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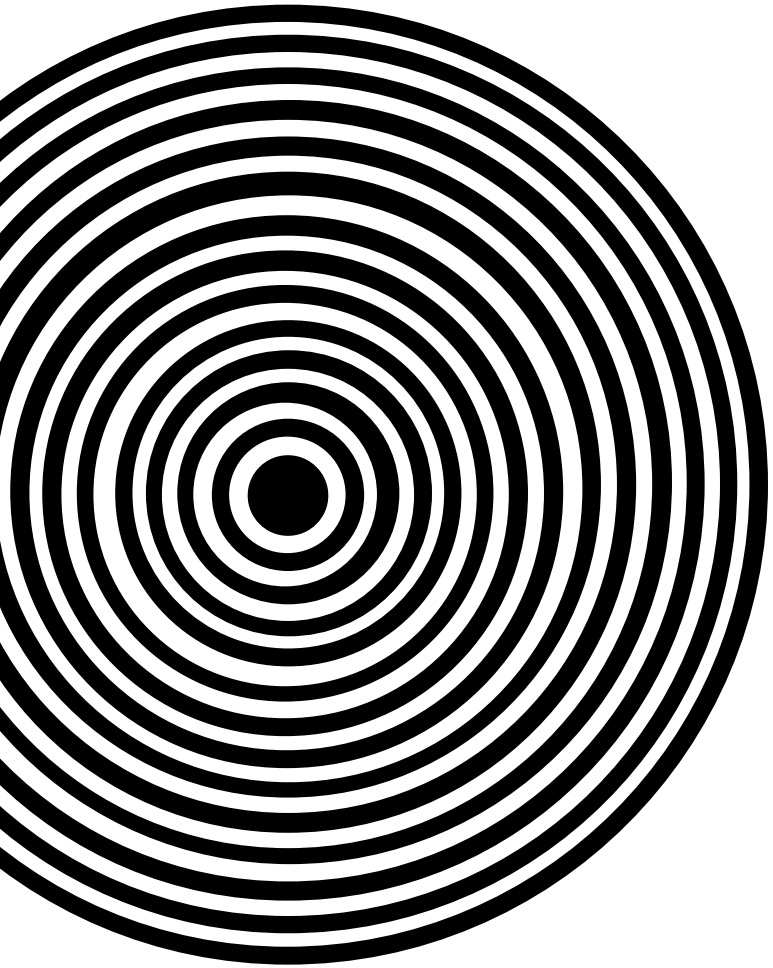
Geoff Sawers



AMONG THE NEIGHBORS

Silver in My Mines

Peter Hay's Work for Two Rivers Press 1994-2003

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Geoff
Sawers

AMONG THE NEIGHBORS 18

The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries,
University at Buffalo, The State University of New York
Buffalo, New York
2021

AMONG THE NEIGHBORS
a pamphlet series for the study of Little Magazines
The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo

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This series is supported by
The Mildred Lockwood Lacey Fund for Poetry

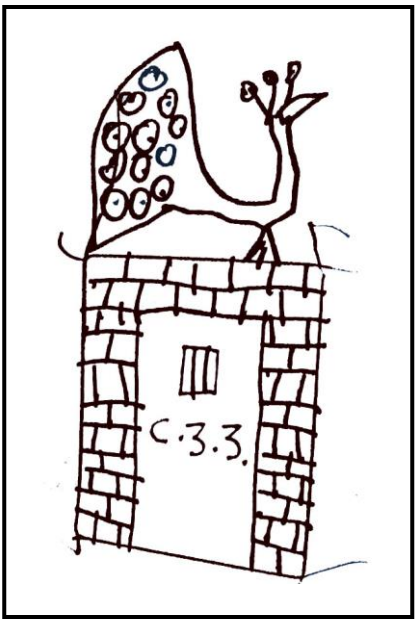
Parts of this text previously appeared as a pamphlet by Goose Cathedral Press (2019) and in the volume *Charms Against Jackals: Ten Years of Two Rivers Press* (Two Rivers, 2004), both copyright Geoff Sawers. Geoff would like to thank Goober Fox, David Greenslade, and Adam Stout.

All illustrations are by Peter Hay and used courtesy of Jill Hay, except for the final image of Peter Hay's desk, courtesy of John Froy. The prefatory poem by Peter Hay "Ode [1987]" is previously unpublished.

cover design by Patrick Riedy and Edric Mesmer

Ode [1987]

give me one flower
for a spark in a shower
one leaf as ikon
one stone to strike on
a light in the dark
a bone for my bark
one knot to tighten
one load to lighten
for I walk alone to the ark.



Artist Peter Hay used to love the quaint and overlooked; he would quote Gerard Manley Hopkins's "all things counter, original, spare and strange" and in a way that summed him up.[1] That he worked outside the mainstream art system may have annoyed him at times, but I honestly believe it spared him as much grief as it did money. His response to 9/11, for instance, was to start painting a series of Islamic paradises, and then pretend to be surprised that they didn't sell, that no one understood what he was doing. He knew perfectly well they wouldn't sell, that he was going against the grain: that was what he always did. Another Pete line: "For better or worse, I've always lived inside the imagination." The very phrasing suggests a marriage and, tacitly, that the marriage has not been one of uninterrupted happiness. There is perhaps a yearning there for a simpler life: imagination can be a burden. But it was a marriage that lasted.

Listed, Pete's array of interests would be bewildering; when possessed by an idea he would pursue it down many-branched paths. He would research but would also welcome synchronicity: a paragraph in the newspaper would ring a bell, he'd make some sketches, next day find a book on a second-hand bookstall. The apple-ladder he was drawing one day for a book about cider-making would suddenly become the ladder for a deposition of Christ as he turned to thinking about Oscar

[1] "Pied Beauty," written in 1877; not published until 1918.

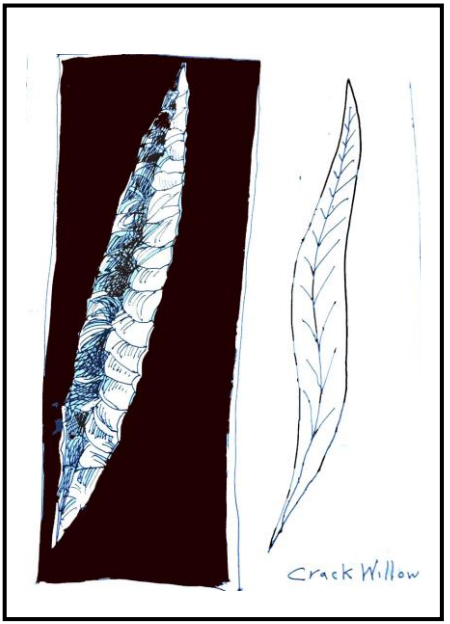
Wilde and martyrdom. He internalised his influences; didn't just plunder his legendary hoard of books for images, "rip them off" as he'd bluffly claim, but he would look at every image through new eyes each time he came to it.

The work for which Pete Hay was initially best known with Two Rivers Press was his rubber-stamp images (though he went on to use many other techniques). He would buy a bag of mixed-size erasers from a shop in Broad Street and carve into them with lino-cutting tools. They could be inked and printed very simply; it was a kitchen-table technique. The first stamp Pete ever cut was, fittingly, of a heron; a bird that would come to populate his paintings and prints in profusion over the next nine years. It was used on page 15 of the press's first book, *Where Two Rivers Meet*—standing on a lock sign—and its relative crudity is obvious beside stamps cut just a few weeks later.[2] Compare it to the sophisticated images he made for *Cat Jeoffry*; the difference is huge.[3]

That first book was born in 1994 from political activism and a campaign to save Kennet Mouth, where the river Kennet meets the Thames, and where Reading as a town was born. King Alfred "the Great" fought a losing battle against the Danes there in 871 AD. The "Cross Town Route" was an attempt to drive a major road through this beautiful and much-loved patch of greenness close to the centre of town. It just so happened that the streets nearby, a network of late-Victorian brick terraces, are some of the smallest—and cheapest—houses in Reading, home to a number of artists, musicians, and others who quickly mobilised as a protest movement. There was a lot of humour and creativity in the campaign against the road. People declared the area an ancient common, set up stalls, hung banners, organised a May Fayre with maypole, sheep, beer tent, and hundreds of visitors. Wandering scholar Adam Stout researched and wrote a micro-history of the area; Peter Hay offered to both illustrate and

[2] Stout, Adam. *Where Two Rivers Meet: The Story of Kennet Mouth*. Illustrated by Peter Hay, designed by Pip Hall, Two Rivers Press, 1994.
[3] Smart, Christopher. *Cat Jeoffry*. Illustrated by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 1999.

publish it. Pip Hall, lettering artist and stone-carver, and a shining light of the campaign, hand-lettered Adam's text.



Reading, a substantial town about 30 miles west of London, was actually Pete's adopted home. He grew up in Stockport, near Manchester, and came to Reading in the 1970s to study Fine Art. He moved to Cornwall for some years but returned to Reading in the mid-1980s. For many people the images Pete produced in one long decade with Two Rivers have shaped how they view the town and its various land- and water-scapes. So many of these books are out of print now; others are available but in new and re-set editions, but most are findable second-hand. One or two may be collector's items. Pete's most successful stamps in *Where Two Rivers Meet* were the landscape vignettes in a slightly nostalgic, Samuel Palmer-ish vein, on pages 18, 20, and 26. This style might in itself have made a career, but Pete wasn't going to be satisfied for long with traditional "local history book" work.

From that beginning, and echoing Adam Stout's text, his scope was wider. On page 11, a Romanesque beak-head carving from the medieval Reading Abbey echoes both the face of a Great crested grebe and a map of the locality. The tiny stamp on the left of page 6—it has been cut down from a larger eraser, as you can note from the single rounded corner—shows one of the illegal raves that used to happen just by the horseshoe bridge at Kennet Mouth at the time.

The marks are quite rough and under the arches they get lost. I guess it gives the effect of a white-out under fluorescent lights, but Pete was really just cutting his teeth on the medium at this point. A second portion of the same eraser is used for another version of the scene on page 24. The baseball-capped raver here is a figure Pete was to draw often: it was a subculture that fascinated him, though he felt too old to take part in or to really understand it. Look also for the Seurat bathers on page 43 of *A Much Maligned Town*; cooling off from dancing at Reading Festival by having a dip in the Thames; and on the *Ancient Boundary of Reading* map where the festival site is marked by a baseball-capped youth with a four-pack of beer, stuck in the mud; even the "cat with a rucksack" figure in *Cat Jeoffry*.[4] Several of the convicts in the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* (pages 8, 11, first edition) wear baseball caps too; more perhaps the look of the young offenders in Her Majesty's Prison Reading at that time than the low "Scotch cap" of Wilde's day a century before.[5]

It would have been quite possible for Two Rivers Press to start and end on that one book; after all, the press's name was just an echo of the book's title. But it had created a buzz and there was soon talk of following it up. With what? Adam, just back from a stay of several months in Australia, had dug out the story of a young Aboriginal boy brought to Reading in the 1850s, and so our second book was *The Story of Willie Wimmera*, put together hastily around New Year 1995.[6]

I had met Pete when he had an exhibition of his paintings at the Rising Sun Arts Centre a couple of years before and worked closely with him painting backdrops for the *From the Ruins*, a large-scale

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[4] *A Much-maligned Town: Opinions of Reading 1586-1997*. Edited by Adam Sowan, illustrated by Peter Hay, designed by Pip Hall, Two Rivers Press, 1997; Stout, Adam. *Beating the Bounds: The Ancient Boundary of Reading*. Lettering, Geoff Sawers, illustrations, Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 1996; Smart, *Cat Jeoffry*.

[5] Wilde, Oscar. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Illustrated by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 1995.

[6] Stout, Adam. *The Story of Willie Wimmera*. Illustrations, Peter Hay, lettering, Geoff Sawers, Two Rivers Press, 1995.

theatrical masque held in the abbey ruins, also in 1994.[7] I went to Pete and offered to hand-letter Adam's new story and we did the paste-ups together. The booklet (100 copies) was quite rough but sold so quickly that we rushed out a revised edition, a further 500, to follow in February. *Where Two Rivers Meet* had been professionally printed in an edition of 1500; *Willie* was just run off on a photocopier by a friend of Pete's who had spare time at work and wanted to do it. We paid for the paper and stapling but nothing else, and sold them for £2 a copy.

There is a map of how to find Willie's grave in the Junction Cemetery on the final page of the book: look for the doubled circle on the cemetery plan. Two pages earlier, under the words "dedicated to God," Aboriginal symbols make a chain from Australia to the horse-shoe bridge. In *Where Two Rivers Meet* the stamps had largely been used as vignettes but Pete quickly grasped the possibilities for using several together to make larger pictures or patterns. He loved the accidental "noise" created when you blow up images on a photocopier, enhanced by the vagaries of printing little stamps roughly on cheap working paper. The endpapers of *Willie Wimmera* feature tiny stamps enlarged many times, as had the cover of *Where Two Rivers Meet*. When Pete came to illustrate the first Waterstones *Broad Street* anthology two years later, this technique came into its own with the wallpapers used on pages 6, 8, and 12.[8]

Adam Stout's third offering was *The Ancient Boundary of Reading*: a large hand-drawn map covered in barely legible scribbles, exploring the history (certainly Saxon; possibly Iron Age) of Reading's old boundaries and how they are still traceable in the town today, with the odd marker-post, ditch, and wall or odd-shaped building.[9] It was exciting also to produce something that wasn't another pamphlet but a large poster. I produced a neater version of Adam's original, sitting cross-legged on the floor of my bedsit above the Rising Sun Arts

[7] Rising Sun is a local independent arts centre, still going strong.
[8] *Broad Street: First Reading Waterstones Poetry Competition 1997*. Two Rivers Press, 1997.
[9] Stout, *Beating the Bounds*.

Centre with a drawing board on my knees, occasionally ringing up Pete to say: "I need an image, about an inch square, for the Redlands Road area."

Pete would respond to requests like this at lightning speed. It was not so much his virtuosity as his inventiveness, his quick darting imagination. An example, of which he was proud at the time, occurs here to the left of and below the title, *The Ancient Boundary of Reading*: I had given him two identical triangle shapes and asked for an angel pointing to the left in one, an angel pointing to the right in the other. It didn't seem easy to me, but it caused Pete no problem. One has an outstretched finger to the left making the point, and billowing skirts and wing making the broader side on the right; the other has feet together making the point of the triangle, both hands outstretched on the other side.

In November that same year we published our illustrated edition of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.[10] Instead of the mixed-size collage designs we'd used before we chose here a more regular design: Pete bought three bags of identical erasers to work on and we planned for each illustration to take the place on the page of one stanza of the poem.

[10] Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.*

We had hoped this book might be our masterpiece and went for a 1500 print run again. I designed a typeface, using elements of nineteenth-century display types, Oscar Wilde's handwriting, and so on, but the production of the book was beset with difficulties. Due to a last-minute mix-up, two-thirds of the book was set in an early, rough version of the font and only scattered pages throughout in the final version. There was no time to reprint as we were working to a deadline. (The centenary of Wilde's arrival in Reading Gaol was our launch date.) No one but me seemed to notice but I was so disgusted with the final result that I destroyed all copies I could find of the font, throwing the master disc into the Thames at Kennet Mouth after an evening's drinking with Pete.

Despite my typographical ineptitude, *The Ballad* sold quickly and was, as well as a commercial success (it paid for new windows in Pete's house), no mean artistic one. Pete pulled his finest set of illustrations out of the hat; by turns comical, lyrical, and savage, they reflect and expand upon the moods of this dark and turbulent poem. It was a joy to work with Pete on this—sitting either side of his kitchen table, we'd scribble layouts and sketches, pass them back and forth, occasionally getting up to change the record over.

I had an image come into my head for one stanza of an angel covering her face—I mentioned it and within five minutes Pete was cutting the picture into one of his erasers. This was the only one of the images that I influenced—everything else either came from Pete's head or was adapted from his huge stack of reference material. He spent ages trying to find an old Frans Masereel edition of the *Ballad* that his wife Jill had once given him, but finally gave it up as lost.[11] I suspect he was secretly glad that he couldn't be too influenced by it.

It is worth looking at his working process step by step. I have chosen his first illustration for Wilde's line "every stone one lifts by day becomes one's heart by night." This is an unused alternate; replaced

[11] Methuen did an edition in 1924; Journeyman in 1978—in any case, the book never turned up.

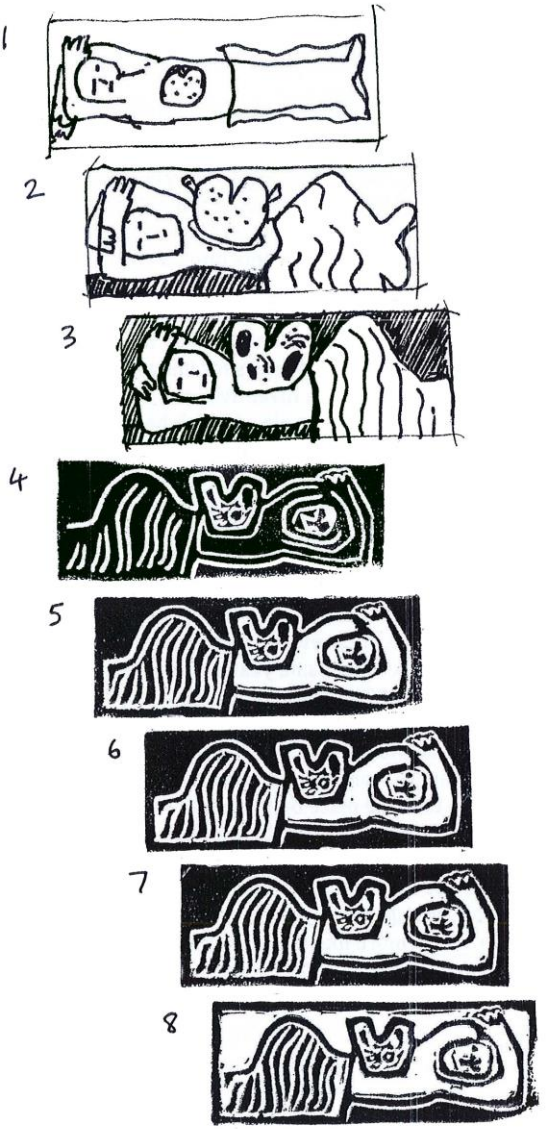
eventually on page 49 by another image more like the "monster from the Id" in the film *Forbidden Planet*.[12]

Pete's first sketch (1), with a bedsheet around the legs, looks a little like a mermaid's tail and the stone heart like an X-ray of a stomach with a loaf of bread in it. Pete starts again (2). The format does not change, because he has already chosen the eraser he's going to carve: horizontal format for a sleeping man seems an obvious choice. Raising the man's knee makes the shape more clearly human; the face takes on a suitably death-mask-like aspect. But the stone heart now looks like a roast turkey. Pete starts once more (3). He's happy with his composition now, so his focus is on making the heart more clearly resemble a large flint; another of his obsessions. He is now ready to start cutting. (4) is just rough outlines; he firms them up and whites out the torso in (5). Next, (6, 7) he works more closely into the face, which morphs from a death mask into something like a Rorschach blot, and the flint. The finishing touch comes in (8) as, looking back at sketch (2), he decides to white out the background leaving a frame and suggesting a bed beneath the figure. The picture is now finished. All these stages comes from one worksheet dated "24 Sept 95"; it might have taken about an hour, most likely after dinner with a glass of wine by his elbow.

The image on page 7 of the *Ballad* was derived from a newspaper photograph of O.J. Simpson, the American athlete whose murder trial was widely covered at the time, demonstrating that the gloves he was supposed to have worn did not fit him. The figure becomes here "the hangman with his gardener's gloves," his face as blank as the unholy trinity of Sheriff, Governor, and Chaplain on the page before. (Pete was unconvinced by Simpson's protestations of innocence.) And there are many more echoes: Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*—a nightmarish image that had moved us both when it was first shown in Britain at the "Genius of Venice" exhibition—crops up on page 13.[13] In this

[12] *Forbidden Planet*. Directed by directed by Fred M. Wilcox, performances by Walter Pidgeon, Anne Francis, and Leslie Nielsen, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1956.

[13] "Genius of Venice, 1500-1600," 1983, Royal Academy, London.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vein, there are shades of José Guadalupe Posada's Mexican "calavera" illustrations in places (pages 29 and 53), a cartoonish version of Edvard Munch's *Scream* on page 33, and the set of Elvis's *Jailhouse Rock* on page 34. Many images are shared between these two books (*Ballad* and *Willie)*—eyes, bleeding hearts, and skeletons—and many more could have been: the crows and cedars that recur throughout *Willie Wimmera*, for instance. The *Ballad*'s back cover image has one rubber stamp, reduced in size, pasted inside a blown-up version of another. We had piles of discarded photocopies of various sizes, many torn and crumpled and rescued from the bin; putting them together in unlikely combinations, we came up with images like this.

The next book Pete did, Welsh poet David Greenslade's *Creosote* in summer 1996, was a landmark for Two Rivers.[14] Everything so far had been cut-and-pasted by hand, but Bridget Long's formal and professional design used Pete's stamps like illuminated initials, instead of scattering them across the page. David was amazed at the way the press worked, as our distribution was still mostly Pete cycling around to local bookshops, or us setting up a stall at summer events or art exhibitions. "None of you even has a car!" David said. *Creosote* was followed by Duncan Mackay's *Apples, Berkshire, Cider*. Pete again welcomed having someone else (Pip Hall this time) to deal with the layouts, and threw himself into carving apple after apple, along with various crabs, pears, worms, and hogsheads. In a notebook page, he kept a tally of how many images he had done, and produced a mock bill, charging his time (to whom?) at £10 an hour; it came to about four thousand pounds. The rate wasn't that excessive—he earned that teaching evening classes at Reading College. Needless to say, he got paid a couple of hundred. The book did however get him a commission from a local organic wine and cider producer. Their publicity and bottle labels from this time are full of Pete's rubber stamp images, several of them recycled alternates from the Cider book. Of course, he undercharged for what he did: whilst he was beginning to master his medium, he was still unsure about the

[14] Greenslade, David. *Creosote.* Illustrated by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 1996.

business side; I don't think he ever felt really comfortable asking for money for what he did. He and I used to work on begging letters to local charities together, and I'm amazed we ever got anything because our letters were so shoddy and apologetic. Perhaps our sincerity shone through? Or perhaps they just felt sorry for us. Perhaps both.

With *Apples* in the bag that Autumn, Pete and Pip had set to work on *Winter Song* from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, as a tiny gift book. The title roundel has an image of an owl (hand-stamped on the cover of some copies) with icicles and snow pasted around it: a cynical stab at the Christmas market. And it worked—400 copies flew off the shelves.[15] The "roasted crabs" on page 13 are a neat echo of the *Cider* book, as well as Pete's love of shellfish. He knew perfectly well they should have been apples. His mock-medievalism combines sinew (the axe in the bucket, for instance) and humour (the Greasy Jone, the droning parson) with very little sentimentality. I'm not convinced that *Spring Song* a few months later managed to do the same. It's never quite twee—the mating doves and the overtly vaginal arum on page 8 see to that—but Pete was beginning to be able to knock off these rubber stamps with some facility, and I think it shows. He needed a new challenge.

[15] Shakespeare, William. *Winter's Song from Love's Labour's Lost*. Illustrations by Pete Hay, design by Pip Hall, Two Rivers, [circa 1996]. Reprinted, 2005.

Adam Stout had just moved to Wales, but a second Adam (Sowan) entered the picture at this point. Which brings us to another of Two Rivers Press's iconic books: Adam Sowan's *A Much-maligned Town*.[16] This was a compilation of visitor's views and opinions of Reading over the centuries. Many towns collect their own praise, but we loved the dark humour in Adam's painstaking compilation of all Reading's negative press as well. There are numerous books about the river Thames, for instance, in which Reading features as the only industrial town and is described in counterpoint to the pretty villages up and downstream. Gathered, the repeated dissing becomes hilarious. Highlights among Pete's illustrations are Concorde flying high over the town hall (page 42), George Palmer in the rain (page 32) and the diving boys (page 31; compare Pete's b/w photograph in *The Waterlog*, page 62). The four-part index, characterized by Forbury Gardens lions in various states of happiness/grumpiness, is a masterstroke. This was Two Rivers co-operative working at its best; the idea was Adam's, and what Pete made of it is great.

Pete and I were, however, starting to pull in different directions. I, rather airily-fairily, wanted us to work towards self-sufficiency but I had no head for business. We did a pamphlet for the centenary of Oscar Wilde's release from Reading Gaol, using Pete's sketches for his *Ballad* illustrations, but I gave all the proceeds to a prisoner-support organisation.[17] I had found an unusual, privately printed story from 1887, *The Island of Anarchy*, by Elizabeth Waterhouse; we published a facsimile and donated the profits to Campaign Against the Arms Trade.[18] She had been a Quaker; it seemed an appropriate cause. But Pete, who entirely against his will but presumably in response to my scatterbrain tactics was actually doing proper accounts now, argued that funding from above was the only feasible possibility for the press's survival. Soon after I left Reading in late 1997, Two

[16] Sowan, Adam, ed. *A Much-maligned Town: Opinions of Reading 1586-1997*. Illustrated by Peter Hay, designed by Pip Hall, Two Rivers Press, 1997. Second edition, 2008.
[17] Sawers, Geoff. *A Ladder for Mr. Oscar Wilde*. Drawings by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 1997. Second, revised edition, 2008.
[18] Waterhouse, Elizabeth. *The Island of Anarchy*. Two Rivers Press, 1997.

Rivers received a substantial grant offer from the Arts Council. For the first time it seemed it might have some kind of financial stability. Pete grumbled, of course. "But Peter," the man from the Arts Council said to him, "you could buy your mum a house with it." Not that Pete was likely to run off with the cash; the worst he was really up for was printing non-commercial books. He mentioned it to me at the end of a phone call, since we had drafted the application together: "Oh, by the way, we've got £71,000 over the next three years. I suppose we'll have to do those bloody books we talked about now."

Corridor Press, another Reading small publisher, began a series of pamphlets by local poets. Corridor had been receiving Arts Council funding for some time, but much more than us. They had "core funding"—offices and paid staff; our grant paid for printing costs and assumed that writers and artists would be paid out of profits. [Sound of hollow laughter.] But Corridor was supposed to do "Literature" and hadn't actually done any yet. To give their pamphlets a "Two Rivers look" they paid Pete to illustrate them, again with rubber stamps. The series began with a set of four and ended there: Corridor had only published them under sufferance and put no effort into distributing or promoting them. Unfortunately, too, Pete's work on these books was a bit uninspired. This often seemed to happen when he was working to commission. Lesley Saunders's book was his favourite, but even his illustrations for that one weren't great. Susan Utting's collection got a fine image on one page, of low sun slanting through bare orchard trees. But, not following his own nose, Pete just didn't seem

to produce much sparkle. The exception was Tim Masters's *Einstein's Eyes*. The imagery obviously struck a chord for Pete; the full-page collages he made for "War Baby"—cameras staring like gun-barrels—and the final page are terrific. His illustration for the poem "Shroud" could have found a place in the *Ballad*.[19]

Just after this time Pete decided that, rather than spending his holiday in Devon making mountains of sketches as he usually did, he would leave his pencils at home and relax. His good will (if that is the word) lasted a few hours: picking up a bunch of cuttlefish bones on the beach, he started to whittle patterns into their soft backs with his penknife. Soon he was carving mermaids, sunsets, sailing ships. He came back with a trayful of the things, but not only that: he told a tall story about how he had stumbled on the remains of a colony of folk-artists, fishermen from the 1920s and '30s whose only form of expression had been these carvings. Most had of course succumbed to the ravages of time, but he had found his landlady feeding armsful of them to her budgie and rescued them. With our new grant from the Arts Council, we had head-hunted Ulric Spenser from Corridor to do our accounts; as the man from the Arts Council said, "You'll need someone to look over that while

[19] The four books, all published in 1997, are: *The Dark Larder by* Lesley Saunders; *Scratched Initials* by Susan Utting; *Einstein's Eyes* by Tim Masters; and *Small Infidelities* by Kristina Close.

the creative types are playing cricket in the corridor." (How did he know we did that?) Now Pete thought we'd publish a glossy book of photographs of the cuttlefish carvings; Adam Stout would be enlisted for a mock-academic essay to accompany it. Believe it or not, the project didn't find favour with the Arts Council and was quietly dropped. I still wonder what happened to the cuttlefish. Did Pete hand the whole lot over with resignation to a neighbour with a cockatiel?

Lesley Saunders and Jane Draycott submitted a collaborative manuscript about the medieval mystic *Christina the Astonishing*. Jane was published by Oxford University Press, but they dropped their entire poetry stable in one go. Lesley is a well-known poet now too, but the Corridor pamphlet that Pete had just illustrated was her first publication. Here was something for Pete to get excited about again. His images, in a variety of media, are printed in black and white on odd butter-coloured panels, and go far beyond the idea of illustration to form a complementary sequence to the poems.[20] He mixed techniques in a delirious joy: lithographs, wax crayons, charcoal, white-out pen—it's all in there. The main image (page 83, cover, and, if you can find one, the promotional postcard, where it is reproduced in colour) is a kind of ecstatic, faceless goddess, blazing with light and radiating kisses.

[20] Draycott, Jane, and Lesley Saunders. *Christina the Astonishing*. Prints and drawings by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 1998.

There are echoes in Pete's work, as always—Max Ernst and Samuel Palmer; also Ken Kiff—but, for the most part, they have a life of their own, a journey that seems to involve a transformation of earth into fire and air.

We rented a tiny office upstairs at RISC (Reading International Solidarity Centre), bought a computer, and the poet Paul Bavister (we had already published two pamphlets of his work) started part-time doing our admin, invoicing and so on.[21] Soon afterwards a man called David Crystal dazzled Pete and Paul with stories of how he knew Irvine Welsh and the like, and they for some reason agreed to publish his poetry. The book—*First Catch Your Hare*—is not a complete dud, though: there's Mark Wallinger's cover design, for a start (Pete despised it; I think it's great), and Pete's illustrations of course.[22] Pete set himself to do pen and ink drawings for this one; in some places with more than a hint of his friend Ian Pollock's work: see page 35 for an example. The text is taken fairly literally: mentions of Keats and swallows draw an echo of *Gathering Swallows* (although the bird depicted is a swift, page 22); a cormorant gets a picture of a cormorant (definitely not a shag).[23] On a couple of double spreads Pete started to break with this, tearing up photocopies of his drawings and pasting them together again. These collages are perhaps the most distinctive parts of the book; disjointed and apocalyptic, with nods to Jörg Immendorff, Hieronymus Bosch, and *Guernica*-era Picasso. Sales of the book, however, were not encouraging.

Paul suggested that a way to ensure poetry publication against loss would be to run a poetry competition; submission fees (a relatively modest £3 in our case) would fund the printing of the resulting book.

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[21] Bavister, Paul. *Miletree*. Illustrations and typeface by Geoff Sawers, Two Rivers Press, 1999; *Glass*, 1998.

[22] Crystal, David. *First Catch Your Hare*. Illustrations by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, [1999].

[23] Francis, Matthew. *Gathering Swallows*. Illustrated by Peter Hay, lettering by Pip Hall, Two Rivers Press, 1997. This was a poetry competition won by Matthew Francis, held to find a contemporary response to Keats's "To Autumn" to celebrate the bicentenary of John Keats's birth.

It's a model many publishers have followed, and we took it on. Soon the office was piled high with poetry submissions. It was hard to give anything the attention it deserved—and you got jaded reading so much so quickly. Pete was ambivalent too, as expressed in a poem he wrote at the time:

This Fails Too

Assassin slits the fat manilla
breaches envelopes for cheques or cash.
Guts them to release the gas
of grieving lonely poets.
All the self-consuming woeful stories
of love-lost dawns
fill the room with a fungal mist.
The words slump into a mush.
A droning, draining voice
neutral, useless.
Losers, losers, the way they use
the bruise of blue.
Their sad, drab histories
everywhere the same.
Vermilion, carmine, crimson? No.

Later he sorts unfranked stamps
piles the paper clips into glittering heaps
briefly thinks of gold fillings, shoes and hair
before opening the furnace.[24]

Pete feels himself on both sides of the envelope here—perhaps at both ends of the knife. Some years before he had put together a small collection of his own poems and submitted them to the publisher Bloodaxe. The manuscript had been returned with a note of cautious praise, though the reviewer found it in places "tight-lipped and world-

[24] "This Fails Too" is unpublished until now.

weary." Understandable for a set that included a poem opening "Life is hard…"

Pete responded: "On the contrary, I am slack-jawed and ecstatic." But his irony was usually subtle and often easy to miss. He had been sending himself up with that line—both of them, in fact—even while believing it (or them). Bloodaxe suggested he try someone else, who finally returned the manuscript a year later. Never slow to scent a conspiracy against himself, Pete decided they'd all been playing him along and retired hurt. I don't think he actively submitted his poetry for publication anywhere again. His writing is certainly dense and allusive, often using chains of three, four, even five adjectives; some people find this hard to read and I admit it can be, but it can also be exhilarating, as he makes the most unexpected connections—lightning leaps. A weakness perhaps is his fondness for the most dreadful puns. An early project (abandoned) on the John Soane obelisk in Reading's marketplace, was to be called "Obelisk: The Gall."[25] But the puns and the allusiveness were two sides of the same coin, Pete would have said; the allusions are there for you if you get them. It should all still work even if you don't. Here is another poem from around this time, one that he agreed I could use in *The Unruly Sun*, a magazine I co-edited for ten years under the aegis of the Rising Sun Arts Centre:[26]

Flint

Think anew. Through a glass darkly.
A chink of light from a fracture.
Pistols at dawn. Antlers locked.
Oscar in the clink.

Silica spuds.

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[25] While Peter Hay's text was never published, Two Rivers did eventually publish a book on this subject, by Adam Sowan: *A Mark of Affection: The Soane Obelisk in Reading*. Two Rivers Press, 2007.

[26] Edited by Jennifer Hoskins and Geoff Sawers; the magazine ran for 10 issues, from 1996 to 2007.

You dig them up, pinging the spade
striking vitreous sparks.
Ridiculous to think
that these were once sponge.

Now surfaced, released.
Dusting off the blackboard chalk
of dull lectures and
dandruff complexion.

Snowdrifts of dallying plankton.

Broken out, incredulous, conchoidal.
Knapped into an axe
sharp enough to skin a tree.

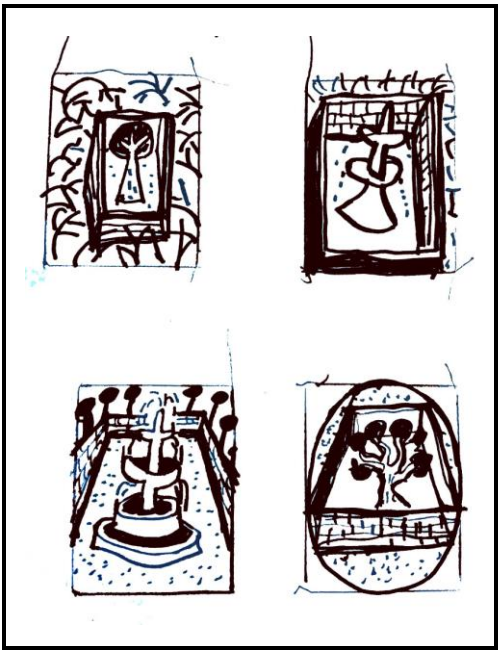
Yet, another was born perfect.
Needed no shaping.
Fell out of bedrock like a heart.

Micraster! My urchin.
My umber acorn. My shepherd's crown.
My star. My boy.
Let's fight.[27]

In fact, this poem was just one aspect of a loose project we had started on the theme of flint. There are mountains of drawings and paintings in Pete's sketchbooks. The other parts I remember seeing the light of day were Adam Stout's *Knappings* pamphlet with an illustration by Pete pasted onto the cover, a sound installation by musician Tim Hill at RISC, and my lettering in the centrefold of our 1998 catalogue (only visible properly if you tore out the order form; it was meant to be a reward for ordering our books). The eventual winner of the poetry

[27] "Flint" was first published in *The Unruly Sun* issue 3 (1998).

competition was Robert Feather's *What the Fridge Said*.[28] Pete didn't actually illustrate the poems as such, but he made full-page textural abstracts (one is a detail from his *Drunken Boat* work), fully utilising the bleed off the page edges. They have something of the feel of Michael Mazur's illustrations to Dante to me; a book that Pete certainly loved. [29] The Arts Council would have liked us to have held a second competition for the illustrator and said so, forcefully. But titles were pouring out at this stage, largely due to Pete's intensity, and he didn't have much time to go looking at other people's work. His values were cooperation, but no one else could work at his speed and he was impatient. Also, Pete, Paul, and I used to be quite abrasive with each other in general. One would bring something into the office and the others would say, "Well what's that supposed to be?" "It's my poem, you cunts. Take it or leave it." But when Paul left to go to work for Macmillan, we had to adjust to working with other people who didn't appreciate this approach.



Matthew Holtby arrived from the Rising Sun Arts Centre; he seemed capable of handling difficult personalities (I should perhaps include

[28] Feather, Robert. *What the Fridge Said: Poems*. Illustrations, Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 1999.

[29] *The Inferno: Monotypes by Michael Mazur*. Edited by Jo-Ann Conklin, University of Iowa Museum of Art, [1994].

myself in there), vast fuzzy aspirations, and miniscule budgets; he was an effective foil to Pete's wayward attention and kept many projects on track that might otherwise have derailed entirely. The Arts Council money was getting swallowed up by rent and printing bills at an alarming rate and none of us was making very much money. I was working as a postman; Pete's main income came from teaching. Every sales success we had seemed to be balanced by two other things that flopped, and there were always some kind of grandiose plans for the *next* book.

Our version of Rimbaud's *Drunken Boat* followed on the eve of the millennium; it worked as a "local" book, nearly, as Rimbaud is thought to have lived in Reading for a few months in 1874, possibly teaching French.[30] And in fact, Pete had thought of illustrating the poem for years. In his notebooks there is a lovely sequence of watercolours illustrating the French text, couplet by couplet. But Pete fell on the chance to do something with my new translation of the text. This was a fresh departure for Pete: the richness of imagery was there in his work as ever, but matched by a richness of medium. He used etchings, litho-graphs, and woodcuts to create a dazzling and turbulent journey that matches and carries the text along. There is a faint echo in the cover image (top left) of his caricature of an overweight Wilde almost overbalancing a canoe—never actually used anywhere properly, but one sketch was published in *Ladder* (page 24, second edition; and that was itself based on a cartoon from 1893). "Free and puffing my pipe"—it's a very Pete moment. And the initial "C" on the back cover is "after Hokusai," of course. The poet Jeremy Reed liked what we were doing and offered us a fulsome blurb for the cover. He had been a supporter of local poet Denham Gray, who self-published two extraordinary and abstruse collections in the mid-1990s; Denham was a good friend of mine from the Rising Sun and put us in touch.[31]

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[30] Rimbaud, Arthur. *The Drunken Boat*. Translation by Geoff Sawers, illustrations by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 1999.

[31] These books by the pseudonymous Denham Gray are *Angel at the Door* and *Twilight Shift*, both published by JTC Books in Reading, 1996 and 1999 respectively.

In a way, the Rimbaud illustrations follow on from Pete's work for *Christina the Astonishing*, but using water as a central motif rather than fire. They sprawl and gurgle, where the *Christina* illustrations sat static and burned. Pete was really starting to enjoy himself. Unfortunately, he did so under pressure—resented, of course—from the Arts Council to stop illustrating everything we produced. From their perspective the press needed to be more broad-based; they couldn't indulge someone's pet project. Perhaps rightly, they could see Pete's drive starting to take over. A deliberate attempt to get in a variety of other artists' work was the *Monoprint* book that autumn.[32] It was put together cheaply and quickly and recouped its outlay straight away, as the contributors all bought several copies to dish out to friends. A rare bit of smart business—not repeated, of course.

Pete had been working away at illustrating the eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart for some time, but in a rather unfocussed way: trying different techniques here and there, sometimes including the words of the poem as etchings (à la Blake), at others seeing text on one page and lithographs or woodcuts facing it. Even the text itself changed. *Song to David* had been his first idea, but after a while he homed in on *Jubilate Agno*. "For there is silver in my mines," Smart had written from his madhouse cell, "and I bless God that it is rather there than in my coffers." This huge sprawling poem was written in the 1760s, but not published until the 1930s. Matthew suggested, sensibly, taking a small section, the oft-anthologised *Cat Jeoffry* sequence for starters: a cat book, it could sell at Christmas and drum up some revenue. It was done at the same time as *Boat*, and they shared an hilarious launch evening at RISC: "The Drunken Cat." The book sold pretty well and has been reprinted, but it never quite managed to kick-start the larger Smart book as it might have done.

[32] *Monoprint*. Images by Bernadette Arnold and others, Two Rivers Press, [1999].

two rivers press

invites you to a book launch and Christmas drink to be held at the sign of

the DRUNKEN CAT

(the Stones Room, RISC)

Thursday 16th December
8.30pm onwards

As a press, we did well with events and by word-of-mouth, but we had no clue how to up-sell. Reading University liked us, and offered a generous deal whereby their in-house library bindery would produce small runs of hardback copies of some of our books. The resulting editions were (and remain) beautiful, but our audiences tended to be cheap and cheerful, and very few of the hardbacks ever sold.

Undeterred by the awkward logistics of the poetry competition, Two Rivers ran a short story competition along very similar lines. The winner was a Scots-Canadian writer called Tom Bryan. His title story *The Sons of Macomish* opens with a Russian sailor flopping out his "dark sweating penis on the bar of the Haddock Arms Hotel" and saying something like "I'll cut this off if I ever betray you!"[33] Rather disappointingly, when an expanded version of the story came out from another publisher a year or two later, the penis flopped on the bar had become a hand. Did some nervous editor demand a cop-out? If so, they literally emasculated the best image of the book. Seven large woodcut illustrations, plus a cover, Pete's work on this was done in a few weeks; but the rich, knotty mark-making within formal vertical

[33] Bryan, Tom. *The Sons of Macomish: Stories*. Illustrated by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 2000.

compositions show his real delight in the medium. And it didn't lose us money!

It was followed by Adam Sowan's *Abbatoirs to Zinzan: Reading Streets and Their Names*.[34] Pete's work is a bit pedestrian for *Abbatoirs*; rather literal and static. Only the Orts Road scrap table really stands out (page 37) with its air of monastic extravagance. Sally Castle's ink drawings for this book have a lot more life, and it's hard to feel that Pete was really engaged with this book. I think he bashed these images out while concentrating on other things—chiefly on the twin sagas of *On Big Flowery Hill* (his father's photographs from a wartime expedition into China) and *The Waterlog* (a lavish journal).[35] Both turned out to be white elephants; they looked great, but they cost a lot to produce and sold badly. We had constant problems with printers, and troubled relationships even with the ones we used frequently. Some problems were clearly the printers' faults; they mixed up pages or forgot to trim as instructed. One of my books appeared with crop-marks visible on one page. But Pete was undiplomatic and could be awkward; he rubbed people up the wrong way. He demanded the best, but sometimes got the worst. We crossed into the new millennium with heavily stocked shelves and a pitiful bank balance. Surely, we thought, someone must want these things we're doing?

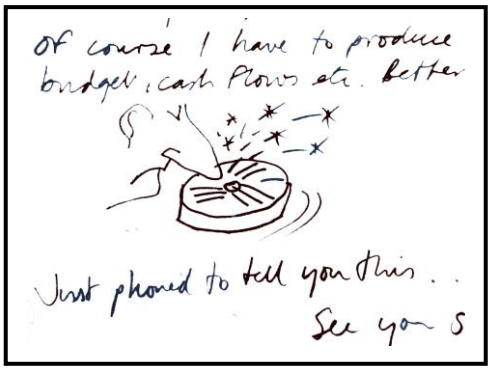
I designed David Greenslade's third book for Two Rivers, *The Sorcerer Receives a Cutte* (2001). Funds were desperately low now; the "Sorcerer" may have got one, but the designer never got paid any-

[34] Sowan, Adam. *Abattoirs to Zinzan: Reading Streets and Their Names*. Illustrated by Peter Hay and Sally Castle, Two Rivers Press, 2000. Sally Castle illustrated many Two Rivers titles and does all the covers for the Two Rivers poetry books to this day.

[35] Hay, John. *On Big Flowery Hill: A Soldier's Journal of a Secret Mission into Occupied China, 1942*. Preface by Jon Lee Anderson, introduction by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 2000. *The Waterlog* was a magazine offering a "selection of poetry, prose, interviews, illustrations and photographs," edited by Paul Bavister, Jane Draycott, and Peter Hay; only one issue was published, Autumn 2001.

thing. Nevertheless, Pete got to design a female version of his celebrated mandrake image from *Creosote* (page 8), a real delight. His woodcut style matched the job of mimicking a seventeenth-century woodcut device for the front perfectly too. Look at the scrolls around the edge, and more closely still, you will see our initials on the three islands: P.H., G.S., D.G. I think the Latin inscription is wrong.

From a distance—I was now living in Swansea—I wished that a lot more of Pete's time could be spent on spontaneous projects like this, and less on invoicing and grant applications. I would do the production and publicity work for most of the books that I was involved with but inevitably, once that was done, sales and returns would have to go through Reading. A condition of the Arts Council funding had been that they would only fund a proportion of our output; in other words, we had to publish a certain number of books each year with no support. That suited me, as my projects could fill those gaps, but it did mean that I was now tending to work on my own, and for me the best Two Rivers books are the true collaborations, like Jane Draycott's *Tideway* (2002). This was Pete's final masterpiece, fluid and assured. A watery subject again and worked in watercolour. Pete made full use of the chance to have images reproduced in colour. Almost perversely, as for years he hadn't used black in his paintings, he started to use dark blank slaps of it for the boats. All apart from one: in "St Mary Overie" it's in orange and white beneath a spatter of stars and a sizzle of lights in the water, taut and tense. Looking at *Tideway,* you felt that this at last was how Two Rivers books ought to be. Unfortunately, although the book sold quickly and Pete himself sold many of the paintings in an exhibition in Henley-on-Thames (belatedly discovering the possibilities of patronage from the moneyed classes), it was a financial disaster. The printing had been exceptionally expensive, and then Two Rivers allowed Jane Draycott's new publisher to use the poems in another book without asking for any payment, which meant no possibility of recouping their money through subsequent editions. What is more, the grant money had all run out by now.



Somewhere—in a junk shop?—Pete found a minute statuette of a Native American raven in dark soapstone. It had a chip off one wing and had clearly been part of a museum collection at some time, as you could see the class mark painted on the base. He took it into the Two Rivers Press office at RISC and put it on the window ledge. "My love, she's like some raven, at my window with a broken wing." Within days, everything started to go wrong. The computer crashed; they got it fixed, but they lost some work. Then the office was broken into, and the computer nicked. The back-up disc was still in the drive. "It's that bloody raven," Pete snapped, and he kept to this line. It amused him that while many people just laughed, the poets all took it seriously. "Oh yes, the raven is a very powerful figure, you shouldn't mess with it." When, not long afterwards, Pete was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, he took the raven down to Kennet Mouth and hurled it out into the rivers with a curse.

Paul Bavister's third book for us, *The Prawn Season* (2002), was for Pete a return to fluid pen-and-ink drawings reminiscent of *First Catch Your Hare*. Maybe too fluid? Some people thought they were just doodles. But look at the mammoths facing off on pages 12 and 13, the way one leans, the other stands firm. It doesn't just illustrate the poem after it, but the implicit violence in the poems before as well.

Early in 2003, Pete and Sally brought out Adam Sowan's *Holy Brook* guide.[36] The Holy Brook is a tributary of the river Kennet, running for six miles into Reading and embanked by the monks of the

[36] Sowan, Adam. *The Holy Brook, or, The Granator's Tale: Map and Guide*. Illustrated by Peter Hay, Two Rivers Press, 2003.

medieval abbey. I am not convinced by the scraperboard technique Pete used on this book, but I don't think anyone was going to say "no" to him at this point. I don't think it allows either for the dynamism you see in his pen drawings or for the finely massed compositions of his prints. Perhaps there is a frail beauty in the line here and there, but it's far from his best work. He himself had done much better scraperboards in the *Worts & All* pamphlet, back in 1999.[37]

A self-declared sceptic and agnostic, Pete was fascinated by magic and astrology, at least in part because of the richness of the symbolism. We once started a spoof project debunking freemasonry; after a few weeks of research Pete told me that he had come to admire the masons now and wanted to join. The nearest he got was being fast-tracked into the Reading Guild of Artists. He didn't fit it into their exhibitions, but then he produced work every day that would look out of place in his own retrospective. Pete liked to take the piss out of me for many things; he wasn't a complex man, though his single major fault was being thinner-skinned than he should have been. Anyone could insult him cheerfully, but it didn't mean a lot because he would give himself a far harder time than anyone else could, if he thought there was even a germ of truth in what they'd said. Oddly, he expected others to be the same, even though it's a rare trait.

Over the next few months, he spent a lot of time at the Abbey, Sutton Courtenay—a semi-Christian meditation retreat in rural Oxfordshire. "I'm thinking about it, you know," he said to me—meaning Christianity, I assumed. "Wondering what's there." Paused, and dragged on his cigarette. "Not much, I don't think." This was archetypal Pete: admitting to nothing but closing no doors either. It was the least cynical comment I ever heard him make on the subject. But mostly when we spoke on the phone he'd just want to talk about the football match the night before. He signed off on our *Thames Bestiary* project three months before the end.[38] "Just do whatever you

[37] A tiny pamphlet we produced for a midsummer event in 1999 as a giveaway, with no ISBN.
[38] Hay, Peter, and Geoff Sawers. *A Thames Bestiary*. Two Rivers Press, 2007.

want with it now." He had put so much effort into it, but he was having to conserve his energy, choose the few things that he could finish himself. He was really touched by a letter from a friend that read "I'm rooting for you Pete like you were a team I supported." But he had been given six months to live, and six months later he died.

I think that there is a lot of the feel of the Abbey in *Kubla Khan*, Pete's final book, published a few months after his death.[39] It was a return to rubber stamps for him, and to two more of his earliest loves: Samuel Palmer and the Middle East. Unashamedly mantic, sentimental, pastoral. In places it's a little unclear: the "Abyssinian maid" is meant to be a giant sphinx, seen from ground-level; on the facing page, paradise looks like a snow-globe. But the front cover image is vintage Palmer-Pete, with a palm tree goddess in the bottom right-hand corner. On the "pleasure-dome" page the imagery becomes punchier; the Palmer hills-and-moon frame an explicitly vaginal spring releasing a sacred river that gushes out over the next few pages. By the "deep romantic chasm," the hilltop oaks and elms have morphed into cedars of Lebanon; the river's journey itself has become a dazzling swirl of textures. And the shallow domed images gradually grow through the book into sharper arches and pinnacles that flower, finally, on the very last page of the book. This closing image ("milk of paradise") is actually Pete's disguised self-portrait, half-humorous but also fierce and gnomically blank. There are no lights, no twinkle in the fruits that double as eyes.

On the rear flap the moon reappears, this time tied to a minaret, instead of a sheep-cropped hill. Below it is a weeping poppyhead. Pete has overlaid an extra buzz onto Coleridge's original text; intimations of mortality, of course, and an almost desperate sexuality, as though fecundity were some defence against death. Pete couldn't quite let himself fall for Samuel Palmer's Catholic vision of an unspoiled rural past, but this was another dream of paradise. All that Pete really believeed in is encapsulated in a piece about the fifteenth-century

[39] Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Kubla Khan*. Illustrations, Peter Hay, lettering, Pip Hall, editor, John Froy, Two Rivers Press, 2004.

Siennese artist Giovanni di Paolo that he wrote for *The Waterlog*. It stands well as his manifesto. "These […] paintings are spells, enchantments," (he could have been writing about his own work) "…perhaps we are all vulnerable enough to need a glimpse of divine beauty as we munch our locusts out in the desert."

Twenty years after the campaign against the Cross Town Route was declared "victorious" and a plaque (featuring Adam Stout's words, Pete's artwork, and Pip Hall's lettering) was erected at Kennet Mouth stating that the area had been saved "for ever," the bulldozers began to gather once more; new road schemes multiply in air-conditioned offices far from the rivers' swirling vortex as they join. Two Rivers Press itself still thrives, in a much more professional form than its earliest incarnation; after Pete's death John Froy ran the press for several years, and then Sally Mortimore took over; and now Anne Nolan. It is a testament to the three of them that they managed to do what Peter Hay never believed possible: balance the books. It is much more than a shoestring operation now. Peter's work lies between covers at the library and on bookshelves all round the town, but I would like to think that his chaotic and contrary spirit lives on: individual, caring, and always demanding more.

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This consciousness within her
uncurled itself upon the rollers of objective experience
printing impressions
vaguely and variedly
upon Ova
in place of the more formulate education
coming naturally
to the units of a national instigation

—Mina Loy
from "Ova, Among the Neighbors"

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