AN ALPHABET REVERSAL VERSE

A. ROSS ECKLER
Morristown, New Jersey

Most Word Ways readers are aware of alphabet poems. Nyr Indictor gave a brief history of them in the August 1995 Word Ways, citing both simple-minded one for children (popular a couple of centuries ago):

> A is for apple, ready to eat;
> B is for boots to put on your feet...

and droll masterpieces such as one by Willard Espy on page 83 of *Words to Rhyme With* *Facts on File, 1986):

> The Addis, a skink, can make lepers feel fine;
> The Balisaur, badger, is nosed like a swine;
> The Chil, or Indian kite, is a hawk;
> The Dikkop's a curlew with dikkopy squawk...

One of the most elaborate poems of this genre is found on page 182 of Rudy Kousbroek's *De Logologische Ruimte* (Meulenhoff, 1984) and reprinted on page iw of Battus's *Opperlans! Taal & letterkunde* (Querido, 2002). Titled "Het BCA, of Kreeftenalfabet" (The BCA, or Backwards Alphabet, *kreeft* in Dutch meaning "lobster" which moves in reverse), it consists of thirteen reversal-pairs, the first of the form AxxxZ/ZxxxA, the second of the form BxxxY/YxxxB, and so on. Unfortunately, his examples are somewhat defective, switching letters in Remki/Imker, and Undof/Fondu and substituting one letter for another in Zorba/Abruz. He found it necessary to invent a few words, notably Quej/Jeuq, and once provided a reversal of only three letters, Pak/Kap.

I have constructed an English analogue of Kousbroek's poem using stricter rules. To begin with, all examples are reversals of at least four letters. All are real words as well; 20 can be found in unabridged dictionaries or the Times Atlas of the World, and the remaining six (the CX, JQ and FU cases) were kindly supplied by Rex Gooch from NIMA, the database of place names for the National Imagery and Mapping Agency.

A is for ZorrA, a tropical grass (don't disturb!)
B is for YarB, the dialect spelling for *herb*
C is for XalaC, an Armenian place name of note
D is for WarD, urban district where one goes to vote
E is for VerE, form of *veer* that's not used any more
F is for UdreF which is on the Tunisian shore
G is for TanG, a flavor that's seldom benign
H is for SelaH, in Psalms, a liturgical sign
I is for RabI, Muhammadan month (two at least)
J is for QalaJ, an exurb of Cairo (north-east)

K is for PanK,   a Calcuttan weight (teensy one)
L is for OdeL,   German land passed from father to son
M is for NeeM, the margosa, an Indian tree
N is for MeeN, in Scotland the moon I can see
O is for LedO,   a village in west Borneo
P is for KnaP,   to break or snap neatly, just so
Q is for JalaQ   in Iran, on the eastern frontier
R is for IbaR,   this Serbian river runs clear
S is for HaleS, these handles are found on a plow
T is for GnaT,   tiny insect annoys me—and how!
U is for FerdU in eastern Iran, I would say
V is for EreV,   Jewish Sabbath comes next in the day
W is for DraW, to sketch using pencil or pen
X is for CalaX, a Yucatan place hard to ken
Y is for BraY,   the sound of an ass (not so nice)
Z is for Arroz, in Spanish, this word denotes *rice*

Crossworld

Crossworld, by Marc Romano (Broadway Books, 2005, ISBN 0-7679-1757-X) is a fascinating glimpse into the high-pressure world of competitive crossword solving, in particular the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament held in Stamford CT each spring since 1978. Romano belongs to the George Plimpton school of journalism—to really understand what is going on you must be a participant instead of a spectator. Having prepared by doing "several thousand [NY Times crossword] puzzles in a matter of months", he managed a respectable finish of 204th out of some 500 contestants.

The book is enlivened by deft sketches of many of the contestants; though often nerdy, they do not match the grade-A strangeness of the ones Steven Fatsis encountered in a similar quest to understand competitive Scrabble. Romano in fact argues that crossword contestants are by and large morally superior to the average Joe, citing the return of a lost envelope containing one thousand dollars. Will Shortz characterizes the Stamford group as "a pretty pleasant bunch overall". He frequently appears in the pages of this book, both in the role of tournament organizer and as the crossword editor of the NY Times. It is clear that he is a very busy man, working from his home about 60 hours per week, rewriting about half the clues in crossword puzzles submitted to him, plus answering an extensive correspondence.