

## A Memoir of the Dim Gray Bar Press

I don't know exactly how or when it all started, but it must have started with Debbie. We met the old fashioned way; though a personal ad I placed in the New York Review of Books. "*Lanky, somewhat loopy doc, meditative and downwardly mobile, seeking a profoundly goofy gal for simple pleasures.*" What can I say. I got luckier than I deserved. As a member of New York State Council for the Arts, Deborah Norden must have known about the Center for Book Arts and pointed me in their direction. I had collected books for years and years, and at some point must have expressed the desire to start doing something more hands on than writing a check. So I signed up for a beginner's class in letterpress printing and looked around for a suitable project. I had around that time discovered the extraordinary volumes that Victor Hammer, designer of American Uncial type, had produced for Thomas Merton. I had my model. In my Merton collection was a copy of *The Lugano Review* containing an uncollected translation he had done from Nicholas of Cusa, "*A Dialogue About the Hidden God.*" I had my text, and in remarkably short time, I had secured permission from the Merton Legacy Trust to print a limited edition. I discovered M&H Type in San Francisco would set the text in Goudy Thirty Monotype (the closest I could come to the look of American Uncial) and ship the pages of lead to the Center for Book Arts, where they would be ready for my first printing lesson. When the appointed day arrived, I discovered my classmates, rather than being fellow budding publishers, were hoping to use the weekend to print a business card or maybe a Xmas greeting. The instructor, Carol Sturm, who ran her own Nadja Press out of the Center, politely indicated I might have gotten in a little over my head. But somehow, by making one mistake after another, I learned my way around the Vandercook press and printed my first book. Or rather, I now had the printed pages and had to figure out how to bind them. (I hadn't taken that class). One way or other, 100 copies came to be piled on our dining room table and a prospectus mailed out to all the rare book dealers from whom I had been buying all these years. Almost immediately, an order for 50 copies arrived. ("Wow, this is going to be easy, I thought.") Never again, would I receive such an order. (One might not uncharitably conclude that the book dealers quickly realized they were dealing with an amateur).

Not long after that first success, Debbie and I decided to get married, and invitations and a wedding program needed to be designed. This time, we followed in the footsteps of Eric Gill, whose wedding announcement for his daughter Petra was on my shelves, along with many of his books. We took our text from Wendell Berry and Debbie copied Gill's drawing of the bride and groom at the altar –though in making her copy she had the bride standing rather than kneeling beside her husband. I admit I was shocked at the liberties she was willing to take.....

Next, Debbie's sister, Linda, made an introduction to Jane Timken, who was running her own small publishing company. At an exhibition of the photographs of Ralph Eugene Meatyard at the Howard Greenberg Gallery, I discovered he had made quite a large series portraits of Merton at Gethsemani, beyond the couple iconic ones with which I was familiar. Many were posed with visiting friends, including Wendell Berry and Guy Davenport. I proposed to Jane that we produce a book of Meatyard's portraits of Merton, and she readily agreed. By a strange coincidence, she had just hired as her assistant, Alan Brilliant, who had once run his own *Unicorn Press*, and had known and published Merton decades earlier. Christopher, the

photographer's son, was open to the project and agreed not only to contribute an essay to our volume, but to make original prints from his father's negatives to be laid into a limited edition of the book. I wrote to Guy Davenport, describing the project and asking him to contribute an Introduction. His note of consent initiated the correspondence collected here.

When *Father Louie* was completed, I asked Guy if I could print something of his as well, and *Belinda's World Tour* became the opportunity for Debbie to illustrate this *faux* children's tale taken from the biography of Kafka. (Having come across a little girl in the park who was crying because she lost her doll, Kafka comforted her by saying the doll was not lost but travelling around the world, and thereafter, sent the little girl postcards purportedly from the doll, describing her travels.) Guy could be an old curmudgeon, but the drawings charmed him and I think he was happier with that book of any than any of those that followed. The letters gathered here follow the course of many projects, large and small. The short coming-of-age story, *The Lark*, followed next, and in subsequent years, Guy offered caricatures of Ezra Pound and H.L. Mencken to illustrate books by his friends, James Laughlin and Jonathan Williams.

I sent Guy copies of my books as they came out. *The Letters of William Carlos Williams and Charles Tomlinson*, with an Introduction by Hugh Kenner, was my most substantial early project. It was set in motion when I purchased Williams's own copy of Charles Tomlinson's *Seeing is Believing*, with a letter from Tomlinson to Williams tucked inside. I contacted Tomlinson, inquiring about the extent of their correspondence and where other letters might be found. He in turn put me in touch with Hugh Witemeyer who had previously expressed a similar interest. Thus, an amateur was able to team up with a professional. Letters from Williams to Tomlinson turned up at the University of Kansas Library and Tomlinson's to Williams, at the Beinecke. After I printed our limited edition in 1992, Hugh and I continued to expand the project, including letters from Williams to Kenner, as well as collecting the Williams' essays from that period, "The American Idiom" and "Measure," along with the reviews in which each took note of the other's work. This greatly expanded edition, with Hugh's appended scholarly notations, was eventually published in 1999 in a trade edition by Peter Lang Publishing. I met Tomlinson in person when he came to New York to deliver an address at the Cathedral of St John the Divine inducting Williams into their Poets' Corner and Debbie drew a picture of the Cathedral for the cover of my edition of his speech.

Inspired by Guy and the example of I.F. Stone, whose *The Trial of Socrates* I had read a few years earlier, I began to take classes at the New School in classical Greek. As a result of another one of Debbie's fortuitous interventions, I then met our neighbor, Walter Blanco, a translator of Herodotus and Thucydides, when we attended a rooftop party of an architect friend of Debbie's. Walter was happy to read Greek with an eager amateur and we began meeting weekly, starting with Plato's *Apology* and proceeding through Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Aristophanes' *The Clouds* and *The Birds*. Guy pointed me to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* as source of many of his anecdotes, and with a good deal of help from Walter, I translated *The Life of Zeno* (the Stoic not the more familiar Zeno of paradoxes).

Once again Guy humored an amateur, and provided a caricature of Zeno for my translation, which I managed to persuade Gray Zeitz to publish at his Larkspur Press in a much finer edition than I ever could have managed myself. And he agreed to set in it Victor Hammer's *American Uncial* type, of which I had been so enamored at the beginning of this journey.

My most ambitious project was printing *50 Drawings*, gathering up Guy's illustrations for his own books, those for his friend Hugh Kenner, and the many scattered among a host of little magazines. Guy sent Xeroxes of what he had saved, each labelled in his distinctive lettering. It was to match the style of that lettering that I chose to set his Introduction in Adobe Lithos, which had the look of a classical inscription. The text was set by Jonathan Greene, himself by then a long time friend and correspondent. His letters, also preserved as part of the Press archive, chronicle decades of freely offered expertise and advice on design and printing. Jonathan, a New Yorker long since transplanted to Kentucky, had known both Merton and Meatyard and was friends with Guy, Wendell Berry and Jonathan Williams. Through him, as through Guy, I was welcomed into a new world.

Printing *50 Drawings* was an enormous undertaking for a weekend printer, but I went at it with dogged perseverance. After many months' work, when I was about halfway done, it occurred to me I ought to show Guy a few samples of how the work was going. He suddenly declared that he never intended his inscriptions to be included and their presence on the page was completely unacceptable. At that moment, it was probably good that I had years of Zen sitting behind me, years of sitting still while feeling incredible pain in the knees. I replied that my only concern was that he should be happy with the result and that I would reprint all the pages if he so desired. Which is what he wanted and what I did. Hundreds of sheets of handmade Johannot paper duly went into the trash bin. The offending pages were reprinted and the book finally published just before Joan Crane's bibliography of his complete works appeared. He had supplied his bibliographer with many of the same captioned drawings he had sent to me, and there they were, captions and all. Guy admitted chagrin.

Debbie's sudden death in 1994 marked a tragic caesura in my life, one that I was able to bridge, in part, by carrying on my practices of psychoanalysis, Zen and printing. I printed a broadside on the occasion of the publication of *Heart Work* by our mutual friend Sharon Dolin and she and I quickly became close. Her father, a retired salesman of window treatments, was the only person in the life of the press to immediately recognize that "Dim Gray Bar" is an anagram of my name. I helped Sharon establish an annual Poetry Chapbook competition at the Center, which she co-judged each year with a different prominent poet, including William Matthews, Gerald Stern, Eavan Boland and Rachel Hadas. Dim Gray Bar printed a signed limited edition of one of the judge's poems, and in the first couple of years, I designed and supervised the printing of the winning chapbook as well. Although, Dim Gray Bar eventually succumbed to the time pressures of fatherhood and Zen teaching, Sharon's Chapbook competition continued at the Center for over twenty years. Guy's last letter tells of his companion Bonnie Jean reading Sharon's poems out loud to him during his final illness.

I spent most of most of my adult life collecting books, no doubt seeking to connect on the page to the friends and mentors I thought I lacked in the rest of my life. For awhile, Dim Gray Bar Press put me in contact, if only at a distance, and often still on paper, with those admired figures. But perhaps more important, it added a shared dimension to my marriages to first Debbie and then Sharon. I've collected here my letters from Guy, but in doing so, I've collected their memories as well.