

Molecular express no. 2

On things produced or abetted by Molecular Press.



Canadian Railway Museum, Montreal. Freight is big in Canada.

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It's hard to know where to begin to describe the exhibition *Regarder le glacier s'en aller*, which is taking place all over Switzerland this year. Look it up! Try this site, for instance : <https://artforglaciars.ch/> Or this one: <https://mudac.ch/expositions/regarder-le-glacier-sen-aller/> .

What prompted it? The melting of the alpine glaciers of course, and an austere four-month residency by Carmen Perrin at the Furka Pass, beside the Rhône glacier. Existing initiatives and interested experts were drawn in; bold plans were made - some vetoed by the glaciers themselves.

This poem (by PMcC, for Carmen Perrin, Georges Descombes and Jacques Demierre) was prompted by the inauguration of the exhibition in Gletsch <https://artforglaciars.ch/gletsch-inauguration/>



Rack & pinion spine of a blue whale
Caught by the flukes and reeled in
To lie on its livid ghost
Preserving both, perhaps,
Shrink-wrapped.

A salty self of mine impressed
In a neon-green crevasse
These thirty years
Processed and printed by
The neutral glacier I've unplugged

As gentians hulloo His Master's
Voice a little earlier
Each year a little higher up the slope
When they get to the top they stop.

For the annual Poésies en mouvement show, this year's theme is *greffer* (graft)
<https://makaronic.ch/evenements/pem15.0.24.html> . A November evening of music, dance,
 poetry, video and performance, for a variegated audience.



It will feature a diatribe by PMcC entitled *Faites demi-tour dès que possible*, along these lines:

Lundi j'ai compris deux choses : que la solution des gros problèmes de l'humanité n'était plus de mon ressort, et que cette réalisation relevait non pas de la sagesse mais de la décrépitude. A ce stade le crépi ne me sert plus vraiment : c'est l'intelligence qui compte et c'est ça ce qui vient à manquer.

Je me suis donc renseigné auprès de M. Musk sur l'option d'une greffe d'intelligence artificielle, mais il paraît que la greffe va dans l'autre sens : c'est le savoir humain qui est greffé sur la machine, et la machine s'était déjà approprié mes élucubrations. Elle n'avait plus besoin de moi.

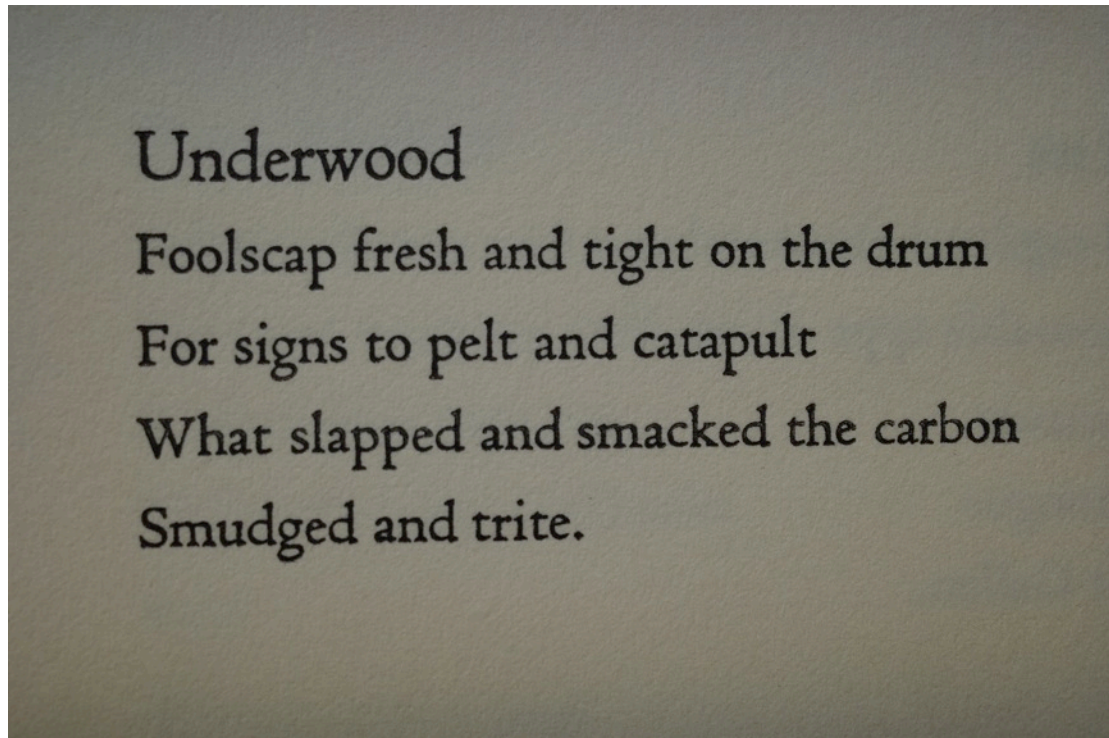
Option deux, une greffe de matière grise, ressent trop la greffe de flore intestinale, et puis il n'y a que les cliniques de luxe qui la proposent.

Reste la technologie qui se trouve dans le domaine public voire dans mon abri anti-nucléaire, au fond d'un placard, ou bien à la voirie, rejeté par le centre social protestant. On fait avec.

The intention, at present, is to spell out criteria for rejecting things I don't understand, prompted by the poet David Black, a fine interpreter of Dante (whom I do read) and of Emmanuel Levinas, whom I can't seem to. It might be the moment when the punters sneak out for a beer. Because there are fine performances you wouldn't want to miss.

Leadhills

A letterpress book! Chuck Peters of Austin, Texas has printed a themed selection of squibs from The Syllabary at Dharma Pine press. Peruse a copy at the National Library of Scotland.



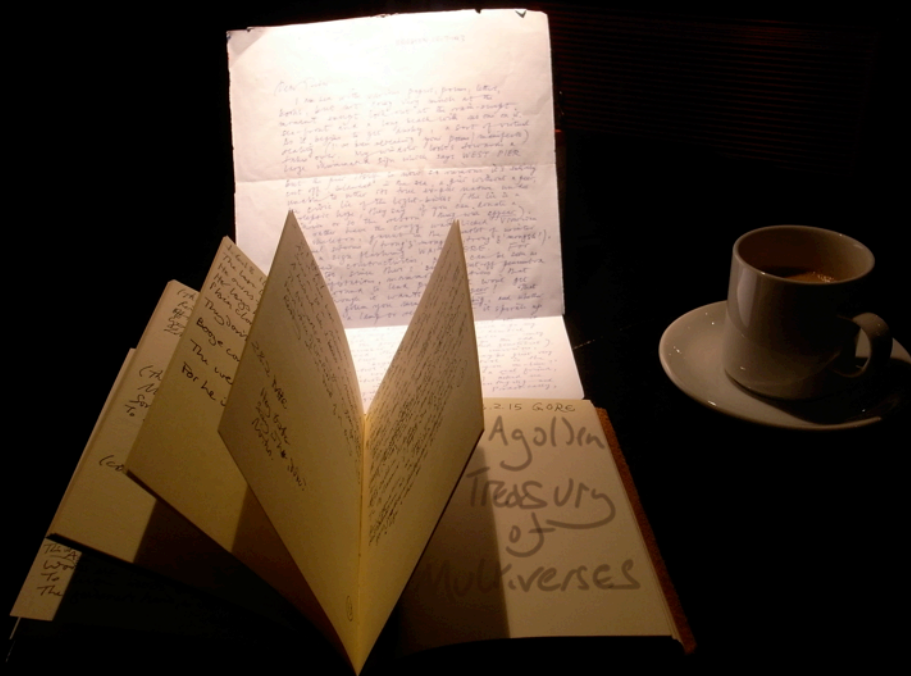
The pyrotechnic displays of illuminated initials draw the crowds and demand our admiration. Then come quiet pages where the scribe or printer's art is all attention to the word; its beauty is a function of clarity. It's the beauty of intelligence, perhaps of elegant and simple mathematical formulae. It would be hard to deserve. Here's to the crafty printer!

The Syllabary review and updates

Metropole Hotel, Brighton
29 July 1993

I am here with various papers, poems, letters, books, but not doing very much at the moment except look out at the rain-swept sea-front and a long beach with no one on it. As it begins to get dusky, a sort of virtual reality (I've been re-reading your poems / manifesto) takes over. My window looks towards a large illuminated sign which says WEST PIER but the pier itself is now so ruinous it's entirely cut off, islanded in the sea, a pier without a peer, unable to utter its true ex-pier nature under the civic lie of the light-bulbs (the lie is a proleptic hope, they say if you can donate a million or so the reborn thing will appear. I'd rather have the crazy wave-licked Victorian iron skeleton, gaunt in the gauntlet of winter Channel storms (trong'z 'mongsh, trong'z 'mongsh!), with a sign flashing WAIT HERE. For all their constructivities, poems can be seen as ruins too, since there's such a cut-off penumbra of manifestations, mammoth-festations, that crowds round to lend power but won't get seen, though it wants you to peer! That fax-info golem you mention is big, and whether you rub a lamp or read a report it spirals up very fast and speaks with tongues the wit of which ye may not wot....

- Edwin Morgan



**Frailty was the initial fear: the weakest link
Might fail the chain of sense. But this was a web,
Chainmail, more like; a toil of strategies that prevailed.
Prevailed? They outstripped Napier's apocalyptic longing,
To rubble the Richter scale of Richter scales. But
Every virtuality needs a toe-hold in the vicious earth,
And every need begets a law. Here - reason, as in ration
Or perish. Some did. One web realtor took this heuristic:
Retain whatever utterance can't translate to or from English,
And every word that etymology can't reduce -
"Gore", for instance; "mardi", which isn't "Thursday".
These are the primes of language, the lauds of number.
The server - their perishable emblem - might be
A broken pier, a rig sunk in the bits it drilled for. Any
Ruin fit for haunting, any sturdy poem
To track the sun, to gauge its motor.**

- Peter McCarey

Reviews of *The Syllabary* are rare, and this one by Philip Terry is rare in the Glasgow sense:

“While the rest of us worry about the future of writing in the age of AI, the poet Peter McCarey has been busy creating his own breed of writing machines, more like the imaginary creations of William Heath Robinson than the slick machines of AI. McCarey has been doing this for some time – his volume *Collected Contraptions* appeared in 2011 – but his most recent work, *The Syllabary (A Poem in 2,272 Parts)*, simultaneously published online and in book form (the book runs to eleven volumes), takes this to a new level. The result is one of the longest poems in the language, rivalling Michael Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion* of 1612, which ran to 15,000 lines.

“In the Foreword to the printed version (a limited edition of twenty-five, each weighing around 5kg) McCarey cryptically describes the mechanism as follows: ‘*The Syllabary* sets every monosyllabic word of my ideolect in a matrix of 20 initials, 10 vowels and 18 terminal consonants or nonsonants. Of the 3,600 [20 x 10 x 18] cells in the matrix, 2,272 contain a word or cluster of words. There is a glyph to every cell, and a lyric to each word-bearing glyph.’ If this leaves you puzzled, the workings of McCarey’s machine become luminously clear when you read the online version of the book. Here the reader enters what at first seems like an endless labyrinth – a ‘3D map’ where there ‘is no telling where it will take you’ – but its fundamental mechanism quickly comes into focus. The first thing you see, turning to the bottom right-hand corner of the webpage, is a wheel, or three wheels, one inside the other, the outer wheel bearing consonants (the twenty initial consonants), the middle wheel vowels (the ten vowels), the inner wheel more consonants (the eighteen terminal consonants), and when the turning wheels come to rest they highlight a sequence of letters: HAM, LEB, HAL, YEL and so on. In the case of YEL (one of the 2,272 cells that contains a word), once the wheel stops, a handwritten glyph appears, spelling the word YELL, then we hear the poet read a poem generated by the word:

To yell at your colleagues
Is maybe cathartic
But not, in the long run,
That wise.

“On other occasions the three letters in the wheel give rise to more complicated glyphs, where by the insertion of additional letters, multiple words are created, as in YEARN, which is the basis of the poem ‘Yen’:

I yearn for you
But never learn. For you
I’d die my dear, but don’t.

“And then there are numerous poems which take this process as far as it can go, giving rise to complicated glyphs that by inserting extra letters create matrices of overlapping words. In the following example, the glyph containing the words ‘gunge’, ‘gulch’, ‘grudge’, and ‘grunge’ forms the building blocks of the following poem:

There’s some gunge in the gulch
You could guddle for bargains
That nobody’d grudge you
So lee aff the grunge.

“The method, which you can begin to glimpse here, frequently gives rise to poems built around clusters of similar-sounding words, something which many traditional poets achieve by employing end rhyme, but here the music is created *within* the lines as well as at the end. This makes for an original and arresting soundscape, very different, in fact, from *any* use of rhyme, end rhyme or internal rhyme alike, for here the echoing sounds are constantly metamorphosing and diverging as we read. And it gives space to the reader, too, not just in allowing them to participate in the act of composition, by seeing the writing process as it unfolds, but in the latent suggestion that each poem, each word cluster, could be resolved in different ways, be rewritten by each reader. In a work containing 2,272 poems, inevitably some will be better than others. Several of the pieces here are throw-away two-liners, though even

these are often infused with sardonic wit: ‘In the random snooker hall of physics / Life’s a glitch’. Occasionally, too, the poem strains to encompass the words thrown up by the machine, like a juggler presented with too many balls, but in the vast majority of cases, and triumphantly in others – as in the moving poem in memory of the poet Douglas Oliver – the poems rise to the occasion, at once enabled by, and transcending, the machine out of which they are born.”

Those paragraphs are lifted from Philip Terry’s essay in PN Review 278, one of a series entitled “What is Poetry?”. As the poem neared completion I took some time – a year or so – to improve or replace old texts that grated. Between the 2023 and 2024 print editions of the poem I replaced a few more, and on reading Philip Terry’s review I saw that I really didn’t like “gulch”.

Molecular Express is the logical place to communicate these repairs; people and institutions that own a copy of the work can print them off and tuck them in. Here, the replacement poems and their glyphs are followed by a few words on their rationale.

An oracular crib of mud brick
On rubik-cube rockers
For Jacob to go off
And Esau to see-saw:
The bickering babies
Of bullet-proof reason,
Bewilderment..

CRIB

Two whelks were apprehended drunk
And tumbling their wilkies
Next to a pile of Black & Deckered
Periwinkle shells
On Ardrossan Beach.
They're fit for work, though maybe not
As earplugs.

WORK
WHELK

Whatever Worked

The worst that can happen
Will. Maybe not to you
But then so what?

WORST
WORKED

Seconds Away

For this is a grudge bout: rope a dope
In Tombstone wadi. Sorry – Gulch,
Ankle-deep in heavy-metal gunge.

GULCH
GRUDGE

For M.S.

White noise of this rough page,
A pebble beach of waves and particles
And birdsong! Hip, hip!
The voice of a language I no longer fully understand
Convinces me.

HIP

Management Con

The boss's guru knows it's all about
Doing worse with less:
He said that once.
but I mean, you know, he says, we do
Whatever they reckon works.

WORKS
WORSE
ONCE

You could do the dirty secret in a whited sepulchre;
You might find an unmarked grave, an empty tomb (the Cenotaph),
A drawer in the morgue in chapter one, a cryptic cross,
Ahem. Catarrh. A catafalque, the brass band playing Chopin;
Or how about a submarine sarcophagus? (sink big);
An ossuary draped with the jolly roger; the joker
In V.I. Lenin's granite mausoleum,
And all those people - most of them dead by now - queueing up to see
him.

TOMB

The Syllabary depends on the 3D listing of all my monosyllabic words, something I compiled in the 1990s. A few essential words, such as “speech”, slipped the net for a time. But it was only this year that I noticed the absence of the word “work” (along with “works” and “worked”) (tell me about it, Dr Freud). So those three texts had to be written. For once I cheated in the “work/whelk” syllable, using the plural rather than the singular form of the key word: once the notion of whelks as earplugs occurred to me I couldn’t get it out of my head, nor could I see a way to keep the singular “A whelk was apprehended drunk”. And, yes, I cheated in “Management Con” also, by quietly dropping the word “whelks”. The little blighters had already been associated with work in “work/whelk”. Anyway, this isn’t a crossword.

The syllable “gulch/grudge/gunge/grunge” was never going to produce a balanced lyric, but a coherent scene was not impossible. This turned out to be a boxing match after a flash flood in Arizona. Why boxing should appear in my work beats me: I only ever watched it on rainy Saturday afternoons in childhood, and I certainly did not enjoy the regular scuffles at school. The missing word “grunge” – not part of my personal vocabulary – is hinted at in the “heavy metal”.

In the discarded texts, for “crib” and for “tomb” I had lazily relied on echoes from the Gospel to do the work. I’ve been asked, why Jacob and Esau in the new text? The anagrammatic “bicker” and “crib” suggest sibling grievances; they might equally evoke the United Nations and the State of Israel, war babies both. Or any incunabula.

Crib? Take its literal
Brick-a-block down; there’s
Hebrew and Greek too,
Hard at it in print.

Then it’s up to the reader to mark
The god of the armies.

Molecular Press web site : direct orders

You may have noticed that Molecular Press books can now be bought directly from this website, using Paypal. Mr Thiel takes a lot less per copy than does Mr Bezos. Not that Molecular Press is threatened with financial success or ruin. The books are good, though. This week I went back to Lindsay Macgregor's *Desperate Fishwives*. Now there's a fine collection for you. Really.

The next issue of Molecular Press will tell you about the Bad Book Club.