

## CHOOSING A TYPEFACE

When I began writing poetry in high school I was fascinated with how a poem looked. I'd really concentrate on the pencil point, wondering how long a line should be and how the title should look. I was fascinated with ee cummings for his lower case obsession and the way he staggered lines and scored one's reading that way. Or how a sonnet looked, so condensed and serious, that tight mass of words twenty syllables wide and fourteen lines long. Or the beauty of Blake's quatrains, the in and out of the first lines, the brevity and stanza breaks. All my life I've paid acute attention to how words and stories exist in the graphic dimension. Comics, cartoons, "Classics Illustrated", adventure novels with stirring illustrations, Alice in Wonderland...everything illuminated, drawn, brushed, limned, or printed carefully. I vowed long ago that I would always *become* the line. That the ink was always my self at that moment. Making love to the empty pages.

When my first book was published by small press in 1996, I was asked to choose a typeface. I'd never studied typography and was suddenly very serious about it. How do I know what I like? My perceptions of type in a book were entirely subliminal. After a lot of agonizing, not unlike that of a seventh-grader practicing different signatures, I realized that Garamond was the way I'd like to see my poems. I'm not sure why at that point...just something no-nonsense about it. And condensed, balanced, rhythmic... in a *poetry* way. It still looks right to me in that book.

When I decided to learn printing, my attention to letterforms went up several stages. Setting up a little shop in my garage, I only had a little room for cabinets, so I had to really narrow in on typefaces that I could build books out of over and over. From Garamond I realized what the humanist romans were, studied the great Venetians, and the way they influenced the 20th C. revivals. What bothered me was that my art was based on improvisation, on letting my freehand handwritten lyrics merge with faces and doodles seamlessly. I was trying to manifest the aesthetics of Asian traditions of calligraphy & brush-painting as a fused experience. Word & image & accidents of the moment all as one. But in setting type and perfectly editing a piece, one was doing away with all chance and flow. Even the forme was a rigid rectangle enforced with wedges. A grid. So if one chose a perfect typeface, like the refined revivals of the Aldine letters in Centaur or Bembo, the aesthetic seemed to vie with my work. The poems would be having dinner with the Doge instead of Arrighi. A classicist problem...perfection death.

Then I found Poliphilus. A facsimile of the type used by Aldus Manutius in Venice 1499. It was taken from a copy of an actual book, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, with all the slight imperfections that occurred as the type smudged slightly into the paper or was already a little dulled from use. Some irregularities were left alone, so it has a slightly darker aspect, heavier in ink, with a hint of syncopation in the reading rhythms. The fit of letter to letter isn't metronomic. It seems hand-made, just enough that my pages might still represent how I felt. Not a machined feeling that puts the reader in a bullet train...a carved feeling. So that became my 'house type'. I've never regretted it either. I see how perfect Centaur is, but I leave that for business cards and announcements.

Poliphilus also allows my meandery graphics to be alongside. The line thickness varies like my penpoint, and the shapes of letters aren't keenly balanced...like my drawings. I think one really has to start with the typeface. If the letterforms are too refined, the writing must go scholarly or formal. If it be too casual the stories will be yakkity-yak. If it be too archaic, the tales will be too quaint. If it be decorative, the language will go Edwardian. Find one that is expressive of your heart & bones...as if you had carved it.