

Six Constrained Texts:

1. *Beau Présent*: "No Sir Shark"
2. Hidden Homophones: "Aural Phantasmagoria"
3. Traditional *Filigrane*: "Old Man of Tricks"
4. Narrative *Filigrane*: "Drag"
5. "the only the wholly the": "Not Me But You"
6. Cooperider's Expansion: "Black Mirror"

1.

No Sir Shark

No Sir Shark or hobo hero

No book banner or books cooker

No cash scammer or hick bore

No harem user or bimbo seeker

No mouse or souse or insane smearer

More a brain brio man

An Ohio re-maker

A reason harbor

Note: "No Sir Shark" was written using an Oulipian procedure called the "*Beau Présent*" ("the Beautiful Present One"). The writer chooses a name (Obama, in this case) and restricts herself to using only the letters in that name. I decided to use the full name, Barack Hussein Obama. Harry Mathews has given this procedure a more elegant English name, "The Beautiful in-Law."

2.

Aural Phantasmagoria

The guy with dorsal fur the color of *basil*, *ischial* callosities with magenta stripes and baby blue eyes whispered "Look, *I'm erogenous!*" to a sophomore *lock-picker*, while sailors in *drag*, *gunning* for *agrifundamentalists*, murmur *mundane* observations on the weather. Captain *Caesar Pentacle*, a commander *aching* for home, called out for "un bouteille de parfum, *Eau de Drâa*, *décoré* avec des fleurs d'or." *Desire* induces strange longings even in the great, as well as among the vastly more numerous *blame yahoos*. "Maybe *hemotherapy* will someday yield a cure," the furry and nameless one opined, then turned to *yammer matey* nothings to the sailors. "A tempest in an *oubliette* teapot," the lock-picker said as he seated himself on a *sycamore log*; "I daresay *turtles* are glad of a break." Just then a troupe of *gogo lemmings* tangoed past, under the guidance of a *Taliban sheik* sporting ready-to-wear *wool* finished off with braid and some *unique ornaments* that gave off a *rayban sheen*. The lock-picker was tempted to yell "*Phony!*" but instead pointed out, to no one in particular, "This affair reminds me of *all key re-fashioners*, that most celebrated of chefs of the mint *julep reconceived* as *soufflé-- anti-war Lochinvar Jones*. He's the guy who served *murrain jello* to his enemies." "Ah, yes," said the Captain, "My dear friend *Nessie Murgatroyd*, one of the *Dior octuplets*, skipped dessert. *Lochinvar* was giving one of his all-you-can-eat *rolodex* dinners, and *Park Avenue* had come out in force, except for her sister *Liz*—"

"*Liz finks* out all the time," the lock-picker muttered. He was feeling plain *ornery* at the Captain's *highbrow needling*.

Note: This piece is built with a constraint that I call "Hidden Homophones" (I'm not sure where this idea came from). I have concealed the names of monsters and supernatural creatures behind their homophones in a text built around those homophones. The monsters hide in the text as sound shadows of words and parts of words. I have italicized the homophones to make the monsters easier to find.

3.

Old Man of Tricks

Old man of tricks

holding the doggie in the air

feed it plastic garbage

hand paper it

end it—

flea body

on the carpet

out of the news.

Note: A traditional *filigrane*. The *filigrane* is a form invented by Michèle Métail, a member of the Oulipo. One takes a word and compiles a list of all the expressions that contain that word. Then one removes the original word from the phrases, and composes a text using the words that remain and no others. *Filigrane* translates two ways in English, as "filigree" and "watermark." Thus the form: a single line convoluted in a delicate design, partially hidden. The word on which I chose to build this *filigrane* is *bag*.

4.

Drag

The tentacle searched the bottom of the river for the delinquent doll. Her last words, “Everyone is tired of me—,” had unfortunately rung true. She would insist on bringing up family episodes best forgotten. When she came along on an outing, she always lagged far behind. The tentacle protracted its efforts despite a lack of result, and soon a team reluctantly joined it to search the depths with grapnel and net.

At length an inventor, more celebrated as a cross-dresser, contrived an apparatus for hauling recalcitrant corpses out of their ill-chosen resting-places. The contraption was a harrow set upon billiard balls rather than wheels. Each ball wore an iron shoe, and each slow, painful step followed upon a pattern of grace notes, actuated by the combustion of a pack of Gauloises, filtering the air pulled through them by the operator. The inventor’s unacknowledged use of a famous brand had earned him three months in the clink. He had resisted his escort there by wearing a gown that trailed regally and got caught in doorways.

Note: “Drag” is a Narrative *Filigrane*, that is, a *filigrane* built out of the key word’s meanings rather than the idiomatic phrases in which it appears. I have revised and expanded Métail’s method in this way for storytelling purposes. The writer compiles a list of the various meanings of the key word and composes a text using those meanings and as few others as possible. The original word is nowhere present in the text, but forms its title. Both the narrative and the traditional *filigrane* are related to the riddle.

5.

Not me but you

Not me but you,

only and always.

Me *as* you perhaps,

me as he, she or it,

but never me as me.

Certainly me as them,

or they as I, forever.

There the I, here the It.

Nowhere a not-me.

Wherever me, you, possibly, hopefully.

But probably not.

Eventually, however, perhaps

nevertheless.

Note: François Le Lionnais called the constraint used above "*la rien que toute la*," of which "the only the wholly the" is an approximate translation. The writer limits herself to adverbs, pronouns, articles and prepositions. No verbs, adjectives or nouns may be used.

6.

Black Mirror

Note: "Black Mirror" was written using a constraint invented by Carrie Cooperider, a member of the Writhing Society. "Cooperider's Constraint" is a variation of another Oulipian constraint called "Larding." In Larding, the writer inserts lines of her own between lines of another text, thus making it "fatter." In Carrie's variation, one divides a single sentence, rather than a text, and lards each fragment so that it becomes a new sentence. I chose two sentences from Arnaud Maillet's *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, translated by Jeff Fort. I have formatted this piece of writing so that that one can read down, reading the two original sentences, and then, down again, the "fattened" text they gave rise to; or across, reading a fragment of the original sentence, then the new sentence containing that fragment, and so on.

The opacity	The opacity of language derives from its deep strata.
of the black	Visualize a word as the last surface of the black layers endlessly piled beneath.
mirror	Each layer thought it was a mirror.
both veils	Each layer both veils and changes the mattresses upon which it rests, however uncomfortably.
and unveils	The accretion of restless resting places hides the struggles and unveils the power of dust.
what is presented	What is presented, surface, terrain, seems to stretch out forever and be all that there is.
to the gaze	Apparently honest to the gaze of the non-digger, it reveals no quarrels.
(a characteristic	An absence of quarrel elides depth, and is a characteristic of denial.
of veils	Denial pretends to know nothing of an underworld of veils.
themselves).	How the veils themselves bear this oblivion is anyone's guess.
The shadowy	The shadowy conversations of strata continue unheard but unabated.
mirror	They mirror, in longer phrases, the vivid chattering of dust.
never	Never does the falling dust consult the deep strata but falls according to its influence nevertheless.
stops renewing	That influence stops renewing when the dust blows away.
this disquiet	The possible vanishing of dust is responsible for this disquiet we feel even now.
in relation	I sometimes suffer in relation to these vanishings.
to vision	The discontinuance of veils holds a threat to vision.

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