

## Process: The Project

Although some schools of literature rather look down on erasure poems, they actually have a rather interesting and erudite history.

“Poet Erin Dorney identified six styles of erasure poetry: blackout; crossout, crossing out words to create a new poem; computer, using computer software to add or remove lines; cut out, using a knife to cut words out of paper; covered up, covering up the original text with another material (paper, sand, rice, etc.); and retyped, retyping the original text to make it look like a conventional, traditional poem, leaving space where the original text used to be. An early appearance of erasure poetry was in 1965 when artist and poet Doris Cross created “Dictionary Columns,” in which she used painting and drawings on a dictionary to create poems. Other examples of erasure poetry include “Freeland: An Erasure” by Leigh Sugar; renowned poet Tracy K. Smith’s poems “Declaration,” which stems from the Declaration of Independence, and “The Greatest Personal Privation,” from notes and letters about slaveholding; and M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, which uses court documents about the 18th-century slave ship that threw more than 120 enslaved Africans overboard in order to collect insurance money. (Source: Poetry Foundation).

But one of my favorite erasure poets is Tom Phillips. His manuscript *A Humument* is his treatment of *A Human Document*, a small yellow Victorian novel by W. H. Mallock. Phillips began “treating” the book with “painting, painting, collage, and cut-up techniques” that obscure a majority of Mallock’s original words. At first Phillips “merely scored out unwanted words with ink leaving some (often too many) to stand and the rest more or less readable beneath rapidograph hatching.” Over time, his methods evolved and became more in-depth, even going so far as to collage a photo of Mallock’s grave onto one of the pages. He employed numerous methods, but all of those methods focused on adding something over physically removing part of the book through erasing.

This piece is part of my hybrid manuscript entitled: ‘Little Fish, Uncanned’ which is a response to ‘Cannery Row,’ by John Steinbeck. Each poem is an erasure of one single page of this brilliant novel, with each poem placed on a background of my original art, whether digital photo-art or some other medium.

## Process: Erasure to find the poem

Through the process of whittling away the forest to reveal the tree, the poem reveals itself to me.

In the pool Doc and Hazel worked together. Hazel lived in the Palace Flophouse with Mack and the boys. Hazel got his name in as haphazard a way as his life was ever afterward. His worried mother had had seven children in eight years. Hazel was the eighth, and his mother became confused about his sex when he was born. She was tired and run down anyway from trying to feed and clothe seven children and their father. She had tried every possible way of making money—paper flowers, mushrooms at home, rabbits for meat and fur—while her husband from a canvas chair gave her every help his advice and reasoning and criticism could offer. She had a great aunt named Hazel who was reputed to carry life insurance. The eighth child was named Hazel before the mother got it through her head that Hazel was a boy and by that time she was used to the name and never bothered to change it. Hazel grew up—did four years in grammar school, four years in reform school, and didn't learn anything in either place. Reform schools are supposed to teach viciousness and criminality but Hazel didn't pay enough attention. He came out of reform school as innocent of viciousness as he was of fractions and long division. Hazel loved to hear conversation but he didn't listen to words—just to the tone of conversation. He asked questions, not to hear the answers but simply to continue the flow. He was twenty-six—dark-haired and pleasant, strong, willing, and loyal. Quite often he went collecting with Doc and he was very good at it once he knew what was wanted. His fingers could creep like an octopus, could grab and hold like an anemone. He was sure-footed on the slippery rocks and he loved the hunt. Doc wore his rain hat and high rubber boots as he worked but Hazel sloshed about in tennis shoes and blue jeans. They were collecting starfish. Doc had an order for three hundred.

## Process – The Poem

Once the poem has revealed itself to me through the process of whittling away the forest to reveal the tree, I writ it out as itself, seeing how its presence should look upon the page. In the instance of “the seeker”, the poem also reveals a process: the process of finding out who one really is, the process of search and revelation.

### the seeker

erasure of *Cannery Row*  
by John Steinbeck p.33

lived in the flophouse with boys,  
haphazard, worried;

confused  
about sex.

he tried every possible way: paper  
flowers, mushrooms, rabbits—

reasoning? to change.  
pay attention:

he came out  
to hear answers—

he was willing, knew  
what was wanted: fingers

like an octopus, like an anemone.  
he loved the hunt,

his rain hat and blue jeans  
collecting starfish.

## Process – The Artwork

Once the poem's complete, I decide what artwork will work best as its background, whether art from scratch or a collage of my own photography, which I then modify to suit the topic.

In this case, I decided to go with a photograph of a pair of sneakers someone had randomly stuck on a pole – a perfect metaphor to me for a journey. I dabble with various digital tools to develop and move each piece wherever it is leading, but I never use Photoshop; I prefer a more organic approach.



Once I'm satisfied with the artwork and the size is adjusted to suit, I paste in the lines of the poem.



# the seeker

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