

Baldness be my friend
and other post-modern prose poems

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Inverse proportion
Goes like so:
As readers dwindle,
Writers grow.

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Note of the Prosody

As definitions of the prose poem vary and overlap, it might be helpful to the reader to note that all the pieces in this selection contain a total number of syllables divisible by seventeen.

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To Nicky,
At Last

METAPHORIC IMFARC

A minor Plumstead poet was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit at Constantiaberg after reading a bad review of his latest collection of verse. A hospital spokesman described his condition as critical.

A PSYCHLING BREAKTHROUGH

Dr Eustace Wheeler, the chief psychiatrist at the Turnhill Clinic, is recommending that his depressed and neurotic patients take up cycling.

Although the benefits of the sport are manifold he claims that the main advantage for the inadequately breastfed or poorly potty trained patient is that it cures the need for instant gratification.

One of his patients, a melancholy 33 year old Caucasian male had a history of deep depression caused primarily by an irrational need to have his desires met quickly. After a weekend in-depth encounter seminar on cycling the patient immediately ordered a state-of-the-art racing bike and had it airfreighted in. Now he can't wait to take his daily ride.

'We have discovered the bicyclic anti-depressant!' declared the eminent Freudian. 'Had Oedipus had access to a bicycle so much of the history of the human dilemma would have been altered. After all, spinning a 77 inch gear an averagely fit young man can travel from Delphi to Thebes in just over 3 hours. He would have missed the encounter at the crossroads by at least 2 hours and 10 minutes.'

COGITO ERGO ERGS

A Benoni panel beater, Mr Tony Frett, is currently constructing an energy transformer that will convert nervous tension into usable domestic electricity.

Intended to harness the most wasted resource on the planet, the Anxiety Accumulator should be ready for production early in 1999.

‘That is barring snags and holdups!’ said the worried inventor.

LESS IS MORE

Casper Fish, the Minimalist who stunned the art world by abandoning his intention to erase a pencilled full stop, has now entered the domain of Dada.

For months he has been feeding a domesticated rock rabbit on modern art reproductions and taking photographs of the droppings.

Dubbed an Excrementalist by art critic, Monita Bunitz, Fish said that he felt that his current work would be a passing phase.

'I might not develop the films,' he smiled.

BALDNESS BE MY FRIEND

The May edition of Medical Monthly reports that the controversial Bloemfontein plastic surgeon, Dr Johan Blomkamp has developed a transplantation technique that destroys definitions of donor and recipient.

The simultaneous cure for male alopecia and female hirsutism deploys hair from the female armpit onto the male bald pate. The glabrous skin from the cranium is laid in the axilla.

In a press interview the jubilant and well-coiffured Dr Blomkamp, who was photographed raising his wife's arm in triumph, said that the concept of symbiosis was new to surgery.

His one snag is the male blonde.

END GAME

Prize winning novelist and mathematician Jim Cemetz's latest work *Detritus Andronicus*, has just won the 1998 Arniston Prize. Composed entirely from letters left at the end of a thousand championship scrabble games his novella, due to the shortage of available vowels, was written in Polish.

Translated into English the work is a meandering dialogue between a semi-mute gardener and a garrulous angel of death. The protagonists are eternally locked in an antechamber waiting to face a tribunal for unspecified crimes.

Atwell Baker, Cemetz's literary biographer, said that the work is a postmodernist masterpiece and a minimalist collage of Beckett, Sartre and Pinter. Imagine if you can', he said 'the vast emptiness of a cathedral abandoned by language in which we hear snatched echoes from *The Caretaker*, *Waiting for Godot*, *No Exit* and, strangely conveyed by the precision of its inarticulacy, *Madame Bovary*.'

Cemetz said in a rare interview that if history can teach us anything at all it is that truth is always told by the redundant and rejected. We are what we discard. Vldmr and 'strgn have taught us that the clues are in the moraine, the midden and the alluvium.

From the 85 letters left over from the novella, Cemetz is currently working on a haiku in Estonian.

GOING FOR BAROQUE

One of the strangest human habits is the rewarding of success and the denigration of failure. Particularly when it is taken into account that failure of the grandest sort is the combination of the highest aspirations with the limits of human grace, whereas in success, human mettle is never fully tested.

One of the saddest and most spectacular failures in both the musical and the cycling worlds was revealed in 1986 and deserves the Nobel Prize for Ambition.

A Viennese wheelwright and chamber musician, Karl Heinz von Willig who was born in 1906 has been building the most beautiful wheels for a connoisseur clientele since the late 40's. Combining his talents as an engineer with his musicianship, von Willig developed a technique of spacing spokes in specially constructed rims and then shaving and tuning them so that when stroked in sequence they produce simple melodies.

The standard 36-spoke racing wheel covers enough notes for a wide variety of popular tunes. A tortoiseshell plectrum is attached by a specially designed bracket to the front fork and plucks the tune from the turning wheel. Much the same principle is employed as that of the musical box or harpsichord.

Importantly, the wheels are constructed with the correct tensile strength to make them racing-competitive. Von Willig's wheels never compromise either of their two components. They are perfect examples of aesthetic and mechanical synergism.

Over the years the international Who's Who of cycling and music have brought the von Willig bicycles. The wheels are set into the best quality frames which are also tuned to give off the correct

harmonic vibrations. The frames are handled by Von Willig's friend and erstwhile cycling rival, the Italian hillclimber Ernesto Collo.

Recently Greg Lemond is reported to have ordered a gold alloy front wheel that plays the Star Spangled Banner while Bernard Hinault is content with a smokey Jacques Brel chanson.

Although von Willig's craft has always brought him an extremely good living, he, like all true artists, needed a challenge and for more than twenty years he has been obsessed with a magnificent ambition: to arrange a Baroque fugue for four well-tempered bicycles. Years ago the engineering was complete and the bicycles were built with extremely sensitive brakes to allow for delicate nuances in tempo and rhythm.

As his opus magnum, Von Willig decided on 'The Cat's Fugue' by Domenico Scarlatti. It is poetic justice that Scarlatti was chosen from amongst the other great baroque composers such as Bach, Vivaldi or Handel. This is because of the accepted criticism of Scarlatti's art, first made by Anthony Edwards of the London Sunday Times who commented that the 17th century master's sonatas for the harpsichord were 'merely mechanical exercises' — a description that is happily compatible with cycling.

The wheels of the four bicycles that would perform the piece while simultaneously taking part in a four-man team time trial were carefully tuned and constructed to perform the fugue over exactly 40 kilometres. The real problem was to find four cyclists who were capable of meeting the virtuoso musical standards of the ride, or conversely training up four musicians who were capable of meeting the rigorous athletic demands.

By April 1985 von Willig had put together his ideal team which included two riders who were initially musicians, and two musicians who were initially cyclists.

Secretly they trained and riding ordinary bicycles managed to qualify for the 1986 Italian Team Trial Championships in Milan. On the day they wore special catsuits with the inscription 'Il Gato di Scarlatti' sponsored by the Steinway Piano Company's harpsichord division. Tragedy struck its dismal chord during the race rehearsal. Sergio Costa Divaris, the alto voice, trying to meet the rigorous demands of the crescendo at 37 km, fell, bringing the team down and breaking in total two collar bones, one leg and one finger. Von Willig was heartbroken and has retired to his Viennese estate to nurse the wounds of shattered ambition.

In an interview with Pedal magazine, which caters to the tastes of the musical and cycling cognoscenti, he confessed that the Scarlatti piece was intended merely as a prelude to a more heroic venture. His follow-up to be founded on the artistic and sporting success of the fugue was to have been the arrangement of the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto for a mass start road race. Bach's Concerto Grosso is coincidentally constructed similarly to a classic bicycle race, with its quick beginning, languid middle, and furious sprint which echoes precisely the allegro andante, and allegro vivace movement of the concerto.

Ironically, as a further twist of fate, it has been pointed out by Professor Cecil Wheeler, who is the chief musicologist at the Constantia Cycling Academy, that in any case 1986 is probably the last year in which competitive cyclists will use spoked wheels in time trial events. Modern technology has rendered von Willig's ambition obsolete. The modern disc wheels carry a stronger suggestion of the tape recorder than that of the stringed instrument.

FOOTNOTE: *It is said that Scarlatti's pet cat jumped on the keyboard of the harpsichord and played the notes giving the master the theme for his fugue.*

MIND-MAIL THREAT TO THE INTERNET

The union of South African Mystics, Mediums and Divine Interpreters (uSAMMADI) is in the process of developing an information network using clairvoyance and telepathy.

Presently four hundred potential fileservers are being trained in telepathic techniques on a farm near Nieu Bethesda.

Eventually the network will be worldwide and communications using m-mail will be instantaneous without the need for non-human hard or software.

Speaking at a press conference the leader of the project, Aldous Moya, said that, although the idea had come to him in a flash during group meditation, the possibilities are tremendously exciting for the business community.

One of the clear advantages over the Internet and e-mail is that by linking up to past-life regressionists, ideas and decisions can be retroactive. Bad ideas that resulted in bad decisions can be reversed at the speed of random thought.

I BEG YOUR PURDAH

The tiny coastal town of Brooklyn, Cape, is planning to hold a Miss Modesty Competition during the forthcoming summer season. By definition all entrants will be automatically disqualified. 'Our publicity budget is small,' said the mayor, 'and this way we hope to get the exposure while saving on the prizes.'

SMALL IS A BEGINNING

The Bakoven Bonsai Society is conducting a campaign to foster the application of Bonsai Horticulture to human aspiration.

The convenor, Mrs Mabel Trimm, believes that the prudent pruning of human ambition is the solution to most of the world's ills. She maintains that the chief cause of psychic pain which manifests as greed, antisocial anger and destructive petulance, is the fact that we are too big for our ecological boots. 'Modesty', she claims, 'is most becoming in the gross and the gargantuan. We should admire the bashful baobab far more than the shrinking violet.'

The society is not overly ambitious for this project which it feels is merely a tentative start in curtailment.

I'VE MEASURED OUT MY LIFE IN COFFEE SPOONS

T S Eliot's line of quiet desperation calls to mind small scoops of experience stirred into the vast cup of existence — for the privileged few, life is a banquet, for the rest of us, a frantic coffee break.

Nothing could be further from the intention of the great poet and ballroom dancer: Eliot was in fact alluding to an acquaintance of a friend of Jacques Prevert called Alfonse Proufroques who had the eccentric habit of stealing culinary silver. A miniaturist by inclination, he specialised in coffee spoons. The felony was not for gain, Proufroques was independently wealthy and owned a large chateau in Provence. He laid his stolen spoons end to end around the perimeter of his estate. Literally measuring his life with coffee spoons.

Proufroques's biographer and life long companion, Jean-Pierre Gaston, who incidentally collected brass door knobs, noted that at the time of his demise, Proufroques had laid nearly fifteen kilometres of spoons round his property which had a five kilometre circumference and was beginning the third arc of a closing spiral.

The spoons were confiscated and melted down in 1938 as part of the French rearmament programme.

A cairn of more than fourteen thousand door knobs marks Proufroques's grave near Arles.

TELLING A LITTLE BIRD

The Western Cape Ornithological Society has taken the bold step in appointing a budgie as its minute secretary.

Although birds are usually seeded low in the IQ stakes the budgerigar in question has a phenomenal short term memory and is able to memorise and repeat, verbatim, up to three hours of intensive debate.

After meetings he is taken to a special sound-proof room where he repeats word for word the proceedings into a tape recorder.

‘Twinkles is an utter gem’, said Professor Michael Feather, his chairman and trainer, ‘he is always discreet, never interrupts, never looks bored and adds an exotic dash of colour to our drab and dreary meetings. When discussion is held in committee, he is turned off by popping an embroidered sock over his head.’

Encouraged by Twinkle’s success the Society is contemplating the use of parrots and mynah-birds as field researchers. Genetically selected birds are being bred and trained to memorise and record the calls of their wild colleagues.

MINDLESS BLISS

Last year, the enlightened Republic of Eritas introduced a humane and paradoxical form of capital punishment.

The condemned has an electrode inserted into the pleasure centre of the forebrain and is then given full control of a switch.

Earlier research in the United States demonstrated that rabbits, similarly rigged and who were able to activate an electrical current by pressing a button with their noses, eventually lay face down on the button in a state of mindless bliss. Ignoring until death, the pangs of hunger and thirst.

Until recently the only capital crime in Eritas was murder and the immediate effect of the new punishment was to push the homicide rate up seven thousand percent.

Compensatory legislation has thus just been passed changing the capital crimes from murder to those of altruism and social service. An additional proposal to include suicide was narrowly defeated after a division in the legislative assembly.

THE AMAZON TWIST

The corpus callosum, a bundle of hundreds of millions of nerve fibres connects the two hemispheres of the human brain. The thickness of this bundle, as has been recently determined, is a critical secondary sexual characteristic.

In women the corpus is substantially thicker than in men. It is speculated that this difference accounts for all the measurable and mythical differences in male and female psyches.

Dr Anton de Bruyn, a Maritzburg neurologist, has just patented a surgical technique called 'The Amazon Twist'.

Under anaesthetic, a steel suture is fed into the base of the brain and looped around the corpus and drawn out again. The two ends of the suture are threaded to accommodate an elegantly designed wingnut. When the nut is turned tight the loop constricts the corpus giving women the instant and voluntary benefit of being able to think like men.

The first woman to try the Twist, Ms Ethel Andrew, said the effect was amazing. Not only was her attitude more aggressive and goal-orientated, but she was able to think logically and unemotionally. An additional effect was that she suddenly found men less attractive. She said, in an interview, that Dr de Bruyn's device effectively renders men redundant.

For less radical users the benefits are bountiful: on releasing tension there is a rebound effect. Women loosening the corpus callosum at night suddenly find themselves alluringly attractive to men, thanks to a surge of repressed femininity.

Unfortunately there is no complementary device for males.