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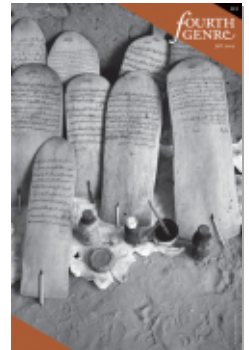
Becoming a Mouth

Heather Sellers

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Becoming a Mouth

HEATHER SELLERS

I. CRAZY GIRL

There is one in every school, standing on the edge of the playground with something in her mouth: hair, finger, paper—sex is next. She brushes her hair, but it doesn't stay brushed; parts of her are always uncomfortably set against her. She is furious she can't fit in. Mother-complex girls try to invite her, convert her, but no one can touch her, she smells. Maybe not really, but she thinks she does—call it psychic stink. From the edge of the playground, she drags her foot around in a circle in the dirty sand. She's watching them and not watching. A teacher yells at her to play, participate, get moving—she's not allowed to stand there against the fence. That area is off-limits.

She can't move from the fence. She is part of the fence. She's mute. She's furious at the others' joy, carelessness, abandon, and hope. She hates the kids. She longs for the adults *to see what is really going on*. Things aren't fair out there. It's hard for her to read a complete book; fractions are impossible; she hasn't spoken a sentence in days and days; and she is so divided, so ugly, so unnoticed, and such a spectacle, all at once. Everything she is cancels itself out. Her clothes—a thick plaid long-sleeve shirt, a polyester skirt in a strange shade of stale peach—are from 20 years ago, purchased from the Cancer Society Thrift Store. Recess is almost over, and it's getting worse. The baseball game gets heated, the four-square girls sing of their husbands named Zachary in Zambia who keep zebras by the zinnias, the singing girls swing and the Coke song evaporates, and the girl on the edge alone has one idea she knows is good. She's going to be funny.

One day, she's going to be a comedian.

It's the most unlikely thing. No one could imagine it. She is the most disturbed serious (as opposed to book serious) person in the school. She's a wreck. She can't even speak.

Already, it's funny.

And she knows this. I know she knows this. I know she wants this. I know she absolutely believes, though she has never once made anyone laugh, even or most especially herself, that she is funny, she is going to become funny. I know this because I am her. I was that girl. It was funny, wanting to be funny, being inside such a frightening serious girl. Real funny.

2. HUMOR LIKE DESIRE

Humor, like desire, does not respond well to brightly lit, close examinations. Humor, like desire, comes from the back of the psyche, from murky, slippery seams nearly impossible to see into by the light of the conscious mind. But I want to try to look at *what is funny*. I so am afraid if I admit that I know I am funny it will be the sentence that closes the door and I will be her again, the dark, fence-stuck, wrong, ugly girl. Pre-funny. Unable, again, to speak—struck down, this time by hubris.

So I have avoided writing about only one thing in my life: humor.

I tell my students that they must write about whatever it is they think can't be written about.

Humor is my forbidden topic. It's also the thing I rely on most in my writing, in order to tell the truth. My trusty tool, my go-to stance, is humor. I'm setting it down to write about the tool itself. It feels like I'm looking at humor with my bare hands. It feels like I'm strangling the source, cutting myself off from the one thing that feeds me.

3. IT'S JOKES OR MORE DRINKS, GIRLS

Recently, a close friend bought my short story collection *Georgia Under Water* and called me a week later to say she would not be reading past the first story:

too upsetting. She hoped I would understand. “I don’t want to think,” she said, “about you knowing those things.” It wasn’t how she saw me. “I don’t want to know,” she said, “how you know these things. I don’t want to say *shocked*.”

Me neither, I told her. I don’t know either.

But I do know. (As we all do.)

I know two kinds of women who come from dark, dark lives. The ones who drink too much. And the ones who can’t help but find the dark, fruitful vein in a walk around the park, breakfast at the café, a lover’s caress.

We’re very good company, those of us who walk around seeing all the dark veins in everything. We’re trustworthy, cautious, and watching closely. We understand exactly how to be terrified. Nothing worse can happen to us. The reason we tell the jokes is the same reason the other traumatized girls from the edges of the playground are drinking more drinks: we’re addicted to the way the edges curl; we love the brush of darkness against our face. We drink too much, too. But the difference is, we’re saying what it is out loud; we’re pointing out the juxtapositions.

4. READING ALOUD IN PUBLIC

“It’s so different when you read it out loud.” “I laugh but I feel bad for laughing.” “Is it *supposed* to be funny?”

I read my dark short stories out loud to an audience, and afterwards, the mother-complex women seem worried that I’m offended people are laughing. Recently, I read in Philadelphia (people laughed) and a woman surprised me during the Q and A. “I wouldn’t like it on the page,” she said loudly. “Too disturbing. I think it’s only good because you read aloud so well.” She was obviously frustrated that she’d laughed, against her will. I was surprised at her response, yet delighted at my effect.

It took me awhile to get used to my effect. One of the first readings I gave was with a group of new writers in Scotland. The manager of the evening was a writer, too, and dressed up in a hunting jacket and shiny black shoes. He was holding a glass thimble of sherry between thumb and forefinger; I felt the pinch. After I was done, he said, as though he were simply sitting in his living room, passing the time, “Is it tragedy? Is it comedy? Is it tragicomedy?”

I was stunned and thrilled and young and still a little speechless back in those days. With my fiction, I suddenly saw that I'd created a Trojan horse; I'd gotten past the guards. He and the others in the audience had laughed; they hadn't meant to, and now they were discombobulated. I felt, strongly that, as a writer, I had found my voice, which is to say the solid ground of my life's work and my attitude towards that work.

I didn't have anything to add to what I read that night, so I kept my mouth shut. I didn't answer his question. I didn't need to say anything.

I know how to stand in relationship to happiness, the abyss, and myself. I have had a hand in all three for my whole life. Or, rather: all three have had a hand in me.

5. THINGS ARE MUCH WORSE THAN WE THINK THEY ARE

A basic comedy principle: we laugh at painful things (accidents in *America's Funniest Home Videos*, pratfalls, El Kabong) because we can: really, everything's okay with these people, and laughter physically purges us of tensions. The man who bounced off the trampoline on the bicycle and into the river will hurt for awhile, and during the commercial break, when we forget about his existence altogether, he is free to go inside his house and eat dinner with his wife and kids and in the morning wake up, go to work.

Everything's okay with him. We laugh, and we're released from our own vulnerability to pain.

However, one thing I've noticed in the work of the writers I love most is that no one uses humor in this way: to purge our violent natures, to soften the blow, to make hell palatable, to size it down to manageable, television-ready, colleague-friendly, classroom-steady chunks.

When it comes to writing humor from the dark, we're calling for laughter centered in the midst of a knowledge that things that are absolutely not okay won't be anytime soon, and never were.

People laugh at this work, and then they're embarrassed and/or annoyed at the author. I think I know why. Humor from the dark margins of life isn't designed to make us laugh in order to enjoy ourselves. I would call that

“delight.” Anne Tyler delights, so does Lorrie Moore, Alexander McCall Smith, Nick Hornby—thank God for their work. Mark Twain delights: he’s a genius at taking what is conscious and putting it into words so sharp, so clear, we’re stunned we didn’t notice this stark, obvious thing before.

I’m rarely ever funny with colleagues; my powers are intact only in the classroom, and on the page. And then, when my work is funny, my reader laughs against her will. It’s jokes or more drinks, girls.

Humor is never really for fun.

Humor is the opposite of delight, the opposite of *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, at which we laugh precisely because we are *not* afraid. Delight is a celebration of consciousness.

Humor takes something that is *unconscious* and thrusts it into the light; the laugh comes when the reader recognizes, for the first time, *Oh my God, I know this dark thing, it is in me, and I didn’t know I knew it*. The humor catches the reader in the act of knowing more than she pretends to know. By laughing, from a mixture of surprise and fear and recognition, she reveals herself to be a person who knows a good deal more about hell—darkness—than she can say.

The fundamentalist doesn’t laugh at darkness: he’s only identified with heaven. The psychotic doesn’t laugh at this work (or make art): she’s only identified with hell.

Laughing at work that is honest about evil and fearless about sordid, horrible events is proof we are not at all okay. Humor juxtaposes wholeness and pieces; there’s the mirror. We cancel ourselves out. There’s the rub.

6. HEAVEN AND HELL: SAME ADDRESS

Where I’m from, things aren’t okay. They’re murderous, psychotic, sick, peculiar, fetid, and unsupervised; it’s chaos. What I know: we are not okay—any of us. And, the people who don’t laugh have cut themselves off at the bones; they are only half alive.

Humor from darkness allows monsters lurking in the unconscious to come forward, come into the light, be seen. And for us, any of us, to move forward, these shapes must be witnessed, acknowledged, held, and loved.

We laugh at darkness in spite of ourselves because we recognize that there is some part of self that is alive, some part of self that is constantly moving

more fully from darkness into light, some part of self that is always progressing. We laugh because we recognize the spirit of something moving forward, a quality of human experience extending from a pit, from darkness, towards us, a hideous tentacle that demands our attention, our affection, our touch.

That's what I felt standing by the fence on the playground. I had one finger on the tentacle. The children were in skins. They didn't see the tentacle. It saw them.

7. HIERONYMUS BOSCH'S GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Mark Twain's line "There's no humor in heaven but hell is hilarious" inverts the point. Heaven and hell are the same place, inside us and outside us.

When we look at the triptych by Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, we tend to read it from left to right, and when we do, we're astounded to see hell reiterated in heaven. Hell, the far right panel, is peopled by familiar figures; it's the same people, and linked to the garden by one continuous orchard, divided by the same river that flows through the other two panels: same trees, same poses, same animals, same weirdness. The innovation of this piece of art is Bosch's concoction of complex visual relationships linking Eden and hell. The painting presents one place, a *whole*; if you close the doors to the triptych, you have a black and white, empty *Earth*. Inside is heaven and hell, the shapes of the former just as creepy, just as bizarre, just as tortuous as in the latter. The lighting's just sunnier off the left. It's only morning.

The heaven self and the hell self in balance are the essence of creative tension. In a world or a family where the creativity has been obliterated, in any structure where the self is obliterated—the artist/child/humorist will find a way to recreate that balance, to impose heaven on hell. She will always make a space for that creative tentacle to come forward from its bed in the unconscious, so it can move around freely. And she'll follow that progressing, alive, human *thing* to whatever it lands on.

That's what humor is; that is how it works.

8. IT WASN'T FUNNY

Both my parents have severe mental illness. We lived in extreme poverty, extreme weirdness, extreme clothes, extreme climates, extreme everything. I didn't set out to see the world as funny—it wasn't, at all; it was extraordinarily hard and confusing, violent, and impoverished in every sense of the word. And, it was terrifying to live with these unpredictable, violent people (prone to rages of happiness, rages of ennui, rages of freedom). I didn't get funny; funny got me.

9. SAVING HER GOLD

Children tend to hide what's alive in them, secrete it for safekeeping, because they know it's so easy for anyone else to take anything they want. *You can't see my gold.* Anyone who grows up in a household of extreme mental and physical stress has to stow her spirit somewhere safe. I took this tendency to the extreme because I had to.

When I consider how I began to employ humor in my dark stories, I go back to when I had profound pica: the unnatural craving for inedible substances, an anomaly seen mostly in the retarded.

I began simply nibbling paper: the corners of the pages of library books, drawing paper, schoolwork. As I read each page, I tore off a triangle of corner, rolled it into a tight tube, inserted it into my mouth, nibbled, gnawed. I stabbed around in my mouth with the tiny swords; I inserted tiny slips of paper between my teeth, letting them macerate there for future use. Any book I read wasn't dog-eared, it was rendered completely earless.

It started with just the upper right corner, but soon I had to eat all four; I could not read unless I had some of the book in my mouth. By sixth grade, I'd started eating the fringe off of my notebook paper, stripping the edges of the formerly spiral bound sheets, releasing a chemical smell—bleach, Mercurochrome, dust—and I added to the nest in my mouth bits of eraser, strips of paper towel, hanks of napkin. I called it "the bolus"—I always had to have some little nest of paper and scrap of this or that in my mouth. I was turning primitive. By Christmas of seventh grade, I'd sampled rocks, shells, and clay, but I really loved pencils. By eighth grade I was devouring whole

Dixon Ticonderogas, bit by bit—first pulverizing the eraser in my mouth, then flanging the metal ferrule, separating the dimpled, ringed silver bands along the seams, one ring at a time. I poked the chips into my teeth, swallowed, and coming to the bare wood, I bit down hard. Except for the metal wire that curled through it, that shiny spine, I ate an entire seventy-nine-cent Duo Tang notebook.

I am not just from the margins.

I ate the margins.

Pica is the perfect metaphor for the work of the comic writer: we have to digest what is not digestible. People are shocked to see what we do with our material. And, in the same way all great comedy works, pica let me create another world alongside this one that was also real, inhabitable, where I could be *more* alive. We—comics and pica people—see and know based on marginal vision: comedy and pica are both based on purposefully and artfully using something for other than it was intended. We witness the physical creation of an alternative interior reality to bring to light and comprehend what cannot be comprehended—processed, digested—by the conscious mind alone. Comedy and pica harness the power of the unconscious in order to make a *whole*; both are motivated by a creative compulsion to connect to what is alive in the dark with its counterpart in the light.

It was not my intention to dissolve myself; I didn't want to disappear. I wanted to sit at the table with everyone else—desperately. But when you don't like what's going on in your life, what you're being fed, some genius in you is capable of *creating another world with different rules*. (The other option? Wear long, black trench coats and stockpile weapons.)

When I had pica, I was mimicking the artist in action. "I'm going to take things from the world into me, but not in the conventional way." I could only eat what people did not eat. I created a way of chewing on things that was elegant and private and delicious. This elemental substitution is the basic rhythm of dark humor—it's a chewing on what can't be chewed. Thus, I boiled myself down to a *mouth*. Of the girl comedian we say, *She's such a mouth*. Even when I could not speak, I was a mouth.

I grew a whole self around that charged space—but it was in my mouth I kept the fire of self burning until I could organize a larger strategy. The day I took the rocks out, I put a pen in my hand; I stopped eating notebooks and

in high school started writing blackly comic novels in them. I hoped to be discovered. By anyone.

Pica, like comedy, is genius running around sideways. It's a long tentacle, coming from way deep in the unconscious, roving blindly, urgently searching for a touch point, a place of contact. Consciousness and unconscious, heaven and hell—they are, as the great spiritual teachers keep reminding us, not opposites. They're one. When readers or reviewers say, "It's not funny," they're absolutely correct—it's not funny. Humor is about something else than funny. And you don't get to *get it*—it gets you.

10. WHAT I TELL MY STUDENTS WHO PLAYED WELL WITH OTHERS

Humor is the use of what doesn't make any sense to explain parts of us that must be understood and can't be understood. You must derange your work, I teach them. Let the back of the mind come forward and surprise you; it knows more than you ever will.

Chew on the inedible.

Humor from the margins is how we are aghast. It's the surest way we have to line up the things that refuse to be aligned and yet must be in order for us to not just go on, but move forward.

When the conscious and unconscious meet, when heaven and hell are one, we have Truth, we have our gold out. And now we can get started.