

Some Poems and an Essay

by John Presley

STEPS

He claimed that he was descended from the man who burned Joan of Arc at the stake. How sure that one had to have been, that she was a different species, communed with Satan, to be able to feed that flame after he saw her eyes. Imagine the anger that lit his heart, the strength of vivid conviction.

Maybe that explained why my friend was an asshole, treated women so badly that even I looked away. Living with me then, he was engaged to one beauty back in England—with a complexion like the sun after clouds—and he cried to her on the phone, left hand stroking his next sacrifice.

John Presley

CONJUNCTION

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John Presley

MINIMALIST

This is no sainted sixth century but
The halogen lamp behind her new cut
Makes her look German, religious, art.

This just isn't working for me she says.

The old Navy doctor with his cigar
Volunteers at the new bright-lit clinic,
Mumbles these are your red corpuscles here
And these are your white. Those other things there
The long black rods well they mean something else,
And reaches behind for a clean syringe.

Her new friend is ten years younger than she.
It's clear that he wants to fight me for her,
But I am deathly afraid that I'd win.

And, I am surprised that I am not surprised.

John Presley

Tell No One

Some raids were for bragging:
A noon kill, burning filled tents or stealing new
horses.
You come whooping back to your women
and you drink and you smoke until dawn.

Others might have been shameful, but needed.
You lay in wait for the old or sick, did what must be
done,
even if ugly, but you never mention it to women
or to fellow warriors, even if they were there beside
you.

In both raids, coup can be counted.
After the second, denying the deed
as the survivors beg peace is a second coup,
Lying to the enemy, a second, sweeter revenge.

When my enemy's thin living ghost asks,
"Did you talk to the Texas consultants?"
I say "No, they must have heard enough from
other people. They never called me."

Lying is always a noble calling.
Flying first class with New York paying.
Cold gin makes the blood sing through my veins.

John Presley

POEM, POET, DETECTIVE, TRICKSTER

by John Presley

Hello, my name is John, and I'm addicted to writing poetry. I'm addicted to writing and revision and discovering meaning in my own life and memories, and to finding meaning in the lives and memories and words of others. I especially like the act of revision, when the sudden light of recognition shines, and I find a meaning I didn't know that I knew, or even meant at first take.

I love putting pieces together that at first glance seem not to mean anything by themselves, but which seem to present a productive

mystery when they are considered together. I revel in discovering cosmic irony or the like when I put one piece of paper near some other scrap I've been hoarding for months or years. For example, I have a sheet of paper with words I overheard in the Dayton airport, when an older woman in a wheelchair was pushed by. When I heard her say, "Well, the first two were bipolar, and the third had a tail..." I knew I had to find my pencil and pad and follow her. And I did, and those fragments will one day work together with other fragments when either my "Inner Detective" discovers a meaning or when Trickster decides to trump or play that inner detective, to show me how and what these mysteries mean.

It's that love of writing and revising and what I might learn from it that keeps me writing poems—there's no fame, no money in it, no longer even a "merit" raise every year—it's just me and my addiction. Hey, some people are addicted to crossword puzzles. And I'm willing to admit that the two activities have a couple of aspects in common. (But I gave up crossword puzzles when I learned that knowing too much was a disadvantage in the competition. I know the names of two "gods of war, 4 spaces, ends in s," for example). But while my revisions may not give me the voice of a legislator of the world, I am highly entertained by moving the pieces around until a mystery is solved and something is built.

Now, don't misunderstand: some poems of mine have "fallen from the sky" almost complete, and astonishingly, even sometimes in the form of sonnets. Like Robert Graves, I try always to have paper of some kind near me in case that happens, and like most compulsive or addicted writers, I can exhibit a bit of obsession with a particular kind of pen, a particular kind of paper. (Sometimes, when Graves forgot his paper, he had to resort to scratching on the backs of dry cleaning receipts. Once when he was completely out of paper and a poem started to fall from the sky, he was reduced to writing on the back of a flattened out ice cream carton!) This year, I like writing on the texture of expensive drawing paper. But I am mainly addicted to the act of writing and revising, not to the paraphernalia, so most of the time I'm happy to "get an idea" and work at it, revising slowly and trying to solve the mystery of the meaning of my memories, words, phrases, and to see how they all change and adjust themselves to new contexts.

Sometimes, I write phrases and sentences down to hoard them, and it may be years later when I discover that the image or the stanza about the peacocks in the park in Vienna and the sentences about the old man stoically putting up and then removing all the

umbrellas from the guest tables, will mean more than I thought if I also allude to, or plagiarize from, e.e. cummings. And it will be fun to put all this in one stanza. I once worked for ten years or more on a poem about Doubting Thomas, only to learn from the poem finally that it was not one, but two poems about Doubting Thomas. Once my inner detective finally solved the mystery, I realized that I had been deluding myself for quite some time about what I knew and how much I knew about Doubting Thomas. No wonder it took ten years.

I enjoy throwing form and structure into the mix, too. That's like really inviting Trickster to toss new meanings at you. The restraints—and possibilities—of form simply make my detective work just that much more enjoyable, that much more surprising. Take a poem that in first draft seems to slam together two fragments I thought were unrelated to each other: the image of a halogen lamp creating the illusion of a halo, and the story told to me by a friend—honest, it was a friend, and not me—about his long-ago visit to the free health clinic. Who knew that the free clinic story, originally told to me as a joke, and a good one, would work so well with the admittedly rather strained halogen-halo figure? Or that the banal complaint of “This just isn't working for me” used here to end a relationship would be ironically illuminated by the threat of violence from the new boyfriend? Or that the poem's speaker would be as disinterested in the outcome of any fight as the “she” with the halogen halo was disinterested in the outcome of the relationship? Well, I didn't—not until I wrote them, and not finally until I went through the revision process with all the lines in place.

So, the poet learns what all these pieces mean and to some degree, the detection, and the unpredictable collaboration with Trickster, is made just that much more enjoyable and surprising by the demands of form. I had no idea that “The long black rods well they mean something else/And reaches behind for a clean syringe” would make such very nice, sloppy and surprising lines of pentameter, and I certainly didn't know that all this now-discovered boredom with love and its complications would make a nice sonnet. Even if the sestet is in the middle.

As a teenager I once wrote a very puerile poem claiming “Poems/are words with/noises happening between.” Though the *New Yorker*, *American Poetry Review*, and even *Poetry* are dominated by such “language poems,” I no longer want to focus on the odd word, or the difficult and unusual syntax, the how-clever-is-this techniques of such poetry. In a later poem I used the image

of leaves blown up in the air by a passing car to represent the ideas and memories and facts that would later be re-ordered into a poem. But it is not a random, chaotic re-ordering that makes a poem—it is the act of will, the detection, or the sudden appearance of the unconscious, of Trickster, that re-orders those leaves into verbal art that fascinates me now. John Updike described the way art can “sidestep mortality with feats of attention, of harmony, of illuminating connections.” It is those feats of attention and those illuminating connections that I want to detect and which keep me working at the mystery of writing and revising. When I began writing “Steps” I thought, after two decades of remembering a British poet I once knew, that I might be able to “detect” a meaning, a significance, simply in my memories of him. I had been so impressed by his great talent as a poet that I’d long wanted to write a poem in which he’d be Mozart to my Salieri, and in which I’d be shown surprisingly, ironically correct in my modest estimate of my talents compared to his. But my poetic Mozart had a lot of other issues: he may have been a thief, he was certainly a liar, and he was so abusive in all his relationships with women that he was the only modern, actual person I’d ever called a “cad.” But the act of drafting, of pressing poetry from my pen, reminded me that my poet-friend claimed to be descended from one of the executioners of Joan of Arc, and he seemed to be proud of this connection.

I began to detect a possible truth. As I struggled to find new words for “fire” and “glowing” and ground away at making the 14 lines work, I was struck not so much by his hostility toward women as by his distant and unfeeling assumption of superiority to women that explained the two behaviors, his and his ancestor’s.

Perhaps what makes a “cad” is the sense that no relationship is important enough to invest oneself in continuing it. And what linked the image of the cad in my mind to the image of his executioner-ancestor may be the “burning” complexion of the betrayed lover back in England. I didn’t know about the possible existence of any of these connections—I didn’t even know that I knew things I might connect—before I began to write and revise. Writing poetry, I remind myself, is submitting one’s preliminary, vague, partial or even incorrect ideas to the detective work of composing, revising, matching form and idea.

And the ambiguity in the last line? Just what is the next sacrifice? Well, sometimes the Detective Making Meaning may be surprised by Trickster. Imagination meeting memory in the dark, as Annie Dillard has said. Sometimes the Detective decides to go with

Trickster, especially when the result is a productive ambiguity (think of the endings of *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*).

I wrote “How My Interview Went” after losing out in an interview for a college presidency. I was angry, fixated, ranting about the unfairness of it all when my wife Katherine told me to shut up and write a poem about it. I began writing the poem in a fever of wounded ego.

But slowly, the I found act of writing uncovering for me a meaning I’d not suspected—and certainly not experienced—solving a mystery of which I was barely aware. Flinging the refrain “What the hell was I thinking?” in my face caused me to begin to think that I might have dodged a bullet when the Trustees decided they liked the Lutheran Air Force General better than they had liked me. When I discovered the figure “When they said X, I should have thought Y,” I began to realize what a constant strain it might have been, this posing as a college president. And when working to clarify the synecdoche of the “chinless corduroy jacket at the inevitable Faculty Forum,” and then finding that figure followed, surprisingly and immediately, by the rather chagrined bird dog “squatting in the field,” I knew that either Trickster or my detective skills had uncovered for me the idiocy and the humiliation of the usual beauty-pageant presidential interview, once and for all. (In fact, I believe so strongly in this “revealed truth” discovered during the act of composing that I have gone on to lecture about the absurdity of this sort of interview process many times).

But I love half-truths, too; they give the detective, and Trickster too, room to play in, and space for discovery. I frequently use the character of a not-very-well-assimilated Indian, and over the years that character has uttered several explanations of how tribal status is measured—that the Indian who lies best to the most white people is the Indian most highly regarded for his status, for example. Or is it the Indian with the stinkiest shirt? (I think I read that one in *Northwest Passage*). And is it true that the Choctaws are the only native North American headhunters? I read that somewhere, too, I’m sure. But the truth of it doesn’t matter to me: I like throwing even imaginary pieces of one culture at another and watching what happens. Like a detective lying to a witness he’s interviewing.

For example, in “Tell No One” the elaborate declension of the status involved in counting coup is a mélange of the various things I’ve read over the years about the practice. There are indeed various ways of counting coup, and the relative honor resulting from each method, I have been told, varies from tribe to tribe. I

don't know if the declension here is literally true or not. I actually began writing the "rules" out, in fragments, when a colleague told me that the reason I find academic arguments so difficult is that I'm always expecting to count coup—and that's also when I began a course of reading about counting coup.

The identity of the speaker in "Tell No One" shifts for the reader, jolting the reader with a surprise: stanzas one, two, and three seem spoken by some historical character, perhaps a warrior who actually participated in the types of raids he is carefully spelling out. But at the second line of stanza 4, the reader is likely to suddenly realize that he or she has been tricked or misled, and that this is a modern speaker, mulling over the rules of coup-counting, and, as the details add up, the reader may realize that this speaker, even though modern, has a warrior character trait or two. And I have to admit that I discovered this shift and its effect very, very late in the writing of the poem. It's the work of Trickster. With very little added detail about why the speaker is musing on this subject, the reader can only infer what may have happened; so now the reader is made a detective, too, discovering meaning and trying to decide the mystery of what is real, what adds to the poem's meaning.

Has the speaker in "Tell No One" counted coup on a colleague? Did the speaker hate the colleague, but pretend to respect the colleague? Apparently the speaker *might* have "trashed" the colleague—or whoever the "enemy" is—in a conversation with a consultant. And the speaker *might* have even talked to the "enemy," helping his victim try to discover who had done the deed for which the speaker will claim honor. But here, the reader is indeed acting as a detective, searching for meaning, making up his or her own story, and the mystery may lie in these inferred narratives.

And the last line is simply a playful allusion to the scariest line in the novel *The Exorcist*, the line heard when the tape of the possessing demon's voice is played backwards.

Did I plan all this before sitting down to write and revise? No. I detected these meanings, all these relationships, in the process of solving the mystery of my fascination with the gradations of coup. Or I had them handed to me by Trickster.

So, that's my thesis. The really interesting part of writing poetry is the detective work, the act of will, the rational, conscious work of trying first this alternative and then this one, and adjusting all the

other ideas when these two seem to click, and so on. The poet feels in control; the poet is the Detective rationally testing, tasting, all the possibilities that he or she can think of. But, then there is the other even more entertaining side of the work—intuition, serendipity, the ideas that seem to fall from the sky, and the sudden thought that entirely reverses the meaning of the piece. The detective, the searching by the intellect may have started the process, but sometimes suddenly Trickster intrudes. And Trickster's frequently ironic and playful intrusions are always illuminating!

Finally, I'm working right now on a comic poem about a literary tour of Boar's Hill, the area south of Oxford where so many British poets have lived. I have another in draft about sleeping upstairs while a beach house is torn apart by a storm. At this point I don't think they're going to be very good at all. I haven't discovered a mystery in either draft yet.

Author Note

John Presley has been writing poetry for 45 years, having published in journals ranging from *Blue Unicorn* and *South Atlantic Review* to the *North Dakota Quarterly* to *Troubadour*, and he has published a chapbook, *How Like a Life*. At the same time, he has published a number of textbooks and written widely on modern literature, especially on the work of Robert Graves. Perhaps most ironically, he has served as Provost or Dean at five institutions ranging from a private liberal arts college, Lafayette College, to the University of Michigan. Having most recently served as Provost at Illinois State University, he is now a Professor of English in the ISU College of Education, where he teaches in the doctoral programs in higher education administration.