EMMETT WILLIAMS

~~ALISON~~
~~BRITA~~
~~CHARLOTTE~~
~~DOROTHY~~
~~ESKIMO~~
~~FRANCES~~
~~GAIT~~
~~HELEN~~
~~ISOLDE~~
~~JOAN~~
~~KICHKA~~
~~LOURDES~~
~~MARGE~~

A VALENTINE FOR NOËL

~~OLGA~~
~~POLLY~~
~~QUEEN ELIZABETH~~
~~RENATE~~
~~SHARON~~
~~TAKAKO~~
~~UTA~~
~~VERA~~
~~WENDY~~
~~XENIA~~
~~YVONNE~~
~~ZELDA~~

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 ex-
patriate returning to the United States after an ab-
sence 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 trib-
ute to the muse's assistant. In the first substi-
tution, the three letters of the title yielded

red up going

as the first line of the poem. continuing the pro-
cess, the ten letters of these three words blos-
somed 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-

tiplying 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 re-
lieve the monotony, and to thicken the plot, I de-
cided 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 re-
peated, 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,

lumen