

Hoss Men (divided)

by Ann Bogle

Hoss Men

An Essay in Prosetics

“hoss”: a survey that provides monthly and quarterly statistics on new single-family non-farm house sales

Previous day:

Sonia would quote Oscar Wilde to me in the kitchen at 1747 Kipling, Houston, “If you can't tell a lie, tell the truth and get it over with.” I wonder now whether I ought to have looked that up then. We didn't have internet yet, and the library on campus was picked over, like chicken bones, and the public library downtown required underground parking. Think of what guards once did to keep people away from the books. In high school, the “geeks,” as the intellectuals were called, had to cross a line, like a picket line, where cheerleaders and their jock boyfriends sat on the steps in protest of knowledge, to get to the library doors. Call Sonia and ask, “Where did you get the Oscar Wilde quote, the one about truth, get it over with?”

We loved to yak, the truth is, in my kitchen or her living room, aware that her bearded jock poetry boyfriend may not have approved our unsupervised pursuit of intelligence. Our books, not our books for writing (the books we thought we were and would be writing, and more than writing, but sending and publishing, a game still mysterious to us, though we meet people every day who have mastered it, their lines and pages glued together between glossy paper covers for which they did not “pay”) but others' books, our reading (a fragment). The men forbade books in their non-absolutist way—they agreed that one lesbian should be allowed to disseminate (word)—and recommended the sexual life to the rest of us, to those

thin enough for it, instead, as if sex were patriotic, as if the sexual life were the only life they would reward in us, not minding their anger and rage when it came to conflicting lines of ownership, the words they'd slur us with—*nice*—a number, what we knew in our rental units of “zoning” and “no zoning.”

The men in bidding us to lead the sexual life did not sublimate (Freud).

We didn't learn “publishing” at school, didn't learn how to turn “writing” into “books,” or, if we did learn “submissions,” it failed. The pupils at other schools learned more—they learned the books, and they “have” the books. We learned it is better not to. Living, as God said, is paradise (prelapsarian) without the tree.

Save a tree than to publish a book, helper to be a ghost.

Next day:

A few of our *compadres* in Barthelme's school were “waiting” to walk through the door of the “establishment.” A car from the service would escort them. Barthelme had died. Someone said talent was not enough. I said if a single thing could be enough, talent then. The quiet surrounding the elections was the quiet of a library or the quiet of the secret service. Were you with “them” or against? Were you one of them or one of the others? Were the others us or against us? Were you “for” war or against it? Were you for Israel or for the Palestinians? Were you an upstart who'd seen a thug from your car window late at night? Did you know whom “paggers” were for? I said paggers were for doctors at the symphony, but someone else—who knew more about new technology than I did—said paggers were for drug sales, drug, not meaning pharmaceutical.

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Years pass, years without remittance, admittance to salary as a professional, years spent swallowing the pills of conformity—I said it was like communion. What had the hoss men said? I focused on my friend's family in Jerusalem and on my early boyfriend from Haifa. Despite the controversy, the confusion over drug v. non-drug, a pill might be needed to balance the mind/body. But was a war needed to balance the economy? I didn't think so.

There were poets' "wars," waged with toothpicks. The front was not in the South nor in the North. Nor was it out West where the bookstores flourished nor in the East where a tree grew. In Brooklyn? where rent was a little lighter. We were guessing. And what of "the short story," literary genre that proliferated yet ceased to exist after the "renaissance" of the 1980s? A few of those writers had gone down "early." Carver had died. An epic novelist, men reasoned, would live longer. A heart attack was reported as a suicide; a suicide in an epic novelist was based on "experimental." The turnstile let one slide in beside the others; no car would await thee at the airport, but the train would arrive.

Same day (as "next day"):

What I mean is: you—one—could go it on your own, research the mechanics of printing, hire or appoint an editor, see about distribution or wait for someone to ask you, someone kind with a good disposition, someone adept at handling her own affairs; you could litmus test her or more likely, she, you, about the Palestinians. "My tobacconist is one. His wife is from Jordan." Are there K-marts in Jordan? Can you see Jordan from your flophouse? She could test you on "post-modern-ism." You could try a position. You could try a translation. You could post it.

The day after that (after "next day"):

The long interview referenced childbearing. A son before 30 meant two contracts.

Yesterday (the day after “next day”):

The hoss men selected one natural light blonde and two Asian-brunettes for young motherhood and timely publishing. I was a dark Swedish blonde—not gone gray—with a total of four fiancés and a Scottish name meaning “ghost”; “fiancé” could land a redhead a teaching post, but could it land her a son-book on deadline?

It came down to fathers and schools, to *alma mater* and Dad.

Today (Oct. 14):

I suggest that we discuss L.'s piece as a whole on Oct. 21 and A.'s novel as a whole on Oct. 28 (or later); that will give me a chance to get A.'s whole novel from her. I have chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 12. A. gave me chapters a few years ago in MN (wh. may have changed since then) and another set of chapters—T. says it is chaps 1-4—which she suggested I pass to T. over the summer. How many chapters are there? It's 350 pp. or so, right?

I'm getting tense as I write this because I also have C.N.'s rapidly changing and unfinished new novel parked on my hard drive and T.M.'s experimental novel. I would consider referring the two of them for an experimental “group.” I'm also supposed to work as editor for two journals and single-handedly publish a chapbook; I haven't heard from my own chapbook “publisher” in the collective, and I haven't been paid for this work in years.

The method for novel that I learned from Woiwode is to write straight through once in pencil, without (you or anyone else) reading or rereading it, before rewriting—three months or so for a

350 pp. first draft. To rewrite as many times as needed. To work on the next book while waiting to hear from editors. In the workshop at Binghamton, we met weekly as a group to discuss praxis in a highly focused way without “workshopping” chapters. Larry later read & line-edited all the novels; we heard read aloud every chap. 1 at semester's end. Then we arranged with individuals to read next drafts as we liked. It was the only novel workshop in the country at the time ('87) besides Kesey's at Eugene in collaborative novel.

Gardner had died; he was no experimentalist nor was he short-shrift. People downstate thought “suicide”; everyone upstate knew it was a fluke motorcycle accident, word spelled in Texas with an “x.”

Agents I have little idea. Woiwode partly supported his family in the 60s by publishing in *The NYer* (his friends were De Niro and Barthelme) so perhaps there was little trouble in his finding one. E.W. met his at a bar. He publishes in Paris and Texas and just got his movie deal. L.R. sold her first novel w/o an agent and didn't recommend it. B. met “my” agent at the Cedar, but that agent and so many others didn't want short stories or novellas.

Virginia Woolf wrote her novels in the morning and edited her morning's work in the afternoon. She and Leonard Woolf self-published as Hogarth Press. How much is “500 pounds” in today's dollars? A room of one's own—with a lock from the inside not the outside as in psych hospitals—or no lock needed? *Angel At My Table*.

Day of a birthday (Oct. 15):

Barthelme had picked G.W. as best, G.W., not G.W.H., who was best at Gardner's school. Twenty years later, a group of men arranged to get the best of G.W.'s six novels and two short story collections into print. They invested in hardcover. His daughter was

already in college by then, his ex- still the subject of controversy if his name arose: I had always thought she was “smart.” All right, some of the women had been strippers, but the ones we knew were smart.

There was an audience for it, for stripping. I had never been to a men's club; later I queried in my hometown—no writers—about strip joints. Four had double-dated as marrieds there. There were strict laws in MN about the width of the panty fabric. No panty, then a plexiglas window separated patrons from the stripper. I asked to go to one, and P. took me. He was from California. The drinks were expensive and abrasive. Men who looked like they'd been beaten with the pole sat ringside beside women who looked like Henrietta Stackpole. There were two strippers; to call them dancers elevated them but offended ballerinas. One was a teenaged Pacific Islander who draped herself over the pole like a moth; the other was a customized blond high-kicker. A group of four men surrounded the blonde where she sat on the edge of the platform to talk. This was before I had bought clogs, shortened my hair, and grown my hips and thighs. I stood there skinny-as-a-half in “big hair,” ankle boots, and black eyeliner. P. was in radio, not books. He had a sense of humor. I was researching a different man for a novel.

Today (Oct. 21):

We didn't meet as a group today to discuss and critique the novel and long poem because everyone was writing poetics papers on deadline, leaving me to wonder about the art and practice of writers reading (again). The long poem veils its willingness to be about the poet herself, and like many novels under 300 pages (about the writer under 30) this seems like a long story.

Later the same day (Oct. 21):

V, I gave version 2 (27 pp.) a rest. This is the distillation of 300 pages sans any previously published sections. It has proven to be a pliable form—as I re-read, I'm riveted (even though I wrote it) until I get to a section about Australian birds and neurosis followed by the lake —the whole lake at a glance or that one fish—and “The Dream” and the rest. These are necessary passages (I assume in that I edited cautiously in '94 in creating a distillation), but that's where I flag—around 20 pp. or so. Is it me or did you flag there in reading it, too? I ask because I'd like to keep working it a while if there's still a little time. The other 270 or so pages are in MN, and this is the second not the first time I wrote so long and left out so much. I suppose it's a rant—it degenerates and becomes proof of inhumility and ignorance of very large patterns in the world (induction) as a direct response to being in isolation and eventually to breaking down, etc. As a proof it is sort of interesting, I supposed then, but I doubted people might actually follow it as such and just notice “bad writing.” Something reminded me of this recently when I read Tao Lin's passages from a recent book and could see how transparent and innocent and unaffected and mad the voice was—it's not that he's a lousy writer at all but the loneliness of the composition and the ambition of the project that created it. If you have a chance, please offer editing ideas for the excerpts of *WOWHBS* I sent you, and I'll try to shape it w/o leaping out of the chronological design underlying the full version.

Oct. 23:

After I had left school, I reflected that what I had learned about the business I could write on an index card. I knew of three deals.

The trails in my hometown are marked by signs with universal symbols on them, rather than words. One winter day, when it was bright like spring, and the snow was shrinking in its piles by the road, I returned from the mall on a mission: I had

bought ivory gloves, a hat, and a ring. I had written a long story about a young academic in Houston who takes up with a rock 'n' roller instead of the man who had offered to marry her, the one who was more like her, because sex with the rock 'n' roller was better and more often. In bed with him one day, she realized that he might lie there indefinitely reflecting lyrically about China—the year was 1997—but not buy her an engagement ring, that he would more likely buy her an ice cream. Her school, she realized, might not pay her, and she'd have to pay herself, buy her own shoes from Latin America (she said). The young academic in the story is a poet who rarely writes poems, not a novelist. By then I knew that fictions have a way of coming true—a compelling argument for carefulness, one we followed by model, not one that teachers elaborated due to fear of seeming religious. On the index card about the business, I could have written “truth is stranger than fiction,” but even the tow truck driver might know that. Why go to schools?

After I had completed the beginning of the story, I set out to true it by buying items mentioned in the story—shoes from Latin America, for example, a diamond. I turned over every shoe in the women's shoe department at the downtown Dayton's—all of them made in Italy—when the clerk, acting suspicious, came over to supervise me. I ended up buying a shiny pair of Italian black oxfords for \$163. I bought diamond earrings next, a half-carat, for \$285, reduced from \$425. It was my lucky day, the jewelry saleswoman said, and she was almost right.

Deals were usually kept private, with little mention of money; these were not listings for *Publisher's Weekly*. I still hadn't bought the ring, the engagement ring that no man in my real life had seen fit to buy, concerned as he was that it should cost two months' salary. On the next leg of the mission, I bought a spring stone and diamond ring at the flea market at the mall. I paid \$287 for it, reduced from \$325. And I bought the ivory gloves and hat. Then I drove in a blaze of sun down the horse trail. I had not

noticed the triangular orange sign with the picture of a horse on it. The car bottomed out at the bottom of the first hill, and I walked two miles home, wearing the hat—a woven one that felt like a basket on my head—the ivory gloves and under it the ring. The police were at my house two minutes after I got there, and I had to explain to them how I'd missed seeing the horse sign. Long story short—I never finished the other story as a novel—the sun down, I tipped the tow truck driver \$15.

[end of first half]

