

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Literature

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3nk1j384>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Presley, John Woodrow

Publication Date

1996-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Three Bulls Views the Portrait of Columbus

Did they tell you they had waited it out
in shelter unsafe from winds from the east?
That the wooden framing strained like your boats'
and that this unheard of storm from the sea

ripped the door from their hiding,
took it away and they ran for the trees?
Were they blinded by sparks from blowing fire
while they shivered and slept in the open?

The next morning I imagine your boats
already there, their arrival a scar,
halfwit platoons to die at your word, devils
drawing lines round themselves on the beaches.

No mere rain could wash that clay smile as
following tales of resurrection
you carried your will sovereign halfway
round the earth, teasing out jewels from crowns.

Could they imagine what it was you brought,
the sheer crush of everything needed
for getting here and getting back again
and making *here* seem like *there*, and returning,

and the torch that you put to the forest
and the plow that you pushed through the prairie
and the steel that you put in the breast,
grandfathers melting away in the gale,

John Woodrow Presley is dean of the College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters at the University of Michigan–Dearborn, where he also teaches writing and popular culture. An earlier version of “Three Bulls Views the Portrait of Columbus” was published in 1992 in *Dear Christopher*, edited by Darryl Wilson and Barry Joyce, University of California, Riverside. “Coyote Dreams” was written by members of an alumni poetry workshop taught by Presley at Camp Michigania in the summer of 1995.

led to Gould and to Frick and these houses,
where soft chairs turned from last year's paintings
to face this year's newest old masters, that
these buttons pressed could call Irish servants?

Swords carried like crosses down streets of flame
made easy the warm dreaming parlors,
and kneeling nations behind rose windows
forgot jimson weed and sycamore leaves,

made the earth unendurable
and morning sky a hemorrhage of red.

Where they once sat now we all stand
with tapes, hats, furs before pictures gilt-framed and
hung there by builders, explorers, and thieves
separate from what we might love
by all that we think we have.

—John Woodrow Presley

Three Bulls at the Ethnobotany Lecture

“Of twenty-five thousand plant species
native to North America, Indians
identified twenty-five hundred
that exhibit medicinal effects.”

Liniment of bull thistle pulls pain from joints.
Boiled leaves of yarrow clear the eyes.
Bunchberry roots in a tea soothe colic.
Ginseng, for eyes and ears, is the plant that cries.

“How did the tribes come to know these drugs?
Why does the willow produce in its bark
the long chain molecules of salicin?
How did they know that its bark cured headache?”

Does the cohosh know its root eases childbirth?
Smooth sumac will dry a wound, as will
the anise-scented root of sweet cicely.
Cool eyewash from the blossoms of beebalm.

“No native plant has since been discovered
to possess medicinal qualities
that native people have not known and used.”
Did you listen to your grandmother’s stories?

Goldenrod reduces fever, stops milk;
Dandelion, jaundice; columbine, love.
Blisters from the balsam tree weep a pitch
that closes wounds. Burdock purifies the blood.

Plaintains—white man’s tracks—for the appetite,
Virginia snakeroot for a stomach tea;
The lady slipper in medicine bags
will bring the wearers many strong dreams.

Juniper for the blood, and cough relief,
poultice for toothache, and a spice for stew.
The jimson weed and the morning glory make
for visions, heaven and earth one from two.

Ginseng is the plant that cries.

—*John Woodrow Presley*

Coyote Dreams

Old dreams of smiling cheats, statisticians—
Coyote sleeps in his deep winter den—
Statesmen, drive-by shooters, Leland Stanford
Polluters, Attila, Dracula, Genghis Khan

Make Coyote’s blood warm and his pulse less thin.

Mad Bear Harney and George Armstrong Custer
Follow lines drawn back East by manicured hand.
Follow orders that will kill ten thousand people:
Sooty trains roll across Sioux land.

Coyote’s lips curl and he tucks his head tighter.

When Stalin needed somebody to blame
Writers and artists were first to the wall.
An old man smiles and counts his change,
Thinks of his millionth black automobile.

Coyote rolls onto his back, with a smile.

Doctors need details, policemen won't bother,
And Speck and Dahmer, for now, are free.
George Wallace lets loose his dogs and his bullies
When old outsiders dare aim for mainstream.

—James Earl Ray, John Mitchell, John Dean,
Sirhan Sirhan, Janet Reno, and Nixon;
Albert Speer, Mark Fuhrman, Earl Watts, and Helms;
Bonaparte, Gingrich, Tojo and Sherman—

Coyote's eyes open. He stretches his legs.

If people will die for their need to believe
Is it always Koresh who feeds the fires?
Is it doctors ready with the last injection
When the old and the ill grow tired of their lives?

Coyote has wakened from his short winter trance.
Soon he will rise, lick his dry lips, and dance.

—*John Woodrow Presley*

