

WRITTEN BY FRED MOODY

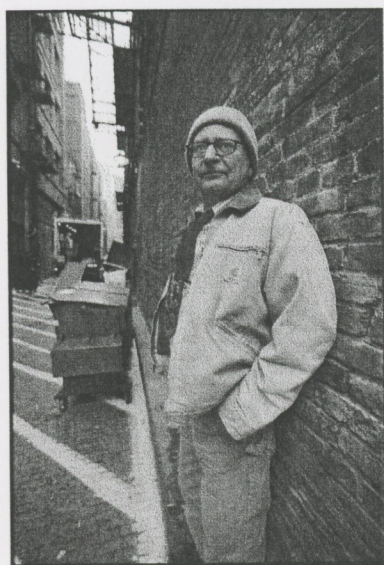
PHOTOGRAPHED BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

I AM STANDING in a tiny triangular, tumbleweed-strewn lot at the point where state Highway 240 enters Richland. It is an abandoned auto-repair shop that had been turned into an artist's studio in 1991, and abandoned in turn by the artist in 1998. It is utterly desolate. The lot and a three-walled corrugated-metal shed, which the artist seems to have abandoned in some haste, are strewn with the detritus of dreams: a large blackboard with sketches and formulae etched on it; some homemade work tables; a half-finished titanium mold of a mask; coveralls; a horse's skull; various timbers and tools; a massive rectangular block of granite; wooden pallets; empty oil drums; an old wooden boat from which the motor has been stolen; and — presiding over the whole mess with a blank, dead, riveting stare — a soiled granite sculpture of a horse's skull on a pedestal.

The carving is a masterpiece that I have been chasing in one way or another for nine years. Entitled "Monstrance for a Grey Horse," it is that rare work of art that captivates, immediately and forever, both the mind and the heart. The first time you see it, you are utterly enchanted; and the more you study it, the more complex and complete and hypnotic grows its hold on you.

THE monstrance

ONE SCULPTOR, ONE WRITER, TWO OBSESSIONS



Sculptor James Acord Jr. spent 12 years carving "Monstrance" by hand from granite.

I have been reunited with the "Monstrance" by a retired Hanford nuclear engineer named Wanda Munn. I had met her an hour before, by arrangement, at a Denny's-esque restaurant perched on the edge of a Richland strip mall, and regarded her immediately as an archetype. A gruff, no-nonsense, heavy-set woman in her 60s, she struck me as a picture-perfect Eastern Washingtonian. Not, in other words, a classic patron of the arts.

But now, as I circle the sculpture, photographing it, touching it, leaning in to examine a detail from up close, stepping away to look at it from a distance — now from this angle, now from that one, now from atop a nearby granite pillar resting on its side — I say to Munn, "I'm sorry I'm taking so long."

"That's all right," she says. Then her voice takes a sudden soft turn for the reverent: "Everyone who comes near this sculpture can feel its power."

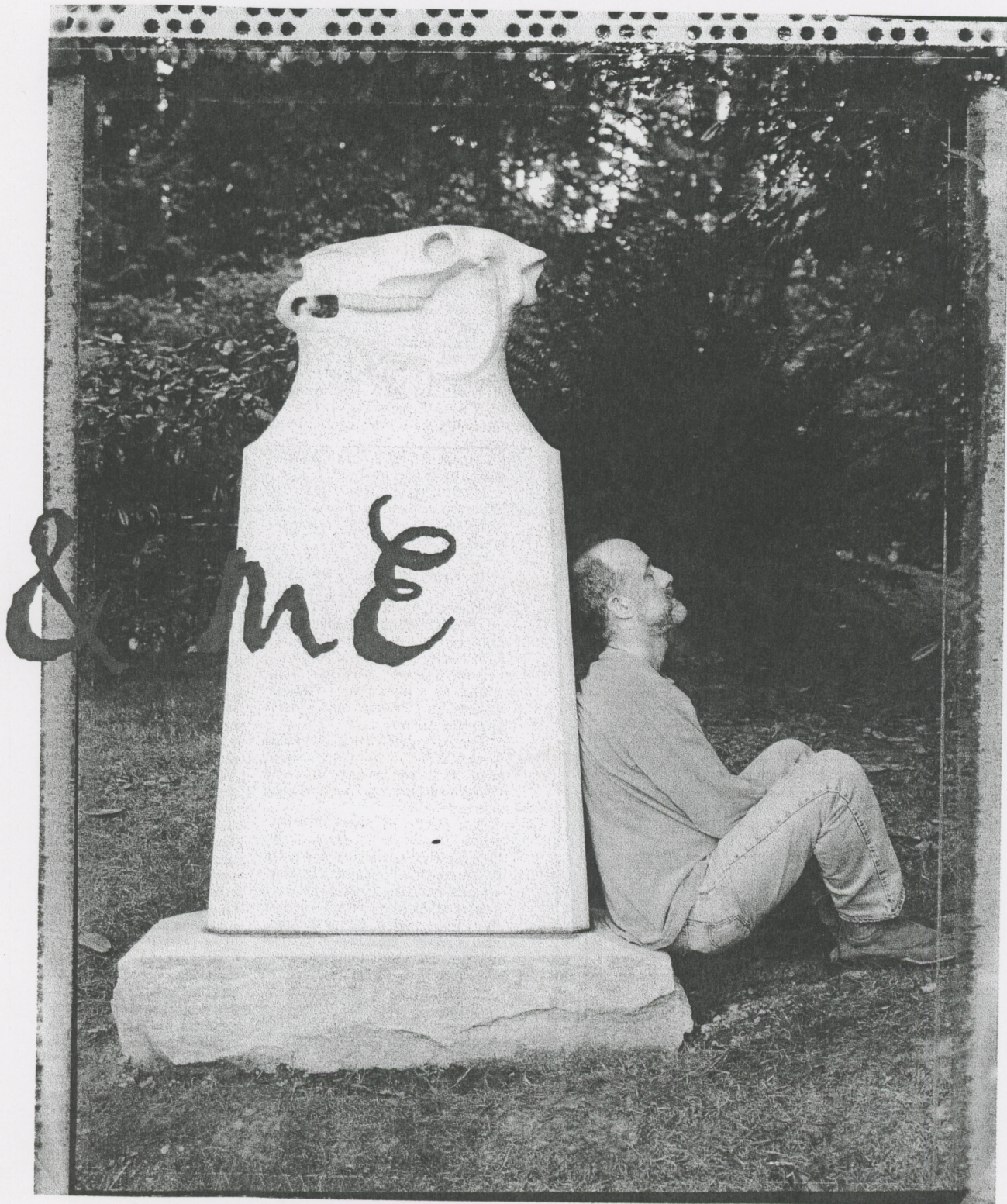
Amen, sister.

I FIRST FELT the power of "Monstrance for a Grey Horse" in October 1991, when I sat down to read a two-part New Yorker piece by Philip Schuyler, entitled "Moving to Richland." Part I of the piece was decorated with a white-on-black outline drawing of the sculpture by its creator, James L. Acord Jr., and the story consisted almost entirely of a recounting of Acord's 12-year-long struggle to make "Monstrance," and an elucidation of the prodigious intellectual and emotional underpinnings of its creation. After reading Schuyler's saga, I contacted Acord, who at the time was in Seattle, and arranged to visit him at the Fremont Fine Arts Foundry. We met at a Fremont restaurant, chatted over beer, then walked over to the foundry to look at his sculpture.

Here my memory falters, as is commonly the case when people undergo a life transformation. I remember walking up a ramp into the building, going through a door, then making my way to a short staircase that led down to a room with a concrete floor. I reached the bottom of the stairs, turned, and unexpectedly found myself face to face with "Monstrance."

And my soul was flooded with light.

I have had this experience only one other time in my life — when I walked around a corner in the Museum of Modern Art and came upon Picasso's "Guernica." (OK, twice — it also >



*Nine years ago
Fred Moody
became
enchanted,
immediately and
forever, by the
sculpture
"Monstrance for
a Grey Horse,"
designed to hold
a canister of live
nuclear material
inside.*

THE MONSTRANCE & ME

happened the first time I heard Screaming Trees' "Sweet Oblivion.")

Stunned, I turned to Acord. Not really knowing what to say, I found myself stammering,

"Have you, like, figured out a price for this? How much would you sell it for?"

Acord is the least pretentious human I've ever met. He is short and bespectacled, with a haircut that makes his head look like a burr, and he generally wears work boots, bib overalls and cheap white T-shirts. He looks like an old sheet-metal worker yearning for retirement. "Well," he said, "I'd like to get enough to finish it. I don't know ... about \$10,000, I guess."

In other words, \$833.33 per year. Either this man was completely insane or the economics of sculpture were seriously out of whack. Or both.

Alas, \$10,000 was more money than I'd ever seen in my life — and, given the way my career was going, ever was likely to see. And it's not like I was an art collector, either; if I were miraculously to acquire this sculpture, I would have exactly once piece in my collection. But no sooner had I seen "Monstrance for a Grey Horse" than life without it was inconceivable. I had to find a way to buy it.

For the moment, though, I just had to study it. And Acord, who is a loquacious sort, was nevertheless kind enough to withdraw and leave me alone with my epiphany.

Now that I've had nearly 10 years to ponder the power of "Monstrance," and have come to learn a great deal about its extremely difficult birth, I have developed something along the lines of a Theory of the Magic of Art. I believe that a great work of art has the same kind of power a great person has. Just as you instinctively like marvelous people as soon as you meet them, so do you instinctively react — with excitement, with awe — to your first glimpse of a great piece of art. Some intangible edifying force is passed into the material as the gifted artist works it, and it is only after further — often obsessive — study that the observer can begin to articulate his or her appreciation. The intellectual apprehension of a piece's artistic greatness comes much later. But the emotional apprehension of the artist's intellectual and aesthetic achievement is immediate, and appropriate.



I also think that through some odd mathematical magic process, the degree to which an artist suffers for the sake of his or her vision is directly proportionate to the degree of inspiration behind the artistic impulse, and that that "value" is transmuted into the artwork through forces not yet detected by science.

"MONSTRANCE for a Grey Horse" is composed of a granite base on which stands a 5-foot trapezoidal granite column, 18 by 31 inches at the bottom tapering to 11 by 24 inches at the top, then giving way to an incurved portion out of which rises the carving of the horse's skull. Two cylindrical holes, one drilled in the top of the base and the other in the bottom of the column, line up to form a receptacle for a stainless-steel canister containing ... um ... live nuclear material. The sculpture weighs slightly more than one ton.

"Monstrance" was conceived over a years-long period that is hard to define, since it is the culmination of much of Acord's learning, his evolving theory of what his art should be, his gradual fixation on the problem of nuclear technology, and various philosophical problems that preoccupy him when he isn't busy trying to figure out how to feed and shelter himself. On one level, "Monstrance" is a design for a monument to be put on the edge of nuclear-waste sites so as to warn future creatures, who may be inhabiting the planet after all current human language and culture have been obliterated, that the area on the other side of the sculpture is dangerous. "Monstrance" is carved out of granite because Acord wanted something that would last at least 30,000 years. It is disquieting, and both grotesque and beautiful, because it is intended to evoke feelings of unease, dread and edification in the onlooker. It was to be composed of granite, stainless steel, live nuclear material and titanium because Acord has always wanted to find ways to work with wildly different materials in the same sculpture. (Acord since decided against including the titanium mask.) The nuclear material embedded in it is also the "sacred substance" of our age, corresponding to the Eucharist that is encased in the traditional Catholic monstrance from Good Friday to Easter Sunday.

The first thing you can say with certainty upon seeing "Monstrance for a Grey Horse" is that it is a triumph of craft. Acord has done the entire thing himself, by hand, with hand tools — an astonishing amount of work, particularly in an age when artists typically design sculptures, then have the work done by machine shops or crews of apprentices. ("Hammering Man" and Dale Chihuly's work are two particularly noticeable local examples.) There is a mathematical exactitude to the symmetry of the piece, to the trapezoidal shape of the column, to the beveled edges of the column and the base beneath it, that seem impossible when you realize that it was all done essentially by eye. And the variety of textures on "Monstrance's" surfaces display, in Acord's words, "the full vocabulary" of techniques for stonework listed in the Stoneworker's Manual. Acord used a variety of chiseling techniques — including a particularly magical one called "bluing" — that cause light to play variously and spectacularly off of the carving's surfaces.

This brings me to the second thing you can say with certainty upon seeing "Monstrance": You cannot keep yourself from fondling it. Acord has taken one of the hardest substances in the universe and made it both soft to the touch and impossibly variegated. Parts of it are rough and sharp enough to cut your hands; others harshly smooth; another section is weirdly pebbled; and the mouth, eye sockets, and teeth are polished to a texture so smooth that you feel it simply cannot be stone. Many of the textural differences are invisible; you only "notice" them by carefully running your hands over the entire sculpture.

Then there is the skull itself — an intricate fusion of the abstract with the anatomically correct. The skull is such a careful study that veterinarians can correctly identify the breed of horse Acord used as a model; yet it also has breathtaking abstract designs carved into it that turn it from naturalistic rendition into an inarticulate and eloquent artistic statement. "The shapes are so varied and so complex," Philip Schuyler wrote in his New Yorker piece, "that the slightest change in angle alters your entire impression of the work."

EVENTUALLY, I composed myself enough to resume my conversation with Acord, say my goodbyes, go off to write the piece about him I was assigned to write, for a publication whose name I choose not to remember, and more or less get back to my normal life and work. I wrote free-lance articles, worked at my job, worked at raising my family, wrote two books, and kept try-

ing off and on to cobble together enough money to buy "Monstrance for a Grey Horse." Occasionally, I would find myself with a relatively large check in hand from a publisher, and would wrestle mightily with the question of whether to spend it on family debt relief, children's braces, clothing, food, education ... or a one-ton stone carving of a horse's skull.

Years passed. The technological revolution brought money flooding into Seattle. "Monstrance for a Grey Horse" disappeared, along with its creator, from everywhere but my mind. Then one day two 29-year-olds — Squish and Joey, about whom I had written a large part of a book and who went on to become a kind of leitmotif in my life — became multimillionaires overnight. Intent on sharing his good fortune with me, Squish bought me and my family a trip to Korea. And intent on sharing his good fortune with me, Joey asked me one day, completely out of the blue, "If you could have any piece of art in the world, what would it be?"

I answered immediately: "Monstrance for a Grey Horse."

There followed a long silence, during which I wondered at how instantaneously that title had popped into my head and out of my mouth, and Joey — his full name is William Joseph King — looked at me in considerable confusion. Billy Joe is a classic Texan, with an accent that lends itself particularly well to incredulity. "Whut the Sam Hill is thayut?" he asked.

The story of the sculpture came pouring out of me. I described it to Billy Joe (being a Texan, he was particularly taken with the canister of live nuclear material embedded in it), and told him who Acord was. I told him how Acord, intent on learning to work with granite, had moved himself and his dog to Barre, Vt., in 1979. While there, he found work in a stone-carving shop, learned the craft, learned how to evaluate granite, and lived in an unheated little shed of a studio while commencing to carve "Monstrance" — a sculpture he already had spent years dreaming up and designing. After two years, by which time he had roughed out the sculpture, he had it shipped back to Seattle, to a vacant lot, knowing that the shipping company would impound it. He was too broke to pay the shipping cost. Then he took a fishing job in Alaska to save up enough money to pay the C.O.D. charge on it — or, as he puts it when he tells the story now, "to bail it out" — knowing that the piece would sit unharmed on Burlington Northern's loading dock, there being nothing much else the company could do with a one-ton granite package.

Acord then spent another eight years patiently working his stone >

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THE MONSTRANCE & ME



at the Fremont Fine Arts Foundry until finally, in 1989, he had done everything save put the pieces together and embed the nuclear material in it.

I also told Billy Joe about what Acord had gone on to do next: He moved to Richland in 1991 as part of his quest to get someone to let him use a nuclear reactor. He wanted to transmute technetium — nuclear waste — into ruthenium, a member of the platinum family, and use the transmuted material in a sculpture.

Billy Joe was enthralled. And I realized that I had found in him the perfect audience for my unfolding Acord story. As someone who lived in the technology startup world, he could appreciate the kind of obsessive visionary that spent 10 years and moved across the continent for the sake of building the best sculpture possible; as a computer scientist, he could appreciate the science in Acord's art; and as a Texan, he had an almost fatal love for grandiosity.

Sure enough, he came through. "Find out if it's still for sale," he said, "and I'll buy it for you."

I WAS STUNNED. For me, the definition of "dream" — particularly when applied to dreams requiring expenditures of money to fulfill them — had always been synonymous with "forget it." Now, as grand a dream as I'd ever entertained might actually be within my reach. I resolved to track Acord down before Billy Joe's enthusiasm waned. Not knowing where exactly to start, I took a shot in the dark and called the Fremont Fine Arts Foundry.

It was early 1999. And incredibly, it turned out that Acord was standing there when I called. Even more incredibly, "Monstrance for a Grey Horse" was as yet unsold. It was sitting, he said, over in Richland. Acord himself was about to take off for London, where he would be spending the rest of the year, but yes, the piece was still for sale, and "I'd like to get \$25,000 for it." I told him that I might have found a buyer, and would get back to him. He said that he was finally leaving Richland after eight years of futile attempts at getting permission to do various amazing artistic things involving nuclear waste. He had just been named artist-in-residence at the Imperial College of Physics, in London, and had been promised access to a nuclear reactor there. He appointed a friend standing next to him as his "agent" while he was gone, and hung up.

Was this really going to happen? Was I actually going to own the greatest piece of art I'd ever seen? The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it would take a pretty astonishing set of circumstances for that to happen. For one thing, Billy Joe would have to avoid coming to his senses. For another, a real art collector would have to not buy the thing first. I started wondering then why "Monstrance" hadn't sold in the 10 years since its completion, particularly after that lavish New Yorker treatment, and I wondered if there might be some kind of obstacle, as yet unseen by me, that had kept Acord from selling it up to now, and that might keep him from selling it to me and Billy Joe.

There commenced a year-long period of excruciating suspense, during which Billy Joe traveled all over the globe, got wrapped up in starting a new company, and fended me off in one way or another every time I brought up the subject of purchasing "Monstrance." Acord's friend would call occasionally, with decreasing frequency as time went on, to say that the sculpture was in danger of being taken as collateral by a group of Hanford physicists who had co-invested with Acord in the property >

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holding his Richland studio. He would throw in a few stories about the grimness and desperation of Acord's life, and say things like, "If he could sell this piece, it could be the event that turns his life around, gets him back on track."

When I delivered stories to this effect to Billy Joe, though, he seemed unmoved. Until one day last May when he said suddenly, "I want to see a picture of the thing. Go get some pictures!" At which point I hied off to Richland.

WANDA MUNN turned out to be a long-suffering soul with a deep appreciation for art, and for Acord's vision. She and Acord had met in 1989 when she and a group of scientists were protesting outside an Acord show at 9-1-1 Contemporary Arts Center (the show included Acord's "Fiesta Home Reactor," a kitchen tabletop nuclear reactor that actually worked), and

Acord had invited them in to chat and take in the show. The two became fast friends. She went on to help fight Acord's battles in Hanford with the DOE bureaucracy and with a scientific community deeply skeptical of Western Washingtonians in general, and artists in particular. Munn helped establish Acord as a legitimate member of the community, and put together a consortium of scientists who helped him buy the property for his studio. As things soured in Richland, though, Acord sank deeper and deeper into exhaustion and disappointment, saw his marriage disintegrate, and had been unable almost from the time he set up his studio to make payments on his share of the mortgage on its land. By the time I showed up, his former partners had put the land up for sale and were so desperate for Acord to move his stuff that they were willing to forgive his debt to them entirely.

I took my pictures, came back to Seattle, and showed them to Billy Joe. I watched his face turn awed as he looked at

the images.

Still, he was noncommittal. I felt like an aging child on the verge of a tantrum. "Come on, Billy Joe . . . you can be a patron of the arts! . . . greatest work of the 20th century . . . art with a near-eternal life span . . . \$25,000 for 10 years' ingenious work . . . I'll never ask you for anything again — I promise!"

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Billy Joe answered. "But if I decide to buy it, I'll be buying it for myself."

"Can you put it somewhere where I can come and look at it every day?" I bleated.

Billy Joe went off for a weekend of thought. Then he came back on Monday and said, as if it were the most ordinary news in the world, "Go ahead and call Acord and tell him I'd like to buy it. On one condition, though: When you die, I want to inter your ashes in the canister of live nuclear material."

I thought it over for — oh, I don't know — 30 seconds or so. Then, excited and strangely honored, I immediately called a friend of Acord's — he had no phone of his own — and left a message. When the sculptor called back a couple of days later, I told him, ecstatically, that Billy Joe was ready to write him a check for \$25,000.

Acord answered in the saddest voice I've ever heard: "Oh."

Oh-oh. I had thought I was calling him

with the best news he'd ever heard in his life — that someone wanted to buy his masterpiece, at his price, after 10 years of having it languish in storerooms and vacant lots. Now, judging from his voice, I began to wonder if his inability to sell it had actually been an inability to let it go.

WE MET, a few days later, to discuss the "problem." Acord looked stricken. He delivered a long, largely incoherent monologue about needing to "take care of people," about his debts and obligations in Richland, about his dreams, about "\$50,000," about "how much it meant to me that you remembered the sculpture after all this time," and how "it needs a good home," how he wasn't prepared to sell it, and on and on and on. He was in agony.

I reported all this to Billy Joe, who blew a gasket. Then I sat down and tried contemplating life without "Monstrance for a Grey Horse." It was a different proposition now: Before, life with it had been unattainable, consigned to fantasy, making life without it manageable; now, life without it after having been promised life with it, was untenable.

I started fielding phone calls from friends of Acord's. Some of them were angry, accusing me of effectively stealing a masterpiece for a fraction of its real worth. Others told me heartbreaking stories about Acord's inability to manage >



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money — or, for that matter, any of the practical matters of life. (This reminded me of a joke Acord had told me once: "You know what the definition of a homeless person is? A sculptor without a girlfriend.")

A picture emerged of a classic artistic genius: focused on vision to such an extent that he cannot manage life in the real world, utterly unrecognized in his own time. Acord had not had a home for years, it turned out — he moved among friends when he was in Seattle, and lived in a university-supplied flat when in London — had no money, and had been unable to recover sufficiently from the Hanford debacle to move on with his art.

There are no artists of my acquaintance — and, for that matter, few artists in history — who live a life as dedicated to their vision of art as does Acord. He first decided he wanted to be a sculptor at age 12, when he was sitting on his front porch in Everett, carving a stick. He ran away from home when he was 15, eventually made his way to the Cornish School, had his first juried show in Seattle when he was 16, spent some time later at Everett Community College, and studied under various Seattle-area sculptors during the 1960s and 1970s. He moved to Vermont in 1979 because he wanted to carve "Monstrance" out of granite, and decided that the best stone and the best stoneworking tutelage could be found there. He supported himself by working days for a tombstone engraver; he worked on "Monstrance" nights and weekends. He

moved back to Seattle in 1983, having acquired both the stone and the requisite skill, because he wanted to work in a more psychologically comforting place. He moved into an empty warehouse space in Fremont and lived and worked in an unheated studio there, sleeping on a homemade wooden table at night, and supporting himself by taking on occasional monument-carving work.

In 1990, with "Monstrance" finished and now determined to make a sculpture out of transmuted ruthenium, Acord moved to Richland, where he was to stay until 1998. He worked nights loading boxcars, and spent his days taking physics classes at the local community college and trying to negotiate his way into using the Hanford's Fast Flux Test Reactor. After failing at that, he took his subsequent artist-in-residence position in London solely because he had been promised access to a reactor there.

Here was an artist, then, who had made virtually every move in his life since the late 1960s for the sake of his work. Acord is legendary among his acquaintances for his fixation and his capacity to sacrifice everything for it: Who else, after all, has moved to Vermont, and lived virtually homeless — or, worse, in Richland — for years, all for the sake of gaining access to ideal sculpting materials?

It was abundantly clear by now that "Monstrance for a Grey Horse" was Acord's masterpiece, and that to him it was far more than a masterpiece. It had been

part of his life for more than 20 years, and now someone had come out of nowhere and offered — or, to be more accurate, threatened — to take it off his hands.

I felt helpless. Worse, I felt like a kind of monster who had upset the odd equilibrium of a great artist's life. Then the phone rang again.

It was Acord. He sounded both upbeat and businesslike. He told me he was excited now about selling "Monstrance," eager to meet again, and that he was "happy" with the price he was getting for it. We arranged to meet later that day, so that I could give him a check.

WE MET, as we always did, in the Elliott Bay Book Co. cafeteria. He was there drinking coffee when I arrived. In a state of high emotion, I handed him the check, which he glanced at briefly before putting it in a pocket. Then Acord explained in elaborate detail about how he and a friend would drive over to Richland in a pickup, rent a forklift there, load the sculpture, bring it back to Fremont, spend a couple days finishing it up, then install it wherever Billy Joe and I wanted.

"You know," he said, "it meant a lot to me that you remembered 'Monstrance' for so long — that you never forgot it. I feel now like it has a good home. I feel good about that. I've had galleries offer to sell it for me, but I never wanted to do that. I don't know . . . my business affairs . . . I've just never been able to handle practical matters

very well." He smiled. "I actually was supposed to live on a different planet, but somebody screwed up." We chatted for a few more minutes, then went our separate ways, shaking hands, as per our custom, on the sidewalk outside.

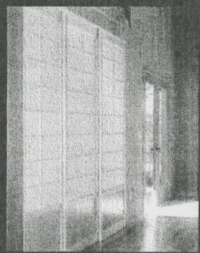
An hour later, Billy Joe called to tell me that a bank downtown had called him. "There's someone here trying to cash a check you wrote for \$25,000," the teller said. Apparently, Acord didn't even have a bank account.

There followed a very long month, during which Acord could not be found. A brush fire raged through Hanford, coming — near as I could tell from news accounts — dangerously close to the sculpture. Then I heard that a second fire had burned Acord's studio there. Billy Joe often would come into my office in the morning and yell, his accent at full tilt, "Wheah in the hell's mah sculptuah?" He still had not met Acord, and was beginning to have doubts about my judgment.

I would occasionally call the one Acord friend I knew who had a phone, and he would invariably say, "I gave up a long time ago apologizing for James."

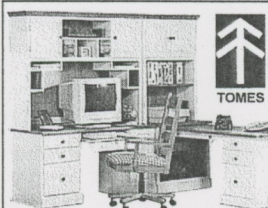
And then one afternoon the clouds parted, angels playing trumpets appeared in the skies overhead, and Acord called, suddenly anxious to get the sculpture moved. I told him to keep his receipts from the trip and that Billy Joe would reimburse him, and invited him to come over to my house to help pick the spot where the sculpture >

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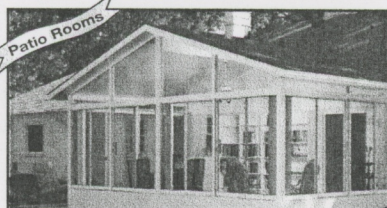
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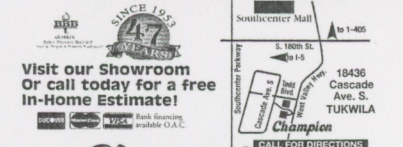
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THE MONSTRANCE & ME



would live. Billy Joe had decided to store "Monstrance" with me for five years or so, until he built his dream house. Acord drove to Richland, brought the sculpture back to Fremont, came out to my house, found a "perfect" spot for the sculpture, and pronounced himself as happy as he'd ever been in his life.

Five days later, Billy Joe drove over to Fremont with a friend to show her his acquisition. They were standing there admiring it when Acord walked over. "Do you like it?" he asked.

"It's gorgeous," Billy Joe answered.

"Well, I just sold it," Acord said.

"I know," riposted Billy Joe. "I just bought it."

Acord roared with laughter. Later, he told me, "It was the best possible way for Billy Joe and me to meet. It was perfect."

Finally the Saturday came for "Monstrance for a Grey Horse" to be installed in my life. Acord and six of his friends — three fellow sculptors, Don Carver, Paul Luksch, and Denny Jensen, along with Carver's two daughters, Jacqueline and Vanessa and their friend Rachel Murphy came over in three vehicles. I had prepared the site by digging a large hole, in which was to be placed a set of cinder blocks for a foundation. I had rented a forklift, which Acord was to operate. After a few hours of careful hard work, the sculpture was properly installed (even though, Acord said, "that forklift had a mother of a clutch!"), and all of us — Acord and his crew, Billy Joe and I — stood there regarding it in a state of happy shock. Celebratory beers were consumed. The sculpture looked splendid. We all stood around for another hour or so, listening to Acord tell hilarious stories about his life and travails with the "Monstrance," and then everyone but Billy Joe and I left.

"Damn," said Billy Joe as we stood there admiring "Monstrance." "This thang's gonna outlast hewman civilization!" Then he left, and I was alone again with "Monstrance for a Grey Horse."

And my soul was flooded with light.

Two days later, Acord called. "That's sculpture's been a part of my life forever," he said. "Dogs and apartments and girlfriends came and went, and the sculpture was always there. Now I feel like this is a big turning point in my life, and I just wanted you to know that Saturday was one of the happiest days of my life. Everything went perfect. Just seeing it there, how good it looked, and knowing now that it's in a good home..."

He may have been the only person on Earth that day who was happier than I was. P

Fred Moody is the author of books on the Seattle Seahawks, Microsoft and virtual reality. Benjamin Benschneider is staff photographer for Pacific Northwest magazine.