

Typesetting and Printing “Elegy for the Silver Eel” as Concrete Poetry

This report describes my experience in typesetting a poem at the Carleton University Book Arts Lab in March and April 2023. Many thanks go to Nadia Bozak and Larry Thompson for extending me this opportunity.

Project Objective

Intrigued by duality of Concrete Poetry, my plan was to print two versions of my poem “Elegy for the Silver Eel” from one typesetting: I want to print:

1. “Elegy for the Silver Eel” as a literary poem – shaped text with a title on the top, and with the author on the bottom right,
2. *Elegy for the Silver Eel* as an object of visual art – no typeset title or author, but hand signed at the bottom in the manner of a fine art print edition.

I wanted to print both versions on 6-inch square artist tiles (Strathmore Bristol Artist Tiles, vellum finish, 100 lb.), which I would provide. Using this size of paper required the text to be centred within a 4 by 4 inch square. In the case of the literary poem the title and the author are above and below. For the fine art print, the shaped text is slightly higher to allow the signature line right below the text. Figure 1 shows the planned configurations.

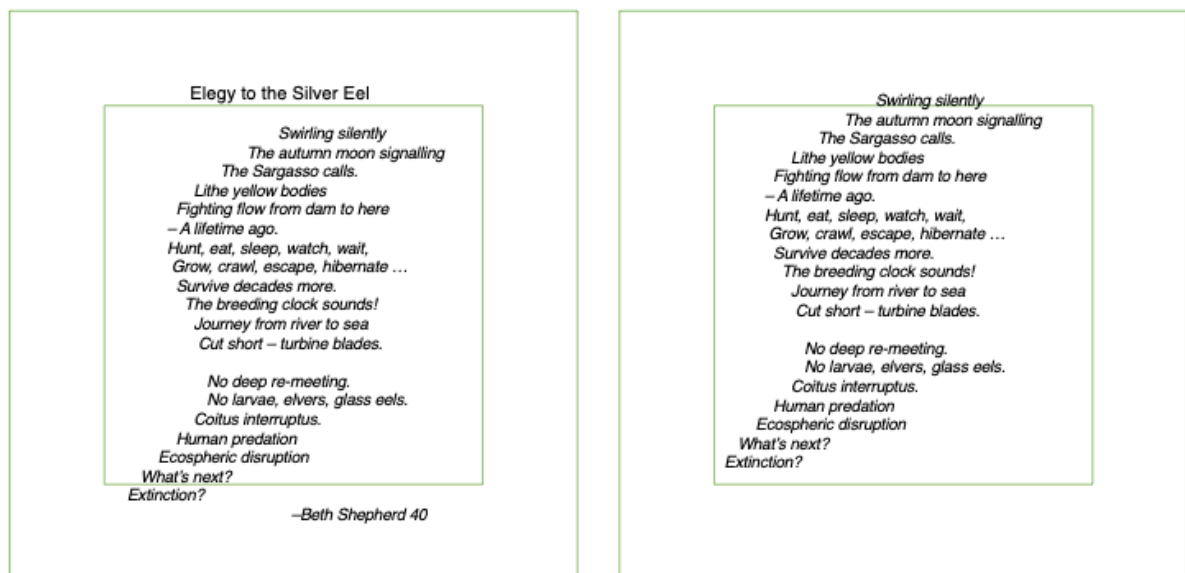


Figure 1: Poem to be printed as a literary poem and as a fine-art print

Day 1 – CU BAL March 8

A student helper at the Book Arts Lab, gave me a quick overview of the process of typesetting. Amazingly it was pretty well as described on the Letterpress Commons website provided here for future reference: <https://letterpresscommons.com/setting-type-by-hand/>.

Another important aspect of typesetting has to do with measurement. Points and picas are the main western measurement systems used:

- Points: one point equals 1/72 inch and is used to specify size of type and the space between lines. A type setting 12/16 means the type is 12 pt and the leading (space between lines) is 16 pt.
- Picas: One pica contains 12 points and is a hair less than 1/6 of an inch. Picas are used to measure fixed horizontal distance, such as column width.

I picked the Helvetica italic font which I thought would add to the sense of smooth flow of an eel moving through water. I used regular 14 pt font for the title. These are the fonts I used:

- Helvetica 14 pt for the title *Elegy for the Silver Eel*
- *Helvetic 12 pt Italic for the poem*

In the Book Arts Lab, the type is sorted into cabinets for different fonts and trays by font size. All the letters – both capitals, small letters, and special characters are sorted into compartments corresponding to a legend (Figure 2). This is called the type case.



Figure 2: Type Case



I was shown how to hold the composing stick – in the left hand held upwards. To accommodate the shaped text and my chosen paper size, we sized the composing stick at 25 picas. See Figure 3.

Text is composed starting at the Left and up-side-down.

Figure 3: Composing stick set to 25 picas

Leading and spacers are used for spacing. M spacers go at the beginning and end of lines and smaller spacers go between each word. Spacers need to match the size of the text. Figure 4a is a box of 12 point spacers. Figure 4b is a box of longer pieces of leading for spacing in between the lines of text or for larger gaps. I used a lot of the cut leading to shape my text.



Figure 4a: 12 point Spacers

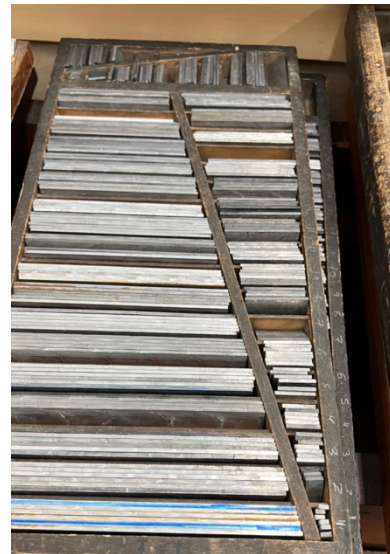


Figure 4b: Leading

On Day 1, I set the title row then transferred it to a galley, which was placed into my own drawer (Figures 5a 5b).



Figure 5a: Galley with my first line of text



Figure 5b: My galley tray with others

Day 2 – March 14

Upon arrival at the Book Arts Lab, I immediately started typesetting the text of my poem. Setting up the positioning of the start of each line presented some challenges at the outset but I soon got comfortable with shaping the flow of text. I had typeset four lines and time to transfer them to the galley. Oh boy! Everything fell apart! I had misremembered the transfer process.

Larry showed me the correct way to move the text from the composing stick to the galley. Before resuming typesetting, I had to sort my jumbled text back into the font tray and start again. I reset three lines. With great trepidation I successfully transferred them to the galley and called it a day. Figure 6 is a photo of my three lines transferred to the galley.



Figure 6: End of Day 2

Day 3 – March 31

Two weeks had passed since my previous visit to the Book Arts Lab. I immediately went to work typesetting. Having typeset four lines I went to transfer my text and found that I had set the type backwards. OMG! A repeat of Day 2!



Figure 7: End of Day 3

But by the end of day, I successfully set and transferred up to the “cut” in the poem. See Figure 7.

I left hoping that I had learned all the hard lessons!

Day 4 – April 4

I was determined to get the poem typeset and I did. I took a photo of the type and reversed it on my iPhone. While I had lunch, I checked for typos – and there were many. Some of these were most likely introduced when I sorted the type after my two earlier typesetting mishaps. It is hard to tell the difference between i and l, a and g, and d and b upside-down and backwards!. Using tweezers, I picked out the erroneous type and replaced it with the right ones.



Figure 8: Photo of type, reversed for proof-reading

By 3pm, I had the typos corrected and was ready to print. Larry gave me a lesson on the use of the Vandercook Letterpress printing press.

The galley was positioned on the press bed (Figure 9a). The paper was fixed (Figure 9b); I plucked off the prints with each roll of the press. The neat thing about a letterpress is that it does not have to be inked with each print, so my prints quickly accumulated (Figure 9c).

I printed 20 prints. Because of the stiffness and size of the paper, the prints weren't 100% clean but I have always been an artist who appreciates expressions of chance in art.



Fig 9a: the galley on the press

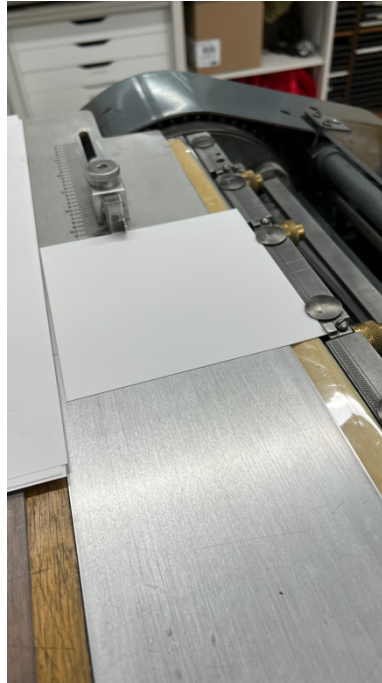


Fig 9b: Paper set



Fig 9c: Hot off the press!

Marking my galley as a work in progress, I left happy, the first set of prints in hand.

Day 5 – April 12 – Final Day

I arrived at the Book Arts Lab and the place was hopping. I was not the only student trying to get their projects finished.

I quickly removed the title and author lines of text and replaced them with leading, as planned. Figure 10 shows the “revised” text.



Figure 10: Revised text

When it was my turn at the press, I positioned the galley on the press bed and secured it with magnets. After adjusting the positioning, I was able to print the second edition of 19 (I lost one in the process of alignment).

I noticed after the fact that I had introduced some minor imperfection into the print. When removing the title, some of the spacers were not seated properly. Again, I refer back to the expression of chance in the art. I appreciate signs of chance as signifiers of the artistic process.

I wiped the text with Varsol and returned the galley to the cabinet. I marked it complete so the text could be resorted by people with better vision and a steadier hand than me.

I decided to present the work as a unit in one clear envelop with an explanatory insert.

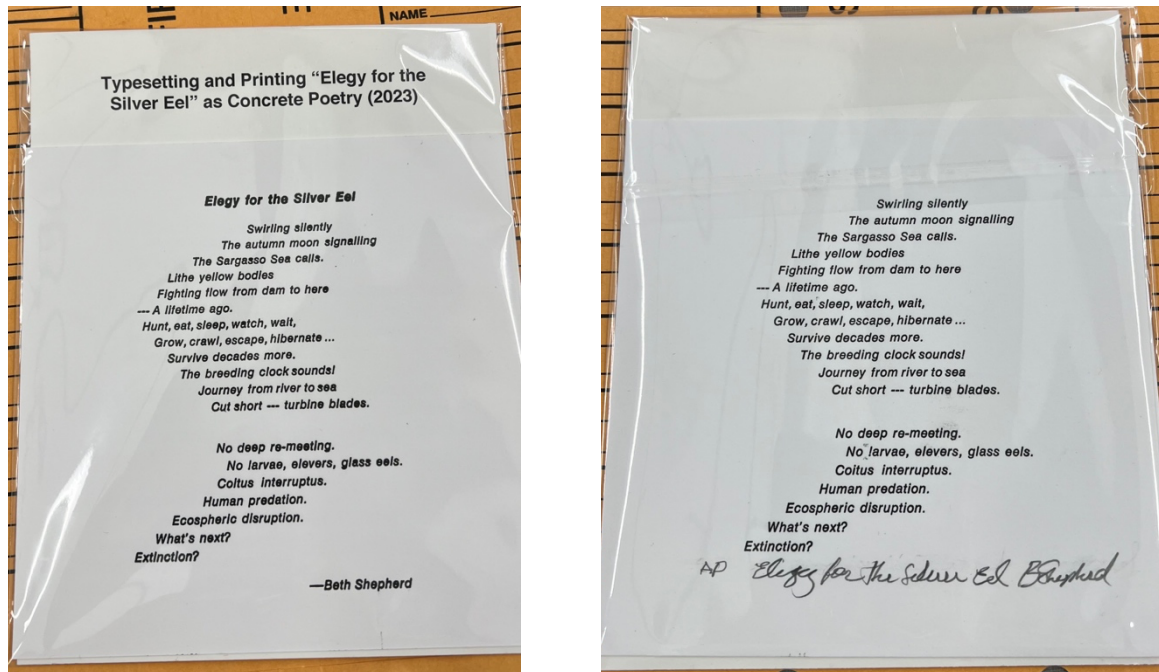


Figure 11: The Final Product