

# A Physical, Textured Genre

High Ground Press' *John Pass* discusses the pleasures and challenges of printing poetry.

I AM NOT BY ANY STRETCH a fine press printer. I print on a very old Chandler & Price letterpress and more recently on a refurbished little Adana from England. But my entry into this world, and my activity in this world, really stems from my role as a poet. I fell in love with the notion that poetry is a very physical, textured genre and could really benefit from being lifted out of books and put on people's walls, in corners where someone might pass by and stop and read something. My real love and interest in printing is to try to attentively stage and respectfully enhance the poem that I am working with.

So what I'm going to do this evening is show you some of the things we've printed in the little print shop behind our house on the Sunshine Coast near Sakinaw Lake. We have two presses. I mentioned the Chandler, dating from the 1880s. When I got this press—originally, as I understand it, a newspaper press in Hazelton—the people who'd been using it had first had to soak it in WD-40 for a year and try repeatedly to kick it over because it was so rusted up. Miraculously, they got it turning. It had a big belt and a very old dangerous-looking electric motor that they were running off the flywheel.

There used to be—as the fine printers in the room will know—a legendary little group of printers who would meet over towards Main Street in Vancouver in a warehouse on Saturday mornings. This would have been back in the early '80s. And if you could find them, and they didn't throw you out immediately, you could go and hang out there. I did

that a couple of times. And it was the second time, I think, that I found this treadle with the C&P logo on it lying there in the doorway and I thought, "My goodness, that's going to fit my press." So I grabbed that and I've always pedalled the thing.

Unfortunately, it's getting to the point now where the mechanics of the original press are so worn that when I put in a new part it simply won't work with all the old parts. It's got beyond repair, I fear. So a couple of years ago I grabbed an Adana. The Caslon company in Britain was recalling these things, refurbishing them and offering them for sale. These little presses were the presses used to teach printing, probably between the wars. Caslon was able to rebuild about 40 or 50 from relics and parts sent in by people all over the U.K., so I ordered one. It is so easy to work with—which doesn't mean you get great print quality, I know—but it is a treat to work with after pedalling the big one.

Our first series of a dozen broadsheets (1986–89) took those years to do because we were raising three kids, and I was teaching and writing and so on. Here's a poem by Crispin Elsted of Barbarian Press, the final one, I believe, from that series. I was quite pleased with it. Like so many printers of my generation and younger in B.C., I'd spent a couple of days with Jan and Crispin learning the basics of printing. (Actually our training amounted to them helping us print a birth announcement for our first-born son, Forrest, in 1981. I've just printed invitations for his wedding this summer!) It was a bit intimidating printing a poem of Crispin's when he'd be capable of doing such a beautiful job with it himself. I remember when I handed it to him he was very gracious...

It's a poem after a Ciccimarra drawing. (Recent correspondence with Crispin reveals that we were short an r in Richard Ciccimarra's name on the sheet.) The visual content of the poem invites broadsheet presentation, invites us to see through the sheet to the drawing. The scene opens:

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*An edited version of an address to the Alcuin Society's annual general meeting on June 19, 2012; transcribed by Wendy Massing. Broadside images courtesy of John Pass and SFU Special Collections and Rare Books, W.A.C. Bennett Library, Burnaby, B.C.*

Standing near you in the morning as you  
 arrange your hair  
 I am absent.

In the buff air...

What I wanted to do was duplicate the mirror motif, both as handsome object/vessel (table mirror on a stand) and the doubling of the sentiment of absence with the cramped awkwardness of our presence in the girl's private space. Viewer and reader have the page and the poem front and centre, while being simultaneously out of the mirror frame of the poem's subject. I thought the open page top with titling up one side and down the other, leaving room only for the girl's image of herself, hidden behind the text, hidden from us given our perspective from behind her, was a graphic way into the poem's complexity.

Something else the titling design tried to reflect, that Crispin alerted me to in the poem, was that the suggested duplication of the figure in the mirror/poem out towards the viewer/reader also occurs left to right on the page; in the central fourth stanza the first word and the last word in each line are the same. There's another doubling too, of the poet observing and the girl observed; in some respects it's a poignant love poem in formal frame, with darkness in it, sadness in the objectivity, paradox. Hard to believe there's a welcome for him into the girl's glassy, angular world, as the poet blithely asserts at the end. I thought that buff air needed that buff shade of paper, the muted atmosphere of bedroom light through blinds at dawn.

From our second series here's an elegy by Michael Ondaatje for bpNichol, a popular and important Canadian poet who died tragically in his mid 40s in 1988. The poem is about the numbness and shock of loss, of course, about connection between friends, but also about displacement, that sudden sense of otherness death brings into the world. I noticed, very conveniently, two parts to the poem, a real shift right in the middle. It begins as though Nichol is still alive and Ondaatje writing,

Nowadays I listen only to duets.  
 Johnny Hodges and the Bean, a thin slip  
 of piano behind them  
 on this page on this stage  
 craft a breeze in a horn.





And he goes on to talk, mostly in the present tense, about things friends do, that he and Nichol do, everyday things like getting a second cup at the Second Cup near Spadina in Toronto. But then there is the shift, the world is unchanged but altered, can't ever again be the same. I wanted a sense of the fickle “breeze” that always blows through the world, that the world is always open to, the constant possibility of surprising shift, change, in the widely spaced lettering of the title, and that there would be a kind of freedom of feeling moving down through the poem. But at the same time this quite awkward and blocky trouble interrupts that, like wind making its way between blocks of buildings, through city streets. There's the sense of these two very close friends now separated, isolated, but still within the same field.

The poem ends,

All these twin truths

(Here's mirroring/doubling again, as in the Elsted. Paradox is often a marker of poetry that appeals to me.)

There is bright sumac, once more,  
 this September, on the Bayview Extension  
 From now on  
 no more solos  
 I tie you to me

Of course, very poignant and paradoxical because now Ondaatje's singing can only be solo, as emphatically as those two parts of the poem are shifted out of their former alignment, but still tied, adjacent on the page.

KATE BRAID, a B.C. poet, wrote a very interesting first book about her experience as one of the first women in B.C. to work in the trades, fully fledged and alive in a man's world. On the most immediate and physical level this poem, “Concrete's Coming!” is about pouring concrete. It's also a wonderfully playful love poem. She starts out,

Concrete  
 is a wrestle with your lover

That is, a wrestle in the liquid state before things set up, the struggle of getting things properly in place, into the form. Facing the necessity of dividing the text to accommodate it on the page I again got very fortuitous little opportunities, such as this striking line break:

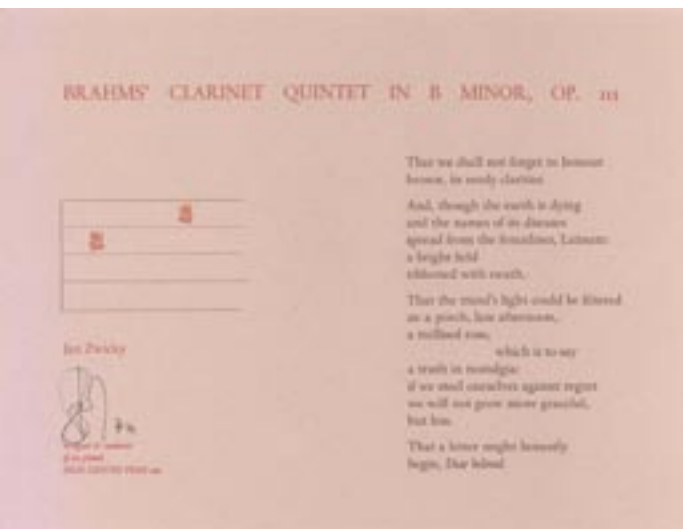
surprising moments  
 when he's come up...

that makes an excellent erotic springboard to the next column, where the reader gets to jump up as the lover's come up...

with the unexpected  
 a little flood here  
 a full step there  
 tears and sweat.

It's that time for  
 grappling hard physical  
 in it up to your eyeballs

Of course, what I was trying to do visually here was, you know, the way concrete is laid and poured,



you have to have forms to shape it, these vertical brown lines mimicking the formwork for a sidewalk perhaps, or sections of wall. Using the silvery/grey paper and woodblock type for titling was a no-brainer...

ONE OF THE MOST beautiful poems I think we have done is a poem by Jan Zwicky, "Brahms' Clarinet Quintet in B Minor, Op. 115." It's worth quoting in full:

That we shall not forget to honour  
brown, its reedy clarities.

And, though the earth is dying  
and the names of its diseases  
spread from the fence lines, Latinate:  
a bright field  
ribboned with swath.

That the mind's light could be filtered  
as: a porch, late afternoon,  
a trellised rose,

which is to say  
a truth in nostalgia:  
if we steel ourselves against regret  
we will not grow more graceful,  
but less.

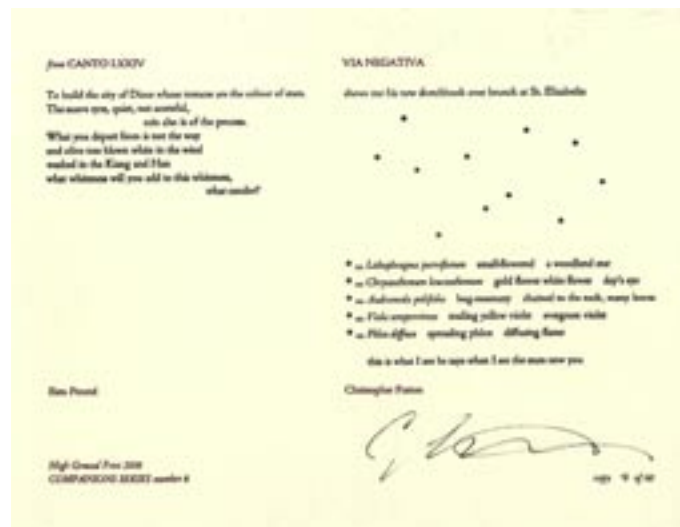
That a letter might honestly  
begin, *Dear beloved.*

What I always try to do with design is pick up some essential elements in a poem that will be connected, recognizable, to a reader but aren't going to overwhelm or intrude upon the text.

I wrote to Jan when I was considering doing this poem, to ask her what the first few notes of the clarinet quintet were. Because I had this idea of a kind of musical score motif, with the trellised roses on it in a way that would echo those opening notes of the piece. She sent me the music for the whole thing. And there are these immensely complex chords, of course, which you can't possibly do with little rose ornaments.

So I had to kind of apologize to her and say, "I've simplified it somewhat." And I think she was a little disappointed with that; I think she thought it might benefit from a more faithful reproduction of the musical score. I wanted to get a sense of the fence lines too, in the score/trellis motif, and the field "ribboned with swath." You can't see the colour very well here—but I think the bright field and the brown, the rich timbre of feeling in the poem, is suggested in the paper and ink I chose.

DON MCKAY is one of my favourite poets. "Meditation on Antique Glass" has him sitting in a bar, I'm guessing, looking at and/or through wavy, marbled glass windows that distort everything beyond them or anything reflected in them. Here again, there's a kind of mirroring and a doubling, so that wherever the oracular glass speaks (or the eerie,



discombobulating other voice of the poet speaks) he uses italics within the roman.

This room, whose windows are waterfalls  
in stasis, dreaming in one place, is wrong  
for figuring your income tax or poker.

*Susceptibility*

they say as they teach the light to cry...

and then later

...the rapids are gentle

they say *drink me*...

and then finally,

... it whispers

*memory muscle* whispers

*Guinness is good for you* whispers

*loss is its own fur* whispers

*once, once*

irresistibly.

So I had the thought that on this side of the “glass” (this wavy vertical border) I would use italic (for the titling and colophon) as on the other side, in the poem, it’s all roman except for where the glass is speaking. I want to signal in the titling the significant otherness of the meditative consciousness beyond the glass, across the page, to point unobtrusively to the importance (maybe the primacy) of the italic in the text of the poem itself.

THE MOST RECENT SERIES of broadsheets we’ve done is the Companion Series, where I asked Canadian poets to respond to a poem in the canon, or by a contemporary, that was important to them

in some way.

Sue Wheeler responded to a poem by Don McKay called “Stumpage” with her poem “Understory.” Both the poems engage issues around the environment, forestry, around clearcutting specifically in the McKay. They’re poems about appearances in all senses of the word, about seeing/looking, and present a new perspective in environmental thinking that tries to imagine humans in landscape from the landscape’s perspective. For the sense of being held down and ravaged, experiencing that sea of stumps in slash, or being lifted up from the understorey in mature forest, I printed these low on the page, with lower case titling. I like to use old ornamentation in intriguing new ways and this is maybe my most successful instance of that here. These stylized twigs, like fir, are old border I had that I’ve only ever seen used before between advertising items in old newspapers, for Christmas specials or the like. I love to give it this new life!

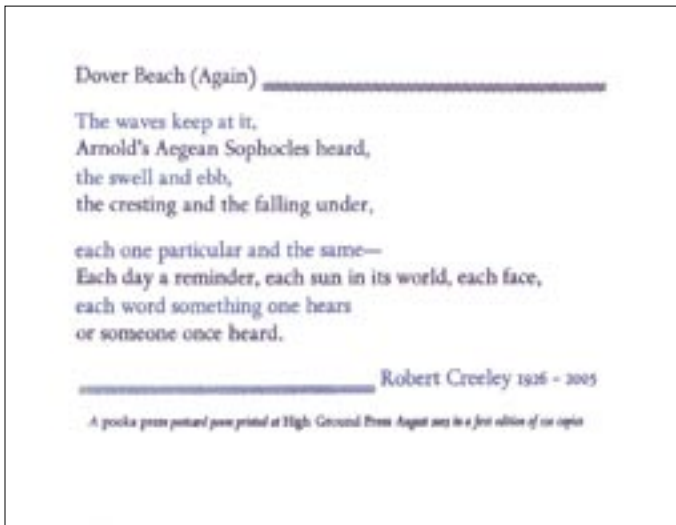
Here’s Christopher Patton with a very, well, you might say crazed, certainly adventurous, striking response to an extract from a canto of Pound’s, which is,

To build the city of Dioce whose terraces are  
the color of stars.

The suave eyes quiet, not scornful,  
rain also is of the process.

What you depart from is not the way  
and olive tree blown white in the wind  
washed in the Kiang and Han  
what whiteness will you add to this  
whiteness,

what candor?



Patton did this amazing thing, a kind of translation into constellation, and he starts with a conceit:

He shows me his new sketchbook at  
St. Elizabeth's

Now, St. Elizabeth's is the mental institution where Pound was incarcerated, having been charged with treason at the end of World War II, and Patton claims to be looking at a sketchbook of Pound's, being shown it by Pound. He presents the stars obliquely suggested by Pound's passage (and possibly pictured in the mysterious sketchbook?) as asterisks, referential to the Latin names of plants, small flowers, printed below the stars like footnotes. Very bizarre but brilliant, I think, incredibly original.

I had a hell of a time finding those asterisks. I ended up ordering a mixed font of them from M & H Type in San Francisco. Actually I had to order a couple fonts just to get enough of the size I wanted. So now I have hundreds of smaller asterisks and many larger ones I'll likely never use at all or again.

What I found, too, is if you look at asterisks really close up, they're not star-shaped at all; in fact they're more a floral motif with soft rounded points like some kind of stylized petals or something—which was a bit disappointing. I mean, I wanted stars. But maybe because the footnoting is all to plants, it works just as well in an unexpected way.

This last sheet is not part of a series, but not really ephemera either. When the famous American poet Robert Creeley died in 2005, Warren Fulton of Pooka Press called me up and said, "I have a poem that Creeley gave me a few months ago. I haven't

got around to printing it yet. I don't want to just do my usual thing with it, a postcard poem. Can you do something a bit more classy, in letterpress?" And I said, "Well, I would be honoured, and delighted."

I'm pretty sure this is the first posthumously published new poem by Robert Creeley, and it's a lovely thing, I think. I guess it extends the Companion Series in a way, being a response to, and a furtherance of, Matthew Arnold's well-loved "Dover Beach" and echoing through that even further back, to Sophocles, a deeply thoughtful lyric. I had the notion that what I would like to suggest is seeing those timeless waves as they roll in through their crests, where they're a lighter blue, where there's some light showing through them, and alternate with that the dark-blue undertow, the swell and the ebb, the cresting and the falling back.

Thank you! It's been a pleasure to talk about some of the thinking and fiddling that goes into making broadsheets, great to have the opportunity to articulate processes I'm often only half-conscious of at the time.

#### *John Pass*

is a poet and printer who lives with his wife, poet and novelist Theresa Kishkan, on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. His book *Stumbling in the Bloom* (Oolichan Books, 2005) won the 2006 Governor General's Literary Award for English-language poetry.

Transcribed by *Wendy Massing* and edited by *Peter Mitham*.