RETURN OF THE PALIMERICK

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In the February 2007 Kickshaws, Dave Morice presented what was probably an entirely new logological object, a limerick of his own devising which was also an end-to-end word-unit palindrome. Dave further wondered whether it would be possible to compose a letter-unit version of such a palindromical limerick. That question had previously occurred to me as well, and as a matter of fact I discussed letter-unit palindromical limericks (or “palimericks,” as I dubbed them) in a Word Ways article about ten years ago (“Palimericks,” Nov 97). I confess, though, that the idea of a word-unit palimerick never even crossed my mind until I saw Dave's example, and I much regret that it didn't, as the limerick form is evidently rather nicely suited, relatively speaking, to word-unit palindromes. Moreover, although it is challenging, such verse seems not impossible difficult to compose. Here are two versions of my own first attempt at the genre, the second of which adopts an antique syntax in order to avoid the problematic “reave”:

There were once green hills, and clean air!
Believe ever—and now reave despair!
Come, child, come! Despair reave,
Now and ever believe
Air clean and hills green once were there!

There were once green hills, and clean air!
Doubt ye never—and aye, rout despair!
Come, child, come! Despair rout!
Aye, and never ye doubt—
Air clean and hills green once were there!

(One could easily create many other versions of these palimericks simply by substituting equivalent phrases for “green hills and clean air,” e.g., “knights bold and maids fair,” “kings just and foursquare,” “flared jeans and long hair,” “Bayonne and Montclaire,” etc.)

Compared to word-unit palimericks, the letter-unit variety, in my opinion, is much more difficult to compose—so much so that I never expect to see a perfect one. Part of the reason for this is the limerick’s asymmetrical rhyme scheme. Examine any other kind of rhyming, end-to-end palindromical poem of four or more lines ever published, and you'll notice that every line in the poem is the exact, or nearly exact, reversal of another line in the poem. As the pioneer palindromic poets J. A. Lindon and Howard Bergerson may have been the first to realize, the use of this construction technique greatly simplifies the composition of such poetry. But in the five-lined palimerick, only two lines, the first and the fifth, can be reversals of each other; after these have been composed, then the real labor, that of working out the details of the middle three lines, begins.

Another difficulty with the letter-unit palimerick is its relative brevity. In a typical limerick, the three long lines usually have eight to ten syllables each and the two short ones usually just five or six. Thus the more complicated three inner lines will only be about 21 syllables long,
the equivalent of 60 or 70 letters. In this constricted letter-space, the would-be composer of a letter-unit palimerick must somehow fabricate a verse passage that

1) is letter-palindromical from end to end,
2) employs at least passable grammar and syntax,
3) makes some sort of overall sense,
4) has exactly the right number of syllables in each line,
5) has the exact rhyme sounds needed in the syllables at the end of each line,
6) and that also exhibits the desired rhythm and meter.

Now this is constrained writing!

Of the half dozen attempts at composing a letter-unit palimerick that were used to illustrate my previous article, none was especially successful. A fresh attempt thus seems called for on this occasion, and accordingly four versions of a new effort, which I believe to be superior to any of my earlier examples, are offered below. In them, the perceptive reader may notice that I've eased my task considerably by largely ignoring one of the six posited constraints, the one that ordains that the verse should make overall sense. In addition, there are lesser faults such as the extra syllable in the fifth lines and the use of the dialectal "et," not to mention the fact that the palimericks make free use of proper names, a practice that some palindrome purists tend to regard as the moral equivalent of consorting with actors. So clearly, the challenge of composing the "perfect" letter-unit palimerick remains unmet.

In the following, the wording of the key three central lines is more or less chiseled in stone, but that of the less-critical top and bottom lines is comparatively malleable. These four (of many possible) variations in the first and fifth lines seem to me to possess about equal merit:

Dew-nacred, nag Nola "stir" fled,
Nate's "Spartan" aid team sat in bed,
Deb Nita's ma "et,"
Diana traps set,
And elf Ari--drab wonder!--can wed!

Dew-nacred now, bard Ira fled,
Nate's "Spartan" aid team sat in bed,
Deb Nita's ma "et,"
Diana traps set,
And elf Ari--drab wonder!--can wed!

"Dew hating"--ah, sad!--as Len fled,
Nate's "Spartan" aid team sat in bed!
Deb Nita's ma "et,"
Diana traps set,
And elf Nels Ada's hag, Nitah, wed!

"Dew hating"--ah, sad!--as Sol sped,
Nate's "Spartan" aid team sat in bed!
Deb Nita's ma "et,"
Diana traps set,
And--Ep's loss!--Ada's hag, Nitah, wed!

("Ritsa" is listed in Bruce Lansky's The Mother of All Baby Name Books as a familiar form of "Alexandra." "Ander" with no "s" is listed therein too, as is "Nitah." "Ep" seems a plausible shortening of "Ephraim.")