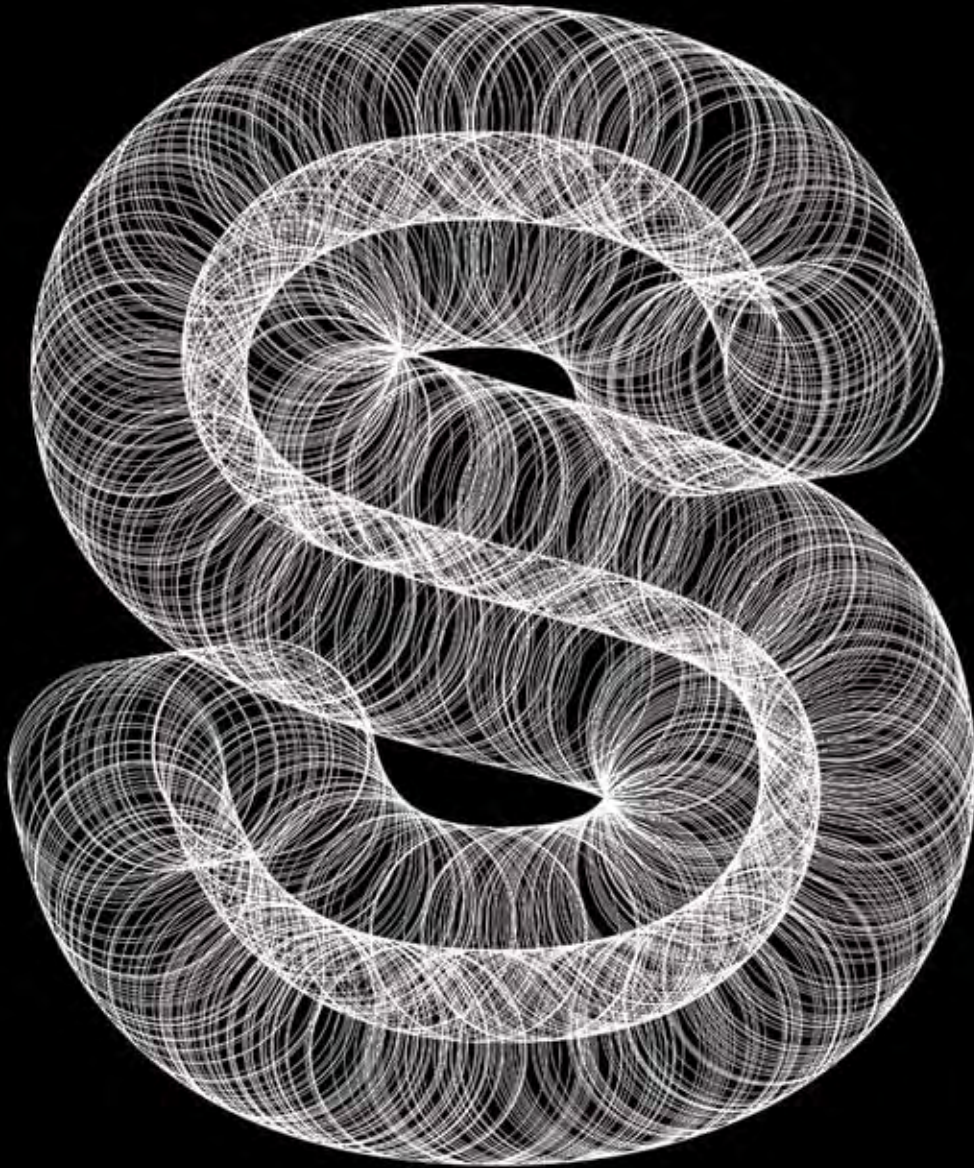
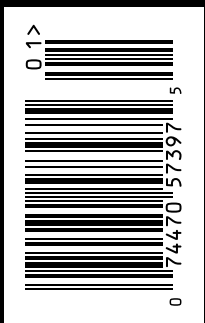


# Letter Arts Review

LETTER ARTS REVIEW 24:1 · Denis Brown works with wishes · Calligraphic animals from around the world  
Public and private projects by Margot Voorhies Thompson · Nancy Leavitt discusses the making of a manuscript book



A LETTER STUDY FROM TYPE+CODE · Yeohyun Ahn



\$ 14.50



# Letter Arts Review

## Letter Arts Review

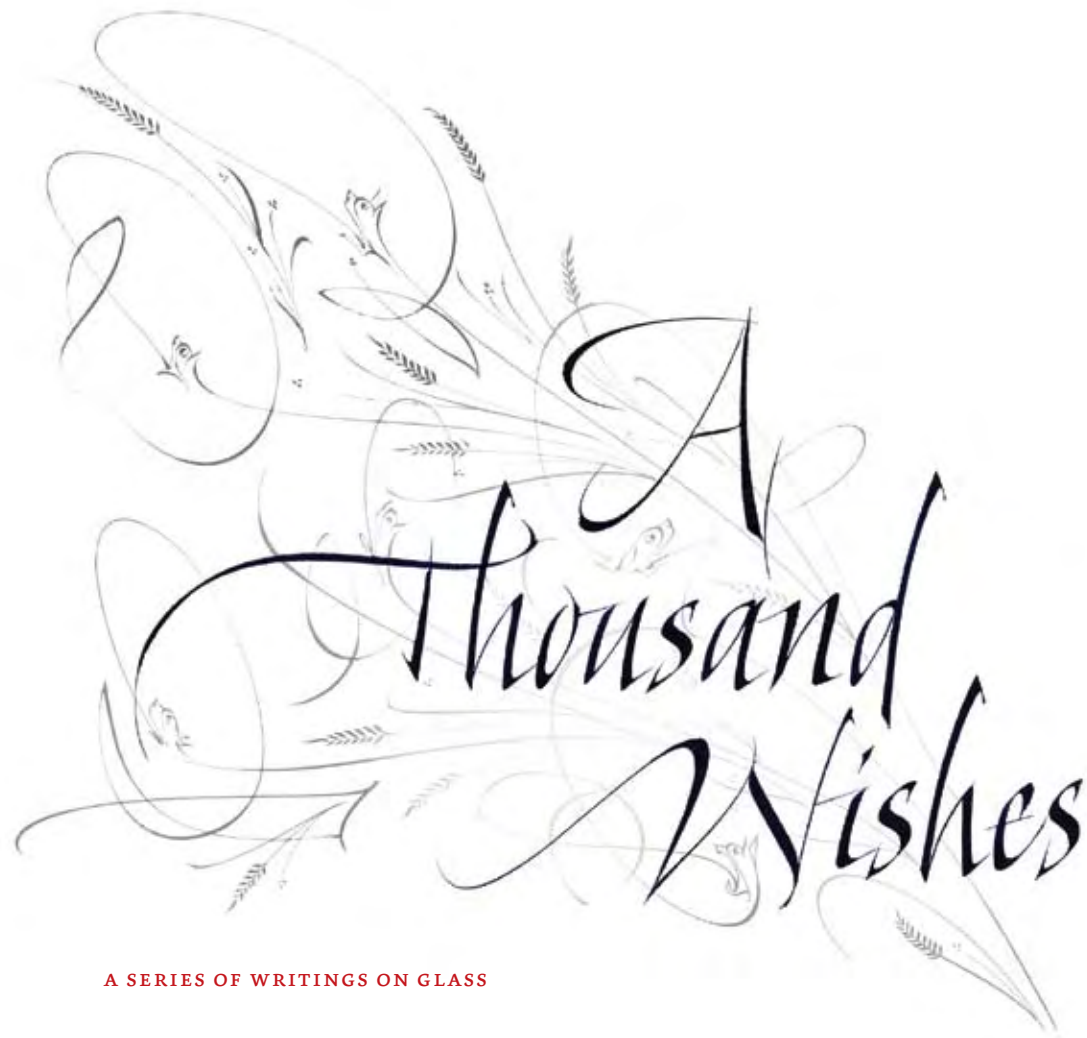
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## Columns

- 2 The editor's letter :  
A story
- 4 What we're reading  
*By Laurie Doctor*
- 4 Letter to the editor
- 5 Tribute :  
Honoring a master  
*By Ryuichi Tateno*
- 6 Cover Artist :  
Yeohyun Ahn  
*By the artist*
- 10 Projects :  
The History of Greece  
*By Georgia Angelopoulos*

## Features

- 12 A Thousand Wishes :  
A series of writings on glass  
*By Denis Brown*
- 24 A Letter Arts Review portfolio :  
Zoomorphs  
*Featuring work by Anthony Bloch,  
Georgia Deaver, Orlando Salgado,  
and Wissam Shawkat*
- 34 Margot Voorhies Thompson :  
The power of giving shape to meaning  
*By Christine Colasurdo*
- 48 In Hibernation :  
*An interview with Nancy Leavitt  
by Christopher Calderhead*



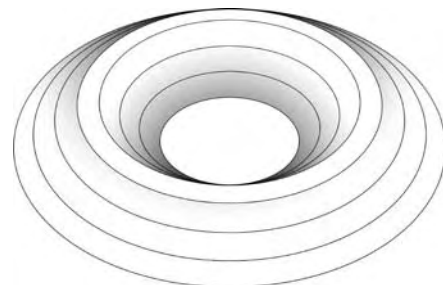
A SERIES OF WRITINGS ON GLASS

By Denis Brown · Imagine if a book's pages were completely transparent; what would that look like?

We could see all the text at once, but layered up on top of itself and thus quite illegible. A text camouflaged by its own presence. Every word being visible simultaneously would mean none could be read. What would be the meaning of a book whose text is lost to texture and to sculptural form? Would this bundle of ironies appear to mourn the passing of the functionalism of the codex to hypertext as the primary means of publishing in our time; or would it form a celebration of its autonomy as a nonfunctional *objet d'art*?

Any of my glass art pieces might be seen as such a volume. I've been making them for years and they are a mainstay of my income as a professional artist and calligrapher, even though I do a broad range of other work, some more traditional, some more avant garde. Each work comprises several sheets of normal picture glass, and I write texts on both sides of most sheets, engraving with a tool with a diamond tip spinning at up to 60,000 revolutions per minute.

The glass sheets are presented each spaced a little apart in box frames, and over a background image on paper. There is a three dimensional aspect that is lost in reproduction, but [fig.1](#) illustrates how the flat sheets when spaced apart may describe such a three dimensional form. Typically, works I've made in the past feature six



1

glass sheets, providing twelve workable surfaces including both sides of each sheet. That's plenty to be able to give my text blocks a variety of 3-D forms; from bowls and domes, to undulating hills and valleys, to more informal structures; and all appear to float in space above a background image. The three dimensional form of the text

Fig. 1, right. Schematic showing how concentric flat circles when spaced apart may describe a three dimensional volume.



Nancy Leavitt is well known for her exquisite manuscript books. Her subtle, thoughtful compositions are executed with perfect craft. We asked her to talk with us and take us through the making of a recent manuscript book, *In Hibernation*. This interview was conducted via e-mail, after an initial conversation on the phone. Nancy also sent us her working file of rough drafts and sketches. All of the images we reproduce here come from that file—a little glimpse into her creative process. Pages from the finished book appear on pages 58 and 59.

# IN HIBERNATION

**Christopher Calderhead:** Nancy, I understand *In Hibernation* came about because you had a dream. Can you tell us about the dream?

**Nancy Leavitt:** Certainly. The dream came to me on one of the darkest days of the year, December 31, 2008. It unfolded thus: I found myself standing in front of my book dealer's table. On the upper right section of the table was a beautiful book with a  $\sqrt{2}$  proportion. I opened it and saw a page filled with a painting of a golden hydrangea. Each of the following pages were painted in watery greens and decorated with gold leaf on pale green paper. It was so beautiful and I smiled as I was sure it had been created by Suzanne Moore. I woke up and wistfully thought, "Too bad you didn't make that book," and then I realized, "Hey, that was my dream!" So, I jumped up, ran to the studio and made a series of pencil sketches of what I saw in the dream.

**Do you dream about your work often?**

I dream about my life which includes my work. The themes and imagery of my dreams often find their way into my work. It is rare that I dream of complete stories that become handmade books. That said, *Floating Through the Desert*, a hand lettered edition of seven books completed in 1987, came to me all at once in a dream. It was a premonition dream really. I dreamt about driving into the sky on an Arizona highway and a month later I had an opportunity

to go to the southwest and the dream came true. Anyone who has spent time recording and analyzing dreams knows how powerful the experience can be. I keep a dream journal of particularly interesting dreams and often draw inspiration from them.

**And you wrote the text that appears in the manuscript. How did you go about that?**

First, I searched for a text that would match the images that I had seen and the vision I had for the book. I have a fair amount of literature and especially poetry in my library so I started there. Then I searched on line and wandered through the stacks at the library. I couldn't find any text that fit so I decided to just write the dream as it happened. Over three months, from December to March, I went through several drafts of the poem, letting it sit for days, even weeks before re-working it.

**How is it different working with a text you have composed, compared, say, to working with the words of someone else? Do you think calligraphers would benefit from writing their own words?**

I will say that I find it purposeful to write my own text. After I complained about not being able to find a text on a particular subject my poet friend, Mark Rutter, told me, "If you can't find the right text that means you need to write it." I took that to heart and now I often write texts for my



In HIBERNATION

IN·HIBERNATIO  
IN·HIBERNATION  
IN·HIBER  
NATION

a sleeping  
& SOUL  
DREAMS OF  
plants that live  
only inside a book

WATERY  
GREEN  
STEMS  
hibernat

a sleeping  
SOUL dreams  
of plants  
that live  
only inside  
a book e

*Dark green with  
brighter gold*

*swan & swans*