

1-1-1997

What They Don't Talk About, When They Talk About Writing

Cynthia Shearer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shearer, Cynthia (1997) "What They Don't Talk About, When They Talk About Writing," *Yalobusha Review*. Vol. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol3/iss1/2>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yalobusha Review by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

CYNTHIA SHEARER

What They Don't Talk About, When They Talk About Writing

Everybody starts out speaking in a poem or two. It's in the pulse, the blood. This teaches you the worth of one word in your mother tongue.

Few end up as poets. Few end up as anything.

In between those two extremes: whole forests of trees are felled, to publish the rest, the wannabes, beginning in magazines. These magazines are important, in the sense that first steps are formative, and somewhat sheltered. You feel funny looking back at first publications.

Why, look, it's Baby, taking its first steps in the privacy of its own mind.

Let's don't tell Baby the truth. Baby will find out soon enough: truth is the negotiable theater of white spaces between words. It can be torqued or scrunched up. A poet is somebody who speaks a novel in eight lines, or twelve, tops, and it takes you three years and 350 pages.

Baby's second, precarious steps. The not-so-little magazines, the slicks.

Ad, scissors, story. Scissors cut story to make room for ad. Ad cuts story, always.

If Baby makes the cut, Baby can maintain morale, and keep writing.

A lucky strike is when you hook up with a true editor who can pull you out of God's hat with just a few telephone conversations. *Voila*; there you are, *live*, the magician, the rabbit, the scarf, the fake roses, the saw, the coffin, the knife, the smiling

target on the revolving wheel, the villain throwing the knife.
Simultaneously!

This, too, teaches you the worth of one word in your mother tongue.

Then you notice that real writers are always going around saying things that help. They want to shore you up against the certain chaos they know you are facing.

You may want to consider another line of work, an honest one warns, up front.

You have to fight, another will tell you.

Any literature worth anything is moral, yet another says.

We need your music, another coaxes.

Jump the barricades, Michael Stipe sings. Belong.

Be also advised: the French theorists will nevertheless peruse the ads before they read your story, cruise cross-continent in rented cars and write about how we are a failed utopia, *a country without hope*. Hit us again, Baudrillard. It hurts so good.

Americans are a species that harvests oxygen-producing trees to make slick magazines where all utterance must be pre-shrunk to make way for advertisements for tampons, and Shake n' Bake, and nose-hair clippers, and those spooky little single serving swimming pools in which to do stationary "laps" living out one's fantasies of being the solitary martyred swimmer in the Cheever story.

But is that any worse than the global habit of harvesting trees to support our curious little habit of shadow-boxing with the almost-dead, the semi-dead, and the most definitely dead? Take *that*, Kafka. Your slip is showing, Sylvia Plath. Up your nose with a rubber *hose*, Nietzsche.

Either way, it all ends up at the city dump, these magazines. Where does the truth lie?

The operative word in that construction is *lie*.

I lie, you lie, we lie, all God's *chillens* lie. So does truth.

The great writers all seem to agree that the act of writing has little to do with truth, and more to do with vaudeville than grief, with theatre or music or live burlesque and synaptic cruelty and the transfer of heat.

Writing actually has little to do with *writing*.

Writing has more to do with the insatiable desire to speak in tongues and jam with the voices you adore at any hour of the

night, and chant down Babylon one more time. It has to do with stealing fire from heaven or pickpocketing it from your neighbor's britches. Not to mention bowling Nietzsche down dead like a dime-store ninepin. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to become a one-human holy jihad against nothingness.

Baby's dance steps. Writing has more to do with licensed lunacy than with writing.

It beats the hell out of being just another faceless face in the assembly line at the Sunshine Dog Food factory.

A funny thing happens to you, steppin' along there on the way to church there in your crisp nun's wimple or sexy black cassock, grooving on all that good press humanity got in the Renaissance. You're all set to lay your blessings upon the masses, like Mother Teresa or Thomas Merton, and renounce the pleasures of the flesh. Surprise! Art has more affinities with strip-tease than matins! But how can you ever have any fun if your entire repertoire consists of Dr. William Carlos Williams' little ditty about how you believe you were *maaaaaade* to be lonely and you feel all snagged up in all kinds of offstage machinery you are not privileged to see? Judging from all the howls and thumps and tin cans rattling, sounds like everybody else is having all the fun, clowning around under the stage in a loopy Marx Brothers outtake.

Is that a knife in your pocket, or are you just glad ta see me?

Did you say French fries or French flies?

That was no lady, that was your wife.

There you are, all set to sew your heart onto the sincere sleeve of your nurse costume and *whoa*, the object of your ardor, the patient etherized on the table has *been there and gone*, wiped his nose on saidsame sleeve. Or you lean over to admire that flower in the bridegroom's buttonhole, and *pfffft*, the thing sprays you in the face. Or you're all decked out in your rented tux, down on bended knee to the woman of your dreams smiling back at you in her rented gown, and *jiminy*, she's an inflatable doll that looks a lot like Nietzsche.

Show me two words and I'll show you two randomized ions, passing in the night.

* * *

Everybody starts out wanting to turn a big camera on The Truth situated *out there*.

Surprise! What gets opened, at first, is sort of like a wide-screen video of your inner child of the present: there *you are, live* and *amphibious*, illuminated in your underwear with that invisible microphone in one hand and an auctioneer's gavel in the other, lip sync-ing along to some nihilist rapmaster of the hour or the epoch: *SOLD, to the lowest bidder, my mother, my father, my sister, my brother, that girl that turned me down for a date in 1991, somebody else's husband.*

Or there you are, *in person*, with one foot in French feminist theory camps and the other on a banana peel, just another nameless backup singer for some Big Mama who expends considerable printer's ink and possibly her whole human lifetime remarking, at ear-splitting volume, on how women are *silenced*. Martyrdom is a form of greedy pathetic need if it becomes your shtick.

Either way, you too can be a published writer these days if you just get the *moves* down, shuck and jive, like the Babinski reflex in a newborn—*yes, yes, it's all just a bloody ditch—the Renaissance was just wishful thinking, just please please do not throw me in that briar patch of the old verities like truth and honor and pity and courage—yassuh, massa—am I a writer yet?*

Is that enough for you?

Borges said he thought paradise must be a kind of library, accessible at what he cryptically called the Garden of Forking Paths. I like to think of paradise as someplace where the immortal Yogi Berra gets equal time: *When you come to the fork in the road, take it.* I could really get interested in the notion of paradise as someplace where Laurie Anderson crashes Wallace Stevens' poker game. The way I imagine it, she slides some chips across the table: *No more tenements, period. You dig?*

But *you*. We were talking about you.

So what, if you don't make the A-list at those dull cocktail parties where the early arrivals have been holding each other hostage in the same room for twenty, thirty years. They will mostly just try to get you to wear some dumb cutesy party hat of their choice. Leave, before they lure you into the back to watch the snuff films from Pacific Rim countries. It's all claymation any way, rear-view mirror of adolescents in the back of a

stationwagon, giggling and doing unspeakable things to an inflatable doll that looks a lot like, well, Nietzsche.

You meet the coolest people at odd places, like the city dump, walking their dogs in solitude .

Hey, what's that you got there, that clanky metal there 'round your ankle?

Why, it's all those *taboos* you pay big bucks to have taught to you at the university! *Thou shalt not have faith in human history, lest you be judged a lesser intelligence all the days of your life. . .* All those expensive hours around the seminar table, all that *lack of pleasure* in those post-modernist texts! All that costly Irish tourism and all you get out of it is a lousy T-shirt that says, *I take the slops up the stairs, I take the slops down!*

Is it enough for you, to enter the next millenium with that slop bucket in your hand?

Don't mind old Uncle Hans over there, all shoes soles and gut on the stationary bicycle there, turning his back on you with his mutterings about more courtesy in the old country. He gets his jollies cursing at you in a language he thinks you don't understand because you choose not to speak it. How seriously can you take somebody whose main activity is to channel-surf for crime documentaries about creativity and cruelty are both centered in the hippocampus? This lets him feel vindicated for the crimes he committed in the old country. He hasn't changed the prescription to his bifocals since 1950.

And Aunt Clarice, bless her heart—she glazes over and turns off her hearing aid if you try to steer the conversation towards anything besides her mastectomy scars or her personal charter-bus trip to the holocaust museum. Leave them each to their final and absolute extinctions, passenger pigeons in the post-Linnaeus taxonomies. They have their uses, they are a constant reminder of the country you exile yourself from every time you switch on the laptop.

You there, with your kamikaze courage, doing that *close, close reportage live from planet nowhere*, where does the truth lie?

Truth lies somewhere in the vast, improbable white barrens between one black word and another. Here you are, hatless, in the collective sight gag, the collective neurosis we refer to as *human utterance*. The main thing to remember: truth *lies*.

Be careful. Anything you say can, and probably will be, used against you in some tribunal you conduct against yourself later. You sure you're ready to fend for yourself, with nothing but that papier mache Samuel Beckett head around your ankle like a ball and chain? And do you have any words to say that will offset the certain loss of, to the rest of your tribe, the trees you sacrifice when you say them?

Say yeah? Say all right? Then get on in here.

This is not paradise. This is the privacy of your own human pulse.

Check any earthly baggage at the door. Move away from the color-coded entrance and onto the dance floor. Bring along the inflatable Nietzsche doll if you like. It would make a great whoopee cushion.

There is work to be done, here in this human pulse. Pockets to be picked, haint houses to be shaken on down, synapses to flash like tracers. Songlines to be traced to the source, Babylon to be chanted down, hate nations to be whispered down into dynasties of dust. Human love to be made, one more time.

Close your eyes. That silence you keep trying to enter? Baby, that's just the rest of us, rocking you in our empty arms, speaking the mother tongue. We've been waiting centuries for you to arrive, all your life. You have no idea how long we've been waiting to hear you. We're here, and we will not abandon you.