

READ ME FIRST

Dear Acquisitions Editor:

It showed up on my back stoop one drizzly morning last spring—a standard packing box sent book rate, a dent in its soft cardboard. The postage slip claimed the mysterious object originated from Claremont, California, posted on April 2nd. Since there was no return address, and I did not recognize the handwriting, I let it sit for over a week, hoping the postman might take it back. As the executor of my father's literary estate, I've received many boxes over the years and have grown weary of opening packages from the strangers, admirers and disciples that moderately famous writers attract.

Eventually I forgot the box entirely—that is, until my wife brought the neglected package inside and dropped it unceremoniously in the middle of the dining room table. Fighting back a growing sense of dread, I unearthed a pair of dull scissors and sat down before the box. The moldy top opened with ease, tape freed of its glue by earlier rains; a slightly soggy envelope had been placed on top of a bubble-wrapped object bound tightly with standard-issue packing tape and resting in a nest of styrofoam peanuts. The words "READ ME FIRST" were printed on the envelope, as if the sender knew I would be inclined to start with the bubble-wrapped object underneath.

The unsealed envelope contained two neatly folded sheets of ivory-colored letterhead, filled both sides to bursting with nearly illegible handwriting. The letter was addressed to “Mr. Matthews, Curator.” Apparently the sender had read an essay of mine in an art journal and decided I was just the person to receive the box, which, reading on, apparently contained the artwork of one Linus Grey, some young street-artist who had dubbed himself “American Crow.”

“A friend brought these handmade notebooks to my attention a few years ago,” the letter continued. “She had found them hiding in a thrift-shop knapsack. I had no idea what to do with these strange artifacts. But, when I read your essay on Ray Johnson, I knew you were the one person who might.”

I had indeed put together an exhibit on the early work of collagist and mail-art godfather Ray Johnson, focusing on his time at Black Mountain College under the tutelage of Josef Albers. (My first and only foray into the field, I should add.) At least the sender had done his or her homework. My curiosity—my vanity—was piqued.

I put down the letter and turned to the bubble-wrapped package. Lifting up the square object, I wondered briefly if the kid’s ashes were inside. I discovered, instead, one of those DJ-style bags popular with bike messengers in the 80s—grey canvas, black shoulder strap, black lining, and a

flap that flipped over and clipped at the bottom. My gaze slipped down the mosaic of patches—*The Clash*, *Greenpeace*, *No Left Turn Unstoned*, *Marley on the Bus*—to a large hand-drawn, ink emblem: the words *American* and *Crow* encircling a stylized drawing of a crow. Wings out in jagged angles, beak open, tongue out like a bell's clapper, it was a visual cocktail of angst, wild energy, and mischief.

I opened the bag slowly to find a square-shaped object encased in brown butcher paper, which I unwrapped carefully, revealing a dozen homemade, stapled booklets (more like chapbooks or early-90s punk “zines”). As I opened the one on top, a folded-up news article fell onto the table.

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As you will soon discover, these chapbooks of Linus Grey—aka *American Crow*—are singular in subject matter and design: a combination of collages, typed text, drawings, watercolors, photos, and inked lettering. Seemingly created by the artist over the last six months of a sad, peripatetic life, they depict the final flaming arc of an artist's creative spirit: from the exuberance of coming into a new city, through the shame and pain of a violent attack, all the way to the utter despair that gives birth to suicidal thoughts.

Over the last year, I've asked myself many questions concerning the origin and nature of this mysterious treasure trove. Clearly they are photocopies of original works. But where are the originals? Does more than just this stash exist? How—and why—was a news article written about Linus Grey, and by whom? Indeed, except for an obscure link to the obituary, I could find nothing relevant on-line. And though I have not made any ironclad conclusions, I have come to believe that, regardless of a lack of reliable context for this work, something special resides inside these pages. You will make up your own mind on the matter, of course, and decide for yourself the worth of these unique objects.

Sebastian Matthews
Asheville, NC

YOUNG ARTIST FEARED TO HAVE JUMPED FROM GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE

August 25, 1992
San Francisco Weekly

After two years traveling "on the road" in the time-honored tradition of Jack Kerouac, street artist and self-proclaimed "stealer of experience" Linus Grey was last seen at the threshold of the Golden Gate Bridge. There has been some speculation over whether Grey actually jumped to his death—no one actually saw him on the bridge—or if he vanished, an act written in his notebooks, which were discovered at the scene. Some speculate the act was a protest of the Gulf War. Grey was 22.

Following his Beat hero's lead—as well as photographer Peter Beard and tight-rope walker Phillip Petit—Grey sketched, wrote and collaged in his notebooks religiously. Two sketchbooks were among the objects recovered by bridge workers from the old satchel, which also contained tattered soft-cover copies of the American classics *On the Road*, *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass*. The backpack was covered in patches, many hand-sewn, including a drawing depicting a crow with the words "American Crow" stenciled around it in a rough circle.

According to friends and acquaintances, Grey had just completed a two-year tour of the United States hopping freight trains, riding buses and hitchhiking. "Linus was in the middle of an epic hegira," old friend Alistair Charles told this reporter from his home in York, Maine. "I am not surprised that he'd jump from that height, or disappear. It was what he always said he wanted. And isn't it, in a way, all the same thing in the end?"

Cryptic references to both suicide and disappearance ("swapping identity" Grey named it) abound in his sketchbooks, as do numerous condemnations of the war. One "illuminated" page shows the bridge and an open road: a figure stands at a crossroads bound for either one. Grey has appropriated a famous line from Frost as a caption: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.."

Grey grew up in the sleepy college town of Durham, New Hampshire, where he attended high school, playing briefly on the tennis team and serving as the co-editor of the school newspaper. After a year in a now-defunct art school located near Portland, Maine, Grey dropped out to spend six months traveling on the road. According to his brother, Ezra, Grey turned up in Seattle, lived briefly in his basement, then headed out for another period on the road: winding up briefly in Los Angeles then camping for a winter on the beaches of Baja, California.

It appears that Grey then returned to his home state, living in a small tree house on his parents' land and hanging out with a circle of artists and activists in the coastal town of Portsmouth. His friends recall a plethora of art parties held in an abandoned factory on the edge of town, one in particular involving a bowler hat and an empty roof overlooking the tracks, according to Charles.

The last months of his short, peripatetic life, Grey spent time along the Pacific coastline, hanging out in hostels, campuses and parks of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and Seattle. He would drop in on college campuses for weeks at a time, sitting in on classes, joining anti-war demonstrations. He once bragged to a friend that he'd earned the equivalent of a BA degree. From UCLA to University of Washington, Grey "force audited" classes, sitting in the back, often attending study sessions and visiting confused professors for office hours.

Grey seemed to have fallen ill his last weeks. He lost contact with his family and retreated from his friends. Supposedly planning a large "happening" in the spirit of the famously *avant garde* Black Mountain College, Grey attempted to rent a downtown gallery space. Grey soon fell out of sight, leaving his apartment and friends behind, taking only a small backpack filled with clothes, a few books and his coveted sketchbooks. Grey was spotted at hostels and homeless shelters in and around the San Francisco area. There is question of whether Grey had become mentally ill. Others presumed him to carry the HIV-AIDS virus.

Grey is survived by brother, Ezra, resident of Seattle, WA, and parents, Gerry and Gail Grey, activists and community organizers, residents of Barrington, New Hampshire.