

RICHIE HOFMANN
Lives of the Typographers

1. Hans Lufft, Wittenberg

I was born
 in the terrible Century
The Word made Flesh
 and back again

to Words Everything
 was changing When
Luther rendered
 the Scripture

in our Tongue
 making the new German
it was I who
 made it material

in Blackletter illustrated
 appropriately
lined up Bodies
 on a Sheet

my Vendors cut
 from Animal Flesh and dried
in the Heat
 And the Wind moved

on the Face
 of the Waters
though in the Beginning
 there was no Wind

2. Aldus Manutius, Venice

The city from above the city broken
into woodcuts six of them and dressed
in ink The sun on the canals the rough white seams

between the parts of town Turpentine
and soot and oil flood the quays the docks
where gondolas are moored the tented markets

Above them all the domes of the Basilica
like letters drying in a holy name
In my hand I hold a weightless sheet of paper

and lift it to the window's radiance
until each slanted letter legible
on either side when held up to the light

is moored to another margin: the woodcut book
St. Catherine of Siena holds swung open
like a city gate in her lined hands with four

italic characters my invention
*ie*u *ie*u on the open page
of the book in the image of the book I made

3. Christophe Plantin, Antwerp

I press it to the page: the name
my father gave me bound in an iron frame
and Latinized Each new-cut majuscule
awaits illumination Oil
and ink are heavy in the air
as I prepare
the double-column index
and stir a tempest in the text
though outside too a landscape set aslant
the house the storefront
blotted out in fire As on a night
when I might walk until the sky is white
with stars over Antwerp
and watch the dark canals below usurp them
record their images
beneath the bridges
beneath the ships
which passing trace their cursive scripts
in the black water
Sometimes days after I've rolled it on to paper

the dim signature
of a single backward character
will linger
against the grain of my fingerprint
a word made visible through technique
though it's not a word I speak