

Meeting the Barbarians

*Discovering a lovely, if temporary, transcendence at the annual
Barbarian Press printing course. By Marnie Parsons*

It takes a lot to lure me away from Newfoundland, even more to do so in the summer. But this summer past, lured I was—and, though one could argue I may have been ruined for life, the experience was wonderful. I had the great good fortune to spend a week in July 2007 at a letterpress printing workshop at Barbarian Press in Mission, B.C. Many readers will know of the Barbarians because of their beautiful work; Jan and Crispin Elsted produce some of the finest fine press books in the country. A great admirer of, and subscriber to, their work, I was well aware of what remarkable craftspeople they are. What I didn't know was the extent of their generosity, wit and warmth—all of which are more than ample and unquestionably on par with the beauty of their books and the calibre of their craftsmanship.

Held yearly, the workshop is offered through the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild (CBBAG). It's billed as a six-day intensive, and "intensive" is more than apt. But it was not only a thorough introduction to the world of letterpress printing, it was also an immersion into the kind of life a love of books can make possible. From the moment Crispin met me at the airport, I realized I was heading for a remarkable week. And, within less than half an hour of our gathering two of the other workshop participants—Joyce Majiski, an artist from Whitehorse, and Jane Henderson, an editor and writer in Vancouver—en route to Mission, I could see what fun we'd have.

During the workshop, participants were encouraged to stay with the Elsteds, pitching themselves in whatever spare corner (of study, library or property) that suited. One participant, Adele Shaak, a bookbinder from North Vancouver, stayed with friends in the area; the rest of us made ourselves at home. Jane opted for Crispin's study, over the press room; Joyce tented for part of the time, then moved into another corner of Crispin's study. I nabbed the couch in the library, keeping company with two Siamese fighting fish, a piano and an extensive collection of fine press books that had me up browsing and reading well into the

night. Everyone ate together, sharing the cost of groceries and the washing up; each workshop participant took on responsibility for making dinner one evening as well. The conversation at table was always engaging and often very funny, rarely slowing except for the occasional pause when someone removed one of the five household cats from the table, or encouraged another into or out of the room.

The sense of community, the welcome into the warm embrace of the Elsteds' lives these living arrangements created was no small thing. To my mind, there's almost as much to learn about a person's craft from the way she dwells in the world as from the way she works in her shop or studio. At least, there's something organic in the pursuit of a craft, a quirky passion that reveals itself, obliquely, in the minutiae of daily life, in the conversations about music and movies, about politics, books, culture and food, that grow out of living closely, however briefly. But, of course, there was also talk about printing, plenty of it. And there was the practice of printing as well.

The first day of the workshop was devoted to discussion and design. Crispin provided a thumbnail sketch of the history of private presses, illustrated with wonderful examples of work from his and Jan's own collection—a collection we were all encouraged to visit and revisit in our spare moments. It is a wonderful gathering of books, chapbooks and broadsides. I quite simply fell in love with some of the books I stumbled upon there. And both Jan and Crispin were well aware that spending time with those beautifully made books was a huge part of the education and opportunity they were offering.

Crispin discussed, as well, the basics of design, showing samples of what past workshop participants had printed and suggesting the range of possibilities for our own projects. Participants had been encouraged to bring along a text to print. Joyce and Jane brought pieces they'd written themselves, fine-tuning and editing as the day went on; Adele had chosen a passage from Milton's *Aeropagitica*. I'd come clutching a collection of poems by Colleen Thibaudreau, one of my favourite poets, and

Inwhich I Realize I Meant
To Clean Up My Brother's
House As A Nice Surprise
For When He Came Back
From His Camp And That
I Have Left It A Bit Late



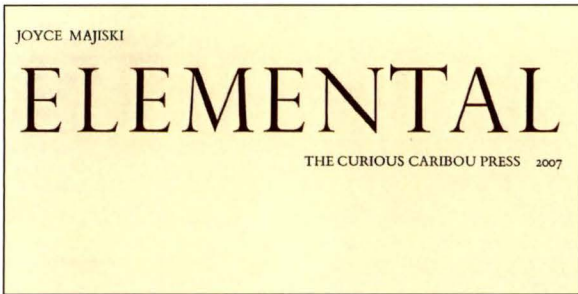
A poem by Colleen Thibaudeau



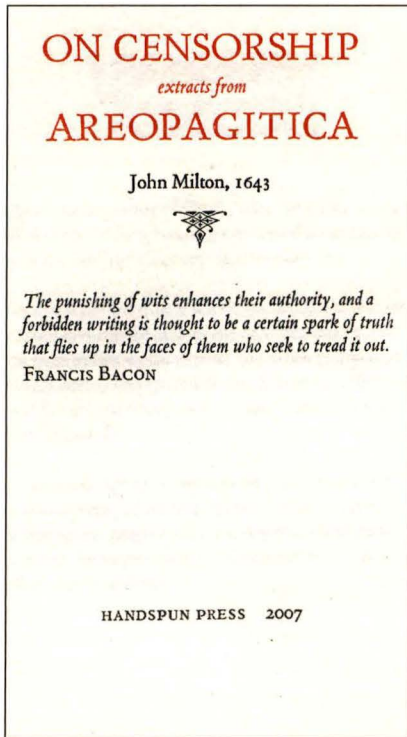
Running the Goat
Books & Broadsides
2007

*Marnie Parsons plundered a variety
of type cases at Barbarian Press
to set her project, a poem by
Colleen Thibaudeau about
a very messy house.*

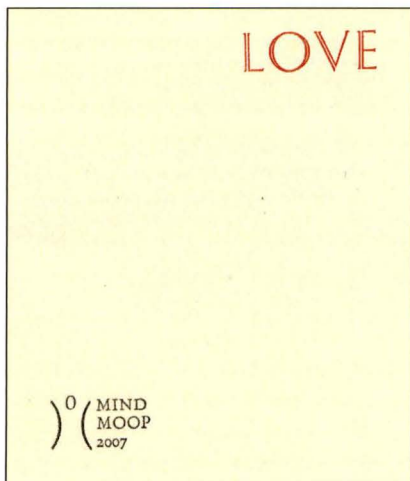
: Cellar, damp old Picasso dreamland-you of the sardine-can (shucked,
swept and hilled), **COMIC BOOK** Valley
and **TO-DAY MAG** Alley,
dune centred Auction Sale desert sandings,
Varsol & stripper Hoardings in **Crown Imperial** quarts squandered,
scuttled wringer-washer parts shifting, vying
for Frogman's coming,
Lianas, vines of the lines of the leotards parted, struggling out
(jammed hinge on the **TREASURE CHEST**)
/ out /



Whitehorse artist Joyce Majiski printed one of her own poems on a Vandercook press.



Adele Shaak chose a passage from Milton's Aeropagitica for her project at the week-long course.



Jane Henderson used one of the Elsteds' small hand presses to print one of her own poems.

waffled over which poem to choose as I toyed with design possibilities. I finally settled on "In Which I Realize I Meant to Clean Up My Brother's House as a Nice Surprise for Him When He Came Back from His Camp and That I Have Left It a Bit Late," a catalogue poem that would give me room to play a bit with the structure of the chapbook as well as opportunity to take advantage of the Elsteds' extensive type collection.

Of course, the first day also included our official visit to the press room itself, a wonderful outbuilding full of type and presses. Platen presses, flatbed presses and hand presses. A dream come true for neophyte and experienced printers alike. The guillotine, the bindery, package upon package of beautiful paper. The extensive collection of CDs (essential for printing). My mouth waters at the remembering of it all.

The next day we fine-tuned our designs, made our dummies (mock-ups of the chapbooks), then were off to the press room for an introduction to typesetting. Crispin was again in charge, giving us the basics on hand-setting type and helping us choose which faces to work in. Since my poem concerned a very messy house, full of all sorts of odds and sods, I plundered a variety of type cases, but most of the poem was set in Garamont. Crispin joined in the fun with great gusto: I had only to mention which words I wanted to set in a unique face ("Clarks' Beans," "Niagaras," "Washcloths," "Comic Book," "Crown Imperial") and he had just the thing, sending me to this drawer or that and, invariably, being quite right. Of course, each project had its own challenges; Jane, brave soul, set her text in a tiny, tiny point size, and half of that italic. And all of us had the pleasure of waltzing around/bumping into each other as we moved through the narrow composing room to find more spacing, more leading or another typeface. There was also the challenge of step-

ping over Phoebe, the Elsteds' very placid and very large dog, who never wanted to be far from the activity.

Our second day of typesetting included a discussion of title pages, titling faces and colophons. We were also encouraged to choose a name for each of our imprints/presses. We had great fun exploring the drawers of ornaments and dingbats for decorating title pages; I settled on a pitchfork (how else clean out a very messy house?) and, to my great delight, found a wonderful little goat to complement my press name—Running the Goat—which is taken from the name of a traditional Newfoundland set dance.

Then it was Jan's turn. With four participants, each with different levels of printing experience, working on four very different projects and on three distinctly different presses, Jan was faced with quite a challenge. A master printer, she's also a generous and extraordinarily patient teacher. She moved between participants, projects and presses with ease and grace, often taking the opportunity to gather the four of us around a particular press to see a technique or challenge that would be of interest.

Joyce worked on a Vandercook, wanting to familiarize herself with the press since she'd recently come into one herself. The rest of us worked on hand presses: Jane and Adele on folio hand presses, and I on a wonderful, large 1850 Super Royal Albion. And this is how I was ruined—quite possibly for life.

At home, I work on a Vandercook, although I've also worked, briefly, on a C&P treadle press; I have, and love to play with, a tabletop C&P as well. But until my time with the Barbarians, I had no idea how wonderful it is to print on an iron hand press, the sheer beauty and satisfaction of that physical process. In truth, what I learned most those two days printing on the Elsteds' Albion—more than about make-ready and hand-inking, more than about measuring twice and then measuring again, about patience and positioning paper, about checking for hairs and dinged type and typos, typos, typos, about consulting my dummy rather than my rather dumb memory—was the joy of physical making, when repetition becomes rhythm, the lovely, if temporary, transcendence that occurs when all the elements of a process coalesce and become their own kind of fluidity.

Not that there weren't lots of stops and

starts, much swearing and more silliness. But there were moments of real connection with that beautiful machine. Moments. They were often interrupted by hoots of laughter (from me or, late at night, from Jan, Joyce and Jane gathered around the press watching me try to race through my too-long project) and occasionally by dancing and hilarity that spontaneously broke out. But, still, they were there. And they reminded me, in their own way, of the first time I danced the dance after which my little press is named—the wild and beautiful set dance that lent me its own transcendence through music and rhythm and movement, the memory of which will never leave me and will never let me stray too far from Newfoundland.

And after transcendence? Well, distributing type, of course—with its lovely, meditative rhythms. And choosing cover stock, and scoring and folding paper, and sewing and gluing. And then sharing around the fruits of our labour: Adele's classically presented selections from Milton, Jane's lovely and tiny dual text *Love and Hate*, and Joyce's *Elemental*, with its hand-drawn illustrations and its beautifully sculpted centre page. Mine was a delayed sharing—it *was* a rather longish project for an all-too-short time, made longer by my frequent and distracted wonderings if I'd ever be able to afford an iron hand press of my own, and if I could, how I'd ever fit it in the basement; my gluing and sewing was finished up back home, and my chapbooks sent by post.

So, there went Saturday, with its latish dinner and last quiet conversations. And then came Sunday morning, with its packing and goodbyes. I can't speak for Joyce, Jane or Adele, although I sensed they were enjoying and benefiting from the workshop in their own ways as much as I was, but I can say that I came away from my time with the Barbarians enriched, renewed and a little bit ruined. And more than ever convinced how essential it is that books continue to be made with love and care and vision.

Marnie Parsons lives and works in St. John's, NF. She is most grateful to the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council for its help in making her trip to Barbarian Press possible. The annual printing course at Barbarian Press is held in July and organized through the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists Guild. For details, see its Web site, www.cbbag.ca.