

A Picture Is Always a Book by Robert Seydel

written by Dennis James Sweeney | December 29, 2014



A Picture Is Always a Book by Robert Seydel
Siglio Press, November 2014
112 pages – [Siglio Press/Amazon](#)

Out of context, *A Picture Is Always a Book* is a collection of 70-something typewritten poems on yellowed pieces of paper colored with crayons and paints, their words sometimes smashed in prose blocks, sometimes spread across the page with dashes of color and ghostly stick figures, abstract shapes, and star stamps scattered between them.

The text itself varies wildly. While mostly given to experimental sentence structures that evade meaning in the same moment they begin to approach it, Seydel's sentences bounce from the plainspoken–

What i imagine is a bench to sit on.

to the surreal–

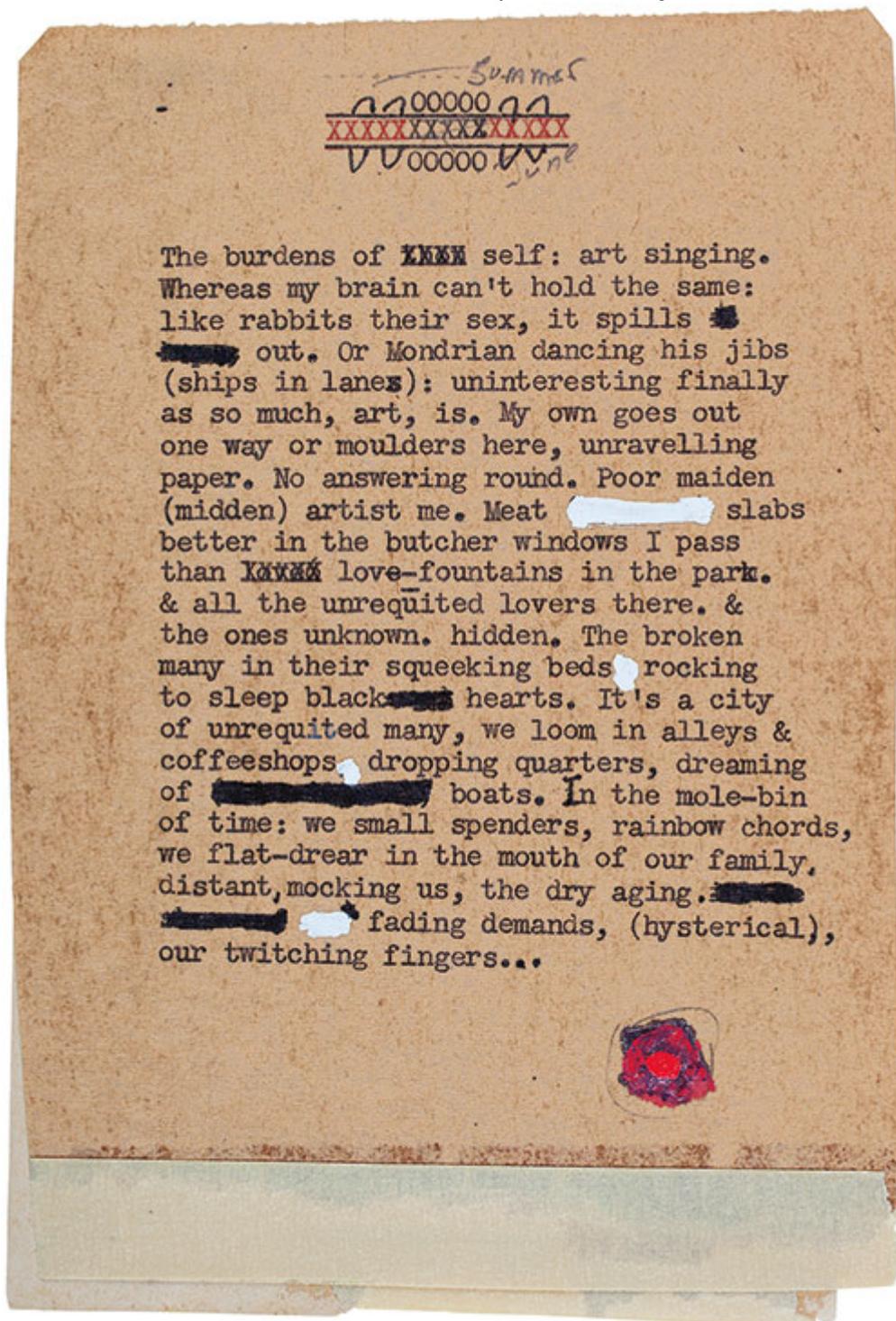
An air that is of bird & of duffballs & rabbits, & an air
simultaneously of porridge.

to nonsensical and linebroken–

& i wld go as
a cat who goes
like elephant
& even where
wood crackles
i am knot
& it is night

all in the space of a single page, in this case titled “(early dec.)” The poems read like the ravings of a person who is at once very disconnected from reality and very attentive to whatever she perceives instead of reality. The childlike drawings that dot the pages, the rips and repairs with tape that are retained in the facsimiles, the wavery, imperfectly aligned typewriter, the references to mundane activities like working at the bank and walking the streets of Queens—all of these coalesce to give us the sense of an outsider artist pounding out mildly brilliant pages that remain undiscovered for years

until she dies and a relative finds them packed away in an old chest



somewhere.

And it seems to me that these pieces are in fact meant to be perceived this way: out of context, discovered, at once obscure and revealing. *A Picture Is Always a Book* begins not with a critical introduction but a short epigraph from its own pages—"A Step, Just One / On My Short Foot, / Into Mystery"—followed by its first poem, the title "almost march" highlighted in red crayon within a green and blue trapezoid:

Thinking poets' ding, in the roughshod & cool world, canaries mate w/ men & song is revision of song. Here poke yr words along, I am artist of another ken.

The poem goes on, but was clearly placed first as a stand-in for an introduction. The artist's (or artist's persona's) statement about his/her work comes first, and is necessarily intradiegetic to maintain the temporary illusion of documents found and displayed as if by serendipity.

Only at the very end of the book do we find the Editor's Note by Lisa Pearson, an interview with Robert Seydel by Savina Velkova, and a two-page write-up about Robert Seydel's life. These materials testify to what their earlier absence seems to convey: the typewritten pages here "belong to a body of work with permeable borders." Or, as the promotional copy for the book states, "Seydel explores the boundaries between the salvaged and the lost, the unknown and the unknowable, art that is made and art that is found." While the poems' artistic frame is eventually undeniable, it is far from central to these pieces and, for the enjoyment of the book, possibly unnecessary to them.

Still, what the supplements tell us is this: Robert Seydel was an artist and writer who created work under the guise of a number of different alter-egos, the most prolific of which was Ruth Greisman, a persona modeled partially after his aunt who lived in Queens with her brother Saul after World War I. Under the Ruth rubric, Seydel created a body of work that consisted not only of these typewritten/colored pages but also of more than three hundreds collages and drawings, many of which were included in *Book of Ruth*, published by Siglio Press in 2011. That same year, Seydel died of a sudden heart attack. *A Picture Is Always a Book* accompanies a posthumous exhibition of Seydel's work called "Robert Seydel: The Eye in Matter" as well as the publication of *Songs of S.*, a book of poems from another of Seydel's alter-egos.

2.6.hare.hat.

i've been studying my hat. Men twitch at it, very clearly, or they don't, in the street. So odd, feathers on a woman's head. Sometimes I imagine all sorts of things. When i walk *** the pavement tilts up to me, to delineate my way. A sensation then of glory sometimes. A ST_aR at my fore head. Roussel-vision. Ruth of the tents. Boulevard Queen. But a rabbit more likely (on my path). Hare under a hat. Mine's no longer so lustrous. Does Joseph notice? His hare under a tree, (that's me), he once sd. Dis/~~me~~/dust. Did Sol go to the butcher's today? He's so slow you never know.

vision. imagination. cardboard.
a hare leap.

hair lip.

brown sky. rawhide
light.

to peep. to peep.
continuing mark. one joy.

(PICTURE)

(rare)

The interview at the back of the book, conducted in November 2010, goes on to probe Seydel's creative process, details about his real aunt Ruth, the relationship of these pieces with the work of Joseph Cornell and Marcel Duchamp, and the cross-gender leap Seydel performs in writing through a female persona. I see the necessity for this, the way I see the necessity for the little plaques that label canvases and sculptures in art museums. I am drawn to those little plaques because I want to understand the art. But when I read them, I often feel as if I understand less than I did before.

The little plaques, in other words, are strangely unsatisfying. They tell us a name, a date, a title. They allow us to grasp what we are looking at, in a way, by reducing it to details of time and place and person. But what is valuable in anything that mystifies us—and *A Picture Is Always a Book* is indeed mystifying—seems to me to be exactly that portion that mystifies,

those elements that cannot be understood.

Example: A mountain-like shape in purple and white hovers over a paragraph on the "Slog of suffering" and under a poem in red ink (except for the final "you") that reads:

did you
see me
not be
me

to be
not me
to see

(you)?

Example: A white blob with big, afraid eyes and four tiny stick-legs haunts the bottom of a page that addresses chairs and gin and poetry.

Example: The alignment of the lines in "(*)(*)" goes slowly awry until the long paragraph begins to look like a fan unfurled. Below, a black holes inhabits a red hand.

Example: A red and blue star stamp squints with ink-dot eyes.

What I mean to say is that the impulse to grasp these pieces of art through their real-world context seems to me to dilute their beauty and wonder. You need to hold and touch and look at this beautiful, hardbound, viscerally satisfying book as a piece of visual art, but after you do all that, you also need to *read* it. It might take you weeks to finish, as it took me.

But don't worry. That is a good thing. That means the mystery is working.