

# CRAZY CALIFORNIA

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"Hey, Dad," said my daughter, Peggy, home from college for the day, "I've written a poem for you to unscramble." (She's into creative writing this semester.) Setting my drink to one side -- a clear head is essential when reconstructing poetry -- I stared at the list of thirty words she thrust before me: anyway, but, California's, cares, crazy, dry, everyone's, fell, go, hanging, if, into, it, it, living, matter, ocean, off, on, on, or, so, somehow, the, there, they'd, underwater, wet, who, wouldn't. This, I thought, ought to be a cinch -- after all, there must be only one way to use words like California's, underwater and hanging in a coherent narrative. I adopted the strategy of looking for plausible phrases, and within half an hour set down the following:

if it fell off into the ocean	California's hanging on
it wouldn't matter	who cares?
wet or dry	they'd go on living underwater
everyone's crazy	

together with five left-over words (anyway, somehow, but, so, there) that could be sprinkled between these phrases as needed. Quickly I strung these into a connected narrative and triumphantly presented it to her at dinnertime:

California's hanging on somehow.  
But it wouldn't matter if it fell off  
    Into the ocean.  
Everyone's crazy there, anyway.  
Wet or dry, they'd go on living underwater.  
    So who cares?

"Very interesting," she conceded. "I put anyway after matter and so after everyone's, and wet or dry should precede who cares. Even so, you've captured the essence." Then the daughterly put-down: "But I suppose almost anyone ought to be able to unscramble it with a little patience."

"Hold on," I cried. "It's not all that obvious. Let's give it to the Word Ways readers -- I'll be surprised if anyone comes as close to your poem as I did. After all, I have a familial advantage." And so it appeared as a Filler in the February issue.

Early response wasn't exactly overwhelming. Albert Wilansky was

the first to write, plaintively. "Will you publish the poem? ... I can't do much with it." Next came Murray Pearce, who couldn't resist the chance to juxtapose California's with crazy, which altered three of the seven basic phrases:

California's so crazy  
 It wouldn't matter if somehow  
 It fell off into the ocean.  
 Wet or dry - who cares...  
 Everyone's hanging on underwater,  
 But they'd go on living there anyway.

But were the phrases all that inevitable? Not at all, said Dmitri Borgmann, who used only two of them: everyone's (so) crazy, and who cares:

If California's matter fell into  
 the wet ocean -- or on it -- it  
 wouldn't dry off, hanging under-  
 water. But, who cares? Every-  
 one's so crazy living there, any-  
 way! They'd go on, somehow . . .

But it remained for Mary Youngquist to come up with the two extremes: one poem as close to the original as my own, and a second which deliberately tried to use the words in different meanings whenever possible. Surely, these represent the outer limits to which these thirty words can be pushed while telling a comprehensible story:

California's hanging on somehow,  
 But if it fell off into the ocean,  
 It wouldn't matter.  
 Wet or dry, everyone's crazy there anyway --  
 They'd go on living underwater.  
 So who cares?

California's underwater? But, if so, who....?  
 Everyone's cares fell off into it  
 Or they'd go crazy hanging on there,  
 Somehow living on dry matter  
 (Anyway, the ocean wouldn't wet it.)