

Metaviews at Metazen

by Ann Bogle

Metaview #1

Here I've been asked to ask myself a few questions. This is not the first time I've questioned myself, but it is the first time I've been asked to write it. Still, it's a statement we've heard before: "Question yourself." That and "ask yourself." "Know thyself" will ask "ask yourself." Ourselves—"ourselves"—shall ask myself. I shall ask you, and you will ask me. It will be the three of us in a pup tent on a rock overlooking the Mississippi—rocks are an endangered natural resource: who knew? We invite the Holy Ghost. You say "Heavenly Ghost" or "Holy Spirit." (One says or the other.) I say, "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." You speak for yourself. This is self-reflection or self-reflexive writing. Candor but not verse. That is what I write: *not-verse*. On occasion I write a poem though rarely an occasional poem. Instead of calling it non-fiction we could call it non-verse.

Today's short story, "Tinges of Envy or How You Learn," is an example of non-verse. I do not give up on this story because I find that one of its central probes: the right word for "male lover friend" is as pertinent today as it was in 1985. Today people say, with some ill ease, "partner." Perhaps that was not a word much in use in 1985, but POSSLQ was: "person of opposite sex sharing living quarters." It was suggested that a poem I wrote called "One Vowel Trafficking" (in *dog barks up a tree at the apple left in it under a deerslim moon*) is about that, but by then, by 2005, when I wrote it, the subject of what to call it had gotten darker. It had, for one thing, dwindled to poetry. It is probably not right to say "dark" to mean "threatening" or "gloomy." We are guided by skies if we say it. What if you and your partner don't live together? What if you—y'all—are yoked but living separately?

There's another theme in the story: to copy or not to copy. An aspect of non-verse — of non-verse story — whether made out of

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fiction or not, is theme. I dislike the idea of clumping poems together under a theme : "poems on motherhood," for example. I might like, though, poems about abortion and I might prefer them to stories about abortion, so what I have against thematic category is unclear. Someone might say the theme of a poem is language; theme in a story is an element of style, one of seven elements. The ostensible theme of "Tinges of Envy ... " is emulation, but there are other, smaller themes within the story, itself small. Does it have something in common with essay? Does essay mean "true" or "about"? Does essay tell rather than show? Is a partly-true story about telling stories an essay? Let's hope it is not an "article."

It is true that I knew Lorrie Moore, that she was the teacher, that we had the assignment described in the story, that I rebelled and wrote this story and presented it to her in my portfolio. It's true, but not part of the story, that for our last exercise, Lorrie Moore asked the students to emulate the neighbor to our right, and when the neighbor to her right could not emulate her because he hadn't read her, I pulled out this story and read it, conscious of flecks of orange pulp on my teeth between sips of end-of-semester champagne. It's true, but not part of the story, that I submitted it for publication to *Fiction International* in San Diego, not knowing that the journal had been based at St. Lawrence University (where Lorrie Moore had attended college). The editor, Harold Jaffe, wrote, "We liked your impious little piece, 'Tinges of Envy ...' and will be glad to publish it."

Metaview #2

To squirrels meat is nuts. Acorn trove. *Trouver* to witness, a mistranslation. *Trouvere* a class of narrative poets in northern France in the 11th to 14th century. Ahead two pages of *trust* in the dictionary.

A meditation on "publishing." I didn't imagine my stories would *not* be in a book. I did imagine storing records and files of utterance in a house I forgot to imagine. I remember admiring bindings and

covers that were sometimes yellow and sometimes blue. I remember thinking that I'd first be assigned a pink cover then work up to yellow and blue. I would not be a grown-up member of a church. I admired watercolor paintings. I was not a painter, but I had painted. There were art studios and two art teachers at our junior high—an art faculty. It was a public school, so everyone got a chance. We painted different versions of a still life. Mine was not the best one. I learned in doing physical things that there were students and people better at doing those things than I. At sports, yes, but also at physical forms of creativity. That became a decision to write, not to be better at writing than all others, but to be better at writing than I. Writing is fluid like a verb. A consequence. A book is a net for fish or word for terrarium. The library is a petting zoo. The bookstore a tent for belly dancers. I am not a belly dancer. I am a turtle or a rock, a rook crossing a field. Real photographers seal the light in my eyes.

A woman I knew in graduate school believed the true talent for writers is photogeneity. She and a male side-kick—a talented poet—gay, so not her lover—went about taking writers' photos, risking them without permission. The photos were funny to them because compromising. I said poets were so poor they played their own paparazzi. The two students didn't realize their lack of talent at photography. She became a type of author, but not the type she had wanted to be—yet, and he became the author he wanted to be; both are photogenic.

“Raisins” is about disguising people in written photos.

I was a visiting writer to an annual conference for gifted and talented high school writers from a region called Chaska Valley in Minnesota. One of the high school men was a jock who wrote poems; one of the young women had written four novels about a world she invented; one of the men had read Nietzsche over the summer. I read the story “Raisins” to the 200 students from the seven schools. I read it quickly but succinctly as if I were being paid by the minute. I told them no one—from *The New Yorker* on down—had wanted to publish it. To let them understand why it had

not been published, I quoted a rejection slip to them. The story, the editor wrote, was “not without evident merit.” I wanted to scare and mystify them. To write without a back-up plan is to be scared and mystified. I wanted them to become firefighters who write, engineers who moonlight as shopkeepers who write, doctors who deliver babies and write about Cancun and astronomy. I did not want them to go to writing school as a way to avoid taking service positions. Writing is a service position that prefers not to pay. It appears to outsiders to be delusional: storing writings like hiding nuts. Building homes of paper.

