



AMA Journal of Ethics®

June 2025, Volume 27, Number 6: E450-456

ART OF MEDICINE

Perch and Peel in Illustrated Poems of Embodiment

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Abstract

Trace monotype is a technique often useful to artists looking to combine drawing and printing, and it is physically demanding, requiring an artist to “perch” over glass and ink while marking paper. This series of 5 trace monotypes considers how a perching posture informs the writing and illustration of 5 poems about the shapes our bodies can take.

Trace Monotype Technique

Perch. When making prints with a technique called *trace monotype*, an artist must use her body to position herself to lean into a “perch” above a thick application of ink on a glass plate. A piece of paper is then placed by the artist “right side” down onto the ink and the artist draws on the exposed, “wrong side” of the paper, applying pressure from a pen or other utensil to transfer ink to the “right side.” Still perched—careful to avoid errant body contact with the medium and, thus, any errant transfer of ink—the artist makes her marks on the paper.

Peel. The artist is blind to the image she has created until this moment: having made her marks, she relinquishes control over the image created from glass, paper, ink, and the artist’s perching stamina.

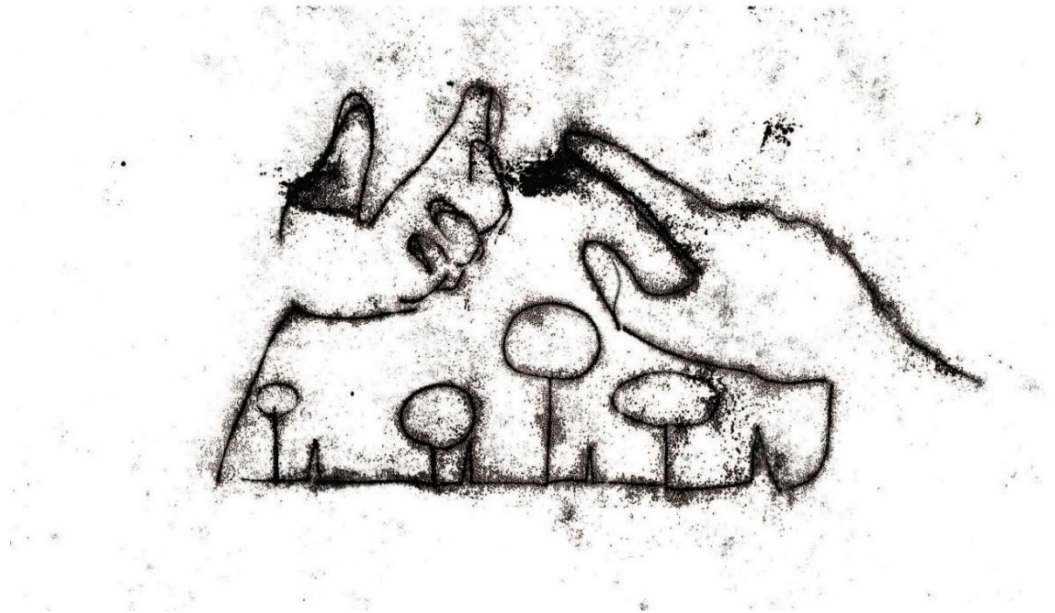
Illustrated Poems

Perch and peel demands of trace monotype printmaking parallel how our bodies can slip, throughout our lives, out of states of control and comfort and into states in which we lack control and feel varying **degrees of discomfort**. Moments when our bodies break, obsess, refuse to speak are unique experiences of embodiment cataloged and considered in this series of illustrated poems.

Figure 1. *Brother*

Brother

He answers the question
I don't ask
with a small gesture
and a glance



Media

Monotype.

Caption

Two hands nearly meet or, perhaps, have just parted. The **gesture** suggests that these hands share a (perhaps fleeting) understanding: wordless, silent communication among siblings that might not, need not, should not, or cannot be spoken.

Figure 2. *Waltz*

Waltz
When walking
I try to
tune into
waltz tempo
one, two, three,
no not four
but four returns
relentlessly



Media
Monotype.

Caption

Proprioception, the sense of one's body position and movement, enables drawing and inspires writing. To draw figures without a live model, an artist might fold herself into a pose and feel how her limbs, torso, and head relate in space. When tuning into a rhythm of walking, the 4/4-time signature used commonly in Western music can be felt. Overlaying a waltz's 3/4-time signature onto footsteps requires conscious effort that, eventually, 4/4-time undermines and subsumes. A body's intimate patterns of being in the world are often not easily adjusted.

Figure 3. *Tempo*

Tempo

Given variable tempo of
heart, eyelids, breath,
I'm hard-pressed to know
if half a second passed



Media

Monotype.

Caption

The poem and illustration observe the disappearance of time through simultaneous and distinct events in one's body: heartbeats, eyeblinks, inhalations, exhalations, swallows, fidgets, lip bites, knuckle cracks, and the arcane clockwork of memory provide cacophonous and changeable temporal experiences that have little to do with one's wristwatch. Such experiences of time might be felt more along the lines of that expressed in Robin Wall Kimmerer's chapter, "Witness to the Rain," in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*: "Water falls from these trees into the pool, each with its own rhythm.... Listening to rain, time disappears. If time is measured by the period between events, alder drip time is different from maple drip. This forest is textured with different kinds of time, as the surface of the pool is dimpled with different kinds of rain."¹

Figure 4. *Knee*

Knee
Three long bones meet
Contraption neat
But brittle weak
No cartilage
To pad a leap



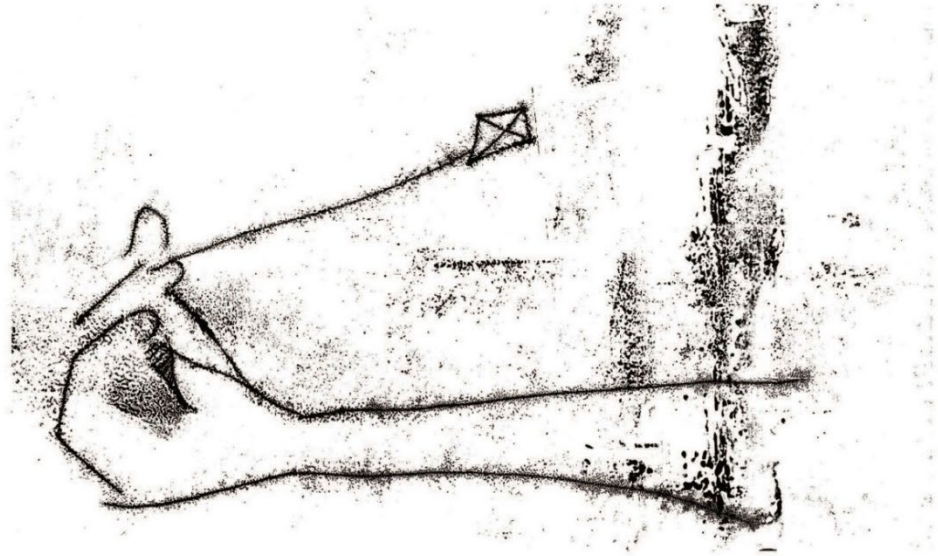
Media
Monotype.

Caption

Knees are complex and strong but also fragile joints that are vulnerable to overuse or excessive force. When a knee is compromised, one cannot bear one's own weight without assistance. This illustration considers a posture of cradling the diminishment to one's body and spirit wrought by **injury** and, perhaps, by regret about one's chosen or accidental movements.

Figure 5. *Pit*

Pit
Where do my expectations hold conference?



Media
Monotype.

Caption

In moments of having had high expectations dashed, disappointment can be felt as an outsized weight in the proverbial “pit” of one’s stomach. One does well to remember that the flight of a kite depends on the solidity and heft of its tether to the ground.

References

1. Kimmerer RW. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions; 2015.

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Citation

AMA J Ethics. 2025;27(6):E450-456.

DOI

10.1001/amajethics.2025.450.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure

Author disclosed no conflicts of interest.

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