



Getting into *Fiction*

Mark Mirksy and Allan Aycock

Asking me to pick a single story as an example of *Fiction's* editorial process is to set me an almost impossible task. Every story at *Fiction* has a different genealogy, and the stated policy of the magazine in combining the well known, the hardly known, the forgotten, and the unknown in each issue, immediately sets one as an editor to the riddle—from which category should I choose? As an essayist, I would find many pleasant hours in anatomizing Harold Brodkey's story about T.S. Eliot, "Eliot," in Volume 10, 3, or Donald Barthelme's fiction, "Three," in our first issue.

It takes no courage, however, to publish writers whom one already recognizes in the golden circle. At least half of the magazine comes from our unsolicited pile, despite *Fiction's* commitment to stories in translation and to regularly publishing writers who are established but want a place to experiment. Before I discuss selecting Mary Clark's "The Red-Headed Man," I think it's important to mention why this story was picked out of over twenty years of publication. I wanted a story that both the present managing editor, Allan Aycock, and I had collaborated on selecting, so that we could collaborate on an essay. This immediately limited me to the years from 1990 to present in which Allan has been part of the editorial process.

We both felt that we should choose a story which came strictly from the non-solicited pile. Some stories come to my attention through the graduate program in Creative Writing at The City College of New York in which I teach. Two of my favorites are by Gabrielle Selz and Martha Upton, but I felt that although still relatively unknown, they were part of a circle close to the magazine. We wanted to make clear that *Fiction*, as opposed to some literary magazines, though it has very specific tastes, is not dominated by a group of insiders. So we even excluded from our field of

inquiry those writers who came to my attention on the recommendation of other writers.

What I like about Mary Clark's story is the riddle of dream and reality. It is this surreal snaking in and out of fantasies that has always characterized the stories we select for *Fiction*. From the very beginning, under the hidden baton of Donald Barthelme, whom I consider the foremost stylist of American fiction through three decades, from the 1960's to the end of the 80's, the magazine was founded to find and to publish such fiction, stories, and passages of the novel that ran against the prevailing grain of naturalism in the American narrative tradition. The Europeans of our first issue, Max Frisch, Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, were masters of a metaphysical riddling that American fiction could rarely embrace in its commercial heartbeat.

Not only the structure of Mary's story, but the language, not abstract, but precise, moving from strands of red hair, to red shading into orange, cantelopes, fields of red grass, drew me to the narrative. Line by line the whimsical laughter mocked the heartache of the dream inevitably to fade. For the moment it even promises solutions, the door back into childhood, sexual bliss, before the car drives off, jilting the narrator. In reading it again I seemed to hear echoes of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* evoked in the playful circling between the storyteller and her red-headed fantasy. This gives it a certain resonance as an American narrative, drawing on those common memories of movies which have become the stock of our nightmares.

I remember Donald Barthelme's praise of John Hawkes, a writer whom I loved but towards whom Donald had a certain reserve, not entirely convinced by his fiction. We were arguing in Donald's living room, and he cut the conversation short with, "But Hawkes writes a tight line."

Mary Clark writes a tight line. When I hear that, I sit up at my desk and pay attention.

—Mark Mirksy

It is easy to discuss what makes Mary Clark's "The Red-Headed Man" a good story. I have read the story many times, worked on it with Mary, discussed it with her, and the story holds me. But what is it about the story that captured me on first reading? What spoke to my intuition?

I am the first or second reader on nearly every manuscript that comes unsolicited to the *Fiction* office. That's several thousand stories every year, of which I pass along a couple hundred to the editor. Why do I pass on one story and why do I return another? We don't have a critical agenda at the magazine, we don't have strict stylistic guidelines, and we don't have a thematic program. Although we do have a distinct proclivity for the fantastic, and we rarely publish strictly naturalistic fiction, these are hardly

restrictive guidelines and, therefore, are not terribly useful in approaching the mass of submissions. And even if I could give a prescription as to what makes a story right for *Fiction*, I wouldn't want to. Nothing could be more deadly uninteresting than handfuls of stories written to someone else's specifications.

The most I can hope for as reader is to approach each manuscript with an openness to being captured by its world. This is impossible, of course, for I am moody and often recalcitrant. Still, what most of us read for, I think, is to lose ourselves for a few moments in someone else's dream. And whatever my mood may have been when I picked up the story, this is what happened when I first read "The Red-Headed Man."

Mary's story came to me with a scribbled comment from a reader that said something like *Strange. Take a look*. Elliptical, yes, but not unusual among our editorial comments. Although it sometimes happens, we don't encourage lengthy analyses of manuscript. Our editors have a wide range of tastes, but they know the magazine well and we rely on their intuitive, visceral reactions.

My personal taste in fiction is for work that is grounded in the concrete, in detail, in the real. When a writer can evoke the fantastic through the portal of the real, I am most deeply affected. This is what is so compelling about Mary's story, and, I think, what first captured me as a reader and drew me into her dream. The story begins with a very cautious, partially recalled dream and the narrator's halting effort to find the details from her real life that she has taken "from the waking to the sleeping world." The story progresses likewise, cautiously, farther and farther into the dream, which is described with a gathering of detail, emotion, narrative. As the narrator gives herself to the dream, where everything is recognizable, everything strange, she leaves behind the waking world only to find it again at the end in the elusive correspondence of memory.

This tenuous negotiation between the two worlds is what the story is about. And the method of the writing is not to define the distinction between them with aggressive or pyrotechnic effects; rather, it is to explore the infinite, subtle, mysterious connections with clear, precise language. The "dream" is marked only by a slight skewing or syntax and by a slight adjustment to the odd internal narratives of the dream fragments. Without strenuous motions to be dreamlike, the story becomes the thing itself, suggestive, slippery, haunting.

Finally, what I can say about Mary's story is that it finds a unity of voice, language, and narrative that makes all three disappear as separate elements; in the unity the writer disappears, the artifice disappears—there is only the dream, and the reader enters.

—Allan Aycock