

## Interview of Steven Riel by *Extract(s)*, June 16, 2014

**You write some of the best persona poems I've read. What is it that draws you to writing in character? And what draws you to the women (usually) you voice?**

Writing in character came later in my development as a poet.

My first task in my late teens was to risk writing openly about my gay experience. Two impulses came to the fore: to write poetry that addressed gay political issues, and to allow a campy voice to emerge from my core. It took years to learn how to do each successfully, and honestly it is always a work in progress. One of my teachers once said that whenever he begins a new poem, he feels he knows nothing about the writing of poetry, because each poem, if it is to be vital, demands something different from him—in terms of form, content, style, etc. I experience that as well to some degree.

Over the years I've developed and explored a "gay chat" voice. There's a distinguished and varied tradition of such poetry—James Merrill, Frank O'Hara, and Richard Howard come immediately to mind, as well as the late Boston-area poet Walta Borawski. And I've also learned to get out of the way when the campy voice needs to make an appearance—sometimes it's almost like I'm channeling something that isn't mine, isn't me, really—my "Robert Goulet Is Dead!" is a good example of this sort of poem. After I've given birth to such poems, even *I'm* surprised by (and sometimes a little uncomfortable with) the result. But I'm comfortable with allowing that discomfort to be created. I'm comfortable in those two modes—the "gay chat" and the campy modes. Often they intersect!

I suspect I began writing persona poems because it was time to break new ground. It came gradually. One turning point may have been a poem I wrote called "Poem Without an I." While I have never intended to abandon entirely the first-person speaker who was at least tangentially related to me, I began a series called "13 Ways of Looking at My Effeminacy," which forced me to grapple with the aesthetic question: how best to explore in poetry my relationship with various divas? In "Rosemary Woodhouse" (published in my second chapbook), when I tried to describe how closely I identified with the character played by Mia

Farrow in the film *Rosemary's Baby*, one section attempted to explore *being* her while maintaining the perspective of the observer:

I imagine I'm you, shopping for fabric, when I'd  
calmly cross Manhattan's widest avenues,  
a slip of a doe-eyed Omaha ingénue...

But the next section switched completely into Rosemary's perspective:

Before the pain  
pinched me into a clenched  
stick of chalk...

My next attempt was to write in the voice of Lena Horne. This is when I got more serious about understanding the form, and began deliberately studying dramatic monologues while in the MFA in Poetry program in New England College. Of course I had already read dramatic monologues by Browning, Tennyson, and Richard Howard, but there was so much more to know and ponder.

What draws me to writing in character? Many things--now that my appreciation of it has deepened. First of all, it allows me to investigate a wider range of personality or situation than my own. Sometimes it's the little nuances that can be most intriguing. How to convey Lena Horne's female version of a swagger? What does it feel like to be as mousy and resigned as I imagined Squeaky Fromme's sister to be? At this point I've written through several other personas: a woman I dreamed up named Practical Patty, Melville's Ishmael, a sailor on the first French ship to land in Canada, the tutor of Tennyson's son, and a pigeon lost inside a subway station! So I've expanded my repertoire, but there can be failed attempts along the way as I develop my muscles.

What draws me to the women I tend to voice? I've often strongly identified with women and found myself intrigued by their marked personas and styles. They literally captured my imagination as a boy. Men seemed so flat by comparison. I discussed this topic briefly in my essay on Cyndi Lauper published in *My Diva: 65 Gay Men on the Women Who Inspire Them*. Certainly when I was a young boy I was constantly play-acting as a female. My older sister, my younger (gay) brother, and I would play at being schoolteachers, nuns, waitresses, Elvis Presley's

girlfriends, *anything female*. When we'd act out *The Wizard of Oz*, I'd be the Wicked Witch; when we played Nancy Drew, I'd be her tomboy chum, George Fayne (who in my imagination still wore neatly pressed powder-blue dresses). As far as I was concerned, I got the interesting parts, even if I wasn't the main character. From 6<sup>th</sup> grade on, I participated in school plays (playing male roles, of course), so I learned more about the *drama* part of dramatic monologues.

Let's not forget that the girl got the guy, which is exactly what I wanted, so why wouldn't I want to play the girl's part? In English class during my senior year of high school, we read Tennyson's dramatic monologue "Fatima." My incipient gaydar started beeping loudly. "Wait a minute," I thought. "This is a poem by a man in the voice of a woman, and it allows him to say:

My whole soul waiting silently,  
All naked in a sultry sky,  
Droops blinded with his shining eye:  
I will possess him or will die."

I immediately suspected that something in Tennyson wanted to write words of burning desire for another man, and this strategy allowed him to do so. Amazingly enough, many years later I wrote my MFA thesis on Tennyson's use of female masks to express his true feelings, and presented my paper at an international conference in Lincoln, England, commemorating the bicentenary of the poet's birth! While doing research for my thesis, I read a wonderful essay by Christopher Benfey titled "The Woman in the Mirror: Randall Jarrell and John Berryman," and have since discovered *The Routledge Anthology of Cross-Gendered Verse*, *Men Undressed: Women Writers and the Male Sexual Experience*, and *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry*. So I have a lot of inspiration and work ahead of me!

As a pro-feminist man, I'm aware of the political issues that arise when a man imagines what it means to be a woman, and puts that interpretation out in public. I try hard to be as conscious as I can of what I'm doing and what its implications are for women's well-being. Traditional gay male culture was steeped in sexism, so this can be tricky.