



12-1-1974

Kenneth Patchen Picture-Poems

Laurel J. Reuter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Reuter, Laurel J., "Kenneth Patchen Picture-Poems" (1974). *Theses and Dissertations*. 3449.
<https://commons.und.edu/theses/3449>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

KENNETH PATCHEN PICTURE-POEMS

by
Laurel J. Reuter

Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1965
Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education, University of North Dakota, 1967

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota

December
1974

T1974
R319

This thesis submitted by Laurel J. Reuter in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota is hereby approved by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done.

Robert W. Shaws

(Chairman)

James J. McKeen

Josephine M. Eley

William Johnson

Dean of the Graduate School

Permission

Title Kenneth Patchen Picture-Poems

Department English

Degree Master of Arts

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the Library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my thesis work or, in his absence, by the Chairman of the Department or the Dean of the Graduate School. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this thesis or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Signature

Paul Kenter

Date

Dec 1, 1944

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| List of Illustrations | v |
| Abstract | vii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter I. The Technical Development of the Picture-Poem | 6 |
| Chapter II. Patchen's Use of Primitive Imagery and Style | 23 |
| Appendix I. Chronology | 45 |
| Appendix II. The Works of Kenneth Patchen | 47 |
| Bibliography | 51 |

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

| Plate | Page |
|--|------|
| I. Kenneth Patchen | 5 |
| II. "The Nature of Reality," poem from <u>Panels for the Walls of Heaven</u> , 1946 | 8 |
| III. <u>The Dark Kingdom</u> , painted book, No. 1, 1942 | 10 |
| IV. <u>Hallelujah Anyway</u> , painted book, unnumbered, 1966 | 12 |
| V. "She Knows It's Raining," poem from <u>Cloth of the Tempest</u> , 1943 | 13 |
| VI. "Panel Twenty-Two," poem from <u>Panels for the Walls of Heaven</u> , 1946 | 15 |
| VII. "We Meet," illustrated poem from <u>Hurrah for Anything</u> , 1957 | 17 |
| VIII. "The One Who Comes to Question Himself," picture-poem from <u>Hallelujah Anyway</u> , 1966 | 19 |
| IX. "What the Story Tells Itself," picture-poem from <u>Hallelujah Anyway</u> , 1966 | 21 |
| X. "Little Chief Son-of-a-Gun," picture-poem from <u>Hallelujah Anyway</u> , 1966 | 30 |
| XI. "Peace or We All Perish," picture-poem from <u>Hallelujah Anyway</u> , 1966 | 31 |
| XII. "All That Leaves Is Here Always," picture-poem from <u>But Even So</u> , 1968 | 35 |
| XIII. "The Argument of Innocence," picture-poem from <u>But Even So</u> , 1968 | 36 |

| | | |
|--------|--|----|
| XIV. | "Sure Is a Peculiar Way to Run a Ball Game," picture-poem from <u>Hallelujah Anyway</u> , 1966 | 37 |
| XV. | "What Can You Do Up Here," picture-poem from <u>Hallelujah Anyway</u> , 1966 | 38 |
| XVI. | "So When That Mosey Conductor Comes Round," picture- poem from <u>Hallelujah Anyway</u> , 1966 | 39 |
| XVII. | "Waiting at the Bathhouse," poem from <u>Wonderings</u> , 1971 | 42 |
| XVIII. | "Snow Is the Only One of Us," picture-poem from <u>Hallelujah Anyway</u> , 1966 | 43 |
| XIX. | "An Old Lady Named Amber Sam," silkscreen folio page from <u>Glory Never Guesses and Other Pages</u> , 1955 | 44 |

ABSTRACT

The problem was to present an exhibition of the works of Kenneth Patchen to the University of North Dakota community; to augment the exhibition with a published catalog which would give the uninitiated viewer a sense of Patchen's place in both literature and the visual arts; to accompany the catalog, in thesis form, with a critical article about Patchen's work.

The procedure involved the following steps: (1) A compilation of a Patchen bibliography. (2) A week in California with Mrs. Patchen during which time I surveyed the artist's entire output of picture-poems and, based upon my critical judgment of the work, selected the exhibition. At this time I interviewed Mrs. Patchen about Patchen's technical development treated in the catalog. (3) A study of layout, reproduction problems, and printing possibilities which resulted in the printing of the catalog. (4) The actual installation of the exhibition based upon relationships between individual works and Patchen's technical development as exemplified by various pieces and treated in the catalog essay. (5) A study of Patchen's art in relationship to characteristics of primitive art. This resulted in the critical essay accompanying the catalog or Chapter II of the thesis.

The tangible results consisted of the exhibition and the published catalog.

The final conclusions of the essay are that: (1) Miriam Patchen contributed to Patchen's work by involving him in her creature world. (2) Technical difficulties and ill health caused him to evolve the picture-poem. (3) He deliberately chose to use Miriam's creature world in a primitive or childlike manner as a statement of theme.

INTRODUCTION

Introductions serve to introduce and to interest, and then through them dedications and acknowledgements are made.¹ Often windows serve these same purposes. My introduction and window to the work of Kenneth Patchen was his widow, Miriam Patchen. She, the charming but still candid teacher, took me, the willing and fascinated student, by the hand and led me into her world, and their world, and then his world.

Before I could enter his world, I needed to know how much of it had been created by her. Hadn't this Miriam, immortalized in the world of literature by Kenneth Patchen's love poems, exerted a powerful influence upon the Patchen art? Doesn't she, to whom all twenty-eight books are dedicated, stand alone in a world where modern writers seem to offer each new book to a new wife? Again and again "For Miriam" can be found sandwiched into a painting or a picture-poem. I needed to know.

During the first two days of our visit she inquired repeatedly, "Don't you have any important questions to ask? Are you sure you are learning what you came out here (from Grand Forks, North Dakota, to Palo Alto, California) to learn?" and then the conversation would revert to another state in their lives or to the art and Miriam would say, "Well, we thought that"

¹Miriam Patchen, private interview held at Palo Alto, California, February 5-12, 1974.

At seventeen years of age Miriam Oiken made a decision to marry the young poet and to wholly devote her life to him and his poetry. She, who in 1933 had organized one of the first anti-war conferences at Smith College, decided that his voice through his poetry was more powerful than hers. As the years went by, she again made that decision: this time for an abortion instead of a child. The poet would have to take work in order to support the child, and the voice of the poet might then be silenced.

In the same spirit she accepted a life of poverty. Then Kenneth's illness settled in. First came a slipped disc in 1937 misdiagnosed as arthritis, followed by years of painful cortisone shots. A spinal fusion in 1950 was successful and then destroyed by a fall from a medical table while in the hospital for another operation for a misdiagnosed lung ailment. No operation--no long ailment. The back condition worsened until it confined him, in pain and virtual solitude, to his bed for the last decade of his life. More medication resulted in a gastric ulcer.

Miriam, already suffering with multiple sclerosis herself, became his twenty-four-hour-a-day nurse. Her daily goal was to ease his pain enough to allow him a few hours' work. Only through him could she cry out to the world of man's needless suffering, of the evils of war, of hatred and injustice, and of love, kindness, and peace.

Miriam also did the usual things women of her warmth and intelligence do for men. She created, almost out of nothing, rented, borrowed, and finally bought homes filled with color and comfort, books and records, natural objects, and especially natural life--creatures.

But unlike other women, she peopled her world with these creatures; and they soon peopled Kenneth's world and then his art. Visiting her back yard with its black and gray squirrels, its frightened and wayward cats, its birds and insects is like entering the peaceable kingdom. Following her on her ventures into the neighborhood might be similar to a trip into the fields with Saint Francis of Assisi.

Kenneth, son of an Ohio steel worker, grandson of a Pennsylvania coal miner, grew up in homes without warmth, in places where pets were only dogs and cats. Yet after being with Miriam for a few years, he began to paint, cut and paste, draw, create in any possible way, the world of her "creatures." As in her world, the creatures in his art took on human and sub-human and even super-human characteristics. He came to use this creature world as both the tool and the substance of his visual art, and her sharing-gift of it to him may well be the most direct contribution she made to his art.

She was his wife, his friend, and always his lover. She was his mentor, and even at times his collaborator, designing the jacket for the love poems and later the record cover, suggesting the dedication page to Wonderings, continually responding to his "shall we use this or that"? For years, despite their poverty, she didn't take any work because Kenneth wanted her at his side as he created. Yet she remains quick to refuse credit for any of Kenneth's work, going so far as to stay away from the large commemoration in San Francisco after his death because "If I had gone they would have naturally focused attention on me and away from Kenneth and the poetry."

It would seem fitting to dedicate this work "For Miriam," yet that would be as silly as dedicating one's own child to oneself. Instead I can only thank her for assistance and teaching. In addition, I must thank others, all friends, who contributed freely of their time and support. Pamela McLean for help in preparing the catalog for the printers, Robert Lewis for proofing, Gary Reynolds for technical consultation, and especially John Ihle who upon a moment's notice moved his photography studio into the Patchen living room to photograph the work reproduced in the catalog. Finally, I wish to recognize my beloved husband Neil whose willingness to go into bachelorhood allows me to pursue my own work.

PLATE I



Kenneth Patchen

CHAPTER I

THE TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PICTURE-POEM

Art is created by artists. They are the element necessary for the movement or the coming into being of art. Not strangely, however, the artist is seldom the catalyst if catalyst is defined as "that which causes activity between two or more persons or forces without itself being affected."¹

Kenneth Patchen has evolved a new artistic genre, taking the historical illustrated poem and advancing it into the picture-poem or the painted-poem. This genre developed as most art develops, gradually, over a period of years. But the catalyst, in the form of events, circumstances, and people, came from outside the artist. Although his art exists within its own life space, it seems valid to trace its development as an expanding of that space and to recognize the nature and impact of those outside forces.

At twelve years of age Patchen began keeping a diary, and by age fourteen he was already writing sonnets, two of which were published by the New York Times after having been submitted by Patchen's English teacher. Once started writing, he never stopped; he likewise never experienced the slump periods common to many artists; but during his years as a wanderer, he left behind an

¹Random House Dictionary of the English Language, College ed., 1968, p. 211.

endless stream of unedited and unpublished manuscripts. Seemingly driven by unnameable forces, he continued to work until the day of his untimely death, January 2, 1972.

He was thirty-one years old when he first tried painting, and again he never stopped. During those intervening years he began the artistic exploration which was to become his quest: How to free the word from the sentence and the sentence from the paragraph? How to open up the page? Finally the search led to the freeing of letters from words and even words from pages.

Because of this search, Patchen is credited with pioneering the movement in modern verse ironically named "Concrete Poetry" (see Plate II). Patchen himself was not willing to stop with visual poetry but continued on into the refilling of the freed pages with his own images. These became picture-poems in which he completely integrated the poem with the painting. One did not illustrate the other; both elements fused into a greater whole.

Patchen's first book, Before the Brave, was published in 1936. The poetry, stylistically conventional, and raging against society, placed Patchen smack in the middle of the social protest writers of the time. But, strangely enough, it was his first novel, The Journal of Albion Moonlight (1941), that proved his scope was greater than mere social protest, that marked him an extraordinary user of language, and that foreshadowed the poetry to follow. Each page took poetic language into new directions as Joyce had done with prose language in his earlier Ulysses; nevertheless, Moonlight was conceived and published as a novel.

PLATE II

men are getting scairt of their world. Charlie Hearse is hobbling your
way and the promised awa

THE NATURE OF REALITY

Bed. Apple.
Sly bird. Policeman.
Famine. Rod of milk.
Dice. Groan.
Stone. Towel.
Divot.
"Put some on mine." Six or Tad Prichard.

THE REALITY OF NATURE

Seeking
death life
growth decay
peace madness
conflict silence
birth dissolution
"Put some in me." Tad Prichard or none.

T R R O R
E

"The Nature of Reality," poem from Panels for the
Walls of Heaven, 1946

Patchen's first venture into the world of painted images was spurred by practical needs. He loved beautiful books: books printed on fine paper with handsome bindings, carefully selected type, and generous empty spaces. In order to publish his own work this way, he was willing to bargain.

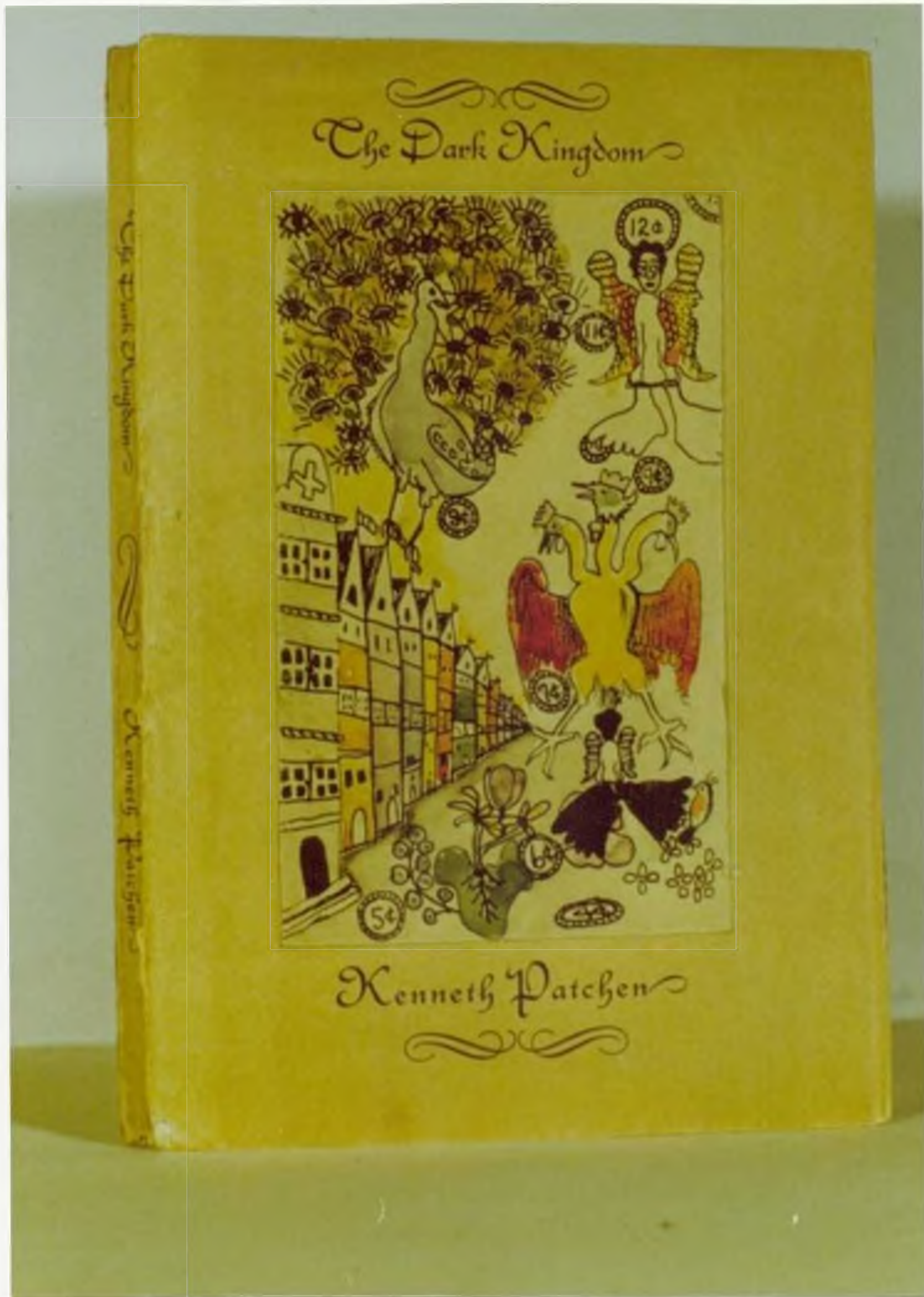
The publisher of his next book, The Dark Kingdom (1942), was Harris and Givens of New York. The young couple, relying on Harris' father for financial backing, wanted to publish the most beautiful of books. Then, as was to happen again and again with Patchen, publishing expenses proved more costly than anticipated; it fell upon the poet's shoulders to salvage the book.

The crisis came during the winter of 1941 when, according to his wife, Miriam, "He was more severely confined to bed than usual. Stuck there in a walk-up tenement on the seventh floor with no telephone, he was pretty well prevented from doing much to facilitate matters." From his sick bed he contemplated alternatives.

The usual ploy would have been a limited and numbered first edition, but Patchen cringed at the idea of charging extra money for his signature. He instead chose to create seventy-five paintings to be adhered to the front cover of each book of the limited edition. These delicate watercolors, reminiscent of Marc Chagall, started what was to become a Patchen tradition--the painted book (see Plate III).

The painted covers evolved along the same lines as other Patchen art. The second series of covers on Sleepers Awake (1946) was still completed paintings, applied symmetrically to the front cover of the book, leaving a

PLATE III



The Dark Kingdom, painted book, No. 1, 1942

generous area of blankness surrounding the work. Then he further integrated the art into the cover in Panels for the Walls of Heaven (1946) by creating paintings or collages, using any handy material, directly upon the whole front cover. The back cover became a hand-painted colophon.

The remaining editions were executed in the untrained artist's mature style (see Plate IV). He either glued a special Japanese paper to the cardboard or worked directly upon it after applying a base of gouache. In any event, having moved the colophon back inside, he filled both back and front covers with one extended or two related images. The images, invariably creatures, were then painted with a myriad of substances including casein, mortar-ground watercolors, coffee, tempera, egg dye, sumi sticks mixed with glues, varnish, carbon inks, Japanese earth-colors, or whatever he came upon in his experimentations.

Other images were created with torn tissue paper. Because he knew nothing of materials, much of his work has already begun, by 1974, its untimely disintegration.

Although the picture-poems didn't come into being until the late fifties, fifteen or so years after the painted books were begun, visual elements had begun to creep into his poetry.

In Cloth of the Tempest (1943) the first "pictures" appear--referred to as "pictures" by the artist who never reached the point of seeing himself as a painter. He did "pictures." Unlike later works, these early pictures maintained the sense of a continuing line (see Plate V).

PLATE IV



Hallelujah Anyway, painted book, unnumbered, 1966

PLATE V

She knows it's
raining and my
room is warm



but she is proud
and beautiful
and I have
no money

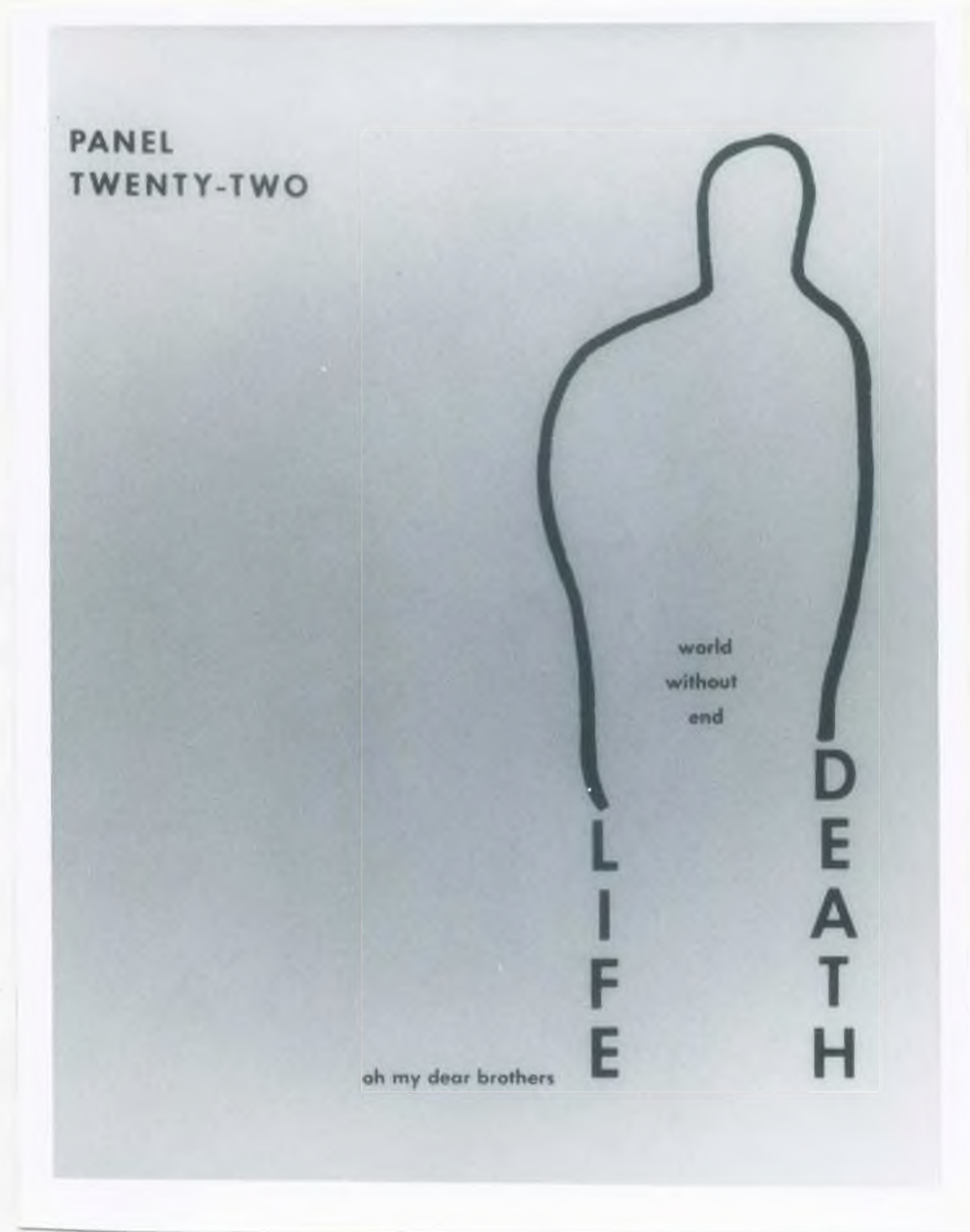
Three years later, with the publication of Panels for the Walls of Heaven (1946) and Sleepers Awake (1946), Patchen expanded the definition of modern poetry by freely placing words and letters on the page without bowing to conventions of verse, line, or even style (see Plate VI).

The latter, Sleepers Awake, remained in the poet's mind his most successful book, perhaps because it represented his greatest involvement in the printer's craft. Never again was a publisher so able to accommodate his art. Patchen himself tramped the streets of New York seeking unusual type, later returning to the print shop to set up the pages himself.

The lack of money was again a problem and at this time diverted him. Patchen wished to repay his publisher, Padell, for the certain losses taken by Sleepers Awake. He decided to write a popular novel, one by which Padell could recoup. After suffering through an endless number of hated conventional tag lines like "she said" and "she thought" and "he did," the book See You in the Morning (1948) came to press. A serialization by Woman's Home Companion, netting \$5,000, split between author and publisher, followed close on the heels of publication. Then came an offer from The Sears Roebuck Book Club. Padell put his foot down. It just didn't seem fitting for a fine poet to be connected with Sears Roebuck, no matter how ordinary the novel. Patchen disagreed. If the object was to make money, then make money! Padell won the argument. Patchen gave up writing popular novels.

Back working at poetry, Patchen still envisioned a greater releasing of word forms. Maybe books themselves might change "so that the rigid block frame

PLATE VI



"Panel Twenty-Two," poem from Panels for the Walls of Heaven, 1946

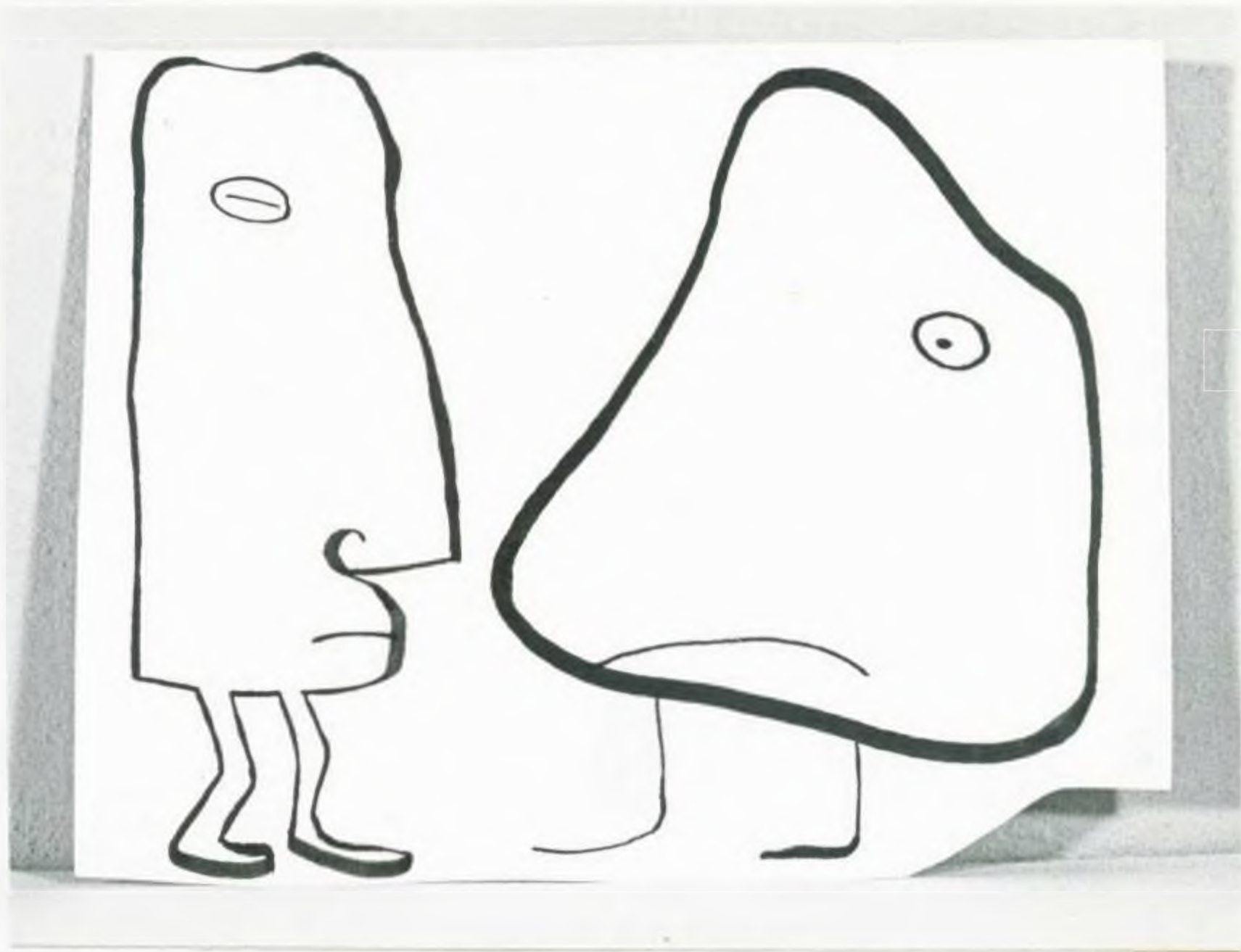
would disappear from holding the words in too tightly." More and more frequently he sought the answer in visual imagery. In the beginning, pictures were used to illustrate poetry as they had in the historical past (see Plate VII). Drawings, sketches, smudges of ink, and suggestive images moved around the poem and along with the poem but not yet through the poem. Then came five years of revolutionary change: 1955-1960.

The revolution, spurred by pain, responded to a lucky chance. Patchen found working difficult. Being right handed, he could only work while lying on his left and more painful side. Idleness was unthinkable. Across town at Stanford University a friend of Patchen's, John Hunter Thomas of the Botanical Department, unwittingly found the answer. He had begun the supervision of a major reclassification project. The old French collection of botanical specimens needed attention. Carefully they were lifted from their long accustomed bed, and the paper beneath them was tossed aside. Thomas, noting the fine quality of the paper, decided it should be salvaged. On his next visit to the poet's home, he tucked a bundle of the 17 x 11" sheets under his arm.

Patchen, with his love of beautiful books, was elated. Days were spent pouring over it, sorting it for color and water marks, separating out stained pieces, and deciphering the strange writing found on certain sheets.

Who before himself had used this beautiful paper? Patchen, determined to know, approached historians and linguists. There was only one answer. The writing was done by military shoppers, Napoleon's shoppers. The lists were supply lists. The paper, Mrs. Patchen said, had been made from the rags of Napoleon's army.

PLATE VII



WE MEET

We are every so often rustled
 By something afar--
 In this case, a stretch of watery coast
 Along which saunter a Cow
 Made of brilliant red roses,
 And two heavily bearded schoolchildren;
 And in the other, by something quite near--
 That is, the imminent presence in us
 Of certain vague and shadowy hungers,
 Of dreams (and even painful rejoicings),
 Which presumably add up to the same thing.

"We Meet," illustrated poem from Hurrah for Anything, 1957

He who publicly hated war far more than the ordinary man began to create art out of the remains of war.

Prior to the arrival of the paper, he had done two silkscreen portfolios of eighteen prints each. Using handmade Japanese papers, many of which Patchen hand colored himself, he made poems illustrated with drawings or decorated with paintings. Or he made lovely visual works in which he imbedded the drawing. A few bridged upon the successful fusion of the two; most were one or the other.

On the new paper Patchen "poeted" as never in his life. Fusion of the poetry and visual imagery finally came (see Plate VIII). Hallelujah Anyway (1966) left his bedside table.

He awaited publication with excitement. His picture-poems were to be in color. Word came from James Laughlin, Patchen's trusted publisher at New Directions: "No color." If the book was to be in black and white, the pieces had to be reworked. The artist spent days toning down areas, reworking red solids which would reproduce as black, bringing the brilliantly colored work into focus with the laws of black and white reproduction. As picture-paintings in themselves, the originals lost much of their charm and power; but they became reproducible.

The book came out accompanied by more disappointments. The picture-poems became a mass of gray upon the mustard-colored paper. The paperback format allowed almost no white spaces and only the narrowest of margins. Reduction of the larger work (17 x 11") cramped the pages to the point that the eye passes over them without reading. Only the few pieces originally conceived

PLATE VIII



"The One Who Comes to Question Himself," picture-poem
from Hallelujah Anyway, 1966

on a smaller format (10 x 7") survived as good art (see Plate IX). The final blow came when he started the limited edition of painted books. Nothing would adhere to the slick cover. He tossed the book aside and refused to look at it ever again.

The last two books of picture-poems, But Even So (1968) and Wonderings (1971) were more successful as books. Once more the art emerged not so much from Patchen's intention as from external catalysts. He was forced to simplify his images, shorten his poems, and build more white space into each work. Ironically, these are his best picture-poems appearing in books.

Shortly after these last books were published, Patchen died. Only days earlier he had told Miriam, "Now my work is done." She didn't believe him. Taking form within his head had been other books: Translations from the English for which he had already selected English writers, including Donne, to be "translated"; The Human Winter, a single continuous line of words, one thousand pages long, for which he had long ago prepared the manuscript dummy; and I Wonder What Alice's Brother Was Doing, a take-off on Alice in Wonderland.

Patchen devotees are still waiting for the art to be given to them in its proper and most enhancing setting. The question remains, how? Prior to the 1974 exhibition at the University of North Dakota,² two major museum shows have taken place, one at the Corcoran and the other at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Yet, only one picture-poem, "The King of Toys" (1964), is best seen on

²A catalog, copyright 1974 by L. J. Reuter, of the show "Hallelujah Anyway! A Kenneth Patchen Exhibition," held March 18-April 5, 1974, in the University Art Gallery, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, can be found at the back of this thesis.

PLATE IX



"What the Story Tells Itself," picture-poem from
Hallelujah Anyway, 1966

a gallery wall. It was created as a painting and never altered for black and white reproduction. Because its decomposition has already gone too far for the camera eye, no reproduction appears in this thesis. Fortunately, Motive Magazine used it for a cover in its December, 1964, issue.

The viewer of any exhibition will only catch a glimpse of what the art must have been.

The answer seems to lie in a book and maybe a black and white book at that. Perhaps a publisher with money to lose (Scrimshaw Press of Berkeley?) will soon save the remaining art for posterity by meeting Patchen's own standard.

CHAPTER II

PATCHEN'S USE OF PRIMITIVE IMAGERY AND STYLE

Labeled early in his career as a social protest writer, Kenneth Patchen knew he could not send his particular message to the world through discursive or political poetry; and so he very deliberately sought to combine it with a visual art that would command in the viewer an emotional and, therefore, for his purposes, an appropriately significant response. In his 1941 The Journal of Albion Moonlight, he presented an aesthetic theory which foreshadowed the development of the picture-poem. He admonished himself: "Pay less attention to dialogue, more to the touch of their presences one on the other. Speech is unimportant if the total atmosphere comes through."¹

His message, known to man since man's beginning, was too blatant to sound like anything more than a Sunday school lesson: "Peace or Perish";² "Mercy, Truth, Freedom, Love, Kindness, Trust, or all men are doomed";³ "The one

¹Kenneth Patchen, The Journal of Albion Moonlight (New York: Padell Book Company, 1941), p. 217.

²Kenneth Patchen, Hallelujah Anyway (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 52.

³Ibid.

who comes to question himself has cared for mankind";⁴ "A feeling of passionate mercy, the rest doesn't matter a damn!";⁵ "Peace or Perish--and to think it all started out like any other world, intended, one might almost have been led to believe, to last for a good long time."⁶

Patchen saw man involved in a catastrophic struggle between good and evil, with modern man losing because his conscience had gone to sleep. Patchen's truth was in his knowing that in the depths of man's soul goodness and truth were basic; if man could but dig back into himself he could unearth this goodness. But how could a sleeping man retrace himself? Patchen the town crier sought to awaken him through his art.

The poet chose the visual imagery of the child or the seemingly primitive because naive art "instinctively and with a wealth of images reflects primal observations of simple communal experience."⁷ He wanted modern man to look at and remember these primal observations. He then cloaked these observations in humor because how else does one swallow such a banal taste--that of the bitter truth; how else does the poet convince the man that these Sunday school lesson words are really truth worthy to live by.

In order to believe that this was Patchen's conscious intent, it is necessary to establish that Patchen was not a primitive.

⁴Ibid., p. 43.

⁵Ibid., p. 92.

⁶Ibid., p. 53.

⁷Oto Bihalji-Merien, Masters of Naive Art (New York: McGraw Hill, 1962), p. 7.

Alfred Frankenstein, critic of the San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle, called Patchen the most sophisticated primitive in American art.⁸ Others have called him a painter of instinct, a folk artist, a neo-primitive, a naive, a grass roots artist, a user of children's art, and a creator of art that comes close to that produced by the insane. It is known that he was self-taught. And, like all self-taught artists before and after him, he made up his technique as he went along.

It is also known that, to paraphrase Henry Miller, his was an uncommon taste. In 1965, the San Francisco Bay Printmakers Society wanted a juror from outside the art world. They chose Kenneth Patchen. After days of sorting through stacks of prints brought to his bedside, he selected what was to be heralded as the finest show ever held by the Society. John Ihle, former student of Mauricio Lasansky, current Chairman of Printmaking at the University of California at San Francisco, widely known as an experimental printmaker and an organizer of the show, said of Patchen that his was an immaculate, sophisticated, and daring taste that always recognized the exquisite in concept as well as technique. Ihle said simply, "It was a beautiful show."⁹

Patchen is labeled as primitive on two levels: content and form (or technique). As a technical artist he started as all unsophisticated or untaught artists start. All of the mistakes of the untaught beginner (see page 16) are recorded in his first book of picture-poems, Hallelujah Anyway.

⁸Miriam Patchen, interview.

⁹John L. Ihle, personal letter, November 20, 1973.

In 1927 Franz Boas published his Primitive Art which is still considered the definitive analysis of the fundamental traits of primitive art. His first construct is that "since a perfect standard of form can be attained only in a highly developed and perfectly controlled technique there must be an intimate relation between technique and a feeling for beauty."¹⁰

Patchen's development as a self-taught artist follows the specific steps set out by Boas who maintains that the feeling for form develops with technical activities. Through the handling of his physical materials (the technical activities involved in transferring the individual picture-poems onto the reduced format of the book), he arrived at a graceful, controlled, and powerful form. But it took some time. At least a third of the pieces in the exhibition showed evidence of this experimentation (e.g., "You Can't Leave the Doughnut Whole . . ." ¹¹ and "The Walker Standing"¹²).

From the beginning, Patchen suffered that basic primitive affliction "horror vacui" or fear of empty spaces. There are no empty spaces in the first book of picture-poems. All of the whiteness of the page has been covered by lines and blotches of color. The reader simply cannot take in more than a few pages at a time, for there are no pauses or rests. The positive spaces lose their impact because of the lack of negative space.

¹⁰Franz Boas, Primitive Art (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), p. 11.

¹¹Patchen, Hallelujah Anyway, p. 28.

¹²Ibid., p. 55.

In the beginning he also didn't know how to handle paint, and he didn't necessarily use paint. He used tea, Tintex, casein, watercolor, gouache, tempera, coffee, Easter egg dye, sumi sticks mixed with glue, varnishes, waxes, cornstarch, and Japanese earth colors. In place of brushes he used whatever his hand fell upon: sponges, cooking utensils, garden implements, toenail clippers, et cetera. He flung, dripped, washed, smeared, and sometimes even painted the paint. Then to complicate matters he learned that many of the pieces had to be reworked for publication in black and white. Now directly on top of the original experiments he had to learn how to make dozens of gradations of gray.

Patchen was an artist who seldom reworked a poem; it was conceived in his mind and then placed directly on paper. The same held with his paintings. Therefore, to go back and rework a picture-poem often meant a lessening of its impact. Compare the vitality of the unaltered "My Program? Let Us All Weep Together"¹³ with the altered "Inside the Flower."¹⁴ Then compare the same "Inside the Flower" with the unaltered "All At Once Is What Eternity Is."¹⁵ The same grays appear in both but in one as a rich texture and in the other as muddy background.

Under these badly overworked picture-poems one is still able to perceive an evolving art form of great power. Therein lies Patchen's genius.

¹³Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 10.

Although the mistakes of the beginner are found in his earliest work, the qualities of design which characterize primitive art appear in greater numbers later. This leads me to believe that he consciously added them both as solutions to his earlier problems with form and technique and as a statement of content. With his increasing technical skill he was learning to create an art very much like primitive art.

His case of "horror vacui" worsens in But Even So where the massive abundance of words turns them into a texture difficult to read and perhaps not meant to be read. But this fear seems to be consciously used and the work made accessible by the addition of another of Boas' noted fundamental characteristics of primitive art, rhythmic repetition. "But Even So," the title and cover piece of the book, is repeated on the verso of every pair of pages. It serves as foil for the richly textured picture-poems to its right. It sets up a symmetrical balance (another characteristic of primitive art) with that corresponding page, being the same size and of the most common shade of gray found in the picture-poem. And, by acting as a comma or pause, it allows the reader to rhythmically move through the whole book, something he could never accomplish with Hallelujah Anyway.

Certainly rhythmical repetition was not a new convention to the poet who, despite his early forsaking of rhyme, had used it eight years previously to tie together his collection of poems and drawings, Because It Is. However, it certainly met his needs in the later book and served to reinforce the primitive quality of his work.

Another characteristic of primitive art, defined by Boas and adopted by Patchen, is the emphasis of form by the application of marginal patterns. A basket weaver, needing to tie off the ends at the top, develops a geometric pattern around the rim. Not only is the general form emphasized, but its "natural divisions are determining elements in the application of decorative patterns and bring it about that the decoration is arranged in distinct fields."¹⁶ For example, a potter will set the neck off from the body of the pot by two different patterns of decoration. Patchen often borders the whole picture-poem with a decorative margin, thus delineating its boundaries on the paper. These are often rhythmical repetitions of scribbles (see Plate X). At other times he separates the picture from the poem in the same manner, thus giving each its own balancing field (see Plate XI).

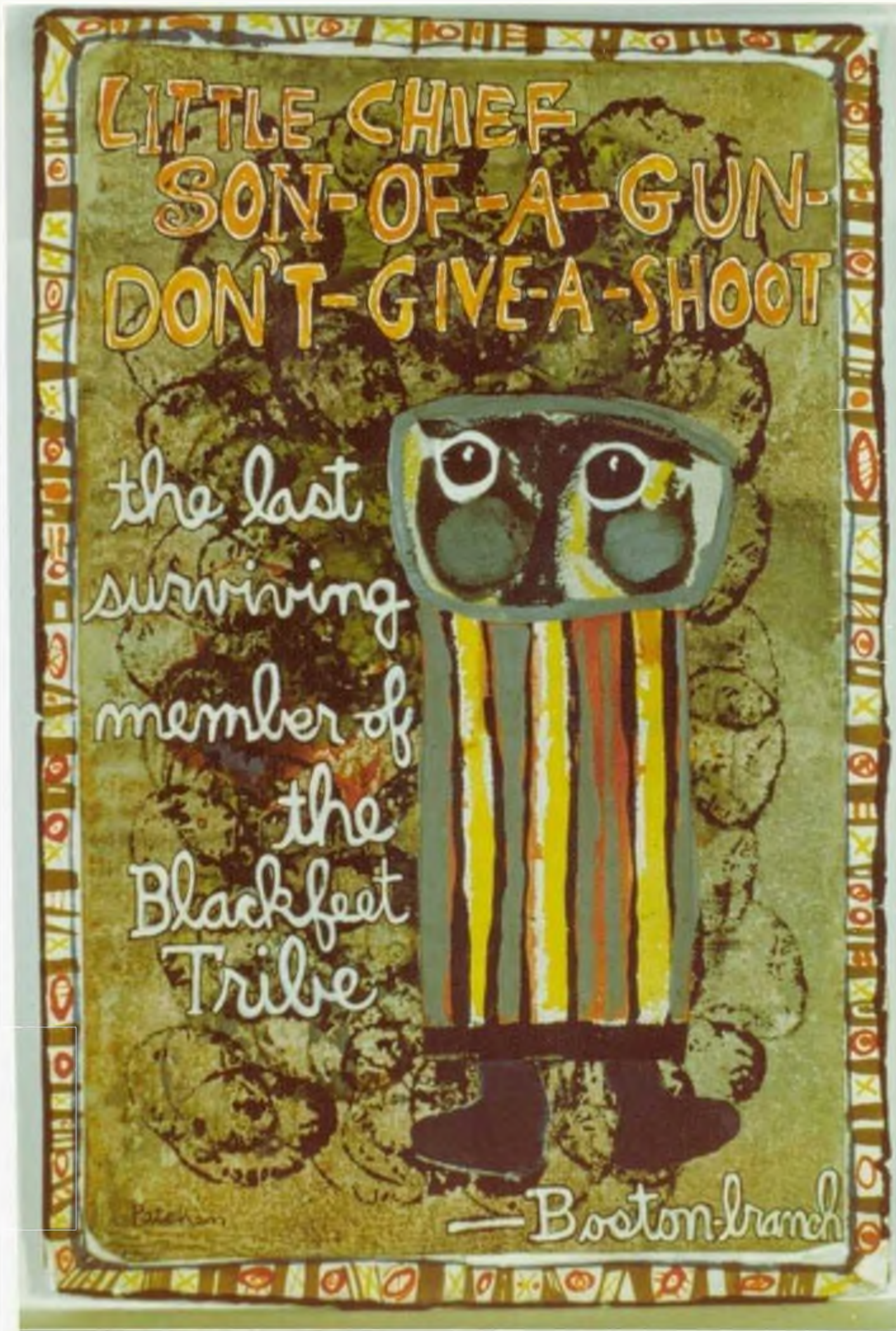
As the critic of primitive art moves from assessing technique to content, he is faced with two possible elements: a purely formal one in which enjoyment is based on form alone and another in which the form is filled with meaning. Usually women's art falls into the first category (baskets, weavings, and embroidery) and men's art falls into the latter (woodcarving, painting, and their derivatives). Patchen chose the latter although he freely borrowed elements from the first.

In Albion Moonlight, a distinctly symbolic book, Patchen said, "Man has been corrupted by his symbols. Language has killed his animal."¹⁷ Almost the

¹⁶Boas, Primitive Art, p. 55.

¹⁷Patchen, The Journal of Albion Moonlight, p. 15.

PLATE X



"Little Chief Son-of-a-Gun," picture-poem from
Hallelujah Anyway, 1966

PLATE XI



"Peace or We All Perish," picture-poem from
Hallelujah Anyway, 1966

only symbols uncorrupted by man were his earliest childhood markings long ago buried in his unconscious. Patchen chose to make creatures after the manner of children, in effect, to revive the child-like art.

Children begin drawing by scribbling. By the time they are master scribblers (between four and five years of age), they can make twenty basic scribbles made up of lines that are vertical, horizontal, diagonal, circular, curving, and waving. The scribbling is rapid and spontaneous. Very early they seem to develop an awareness of figure-ground relationships.¹⁸ This scribbling technique could be an exact description of Patchen's drawing facility in the picture-poems. "Upon the Book of the Waters"¹⁹ is a fine example of a scribble drawing that might have been created by any young child.

Almost the first figure that a child adds to his scribbles is the mandala (a figure symbolic of the universe and literally meaning "magic circle"). In the self-taught art of the child, the mandala is a favorite balance symbol. Crossed squares and concentric circles and squares are also types of mandalas. The child transfers the figure into suns, radials, people, and, eventually, the eyes of people. From the beginning of time man has preserved it as one of his oldest and most sacred symbols. From caves to stone tablets to temple walls it appears again and again. There is not a picture-poem in either book which does

¹⁸Rhoda Kellogg with Scott O'Dell, The Psychology of Children's Art (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 20.

¹⁹Patchen, Hallelujah Anyway, p. 26.

not include at least one very distinct mandala, and almost always it appears as a dot surrounded by concentric circles representing the eye of the creature.

When using the symbolic method, the artist, whether he be child, primitive, or sophisticated modern man, uses only the essential parts as symbol of the object. To illustrate, at about age four children begin to draw the human figure. Kellogg and Dell in their Psychology of Children's Art cite:

From the mandala sun in his drawings comes the human face, at first huge in its relationship to arms and legs. The first people drawings naturally seem pretty inhuman. Rays of the sun become arms and legs, ears, hair, and head decorations. A child may take away some of the sun's rays and lengthen others, add scribbles for facial features, use small suns for hands and rays for fingers. In the first drawings of humans, the arms are attached to the head, and there are markings on top--not for hair, really, but to balance the legs. In later drawings, the child omits arms, perhaps in an effort to relieve the monotony of mandala balance.²⁰

The child's drawings of the human figure are followed after a while by pictures of animals which stand up firmly on two legs instead of crouching down on all fours. The child simply puts two ears on top of a head he has drawn, and he has something which adults obligingly call an animal. Very often he draws two arms, or sometimes three or four, on one side of the figure, and then the drawing looks like any number of exotic creatures.²¹

Boas describes the same process in similar words:

It will be readily seen that children's drawings are essentially of the character here described. They are not memory images, as Wundt claims, except in so far as the symbols are remembered and reminders, but compositions of what to the child's mind appears essential, perhaps also as feasible. A person has two eyes which have their most characteristic form in front view, a prominent nose which is most striking in profile; hands with fingers which are best seen when the palms are turned forward; feet the form of which is clear only in profile. The body is essential and so is the clothing, hence the so-called Röntgen pictures in which

²⁰Kellogg with O'Dell, The Psychology of Children's Art, pp. 65-66.

²¹Ibid., p. 75.

covered parts are drawn The same traits prevail commonly in primitive drawings.²²

Patchen's eye-dominated, grotesque, but strangely natural creatures could have been drawn from Boas' formula. The weighted symbolic content placed on the eye, conventionally accepted as the "window to man's soul," fits with Patchen's aesthetic and intellectual purpose. Note the movement of the frontal eye to the side of the head which Boas describes and which is a characteristic of Egyptian art (see Plates VIII and XII). The placing of arms in "Come, Say Yes"²³ and "All at Once Is What Eternity Is"²⁴ come directly off the head which wears some type of balancing apparatus, not necessarily hair. But much of the time, as though according to the formula, the arms are missing altogether (see Plates VI, VIII, XIII, XIV, XV, and XVI).

Boas states above that "the body is essential and so is the covering." Patchen's figures always wear a body covering of some nature. Usually this body covering is used to create the most active or positive area of the composition, contrasting with the rest of the page through movement or color. The color is either a solid block as in "My Program? Let Us All Weep Together,"²⁵ highly decorative and busy as in "The Scene of the Crime,"²⁶

²²Boas, Primitive Art, p. 74.

²³Patchen, Hallelujah Anyway, p. 9.

²⁴Ibid., p. 10.

²⁵Ibid., p. 18.

²⁶Ibid., p. 71.

PLATE XII



"All That Leaves Is Here Always," picture-poem from
But Even So, 1968

PLATE XIII



"The Argument of Innocence," picture-poem from
But Even So, 1968

PLATE XIV



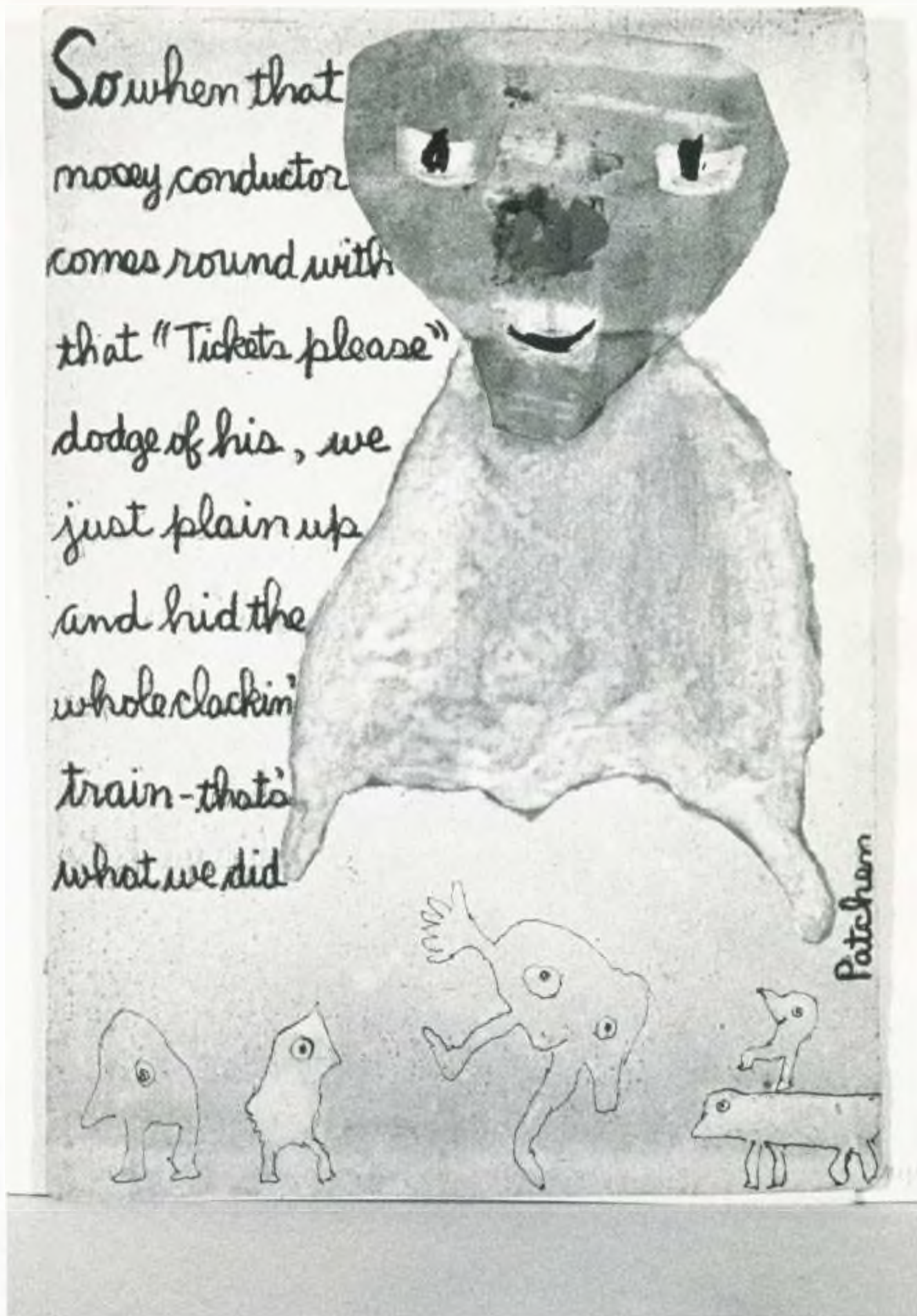
"Sure Is a Peculiar Way to Run a Ball Game," picture-poem
from Hallelujah Anyway, 1966

PLATE XV



"What Can You Do Up Here," picture-poem from
Hallelujah Anyway, 1966

PLATE XVI



"So When That Mosey Conductor Comes Round," picture-poem
from Hallelujah Anyway, 1966

a pointalistic massing of color which reproduces as variations of gray as in "There Isn't Much More to Tell,"²⁷ or a subtle wash as in "So When That Mosey Conductor."²⁸

By erasing the careful line between the rational and the irrational, between the serious world of man and the child's world of play, Patchen establishes the point of view of the poet speaking through primitive (or child) man. The creatures are his medium. Again, by going back to Albion Moonlight, it becomes possible to trace his intent: ". . . write about these people as though you were lying full length at their feet. The perspective from below."²⁹

In the same book he predicts how his language will develop in the picture-poems:

What is there to say about any of this that can be said clearly and simply?
Above all I want to be understood.³⁰

Meet your narrative with treatments of your own feeling.³¹

Avoid delightful passages; bring your ship in at low tide every time.³²

Make sure that the words are hung with all their flags: kick them into each other; make their noses bleed.³³

²⁷Ibid., p. 73.

²⁸Ibid., p. 13.

²⁹Patchen, The Journal of Albion Moonlight, p. 217.

³⁰Ibid., p. 6.

³¹Ibid., p. 217.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

That which is not daring is nothing An idea must have an inexhaustible substance; it must burst its banks--without control.³⁴

And the powerful, short, epigrammatic "poems" work best in their most spare terseness. I am not sure why they are even called poems, or why, for that matter, the paintings are called pictures. Maybe Patchen believed himself when he said, "They will not listen because at times I became afraid and tried to clothe my spirit in art."³⁵ He denied being an artist by saying he had never studied art. He only made pictures. Ultimately he has to be judged on the final product, and the "art form" which he developed met his purpose most powerfully and succinctly. Certainly works such as "My Program? Let Us All Weep Together,"³⁶ "What the Story Tells Itself When There's Nobody Around to Hear It,"³⁷ "The Argument of Innocence Can Only Be Lost If It Is Won,"³⁸ and "All That Leaves Is Here Always"³⁹ illustrate this powerful uniting of word and image. The thoughtful viewer, of course, may perceive the nature of Patchen's successes for himself. The parts add up to the whole which still seems greater.

³⁴Ibid., p. 219.

³⁵Ibid., p. 23.

³⁶Patchen, Hallelujah Anyway, p. 18.

³⁷Ibid., p. 23.

³⁸Kenneth Patchen, But Even So (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 11.

³⁹Ibid., p. 89.

PLATE XVII

77
Waiting at the bathhouse while a duck is



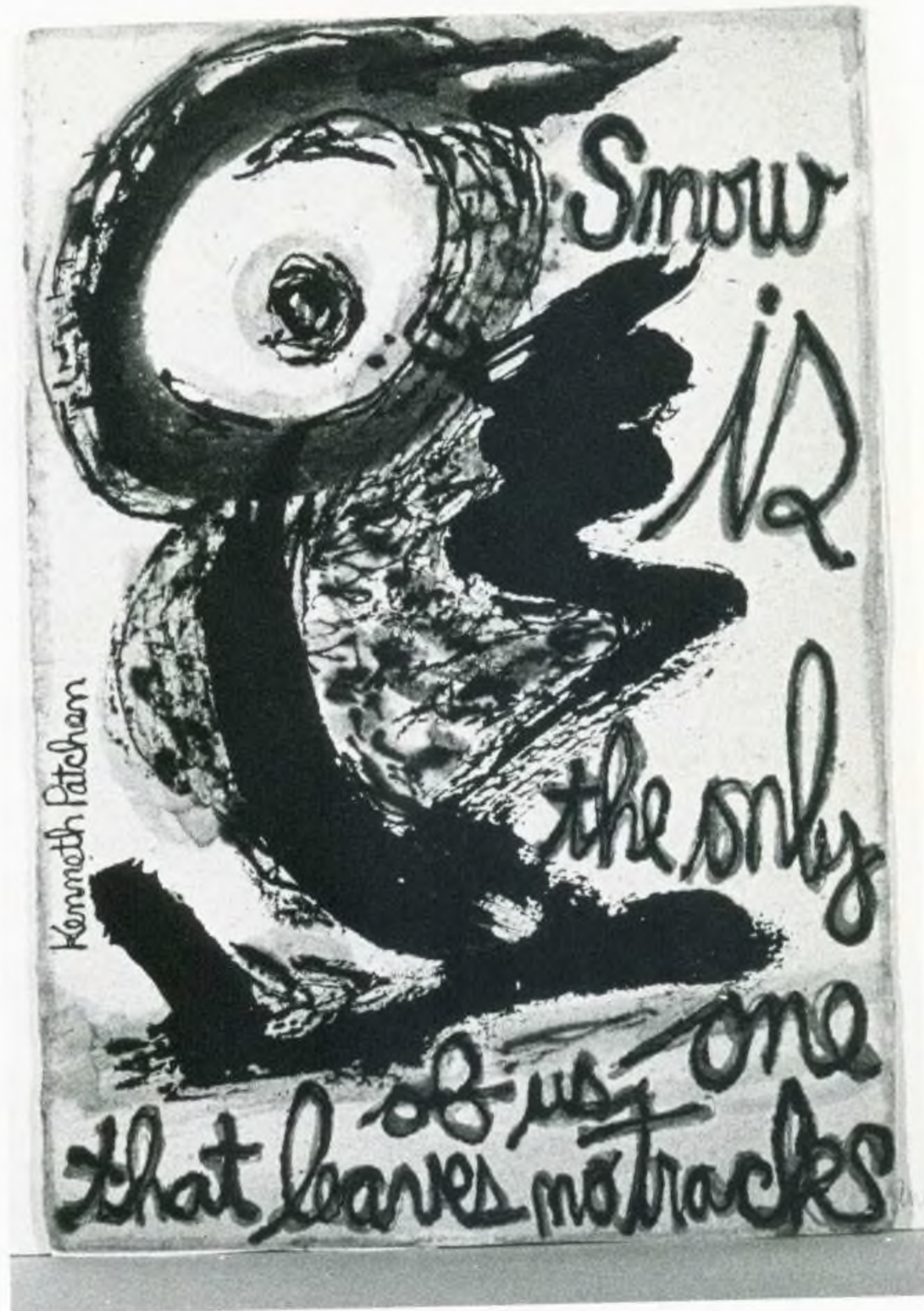
already having a fine swim for himself below



77
1971
5/14

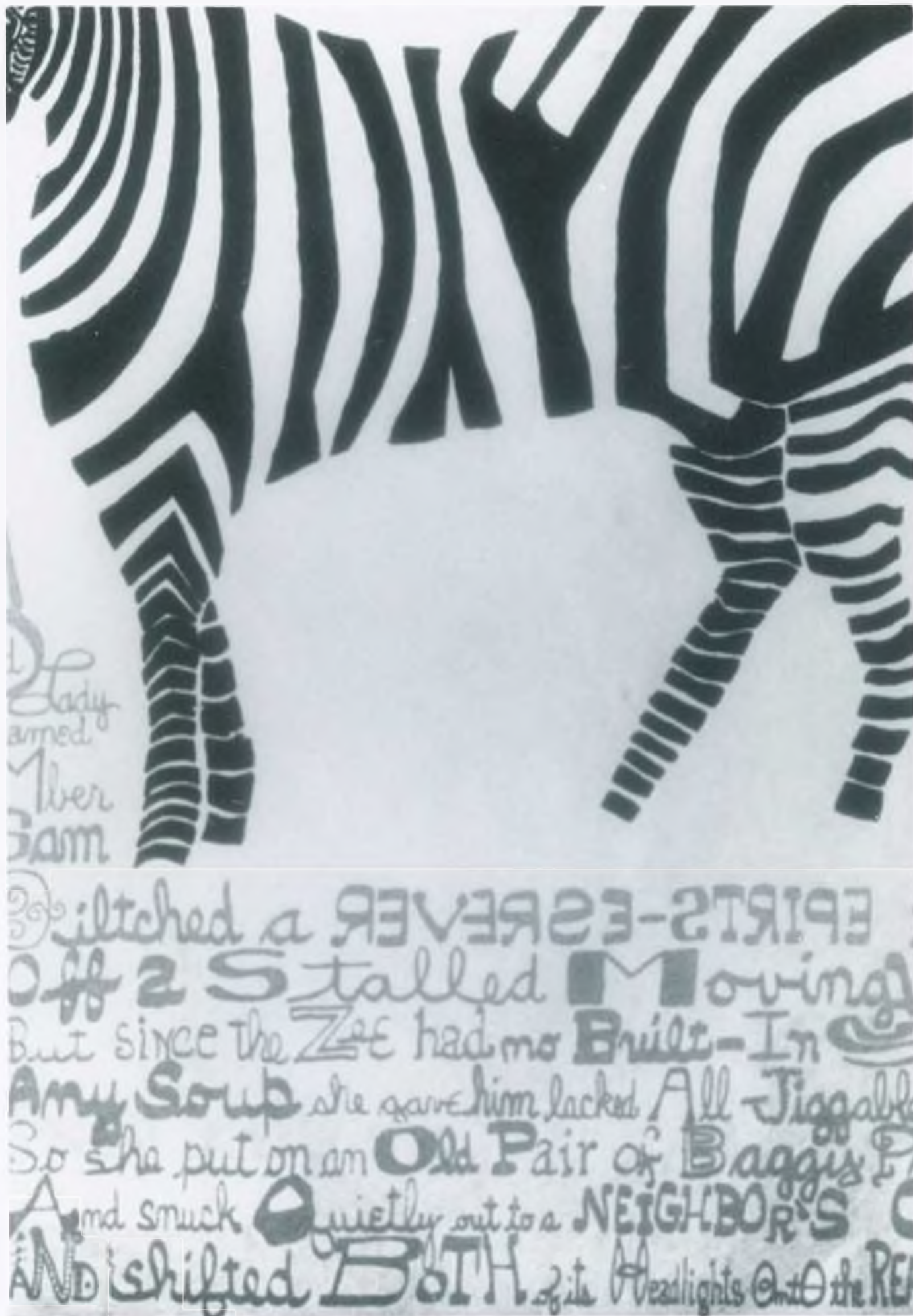
"Waiting at the Bathhouse," poem from Wonderings, 1971

PLATE XVIII



"Snow Is the Only One of Us," picture-poem from
Hallelujah Anyway, 1966

PLATE XIX



"An Old Lady Named Amber Sam," silkscreen folio page from
Glory Never Guesses and Other Pages, 1955

APPENDIX I

CHRONOLOGY

1911

Born on December 11 in Niles, Ohio

1928-29

Studies at the Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin

1930

Studies at Commonwealth College in Mena, Arkansas

1934

Marries Miriam Oiken on June 28

1936

Receives Guggenheim Fellowship

1944

Receives Ohioana Book Award in poetry for Cloth of the Tempest

1950

Has major operation on spine. Money for operation was raised through a fund headed by T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Archibald MacLeish, and Thornton Wilder which was supported by poetry readings given by E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and Edith Sitwell. Surgery a failure.

1950

Begins experimentation in "poetry jazz"

1954

Received Shelley Memorial Award

1957

Pioneers the "public birth of poetry jazz" in night clubs in Los Angeles and San Francisco

1957

Denounces all connections with the "San Francisco scene"

1967

Receives \$10,000 award for "life long contribution to American Letters" from the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities

1972

Dies on January 2

In between these years, creates over 1,000 painted-books, founds the international concrete poetry movement, develops the picture-poem genre, and publishes twenty-eight books.

APPENDIX II

THE WORKS OF KENNETH PATCHEN

Before the Brave

New York: Random House, 1936
poetry

First Will and Testament

Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1939
poetry

To Say If You Love Someone

Prairie City, Ill.: The Decker Press, 1939
poetry
unnumbered limited edition of painted books
(covers created during period from 1960-
1970)

The Journal of Albion Moonlight

New York: Kenneth Patchen, 1941
prose

The Dark Kingdom

New York: Harris and Givens, 1942
poetry
limited edition of 75 painted books

The Teeth of the Lion

Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1942
poetry

Cloth of the Tempest

New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1943
poetry

The Memoirs of a Shy Pornographer

New York: New Directions, 1945
prose

An Astonished Eye Looks Out of the Air
Walport, Ore.: The Untide Press, 1946
poetry

Sleepers Awake
New York: Padell Book Company, 1946
poetry
limited edition of 75 painted books

Pictures of Life and of Death
New York: Padell Book Comapny, 1946
poetry

They Keep Riding Down All the Time
New York: Padell Book Company, 1946
poetry

Selected Poems
New York: New Directions, 1946
poetry

Panels for the Walls of Heaven
Berkeley: Bern Porter, 1946
poems-in-prose
limited edition of 150 painted books

See You in the Morning
New York: Padell Book Company, 1948
novel

Red Wine and Yellow Hair
New York: New Directions, 1949
poetry
limited edition of 108 painted books

Orchards, Thrones and Caravans
San Francisco: The Print Workshop, 1952
poetry

Fables and Other Little Tales
Karlsruhe-Durlach, Germany: Jonathan Williams, 1953
prose
limited edition of 50 painted books

Poems of Humor and Protest

San Francisco: City Lights, 1954
poetry

The Famous Boating Party

New York: New Directions, 1954
prose-poems
limited edition of 50 painted books

Glory Never Guesses

San Francisco: Kenneth Patchen, 1955
silkscreen portfolio; poems with drawings
limited edition of 200

A Surprise for the Bagpipe Player

San Francisco: Kenneth Patchen, 1956
silkscreen portfolio; poems with drawings
limited edition of 200

Hurrah for Anything

Highlands, N.C.: Jonathan Williams, 1957
poems and drawings
limited edition of 100 painted books

When We Were Here Together

Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1957
poetry
limited edition of 75 painted books

Poemscapes

Highlands, N.C.: Jonathan Williams, 1958
prose-poems
limited edition of 75 painted books

Because It Is

New York: New Directions, 1960
poems and drawings

A Selection of Love Poems

San Francisco: City Lights, 1960
poetry

The Moment

San Francisco: Kenneth Patchen, 1962
bound edition of two silkscreen portfolios;
poems with drawings

Doubleheader: Poemscapes and Hurrah for Anything
New York: New Directions, 1965
prose-poems and poems with drawings

Hallelujah Anyway
New York: New Directions, 1966
picture-poems

The Collected Poems
New York: New Directions, 1967

But Even So
New York: New Directions, 1968
picture-poems

Aflame and Afun of Walking Faces
New York: New Directions, 1970
fables and drawing

Wonderings
New York: New Directions, 1971
picture-poems

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bihalji-Merrien, Oto. Masters of Naive Art. New York: McGraw Hill, 1962.
- Boas, Franz. Primitive Art. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955.
- Ihle, John L. Personal letter, November 20, 1973.
- Kellogg, Rhoda, with O'Dell, Scott. The Psychology of Children's Art. New York: Random House, 1967.
- Patchen, Miriam. Private interview held at Palo Alto, California, February 5-12, 1974.
- Patchen, Kenneth. But Even So. New York: New Directions, 1968.
- _____. Hallelujah Anyway. New York: New Directions, 1966.
- _____. The Journal of Albion Moonlight. New York: Padell Book Company, 1941.
- Random House Dictionary of the English Language. College ed. 1968.

HALLELUJAH ANYWAY!

A Kenneth Patchen Exhibition

18 March - 5 April, 1974

University Art Gallery

University of North Dakota at Grand Forks

Copyright © 1974 by Laurel J. Reuter

Reproductions of Kenneth Patchen's work appear through the courtesy of New Directions Publishing Corporation, New York, and Mrs. Kenneth Patchen.

But Even So, copyright © 1968 by Kenneth Patchen

Cloth of the Tempest, copyright 1943 by Kenneth Patchen

Hurray for Anything, copyright 1958 by Kenneth Patchen

Panels for the Walls of Heaven, copyright 1946 by Kenneth Patchen

INTRODUCTION

Introductions serve to introduce and to interest, and then through them dedications and acknowledgements are made. Often windows serve these same purposes. My introduction and window to the work of Kenneth Patchen was his widow Miriam Patchen. She, the charming but still candid teacher, took me, the willing and fascinated student, by the hand and led me into her world, and their world, and then his world.

Before I could enter his world I needed to know how much of it had been created by her. Hadn't this Miriam, immortalized in the world of literature by Kenneth Patchen's love poems, exerted a powerful influence upon the Patchen art? Doesn't she, to whom all twenty-eight books are dedicated, stand alone in a world where modern writers seem to offer each new book to a new wife? Again and again "For Miriam" can be found sandwiched into a painting or a picture-poem. I needed to know.

During the first two days of our visit she inquired repeatedly, "Don't you have any important questions to ask? Are you sure you are learning what you came out here (from Grand Forks, North Dakota, to Palo Alto, California) to learn?" and then the conversation would revert to another stage in their lives or to the art and Miriam would say, "Well, we thought that. . ."

At seventeen years of age Miriam Oiken made a decision to marry the young poet and to wholly devote her life to him and his poetry. She, who in 1933 had organized one of the first anti-war conferences at Smith College, decided that his voice through his poetry was more powerful than hers. As the years went by she again made that decision: this time for an abortion instead of a child. The poet would have to take work in order to support the child, and the voice of the poet might then be silenced.

In the same spirit she accepted a life of poverty. Then Kenneth's illness settled in. First came a slipped disc in 1937 misdiagnosed as arthritis, followed by years of painful cortisone shots. A spinal fusion in 1950 was successful and then destroyed by a fall from a medical table while in the hospital for another operation for a misdiagnosed lung ailment. No operation — no lung ailment. The back condition worsened until it confined him, in pain and virtual solitude, to his bed for the last decade of his life. More medication resulted in a gastric ulcer.

Miriam, already suffering with multiple sclerosis herself, became his twenty-four-hour-a-day nurse. Her daily goal was to ease his pain enough to allow him a few hours' work. Only through him could she cry out to the world of man's needless suffering, of the evils of war, of hatred and injustice and of love, kindness and peace.

Miriam also did the usual things women of her warmth and intelligence do for men. She created, almost out of nothing, rented, borrowed and finally bought homes filled with color and comfort, books and records, natural objects and especially natural life — creatures.

But unlike other women, she peopled her world with these creatures and they soon peopled Kenneth's world and then his art. Visiting her back yard with its black and gray squirrels, its frightened and wayward cats, its birds and insects is like entering the peaceable kingdom. Following her on her ventures into the neighborhood might be similar to a trip into the fields with Saint Francis of Assisi.

Kenneth, son of an Ohio steel worker, grandson of a Pennsylvania coal miner, grew up in homes without warmth, in places where pets were only dogs and cats. Yet after being with Miriam for a few years, he began to paint, cut and paste, draw, create in any possible way, the world of her "creatures." As in her world, the creatures in his art took on human and sub-human and even super-human characteristics. He came to use this creature world as both the tool and the substance of his visual art, and her sharing-gift of it to him may well be the most direct contribution she made to his art.

She was his wife, his friend and always his lover. She was his mentor, and even at times his collaborator, designing the jacket for the love poems and later the record cover, suggesting the dedication page to *Wonderings*, continually responding to his "shall we use this or that?" For years, despite their poverty, she didn't take work because Kenneth wanted her at his side as he created. Yet she remains quick to refuse credit for any of Kenneth's work, going so far as to stay away from the large commemoration in San Francisco after his death because "If I had gone they would have naturally focused attention on me and away from Kenneth and the poetry."

It would seem fitting to dedicate this exhibition "For Miriam," yet that would be as silly as dedicating one's own child to oneself. Instead I can only thank her for assistance and teaching. In addition I must thank others, all friends, who contributed freely of their time and support. Pamela McLean for help in preparing the catalog for the printers, Robert Lewis for proofing, Gary Reynolds for technical consultation, and especially John Ihle who upon a moment's notice moved his photography studio into the Patchen living room to photograph the work reproduced in the catalog. Finally I wish to recognize my beloved husband Neil whose willingness to go into bachelorhood allows me to pursue my own work.



CHRONOLOGY

1911

Born on December 11 in Niles, Ohio

1928-29

Studies at the Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin

1930

Studies at Commonwealth College in Mena, Arkansas

1934

Marries Miriam Oiken on June 28

1936

Receives Guggenheim Fellowship

1944

Receives Ohioana Book Award in poetry for *Cloth of the Tempest*

1950

Has major operation on spine. Money for operation was raised through a fund headed by T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Archibald MacLeish and Thornton Wilder which was supported by poetry readings given by E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams and Edith Sitwell. Surgery a failure.

1950

Begins experimentation in "poetry jazz"

1954

Received Shelley Memorial Award

1957

Pioneers the "public birth of poetry jazz" in night clubs in Los Angeles and San Francisco

1957

Denounces all connections with the "San Francisco scene"

1967

Receives \$10,000. award for "life long contribution to American Letters" from the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities

1972

Dies on January 2

In between these years, creates over 1,000 painted-books, founds the international concrete poetry movement, develops the picture-poem genre, and publishes twenty-eight books.

ART is created by artists. They are the element necessary for the movement or the coming into being of art. Not strangely, however, the artist is seldom the catalyst if *catalyst* is defined as "that which causes activity between two or more persons or forces without itself being affected." (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*)

Kenneth Patchen has evolved a new artistic genre, taking the historical illustrated poem and advancing it into the picture-poem or the painted-poem. This genre developed as most art develops, gradually, over a period of years. But the catalyst, in the form of events, circumstances and people, came from outside the artist. Although his art exists within its own life space, it seems valid to trace its development as an expanding of that space and to recognize the nature and impact of those outside forces.

At twelve years of age Patchen began keeping a diary, and by age fourteen he was already writing sonnets, two of which were published by the *New York Times* after having been submitted by Patchen's English teacher. Once started writing, he never stopped; he likewise never experienced the slump periods common to many artists, but during his years as a wanderer, he left behind an endless stream of unedited and unpublished manuscripts. Seemingly driven by unnameable forces, he continued to work until the day of his untimely death, January 2, 1972.

He was thirty-one years old when he first tried painting, and again he never stopped. During those intervening years he began the artistic exploration which was to become his quest: How to free the word from the sentence and the sentence from the paragraph? How to open up the page? Finally the search led to the freeing of letters from words and even words from pages.

Because of this search Patchen is credited with pioneering the movement in modern verse ironically named "Concrete Poetry" (see illustration page 17). Patchen himself was not willing to stop with visual poetry but continued on into the refilling of the freed pages with his own images. These became picture-poems in which he completely integrated the poem with the painting. One did not illustrate the other; both elements fused into a greater whole.

Patchen's first book, *Before the Brave*, was published in 1936. The poetry, stylistically conventional, and raging against society, placed Patchen smack in the middle of the social protest writers of the time. But strangely enough, it was his first novel, *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* (1941), that proved his

scope was greater than mere social protest, that marked him an extraordinary user of language, and that foreshadowed the poetry to follow. Each page took poetic language into new directions as Joyce had done with prose language in his earlier *Ulysses*; nevertheless, *Moonlight* was conceived and published as a novel.

Patchen's first venture into the world of painted images was spurred by practical needs. He loved beautiful books: books printed on fine paper with handsome bindings, carefully selected type and generous empty spaces. In order to publish his own work this way, he was willing to bargain.

The publisher of his next book, *The Dark Kingdom* (1942), was Harriss and Givens of New York. The young couple, relying on Harriss' father for financial backing, wanted to publish the most beautiful of books. Then, as was to happen again and again with Patchen, publishing expenses proved more costly than anticipated; it fell upon the poet's shoulders to salvage the book.

The crisis came during the winter of 1941 when, according to his wife, Miriam, "He was more severely confined to bed than usual. Stuck there in a walk-up tenement on the seventh floor with no telephone, he was pretty well prevented from doing much to facilitate matters." From his sick bed he contemplated alternatives.

The usual ploy would have been a limited and numbered first edition, but Patchen cringed at the idea of charging extra money for his signature. He instead chose to create seventy-five paintings to be adhered to the front cover of each book of the limited edition. These delicate watercolors, reminiscent of Marc Chagall, started what was to become a Patchen tradition — the painted book (page 11).

The painted covers evolved along the same lines as other Patchen art. The second series of covers on *Sleepers Awake* (1946) was still completed paintings, applied symmetrically to the front cover of the book, leaving a generous area of blankness surrounding the work. Then he further integrated the art into the cover in *Panels for the Walls of Heaven* (1946) by creating paintings or collages, using any handy material, directly upon the whole front cover. The back cover became a hand-painted colophon.

The remaining editions were executed in the untrained artist's mature style (page 14). He either glued a special Japanese paper to the cardboard or worked directly upon it after applying a base of gouache. In any event, having moved the colophon back inside, he filled both back and front covers with one extended or two related images. The images, invariably creatures, were then painted with a myriad of substances including casein, mortar-ground watercolors, coffee, tempera, egg dye, sumi sticks mixed with glues, varnish, carbon inks, Japanese earth-colors, or whatever he came upon in his experimentations.

Other images were created with torn tissue paper. Because he knew nothing of materials, much of his work has already begun, by 1974, its untimely disintegration.

Although the picture-poems didn't come into being until the late fifties, fifteen or so years after the painted books were begun, visual elements had begun to creep into his poetry.

In *Cloth of the Tempest* (1943) the first "pictures" appear — referred to as "pictures" by the artist who never reached the point of seeing himself as a painter. He did "pictures." Unlike later works, these early pictures maintained the sense of a continuing line (page 20).

Three years later, with the publication of *Panels for the Walls of Heaven* (1946) and *Sleepers Awake* (1946), Patchen expanded the definition of modern poetry by freely placing words and letters on the page without bowing to conventions of verse, line, or even style (page 16).

The latter, *Sleepers Awake*, remained in the poet's mind his most successful book, perhaps because it represented his greatest involvement in the printer's craft. Never again was a publisher so able to accommodate his art. Patchen himself tramped the streets of New York seeking unusual type, later returning to the print shop to set up the pages himself.

The lack of money was again a problem and at this time diverted him. Patchen wished to repay his publisher, Padell, for the certain losses taken by *Sleepers Awake*. He decided to write a popular novel, one by which Padell could recoup. After suffering through an endless number of hated conventional tag lines like "she said" and "she thought" and "he did" the book *See You in the Morning* (1948) came to press. A serialization by *Woman's Home Companion*, netting \$5,000. split between author and publisher, followed close on the heels of publication. Then came an offer from The Sears Roebuck Book Club. Padell put his foot down. It just didn't seem fitting for a fine poet to be connected with Sears Roebuck, no matter how ordinary the novel. Patchen disagreed. If the object was to make money, then make money! Padell won the argument. Patchen gave up writing popular novels.

Back working at poetry, Patchen still envisioned a greater releasing of word forms. Maybe books themselves might change "so that the rigid block frame would disappear from holding the words in too tightly." More and more frequently he sought the answer in visual imagery. In the beginning, pictures were used to illustrate poetry as they had in the historical past (page 21). Drawings, sketches, smudges of ink and suggestive images moved around the poem and along with the poem but not yet through the poem. Then came five years of revolutionary change: 1955-1960.

The revolution, spurred by pain, responded to a lucky chance. Patchen found working difficult. Being right handed, he could only work while lying on his left and more painful side. Idleness was unthinkable. Across town at Stanford University a friend of Patchen's, John Hunter Thomas of the Botanical Department, unwittingly found the answer. He had begun the supervision of a major reclassification project. The old French collection of botanical specimens needed attention. Carefully they were lifted from their long accustomed bed and the paper beneath them was tossed aside. Thomas, noting the fine quality of the paper, decided it should be salvaged. On his next visit to the poet's home, he tucked a bundle of the 17 x 11" sheets under his arm.

Patchen, with his love of beautiful books, was elated. Days were spent pouring over it, sorting it for color and water marks, separating out stained pieces and deciphering the strange writing found on certain sheets.

Who before himself had used this beautiful paper? Patchen, determined to know, approached historians and linguists. There was only one answer. The writing was done by military shoppers, Napoleon's shoppers. The lists were supply lists. The paper, Mrs. Patchen said, had been made from the rags of Napoleon's army.

He who publicly hated war far more than the ordinary man began to create art out of the remains of war.

Prior to the arrival of the paper he had done two silkscreen portfolios of eighteen prints each. Using handmade Japanese papers, many of which Patchen hand colored himself, he made poems illustrated with drawings or decorated with paintings. Or he made lovely visual works in which he imbedded the drawing. A few bridged upon the successful fusion of the two; most were one or the other.

On the new paper Patchen "poeted" as never in his life. Fusion of the poetry and visual imagery finally came (see page 22). *Hallelujah Anyway* (1966) left his bedside table.

He awaited publication with excitement. His picture-poems were to be in color. Word came from James Laughlin, Patchen's trusted publisher at New Directions: "No color." If the book was to be in black and white, the pieces had to be reworked. The artist spent days toning down areas, reworking red solids which would reproduce as black, bringing the brilliantly colored work into focus with the laws of black and white reproduction. As picture-paintings in themselves, the originals lost much of their charm and power; but they became reproducible.

The book came out accompanied by more disappointments. The picture-poems became a mass of gray upon the mustard-colored paper. The paperback format allowed almost no white spaces and only the narrowest of margins. Reduction of the larger work (17 x 11") cramped the pages to the

point that the eye passes over them without reading. Only the few pieces originally conceived on a smaller format (10 x 7") survived as good art (page 25). The final blow came when he started the limited edition of painted books. Nothing would adhere to the slick cover. He tossed the book aside and refused to look at it ever again.

The last two books of picture-poems *But Even So* (1968) and *Wonderings* (1971) were more successful as books. Once more the art emerged not so much from Patchen's intention as from external catalysts. He was forced to simplify his images, shorten his poems and build more white space into each work. Ironically these are his best picture-poems appearing in books.

Shortly after these last books were published, Patchen died. Only days earlier he had told Miriam, "Now my work is done." She didn't believe him. Taking form within his head had been other books: *Translations from the English* for which he had already selected English writers, including Donne, to be "translated"; *The Human Winter*, a single continuous line of words, one-thousand pages long, for which he had long ago prepared the manuscript dummy; and *I Wonder What Alice's Brother Was Doing*, a take-off on *Alice in Wonderland*.

Patchen devotees are still waiting for the art to be given to them in its proper and most enhancing setting. The question remains, how? Prior to this exhibition two major museum shows have taken place, one at the Corcoran and the other at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Yet, only one picture-poem, "The King of Toys" (1964) is best seen on a gallery wall. It was created as a painting and never altered for black and white reproduction. Because its decomposition has already gone too far for the camera eye, no reproduction appears in this catalog. Fortunately *Motive Magazine* used it for a cover in its December, 1964, issue.

The viewer of this or any exhibition will only catch a glimpse of what the art must have been.

The answer seems to lie in a book and maybe a black and white book at that. Perhaps a publisher with money to lose (Scrimshaw Press of Berkeley?) will soon save the remaining art for posterity by meeting Patchen's own standard.

Laurel J. Reuter
Director
University Art Gallery

The introduction and essay are based on conversations with Miriam Patchen at Palo Alto, California, during the week of February 5-12, 1974.

CATALOG OF EXHIBITION

PICTURE-POEMS

But Even So (1968)

45 original picture-poems were created for inclusion in the book published by New Directions

Hallelujah Anyway (1966)

83 original picture-poems were created for inclusion in the book published by New Directions

The King of Toys (1964)

An original picture-poem

Wonderings (1971)

89 unrelated drawings, picture-poems, serigraphs, and handwritten poems collected together so they wouldn't be lost

PAINTED BOOKS

To Say If You Love Someone (1937)

six unnumbered copies

The Dark Kingdom (1942)

Copy No. 1

Panels for the Walls of Heaven (1946)

Copy No. 2

Copy No. 10

Copy No. 82

Copy No. 83

Sleepers Awake (1946)

Copy No. 7

one unnumbered copy

Red Wine and Yellow Hair (1949)

Copy No. 1

Copy No. 6

The Famous Boating Party (1954)

Copy No. 4

Copy No. 5

Copy No. 32

Hurrah for Anything (1957)

Copy No. 1

Copy No. 6

Copy No. 10

Copy No. 29

Copy No. 34

Copy No. 50

When We Were Here Together (1957)

Copy No. 1

Copy No. 13

Copy No. 70

Poemscapes (1958)

Copy No. 1

Copy No. 3

Copy No. 5

Copy No. 10

Hallelujah Anyway (1966)

one unnumbered copy

HANDWRITTEN POEM

"For Miriam" (1952)

Handwritten by author

First published in *Orchards, Thrones and Caravans*

SILKSCREEN FOLIOS

Glory Never Guesses and Other Pages (1955)

A Surprise For the Bagpipe Player (1956)

Two folios of eighteen poems each with drawings and decorations reproduced through silkscreening from the original manuscript pages by Kenneth Patchen.

SCULPTURE

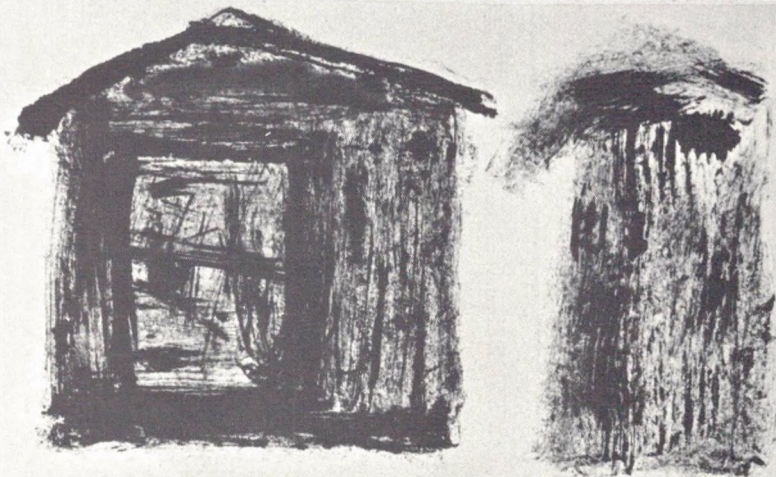
7 original "creature" sculptures of painted papier-mache made during period from 1960-1970

The Dark Kingdom



Kenneth Patchen

77
Waiting at the bathhouse while a duck is



already having a fine swim for himself below



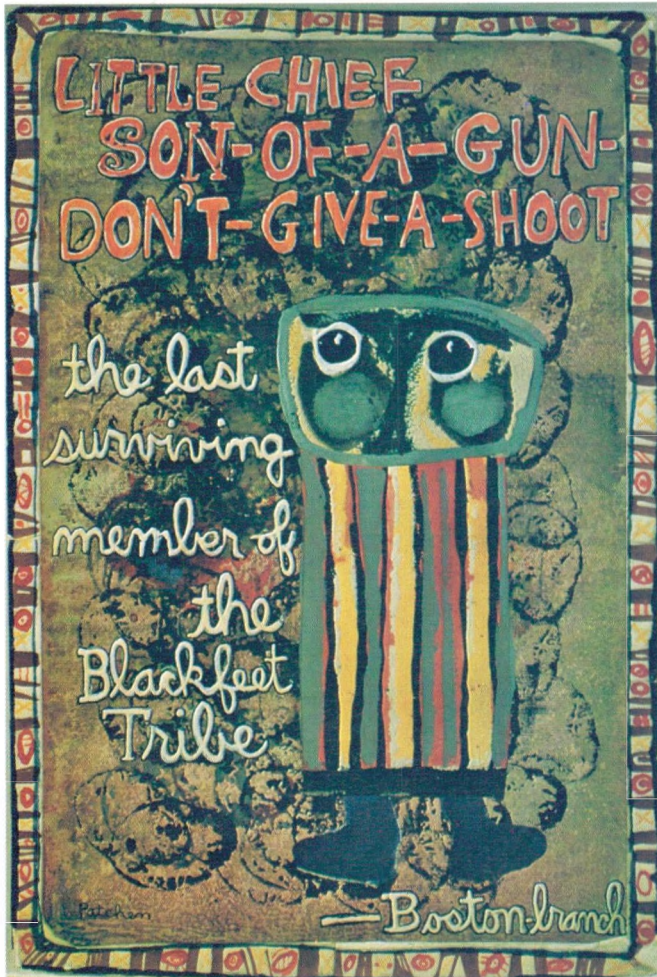
77
m. 106
5190



"The Argument of Innocence," picture-poem from *But Even So*, 1968

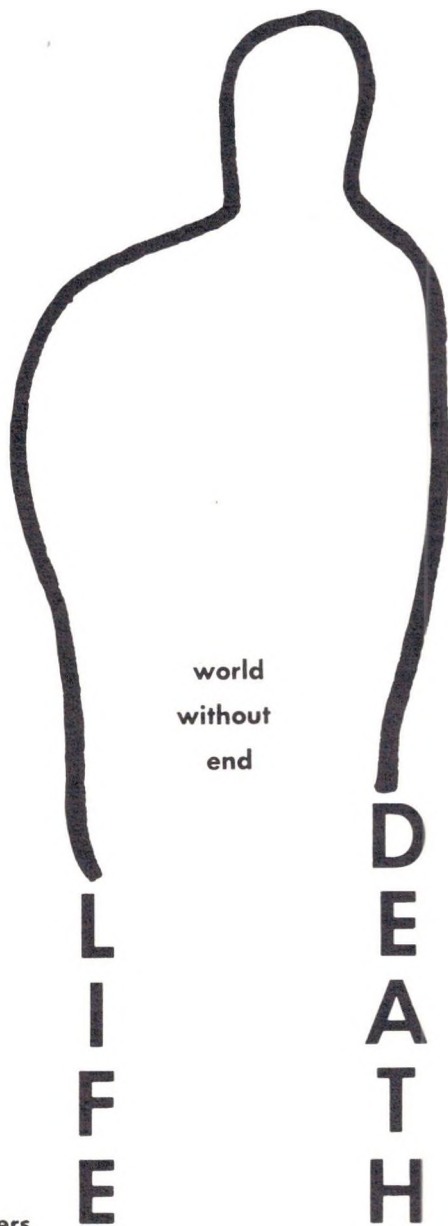


14. *Hallelujah Anyway*, painted book, unnumbered, 1966



"Little Chief Son-of-a-Gun," picture-poem from *Hallelujah Anyway*, 1966

VEL
ENTY-TWO



oh my dear brothers

men are getting scairt of their world. Charlie Hearse is hobbling your way and the promised awa

THE NATURE OF REALITY

Bed. Apple.
Sly bird. Policeman.
Famine. Rod of milk.
Dice. Groan.
Stone. Towel.
Divot.
"Put some on mine." Six or Tad Prichard.

THE REALITY OF NATURE

Seeking
death life
growth decay
peace madness
conflict silence
birth dissolution
"Put some in me." Tad Prichard or none.

T
E

R

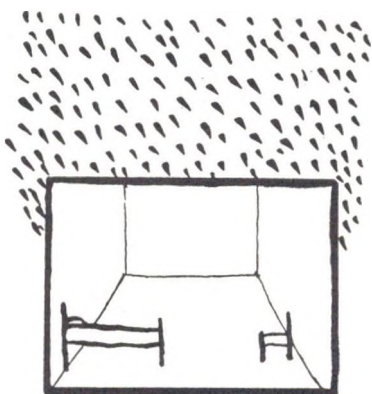


18. "Sure Is a Peculiar Way to Run a Ball Game," picture-poem from *Hallelujah Anyway*, 1966

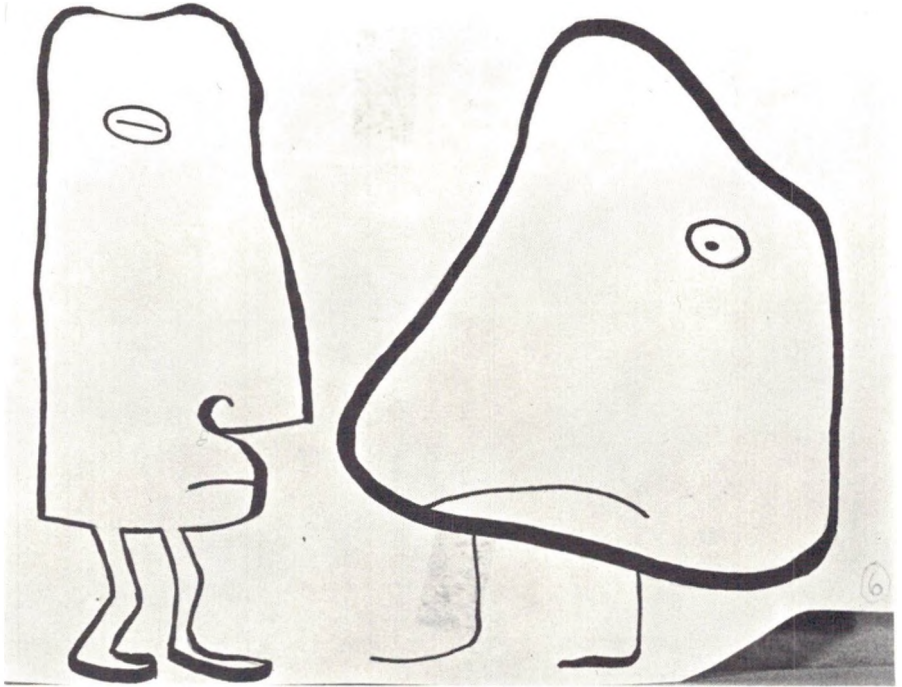


"What Can You Do Up Here," picture-poem from *Hallelujah Anyway*, 1966

She knows it's
raining and my
room is warm



but she is proud
and beautiful
and I have
no money



WE MEET

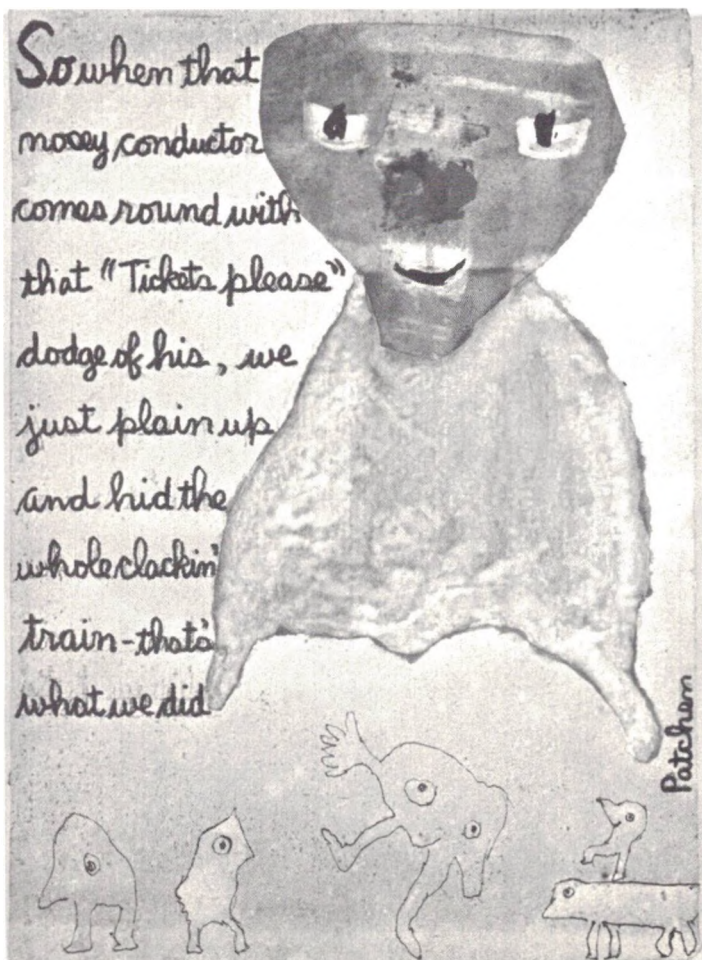
We are every so often rustled
By something afar —
In this case, a stretch of watery coast
Along which saunter a Cow
Made of brilliant red roses,
And two heavily bearded schoolchildren;
And in the other, by something quite near —
That is, the imminent presence in us
Of certain vague and shadowy hungers,
Of dreams (and even painful rejoicings),
Which presumably add up to the same thing.



22. "The One Who Comes to Question Himself," picture-poem from *Hallelujah Anyway*, 1966



"Peace or We All Perish," picture-poem from *Hallelujah Anyway*, 1966

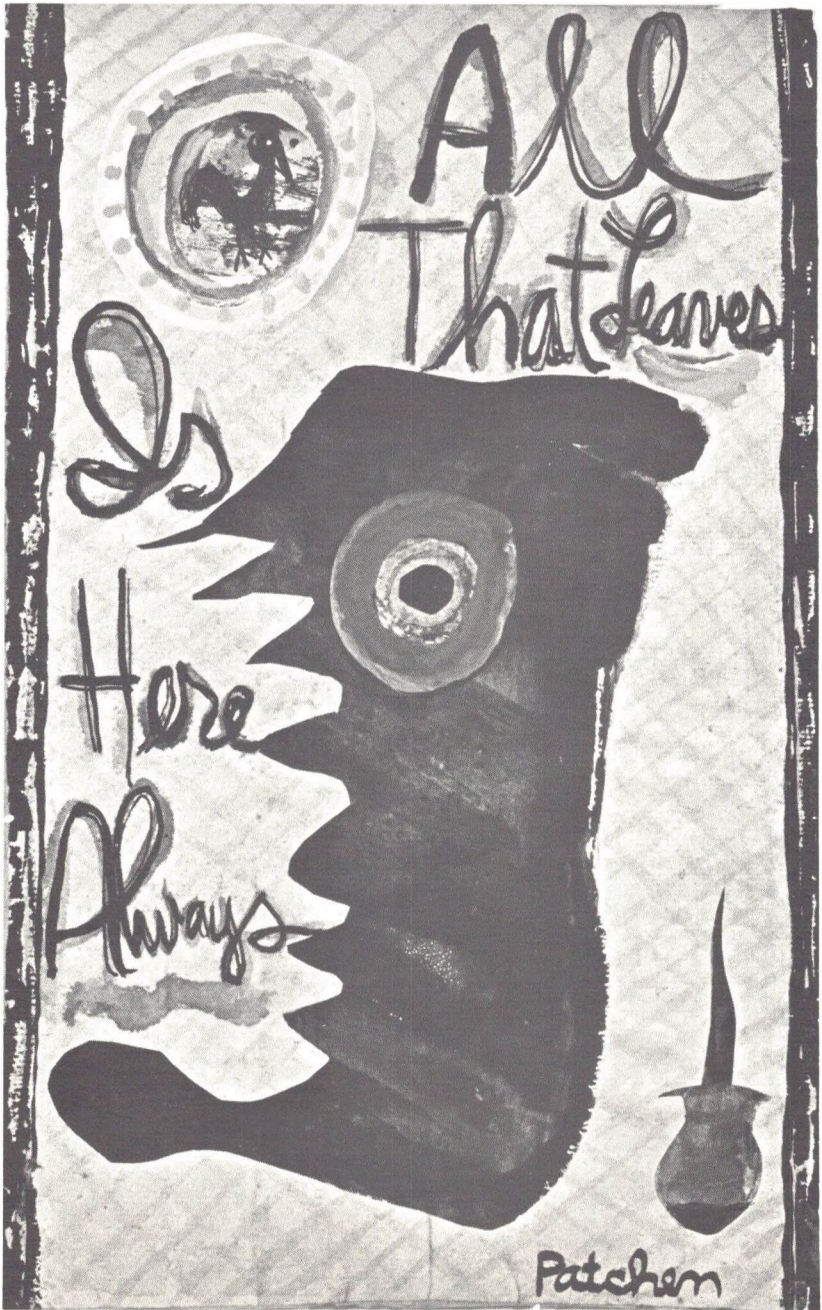


24. "So When That Mosey Conductor Comes Round," picture-poem from *Hallelujah Anyway*, 1966

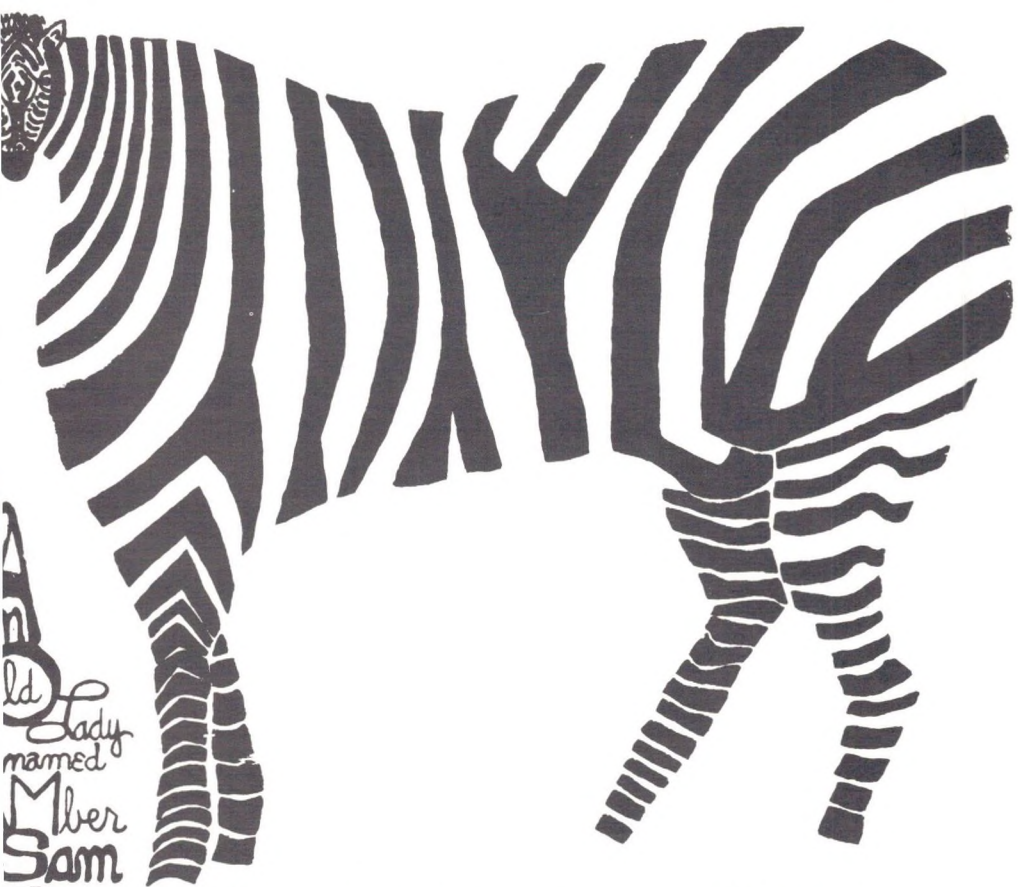




26. "Snow Is the Only One of Us," picture-poem from *Hallelujah Anyway*, 1966



"All That Leaves Is Here Always," picture-poem from *But Even So*, 1968



ld
Lady
named
Mber
Sam

Pilched a REVERSE-STRIPED zebra
 Off a Stalled Moving Van
 But since the ZEE had no Built-In Spoon
 Any Soup she gave him lacked All Jiggable Time
 So she put on an Old Pair of Baggy Pants
 And smuck Quietly out to a NEIGHBOR'S CAR
 AND shifted BOTH of its Headlights Onto the REAR-BUFFER

THE WORKS OF KENNETH PATCHEN

Before the Brave

New York: Random House, 1936
poetry

First Will and Testament

Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1939
poetry

To Say If You Love Someone

Prairie City, Ill.: The Decker Press, 1939
poetry
unnumbered limited edition of painted
books (covers created during period
from 1960-1970)

The Journal of Albion Moonlight

New York: Kenneth Patchen, 1941
prose

The Dark Kingdom

New York: Harris and Givens, 1942
poetry
limited edition of 75 painted books

The Teeth of the Lion

Norfolk: New Directions, 1942
poetry

Cloth of the Tempest

New York: Harper and Brothers
Publishers, 1943
poetry

The Memoirs of a Shy Pornographer

New York: New Directions, 1945
prose

An Astonished Eye Looks Out of the Air

Walport, Ore.: The Untide Press, 1946
poetry

Sleepers Awake

New York: Padell Book Company, 1946
poetry
limited edition of 75 painted books

Pictures of Life and of Death

New York: Padell Book Company, 1946
poetry

They Keep Riding Down All the Time

New York: Padell Book Company, 1946
poetry

Selected Poems

New York: New Directions, 1946
poetry

Panels for the Walls of Heaven

Berkeley: Bern Porter, 1946
poems-in-prose
limited edition of 150 painted books

See You in the Morning

New York: Padell Book Company, 1948
novel

Red Wine and Yellow Hair

New York: New Directions, 1949
poetry
limited edition of 108 painted books

Orchards, Thrones and Caravans

San Francisco: The Print Workshop,
1952
poetry

Fables and Other Little Tales

Karlsruhe-Durlach, Germany: Jonathan
Williams, 1953
prose
limited edition of 50 painted books

Poems of Humor and Protest

San Francisco: City Lights, 1954
poetry

The Famous Boating Party

New York: New Directions, 1954
prose-poems
limited edition of 50 painted books

Glory Never Guesses

San Francisco: Kenneth Patchen, 1955
silkscreen portfolio; poems with
drawings
limited edition of 200

A Surprise for the Bagpipe Player
San Francisco: Kenneth Patchen, 1956
silkscreen portfolio; poems with
drawings
limited edition of 200

Hurrah for Anything
Highlands, N. C.: Jonathan Williams,
1957
poems and drawings
limited edition of 100 painted books

When We Were Here Together
Norfolk: New Directions, 1957
poetry
limited edition of 75 painted books

Poemscapes
Highlands: Jonathan Williams, 1958
prose-poems
limited edition of 75 painted books

Because It Is
New York: New Directions, 1960
poems and drawings

A Selection of Love Poems
San Francisco: City Lights, 1960
poetry

The Moment
San Francisco: Kenneth Patchen, 1962
bound edition of two silkscreen
portfolios;
poems with drawings

*Doubleheader: Poemscapes and Hurrah
for Anything*
New York: New Directions, 1965
prose-poems and poems with drawings

Hallelujah Anyway
New York: New Directions, 1966
picture-poems

The Collected Poems
New York: New Directions, 1967

But Even So
New York: New Directions, 1968
picture-poems

Aflame and Afun of Walking Faces
New York: New Directions, 1970
fables and drawing

Wonderings
New York: New Directions, 1971
picture-poems