

CHRISTIAN

# Bök\*

& HIS QUEST TO WRITE A LIVING POEM

by: Nickolas Johnson  
(research: Greg Hudson)



I AM PRESENTLY TRYING TO RAISE \$100,000 TO WRITE MY NEXT POEM.

ONE OF THE DIFFICULTIES OF BEING A POET IS THAT NO MATTER WHAT KIND OF POETRY YOU WRITE, WHETHER IT BE VERY CONVENTIONAL, WHETHER IT BE VERY EXPERIMENTAL, ULTIMATELY YOU'RE STILL WRITING WORDS ON A PAGE, AND THESE POEMS OFTEN LOOK THE SAME.

SO I'M PROPOSING TO VARIOUS FUNDING INSTITUTIONS THIS PROJECT, WHICH IS TENTATIVELY CALLED THE **XENOTEXT EXPERIMENT**. THIS EXPERIMENT IS TRYING TO EXPLORE THE ARTISTIC POTENTIAL OF GENETICS AND HOPING TO MAKE LITERAL AN APHORISM BY THE AMERICAN WRITER WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS, WHO DECLARED IN THE 1960s THAT "THE WORD IS NOW A VIRUS," THAT CULTURE SEEMS TO BE A KIND OF DISEASE THAT TAKES OVER OUR MINDS AND GETS PASSED ALONG LIKE A BIOLOGICAL ENTITY. IN THIS EXPERIMENT, I'M HOPING TO MANUFACTURE WHAT I'VE CALLED A **XENOTEXT**. IT'LL BE A BEAUTIFUL, ANOMOLOUS POEM, SOMETHING WHOSE ALIEN WORDS MIGHT ACTUALLY SUBSIST LIKE A PARASITE INSIDE AN ORGANISM. I WOULD LIKE TO WRITE A POEM THAT COULD BECOME, QUITE LITERALLY, A **LIVING THING**.

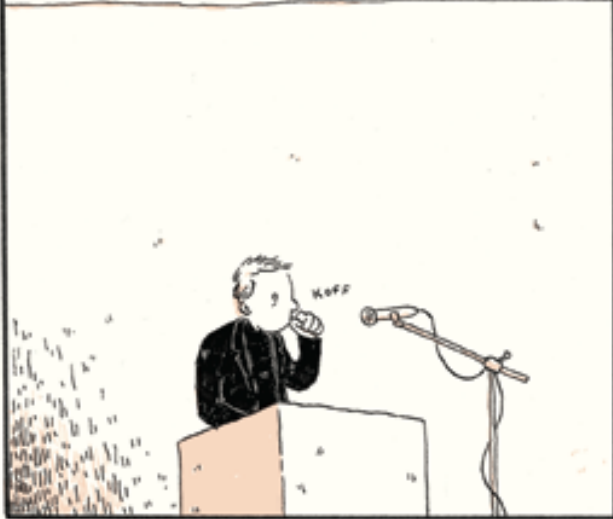
INNOVATIONS IN SCIENCE AND GENETICS HAVE MADE IT POSSIBLE TO STORE ENCODED TEXT IN ORGANISMS. WITH THE HELP OF RENOWNED GENETICIST STUART KAUFMAN, I PLAN TO, THROUGH A PROCESS OF ENCIPHERING IN THE SAME WAY THAT YOU MIGHT TRANSLATE A MESSAGE INTO MORSE CODE, TRANSLATE THE POEM INTO A GENETIC SEQUENCE INTO A SEQUENCE OF AMINO ACIDS THAT WOULD BE SUBSEQUENTLY IMPLANTED INTO THE BACTERIUM, REPLACING ITS GENETIC CODE WITH MY POEM. IT WOULD INFACT BECOME THE LIVING EMBODIMENT OF THAT TEXT- IT WOULD BE THE POEM.

THE ORGANISM I'VE SELECTED\*\* IS ONE OF THE MOST UNKILLABLE THINGS ON THE PLANET. SO IT MAKES A VERY DURABLE ARCHIVE FOR STORING A POEM. THIS WILL BE A CULTURAL ARTIFACT THAT WOULD SURVIVE TERRESTRIAL CIVILIZATION. IT WOULD ACTUALLY OUTLAST HUMANITY ITSELF.

\* award winning Canadian poet Christian Bök is currently a professor at the University of Calgary.

\*\* DEINOCOCCUS RADIODURANS can survive in the vacuum of space, can survive 1,000 times the gamma radiation that would kill a human. It could survive an asteroid attack, nuclear fallout, it has been unchanged since, probably, before life began on earth.

...SO OBVIOUSLY THE POEM HAD BETTER BE GOOD



POETRY NOW IS THE LOWEST FORM OF ART.



IT USED TO BE POETRY FOUNDED CIVILIZATIONS. IF YOU WERE A POET, YOU WROTE A BOOK, IT WOULD BE THE FOUNDING RELIGIOUS TEXT OF A CULTURE, A BOOK THAT ENCOMPASSED ALL OF YOUR CULTURAL HERITAGE AND EMBODIED IT FOR SUBSEQUENT TRANSLATIONS.



TELL ME YOUR FAVOURITE POEM ABOUT THE MOON LANDING. THERE ARE NO CANONICAL WORKS IN THE WORLD OF LITERATURE OR POETRY ABOUT THAT EVENT. IF THE GREEKS HAD RODE A TRIMARAN TO THE MOON, THERE WOULD BE A 12 VOLUME EPIC WORK CREATED TO CELEBRATE THAT EVENT. HERE WE ARE, IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY, AND PROBABLY THE BIGGEST THING WE'VE EVER DONE COLLECTIVELY AS A SPECIES, WE'VE SET FOOT ON ANOTHER WORLD, AND IT'S IGNORED.



POETS ARE VERY POORLY IMMERSSED IN THE WORLD OF SCIENCE, EVEN THOUGH SCIENCE IS RIGHT NOW OUR FAR MOST SIGNIFICANT CULTURAL ACTIVITY. ITS LANGUAGE IS NOT TYPICALLY FEATURED IN POETRY.



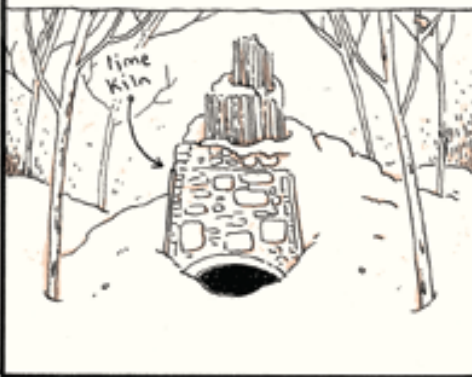
POETRY IS VERY SELF-INVOLVED IN ITS OWN DOMESTICATED, TRIVIALIZED LITTLE UNIT AND DOESN'T SEEM TO SPEAK VERY ADEQUATELY IN THE CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE OF OUR MODERN WORLD.



I WASN'T ALWAYS LIKE THIS.  
I WAS BORN IN A LITTLE VILLAGE OUTSIDE  
GEORGETOWN, ONTARIO, CALLED LIMEHOUSE.



CALLED THAT, I GUESS, BECAUSE IN  
THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, IT WAS A PLACE  
LIME WAS MADE.



WHEN I WAS FOUR I ASKED MY PARENTS  
FOR A TYPEWRITER FOR CHRISTMAS.



I COULDN'T READ OR WRITE YET, BUT I  
HAD A FASCINATION WITH LETTERS,  
THE STUFF OF WORDS, LANGUAGE.



I STARTED TRANSPOSING, LETTER BY  
MYSTERIOUS LETTER, THE 1967 EDITION  
OF "HOW THINGS WORK," AN ILLUSTRATED  
ENCYCLOPEDIA.



RECONSTRUCTING BY BASE INGREDIENTS  
THIS TOME I COULDN'T YET DECIPHER.



OF COURSE, I HAD OTHER SERIOUS  
ASPIRATIONS:  
I WANTED TO BE A SPY,



A MAD SCIENTIST,



A STAGE MAGICIAN.



SCIENCE AND MATH WERE MY BEST SUBJECTS IN SCHOOL. EVERYONE THOUGHT I'D BE AN ENGINEER OR SCIENTIST, BUT I INSTEAD FOLLOWED MY BLISS: TO BE A WRITER.




I IMMERSSED MYSELF IN POETRY, CONTEMPORARY AND CLASSIC CANADIAN WRITERS; ATWOOD, COHEN...



I WROTE, AND WAS VERY COMPETENT, BUT I REALIZED THAT, THOUGH I COULD WRITE AND BE PUBLISHED, I WAS MAKING NO IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTIONS.



THEN, OF COURSE, I CAME ACROSS A BOOK.



I READ IT WITH SOME INTEREST AND WAS DEEPLY BOTHERED BECAUSE I DIDN'T "GET IT."



I COULDN'T FATHOM WHY SOMEONE WOULD BOTHER TO WRITE THIS, MUCH LESS PUBLISH IT.




SO I SOUGHT TO FIGURE IT OUT, TROUBLED BY MY SURPRISE.

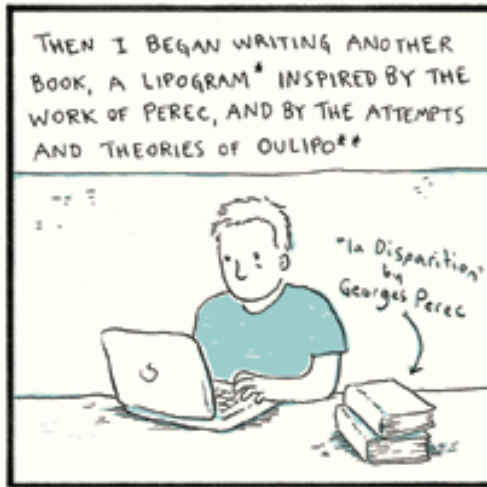


IN DOING SO, I DISCOVERED A PARALLEL HISTORY OF WRITERS AND WORKS, ONE THAT BLEW MINDS, FED AND INFLUENCED THAT HISTORY WHICH I'D ADOPTED



IN THIS NEW UNDERGROUND, THE AVANT GARDE, I BEGAN TO FIND A CONTEXT WITHIN WHICH I COULD DISSECT AND EXPERIMENT WITH THIS ORGANISM I'D COME TO LOVE.

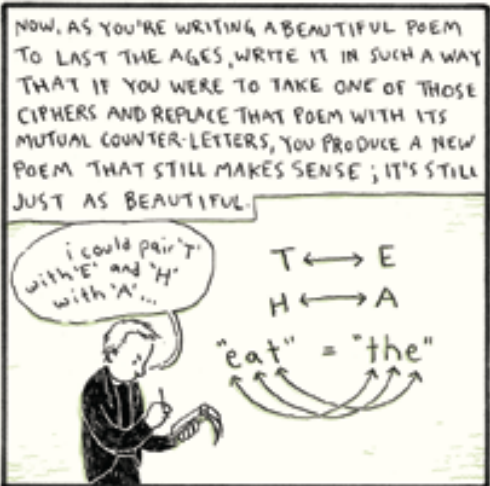




\*EUNOIA, 2001, won the \$40,000 griffin prize. each chapter uses just one vowel. "writing is inhibiting, righting, i'sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script. i sing with nihilistic witticism... isn't it glib?"

\* a LIPOGRAM is a kind of constrained writing in which a particular letter or group of letters is missing, usually a vowel.

\*\* OULIPO, founded in 1960, is a group of french writers and mathematicians who seek to create works using constrained writing techniques.



Smokey '08