

Mesostic Exercise

Here is an exercise fun to do to honor a person or artist you love, for friends' birthdays, or any such occasion, or just to see where the need of one specific letter will lead your mind in the act of writing a poem. Like it's sister form, the acrostic, this takes certain words and spells them going down the page. Unlike acrostics, this form does not settle for the left hand margin, but puts the words going down in the middle of lines making for a shape quite unlike "lawnmower poetry." From Postmodern American Poetry, edited by Paul Hoover:

JOHN CAGE

1912-1992

Born in Los Angeles, John Cage was the son of an inventor who developed an explanation of the cosmos called "Electrostatic Field Theory."¹ This history predicts Cage's own innovations in music, a field he chose after early ambitions as a writer and painter. In 1933, he became the student of Arnold Schoenberg, who later called Cage not a composer but "an inventor—of genius."² Committed to experiment, especially the Dadaist example of Marcel Duchamp, Cage went on to pioneer a new conception of music based on the use of chance and other nonintentional methods. In this, he was aided by his study of Zen Buddhism and a pacifist social philosophy based in the writings of Thoreau. As William Carlos Williams had done in poetry, Cage expanded the definition of music to include all categories of sound, such as random everyday noises. As he writes in "The Future of Music": "Klangfarbenmelodie has not taken the place of *bel canto*. It has extended our realization of what can happen."³

In the 1960s, following his own example in music, as well as the work of Clark Coolidge and Jackson Mac Low, Cage turned his attention to poetry, using both nonintentional and intentional methods. He soon discovered the use of mesostics, a form of acrostics, as an aid to composition. He also began using the texts of honored predecessors, such as James Joyce and Ezra Pound, as the basis for his chance procedures. Such methods as the casting of the *I Ching* to determine relationships within the text are intended to bring about the politically desirable goal of "demilitarizing" the language. Cage's "indeterminacy," his challenge to the status of author as ego, and his use of appropriation and found materials have become defining characteristics of postmodern art in general.

His work in language includes A Year from Monday (1967), M: Writings '67-72, Empty Words: Writings '73-'78, and X: Writings '79-'82.

A frequent collaborator with choreographer Merce Cunningham, Cage lived in New York City.

1. John Cage, "Autobiography," in *Conversing with John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, New York, 1988, p. 1. 2. The same, p. 6. 3. *Empty Words: Writings* '73-'78, Middletown, CT, 1979, p. 178.

25 Mesostics Re and Not Re Mark Tobey

R.

it was iMpossible to do Anything: the dooR was locKed.

i won The first game. he wOn the second. in Boston, nExt Year, he'll be teaching philosophy.

> the house is a Mess: pAintings wheRever you looK.

she told Me his wAy of Reading assumes that the book he's reading is true.

> why doesn'T he stOp painting? someBody will havE to spend Years cataloguing, etc.

The girl checking in the baggage reduced Our overweight to zero By counting it on a first-class passEnger's ticket: the heaviest handbag had been hidden unnecessarilY forTunately, we were with hanna, antOinette, and hanna's two Boys. thE girl at the counter gave one of the boYs a carry-on luggage tag as a souvenir.

My

strAtegy: act as though you'Re home; don't asK any questions.

instead of Music: thunder, trAffic, biRds, and high-speed military planes/producing sonic booms; and then a chicKen (pontpoint).

> each Thing he saw he asked us tO look at. By thE time we reached the japanese restaurant our eYes were open.

the rooM dAvid has in the attic is veRy good for his worK.

how much do The paintings cOst? they were Bought on the installmEnt plan: there was no moneY.

fOur in the morning. carpenters came aBout sEven thirtY to finish their work in his bedroom.

you can find ouT what kind Of art is up to the minute By visiting thE head office a successful advertising companY. It continues, but you get the idea. When there is a proper. noun in the poem, he purposely makes the first letter lower case so as to not confuse the subject of the poem, the brilliant painter and <u>Bahá'í</u> member, Mark Tobey. Pick a friend, an artist you love (and go to over and over) or a family member, and write their name in ALL CAPS going down the page. Start the poem with a line that will include a word that has the letter in the subject's first name and go from there. You can make lines as long as you want and as long as will allow the form to hold. You can line up the starter words (subject) as you go, or tidy up after you write the poem and you'll see if the lines need to be tweaked to retain the form. Cage gave some of the versions of this form more restrictions, but this easier version can work for now. One example of mine which ignored the capital letter rule:

Morris Graves Mesostic

Consciousness assuming the forM of a man partial to sOlitude y ceanothus that side The Lake under 800 y.o. Redwood gRandfathers stifle the machine age noise. Consciousness assuming the foRm of a cup chalice, snake, bIrd, moon, blooming flower or lotus blossom breathing forth itS own birthing chamber.

> Consciousness assuminG the form of an avalanche in which no casualties, a foRest fire in which a single deer mAy find safety in a mountain creek, in a Vedanta Sutra, a Gurdjieff Hymn playEd back by a rapturouS vocalizer or a winter in Chartres or

Harlem. consciousness assuMing the form of a purification rEtreat & banana slugs, pasta with meat sauce, goat cheeSe, puer and a stolen peppermint chocolate patty. ConsciOusness assuming the form of a snake bathing in the light of the Snow moon, a querent in retreaT from all the machine age noise. *Evil Is mechaniCal.* No pretending this is no vigil.

8p - N.3.13 The Lake Loleta, CA Quote from D.H. Lawrence



Paul E Nelson 8:22pm, 4.10.2021