

*the*  
**BONEFOLDER**  
*an e-journal for the bookbinder and book artist*

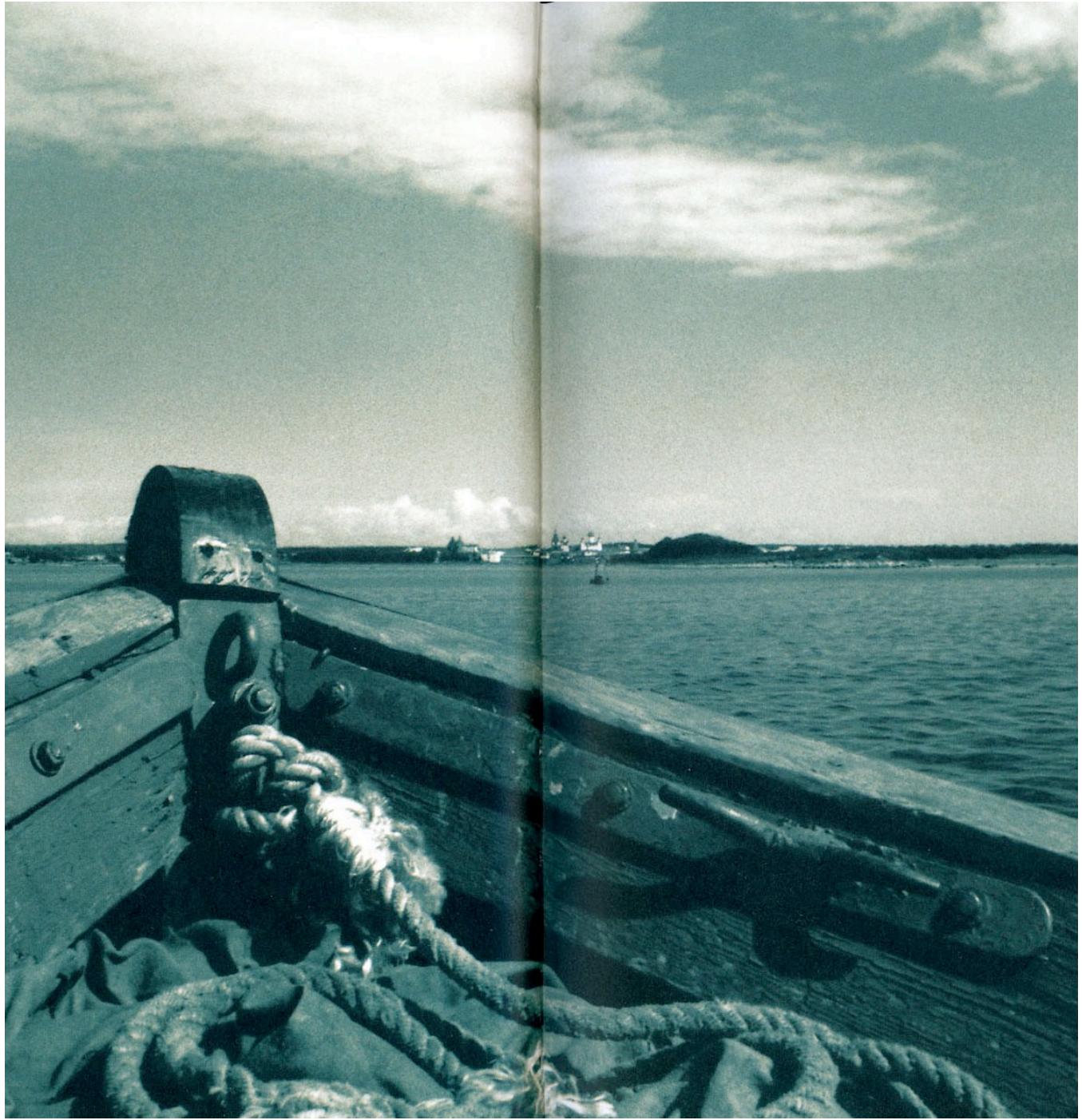


Image from Clif Meador's Memory Lapse

Volume 6, Number 2, Spring 2010

# The Bonefolder: an e-journal for the bookbinder and book artist

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## **Beautiful & Clever (As Well As Technically Correct): A collection of five essays**

By A. Kendra Greene

### 1.

#### **Mountain Splices, Why Do You Spurn Me So?**

Other people discover Led Zeppelin or The Cure or Nine Inch Nails while sampling an older sibling's music collection. My brother introduced me to the accordion-driven lyric parodies of Weird Al Yankovic. Years later, on my own, I would discover Robert Palmer, The Rolling Stones, Joan Jett, Queen—everyone, it seemed—and recognize their melodies from one Weird Al polka or another. It was the 1980s when my brother began playing his Weird Al tapes for me, a point in American culture when the accordion virtually implied farce. Maybe you remember when Wesley had to take music lessons on the sitcom *Mr. Belvedere*, and how the accordion was the obvious punch line. Perhaps you noticed the stereotype stubbornly entrenched even into the 1990s when the instrument was featured prominently, necessarily, as the comic accessory strapped to uber-geek Steve Urkel on the long-running *Family Matters*.

It would be an exaggeration to say the accordion gets no respect, but even the accordion as a style of book suffers from certain misconceptions. It suffers mostly from an apparent simplicity. Just as a jellyfish is generally held to be less complex than a vertebrate, so, too, the spineless book appears uncomplicated, unevolved next to its bound-spine cousins. I think about this assumption as I fold pages, as I line the paper against itself and crease a mountain or a valley into being. Holding the pleat of pages together, I marvel how the top edge can be smooth and neat while the bottom of the text block runs in rippled, ragged teeth. I sweep the bone folder across a crease and wonder if I've pressed in place a page that's a smidge too short—it's as likely I've just smoothed out the paper the very fraction of an inch that will make it jut out from the rest. But if I am lucky, it's just another anonymous pleat, no different from any other in its soldierly file.

In most endeavors, and accordion books are no exception, it takes a lot of skill to make a thing look easy. Though it appears seamless, it's possible that every page of an accordion be joined to the next by a tab, the whole chain of paper fixed in place with a splice at every turn, linked at each fold by a cupping valley splice and then the carefully met kiss of a mountain splice. In some Sempu-yo, that most restrained accordion, every outward facing peak might meet in a mountain splice, arranged from a quiet frenzy of alignment and glue management and pages threatening to stick together where they should open.

If a page in a spine-bound book ever seemed constrained, finite, split from its brethren, the accordion offers a nearly endless run of paper. Open one page and you may open the whole book, your arms held wide and a story swirling at your feet. Pages may spill like waters. In a thicker stock, they will slap and fall like shingles of a Jacob's ladder. Rigidly interdependent, each page is a push or pull on the next, a sequence, a reaction. Like dominoes. Like a house of cards.

Only the scroll rivals the accordion for flow, for extension, for space. In the company of other books, accordions are notably three dimensional, so clearly things with angles, objects with shifting sides. In its expansive Orihon form, it is quite literally a book with a back-story. A species of mobius strip. Even in the careful constriction of a fluttering Sempu-yo, where the beauty of the far pleated edge hides demurely behind a thin screen, the pages lose the strict anatomy of front and back as they instead sway in the current of back and forth. They balance between an old order and an unpredictable new form. They respond to the reader. They teeter. They threaten to fall apart.

The Sempu-yo wrapper is the thin veil of a robe, defining, obscuring. It is the teacup that contains the borderless tea. It is a vessel of waters, of pages lapping against its covers; and it is the banks astride rivers, it is the shores met by waves. The Sempu-yo form lends itself to the sheltering of delicate pages, the weight of pale thin leaves sustained by the support of its casing, the way a sapling braced against a stake is trained to grow straight and strong.

The elegance of an accordion, like a dovetail joint, lies in its integrity. Despite its many constituent parts, the finished accordion seems to be all of a piece. The slim square makes the cover blocks only two more leaves, a little thicker than the rest perhaps, but only the natural bulk of exterior protection, just what you'd expect to feel in a shell or a crust or a skin.

Yet I can scarcely imagine an accordion book with its covers closed. No sooner do I try than it is opened, impossible to collapse, as if its zigzag was the spring of a jack-in-the-box, a lively surprise barely contained, anxious to burst forth. Closed, the accordion is a roof shingle, an armor plate; opened it moves, it breathes, it plays. Its bellows fill like sails, like lungs. It flirts. It laughs. It sings.

The features that make the accordion as book so unassuming, so easy to underestimate, are perhaps also what make the accordion as instrument so vulnerable to humor and derision. Yet oddity and antiquity are, too, the very attributes that make the accordion distinctive, exotic, and ultimately sought after. If you were paying attention in the 1980s, you might have noticed The Talking Heads, Bruce



Springsteen, Los Lobos, The Grateful Dead—everyone, it would seem—performing or recording with accordion. Even the Piano Man, Billy Joel, believed in the accordion, long before its electric version found favor with Paul McCartney and Madonna. That would have been back when Jimmy Page called himself a Yankovic fan while nonetheless denying permission for a Led Zeppelin polka medley—back before Weird Al went platinum.

## 2. Sea to Sea

Should you pinch the metal knob at the top and pivot the spring dividers from one pointy leg to the other, you are suddenly a navigator strolling a course across the ocean in great arcing sweeps. It's reason enough to own a pair.

Spring dividers are not as springy as their name suggests—it's just the opposite, in fact. They are as rigid and exacting as a ballerina en pointe. Unmarked by numbers or ticks, these curveless calipers are faithful to specific distance, which they hold in an iron memory. This leadless twin to the geometer's compass leaves a mark of its own: its tiny footprint a mere pinprick, a sting. Each such divot, each infinitesimal bite, is set perfectly equidistant from the last. As a purely personal system of measure, spring dividers reject the arbitrary abstraction of inches, the tyranny of predetermined scales, and trade instead in absolute equivalency. *This is that*, they say. *That is this.*

Flax paper is earthly. Its fine down of fiber warbles, uneven like the undulations of tilled soil. I handle a sheet of gray that looks like flannel, soft and stiff as heavy winter clothes. Then I pick up a sheet of cream and it seems lighter in every way. It relaxes. It holds a crease more forgivingly. In color and weight, the cream flax begins to approach that of the pages, the Torchglow paper I have cut down with a knife by jagged strokes until it gave me twelve sections, each eight sheets thick. Paired this way, the cream and the Torchglow, the transition from cover to page seems remarkably gentle, so very soft and seamless.

The rough cut of the sections, torn and bitten by a blade too dull for the job, echoes the deckled edges of the flax paper. I trim one side of the sections, taming the wild and frayed edges that lunge and rage out at the air. The tears have knit some edges together, entangled them, and on opening a section there is a crackle of pages breaking apart. I think of Fall and harvest, of leaves drying to a brittle curl and crunching under foot. I think of maple and oak leaves pressed between pages, their resplendent reds and yellows preserved flat and forgotten. I begin to think I can bind Autumn itself, the rough rustle of leaves stitched together with rust and

golden threads. I reach for a bark brown thread, hold it against the spine, and reconsider.

It's something about the flax. Its surface won't flatten, won't level. It has a warp and ripple, unruly as a living thing, and restless. It's something, too, about the Torchglow, its edges rough like whitecaps. Pointed down, as the tail, the effect is a disappearing, an unraveling, an erasure; as if the block of pages was being lost in fog and mist. Pointed up, less conventionally as the head, it is the rollick of a choppy sea. I smell the start of a squall. I know now that I am binding the ocean.

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Twelve sections, I think; twelve months, twelve apostles, twelve Olympians. I pierce sewing stations into the crease of each section and stand them up again. They look like a stand of pale bamboo, each puncture the ridge between segments. No wonder they call this a spine, each white rupture like a bony vertebrae. I almost expect these joints to powder my hands in a calcium dust. I think about the Philippines and Malaysia, I think about the stories of Japan. *Is it true that humanity emerged from a bamboo stem?* I wonder, *Did we come from a rib or a garden?*

I look at the stations again and see them as portholes in the pages. Running my finger down them, I recognize them instead as barnacles: a texture of my childhood, of bobbing docks and hulls. I sink into thoughts about barnacles, those coarse volcanoes with their deep pits, their chalky coronas, and their abrasive endurance. And then I plunge the sections into the waiting gap of the cover, sewing each into place.

Of the four threads I'm using, the blue and the green threads must be waxed. I pull the lengths of thread I've cut through grooves in the beeswax, each taut string angled to cut the lump of wax deeper still, a sharp action totally divorced from the round motions of waxing a boat or a board. The gray and the aqua colored threads come already prepared, are in fact too waxy. Drawing these threads between my fingernails, scraping the wax away, I think of build-up, of how salt, too, will coat a thing and preserve it.

Weaving a pair of thin cotton threads back and forth at the head and the tail of the spine completes the binding, ensures the shoulders of the book won't shrug off the binding thread of the first or last sections like a stray spaghetti strap. Weaving so clearly belongs to the earth, to the ground that yields the fibers in employs, and yet, I think, weaving is an ocean art. In Ireland, fisherman set sail clad in cables knit from the wooly sheep that stay on shore. And far from land they drop nets into the depths and pull up life.



I wonder, for a moment, if it might be better for this ocean book I'm binding to have a waterproof paper, something truly seaworthy? But no, I think, it should be of the earth, durable and vulnerable like earthly things, and if it loses integrity in contact with water, if it is in fact washed away, so much the better, I think: ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

### 3. Sutures, Secrets, Sects

I was in the home of one Amelia Bird, in a central area of the house that isn't a room in itself but rather the open space joining living room to sun porch, sun porch to kitchen, kitchen to bath. I was there in the heart of the house, in front of a brood of bookshelves, kneeling, the first time I saw a Coptic binding. I was so taken by the stripped-down simplicity of its bare spine, the sections of paper linked together like a group of school children I once saw snaking through the Bronze Age relics of a Greek museum, each holding firm her place along a white knotted rope. Opening the book, bending its spine, I may actually have gasped. Certainly my eyes grew wide and I know my throat tightened into the silence of awe: this was a book that lay flat—wherever you opened it! Democratically, even-tempered, as if any page was as good as any another. As if you might stay forever at any one spread.

I remain utterly disarmed by the way an open page stays open. Surely it is a kind of patience, a humility. To fill the leaves of such a book is doubtless its own meditation. My sister has painted little birds and branches for half her life, nesting them in papers delicate to substantial. I've seen these fierce finches and bowing songbirds sometimes grouped in frames and sometimes sent as postcards—occasionally set in a somber scroll—but once I discovered a Coptic binding I knew they were meant to live in a book like this. Imagine: a flock of them together but every one with the breathing room of its own page, each given its due and never the rustle of pages curling impatient and ready to turn themselves.

Looking at the Coptic book I'm sewing now, I squint at it and knit my brows. The four sewing threads, stiff with wax, run out from the paper like wires, like electrodes. I look at the thumb on my right hand, the nail broken and skin slashed by a knife blade two weeks ago while chopping tomatoes. Two weeks and still not healed. If I pinch a needle enough to pull it through, my thumb throbs. I pause often. I eye the split that isn't mending, watch it move towards and away from the spine as the threads cross over and duck in and pop through the sewing stations pierced precisely through each section. I wonder if I would have been better off with stitches myself. The needles that slip and bob so beautifully into a link stitch, tying section to section, are curved as a surgeon's needles are.

The half book before me is laid out so very still, so vulnerable on the table. The red apron tied high on my waist seems a bloodstained butcher's garment. I look at my patient the book. *I'm sorry*, I think. *We did all we could*.

Despite my best efforts, I'm growing cross with this book. This book, for which I so carefully folded so many sections of six sheets each, which I should have cut long and somber as a Tibetan prayer book but instead cut haplessly into something short and stocky—an imperfect and charmless brick. This book deformed by my every intervention, it's this book that starts to make me mad. I'm still disappointed with its square-covered predecessor, the way the binding thread heaps up on one side and, with nothing to balance it on the opposite side, causes the cover to slope at an angle so that the book fails to lie as I had intended: flat and solid as a marble slab.

I imagine a book with so many sections and so much sewing that it would arc from cover to cover like a rainbow, curve in on itself, lie on a shelf like a bridge. I imagine a book with still more sections and more sewing, a book that completes the wheel, binds back into itself, a circle unbroken. I like the idea of a book that keeps its own counsel, a book complete without a reader. I smile at this book that would make physical all the difficulties of text and literacy and accessibility and stories forgotten and tomes out of print and the way every story exists in the context of every other. Then I remember the book in front of me. I frown.

I know it's my own fault. I was thinking about books as nothing more than objects of weight and dimension, geometric solids that might vary only in density—which is to say, I had forgotten to plan not only for thread but for color, for the temperament and character of anything but the milky Torchglow text block. How else to explain the languorous marbled paper I chose for the covers, the lilting ripples of yellow and green, the bubbles of blue as lazy and distended as the clumsy blobs in a lava lamp? It's a beautiful thing, handmade and effervescent, but the whimsy of such a cover is at odds with the very girth of this book. I know, even as I sew, that I don't have to put in all twenty-one sections I've prepared; I could stop at eleven and it wouldn't look bad, could probably have stopped at eight, but I was aiming for something more ambitious when I started, something substantial, and I am loathe to give it up. So I sew in another section. Another and another. Resignedly. The book begins to remind me of a phone book, dense and more useless than it should be. I keep sewing, and contemplate the hubris of thinking I could bind a monument.

The cover paper is doubly wrong. Not only is the timbre of the pattern ill-suited to the shape, the fibers themselves are weak. The stress of punching and sewing is told in rips



and splits, stretch marks and loss that disfigure the final look of both my books, though happily their function seems unmarred by the tears. In the interest of cosmetics I consider mixing paint in just the colors to take a fine-tipped brush and spot away the hairline cracks, the way one would retouch a photograph, but I am afraid of making it worse. I think about the pottery I tried to glue back together after my last move, how much prettier the shards were than the chipped and marred bowls I resurrected from the broken pieces. No, I think, it's not worth another procedure. This book will just have to live with the scars.

A bookbinder recently whispered to me, *whispered* though none but the two of us were in the room, that her boards don't seem to slip in the nipping press, that they stay as straight and square as she set them, are spared the approximation of sanding down the edge that juts away—provided she brushes glue down on one board of the pair instead of onto both. *What a secret*, I think, quietly, all to myself, and delight that this most secret binding, associated as it is with the clandestine reading of a 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian sect, this binding has its secrets, too.

And how fitting that these books harboring the text of revolution should be revolutionary in form as well. Surely this was the greater scandal, the codex format departing from the scroll, the insistence on separation, on discrete pages in the face of a tradition of continuity. Imagine the shock of so many edges, such sharpness! And not even a perfect flatness to eclipse the scroll's perfect circle—no, what with the bulk of sewing that slants the cover to one side, the Coptic-bound book wears its flat face crooked. Or at least it will for a while, a kind of youthful smirk that gravity will iron out with age. Eventually the spine will push out, like a yoga pose or a Roman arch, and bring the covers in parallel, to lie as flat as the fourth century earth. It's the very curve of a cat's raised back, and yet in the book's spine it is a sign of relaxing, of submission. I think of the curves in my own spine, the ones doctors didn't notice while there was still time to correct them, the same ones I wouldn't notice at all if the doctors since didn't mention them every once and again. These very curves you perhaps don't suspect even now, me sitting straight as I can, my sewing to my side, as I pull the last needle through the last waiting hole.

It ends here.

I close the sutures. I tie off in square knots. I clip the threads and pick up an English backing hammer, the broad slight curve of its head dull yet gleaming, and I pound the thread into the flesh of the board. I pound until it reads smooth and flush under my fingers as I draw them gingerly along the hinge, probing the surface, tracing the wound.

## 4. Case By Case

I am, it would appear, simply incapable of learning a new binding style without making each of two exclamations. First, "It's like a real book!" And second, "This is taking forever!" Repetition has drained all originality out of these twin epiphanies, and yet, according to my ritual, when I invoke them this time, for the Quarter-Cloth Flat-Spine Case-Binding, it is with the knowledge that *this time* they are really true, true for the first time true, true as they were never true before, and I say them with the breathless surprise and conviction of someone who has just fallen in love, again. How could I have thought the slap of a thick pamphlet was just like a real book; how innocent was I to cover two boards in sekishu-backed cloth and think the same thing? Surely I was deceived when I creased a flax cover into a flat spine, even if I sewed in sections enough to pen a novel. I had made, I know now, no *real* book before the flat spine case binding.

Just look at it. Look at the stiff covers with a healthy square protecting a clean-edged text block; look at the spine fabric wrapping the spine with a quarter width overlap on front and back. Look at the *end bands*, for goodness' sake! In every attribute it matches no less august an object than the library book I've just borrowed. True, they aren't identical. The square of the library book is wider, for instance—the robust bumper of a working book, compared to the proportions of my more delicate and parlor-like versions. And, admittedly, the library book's spine fabric seems to fall a little shy of one quarter the cover width. A matter of style, I first suspect, no different from the changing fashions which make men's ties a little wider one year, downright skinny the next. But no, I note, running the pad of my finger down the seam of cloth and fabric, it's that the cover paper overlaps the spine fabric by such a hearty margin, far more than the thin flirtation I've allowed to the books I'm making. And, while we're cataloguing the little variances between the books I'm making and the one I've borrowed, I should perhaps note that I've picked a spark of color for my end bands and hand-painted paste papers for the covers, while the library book is accorded camouflaged black end bands to match the spine cloth and an institutional solid-color paper for the cover. Yet the differences between these books are no more than the distinct proportions and markings of two closely related species of bird.

Small environmental adaptations aside, the point is, *this time*, I've bound not just a book that looks like a book, but a book that looks like *the book*, the archetypical what-springs-to-mind Platonic-form kind of book. The flat spine case binding is simply the quintessential book. It is a book for the ages—and appropriately enough, it takes forever to make one.



Marathons of any kind are a little somber, and here I include *Law and Order* marathons right alongside ambitious running events. They are venerable in the way of ancient and consuming things. They inspire something of the same reverent mood conjured by a stately flat spine case binding with quarter cloth cover, but the underlying trait of a marathon, the real parallel between an hours-long foot race and an epic book binding project, is the demand for extensive preparation.

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When you decide to run 26.2 miles in this day and age, you almost certainly commit to a training plan principled on the oscillation between active training and the periods of rest necessary to adapt to and accept that activity. Not to suggest too neat an analogy, but the case binding is built on the very same sense of alternation. You cut down sections, for instance, then leave them to press flat. With the book snug in the lying press as if in a cradle, you apply layers of wheat paste and kozo and cotton hinge fabric and western paper all in waves, waiting as long as it takes for each new layer to dry before adding the next. Indeed it's during the waiting that the book comes together, integrates parts into a single thing, makes a kind of peace with itself and settles in. This happens as fiber accepts creases, as moisture comes and goes, the book itself expanding and contracting in long, slow breaths. And just as the runner tapers, builds to a peak of long days and then reaps the equal rewards of repose, so the work sessions of binding finally give way to a book that in its final stages can only be finished by a good, long rest.

What you get is a book that opens like a cellar door. If you've been careful, it is sturdy and utterly utilitarian, familiar and formal as an encyclopedia volume; if you've been careless, it creaks and sticks. The flat spine case binding suggests the status of something that will be around a long time, something that deserves special attention. It would be the binding for your dissertation, your genealogy records. It connotes the elegance and authority of classic literature and law libraries, would elevate a collection of sketches into something that looks like an oeuvre. Yet for all the associations of austerity and accomplishment, it is the humanness that draws me to this style. It is, after all, a book you rub with the palm of your hand, a book that responds to that heat, its layers bonding under your warmth. It's a book you test with your fingers, feeling for bubbles and pressing down the edges while it's still too fragile to open wide enough for a look inside. It is, and I don't know why I find this so charming, a book where you leave the end sheets and cover boards much too wide at first, waiting for each progressive incarnation of what will eventually become the book to find its own particular shape before you can know what is excess and what is true.

Which may be why this feat of endurance requires such a sense of balance, such a gentle touch. The process is a litany of decisions and consequences, and you can't fret too much about any of them or you will be paralyzed and never take the next step. It is painstaking and unpredictable. I pull the kettle stitches linking the sections a little too tight, and the French sewing appears to swell and distend between the head and tail kettles. My end bands, which I have been whittling down, respectively, in crimson and butter slivers, look far too narrow and still I am told they are entirely too wide. So I stop trusting my eyes and put faith in my fingers. With the forwarding done and the text block knocked back in the lapped case, I pinch at the spine as if it were a fruit and I was unsure whether it was ripe enough to eat. I learn that what I can't see, I must feel.

Normally I crank the nipping press as if I were a Salem torturer and Giles Corey himself was calling out "More weight!" However with brass-edge boards sandwiching my book, I am mindful of the real ability to do harm, and I turn the press just until the book presses back—then I walk away and, on my first try, return to a perfect bite crisply pressed where minutes before I'd left a lazy curve of untrained gutter along the spine.

I glue out the pastedowns earnestly, yet get worse with practice. I worry over a hair's width and it matters. All my successes, I find, are conditional on the next success. And yet my failures, some of them anyway, are forgiven. I learn it isn't enough to double-check the measurements; I must also allow for what I cannot measure. This is real world, after all. And this is, unmistakably, a real book.

## 5. Boxing Days

Outside, it is dark. The light within the bindery bounces against the counter tops and cupboard doors and back from the windows like mirrors, doubling me and the board shears and the glue brushes hung to dry and the irons heavy in stacks. Earlier there was a sloping hill and a walk, not the hilltop path that brought me here, but a lower one, wrapping along the frozen river and crossing over a bridge to the break of bare-limbed trees on the other shore. But that was earlier, when I could see out. Now the world stops at the panes.

I touch the pad of my index finger to the PVA before me, a shallow pool of it in a plastic Tupperware dish. For just a moment, it resists. PVA is quick to dry, and, with the lid off, the surface will grow a skin, like milk left to heat a little too long, thickening against the air. Just opened, though, this still supple pool of glue depresses under my touch, clings to my finger, and leaves an even white glaze over the fingerprint

when I draw my hand away. It's like dipping into a bowl of icing, but instead of touching the white-frosted finger to my tongue, I hold it against the edge of a 60-point board, the edge of glue just kissing the edge of board, and pull my finger down its side, turning the finger as I go until I have spun the adhesive in a clean board's-width border from top to tail.

It's important to move quickly. Dry, the edges that don't meet flush can be sanded into fluff and blown away like eraser dust. If that's done, then the lid must be fitted similarly, each compromise holding the tail of the last, but it's like telling new lies to cover up old ones. It's just easier if you can get an honest start.

The panels of book board I've cut have dimensions like graham crackers, some whole and some the long rectangles or square pieces snapped apart. They lie flat against the counter until the last is trimmed in glue and I draw them up suddenly on their edges, like a gingerbread barn-raising, rigid walls tacked together with this icing-like glue.

Though I will wrap them in books' clothing, in scraps of book cloth and paste paper and two precious strips of hand-marbled paper gifted from a friend who makes artist's books, I am not covering these boxes the way I cover books—I can't. I have too much a sense of *up*, of sides and fences, of walls that will stay put instead of gates that swing open.

The boxes I'm making now are of two varieties. The tall square-bottomed ones are towers, would soon become lanterns if I would only fit handles to their tops, and I imagine them as wells of light. The low rectangular one, soon to be clad in a black paper with gothic red swirls, is a darker thing. Its proportions a bit narrower and more shallow than a box of checks, it looks rather like a diminutive coffin.

Of course boxes should be made with the bits and bobs of books. Books are containers, too, vessels that shape and hold and carry. And when they moor and come to rest in boxes, it is like one hand cupped in the other.

These shapes of shelter, so hollow, dry sooner and also slower than I'd like. The panels slip and squirm where they should join. But a moment later, the glue dry, they are inseparable. Solid. I drop them on the tabletop and they make a satisfying empty knock. It's like an elevator cut from its cables jolting a few stories. I can't imagine they benefit from these short falls, but it's such a delightful percussion—they sound so exactly like boxes, and not until this moment had I known that boxes even have a sound!—that I cannot resist making them fill with the note again and again.

Covered all over in a crisp sheet of craft paper, however, the boxes are as brown paper packages, all sharp creases and

smooth sides and the faintly acidic scent of library stacks. Whatever structural support this skin adds, it has the look of order, of starched bedsheets tucked into hospital corners. Why putting paper around boxes should be so satisfying I don't know, but there's no denying the pleasure of it, of wrapping presents, of sharp scissors and double stick tape. And making boxes is better still than wrapping them. Making boxes unites content with form, the noun with the verb, the box as a thing that *is* and a thing that *does*. Which is to say, a proper box, a truly beautiful box, is complete in itself, with or without anything else to add to its contents.

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My boxes, as I look at them, as I plan the lids and bases that will stick out with a dramatic 3/16<sup>th</sup> square, horizontal lines like the lintels and pediments of a Craftsman home—these boxes seem to deserve an offering, are compact shrines and pagodas.

I've never been much good at thrift stores. I am hopeless in secondhand shops. But give me a minute to rummage the scrap paper drawer in the binding studio and I'll come up grinning. This time the margin of a broadside yields up the edge of an ink drawing, a leafless tree on a hill, its black branches so many dark scratches, and it is just the right size to line my small coffin box—a box which, coincidentally, fits as if custom-made a blood-red long-stitch book I bound a month or two earlier from a different scrap drawer scrap.

The taller boxes are trouble. I congratulate myself on the foresight to make them wide enough I can actually fit my hand inside and touch the bottom, a feature that pretty well marks my first and final act of good planning for them. Pasting down the long flaps—first in craft paper, then the decorative skins of a birch-colored cloth for one and a gold-embellished ice-blue paper for the other—I am cautious, hesitant, careful not to smear glue on the sides I've already put down, which proves harder than you'd think. I keep marring them with sticky white lines and I begin to wish I'd spent more time at the sleepover parties of my youth playing the battery-powered game Operation, which I grow convinced would have steeled in me superior spatial planning and a steady hand, had I only subjected myself to the unrelenting reprimand of its jarring buzz and tremor.

I do better with the bottom squares, the color that will glint and wink from the bottom of the box when the lid comes off and light pours in. The squares for both the lantern boxes have a warm metallic sheen, one dull and the other textured like a foil gum wrapper crumpled and then smoothed out again. These, too, are scrap drawer finds. I myself am usually loathe to give up remnants, as if all excess could be put up in jars to get through the winter, but the ample generosity of the scrap drawer moves me to share the pieces I have no plans for, that



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we might all build from fragments and make a thing whole. It reassures me. It restores my faith that it can only get so dark, that scraps can be resurrected and redeemed.

Reaching in to press down the corners of the bright bottom squares, my knuckles scraping against the side walls, I think of the raccoon in *Where the Red Fern Grows*: one hand caught in a rigged tree stump, a ring of carpenter's nails pointing in and pinning its fist clutching something shiny, the oily black hand that will not let go. But I grasp at nothing, and because of that, because my hand relaxes and the fingers curl away from the palm and I release, I walk away. I walk away full with the pride of seeing every corner seamed exactly in its place, and I carry no small joy in having planted a secret worth uncovering.

And then there is nothing left but to tap down the lid. I turn out the lights as I pull the door closed behind me. I step into the night that keeps getting longer, and greet the darkness I will walk home in no matter how early I leave the bindery.

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*A hand printed edition of "Beautiful and Clever" is currently underway at the University of Iowa Center for the Book. Faculty and students are setting type and engraving blocks as we speak in anticipation of a December 2010 release date. A prospectus and ordering information will be available in November. For information on UIICB publications check our web site <<http://www.uiowa.edu/~ctrbook/>> or write us at <[center-for-the-book@uiowa.edu](mailto:center-for-the-book@uiowa.edu)> if you would like to be added to our mailing list.*