III.

FEARS ABOUT YOURSELF

We have met the enemy and he is us.
— Pogo

AHEAD LIES A BROAD EXPANSE of river, flowing rapidly. The oarsman, only recently learning his skill, nervously maneuvers to avoid the one and only rock breaking the surface downstream, dead center, smooth current to either side. You watch from shore. The oarsman zigs left. Zigs right. And then crashes directly into the rock. When you act out of fear, your fears come true.

Fears about artmaking fall into two families: fears about yourself, and fears about your reception by others. In a general way, fears about yourself prevent you from doing your *best* work, while fears about your reception by others prevent you from doing your *own* work. Both families surface in many forms, some of which you may find all too familiar. Try this sampler...

PRETENDING

The fear that you're only pretending to do art is the (readily predictable) consequence of doubting your own artistic credentials. After all, you know better than anyone else the accidental nature of much that appears in your art, not to mention all those elements you know originated with others (and even some you never even intended but which the audience has read into your work). From there it's only a short hop to feeling like you're just going through the motions of being an artist. It's easy to imagine that *real* artists know what they're doing, and that they—unlike you—are entitled to feel good about themselves and their art. Fear that you are not a real artist causes you to undervalue your work.

The chasm widens even further when your work isn't going well, when happy accidents aren't happening or hunches aren't paying off. If you buy into the premise that art can be made only by people who are extra-ordinary, such down periods only serve to confirm that you *aren't*.

Before chucking it all for a day job, however, consider the dynamics at work here. Both making art and viewing art require an ongoing investment of energy—lots of energy. In moments of weakness, the myth of the extraordinary provides the excuse for an artist to quit trying to make art, and the excuse for a viewer to quit trying to understand it.

Meanwhile artists who do continue often become perilously self-conscious about their artmaking. If you doubt this could be a problem, just try working intuitively (or spontaneously) while self-consciously weighing the effect of your every action. The increasing prevalence of reflexive art—art that looks inward, taking itself as its subject—may to some degree simply illustrate attempts by artists to turn this obstacle to their advantage. Art-that's-about-art has in turn spawned a whole school of art criticism built around the demonstrably true (but limited) premise that artists continually "re-define" art through their work. This approach treats "what art is" as a legitimate, serious and even thorny topic, but expends little energy on the question of "what art *making* is".

Clearly something's come unbalanced here. After all, if there were some ongoing redefinition of "what chess is", you'd probably feel a little uneasy trying to play chess. Of course you could always stick with the game by limiting yourself to a few easy moves you've seen work for others. Then again you might conclude that since you weren't sure yourself what chess was, you weren't a *real* chess player and were only faking it when you moved the pieces around. You might secretly come to believe that you deserve to lose. In fact, you might even quit playing entirely. If the preceding scenario sounds farfetched *vis-a-vis* chess, it remains discouragingly common *vis-a-vis* art.

But while you may feel you're just pretending that you're an artist, there's no way to pretend you're making art. Go ahead, try writing a story while pretending you're writing a story. Not possible. Your work may not be what curators want to exhibit or publishers want to publish, but those are different issues entirely. You make good work by (among other things) making lots of work that isn't very good, and gradually weeding out the parts that aren't good, the parts that aren't yours. It's called feedback, and it's the most direct route to learning about your own vision. It's also called doing your work. After all, *someone* has to do your work, and you're the closest person around.

TALENT

Talent, in common parlance, is "what comes easily". So sooner or later, inevitably, you reach a point where the work doesn't come easily, and — *Aha!*, it's just as you feared!

Wrong. By definition, *whatever* you have is exactly what you need to produce your best work. There is probably no clearer waste of psychic energy than worrying about how much talent you have — and probably no worry more common. This is true even among artists of considerable accomplishment.

Talent, if it is anything, is a gift, and nothing of the artist's own making. This idea is hardly new: Plato maintained that all art is a gift from the gods, channeled through artists who are "out of their mind" — quite

literally, in Plato's view — when making art. Plato, however, is not the only philosopher on the block; while his description correlates well with the functioning of the Oracle at Delphi, idiot savants, and certain TV evangelists, it's difficult to reconcile with most real world events.

Were talent a prerequisite, then the better the artwork, the easier it would have been to make. But alas, the fates are rarely so generous. For every artist who has developed a mature vision with grace and speed, countless others have laboriously nurtured their art through fertile periods and dry spells, through false starts and breakaway bursts, through successive and significant changes of direction, medium, and subject matter. Talent may get someone off the starting blocks faster, but without a sense of direction or a goal to strive for, it won't count for much. The world is filled with people who were given great natural gifts, sometimes conspicuously flashy gifts, yet never produce anything. And when that happens, the world soon ceases to care whether they are talented.

Even at best talent remains a constant, and those who rely upon that gift alone, without developing further, peak quickly and soon fade to obscurity. Examples of genius only accentuate that truth. Newspapers love to print stories about five-year-old musical prodigies giving solo recitals, but you rarely read about one going on to become a Mozart. The point here is that whatever his initial gift, Mozart was also an artist who learned

to work on his work, and thereby improved. In that respect he shares common ground with the rest of us. Artists get better by sharpening their skills or by acquiring new ones; they get better by learning to work, and by learning *from* their work. They commit themselves to the work of their heart, and act upon that commitment. So when you ask, "Then why doesn't it come easily for me?", the answer is probably, "Because making art is hard!" What you end up caring about is what you *do*, not whether the doing came hard or easy.

A BRIEF DIGRESSION
IN WHICH THE AUTHORS ATTEMPT
TO ANSWER (OR DEFLECT) AN OBJECTION:

Q: Aren't you ignoring the fact that people differ radically in their abilities?

A: No.

Q: But if people differ, and each of them were to make their best work, would not the more gifted make better work, and the less gifted, less?

A: Yes. And wouldn't that be a nice planet to live on?

Talent is a snare and a delusion. In the end, the practical questions about talent come down to these: Who cares? Who would know? and What difference would it make? And the practical answers are: Nobody, Nobody, and None.

PERFECTION

The ceramics teacher announced on opening day that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the *quantity* of work they produced, all those on the right solely on its *quality*. His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the "quantity" group: fifty pounds of pots rated an "A", forty pounds a "B", and so on. Those being graded on "quality", however, needed to produce only one pot — albeit a perfect one — to get an "A". Well, came grading time and a curious fact emerged: the works of highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the "quantity" group was busily churning out piles of work — and learning from their mistakes — the "quality" group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.

If you think good work is somehow synonymous with perfect work, you are headed for big trouble. Art is human; error is human; *ergo*, art is error. Inevitably, your work (like, uh, the preceding syllogism...) will be flawed. Why? Because you're a human being, and only human beings, warts and all, make art. Without warts it is not clear what you would be, but clearly you wouldn't be one of us.

Nonetheless, the belief persists among some artists (and lots of ex-artists) that doing art means doing things flawlessly — ignoring the fact that this prerequisite would disqualify most existing works of art. Indeed, it seems vastly more plausible to advance the counter-principle, namely that imperfection is not only a common ingredient in art, but very likely an essential ingredient. Ansel Adams, never one to mistake precision for perfection, often recalled the old adage that "the perfect is the enemy of the good", his point being that if he waited for everything in the scene to be exactly right, he'd probably never make a photograph.

Adams was right: to require perfection is to invite paralysis. The pattern is predictable: as you see error in what you have done, you steer your work toward what you imagine you can do perfectly. You cling ever more tightly to what you already know you can do — away from risk and exploration, and possibly further from the work of your heart. You find reasons to procrastinate, since to *not* work is to not make mistakes. Believing that artwork should be perfect, you gradually become convinced that you cannot make such work. (You are correct.) Sooner or later, since you cannot do what you are trying to do, you quit. And in one of those perverse little ironies of life, only the pattern itself achieves perfection — a perfect death spiral: you misdirect your work; you stall; you quit.

To demand perfection is to deny your ordinary (and universal) humanity, as though you would be better off without it. Yet this humanity is the ultimate source of your work; your perfectionism denies you the very thing you need to get your work done. Getting on with your work requires a recognition that perfection itself is (paradoxically) a flawed concept. For Albert Einstein, even the seemingly perfect construct of mathematics yielded to his observation that "As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality." For Charles Darwin, evolution lay revealed when a perfect survival strategy for one generation became, in a changing world, a liability for its offspring. For you, the seed for your next art work lies embedded in the imperfections of your current piece. Such imperfections (or *mistakes*, if you're feeling particularly depressed about them today) are your guides — valuable, reliable, objective, non-judgmental guides — to matters you need to reconsider or develop further. It is precisely this interaction between the ideal and the real that locks your art into the real world, and gives meaning to both.

ANNIHILATION

For most artists, hitting a dry spell in their artmaking would be a serious blow; for a few it would amount to annihilation. Some artists identify so closely with their own work that were they to cease producing, they fear they would be nothing — that they would cease *existing*. In the words of John Barth, "It's Scheherazade's terror: the terror that comes from the literal or metaphorical

equating of telling stories with living, with life itself. I understand that metaphor to the marrow of my bones."

Some avoid this self-imposed abyss by becoming stupendously productive, churning out work in quantities that surprise even close friends (and positively unnerve envious peers!). They work passionately, as if they were possessed — and wouldn't you too, if that were all that kept the Reaper at bay?

Others, no less driven, project instead a certain no-nonsense professionalism: precise, relentless, and narrowly aimed at making art — which, indeed, they may be very good at. History records that Anthony Trollope methodically drafted exactly forty-nine pages of manuscript a week — seven pages a day — and was so obsessed with keeping to that schedule that if he finished a novel in the morning he'd pen the title for his *next* book on a new sheet and plod relentlessly ahead until he'd completed his quota for the day. And from personal experience the authors can verify that Brett Weston, a virtual case study in annihilation, for decades maintained in his home an ongoing exhibition of a dozen or more of his photographs, none of which was ever more than six months old.

Still, there must be many fates worse than the inability to stop producing art. The artist who fears annihilation may draw the connection between *doing* and *being* a little too tight, but this is really just a case of having too much of a good thing. Annihilation is an existential fear: the common — but sharply overdrawn — fear that

some part of you dies when you stop making art. *And it's true.* Non-artists may not understand that, but artists themselves (especially those who are stuck) understand it all too well. The depth of your need to make things establishes the level of risk in not making them.

MAGIC

> *"There's a myth among amateurs, optimists and fools that beyond a certain level of achievement, famous artists retire to some kind of Elysium where criticism no longer wounds and work materializes without their effort."*
>
> — Mark Matousek

In a darkened theater the man in the tuxedo waves his hand and a pigeon appears. We call it magic. In a sunlit studio a painter waves her hand and a whole world takes form. We call it art. Sometimes the difference isn't all that clear. Imagine you've just attended an exhibition and seen work that's powerful and coherent, work that has range and purpose. The Artist's Statement framed near the door is clear: these works materialized exactly as the artist conceived them. The work is inevitable. But wait a minute — *your* work doesn't feel inevitable (you think), and so you begin to wonder: maybe making art requires some special or even magic ingredient *that you don't have.*

The belief that "real" art possesses some indefinable magic ingredient puts pressure on you to prove your work contains the same. Wrong, very wrong. Asking

your work to prove anything only invites doom. Besides, if artists share any common view of magic, it is probably the fatalistic suspicion that when their own art turns out well, it's a fluke—but when it turns out poorly, it's an *omen*. Buying into magic leaves you feeling less capable each time another artist's qualities are praised. So if a critic praises Nabokov's obsession with wordplay, you begin to worry that you can't even spell "obsession". If Christo's love of process is championed, you feel guilty that you've always hated cleaning your brushes. If some art historian comments that great art is the product of especially fertile times and places, you begin to think maybe you need to move to New York.

Admittedly, artmaking probably does require *something* special, but just what that something might be has remained remarkably elusive—elusive enough to suggest that it may be something particular to each artist, rather than universal to them all. (Or even, perhaps, that it's all nothing more than the art world's variation on The Emperor's New Suit of Clothes.) But the important point here is not that you have—or don't have—what other artists have, but rather that it doesn't matter. Whatever they have is something needed to do their work—it wouldn't help you in your work even if you had it. Their magic is theirs. You don't lack it. You don't need it. It has nothing to do with you. Period.

EXPECTATIONS

Hovering out there somewhere between cause and effect, between fears about self and fears about others,

lie expectations. Being one of the higher brain functions (as our neocortex modestly calls itself), expectations provide a means to merge imagination with calculation. But it's a delicate balance—lean too far one way and your head fills with unworkable fantasies, too far the other and you spend your life generating "To Do" lists.

Worse yet, expectations drift into fantasies all too easily. At a recent writers' workshop, the instructor labored heroically to keep the discussion centered upon issues of craft (as yet unlearned), while the writers (as yet unpublished) labored equally to divert the focus with questions about royalties, movie rights and sequels.

Given a small kernel of reality and any measure of optimism, nebulous expectations whisper to you that the work will soar, that it will become easy, that it will make itself. And verily, now and then the sky opens and the work *does* make itself. Unreal expectations are easy to come by, both from emotional needs and from the hope or memory of periods of wonder. Unfortunately, expectations based on illusion lead almost always to disillusionment.

Conversely, expectations based on the work itself are the most useful tool the artist possesses. What you need to know about the next piece is contained in the last piece. The place to learn about your materials is in the last use of your materials. The place to learn about your execution is in your execution. The best information about what you love is in your last contact with what you love. Put simply, your work is your guide: a

complete, comprehensive, limitless reference book on your work. There is no other such book, and it is yours alone. It functions this way for no one else. Your fingerprints are all over your work, and you alone know how they got there. Your work tells you about your working methods, your discipline, your strengths and weaknesses, your habitual gestures, your willingness to embrace.

The lessons you are meant to learn are in your work. To see them, you need only look at the work clearly—without judgement, without need or fear, without wishes or hopes. Without emotional expectations. Ask your work what it needs, not what you need. Then set aside your fears and listen, the way a good parent listens to a child.

IV.

FEARS ABOUT OTHERS

"Don't look back—
something might be gaining on you."
— Satchel Paige

ART IS OFTEN MADE IN ABANDONMENT, emerging unbidden in moments of selfless rapport with the materials and ideas we care about. In such moments we leave no space for others. That's probably as it should be. Art, after all, rarely emerges from committees.

But while others' reactions need not cause problems for the artist, they usually *do*. The problems arise when we confuse others' priorities with our own. We carry real and imagined critics with us constantly—a veritable babble of voices, some remembered, some prophesied, and each eager to comment on all we do. Beyond that, even society's general notions about artmaking confront the artist with paralyzing contradictions. As an artist you're expected to make each successive piece uniquely new and different—yet reassuringly familiar when set