

## The Japanese rock garden

by Nadine Pütz

630 hours: Train tracks or Parallels

The ICE train slowly leaves the station as Michael opens his coat to pull out the financial times which he has tucked into the inside pocket. His eyes ping-pong across the pages as he skims the abstracts and headlines. As the train passes through a tunnel a rhythmic thud causes the paper to shake slightly. With a cracking noise the speakers come to life. The conductor's almost chirpy voice notifies all travellers of their imminent arrival at Frankfurt Main Station adding the mandatory *thank you for travelling Deutsche Bahn. Please exit on the right hand side.*

1420 hours: Nirvana or gentle waves

He sits at his plexiglas desk overlooking the winter city grey sipping green tea out of a black ceramic cup. The tea tastes of dry grass and something that reminds him of the leftover colourless gummy bears, he used to fool his sister into eating by telling her they were his favourites. He checks his watch and rubs his eyes feeling the afternoon fatigue wash through his body as he attempts to flatten the budding wrinkles under his fingertips. Yawning he reaches out for the wooden fork resting on the dish containing the miniature rock garden he was given by one of the consultants on his last trip to Japan. He wonders if a desktop Zen garden is the visual translation of a power-  
nap. Meditation in small gulps and a pocket-sized nirvana for those who don't have time for the real thing. Indecisively he pokes at

one of the larger pebbles resting in the sea of pulverised rock and begins to draw gradually tightening circles around the small island like a shark honing in on its prey. The situation had calmed, only a few ripples still mark the place where the stock market erupted months ago. Maybe he would be able to take a few days off now, to get the pain in his stomach checked out. On the other hand they might interpret his non-attendance as a slippage in discipline. The competition never sleeps.

Using his index finger and his thumb he carefully weeds out a path to the edge of the dish. The balsa wood utensil does not weigh more than a chopstick in his hand. Four tidy lines cut into the sand leaving scars similar to those of a knife carving soft butter.

He gets up, opens the door and heads for the bathroom. After taking a leak he washes his hands, as he always does obeying all the hygienic rules in the book and looks up at the mirror briefly checking if anyone is around. Looking back at him is a smile he has practised for thirty-one years. The pearly smile of a boy with higher productive capacity than the average. The smile of an over-achiever. A capable smile.

1500 hours: Simplicity is Organisation or Thinking in Squares

The Tablet PC is a neat Microsoft innovation, he thinks while doodling on it in the meeting. The old child's version of a crayon board or the slate which his grandparents used to do exercises on in school, the only unique difference being that the written word was blissfully erased from it, giving space to what was to come

instead of piling, hoarding, saving, nursing irrelevant thoughts if only in a virtual world. Admittedly it made the stacks of paper scattered around the office redundant, waiting to be signed by x, y and z before they could be filed and tucked away into an archive. But essentially this thing just enables you to keep handwritten notes on the computer. So if he wanted to do a drawing of Paul's zip undone he could and publicise it to the whole world in a matter of seconds while sitting in the meeting smiling at Paul's face. Organize to minimize. Organize to maximise. Efficiency. Another gadget to cover up for mushy thoughts. At least the lack of content had a swish cover.

2030 hours: Less is More or Quick Horizontals

Every morning an antelope wakes up in Africa knowing that she will have to run faster than every lion to survive the day. Every morning a lion wakes up in Africa and knows that he will have to run faster than the slowest antelope. After a pregnant pause the speed-reading course instructor says; simple maths: We need to run fast. The average person has a reading range from 125-250 words per minute. We are going to get you up to 500-1000 words per minute, the guy promises, blushing from the excitement he has talked himself into. Michael stares at his cuticles. Well-shaped cuticles. The well-shaped cuticles seem to say this is how things should be. This is your world. He pulls a face at his cuticles. The first thing we want you to understand is that you are not here to read but you are here to practise. When you practise basketball you are not going to play game after game but you practise running and you practise

getting the ball in the net. So what we want you to do is to look at the words, don't attempt to read or comprehend, just see the words pass in front of your eyes, get used to the speed and use your hands as a pacing tool, because your eyes are attracted to motion, so your finger is going to help you keep up the pace. The metronome is stomping ahead, unforgiving, Line. Line. Line. Line. Line. Line. Line. Line. Line. Line. Line. Line. Line.

The eye-gymnastics make him feel dizzy. He watches his finger eating away words from the page. Devouring words, characters, dots. Dots gaining resemblance to mouse droppings. Always look at what lies ahead, don't look back, and don't look back. Stop sub-vocalisation, the guy frowns, slowing down condescendingly as some people do when they think they are talking to someone deaf or mentally impaired. A human tape recorder running low on battery.

The.            Reading.                            woooooord.  
by.                            wooooooord.                            is.  
what.                            holds.                            you.  
back, or to make things worse                            the  
moooooving                            your                            lips. Win  
control back. Save time. Less is more.

His voracious index finger comes to rest on the word *low* where it meets his thumb, which miraculously has found its way there, and the two of them fall into a slow waltz right on *low* across the page.

And he thinks, it could be this simple.