DON DADA ON THE DOWN LOW GETTING GODLY IN HIS GAME

Between and Beyond Play and Prayer in the Abecedarius

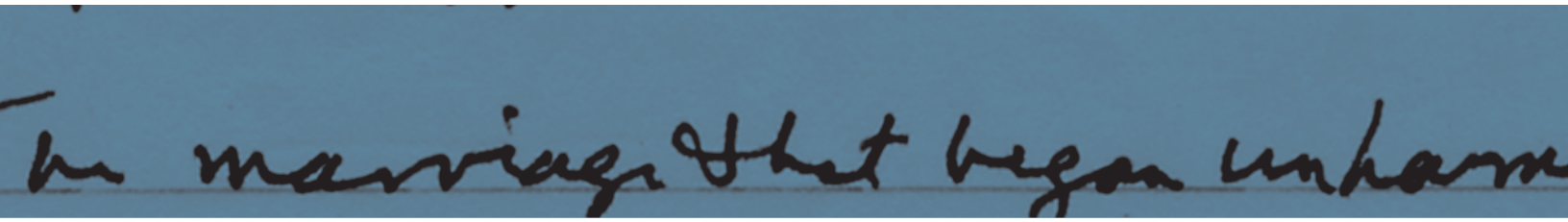
by Matthea Harvey

AMONG THE FIRST THINGS we remember being taught are our ABCs and we learn them in an order, to a song. According to the *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* the abecedarius takes its name from the medieval Latin equivalent of an ABC primer, and the word itself was created from the alphabetical progression of the alphabet's first four letters plus the suffix "-arius." I love imagining our cardboard flashcards in their illuminated manuscript versions: *A is for Arabella, asleep in the apothecary* (picture intricate paintings of tiny gleaming leeches inside the apothecary jars behind her), *P is for Perceval, peering into his pottage*. . . . The abecedarius proceeds alphabetically—following the pattern set up inside its own name—and acrostically, in that each line or stanza of the poem begins with a letter of the alphabet: A then B then C, and so on. There are variations on the abecedarius that are even stricter, like that calligrapher's pet, the pangram, a sentence that uses every letter in the alphabet (The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog)—perhaps too restrictive a form for it to allow any poetry to spring forth from it—or the Japanese form called iroha mojigusari, in which the first line starts with the first letter of the alphabet and ends with the second, the second starts with the second letter and ends with the third, and so on through the alphabet. In much the same way that the modern sonnet has been so deftly shattered and netted by such modern practitioners as Olena Kalytiak Davis and Stephanie Strickland, I would like to propose that it is time that the abecedarius take on a slightly more flexible definition.

I would also like to quibble with *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* assertion that "In modern times the abecedarian has been widely viewed as a mere word game or mnemonic device for children but in many ancient cultures the form was commonly associated with divinity, being used for prayers, hymns and oracles." It is true that some of our best wits have tried their hands and minds at abecedarii, including Edward Gorey. However I would hesitate to call any word game played by Gorey "mere," and clearly his games are equally enjoyed by both adults and children. One of Gorey's most lovely is titled *The Eclectic Abecedarian* and includes such excellent and varied advice as "Be loath to drink / India Ink" and "Don't try to cram / the dog with Jam," and after dispensing with "klmnopqrstuvwx" gets to "With every Yawn / A moment's gone." One of my favorite graphic artists, Tom Gauld, also has an excellent abecedarian strip (reproduced here) entitled "Our Hero Battles Twenty-Six Alphabeticised Terrors," in which a tiny stick figure with a sword faces an axeman, a burning effigy, crazed animals, a doppelganger, and so on through to zombies. There is something very satisfying about the inevitability of the progression of this form—if you know your way around those twenty-six letters, you always know where you are in the game. The delight and surprise is in which word/horror is selected to fulfill the abecedarius's promise. That part you can rarely predict. I for one would never have guessed that "robot" would be followed by "sexy robot" in Gauld's series of horrors. Just as blues music has the twelve-bar harmonic progression but allows room for improvisation, the abecedarius provides a firm foundation along with the opportunity for invention. And perhaps that is one of the abecedarius's main charms: the tension between its linear progression of twenty-six steps and the wild uncontrollable range of where each line can go.

So yes to play but no to *only* play. There are a number of contemporary poets who have been drawn to the abecedarius and have mined the full spectrum of the form. To be honest, the abecedarius doesn't churn out poems that are either a) prayerful or b) playful any more than *all* poems are playful and prayerful. So let's look at a few authors, *not* organized alphabetically, though the pull is strong . . . Anna Rabinowitz has two

MATTHEA HARVEY
P. OSIE



abecedarius poems in her first book, *At the Site of Inside Out:* "Blue Dome" and section two of "Ars Poetica." Here she uses the abecedarius to write philosophically about poetic techniques—doubly emphasizing the way our words are always defined by the constraints of the alphabet we write within:

> Alphabets act with agility
> Before assonance, alliteration,
> Consonance, anaphora or other
> Devices dramatize a dilemma
> Equal to our very existence

In this slice of the alphabet you see the first line swelling with the A's of "alphabets," "act," and "agility," which fall over into the B line and C line where "assonance," "alliteration," and "anaphora" appear and are enacted—quite the bag of tricks. On the D line the power of the acrostic first letter is reasserted and the game starts again.

Blackalicious's delightful 1999 hit "A2G" also seems as if it could go on forever—indeed it ends with a second voice saying "good . . . can you say it faster?" In this abecedarian hip-hop poem, in which the speaker brags about his poetic/rapping prowess (and from which this essay takes its title), each letter is mined not once but twice at the start of a line, while within each line the letter is used anywhere from four to six times:

> Artificial amateurs, aren't at all amazing
> Analytically, I assault, animate things
> Broken barriers bounded by the bomb beat
> Buildings are broken, basically I'm bombarding

Harryette Mullen's book *Sleeping with the Dictionary*—a book whose contents are arranged alphabetically, starting with the poem "All She Wrote" and ending with "Zombie Hat"—showcases her desire to be both architect and archaeologist of the language. Naturally, it contains two abecedarian poems, "Blah-Blah" and the ten-page "Jinglejangle." Both flirt with being nonsense lists. "Blah-Blah" concerns itself with an alphabetical list of words made of the same sound repeated, as in, "Baa Baa, Baba, Bambam, Bebe, Berber, Bibi, blah-blah, Bobo, bonbon," and "Jinglejangle" investigates the abecedarius via lists of near-rhyming words: "Only the Lonely oodles of noodles Oshkosh b'gosh." Note how the first word in the rhyming pair (only, oodles, and Oshkosh) is also alphabetized. Mullen's are nonnarrative poems, but as a reader you start creating mini-stories out of them anyway—playing connect-the-dots with the random stars until constellations appear.

Karl Elder has written an entire book of abecedarian poems called *Mead: Twenty-Six Abecedariums*, twenty-six poems of twenty-six ten-syllable lines. His poems are strictly acrostic abecedarii—they don't continue the alphabet game throughout the line—but he's exploring the form on the macro as opposed to micro level by writing twenty-six of them. Here is the conclusion to a poem about kindergarten, called "Everything I Needed to Know":

> . . . Later when
> we go around and tell in tones like the
> xylophone's, girls always first, what is it
> you want to be when you grow up, I say
> Zorro because a poet needs a mask.

There's a lightheartedness in the treatment of the subject matter seen in the internal rhyme of "tone" and "xylophone," and the choice of the abecedarian form here seems particularly apt given the kindergarten setting, but the conclusion that Elder reaches is quite serious. "I say / Zorro because a poet needs a mask" swivels from evoking a hilarious image of the little boy imagining his future as a masked avenger to the precocious knowledge of a child that he wants to be a poet, which will require some masking of the self.

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics lists a number of examples of the historically prayerful abecedarius—Psalm 111-2 and 119 as well as St. Augustine's *Psalmus contra partem Donati* (a psalm against the Donatists). Carolyn Forché's most recent book, *Blue Hour,* contains a forty-six-page acrostic poem titled "On Earth," which she aligns with gnostic abecedarian hymns from the third century A.D. Forché's poem contains abecedarius within abecedarius ("the stories nested, each opening to the next"), with an "A" section moving from "a barnloft" alphabetically to "a yellow mosaic," then starting again at "A" with "above a pacific slumber of white houses" until it reaches "back to the blowing-out of birthday candles" In almost each letter's section there is also a moment where the phrases break down and a line becomes an italicized list of words beginning with that letter. Far from feeling arbitrary, they have an incantatory feel, as in "*balefire, balcony, balm, belief, benediction*." What I take from all these adaptations of the abecedarius is that there is something infectious about it—once you start you want to see how far you can push the form. In Forché's case the effect is that of a double or triple Ferris wheel in which your own carriage spins at the same time the whole mechanism of the Ferris wheel is spinning. The effect is dizzying, and disconcerting despite the predetermined progression from A to Z.

I stumbled into a modified version of the abecedarius in my own writing last August. I came up with the title for a poem: "The Future of Terror"—I'd heard the phrase over and over on the radio, and I wanted that phrase to mean something concrete

as opposed to being an amorphous umbrella of dread. At the same time, I felt trapped under that umbrella and I wanted something in my poem to reflect that. One day I ended up turning to my big fat red Webster's dictionary and looking up the definitions of "future" and "terror." There's a lot of heft between those two words in the dictionary, and I decided to create a word list by writing down every word between "future" and "terror" that fell in the same place on the page as "future." It was just an experiment. As I made the list, I found myself writing down only the words that sparked my interest—I was amazed by the wealth of riches that appeared. The original list included such words as gamma ray, heliotrope, itinerary, juxtapose, kenosis, legerdemain— all words I loved but had *never before used in a poem*. Pablo Neruda captures this experience perfectly in his "Ode to a Dictionary":

> I
> turn
> its
> pages:
> *caporal,*
> *capote*,
> what a marvel
> to pronounce these plosive
> syllables,
> and further on,
> *capsule*,
> unfilled, awaiting ambrosia or oil
> and others, *capsicum, caption, capture,*
> *comparison, capricorn,*
> words
> as slippery as smooth grapes,
> words exploding in the light
> like dormant seeds waiting
> in the vaults of vocabulary

They were indeed seeds, and they sprouted strange fruit. When I started to write the first poem with the word list, the words led me, pulled me in new directions, created a narrative I didn't have in my head. It was perhaps the most wonderful experience of writing without knowing where I was going that I've ever had. When I finished that first poem, I realized that I was writing not about this world exactly, but about a version of our world in an imagined future—where people could dial information intracranially; where a sad soldier might start a futile art project, making "dents in the shape of stars on the inside / of his P.O. Box with a Phillips head screwdriver"; where bored battalions invented games called "Jump the Gun, Fine Kettle of Fish and Kick / the Kidney" to play with the prisoners. There were a lot of parallels to the situation we were in right now, and I was amazed at the way words like "soldier" and "oilfield" kept popping up on my word lists.

I am working on a manuscript tentatively titled *How We Learned to Hold Hands* which is obsessed with halves and halving (there are poems about centaurs, figureheads, a museum of the middle). After writing that first incarnation of "The Future of Terror," I realized I had simultaneously created a mirror image, a "Terror of the Future" within me. For the "Terror of the Future" poem I went backward through the dictionary, my finger this time tracing where "terror" would fall on each successive page until I hit "future" and stopped. There isn't a name for this that I can find—"backward abecedarian" or "decebarian," or perhaps "zeyexewrius. " After writing one of each of these poems, I was addicted. I wanted to see what other stories would emerge. And as I kept writing them (I am now at 18, with a goal of twenty-one) I started noticing differences in the poems. Going forward, the story was more official. The characters, often soldiers, were stuck in systems they didn't understand. By going backward, (like playing a record backward to hear its secret message), I found that different, more personal stories emerged. For instance, an "I" and a "you" emerge as characters and become lovers ("We shook talc onto our tastebuds / and watched the skyrockets, starry-eyed, / until night blacked them out like a giant / malevolent Sharpie.") These are things I noticed pretty far along in the process—I wasn't aware of them right away, but realizations like this made me want to articulate what was going on when I used the form.

I should point out that that I didn't require each successive line to begin with a successive letter. Instead I lingered on a particular letter for as long as I wanted, and I also allowed myself the use of words outside the F–T realm—it was just that the F–T words were the engines of the poems. They propelled the poems—the story was heading for "kick-pleat," then heading for "lemming," and it was a question of what would get me there. My poems don't care about their edges in the way that acrostic abecedarian poems do, because in a way "future" and "terror" were acting like "A" and "B"—they were the markers that mattered. Within the body of the poem, I had to take small steps from letter to letter (making the poems wildly alliterative) but the real walls were those two words. I was stuck on a highway between the towns of Future and Terror and I could explore the countryside in between the two. Beyond them, the road ended.

My experience of writing in my version of the abecedarius has been one of extraordinary exhiliration and surprise. There is certainly a large element of play to it—plotting which stones in the river (words in the language) to use as my path to get across the river, but also an element of prayer—I never know what I am conjuring and I am certainly seeking out answers—answers to the largest questions. Why do we fight wars? Where do I fit in, in a world of slogans? So to say that abecedarian poems have moved from prayer to play seems too limiting.

I looked for a metaphor to describe the abecedarian's particular combination of restraint and freedom. Forché's poem contains a number of images that seem to speak to this, such as "a

bullet-holed supper plate / a burnt room strewn with toy tanks /a century passing through it." There's play (the toy tanks) taken to a new level of seriousness, and also an image for the abecedarian form—something large (i.e., the century or the message of the poem) squeezing through something small and restrictive (the small openings of the bullet holes in the supper plate as embodied by each letter of the alphabet). Over and over again images of objects forcing themselves through holes or openings appear in Forché's poem: "a feather forced through black accordioned paper" and "a hole in light, an entrance." Then there were the self-concealing, world-sieving eyeholes in Elder's Zorro mask.

Perhaps writing with full access to every word in the language is like looking at a 360-degree panorama from which we can choose to look at any thing at any time. The thing about the panorama, though, is that while it's available to us, we don't use it all at once. We can't ever keep the entire possibilities of the language in our heads at one time. Instead we tend to revert to the vocabulary we are familiar with, to our favorite words. So the panorama, instead of stretching out endlessly, has an invisible wall which we rarely go beyond. By contrast, writing abecedarianally (a term which I think I have just invented) is more like walking up the stairs of a castle and looking through a series of small windows. From one you see the forest of F, complete with flora and fauna. Through another, you can see the meadow of M, brimming with marigolds and mushrooms. Each little window contains every word beginning with that particular letter, and all the windows combined contain every word in the language—it's just that you have to look through them step by step. There's a lushness to the abecedarius that speaks to the old saw about form allowing freedom, or as Wordsworth put it much more aptly in "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room": "In truth the prison into which we doom / Ourselves, no prison is." The abecedarius can encompass everything you can see through the porthole of P—play, prayer, politics, to name just a few. And then there are still those other twenty-five windows to look through.

POEMS BY MATTHEA HARVEY >

The Future of Terror / 1

The gift certificates advertised
goggle-eyed paratroopers attempting a fall
from grace, but the heart-lung machines
strapped to their packs kept them loving
and breathing long beyond when they were supposed
to live. Happy-go-lucky is just a decision to proceed
with an assumption of happiness and luck.
The Observation Station gained a toehold,
appeared on houseflags, had us hooked.
Don't get the impression we weren't
all dialing information every hour: we were,
if only intracranially. In an inversion of
the usual itinerary, we felt a jolt of bullets
before we even entered the jungle. Juxtapose that
with the killing frost which knotted the vines
and made the whitefish shiver underwater
and one can account for our general sense of
get it out, leave it alone, leave it.
We would have written that on our license plates
if not for the bureaucratic line of scrimmage
we knew in our livers we'd never cross.
A mailing machine can't sort for meaning or memory
but it gets the merchandise to your door. It gets you
your mitten money. It's only natural to neglect
the near-point, the one thing you can actually see.
Our poets were Pied Pipers handing out
photocopies—parroting, parenthesizing.
Might as well pay attention to the children
practicing ballet plastique in front of the playhouse.
With the right pomade you can smooth over
anything. In the precinct they were making predictions
based on prehistory, listening to old recordings
of preacher-birds. The Reform Bill wanted
us on risers with rosettes pinned to our breasts
while we sang the same song again.

Terror of the Future / 1

Like the string quartet in the storm cellar,
the swindle sheets were a surprise.
A stickpin stirred in our stomachs.
When there was standing room only
we tended to get out our soapboxes.
Was it small-minded of us to want to siphon
off some sidelight from the castle?
The regime's shaved heads felt like sateen
and their salutes shot through us
like good rum. There was something remorseless
about cordoning off the red carpet with red tape.
One of them was red for the wrong reason.
Not in a quadrillion years had we imagined
anyone would want proof of our prowess.
It was premodern, like the pulley.
We had portals to the future in the poolhall.
We had nuclei printed on our notepaper.
And still the night effect produced murmurs
amongst the national guard. They didn't like
mousing about while meltwater slid like mineral oil
down the mountains. The magic lantern lurched.
We'd extracted "kingdom come" from something longer
while the original incubated in our hearts.
Even after hours of swinging back and forth
on the horizontal bars, our history stayed hooded.
We were just a gumdrop on the grid.

The Future of Terror / 2

We wore gasmasks to cross the gap.
Goodnight, said the gravediggers, goodnight.
We looked heavenward but kept our hands
down when they asked for volunteers
so they simply helped themselves.
Our protestations sounded like herons
on the hi fi. Even armed with invoices,
it's human nature to proceed inch-meal.
We were a sad jumble of journeymen and here's
the kicker: a few of us had never been in love.
Sure, we shared our laminated letters with them,
made models out of lard, but there's no way to leap-frog
that sort of thing. The lieutenant thought the unloved
made better lookouts, though mostly they read
magazines stashed in their mackintoshes
and came back with useless reports on
the micromotions of magpies. When I looked
at the nametape inside my uniform, I missed
my mother. I knew where I was headed:
a spot in the necropolis with plastic nasturtiums.
Periodically, we started projects: one man
made dents in the shape of stars on the inside
of his P.O. Box with a Phillips head screwdriver.
We all carried plump pods filled with poison
that quivered as we made our daily rounds
of the ruins. Giving sadness the run-around
was even harder after our sergeant succumbed
to Salt Lake Syndrome. At night in our
smokeproof sleeping cars, we dreamed of
sharp sticks that would make wounds
a simple surgeon's knot couldn't fix
and other ways to pry the lid off the terrarium.

Terror of the Future / 3

You had to win the sweepstakes
to get a survival kit. Some of the smarter
Sunday painters kept suet and saran wrap
stowed amongst their stencils. My sponsor
disappeared with nary a splash. I didn't speculate.
I said he was "snowed under." All we ever did
together was play "Simon Says" and try to outrun
our shadows. It was a rotten routine and I'm not
going to romanticize it. I wouldn't have put ribbons
on his wreath but I was hoping to qualify for
the preharvest and a few jars of preserves.
In the meantime I sent my remaining relatives
postcards with phoenixes on the front.
No need to be a pessimist and think about
the family plot. Perhaps I was on a path
that would lead to parties with passionfruit
cocktails. Yes, the panic-stricken and pain-ridden
continued to dive into the Pacific, but one
could get overstimulated thinking about it.
I was no onlooker. I went shopping for
a new look. I studied myths. I even invented
a motto for myself: Never say mayday
when there's still marzipan. When I was feeling
low-spririted, it helped to think of the lion
who was being given only lichen to eat.
The lily-livered wouldn't look through the lens.
I looked and saw that the scientists
in the laboratory were looking for keywords in
the Judgement Book, still hadn't jettisoned
that piece of junk. It was time to make a home
in the hedge and try not to hear the gunshots.
So what if the grass was really green glass?

CARTOON BY TOM GAULD >