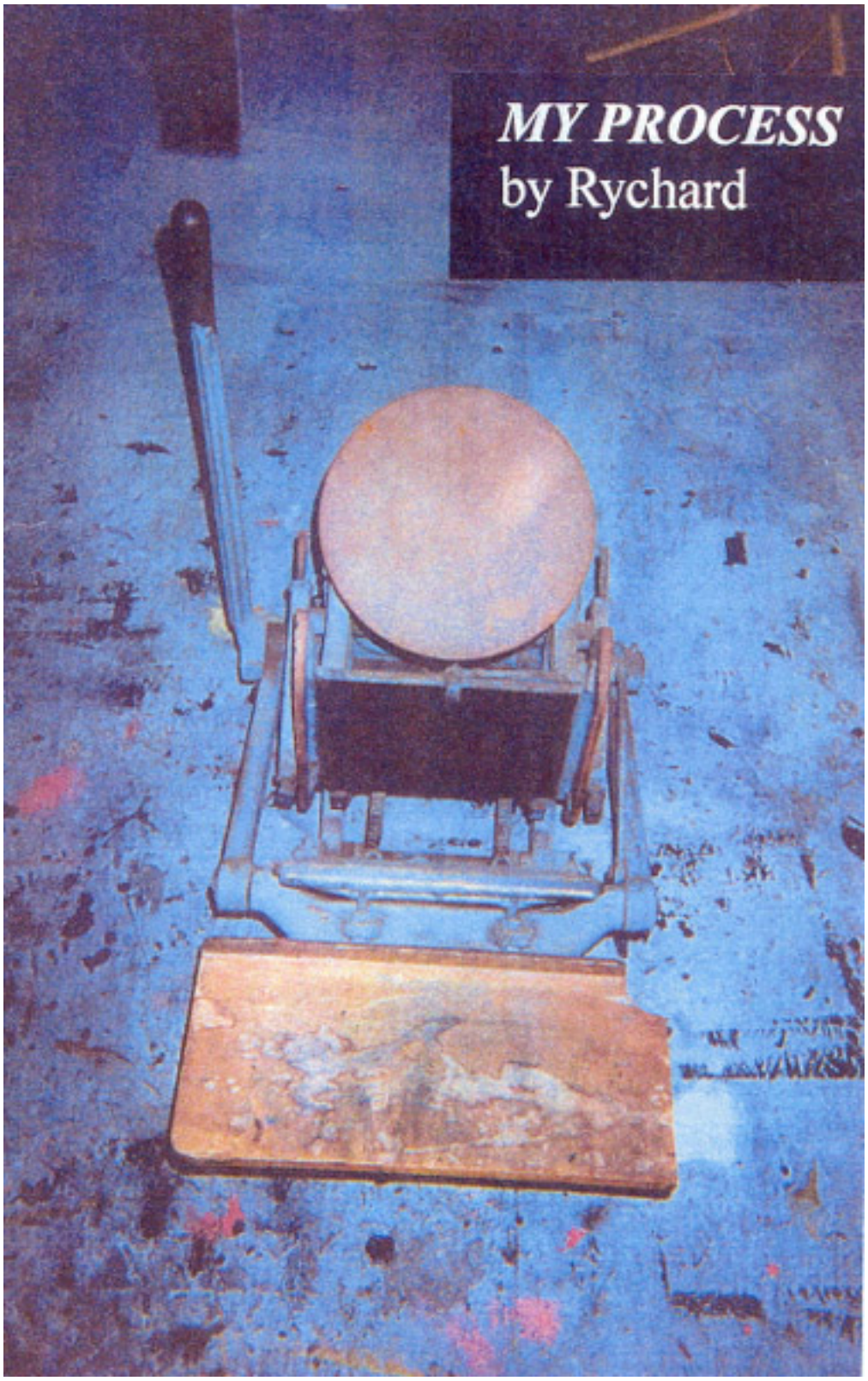

MY PROCESS

dPress 2003 Sebastopol

Cover photo by S. Mutt

This essay is based on talks given to Belle Randall's creative writing class at the University of Washington in Seattle and to Joe Powell's creative writing class at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington, in the spring of 2003.

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In the late 1950s, I attended Oakland High School. My buddies and I would drive over the Oakland Bay Bridge to North Beach. We were curious about the Beatniks. We looked at Keene paintings and browsed in stores for prints of nude drawings by Picasso and Modigliani. We made it to the Blackhawk to dig Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Cal Jader & Mongo Santamaria. We admired these cats. We would sit in the back in our suits and drink Grenedines or Cokes.

Later, the establishment insisted we sit in a special section behind chicken wire. My heartfelt thanks go to Herb Caen and Ralph Gleason who campaigned to let the youth hear these musical giants in an atmosphere where liquor was served. Crazy, now, to think the City Fathers fell for it, but they did. At 2:00, when the Blackhawk closed, we would follow the musicians to an after hours club. There, soda pop was served in paper cubs, and I could see small brown paper bags emerge from suits and whiskey be poured into the soda pop under the table. I was beginning to catch on—something was happening on the surface, and something going on below. At age 17, I entered the Underground.

At 19, I had, what seems now, a fortuitous breakthrough. I was a freshman at Cal, and I was given an assignment to write an essay. I brazenly copped from a well-known introduction to William Blake. Alfred Kazan's words were easily recognized, since he had taught at Berkeley, and his analysis of Blake was considered seminal in any study of the bard. I was embarrassed in class and guilt-driven to create my own words.

"A difficult birth astride an open grave"

Abusing a line of Beckett's as an epigram, I began to write.

Grandure of grey dawn in transparent gold,
Miramids of restless weary wanders
to play the harpstrings of youth
and separating a bright red bar
held by a square bolt.

Price Charlston, a professor of æsthetics at Cal, said, "I wish you would have let me proof your manuscript before publishing it, so I could have helped with the spelling." Misspellings and weird inking would become a stylistic hallmark of the D Press.

Breastbeaters, which collected my first poems, was published in 1963 by Berkeley Pamphlets. I had renewed a childhood friendship with Dennis Wier, who worked at Cal as the night supervisor of the cyclotron. He showed me how to burn a plate with a light bulb in an orange crate in his closet. The book, with all its imperfections, gave me an introduction to The Sticky Wicket in Aptos, where I was received as a young lyric poet. I made friends with Vic & Claire Jowers, owners of this oasis for the Monterey Bay Bohemian crowd. I took parts in plays and gave readings, had affairs, drank wine, and danced on the tables. My poetry suffered, and I had my first writer's block, but I discovered I could imitate other poets than William Wordsworth and Dylan Thomas. I studied esoteric philosophy. I broke from my wife. I traveled to New York. I smoked pot. I returned to California and took peyote. After reading a Time Magazine article on LSD, I was scared I was going to murder my family and spent a year in and out of mental hospitals. I couldn't think on more than one level, so I sat and meditated on my

belly button. My dad suggested I go back to college, so I closed my eyes, ran my finger down a list of schools and picked Cal Poly. It was in the atmosphere of highly charged horticulture that I wrote "Scorpio, Scorpio Rising" à la George Barker, Kenneth Anger, and Madame Blavasky. My alchemy improved.

I fell into generation

When I started writing poems in Berkeley, in 1960, the golden voice of Dylan Thomas on Cædmon Records set my soul ablaze. Dylan Thomas was a big-time poet, traveling, reading his poems, loving women, drinking Scotch, and to me this seemed to be an ideal lifestyle. Later, I discovered the horror, but for awhile I had a fantasy, and the seed to be a poet grew in me.

MAKE IT NEW—NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS—THERE IS A WAR; THERE IS NO WAR! I knew that what I knew might not be true. I thought this for sure when I dropped acid in Big Sur. I contemplated a bench on which was carved "Thinker, Worker, Lover" and had trouble making up my mind where to sit, so I lay on the bench and tried to be all three. I saw little men working among the foliage. I freaked and ran up the hill and encountered an ogre cutting a fresh swath through the bank with an earthmover. I ran back down the hill and tried with difficulty to read the spidery script on the lunch menu at Deetjun's. I jumped from hot pool to hot pool at Esalen in the middle of the night. I was getting myself primed for the Berkeley Poetry Conference.

The Berkeley Poetry Conference

In 1965, I had been given an introduction to Robert Creeley from my college English professor, who said I'd learn more in two weeks at the conference than I'd learn in a year attending classes at Cal Poly, plus I longed to get back to Berkeley. In *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac had hopped a freight train climbing the grade outside San Luis Obispo. I was afraid I'd get caught in the Oakland railroad yards so, more in the style of the ‘60s, I hitch hiked up the highway.

I didn't know what was going on. Most of the names on the roster were unfamiliar to me. A fusion of Beat, Black Mountain, Northwest, and Bay Area Renaissance poets. I can still hear Charles

Olson tuning up to read a line, trying to get it right the first time. He needed one hell of an airstrip to get his cargo aloft; then he soared like the Concord.

The conference was held in California Hall on the U.C. campus and consisted of lectures, readings, and workshops. Initially, there was a registration fee, but once word got out, poets of all ilk were perched on the window ledges of the hall, and when Paul X suggested the fees be waived, Creeley invited us in. The conference continued informally into the night in coffee houses and people's homes.

Lectures:
July 13, Robert Duncan, "Psyche-Myth & the Moment of Truth"
July 14, Jack Spicer, "Poetry and Politics"
July 16, Gary Snyder, "Poetry and the Primitive"
July 20, Charles Olson, "Causal Mythology"
July 21, Ed Dorn, "The Poet, the People, the Spirit"
July 22, Allen Ginsberg, "What's Happening on Earth"
July 23, Robert Creeley, "Sense of Measure"

Readings:
Gary Snyder, July 13, introduced by Thomas Parkinson.
John Wieners, July 14, introduced by Robert Creeley.
Jack Spicer, July 15, introduced by Thomas Parkinson.
Robert Duncan, July 16, introduced by Thomas Parkinson.
Robin Blaser, George Stanley, Richard Duerden, July 17, introduced by Robert Duncan.
Young Poets: Jim Boyack, Robin Eichele, Victor Coleman, Bob Hogg, Stephen Rodefer, David Franks, July 18, introduced by Victor Coleman.
Special Poetry Reading: John Sinclair, Lenore Kandel, Ed Sanders, Ted Berrigan,, July 17, introduced by Allen Ginsberg.
Ed Dorn, July 20, introduced by Robert Creeley.
Allen Ginsberg, July 21, introduced by Thomas Parkinson.
Robert Creeley, July 22, introduced by Robert Duncan.
Charles Olson, July 23, introduced by Robert Duncan.
Ron Loewinsohn, Joanne Kyger, Lew Welch, July 2, introduced by Robert Duncan.
Young Poets from the Bay Area: Gale Dusenbery, Gene Fowler, Jim Wehlage, Eileen Adams, Doug Palmer, Sam Thomas, Drum Hadley, Lowell Levant, Jim Thurber, July 25, introduced by Gary Snyder.
There was, also, a reading by David Bromige, David Schaff, James Koller and Ken Irby, but the tape is lost.

Two weeks of incredible poetry and mind-blowing instruction. In hindsight, there is a notable absence of women on the program, and I remember that Leroy Jones (Amiri Baraka) refused to attend, saying he didn't want to be the token Negro. Still, it was, as John Bennett put it, "an event creating a white-light intensity that rivaled any drug experience and had more staying power." Ed Dorn and Robert Creeley encouraged me to read with the Young Poets of the Bay Area. I missed my moment of glory because I didn't feel confident.

After the Berkeley Poetry Conference, I met Luis Garcia, and we continued in the conference's spirit with many of these young poets. Lu's parents had gone on vacation, and we partied down. Lu gave me a used thesis binder with a spring spine and told me to get my shit together. He instilled confidence in me, and I began to write in earnest by composing improvisationally, blowing with words in an acid-induced psychosis.

Then, I moved to Alaska

and began printing in an attic apartment in Ketchikan, near the ball field. I'd come home from a day's work in the back shop of The Ketchikan Daily News, and I'd print 100 pages and hang them to dry on cotton string along the roofline of the apartment. On the weekends, I bound my books together, set type, and prepared for the following week of printing. The printing was smudgy and uneven, but I pressed on. The typefaces were worn, so I over-inked and pressed harder, pressing the letters into the paper, embossing the page, letting the ink bleed through. Grant Risdon taught me how to cut linoleum blocks, and in a rush of visual imagery, I tipped my linoleum nudes into the books, alternating poems and blocks, giving color to the big words.

After reading *How to Live in the Woods on $10/Week*, I moved wife and child and press to Deep Bay, fifteen miles from the nearest road by boat. D Press moved into a new dimension. Pouring the words right into the type case seem natural. I began to break my poems into smaller and smaller units. Tried to express myself with just the Anglo Saxon. I was printing with 60 point Bodoni type, and this limited the number of words that could be arranged in a 4X6

inch type case.

People said, "These aren't poems! What are you doing?" Well, I was working with the physics of the poem, the subatomic particles, semiotic murmurs, getting down to the hub and nub, nothing behind itself, *no ideas but in things* as applied to the letters of the alphabet. My idea of the book consisted of five poems: one political, one religious, one erotic, one psychological, and one about language.

a
y
e
i
o
u

I posited the vowels, the basic building blocks—anagogical in the sense that these sounds can be considered sacred. Internal rhyme scheme, *I* with y. Reads, "Yes, I owe you." Zen take on the alphabet, beginner's mind discovery that if I wrote a longish poem, I could find shorter poems in it. Lu Garcia listened for echoes of words within words, and I looked for visual echoes.

Something primal about the stitch

On my return to the Bay Area, in 1975, while working at Arif Press, I learned how to make a signature stitch from Wesley Tanner, and I applied this bindery technique to my book making format. A fusion of high-tech and low-tech elements.

You need a needle with a large eye. Darning needles are dull; get a sewing needle long enough to grasp. I use linen bookbinding thread, which has a strong weave. Dental floss? Sure, I've used that, but book-binding thread is best. Cut the thread to length by wrapping it once around the length of the book; thread your needle with a few inches of string sticking through and punch it through the middle, from the inside, outward. Make sure you go straight, or the stitch will come out off center. Next, go to the top or bottom of the spine on the back cover, a couple inches from the edge, and poke straight through to the inside. Then, go back to the center hole, and, being careful not to run the needle through the thread,

stick the needle through the center hole. Now, go to the opposite end of the spine and poke through the back cover to the inside. The stitch is complete except for tying it off. Run the needle and what's left of the thread under the piece going into the center hole and cinch the two ends tight, not so taut that the book bows but taut enough to remove any slack. The two ends should be about the same length; but if not, work the shorter end forward, and tie the two ends in a square knot, not a slip knot. Trim the two ends to equal length. I leave them long, so if the knot slips, you have enough thread to retie the ends. Sew together a few pages and, voilà, you have a *chapbook*.

And what is a chapbook?

According to the *1911 Encyclopedia*, the chapbook was first mentioned in 1824, when the bibliographer Dibdin described a work as being *a chapbook, printed in rather a neat black letter*. The source of the word is from the OE, *chap*, to buy and sell, and is a comparatively modern name applied by booksellers and bibliophiles to the stitched tracts written for the common people and circulated in England, Scotland and the American colonies from the late 15th century onward by itinerant dealers, or chapmen. I've also heard that the derivation of the word comes from an apron worn by the chapman, which had pockets that contained items for sale, but this might well be a term confused with the leather pants called *chaps* (from the Mexican, *chaparajos*) worn by the American cowboys to protect their legs from the bramble bush known as *chaparral*. In *Poets & Writers Online*, Therese Eiben claims that the origin of the word is either *cheap* book, sold at newsstands during the era of Penny Dreadfuls or *chapter* book, because of its scant number of pages.

There are many kinds of books, books such as a pre-Columbian *codex* (where a manuscript is painted on strips of deerskin which are glued together to form a single band, then folded accordion-fashion and glued onto wooden boards) to Jackson MacLow's pages made from two-by-fours. The signature stitch has been used since the renaissance, where it was employed to sew a *quarto* page (a large sheet of paper, printed on both sides, folded twice and cut along the folded edge to form eight pages). Sewing the pages to the

cover is part of the foundation of the book, what holds it together, and it contains a utilitarian element as well as an esthetic element. Jerome Rothenberg remarks in his editor's note to *The Book, Spiritual Instrument* (Granary Books, NY, 1996), "To say again what seems so hard to get across: there is a primal book as there is a primal voice, & it is the task of our poetry & art to recover it—in our minds & in the world at large."

Toward the book through the computer

One of the basic uses of a computer is to solve the problem of justifying lines. Justified lines are the even alignment of words at the margins of a text. It is the demarcation of where a line of type ends, not the end of a rhythmic line, where the number of scanned syllables makes one line a bit longer than the next because of the constituent parts of the sentence in various scripts and fonts. It's the printer's task to choose the right font and make the line end at a given spot, to choose the point size of the font so the longest line fits in the type case, within the margins. Poetry is usually justified to the left margin and proceeds as a dance of consonant and vowel. The carcass of prose is anchored to both margins with hyphenated word breaks. In letterpress printing, lines are justified by filling the space between pieces of hand-set lead type. In a computer, this operation is accomplished in a text box by clicking the desired format on the tool bar.

Mapping the book

Mapping out the book. First, I estimate the size of the book. Then, I make a dummy of the book by figuring out how much of my text will fit on a page, say 8½x11 inches, folded in half, or half-letter size. I count the lines and estimate how many pages it will take, adding a title page, a page for acknowledgements, a dedication, and so forth. I divide by four since there are going to be four pages on a sheet of paper folded in half. I take that number of blank sheets, fold them, and write the page number and an abbreviation of what text will appear on each page. This guides me since the opposite sides of the page are not consecutive. For example, in a 32-page book, page 1 is next to page 32, page 2 is coupled with page 31. If a

given page is going to be blank, I write "blank" on it. I design the page setup in *landscape* and create my master pages, using either Publisher or Quark programs. All this to say, if I want to add a new page of text, I have to think in terms of four pages.

Although the cost per copy decreases slightly when you reach certain print amounts, the unit cost per book is essentially the same for one book as it is for one hundred. This is in contrast to offset and letterpress processes where the setup cost is much higher and the runs must be longer in order to make back the initial investment in labor and materials. I make short runs. I use the book as an editing tool and print off one copy at a time until I am satisfied with the layout and content, then I run a handful of copies to be archived in the collections of a few friends. I sell books at readings and exchange books with poets that I meet, but, at present, I am not as interested in marketing my books as I am in the process of creation.

Backward process

I work from the final form, the book that is already accomplished, like in a Tantric visualization, I develop the book by extending the vision, adding the ornaments, which are the poems. Marllarmé conceived of the book as a spiritual exercise. To me, the book fuses Newtonian *sequence* and Blakian *simultaneity*. It's a vehicle to write poems, the book as pen. I am writing with the book. Jack Spicer, winning out against the poem, is my inspiration for molding serial poetry into small books. The poem arrives on the page, whether I collage it together from bits or carve it from a single block, whether I dream it or work it out as a puzzle. Once it makes it onto a sheet of paper and can be read, the poem is already a part of a book. And, once in a book, it gets lonely, wants to *speak* to other poems. I let it breathe, let it percolate, let it draw to itself it's magnetic companions, let them be a piece of a larger poem. What starts it?—a metaphor, maybe, or some scribbling on the washroom wall, something fleeting, a little synaptic firing in my brain. I get these firings into words and onto a page because I have developed a modicum of mind-body coordination, and the words might even mean something. I keep making books, this book overlapping the next, always leaving a bit undone, like a Navajo weaver, letting the spirits come and go.