

# How Did You Get To Be Animals?

*Reports from the Intersection of Art and Life*

by

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*For Fred*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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I remember lying in bed, miserable from having my tonsils removed, sick of ice cream and Jello and life in general. Polly Ann Graff came to visit, bringing a newsprint pad and some charcoal. Until then, I had glimpsed only a little of what art was, none of what it was for. Since then, I have been sustained in the often solitary pursuit by many stalwart friends, but especially Jude Bea and Jim Bogan.

"Living-room Statement," "Painted Children," and "Well-balanced Bird" have appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*; "Jazz Art" was published in *Buffalo Bones*. The video documentary, *Chalk Up Another* was produced and directed by James Bogan and features the collaborative work of Phillip Streamer and Ellen Pearce.





## HOW DID YOU GET TO BE ANIMALS? \_\_\_\_\_

How did you get to be animals?—  
how set in pasture  
to graze lazily in sun  
and I on doorstep, busy with pen,  
trying to draw a picture of life?

## SHADOW AND LIGHT

---

If there is found to be a gene that predisposes a person toward art, I have it from Rockwell Kent, my maternal grandfather. If there was a shadow over my childhood, it was cast in large part by the same man.

Kent's name was rarely spoken in our house and never with favor. In retrospect, I understand some of the personal and political elements of the situation. Kent was evidently an abrasive personality, certainly not a sympathetic father, and my mother betrayed no fondness for him. Also, he was an avowed socialist, my father, an adamantly reformed one. They'd had business dealings—my father published at least one book of Kent's—but all I know of any interactions between the two men was my father's often-told story of

having called Kent a "trumpeting ego" to his face.

The taboo against Kent made for a loud silence, given the presence of his art in our home—from the Greenland landscape that hung over the fireplace to his many prints and illustrated books. But children have a way of accepting the given, and it never occurred to me that Kent should have been a living part of my life.

Kent's shadow was longer yet. Having a famous Soviet sympathizer in the family, however removed, could be difficult. I was too young to have to endure the grade-school taunts my sister suffered when Kent was called to appear before Senator McCarthy, nor did I experience any emotional confusion

when our high school art teacher was so obviously pleased to have my sister and me as students. I was embarrassed, though, to have to admit, time and time again, that I didn't know Kent or very much about him. Whether I knew him or not, I could not escape him.

I didn't like Kent's illustrations (with the exception of *Moby Dick*), I had no reason to like the man, and the one painting of his I knew seemed gloomy and too familiar. So it came as no small revelation to me, when I visited his sister in New Mexico after my first year of college, to find people who held him in

high regard and to see paintings of exciting scale and openness and irresistible drama.

The paintings spoke to me in a voice so clear and close it could have been my own. I can't say his landscapes influenced my own because I was not yet painting or even thinking about painting, and I can't say they didn't because they embodied an appetite I knew first-hand: a hunger for spare lands lightly handled. The paintings did not transform me into an instant Kentophile, but I admired his landscapes with great relief: here was a nonproblematic aspect to the man, a light within the shadow.





## THE ART PROBLEM

---

Artists like to talk of problems, the problems they are trying to solve with this or that work or technique. This language bothers me, seeming either too lofty or not lofty enough, too philosophical or too prosaic. But clearly art has problems.

It's obsolete, for starters. We are so gorged with images—flashy digital images, ominous or provocative or fantastic, rushing past in fractions of seconds—that the very idea of painting, say, seems impotent and archaic.

Art is too easy. Anyone can make a picture; lots of people can make good pictures.

It's esoteric. The untutored eye tends to see non-representational art as bad art and admire only familiar themes realistically rendered. The tutored eye, on the other hand, is less an organ than a process. In much the same way that sports broadcasters invoke statistics to make baseball seem important, art schools invent pompous jargon for speaking of art that does not speak for itself, or to us, as if to compensate for the fact that

perhaps it wasn't meant to. They fill it with so much gas that it must either be propelled into permanent orbit or go up in flames.

The problem with art is the need to manifest a vision in the first place, or to get the work to match the vision. How much money should you risk in the doing?—for unless you are both marketer and artist, you will lose money.

The problem, then, becomes when to do it, if you have to earn a living some other way. And art requires isolation. You have to remove yourself from the world in order to respond to it artistically.

Art supply stores are disappearing—that's a problem. And pixels are trying to replace brush strokes. That's an environmental good, because paper is hard on trees and volatile organic compounds worse

on the air. But some things simply cannot be digitized.

Art must be a problem, for they've found a way to cure it. Now they have ways to quiet the urge to paint, to spare Picasso his blue period, as one TV commercial puts it.

\* \* \*

The problems of art came to mind while I was sketching—actually sketching, with the ancient, low-tech tools of charcoal and newsprint—an abstract landscape. The ultimate work would be all color and form: teasing, suggestive planes in an atmosphere that touched archetype. What part of my brain thought it needed more, caused my hand to insert that crisp upright rectangle, like the pier of an unseen bridge? It torqued the scene!

Even as I was appreciating the change and all it suggested, I realized I had seen the device before. In large landscapes painted by an acquaintance, subtle disturbed smudges that spoke unmistakably of the natural world were interrupted by rulers—the same imposition of the measured, the engineered, on natural forms.

Why should I have had the same impulse? It would be easy to say it was mere imitation: I remember those paintings well. But, though I understood them intellectually, I didn't altogether like them. The march of the man-made over the breathing earth is all-too evident in real life: I don't want to see it in art!

I know enough of the sweep of ideas through contemporary imaginations and enough of that particular painter's love of the land to say that we were each, in turn, representing a tension within us and around us. She had spoken of it as a problem, and I suspected her of MFA-speak because, at the time, it wasn't my problem. I wasn't living in a mountain valley that had just been opened to drilling for natural gas. For now, my immediate environment is not under that sort of siege; still, I am alienated from the land by a 40-hour work week, and I feel it in my guts. It has become my problem, a problem for art.



## AT THE FAIR

---

Beautiful Barbara thought I, African Barbara,  
the best painter she'd known.  
So reported the Gypsy's Little Love Bug  
as the two of us sat,  
meagerly disguised  
with pillows under our shirts,  
watching the festival.  
I was pleased to hear it,  
even if African Barbara was just so much goose down,  
because Beautiful Barbara was all her name claimed,  
and it's good fortune to have admired ones  
among one's admirers.

(African Barbara had just conceived of a painting  
of two tractor tires suspended  
halfway up a steep slope  
above the homes of some poor people  
who cherished their small share.  
That seemed the essence of the festival:  
the shacks along the alleys of our route there  
had all displayed clothing—

clean but not pressed—  
like flags.)

I was surprised to see Beautiful Barbara in the  
procession.  
Her face still held attraction but was one of a crowd,  
and no one spoke about her breasts.

They said, "There's Beautiful Barbara,"  
but seemed to mean, "That woman was Beautiful  
Barbara  
and used to bewitch both men and women,  
but now she's been seen too often  
in the same company  
and we're tired of proclaiming her beauty."

I wondered if she was not a person  
but a pond, gone dry.  
I had thought otherwise  
and the uncertainty made me queasy.



No one would say of me, "She was Beautiful Barbara,"  
but they might say  
"She was African Barbara, the painter,"  
and then, to themselves,  
"but no one has ever seen her paintings."  
They cannot believe forever.  
I let my pillow slip from under my shirt  
and faded back among the shacks,  
as we had come.



## LIVING ROOM STATEMENT

---

I have made a statement on my living room wall, but since few people will see it there, I wish to describe it.

Above the bookcase hang nine pictures, not chosen for the purpose of making a statement but for enlivening the room. The rightmost two, by the same artists, are brush and ink studies of a New Mexico homestead. The next six represent a diversity of human attitudes and artistic techniques.

A lithograph of a man dozing while the sand in the hourglass beside him runs out

is followed by a charcoal sketch of a baseball pitcher studying home plate before the windup.

Below the pitcher is a print of an oil painting of a young woman in a long blue dress reading a book while her spaniel slumbers at her feet.

The scratchboard above and to the left is also of a woman and dog, but they are in a darkened room and the dog is barking at the person, seen in silhouette, who is rapping at the window.

Below that is a wood engraving of a woman fleeing into the hills at night, her small child perched on one shoulder.

While each of these pieces has merit, and the arrangement is pleasing enough, no statement has yet been made. For this, one must look to the final picture on the wall, a

small photograph of two derelicts in a sidewalk meditation. How do they view the feast of fancy and finish before them? One is obviously disgusted. “Bah!” fairly leaps from his features. His companion, leaning into him as if for support, is lost in an amazed reverie, his eyes glazed with wonder. Thus, unwittingly and unerringly, they summarize all that can be said of art.



## REDS

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Reds was a group of men and women that met once a month or so over pretzels and juice to talk politics. The name was unofficial and ironic: left of center we no doubt were, but we were neither organized nor radical, except by comparison with the Bible-belt town in which we found ourselves.

We were librarians, writers, university professors, with a newspaper publisher and a photographer thrown in. The discussions were informal and largely impromptu, though sometimes a topic was selected in advance and the discussion led by one or another of us. One evening, for example, we were skillfully led to a militarist

stance that none of us liked by a devil's advocate political scientist. On another evening, we experienced vicariously the emotional trials of growing up literate, sensitive, and liberal in a tiny Fundamentalist community steeped in ignorance and violently disposed toward outsiders as a man of fifty-some years read from the journal he'd kept at the urging of his psychiatrist.

My turn came: I was asked to talk about art—"Politics and Art," or was it "the politics of art"? The distinction was important, but I neglected to point it out, and I could see my comrades were puzzled, four

weeks later, when I launched into a defense of Walter (Margaret) Keane.

Keane painted redundant, maudlin “portraits” of children, mostly girls, with huge, dark, tearful eyes. The paintings were a brief fad in the mid ‘60’s, making it to the cover of Time magazine, to the horror and consternation of serious folks like me.

Still, when I thought about leading this cabal of high-minded people in a discussion of art, only Keane would do. I found myself rebelling against any definition of art, any analysis of its role in or victimization by political currents. Keane’s paintings had been popular, for whatever reason, and who was I—who were we, great liberals and all—to say they were or weren’t art?

The point I wanted to make was that, to the extent that an artist chooses color and

form, mood, composition (is choice what separates art from therapy?)—any of the visual elements—art is politics. Rather gratuitously, I admit, I was equating citizen with city, allowing “politics” to encompass the public statements of individuals. I posited that Keane’s work spoke of sentimentality and capitalism and, perhaps, touched a collective grief for wounds never soothed, or never suffered. We could not dismiss or denigrate it simply because it did not satisfy our intellectual requirements. The people had elected Keane to represent them, in a sense.

Unfortunately, I never learned what, if anything, my fellow Reds got from this exercise. The group dissolved as one and another and another of us moved back toward civilization.





## OBJECT LESSON

---

I am looking at an object that is at once common, wholly functional, and extravagantly beautiful. It comprises many parts—some durable and hard, some too fragile to touch—joined by visible seams of apparently arbitrary shape and placement. The beauty of the object lies in its graceful lines, its smooth outer texture, and the sheer improbability of its every detail: holes within holes, tunnels within tunnels, a jut here, a swell or swoop there. Even the most capricious feature has a perfect mirrored twin on the object's other half. To look at this object is to see both future and past, to behold the wellspring of all art and religion.

All these wonders notwithstanding, most people, by choice or circumstance, will never see anything like it.

The object is a deer's skull. I came across it while walking at the edge of a cornfield some 20 years ago. It is one of the more revealing items in my small bone collection. Over the years, these bones have taught me repeatedly things I tend to lose sight of. Mortality is certainly one, but far more compelling is the inscrutable marvel that is life. Science would have me believe that this miraculously complex device for maintaining and managing a complex organism was devised, albeit slowly, as a kind

of spontaneous cellular cooperation. Religion teaches that a Supreme Being put this and everything else together rather more quickly and for debatable purposes. Neither is credible.

I look at this skull and know that I live in perpetual ignorance. All I can do is respond: channel the wonder into whatever form it will take, trying not to compare what comes out with what went in because, after

all, they are the same. This is not to say that I stand before my easel surrounded by twittering bluebirds while pure stardust flows from my brush. I am a modern person—that is to say, cynical and critical and full of vain ambition. But even at my proudest moments, when the work I have done surpasses my most sublime intention, I know I am not the creator.





## IMPORTED SHELTER

---

A new sight has come  
to the American snowfall  
borrowed from Hiroshige's snow-swept bridges  
where pedestrians gathered in their silks  
and raised bamboo shields against fat flakes.  
In his images I recognized kimonos  
but never wondered at the arched walkways  
nor thought to stay a storm  
with my umbrella.  
Now the East is rising in our midst  
and I see the whitening streets  
fill with bobbing arcs of calm.

## ART IN THE WORLD

---

"It is not primitive art. It is art."

—Magdalena Abakanowicz

In and around New York City, where I grew up, the important art was large and aggressive and abstract. Vision and concept took precedence over the mundane, even when the mundane was the ostensible subject. What mattered was the frontiersmanship evident in the depiction or interpretation. To succeed as an artist seemed to require more nerve than depth, and the whole world was watching.

Now I live in one of this country's least visible regions. Art here still derives largely from the visual stimulus of the subtle, alluring landscape, which is often primitive to

the point of profundity. Despite its comfortable aspect, it is hard land, with hard soil and hard trees, and the people it shapes work without expectation of real prosperity. They are humble, realistic, and defiant. The art they most esteem is that which depicts familiar places and things in minute detail. I call it weasel-whisker art, this painting that evokes admiration invariably and solely for the obvious, painstaking work it entails. But I do call it art, and it gives me cause to reflect.

Is the attachment to detail a way of proving technical skill to the indifferent world? Is it a symptom of impoverished imagination, or a reluctance to contemplate large ideas? Does the closeness of the land, with its narrow roads and thick forests, block out all perspective?

The common ground between urban abstractions and rural representation is obvious. The artist, today as ever, strives to balance the urge to act and be seen and heard as an individual with the felt need to speak to and for the society nearest at hand. It is never easy, given the elusive nature of any society and the perverse tendency of people to see things through their own eyes and to misunderstand what artists are saying to and for them.

In the unevenly shrinking world we inhabit, one can easily remove oneself from the asphalt maze, can eat, sleep, and work in the outback, and still feel a part of the larger world and its issues. From an affordable homestead in an elemental setting, an artist may tackle universal subjects with modern language. But what is his society? His rural neighbors do not understand why he looks so far afield, and in the self-absorbed city he is an unknown from an unknown land.





## PAINTED CHILDREN

---

I once attended a panel discussion on painting. Of the five panelists, two had given up painting—one to study and eventually practice, psychology, the other to organize senior citizens against the arms race. Their being on the panel made perfect sense to me. Psychology and politics are concerned with consciousness and response. Art is a conscious response.

The woman who went political was herself a senior citizen who had had a long and successful career as an Abstract Expressionist. She'd had the good fortune of finding an exceptional agent, one who loved art better than money, and her work had been purchased by several major museums. She had recognition and respect, as well as a family. A

success. But when she spoke of her experience as an artist, she was surprisingly gloomy. "Don't go into the visual arts unless you are compelled," was her advice, because of the long solitary hours in the studio, and because there will be few people with whom you can talk about your work.

Her words interested me. Writers give us ample images and insight into their lives, but painters are less accessible somehow. Besides, I knew what she said to be true.

I have always written. I have not always painted. I had yearned to paint for years but didn't get around to it until I lost faith in words. I felt that visual images had an immediacy and a visceral impact that the written word cannot have. What I didn't

know but quickly learned is that most people don't have much of a visual sense, don't know how to respond when confronted with a painting, are afraid to say, "I like it," or "I don't like it," much less why.

I believe it is impossible to make a mark on a blank page or canvas without considering, however fleetingly, that someone else will see it. When you go to such brazen lengths as to hang your marks on a wall, to offer them as communication, nonresponse can be extremely disheartening. It leaves you with a furtive craving for the approval of other artists.

I think I can say without exaggeration that I have never had an earnest discussion with another painter in which the word

passion did not come up. I would describe that passion not as a love but a clarity—the calm, intuitive knowledge that what you are putting down is exactly what you mean to be putting down and that your entire being supports it. Of course, not every moment at the easel is characterized by such purity—still I believe it is the essential force behind art.

Despite the private passion and the conscious communication, paintings are very much like children. For all your care and pain, they will be what they will be and you must let them go. Perhaps they will do well in the world and your life will be easier for it. Perhaps they will be misunderstood. If their success matters, you have failed.





## MISSING

---

When my dog found me  
I realized I had been away a long time  
and I knew I was in trouble.  
Someone had flown her there to search.  
I was missing.

And it had been a reasonable time.  
That is, I had lived reasonably.  
I had eaten well, spent whole days  
in town. Nights I sheltered.  
Mostly I sat in the rocks above the city  
having artistic thoughts.  
I went to talk to God.

That's what I told them.  
Why admit to a frenzy of misanthropy?



## CHALK UP ANOTHER

---

There are only so many walls; the supply of things to put on them seems limitless—posters, pennants, plates, plaques, racks, maps, clocks, calendars, photos, mirrors, macrame, tapestry, graffiti, paintings, ... The impulse to cover walls is second only to the urge to build them.

Faced with a wall of blackboard and some time to kill before the film started, it was only natural for me and my friend, a graphic artist, to want to make a chalk drawing. The film that evening was *All That Jazz* and we didn't know much about it, so we designed a simple marquee with some colored chalk he had.

We worked fast, wanting to finish before the students and other film series regulars began arriving. We left the auditorium and returned a while later, all innocence. There was a low buzz in the hall, and the professor, a friend, had a puzzled look. He asked us if we knew anything about the chalk drawing, and, both coy and cautious, we said no. We took our seats, enjoying our work, our secret, and the curiosity we had provoked. When the film was over, we exited with everyone else, leaving the marquee for the next day's students. Knowing our handiwork would be erased was a little sad, but it also seemed right and refreshing. The notion of transitory

art, art that does not turn to artifact but vanishes instead, leaving only idea and memory behind, was fresh air in a room that tended to stuffiness.

The collaboration begun that evening lasted several years. For almost every film, we did a chalk drawing of some sort. Informed in some cases by a film review, at other times by the film series blurb alone, we spent between 20 and 45 minutes creating an illustration we hoped would suit the actual film. Sometimes we prepared “stencils” beforehand; often, both the drawing and the lettering were done from thumbnail sketches or simply invented on the spot.

Our still-anonymous work brought some complaints. The math professor who taught in the hall the following morning did not appreciate having to clean up after us, and the custodians claimed that the chalk marred

the surface of the board.

The film prof received these objections with equanimity; he was glad he could honestly say he didn’t know who was responsible because he liked the drawings and wanted to continue seeing them. He did, however, air the grievances to the audience at large.

We took note. We now began sneaking back into the hall to erase our work and actively searching for more suitable chalk. About this time, our identity became known. With the secret out, we began signing and photographing our works. (Eventually, the slides were incorporated into a short video documentary of our endeavors, called *Chalk Up Another.*)

Always, our chief enjoyment came from the audience reaction and from the suspense of waiting to discover whether our

image fit the film. Often the match was wonderfully, uncannily close; at least once, the experience seemed other-worldly. That evening's film, John Sayles' *Leanna*, was about a woman exploring her sexual identity. We had lettering but no image in mind when we arrived at the auditorium. Rather spontaneously, we were inspired to draw a

red flower that exceeded the bounds of the chalkboard as an O'Keefe poppy exceeds its canvas. It so happened that, at something very close to the precise moment we had our idea, Georgia O'Keefe had died and, one might say, her spirit was released to the ether where, perhaps, it brushed past us.



## ECHOES OF THE SOUND BYTE

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"...musicians don't like dabblers, and literary men don't like people who cross boundaries... If you're a writer, you're a writer, and if you're a composer, you're a composer—and no scabbing."

—Robertson Davies, in *The Lyre of Orpheus*

I was riding along I-44 en route to a Web Marketing seminar, listening to the news on a public radio station, when somebody pushed a button, my button. A reporter was marveling over Native American artist, Chief Lelooska, author of *Echoes of the Elders*, who could not only write stories but make pictures and I don't even remember what else because I was already reacting.

If art comes about through a combination of inspiration and skill, if

inspiration is an openness to the flow of energy and ideas, and if skill is a combination of ability and discretion, the coming together of these elements in a single being is indeed a gift, and a wondrous gift.

But where is it written that these gifts must have focused application? Who prescribes that writers write and artists art and never, within the folds of a single skin, shall the twain interact? Who supposes that these gifts come with rules or labels attached?

Why should anyone imagine that inspiration can come from only one direction, that ability comes addressed and pigeon-holed according to medium, that expression can take only one form?

The evidence to the contrary is all around us and always has been: Da Vinci, Blake, Strindberg, Ibsen, Kent, Bowles, Bishop, Joani Mitchell—men and women who wrote words and music or painted and wrote or sang and painted. I don't even count such narrow divergences as musicians who conduct orchestras, actors who direct films, poets who write plays, or dancers who choreograph, though critics frequently howl at such strays.

Focusing on a primary form may be desirable or practical for an artist, but anyone who stands long in the river of creativity

knows its breadth. Only someone peering across the complex current from the safety of shore could be surprised by Chief Lelooska's varied accomplishments.

In all fairness, anyone whose job is to talk about anything in a predetermined amount of time for the edification of a general audience must remain on shore. The trouble is that, when the reporter is finished, we are left with the impression that a respectable stream is a raging torrent, half-hidden in swirling mist. This longish cousin to the sound byte insults and diminishes us all. We are being told, however subtly, that it is enough to do one thing well, when we should be prepared and encouraged to do as many things as we might feel inclined or compelled to do, well enough to be proud or pleased.

## JAZZ ART

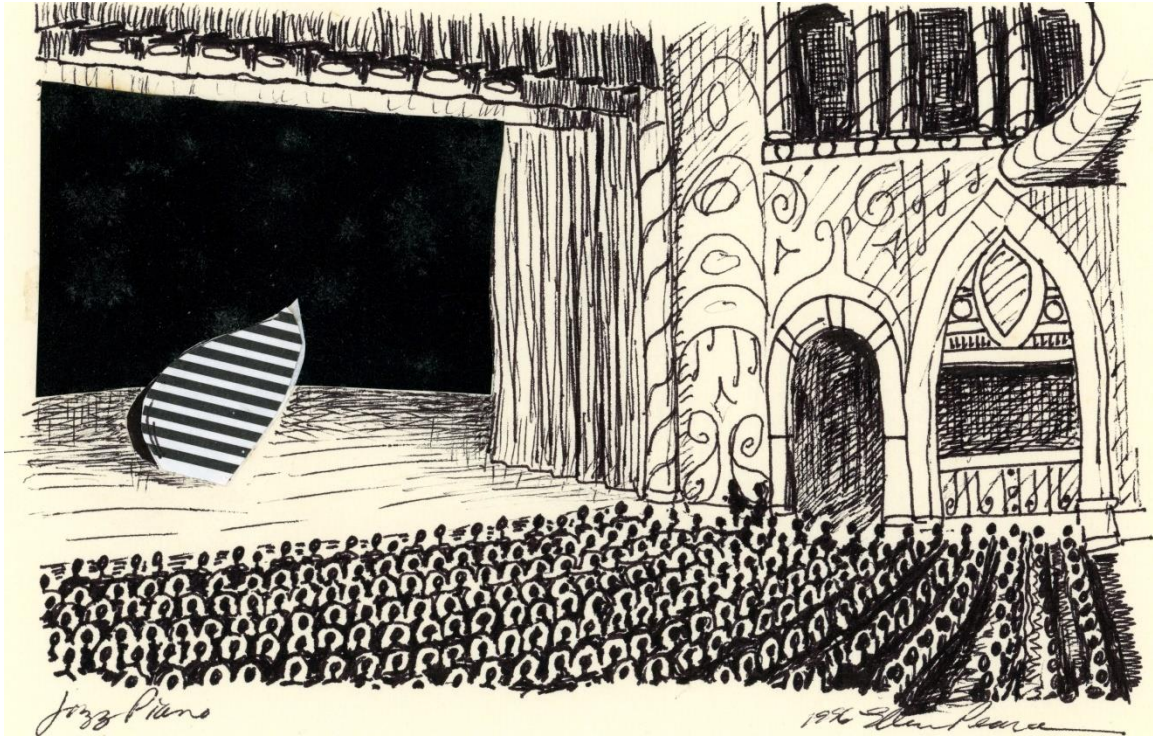
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You can't  
draw jazz with a pencil.  
I've been listening for years  
and drawing with pencils  
so I know.

You can  
smoke  
and eat and dance and  
throw another log on  
if it's winter

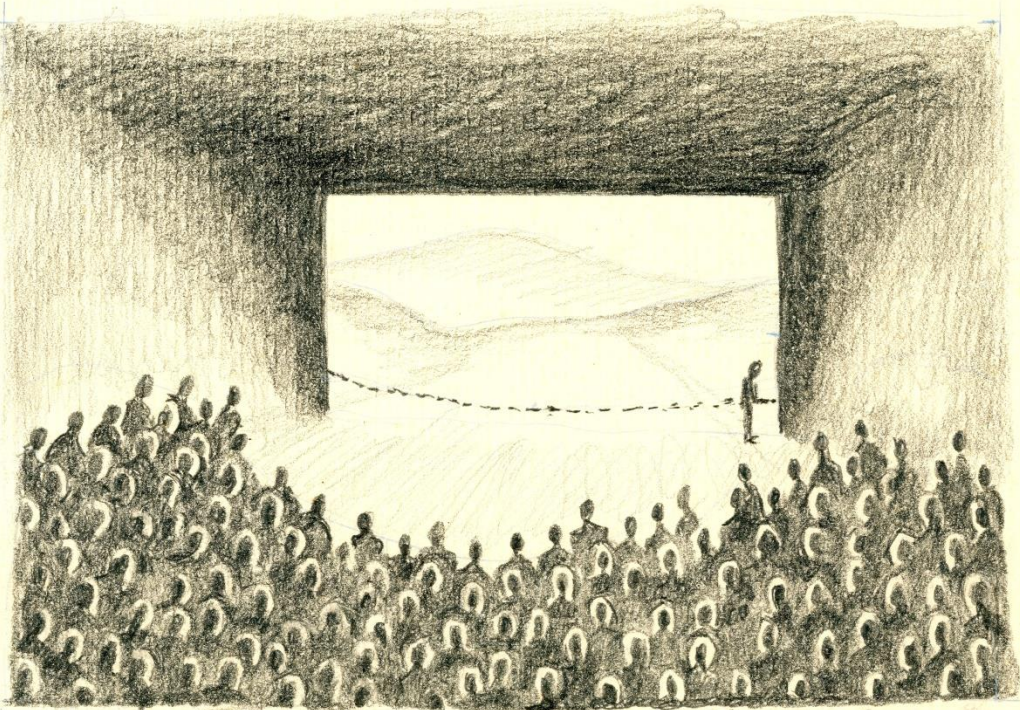
and you're home.  
Have a beer or a shot  
and think about a lot of people all at  
once.

I listen to jazz till I want to break  
every plastic sax  
till I long for the stench  
of citrus and booze in cigarette ash  
and the torture  
of busted love.  
Jazz takes paint.



Jazz Piano

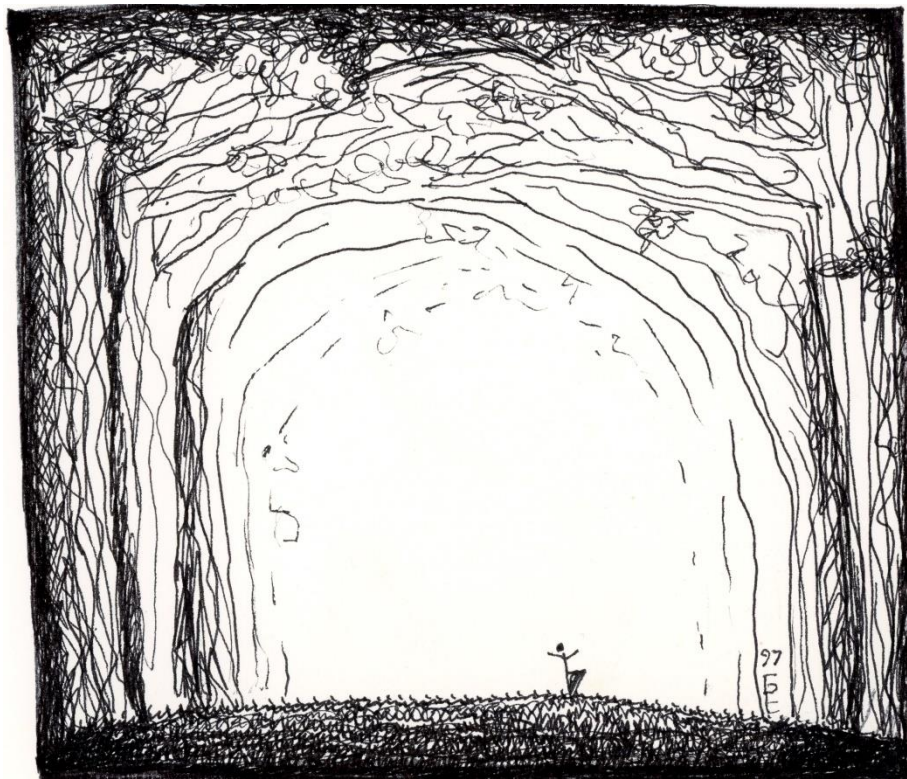
1976 Stan Pearce



*All Clear*

*1946 Eldon Pearce*

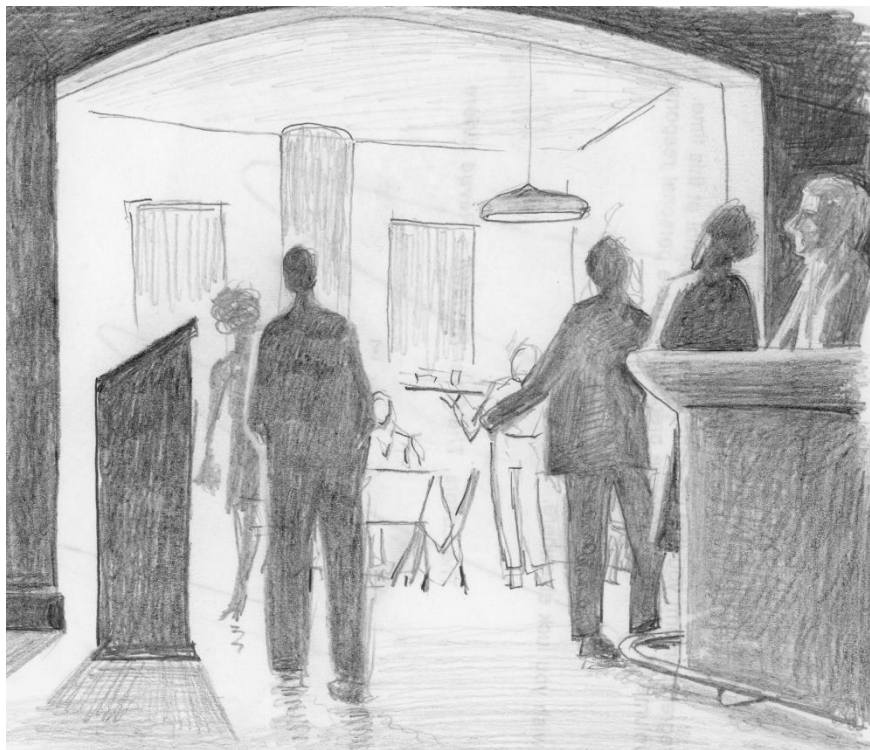






Hearth

1996 Elurbeam



## MONEY AND TERROR

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Last month's meeting of local artists was well-attended. There was the stern-seeming gentleman who paints formal portraits and meticulous landscapes; the travel agent whose dark abstract dominated the June show as a wolverine might a litter of kittens; the sculptor who divides his time between painting signs and devising extravagant bronze poetry; the nationally known bird artist; and more. We embody a spectrum of style, technique, philosophy, and experience. We have almost nothing in common. Still, we come together because, in this little town, only the natural world favors art, because the

sense of being shipwrecked afflicts us all at times, and because we each need the nudge that someone else's work provides.

Only two in the group actually make a living, however meager, from art alone. The rest of us wrestle with our "seriousness" (a serious artist, which we each think ourselves, is the opposite of a Sunday painter, which many of us necessarily are).

The art debate in small towns is not elevated. The discussion at this meeting concerned the money question. A "collector" had been invited by the owner of the gallery where we meet to offer advice on selling art.

What he had to say was uninspiring in the extreme: in order to sell paintings, you must paint what people want. Here, what people want is presumed to be pictures of their homes. (One of us had earlier been encouraged by a different voluntary consultant to choose colors from carpet swatches and chips of house paint. To think I used to rail against building decor around art! At least that gave art the leading role.)

It is stubborn or even rude of me, I suppose, but I cannot take this talk seriously. I have heard too often the argument about raising the public's appreciation of art by accommodating its ignorance. I don't believe it. I don't believe artists should even think of selling their work to people who don't know what it's for. It is true that much of the world's great art is commercial in one sense or another—created to please patrons and

secure a living—but I hold to the notion that an artist is more than a contractor.

Art is witness, witness to singular being—serving to illuminate the universal through its particulars—and to whatever that being may find remarkable, which may or may not include domestic architecture. Art is a way of talking back to life, rejoicing in or reproaching its manifestations. The passion for personal truth should be what distinguishes “serious” artists, not the amount or source of their income. The calling to art is successfully answered when the work brings artist and public together in mind or spirit. If the public can afford the price named by the artist in a moment of high self-esteem, so much the better, but an artist who focuses on that narrow possibility has fallen asleep while on watch.

But, oh, the loftiness of such thoughts! Where is reality? Do we not live in a material world? Are we not all defined by the dollars we command? Do we not long for recognition and reward? What will sustain an artist whose vision is too particular?

An economist I know who is also an artist sheds a most practical light on the matter. Certainly artists must sell their work. Certainly the public must want to buy it. The trick is not shaping the art to its market but creating the market. People seek to elevate themselves through knowledge and possessions, and the two are not separate. Most people, sad to say, do not know much about art, or at least they don't know how to talk about it. Worse, they are terrified that

simply liking or disliking it will expose their ignorance. An artist or work without accompanying copy, therefore, has little chance of acceptance. Artists must learn to talk about what they have done and why in a way that allows others to understand and talk about it. They must do so whenever and wherever they can.

The difficulty is that artists are, of necessity, people who like to work alone in a studio for hour upon uninterrupted hour, laying their souls upon the wall, so to speak. To require them to go forth and promote is like saying, "This may be the very most profound thing you've ever felt, but what does it mean, really?" Artists have their terrors, too.





## THE WELL-BALANCED BIRD

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This owl is a serious bird. She stands a full three feet tall from claw to crown, and though she never utters a sound, she commands the room. She appears to be a barn owl, though her look is more monkish than “monkey-faced”—as more than one field guide describes that bird. Her serious face, with its large dark eyes, is framed by a red-brown cowl. Her eyes are surprisingly dull, yet she watches, unblinking, all my moods and movements. No, that is not poetic license—she (or he?) watches my moods, watches and responds. When I am angry—over the determined foolishness of politicians, say—the tilt of her head counsels forbearance and a sense of history. When ennui is on me, that

same aspect reminds me than peace and solitude are luxuries. There are times, of course, when she looks precisely and simply like a bird who cannot understand what she is seeing: plainly, I’m not a mouse, but what and why am I?

If I anthropomorphize a bit too much, it is because, like me, this bird has a navel, and feet of clay. In fact, she is made entirely of clay by Colorado ceramic artist, Jenifer Erickson. But I swear, as will anyone who sits long in my front room, that the owl’s expression is no mere trick of light. Those lusterless eyes somehow transmit, in any given moment, the very emotion required for balance.



## THE DAY JOB

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When I sit in my office contemplating small business and the economy as a whole, all the while wishing I could be making a living by writing or painting instead, my thoughts sometimes run together.

Why, I wonder indignantly, if the great well of American creativity is what sets us forever ahead of the Japanese, do I find “artists and athletes,” as a single category, at the very end of a long list of job categories?

Why, in a culture where image rules, does a job carrying “full responsibility for ... corporate image” pay only \$24,000? (In that year, 1996, that was a paltry sum even for Beaverton, Oregon, the corporate site.)

Why, in a society forever glorifying the individual, does individuality seem so disruptive, so risky?

I go on like that for a while until I realize I am whining. I do not write or make art for a living because, in large part, I chose not to. I grew up believing that work stood in natural and inevitable opposition to all that was meaningful and pleasurable in life. I got this notion from my father who was, in his soul, a poet and a scholar, but who was obliged to trundle off to midtown Manhattan every morning to watch his vision of a quality publishing house be corrupted by fiscal considerations. I made up my mind early on to keep my creative pursuits unsullied by external demands.

By the time various friends had demonstrated to me that my father was wrong, that it is possible for one's love and one's work to coincide, I had painted myself, so to speak, into a corner. I needed work, but after years of freelancing as a copy editor—work kept to a minimum to leave time for arting—I had a short resume full of words like “technical” and “engineering,” a small body of work, not much money, a house in the country, and no adequate or reliable

transportation. Even if I could find and land a job (there was a recession on) that somehow engaged my well-guarded, un-documented talents, I couldn't get to it!

So I grudgingly give up whining and take comfort instead from T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and all the artists and writers who work or have worked as land surveyors, craft-store clerks, park attendants ...



## DREAM WORK

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He comes into my office, seeking information that will help his “business,” and asks if he can close the door. I understand that what he has to say is confidential. I also know that the one or two people who might come to this corner of the building in the next hour have no interest in his affairs.

“Yes, of course,” I defer.

Before closing the door, he remembers that he has left something in his car and goes back out to fetch it. He returns empty-handed, closes the door, and pulls a chair around so that we are seated more or less side by side. He asks for a piece of paper, and I hand him one.

As he sketches, I study him. He is in his middle fifties, only a little older than I. Portly, I guess, is the nice way to say that his body has lost whatever shape it may have had. His sandy hair is thin, his eyes, blue and bright.

He shows me his drawings, none of which make any sense until he begins to explain his invention. I learn a little about him in the process. He has an engineering degree and earned pretty good wages for a while working for a major manufacturer. He’s out of work now: he doesn’t come right out and say so, but clearly he has no constraints on his time.

His idea appears sound to me, though whether or not it's marketable is another question. I ask if he intends to manufacture and sell the product himself. No, he tells me. What he'd really like to have is a research and development company where he could just, you know, have ideas.

The guy is a dreamer, and there's nothing I can do to help him. By rights, I should tell him—diplomatically, of course—that he is out of touch with reality and will die broke if he's not careful. Any of my colleagues would do that and be perfectly justified. But I can't.

First, there's a hint of vagueness about his eyes that tells me he hasn't lost his sense of reality so much as put it aside. Too many of his dreams have already been spurned or, one might infer, stolen. Rather than admit that he may not have a winning hand, he has chosen

not to look at the cards already showing. He believes in himself in the face of merciless odds. We are very much alike.

Still, I can't encourage him. I tell him several things he needs to do and give him the names and phone numbers of some people to contact. Then I say, knowingly, "Having an idea is the easy part."

It's as true as night, and I don't entirely mind saying so. I feel no desire to protect him. I have thrown away more half-written stories and essays, painted over more canvases, than I can bear to think about. On some level, I resent the fact that I am there for him, that the government pays me to counsel would-be entrepreneurs through the very early stages of what almost certainly will never turn into a business, in the hope that one or two of them will have a good idea and the sense to run with it. Where are the

public-sector editors and agents, waiting for me to drag in my sketches for a go/no-go opinion? Why is his half-formed idea better than mine? He can afford the vagueness around the eyes: if I reject his brain-child, he can nurse it back to importance and call me names all the while. I must destroy my own progeny. Sometimes I feel as though I'm made wholly of ashes, but half phoenix, half Sisyphus, I persist. In my book, dreams count.

The inventor leaves my office door open as he goes out. I find myself both hoping and doubting that he will pull it together, that he will generate some meaningful economic activity, start a business, and create jobs. It would justify my position and help secure his future. Mostly, though, it would affirm the dream.



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

I grew up in Tarrytown, New York, and was educated (formally) in New York, Ohio, and Missouri. I have lived and worked in Europe and diverse corners of the U.S., at occupations as various as farming and spinning the platters in a French discotheque. I now live in rural Missouri.

I have published two volumes of poetry and numerous poems, essays, and stories in journals. I have exhibited paintings and collages in numerous galleries and museums.

