

## Why Did You Write That?

by Donal Mahoney

Anyone who has written fiction or poetry probably has been asked at one time or another, "Why did you write that?" I've been asked that question and I have never been able to provide an answer.

Some writers may set out to write a poem that will address an important question about life, such as who we are as human beings and what purpose, if any, we have on Earth. I have never tried to write a poem like that. Nor have I ever written a poem knowing in advance what it might say. I just write down "words" that come to me, provided I like the way they sound and like their "rhythm" when heard together.

I might be sitting in a diner or in my living room and "hear" a few words that sound as though they belong together and so I jot them down, often on a napkin or scrap paper. Maybe an hour or a week later, those same few words will "give birth" to a few more words that seem to fit with their "parents" so I add them to the scrap paper. When I have enough words, I make my first conscious decision to do something with them. I add verbs or nouns and whatever else is needed to add structure. Eventually I have sentences which I then break into lines, according to sound and inflection. End breaks are important to me. Next I try to determine what the poem, if anything, is trying to say. And that's not always easy.

I have never been impressed with adjectives and adverbs. I like concrete nouns and strong verbs that drive those nouns wherever they need to go. Sometimes they never go anywhere. Sometimes they "sleep" for a long time, technically alive, but not developing into anything. It's as if they were an ovum needing semen to become an embryo. But no matter how long a group of words may lie dormant, I never abort them because some day I may know what to do with them and they might develop into a poem.

By themselves words exist "in potency." In the right poem, they exist "in act." Big transition, all for the better.

Once my "heard" words are in sentences, I try to arrange them in the first draft of a poem. The sound of words bumping into each other, one after the other, is paramount for me. At its best, the sound would be lyrical but it doesn't have to be as long as there is a "rhythm" of some kind that I can hear. I have no interest in the "meaning" of a poem in gestation, although I hope to discover meaning when the

poem is finished or almost finished. Sometimes, however, I have to inject "meaning" so I can finish the poem and not lose the words that prompted me to write the piece in the first place.

When I come back to a first draft of my "heard" words, I always find the text needs surgery. So I begin to search for whatever message might lie in those early lines. If I find I actually said something meaningful, I'm not surprised. Over the years, I've sensed a process in which a poem bubbles up in my subconscious and then slowly takes shape in my mind. Part of this process I direct, and part of it just happens.

For once, I'd like to write a poem on purpose about an idea, major or minor. I'd like to know the point I want to make in a poem before I start making it. But I don't ever recall writing a poem with a purpose in mind. I started writing poems around 1960 and now it's 2012, and the way I work hasn't changed: I "hear" a few words while doing something else and their arrival always surprises me. They're like a gopher popping out of a hole. If I were a painter or photographer, I would paint or photograph the gopher. That strikes me as far less laborious than jotting down "first words" on scrap paper in the hope they will eventually mature into a poem.

It's amazing to me, for example, how one of my earliest poems, "In Break Formation," which appears below, ever got written, never mind accepted and published by *The Beloit Poetry Journal* in 1968. The panic attack that occurs in the poem actually happened to a woman in a kitchen while I was with her. At the time, neither the woman nor I knew she was having a panic attack because nothing bad had happened and neither of us had ever heard of a panic attack. Every other detail in the poem, however, I had to fabricate over time to make the poem come together and "work." To accomplish this I used the three words I "heard" at the start--"in break formation"--and the image from an old World War II movie that I "saw"--namely, planes in the sky diving in a diagonal line, one right after the other, toward a target somewhere below.

Any poem I write I write to satisfy me--not anyone else. If I'm lucky, an editor will publish the poem, and that's wonderful. If a reader or two likes the poem, that's a bonus. But I write only for myself, to satisfy my own ear, to "finish" a given poem so I don't have to think about it anymore. However, six months after the poem is published, if I read it again, I'm apt to find something "wrong" with it. And so I begin tinkering with the "finished" text to eliminate the flaw. Sometimes I can make the fix. But sometimes my efforts result in a new and different poem. It was Dylan Thomas, I think, who said that a poem is never finished, only abandoned. For me, Mr. Thomas was right.

Completing a poem has always been more important to me than saying something important. Maybe it's like making a vase on a potter's wheel without concern as to what the vase might be used for. I admit to this now because I hope one day to be able to answer the well-intentioned person who might ask me how or why I wrote a certain poem. Not long ago I saw Philip Levine, former U.S. poet laureate, on public television. The interviewer asked him if he knew where his poems "came from." Mr. Levine looked embarrassed and finally said he had no idea where his poems "came from." I share his ignorance, in the best sense of that word. If I knew where poems came from, I would go there with a big suitcase or maybe just a laptop.

I don't understand how or why my way of writing a poem works for me but I would like to know if anyone else writing poetry works in a similar fashion. I'd also like to hear from any poet who knows what he or she will write before starting a poem or what the ending will be before the first line is written. For me, that would be like knowing from the moment of conception the gender and personality of a child I had fathered. Some day technology in obstetrics may make that possible. But I don't think technology will ever explain in advance the DNA of a poem.

## **In Break Formation**

The indications used to come  
like movie fighter planes in break  
formation, one by one, the perfect  
plummet, down and out. This time they're  
slower. But after supper, when I hear her  
in the kitchen hum again, hum higher,  
higher, till my ears are numb,  
I remember how it was  
the last time: how she hummed  
to Aramaic peaks, flung  
supper plates across the kitchen  
till I brought her by the shoulders  
humming to the chair.  
I remember how the final days  
her eyelids, operating on their own,  
rose and fell, how she strolled  
among the children, winding tractors,

hugging dolls, how finally  
I phoned and had them come again,  
how I walked behind them  
as they took her by the shoulders,  
house dress in the breeze, slowly  
down the walk and to the curbing,  
how I watched them bend her  
in the back seat of the squad again,  
how I watched them pull away  
and heard again the parliament  
of neighbors talking.

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