

A Contrast

Erika Mikkalo

And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.

~Sylvia Plath

Why be envious of a poet? A poet has a much easier job than a comedian.

I see him – here. I will differ from Plath, or just go with the ever-normative masculine, inspiration for lip-curling fang-bearing resentment that it may be – I see him, of course, at a rough-hewn desk at some cloistered academic window, smoking a cigarette in direct violation of university policy, slicking his hair back, or palming the whisper of stubble on a newly-shaven scalp. I see him swigging coffee from a mug with a patinated interior, temporarily distracted by a cobweb in a corner, spinning into the metaphor of Arachne, punished satirist, perpetual digression arrested by the flickering return of the iris to the window. The Comedian furtively scribbles in a small orange notebook sitting in the corner at her day job.

The Poet gazes upon the bare branches outside, the reflection on the echo of his own reflection, speculation regarding the selection of an appropriate simile in reference to an unjust mandate, promptly followed by the interior rehearsal of a precise turn of phrase specifically calculated to get into an undergraduate's pants. The Comedian releases a precisely crafted string of syllables with a specifically timed pause, a caesura honed in inflection and duration of silence, out over a crowd. There is no response.

The Poet lounges at the head of seminar table, digressing *ad nauseam* on the prevalence of a particular trope. He decontextualizes to consider how many participants are paying attention, which ones have dozed off, which ones are there merely because they believe that it would be an easy "A," that this was the only section that fits in their schedules. He decides that, ultimately, it does not matter: he has tenure. The Comedian yowls to the back of the house, attempting to be heard over a drunk, and prays that he

will shut up instead of becoming a heckler. The pay for the gig won't even cover the gas to drive out to 'Chuckles' in Lombard¹, but this is known as "paying your dues."

To the Poet, this lucky one, there is no particular obligation to coherence or conviction. Any form will suffice. He can rhyme or not rhyme. Words can scatter on the page or align primly flush with the left margin. His concerns are esoteric, how unique a degree of wordsmithy to which he might aspire, who will understand what references, if a particular image is evocative, if a phrase is clichéd or trite. His concerns are craft and communication. But the audience is rarified and removed, on paper and far away, fellow fellows flashing signals to one another with pocket mirrors from window to window of their ivory towers. And he, I would estimate, does not operate with instant rejection or deadline pressure. He can write for the audience decades in the future.

The Comedian writes for the immediate.

I'm not talking about an extended monologue, obviously. I only have three of those, although fairly short, and a twenty-minute-everything-but-the-kitchen-sink set on dating and relationships entitled "Who Gets the Privilege of Disappointing Me Next?" – a one-woman show in which the Narrator is the Job of Poontang. I'm talking about the instant feedback, not the gradual emotional shift of the audience "getting it" as the previous two pages of verbal romp culminate in a torturously consciously wrought twelve-syllable final sentence. I'm talking about the gasp, giggle, belly laugh, guffaw, howl or yawp. I'm talking about the whoop of ribald approval or the slow-burn "Oooooo..." that means "I can't believe she said that." Last set I did, a guy in the crowd gave me a firm nod and a thumbs up. Set previous, I returned to a seat at the back of the house, and the man adjacent turned to me and shook my hand. If I play it more dark and serious, people don't laugh, but come up to me and shake my hand, or touch my forearm but can't look me in the eye, or say "You were funny" or "Good job." Everyone wants love but everyone's afraid to admit it. The Poet gets to be obscure, obtuse, metaphorical, perhaps even subtle or refined.² The Comedian does not.

¹ A fictional archetypal comedy joint, alternately known as 'The Ha-Ha Hut,' 'Peanut Gallery,' or 'Larry's Laugh Lounge.' These never conveniently located establishments are redolent with the scent of stale beer, favor flocked red brocade wallpaper, and have walls studded with black-and-white headshots of the more illustrious performers, e.g., a young Carrot Top.

² E.g., "The Phoenix and the Turtle" (Clark 1318).

So you tell a joke.

Here is a polished recounting of an incident from my life as a single woman in Chicago:

Jane Addams' Memorial

In a park with grass and shrubbery, I sit on a bench. To the south, there is a monument to a famous woman. It seems oddly deferential for something representing a Nobel Prize Recipient: disembodied black hands sit supplicant and accepting on plain stone plinths. I passed it moments earlier, and am still considering its contrast in the shadow of massive bronze heroic male figures as I sit on a park bench and eat an Italian grocery store sandwich. Delicious indulgence: pepperoni, provolone, tomato, lettuce, oil and vinegar. I swig a bottle of San Pellegrino. An elderly man wanders up, gray-bearded, nut-brown, foreign, wearing a torn blue puffy parka and a stocking cap. He wheels a bicycle with a wire basket filled with crushed cans. There is a can-crushing contraption attached to the bicycle's basket. I appreciate the innovation and entrepreneurial initiative. He asks if he can sit on the bench. I am busy communing with the Universe and do not consider it mine to say one way or another. "I don't know. Can you?" I think. "Do you have a butt disorder? Do I look like Mayor Daley? It's not my park bench." The breeze shuffles yellow leaves. The old man's name is Assad. Apparently he is from Assyria. We chat amicably. He finds out that I write and suggests that we could collaborate. On a book. About Assyria. He suggests that we could meet in his apartment to discuss the book. He asks for my phone number. I decide to finish my sandwich at home.

That night, I tell the story to a classmate. She laughs. I speculate that if he gets Social Security in addition to the aluminum recycling business, he might be doing better than a graduate student. We laugh. I'm still laughing. Last summer, I pointed out the Jane Addams memorial to tourists, wondered if it shouldn't be a massive marble allegorical figure like those by Lorado Taft,³ a twenty-foot Jane Addams flogging a corrupt alderman with a ladle. I describe her accomplishments and accolades the weekend of the air and water show. "Nobel Prize," I explicate. The sonic roar of Blue Angels overhead tears the sky. I try to finish, but the "For Peace" is lost in the roaring boom, metal machines dancing in the blue, blue sky.

Since brevity is the soul of wit, this gets condensed to the following (punchline supplied by Amanda Cohen⁴):

"The last guy who asked for my phone number was seventy-two years old, had three teeth, and was collecting scrap aluminum. And he still hasn't called."

If a poem is gargantuan and open; boundless, infinite, insatiable, liquid, polymorphous, then the joke is a small, sharp, dart. Sometimes they merge, in wordplay and visual puns, although there is consensus that the pun is the lowest form. Here is my favorite verse by Margaret Atwood⁵:

you fit into me
like a hook in an eye

a fishhook
an open eye.

³ An accomplished American sculptor (1860 – 1931), he "sought to depict the highest aspirations and emotions of humanity" (Armstrong 315, 139).

⁴ Ms. Cohen is a former stand-up comic and longtime fan of Emo Phillips.

⁵ Ellman 1545

And, like a poem, you can write a joke about anything.

Well, except, possibly, rape, cancer and the Holocaust. A former supervisor once joked that his previous position had been "Publicist for Pol Pot."⁶ I'll leave riffing on the five million to Sarah Silverman. But Sylvia Plath appropriated Dachau in reference to personal pain. She also clearly possessed a sense of humor, as demonstrated by her evocation "of turkey neck and turkey gizzards" when describing an intimate moment in *The Bell Jar*.⁷ What's funny? What's appropriate? Is impropriety the job of Art? What is merely ignorant and unkind?

I was once asked to perform a "family friendly" set at an event, so it contained only one size joke, one bisexual reference, one bestiality reference, and a litany of fantasies involving grocery store cereal box characters. I've tried to think of a clean limerick. Or a serious one. The rhyme and meter do not lend the limerick the dignity appropriate to tragic themes. An attempt by your humble author:

Climate Change

"The planet is getting much warmer,"
Said the Eskimo to the farmer.
"I know what you mean,"
Replied the blue-eyed beet queen.
"Now every silo is a sauner."

Or, perhaps you can use any form to communicate a point, just not necessarily well. Didacticism must be avoided.

Plath said she'd never put a toothbrush in a poem. But it is entirely possible to do so. Here's my example:

Toothbrush Haiku

Against enemy
plaque scrub my tired enamel:
Make ivory sing.

⁶ A chain-smoking terminal doctoral candidate and the poor soul assigned the duty of training me to be a competent trolley driver for a summer tour company. During one parking attempt I managed to wedge the orange safety cone inextricably into the wheel well. I then clipped the mirror of a delivery van parked next to a skyscraper during my first practice jaunt downtown. They decided to give me a microphone and make me a tour guide instead: it is considerably more difficult cause property damage with a microphone.

⁷ Becker 27

Whereas a joke about a toothbrush is much more challenging to conjure. "*A toothbrush, some floss, and some mouthwash walk into a bar. The bartender says, 'Hey, we don't serve dentifrice in here!', and the toothbrush says...*" The one comic anecdote that I can recall related to a toothbrush is the urban legend about the tourists who had their hotel room ransacked and then return home to develop their vacation photos only to discover pictures documenting the vandals' rectums encasing the tourists' toothbrushes. But now the advent of digital photography might render this joke obsolete, or the tourists in question might discover their need for new toothbrushes quickly enough to avert hygienic disaster.

Perhaps some poets will be angered by the suggestion that they lack terseness, relevance, or precision. And I will respond that they obviously just can't take a joke.

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