

Postscript

ONE SUMMER DAY—but they were all summer days thirty-and-a-few years ago in Barranquilla, Colombia—I stepped on a bus to find a man coming back up the aisle selling dittoed collections of poems, his own poems, for ten centavos—one penny. That was an offer I could not refuse, even though I could not read his poems well. Nevertheless, as the bus rocked out of the market district, along the palm-lined boulevard of magisterial homes, then toward my apartment north of the tourist hotel, I forgot the heat and swaying while picking through lines and passages. And I thought of Vachel Lindsay. Any poet who would hit the road to sell his poems can't be all bad. I was teaching children in those days, fourth graders. One of Lindsay's poems had become one of our favorites:

Two old crows sat on a fence rail.
Two old crows sat on a fence rail.
One old crow said to the other old crow,
“Why does a bee have a sword to his tail?”
“Because . . .
Beebeebecaaaauzzzzzzzz . . .”

Perhaps it loses something in translation, from a youthful classroom on the sunnier side of the Caribbean. But it is warm in my memory.

Self-publication. Lindsay did it and Whitman too. Recently I've been thinking that multiple submission amounts to much the same thing. How many multiples do you suppose there have to be, handsomely printed by laser jet these days, to equal self-publication? Mightn't a couple of dozen editors, along with whatever co-conspirators they dragoon to the task, add up to the readers one would expect for a small, self-published volume? It is a lot less risky to send your poems off multiply through the mail than to stand around trying to sell them on street corners; it is also likelier that your work will be read.

We've come a long way in the last decade or so. It used to be that editors only permitted typed manuscripts to linger on their desks; no carbon copies or Xeroxes, for those suggested the audacity of multiple submission. Of course those old stringencies did not last, nor did they need to. I remember

Xerox copies becoming permissible, as it were, more or less abreast of the dot matrix printer. Xeroxing actually helped the dot matrix by supplying a darker, more typed-seeming page. Now, with laser printers, everything is handsome and no page an original—as the higher reaches of criticism remind us.

I remember the first laser printed submission we received, and that less than a decade ago. At least we printed it in 1986 so would not have received it much more than a year before that. When it came in, it lay around the office unattended. Only a few pages, it sported crisp line drawings of a high jumper going over the bar at various heights, and was both sly and amusing. But I assumed it was already printed and someone had just sent it along to pass on a smile. It must have lain in our office for months before it occurred to me that it was not an off-print but a submission.

I'm sure it is no coincidence that multiple submissions, a good idea for plenty of good reasons, the most important of which is that people like me can be so goddamned slow, should have found its time coming in lockstep with technology that erases any evidence of an original text, not to mention with theoretical work that argues similarly. And finding its time, it has come in a rush. For a few months there were accompanying apologetic notes that such and such was a multiple submission. Before the term was out, however, we became familiar with curt notices that this or that was being withdrawn from consideration. Oh, at first writers offered the pretense of some dreadful mistake. But pretty soon it was all matter of fact. Works are spread upon our tables and whoever pounces first gets it. We're not always even sure of that. Now, when we send out an acceptance letter and don't hear back by return mail, we begin to suspect the writer is holding out for a better offer as long as he or she decently can. We hope most of all that writers will at least let us know when a work we have of theirs has been taken.

All this leads to some nice questions in practical ethics, as an earlier century might have said. But since the best of those stories that I know don't involve this magazine, I'll not spill them. Instead I'll pass on another sweet story about multiple submission that I can afford to tell because it is ours.

Once upon a time we picked a story against my better judgment. It was a painful, compromise choice, and we made the story somewhat better, we thought, by negotiating a few shrewd changes. My chief reader for fiction

at the time did all this, and through the writer's agent—we rarely deal with agents—making it all quite professional. Then we had the story in our files, a lingering trouble for me the following year.

Because I didn't like the story, I dawdled finding the issue for it. One late autumn afternoon I even thought of sending it back, with the payment we would have paid, and saying, "Oh go publish your story somewhere else, if you can, and get paid twice. Don't make it an embarrassment for us both." But I could not bring myself to be that drastic. Instead, I went over the story again, marked it up for the printer, and was about to send it off. That very afternoon, idly—and praised be idleness for it—I picked up an issue of another magazine that had come into the office and found our story printed. Its text even included the revisions my assistant had negotiated! There is no way that author and agent could have traveled separate paths to that moment, each one ignorant of what the other had accomplished. You can imagine my pleasure in a short, vindictive letter.

In the long history of writing, our aesthetics have derived from our technological means. Lapidary verse made much less sense once writers picked up the quill pen. When I set out to write my dissertation in 1967, I treated myself to the state of the art, a Smith-Corona portable electric typewriter, and couldn't imagine how I would write and rewrite the required stack of pages without it. Surely our progress from quill pen to typewriter to ball point to electric typewriter to word processor, with ever greater quickness of response and to the extreme, so far, ephemerality of words as winks of light, has much to do with our affirmation of "writing as discovery," whether we speak of a freshman composition or a veteran's poem, and, further, of writing as gesture. Now we find the gesture multiplied and sent out as so many duplicated paper airplanes toward editors' desks across the land.

I suppose that I may be permitted to speak a bit darkly of these changes without being construed as opposing them. I know we are slow. I know I am slow. I know the readers who work with me are faster than I and I often prove the bottleneck of our office. I know, further, that much is at stake for writers—so many stories, essays, or poems must be in print before application to NEA can be made; another fifty poems must be committed to print before a publisher will look kindly on a new book; so many books have to exist to get the job desired, or before one exists enough to review for *The New York Times*. Moreover, when you have written hard and sent

something out that you think well of, you want a response—tomorrow if possible. Editors are merely the last vestige of antique, lapidary caution; your gesture should sweep into print. But I suspect also that we have fallen into a new trap.

When simultaneous submission first appeared, tentatively, as a new possibility, I believe our response was a heightened eagerness, a desire to read and decide quickly and to get the drop on more sluggish magazines. But as this practice became the norm, and as, consequently, we find higher and higher stacks of envelopes in our office, that purer desire wanes. It is very hard to avoid the feeling, now, that since we have not been sought out, why should we think of the manuscript as special? If we are pressed by other concerns, well surely someone somewhere is giving the manuscript the attention it deserves.

In the meantime, I am happy to say, what has become normal practice is not everyone's procedure. I can remember one generous selection of poems we printed a few years ago that came not as submissions, but as gifts, pamphlets hand set and hand printed that had collected in my office. One summer morning, reading through the set of them just for fun, I thought, Hey, these are good; let's extend the care already taken here by sending this work out farther. I find it difficult to imagine finding that joy of response to any multiply submitted manuscript.

Why? Just because.

Beebecaaauuzzzzzzzzz.

D.H.