

SPRING 2010 ORLANDO NONFICTION PRIZE WINNER



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A Redhead Brunette and Blonde: My Muse was a Bird

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The first one to quit writing had fiery red hair and a penchant for dark haired men (and women) who lacked formal education. Once, while we were in graduate school, we woke up in the same bed. "Now this doesn't worry me," she had said. "But he does." She motioned to a young man crashed on the sofa: jeans around his ankles, tender white boxers dangerously close. "Do you know who that is?" I did not.

The redhead wrote poems about setting kitchen curtains aflame, stealing almonds from barrels in co-ops, and the Armenian genocide. She always said her muse was a prostitute with a drug problem. Soon after we graduated, the redhead got a job teaching composition at a private school. She married an overweight balding man who drives a Saturn. At night, she drinks herself silly in the bathtub. She tells me she puts her head underwater to stifle the giggles. "I don't miss writing at all," she says. "I never think about that whore."

I quit next. My students are the reason, but that's a lie. I moved to Albuquerque for a man, left him and found another. Now I direct literacy centers and teach people how to write a standard five-paragraph essay. "An argument," I tell them. "Everything is an argument." They want to know if it's acceptable to start an essay with the words Society today has many problems. "Of course," I reply. The GED has five sections: Reading, Writing, Math, Social Studies and Science. I tell my students that if they just learn this paragraph, this equation, this paradigm, this hypothesis, everything will fall into place. Everything gets better from this point forward. They never believe me.

The blonde held on for a while. In school she liked to say her muse was a Disney character. The cricket. Her writing was just as elusive and priggish, but damn near perfect. Before she quit she edited a collection of short stories where, "birds illuminate the human condition." I had to read several of these stories to comprehend her argument, if I ever understood it. Dead birds appear on doorsteps, in attics; some birds are forgotten, rotten, and stuck inside chimneys. Sons and fathers go bird watching (never hunting) and observe obese or wounded birds and this is somehow emblematic of human experience. She was quick to inform me that the book wasn't a field guide of sorts. It was literature. Literary birds. She sent me fifteen signed copies and softly suggested that my students might enjoy reading it. "I don't know what else to do with them," she said. Now she writes screenplays and teen pilots with her boyfriend in LA. "It is definitely," she stammered, "NOT literature." Apparently her muse in the top hat couldn't pay the bills. She evicted the green bastard.

According to one story in the book, a grouse is an exceptionally rare bird that resembles a crow. After assigning the story for homework, the students who read it beg for more of a description, a picture in the margins. The word "grouse" rhymes with "mouse" so many assume it's a rodent-looking bird. Others inquire if it is the kind of bird they can eat like a chicken.

I ask them why they think the author chose this particular bird.

"Cause that's the one flew in the house."

I nod. I remind them again that this is a story so nothing actually happened. "It's fiction, so it's what? We talked about this," I warn.

"A story?"

"Yes, a story. So it's what?"

"A lie?" one posits.

"Yes, a lie. It's not true."

I dive into the harangue about how in fiction an author maintains a reason for writing something in a particular way. I reiterate, "So, it's not a hen or a rooster. It's a grouse that flew into the lady's house. Why do you think the author picked this bird?" A slight voice from the back: "Because a hen or rooster can't fly."

This is a classroom moment when the student answers correctly, but not the way I intended. Time for a re-cap.

"So there's this old lady and it's her birthday," I begin. "She's 84." A chorus of damn, shit, and that's fucking old bubbles up. "So this grouse flies into her apartment and it keeps clattering into the window. She calls her son. He doesn't want anything to do with it and tells her to call the SPCA. He never mentions her birthday. The bird is on the floor, panting. She thinks it's dead only it gets up and flies into the window just as she is poised over it. Finally the SPCA lady comes and traps the bird in a net and leaves. Tells the woman it's a shame this happened on her birthday. The end."

This is the dumbest story they have ever heard.

"What," I ask them—sweating now. "What does this say about the human condition?"

There is a long silence. They look at me. They want so badly to know what a human condition is and if it's going to appear on the GED. For some reason, the word 'metaphor' sits on my tongue, heavy, like an egg. I am struck with just how idiotic it would sound if I were to say it, so I don't.

Finally one student, sixteen and pregnant, asks, "Why didn't that old lady just open the window?" At last, a dialogue emerges.

"We had a bat in my house once and we just opened the window and my mom chased it out with a broom."

"We get birds in Home Depot like every day; they got nests in there and everything. We leave the doors open and they fly in and out."

"All you gotta do is open a window."

"Good point," I say. "So why didn't she open the window?"

If our classroom had a window I would open it now. Jump out.

From the back row my best student has an answer. "Because clearly," he states, "she's a dumbass."

Given that the redhead teaches in private school she assumed, naturally, her students were brighter. She explains to me later, as she too had received several copies of the literary collection, her students just weren't interested in birds. I tell her that I'd never seen my students simultaneously grasp and miss the point. We both agree we were very proud of the blonde, though, for editing the book. For doing something before she quit.

"Isn't it kind of surprising?" the redhead asks. "How easy it was to give up?"

In the background I can hear the swish of water. "To just, I don't know. Stop."

I find myself agreeing. I can nearly see her in the tub, the fat dollops of water dripping from her hair. This is so like her, I recall suddenly, to prattle obliviously in the bathtub on her cell phone. I hear something plunk and sink. Soap?

"I always thought you'd be the one to hold on," she observes. "For dear life."

Before I quit writing my husband and I rented a dilapidated house. When it rained, torrents of water crashed in with such force I sometimes wondered if the roof was an illusion. We liked the house because it was funky and hip, but also because of the casita in the backyard. When we first moved in, my husband flung open the door and said, "This is where you'll write."

Only I didn't. Instead I cleaned the cobwebs from the corners and ran the space heater for three days to remove its chill. I put in a television so I could watch *The Bachelor*. Then I stocked the minifridge with cookies and wine. Every night I pushed the door open slowly, cautiously. And every night I exhaled when there was nothing behind it. Just my unpacked computer, the unwashed sheets.

Of course I stopped waiting. I left the door wide open, strutted absently inside each night and wrapped the vacuous chatter of television around me.

And it was bound to happen, I suppose. Yet when it does, I am still surprised, shocked really, to see it sitting on the metal folding chair in front of my dusty desk. It squeezes a long oily feather between in its beak. The ostrich -- that awkward massive beast—is back.

"Not you," I say.

It cocks a head on its tenuous neck, and narrows its black eyes. I move closer.

It flaps its useless wings with thunderous abandon, carousing into doors, thudding against furniture. It hurtles around the casita scratching its beak into cedar walls, rattling sharp toenails across the floors. In mid stride, I grab the bird and try to choke it. It bites my fingers until they bleed. Then I attempt to shove its downy ass through the window, but it won't fit.

After forty-five minutes of violence, of writhing shame, and shrieking compromises. After we wrestle ourselves into a corner, my mouth full of feathers, our cumbersome hearts beating madly, tongues loosed like scrolls, I relent. "Fine," I say, breathless. "You can stay."
