

Article

A Poem Is a Material Object: Claire Van Vliet's Artists Books and Denise Levertov's "Batterers"

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Abstract: A literary text is, for a book artist, like a score for a musician or a script for an actor: a basis on which to construct an artistic performance. Book artist Claire Van Vliet has, at her Janus Press, constructed dazzling broadsides and artist books based on poetry by, among others, Hayden Carruth, Galway Kinnell, and Margaret Kaufman. These works test or ignore boundaries between conventional categories such as book and broadside, two-dimensional display, and three-dimensional construction. The object she built based on Denise Levertov's poem "Batterers" unfolds especially powerfully in time and three-dimensional space.

Keywords: Claire Van Vliet; Denise Levertov; Janus Press; "Batterers," Artists Books; Hayden Carruth; Margaret Kaufman; Galway Kinnell; W. R. Johnson

After how many pages is an object no longer a broadside?

One exhibition catalogue for a show of works from book artist and printer Claire Van Vliet's Janus Press calls the Janus edition of Denise Levertov's poem "Batterers"¹ a twelve-page book (Fine 1984, Janus p. 52). Looking at the folds, overlaps, sewings-on, and separable parts of this complex object, it's hard to see how anyone (not forced to do so by cataloguing conventions) could offer a meaningful page-count. One could just as arbitrarily say it all folds out into a single spread and count to one. In fact, another catalogue suggests that the wooden frame on which the paper is mounted can itself be used to mount the object on a wall, presumably for a two-dimensional display (Catalogue 2005, p. 23). It's an anomalous object: an artist's book, a sculptural work that includes a text that can be displayed as a broadside, though that is only one of several display options.

Artists' books, as well as other works of books artists and printmakers that include literary texts, have continued to be anomalous and, for the most part, have neglected works in literary studies. Within the discipline of art history, on the other hand, there is a growing body of work on artists' books, but that work has, reasonably enough, attended to the book primarily as an art object—a sculptural object or the product of a printer's art rather than as a literary object. Such studies tend to focus on the development of the visual art genre and do not generally attend in detail to the texts they convey.² Conversely, scholars of modern poetry typically attend to text as though it has no body, attending to

¹ "Batterers." Catalogue—University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. U of Wisconsin. Available online: <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999791625402121> (accessed on 18 January 2019).

² Studies of the history of the artist's book as a visual art form begin with the path-breaking collection edited by Joan Lyons *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (Lyons 1985). Building on that beginning are histories of the form by Johanna Drucker (2004) and Betty Bright. These books certainly mention the texts in the books, but the critical historical focus is on the art.

the words as though they do not arrive to readers through some material form, but rather as immaterial linguistic constructs.³

Jerome McGann has insisted that “all texts, like all other things human, are embodied phenomena, and the body of the text is not exclusively linguistic.” When we read, we are interacting with material artifacts that have material qualities, and those material qualities are part of the experience of reading. To understand that phenomenon, according to McGann, “We must turn our attention to much more than the formal and linguistic features of poems or other imaginative fictions. We must attend to textual materials which are not regularly studied by those interested in ‘poetry’: to typefaces, bindings, book prices, page format, and all those textual phenomena usually regarded as (at best) peripheral to ‘poetry’ or ‘the text as such’” (McGann 1991, p. 13). For McGann, the materiality of reading is always a part of the literary experience, not just in those works that, like artists’ books, call attention to their material form. “Literary works do not know themselves and cannot *be* known apart from their specific material modes of existence/resistance. They are not channels of transmission, they are particular forms of transmissive interaction” (McGann 1991, p. 11).

Reading is always an engagement with a physical object, never just a transparent access to an abstractible entity of pure textual form. Every text has a material form by which we know it. Conventional reading practices simply ignore the material, edit it out of conscious consideration. Artists’ books, broadsides, and other text-bearing objects that are made for display bring that materiality to awareness. Confronting an artist’s book, a reader becomes aware of the material interaction rather than reading straight through it to the text. Since these art objects bear literary texts, they call for literary critical reading, a sort of reading they have, for the most part, not yet received. Such a reading will, however, have to read the encounter with the artifact, not just with the text it bears.

Consider this a call for literary scholars to attend to a neglected literary genre. Scholars of modern poetry are, as literary scholars, understandably committed to exploring language and may lack clear models for attending to unconventional artifacts. What follows is, I hope, a useful model for such criticism. Claire Van Vliet is one of the most admired and influential book artists in the U. S., and *Batterers* is one of her most remarkable creations—a good place to start.

Ever since she started Janus Press in 1955, Claire Van Vliet (Fine 1984) has been one of the most imaginative book artists in the U.S., committed to exploring original and always beautiful ways of discovering what can be done with paper, bindings, and the other things that books are made out of. Betty Bright credits her and irrepressibly playful book artist Walter Hamady with creating an atmosphere of visual invention in the book arts, in which the material qualities of the book became more than a fine setting for a text, but a dazzling site of interest, the step from the book maker as a craftsman serving the literary artist to fellow artist of equal status (Bright 2005, p. 259). They played with and explored ways to integrate, use, and present literary texts in new or unexpected ways. And her transformation of Levertov’s poem “Batterers” is one of the most powerful.

Van Vliet has produced sensually rich and surprising manipulations of texts and of the space and time in which readers encounter them. Even a broadside in her hands, maybe folded up pamphlet- or accordion-wise or else in some other way, can elaborate out beyond the typical two dimensions. A book can fold out into a single broad spread, or else it might come apart into a wall full of broadsides. Distinguishing between book and broadside publication often becomes difficult or else entirely artificial when looking at Janus Press publications.

³ Notable exceptions include works by Marjorie Perloff’s career-long attention to the material qualities of literary artifacts, beginning with her discussion of *Stones*, Frank O’Hara’s collaboration with artist Larry Rivers (Perloff 1998, pp. 99–105), and continuing through much of the rest of her critical work, including, among others, a good deal of her *The Futurist Moment* (Perloff 1986) and *Poetry On & Off the Page* (Perloff 1996). James D. Sullivan’s *On the Walls and in the Streets: American Poetry Broadside from the 1960s* (Sullivan 1997) specifically draws attention to the material qualities of poetic artifacts in the design and use of poetry broadsides. Sullivan’s monograph remains the only book-length literary-critical study of modern poetry broadsides.

As opening examples of this intentional confusion of forms, Van Vliet collaborated on several projects with Peter and Elka Schumann. In New York City in 1963, the Schumanns had founded Bread and Puppet Theater, which featured radical politics, audience participation, enormous puppets (up to fifteen feet tall), and fresh bread. The company moved to Glover, Vermont in 1975—like Van Vliet’s home base in West Burke, a community in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom. From 1977 to 1997, Van Vliet printed the posters for their annual Bread and Puppet Our Domestic Resurrection Circus, and she participated every year till that event (though not the company) ended in 1998 (Fine 2006, p. 19). One of her Bread and Puppet publications is Peter Schumann’s *Bread and Puppet White Horse Butcher* (Schumann 1977), a play written by and with woodcuts by Schumann. The pages are bound to the cover boards by screws, and the colophon encourages readers to unscrew the pages and mount them on a wall. She also published *The Dream of the Dirty Woman* (Schumann 1980) by Elka Schumann, illustrated and printed by Van Vliet. It’s another play script, printed on one side of accordion-folded paper. It can unfold into one long strip, and it comes in a box along with photographs and an audio recording of the Bread and Puppet production. The Bread and Puppet books, therefore, are a part of Van Vliet’s project of exploring and creating new book forms. They can also, of course, be displayed as broadsides: Peter’s a bound but easily removable collection of them, Elka’s a long horizontal one.

Van Vliet has published works that fit standard understandings of what a book or a broadside is, but she’s investigated, played with, and stretched the forms. If a broadside is a publication that consists of a single sheet imprinted with image and text, then, yes, Van Vliet has published those. A striking broadside from (Gallagher 1984), for example, includes Tess Gallagher’s poem “Death of the Horses by Fire” along with crudely shaped red and black relief cuts by Peter Schumann that, full of violent energy, illustrate the horses’ panic and suffering as they die in the blaze. It’s a powerful image but, for Van Vliet, is uncharacteristically conventional in form. The colophon says Janus Press printed it for Charles Seluzicki, a rare book dealer in Portland, Oregon.

A library might typically catalogue as an artist’s book any Janus production that folds—pamphlet or accordion style—or that includes multiple sheets of paper, though it still might fold out into a broadside display. But for an imaginative work in the book arts, “artist’s book” is a catch-all category that does not pretend to describe the object very precisely. Though Van Vliet has produced objects that can be neatly and precisely described as codex or broadside, much of her most interesting work, such as *Batterers*, cannot be so concisely described. Is a broadside necessarily a single printed sheet? Is an object a book even if we read it as a single two-dimensional display?

The Van Vliet’s broadside of Margaret Kaufman’s poem “Old Quilts” (Kaufman 1989) (made with Minnesota-based paper artist Amanda Degener) offers innovative use of paper—a two-dimensional display of multiple sheets pasted over and visible through one another. The initial visual impression is of faded delicacy. On a base of handmade white paper are pasted other papers: black, pale blue, and orange-red triangles and squares—and overlaying them, four different patterns of white tissue. The tissue looks so delicate and easily tearable that the excruciating care of the object’s manual construction becomes a part of what it communicates—the impossible difficulty of pasting the tissues flat. The white base has a deckle edge all around, the blue and black pieces have some cut and some deckle edges, and the black and red have some frayed fibers, especially at the outer edges of the broadside. And a thin wash of white pulp fibers seems to be painted across it all, fading the colored papers. The quilt-like display of paper pulp fibers and the signs that the paper is handmade indicate fragility, folk craft, precision, care, and vulnerability.

The four-stanza poem is printed on the right side directly onto the more plain-patterned pieces of tissue. It’s not all left-justified. The left edge of the first two-and-a-half stanzas slants downward to the right, then left, then right again, following the edges of some of the quilt pieces. Those lines are about the delicacy of the quilts: “fragile and dry as blue hydrangea/ ... /color reduced to an idea.” And,

Sometimes, whole pieces fall away
no matter how carefully you take them up—

they shred into nothing, leaving thin ribbons,
a ribbon, a space, a nothing,

Then, indicated by the shift to left justification, there is a sonnet-like turn, a comment on what has been described, ending, “Beauty lies not in only the making of a thing/but in its use, not in its preservation/but in its wearing down.” The ink, too, enacts this process of “wearing down”: blue for the first stanza, a lighter blue for the others, and a still lighter blue for the colophon at the bottom.

Following a book arts convention, the image is an icon for the poem. Someone who lives with a framed broadside does not reread it every day, but a glance at the image cites the text, calls it to mind without repeating it in full. For “Old Quilts,” it’s a pasted-paper design rather than a print image, but the function is the same. It’s also a minor challenge to broadside convention: sixteen sheets of paper rather than just one, though it does display, like a conventional broadside, on a two-dimensional plane.

With another Kaufman poem, “Pandora’s Box” (Kaufman 1991, about a reunion “centuries later” of three figures from Greek legend: Cassandra, Pandora, and Penelope), Van Vliet further plays with the conventional one-sheet definition of a broadside. The image is a tumbling-blocks quilt pattern. A peach-colored sheet is mounted over a blue sheet, and fourteen diamond-shaped holes are cut in the peach so that the blue shows through. Slits are cut into edges of the blue diamonds, and strips of paper colored black, green, light blue, and mauve are woven through it to make box shapes. Some of the boxes are closed and some of them open. A white backing sheet hides the verso of the weave. So this broadside is made of eleven pieces of paper: three sheets and eight strips. It follows the broadside convention of a two-dimensional display, but it plays on a tension between two- and three-dimensionality. A weave (like Penelope’s shawl, always being woven, always being unwound) is a two-dimensional display made via three-dimensional manipulation: threads or (as here) strips bent and alternately superimposed on one another. The image is made from the relation of what is before and what is behind. And the tumbling-blocks pattern itself creates the optical illusion of solid blocks that shimmer as each corner seems to both lead and recede, and perception can’t decide whether this is a view from below or above. So the shallow three-dimensional structure of the weave creates a two-dimensional display and an illusion of deeper three-dimensional structures.⁴

Both “Old Quilts” and “Pandora’s Box” are multiple-sheet but single-page displays. Some of Van Vliet’s other experimental broadsides explore further the possibilities available in a single sheet of paper. Her broadside of Kinnell (1985)’s “The Geese,” for instance, is a poem printed on a single sheet—but, ah, no ordinary paper. The poem describes a migration of Canada geese, and the image that accompanies the text offers a goose-eye view of the Connecticut River Valley mentioned in the poem: river, hills, trees. Unlike the horses in the Gallagher broadside or the quilts and boxes in the Kaufman broadsides, however, the images here are not printed onto the paper or attached to it, but are a part of the paper itself.

Van Vliet had been working with Kathryn and Howard Clark at their Twinrocker Handmade Paper mill in Brookston, Indiana on developing pulp painting techniques, making a paper that is not just a clean or evenly tinted sheet, but that has areas of different colored pulps, manipulated to form images. Actually, it would begin with a hand-milled sheet, but then Van Vliet would apply the colored pulps with a brush, thinly or thickly to make areas transparent or opaque, using the same or maybe different quality fibers from those of the base for different effects. The Clarks helped her set up her own paper-making equipment at her studio in Vermont, and she has also worked closely with

⁴ Both “Old Quilts” and “Pandora’s Box” appear also in a Janus Press book of Kaufman’s poems (Kaufman 1998) *Deep in the Territory*. Another of Van Vliet’s dazzling experiments, that book has facing pages of text on one side and paper woven into quilt patterns on the other. Most amazingly, this complex book has no binding—no thread or glue holding it together. The text and quilt papers are folded, cut, and woven together into tight patterns that hold together on their own. *Beauty in Use* by Sandra McPherson (McPherson 1977) is another non-adhesive quilt book, made by Van Vliet along with Audrey Holden and Lulie Larus. For more on book structures without binding and explanations of how they are made, see Van Vliet and Steiner (2002).

Katie MacGregor and Bernie Vinzani at their papermaking studio in Whiting, Maine (where the pulp painting for “The Geese” as well as for *Batterers* was made). Besides using this technique to make paper for books and broadsides, Van Vliet has used it to make non-literary visual art, especially landscape scenes (Fine 1984, Claire n.p.).

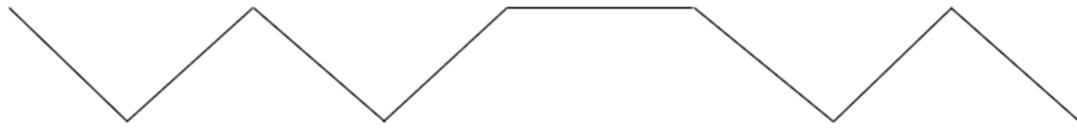
Each sheet of handmade paper is individually framed rather than uniformly mass produced by a machine and is, thus, in subtle ways, unique. And Van Vliet then applied to that paper the colored pigment for her image, sheet by sheet across a whole edition, so each one would have a further subtle uniqueness. Out of the hundred copies in the edition of “The Geese,” therefore, no two views of Kinnell’s valley would be exactly alike. The text and the letterpress printing would be the elements that remained identical across the whole edition. The paper base on which the inked text appears bears the marks of contingency while the text, like the geese, flies above it,

Pretty straightforward: a single, flat sheet of paper (however unconventional that paper) with a poem printed on it. Van Vliet’s earliest experiment with pulp painting to accompany a poem, however, had been more sculptural: a pulp painting that accompanied Hayden Carruth’s poem “Aura.” (Carruth 1977). The pulp painting and the poem are on two different kinds of paper connected together. The landscape pulp painting that she worked on with Kathryn Clark folds up accordion-wise into the attached text sheet (also Twinrocker paper) so that, along with the clamshell box, the text paper becomes part of the protective storage material for the pulp painting. It can fold out flat on a table or a wall, or this sturdy paper can stand up vertically on its folds, the folds accentuating the earth-folds of the mountains in the image. Since light would hit those folded panels at different angles and intensities, the varied reflection of the room- or window-light rhymes with the shifting intensities of light across this mountainscape. Even flat, the fold-scores mark regions of shifting gradation in color and brightness, from a deep purple on the left to a bright orange on the right, illustrating the changing autumn light of Carruth’s poem.

The text is printed on both sides of the wrapper paper of “Aura” but not on the pulp painting. On several other works, such as Kinnell’s “The Geese” and W. R. Johnson’s *Lilac Wind*, (Johnson 1983) the poem is printed right on the pulp painting. *Lilac Wind* (which includes three poems: “Death of Li Shang-yin,” “January Hours,” and “Her Contemplation”) also has a more ambiguous formal status than “The Geese”: arguably either a broadside or an artist’s book. Since it’s folded up (folds creating pages) and boxed (thus occupying a book-shaped space in storage), library catalogues call it a book.

In the *Lilac Wind* box, one finds a folded up pulp painting. Unlike “The Geese” (but like “Aura”), this one has pulp painting on both sides. So it can be seen and read in space as well as on a plane. It can fold out into a sheet (two irregularly shaped pulp paintings attached together to make a single spread) twelve inches (at the highest point) by sixty. Displayed that way, the full text of the three poems would be visible at the same time, and the title and colophon would be on the verso of the rightmost panel. The bottom is a straight deckle edge, but the top (deckled also) has the round billow of a cloud shape.⁵ The base of the pulp painting is blue, with white, violet, and other blue pulps painted over it. The whites are mostly toward the bottom where the violet-inked texts appear. And there is one pale green printed circle representing either a sun or a moon toward the top of the highest area, which is just right of center. Like “Aura,” it can also stand on its bottom edge, a three dimensional cloudscape, with different parts of the cloud catching different intensities of the available light. But the folding pattern is not just a simple back-and-forth accordion fold. Here is a drawing of how it would look from above if it were standing on its flat edge:

⁵ A photograph of Bernie Vinzani making a shaped sheet for *Batterers* shows him holding a conventionally rectangular frame, but part of that frame has a molded shape in it blocking out part of the frame and leaving an area shaped like one of the *Batterers* sheets (Fine 2006, Janus p. 22). Presumably, they used a similar process to make those cloud-billow sheets for *Lilac Wind*.



In that display format, the highest panel, the one with the sun/moon circle, would be on a plane facing the reader, with the others rippling out not quite symmetrically to the left and right. And the panels, with their cloud-curved tops, grow shorter as they recede from the high center, stopping with a vertical edge on the right, descending all the way to a point on the left. The right panels fold up onto the back panel, and then the left panels fold up over them. Folded up like that, since the curved tops are of different heights and orientations, a reader catches glimpses of rectos and versos revealing bits of one another. The effect is of a narrow vista of clouds piled above clouds with the sun/moon shining in a clear sky above them.

A reader can unfold it out flat, broadside-wise, and read it left to right across that majestic cloudscape. Or a reader can open it a page at a time, letting different views of images and text emerge. As with a codex, each turning both reveals and hides parts of the work, but unlike a conventional codex, this work lets some parts remain in view through multiple page turnings. Some clouds seem to move rapidly across the sky, while some move into or out of view more slowly. That printed circle persists above it all.

Reading the folded up *Lilac Wind* book-wise (parsimoniously keeping to a minimum of panel openings, at or near the codex convention of two), one might turn the first opening toward the left to make a two-panel spread—rather than open it up to make a three-panel spread. That first book-opening would show clouds on the left of the page-spread fold and “Death of Li Shang-yin” on the right, under the sun/moon circle that rises above the clouds. This poem includes the title phrase “lilac wind.” The cloud/sky piles up above and behind the text. The text is all in violet italics. The title stands to the left of and on the same line as the poem’s first line. Each begins slightly to the left of where the one above it begins. So while this contemplative poem about a ninth-century Chinese poet slants gradually down toward the lower left, the visual design creates a negative-space wedge (under the title, to the left of the poem) that points onward toward the upper right.

Turn (rather than open up) the page, and there’s another cloudscape with the title page and colophon to the right on the verso of the eighth panel. Turn the colophon then toward the right, and another poem appears, “January Sun,” this time in the middle of a three-page cloudscape. The lines of this poem begin this time progressively farther toward the right, with the title on a line with and to the left of the last line, so that the negative-space wedge this time points toward the lower right. It is centered on the three-panel spread under the sun/moon, but is still not quite symmetric because the sun/moon draws attention upward, the text wedge draws it downward, and the overlap line of the billowing cloud deckle descends below the sun/moon toward the left-center fold line. And there is the further tension of knowing there is just one more page reveal. So even when the text is centered, it remains visually dynamic.

Turn the panel with “January Sun” toward the right, and another three-panel spread opens up. The sun/moon shines clearly above the central panel; there are clouds, but no folds, versos, or deckle edges piling up between circle and text—visual resolution. This text, “Her Contemplation,” appears in the right panel, the text again slanting downward toward the right with the title to the left of the last line—dynamic asymmetry.

Even unfolded all the way, the scene has a dynamic asymmetry. The sun is off center to the right in panel five of the eight (counting from left to right). The whole design descends to a point at the left, but to a vertical cut at the right. There is one poem to the left in panel three and two to the right in panels six and seven. So the printwork (circle and text) balances toward the right, and the arrow of the paper (wider toward the right) points toward the left. The image, like the poems, is thus peaceful without being boring.

The poems in *Lilac Wind* are discreet and self-contained texts within the physical form. But the order they are likely to be read changes according to whether they are read as a broadside (left to right “Death of Li Shang-yin,” “Her Contemplation,” “January Hours”) or as a book (unfolding from “Death of Li Shang-yin” to “January Hours” to “Her Contemplation”). The texts remain the same even if the order of their reading changes.

Batterers is one of Van Vliet’s most spectacular objects. It includes all these elements already discussed: incorporation of multiple sheets of paper, pulp painting, non-rectilinear paper, interplays of recto and verso, unfolding as a rhetorical device, ambiguity regarding the order of the text, and options for display in either two or three dimensions. It also includes other parts: one that is a base, frame, or sculptural illustration for “Batterers,” and another that is a storage box that is also the first utterance in the artistic statement of the piece.

“BATTERERS” appears in very large blocky capitals six times in a maroon, bruise-colored ink over the skin of tan fabric that covers the thick slip cover box. Adding to the uneasiness of the design, those big title words don’t quite match up to the edges of the box. The whole word is mostly visible only on an oblique view rather than straight on at a side: e.g., “B/ATTERERS,” or even an edge cutting through a letter so that a whole “S” or “A” becomes visible only from an angle. Looking at the box straight on, one can tell what it says, but it takes some shifting around to alternative angles to see it whole. One viewpoint is not enough. Those big, bloody letters, therefore, look chaotic on the box—all in different heights and widths, letters within each word the same height, but in some of those words alternating thin roman and thick bold lettering. It’s always the same word, but its appearance constantly shifts around within a narrow range of variation. Wedged between the batterers—once on front, once on back—in the same capitals, but smaller, “LEVERTOV,” and below, smaller still, “JANUS PRESS”: whole on one side of the box, cut by an edge on the other. The rectilinear box violently cuts the text and hacks it into the predetermined geometric shape; alternatively, the text busts out of that too-confining form and won’t respect the predetermined shape. However one reads it, the text ends up bruised.⁶

The box is the overture for the drama staged within. The physical structure of the object enforces a temporal sequence of reception. At each moment, one either removes or unfolds, and then beholds, one part of it at a time. Each part creates a physical and rhetorical context for the next part that comes into view. Like a book, you say, each page building the rhetorical and narrative context for the pages that follow? Perhaps, if one were compelled to read a book straight through, but a codex implies not only a sequence, but also the option of plucking a poem out of sequence, opening the book up to a particular page, maybe bookmarked so that there is not even a flipping through the leaves to get to the desired poem—just flip it open, and it’s there. The physical approach to a poem in a codex is so conventional and familiar that it is not generally an element of critical attention. But *Batterers* is not—boom—there, down from the shelf and before one’s eyes. One has to reach the poetic text through a set of discoveries, each of which has its own tactile and visual quality. The sequence of revelation and the material qualities of each moment of that revelation are all part of the artwork. Levertov’s text here is a part of that artwork, a set of moments in its step-by-step revelation.

Within the slip case is a black wooden-framed box. It has a couple of aesthetic functions. On the verso, the side that does not unfold, the wood forms a dark, rectangular frame, a conventional signifier for an object of visual art: what lies within this rectangle is a work of art, an object for display, dividing the formal, created, and properly aesthetic thing from the randomness of the world at large. The work of art it frames is a paper relief sculpture by Kathryn Vigesaa. The ochre, black, and red look like wounded flesh or ruined earth. The slip case title “Batterers” suggests an interpretation of this inside

⁶ The title has varied slightly in different publications: “Batterers” when first published in *American Poetry Review* in 1990, “The Batterers” in (Levertov 1992) collection *Evening Train*, and again *Batterers* in the 1996 Janus Press work. The definite article in collection suggests a category of people who can be isolated and separated from the discourse of the poem; it is about those people. The more indefinite title of the magazine and Janus publications, however, indicates that this poem is about such people, but it does not suggest they are necessarily third person.

image as battered skin with scars, gashes, calluses, and burns. It's not smooth and flat, but like a topographical bas relief. It's grainy. It's like the contour of land ruined by toxic mine tailings. The black frame, as around a photograph, suggests cropping; what lies within the frame is but a fragment, selected as representative of a scene that extends beyond the rectangle. The wrinkles, scars, black stains, and red flows extend, in that implied original, beyond this frame. There is far more destruction, and we see here just a fragment. Here is the battered flesh and battered earth the poem refers to. Sure, look away from this; turn it around so that this ugly scene is no longer visible. Look instead at the literary drama on the other side rather than at this mute testimony. Anyway, this has been the verso of the literary recto. This is the hidden side, and I've arbitrarily turned to it first.

Alternatively, it's a base, a thrust stage on which the literary drama takes place. The literary side can be removed from the frame and either displayed separately or else stood upon Vigesaa's work. Rare book dealers and library catalogues have described the relationship between the parts in various ways. A note in the Noble and Greenough School's on-line catalogue says, "Text and illustrations mounted on a wooden cradle, inserted in a wooden cover frame" ("Batterers/Denise Levertov"⁷). A University of Delaware Special Collections exhibit catalogue says, "the clay paperwork, made by Kathryn Vigesaa, was set into a wooden tray, forming the base of this sculptural book" (*Personal*⁸). One rare book dealer describes it as a protective box that lifts away from Van Vliet's work: "The wooden framed clay-paper cover fits over the book" (*Catalogue* 23), or as another library catalog describes it: "This structure [the text-paper construction] fits under a heavy framed wooden box with an abstracted bas-relief image on the cover" ("Batterers," *Catalogue*). So Vigesaa's work has been seen as a frame, a base, or a cover for Van Vliet's.

Reading the back of Vigesaa's work as a frame into which the recto literary side is set, that frame becomes a proscenium. This is the side on which the narrative continues to unfold. (On the verso, there is no narrative progression, just the static fact of the wound.) Four irregularly shaped and folded sheets of paper—pulp paintings, rather than the standard uniform blank rectangle of conventional book or business paper—attached to a wooden frame backing. This whole construction is removable from the black frame, but the unpainted blond wood clearly is not part of the black and red-themed paper display it supports. It's more like the back of a stage set. Slim wooden triangles that attach to the back of the set and angle inward make the front of the set slightly concave, suggesting a theatrical space. A drama is going to unfold here. The paper will arise or unfold outward from that proscenium or else separate from it entirely. This is an artwork that proceeds ever outward beyond the frame and into the world.⁹

On brown handmade paper (made, the colophon says, by Van Vliet with the help of master papermakers Katie MacGregor and Bernie Vinzani), Van Vliet has applied red and black pulp. This creates an effect of a cloudy wash made of distinct little fiber lines. They are not, however, just applied to the paper like pigment clinging to sizing, but are part of the paper. Not here a paper/ink, medium/message relation—the paper itself is not the neutral bearer of the message, but the wordless, wounded message itself, as blood in the dirt becomes a part of the groundwork for the text.

The initial image is of a mountain, shadowed in uneven black against a red sky and streaked with some red reflections of that sky. Two of the four sheets that make up the image are folded up against it in a complicated way, making that mountain three-dimensional (ridge beyond ridge of paper mountain) and suggesting a coil of energy back there ready for release (like the image of cloud piled on cloud in a folded up *Lilac Wind*). One of the pulp paintings is in a rectangle and represents the red-stained sky behind the mountain. The others, constituting the mountain, are unconventionally

⁷ "Batterers/Denise Levertov." Putnam Library. Noble and Greenough School. Available online: <http://library.nobles.edu:8080/#section=resource&resourceid=447767¤tIndex=1&view=fullDetailsDetailsTab> (accessed on 18 January 2019).

⁸ Personal Visions: Artists' Books 1996. U of Delaware Library Special Collections, U of Delaware, 19 March 2009. Available online: <http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/exhibits/artistsbook/text/1996t.htm> (accessed on 29 April 2019).

⁹ Recall Van Vliet's street theater experience with Bread and Puppet Theater—busting out of the proscenium.

shaped. The curved deckle edges show that they were not trimmed to that shape (as conventional, rectangular, readily available, commercially mass-produced paper is trimmed) but molded into that shape. It's not an indifferent, standardizing violence that is at stake here, but something intimate and individual. Applied to that pulp painting that represents the sky and blocking out most of it is another that represents the great mass of the mountain (two others will represent the parts of the mountain that flow out and thrust toward the audience). The streaks of red in the sky, therefore, do not stop at the outline of the mountain as they would in a standard one-sheet two-dimensional representation. One knows that those red streaks continue on, as streaks across a real sky would, behind and independent of the mountain. The red and all that it represents continue on beyond what I can see. In fact, those four sheets are sewn together with red thread—blood and anger binding it all together.

On the lower left of the mountain (still we have not unfolded it), printed in red upon a space left brown:

DENISE LEVERTOV

BATTERERS

Janus Press 1996

Levertov, therefore, gets top billing. Her work as a poet is credited as the occasion for this elaborate work of art—the script for the drama. The writer typically gets top billing in any literary artifact—the editor, designer, printer, and binder are usually modestly tacit contributors to the project of representing the writer's work. Here, the work of all the other artists and craftspeople is on clear display rather than self-effacingly withdrawn. Levertov's words are almost the last thing one comes across in unfolding and exploring the artifact. The last thing one comes across is the colophon, on the lower right of the mountain, hidden behind one of those folded sheets—hidden still, in fact, as is the title corner, too, when the mountain unfolds into an erupting volcano, hidden behind the mounds of slag and pools of lava. But that, of course, is where one usually finds the colophon of a book, also, hidden toward the back. This colophon credits, first of all, Kathryn Vigesaa with the "clay and paper cover panels"; then Van Vliet, MacGregor, and Vinzani with the "text paper"; Jack Sumberg with the wooden frames; and Judi Conant and Mary Richardson with the outer slipcase. The relation between the writer and the other artists, then, is indeed theatrical. As in a play, the audience sees foregrounded (as opposed to refined out of notice as in most commercial book publications) the work of many artists, not just the writer, but the writer's work provides the title and the original verbal matter upon which all the other artists work. Below the colophon are three signatures from three artists who contributed to the project: Levertov, Vigesaa, and Van Vliet. All three, thus, take credit, and they all, presumably, make the artifact more valuable by this acknowledgement. It is a collective work rather than one artist's vision.

The viewer's own hand releases the energy restrained within the mountain. The volcano explodes at my behest. In the central area where the third and fourth papers (the ones that open out toward the reader and bear the text of the poem) overlap, the pulp painting represents the fire and the spewing lava of an eruption. Upon the unfolding, a pool of lava flops out in front. As the burning mountain of reds and blacks unfolds, it surges forward and outward to the left and right, beyond the plane of the proscenium. The lava pools forward from those side fold-outs as well. On the left side, it's clearly flowing down off the mountain. From the sides of the wooden-framed rectangular backing on which the four paper forms overlap one another, those final two papers come forward like left and right arms of the mountain stretching toward the viewer. Then each bends outward again, toward the left and toward the right away from the central area, with a final further bend on the left side, a final hump of the mountain's longest arm. One of the poem's three stanzas lies in the sheltered area toward the back between the arms; it pools out from the backdrop. The other two stanzas are in the most forwardly part of the poem, flat in the lava pools that extend from those arms. The two forward stanzas describe a scene of domestic abuse, and the stanza sheltered at the back makes an environmentalist statement. Each works as a metaphor for the other. (If the text paper is set on top of the clay-paper sculpture, then

the clay paper is the ground from which the volcanic fury arises or the ground onto which the lava spills and burns.)

The poem, then, can be displayed either as a three-dimensional sculptural work (set in or on Vigesaa's work, or else removed from it); alternatively, it can be unfolded out flat and broadside-like, the blond-wood frame a means for mounting it on a wall. (Some way would have to be found to hold up the left and right wings so they would not droop and pull at their backing.) The layout (two- or three-dimensional) affects the order in which the stanzas are read. Unfolding the work out flat suggests a left-to-right order, with the stanza that makes the explicitly environmentalist message in the middle—the order, incidentally, of the stanzas when the poem appeared when it was first published in *American Poetry Review* in 1990 (Levertov 1990). The three text areas would then hang down below the graphic area, divided horizontally from it. Those three red text areas would hang down like tongues: the landscape speaking.

A three-dimensional structure, however, makes the order of the stanzas less obvious. The same left-to-right order as in the two-dimensional display is possible. One might also read the two front stanzas about domestic abuse first and then delve to the back one (the order in which they appear in Levertov's 1992 collection *Evening Train* (Levertov 1992)). Or a reader might begin at the back and then move to the two forward stanzas. The magazine and book each fixed the order of the stanzas for readers of that publication, but since they differ, there is clearly no one way to read the poem. The three-dimensional format unfixes the order and increases the reader's rhetorical options. The abuser (of a woman, of the environment) in the poem has an opportunity to see his choice clearly. The reader has, in this choice of how to read the poem, some decisions to make, also—a lower-stakes choice, sure, but a set of options. The rhetorical sequence must be decided rather than passively received. (As well, of course, as the physical orientation of the thing read: three dimensions or two. If two, displayed flat on a table or mounted on a wall. And in what relation to Vigesaa's scarred flesh/land: so that it is visible alongside or underneath the text area or else as an unseen verso—always back there behind the text or else as something the reader has decided to turn away so that the text about battering, rather than the physical evidence of the battery, can become the object of attention.) How shall one read it, and what do those decisions mean?

What's at stake in the choice of stanza orders is the relation between the poem's two themes of domestic and environmental abuse. Is one a metaphor for the other, do they stand in equal value alongside one another and each commenting on the other, or are they both instances of some broader theme?

The text, by the way, is in Neuland display font (*Catalogue* 23). And it's in all capitals. And each stanza is centered within its half-circle red text area. Without a left margin, a left justification would look awkward and arbitrary. The centering, the swaggering but primitive-looking bold font, and the all caps amid the bloody red make the tone of the text especially declamatory. The ink is a darker red than the paper.

The left stanza (to begin there arbitrarily):

A MAN SITS BY THE BED
OF A WOMAN HE HAS BEATEN,
DRESSES HER WOUNDS,
GINGERLY DABS AT BRUISES.
HER BLOOD POOLS ABOUT HER,
DARKENS.

The visual design equates the lava with the blood. The man's rage is the bursting of the volcano, the woman's blood the red flow, darkening like the dark red ink of the text upon the lighter red of the paper. This is the wound, right here. Here is rage and its effects. Also, a tenderness: she is hurt, and he cares for her, touches her "gingerly" now, not wanting to add to the harm as he tries to help.

The irony tastes of bile. Though describing his moment of care for her, the capitals here suggest an uncontained anger at him, so perhaps the volcanic explosion here is that anger on behalf of the woman. The standard font and case choices of the book and magazine versions of the poem feel much more restrained. In the capitals, sounds the voice of the Furies.

Moving then inward (or across, depending on how the object is displayed, arbitrarily here in any case) toward the fiery heart of the mountain, the tone there shifts toward the vatic, and the scope shifts beyond the intimate and toward the planetary:

EARTH, CAN WE NOT LOVE YOU
UNLESS WE BELIEVE THE END IS NEAR?
BELIEVE IN YOUR LIFE
UNLESS WE THINK YOU ARE DYING?

Before the shock of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, there wasn't much of an American environmental movement. Awareness of ecological harm tends to raise environmental concern. Awareness that the world will not just absorb all abuse, that parts of it, or even the whole, can start to die—such awareness can start to shift an abuser's attention toward concern and care. We cannot limitlessly vent upon it without losing it.

Outward toward the right, away from the heart of the mountain, back to that intimate juncture of care and cruelty:

ASTONISHED, HE FINDS HE'S BEGUN
TO CHERISH HER. HE IS TERRIFIED.
WHY HAD HE NEVER
SEEN, BEFORE, WHAT SHE WAS?
WHAT IF SHE STOPS BREATHING?

The batterer comes to an awareness of the woman's mortality, the finitude of his relation with her, a relation that must extend beyond abuse if there is to be any relationship, any *her* at all. With the sudden thought that his actions should cause her loss and death, he feels a rush of terror. The line break suggests that his own unaccustomed feeling of tenderness scares him, too: "TO CHERISH HER. HE IS TERRIFIED." Comfortable in his prerogative to do violence, he feels moral fear at this knowledge that he bears responsibilities as well—and that he has perhaps fatally bungled those responsibilities.

That rightmost stanza applies equally well to batterers of women's bodies and to abusers of the earth. When the poem is read in this order, that environmental abuse comes, it comes from a particularly masculine obliviousness and cruelty. Read instead in the order left-right-center, that right stanza picks up immediately on the scene in the left stanza—the domestic abuser becoming aware of the consequences of his brutality—but then the back-middle stanza broadens the abusiveness from specifically male-upon-female to that of all humans toward the whole earth—from "he" to "we." The thematic scope of the right stanza is, therefore, more restricted. Read the back stanza first before moving on to the front row, and the story of domestic abuse becomes an accusatory parable: our abusive attitude toward the environment is like this. The environmental message is primary and the parable ancillary. The catalogues of libraries that hold this work, however, generally list it under the subject heading "Abused women," reductive (though, of course, a catalogue subject heading has to be) any way one reads the poem.¹⁰ By making the order of the stanzas indeterminate, Van Vliet eliminates

¹⁰ Yore (2009) reads the abuse in the *Evening Train* version of "The Batterers" (in which the stanza about the Earth appears last) "as an allegory for the way human beings have mistreated the earth . . . Levertov uses domestic violence as a metaphor for the mindless destruction of the natural environment to suggest that we only love what we are in the midst of destroying"

any necessary sequence of the stanzas (though given English-language reading conventions, it would be unlikely and awkward to read the right stanza first or the left stanza last).

As eyes regarding a work of visual art may be directed yet still move freely, so reading eyes upon *Batterers* may also move freely, choosing an order of stanzas—visual art reception practice thus applies to a literary work. The literary and the graphic are no longer distinct.

As musicians interpret a score and find new ranges of expression in it, as theatre artists work with a script and make it new, as translators give a literary work a new life in a new historical and linguistic setting, so a master book artist can set a poem anew, make it a basis for an original work of art that includes the poem. The book arts are to poetry as theatre is to drama and as performance is to written music: a realization worthy of attention in its own right. We can read a play in isolation from its performance, of course, and we can read a poem in isolation from its material realization, but we can also see a play and, with the help of a great book artist such as Van Vliet, see a poem.

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(Levertov 1996, p. 267). Edward Zlotkowski, on the other hand, includes “The Batterers” in a list of Levertov’s poems about abuse and other violence, but not in another list he makes of her poems about “environmental degradation” (Zlotkowski 1997; 1998, p. 136). And in discussing her own and other women’s emotionally intense responses to *Evening Train*, Rebecca McClanahan also discusses “The Batterers” as a poem about domestic violence (McClanahan 2000, p. 679). The catalog entry for *Batterers* in the University of Wisconsin-Madison library offers this commentary: “The artist suggests parallels between the abuse of women and the abuse of the earth through her imagery” (“Batterers”). Van Vliet’s design gives material form to this interpretive ambiguity.

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