact this theory could have on the teaching of creative writing, this is certainly not the only area of concern in creative writing that could be supported by wide reading in the other disciplines. There is plenty of information on how stress and fear impact cognition and how these factors can potentially create blocks to learning and creative thinking.

David Radavich summarizes the need for the field of creative writing to make connections with other disciplines, emphasizing the potential of creative writing courses to make a positive impact on students' educations:

> Courses that teach poetry, fiction, and drama writing can offer students valuable insights and experience on today's college campuses, but only if creative writing classes are brought into deeper and wider relation with courses in the curriculum; only if such programs maintain a pedagogy not geared toward packaging for the marketplace but instead emphasizing reading skills, critical thinking, language awareness, and historical consciousness, qualities and abilities that will prove useful in many walks of life; and only if such programs can be made to foster more understanding of public concerns and social responsibility. (112)

Radavich's statement emphasizes the potential of the creative writing course to provide space that supports the development of skills and knowledge that are applicable to a wider range of tasks than the production of creative texts. By drawing on the work of other disciplines to help understand and question our own, we may be able to tap into this potential and mold creative writing to serve more than the act of "packaging for the

marketplace" and instead be a place where students cultivate stronger relationships with reading, writing, and research (112).

In addition to expanding our own understanding of how to best support student learning in creative writing, further theoretical exploration outside of our discipline may also contribute to changes to English studies as a whole. By exploring issues in writing that are important to creative writing, such as the development of creativity, the field of creative writing may be able to supplement growth in composition. Peary and Hunley hope that further research into creative writing pedagogy may spur a more reciprocal relationship with composition studies, where creative writing could eventually supplement composition's understanding of how writing happens. They write that: "perhaps the pendulum of borrowing will swing back in a few years in the opposite direction, with composition scholars peeking over their disciplinary boundary to borrow once again from creative writers" (3). Composition scholar Doug Hesse echoes Peary and Hunley, suggesting that "creative writing and composition studies would do better by keeping more open borders, if not sharing a departmental house then at least being friendly neighbors with fenceless backyards" (43).

CHAPTER III

ALL HANDS BURY THE DEAD

All Hands Bury the Dead

Your navy dog tag
is the last article
I remove from your body

When I pick it up
it catches the light
coming through the chapel's
stained glass window

But when I put it in my pocket
and close my fingers around it
it is cold

If I take your hand
the chapel floor
beneath my feet
will turn to water

I place my palm
atop your head
where they allowed you
a whisper of hair

It is singed wheat
beneath my fingers

My gaze falls

All the shades of brown
lived within your eyes

You took
the world
with you

Leaving Kuwait

The plane
left Kuwait
at dawn
        a white smear
        in orange

I landed
in St. Louis
opened
the door
to the shade
        and felt
        electric indigo

America
slipped
onto me
        and stuck
        to the Persian red
        paisley swirls
        of my jacket

        And
        the guilt
        followed me
        each
        day
        after

                Precious
                one

                        How could I leave you
                        alone in the desert?

A Tour of My Place

Here's the inky mess
Here's the guilt

Here's the quilt
my mother made me
to match my wheat
and cranberry room
in Kuwait

Here's Stella
licking her butt
and people's faces

Here are some dying
star gazer lilies

Here's some fresh
Guatemalan coffee
in the poinsettia mug
Joyce gave me

Here's my hooded red
zip-up jacket from Chico
that says Chico
in white letters

Here's the best seashell
from the beach
by my house in Kuwait

Here's a bunch of poems
I wrote for someone
I'll always be in love with

Saddam Hussein

Before the Gulf War started, Saddam Hussein claimed Kuwait was an artificial state carved out of the Iraqi coast by Western colonialists. In reality, Kuwait had actually been recognized as a separate entity before Iraq itself was created by Britain under a League of Nations mandate after World War I.

Hussein told the Iraqis he would kill their families if they refused to fight in the Gulf War.

Towards the end of the war, Iraqi Prisoners of War became rightfully terrified of what the Kuwaitis would do to them. They tried to get Americans to collect them and take them to Saudi Arabia. Some would even step in front of the armored convoys demanding to be captured.

They would chant in English: Bush good, Saddam no good. Bush good, Saddam no good. Bush good, Saddam no good.

The Iraqis let the hippos loose at the zoo, and the cows loose from the milk sheds. They shot an elephant and other animals at the zoo. And they incinerated the remaining animals in their cages.

Through the oilfields, cattle, camels, and horses wandered searching for water and food. Most died from dehydration and starvation because the water holes and vegetation were covered in oil.

Soldiers were in such a hurry to get away they abandoned their tanks and stole cars. Just before retreating, the remaining Iraqi troops ignited 85% of the oil wells in Kuwait.

They did this as part of a scorched earth policy – a military strategy of destroying anything that could be useful to the enemy while advancing through or withdrawing from a zone.

On the evening of February 26, 1991, American aircrafts destroyed retreating units of the Iraqi army on Highway 80, a road between Kuwait and Basra.

It was a war crime. The six-lane highway became known as The Highway of Death.

Over a thousand Kuwaiti civilians were killed in the Gulf War.

Many of those left behind talked about how the 600-something missing POWs would be back soon.

375 Kuwaiti bodies would later be found in a mass grave in Iraq.

The last oil well was capped on November 6, 1991 because the firefighters had to navigate the landmines the Iraqis had buried around them. By then the fires had burned for ten months, causing widespread pollution.

The oil wells themselves eventually recovered. The rest of the land never fully recovered.

Saddam Hussein was captured on December 13, 2003, on a farm near Tikrit in Operation Red Dawn.

Intelligence on his location came from his family members and former bodyguards.

Hussein was executed by hanging on Saturday, December 30, 2006 at 6am in Baghdad. At Camp Justice.

Saddam shouted something with the intention of causing political upset just before he dropped.

I will not repeat it because that's what he would want me to do.

And fuck him.

During the drop there was an audible crack indicating that his neck was broken.

A doctor listened for a heart.

The rope was cut.

The corpse was placed in a coffin.

Escaping the Desert

I am not
armed
for this
disconnecting
land

This place
is nightmare
on my wrists

I cut out
the parts
of my brain
holding
the trauma

But it grows
back and
back and back

Sad
and
bruised

She
pretends it
never happened

It happened

In me
there is
the screaming
of it

so loud
meaning leaves
the screaming

Yelling in My Sleep

I DON'T WANT ANYONE TO CONTROL ME
FUCK IT, DON'T CONTROL ME

I DON'T WANT ANYONE TO CONTROL ME
FUCK IT, DON'T CONTROL ME

How to Write a Poem

Decide what gives you feelings.

Feeling feelings.

Sad feelings.

No one wants to hear about sunshine and shit.

Act sadder, dammit.

What's wrong with you?

Oh damn.

Sorry, baby.

I love you.

You are good.

And special.

Oh.

So.

Special.

Sorry.

Look.

Babe.

When someone asks you a question, say:

My soul is black and bitter like coffee.

And darkness.

Get high or drunk or caffeinated or sober.

Or whatever.

Or don't.

Whatever.

Go now to Starbucks.

Bang that keyboard LOUD AS FUCK.

That way people will know you are a writer.

A writery writer.

Don't revise.

Because fuck revision, right?

Your first draft was clearly perfection.

Oh, and don't proofreading.

Proofreading is for the weak.

Go to a poetry reading.

Make the audience feel the things you want them to feel.

Or whatever.

As long as they react.

You want attention.

Right?

Why else would you do this to yourself?

It should hurt you.

It should hurt them.

And when you read?

EMOTION!

DO IT!

SCREAM LIKE A DICK!

Cry if you can.

Talk about some stupid first world problem you have because your life is so fucking hard.

And your problems are real.

Dammit.

You matter.

People care.

Yeah.

Ha.

Ha.

People.

Care.

Walk off that stage.

Rinse.

Repeat.

Motherfucker.

A City for Nomads

Humans
and animals
live within
and without
the blue windows

Some hang
in orange hammocks
between buildings

A Kuwaiti girl
in the street
runs wild
and sick
and free

The street

It is
ocean

The city
is of
seaweed

of
coconut
lotion

Meat Robot

Who am I?

A name tag?

More tag
than name

I've given
my body
to doctors

Pill to pill

Bed to bed

Each one of us
rotting robot
meat

Gabriel did
warn me
we are just
meat robots

Nobody
here
now

but
pale
strangers

Their stares,
hooks

A gloved hand
shines a light
into my glazed
pupils

The doctor's voice

is cinnamon

My mouth
is full of it

Doctors
of the mind
fit their
pedagogies
into me

Gray light
pools through
the window bars

Sleep is
so often
a PTSD
parade

But
sometimes
sweet

Sometimes
fleshy

Sometimes
I wake
with a girl's
hand
still
on my lips

So heavy
So forbidden

She empties into me
yet I am still empty

My fingers,
numb as graves

Returning to Kuwait

We return to Kuwait
after the war
to screaming
mushrooming
black clouds

The darkness
infects us all

The odor
of corpses
rots
through the desert

The air
is not fit for breathing

I would rather
breathe water

The buildings
are flattened

The land
and the people
are filled
with empty
orifices

Some
the Iraqis hanged
by the feet

Sheep

Their expressions
twisted

Some
they lit up

Their flaming
eyeballs
rolling
and bursting
from their skulls

Dying

as breathing
torches

Calling You Back

The last time I saw you
was July 2003

It had stopped raining
and was blazing with blue

Our last kiss
was at your door

It was salty with tears
and long and sweet

And we didn't know
it was our last kiss

The smile you had for me
a second earlier
was already being lost

I still ache
with your affection

I still reach
into the emptiness
I can't breathe
under

I lie in my bed
each evening

I lie in the vanishing memories

And call
and call
and call

your
touch
back

Inside the tent in my family's backyard in Kuwait.[6]

[6] Kuwaiti Tent, Kuwait. Personal photograph by author. 2015.

Ahmad Qabazard

My father's cousin, Ahmad Qabazard, was a leader of the Kuwaiti resistance during the Gulf War.

He was nineteen years old when the Iraqis took him prisoner.

One day in September 1990, an Iraqi officer told his parents Ahmad would be home on September 16th 1990.

The family cooked a feast of lamb and rice as they waited for him.

When they heard cars approaching, they went to the door and opened it.

When Ahmad was taken out of the car, the family saw that his ears, his nose, and his genitals had been cut off.

He was coming out of the car with his eyeballs in his hands.

As Ahmad stood, he spat in the face of an Iraqi soldier.

Then the Iraqis shot him.

Once in the stomach.

Once in the head.

They told his mother not to touch the body for three days.

As is Islamic custom.

The Coffeehouse

At the coffeehouse
I fall in for hours

Molecules evaporate
note by note

The scent of curry
spinning in the center

It is dots of green
and lines of orange

It is oxygen
and carbon dioxide

Silver glints
off the mug and spoon

clinking through
my reverie

Whiz khalifa in instrumental
to my purple ear buds

lets me know I belong
a couple of hours south of Chicago

All in my blood
with spanking bass lines

Folks bumping
and jamming into booths

My feet in purple converse
faded star bouncing on the gray carpet

drumming
secretly heartbeating

Phatt man

the heart beats backwards

Coffee with trailing cress
twists the senses

November corners
the aura

Brown so alive
it bends beyond the rim

Warmth down deep
into the infinity of me

The chocolate sound of cello
brings cadences of moonlight

A balloon of light, with stripes
of all colors

hangs over Mary's head
as she stacks cups

Her long brown hair
waxing gold

She lapses into
the fold

Her white teeth creating song
Her voice bel canto

She walks mezzo-soprano,
mezzo-legato, full bow

with controlled wrist movements
with fleshy shapes

Taking the warmth inside of me
with her

and bringing it back
with the lilt of her phrasing

The coffeehouse is a map
that marks the crossroads

and tells me that I know
what I never should have known

It shows me its ghosts
and dares me to tell them

to come and get me
with the lights off

The Doctor's Office

The doctor
professes
such feelings
behind her locked
office door

My sweet
pink
bubblegum
is in her mouth

Her hand
is over my mouth

I can't breathe
in a world were
rhythm
has no
rests

She tells me
I can

I laugh
and tell her
she's not a

real

doctor

She tells me
my mouth is sweet
and young

and should be used
for more
than talking

People move
outside her door

We stifle each other's
laughs

She stitches my lips
to hers
and our bodies
fall to the ground
in a sweet,
painful unfurling

It
is

worth

it

so
worth
it

oh

So
worth

it

Kuwait

Kuwait smells of dust
in your nose and mouth

Kuwait smells of
the fish market
on Friday

Loud men
and shuffling maids

It smells of parsley
and mint, and of hot
doughy pita bread

Of white marble
and black wrought iron

Of clover honey
and expensive chocolate

Kuwait smells
of the ghosts of the resistance

Of designer perfume
and bukhoor

Of chickpeas
and curry
and India

Of migrant sweat

Of a girl
in ripped jeans
whose father says
“people will see
her body”

And an emaciated,
eyeless, toothless
Indian man

begging for money

Of the gray stubble
poking through his skin

Of his unwashed kurta
and cracked, bleeding
hands

Kuwait smells of
palm trees
and dates

Of coiled cobras waiting
in the sand

Of Arabic coffee

Of Turkish coffee

Of an eagle cleaning its wing
feathers after a dust storm

Of a funhouse mirror
surrounding a dismembered
head spinning in the air

Of sandals and sunscreen
of sumac and skulls

The sandy gut of the earth

Fish and rice thoughts

Egg-scented sewage
from drains not designed
to take in rain

Kuwait smells
of seaweed and salt

Fries and gasoline

Loud

people

All noses
and lashes

Of the blood of lambs
who were conscious
when killed

Kuwait smells of buttered rice
and musty tents

Of sunken dhows
and the barnacled dead

Of someone I lost

Someone who mattered

Kuwait smells of nasty

unsolicited advice

Kuwait smells of parents
trying to hide their gay kids

Trying to make their gay kids hide

Change

Trying to make them

Fucking

Sub
mit

Kuwait smells of loss

One might even say love

I Remember 2003

I remember losing you
and wanting to go back

Running away from home
and wanting to go back

I remember
cutting into my wrists

and how they stung
in the cold shower water

I remember passing out
against the white tiles of my bathroom

Long sleeves
through 2004

I remember the music
stung with a special sharpness

The pictures of us
The love notes
The texts

The love

I remember
a London bus driver
buying me a sandwich
because I only had
one pence

I remember crying
at his unexpected kindness

That the kindness felt
so rare

I remember walking through the days
held together by skin

And I remember Kirstin,
her golden hair framed
by the light
of the Garlic Press window

How she touched my hands
and said

It's okay
to cry

Sometimes I think I see
you in a crowd

Sometimes it's 2003

I remember the silence

I remember you in my bed

This is still
your pillow

Baby

That is still
your side of the bed

Fighting with Boys

Aly and I swing our bags of candy as we walk back to my house from the corner Bakala.

A bakala, if you didn't know, is a little shop. Not be confused with baklava, which is a rich, sweet pastry made of layers of filo filled with chopped nuts and sweetened and held together with syrup or honey.

Two boys on bikes have been trailing behind us since we left the bakala. They are a few years younger than us. We ignore them.

They yell at us in English:

Hey
hey you
hey you girls

HEY

GIRLS

As we reach the front door, one of the boys gets in Aly's face and yells again:

HEY

YOU!

HEY!

YOU!

GIRL!

As Aly turns away from him, the boy reaches for her right breast with his skinny, brown hand.

I instinctively grab his wrist with my right hand and wrench him away.

I grab his hand with my left hand, and begin to swing him around.

What Aly and the boy's friend are doing, I don't know. It's just me and this fucking boy in a universe of shit.

He is able to keep his bike between his legs for several seconds, and then it falls from between his legs like a sad appendage.

I hear his friend running away. Also like a sad appendage. I let the boy's hand and wrist slip out of my hands, and I watch his head, arms, legs, and torso scrape across the gravel of the street.

I smile.

He scrambles for his bike.

I let him escape.

I'm glad I did it.

Glad of my temper for once.

After all.

Boys gotsta learn.

The Love I've Earned

One of the pink
tear-sized seashells
I picked for you
escaped

I carry it
with me now

How you
pass
through me

Our hands in air,
always just
missing

Always just

almost

I watch the Arabian Gulf
holding my hollow seashell
in my palm

Wondering
what kind of love
I've earned

Bigger Than Cornfields

I’m awake again

The panic of night
is bigger than cornfields

Whispers
land on me
and spread

The dark
spreads

The dark
seeps into
everything

Nothing left to touch
but white of bone

I pretend you
rest in my arms for some seconds

Rest in my arms for some seconds

Each returning evening
is a finger on my lips

We sleep to forget this peace we had

Forget this peace we had

It will only
make us cry

It is silent
in the shadows

It is silent
in the nothing

And I

am feeling a sadness
so human it’s unreal

Sleep
is another place

The house sleeps
The house is full of moments

The house
is full of

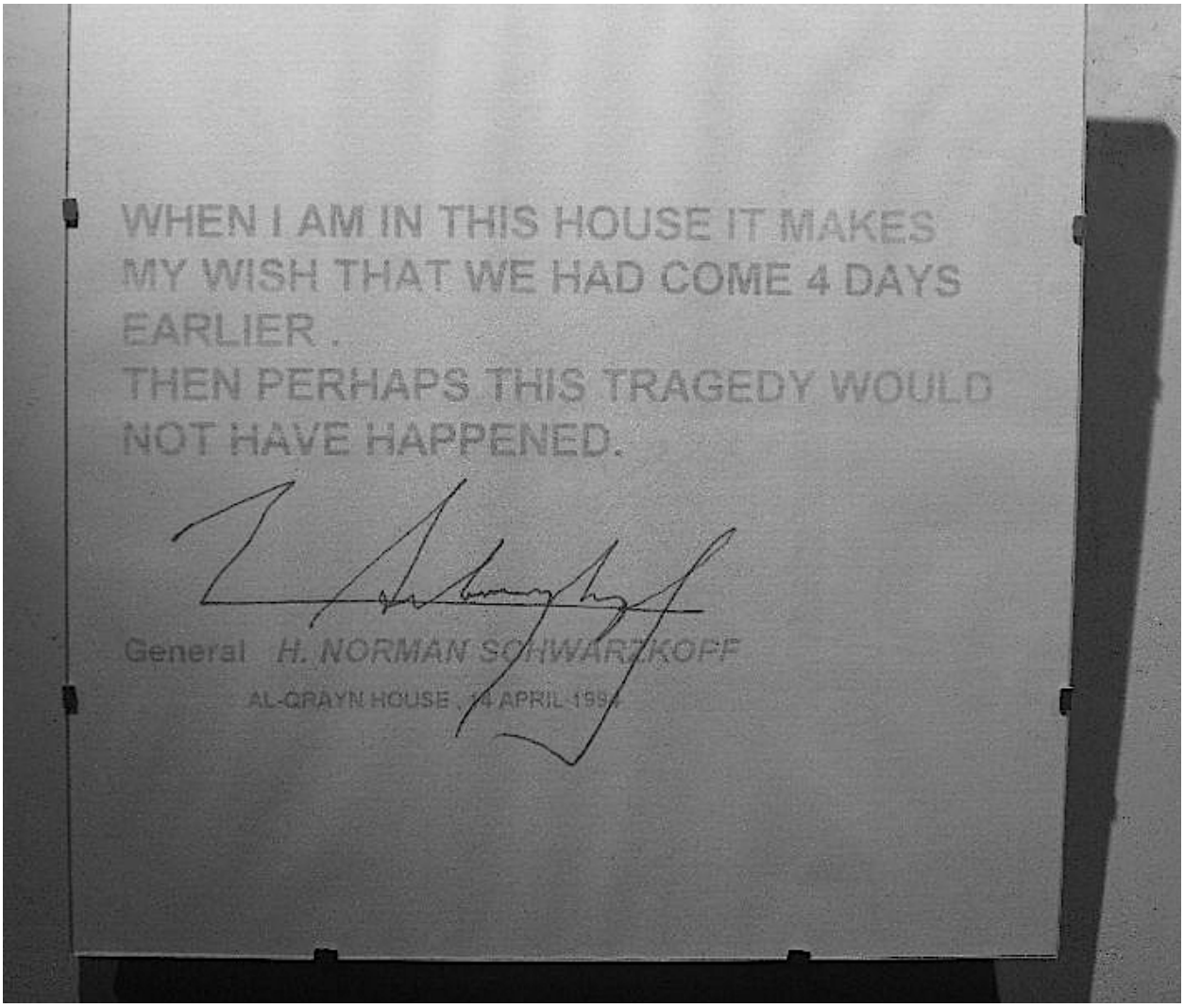
you

not

here

Words Fail

coom
coom
shh
na
be
sof
luf
na
coom
coom
luff
coom
luff
coom
sof
saff
shh
coom
coo
inawataa
loon
inaskaa
alwa
wit
luff
inawe
wit luff



A note written and posted by General H. Norman Schwarzkoff of the U.S. Military in what is now The Al-Qurain Martyrs Museum – the site of a ten-hour battle between invading Iraqi troops and a branch of the Kuwaiti resistance. The battle took place on February 24th, 1991, four days before US ground troops reached the site.[7]

[7] Schwarzkoff's Note, Kuwait. Personal photograph by author. 2003.

My Professor

My professor is in the garden again
howling at the house

We pretend not to hear

We make tea
We write

We pretend not to look outside

We bathe the dog
We do the laundry
We get high

My professor is in the garden again
Perhaps we should ask her in for lunch

First Darkness

My six-year-old body
was safe before
that day

The years before
were sweet

The years before
were full of love

Safe to launch boats
in the blue road

Safe to play
in the red trees

I was once
a safe and happy girl

I only knew
obedience to adults

Then I knew what it was
to be forced to kneel

To have pressure on
the back of my head

To have a choking
in my throat

And a voice saying

Don’t
You
Want
To
Be
A
Good
Girl

On Repeat

Drown me in the ocean

In the memory of seashine
beating on feet

That seaweed smell

No one here but my stutter
pulled from the past

My missing is bad timing

I shine of 2003

I broke the sky
renamed the stars
and thought of you

Remade the light
rewound the world
for you

You are not lost

Nor forgotten

You reassure yourself
you are loved

You are
loved

Responsibly

Buy her Starbucks
frappuccinos

even on days
you can't afford them

Tell her she's
beautiful

because
you can't help it

Dream of her
every night

because you
can't help it

Be glad she's real
when you wake up

even if she's not
in your bed

Understand
that this is

inevitable

Gravitational

You try to love her
responsibly

But syllables
will fly out of your mouth

in a wine-fueled scene
eventually

Syllables bloody

like meat

Teeth

Rough

It’ll be a contest
to see who can
hurt harder

You will cry
and scream

'til you heave
blood and air

Until you’re quivering
and gasping

on the freezing
white bathroom tiles

And
she

She will always
come back

because
she loves you too

A Rejection Note

We regret to inform you
that we to have to pass on you

We do not feel that you
are a good fit for us

Please know you received
our careful consideration

Thank you for your interest
and for allowing us to look at you

We wish you the best of luck
placing yourself elsewhere

A woman in an abaya lying by the sea outside Naif Chicken on the Gulf Road in Sharq, Kuwait[8]

[8] The Arabian Gulf, Kuwait. Personal photograph by author, 2006.

Sierra Oscar Sierra

Tango Hotel India Sierra

Papa Lima Alfa November Echo

India Sierra

Golf Oscar India November Golf

Delta Oscar Whiskey November

Delta Oscar

Yankee Oscar Uniform

Charlie Oscar Papa Yankee

Falls Apart

I climbed into her room

Her moon garden

With magnolia
with snowdrops
with yarrow
with foxglove

With tulips
and candytuft
and pear trees

With these,
there was me

And her body
under me

I let her go

I let her go
with earth
chattering
under foam

I let her go
but not really

I let her go
in thin blue air

I let her go

Closed her brown eyes

I let her go in stillness

Darkness throws me
through air

She dissolves
when she dies

I let her go

My arms close
and close
around nothing

My insides,
my insides
she took with her

I died

I collapse from the sky

I close my eyes

see forms in surf

Warmth-washed bodies

Clinging in waves

The beautiful dead ones

I let her go

I knew she'd die

I killed my girl in Kuwait

I let her mother
tell her what to do

I let her believe
I let her go

Even though

she
whispered:

don't
ever
let
me
go

don’t

ever

An Email

I know you are not keen
on coming back here

but it is just a short visit
and would be beneficial

I have listed the benefits below
and hope you will give them
plenty of thought

We would ALL
like to see you

As you are heading into
the last part of your PhD

I don't want you to get
distracted by money worries

You must renew
your passport

I would like
to talk over
many things
with you

Your brothers could do
with some mentoring

You need a rest
and a break

You promised

Your father is busting
to get the house
and garden
ready for you

He has been

buying and
planting new flowers

He does
love you

you know

and would be
devastated to know
how you feel about him

He cannot grasp
that others around him

are affected

by his yelling

Perhaps you can
talk about that with him

again

Leo

At midnight
I rested my head
on the white kitchen tiles
next to his bed

I put my left arm softly
around his pink, swollen belly
his murmuring heart

I looked into
his sweet eyes
and kissed
the softest spot
of his white
and chestnut
forehead
and said to him:

Leo

you are
a good boy

such

a good boy

and
I love you

He sighed,
shut his eyes

And went to sleep
for the last time

Not Poetry

That's not poetry

That's
words

It's
attention-seeking behavior

It's
sexual

It's
dumb

You're
dumb

It's
unbecoming of a young lady

It's
day one at the asylum

That's not poetry

That's
gross

You
sick
fucking
fuck

It's
whining

It's
raving in a loin cloth

It's
whatever

That’s not poetry

That’s
my ass

That’s
mindless self-indulgence

It’s
smoking
too much
fucking
pot

That’s not poetry

That’s
how it really was

On Mourning

A person dies
some people
mourn

some
don't

A person dies
some people
mourn

some
don't

A person dies
some people
mourning

are mourning
themselves

Acid Dreams

And (when)
did I learn
to breathe
underwater?

it
was
(not)
that
way

It was
that way
Oh, groovy
Why am I in
the basement (in Kuwait)

We have some
old VHS tapes

There's a (dead) gray cat
on the carpet by the door

It was here
yesterday

How could I (forget to) mention it

Nah
babe
I
don't
have
incense

I just have
indicas
and sativas

I see you (again)
And (every time)

you
slip from me

A (harsh)
reminder

babe

I'm
not
afraid
of your chokehold

I
just
(wanna)
feel
your
hands
on
me

Aurora

I hoped
you would come

bringing your browns
and golds

in blinking rays
and cotton waves

Everything in me
hoped you would come

You move
and the sun falls
and rises in your hair

A universe
circles your irises

My fingertips
find the textures of you
across continents

You have me
in an eternal trance
that spins

Where the world flows
but without you here

I can't stop watching the door

Warmth, loving on my breath
fills the spaces around me
where you were

Transfix me with love

Your colors flood to me

My heart opens to them

echoing as they swim in

A scar in my palm
I hold you

I offer you my two hands
full of stars

but wake
before you take them

And when I look up
your bed-brown
eyes have me

Sami Sayed Hadi Alawi and Jamal Ibrahim Al-Banai hid in the attic of what is now The Al-Qurain Martyr Museum after a battle two days before the war ended. When the Iraqi soldiers searched the house after the battle, one soldier looked the men in the eyes and called out that there was no one there.[9]

[9] A Kuwaiti Attic, Kuwait. Personal photograph by author. 2000.

Brink

she
has
come
far
enough

every
departed
cadence

every
pool
of
life

darkened

under
cloak
of
skin

dark

dark

under
each
human
choke
of
life

War Trophy

The corpse of a man
sprawled on the desert

His teeth
were still in his head
I glanced gold
in one

kicked it loose
with my bloody
shoe

threaded it with string,
wore it
around my neck

And it hung there

A secret
revenge

A trophy
from
war

Rain Song

Rain settles on my skin
in waves of white,
finding me through
green canopies

I cover my head
in the growing dark
that cannot hold

I watch a woman
face the universe
with her mouth open

to remember
the taste of rain

And when I look around,
the whole country is drinking

The woman's white blouse
becomes slick
against her skin

She tells me who she is,
but I ignore it

wanting her to be
who I want her to be

She is becoming poetry

And I
am floating
in the cosmos

A representative
from the spirit world
follows us

wondering where I am
in relation to her

I say
she is a pack
of cosmic light

and I
am an unknown arrangement
of particles

We are
of the same world

the two of us
dying away

It is velvet
here in the sky

I let it slide
down my skin,
washing off
the fingerprints

With each snap of rain,
I ask constellations

to convince me
that I am not just a fragment
of a broken philosophy

Airport Road

The traffic in all four lanes of the highway slows.

A white jeep ahead is turned around in the emergency lane. A man in a white dishdasha stands in front of it. There's a vague gray bundle at his feet.

As we get closer, the bundle becomes a twisted body. I turn to my mother in the driver seat.

"Mum, it's a man. There's a man on the ground. I think he's dead."

The man in the white dishdasha is on the phone. His left arm is waving wildly.

The man on the ground becomes visible. My mother looks over.

His dead eyes are still open, frozen looking into the sky. My mother's baby blue jag pulls alongside him. He is feet from me.

His eyes are black. There is sand and gravel in his cheeks. And blood.

We drive past him.

Captions

Priestess of 3 a.m.
Igniter of fires
Co-loader of the dishwasher
Knitter of neon rainbow scarf
Wearer of tattered Dr. Seuss PJs
Feeder of the Chihuahua mix
Witness of death
Taker of Rolaids at midnight
Buyer of cookware from Amazon
Soother of nightmares
Eater of pickles
Driver of 1999 Lumina
Replacer of lights
Household distributor of scrunchies
Dweller of Blono
Dweller of Chico
Dresser of wounds
Kisser of scars
Mourner of mothers

Maggie Miley

She sat on a bench on Beaufort
making spirits out of rain
crying cloud breaths

Each honeyed wish
worth the elasticity of bones

She traced circles in me
'til I cried harmonies

I cried ‘til she sang
through my skin
a song that was light

Right on the Iraqi border[10]

[10] The Iraqi Border, Kuwait. Personal photography by author. 2002.

PTSD

what to be
inside
memory?

wall
I hear

GET YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF ME

wants
make

FEEL IT

what
do
with

says was

scared boy

keeps

attacking?

The Uncertainty of Affection

We telephone unhappy

We speak with affection

The moment smells of vanilla

I recognize the moment

We don’t always speak with affection

Keeping by mildness

I notice the leaves

I know the starlit spreadlings of city in warmwind

I lie under a canopy of music

I lie under the color of wine held by a glass

Ghosts circle rooms

The dead city walks through me

I’m star-bathed white

Broken bodies are sent into distance

I honor the uncertainty of affection

I see night change above the house

The night offers me darkseconds

The night is in expectation

Words fall from us

Shadows replace syllables

The sound is a winding ready to leap

The speechattempt has a harsh effect

A failing of softness

I’m broken by the not-speaking

I’m broken by the no-answer

Stella

She fumbles across the floor,
all tongue and clamor

A grinning demented fish
A floundering keg of eels

With wiggles and ripples
With neurotic eyes and under-bite

She sees dignity in keeping company
with the worn, brown carpet of our apartment

that's been here since the seventies
still smelling of patchouli and pot

Two brown paws,
seashells on my neck

No one loves
quite like a dog

A Coffeehouse Sunset

A woman who works
at the coffeehouse
twists

chocolate chip
cheesecake
into her mouth

as she taps
the toe
of her white Birkenstock
against the counter

and flashes
her new wrist tattoo
at everyone
who comes in

She sings along
with the happy
indie music

brushing against
locally created

orange, blue,
purple, teal
abstract oil paintings

Through the window
the moonwind rattles
and sings hypnotic

And every time
the sun sets
love light
fills the coffeehouse

The Hanging Man

Traffic is slow and a woman in an abaya in the silver BMW in front of me is punching her horn.

Jess gasps and I look at her to see what's wrong. Her expression is terror.

I follow her eyes.

An Indian worker is hanging by his neck from a branchy tree. His neck is at such an unnatural angle that it must be broken. His white kurta is blowing roughly in the wind.

I gently pull Jess's face into my shoulder to shield her gaze.

A Kuwaiti man jumps out of his car and calls the police.

I hold Jess against me with my right arm. I drive past Salmiya high-street to the Gulf Road where we can see the ocean.

We pull up by the beach and cry.

When we get home, I tell my family about the man. I tell my friends. I tell my professors.

People say lots of things.

They say: oh. wow.
They say: are you okay?
They say: that's awful.
They say: then what happened?
Some people even say: that's Darwinism at work.

The Garden

She tells him she's leaving him again, and he
tends the garden. The garden is flawless,
its palms shaped, each leaf in place

He doesn't change clothes, works
in his white, cotton dishdasha, sleeves rolled up
Summer makes the garden unbearable

but he suffers diligently, tenderly
pulls the weeds, pours
water into each hyacinth's roots

She watches him shape the earth from the window
When there is nothing left to tend, his brow drips,
and he brings his hands to his face

The World Ends

In our house in the rain
we gather at the kitchen table

where we shared meals
and watched each other grow old

I build a fire to keep us warm
before we bury our dead

We remember family
we never reconciled with

We remember the ghosts
of our lovers

We remember the last
sunrise and sunset

Each star shakes to earth
and brings with it
a new level of gravity

The clouds pound
into the garden

And we hear the knife
slice through the moon

Lexapro

Trust this young pair of lips

professing what only
a page should learn

I'm a phdiddleedee

Full of lala

Inhaling your blahbla

I'll be your puppet
if you suck it

I'm looking for
Narnia

Wonderland

There's no pill for you

Alice?

Lucy?

The names of the body
parts you're looking for
are irrelevant

I need to do an independent study in you

I can keep a secret

Orifice hours
are by appointment only

Today began with vaping
and ended with the professor

I'm property of the graduate department

Return if lost

Run if lost

Oh

Merry, merry Christmas!

Grad school is delicious

Oh

You

May experience loss of people
May experience loss of self
May experience loss of language

Unspeaking of language

No end
No such end
No such thing

We jellyberry
coolshock
against your office wall

And it's hard to swallow
with your brains in me

Doc

With my

young
red
beating
heart

in your mouth

Your lips

pink
with laughter

Doc

It’s hard

to swallow

I glow

a blunt flinging attention
'til you cranberry

And it’s the lovefest of the year

Coming 'til we’re dust

The Music Box

The music box turns again
and life comes through the body ringing

As I speak with the broken
I know we are a work of becoming

I find myself at war
with the clatter of the world

I breathe the mist
Cool, fresh, green

I know the whisper
of pavement puddles

The treeobject is light
The roar is silver

I cry through the sky

The sound is loss

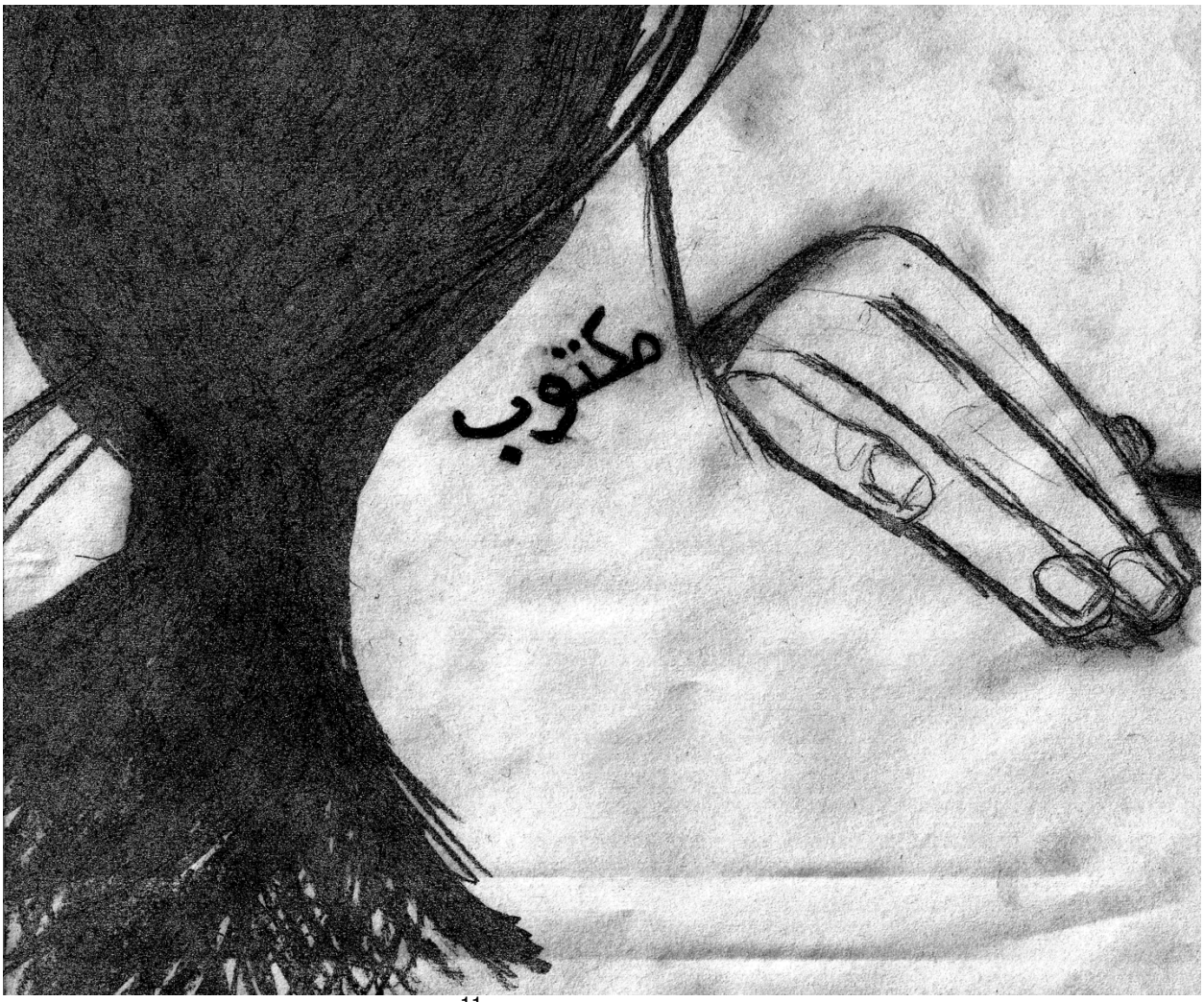
I see the gentleness,
the starlit sprinkles

I try again

There are no words
for how the world collapses

We break and become

The music ends



Muktoob. Arabic for “it is written.” [11]

[11] Drawing by author. *Muktoob.* 2015. Pencil. Normal, IL.

Somewhere in Time

i ache
2 b worthy
2 b chosen

u r
all my cure

im
broken

babe

come in2 me
like yesterday

come in2 me
like a soulm8

fuck

im crazy & stupid
4 u

i will always b
a teenager
4 u

my body
has always
belonged 2 u

the lungs
cant
let go
the breath

the veins
cant
let go
the blood

im sorry
4
everything

baby

im so
tired
of u
not touching
my face

im so
tired
of u
not
holding me

fuck

babe

im so

painfully

beautifully

stuck

in 2003

The Land Mines

The mines were disguised as toys. Special toys to blow up children. Others were disguised as wallets, cigarette packets, torches, and transistor radios. Us kids knew too that if there was a pile of sand on the flatness, it could be sand that the Iraqis had piled on a landmine.

The mines were waiting for us in the desert and city, unstable and waiting to explode. There were also unexploded hand grenades and other live weapons and pieces of live weapons. The police came to the school and showed us a diagram of the different kinds of mines. My brothers and I found some possible mines and other objects in the desert: helmets, scraps of clothing, gasmasks.

Mines are still there, you know.

Be careful in the desert.

Ok?

Christmas

You need to come to Kuwait for Christmas, don't you, love?
You need to come to Kuwait for Christmas, don't you, love
You need to come to Kuwait for Christmas, don't you
You need to come to Kuwait for Christmas, don't
You need to come to Kuwait for Christmas
You need to come to Kuwait for
You need to come to Kuwait
You need to come to
You need to come
You need to
You need
You
Yo
Y
.

Dear PhD

I tell people I'm getting a doctorate in poetry, and they are charmed. Awwwww. What a sweet, harmless pastime.

They don't know how we fight. How you always want something different from me, and how I always want something different from you. That you don't listen to me and put words into my mouth. That I bite you sometimes. You started it though.

But – hey – don't tell me I have no interest in you. I mean, damn. I love you. Baby. Oh my sweet, sweet baby.

We've lasted five and a half long years.

I've lasted five and a half long years with you and your constant theories.

You say constantly: I have a theory that, I have a theory that, I have a theory that, I have a theory that…

Well, I have a theory that you should finally shut the fuck up.

Love,
Someone who should also probably also finally shut the fuck up

A Distraction

This used flesh
silver slithers
a jammy
red
gush

Left
alone
alive

I mean
to leave

I want to own my body
I want my own body

Let's bury
this body

Unsaid
Unreachable

Help me
bury me

HELP ME

Love

A joke

People

A sickness

Effexor

I write until
you're real
again

you can't
lose
a memory

you can
only
misplace it

settle
here
softly

longing
for
something

we huddled
in the surrounding
darkness

I feel
love

it's
enough

how dare you
call me a reliable
narrator

I dissertate
all over
your face

2003

Our first kiss

Swimming in the ocean
in our clothes

You clinging to me
like a cat in the ocean

Lying on the beach
by my house
eating turkey sandwiches
with traces of sand in them

Pushing you
around the Sultan Center
in a shopping cart

Skinny dipping in my pool
at 3 am

That day on the gym mat
in the pitch-black
PE equipment closet

You fainting on the staircase
and me carrying you to your room

Making sweet
and sour chicken
together at my house

Planning our future house together,
with a bedroom under the ocean
because we were dreamers

Climbing over the fence
when everyone was asleep
and sneaking into your bedroom

You and your sister surprising me
at my Kuwait Singers concert

and me stopping my walk to the stage
and the soprano behind me
having to poke me in the back

You showing me your favorite book
from when you were a kid

Coming home from Iowa,
meeting you
in the Salwa co-op parking lot
and getting to
finally
hold you again

Bringing you a red rose
and singing “Once Upon a Dream”
to you in your outside kitchen,
and the maids laughing at me

Me secretly keeping you on the phone
for a few minutes in Kuwait Singers
so you could listen to us rehearse

Watching F.R.I.E.N.D.S on your bed

You trying to get me to eat a tomato
and me spitting it right out at you
because I told you I hate tomatoes

You playing the drums
in the band room at school

Hiding in your closet reading Harry Potter
by the light of my flip phone
while you had to eat lunch with your family

You sleeping in either a shirt or boxers
but never both

You sucking up
the Pepsi we spilled
out of the cup holder
in my blue Volvo
and spitting it out the window

Singing in harmony together

You putting my cheek
in your mouth
just to see if it would fit
and your brother
walking in on us

You making us breakfast
and us eating it
by your living room window

Throwing the post-it your sister wrote
“do not throw” on
because we thought it was funny

Those spaceship-looking buildings
I’d drive past
on the way to your house

Dancing all night
at Aly’s Halloween party
and then getting to go home
to my house together

Running away together
to the Burger King by your house

Holding each other close enough
to both sleep in your single bed

Talking on the phone
with you all night
whenever we weren’t
sleeping in the same bed

The way you loved to smell my hair
after I used my v05 raspberry conditioner

Drinking water
from the bottles
you kept in your room
in case Saddam invaded again

The beautiful and unforgettable
things we did
before we drank all that water

Things I'd better not write about here

Singing "Tomorrow" from Annie to you
while you were crying so hard
you could barely breathe

The poem you wrote me

You buying me
purple chenille gloves
and a purple chenille scarf
before I went to Cedar Falls
so I wouldn't be too cold
without you

But
we both
knew
I would always
be too cold
without you

Planning our lives
together

Our last kiss

Questions for Further Thought

What is a memory?

How does a person
fall in love?

Are you here
to make me sad?

Are you here
to save me?

Are you here
to make me sad
and save me?

The lost love me

Do you love me?

Are you
high
right now?

Are you
here
right now?

What broke you?

Are you
asking for help?

How do you
get back?

How do you live
without someone
you love this much?

The Stars Grow Cold

I held you
and the sky
exploded
with light

I kissed you
under a quivering
chorus of stars

But the days
and nights
are now
all broken

You are kept
from me

The stars
have drowned
all under the ocean

I stumble through
the dark
world
without you

The ache falls
through my body
forever

You are in me
so deep

Even when I
slashed myself
open

When I tried
to tear you
out of my skin

I couldn’t
bleed you out

Through the sky
I feel you crying

This will not be
the last pain
we suffer

And
these

These
will not be
the last lines
I write for you

Time Traveler

Time travel's a bitch.

I drive you far from the city. The sadness glides from tree to bending tree. It's a breathing sadness.

Your dark brown eyes watch me. Your dark brown eyes swallow me. The air is cool against our cheeks. The air is green electric, twinkling. The apple trees create an apple smell. Can you overlook the sadness?

The stars are spread wide and bright outside the city. The sky is white with stars. We take each other in under our stars.

Our skin touches under our stars. The light lies on our skin. Each star is a memory. Each memory, a promise. Each trembling second is precious.

Not far from the water now. The violets are singing. I slip you the colors of me and you drink them like you're dying. You always did. Damn. What drug are you anyway? Your warm palm is on my cheek.

Time is a motherfucker.

The blades of grass are wet between our toes. The trembling starlight catches the dewy grass. The night is liquid in the glass. The night is glowing.

The night is wetter than the inside of my mouth.

It Takes Years

We are not
born
with love

Our first
heartbeats
are empty

It takes
years
for the world
to come

and
beat
the heart

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