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*Armature Standing*

I gave my heart to figurative art in the eighth grade. Largely thanks to Miss Pankiewicz, a free spirit just out of college, who encouraged us to call her “Nadja” and spent a lot of class time perched on the edge of her desk, engendering fantasies.

Starting then and for a long stretch I would twist wire into skeletal frames or armatures, then clothe them with flesh of clay. This never made me feel “godlike”—just muddily mortal. Till there came a day when I looked at my attempts at molded sculpture and saw them all as *lumps*. And smashed them, one by inert one.

So I turned to wood (as it were) and specialized in carving reliefs. Which sometimes provide their name.

To me, if not to viewers.

After college I spent a decade in Milwaukee and Chicago, honing my technique. Trying to persuade galleries to take my pieces on consignment. Seeking the pettier commissions, the punier grants and fellowships. Each month I pored over *American Artist's* Bulletin Board, hunting for the little stars denoting competitions open on a national basis. Till there came a month when I found a star by:

FIGFEST: Cairney Academy Annual Figurative Festival, 7/14-16;  
open to living artists w/orig. work. Media: all figurative art. Juried  
by 3 slides. Over \$5000 in cash prizes and purchase awards, medals.  
Fee \$40, entry due 3/15.

Always difficult to tell whether a juried competition is legit or a scam. But the Cairney Academy was and remains an accredited institution (if barely, then and now). It's at 10th and Julius, the age-old heart of the Demortuis streetwalking district, as celebrated in vulgar ragtime:

*On Julius Street in Demortuis town  
I met me an evenin' lady;  
She even'd me out of a couple o' bucks...*

It goes on in that vein awhile, ending:

*But you know I think she was shady.*

Which may explain why Cairney's Figurative Festival hands out medals shaped like figleaves. I won the bronze figleaf that year for my panel *All We Ever Look For*. And that signed me up with Catapult Woman.

Geraldine Crouching came to FigFest trusting to "serendipity," in search of a Wholly Unexpected Find. Those were among the very words she used (and she used very many) to describe *All We Ever Look For*, tap-tap-tapping it with her tinted pince-nez.

"I like this! There's skin for the men—*J'accuse* for the women—whimsy for the gays—*Twilight Zone* for the critics! This says POTENTIAL to me, it says savvy, it says bent!"

So far as I was concerned, anything *All We Ever Look For* had to say was more than straightforward. A female nude, scrupulously detailed, recumbent on a couch; a queue of male mannequins, each bearing a lighted candle, filing into the bedchamber; with the head of the line climbing over the nude's footboard.

Geraldine went on to draw suitable comparisons between my work and that of Chagall and Chirico, Magritte and Delvaux. She asked to see any slides I'd brought of other pieces, then let fly her slingshot: "Do you have professional representation?"

Not even amateur, I told her.

"Well, H. Huffman," said Geraldine, "prepare to start going places."

I did. Strolling up Julius Street to Portal Park. Riding to the top of the Cenotaph and there buying a rubber mourning dove that went *cooAHH coo, coo, coo* when squeezed.

Savoring the status of professionally-represented bronze leafwinner.

People began asking me for directions. My first Demortuis panhandler approached me that same summer evening: a big cheerful bearded man, like an off-season Santa Claus. (My first Demortuis streetwalker approached me later that night: a thin restive black-eyed woman, like an out-of-sorts Avon Lady.)

I returned to Chicago long enough to retrieve my worldly possessions and load them in the aged Subaru I'd had since college. Which got me back to Demortuis before giving up its ghost and burning down my bridge.

But never fear: Geraldine launched my representation right away. She was just starting out as a dealer, having discovered she enjoyed selling other people's art more than creating her own. (Whose dominant theme appeared to be ballistics on a David-and-Goliath scale. Not Catapult Woman for nothing.)

She suggested Selfsame as a feasible dayjob; introduced me to the Wilsons, who'd bought a couple of Crouching projectiles; got me settled above their garage in Zerfall. Her "space" back then was a mere hole in the Jackdaw wall, but Geraldine provided service—even when the art market collapsed a few months later, at the tail end of overpriced yuppiedom. We were Davidian small fry chillin' in the GC, not SoHo or the East Village; their Goliathlike bottom might have dropped out, but *we* had nowhere to climb but up.

More than a dozen mortal years ago...

Today I stand in front of the new Crouching Gallery on Shoveler Street. "New" I still call it, though Geraldine's been in these larger quarters for so long that half her artists never knew the old wall-hole.

Peering through the front window, I see Geraldine's wispy-pale assistant Ralph. Even after a decade's acquaintance I have never heard Ralph say anything aloud. He murmurs a lot in Geraldine's ear, like Leonardo in the old Clyde Crashcup cartoons.

I do not go inside. Bram Taggart's one-man show is currently on exhibit: broken light bulbs turned into effigies. Feel no need to look at these a second time.

Geraldine wants Something New for the group show in May.

My work is no longer Wholly Unexpected.

Nor, of late, has it been Especially Sellable.

And *The Glorious Fourth* isn't apt to reverse either condition. Even if it were remotely close to being finished.

So here I am, Last of the Red-Hot Chiselers, heading back down to The Trail and Chinatown. Heading back down, period. No one says you can't continue creating art. Or that you have to sell any of it, so long as you keep your dayjob. At least the "Stus" of the world would quit trying to make you their stepping stone.

Right.

The airborne riversilt seems thicker than usual today...

Eyesnag: this time by a quartet of Vietnamesettes. Teens by the look of them, dressed for April despite the February wind. Allowing midribs and rumps to run free in lowride jeans; garish-colored pantybands on proud display.

The shortest and hottest one has the hiccups. Each time she goes off, the other three giggle in choral response. "*Stop laughing you guyees!!*" she yelps at them, flapping aggravated hands.

Lurch of my heart.

Ridiculous. You would think, after so many years—  
—never mind.

The quartet turns into the Paktong Palace, a cutrate emporium. To find something so rinkydink it'll frighten the spasms out of Shorty Hottie? I linger outside, as though waiting for the light to turn green. "As though?" What else? If I were a younger or more decadent man, I could claim to be from the Blah deBlah Modeling Agency. Care to put the rest of your fine young selves on Glorious Fourfold display?

*Damn.* Get a hold of your sorry self—and not literally, here on the street corner. The light does turn green; move the hell along.

Fortunately there's never been need for deceit of this magnitude. My standard op is to post an ad on the Cairney Academy website. Go there to interview respondents; try a quick preliminary sketch. If a prospect shows promise, invite her to Zerfall for a studio session. All on the up and up. And it's not like crowds of women have streamed through as a result: only one or two, every year or so. Nina and Stormin', Josephine and Miranda, K.T. and Amy-Kay, LaQuita and Pluanne, Sage and Rachael, Ginger & Candy.

My Diverting Dozen.

Or Diverted, if you prefer. Though they were all paid for their posing. And only half of them, in fact, came from the Cairney ads.

I obtained my first model via Antonio of the FigFest, who introduced me to Nina Silbergeld. Rather like Garbo in *Ninotchka*, without the laugh. Every move she made was measured, unhurried; she even chewed gum in slow motion. Nina not only used words of one syllable, but only one at a time. “Hi.” “Kay.” “Here?” She could hold a pose almost indefinitely.

Antonio drove her to Green Creek Lane and stayed for the first session. He and I traded occasional remarks while Nina gradually undressed in the bathroom. “She’s just a wee bit *pocourante*,” Antonio confided. “Nina darling! Did you fall in or what?”

“Sec,” replied Nina.

She emerged ten minutes later wrapped in a towel that was lowered, indolently, to reveal implants the size of unexploded zeppelins.

“Ah, she’s something, is she not?” smiled Antonio.

*Chomp* went Nina’s jaws on Nina’s gum. *Chomp*. And, after a moment, *chomp*.

I did what I could with her, trying to disregard the outgrowths where her breasts should have been. Whatever stance I had her assume, they protruded like frozen sandpiles. In one sketch I tried approximating how her original bustline must have appeared, but Nina disputed this use of artistic license.

“Hey,” she said. And would pose no more for me.

So I advertised for a replacement. Scant interest shown by anyone at Cairney—except Stormin’ Molly Brown, who danced at the Salome Oasis down the street but liked to check out Academy exhibits. She was largely self-educated, well-read, with a taste for mythology and improvised pronunciation.

“Can you sculpt me as an droMEEda?” she asked.

“An—?”

“You know: the chick in the chains on the rock with the sea monster that perSeuss kills after he cuts off the Gorgon’s head with the hair like live snakes.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sure, why not?”

“Great!” said Stormin’. “I’ve got my own chains here, and I can bring the snakes next time!”

If Nina was another Garbo, Stormin’ was descended from Bettie Page, the beaming gleaming queen of Fifties girlie mags. Stormin’ cultivated this resemblance with brunette hair in bangs, alarmingly high heels on her shoes, a proficient interest in bondage and so forth. Fully dressed she looked like an on-air meteorologist—what used to be called a “weather girl”—smiling brilliantly as she forecast the arrival of big warm fronts. Such had been her girlhood ambition, before she detoured into exotic boogaloo “for a little while” that had lasted through the *Fame*, *Flashdance*, and *Footloose* eras. Now over thirty, Stormin’ wanted redirection—and me to provide it.

(Sure, why not?)

She showed up at Zerfall toting a suitcase packed tight with props and accessories. Began to undress before she got upstairs, shrugging off my offer of privacy—“I’m not changing *into* anything, you know”—along with her bra. Shimmy-pirouetting at she slung it across the balustrade. “Only way I can take my clothes off anymore. You should see me at the doctor’s office.”

(*Her* bosom, by the way, was naturally unsinkable.)

Always very chipper, very prolific, endlessly inventive. Things clicked between us. The charcoal loved her, the wood seemed eager to embody her, and many relief panels resulted over the next couple of years—more than I’d produced over the entire previous decade. Better ones, too, and more marketable. Each time Geraldine unloaded one, I upped Stormin’s modeling rate, and she would give me even more of her all.

True, she wasn’t the *quietest* woman on the face of the earth. Nor the absolute tidiest, when it came to littering my studio with left-open jars and bottles, unrinsed cups and plates, and enough crumbs scattered over floor and futon to lead a dozen Hansels and Gretels out of the forest.

“You want a maid, look in the Yellow Pages,” said Stormin’. “Now in this one I don’t think it’s clear I’m wearing *black* nylons. Maybe you could do more of an intaGLEEoh pattern?”

We were working together when Desert Storm broke out, the first Gulf War. Stormin' added khaki and camouflage to her Salome Oasis dance costume and started raking in the dough. I did likewise by depicting her in a variety of bellicose settings. The best of these, *Gatherin' Stormin'*, snagged the eye of an heir to a formaldehyde fortune.

Edgar Clint collects anything remotely erotic, from underground comix (hence his byname, "Double-Bag Eddie") on up. A dealer's dream: Eddie gets suspicious if the asking price seems too low. Geraldine was ecstatic at corralling such a customer.

*Gatherin' Stormin'* was my first four-figure sale. In its honor I carved myself the improved copy that hangs above my drafting table—and a second one for Bettie Page Jr., as a parting gift. Her attention had turned to computer BBS imagery; in a very short time she staked out her own corner of the Internet and was able to retire from dancing. Today Stormin' Molly Brown is a virtual madam, offering a vast array of digital cheesecake and online intercourse. I still receive Christmas cards from her.

As Geraldine began to inflate my prices, with Double-Bag Eddie having first refusal on anything I could sculpt, a flock of applicants responded to my next Cairney ad. Rather to everyone's surprise I chose Josephine Hynde. (Never call her "Josie" or mention pussycats in her presence.) She had an air of complacency that seemed at odds with her slightly pearshaped and puddingfaced appearance. Yet at second glance Josephine left no doubt about her own particular flair.

It was all in her regard. Eyes forever half closed; a mouth that smiled without adjusting its lips. A demeanor both knowing and slightly derisive. Wise enough to the ways of men to dismiss us (the men) and them (our ways) as silly, foolish, futile. She possessed a gift for silence and stillness, watching and waiting, that translated into immense appeal.

"All we ever look for" is not always what you'd expect.

Stacked beauties can fall short; scrawny plainjanes can outshine.

And there've been changes over the past twelve years. Less silicone but more tattoos. More piercings but fewer pubes. *Too* shaven 'n' shorn, in my opinion—like yanking the gold stars off Christmas trees.

Overall quality has declined of late. My last two models, from the autumn before last, worked as a team: Ginger & Candy. Never did know their surnames—they asked to be

paid in cash. Both were streetsmart (Julius Avenewise?) yet insensible. Accommodating, yet mechanical to the point of sterility. Where Stormin's eyes had danced with zestful relish, Ginger & Candy's shared an Arrid Extra Dry.

But if you're thirsty enough, you'll drink evaporated milk.

Till you're a middle-aged coot picturing young passers-by in and out of their garish-colored underwear.

Admirable habit? Of course not. Breakable? Unlikely, so long as the sap keeps rising. (To a different kind of saphead.) When asked I say I'm thirty-nine, an age good enough for Jack Benny and Winston Smith—and me for almost six years now. But does thirty-nine mean acting three times as adolescent?

Never delude yourself. Or let yourself be hauled around by your sapheaded *schweinhund*. As my Grandfather Rhine told me when I was barely in my teens: “Boy, you best think of that as your *tool*, and treat it same as you would any other. Keep it clean, keep it dry, and don't be monkeyshining with it. Else it'll end up the boss of you.”

(An accurate forecast. Thanks, Gramps.)

I have been accused—by Io MacEvelyn, who shows at the Crouching Gallery and contributes irregular reviews to the local press—of “objectifying” women. And every time she charges this, Ben Szilnecky the pencilnecked painter hastens to relay it to me, unasked, in his bizarre Budapest-by-way-of-Tennessee-Williams accent:

“Ay-utch! Hoff yuh herdt the lay-uttest? Lemme tell yuh somesink—”

(Try to avoid him.)

You can say that objectification *depersonalizes*, robbing women of their individual character and identity. Contrariwise, I can say that objectification *personalizes* by taking an imaginary objective and giving concrete form—

—or, at least, the *illusion* of reality.

Thanks to *trompe l'oeil*. “Trick of the eye.” Result of careful effort on the artist's part to create something out of nothing, depth where none exists.

Io MacEvelyn interprets this as deceit. As she illustrated in her essay “Shameful Subject,” which just happened to be published in the Sunday paper the week my first solo show opened. I didn't commit the spiel to memory, but its gist was that women ought only

to be sculpted, painted, photographed, what-have-you'd—by other women. If done by men, it causes subjugation and degradation.

Now, I can understand that being judged solely on the extent of your chest must be a pain; like being written off as less than 5'8". What doesn't wash, though, is the stipulated remedy: purging your brain of unreal fantasies and settling for the mundane. Not just settling but reveling: "Broccoli is so nutritious it must be delicious, sweeter than chocolate, more intoxicating than wine."

Right. Let's brain-purge for a moment and look at the mundane female body. Fundamentally designed for bearing and rearing children; hence the enlarged glands, monthly moodswings, troublesome waterworks. The same set of secretions and excretions that make men ambulatory shitsacks, plus a few extra.

And yet women are able to surpass this, and achieve the transcendent.

Not all of them. Nor all the time. But always evinced in the way they *look*—to you and at you. Stormin's avid gusto; Josephine's mocking cheek. Sometimes barefaced, but more often embellished with cosmetics: as in artwork. (Even Io MacEvelyn has been known to run up a salon tab before a gallery opening.)

And how do men react? Obsessives fixate. Whimsicals impersonate. The rest ambulate their lives away on the superficial level.

When they could be climbing a ladder.

Distancing themselves from the surface. Rising above it, delving below it. Moving beyond reality.

In the panel *Impossible to Say* I had Josephine lounging on a dais, plucking petals off a rose. To her left, men are transforming into swine; to her right, swine are transforming into men. At her feet, a pile of fallen petals and thorny stems is kindling into a blaze. Josephine ignores it all, giving the viewer her closemouthed smirk.

"Weird," she said when I showed her the completed piece. "What's it supposed to mean?"

I pointed to the title.

Follow the ladder. Be surrealized.

*Ladder* is another double-sided word, in its British sense: a run in a stocking. Also known as a raveling—which is to say, an unraveling. And when you ravel/unravel an object, you either clarify it or complicate it. Put it right or have it fall apart on you.

Like it's been doing in recent months, with that ebb of quality. That tinge of "knockoff" clinging to all my work of late. *The Glorious Fourth*. Other Ginger & Candy pieces—*Counter Feint*, *Glass Houses*, *No I.D.* Ditto the pieces of Rachael Guterra before that: a mild-mannered model with a bossa nova body, the face of a lamb and the soul of a sheep. Set against her Brazilian background, this should have led to *Blame It on Rio* crossed with *Blade Runner*: post-apocalyptic samba. But our sessions came off as ersatz, bogus, torpid: sham laddering.

Before Rachael there was Sage Maltese, as in Falcon. Recommended by Stormin' Molly Brown, who called her "a ringer for Julie Newmar." Splendid, I thought: *Batman*, *My Living Doll*, *Li'l Abner's* Stupefyin' Jones. Then Sage turned out to be more of a ringer for Mary Astor as Brigid O'Shaughnessy: cloying throbs, lopsided hairstyle, and roughly twice as old as she claimed.

*Be—generous, Mr. Spade!*

"Julie Newmar??"

"Oh, I always get those two mixed up," said Stormin'.

And before Sage Maltese came Pluanne Torty...

Almost makes you wonder whether there's any validity to juju, gris-gris, and hoodoos generally.

Geraldine wants Something New. By May. Or Else.

And I've been dawdling over this rehash for ninety minutes now. So I get to await the 4:42 bus, encircled by hullabalooers. "*Running late today!*" "*Weather sure is wet!*" And a good-buddy cheer when the #104 heaves into view: FISH BEND / VIA KNOTTS.

I grab my usual spot on the sideways settee.

Up 14th Street we chug, till we reach Figure Eight Way.

Where enters the Nodding Lady.

Who again places herself across the aisle from me, one row down. A prime seat left surprisingly vacant, as though reserved for fair complexions and decided calf-curves. She

extracts a paperback from her totebag, opens it at a tasseled marker, settles back to read. A book written by...? Rita Mae Brown?? “And Sneaky Pie”—the cat who co-authors mystery stories. This one titled *Pawing Through the Past*.

(Yeedge.)

Watch the Lady’s face grow intent. Flicker of apprehension. *Blink—blink*—and then her slightly-parted lips climb their own tiny ladders, up and down. She smiles.

By damn.

You could look at a thing like that for a hell of a long time.

There you have it: we’re not out of options. *The Mute Commute* hasn’t wholly slipped my mind. And this is another Wednesday, the 13th of February—“Valentine’s Eve,” as the Warbler kept announcing at Selfsame.

So let’s see. The complete figure, not just the face. Perhaps a separate figure. In the round? Haven’t attempted one of those in years, not since *Plue Velvet*. Put the passengers/prisoners/zombies on a panel. Or panels: can’t “surround” with only one. Make it three, box the Lady in? No—too confining, obscuring. A couple jointed at right angles, on a base. One behind the Lady, the other at her side. Yes. Good. And do-able by May. The two panels, at least; those I can carve off the top of my head.

The in-the-round is another matter.

Leaving the Lady fully clothed would eliminate part of the challenge. But there’s still the attitude, the bearing, the contours to consider. Not to mention the *face*. And the three dimensions you’ve signed up for: A-B-C, 1-2-3.

Okay then. Onto the bottom rung.

Got to get to work.

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Eleven weeks from “Valentine’s Eve” to May Day. I start loitering around town in the afternoons, braving the *bra-a-a-ang* gang to gaze at the Lady on the 4:42. Mornings I continue to survey her nod-naps, the hanky-wrap and purse-drop of the item taken out of her mouth.

Come spring, her navy overcoat is replaced by five different sweaters in shades of blue and violet. (Mulberry on Mondays, turquoise on Tuesdays, etc.) The headscarf comes

off to reveal wiry-looking hair, not quite shoulder-length, with a bit of a wave to it. Hair the color of sugar maple wood. Like creamy toast. Or toasted cream, if you prefer.

She cuts an elegant figure, sitting very straight even when her head nods off. Why does she commute by bus? Has her dream of breaking through the glass ceiling amounted to no more than *Get out in that office and rattle those pads and pens?*

Faintly pained expression as she naps. As though her sleep is troubled by a peapod underneath her furthest mattress. A restless princess, then. Picture a maidservant crowning that wiry sugar maple with a tiara. See the young empress with the clouded brow in old photographs of newlywed Alexandra, who shed so many tears before agreeing to marry Nicholas. The both of them ending up shot to death and dumped down a mineshaft.

Presentiments. Forebodings. Nervous exaltation. Masked by a Victorian reserve so stiff they say she looked like she'd swallowed a yardstick. She who proclaimed rapturous love for her husband (despite the misgivings) and children (especially the bleeder boy). She who gave wholehearted faith to Rasputin, lock stock and ikon—while yanking her inflexibilities ever closer and tighter, like so many whalebone corsets.

A straitlaced ecstatic. No wonder she appeared ill at ease.

Or should I say *appears*, meaning the Nodder across the aisle.

Whom I'm tired of mentally addressing as "the Nodder."

Her name. Unlikely that it's Alexandra. What else? Alex: overandrogynous.

Alexis: bleeder-boy Tsarevich. Alicia: pretty but clueless. Alison: too snooty-sounding.

Alice: too rabbit-holy.

But also looking-glassish.

"Lady Alice."

Not bad.

Her face is diamond-shaped. Angular, without being abrupt or pointed. Certainly not gaunt or haggard, except for those hollows around the eyes. Chin and cheekbones dovetail very smoothly, curvilinearly. Everything nicely rounded off.

Of course, that pained expression might be due to my twice-daily goggling at her. I make no sketches on the bus, jot no charcoal notes, but keep helping myself to her image. Committing it to memory, detail by detail. Dainty nose-bridge and nostril-wings. Silvery

chain around the throat. Sweaters buttoned neatly up, skirts smoothed primly down. Knees juxtaposed over those sleek decided calves and ankles.

Here sits Lady Alice: kindly maintain your distance.

And shift your ghoulish bastard eye to a window or the bus ads above her head, whenever she might catch you acting triply adolescent.

I feel like I should be standing guard while she naps on public transit. Protecting her from harm, or sleeping past her stop. Which she never does: her eyes jolt open the moment we leave the Interstate.

While I try to jolt open up my ears. Not the ones on the sides of my skull, but those within it. If you open them wide enough, you can tap into all sorts of unspoken things.

If I tapped into Alice's, what might I catch? Probably thoughts I couldn't handle—*OH* and *NO* and *That strange short middle-aged creep is staring at me, how I wish he'd leave me alone.*

Then again, she never moves to a different seat further away.

If only I could get her to sit formally, properly. Imagine approaching her: "Madame, would you be so kind as to hold various poses while I draw pictures of you?" Then it would become a question of which hand she'd slap me across the face with.

I've had that happen before, my face slapped by women. The first time by a girl aged eight. (I was seven-and-a-half.) If Alice did it, next thing you know she'd be escorted onto the bus by her husband—some big "bluff" type, insultingly tall and heavy-chested. "You been eyeballing my woman, fellah?" Followed by playground-style administration of nosebleed and Indian burn, with Alice looking on and nodding approvingly—

Just keep your big trap shut.

\*

In April I turn forty-five (thirty-nine plus six) and treat myself to a bottle from the liquor store's top shelf. From my half-sister Cassandra I receive a tract demanding to know "WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY??" Not, I hope, like our mother, whose urn accompanies Cassie everywhere she goes. As I discovered the last time we dined together, Cass placing the urn on the table between us.

"Say hi to Mom," I was told.

“Ma’am, you can’t bring your own food in here,” announced the waitress.

What’s wrong with being laid to rest in a wooden box? Wood provides relief—or so I hope, as I start carving a block into *The Mute Commute’s* Waking Lady.

First I reconstruct Alice’s memorized likeness on sketchpaper. Borrowing a few features from the Misses Sarandon and Kane, Ryder and Murphy.

Then comes selection of material. After dismissing my stock in the ex-bedroom closet, I head for the LeThean Lumber Yard on Downy Owl Road. They’ve never failed me yet—or charged a dime less than the market will bear. But at LeThean you get what you pay for. In this case a couple of choice well-seasoned blocks: one of cherry, the other of walnut. Both free from knots, checks, and overt blemishes.

For a full hour I examine these two, looking for a Lady within them. Finally I decide on the walnut, tucking the cherry away in case I botch the walnut with my rustiness at in-the-round sculpting. To prevent that, I mold a clay maquette over a wire armature. Here too I’m out of practice, and the thing takes longer than it’s strictly worth. But with any luck this prototype will serve as both 3-D reference and talisman.

Nor am I kidding. Ill winds blow, evil eyes squint, and a hoodoo is as a hoodoo does. So plant that maquette on the workbench and hope it helps dejinx.

Art, as they say, isn’t easy. But it was Schwitters the Dadaist who answered “What isn’t?” when asked “What is art?”

Time to take this artwork out of the isn’t.

Screw the walnut block onto my swivel stand. Transfer the outlined design to its front, back, and sides. Use a handsaw to cut away the chunkier waste. Then rough in the profiles with my mallet and a 1" No. 3 straight gouge.

Establish positions; from them come proportions. These—*tap tap*—will be the knees. Those—*tap tap*—will be the shoes. We can now locate the Lady’s backside precisely, and arrange it upon the bus seat. Confirming that *here* will be her shoulders, *there* her elbows, and her clenched hands in her skirted lap (gentle *tap*) yonder.

The Lady begins to emerge.

*Trompe l’oeil* can give the impression of depth, but flattens into nothingness when you introduce genuine palpable convexities and concavities. Literal laddering now, using the

V-tool and ¼" firmer. Refine those lines. Engage those curves. Let instinct take over—though not to the point of scrapping the coat and skirt and exposing a nude Nodder to lewd ogles. Stand guard; protect her from the likes of you.

And don't draw attention away from the *face*. Lose the headscarf, show off the hair. Allow it to frame and focus.

*Tap tap* goes the mallet.

Each day we begin by touching the maquette mascot's lump of a pate. Each day sees the Lady in the Block a little more liberated. Transcending confinement. As we reproduce Alice's dovetailed diamond with fishtail undercutting. Her wiry hairwave with a No. 11 veiner. The delicate hollows around her haunted sockets with a Stubai detail knife.

And in the process I capture her expression perfectly: better than in my sketches, better even than in my mind. By damn.

Scrutinize her from every angle. Tilt and turn the swivel stand. Oh, by damn.

The image of the Waker. Shaped by my hand in conjunction with my eye.

I want to make it bigger. I want to make it lifesize—

Instead I quickcarve two walnut panels of the other passengers/prisoners/zombies, to be visible behind and beside. And if they look at all hallucinatory, so much the better.

Leave me at the top of the ladder. With a tooled finish rather than smooth, except for the Lady's face and legs: this is not a crone. Seal everything with a coat of oil and a layer of wax. Then put the piece together, Lady and panels and base; adding my initials to a corner of the latter.

*The Mute Commute*. It is done. I have done it.

Whew...

Too unwieldy to transport by bus. So Mr. Wilson lends me his least favorite truck (the one with automatic transmission) on May Day, and I drive my semi-diorama downtown. At the Crouching Gallery it excites considerable comment, not all of which is audible. I hear later—from Ben Szilnecky, needless to say—that Io MacEvelyn peered closely at it and said nothing afterward. Which is the highest compliment she's ever paid me.

Geraldine lavishes more words than she's used about any piece of mine since I can remember. But follows them up with:

“I wonder if you could have another one or two of these ready before the 24th?”

“A panel?” I ask, singularly.

“Well... same model?”

“Sure,” I say. “Why not?”

So I’m not off the hook yet. Although when Geraldine gives Double-Bag Eddie his first-refusal peek at *The Mute Commute*, Eddie snaps it right up. And goes so far as to change his mind about *No I.D.*, the Ginger & Candy panel, buying that too.

Even after Geraldine deducts her share of the proceeds (hogs her half, some might say) I will make as much from this one day’s sales as I’ve taken home from Selfsame since Valentine’s Eve.

Art may not be easy; but go figure.