Evolution and Revision:
Two Narrative Poems
and How They Came to Be
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EVOLUTION AND REVISION

The first book of poems I can remember reading was Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* in about the third or fourth grade. Oddly enough, I wrote my first narrative poem some time before that. This means that either someone read poetry to me when I was very young (and no offense intended, but it certainly was not my parents), or else I was just born with poetry in my soul. I like to think the latter.

I don't remember what, if anything in particular, inspired "The Village Rose". As I like to tell people, though, it took two years but was written in one night. My junior year in high school I decided I wanted to write a poem as a Christmas present for an English teacher. I had the title right away and knew more or less what was going to happen. Try as I might, however, I just could not write it. I got the first nine stanzas down and was stuck.

At that time how I wrote a poem was, I had an idea, I sat down and wrote until the poem was done, and that was that. I revised as I went and once I considered a poem finished, I would not change it; it somehow did not seem right.

When I could not write "The Village Rose" that one night that I tried, it was put away, and though I would occasionally get it out to see if I might be struck with a blinding flash of inspiration, the poem went nowhere for the next two years. Finally, the second semester of my freshman year at Ball State, I got the motivation I needed: a deadline. I had to do a final creative project for a colloquium and "The Village Rose" seemed perfect. True to form, I sat down two nights before it was due and wrote it in one sitting. I turned it in, got a good grade, and left it at that. My family and friends liked it and so did I; I was content.

Fall of my sophomore year, though, I went to England and took a creative writing course and something happened. I was reading over "The Village Rose" before printing it up to show to my professor (he had said that rhymed poetry was very difficult to write and I had disagreed) when I realized that I did not like the poem as much as I had used to. There were several parts where the end rhyme was forced or I had made some poor word choices. All of a sudden, I did not want to show this poem to my professor--especially not if I was trying to prove a point with it. So I did what I had never before done: I revised it. They were minor changes, really, but I was instantly much happier with the poem.

I still think "The Village Rose" is a good story, so when I decided to write narrative poetry
as my thesis, I could not leave it out. Once again, I got out my nit-picker’s pen and revised it. Again, I think it is a better poem because of it—and to be honest, I would like to do even more with it.

I had planned on having four or five poems included in my thesis. It did not seem an unreasonable goal, since I still believed I could just sit down and hash out a poem in a single sitting. I never imagined what a bear “Just My Luck” would turn out to be.

Really, it was not that unrealistic to think I could crank out “Just My Luck” in a day or two; it, too, is a revision of an earlier poem (the original has been included in this thesis for comparison and as a curiosity). Written in the eighth grade as a school project, the original poem was only twenty-one stanzas, less than half the length of the revision. As with “The Village Rose”, the original had an interesting premise and I wanted to see it included in my thesis. Unlike “The Village Rose”, however, which only required minor adjustments, “Just My Luck” needed a major overhaul.

At first I thought I could simply (“simply”—there was where I went wrong) tighten up some of the end rhyme and change certain rather obvious lapses in the rhythm. As a means for accomplishing this, I decided to convert the poem into an old west dialect, which was fitting anyway since the poem is set in 1881 and since the style is based on the western ballads.

The dialect came easily enough, but it was not long before I had to admit to myself that the story was lacking. The whole plot revolves around the main character’s supposed bad luck, but in the original poem, nothing ever happens that could really be considered the work of a “curse”. I left off “converting” the original into dialect and began rewriting the story.

First I had to establish the characters. Thomas and Theo were in the original “Just My Luck”, along with three other men named Alasdair, John, and Jake. Jake died in the original, and there came a point in the poem where I needed something to rhyme with his name, so I made John crazy and referred to him as “the flake”. That was the first to go. John became James, and I tagged “Crazy” on, first, as a sort of tribute to the original poem, and second, to help set up the scene in the saloon. Alasdair—well, heaven only knows where I came up with that name in the first place, so I scrapped him too in favor of Will Carey, who I made James’ brother. Since “Jake” was such a difficult name to find a rhyme for, and as I realized that I just did not need so many characters, I discarded him altogether and dumped his fate on poor Theo. Having fewer characters
allowed me to devote a little more space to each, thus injecting some personality where before there had only been a bunch of names.

Other than changing which character dies, I left the end as it was. The real task was having Thomas’s curse affect each of the other characters so that it would seem that he really was the cause of all the trouble. I decided that something would happen to each of the characters, in worsening degrees, until Theo’s unfortunate demise. In the original, Alasdair’s horse threw him; as I said, that could very easily have been a fluke, so instead, Will’s horse throws a shoe—a shoe that had just been replaced a few days earlier.

Next came Crazy James. I had the idea right away to have Thomas and James mistaken for outlaws and run out of town. It was not until later that it occurred to me to have Crazy James mistaken for Jesse James—it was purely coincidence that I had named the character James.

And so the plot was laid out, and with relatively little difficulty, really. All I had to do now was...write the poem. I would have to describe the task as agonizing. I got started without much trouble, but a few stanzas in, I hit a wall. The dreaded writer’s block. I had the plot, but the poetry just would not come. Sometimes I would sit staring at my notebook for hours and either draw a complete blank or end up “crossing and tossing” everything I wrote. The most elusive part was the saloon scene; I just could not seem to write it so that I could be sure the reader would catch the reference to Jesse James. I was also at a particular loss as to how to tie each scene together, especially after the saloon mix-up; I felt as though I should write a great deal more before having Thomas knock Theo into the creek.

The upshot of all this was a poem that took about three months to write instead of a weekend. It was one of the most frustrating experiences of my life—imagine my surprise at realizing how much I loved it. When the last sentence was typed and I saw the finished product printed up (at forty-four stanzas, the longest narrative I have ever written), I cannot begin to describe the feeling of excitement, of accomplishment (and yes, even a little relief).

I have learned a great deal from all of this, not the least of which is that the creative process is, indeed, a process; sometimes it may be relatively easy and other times it may be rough, but it can never be forced. I have also gained a new understanding of and respect for writing. I have always wanted to be a writer; I have been writing poetry since I was a small child. Somewhere along the line, though, I got the notion in my head that if a person is meant to do something, if a
person really is talented at something, that something should come easily. Yeah, I don’t know what I was thinking either. It’s like a friend of mine has said over and over again: being a good writer is just like being a good athlete; you have to take pride in it, stick with it, work at it, and realize that there will be bad days--but it’s the bad days that make the good ones so good.
THE VILLAGE ROSE

The day dawned soft, the palest hues
Of yellows, pinks, and baby blues
Stretched across the morning sky,
Reflections of the Maker’s eye.

Shafts of light like honey fell,
Awaking folk who yet did dwell
Securely in the folds of night,
Reluctant to admit the light.

Tradition brought them out of bed,
But how they wished to sleep instead!
To sail in dream’s delightful ship,
Fleeing reality’s iron grip.

Their village was small, the people poor.
Tattered rags the clothes they wore.
Rarely did visitors pass their way,
And when they did, they did not stay

The village was dying, the people knew.
Nothing thrived there, nothing grew.
Their last hope: abandon; yet they stayed.
In this, the villagers were not swayed.

You see, when all was said and done,
It was their home; their only one.
To God above they knelt and prayed
Somehow, some way, their home could be saved.

* * *

The village folk awoke one morn
To find a bud now did adorn
The center of the village square.
One single flower, tall and fair.

Then the petals, one by one,
Opened towards the rising sun,
Presenting the assembled cast
A rose, in beauty unsurpassed.

The stem was emerald green and long;
So delicate, and yet so strong;
The petals so dark red--indeed,
It seemed a touch could make them bleed.

The village stood in silent awe,
Searching for the smallest flaw.
Finding none, they realized
Perfection stood before their eyes.
At last they tore their eyes away
To find they'd well nigh lost the day.
The morning next they came again,
And all was just as it had been.

Each day that passed they knew increased
The chance they'd find the rose deceased.
But strangely, whether by chance or will,
The flower grew more lovely still.

Never another grew nearby;
It mattered not--the one never died.
Thriving where naught could live before:
In sand and gravel, nothing more.

Word spread quickly, as word will do,
Telling of the rose that grew
In the village believed a barren plot
Of land that God had long forgot.

And soon they came, from far and near
To test the stories they did hear
Of the rose that did in the village bide.
The village hope, the village pride.

And when they left, the left perplexed
(Curious, that is; in no way vexed).
This rose, they thought, this single flower,
Seemed to possess an awesome power.

They could not explain or elaborate
On the joy the rose did emanate,
Making friends of lifelong foes--
It seemed that God had touched this rose.

And still they came, wanting to feel
The power of the rose, professed to heal
Wounds of the body, heart and mind,
Afflictions of most any kind.

The village folk were duly proud,
And happily they welcomed the crowd.
Hundreds came, and hundreds more;
The village flourished as never before.

Then the inevitable happened at last,
The fate of the village rose was cast.
Gazing at it in the setting sun
They thought, "A pity there is but one."

The more they thought, the more they believed
In the idea that they had conceived:
If hundreds came to view one rose,
How many a garden? Who knows?

So, with visions of riches grand
And the continuing prosperity of their land,
They took hold of their priceless gem,
Cut the flower, and buried the stem.

And then they waited, wondering when
The remaining stem would bloom again,
And when the planted stem would show
Above the ground; when would it grow?

* * *

The morning dawned a dismal grey,
Chasing greedy dreams away.
Anxious, the villagers rushed to the square,
Hoping to find new roses there.

As the villagers drew near,
Each felt in his heart a fear
That tragedy had followed night;
In the square they were proven right.

They stood and faced the scene with dread.
No one could move nor hand nor head
"Til at long last a soft voice said,
"The rose; the rose; our rose is dead!"

The people could do naught but stare
At the sad remains that wasted there;
The leaves and stem a solid brown,
The plant had withered to the ground.

Then the villagers glanced to the side;
Some gasped in horror, most simply cried.
The first shoots of their second pride
Had broken ground, withered and died.

And etched in the ground for all to see,
A message cold in its clarity,
A sentence almost lyrical:
"One cannot improve a miracle"

* * *

Occasionally still some travelers came
To see the source of the village’s fame,
Only to find they’d come too late;
The village rose had met its fate.
Word spread quickly, as word will do,
The legend of the village grew:
How God had answered the villagers' need--
And how they thanked Him with their greed.
JUST MY LUCK:
MY ADVENTURES AS A GOLD MINER

They coul'da bin successful,
Could at least' ve made a buck,
If they hadn' ta took me with 'em;
Me an' my cursed luck.

'Twas 1881
An' I was barely 25,
Just a simple farm hand
Doin' my best t' stay alive

'Til one day, late in August,
As the sun was goin' down
An' my friends and I was ridin'
To a tavern in the town.

We was four of us together:
Thomas Ryker, that was me,
Theophilus "Theo" Johnson,
The oldest at forty-three,

My closest pal, Will Carey,
An' his brother, Crazy James
(We only called 'im "Crazy"
'Cause it went well with 'is name).

So the four of us was ridin'
An' reflectin' on the day,
When Theo up an' asks us,
"Ain't y'all tired of this place?"

He shook his head 'fore we could answer,
Gave a sigh an' then went on,
"I gotta take some chances
'Fore my chances is all gone.

"I done my share a bein' timid;
Now's the time for bein' bold--
I'm ridin' outta here t'morrow,
Goin' west to search for gold!

"An' boys, well, let's be honest,
There ain't nothin' here for you.
I shore could use some pardners;
How 'bout if y'all come too?"

Will an' Crazy James,
They both agreed without a thought,
So it weren't easy when I told 'em,
"Thanks, but I don't think I ought.
“Prospectin’ can be risky
An’ I’ll only make it worse.”
“How’s that, you figger?” Theo asked me,
So I told ‘im ‘bout my curse.

“Bad luck--I just attract it,
Like an ever-lovin’ pest.
It’s been so all my life;
Will Carey can attest.

“But this here’s the real ringer:
I ain’t never had t’ fear,
‘Cause it don’t do no harm t’ me,
Just anyone what’s near.”

The story shoulda ended then,
I shoulda stayed behind,
But they wouldn’t go without me
So I fin’lly changed my mind.

We rode out two days later,
A determined, hopeful crew;
We turned back after half a mile
‘Cause Will’s horse threw a shoe.

Now, I knew it was a warnin’
Of the things we had in store,
‘Cause Will had had ‘is horse reshod
A coupla days before.

Despite my better judgement,
I rode out with them again,
Wishin’, hopin’, even prayin’
My bad luck was all done in;

But one mornin’ two weeks later,
Our awakenin’ was rude--
As (my) luck would have it,
Raccoons had eaten all our food.

Theo took it all in stride,
“There’s a town not far from here;
Thomas, you an’ Crazy James
Kin go an’ rustle up some gear.

“But the two a you is gone,
Will an’ I’ll clean this mess.
An’ Thomas--this here weren’t no curse,
It’s just plain carelessness.”

We rode out like Theo asked
An’ found the town around ‘bout noon.
Feelin’ tired from the ride,
We sat a spell in the saloon.
Well, I got t’ feelin’ cocky
(I s’pose the whiskey was t’ blame),
“Theo’s right; I’ll beat this curse!
What d’ you think, Crazy James?”

The place got real quiet;
We was the mark of every eye.
“You!” the barkeep shouted,
“You ain’t leavin’ here alive!”

He took a mighty swing
That knocked poor Crazy off ‘is feet,
All the while swearin’ oaths
That I don’t think I’d best repeat.

We’d just bin drinkin’,
Now we was the center of a brawl;
T’ say I was a mite surprised
Don’t catch the mood at all.

I made a grab for Crazy James,
“We gotta get outta here!”
We fought our way outside
As lead came singin’ past our ears.

We rode hell-bent for leather
A full ten miles outta town
(‘Course, we’d gone the wrong direction,
An’ we had t’ turn around).

As we circled round the town,
Wastin’ well nigh half a day,
I tried t’ figger why them townsfolk
Had it in for Crazy James.

So I asked him what he thought;
He smiled, “Well, I guess he
Heard you call me ‘Crazy’ James
An’ thought that you said ‘Jesse’.”

Will laughed at our ‘adventure’,
But Theo shook ‘is head
An’ stared at me in wonder,
“Well, I’ll be damned...” was all he said.

We fin’lly got t’ minin’
An’ several weeks flew past.
We even found some gold dust!
I thought I’d shook my curse at last.
But a'course I hadn'ta lost it;
It just weren't meant t' be.
That was clear the day I tripped
An' knocked poor Theo in a creek.

He shoulda bin all right;
We tried t' dry 'im real quick,
But it rained the next five days
An' Theo soon took sick.

A cold became pneumonia.
Theo just kept gettin' worse,
An' 'fore we knew it, he was dead,
A victim of my curse.

A twisted tree grew by the creek,
That's where we made 'is grave.
We stood over it in silence,
Not knowin' what t' say.

We kept on a while longer,
But fin'ly we gave in
An' headed home with only gold dust
T' remind us where we'd been.

* * *

A full three years went by.
Me an' Will an' Crazy James
Was back in our old routines,
As though nothin'd ever changed.

Then, one day in late October
As the sun was goin' down,
The three of us was sittin'
In our tavern in the town,

An' as we was reminiscin'
'Bout our fateful journey west,
We heard a stranger tell a tale
What grabbed our interest.

Seems he was minin' Border Creek,
An' was about t' quit from cold,
When just beneath a twisted tree,
He found a lump of gold.

But lyin' right beside it
Was some dead outlaw's bones;
Thinkin' it might be cursed,
The stranger left the gold alone.
Will Carey burst out laughin’
‘Til I had t’ ask, “What’s up?”
“Them weren’t no outlaw’s bones!” he said,
“‘Twas Theo he dug up!

“That was where we buried ‘im
Three years ago last night:
Beneath a tree by Border Creek--
Oh, yeah; it’s him, all right!

“Say, Thomas--you thought bad luck kilt ‘im,
So we’ve all bin told.
Seems more like good luck t’ me--
‘Twas Theo found the gold!”
Just My Luck:
My Adventures As A Gold Miner
by Thomas J. Ryker

I’ll tell ya the adventures of my gold mining days,
A tale of treasure and dead outlaws’ bones;
Just keep in mind I’ve been cursed with bad luck--
So don’t expect Indiana Jones.

I had four partners back in those days;
Lemme tell ya, one was a flake!
The weird one was John and my other three partners
Were Alasdair, Theo and Jake.

It started one day in a tavern
When Theo said, “Guys, I’m gettin’ old.
There’s nothin’ worth my waitin’ for here,
So I’m goin’ out to search for gold.

“No, speakin’ of things not worth waitin’ for,
I know there’s nothin’ here for any of you;
So if you’d all care to join me,
I’d be happy if you’d come too.”

Theo was right on all accounts.
There was no reason to stay.
We packed up all we needed
And left that very day.

I’d like to explain something about my bad luck:
I never had anything to fear!
Nothing bad ever happened to me,
It just happened to those who were near.

I guess we’d been searchin’ for about a week
When first my bad luck appeared;
Alasdair urged his horse to a gallop,
But instead the dumb thing reared.

Alasdair flew off his horse like a bird--
Talk about bitin’ the dust!
He landed right square on his hands
And two of his fingers were crushed.

Alasdair would ride no further that day.
It’s not that he wasn’t all right,
But he didn’t care to try the horse again,
So we stayed where we were for the night.

It was now three months later
And we were all about ready to fold,
When while mining a creek Theo shouted,
“Guys! Come here! I’ve found gold!”
I finally got a look at the gold
And I turned away with a sigh.
The gold Theo held was so incredibly small,
Well, I thought that I'd just about die.

Theo knew we were disappointed,
But he was sure we'd find more in the creek.
So we looked for a while, but finally gave up
After searching a month and a week.

Yet again my bad luck appeared
While we were searching that place for gold;
I tripped and knocked Jake into the creek
And he unfortunately caught a cold.

Two weeks later, Jake died of pneumonia.
We buried him under a tree that was twisted and rotten.
We held a short funeral for our dear, departed friend;
All thoughts of gold were forgotten.

Except for Theo. Theo hadn’t forgotten.
He said to let him be.
He moved further West and kept prospecting;
Alasdair and John went home with me.

It was years later and John and I
Were in the same old bar back in town,
When suddenly a stranger burst in and yelled,
“You wouldn’t believe what I found!

“I was diggin’ under a twisted tree by a creek.
I was about to quit from the cold,
When I suddenly hit something big, hard and yellow--
I’d just found a chunk of gold!

“Then I looked to the right and gasped in surprise;
I’d also dug up a dead outlaw’s bones!
I didn’t know what curse he laid on the place,
So I left the gold alone!”

Maniacal laughter then filled the bar.
It was John; you know--the flake.
“Them weren’t no outlaw’s bones,” he said,
“Them bones belonged to Jake!

“That was the creek where we buried him
Three years ago last night.
I’ll be hanged if that ain’t the tree what marks his grave;
Oh, yeah, it’s Jake all right.

“Now Thomas,” (that’s me) “you say your bad luck killed him.
That’s what we’ve all been told.
I say it was good luck, after all,
’Twas Jake that found the gold!”

1-17-86