

## *The Flexicon*

*Editor's Note: The Flexicon is the playful brainchild of Albert Goldbarth. Its aim is to pay homage to the lexical richness of English, a birthright that many poets and novelists today either ignore or squander. It is no accident that all the writers who participated in The Flexicon round-robin draw heavily on food metaphors, since their gourmandizing appetite for sensual words is astounding. Advocates of the plain style often react uneasily to what they believe is self-indulgent verbal excess or pedantry, castigating the stylists who prefer the fleshpots and musical embellishments of Baroque vocabulary to the stern truths of more restrained wordsmiths. Mere rhetoric, the Puritans scoff.*

*I, for one, cast my lot with the maximalists. Too much contemporary American poetry, in my opinion, is timid in choice of language: no seductive consonants, no mellifluous or raucous vowels, no cockatoos, no memorable turns of phrase. Instead, the verse plods flat and bloodless down the page, sounding like lowest-common-denominator speech or a drone of shopworn abstractions. The Flexicon's tomfoolery offers a cogent reminder of the lexical pleasures waiting to be savored.*

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There are some who want language to be a clear broth. *Stone. Light. Milk. Soul. Darkness.*

But there's also a bowl of broth asquiggle *à la* Pollock with thick egg noodles, with involuted vegetables sprouting hairs and wearing wens like lavish boutonnières, with floating sargassos of tripe, or matzoh balls so fully lunar you'd think that they would warp the field of gravity in the bowl. *Seiche. Grommet. Hoochie-koo. Incunabula. Houghmagandy.*

The language is a hobo stew, a ragout, an up-to-the-elbow search in the haggis.

I'm thinking of food not only because a word is a density on the tongue, but also because this morning I overheard one of those lucky moments of natural spoken beauty, in the supermarket. A guy in a hurry was questioning the girl behind the register, saying:

*Do you know where the Cheez Whiz  
That you squeeze is?*

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

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And so they got to it among the ant traps, she overcome by his burst of natural spoken beauty, coiling and uncoiling among the mounds of ersatz cream right next to the Limburger, he racking his deblooded brain for words to reward her with—*puttee, abonnement, scuzzy, porcelain, fanny, shebang, couvade, plimsoll, googol, fistula*—while she sighed ectoplasm all over him, inhaling phonemes like a milkmaid her own stool. *Phlegm, java, algebra*, he went on, heaving toward climax, stirred by a simple slangy anacoluthon, *boycott, Pernambuco, indri, gasket, akimbo, Aliquippa, dunt*. Then his mutter broke into the clear and he asked, “Does the Swan of Tuonela sing because it happens to be dying or because it is surviving? Why does it sing so majestically?” Jubilantly aghast, she ignored him, having gone beyond receptivity to mere words, having already sourpissed her mistresspiece.

“What’s your fucking name?” he asked. “Joyce?”

“Only Joyce when I’m fucking,” she said, aware that her best was behind her, as they all had always said. It was over, their oleaginous peak. It is possible to have no more than a paramedic’s sense of fatality. He and his Joyce ended up barricaded (flimsy Maginot) behind huge blocks of weightless styrofoam, Poe-ed by Amontillado, gasping at their new diet of excelsior, waiting for fescue but doomed to remain there forever, he asking where it was, she answering with one immaculate phrase, a prodigy of impromptu civility. “It isn’t where it *once* was,” she told him, “you’ve scrambled my tripes good and proper, and they’re going to move me to Fish and Meatus in the morning. Put that in your pipette and suck it. That’s what comes of fancy talk.”

“Sorry,” he gasped, “I take it all back.”

“They doesn’t swim backward,” she told him.

“Then we’ll blind the little bastards with vinegar.”

At once they set off for Aisle Eleven, pausing only to bow in the direction of a sign saying “Support the Dweebs of Hendiadys Planck.”

They walked it all right, emerging in a golden shower that drowned the ant traps one and all.

PAUL WEST

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Words were his only and all, his food for thoughts, his bonbons as well as bons mots, and when it came right down to it the hardscrabble of his despair. True for him, because true for all. Rhymes can slide over the lips like raw oysters without being tasted. But perhaps he knew only too well his rhyme scheme, perhaps, due to a concussion he suffered while heliarc welding, he could only speak in a four-point rhyme, and that the next thing he said was: "Holy mole, my goal is frijoles," and that while standing at the check-out line, with a soupçon of soup, a mélange of melba, a ragout of Ragu, and half a shopping cart filled with corpse food, he began dreaming of making a cajorie for Marjorie, and quite unselfconsciously burst into the following song:

Please leave your sweaters at home,  
if you are tempted to roam.  
You can eat some linguini and wear a bikini,  
but please leave your sweaters at home.

It was a small ditty, but Marjorie, whose favorite dish was word stew (which, like revenge, she preferred to eat cold) was bound to giggle and jiggle all the same. Panic set in. Had he run all his errands? From his pocket, he pulled out his list, "Things To Do Today":

1. Stomach-pump the vampire
2. Curry favor (with chutney)
3. Skip to my loo
4. Rediaper the babe in the woods
5. Squash blossoms on neck
6. Auscultate silverfish
7. Moon over Miami
8. Unzip tse tse fly
9. Refrond punkahwallah

10. Absquatulate
11. Teach car about auto-eroticism
12. Read Coppard on pool coping
13. Lope, mope, and syncope
14. Knit sweater from brows
15. Jactitate soundlessly
16. Peel Adam's apple
17. Shuffle off a mortal coil
18. Be gross in a grocery

With a flourish he checked off the last item. Because the day was still young and wordful, all that remained was to phone his fine, phoneme-mad friend, Goldbarth, and invite him to dine, in the margarine-free expanse of Marjorie's mansion.

DIANE ACKERMAN

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"This sort of coy self-reflexive metaverbal text thing just depresses the shit out of me," exeleutherostomizes an incidental character—maybe a bagboy at the PriceChopper or some kind of high-class chef at Marjorie's Mansion or something—who appears now w/o any more reason or reality than the soubrettish cashier or the logophilic protagonist of the earlier sections of this serial exhibition, the nameless guy whose lexical sex scene in (2) is just an excuse for a lot of metalexical riffs and intertextual allusions and whose recursive errand-list in (3) is just an excuse for some arch wordplay and pinchbeck paradox. (Plus note that that cheese-happy protagonist (a male) is nameless so far, which is another standard move for this kind of kooky wacky metalexical serial spree-type fiction: either you give the guy a name like "Name" or "Logos" or "Techst" or something, or else you give him no name at all so that his queer namelessness becomes an object of the reader's attention and so comments obliquely on names/naming/signification as abstract phenomena, all of which seems tremendously cool and complex and *sui generis* if (a) it's 1965 and/or you're either (b) 20 years old or (c)

French, but which to the 35-year-old WASP bagboy/chef in 1998 seems generic and lame and depressing.)

Maybe the only important character-developmentish thing to know about the bagboy/chef is that he washed out of a Masters of Fine Arts in Poetry program at one of the Graduate Creative Writing Departments that I predict will compose just about the entire interested readership for a metalexical line-dance such as the *Flexicon*. This bit of developmental background, however clunky and discursive its insertion, has the advantage that it quote/unquote *motivates* not only the bagboy/chef's pissy attitude toward the preceding sections but his whole resoundingly confused and caveat-hobbled attitude toward the aesthetics of big fancy words. E.g., consider the following list of predicates, which the bagboy/chef would have seen in the Graduate Creative Writing Dept's "In(/Ex)clu(e)si(e)ve Vocabularies and the Canon(sens)ical Phallocracy of Neoclassical Dic(k)tion" poetics seminar if the seminar hadn't been offered only every other Spring (because the seminar's famous but almost translucently pale and delicate Prof took three out of every four terms off to do Visiting Writer gigs at Iowa and Hopkins and to undergo hormonal treatments for the congenital cryptorchidism that most of his own celebrated poems were sustained meditations on) and if the bagboy/chef hadn't dropped out after his first term (which was, of course, a Fall term):

Diminutive  
Big  
Unwritten  
Invisible  
Pulchritudinous  
Indecorous  
Foreign  
Unrecognizable  
Fancy  
Uncapitalized  
Misspelled  
Obscene

. . . and so on, like seven or eight columns of them, with the students' assignment being to name what truly interesting feature all the words

have in common, which, after stuff like “all predicates” and “all written in chalk” has been essayed and shot down, ends up being that each word itself possessed something like the opposite of whatever property it functions to denote, for example “Misspelled” being correctly spelled and “Big” being a small word and “Pulchritudinous” being a seriously repulsive word, etc., with the pharmaceutically hirsute and seborrheal Prof up at the board patting his forehead with a hankie and explaining that the list’s semiotic point is that words are also themselves things, objects, and themselves have qualities, qualities which are themselves subject to predication/signification/nullification via still *other* words—e.g., “‘Paris’ has five letters in it” vs. “Paris is a town in which no second-semester grad student would regard this sort of revelation as in any way revelatory”—and plus (for extra credit) that words’ and terms’ semantic and affective and ontological properties remain extant and describable even when those words and terms don’t refer to anything real—e.g., the well-known Russellian noun-phrase in “The present King of France is a cryptorchid.”

Missing this (ex)plication of what the Prof sometimes called Hypernominalism and sometimes called the Ineluctable Ontological Opacity of the Signifier (neither of which terms caught on) actually cost the bagboy/chef/ex-grad student nothing but a certain chic vocabulary for describing the whole problem, however, since he’d already hit the problem face-first at the inaugural meeting of his (one) career Graduate Poetry Workshop experience that first ill-fated fall, when the Workshop’s non-Prof (this teacher didn’t have a Ph.D., of which fact he seemed to be extremely proud, and mentioned it a lot, like it denoted some sort of special integrity or exemption), who was a burly workingman’s poet very much in the austere tradition of plain single-entendre diction and maximum unfussiness, put up on the board what he (i.e., the laconic and perversely proud non-Prof) called his Rule of Thumb, meaning if you didn’t follow the Rule his big thumb (which was actually muscular, visibly, like an arm, the thumb was) would jerk doorward in such a way as to signify that you were kicked out of the Workshop and thus flunked out of the Graduate Creative Writing Department itself and thus had no chance of earning the M.F.A. that could (assuming you had sufficient publications on your c.v.) get you a tenure-track job even without a doctorate, this R. of T. being:

\*DON'T USE A BIG WORD WHEN A SMALL WORD WILL DO[,]\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Note that this, the 4th Section of *The Flexicon* to which this recursive digression is itself appended—and which went through several agonizing drafts and countless perusals of dictionary and thesaurus in search of just the right word/phrase to convey just the right concept/tone/*entendre*-matrix—follows the non-Prof's prehensile proscription to the letter at all times, despite the occasional deployment of such apparent jawbreakers as for example “exeleutherostomizes” and “cryptorchid,” which however in each instance of their use were the absolutely right and only words in contemporary English to signify just what needed to be signified. For instance, if “cryptorchid” hadn't been used, some kind of noun-phrase like “man who's got testicles but whose scrotum is nevertheless empty because the testicles refuse to leave the natal warmth of his abdomen and descend into the so-called ‘real world’ ” would have had to stand in for it, which would not only have been clunky and infelicitous but would have taken a lot more time to read than just the one obscure but pathologically precise word does, not to mention the fact that the long clunky noun-phrase would have had to be used more than once, since a form of the word “cryptorchid” appears in the text of *Flexicon*'s Section (4) either two, six, or three times (depending whether you construe this FN1 as itself part of 4's actual “text” and, if so, whether you choose to count only *uses* of the word (i.e., the word deployed to refer to an actual extralinguistic cryptorchid, which by the way the renowned Prof in question really was) or to count both *uses* and *mentions* of it (“mentions” being the precise technical term for the deployment of the word in quotes or ital or bold so as to signify that the word is referring to the word *itself* rather than to any real-world referent—q.v. the “‘Paris’ has five letters in it” example in the Section's main text above. And same sort of deal with “exeleutherostomizes,” which denotes a very particular sort of one's-mind-speaking not captured by “exclaimed” or “ejaculated” or “interjected” and especially not by “jactitated,” although “jactitated” would, in less restrained and painstaking hands, have proved irresistibly tempting, establishing as its deployment would the sort of interpersonal but intratextual link to Ms. Ackerman's Section (3) that coy self-reflexive serials like *Flexicon* thrive on, except “jactitate” has a subtle flavor of vaunt/obnoxiousness/calumny to its connotation that's different from “exeleutherostomize”'s flavor of just innocently happening to verbalize something—almost the way you can sometimes think you're only thinking something and then look up at your listeners' faces and realize to your horror that you seem to have verbalized aloud the thing you were thinking without even consciously intending to do it (i.e., to say it), an innocence and lack of self-consciousness that might well be *perceived* as insolent or obnoxious but hasn't got the *intrinsic* obnoxiousness built into it that's part of the sense of “jactitate” (which word—that is, “jactitate”—also, as it were tertiarily, denotes a spasmodic or uncontrollable twitching, which means that Ms. Ackerman's Koan #15 could, if uttered to or interpreted by a neurologist or pharmaceutical researcher, make perfect—but I'm guessing wholly unintended—sense (which brings up the fascinating case of linguistic paradoxes that depend on a certain univocal interpretation for their paradoxicalness and so are heavily context-dependent (the context being the identity of the listener and her particular interpretation of the relevant terms) when the whole point of paradoxes is that, like logical tautologies, they're supposed to hold sort of *a priori* in every possible real-world instance,

[FN1, continued]

whereas in the case of Ms. Ackerman's #15 and a tardive-dyskinesia specialist the paradox fails to "not-signify" and thus isn't a true coin-of-the-realm paradox at all, at least in contemporary English).

All of which prenominate issues seem, at least to somebody like the dysphoric bagboy (who himself is sometimes given to jactitating a bit when he chances to look up and see the "15 Items or Less" sign swinging blithely over the #2's conveyor belt), to entail certain absolutely vital caveats and corollaries to the burly non-Prof's Rule of Thumb, viz. e.g.:

\*.But sometimes a small word won't do, and then it's not only permissible but probably even *necessary* to use a big word;

\*.Except you have to be really careful in the application of (\*), because since words are themselves things with qualities, and since there's always going to be a slight divergence or doubling of a poetry-reader's attention between the qualities of the referents of the words and the words' *own* qualities (qualities which can, by the way, vary incredibly, even if there's no L.-Straussian context to affect interpretation—for instance, Rev. Goldbarth surely jests with "a word is a density on the tongue," because it is clearly *not* the case that all words are densities on the tongue: as in for just one example see the way the word "aquarelle"

is not a lingual density but rather a liberation of the tongue from all density (say "aquarelle" out loud, like chant it, over and over, until it does that weird thing chanted words do where "aquarelle" separates from what it so perfectly names and becomes its own object, pure sound, floating, taking with it first tongue and then *chanteur*)). And if you consider that a good portion of the attention the reader will be paying to the words themselves will be not just cognitive but *aesthetic*, which let's face it means in certain respects critical, judgmental, normative, then you can see why you have to be just *exceedingly* disciplined and painstaking and judicious and restrained in your use of a big word, because if the reader's ever tempted to deploy predicates like "gratuitous" or "pretentious" or "jactitatory" or "show-offy" in her critical second-order description (even to herself, silently, even unconsciously) of the big word, then the entire delicate floating mechanism comes crashing down: she will be both unmoved by the poem and contemptuous of its author; and the contempt will be (in the bagboy's opinion) your well-deserved desert.

at which introductory inditement and promulgation the future bagboy, the first poem of whose application portfolio had been entitled "*NATURA NON FACIT SALTUM*" and had started out "Woe betide the Helminth whose Host / eschews Cheese," had begun already to get his affairs in order, decamping<sup>2</sup> soon after for PriceChopper's Express Lane #2 and for the next thirteen years standing forlornly beneath an advisory Express Lane sign that uses "LESS" to refer to countable items, and still living with his folks, and being one of those unpublishable-type poets who submit stuff to places like *APR* and *Parnassus* and never even get out of the Slush Pile because they don't even type it or enclose an SASE or any of the unmistakable nonverbal clues that the submitter's a pro and his submission ought to be read seriously. All of which, when you think of the corollaries the non-Prof c(/sh)ould have appended to his digital axiom, is pretty fucking sad.

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

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<sup>2</sup>(not absquatulating—see FN1)

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A Three-Part *quoz* for the Alchemical Flexicon:

Deep in the Malabar nightshade, dear,  
                   magnus hitch  
                   is diazitized  
                   with a swivel-type  
 newel. Deep in the sem-sem X

Madras, madrasah, mahoon.

Philargyry, that  
philocubist,

does it  
en-  
candle

the Dome of mysterious  
Hem-line?

Know it now.

Gladly, my eyes turn from a site of ruin  
to happy nomenclature.

MAC WELLMAN

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Folderol. Gewgaw. Speaking in tongues. Fribbling. Cheese Whiz or  
No Biz. Let's get these excesses straight, 'kay? The demagogue slipped  
into the demislip.

In the dark woods  
In the dark woods  
In the dark woods  
The noodles  
Noodled  
Their noodles

Sign on the Staten Island Ferry: *Notice: Please Remain Inside of Ropes,  
Until Boat is Fast to Dock.* Is the boat fast that we jump the ropes? Are  
we there yet?

By the blue stream  
By the blue stream  
By the blue stream  
The prick  
Pricked  
His prick

Greasy chicken feathers and cheese rinds, Mom. Not sufferin' succotash. "I didn't know a verb from a house."—Malcolm X.

In the fast car  
In the fast car  
In the fast car  
The weenies  
Weaned  
Their wieners

*Pied affectation never made him rome / his stile is like his garmentes spun at home.*—Ben Jonson, holding Mermaid Tavern court, drowns the lot of 'em, though his unpied garments were no guarantors of gravity he found wanting in pied.

In the grocery cart  
In the grocery cart  
In the grocery cart  
The wankers  
Wanked  
Their wanks.

*That car got us there and back for one hell of a spell, Marjorie.* Could it have all been only a ruse of the hegemony—the groceries, the check-out, the bagging, the taking, the driving, the storing, the cooking, the eating, the living, all a trick of the arbitrary vehicle?

We still need a reason to read.

Over the green dale  
 Over the green dale  
 Over the green dale  
 Peter's  
 Peter  
 Petered out.

*Sup?*

*No thing.* “There are times when . . . ‘plain talk’ . . . distorts the truth through a deliberate avoidance of complexity.”—September 1996 letter to the editor, *New York Times*. “The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering.”—Wallace Stevens.

Cut the c\*\*\*

Beneath the bridge  
 Beneath the bridge  
                   Beneath the bridge  
 Shaft  
 Shafted  
 His shaft.

“Cursed be the father of the bride of the blacksmith who forged the iron for the axe with which the oak was felled from which the bed was carved in which was conceived the great grandfather of the man who was driving the carriage in which your mother met your father.”—Robert Desnos.

On the sunny hill  
 On the sunny hill  
 On the sunny bill  
 The cranks  
 Cranked  
 Their cranks.

Where did I hear the tale of Amiri Baraka seeing Thelonius Monk on the street? *Sup?*—or *What's happening?*—Baraka asks. “Everything. All

the time. Every googolplex of a second.” One of the Originals group of Chinese poets working now, Jhou Yaping, cites the influence of the late T’ang dynasty:

ornamental, colorful diction stimulating the senses  
metaphor  
heaping  
static states, details

Jeremy Prynne notes “our” exoticism, to the Originals, “with our credit-card view of the speech act.”

At the frilly mall  
At the frilly mall  
At the frilly mall  
The bagboy  
Bagged  
A bag.

*I am grateful to follow DFW, whose poets btw do not fare well here.—*  
This is a constructed sentence with an invented implied subject.\*

At the pearly gates  
At the pearly gates  
At the pearly gates  
The pecker  
Pecked  
His pecker.

\*Surely the years since 1965 add up to more than the second sentence of this ¶, or I’m off to the movies dinner, movie, art—the Biennial, where the painting by Raymond Pettibon reads:

*If rhetoric ever meant anything. And it did! It did!*

SUSAN WHEELER

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If the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom, then that mode of lexis breeds the Callas of idiom, aria auf excelsius, and exceeds the analysis of reductio ad absurdum, and amen!, till the node, malignant, of success speeds to its kingdom-done-deal

and the goad of sexus is freed of its load of excess and meads in the alice of pissdom where, feckless, it seeds the chrysalis of vision and weeds the women from the amen, hallelujah, glorioso, the abode wherein the toad of hexes leads to the princess of kissdom, her hair a frizzdom, and the pillow prince of Priapus showed off his phallus of jism that musta growed in Texas and its molasses that flowed reckless into the chalice of fizzledom, domicile for the pizzle of sizzle-and-cum, to explode (outside the malice of Christendom, the tallis of Judaism, the talismen of schism)

while fee fi fo fum bleeds the Englishmun and Puritun, simple Simun one to one, one syllable to one deed does indeed lead to killable paralysis in abyssdom, the asinine fallacy or the callous of hell (which some say is too many adjectives, and pun, they solemn, the low road in the shallows of the system!) with no side wallows in hallelujahs or frissons that lead to the omphalos of elysium, glory be to dapp and sap

for yea, the road of excess leads to the palace—see where the circumlocutionous road goed, how the road growed and growed by following its nose through the plexus, then rose and got high on the Parnassus—of wisdom, exultate in excess!

SUSAN YANKOWITZ

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“Cecilia was a tough cookie.”

And so I’m taking this back to food, this splicey piece that started so simply with its need to locate squeeze cheese, segued immediately to Paul West’s gamy main squeeze, then went on to mainline endless hypo’d hyperlingual lalaland digressions into its overblown system. Now, though—back to basics. To food.

In one of his dextrous essays, Bernard Cooper refers to an early childhood playmate who, “entranced by any old ordinary word, [would] begin to say it over and over. Mary, his sister, once let out an ear-splitting scream because . . . Jeffrey sat in a corner incessantly chanting ‘cheese.’ ”

A small word; but it evidently transported him big distance.

“Cecilia” above is Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin, perhaps the most eminent woman astronomer ever, a kind of Columbus of universal hydrogen. (The description of her tenacity is from fellow astronomer Jesse Greenstein.) When she sat in on lectures by bigwig Niels Bohr at Cambridge, she found that they were “rendered almost incomprehensible by his accent. There were references to what I recorded as ‘soup groups’ ”—

Which should bring us back full-circle to the supermarket. That guy is leaving. He has his can of pseudocheese, and his receipt. Two tickets to a Bulls game. A condom. A picture of Otis, three, and Nona, four now. *Real things*, he thinks. A job. A plank of cut white pine. They don’t go gassy, metamorph, and recombine to something else, they don’t fog up or rhapsodize or curl around to gnaw themselves, they aren’t made of void and a tickle of quantum fizz.

—“only later emended to ‘sub-groups.’ ”

Language is my pleasure.

Still, I’m ending with non-verbal pleasure: a man who’s simply cleared one hour at dusk to nosh on cheese-and-Ritz and stare at the day’s-end colors. He sits on a stone. The light froths over him, like milk. He doesn’t consciously think of his soul, but surely *something* in him stirs. And then the darkness comes.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH