THE WRITTEN IMAGE

ROBERT PERKINS

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THE WRITTEN IMAGE

by Robert Perkins

I am dyslexic. Whole words, even letters, terrified me as a kid. Now, they can only unsettle me. Even looking at one black letter or a printed word could make me anxious. On the page, they made no sense. No matter how often I was forced to mumble through the alphabet or I tried to spell words or read a simple sentence, I was always wrong, embarrassed, backwards. Faced with reading a whole page, I felt panic, as if I were in a small boat launched onto a large, unfriendly sea. In class, I was terrified of being called on.

Letters and words had physical weight and appeared to have magical powers. At breakfast I sat watching my father read the Boston Globe while he ate his cornflakes. We were not allowed to talk. I was convinced he was eating the words, too. He would read out loud from the paper. He would talk to it, disagree with it, and shake his head and rustle the pages, mumbling. Some magic was happening I had no idea about.

As compensation, I gravitated toward sports, enjoyed entering the quiet, nonjudgmental woods around the house, and was silent. Once, I hid in the rhododendrons below the porch while my parents hosted a cocktail party, happy to be invisible but near the susurrus of adult voices, the clink of glasses, and the laughter. I hid in the doily of light and shade under the rhododendrons. I pushed my warm hands into the cool earth and saw the contrast of my white hands entering the dark dirt.

As a family, we drove once to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

This was my first exposure to the silence that attends museums, coupled with the hollow sound shoes make on marble, and held my attention---until we entered a room with a life-size painting of a naked man, white-skinned and immersed in green water, desperate, about to be bitten by a shark with huge white teeth. The shark had lips. Hovering over the man was a boat full of dressed-up men frantic to save him from the shark attack. The naked man reached from the water towards the men in the boat, helpless.

Level with the shark's teeth and seeing the desperate man, I screamed. This wasn't a painting, this was happening; the room began to fill with water. I heard the men's cries. The shark. I screamed until taken out of the room, sure those teeth would come for me next.

John Singleton Copley's painting raised controversy when first exhibited in 1778. He had painted a contemporary scene, not a Biblical or ancient parable, a heresy. He painted Watson and the Shark to commemorate an incident in the Lord Mayor of London's young life when a shark in Havana harbor bit off his leg.

My bedroom on the second floor faced south toward the ocean. There were no window shades, just the sea and the railroad along the coast two miles away. At night, the dark, silent islands—Misery, Chubb, Bakers and House—sat on a slightly lighter sea, a symphony of greys and blacks. The view resembled a Chinese scroll painting. At night, silent commuter trains added light as they passed like a drawn line along the scroll's bottom edge, a stiff caterpillar inching along with squares of light, eleven to a car, running out of Boston or back in the other direction from Gloucester.

The room caught the swing of the Bakers Island lighthouse sweeping through the window. Its light made each object dance, and made the room spin. I lay in bed afraid. Shadows telescoped out of objects and snapped back as the light passed over them. The toy soldiers on the mantel cast huge shadows up the wall that bent across the ceiling. The two chairs flew around the room at the end of their turning shadows, bumping into each other. Little things became big, bigger things were swallowed by even larger shadows. The world was not a stable place. Safe in bed, my young speechless soul stayed anxious until I fell asleep, or daylight arrived, and the fear passed.

These experiences prepared me to accept an old and precious world full of contradiction as it was overflowing with beauty. Our age doesn't welcome the introvert. For these reasons, when I discovered her, poetry meant the world to me. These men and women seemed like fellow travelers, older, wiser, more acute observers, spinners of the most gossamer fabrics and emotions.

Instead of being woven into the fabric of our everyday life, I've noticed poetry is, for most people, something they turn to on an 'occasion': a marriage, a death, even an illness. I discovered poetry again on Bowditch Hall, a maximum-security ward for men at McLean Hospital, the same ward referred to in Robert Lowell's poem 'Waking in the Blue.' I was there a year (in 1968, insurance paid for a full year) and the aide who is mentioned in Lowell's poem as the B.U. sophomore was still there. He had a copy of the poem in his wallet. He would pull it out and point to his mention, as proud as any parent showing off pictures of his child. I think of William Carlos Williams in his late poem Asphodel, written for his wife, whose insight rings as true today,

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

In second grade I was identified as dyslexic. I was taken to see Miss Hawkins, the remedial reading instructor. She was the first angel in my young life. She rescued me and taught me to like to read. She helped me overcome my fear of words. We saw each other for forty minutes twice a week from second grade through eighth grade. She remained constant, while my homeroom teacher changed each year. I grew to like the way she looked. She had a long face and a hooked nose and a wart on her cheek with a few bent hairs growing out of it. She never married. She drove a red convertible Mustang. She had the patience of Job. We read flash cards. We repeated the alphabet. We played word games. We read and read and read until I understood. We learned the rules of grammar. To this day, I remember the exceptions to the 'ie' rule: Neither leisured sheik nor sovereign seized the weird heights.

The first book I read on my own was The Moon is Down by John Steinbeck. I didn't care for the story. The epiphany was reading it on my own. I was off. I read everything, including operation manuals in cars, the ingredients on cereal boxes. Everything. As a teenager, I read the great novels I am rereading today. I may not have understood the flow of emotions, the mix of characters, the life lessons… but I could read. I could travel these different terrains, begin to see more, and express myself and not be afraid.

In high school, thanks to another teacher, A.O. Smith, I read a Wallace Stevens poem about blackbirds. I loved it. I didn't care that I didn't understand it. I read another about the roller of big cigars, and one about a deal table. The poems held vivid images. There was music in the language. There were mysterious things called metaphors. There were odd jumps in logic. Some poems read like secret languages, in code. The other day, I read the end-of-life poem by the haiku poet Issa, written in the eighteenth century…

Insects on a bough
floating downstream
still singing

Think of Emily Dickinson. I don't care if I completely understand her. I don't look for logic. I don't require the clear-cut or a rhyming narrative. I am not afraid to go where she beckons.

I have three sisters, two older and one younger. Growing up, they were the artists, not the boys. They drew. They went to fashion school. They attended art school. They had 'an eye.' The arts were their exclusive world. My brother and I were relegated to language until I spent that year in a mental hospital at nineteen. In OT I was given watercolors and pencils and left on my own to draw. I loved it. A nonverbal world. My first job out of college was in the art department of a private library in Boston. I was voracious in discovering art and artists.

It's important that the poet choose the poem, or fragment, for me to work with, and that they write in their own hand. This becomes a mini self-portrait, revealing something of their spirit not conveyed in a book or a printed broadside. I work for the poem. I try to include what I glean of the poet's personality. In some instances, creating small, limited-print editions combining lithography or etching with monotype allows for a fluid series of images, with the poem providing a constant architecture. Occasionally, I obscure portions of the poem, or tear the paper. When I began, this annoyed one publisher, Glen Horowitz. He berated me for drowning James Merrill's words from 'McKane's Falls' in the waterfall. James had wanted his words to be printed in red and to ascend up the waterfall, like a salmon.

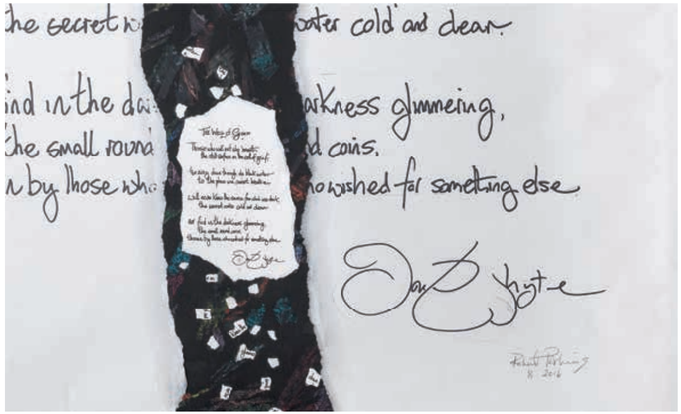
Contemporary collaborations between poets and painters have become more accepted, as has art that combines word and image. There's a long and colourful history of collaboration and interplay between poet and painter, word and image, going back to Chinese and Japanese scrolls, Persian miniatures, the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, and William Blake.

Often modern collaborations disappoint me, handsome as they are. You have a famous poet and a famous artist 'collaborating' but not much interplay between the two. Examples are the beautiful collaboration between Octavio Paz and Adja Yunkers called Blanco. Or between Jasper Johns and Samuel Beckett called Foirades Fizzles. An exception is the series of collaborations between John O'Hara and Larry Rivers, and other members of the New York School, where poets and painters played off each other, interacted.

I would love to take *The Written Image* outside, further from the covers of a book. I'd welcome working with willing poets to adorn buildings and bridges, sidewalks and walls with their words. At the very least, the work to date has released a handful of poems from inside a book onto a wall, to be discovered by people who would never open a book of modern poetry.

I've collaborated with poets for forty-five years. I want to thank Benjamin Spademan and his wife Constance and the Benjamin Spademan Gallery in London for their support in bringing this work to a larger audience. I also want to thank Adam Munthe, who first brought my work to the UK for the Ledbury Poetry Festival as well as the Poetry Café in Covent Garden. And of course, I want to thank the poets, the diamond cutters of our language, without whose words *The Written Image* would not exist.

Robert Perkins, Seamus Heaney, from *The Haw Lantern*.



Robert Perkins, David Whyte, *The Well of Grief*, detail.

WRITTEN PATHWAYS

by Ewan Clayton

As I settle down to write this essay for Robert Perkins's *The Written Image*, I find myself in Japan. Here the juxtaposition of images and writing is a natural combination; each sits on the same substrate, created with the same tools. In the Haiku Museum—the Kakimori Bunko—in Itami I have just seen a scroll that Matsuo Basho (1644–1694), the walking poet, had prepared about a journey he had taken. It contained only painted images—he died before he had the chance to write on it. But, significantly, one saw that he had taught himself to paint, because as a poet he thought it complementary to his haiku, natural even: words and images. In his introduction to this catalogue, Robert Perkins recalls how words have had a very strong visual connection for him since childhood. They seemed like magic, signs that had an almost physical power. Like Wordsworth and Basho too, the 'Walking Poets' celebrated at the symposium I am attending here in Japan, Robert Perkins's development as an artist, as a storyteller and film-maker has come from his complete immersion in nature and from the many journeys he has challenged himself to undertake, most often on water and by canoe.

So what is writing? The roots of the word hint at a mysterious alchemy… we are word-smiths, we 'wright' them, and these 'rites' of making enact and change things, they can cast their spell over us.

Words - carved in stone, written by hand in ink with reed or quill and pen on papyrus, vellum, and paper - slowly wove the world we live in. They gave shape to the daily order of things, housed meanings, built with vivid imagination and unfolding stretches of human thought. The dyslexia that Robert Perkins mentions in his introduction placed him deeply in connection with this mystery, an entanglement of words and images. This entanglement has a history, the history of writing itself.

In China the written symbols first emerge in the context of divination. Cracks in burnt bones are 'read' as answers to questions posed by seers. This particular kind of crack, the soothsayers agree, means your pregnancy will deliver a

boy, or that this raid will be successful. The symbols were signs of particular forces at work in the world; they carried a nascent energy. To write was to allow this energy to flow through both you and the symbols you wrote; you were to be shaped by their force.

Robert Perkins has engaged in a different kind of divination. Looking into the writings of poets and his meetings with them, he paints, prints or collages the images he finds there. Poems are split open, obscured, fragmented, juxtaposed to timeless, simple imagery. This simplicity plays down the many centuries of a gradual reconceptualization of writing using the Roman alphabet that made such combined artworks understandable. The shape of a poem has long been subject to creative manipulation, but it is relatively recently that the autographic manuscript came to carry some kind of individual potency.

Greek poets were the first to play with the shapes of a poem. 'Shape poetry' was picked up by Roman authors: by Ennius (239 –169 BCE) and Vergil (70–19 BCE) and Arator (6th century CE) and Venantius Fortunatus (c. 530–600 CE). We find manuscripts from the Carolingian period illuminating some of these poets' acrostics. Later, in the seventeenth century, the English poets Robert Herrick and George Herbert wrote in this form, Herbert famously shaping an Easter poem as several pairs of wings. Lewis Carroll created shaped poetry in the nineteenth century; the French poet Apollinaire in the early twentieth shaped poems like falling rain and a watch face.

The most interesting experiments in the late nineteenth century belong to the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé; they anticipate later 'concrete' poetry. His final poem 'Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard' (A Dice Throw at Any Time Never Will Abolish Chance) was printed in 1914 in the form he had imagined several decades earlier, as eleven double-page openings, each opening acting as a single (yet sequential) canvas on which the type was arranged. He had created a kind of musical score to read from.

In 1862, when he was just twenty years old, Mallarmé had written that he regretted the easy accessibility of literature. 'Everything that is sacred and that wants to remain sacred shrouds itself in mystery. Religions take refuge behind arcana: art has its own.' He offered a musical score as an example: 'If we idly open Mozart, Beethoven or Wagner and cast a casual glance at the first page of their work, we are smitten with religious awe at the sight of those gruesome processions of stern, chaste and unknown signs. And we close the missal unsullied by any sacrilegious thought.'[1] It remains a mystery, and he wanted writing to have this air. There is something of this sense of mystery and purity in Robert Perkins's presentations of the poet's work.

1 In *Hérésies artistiques: L'art pour tous* the translation comes from 'Mallarmé on music and letters'. Austin, L J. Bulletin of the John Rylands Library. 1959;42(1) p.24.

To me as a calligrapher the forms of each poet's script are fascinating. The looped nature of David Whyte's handwriting and especially his signature, the intensity of William Meredith's desire to be read. But I am aware that noticing the individuality of handwriting is a much more recent happening than playing with the shape of a poem, and a mere few hundred years old in Europe, compared to just short of two thousand years in Southeast Asia.

The English poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850), ever a bellwether for movements in the sphere of the imagination, experienced a certain painfulness in his left side whenever he wrote. The pain is noticed first by his sister Dorothy when he is seventeen years old, and it's still there in the last decade of his life. It made writing things down a frustrating and difficult experience. There is no physical reason for pain in the left-hand side of the body in a right-handed writer. This is perhaps the first recorded case of a psychosomatic illness in relation to writing in modern European history. It marks an important moment. It was shortly before and during Wordsworth's lifetime that the idea of the autographic manuscript first took hold of the popular imagination. Its roots can be traced to changed notions about the nature of individuality but also to the availability of the printed word, which by the first decade of the eighteenth century was finally everywhere. In contrast to the uniformity of printed letters, handwriting now became conceptualized as something that had a variety of individual qualities. Differences between writers had been noticed in the past but only as markers of gender, social class and national background. The first case in English law when handwriting is taken as evidence of individual identity is in 1729. A century later, the collection of autographs was so common a practice that the American author Edgar Allen Poe wrote a number of literary articles on the topic[2], illustrated with woodcut reproductions of the signatures of over 100 authors whose correspondence he had solicited under a pseudonym. Articles like Poe's encouraged many to write for autographs to the rich and famous. Longfellow kept a supply of signatures ready to hand on his mantelpiece. Washington Irving, the author of '*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,*' referred to autograph hunters as the 'musquitoes of literature.' But in all these instances, the collected samples were left intact. To collect was the end of the process.

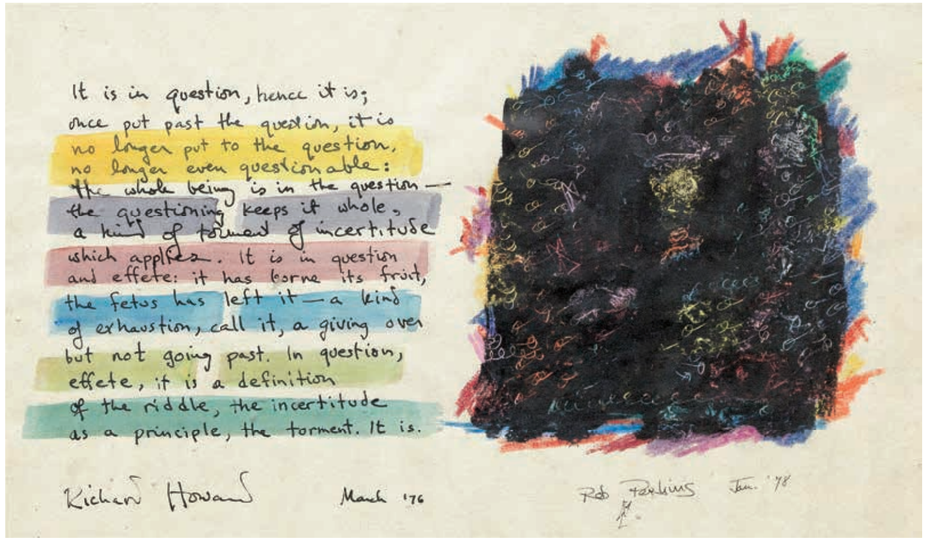
It was with Picasso and Braque in the early twentieth century that letters finally entered paintings as visual elements in their own right. From Roman times down to the present, written forms had usually appeared in a classically structured setting, meaning that they were symmetrical, balanced with harmonious proportions and graduated steps of increase in scale or weight, and they filled a page from top to bottom, right to left. But the new visual language that Picasso and Braque introduced in Cubism shattered that orthodoxy. They played with a complex picture plane and came to incorporate stencilled and then collaged letters. The Cubists' papiers collés form part of the visual hinterland of the work we see in *The Written Image*. Papiers collés were important historically because they encouraged a number of movements to

2 In 1836 for the Southern Literary Messenger and then in Graham's Magazine for November and December 1841 and January 1842.

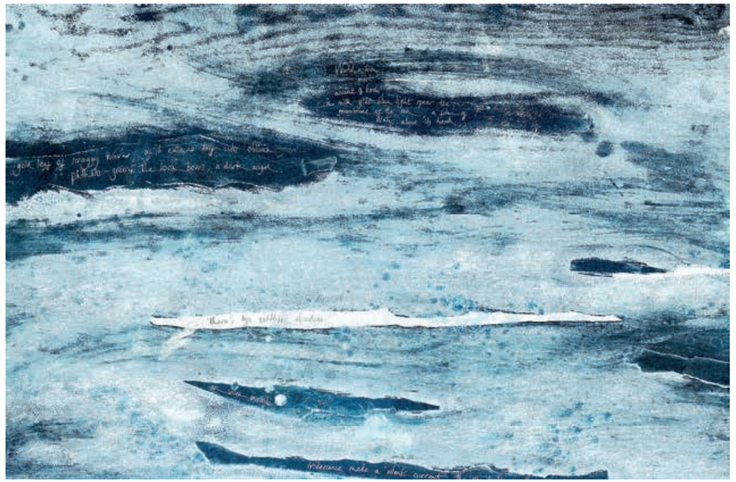
incorporate writing into an artwork: the Futurists; the Dadaists, with their spliced words; and photomontage— something we accept today as a normal part of our visual language.

What makes the exhibition *The Written Image* unique is that here for the first time we have a substantial body of work that combines images with the autographic writings of poets, sometimes—as in James Merrill's 'McKane's Falls'—incorporating images the poets have suggested themselves. It seems an obvious step, but actually I think it has rarely ever been done before. (Perkins mentions the exception of Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara). Robert Perkins and his collaborators stand at an intriguing confluence; they cut out new territory.

As Ilka Scobie mentions in her essay, these works operate at a number of levels and distances. The handwriting gives them an intimacy. Ah! The taut fluency of Seamus Heaney, each word gently knotted together and widely spaced; the whipped-back, windblown descenders of Henri Cole; the surprise of Richard Howard's y's and g's that are missing vital parts in 'Among the Missing'… each is an individual pathway forged by writing in the fires of life itself.



Robert Perkins, Richard Howard, *It is in question…*



Robert Perkins, Claire Clube, *Loon*, detail.

HAND WRITTEN AND HAND MADE

by Ilka Scobie

For creator and audience, painting and poetry are a last frontier for contemplation. Both mediums are mediations on, and an intimate examination of, our existence. Robert Perkins's homage to poetry starts with the poet's handwritten text joined with his simple imagery and edited palette. His images follow poetry's intrinsic economical grace. As a poet, as well as an art critic, it was thrilling to encounter such elegant visualizations in harmony with carefully honed words. His art lifts poems from between the covers of books and offers them a home in the larger world. To encounter one of his collaborations is to perceive an image from a distance and then to move close, into a more intimate, conversational space, to discover the poem's embedded words.

Perkins spends solitary time in remote areas, from the Canadian Arctic and Siberia to the Scottish Highlands, drawing solace and inspiration from wilderness, particularly rivers. He has written extensively and made documentary specials for Channel 4 and PBS about his river journeys.

As a young artist discovering poetry, he felt the same thrill wilderness provides, except poetry offered him an interior wild terrain to explore.

At twenty, his first collaboration was with his teacher, Elizabeth Bishop. She offered him her poem 'The Fish' to illustrate, and he became, so to speak, hooked on this opportunity of combining words and image. It met a fundamental need in him to experience the world and respond. For example, the enigmatic shapes of Claire Clube's 'Loon' suggest a northern landscape, as pristine as it is hazardous. The poem and its image entwine to allow him a third elusive imagination: a loon diving under water after its prey. This image has the intensity and insight of a Morris Graves watercolor. Even the angular wooden frame suggests a purity rarely seen in the white-walled gallery world.

Donald Hall's poignant 'Another Christmas' is rendered in several technically diverse versions. Not only a graft of the verbal and visual, the series combines monotype and lithography to unite strong and singular markings: a sapphire Christmas tree

embodies a yuletide ambiance devoid of consumerism, his wife's recent death the undertow of the poem where a Christmas bauble morphs to a hand-grenade. Using monotype as he does allows Perkins the freedom to create families of images inside an edition, using ghost images always related but never the same, a visual strategy he often employs. The poem's stability placed on each sheet provides the architecture, or 'home,' for his images to play upon and sometimes even obscure words.

A sublime cerulean spiral that Perkins conjured for Seamus Heaney's sonnet from his book *The Haw Lantern* is juxtaposed with what appears a collaged vortex (that in reality is a monotype), provides a spontaneous balance to the poem's metered formalism, echoing its last lines: 'silence beyond silence listened for…'

Strong terra cotta footsteps wane to wraithlike shadows in Robert Pinsky's 'The Rider'. Words irradiated by a sunshine halo replicate a patch of light filtering into a dusty fenced riding rink where a budding girl is astride a trotting horse.

Richard Howard's 'Among the Missing' memorializes the early devastating AIDS epidemic. A sculptural vessel that could be a bollard changes to a straight phallus, adorned with a faint floating constellation of 'long-since lonely hearts.' The piece is a lyrical elegy for the 'ghost of Gansevoort Pier'; the pier is a legendary gay cruising spot.

Another, unusual triptych is W.S. Merwin's poem 'Place.' As the poem scrolls downwards, the positive and negative images soar upwards; the 'tree' Merwin wishes to plant? Totemic perennials recall the repetitive patterns of solarized ray-o-grams, or the early twentieth-century botanical prints of the German photographer Karl Blossfeldt. Image and text combine in transcendental harmony. A later version's three time-lapsed depictions of the World Trade Center Twin Towers narrate sequences of motion, beginning with subtly scaled towers embedded with Merwin's poem 'Place.' Perkins lived in Williamsburg with a view of the Twin Towers. The ghostly ash-filled aftermath of the last image is dramatically bereft of the pastoral prism of the other interpretations of 'Place.' However, the power of the Merwin poem remains steadfast.

The three images of James Merrill's excerpt from his Ouija-based long poem, *Mirabell,* progress from obsidian to white, backwards written words to forwards, the words themselves changing color, white to black. Merrill suggested the X to stand for MAN and the curved line to represent EARTH that man stands on. What is above is below, therefore, the upside down mirror of the first X. The line across the top of the X stands for TIME, what man holds in his hands. The tonal exploration of Perkins's images and Merrill's lines exemplify poetry and monotype at their most eloquent incarnation. The campy mirrors around the frame literally draw the viewer into the piece.

Perkins's sensitivity to materials— pigment and paper— enriches his work with a refined chromatic harmony, stretching effortlessly between the static categories of abstraction and figuration. Fragments from 'Trowbridge Street,' the Octavio Paz poem,

infused with light and layered elements, recall Arte Povera's visual immediacy. Reflective of chaotic urban density, the Allen Ginsberg piece explodes with dazzling darkness and movement. Written decades before Ginsberg's death, there is a prescient power in the words: 'not to be buried in the cemetery near Newark airport some day?' The poet was buried there.

'A self-portrait of the poet in the moment' is how Perkins has described the handwritten texts. Handwriting can reveal a personal glimpse into the creator's thoughts and mind. Sometimes the handwritten poems can be challenging to decipher. William Meredith had suffered a stroke, and he took two hours to write out 'Airman's Virtue.' Basil Bunting was in his eighties when he penned his fragment. In both cases, their handwriting reflects their physical condition, creating a further intimacy for a viewer. Robert Pinsky was formal. Merwin wanted to draw a picture of his tree. From cramped hieroglyphics to clear, concise calligraphy, the individual poet pens their words. The artist then can obscure, embed or collage their words with images. But like a reader who recognizes their books by the visible spines on their shelves, once known, the poem carries the flavor of remembrance when viewed. These 'collaborative' pieces actively represent the relationship between the artist and the poet, and a viewer who connects in a personal cosmic leap the image and text.

Such intimate work belies the current fashion for 'monumental statements.' Whether in the immediacy of a torn-up manuscript (Paz), or in action ranging from bird flight (McClatchy) to inky abstraction (Heaney's Penelope poem), these works reflect a rich and thoughtful visual vocabulary. His encompassing reverence for nature, ancient as the Arctic's Inuit culture he adores, inflects his work and brings to his collaborations a refreshing counterpoint to much contextualized, theory-driven art.

In not producing literal representations of the poetry, Robert Perkins creates evocations of a modern and nuanced elucidation of poems, calligraphy and image. His formidable body of work evokes a nature attuned to two worlds, the word and the image: *The Written Image*. As in traditional Japanese and Chinese scrolls, but with a contemporary American twist, Perkins creates an elegant dance between poetry's immaterial words and the grounded practice of his mark making.

THE WRITTEN IMAGE

We have chosen to print the ‘official’ published version of the poems.

However, in their manuscript form many differ in their wording.

Elizabeth Bishop

The idea for *The Written Image* came from Elizabeth. At Harvard, I was a good enough poet to be accepted into her small creative writing seminar. When we had our first one-on-one meeting, she said, 'You're not a poet. What are you?'

I stuttered and said I wanted to be a painter. She said, 'We'll find a way for you to get credit.' She wrote out her poem 'The Fish' and said, 'Illustrate this.' After that, I went down the hall to ask my other teachers, Robert Lowell and Octavio Paz, if they would like to collaborate. I did not realize this at the time, but once I'd worked with them, I had shot the moon. Other poets wanted to participate. At college, the only courses I took were poetry and painting, even though my father suggested I take an economics course, or some history. After all, he said, 'I'm paying your tuition.'

The only collaboration I've lost is Elizabeth's. It's fitting as she was very reticent and shy. Many times I went to a scheduled reading only to be told she wouldn't be coming. Readings made her anxious. We did become friends, though, and I visited her on Lewis Wharf on one condition: that I never ask her anything about poetry. I had not realized until I visited her apartment that she was a painter herself. She did watercolours and drawings and had done some etching. We whiled away our time talking about art and artists. We played backgammon. Drank tea.

What do you learn in school? I believe spending time with Elizabeth, studying nothing, enjoying each other, was a deep learning. I couldn't tell you what

I learned, but she was modelling an ephemeral aspect of her art: the present moment. Those afternoons were a Zen koan for me.

The Fish

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
- the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly-
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
- It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
- if you could call it a lip
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and
snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels- until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!

And I let the fish go.

John Ashbery

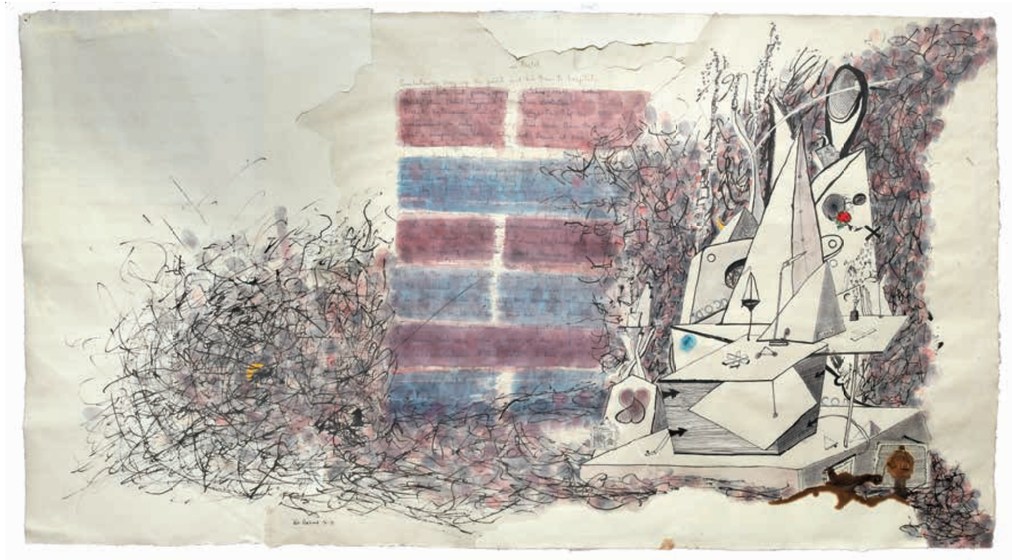
In the mid-1970s, John Ashbery invited me to his New York apartment on a Sunday evening. We cleared space at the dining room table littered with the remains of a large dinner party, a platter of chicken bones, empty and half-full glasses, plates, crumbs…so he had enough room to choose a piece of paper to write out his poem…oddly enough, a poem about a party.

He wrote down the centre of the sheet, covered the whole paper, leaving little room for me to draw. I lived with his words for several months until I realized I could add more paper and create 'flanges' to the sheet he wrote on. As his fragment seemed like a collage, a collection of disparate elements, clips of conversation, observations, I drew random things, whatever came to mind in the moment. I even included a candy lifesaver. To the left of his words, I watercoloured a hexagram from the I Ching. I let my pen squirrel around creating a huge tangle of lines. His words, and my drawing, felt like a stream of consciousness.

In Ashbery's poetry, I feel a strong intention at work, even if I don't know what it is. I had not appreciated his deep commitment to painting until I read his art reviews written early in his life. They reveal a deep understanding of principles and process. I wouldn't turn to his poetry to read at an occasion, as many people did 100 years ago when deaths, births, and celebrations were marked by reading poems. Art is a combination of a hand, a head and a heart (the head equalling the intellect, the hand equalling technical dexterity, and the heart standing for the spiritual, feeling element). Rembrandt's last paintings, especially the Man with the Golden Helmet is a perfect example of the three balanced together. Ashbery's poems exist in the same sphere.

From *Daffy Duck in Hollywood*

Ambulances scoop up the quick and hie them to hospitals.
'It's all bits and pieces, spangles, patches, really; nothing
Stands alone. What happened to creative evolution?'
Sighed Aglavaine. Then to her Sélysette: 'If his
Achievement is only to end up less boring than the others,
What's keeping us here? Why not leave at once?
I have to stay here while they sit in there,
Laugh, drink, have fine time. In my day
One lay under the tough green leaves,
Pretending not to notice how they bled into
The sky's aqua, the wafted-away no-color of regions supposed
Not to concern us. And we too…'



Frank Bidart

Frank assisted Robert Lowell. Their collaboration was beneficial to them both. Lowell was a genius, but also a cranky, old-school, unbalanced New Englander, in and out of McLean Hospital. Frank helped keep him on track. He grounded Lowell's genius in practical assistance.

For decades Frank has taught at Wellesley College and is considered one of the leading poets of this generation. When we collaborated, he was very careful how he placed his words on the page and took a long time to choose the paper. He admired Stéphane Mallarmé.

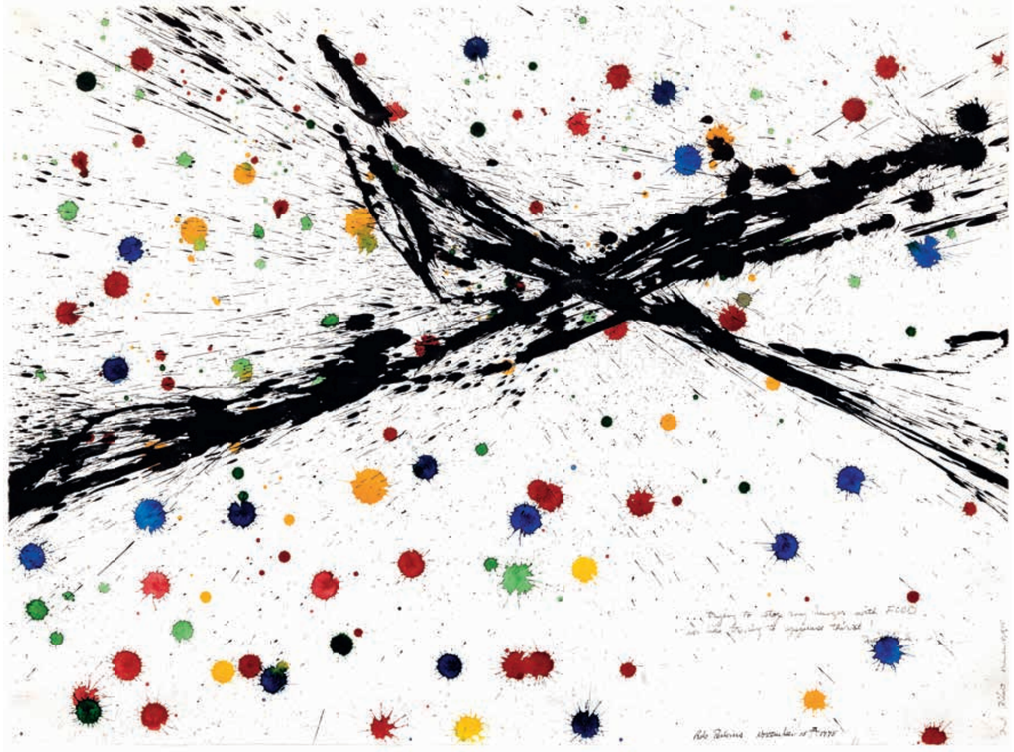
I wonder if my bravado in loading a brush with India ink and making my X made him nervous. However, he said he liked the result. I showed the finished piece to the curator at the Houghton Library at Harvard, Rodney Dennis. He would not consider this art. He said 'chance' played too large a part in its creation. To him, the India ink X was just a splatter. He said another strike against the piece was that I couldn't repeat what I'd done. Rodney admired the Old Masters and their control. He viewed life differently than I did. For me, chance plays more of a role in life, in art, than we might acknowledge, or even know.

Rodney and I became friends. I used to join him and several others to eat hamburgers in a small booth at Mr. Bartley's Burger Cottage in Harvard Square. One day, he came in dazed. He had been negotiating the purchase of Lowell's papers for the Houghton Library. He said, 'Lowell kept raising the price. I'd think we had a deal and then he'd change his mind and up the price! What could I do but agree?'

From the longer poem, *Ellen West*

…trying to stop my hunger with FOOD
is like trying to appease thirst

with ink.



Basil Bunting

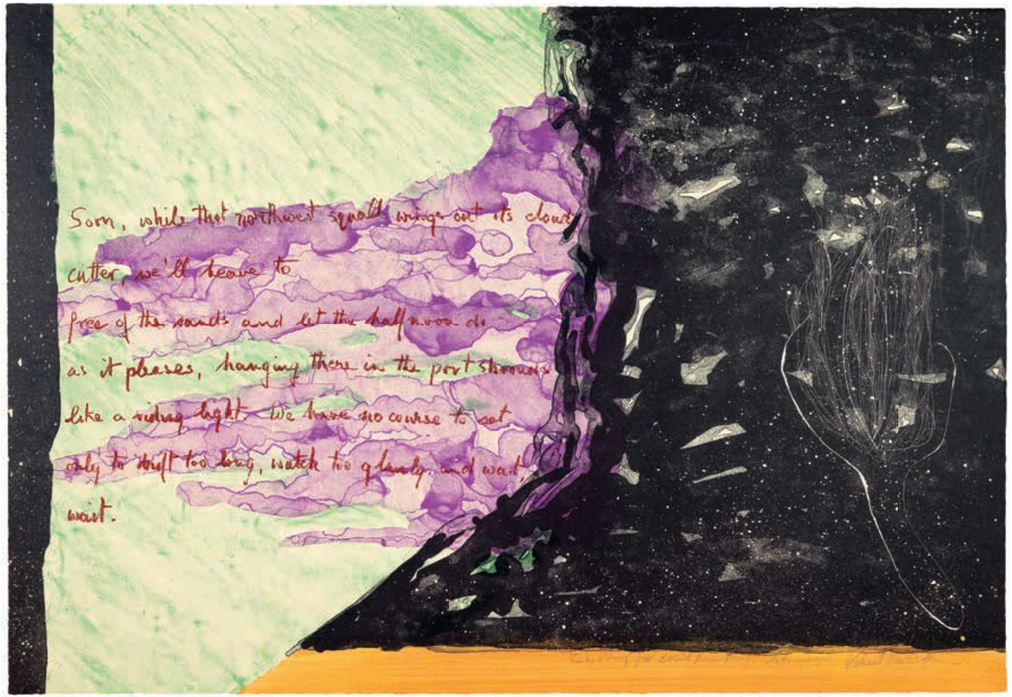
Basil Bunting was old when we met in Hexham, England. He lived simply in a carriage house with a younger poet living beside him, helping. On the coffee table when I arrived was the recent large catalogue on Balthus paintings. It wasn't there when I came back downstairs. I've written about the ten days I spent with him in my book *Into the Great Solitude.*

Initially, he mistook me for an American poetry critic, but I did not know this. He and his assistant were very cold and questioning when I came back downstairs. When I couldn't answer the barrage, and minutia, of their literary questions, Basil turned to his friend, and spoke derisively, 'Look what America turns out for critics!' I objected, saying I was an artist, not a critic. When they understood I was there to work with him, to pay homage, Basil opened the cupboard under the sink to reveal many large green bottles of Glenlivet whiskey. He explained, 'This is what those critics bring me as gifts. I guess they aren't totally useless.' In the next few days, we went through several bottles. His fragment of a poem remarks his old age. Remarks what an old person gets to do…'Wait, wait.'

He told me the story of his applying for a Guggenheim Fellowship. His references read like a list of the great twentieth-century writers: Gertude Stein, Ezra Pound, Ford Maddox Ford, Ernest Hemmingway. The committee turned him down!

Printed in New York at Derriere L'Etoile Studio, the edition was paid for by the book dealer, Glen Horowitz, as was the first collaboration with James Merrill. You can see Basil's age in his handwriting. He was old. He was 'waiting.' He was fabulous.

Soon, while that northwest squall wings out its cloud,
Cutter, we'll heave to
Free of the sands and let the half moon do
As it pleases, hanging there in the port shrouds
Like a riding light. We have no course to set,
Only to drift too long, watch too glumly and wait,
Wait.



Jon Galassi

Jon and I attended Harvard together. We met freshman year in the class called 'Physics for Poets'. This course was offered to help un-scientific students pass their requirement. Jon and I remain friends. With three others, we were slated to room together in Winthrop House in sophomore year, 1968. That spring, four of us left college, not all of us by our own choice. I went to a mental hospital, another left for the religious community in Switzerland called L'Abri Fellowship, another joined SDS, the militant student organization. Only Jon and one other man completed their degrees on time. He went into publishing. He began in Boston. He was told he was too intellectual and not a good enough businessman to survive in publishing. For the last two decades, he has been president of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and has proven his critics wrong again and again.

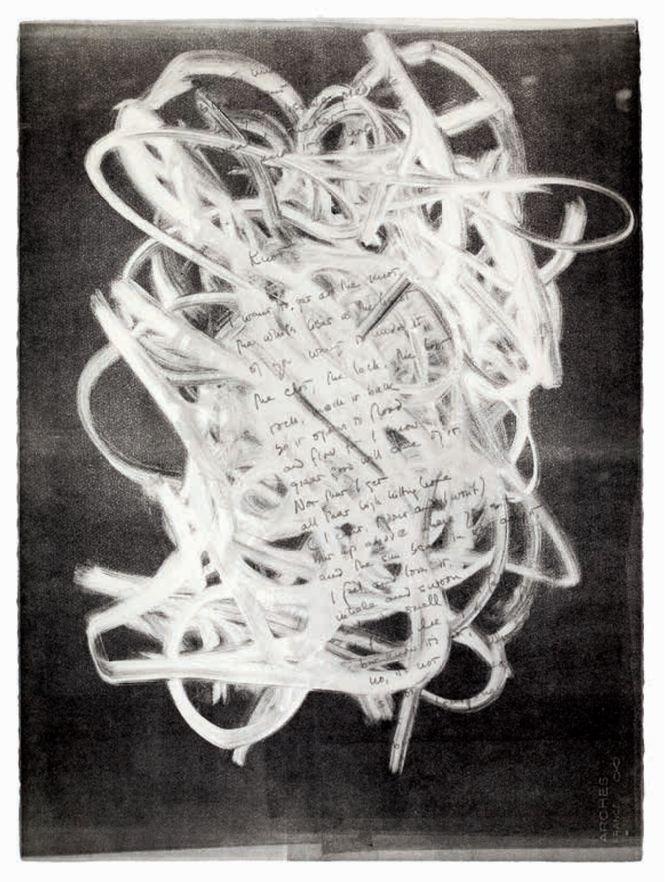
He chose 'Knot' from his second book of poems, North Street. Intensity, strong emotion, and word play drive the poem. It's as lovely as it is powerful, slightly terrifying. I found myself referring to the nautical book of knots to find images. I used a small piece of Plexiglas as my plate for the image. It fitted on a portion of the paper, giving me an isolated image on the sheet of his poem. When I became tired of this, I drew directly on the bed of the press a great tangle of a knot. Printed it. I was inspired by the work of the German painter Wols.

To hide a depth of feeling in words? To expose a depth of feeling in words? To inspire a depth of feeling in words? I am struck by the way certain poems delve into the world more deeply than I've been able to.

Knot

I want to get at the knot,
the white heat at the heart
of you, want to undo it,
the clot, the lock, the hot
rock, knock it back
so it opens to flood
and flow, for I know
great good will come of it.
Not that I get
all that high hitting home
(I can't, I don't, and I won't)
but up above where you sit
and the sun beats in your armpit,
I feel and love it,
Inhale and swoon

With the smell, I fell.
I flee, I lie, I try to fly,
But know it's not,
No, it's not on. What I've got
's not a lot of excitement,
not the loud
shout or tight shot,
but not nothing either,
mu bright fuchia lover;
together, whatever, I'm over-
spent, undersold,
blown, bent low
by your absolute predicate
weather, whether
you know it or not....



Allen Ginsberg

James Merrill gave me Allen Ginsberg's phone number. I was visiting my cousins on the Upper East Side of NYC. I wore a blue blazer, white button-down shirt, penny loafers. I didn't even know where the Lower East Side was let alone what it represented.

When I called and told Allen my name, he said, 'Who the fuck are you?' I said I wanted to invite him to participate in The Written Image. He said, 'What the fuck is that?' I explained and he replied, 'Why the fuck would I do that?' Now, I got mad and said, 'Well, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Octavio Paz thought it was a good idea.' He replied, 'Why the fuck didn't you say that! Get down here right now.'

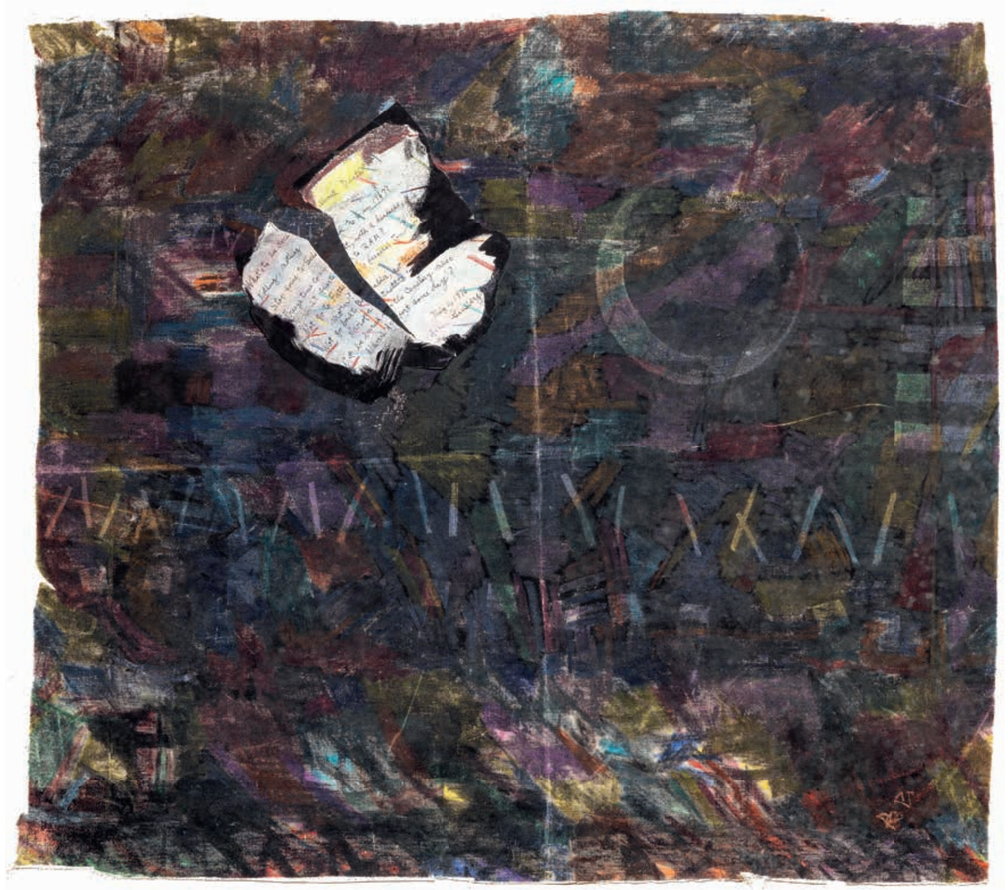
I was nervous on the Lower East Side. I was twenty-two, dressed like a prep school kid. A young Spanish man and a rumpled, older man wearing a large overcoat followed me into Ginsberg's building. I climbed the stairs faster. Ginsberg's door was open. He was down the hall. Inside, I tried to close the door, even leaned against it, as the other men tried to push in. When Ginsberg saw me, he shook his head and said, 'Let them in. They're my friends.'

Ginsberg was the most fastidious poet I've worked with. He wanted reassurance that the rag paper, and the India ink, would last forever. He wrote out a recent journal entry. The irony is that he is buried in the graveyard he mentions.

I struggled to discover a visual equivalent, and eventually saw light under shadow. This gave me the idea of covering crayon colours with India ink, the colour peeking through by scraping ink away. The tension between the suppressed colour and the colour poking through seemed to speak about Allen's concerns while capturing something of his childlike nature.

Don't Grow Old: VII

What's to be done about Death?
Nothing, nothing
Stop going to school No. 6 Patterson, N.J., in 1937?
Freeze time tonight, with a headache, at quarter to 2 AM?
Not go to Father's funeral tomorrow morn?
Not go back to Naropa teach Buddhist poetics all summer ?
Not be buried in the cemetery near Newark Airport some day?



Seamus Heaney

I met Seamus in Adams House at Harvard. He was on crutches in his room, and apologized for not standing. His door was open. My having attended the University College Cork in Ireland helped him understand me, as did the bottle of Jameson I brought. We became friends and collaborated several times. He had not received the Nobel Prize and had more time then. When we went to Maurice Sanchez's lithography studio, he spent a long time asking Maurice questions, fascinated with how a print was made. He wrote out his sonnet from *The Haw Lantern* about the chestnut tree and his mother, ending in the delicious line, 'beyond silence, listened for.'

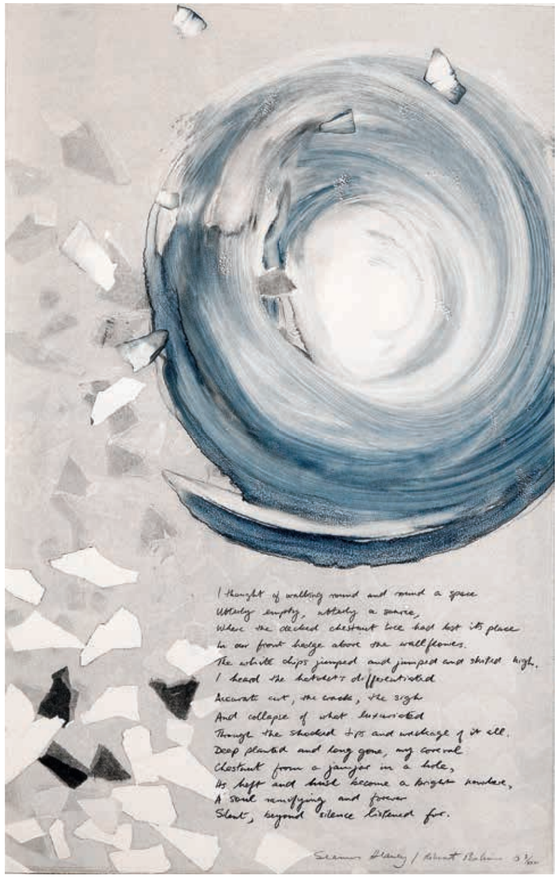
In combining monotype and lithography, I can let my imagination play with the poem. This was the first time I'd worked this way. The former collaborations were one-offs, but I felt it would be too precious to make only one with Seamus. We made a small edition. The image I enjoy most is the dark print where the poem appears in the white chips of the wood being cut. The whole poem is there, hidden in the dark ink.

We went on to work with Penelope and then the piece about Saint Kevin. He also wrote out the poem about the vision seen by the monks at Clonmacnoise from his book Seeing Things as a wedding present to my second wife, Bailey, and myself.

After he won the Nobel Prize, we had lunch. He confided that he wondered if he'd ever write anything good again or whether the prize would signal the end of his creativity. It's sad to see him fall out of favour among younger poets, but time and poetry move on; however, I feel that movement is circular, not linear. He'll return to favour.

From *The Haw Lantern*

I thought of walking round and round a space
Utterly empty, utterly a source
Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
In our front hedge above the wallflowers.
The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high.
I heard the hatchet's differentiated
Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh
And collapse of what luxuriated
Through the shocked tips and wreakage of it all.
Deep planted and long gone, my coeval
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
A soul ramifying and forever
Silent, beyond silence listened for.



The Stone Grinder

Penelope worked with some guarantee of a plot.
Whatever she unweaved at night
might advance it all by day.
Me, I ground the same stones for fifty years
and what I undid was never the thing I had done.
I was unrewarded as darkness at a mirror.
I prepared my surface to survive what came over it—
cartographers, printmakers, all that lining and inking.
I ordained opacities and they haruspicated.
For them it was a new start and a clean slate
every time. For me, it was coming full circle
like the ripple perfected in stillness.
So. To commemorate me. Imagine the faces
stripped off the face of a quarry. Practise
coitus interruptus on a pile of old lithographs.

Saint Kevin and the Black Bird

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so
One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
and lays in it and settles down to nest.
Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,
Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.
And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time
From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth
Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,
A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

Robert Lowell

I was Lowell's student three years. At 19, I spent a year at McLean Hospital on the same ward he frequented, Bowditch, the maximum-security ward for men. This gave us an understanding, a touching point. When I was at McLean, the same attendant Lowell wrote about in '*Waking in the Blue*,' the B.U. student, was still working there. His name was Bill Shine. He would pull the poem out of his wallet the way other men show you pictures of their children, and with the same ardour, point to the poem, and say, 'That's me!' I could have cared less.

Lowell gave me the opening lines of 'Man and Wife,' a violent, game-changing poem from the 1950s, shifting poetry's material towards the intensely personal, the confessional. He laughed maniacally after he wrote it out and said, 'Have fun with that!'

As much as he was imposing, I always felt a child residing inside him, a spoiled and precocious one, which gave me the idea of drawing stick figures. The black and blues, the red, capture the intensity and dark quality of the man and of his poem. In the red window, in the lower right, are his tangled words and name. He read his work well. Most poets don't. He began one reading by spending three minutes taking off his watch and placing it on the lectern. Then, slowly, looking up, he said the title of a poem: 'Water.' Then, he waited while all the possible images of water circled through me.

When I graduated, he asked if I could manage a farm and then offered me a job at his estate in England. I said of course, not knowing the first things about England, or farms. I felt I could learn. When Elizabeth heard about this, she put a stop to it.

Tamed by *Miltown*
We lay on Mother's bed…

John Montague

In the early 1970s, Rene and Joan Hague befriended me in Ireland. I rented their small cottage overlooking the sea, for one Irish pound a week, provided I paid in cash and in person every Friday and stayed for a good dinner and the night. They lived in Shannagary in the Penn-Gaskill house where the Quaker William Penn lived before he sailed to the New World. Joan was Eric Gill's daughter and Rene had been the printer at the Golden Cockerel Press.

My room was under the main stairs, a monk's cot and side table. The ceiling sloped to the contour of the ascending stairs. The walls were high and whitewashed.

Rene was a calligrapher, and in four-inch-high black lettering on the white walls, he calligraphied (in Latin) the death of Hector at the hand of Achilles.

I drifted to sleep hearing the clash of their swords, the grunts of their fight.

I met John Montague at the University College Cork, or UCC. Two hundred students listened to him lecture. This must have been painful for John as he sometimes became flustered and stuttered. On the first day, John concluded his remarks by reciting Shelly's poem 'To a Skylark.'

I shrank down in my seat as two hundred Irish voices joined him in the recitation. We became friends. In his home, I met many aspiring artists. He had a Morris Graves drawing of a bird. Graves is one of my heroes because his interest is in spirit, not anatomical accuracy.

A man of modern faith, John loved Teillard de Chardin and Ireland. He questioned dogma. He liked the Hagues, who loved poets' conversation. In both houses, I was the fly on the wall, too shy to speak, but absorbing it all.

At Teilhard de Chardin's Grave

A Jesuit graveyard recalls a military cemetery,
small white stones standing to attention,
orderly as that other trim forest of the dead,
the white crosses glooming above the Somme,
awaiting the mute trumpet of the resurrection.
French aristocrat, bearer of the ennobling de,
you now lie between MacQuade and Reilly,
foot-soldiers in the army of Jesus;
you who were earth's theologian,
servant of the evolving logos, who sought
in Chinese deserts to decipher
the living book of our universe.
A gaunt cavalry broods on a hillock
above you and your fallen comrades:

three veiled and mourning women
the shadowy figure of an exhausted Christ;
the dead centre of your world as priest.
In winter there are tracks through the snow
to your grave. In summer, flowers.
Each evening the last rays of the sun
strike your tomb, above 'the lordly Hudson'.

Dying, the salmon
heaves up its head
in the millstream.
Great sores ring
its gills, its eyes
a burning rust
slowly corrodes
its red gold skin
Wash the poison
from the streams,
cleanse the enormous
belly of ocean, tear
the invisible insides
of mesh, so that your
kin might course again
proudly through clean waters.

Octavio Paz

In the 1970s, for five years, Octavio Paz taught Comparative Literature at Harvard. As his student, I asked if he would participate in *The Written Image*. He wanted to see examples. When I showed him the only two collaborations I had completed, with Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, he said, 'They write too small. Can I write large? And can I write in Spanish?'

My rule for what was becoming *The Written Image* was the poet chose the poem and how to write it out. I accepted whatever they gave me. I said, 'Sure.'

When I went to pick up the piece and to have a drink with Paz and his wife, he pointed out a spelling mistake he'd crossed out. He asked if that was acceptable. I said yes. His wife said to write it out again. I left with two sheets and the koan of how to use all I had received.

I shredded the sheet with the mistake and deckled the edges of the other sheet.

I collaged all the pieces of paper onto Belgian linen. The linen's gesso shows through to the front, mimicking the torn pieces. Because the gesso dried on the wall, a slight hint of blue pulled off with it. Perfect.

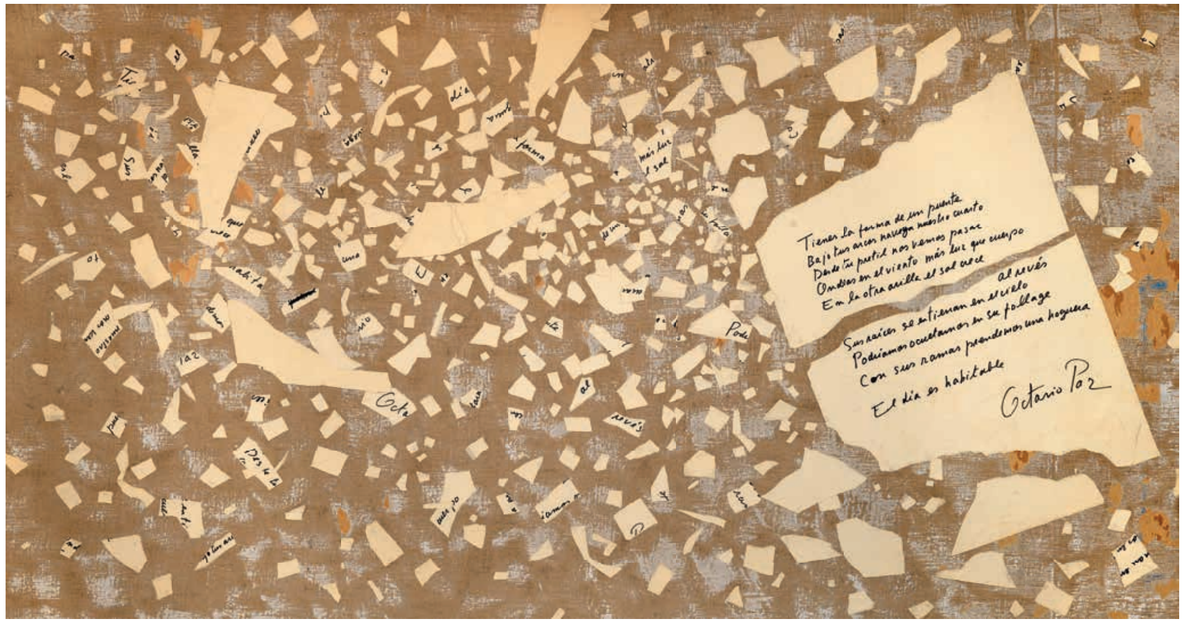
Years later, in 1990, the day he won the Nobel Prize, he appeared on the nightly news. I happened to be watching with my father. They cut to Paz talking about winning the prize. He had just expressed his gratitude when the announcer interrupted. Paz was cut off. I told my father Paz had been my teacher. He said he hoped I'd learned a lot, but he felt artists were second-class citizens.

I didn't answer.

fragment from *Trowbridge Street*

Ahora tienes la forma de un puente
Bajo tus arcos navega nuestro cuarto
Desde tu pretil nos vemos pasar
Ondeas en el viento más luz que cuerpo
En la otra orilla el sol crece
al revés
Sus raíces se entierran en el cielo
Podríamos ocultarnos en su follaje
Con sus ramas prendemos una hoguera
El día es habitable

Now you have a bridge-shape
Our room navigates beneath your arches
From your railing we watch us pass
You ripple with wind more light than body
The sun on the other bank
grows upside-down
Its roots buried deep in the sky
We could hide ourselves in its foliage
Build a bonfire with its branches
The day is habitable



Robert Pinsky

As I began *The Written Image*, Robert graciously agreed to participate.

The orderliness of his handwriting, his poise and his careful placement of the words on the paper indicated a thoughtful poet. His poem about a young girl riding a horse created clear images; it brought me into the ring. The man in the suit watching the young girl, his discomfort, became my way into an image.

I mulled over his poem, finally settling on the image of the man standing in the dust. I soaked the paper in brown ink and while it was still wet I stood on it, letting my shoes make their mark. The yellow halo around the words stands for the sunlight filtering into the ring.

The poem evokes a quiet moment. It makes me think about imagination and the effectiveness of poetry. Our culture is upping the ante for 'look-at-me-ness' with ever louder and attention-grabbing volume. On the other hand, any time you walk out into nature, you are present to processes at work that are miraculous, as unremarked as they are remarkable, if we even notice. Robert Pinsky's poem is like one of these small miracles of nature.

What kind of time does a poem create? Robert's poem is now one of my memories as present today as it was in the 1970s. For those who read it, see it today, it becomes one of their memories. Certain poems carry that vividness into our lives; aren't they as large inside us as the night sky, as small as two hands held up?

Rider

A field house built of corrugated metal,
The frosted windows tilted open inwards
In two lines high along the metal walls;
Inside, a horse-ring and a horse called Yankee
Jogging around the ring with clouds of dust
Rising and settling in the still, cold air
Behind the horse and rider as they course
Rhymically through the bars of washed-out light
That fall in dim arcades all down the building.
The rider, a girl of seven or eight, called Rose,
Concentrates firmly on her art, her body,
Her small, straight back and shoulders as they rise
Together with the alternate, gray shoulders
Of the unweary horse. Her father stands
And watches, in a business suit and coat,
Watching the child's face under the black serge helmet,
Her yellow hair that bounces at her nape
And part-way down her back. He feels the cold
Of the dry, sunless earth up through the soles
Of his thin, inappropriate dress shoes.

Mark Strand

When we met, Mark was living in New York. He laughed introducing me to his wife, Jules, saying, 'Rob, meet Jules. Rob… the jewels.' Neither of us thought it was funny, but he did. He took our collaboration seriously, though. He had studied art at Yale under Joseph Albers. He lined the paper into stanzas to help guide him as he wrote out the poem. Without a pause, he turned the paper over, saying as he wrote out a second poem, 'If you mess up on the first, you'll have another chance.' I said nothing, having a private rule to use all I was given. I wondered how I would integrate the two poems.

The challenge was how to get both poems on the same side. I lived with his sheet a long time before the solution dawned on me. I could transfer the second poem to the front side of the paper by using colour. I covered tracing paper with pastel and laid it over the front side of the paper with the poems on it, turned this paper face down and traced the words of the second poem, pressing hard. This transferred the words to the front of the paper, but backwards, creating a long rectangular column of two Mark Strand poems, half appearing backwards and half in colour. I let it stand as I felt I should quit while I was ahead.

It's a process working out my side of the collaborations. Knowing why this one appears as it does might help the viewer understand it. His mark making and mine. Not too far from the markings on the cave walls at Lascaux.

I never saw Mark again, except through reading his poems when they were published. Henri Cole wrote in Poetry that Strand was 'a poet of mood, of integrated fragments, of twilit landscape, and of longing.'

My Son

My son,
my only son.
The one I never had,
would be thirteen today.

He moves
in the wind
fleshless, shameless
sometimes

he comes
and leans his head,
lighter than air,
against my shoulder

and I ask him,
Son,
where do you live,
where do you hide?

And he answers me
with a cold breath,
you never noticed
though I called
and called
and kept on calling
from a place
beyond love,
where nothing
everything
wants to be born.

Another Place

I walk
into what light
there is

not enough for blindness
or clear sight
of what is to come

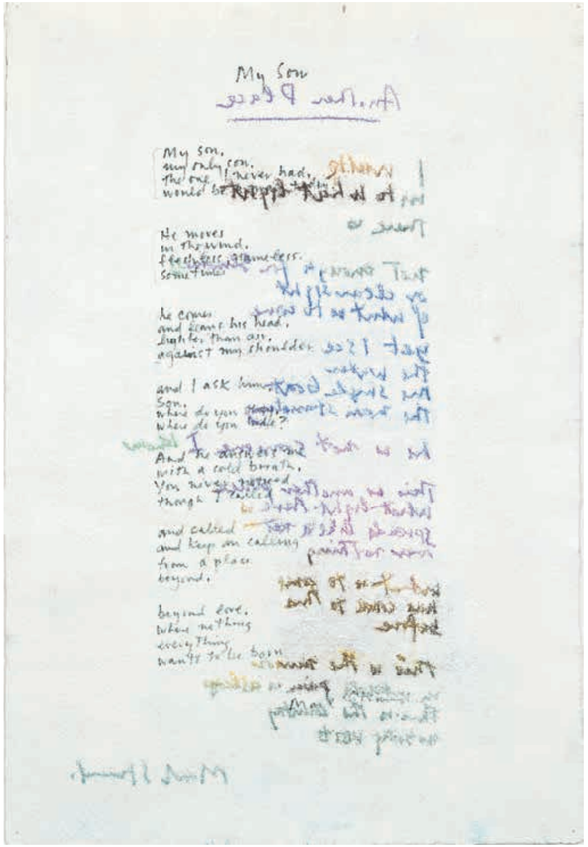
yet I see
the water
the single boat
the man standing

he is not someone I know

this is another place
what light there is
spreads like a net
over nothing

what is to come
has not come to this
before

this is the mirror
in which pain is asleep
this is the country
nobody visits



Claire Clube

What can I say?

We spent seven lovely years together, married the last four. She finished her first manuscript, Dora, poems for and about women and nature. She loved Janet Frame. She loved Gerard Manley Hopkins. She loved what she called the barely-there, what others overlooked. David Whyte admired her first lines. I loved the whole complex, dazzling poem of her.

'Loon' was our first collaboration. We hardly expected it to be our last. Ten minutes before she and her daughter were killed in a plane crash, she texted me:

'I feel free. I feel close to god and there are angels all around me.'

Loon

Watch a loon, most ancient of birds, in milk-glass-blue light
spear the membrane of the sea, a film of water about its head,
gold leaf of waves as it extends itself into oblivion,
phthalo-green. The loon bows, a dark angel.
There's life within shadow, an unseen miracle,
iridescence inside a silent current, the icy field of the sea
carding the loon's plumules, onyx wings.

Henri Cole

Henri was Claire's favourite teacher at the Bennington low-residency writing program. He helped her find her voice and admired her spirit.

He is a hidden presence behind the creation of her book Dora. In Boston, they spent time visiting galleries and looking at art. Henri admired the work of Kiki Smith, another artist he collaborated with. Claire bought a beautiful Kiki Smith print of a dead bird, with the lightest touches of pink blossoms scattered around it.

Henri's sharp observation of the crows is clear and concise. Perfect in its chilling brevity. I identified with the kitten, yet the crows are the striking image. I used torn and deckled paper to form the crows, adding touches of colour in some, but mostly revelling in the rich play between black, grey and white that comes by working in monotype and using printer's ink, Vine Black 514. With monotype you can achieve a subtly of greys and a richness of colour, perhaps because unlike a drawing, or painting, the pigment is pushed into the paper, becomes a part of it, as the paper travels through the pressure of the press. Collaging the crows gave an infinitesimal height to the images as they went through the press. In some they appear three-dimensional. The black crows, the white paper.

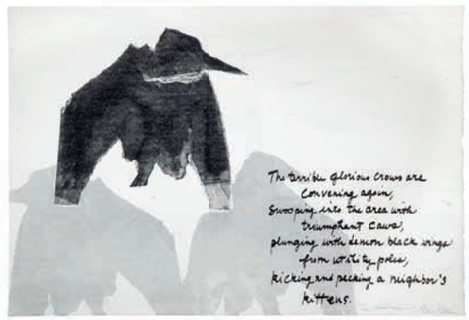
Henri wrote the fragment boldly. My crows seem sinister, especially in pairs. Maurice printed thirty sheets. When I was done creating the images, Henri and I went through them, choosing the best and destroying the others. For us, fewer meant more, and meant more intimate.

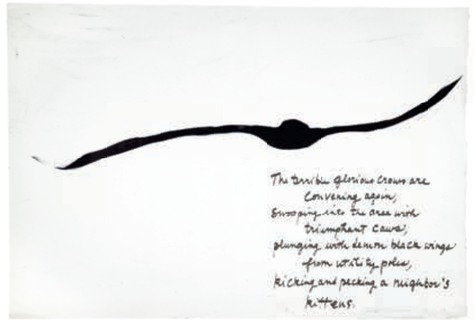
I first exhibited the prints in the Grolier Poetry Book Shop in Harvard Square. Henri's crows hung high up and garnered the most comments of any prints I showed there.

Perhaps because birds of a feather….

Crows in Evening Glow

The terrible glorious crows are convening again,
swooping into the area with triumphant caws,
plunging with demon black wings from utility poles,
kicking and pecking a neighbour's kittens.





Louise Glück

When I wrote to ask whether she would participate in *The Written Image*, Louise Glück replied by saying what she liked was that my images varied. I asked why they would be the same. Each poem, like each poet, is different. I try to be true to the poem and to what I perceive about the poet. She invited me to visit her in Cambridge. She is very considered, and did not strike me as an impulsive person. We talked. She enjoyed the different papers I brought for her to choose from. She spread them out, touched them, and kept regarding them while we talked. She finally decided on something simple and handmade.

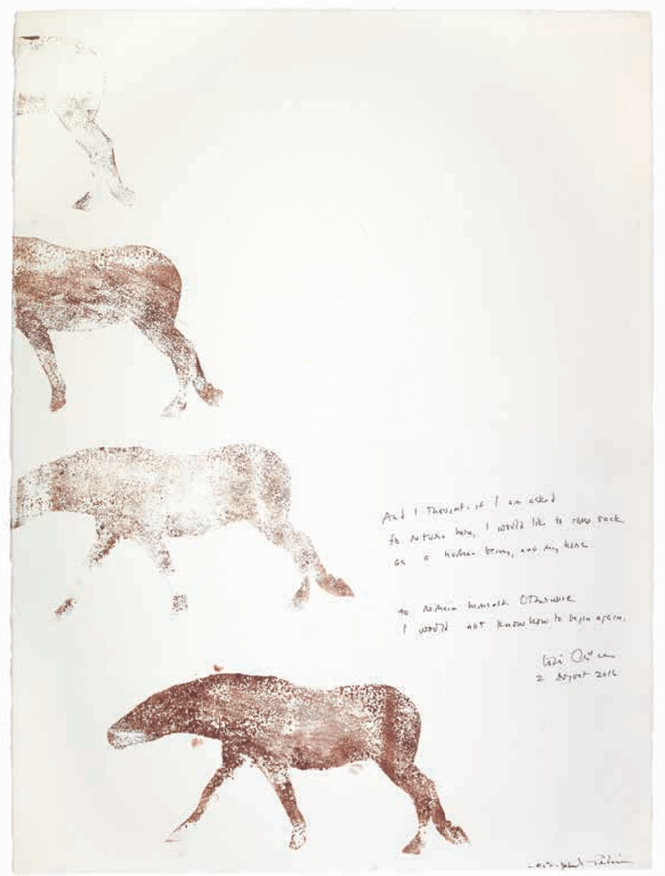
Economy is a quality she admires; her poems present large ideas in small packages. Her passage about the horse conveys feeling plus desire plus a question, and it makes me take into account something larger than myself. She was unsatisfied with her writing of the poem and rewrote it several times, allowing me to create more than one visual equivalent.

She was presented the National Medal for the Arts in 2015 by President Obama.

She has published a collected works as thick as an old-style phone book. She swims in words. She dreams words. She dreams images, and each set of new words seems handled and considered before it is laid out for us, the same way she spread out and touched the different papers I brought. She reaches depths William Blake would admire. She will be remembered and read a long time into our unknown future. Her poems are delicious.

From *Landscape*

Then the snow was thick, the path vanished.
the horse was tired and hungry;
he could no longer find
sure footing anywhere. I told myself:
I have been lost before, I have been cold before.
The night has come to me
exactly this way, as a premonition —
And I thought: if I am asked
to return here, I would like to come back
as a human being and my horse
to remain himself. Otherwise
I would not know how to begin again.



Donald Hall

One January, I met Donald in New York at a sterile apartment off Union Square where he was camping out while he taught at NYU. With him was his very old dog, Gus. My first wife, Rene Goodale, had recently died at thirty-three. Donald told me his wife, Jane Kenyon, had recently died. While we worked together, we were two sad men hoping to make each other feel better. Another Christmas is from his manuscript *Without*, a stunning portrait of grief. In some of my images, I drew Christmas decorations as hand grenades. The poem is powerful, emotionally accurate, and stated in a clear-eyed manner.

When *Without* appeared and my book *Talking to Angels* was published, we made several presentations together. The audiences were often composed of people who'd lost someone. I watched a master as Donald Hall conveyed compassion to them. In his speaking, in reading his poems, he was able to go beyond himself and give people a taste of solace. I don't know why I am comforted when I read 'Another Christmas,' but I am.

Over the years, we would meet for lunch. I would drive to his home at Eagle Pond and, first thing, we would drink. He would pour out tumblers of sherry and then pour more. Donald is an old, loveable goat. We'd drive to a near-by restaurant where the owner cooked omelettes and serve us a salad. Several times during each meal, Donald would excuse himself to walk outside and smoke.

Donald mentioned his connection to the Bennington low-residency writing program in Vermont. He invited me to apply; he said it might help me get my spark back. It took several years and then another year before I attended. I had no idea the profound effect going there would have on my writing, or my life. I met Claire.

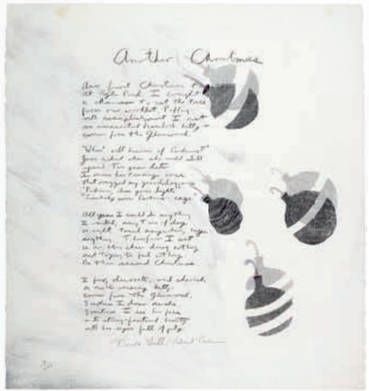
Another Christmas

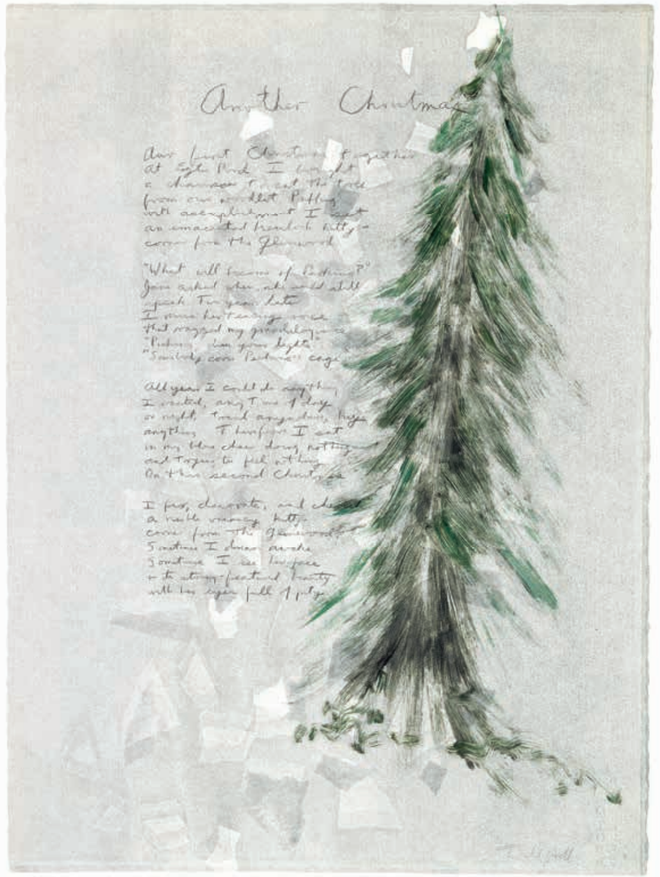
Our first Christmas together
at Eagle Pond I bought
a chain saw to cut the tree
for our woodlot. Puffing
with accomplishment I set
an emancipated hemlock kitty-
corner from the Glenwood stove.

"What will become of Perkins?"
Jane asked when she could still
speak. Two years later
I miss her teasing voice
that razzed my grandiloquence
"Perkins, dim your lights."
"Somebody cover Perkins's cage."

All year I could do anything
I wanted, any time of day
or night, travel anywhere, buy
anything. Therefore I sat
in my blue chair doing nothing
and trying to feel nothing.
On this second Christmas

I fix, decorate, and cherish
a visible vacancy kitty-
corner from the Glenwood.
Sometimes I dream awake.
Sometimes I see her face
in its strong-featured beauty
with her eyes full of pity.





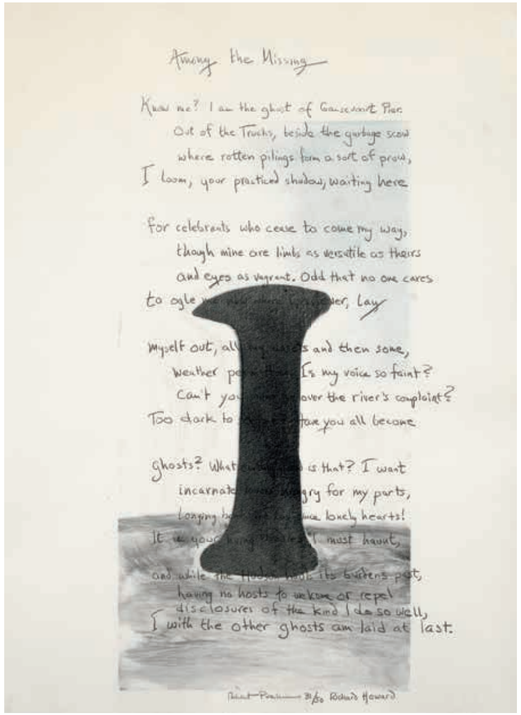
Richard Howard

Richard was a friend of James Merrill, and a willing recruit for collaboration. They arrived in New York about the same time, and grew up together artistically and emotionally. Richard came from the Midwest. Once, on a tour with James, reading to a large Midwest audience, James made a remark to Richard. I remembered it as, 'Well, Richard, this is where the Great Plains meet the Great Gays.'

Richard remembered differently. He sent me this: 'the notable line was uttered by James and was in fact, "You see, Richard. This is what happens when the Great Plains meet the Great Fancies." He said this as we were leaving a conference of otherwise regional poets. We both felt we might possibly be tarred and feathered for being formalist and erudite.'

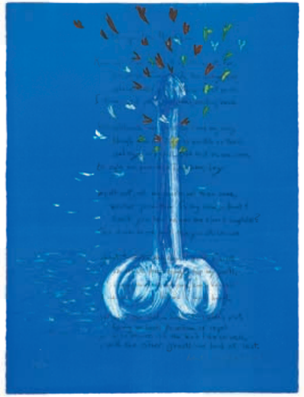
Richard's apartment on Waverly Place in New York is stunningly full of books, his bathroom walls covered in photographs and postcards of famous writers. From floor to ceiling, it's books and the literary life with just enough room for him to live there, too. He sits at his desk facing the window and translates—either French into English, or life into poems. He has been a great mentor for many, myself included. He is fulfilling his wish to outlive others of his generation, although John Ashbery is still alive. Perhaps they'll keep each other going, not leave us soon.

He chose 'Among the Missing,' explaining it was about a gay gathering place on the West Side, Gansevoort Pier, after the beginning of the epidemic. I was free to interpret this in various ways: the bollard became the main image. A bollard is a short post that sits on a wharf that ships tie up to, or they could represent a wounded sex.



Among the Missing

Know me? I am the ghost of Gransvoort Pier.
Out of the trucks, beside the garbage scow
Where rotten pilings form a sort of prow,
I loom, your practiced shadow, waiting here
for celebrants who cease to come my way,
though mine are limbs as versatile as theirs
and eyes as vagrant. Odd that no one cares
to ogle me now where I, as ever, lay
myself out, all my assets and then some,
weather permitting. Is my voice so faint?
Can't you hear me over the river's complaint?
Too dark to see me? Have you all become
Ghosts? What earthly good is that? I want
incarnate lovers hungry for my parts,
longing hands and long-since lonely hearts!
It is your living bodies I must haunt,
And while the Hudson hauls its burdens past,
having no hosts to welcome or repel
disclosures of the kind I do so well,
I with the other ghosts am laid at last.



J. D. McClatchy

When Sandy heard I lived near Zion Park in Utah, he said, 'I've been there. I'll give you what I wrote about Angels Landing.' His beautiful imagist poem is enhanced if you've stood on top of this 5700-foot-high pinnacle, surrounded by swallows, watching the sun go down in summer. Several times, I've had the pleasure of mounting all fifty of our collaborative images together, seeing my zoom of swallows all together.

Once I met Sandy and his husband Chip Kidd at a summer literary conference in Sun Valley, Idaho. He seemed a fish out of water, but at the restaurant he ordered heirloom tomato salad and looked happier. We talked about a novel he was writing and what colour the California license plates were in the 1940s. The other time we met was at his apartment in NYC. I remember it as immaculate and full of fresh flowers in large bouquets. We ate ham sandwiches. He's written the libretto for several operas. *Grendel* is my favorite.

To create the images of the swallows, I cut and deckled paper. The paper's thickness left an 'edge' on the print. This made the swallows appear to be collages, giving them depth. I inked the torn paper a different colour than the background, or I left the 'ghost' of one swallow and printed a new one by running the paper through the press again. The possibilities were limitless, as is the view from the top of Angel's Landing. I spent fifteen years in Zion. I found my spots. One was an 'office' where I went to write, a ledge overlooking Hop Valley. The ledge was five feet wide and backed by a huge rock slab. You don't need more than that for a perch in this world.

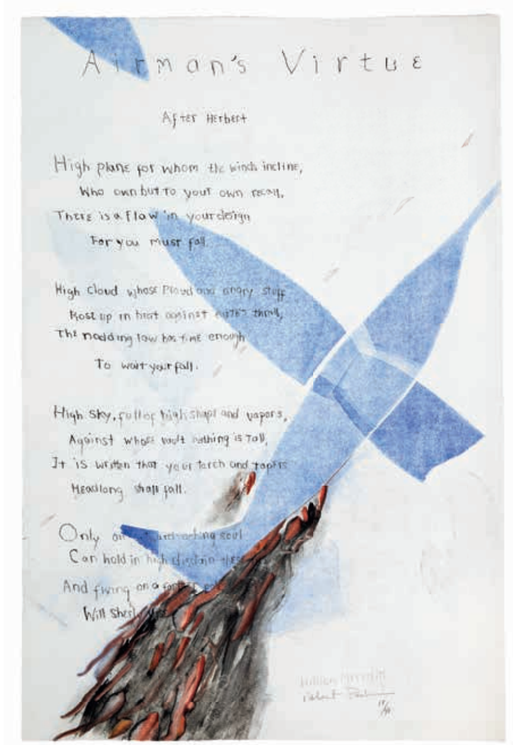
Zion

Twin cloud mesas abut
the Angels Landing, as the sun
slips around the caprice one last maize gold
circle that swallows tighten,
running laces of thin air back
and forth across the fractured sandstone edge….

William Meredith

William wrote out his poem years after his stroke. This took him two hours, punctuated with short breaks. He was very pleased when he was done. I drew fighters in the blue of that Pacific Ocean sky, not exactly the type of plane he flew. Mine were one of the first things I ever drew, along with tanks and stick soldiers fighting…little dotted lines indicating the trajectory of the bullets. I drew these in art class under the watchful eye of Mrs Barstow, the sixth-grade art teacher. She actually derided me by saying they did not look real. Draw something real, she said. Looking up from my desk at a woman with old-lady, rinse-blue hair, I could have said something but didn't.

I met William through a neighbour, Katherine Hull. Her husband was a navy admiral. As kids we joked he got his promotion because his name was Hull. Kathariine had dated William in Hawaii during WWII before she met the admiral. They remained friends. She said, 'I'll let you know when he is coming to visit.' Finally, William came when she was a widow. Years before, William had suffered a bad stroke. He had a hard time taking care of himself and had a live-in helper/lover, a poet named Richard who never left William's side. He wanted to hear all the conversations and to attend William. The two old friends, Katherine and William, wanted to be alone, and Richard didn't take the hint. Mrs Hull whispered to me to take Richard away. I fabricated a reason to take Richard on a long car ride to pick up some food. I went miles out of the way. This gave the two old friends time alone.



Airman's Virtue

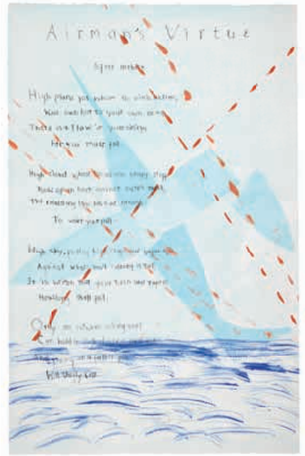
after Herbert

High plane for whom the winds incline
Who own but to your own recall,
There is a flaw in your design
For you must fall.

High cloud whose proud and angry stuff
Rose up in heat against earth's thrall,
The nodding law has time enough
To wait your fall.

High sky, full of high shapes and vapors,
Against whose vault nothing is tall,
It is written that your torch and tapers
Headlong shall fall

Only outward-aching soul
Can hold in high distain these ties
And fixing on a farther pole
Will sheerly rise.



James Merrill

My first job out of college was working in the art department of the Boston Athenaeum, a private library on Beacon Hill. I wanted to initiate a poetry series. Nervously, I approached the director, Rodney Armstrong. He asked me whom I had in mind. I said I'd like the first poet to be James Merrill. After a long pause, Rodney said, 'You mean Jimmy Merrill, the poet, my classmate? Of course!' I was invited to the spring dinner after James's reading, asparagus and shad roe. James invited me to visit Stonington, Connecticut.

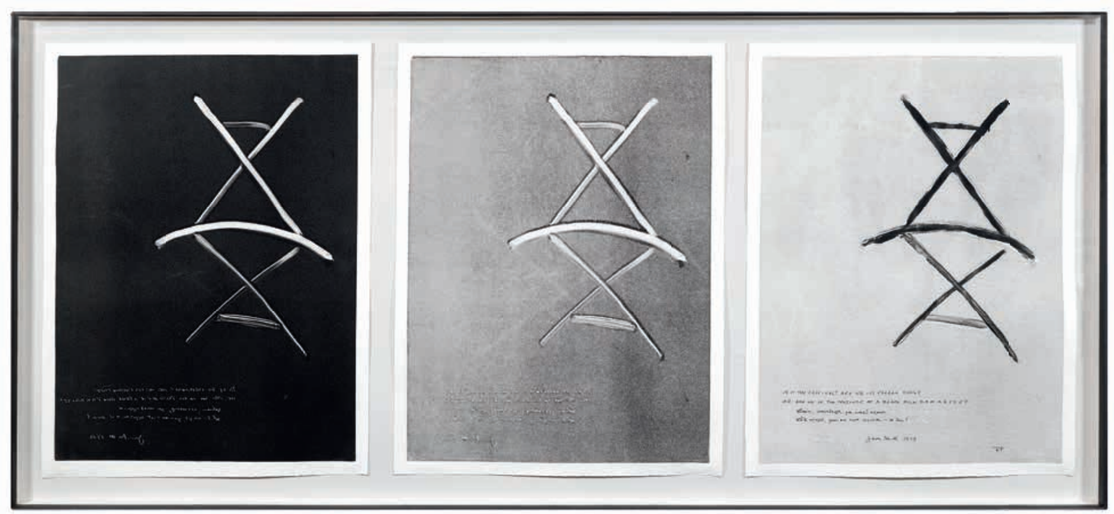
Our first collaboration used a portion of his poem 'McKane's Falls,' and it was a straight-ahead lithograph. I hid a stylized New England gravestone head inside the pour of water in the waterfall's middle section.

Our second collaboration is a one-of-a-kind. James gave me the passage from Mirabell and suggested an image, explaining: MAN… and he drew a large X on a napkin to represent man…stands on the EARTH—and he drew the curved line under the X to represent the earth—and WHAT IS ABOVE IS BELOW—and he drew another X under the first, under the earth. He concluded by saying that what man holds in his hands is TIME, and he drew the line across the upper section of the two X's. These three prints are one of the most successful collaborations I've created. They are the perfect representation of the monotype process.

One afternoon in Stonington, we walked up Water Street to collect a freshly baked peach pie. On the way back, James held it in front of himself like an offering. A small breeze coming off the water wafted the pie's sweet smell over us, as if it were a blessing. What I loved about James, and about many of the poets I've collaborated with, is their ability to turn the most ordinary thing into a metaphor, into something special, a journey.

fragment from *Mirabell*…

Is it the original? are we its carbon copy?
Or: are we in the presence of a black twin paradise
wherein, accordingly, you would appear
white-winged, your own cool opposites—oh dear!



From *McKane's Falls*

Now you've seen through me, sang the cataract,
A fraying force, but unafraid,
Plunge through my bath of plus and minus both,
Acid and base,
The mind that mirrors and the hands that act.
Enter this inmost space.…

Get me by heart, my friend,
and then forget

And then forget.

W. S. Merwin

Perhaps, besides James Merrill, the most elegant poet I've worked with is William. He has a Japanese, distilled quality about him, hard to explain, but a reserve and knowing air, like a haiku. After all, he lives in Haiku, Hawaii. I knew him when he lived in NYC. We met through a mutual friend, Francis Whitney, who was married to George Kirstein, publisher of *The Nation*, brother to Lincoln and their sister, Mina Curtiss. *The Nation* regularly published Merwin's poems.

I met him to choose the poem in a house on Union Square, not his. He had piled all his published books on the floor in front of him. They reached to his waist and he said, 'Which poem from which book do you want to work with?' I was able to say, 'You choose.' He chose 'Place,' one of his most famous and accessible poems.

In my part of any collaboration, I try to incorporate my sense of the poet—a trait, an aspect of them. Merwin's elegance and generosity struck me. There is more behind what you're shown. I felt the images I created conveyed a sense of the haiku of the man. When we were with Maurice Sanchez, Merwin asked if he could draw, too. He drew the small red tree beside the poem. I made many variations, as this was one of my first collaborations where I made multiples.

One challenge in monotype is to create a crisp edge. A drawn line tends to blur because the ink is wet, the paper damp, and the press's pressure strong. Using cut and torn paper for imagery gave me the opportunity of doing something unexpected inside the medium.

Years later, when 9/11 occurred, I had several sheets of his poem left. I spontaneously made the images of the World Trade Towers dissolving with Merwin's poem inside them, counterpoint to such a tragedy.

Place

On the last day of the world
I would want to plant a tree

what for
not for the fruit

the tree that bears the fruit
is not the one that was planted

I want the tree that stands
in the earth for the first time

with the sun already
going down

and the water
touching its roots

in the earth full of the dead
and the clouds passing

one by one
over its leaves

Jean Valentine

‘Annunciation’ calls for dark colour, linseed oil, and suffering lines. Instead, I went the other way and drew an angel in lots of space. The solace she was praying for: an annunciation. I love the line ‘my pelvis thinning out into God’ and think of the caribou bones I come across in the tundra, lying white on the green ground. They stay there years, bleaching in the sun, cooled in deep snow, a part of the land dreaming…thinning out to God.

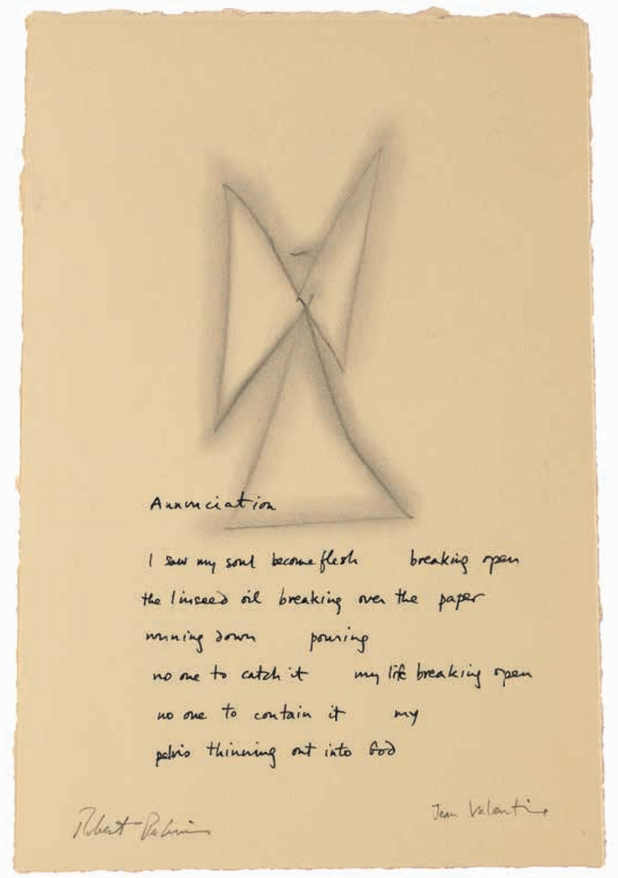
I drew Jean’s angels with a soft pencil. Then I rubbed gently over the line, causing it to blur. Of all the Old Master paintings, I adore ones with angels like Simone Martini’s Angel Gabriel, Petrus Christus’s angel, or Leonardo’s Annunciation. We have lost the possibility of believing in angels or in a multitude of gods. They say when the gods on Olympus heard there would be one god, and one god only, they died…laughing.

The day I went to show Jean my drawings in New York, she had a shy assistant with her, listening and watching. She was a young poet, hovering. She was helping Jean sort her papers. Papers and assistants, learning and angels, we gathered around the table to look at my drawings and Jean’s poem. The assistant made the mistake of saying, ‘I like that one.’ We gave it to her.

Claire met Jean only once. She gave a reading at our home in Utah, next to Zion National Park, on her way to a Buddhist retreat. I’ve seen her several times since. She’s quiet and observant, and when Claire died she was one of few people who knew what to say, or not to say, about my loss. We sat in the Buddhist Center in New York several hours, not saying much, having tea, green tea, lots of green tea.

Annunciation

I saw my soul become flesh breaking open
the linseed oil breaking over the paper
running down pouring
no one to catch it my life breaking open
no one to contain it my
pelvis thinning out into God



David Whyte

David and I first met on one of his tours to Yorkshire. He admired Claire's poems. He called her a first-line poet. He admired *The Written Image*, and after Claire's death, wrote out 'The Well of Grief.'

When I say I've been with him, went to hear him, or admire his work, most people look quizzical and make the remark, 'I don't understand modern poetry.' Another variation is, 'Poets today are too obscure.' I recently proposed to the two men who have sponsored past films, one at PBS and other at Channel 4 in London, that I go on a canoe trip with David Whyte…that the conversation would be worthwhile, make an interesting film. We sat together at a London cafe. They didn't know David. They asked who he was. When I said, 'A poet,' they spoke simultaneously, almost in alarm: 'A poet?'

I felt small. They said, 'Look, Rob, if you want to take Michelle Obama, or a Kardashian, we'd be interested.'

We don't live in a contemplative age. We don't live in an age of poetry, as we once did. Much contemporary poetry attempts to abandon metaphor and beautiful language… for what?

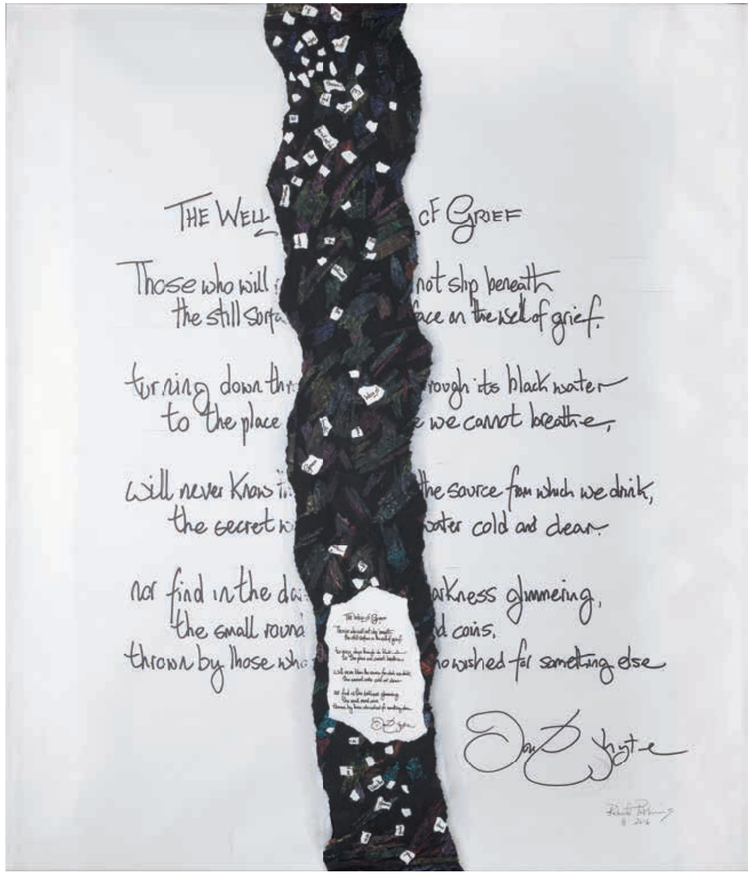
The Well of Grief

Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface on the well of grief

turning downward through its black water
to the place we cannot breathe

will never know the source from which we drink,
the secret water, cold and clear,

nor find in the darkness glimmering
the small round coins
thrown by those who wished for something else.



Debra Wierenga

I tore paper. I organized and reorganized the torn paper into trees. The apples were freehand and the possibilities limitless, clear and concise, like the poem.

I placed the tree on top of the poem, as if the sonnet were earth. I inked the pieces of paper and laid them on the plate face up, the ink wet. I drew an apple. Drew another. Laid the damp paper on top of the plate. Ran the plate through the press. There is a moment before you lift the paper off the plate where you pray it's a good pull. So many things go wrong: the paper is crooked. The ink 'pulls,' destroying the sheet. Unexpected objects—dust, a blob of ink— make the collaged paper shift under the press's pressure and you find yourself no longer in Eden.

Lithographs and etchings are based on sameness. Once set, they print exactly the same. Not the monotype. In making monotypes, the element of chance plays its hand. Not a quality you'd want in a surgery, but the unexpected to a monotype often adds grace to the print. More often it destroys. As you become familiar with the elements of paper, ink, viscosity, wetness, press pressure, and chance, you gain some control. No, that's not right. You don't control chance but you can come to welcome its arrival, and can encourage it instead of always wanting to banish it. Many people's lives are lived attempting to limit the unknown. Safety and comfort are their gods, but that sword has a double edge, doesn't it?

Debra attended the Bennington low-residency writing program. She was one of a few poets committed to writing in a form, in this case the sonnet. I thought her poems exquisite and asked if she would collaborate. She gave me this bold and erotic poem, wanted it printed in red.

Self Portrait as Eve

I never use a peeler. I prefer
the sweet frisson of a paring knife
chasing my thumb around an equator
of red-green globe. I'm a risk-starved wife,
peeling apples for a son who insists
on naked fruit. I eat a snakey coil of skin
and he says I'm disgusting, then kisses
me on the mouth.

I'd do it all again—
marry the man, carry the sons. I'd eat
the whole McIntosh, seeds and all.
But I keep an eye peeled for that serpent.
I'm yearning for another Fall
and watching for new fruit to grow—
there's something else I need to know.

Elizabeth Bishop: *The Fish*, 1973, lost image. p.23.

John Ashbery: Fragment from *Daffy Duck in Hollywood*, mixed media drawing, with one Lifesaver, 1973 (3' x 4.5'). p. 27.

Frank Bidart: Fragment from *Ellen West*. Watercolor and India Ink, 1975 (22" x 28"). p. 31.

Basil Bunting: Fragment, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY, 1980. p.35.

Jonathan Galassi: *The Knot*, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Monotype variations, 2000 (21" x 28"). p. 39.

Allen Ginsberg: *What's to be done*, Crayola crayon, India ink, collage on canvas, 1998 (51" x 46"). p.43.

Seamus Heaney:
From *The Haw Lantern*, Lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Three monotype variations, 1989 (32" x 28"). 25 images in addition. p. 46, 47.
Penelope, two variations, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Monotype variations, 1998 (32" x 28"). p.49.
Saint Kevin and The Blackbird, collage and ink on rag paper, 2000/2017 (34"x 28"). p. 51.

Robert Lowell: 1972. *Man and Wife*, Collage on paper, monotype and pastel, 50" x 34". p. 55.

John Montague:
At the Grave: ink and watercolour, 1973 (22" x 36"). p. 59.
Dying Salmon: India ink and monotype, 1973 (4' x 38"). p. 61.

Octavio Paz: Fragment from *Trowbridge Street*, collage on Belgium linen, blue paint, 1972 (6' x 4"). p. 65.

Robert Pinsky: *Rider*, India Ink and watercolour on paper, 1980 (22" x 31"). p. 69.

Mark Strand: *My Son and Another Place*, India ink and pastel transfer, double sided sheet, 1979 (18" x 26"). p. 73.

Claire Clube: *Loon*. Monotype, silver ink, and collaged stripes of silver paper, 2010 (38" x 62"). p. 77.

Henri Cole: *Crows*, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Monotype variations, 2008 (32" x 23"). Edition of 30. p. 81.

Louise Gluck: From *Landscape*. Monotype and India ink. 2016 (32" x 26"). p. 85.

Donald Hall: *Another Christmas*, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Monotype variations, various sizes. 1995. Edition of 40. p. 89, 90, 91.

Richard Howard: *Among the Missing*, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Monotype variations, various sizes. 1980. Edition of 35. p. 94, 95.

J. D. McClatchy: *Zion*, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Monotype variations by Perkins, 1995 (21" x 28"). Edition of 35. p. 98, 99.

William Meredith: *Airman's Virtue*, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Monotype variations by Perkins, 1976 (22" x 28"). Edition of 30. p. 102, 103.

James Merrill:
Mirabell, monotype & India Ink, 1985 (4' x 36"). p. 107.
Mckane's Falls, etching printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. 1977 (23" x 32"). EDITION SIZE. p. 108, 109.

W. S. Merwin:
Place, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Monotype variations by Perkins, 1993 (31" x 24"). Edition of 30, p. 112
Place, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY.and three monotype variations by Perkins, 2001 (31" x 24"), p. 113.

Jean Valentine: *Annunciation*. Lithograph and pencil drawing. Lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY., 2015 (21" x 32"). Edition of 20. p. 117.

David Whyte: *The Well of Grief*, India ink and collage on rag paper, 2016 (30" x 25"). p. 121.

Debra Wierenga: *Eve*, lithograph printed by Derriere L'Etoile Studios, Long Island City, NY. Monotype variations by Perkins, 2004 (18" x 23"). Edition of 32. p. 124, 125.

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Robert Perkins: Octavio Paz, fragment form *Trowbridge Street*, 1972.