BIG SKY JOURNAL

ARTS ISSUE 2001

CHARLES LINDSAY'S FLY-FISHING PHOTOGRAPHY

EQUINE SCULPTURE BY DEBORAH BUTTERFIELD

NICK LYONS' MONTANA, THE VIEW FROM NEW YORK

NEW FICTION BY PETE FROMM

$5.95/$6.95 CAN.

17>

7 25274 84789 1

A PORTRAIT
of the Artist's Old Man

BY ALLEN MORRIS JONES

The way I remember it, he started out with pieces of dental wax the size of teeth. There would be nothing, then there would be a mule deer antler, the hoof of a horse. Beauty arose from the blandest of materials. Later, more comfortable with his medium, he would throw fist-sized chunks of clay across foam and wire armatures: building up, scraping away. He always worked according to instinct—a chunk here, a hole there—untempered by formal training. I've thought that it must have begun as a kind of nervous fiddling. Sitting in his lab, carving around on the same material he used for crowns, bridges, dentures. Ten free minutes and the hankering to see what a grouse might look like. Twenty years later, he stood directing the placement of a thirty foot memorial frieze onto the side of a university football stadium.

I'm eight or nine years old, sitting on a stool in the basement of our house in Sissonville, West Virginia, watching my father use a Dremel tool to carve grooves into a belt-buckle slice of antler. The relief of a bighorn sheep, maybe an elk. Hard to tell at this point. There's just this vague shape of a nose, maybe an eye. I watch closely, cheek on forearm, sock feet hooked around the legs of my stool. The white dust of pulverized antler floats in the air, thick as steam from a bog. I can smell it even from here. A singed, electrical odor, like insulation burning. Twenty-five years later, I can still smell it. These are the early years of Dad's aspiration, and he is experimenting with

Livingston sculptor Burl Jones, the author's father, explains the story behind his piece, "Ghost Dance."

THE EVOLUTION OF A SCULPTOR THROUGH A WRITER'S EYES.

mediums. Testing the materials, probing at his own abilities. My older brother, who hasn't decided whether he likes me or not, sits on the other side of Dad, tapping a finishing nail into the side of a jewelry box. Something he'll be giving to our mother for Christmas. Like Dad, he has an impulse to fiddle, to put things together and pull them apart. To use his hands. An inclination that will finally take him into medicine. Me, I'm content to watch.

Blink an eye, turn the head, and here I am (a few inches taller) standing next to the open mouth of Mom's electric pottery kiln. Heat twists in the air, and the bricks of the kiln glow red. Dad works over the furnace mouth, hands in foil-covered gloves, face covered by a welding mask. He reaches down with a pair of stainless steel tongs and extracts a small knot of ceramic investment, undersized all out of proportion to the care it's recently received. As soon as it cools, he'll crack it open to reveal a bighorn sheep the size of my own small hand. Cast well but for one front leg, which will turn out warped and thin. Dad is discouraged. And truthfully, so am I. I had been expecting silver and gold. A flourish of trumpets. After a few more attempts, he'll start sending his pieces to commercial foundries where, with a few variations for the larger pieces, all of the bronzes will go through the same lost wax process of casting: plaster mold, rubber mold, cast wax, ceramic shell, metal cast and finish, patina.

We start spending our family weekends at county fairs, lugging bronzes in and out of the truck. We wrench our backs and poke our stomachs with antlers the size of dinner forks. We stretch bungee cords and wrap cheap blankets around battling bighorn sheep. We have family debates on the merits of marble versus oak bases. Men who wear cheap suits and look like high school principals tape blue ribbons to our card table. Dad argues with foundry workers, frustrated by the results that come from these eastern dilettantes. An Atlanta company, never having seen a prairie dog before, takes it upon themselves to replace his gopher with a red squirrel. And then, when I am nine or ten, Dad slices the tips off two fingers of his right hand as he's feeding boards through a planer. It's his tooth-pulling hand, his sculpture hand, and the sight

Trained in the hard sciences, Burl Jones brings to sculptures like "Deadfall," above right, and "New River," right, a clinical need for precision.

of his blood spotting through the thick wrapping of a towel will stay with me for years. It's not an easy thing for a child to realize that if his father sticks his hand in a saw, it's going to be cut.

Years pass. We move to Montana. Travel north to south visiting art galleries. Trying to find a market. The galleries look at us—my parents with their Appalachian accents, my brother with his forehead scabbed from a tight football helmet, me standing upright by the door reading a Louis L'Amour novel—and they say sorry. No room. Sometimes they critique the anatomy, the elk that Dad knows so well. Finally, Dad unzips his polyester dental frock and, with a relief recognized only by his family (he has been a skilled and, for the most part, a cheerful dentist), tosses it into the hamper for the last time. Takes advantage of his savings and the goodwill of certain loan officers to open his own gallery south of Livingston. My mother will run the place, selling Dad's art with her own aggressive kind of genius. In later years, I will often look at my mother and think of Nancy Russell. How there wouldn't have been a Charlie if there hadn't been a Nancy. For our own small part, my brother and I will stand behind a glass counter filled with Navajo jewelry. We'll pass the time. My brother will captain the football team. He'll be elected student body president. I'll quit football to write a screenplay. I'll run for student body president and lose. I will, for a time, frame art prints for the gallery—trimming mats, cutting glass, gluing frames. I'll fish the Yellowstone River. Buy beer with a beautiful little fake I.D. My brother will go to medical school. We'll live our lives and become great friends and somewhere in the middle, wake up old enough to feel proud of our own father.

Outside his family, Dad's strongest passions have been hunting and fishing, and it seems quite natural that he should want to sculpt the animals

PEOPLE PAY GOOD MONEY FOR SMALL GLIMPSES OF THE WORLD THROUGH DAD'S EYES.

he hunts. It's at once an homage and an investigation. A capturing of things. Having been trained in the hard sciences, in anatomy and dissection, he brings to his art a clinical need for precision. The barb and vane of every feather. He has said that while he admires looser styles in other artists—the pinched clay that only suggests muscle and bone—he can't bring himself to imitate them. It's just wrong. Fortunately, the markets agree with him. It turns out that there are any number of people out there who prefer precise renderings of animals, who are anxious to pay good money for small glimpses of the world through Dad's eyes. They take his bronzes home and set them in the corners of their living rooms.

See my father now. He maintains three studios, although he and Mom seem to spend most of their time on our ranch in the Missouri Breaks. When he's working, he sits on the edge of a swivel chair facing a turntable: stomach pushed out, shoulders straight—a position that probably eases the strain on his lower back. He wears a bemused, preoccupied expression. Contentment, maybe. He still uses his old dental tools, some of them self-modified to the needs of sculpture. Not caring for bifocals, he often wears reading glasses set crooked over his prescription glasses. As he works, he tilts his head back to stare down through two sets of lenses. He likes to listen to music—anything with a good beat—and usually has Steve Earle thumping in the background. Sometimes Ian Tyson. Jimmy Buffett or the Kentucky Headhunters. If he's carving small detail, he'll use the hard dental waxes (their varying shades of red give his originals a mottled, Dalmatian look) but if he's

working a larger piece, he'll have a chunk of clay heating in a kitchen crockpot by his elbow. My mother turns the music down to write poetry on the kitchen table. She wedges clay and throws pots on her electric wheel, finishing them in the raku tradition. All in all, they've managed to build the finest kinds of lives for themselves.

Even as he ages, he still wears an obvious ability. A confidence that comes ultimately, I think, from physical roots. A WVU football player (where football means something, by god), his calves had once been the size of some men's thighs. He works at anything that needs to be done. And this is what, in my adulthood, I've come to admire most about my father. He is unintimidated by the unfamiliar. Turns out that this is what separates the world's accomplishers from the world itself. Intimidation. Fear, and then the disregard of that fear in favor of movement, action, accumulation. When you don't do anything, you don't fail at anything. It takes the greatest kind of courage to work at something which is sure to disappoint, at least for awhile. When he's done sculpting for the day, or if his eyes are tired, he'll step outside to work over one of his grain fields: disking, smoothing, seeding. He'll plant willows in the moist ground below one of our reservoirs. He'll rewire rooms, replace water pipes. Sew around on one of his taxidermy projects. Weld and solder and pound machinery back into place. He is, just now, finishing a monument-sized coal miner commissioned by the state of West Virginia. In another year or two, it's due to be set on the lawn of the capital building in Charleston.

I have come to regard him as perhaps the finest wildlife sculptor in the West. Some of his work approaches genius. His less successful work (everyone has less successful work) usually comes as a result of trying to predict the market, to force

WHAT'S IMPORTANT IN LIFE IS WHAT YOU REMEMBER.

a certain, obvious heroism on his subjects: bigger bucks, bears, bulls. But his small number of failures are incidental. Most of his work is very, very good. And some of it is brilliant. And if the body of work is large enough, posterity does not judge an artist by his poorest work but by his finest. Ask Andy Warhol. Hemingway. Bob Dylan.

Dad's body of work is large enough. With at least another fifteen, twenty years of work ahead of him, he's already sculpted more than 140 pieces. The list begins with "A. J. Foyt" (a commissioned portrait) and ends with "Zebras" (a mare and foal being chased by a lion, their white stripes coated in sterling silver). Life-size bald eagles locked in a mating flight and a Labrador retriever swimming with its head above the glass of a coffee table; busts of deer, elk, moose, caribou. Bookends and bears, songbirds and rabbits, commissions of life-size fly-fishermen, grizzly bears and mountain lions. A ten foot soaring eagle meant to be attached to the outside wall of a building. He has sold bronzes to land barons, politicians, race car drivers, professional athletes. He is at the peak of a career. And he's just getting warmed up.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT IN LIFE, AS James Salter wrote, is what you remember. Before we moved to Montana, my father would often take me for motorcycle rides through the hills behind our house. Muddy roads and mottled trails dark under canopies of oak, maple, hickory. Memory has us on these rides alone, although I'm sure my brother was there as well, riding ahead or behind. Until I was old enough to have my own little Honda, I would ride on the square, uncomfortable cargo seat behind Dad. But if he was in a generous

mood and inclined to let me steer, I would sit up front on his lap. Handlebars in my fists, throttling through mudholes. I can still smell the wet, sodden odors of fall leaves (like prying a board away from dirt) and the acrid stink of exhaust. It was Dad's habit to get us four or five miles back into the hills then turn around and shut off the motor. There was the hiss of water against the exhaust pipe. Squirrels the size of house cats skittered through the underbrush, chattering at us from the canopy. Then he'd tell me to point the way back. What I mostly remember is the anxiety of suddenly feeling lost. Forced into the choice of two directions, I would always choose wrong. "That way," I'd say, pointing. "Are you sure?" And I would twist around to get a look at his face, looking for some clue. But it was always the same slight, unreadable grin. "Pretty sure," I'd say. Ten minutes later, after bouncing around fallen trees, grinding up the faces of steep, unfamiliar hillsides, we'd turn around to take the other trail. Half an hour into it, near tears, I'd feel Dad's chin pointing directions against the top of my head. That way, that way, that way.

He's older now, of course. Young by the standards of antibiotics and heart valves, but old in the eyes of the child still watching him grind a Dremel into the butt of an elk antler. I am thirty-one. Dad's a stone's throw from sixty. And all these years later, I can still hear the tick of a motorcycle's engine, exhaust hissing. Dad behind me. Every writer has his ideal reader. Someone for whom he writes. The constant, silent aesthetic perched over one shoulder. This is how you write: Work, work, work. Hunt. Fish. Play with your children. Take life as the raw material that it is. Work, work. Slap some clay on foam, carve it away. Put words on paper, take them out. Fail, fail, fail, succeed. This way, this way. My father has always been my reader; and if he hasn't known it, I tell him now. BSJ