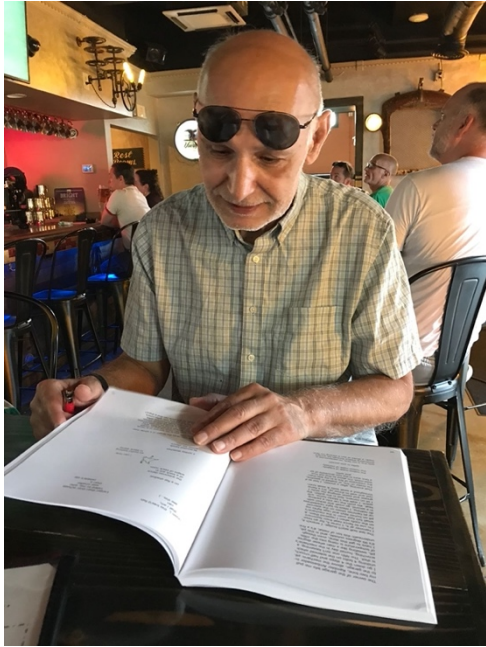


In Memoriam: Ted Stimpfle (1950-2024)



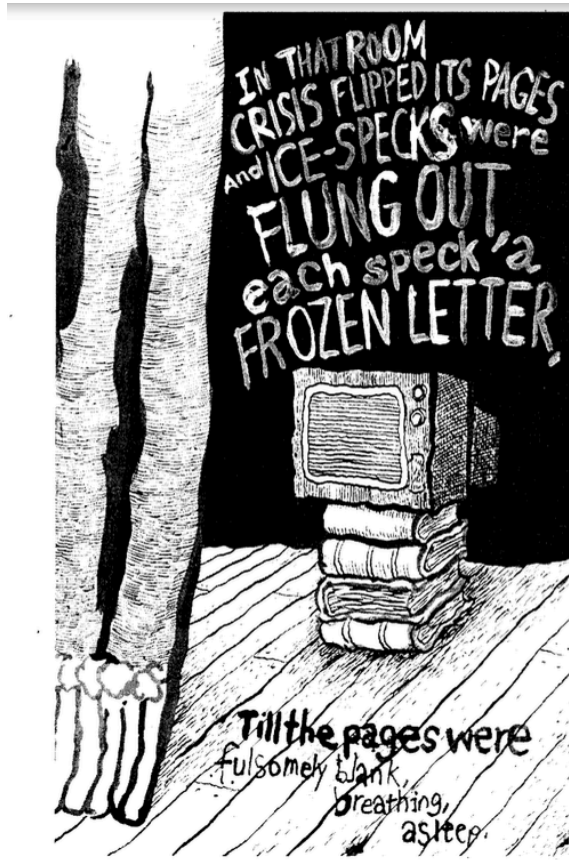
Ted Stimpfle scanning the proof of his unpublished book *The Subexplorer Notebook* in 2017.
Photo: J. Gordon Faylor

Not many people outside the Lehigh Valley know the name, and even less the poetry, of Ted Stimpfle. Ted passed away at the age of 74 on September 10, 2024, perhaps fittingly on what would have been the 138th birthday of H.D., who had roots in the Lehigh Valley as well. Ted and I often frequented her grave at nearby Nisky Hill Cemetery.

Ted lived all his life in Pennsylvania, for the most part in Allentown. I met him a little over twenty years ago but had been aware of him for years prior. He was a fixture at the local cafes and diners, especially Hava Java on 19th Street, and I would see him there either with his nose in a book or chatting with friends. I overheard him discussing poetry and books on multiple occasions, but being a teenager and a bit intimidated, I was always too shy to introduce myself. When I turned 21 and started to frequent Cannon's, the principal haunt for the arts community in Allentown (at least at the time), one evening I found myself alone reading at the bar with him a few stools down. I don't recall what book I had, but I definitely remember his: a first edition of Ron Silliman's *Ketjak*. "Are you familiar with Silliman?" Ted asked.

While Allentown had an active art scene, encountering poets was uncommon; but finding someone like Ted was like unearthing buried treasure. His knowledge of books and writers was otherworldly. He could talk about poetry for days, and that's pretty much what we did when we would get together. His tastes were eclectic, but he talked often about his love for Yeats and Blake. His gateway was a childhood obsession with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—he would raft down the Little Lehigh River (where he requested his ashes to be scattered) pretending to be Ulysses. But I think Ted only discussed poetics with me because I wanted to. He could talk about anything really; he was a brilliant—and hilarious—storyteller. It was always a pleasure to hear him sing on any subject, but it was also a cadence marked by much sadness, a vestige of his difficult life.

When I met Ted, his first book was just being published, *Understudies* (Obscure Publications, 2004), a collaboration with the artist Seann McCollum. But if it hadn't been solicited by Ted's old friend, the writer Stephen-Paul Martin, I doubt *Understudies* would've seen the light of day. While Ted had occasional publications in poetry journals, he didn't care at all about getting into print. Rather, he treated his poetry as if in constant flux. His poems were subject to incessant editing, overwriting, and erasure. It was as if he viewed his published work as frozen in time, no longer living but stagnant and unchangeable, something he clearly wanted to avoid. Consequently, his archives are filled with palimpsestic manuscripts. One he worked on for



Sample spread from *Understudies*.

close to thirty years called “Blue Road” consists of poems mostly written while Ted was taking care of his disabled mother, something he did for a very long time. He was still editing and adding to “Blue Road” when he suffered a stroke, which left him unable to write without difficulty. But he remained as eloquent as ever in conversation, and we continued our rich correspondence, pretty much without skipping a beat.

While he often talked to me (and others) about his inability to write after the stroke, Ted had amassed a large collection of poems that he continued to work on, albeit slowly. He eventually gave some close friends access to his archives, and one of them was J. Gordon Faylor, who used to refer to Ted as “the poet laureate of Allentown.” At the time, Gordon was running Gauss PDF, and he ended up slating a long poem called “The Subexplorer Notebook” for publication. However, in Ted’s customary fashion, every time the book was close to the finish line he would block it, citing—usually very minor—changes that still needed to be made. We had some luck a bit later. I’d been chipping away at a selected works for several years. When I surprised Ted with the manuscript, he was of course lukewarm. Fortunately, Stephen-Paul agreed to write

HIDING

for Kent Herman

He's in a transmission fluid stain glistening near the curbside. He hides inside STOP signs. Hides in a child's red t-shirt he sees flying after a bounced football (he told me). He's received shrewd letters from my fellow lawyers skewed toward absolute lies. He has postal-traumatic stress syndrome. Utility Bills sandpaper his rough interior to a raw look. My friend gets frantic at the footsteps belonging to mail delivery. He's 51 and he's hiding in the bathroom where a working radio is stationed. Real-Estate taxes are delivered on his stolen house. Weeks pass and I open them up, the taxes he's supposed to pay that turn him into a breaking bullet aimed at the invulnerable thief. He's hiding in a box in the cellar. He said he hid in a tin can gleaming in the gutter. He worked hard and got his punishment. He was a Caregiver 3 shifts a day for years and Caregivers get shit and taken advantage of and that's that and nothing else. He's crouching under your carpet now and in the mouth of my sick mother. There, behind endless truck shadows flattened at 12 noon. His head (he wrote me) is now hidden in a 2 foot tall soybean field resting on his right ear listening as time scoops layers & layers of him away till everything else is a fierce back-hoe and he is invisible, plain dirt.

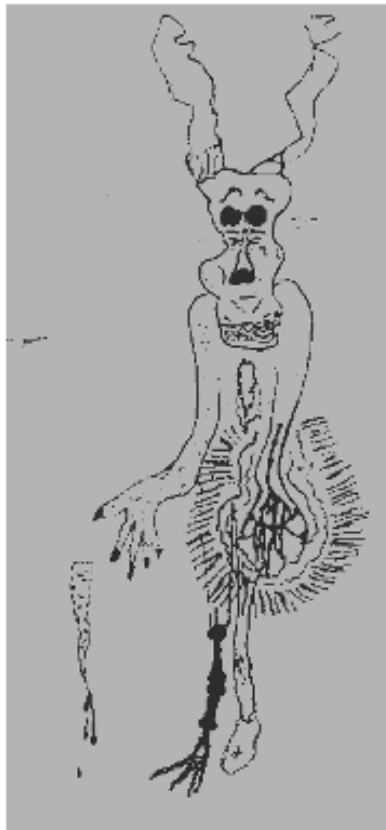
His neck tightened
to an apple core's
white width

tongue flaking
to wet red ash

(too strange
to stay dead)

the line of sustaining drink
a syllable wet with itself
and its surroundings

his bones have given up
the fiddler stone
it plays as the wind
plays on a windy day,
in rounds of bodied
colorful nothing



The Chariot's Nuclear-Wheels

Gigantic
storms of pollen
capsized
the river of boats,
soaked it up to dry

On a branch struck by
the last river of twilight
darkness was listening
to me so starkly gentle
even a moth could hear
the thin bones breaking

Sample page from "The Subexplorer Notebook"

an introduction, and this was integral to getting Ted fully onboard. Gordon did the design, and the result is Ted's second book *A Network of Vanishing*, which Hiding Press published in 2023. So nearly twenty years after the publication of *Understudies*, we were finally able to get more of Ted's poems in front of people.

In Stephen-Paul's intro, he concludes with the following: "The last time I saw Ted was three years ago.... We picked up right where we left off fifty years ago, old men instead of young men, but still driven by the same poetic enthusiasm. As we shook hands at the end, Ted smiled sadly and said, 'It's strange to think that this is probably the last time we'll ever see each other.'" Ted had quipped similarly the last time I saw him; it's odd—and devastating—to realize he was right. To all the writers and artists in the Lehigh Valley that he affected: we lost a friend when Ted went, but we may have gained a patron saint.

On the evening that I presented Ted with the manuscript that eventually became *A Network of Vanishing*, Gordon and I asked him to read some poems for us. We somehow got on the topic of sorrow, and Ted mentioned that he couldn't remember the last time he cried; but he couldn't make it through this one. It was the only time I'd seen him choke up. Ever fitting, I leave the reader to it:

HOW do they get their shoes on

What do the unconsolable do to keep on going?
How do they get their shoes on in the morning...
their shirts or dresses?

*They move with the space around that concretion
keep feeling it as if it was a rolling marble moved by
the space around the marble in slowest momentum.*

Do the unconsolable act from negative blessings? Has senselessness been so beaten into them for such a long time there's no possibility for living except to shoulder making a best-of-it, that never works— is always doubled-up in its own decline?

The moth that is tied to being a moth,
in a painting I saw. Wings fluttered apart with painted
interiors that held it together. The rope that looped up
behind its thorax and suggested it was tied to the post
on the left side of the painting; a stripped stick from which
it could alight and tattered as a rag shorn from a rag
still fly in a short burst to the surface of the paint.

It looked unconsolable and independent in its loss.
Vital in the saddest being of a painted moth.

Does it allow a few of them to move their eyes about,
here and there, across the landscape finding an open moment
which enlarges, and some sentience leaps through the darkness
we live, to a serendipitous darkness— purposelessness and purpose
both are written on cellophane touched to fire... and are gone for
a while?... and they want to say, “This salvaged beauty..... we are
to rise, again?”

I don't want to call up the 20th century of death-camps and poverties and
outrages.
I don't want to go back toward my useless consoling of a new widow
whose husband's
tall skeleton jumped all the way through a car accident into a permanent
grave.
I don't want to go back to the Vietnam veteran setting his military clothes
on fire
(he was wearing them) among us hippies in the Parkway,
I don't even wanna go back 2 weeks ago to holding the pull-away hand
of a severely ill
man who threw away all his medications,
I don't want to... but it's here, squatting on my hunched shoulders.

Does the unconsolable birth an uncharitable distance? An unchartable
distance? Is it a structure or a mysterious substance? Is a talking dog
its favorite living relative? Is a person its closest resemblance? Or is it
more like infamous 1787 Australia? A penal colony, faraway. Continent
where the next life begins: reborn singing the fresh wounds of conviction.

I'm acquainted with an elderly man who is sure there is one simple
reply— too much suffering happened for too long a time. Please,
don't ask him to tell his dormant story; unless you're a practitioner
of listening closely. It's an epic dismemberment rushing to end.

My stopped feet send out pulsing radar waves that encounter
the mistakes and reverberate the steps behind my stationary heels.
Some serious apprehension is a wave low in the body's cells.
It foretells that those previous, unsound steps are what is coming.

Backward or forward it's like the word radar; it stays the same.

I know that if there are no resources in any frame-of-reference,
the unconsolable is prospering in its ashes. Alone, in a car, a voice
exits your mouth and heads for a dilemma: the throat's scratched
terribly by screaming: it must quit eventually though it's not a choice.
To move again in life is to encounter what happened before.

I think of William Blake so close to his own experience—wavering flock
of fire feathering-up around his immense innocence as he walks
through London.

Does the unconsolable make someone sweat the small stuff less?
Is it good for something—like a distance, a tolerance able to take
the endless vanishing going on in the daily, stupidity-continuum?
Or is it a stone, mountain-heavy, that would need an earthquake to move
it?
Or a stonelike pulse as if the sun were rage blinking off and on?

Among a 30 year book collection
(I can't rely on that library anymore: it's foxed papers, mold, and ashes)
a page on transformation translated into american english said:
The stone of the unconsolable draws little attention to itself
The story of the unconsolable that is an invisible fire
and all around it the winds shove the lake's surface in crossing wavelets
as if
remembering...

*They get in shirts. They get in dresses.
they get in their own shoes. By their own
rested hands or others determined to help.
The morning deepens towards impossible daylight.*

Unconsolable earth.