

## ASTROLOGERS BLAME ETHEREAL FLUID FROM STARS<sup>1</sup>

### On Influence and Writing and *The House of Muzzle Loading*

My students accuse me of being morbid because so many of the stories I ask them to read feature somebody dying. I didn't consciously realize this pattern until they pointed it out; I thought I was merely choosing stories I liked that illustrated some aspect of fiction writing. But my taste in stories, it must be said, leans toward the epiphanic (as opposed to the episodic) and there's nothing better than death to invoke the mystery of being alive. Of course, taste reflects influence, and influence can be generally stated as those people, things, events, etc., which come into my life and affect me, and when I started teaching story writing my father was dying of cancer. It's strange to think that my personal experiences have trickled down to my students this way, but the action of influence is indeed fluid, impersonal in a sense, and connective, like a sexually transmitted disease. When the students disappear into their lives at the end of each quarter, I wonder how much of me they take with them. I usually assume I fade from their purview sooner than they fade from mine, but who knows? Maybe one of them will go on to teach writing someday and repeat something I once said in class that made an impression. Maybe it would be something I picked up from one of *my* teachers<sup>2</sup>; one of those juicy bon mots I hear myself tossing off, sometimes with a credit to the source, other times taking all the credit myself.

Truth be told, "being influenced" is a nice way to say writers steal. On bad days, I think of myself as something of a cultural vampire, absorbing all that catches my senses and using it as bait for my artistic fishing around. Let's take as a for instance a one-act play of mine called *The House of Muzzle Loading*. The gestation of this play is a model of kleptomaniacal inspiration; an example of what I'll loosely call my "creative process," which often begins like this: I see something creepy or strange in the world and I say to myself, "what the hell...?"

At the time I started collecting stuff for this play I was living in Glendale, California, at the foot of the bone-encrusted hill of the original Forest Lawn cemetery. It was one of those great Angelean neighborhoods where everyone is mixed up together: Latinos, Armenian-Americans, European mutts like myself. My landlady spoke with a thick German accent, the next door neighbors were second generation Mexican-Americans who vehemently opposed

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<sup>1</sup> The word *influence* was originally coined by astrologers to describe the "ethereal fluid or power" that flowed from the stars to affect our behaviors.

<sup>2</sup> Charlie D'Ambrosio never used the chalkboard except at one workshop, when he got up in a fever over someone's defense of a "stylish" piece, wrote STYLE = ANY OLD SHIT, circled it and drew a slash through the circle and yelled, "What's all this about *style*? Style has become a rubric for any old shit people feel like throwing out on the page!"

open borders. Down the street from my little duplex hulked a strip of aging storefronts, built perhaps in the thirties. We had an Armenian market, with feta cheese and olive oil and chickpeas sold by the bulk, a salon where hair phobic women paid twenty bucks to get themselves waxed, an empty space with a crumbling facade, and The House of Muzzle Loading.<sup>3</sup> I was absolutely taken the first time I saw that handpainted sign-- a "what the hell" moment of the stop-in-your-tracks variety-- but it took me a few more passes, peering inside the tinted plastic-lined windows, before I mustered the courage to go inside. It turned out to be a gun store specializing in Civil War memorabilia. They had replicas of the guns and swords of the period, a few bonafide antiques, and lots of information about Civil War reenactments, which the owners avidly participated in, traveling to Bull Run and Appomattox to march around in uniform and shoot blanks at the similarly obsessed, and of course, to barter their gear. I can't say I became a regular at their shop, which also sold modern used guns, but I stopped in a few times and overheard some interesting discussions; this was 1995, around the time of the Rodney King riots, and the mostly white guys who hung out there liked to brag about their arsenals and how pleased they'd be to break out their shit at the first sign of the lawless masses. But this was Glendale, and the masses never showed up.

The moment I stepped inside that store I knew there must be a play called *The House of Muzzle Loading*. Whether I myself would write it was unclear for a time, but in general it's quite common for me to start work from a place, a very particular place often based on a real location. This probably stems from an exercise I did several times in workshops with Irene Fornes— a most influential writing teacher— where you sit with your eyes closed and picture a place in detail, then draw it, as best you can. Only after you have mentally and figuratively envisioned the setting do you allow it to be peopled by characters.<sup>4</sup> And so it went with this play. Once I had *The House of Muzzle Loading*, *Forest Lawn*, the ice cream truck that tooled through our neighborhood tinkling not "Pop Goes the Weasel," but an equally irritating Armenian folk song, the characters happened along pretty briskly. I wandered the streets, I watched, I listened, I started to doodle with scenes, but they weren't really going anywhere. I knew fairly quickly that in order to write Armenian-American characters, I had to know more about

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<sup>3</sup> The shop has since moved. The last time I checked, it was somewhere out in Pomona, in one of those crappy storefronts on Foothill Blvd., the original "Route 66."

<sup>4</sup> The first time I did this exercise, I imagined a drive-in theater at the edge of a town in the desert. I ended up writing a play from that image, and oddly enough, while on a drive thinking about a rewrite, I came upon a place disturbingly similar to the one I had seen in my mind-- a drive-in *literally* on the edge of the desert in Barstow. When you stood with your back to the screen, there was no rear fence, just the sage and the creosote and the dry hills stretching out before you. In one of those bursts of silliness that arises from pure doubt, I decided to ascribe synchronous meaning to this coincidence, a sort of seal of universal approval.

Armenia than where it was on the map and that the immigrants ran great markets and had a fondness for fancy weddings. In particular, why had so many Armenians left their home country for California in the last century? I talked to people in the neighborhood and they spoke rather generally about following relatives here or better economic opportunities. But writing depends on the specific, so I needed more; the particular instances, the pictures and anecdotes that would reveal to me how the characters thought.

Feeling self-conscious about prying into what appeared from the outside to be a private and tightknit culture, I went to the local library where there was plenty of material on Armenian history. The information I found there was what gave me the spine of the play. I learned about the Armenian Holocaust, a repressed horror of the first World War in which Turks— who had been the latest of many conquerors of Armenia— used the chaos of the war to cover an “ethnic cleansing” of Armenians from their homeland. Though Turkey still officially denies it ever happened, according to the histories I read, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people who could not hide or flee were killed. Whole towns were wiped out; the men rounded up and told they were being conscripted and then taken to a deserted location and shot, or locked in a wooden building and burned alive. The women and children and elderly that remained were then marched— supposedly for relocation, though a destination was never intended— until they dropped dead from exhaustion or starvation. These appalling events marked Armenians of that generation for life; I read stories of people who were the only members of their families to escape, eventually making their way through terrible hardship to the United States. There was one particular eyewitness account that gave me a picture that haunts me still; a woman who survived “relocation” and later spoke of being marched along the Euphrates River, and seeing, in the water, what she thought was a log in the distance, bobbing through the current. When it came closer she saw that it was not a log at all, but a woman's dead body, the skin stretched black like rubber over the swollen corpse. She describes looking down the river and seeing hundreds of them coming after; hundreds of bodies of women and children, floating down that ancient biblical river.

These images catalyzed the details I'd already collected— the gun shop, the American Civil War, an angry main character who refuses the traditional female role of submission— and then that mysterious alchemy happened that allowed me to sit down and write the whole one-act play in a weekend. Since the first draft, there has been little revision, just cutting and a couple of scenes reworked for the subsequent production. I suppose because it arrived somewhat Athena-like from my head, I consider the play representative of a successful application of my so-called creative process; but these alchemical occasions I've found are discouragingly rare. The majority of my work is hammered out in a much more painful process of revision, sometimes over years; which means, of course, years of ongoing plunder. I think, in

fact, it's the stealing that keeps me going— or rather, that precondition for a good swipe: paying attention.

A lot of writers complain of being unable to participate fully in their lives because of the demands of their role as an objective observer. But it's the objectivity, too, that saves us somehow; its rigor allow us to detach from the world in the most generous sense, to observe with fascination rather than contempt, or at least to hold judgment spaciouly, without acting upon it. This writerly dis-attachment doesn't mean I don't feel a moral imperative behind what I do; in fact, as time goes on, I am more and more interested in "facing existence through language" as fiction writer Chris Offutt described his daily regime. Sometimes this posture feels suffocating (as in the issue of taste), but like the black sack in which Ivan Ilych struggles at the cusp of his death, its enclosure can suddenly "fall through" into big space— redemption, as Tolstoy would have it. The ethical stand behind facing life (ie., behind paying attention) is the best I can do to make meaning out of the mysterious circumstance of being alive. It's not science (my first love) and it's not social service (what I think I ought to be doing instead of writing), but it's what I can do with the personality, skills and interests I've been imparted. At this point in my life, I've developed what I can safely call a commitment to being awake in a culture that has taught me many, *many*, wonderful ways to be asleep, and I'm only beginning to understand how difficult that commitment is, on a moment-to-moment basis. I have trouble getting up in the morning. It's Seattle, it's raining or maybe the sun is out, but I have a big piece of writing to do and I don't want to get out of bed. In short, I need help on this mission, and help comes in the form of teachers and artists who, for lack of a better cliché, have walked this path before. While I may feel like something less than a success in other areas (like getting published, for instance), I've been blessed with great and inspiring teachers, all of whom have pointed me to essentially the same practice. There have been writing teachers, acting teachers, professors of English, astronomers; therapists, meditation masters, my father, Tolstoy, Alice Munro, Shakespeare, neuroscientists, my own writing students who've shown me more about the craft of writing than I ever thought I knew— they have all taught me, by example and by direct instruction, that there is beauty as well as horror to be seen when one is awake, and not just the grandiose beauty of sunsets and beaches and wide open spaces (though those are pretty great too) but the beauty of being awake itself, of having the gift of awareness. They have shown me how to take my experience and put it down on paper, or how to just be with it, breath after breath, which is the same practice, essentially, as writing: word after word, letting go of notions of outcome.

Maya Sonenberg, another influential teacher, once told me that I write my obsessions. I had never quite thought of it like that, more like I was obsessed with writing, but I think what she said is true. Obsessions are the influenza of influence for me, infecting me without my

knowledge or consent, and often making me ill with shame at what I've created, like waking up to find oneself naked on the bus. It seems that I "face existence" with characters who live on the margins; who are mean and have perverse sexual tastes; who sling guns around and insult each other and deploy sarcasm as a weapon; who are lost, half-crazed and deluded, and like every human being, they crave connection with others, with themselves, or with something greater than themselves, even though they sincerely doubt that such connection is possible. I am not so much interested in the psychological and behavioral roots of why people "go bad," but rather I want to explore for myself the dance we all have with transcendence, the interplay of the banal and the ignorant with the sacred. I gather through certain patterns in my work that I believe transcendence may be found through intimate connection (with others, with oneself, with the world), and this intimacy— a natural state— is discovered only by facing whatever stands in its way: the terror of disconnection, the pain of injustices perpetrated in the past, the fear of what is to come. I saw a new thread of this examination of "connective redemption" (to coin a phrase) come up in *Muzzle Loading*, in the bridging or connection of the individual to history. The final image in the play, of the main character Daf piercing her Armenian friend Susanna's breast, for me touches upon the universality of suffering; after Susanna's retelling of the log in the river story, this small act of pain becomes a ritual enactment of all the pain that has come before— of the Armenian women who marched to their deaths, and of every gender and generation standing under the "darkening sky" of existence, and feeling so small under that sky, a finite physical being adjudicated by a mind that aches for the infinite. The womens' intimacy and trust in each other is what allows the boundaries of action, or event in time, to expand into timelessness; by facing their pain with trust, the women connect with the something larger than themselves that they long for; in other words, love.

So my obsession with love (okay I'll just say it) is the engine for all of my work; and you can see from the previous paragraph why I prefer to show it unfold in drama rather than try to explain it through prose. Love resists conceptualization.

In his essay *On Writing*, Raymond Carver admits to keeping a collection of three-by-five cards with inspirational phrases from other writers: "Fundamental accuracy of statement is the one sole morality of writing," (Pound); "...and suddenly everything became clear to him," (Chekhov). I have some of those too, in multicolored post-its stuck all around my computer. Because they are post-its, they fall off, lose their stick, are replaced by fresh ones-- a constant stream of pithy quotes decorating my thinking spot. Right now I have these: "The bones of haiku are plainness and oddness" (something someone read to me over the phone); "I enter the realm of the imagination through the small event and let the story show itself to me," (Ethan Canin); "That is what all phenomena want— to be allowed to arise and pass away in their own time," (Larry Rosenberg). The last one is interesting because it shows me something different

whenever I look at it and reflect. While writing this essay, it reminded me that one can't possibly locate all the conditions that lead to a particular moment of creativity, or a moment of existence in general; that the currents flowing in and out of one's consciousness are so varied and innumerable and far-reaching, one might as well blame the ethereal fluid from stars. There is perhaps a nearly infinite chain of cause and effect leading *here*, which consists, as Mr. Rosenberg says, of "phenomena arising and passing away." And besides the gorgeous instruction of simply allowing this dance to unfold, the spectacular mystery of it produces in me a kind of relief that my solitary efforts may be more, much more, than the smallish picture I have of myself, hunched before my computer, rejection letters stuffed in the mailbox, a stiffening neck, the rain.

Seattle, July, 2004.