

TWO CAUTIONARY TALES

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In both of the poems below, the letters of the title are repeatedly rearranged to form the successive lines in each stanza.

CIGARETTE SMOKING IS DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH

That hooley -- a Surgeon General's dictum? Go risk it!
Look out! He and straight seeing cue a grim story.
A thing soothes me during our scary age; OK, let it!
Hooked, must a groggy stoic natter? Sure I inhale!

The cost? Gain? I shrug, take it -- one more lousy drag.
Die cast, lungs shot, argue it a yoke right no more.
A ghastly cough does me in; I, too, greet stark ruin.
A sick tie's rough, a sorry denouement. Got a light?

DISCRETION IS THE BETTER PART OF VALOR

Bet not I favor error this tale depicts.
For I (hic!) never taste a drop (titter, slob!)
Fiction's reported here, bar vital tots.
This clear, pore over it for it be sad TNT!

For thirst I creep to a dive, belt a snort.
It felt basic, vet; I sport, order another.
This ripe attractive blond's free, toro.
She titters; I cavort, probe life, dart on.

Bar service! I spend a trifle, hot to trot.
Overt, a pert dish I bet on cares to flirt.
Her beat lover reacts; I spot it, drift on.
Bold? I prove it, erratic after ten shots.

It's terrible, head vast contrite proof.
Bottled Perrier for this cat, naive sot!
Let id face it; it's proven horror at best.
That bar-inspired love I force totters.

I've this report, bad actor: life's rotten.
Err, then lord it? It's best I opt for a cave.
I forbid love, this secret trap no treat.
Celibates don't protest for her trivia.

Stern strict poor life, avoid that beer!
 It's peace, love barred; thirst not for it.
 In this respect, I retreat to fold. Bravo!
 Past battle, other dire friction's over.

I reflect I strive hard not to be a sport.
 No daft sort, I thrive, celebrate. Prosit!
 Spirits, blithe, etc., are not favored? Rot!
 Restored to frantic habits, toper, live!

To live on, hipster, act faster, be torrid!
 Hot? I care not; I revert, a bold first step.
 To prove it, ditch a bore -- self-restraint!
 I don't prattle, I teach: bistros forever!

The latter poem traces the history of a hard-drinking womanizer from bistro to hard-won reform to the reassertion of old ways.

CONVERSATIONS OVERHEARD IN RESTAURANTS

Everyone agrees that word frequencies of printed and spoken English differ substantially. Because of the difficulty of obtaining representative samples of spoken English, few studies of this have been made: telephone conversations in 1930, classroom oral reports in 1955, comments about Thematic Apperception Test Cards in 1966. In a 40-page monograph, "The Most Common 100,000 Words Used in Conversations" (Herald Publishing House, 647 Longmere Drive, Kent OH 44240, 1977), Kenneth W. Berger describes how he and his colleagues eavesdropped on restaurant conversations (other than food ordering) of businessmen, white-collar workers and skilled laborers in and near Kent, Ohio. (The title is misleading -- 100,000 words in total were sampled, not 100,000 different ones.) He tabulates words by decreasing frequency and alphabetically, often combining related forms (such as work-works-worked) into a single count, but other times distinguishing pronunciation differences (you and ya are separate entries). The 20 most common words were

I	3641	is	2201	in	1167	do	889
you	3492	it	1965	what	1076	she	841
the	3073	that	1605	he	1015	not	837
a	2562	of	1462	this	960	on	766
to	2407	and	1363	have	948	they	741

Note that the first eleven words account for one-quarter of all spoken words, the same as in printed text (see "One Million English Words" elsewhere in this issue); however, only eight words are common to both eleven-word lists. Berger concludes that nouns are rarer and monosyllabic words are commoner in spoken than written English.