Fannie, Freddie, Bear & Hard Times: Wall Street’s Collapse, Told in Rhymes

Crisis Inspires New Odes to Financial Ruin; Quoth the Trader, ‘Nevermore’

BY MARY PILON

This year, things fell apart. Mere anarchy was loosed upon the world of investment banks, markets, homeowners and workers. And people wrote a lot of derivative poems about it.

Among those moved by the financial carnage was Todd Federman, a 25-year veteran of Wall Street. In the wee hours at home in Livingston, N.J., Mr. Federman crafted “Subprime,” a poem inspired by the children’s song, “I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly.” It begins:

No money down, two years interest free,
Buying a house was no problem you see.
And so the young man along
with his spouse,
They could not afford, but yet bought the house.

Mr. Federman, a former hedge-fund trader who is now a private investor, followed “Subprime” with his year-end revue, “The Last Word at Christmas,” which laments the recent market losses: Stocks, commodities and private equity too.

It seems every sector has stepped in the poo.
Real estate, which cratered this year, was also a source of inspiration. In March, Mike Mueller, a former mortgage broker in Walnut Creek, Calif., posted 17 property-themed haiku to ActiveRain.com, a real-estate networking site. He found himself in his office with fingers extended, counting.

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Financial Hard Times Are Poetic Inspiration

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Outing the five-syllable, seven-syllable, five-syllable meter of the three-line poems.

“Some of the acronyms were tricky,” said Mr. Mueller. Not every reader of poetry knows such real-estate terms as NINA (Non-Income No Assets), LTV (loan-to-value) and ARM (adjustable-rate mortgage).

Mr. Mueller is no longer a mortgage broker and works as a regional director of technology for Fidelity National Title. He maintains a real-estate blog and hopes to institute a regular Friday poetry feature. “It’s a release for me,” he says. His current favorite is:

Hauk Connection

Stephen T. Zillik, a professor of economics at Roosevelt University in Chicago, has spent eight years studying the relationship between his field and hauk. In his most recent article, “Hauk Economics: Little Teaching Aids for Big Economic Pluralists,” Mr. Zillik argues that the Japane-ese poetic form and economic theory are linked through their efficiency and their reliance on counting. Students earn extra credit points for writing eco-nomic-themed hauk on the back of exams.

For Zillik says he has studied hauk back to the 16th century, and finds that more poetry is produced during periods of scarcity than abundance. “Even economists and financial analysts have a need for making meaning out of what they’re experiencing and sharing it,” he says.

Thematic Shift

Since he started teaching financial hauk in the early 2000s, Prof. Zillik has noticed a thematic shift. Rather than writing about economic theory, students are coming down from the clouds, comparing the current economy with the Great Depres-sion and expressing concern about the unemployment rate when they graduate, he says. The first exam he administered earlier this month was no excep-tion. “The tenor has become more dark,” he says. But hope springs eternal. One student wrote:

Economic drain:
The semester is complete
Suffered not defeat.
Wall Street bars are also
Square, “a small vial of Botox” and “pristine hallways.”

Madeline Kane, a corporate lawyer turned writer in Queens, N.Y., departed from her normal regimen of political blogging to pen financial poetry. It began when she opened her 401(k) statement in September and was awed by the losses to her portfolio, but at least I’ll sell some humor pieces during the current crisis,” she says.

TARP Inspired

In addition to “401(k) Ode (Owed),” Ms. Kane wrote some TARP limericks, inspired by the Treasury Department’s Troubled Asset Relief Program and a delay in confirming the program’s inspector general (IG) nominee.

I’m not a person to carp,
But nobody oversees TARP.
One anonymous “hold”
Stopped the process out cold.
Of confirming an IG who’s sharp.

“When I heard the word ‘TARP’ I was excited,” she says. “Bush is actually harder to rhyme than you’d think. Barney? Forget about it.”

Anonymous finance bloggers have been circulating poems scrawled in between trades. Blogger “Macro Man,” who writes mostly about trading and global markets and declined to be identified for this story, ended the year with his version of the “12 Days of Christmas.” In it, he replaced the line “five golden rings” with “five-year TARP CDs.” He also penned a takeoff of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”:

As he stood there slightly smirking, doubts I long felt vaguely lurking.
My subconscious let emerge and push their way out to the fore.

“Though our P/Ls have been sinking and our share price swiftly sinking
Surely I’m right to being that the worst is in Q4?
When will we return to normal, back the way it was before?”

Quoth the trader, “Nevermore.”

Blogger “Cassandra,” who also declined to be named, wrote a series of eulogies to hedge funds throughout the year:

Farewell then
Carlyle, Drake
and Go Capital
and whoever else gets carried out.

links Lashkar to Attacks

now is the evi-dence that the in-pendence attempt is developing in a way that is dangerous for the country. The political power structure and the leadership of the political parties are divided, and the situation is tense.

There are also increasing tensions. Mr. Zarkari, who replaced his wife, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, as their party’s candidate to lead the country after her assassination last year, has faced frequent reminders that the military’s support is not a friend of the Zardari clan.

Mr. Zardari officially offered to send Gen. Pasha himself to aid India’s investigation into the Mumbai attacks, but India’s Premier leaked the plan to rival political groups and the government.

Two months before his election, Mr. Zardari as party chief made an attempt to wrest the control of the ISI from the military and place it under a close political adviser. Word spread through a wedding attended by Pakistan’s murdered wife. But over the years, the spy chiefs—the agency leadership—are all active military officers—uncomfortably close to the military than the government.

During the Soviet Union’s occupation of neighboring Afghanistan in the 1980s, Pakistan’s spies became partners with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which cultivated the same insurgent groups. In the 1980s, the ISI helped fashion Lashkar into one of the most pot-ent militant Islamic militant forces battling Indian troops in Kashmir.

The Indian government blamed the ISI for helping plot the 1993 Mumbai bombings, which killed hundreds of people. The agency and Pakistan government still deny ISI involvement. The ISI’s purge was considered a victory and some had moved to the political side. But Pakistan continued to support anti-India militant groups in Kashmir and the ISI maintained extensive links to the Taliban, according to Western and Indian security officials. Current and former ISI officials acknowledged the ISI maintained extensive links to the Taliban.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terror-ist attacks in the U.S., Pakistan’s military-led government signed an agreement with the global battle against Islamic terrorism, and the ISI helped coalition forces rout the Taliban. According to a former ISI officer, hundreds of military-operatives involved with the Afghan cell were removed from ISI.

In recent years, Lashkar and other groups have turned to waging global violence against heavily covered targets, putting Pakistan under rising pressure from its allies and complicity in peace negotiations with India. The groups also are striking targets within Pakistan. They have become, said the ISI official, “a monster we’ve created that we can’t put back in the box.”

S. INCY t at
Afgan guerilla, 1988

R. 2001: Pakistan becomes an ally in the U.S. war on terror
2002: Several officers with suspected links to Islamic militants removed from ISI

G. 2007: General Asaf Asha Kayani (above) becomes first ISI head to be appointed chief of army

E. 2008: The new civil military government closes down ISI’s political cell as part of revamp.
Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha is appointed new ISI chief.

B. D. 2007: General Asaf Asha Kayani (above) becomes first ISI head to be appointed chief of army

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The Thematic Shift

Since he started teaching financial hikku in the early 2000s, Prof. Ziliak has noticed a thematic shift. Rather than writing about economic theory, students are now concerned about the climate crisis and social inequality. Prof. Ziliak has shifted his focus to these topics, and his classes have become more interactive and engaging.

Mr. Federman, the former hedge-fund trader, is now working on a poem about collateralized debt obligations and an essay on the role of the Securities and Exchange Commission in the recent financial crisis. His work is receiving critical acclaim from both publishers and readers.

Online Today: Read some of Mr. Mueller's haiku at WSJ.com/US.

smirking, doubts I'd long felt vaguely lurking My subconscious let emerge and push their way out to the fore. “Though our P/L's been stinking and our share price swiftly sinking Surely I’m right to be thinking that the worst is in Q4 When will we return to normal, back the way it was before?” - Both the trader, “Nevermore.”

Blogger “Cassandra”, who also declined to be named, wrote a series of eulogies to hedge funds throughout the year: Farewell then Carlyle, Drake and Go Capital (and whoever else gets carried out tomorrow). You certainly weren’t the first to rapidly combust: fuzz bang WHOOSH. And you won’t be the last.

The Academy of American Poets released an official list of recommended “Poems for Times of Turmoil,” featuring authors such as Robert Creeley, Virgil and Walt Whitman. But many financially minded poets seem too bogged down in the technical challenges of financial versifying to worry much about competing with the greats.

Mr. Federman, the former hedge-fund trader, is working on a poem about collateralized debt obligations and another poem about the role of the Securities and Exchange Commission in the alleged Ponzi scheme of Bernard Madoff.

“Everyone says 2009 is going to be worse,” Mr. Federman says. “But right now I’ve gotta figure out something that rhymes with SEC.”
Chemical Giant Mulls Bankruptcy

Crisis of Confidence

By Jeffrey Mackerack

A trader sitting at a desk on a floor in a company executive office checks his phone. The executive office is filled with large desks and chairs, and a large window with a view of the city. The executive is discussing the company's financial situation with a colleague. The executive's phone is a smartphone with a black case. The executive's colleague is taking notes on a notepad. The floor is carpeted, and there is a large conference table in the center of the room. The executive is wearing a suit and tie, while the colleague is wearing casual clothing. The executive's phone has a protective case on it. The executive is checking the time on his phone.