

from Jena Osman, *An Essay in Asterisks*
Roof Books, 2004, pp. 45-47

addendum:

Emily Dickinson wrote

Step lightly on
This narrow spot —
The broadest Land
That grows
Is not so Ample
As the Breast
These Emerald
Seams enclose

Step lofty, for
This name be told
As far as Cannon
Dwell
Or Flag subsist
Or Fame export
Her deathless
Syllable

In the fascicle version, this poem appears as a field of X's, due to how Dickinson chose to cross her T's and F's:

SXep lighxly on
 Xhis narrow Spox—
 Xhe broadesx Xand
 That grows
 Is noX so ample
 As Xhe Breasx
 Xhese Emerald
 Seams enclose.

SXep lofty, for
 Xhis name be xold
 As far as Cannon
 Dwell
 Or Xlag SubsisX
 Or Xame Expox
 Her deaxhless
 Sylla ble

The X's are stitches in the picture of the poem. Letters are actually what sew the "seam," and what they enclose is the dead body in its emerald "spot." What is equally interesting is the apparent discarding of the dash. Thus, the poem has a squarer look to it—a plain, a plot, a field. The more defined/geometric the space, the more it resembles a space enclosed. The dashes signify an opening, but this poem has a concrete and pictorial surface, patched in places by the letter "X."*

There's a confession that links a man's name to a body beneath a field of X's. The man attempts to remove his name from the penalty box. He wants to become the X, the blank spot. The court eventually agrees to this, but the mark is still there. The X is both an absence and a presence.

* "The abstract term 'equality' took on materiality as we moved towards the church hall polling station and the simple act, the drawing of an X, that ended over three centuries of privilege for some, deprivation of human dignity for others. [...] A strange moment: the first time man scratched the mark of his identity, the conscious proof of his existence, on a stone must have been rather like this." (Nadine Gordimer, "Standing in the Queue")

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