

Tinges of Envy or How You Learn

by Ann Bogle

There is a point with me in matters of any size when I must absolutely have encouragement as much as crops rain; afterwards I am independent.

—Gerard Manley

Hopkins

Decide to give in to the impulse to write like your writing teacher. When you hand in your story, say: “I read your pink book a long time ago.” Say: “At another workshop, I told the teacher there, ‘I want to be her.’ ” Say it in that ambiguous way so she will not know whether you mean her, the other teacher, or her, the teacher to whom you speak, your current teacher who writes “you” to mean “I” much of the time. For the sake of fiction call her Londa Lure.

Acknowledge that your primary creative ambition until this point has been to think of a plausible word for male-lover-friend that is not overly significant or obsolete like husband and boyfriend. You are experimenting with manfriend which suddenly sounds to you like a German name or a sandwich. Your other ambition has been not to copy.

You learn to copy in nursery school when you make your first image with finger paint. Mrs. Wilde, the pre-school authority, mother-figure leader, whom you learn to call teacher, says: “Everyone see what David has made. David has made a yellow sun. See if you can make a sun.”

Look at your own wet paper, how it is shapeless and copied from your prescient knowledge of menstrual blood. Mrs. Wilde admits nothing. She encourages you to make recognizable objects of paint.

Later, twenty years later, realize you have no signature. See how your handwriting changes several times every year depending on whom you know. Realize, too, you will never say “who” instead of “whom” even when you want to. Blame Mrs. Wilde. Blame your countrymen.

Consider that people are not created equal. Some people win at poker, lose at scrabble. All you want is the chance to write effective ad copy. Confess you are a bookkeeper.

You forget to create plot and characters and images. Turn to your *How to Write Fiction* book. The teacher in that book says: “It is sad but true. You must reward your reader with a real story.” Aristotelian style.

Begin to think of yourself as a hunter/gatherer/laundress. Collect actual objects, put them in a basket over your arm, walk to campus. Offer people on the sidewalk religious conversion stories (a yarmulke, a rosary). Meet some punks. Tell them they are gravediggers in *Hamlet* and you are Hamlet with all that gold in your teeth. Hand out grapes, saying: “Wrath, wrath, would you like some wrath?” Give men a certain story. Hand them miniature car crashes and naked ladies trapped on ships trapped in bottles. Give women stories about perception and food. Show them heavenly hash frozen dessert and height and weight tables.

Think of what your German sandwich told you: You learn by copying the best writers. Then encounter the concept in *How to Write Fiction* that you have thought of yourself but forgotten: “Try

writing a story in the second person. There are few examples of this in literature. It is startling and relatively unexplored.”

Londa Lure has a sense of humor, but she is the teacher and suggests for your first impromptu exercise a marital desertion story narrated in the first or third person. No one says: What about the second person? Pretend you are like other people who reserve the second person for interrogation and assault.

Decide that Londa Lure is on the Santa Maria of twentieth century literary investigation. When you find her land, you defoliate it. In years to come, you will advance the notion that she was the first in her genre, a Lady Murasaki.

Come to class singing, “Nobody does it better,” the way Carly Simon would with odd intonation. Bring a video tape of Carly Simon. Impersonate her, sing: Noah buddy duz it bed-der.

Talk about performance art as if you discovered it. Fret because everyone in the room says, “Laurie Anderson” before you can spit, before you can drop the names of Laurie Anderson's teachers.

Escape to the memory of another workshop, another impromptu assignment. Half the class writes about tinges of envy. The other half writes about the lifestyle of a writer. You write something called, “Tinges of Envy is the Lifestyle of a Writer.” You tell simply how a man you know has stories in a famous magazine. He is the best friend of your best friend (your best friend, not your manwich). Decide the story is too old to tell again. Tell it a new way. Tear it up. Begin to write memoirs.

Write your first Updike sentence. Calculate how much money you could get from the famous magazine if all your sentences

were Updikian. Suspect they don't buy Updikian memoirs written by other people.

Brew tea. Wash your face slowly with Neutrogena. Look at the whites of your eyes in the mirror while you make a million sudsy finger circles on your cheekbones. Compare the whites of your eyes to egg whites, your teeth to kernels of corn on the cob.

Wonder if it is too late to call your mother. You want to tell her you play poker and gamble. You want her reaction.

