

Halifax

Feb. 14

Dear Ann Noël,

I've wasted a pile of paper tonight attempting to explain, in a nice informal little essay, how the IBM poem works, but so far the little essay is about as nice and informal as the instructions for the installation, care and use of our new General Electric kitchen range. It ought to be more human than that. Maybe it will come a little easier if I write you a letter about it while you're in the next room doing your natural childbirth exercises. (I wonder if the baby will read this letter someday?)

All right, then. IBM is the latest version of an old do-it-yourself event. I invented the rules of the game back in 1956, when my head was solidly imbedded in concrete poetry. Some of the results of the game have appeared, with various titles, vocabularies and typographical settings -- and varying degrees of failure -- here and there over the years. I have given the poem up almost as often as I've given up smoking. But this present version really works, I think, and it owes its existence to you -- or rather to that awesome-looking phototypesetting machine you taught me to use last year in Marienbad. Good grief! I mean last

year in California. It's getting late, but finish this I will, and tonight.

And now, back to the very beginning. Here are the rules of the game, vintage 1956:

1. Choose 26 words by chance operations -- or however you please.
2. Substitute these 26 words for the 26 letters of the alphabet, to form an alphabet-of-words.
3. Choose a word or phrase (a word or phrase not included in the alphabet of words) to serve as the title of the poem.
4. For the letters in the title word or phrase substitute the corresponding words from the alphabet-of-words. This operation generates line one of the poem.
5. Repeat the process described in step 4 with the results of step 4.
6. Repeat the process with the results of 5.
7. Et cetera.

It's much simpler than it sounds. I suppose we sort of talked funny in those days of innocence. But I should warn you about that "et cetera". That old et cetera is dangerous (in case you ever care to play the game) because what the poem amounts to, if carried out too far, is an eternal project, and, for

most of us, eternity is more time than we have at our disposal for perfecting works of art. Besides, these days there are far more important things to try to achieve.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch.....I chose the vocabulary of the present version in 1966, when I was first offered the opportunity to "do something" with a computer, and resurrected the old do-it-yourself poem to do it with. The words were selected by chance operations, I forget how, but I won't dwell on it because, judging from the way the words manage to reflect the bewilderment of an expatriate returning to the United States after an absence of 17 years, I might have cheated. Anyway, here is the alphabet-of-words:

A = money
B = up
C = idiots
D = sex
E = like
F = quivering
G = evil
H = old
I = red
J = zulus
K = ticklish
L = kool

M = going
N = black
O = jesus
P = hotdogs
Q = coming
R = perilous
S = action
T = virgins
U = yes
V = easy
W = fear
X = death
Y = naked
Z = white

For the title I chose IBM, an understandable tribute to the muse's assistant. In the first substitution, the three letters of the title yielded

red up going

as the first line of the poem. continuing the process, the ten letters of these three words blossomed into

perilous like sex

yes hotdogs

evil jesus red black evil

The 46 letters of these ten words in turn generated 46 words, the 215 letters of these 46 words 215 words, these 215 words 1,050 words, and so on, mul-

tipling into the millions by leaps and bounds.

No great accomplishment, considering the rules of the game and the indefatigability of the computer. And how utterly boring when carried out beyond three or four substitutions. As Claes says, "Boredom is beautiful but it is hard to keep awake."

Well, to relieve the monotony, and to thicken the plot, I decided to temper the generative dimension of the poem with a cyclical dimension. After the third process of substitution, the alphabet-of-words shifts. What used to be the "Z" word becomes the "A" words, the old "A" word becomes the "B" word, and so on down the line. Thus the first line of the poem

red up going

becomes

old money kool

after the first shift in the alphabet-of-words. And there are 25 such shifts during the course of the present version of the poem. One more shift -- and you'd be right back where you started. A logical place to stop.

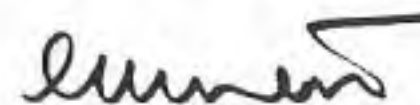
And that's where the poem stopped, and was all but forgotten, until last year, when you taught me how to thicken the plot still more with that monster toy with its baffling range of type

sizes, the Diatype. Now, every time a word is repeated, it gets larger, and creates real tension as it grows in stature. The motif constantly changes as new words, combinations, and random associations upstage the principals of the preceding variations. There, I'm pontificating again.

Anyway, I suppose it is clear that I like this latest, handmade version of the poem. And (if you can take the word of a poet) I promise it will be the final version, too.

LOVE

as ever,



red up going

perilous like sex

yes hotdogs

evil jesus red black evil

hotdogs like perilous **red** kool jesus yes action

kool **red** ticklish **like**

action **like** death

naked **like** action

old jesus virgins sex jesus evil action

like easy red kool

zulus **like** action yes action

perilous **like** sex

up kool money idiots ticklish

like easy red kool