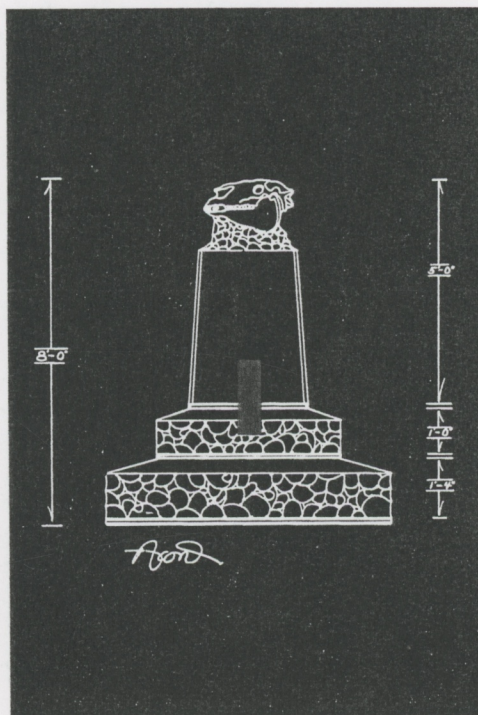


MOVING TO RICHLAND—I

IN the waning moments of Civilization, June 24, 1989, tumbleweed rolled in the streets of Seattle, and the air hummed with the sound of decaying uranium. Cooling water bubbled chaotically in the tank of a nuclear reactor as the ghostly neon blue of the Cerenkov effect—the glow of radiation passing through liquid—played across the face of a large chunk of granite. A few feet away, an amplified Geiger counter chirped like a giant grasshopper. A woman's voice stuttered over and over, "Ato-ato-atomic." At 6 P.M., and again at 7:30, a man in a yellow radiation suit and a gas mask calmly announced his plan to contain the hazard. Over a television monitor a few observers watched workmen drop uranium fuel rods by remote control into a vat of acid; a moment later, the monitor flashed with the light of a thousand suns. Afterward, the survivors sipped sangria from plastic glasses.

The humming and stuttering were part of a synthesized soundtrack, composed and produced by Paul Korsmo, an electronic musician and environmental consultant. The Cerenkov glow and other visual effects were in part assembled from the film archives of the Atomic Industrial Forum and the Department of Energy by an independent filmmaker named Tom Putnam. Civilization ended, in other words, not with a bang but a performance piece. But then Civilization itself was only an umbrella name for a three-month series of exhibits by a variety of artists, presented by the 9-1-1 Contemporary Arts Center in a storefront near the docks of Seattle. The performance was part of the final show, called "Moving to Richland," featuring the work of James L. Acord, Jr., the man in the yellow radiation suit.

Acord had, in fact, recently moved to Richland, the administrative center and bedroom town for the Hanford nuclear reservation, in eastern Washington. Richland is not known as a center for the arts, but to Acord, who designs and builds nuclear sculpture,



it seemed natural to set up shop in a place called Atomic City. It was there that he hoped to find a source for two materials he deems necessary for his art: uranium and plutonium.

Acord's work is fundamentally different from that of other sculptors involved in nuclear issues. For example, Henry Moore's mushroom-cloud death's-head at the site of the first atomic pile, in Chicago, is a commentary on nuclear power and destruction. Tony Price, a New Mexico assemblage artist who gets parts from the Los Alamos scrap yard, makes sculpture that could be considered a mechanical by-product of the nuclear industry. Acord is apparently alone in his use of radioactive material as an integral part of his art.

Sculpture, Acord wrote in his notes for the exhibit, is "the art of shape—the purposeful and aesthetic arrangement of mass and void." And shape is "the *critical* property of uranium and plutonium," he pointed out. "It was the ordered arrangement of the mass and void of these two metals that was our twin ticket into the nuclear age. Obviously, no more appropriate materials exist for sculpture than those whose essence is altered so dramati-

cally by shape alone. . . . I believe that my work will benefit from access to modern materials usage, and, equally, I believe that art has something to offer toward civilization's understanding and mastery of the nuclear age we have created."

Acord has proposed solutions to problems all along the nuclear fuel and weapons cycles. He has designed two-hundred-mile-long earthworks for uranium-mine tailings on the Colorado Plateau. He has also developed plans for a series of granite sculptures, each containing the plutonium from one nuclear warhead, to be strung across the Aleutian Islands and through Siberia, stretching eventually, perhaps, around the world. He would then replace the warheads themselves with "artheads"—missile-launched sculptures of granite and titanium. These would be useful as warning markers in times of a reactor accident or a border skirmish; in the meantime, they would satisfy budget-hungry bureaucrats in the Department of Defense. "They'd cost as much as the real thing," he says, "but they'd be perfectly harmless." Sketches of these works—nearly two hundred altogether—lined the walls at the show.

While waiting for his chance to work with weapons-grade plutonium, Acord learned to make do with a different radioactive source material: Mango Red Fiesta pottery. The prototype for Acord's plutonium repositories, a granite sculpture called "Monstrance for a Grey Horse," is designed to hold thirty-three pounds of concentrated Mango Red glaze, safely contained in a stainless-steel canister hidden inside its base. The "Mark I Studio Reactor," a desk-top nuclear-power source, is fuelled by a cupboardful of mixed Fiesta stacked in a thirty-gallon fish tank. At the moment, the reactor is quite safe; by Acord's calculations it will not actually go critical for several million years. Nevertheless, the stream of gamma rays coming off the plates at the 9-1-1 exhibit was strong enough to set the Geiger counter chirping at a level measurably

greater than that of natural background radiation.

Casual collectors of Fiesta, the Art Deco tableware beloved of Andy Warhol, may be unaware that their Mango Red pieces should be treated as hazardous waste. But the vivid color of these pieces, more orange than red, is indeed produced by a radioactive material—uranium oxide. Reports on the glaze occasionally appear in the newspapers, and Fiesta connoisseurs circulate stories of crazies who claim that beams emitted by the plates can penetrate walls and light up the ears of diners. No one takes these ideas seriously, of course—no one, that is, except the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. In the spring of 1987, Acord took a sample of powdered Mango Red glaze to the State Office of Radiation Control, to request a gamma-ray spectrum analysis. Officials there, citing a series of state and federal regulations, responded by confiscating his sample and imposing a number of restrictions on his work. They forbade him to possess more than fifteen pounds of Fiesta ware at any one time, or more than a hundred and fifty pounds altogether in a calendar year. They further insisted that he wear a personal dosimeter and file a quarterly report on his exposure to radiation. Finally, they threatened that if he willfully chipped the glaze on a piece of Mango Red he might be

subject to a licensing fee of \$292,885 for mining and milling radioactive source material. Eventually, after a correspondence lasting eighteen months, the regional office of the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission overrode these decisions, and Acord was permitted to continue his work. Copies of the correspondence were included in the 9-1-1 exhibit.

For all its conceptual elements, the heart of the show was solid sculpture. The "Mark I Reactor" had been set up in a sanctuary marked off by yellow-and-black warning tape, with biohazard signs and a dosimeter hanging over it like icons. Inside the tank, the pottery was composed in a complex, cascading still-life. A mixture of black and fluorescent light cast an ethereal glow through the water and over the plates. The random bursts of bubbles were carefully controlled by channeling pumped air through various pitchers, bowls, and saltshakers; the irregular rhythm of the bubbles played counterpoint to the chirping of the Geiger counter. Hastily assembled on a limited budget, the reactor nevertheless showed signs of exacting craftsmanship. But the real proof of Acord's seriousness was "Monstrance for a Grey Horse" itself, a one-ton monolith depicting a horse's skull atop a five-foot trapezoidal column. By the time the piece was shown in the 9-1-1 exhibit, it had already consumed a

dozen years of Acord's life—nearly half of his professional career—and even now it remains unfinished. When it is complete, it will have a cast-titanium helmet mounted over the skull—and, of course, its cannister of crushed Fiesta. Even as it appeared in the show, however, it was a remarkable work. Monumental in design and delicate in detail, it incorporated all the techniques and surface textures of traditional granite carving. A ponderous portrait of death, it somehow managed to soar.

AFTER the performance, Acord stood outside the gallery, unwinding with a cigarette and a beer. He chatted with friends and fielded questions from members of the audience. A researcher for a private environmental data base discussed the possibility of including Acord in a national directory of repositories for nuclear waste. Everyone complained about the muggy weather, but Acord assured people that it was not the fault of *his* reactor. He had stripped off the radiation suit and gas mask, but he was still showing signs of the heat. His face was flushed, and drops of sweat meandered down his long North German nose. (His grandfather changed the family name from Eckherd during the First World War; the name is now pronounced like "acorn" with a "d.") When he put on his glasses—thick prescription safety goggles—they steamed up briefly, hiding his pale blue eyes. His graying red-brown hair, cropped close along the sides, stood up on top in a high crest. He was wearing splayed-out running shoes with black socks, khaki shorts held up by rainbow suspenders, and a T-shirt advertising "Civilization." A tattoo of a lapwing peeked out from beneath each sleeve. The outfit emphasized his short, lean legs, barrel chest, and expanding waist. Pinned to one suspender strap, just above his heart, was a button from the Granite Cutters' International Association—A.F.L.-C.I.O. Farther down the strap was a "five-chip," a thermoluminescent dosimeter badge, with five lithium-crystal chips to measure broad-spectrum radiation.

A woman wearing a yellow sundress approached him with a puzzled frown. "Excuse me," she said. "But aren't you glamorizing—or, no, *glorifying*—the whole nuclear process?"



Acord pulled his shoulders back and held his neck so straight that the flesh under his chin swelled out like a ruff. He had heard this question before. "Well," he answered slowly, "the thing is, is like it or not, we've created tons and tons—thousands of tons—of radioactive material. The waste from the Manhattan Project is still with us, out at Hanford, and, one way or another, it'll be with us for a long time. We're talking about containing radioactive materials with half-lives that exceed our written history by thousands of years—plutonium, for instance, with a half-life of about twenty-five thousand years. And now we've got to deal with it, all of us, for the very survivability of the planet."

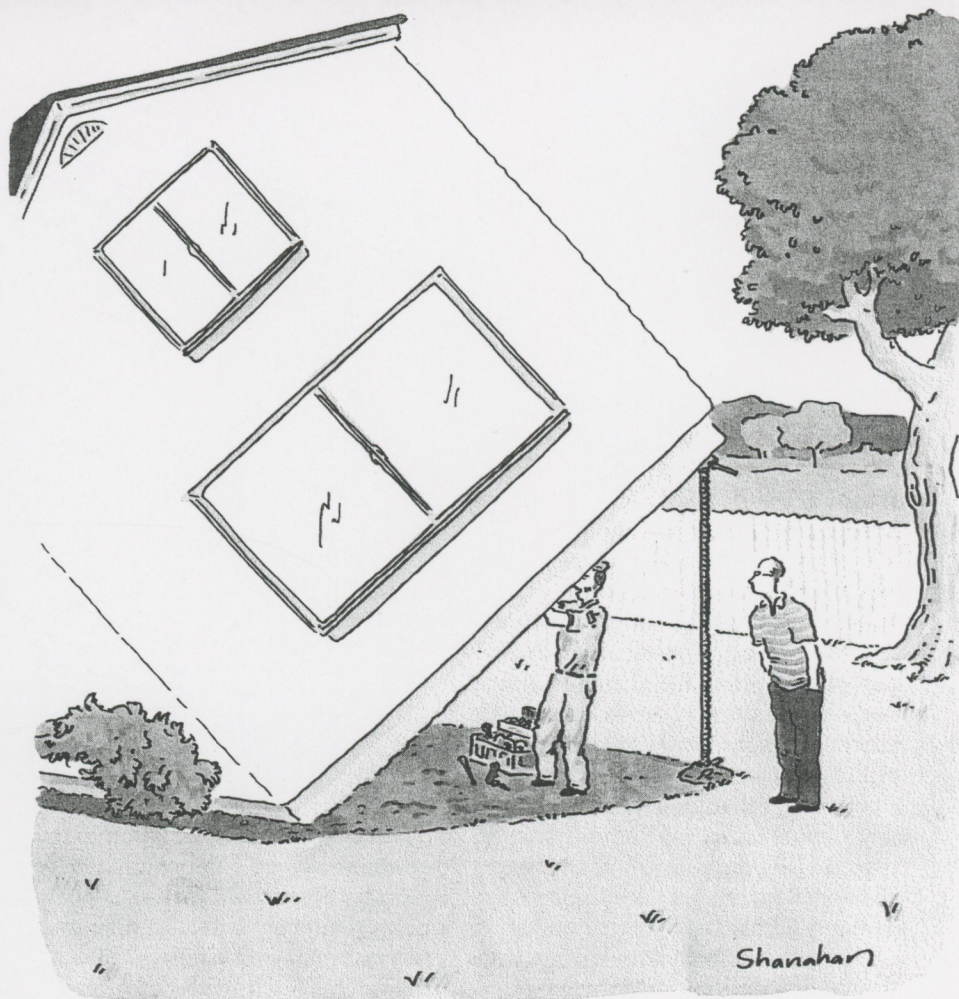
"So is this for real?" the woman interrupted. "Or is it just symbolic? Are you talking about warning markers?"

Acord squinted, cocked his head, and leaned toward the woman. He had the look of a large, amiable woodpecker. "Am I talking about the *mourning market*?" he asked.

The woman repeated her question.

"Oh, warning markers. Well, you know, that's a big part of it. I don't want to tout my engineering skills here, but the materials I'm using can, in fact, safely contain this material, in a way in which it can be preserved and safely shielded from the outside environment. But there's always the human factor. Anything that's been made by man can be destroyed by man. If someone *really* wanted to get into one of these things, they could; I can slow 'em down a lot, but I can't stop 'em. No one can. So we need to send a warning to generations yet unborn. The trouble is, we have no idea what the world will be like twenty-five thousand years from now, what people will be thinking, how they will be communicating."

Acord paused to light another cigarette. "If we look back in the other direction, though, we do have art that dates from the Ice Age, thirty thousand years ago. In fact, I've often speculated that my shadowy, forgotten colleagues from long ago created these works of art out of enduring materials specifically to span the time, to outlast the individual short life of a human being, or even of the tribe or the society that created them. Some of these sculptures and paintings still speak to us today with an eloquence that we can all



"Someone's been tinkering with your adjustable-rate mortgage."

respond to, I think. So art is an answer. I'm not against words and mathematics, you know, but I'm not counting on them. The language of art may be the best way we have to let people know that this is *bad* stuff, and they'd better keep away."

THIRTY thousand years is a standard unit of measure in Acord's time scheme. One might, for example, begin his story back in the Lascaux caves, where his "shadowy forgotten colleagues" inscribed their ideas in pigment and rock. To do him justice, though, one might have to go back two billion years, to the Precambrian era, when granite welled up from the earth and oozed across what we now call Vermont. Or even to the Big Bang, if there was such a thing, when the radioactivity now glazing the Fiesta ware first put in its appearance. Acord invokes these events as though he had

been there, and all of them invade his thoughts as he pursues his work.

He was actually born in the Holocene, on October 19, 1944, the only child of Gail Elizabeth Chapman and James Leroy Acord. Gail had trained to be an English teacher, but during the war she worked as a billing clerk in the Port of Seattle. Like many of her friends, she also contributed to the war effort by joining a dating pool, drawing lots for blind dates with sailors on shore leave. One weekend, she was matched with a James Acord, of the Merchant Marine, who was the pilot of the Alaska Standard, a tanker that ferried airplane fuel from Seattle to Alaska and Vladivostok. Soon Gail and three of her friends were tending the Captain's houseboat while he was off at sea; then, during one of James's visits to port, they got married. Little Jimmy was born sixteen months later.

After the war, Gail Acord resumed

her teaching career, and her husband reluctantly took a job on shore. It is difficult to see what the two had in common beyond a fervent belief in Catholicism, but their marriage lasted until Gail's death, in 1984—on the day of their forty-first anniversary. Gail wanted her son to go to college and become a doctor or a lawyer; she brought home all the latest pedagogical theories and techniques to try out on Jim. These experiments seem to have failed, but Acord believes that they did leave a mark on him—most notably in an almost pathological inability to spell what he hears or pronounce what he reads. (A mild hearing impairment, the result of chronic childhood ear-aches compounded by years of work in high-decibel industries, only adds to these difficulties.) Mr. Acord wanted his son to go to veterinary school or perhaps West Point. From an early age, he attempted to teach the child marksmanship and self-discipline, which Jim appreciated scarcely more than his mother's lessons in phonics. Certainly neither of his parents expected their child to be an artist.

In her later years, Gail Acord became an enthusiastic painter of domestic animals, but at the time her son was growing up his only source of inspiration was the *National Geographic*. Other than that, he can't explain the origin of his urge to create sculpture, because he has been carving for as long as he can remember. By the time he was eight or nine, he was saving up his allowance to buy fifty-pound blocks of salt. The blocks became imaginary marble that he carved into busts, using a hammer and chisels borrowed from his father. But the salt destroyed the tools and the Seattle rain dissolved the salt. All the boy had to show for his work was a beating for ruining the chisels. He had had his first brush with authority over his art, but he had also learned his first lesson in the durability of materials. He then turned his attention to brick, carving heads and figurines that he buried in his back yard. "I'd always imagine that someday someone would dig one up and wonder about it," he told me recently. "The sculptures that I'd seen in *Geographic* all seemed to come out of the ground. Right next to a shot of the sculpture there'd be pictures of guys with beards, you know, looking down into pits in Greece or Egypt, or

MISTER HANUSEVICH

Hanusevich wants Nina. But why? Why?
He has tantrums, blubbers when drunk.
Nina laughs. Is he not funny?
Fat and all nerves, he has big ears
And flaps them, a real elephant.

A dark-blue cloud stands over San Francisco
When I drive along Grizzly Peak,
And far out, beyond the Golden Gate, the ocean gleamed.

Ai, my dead of long ago! Ai, Hanusevich, ai, Nina!
Nobody remembers you, nobody knows about you.

Hanusevich had his estate somewhere near Minsk.
The region was taken by the Bolsheviks, so he lives in Wilno.
When he was young, his mommy let him have flings.
He caroused with chanteuses, pretended to be a big shot,
Would send telegrams in Russian: "*Arriving with ladies
Meet with music troikas champagne.*"
And a signature: *Count Bobrinskii*.

Chanteuses. I see now their satin underskirts
And black panties with lace. Breasts, too big, too small,

somewhere. I was just putting them
back where they belonged."

Acord's earliest exposure to nuclear energy came soon after, in 1955, when he was given a box labelled "The Story of Atomic Energy with Safe, Interesting Experiments." Billed as "a safe, thrilling Introduction to the Mysteries and Miracles of an Atomic World," this was nothing less than a nuclear chemistry set. It included bits of radium and uranium and a "scientific instrument" called a spinthariscopes—a device that permitted the child to observe the effects of atomic decay, in the form of kaleidoscopic tracers emitted by radium. The spinthariscopes became Jim's favorite toy, and he spent a great deal of time in a dark closet watching the fireworks. His father found this preferable to an earlier chemistry set that had produced many foul smells and at least one fire in the basement. He was less pleased when another experiment, designed to test the effects of uranium, contaminated the family Brownie and fogged a roll of film. The Porter Chemical Company, the manufacturer, declared these procedures "HARMLESS! EXCITING! PRACTICAL!" The kit is no longer sold.

The Acords never knew what to expect from their son. At eleven, Jim served faithfully, seven days a week, at 6 A.M. Mass; but whenever he got

the chance he played hooky from school. As a senior altar boy, he had the keys to the church, and part of his job was to get there half an hour early to turn on the lights and open the vestry. "I'm sure there were many times I might have awakened at four, four-thirty in the morning, you know, and thought, what the hell, I'll go to church early," he said. "I usually left home before my parents got up, which was one of the fringe benefits. If you didn't see them, you didn't have to deal with it all. Besides, I would enjoy sitting in the darkened church with this faint smell of incense, the ornate tapestries, the gilding of this and that. I really found a lot of comfort in the church in those innocent early days. I was a devout little kid, that's for sure." By the time he finished Mass, his parents had left for work, so when he got back home he would often just stay there, reading or drawing all day.

As far as Jim's parents were concerned, the contradictions in his behavior were definitively resolved one morning when Mr. Acord got a call from Christ the King Parish. "Jim had a little problem at church," his father told me. "One of the sisters found him in the back room mixing something with the holy water." He couldn't quite recall what Jim had been mixing, but his son did: "Necco wafers, probably.

Worries, touching themselves in mirrors, tardy menses.
Later on they changed into *sestritsas* in the windows of hospital trains
(On their brows, bound with a veil, the sign of the red cross).

Nina is not for Hanusevich. Look how she walks.
She rolls from side to side, like a sailor.
A whole year in the saddle, in a cavalry regiment.
What sort of marriageable young lady is she?

What did you find in her, Mister Hanusevich,
That you got so romantic? Always pretending,
Perhaps you adorned her with your fantasies.
And, it is true, your funny ears
Nearly transparent, with red veins,
Move, and in your eyes, nearly always, fright.

Once upon a time there was Hanusevich. And there was Nina.
Once only, from the beginning till the end of the world.
It is I who perform, late, this ceremonial wedding.
And around me striped, emerald-eyed beasts,
Ladies from journals of fashion, shamans of lost tribes,
Or, with a secret smile, a grave *sestritsa*,
Appear among white clouds, assist.

—CZESLAW MILOSZ

(Translated, from the Polish, by the author and Robert Hass.)

And wine, of course. I had all these implements laid out in this vestibule kind of room. The cruet and the chal-ice and the paten. Various rosaries and knickknacks, religious artifacts. I used to know the names of all of them. In any event, when this nun came in to check on me—I suppose she did it once a year, you know—I was mixing water and wine and things, using some of these sacred instruments. And, of course, I'd already suited up—I had my cos-sack on." He meant cassock. "Well, no one's really supposed to touch these things except the priest, so when the nun saw me she almost had an apoplexy. I mean, the veins stood out on her face. If I remember correctly, she took me by my ear, you know, and banged my head into the wall. She was clearly out of control. Sputtering. She sputtered a lot, and made a scene out of it. Clearly and unmistakably made a scene out of it."

The Acords eventually concluded that Jim needed a stronger dose of morals and discipline, so they packed him off to Marymount Military Academy, a Catholic boarding school outside of Tacoma. Mr. Acord once told me that Jim was enthusiastic about the idea, and Jim admits that he probably was—until he got there, and found the place surrounded by a fence. The faculty at Marymount was a curious combina-

tion of nuns and retired Army drill instructors. Acord managed to confuse them as well. Thanks to his father's instruction, he had developed a remarkable aptitude for riflery, a very pure exercise in eye-hand coordination and intense concentration. Now, at age twelve, his marksmanship won him a place alongside sixteen-year-olds on the school's championship team. Within a year, he had added nine bars to his Sharpshooter's medal. His academic performance, on the other hand, was inconsistent, at best. In his second year, while nearly flunking English, he won an essay contest on the subject "Why I Want to Be a Priest." Eventually, however, his grades and assorted disciplinary problems caught up with him, and at the beginning of his third year his parents withdrew him from the school.

Back in Seattle, Acord finished out the year at Woodrow Wilson Junior High, and then enrolled in Ingraham High School. His parents would have preferred a parochial school, but Jim had had enough of clerical discipline. "There was trouble in school anyway, of course," he said recently. "I was supposed to be a bright kid, but no one could figure out why my performance was so erratic. So the guidance counsellor sent me to a school psychologist, and then my parents found a private

psychiatrist who prescribed a lot of drugs—nothing you could get any pleasure out of, though. I think the idea was to keep me tranked out so that everything would sort of stabilize. I flushed them down the toilet whenever I could."

In his sophomore year, tranquilizers notwithstanding, Acord entered Seattle's Fifth Annual Science Fair with an experiment in radiation genetics which he had devised himself. He had persuaded a neighborhood veterinarian to teach him how to use an X-ray machine, in exchange for doing odd jobs around the clinic. In the experiment, Acord gave varying doses of X rays to eight pairs of hamsters and observed the effects on their offspring: by the third generation, the hamsters had begun to display signs of mutation. These results were impressive enough to win the Seattle Veterinary Medical Association Award (and a twenty-five-dollar Savings Bond) in the Senior Biological Division of the fair. A family photograph from that time shows a scrawny, rather nerdy kid standing in front of his cages of mildly mutant rodents. In a plaid shirt and bluejeans, he looks like just the sort of guy who ends up going to M.I.T., Cal Tech, or, at the very least, Washington State University in Pullman. Instead, Acord quit school at the end of that year.

"My mother had a nervous breakdown, I guess you'd say, and she was in the hospital for a few months. My father would go to see her every weekend, so I was left alone a lot, and suddenly there wasn't any structure anymore. After the years in military school and all the hassles at home, it was like a bell jar had been lifted off me. I could go down to First Avenue whenever I wanted, and look in the windows of tattoo parlors and sit in greasy restaurants with grizzled old men, drinking coffee and sketching for hours. It seemed a lot more sensible to me than going to school. I got the scent of the wild in my nose, and I never wanted to go back."

IN the fall of 1960, just before his sixteenth birthday, Acord ran away from home. "I thought I'd go to Italy, you know, and become a painter," he said. "Jack Kerouac's 'Drama Bums' in my back pocket, change of socks in my jacket, hitchhiking and walking to New York in October." An early bliz-



"After probate, family members will receive duplicate videos."

zard changed his plans. "It started snowing before I reached Casper, Wyoming, and by the time I got to Cherry County, Nebraska, I was the only thing moving on the highway. There I was, in my jeans and loafers, hip deep in snow." The road would probably have been deserted in any weather; northwestern Nebraska was cattle country, and Cherry County had more white-faced Herefords than people. Acord knew that his father had a "shirttail relative" somewhere in the area, a man named Chick Reece; it seemed like a good time to look him up. In a café in Valentine, the county seat, he first washed dishes for his breakfast, and then began to make inquiries about his relative. The manager told him to ask a group of ranchers sitting at a booth in the corner. Sure enough, one of them knew the man, and agreed to drop Jim at the driveway of the Dusky Bonnet, Chick Reece's ranch. Reece, it turned out, was looking for an extra hand; he offered Acord room and board until he could prove himself, and an additional thirty dollars a month after that. "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind," Acord told me, "but it sounded pretty good at the time."

A ten-dollar raise soon lured him to another ranch, the Tetherow Cattle Company, where he shared the bunkhouse with Doc McKeel and Lloyd Walking Eagle. Together, they did all the things that cowboys are supposed to do: rounded up cattle from summer pasture, five hundred head at a time; separated the herds; branded and ear-marked calves; drove the herds back out to pasture in the spring. During calving season, Acord was promised an extra twenty-five dollars a week for riding out every two hours around the clock to make sure all of the births went smoothly. Mostly, though, it was pitching hay, as much as twenty tons a day in the dead of winter—followed, naturally, by the need to shovel out the barn, a truly herculean labor. "That was also the first time I ever welded," Acord said. "When something broke, you know, we fixed it. I didn't make the connection to sculpture at the time, but there was something about the color of the welding torch against the northern-Nebraska sky that I really liked."

After eleven months on the ranch, Acord gave up his dreams of Italy and returned to Seattle, but not to his family. He found an apartment and signed

up for classes at what was then the Cornish School of Allied Arts, the former home of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Mark Tobey, where he enjoyed a brief but hectic career. "I was going to art school full time and working midnight to four or five in the morning loading trucks down at Irving Katz Produce. Seventeen years old, with a 750-cc. Norton Atlas and a girlfriend. Great year—boy, it was, I'll tell you. Seventh heaven!"

When a Seattle art critic asked him recently about his "teachers," Acord told me, he thought immediately of Sister Mary St. Felician, whom he remembers as "well over nine feet tall, weighing at least a thousand pounds, and not less

than one hundred years old." At Christ the King Elementary School, she had presided with an iron hand over his third-grade homeroom. The faculty at Cornish were not teachers in that sense; they were his mentors, and some later became his friends. Indeed, within a few months of his enrollment at the Cornish School, his instructor in sculpture, Ray Jensen, invited him to help out with a commission he had won for the Seattle Opera House, which was to be dedicated during the 1962 Seattle World's Fair. In exchange for helping Jensen with the heavy work, Acord got practical exposure during the day to many tricks of the trade and the opportunity to try them out at night using Jensen's equipment. The piece they did together, a welded-bronze sculpture called "The Dance," still stands in the upper foyer of the Opera House, just outside the men's room.

Acord found apprenticeship and private study more satisfying than classwork. Cornish had accepted him on the condition that he go to night school, to work toward a high-school diploma, but he had no interest in completing the requirements. ("They were boring a couple of years before, and they hadn't gotten any more in-

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teresting.”) There were problems at Cornish as well. For one thing, he had no money to keep up with his tuition payments. Even worse, from his point of view, his fellow-students seemed uninspired and unmotivated, rich dilettantes who failed to respond to the lessons as he did—“like a dry sponge thrown in water.” Somewhere along the line, he simply stopped going to class. His formal schooling had ended, and his education had begun.

After six months with Ray Jensen, Acord went to work for Philip McCracken, another local sculptor, who lived on Guemes Island, north of Puget Sound. Acord struck a deal for studio space and “some cash,” and moved into a cottage on McCracken’s property with no electricity or running water. The older artist remembers Acord as “friendly and curious and always enthusiastic. He’s such an intelligent guy, but... I don’t know, he has this intense awareness of the dark side, the dark side of life, as though he’d somehow been imprinted with it. It seemed like he had some kind of a mission that he was looking for.”

McCracken himself had been a student of Henry Moore, and he urged all his apprentices to follow the Master’s example and study form by making drawings of bones and other natural objects. Acord took to the idea immediately, but he preferred whole corpses to bones alone. The appeal was partly emotional—as a child he had done a number of drawings of the family dog, Poodie, after she had been run over by a car—but it had a practical side as well. “They were models who never moved,” he points out. “Cheap, too.”

In addition to their natural forms, the partly decayed animals presented a rich variety of materials and textures: teeth, bones, muscle, hair. Acord’s subjects included birds, small mammals, crustaceans, and some plant parts, such as seed casings, and his studies of them were extremely realistic—almost in the style of scientific illustrations—but they had a mysterious quality as well. His palette ran to deep browns and ominous grays—colors too dark to reproduce in a textbook, or even to see clearly on a wall. You had to get up close, which was all to the good, because there was no other way to catch the fine detail. What appeared from a distance to be a spiky abstraction might turn out to be a tangled

nest of twigs cradling a dead baby bird. Even at close range, the subject often seemed obscure, like the split seedpod of a plant you had never seen, or the fossilized palate of an animal you had never heard of. For the next twenty years, Acord devoted at least an hour a day to his drawing, and he always kept his models close at hand. Since his drawing board was often the only table in the house, the little corpses also served as his centerpiece at meals, much to the dismay of dinner guests.

McCracken had wanted an assistant to help out with a piece in cast concrete, but he and Acord spent most of their time carving wood. McCracken taught Acord to collaborate with his material—to work the wood to express his ideas but at the same time to let the wood work through him to express its own nature. That was the goal, anyway. During the spring and summer of 1963, the two of them used to cruise the San Juan Islands, looking for the perfect juniper. When they found the tree they wanted, they’d cut it down, take it back to the studio, and prepare it for aging. By the time the wood was ready to carve, six or eight months later, Jim had moved on. In the meantime, however, he had borrowed some scrap from McCracken’s studio and carved several pieces of his own—mostly bird and animal forms, and some human figures that Acord now describes as “halfway between Henry Moore and reality.” He even sold a few at his first exhibit, in the Northwest Annual at the Seattle Art Museum. Encouraged by his success, he took out a business license as James L. Acord, Artist and Craftsman, and declared himself a professional sculptor. He was eighteen years old.

APPRENTICESHIP with other sculptors had introduced Acord to a variety of skills, but it had also shown him the technical limitations of most professional artists. All the sculptors he knew about were faced with a choice: they could limit their vision to the work they were actually capable of producing or they could design a piece and subcontract the manufacture to specialized craftsmen. Both approaches represented compromises that Acord was unwilling to make. Rather than lower his sights or relinquish control of his work, he elected to get his training from men who knew how to do the

job—skilled workers in wood, metal, and stone.

Acord's unexpurgated résumé, a stack of file cards half an inch thick, belies the motto he has scrawled across the top: "*Ars longa, vita brevis.*" Altogether, he lists forty-six jobs in the past thirty years, ranging from logger and carpenter, through pottery teacher in a mental institution and gardener in a convent, to commercial fisherman in Alaska and consultant to the Junior League of Seattle. His most illuminating jobs, however, have been in the metal and stone trades. Over the years, Acord has fitted ships, welded natural-gas pipe, plated high-voltage conductors for hydroelectric generators, tested the crystalline structure of cast submarine parts, and carved angels and baby Jesuses for the monument industry. He has belonged to nearly a dozen different craft unions, and he once served briefly as the president of the Barre, Vermont, branch of the Granite Cutters' International Association of America. He has stayed in each job just long enough to master the skills involved and, with luck, to save enough money (or qualify for unemployment) to support a few free months of full-time sculpture. Since his days as an altar boy, he has always preferred the graveyard shift: with less supervision, he has more opportunity to collect interesting things around the workplace, like scrap and rejects, and he also has more time to experiment and to work on his own projects "out of the lunch pail."

For many years, Acord changed his residence and his romantic involvement about as frequently as he changed jobs. Indeed, the three changes were often closely related. A girlfriend (or once, briefly, a wife) could provide room and board, which reduced the need for gainful employment. But when he had enough cash to buy supplies he sometimes preferred to be "celebrant," as he puts it, and pour all his energy into his art. Other than his daily exercise of drawing, the only constant in his life during those years was Gefion, an enormous Scottish deerhound, named for the Norse goddess of the hearth and of unmarried women.

Scandinavian mythology is just one of Acord's intellectual passions. To complement his practical experience, he has taught himself chemistry, geology, metallurgy, and radiation physics. To understand the purpose of it all,

That farm just north of town
does little but subsist.
Tumbledown sheds, machines
peppered with rust: it means
another struggle to exist
is tiredly winding down.

After their stand of corn
is picked to the last ear,
they let the cornstalks stay
to bleach as pale as hay.

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Signalling winter near,
beggared and blond, forlorn,

these come into their own
beneath a birdless sky,
and give the meagre field
for once a second yield—
ingathered when the eye
sees beauty in the bone.

Opportunistic eye.
Eye of the passerby.

—ROBERT B. SHAW

he has studied anthropology, art history, history, and philosophy. He reads books like Frazer's "Golden Bough" and Russell's "History of Western Philosophy" over breakfast, and he has been a subscriber to the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* off and on since 1964. The two books that have influenced him most, however, are "Pirotechnia," a sixteenth-century manual of metallurgy by Vannoccio Biringuccio (whom Acord insists on calling "Berlinghettia"), and the "Selected Writings" of Paracelsus—born Philip-pus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim, as Acord loves to point out.

Biringuccio and Paracelsus made wonderful role models for Acord. Both men spent decades wandering from job to job, all over Europe. Biringuccio wrote in Italian rather than Latin—evidence of his limited classical education and his desire to reach out to craftsmen. Agricola's "De Re Metallica" was better known among scholars, but "Pirotechnia" remained the standard handbook for practical metalwork until the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. For a number of years, it was Acord's standard as well; his third copy of the 1942 translation long ago reached what he calls "the rubber-band stage." Paracelsus, too, was, like Acord, a frequent dropout who based his ideas on experience in the workplace, not just on experiments in the laboratory. He nevertheless made significant contributions to chemistry and pharmacology as well as to the subject for which he is best known—alchemy.

Alchemy, in fact, became Acord's most enduring philosophical interest. "All my knowledge of nuclear energy is just a hat to put on my alchemy rack," he says. Acord's fascination

with alchemy was in keeping with the spirit of the late sixties, when all his friends were boning up on tarot and astrology and the secrets of the Great Pyramids. What appealed to Acord was the alchemists' sense of adventure as they pursued high-risk explorations in chemistry, physics, metaphysics, and mysticism. "In fact, some of the early fathers of chemistry were really alchemists, you know," he said once. "They just happened to stumble across things like nitrogen. 'Wow, check this out!... Not what I'm lookin' for, though. Pass me that bottle of mercury and gold over there.' But, I mean, they were performing almost all the basic chemical processes that remained in use for the next two hundred years and allowed later chemists to identify and isolate each of the elements—including uranium, I might add." Acord recognized that the idea of transmutation, central to alchemy, was equally applicable to radioactivity and also to sculpture, both of which involve the mysterious transformation of elemental materials. In addition, alchemy provided a moral underpinning for all his work. "The base man who desired only for wealth would always fail," he said. "The higher adepts, the true alchemists, knew that what they were really transforming was themselves. The real lead was in their own hearts, and only through purity of motivation could they transform that lead into gold."

As early as 1964, even before he began to delve into alchemy, Acord had tried to transform his sculpture through magic. His work at the time was mostly hollow—molded plastic or welded steel—and just before completing each piece he would seal inside it a cache of secret items. He didn't realize then that such offerings were

part of a long tradition among his colleagues in the trades—as old as the wildflower bouquets in Neolithic chalk mines and the handfuls of millet gruel left under the stones of the pyramids, and as recent as the three pennies tossed into the foundations of modern construction sites before the concrete is poured. He says, “The packet generally included some of the waste products from the manufacturing of the sculpture, floor sweepings, if you will, like the gloves that I had worn while making that sculpture, or wood shavings from an earlier carving, or crumbs of welding spatter—the tiny droplets of metal slag that solidify in the air like shot. There were also, you know, sentimental things, like dried flower petals from the romance of the time. I felt there was some cumulative power there.”

The packets apparently were not powerful enough to produce the intended effect. Indeed, within a few years some of Acord's patrons began to complain that his early pieces were falling apart. He, too, was unhappy with his work; he had not yet found in metal the harmony he had sought in wood. His discontent is reflected in a change in his business license, in 1968, from James L. Acord, Artist and Craftsman, to Savage Abusement Sculpture Works.

Before long, Dean Andersen, a sculptor friend of Phil McCracken's, offered a solution to Acord's dilemma. Andersen was as meticulous as McCracken in his use of materials, but, thanks to Welsh parsimony, an interest in Zen, and a fascination with antique technology, he was less concerned with the sculpture itself than with the process of making it. He is still a highly respected artist in the Northwest, but his greatest creations may be his garden and his tool set. “Dean is the kind of guy,” Acord says, “who would spend eighty hours of highly skilled craftsmanship making something that's available for ninety-eight cents.” In the early nineteen-seventies, Andersen set up his own forge and bellows and started making jewelry; he persuaded Acord that this was a good way to carry out small-scale experiments with metal and stone and perhaps make a little money at the same time.

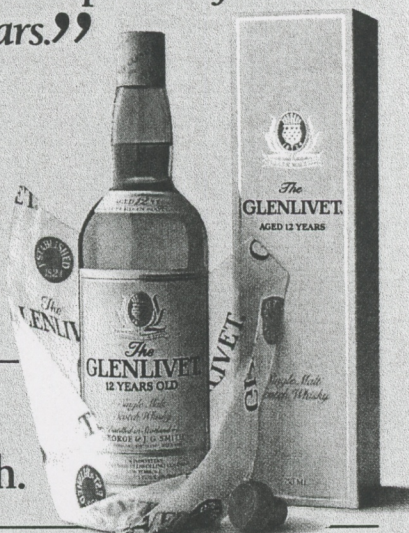
The jewelry sold well enough, but the venture was never profitable, because Acord, like Andersen, became



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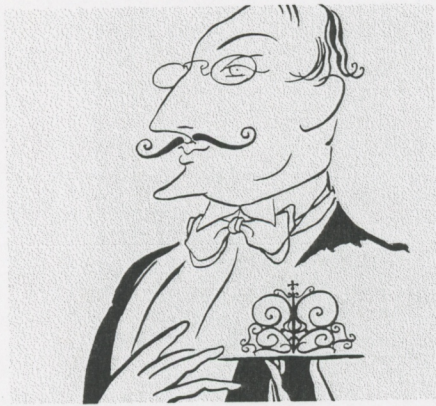
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more involved in the process than in the product. While climbing in the Cascade Range, east of Seattle, during the late nineteen-sixties, he had come across an abandoned gold mine, the Honeymoon, at the foot of Mt. Index. He started bringing a packload of ore from the back of the shaft every time he came down from a trek. At home in his studio, he processed the ore, following a series of formulas inspired by "Pirotechnia" and Paracelsus. "I would laboriously crush up the rock in a mortar, thinking meditative thoughts about the alchemical green dragon, you know," he told me. "Then I would melt it down in a simple iron pot over the stove—that kind of thing—and when I needed more heat I could supply it with my welding torch. Berlinghettia would have approved, I'm sure—he always worked with the highest level of technology available—but Dean would probably have gone for cherrywood charcoal, or something."

The Honeymoon ore was very low-grade, and Acord was never able to carry out more than sixty pounds at a time. Altogether he produced only a few grams of pure gold, but in the process he refined his understanding of metal, and reestablished a connection between his work and the natural world. Acord combined his gold with pure silver, purchased commercially, and then cast the alloy, electrum, in molds taken from the claws and shoulder bone of a desiccated cat, his drawing model of the moment. The claws went into little hammered-silver envelopes, and the envelopes went into his sculpture.

The next step was to inoculate the metal itself with magical essences. "I was working with Jung propped open on one side of the workbench, Paracelsus on the other. My materials were mostly silver and gold and lead, but when you make an alloy you add other things that affect the crystalline structure. I was trying out different organic materials reduced by tincturation, so that in fact almost no particles of the real essence went into the metal. I'd take a drop of blood or tears or semen in a cup of distilled water and shake the water up carefully, you know, reciting chants and watching the moon track through the sky. Then I'd put one drop of that on a Kleenex, wad

it up, and throw it in the crucible."

Acord soon discovered that industrial alloying was still done in much the same way, though on a somewhat different scale. He had hired on as plant engineer—mechanic and trouble-shooter—at a foundry in the town of Sultan, in the foothills of the Cascades. "My metallurgy had gone from the theoretical, theological, and esoteric to a time clock and a hundred tons a week. It was just right, just what I needed." The crew would tap off two hundred and fifty pounds of iron at a time, enough to fill twenty molds, and at that instant, just before pouring the ductile metal into the molds, they would add a cupful of inoculant. "It was a mixture of bismuth and sulfur, boron and—oh, potassiums and sodiums and other patented minerals. There must have been some magnesium in there, too, because it puffed off instantly, in a big flame. It immediately vaporizes, see, and, as it vaporizes, the information races through the metal. It works like a blueprint, like metallic DNA, to tell that metal what shape its crystals should be arranged in. In fact, there's almost no traceable amount of the material left behind, but it adds exactly what I had in mind, because the metal remembers it."

Acord was eager to experiment with the fusion of elements on any level—molecular, conceptual, or visual. One of his jewelry commissions, a pendant,



featured an owl's foot—the genuine article, except that the talons had been replaced with little castings of electrum, the same ancient alloy he had used for the cat's claws. The owl's ankle was banded by a heavy silver cuff with a planished surface and a scattering of moonstones. The medieval design of the cuff and the deep russet tone of the owl's foot seemed to

call for a golden finish, and that gave Acord an excuse to try out mercury flame gilding.

The alchemists, of course, loved mercury; it is the only metal that is liquid at room temperature, and, even better, it is also a solvent of gold. The combination of these two properties makes possible the fillings in your teeth. It also leads to the process of flame gilding. Medieval metallurgists discovered that they could saturate their mercury with gold—much as water

can be saturated with salt—to produce a kind of liquid gold. Left alone, the mercury would eventually evaporate, leaving a finely divided gold powder. If the amalgam was painted on a metal, however, it could be heated to the point where the mercury fumed off just at the moment that the other metals fused, creating a skin of gold flash-plated on the surface.

Dean Andersen was not enthusiastic about the owl's-foot project. "Jim seems to have a fascination with the macabre," he told me. "I've never completely understood that side of him. In a sense, as an artist trying to make a living, it's sort of like he's butting his head up against the wall. When most people go to buy art, at their worst they want to decorate their house, or they want something pretty that, you know, makes them feel good. At their best, they'll meet you halfway. But Jim wants you to meet him completely on his territory. That's not bad in most art, but when you start making jewelry with bones in it you're kind of putting yourself on the spot."

Andersen also had reservations about flame gilding itself. "Dean was already growing cautious about the medical ramifications of certain sculptural processes," Acord recalls. "He had had a little bout of ill health there, and had decided that maybe being hunched over all these smoking crucibles of pewter and things might be having a lot to do with it." In the case of the flame gilding, Andersen was right to be concerned. As late as the nineteen-fifties, a British handbook of metalwork identified flame gilding as the most expensive and most durable method of applying gold plate, but failed to add that it is also the most hazardous. In the long run, the heavy-metal fumes will kill you. In the short run, they just cripple you and drive you insane. It is quite possible that the more obscure, occult passages in alchemical writing are a product not of mysticism but of mercury-vapor poisoning.

Acord figured that the risk of mercury poisoning was outweighed by the result he could achieve and the knowledge he would gain. The danger was irrelevant, except insofar as it added to the excitement. He went ahead with the owl's-foot project, departing from the medieval recipe only in the use of his trusty oxyacetylene torch. "What I did would be a punishable offense

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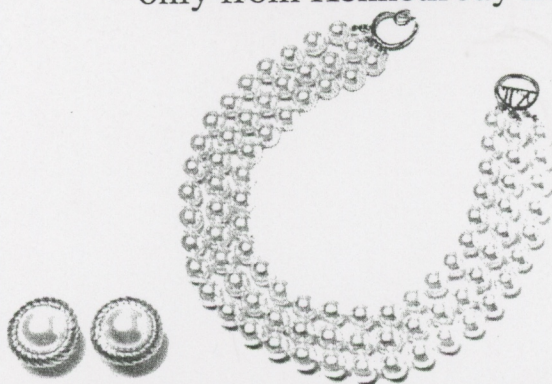
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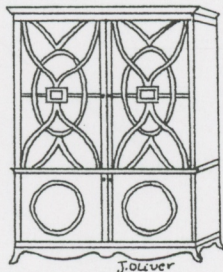
under E.P.A. standards. It might be a twenty-five-thousand-dollar hit, or something, for releasing mercury fumes into the air without a filter. Bad news. Irresponsible. I mean, I was upwind, for whatever good that might have done." He chuckled. "I noticed my fillings got a lot brighter, though. If I did it all the time, I probably wouldn't have to see the dentist as often."

IT was just about this time—the spring of 1973, to be precise—that Acord and I first met. My wife and I were living in a cottage on Mercer Island, a suburb of Seattle, and one day Jim simply appeared over the top of a twelve-foot laurel hedge in the front yard. Our landlady, a tough-talking, kindhearted schoolteacher named Kay Wooten, had asked him to trim it. Kay had been Gail Acord's best friend in graduate school, and she was also Jim's godmother. She used to hire him from time to time to do odd jobs, more out of a desire to give him some money than a need to get the chores done. For his part, Acord accepted the work more out of a desire to help Kay than a need for the little money she could offer. Somehow, the arrangement pleased them both. Acord had given Kay her own Scottish deerhound (a nephew of Gefion's, and a mixed blessing, named Douglas). He had also given her some of his early works of sculpture, including a small, rough (and, by then, broken) concrete casting of a helmeted, cone-breasted Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom and technical skill. The bust, in two pieces, sat in the woods beside the house. My discovery of the piece fulfilled Jim's childhood archeological fantasies; I did wonder about it. (I didn't find out for fifteen years that Jim had been its creator.)

It turned out that he and I had a few friends in common, but then everyone in Seattle seemed to know everyone else in those days. In any case, my wife and I ran into Acord at parties now and then, and sometimes he'd come by the house. There was not much chance to get to know him, however. He was preoccupied, as usual, with his jobs, his work, and his girlfriends, and he was spending most of his time near the town of Index, in the Cascades, where he'd made a down payment on a cabin. We went to visit him there one time, more for the mountain air than the art. We learned

nothing at all of his alchemical experiments, and we saw very little of his work. The only piece I remember from that trip was a thick log, six feet high, stripped of bark and inset with bronze disks.

I reminded Acord of that sculpture when he and I went back to Index not long ago. We had driven up from Seattle one afternoon, stopping in Sultan to pick up cigarettes and snacks. Now we were sitting on the deck of a friend's house overlooking the Skykomish River, waiting until sunset to hike to our real destination, the falls nearby. Below us, the river, about a hundred feet wide at that point, swept by at a brisk but dignified clip; only the broad gravel wash on the far bank suggested what a torrent it could be during the spring runoff. "I always liked that piece,"



Acord said as he popped the cap on a beer—a local brew we had bought on the strength of its hand-printed label and the old saying that the closer the brewery, the better the beer. "I was already thinking about stone and steel, but wood and bronze was the best I could do at the time. See, I'd been wanting to make *big* stuff, really monumental sculpture, and I was looking for a way to increase my vocabulary. Well, jewelry had shown me that one way to do that was to combine different materials. Ray Jensen and Phil McCracken had always tried to steer me in the opposite direction, of course. They thought that it was impossible to express the essence of more than one material at a time, and in a way they were right." Acord took a swig and grimaced. We both held our bottles up to the light; there was a good inch of yeast in the bottom, clearly visible through the brown glass. "I mean, you could see it in a lot of sculpture. Sometimes the materials just didn't work together—kinda like this beer, in fact—and they were structurally weak as well. Dissimilar materials tend to decay at different rates, and often the bonding is the first thing to go." The challenge, then, was to take advantage of the interplay of unlike materials without undermining the physical and spiritual integrity of the sculpture.

As it happened, Acord had been working on the problem for years, without realizing it. Once he recognized the question, the answer came

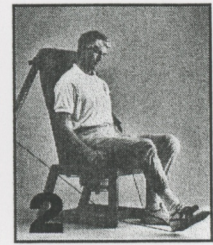
quickly, a gift from his old friends—birds' nests, seedpods, and the carcasses of crustaceans and small mammals. In particular, his drawings of bones and teeth revealed a firm, natural way to join dissimilar materials, and they also helped him understand the relationship between the materials themselves. Rough, porous bone and dense, glossy teeth, so dissimilar in appearance, were in fact just variations of a single material, produced by the same organism, by the same growth process—indeed, by the same cells—differing only in the details of their DNA. "And then I made the connection to the extraction of metal from stone, where the ore is crushed and refined and inoculated with a new crystalline code. Same process." This revelation gave a new dimension to his work. Now his purpose was not only to translate his ideas into metal and stone but also to perfect the idiom of the two materials, in order to express the essence of each and its relation to the other.

As for the materials themselves, Acord could eliminate most candidates simply by looking around Seattle. The politics of contemporary outdoor art—publicly funded, selected by committee, with construction and siting contracted to the lowest bidder—dictates the use of cheap materials. Most of the new commissions that Acord saw going up in the sixties and seventies were built of low-grade concrete, scrap carbon steel, discarded curbstones, and similar materials. As he knew from his own experience, many of these pieces would not last the lifetime of their creators. Furthermore, in a corrosive environment even good materials age fast, flaked away at the bottom by salt, melted down from the top by acid rain, and blackened all over by soot. The problem is compounded when different media are combined; indeed, the materials can be destructive of one another. Bronze and limestone, for example, look great together at first; that's why you see so many plaques and castings set in a limestone base. But after a few years and a few good rainstorms, the patina of the bronze begins to erode and drip down the face of the stone in moldy-looking streaks. Meanwhile, minute thermal expansions of the mounting pins pulverize their limestone sockets, so that the

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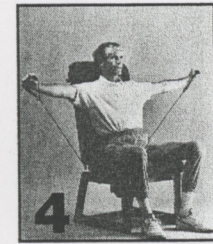
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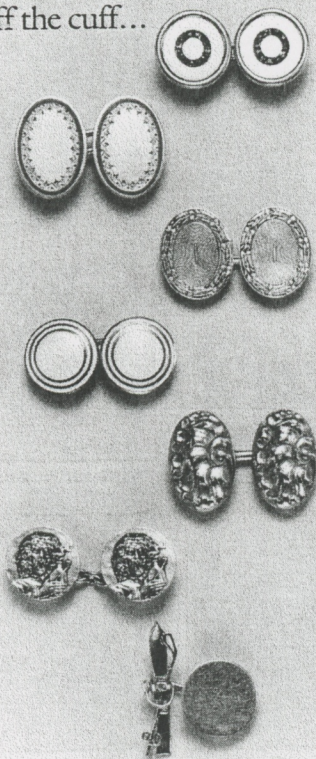
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bronze effectively loosens its own bonding. In order to survive in a corrosive atmosphere and a hostile environment (anticipating anything from random vandalism, through a major earthquake, to a full-scale nuclear attack), Acord figured, his work would require materials of high density, low surface porosity, and low chemical reactivity. The only materials that filled the bill were high-grade stainless steel and granite.

Since his first step up from salt blocks to brick, Acord had pushed himself toward ever more durable and intractable substances. The choice of granite was a logical extension of that process, but the decision involved more than logic. As it happened, Acord had established an intimate relationship with granite long before he began to carve seriously. For a number of years, he was an avid rock-climber, of the technical sort. When he was most deeply involved in the sport, he regularly led groups at the 5.8 level, at a time when the highest degree of difficulty was 5.10. The top level has since been pushed to 5.14, and Acord has retired from active climbing; nevertheless, he has occasionally practiced techniques at 5.11 and 5.12. In other words, he excelled in rock climbing, just as he had in riflery. Technical climbing demanded strength, courage, and, even more than riflery, sustained concentration and precise coordination. It was a lot more thrilling, too. During the early seventies, Acord spent a lot of time spread-eagled on sheer escarpments, trusting his fingers and toes to grip the granite, and trusting the granite to hold his weight. With adrenaline focussing his attention, and with his eyes three inches away from the rock, he had ample opportunity to study granite at close range.

Acord left a lot of himself on the rocks. His first wife was a climber; climbing was, in fact, the basis of their relationship—not quite enough to sustain the marriage for more than a few months. The cliffs had claimed the lives of several of his friends, including his closest climbing buddy, who fell to his death before Acord's eyes. Acord himself got his share of scrapes and bruises, and broken bones now and then—nothing so serious that he couldn't go back up as soon as the cast was set. But it was not enough for him to cohabit with the rock; inevitably, he had to try to shape it. Every few years,

starting in the early nineteen-sixties, he took a crack at some small granite boulder he had brought in from the mountains or the beach. Like a recalcitrant lover, the stone refused to yield. Matched against Acord's hammer and untipped, mild-steel chisels, the granite always won.

IN 1974, on the eve of his thirtieth birthday, Acord made a list. He had been an aspiring artist for twenty years and a professional sculptor for twelve. All that time, he had been gathering ideas and learning techniques. Yet now that he finally knew what he wanted to do, he still didn't know quite how to do it. So he wrote down all the skills he would need to make the kind of sculpture he dreamed of, and thus charted a quest for the status of master in a guild of which he was the only member. Happily, he could already check off some items on the list, like welding and wood carving. He could improve his knowledge of other areas, like pattern-making and casting, in shops around Seattle. A few, more arcane skills, like electroplating, could be put off for a few years, but he knew where to go to learn. Granite carving was his highest priority, and his greatest problem. His own experiments were getting him nowhere, and there was no one around to teach him.

When Acord felt defeated by his struggles with stone, cemeteries gave him hope. He was not concerned with the contents of the tombs, or with the artistry of the carvings. He was interested in the qualities of stone and the techniques of stonework, and the graves gave him a syllabus for his study. The dates of the markers provided an accurate gauge of the durability of different varieties of stone, and the markers themselves offered a glossary of carving vocabulary—ornamental lettering, folds of cloth, surface textures, scrollwork, and so on. "I could walk in a cemetery and I could look at those homely little carvings in granite and say, 'If I could do that, I could do what I'm trying to do.'" He supplemented his graveyard investigations with research in libraries, and gradually he grew familiar with the varieties of stone: different grades of marble from Italy, Vermont, and Tennessee; limestone from Indiana; and, of course, granite—red from South Dakota, pink from North Carolina, black from Pennsylvania and California (and now India



"I suppose one could say that stress is an inescapable part of the human condition."

and Finland), gray from Georgia, Washington, and New England, a pale brown from New Hampshire (prized by some, but not by Acord, for its fleshlike tone), and a blotchy Midwestern blend of pink, brown, and gray, known in the stone trades as "pukestone."

Visits to the back lots of monument dealers provided him with further information. At one point, he went out to visit the quarries at Big Stone Lake, in South Dakota, where he found huge saws and cranes and polishers—fascinating pieces of equipment—but no carvers. In fact, he discovered, most major quarries around the country specialize in mass-produced tombstones and cladding panels—the exterior veneer that the *Times* critic Paul Goldberger has called "stone wallpaper." If he wanted to carve granite, he was told again and again, there was only one place to learn: Barre, Vermont. That was good news, in a way, because no stone he had studied held up better than Barre granite; in some cases, the lettering on Barre stones was still clear and crisp, the polish smooth and shiny after a century or more. Best of all, Barre had the color he loved most, the luminous gray of the Cascade mountains.

The trouble was, he didn't really want to go. Acord had been a nomad for most of his life, but always within a narrow territory. Now that he had a place of his own, he was not eager to pull up and move across country. He was particularly reluctant to leave behind the falls on the south fork of the Skykomish, his favorite spot for pondering the problems of art and life. It was there that he had drawn up his list, and there, too, that he had experienced some early revelations about the unity of mass and void and the relationship of sculptor and sculpture. "But then, in another visit to the falls, meditating again on the granite and the water, I realized that I had to go to Barre," he told me. "I thought, Aha, you know, two things are there—the granite that I liked, just visually, and also the skill level. It's funny when you think about it, but in order to get deeper into the mountains I had to leave."

IN December, 1978, Acord set out for Barre, with Gefion riding shotgun in the cab of his pickup. The trip lasted nearly seven months, but by the time he arrived the design for his masterwork was substantially complete. Characteristically, Acord took the long

way around, heading first for Los Angeles, where he visited friends. Next, he devoted a full week to an empirical investigation of the durability of stone in the graveyards of New Orleans. Even there, in what Acord calls "a hothouse of corrosive atmosphere," Barre gray held up well long after other stones had melted. He went on to visit his parents, who had retired to Florida, but his search for reconciliation (and an advance on his small inheritance) ended in a draw; his mother, ever the schoolteacher, dictated spelling lessons, which he painstakingly copied in his sketchbook and then promptly forgot.

Turning north, Acord settled in for six weeks with a childhood friend in Washington, D.C.,

where he was pursuing research at the National Gallery and the Library of Congress. He started out looking for documentary evidence of the durability of granite, and what he discovered more than confirmed his own observations and instinct. Solid-granite batholiths were the preferred location for underground doomsday command centers, like Cheyenne Mountain, in Colorado. Granite in general has the capacity, unparalleled among other naturally occurring materials, to withstand both the blast and the radiation of a nuclear explosion. "The heat will do some damage to the surface," Acord acknowledges, "but when it comes to structural integrity what you're worried about is the shock wave. Well, at about ten thousand metres you'd have virtually no damage. And really sound granite may very well survive a nuclear explosion as near as a thousand metres. If you're talking about sculpture, you know, you might lose a nose, fingertips, but the statue would remain."

The different figures on blast resistance showed that while all granite is hard, not all granites are created equal. The stone begins life deep in the core of the earth as a molten dough that cools into crystalline silicates—feldspars, hornblendes, micas, and quartz. If the

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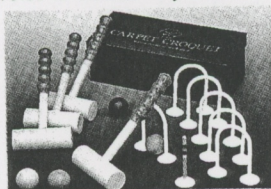
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magma cools slowly as it seeps to the surface, the different crystals may continue to grow until they are several inches across. This mottled texture is fascinating to observe but unstable under stress: hairline cracks between the crystals make the stone brittle and fragile, and the unequal hardness of the particles makes it jarring to carve. In a fast-cooling stone—like Barre gray, as it happens—the crystals never have a chance to grow. The tiny particles blend tightly together in a uniform fabric of high density and low absorptivity.

The feldspars, hornblendes, micas, and quartz make up about ninety-eight per cent of the rock, and most chemical analyses of the stone stop there, listing the final two per cent as "trace elements." But those trace elements were precisely what Acord was looking for. He wanted to identify the characteristic metal of granite—the one he

could extract from the stone to create an integral fusion of dissimilar materials. What he found was uranium. Amid the apatite, allanite, ilmenite, zircon, and other elements, granite contained enough uranium (as a chemical compound) to make the stone measurably radioactive. Indeed, a January, 1980, article in *Scientific American* later pointed out that granite was the main conduit for bringing uranium to the surface of the earth. The heavy metal was most easily recoverable from sedimentary deposits formed as the granite eroded, the authors noted, but they concluded that if the price of uranium rose high enough, granite itself could be profitably mined for its uranium content. (Indeed, such a mine already existed in Namibia.) That reminded Acord of the medieval practice of burning classical marble sculptures for their lime content: a sobering but somehow exciting thought. He later turned up a study published by the Atomic Energy Commission—which naturally liked to proclaim its own safety standards—showing that the average nuclear worker received an annual radiation dose comparable to that of a porter standing patiently in front of the granite walls of Grand Central Terminal. On the surface, the claim would seem to rank with Ronald Reagan's contention that trees produce pollution. On the other hand, perhaps that's why it's so difficult these days to find a

porter. In any event, Acord's interest in durability had driven him to a material that could resist radioactivity and yet was itself mildly radioactive. He had his characteristic metal, but he could not use it in a visible combination with the granite.

Acord's next stop was New York. He was drawn to the stone, bones, and fossils in the American Museum of Natural History, of course, but he spent most of the next three weeks poring over the medieval and Renaissance art in the Metropolitan Museum and the Cloisters.



He was particularly impressed by the reliquaries, designed to preserve sacred objects, and the monstrosities, designed to display the Host before Communion. "I already knew of sculpture as a way of preserving and communicating ideas and emotions over endless spans of time, and I must

have known about reliquaries in an abstract sort of way," he told me. "I'd been putting things in sculpture for a long time, after all, though that wasn't the purpose of my work. I guess the idea of actually preserving an object really hit me in the Cloisters. It crossed my mind that here these medieval sculptors had an excellent reason for making durable sculpture, and that was because it was going to contain something sacred. What also struck me was the visual relationships between mass and void, the outer surfaces and the inner preserved things. Quite frankly, I even found the empty reliquaries especially poignant." He meant poignant. "There are some, you know, in which I suppose the fingernail of the saint got boosted, or the hair of the Virgin turned to dust, or maybe some cold night someone threw a sliver of the True Cross into the fire to warm up. There's always the human element that haunts these things."

Acord had been doing sketches of a horse's skull since 1977, playing with ideas for his first major granite carving. He now began to see the skull as part of a large containment vessel, to be titled "Monstrance for a Grey Horse." He was not yet sure what he wanted to preserve; the answer—uranium—was already inscribed in his sketchbook, but it would be several years before he discovered the connection. Before he left New York, however, Acord did manage to solve an-

other design problem: the visible combination of stone and metal. The medieval galleries of the Met—specifically, Arms and Armor—once again provided the key. “I’d been thinking about—oh, maybe stainless-steel eyeballs or teeth,” he said. “That was one solution. But my drawings of crabs and shrimps and things had also encouraged me to think about the concept of the exoskeleton, a hard outer surface with a different material inside. So when I saw the medieval equestrian armor I knew it was just what I was looking for. Two different materials, two shapes that had been designed to go together. I could show their relationship more clearly by leaving a space between them, the void that would have been filled with skin and hair and flesh. It all clicked right in. The connections—Connections like that seem to happen almost instantaneously. I mean, the visualization process is faster than even a speed freak’s words could keep up with.” Acord caught his breath. “I don’t know, I’m really best off when I don’t try to describe some of these things. English is a second language to me, you know, as are all other human tongues. But these are things that are revealed in the way the wind blows a crumpled newspaper down the street sometimes, moving from shadow to shade and sunlight again. I can see it in the shapes. I mean, you know right away when you’ve solved some problems. A whole bunch of things drop into place.” He could see the shapes now: an invisible cylinder in a frustum, a horse’s skull with mask. The materials, too, were beginning to come clear: a sacred substance embedded in granite; the granite sheathed (in part) with stainless steel. It was time to begin work.

ACORD finally reached Vermont in June of 1979. Even before he arrived in Barre, he was sure he had come to the right place. Once he had crossed over from New Hampshire, at White River Junction, he began to meet more and more tractor-trailers loaded with granite. Then, on the outskirts of Barre, an eight-by-twelve-foot monolith welcomed him to the Granite Center of the World—a claim endorsed by the Lions, Rotary, Kiwanis, and Jaycees, their logos and meeting times sandblasted into the stone.

Acord checked in to the cheapest motel he could find, and began to scout



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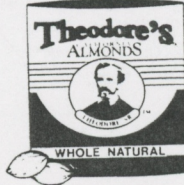
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out his new home. Everywhere he looked, there was stone. In residential neighborhoods, rickety frame houses stood on granite foundations, and mailboxes rested on granite posts. Downtown buildings were mainly brick—here, as elsewhere in this country, the distinction of solid stone construction was reserved for banks, churches, and the public library—but even modest office buildings were massively trimmed with granite along their bases, rooflines, corners, and windows. Underfoot, the walkways were covered in cobblestones, pebbles, or gravel. A powdery dust thickened the river and settled by the roadside in icy-looking patches of mud.

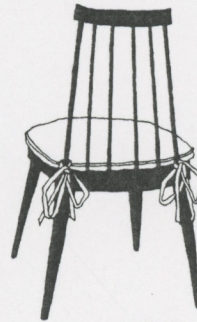
The source of it all was the quarries—steep pits up to five hundred feet deep, sunk into the hills around town.

The quarrymen used high-velocity torches, twenty-foot channelling drills, and delicate charges of primer cord to split blocks weighing thousands of tons. The Rock of Ages Corporation, the biggest employer in Barre, claims the world record for the largest single block of stone ever quarried: it measured twenty-four feet by eighty by two hundred, and weighed about thirty-two thousand five hundred tons, or nearly half the current annual production. In terms of sheer weight, the granite business was a heavy industry.

Barre claims to be the world's largest quarrier of dimensional granite. No quarry offers a better stone. The quick-cooled vein of rock that runs through the town has a remarkably fine and even texture. Barre granite gets its soft, dove-gray color from two kinds of feldspar—oligoclase mixed with a bit of microcline. Two types of mica—colorless muscovite and black biotite—sprinkle the stone with a salt-and-pepper glitter. An unusually high quartz content, up to thirty per cent in some samples, adds sparkle and strength. In all, Barre gray is nearly as hard as sapphire and yet is as accommodating to the carver as a granite can be.

For more than a century, Barre has survived, and sometimes thrived, on "memorial art." The Barre Granite Association, the manufacturer's trade group, boasts that its members will memorialize you in any way you choose—with a lifelike trout the size

of a small shark, or a three-foot soccer ball, or a full-size replica of your Mercedes limousine. Most of their offerings, however, consist of mass-produced gravestones, ground out, literally, on an assembly line. Diamond-tipped rotary blades, up to twelve feet in diameter, or gangs of wire saws, up to seven strands at a time, cut the blocks of rough stock into slabs, like so many slices of bread. Automated polishers with a series of graded grits



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grind the surface to a mirrorlike finish. Vertical wire saws, like giant jigsaws, shape the stone. Stencil-cutters slap on adhesive rubber mats and slice out patterns with X-Acto knives. Sandblasters, in big rubber suits and helmets that make them look like astronauts, rout out borders and roses, names and dates, with jet-propelled steel shot.

In the old days, floral work and lettering were sculptors' jobs—stages on the path to mastery, or to a journeyman's career. New technology has taken most of those jobs away, just as changing tastes have diminished the call for some of the carver's more elaborate skills. In 1900, the industry employed over a hundred sculptors (known as "sculptures" in the local dialect). By 1948, the number had dropped to about ten, and the manufacturers of gravestones had to recruit five new carvers from Italy. When Acord arrived, there were seventeen sculptors, with steady, low-paid work and a precarious future. They lived for the occasional commission of a full-round statue, but they lived off a constant demand for low-relief niches in upright dies.

In all, Barre seemed a town out of place and out of time, a Depression-era industrial city in miniature, set amid the covered bridges, cow pastures, maple groves, and ski slopes of central Vermont. But Acord didn't mind. After three days of exploration, he was only slightly disillusioned. The brutal cubism of the quarries offended his rock-climber's sensibilities, but he couldn't help admiring the scale of the work; after all, he dreamed of carving mountains himself someday. The sculpture that came out of the sheds had no more appeal for him than concrete foundations or welded sewer pipe, but he still longed to learn the skill that had produced it. In any event, he was well beyond the point of no return. He

had left New York with his last twenty dollars in his pocket, and the motel was running him six dollars a day.

When Acord stopped in at the Barre Granite Association to inquire about an apprenticeship, he was told that there was only one place to go—the Frank Gaylord Sculpture Studios. The large manufacturers would not take on an inexperienced carver, and most independent sculptors could not afford to, but Gaylord's shop was just the right size. And Gaylord himself enjoyed a reputation as Barre's most distinguished artist: he was a member of the National Sculpture Society—a prosperous group of corporate portraitists and Franklin Mint types—and his work was frequently featured in *Barre Life*, *Stone in America*, and other organs of the monument industry. He could carve as well as anyone, but he preferred to concentrate on design and hire others to cut the stone. Acord went to visit Gaylord on a Monday, and by Wednesday he was at work.

I once asked Gaylord what Acord had been like as an apprentice, and he launched into a litany of tales about Acord's prodigious capacity for alcohol, his string of girlfriends, and his many colorful exploits, including the time he disguised himself as a blind man so that Gefion (also in disguise) could accompany him on an airplane as the world's tallest Seeing Eye dog. Of Acord's work Gaylord said, "He could do anything. He could weld, he could do the carpentry, he could cast better than I ever could. He had some difficulty with faces, but as long as a thing would hold still Jim could draw it. And sculpture, any art, is all drawing. You either draw with a chisel or a paintbrush or a pencil or a modelling scratch—it's all the same mental process. Now, not everyone agrees with that, of course—one guy used to tell me, 'Pencil don't cut nothin'.' But I say if you can do it with a pencil you can do it with a chisel."

Acord spent his first month in the studio on probation, roughing out sculptures and doing odd jobs around the shop. Then, when it came time for him to join the Granite Cutters' International Association, Gaylord gave him a test. He sketched a niche on a granite slab, drew a line through the middle, and proceeded to carve out one side,

leaving the other side for Acord to finish. "That's what I do with any new man that I'm giving a tryout," Gaylord told me. "I say, 'You look at me and see what I can do. I'm not showing off, I'm just going to show you what I can do.' And you say to yourself, 'If that son of a bitch can do it, I can do it.' And Jim could. He wasn't afraid."

A modern stone shed is a far cry from the romantic image of a sculptor's studio, with soft shafts of light cutting through a faint haze of stone dust, and the mellifluous *chink-chink-chink* of chisel on rock. Most of the carving these days is done with pneumatic tools, and the deep throbbing of the air compressor, felt as much as heard, provides a constant background. Plug drills, used to rough out the sculpture, look and sound like small jackhammers. Smaller carving machines, with pistons no more than an inch and a quarter in diameter, put out a high-pitched chatter. Tiny diamond-tipped rotary saws—a recent innovation—scream and grind like a satanic dentist's drill.

Acord likes to point out that sculpture is the most capital intensive of the arts, that stonework is the most expensive brand of sculpture, and that granite carving is the most expensive kind of stonework. A granite carver's tool chest may hold over a hundred chisels, with list prices ranging from seventeen-fifty, for an eighth-inch carbide-tipped machine chisel, through fifty-two dollars, for a nine-point (a square-shanked bit with a head like a small meat tenderizer), to more than a hundred and fifty dollars, for an eight-cut bush chisel (a club sandwich of eight thin blades bolted onto a single shank). A sculptor needs from three to eight dupli-



cates of each, because the blades lose their edge after fifteen minutes of carving at top speed. Sculptors sharpen their tools themselves, but the carbide tips must be replaced from time to time, and the shanks sometimes shatter. The tool bill for a full-time stone carver can run to several hundred dollars a week.

Even with a carving machine, stonework is exhausting, and dangerous as well. Workers are supposed to wear hard hats and gloves, an air mask for

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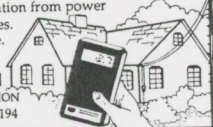
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protection against the dust, acoustic earmuffs against the noise, and goggles against flying chips of stone and broken chisels. Each work space must be equipped with at least one three-inch suction pipe, to vacuum the dust as it sprays from the carving. But the granite can still take its revenge on unwary workers. Hernias and smashed toes are frequent, and small abrasions from the quartz crystals are a constant annoyance. Acord says, "The joke in Barre is that you're a journeyman when you've lost enough skin off both hands to make an apron out of."

In his early weeks in Barre, Acord had no objection to executing other people's work: it allowed him to develop his technique and study the design solutions of different sculptors. In a way, he actually relished the anonymity: after his first visit to New York, in fact, he had seriously contemplated reincorporating himself as the Unknown Master of the Inner Cloister (but decided instead to stick with the name he had chosen in 1975, Atomic Plasma Sculpture Works). The steady diet of pious images soon got on his nerves, however, and after a couple of months with Gaylord he decided to set up a studio of his own, in a small warehouse. (He continued to work part time for Gaylord.) Within a few weeks he had acquired a compressor, suction, carving machines, and blades, all bought at auction from retiring carvers and bankrupt stone sheds. He had a bed, a drawing table and chair, a Primus stove and a bar refrigerator, and a space heater powerful enough to thaw his hands (and not much else). He had picked out a spot in the quarry that looked particularly promising, and ordered a three-ton chunk from the next block to come up from that area. Meanwhile, he took some grout—waste granite—from Gaylord's studio, and began to experiment with designs of his own.

The first night, almost as soon as he started working, there was a knock on the door. Louis Partlow, the business representative of the Granite Cutters' International Association, was curious to find out why a union member was cutting stone after hours. Acord invited him in to see for himself, but Partlow declined. A week later, after carving in his own studio through the weekend, Acord arrived at work on Monday to find the union representative registering a complaint with Gaylord.

Partlow *knew* that no worker in his right mind would carve for the fun of it, and he had concluded that Acord must be making "black markers"; that is, cut-rate gravestones that took profits from the manufacturers and wages from the union men. Articles 5 and 19 of the contract between the granite manufacturers and the G.C.I.A. expressly forbade any union member to cut stone in any place outside the shed where he was employed, and at any time outside the normal working hours. Exceptions had to be approved in writing by Louis Partlow himself. Violators were subject to dismissal from their jobs and suspension from the union.

In a conversation I once had with Partlow, he had little to say about Acord ("A good boy, a nice young sculpture"), but he was eager to discuss the union's warm relations with the manufacturers ("Fabulous"). Partlow's forebears would not have expected this response. Ninety years ago, Acord often points out, the unions were radical, sculptors led the unions, and men gave their lives for what they believed in. In those days, Barre was a regular stop on speaking tours by the likes of Emma Goldman, Big Bill Haywood, Mother Jones, and Eugene V. Debs. In recent years, however, the G.C.I.A. has grown weaker and less militant. Acord decided to ignore the union. He simply kept on carving while the union rep kept on complaining. Then, in 1980, Acord invited everyone in the industry to a Halloween party at his studio. Two hundred people showed up, including Louis Partlow. "He didn't stay long," Acord recalled recently. "About ten minutes. That was long enough to get a good look at 'Monstrance' and an eyeful of a lot of women roller-skating in the middle of the floor. I think it was all too much for him, and after that there were no more complaints about black markers."

WHEN Partlow met "Monstrance," Acord had been working on the sculpture for six months; the four-foot pedestal was nearly complete, and the outline of the horse's skull was vaguely visible at the top. By the time Acord left Barre, in 1981, the skull had clearly emerged from the stone, but it was not until 1986 that he felt the work worthy of his signature. (He carved it on the bottom, where it

will not be seen.) Even now, "Monstrance" is still far from finished. Acord has left some webbing—supporting stone—in the nose and mouth, to be cut away when the piece is installed. The two-foot-high two-stepped, bevelled-edge base with rock-pitched sides—a difficult stoneworker's technique used to imitate natural stone—will not be completed until the final site is selected. The metal helmet (which Acord now hopes to cast from a classified alloy of titanium) will require substantial funding, and also permission from the Department of Defense. Finally, of course, there is the nuclear material. In June of 1989, Acord cored a two-foot cylinder in the base where the Fiesta ware will be stored, but the container has yet to be constructed and filled.

The slow progress is largely the result of Acord's difficulties in financing the work, but it also reflects the complexity of the piece and the perfectionism of its creator. Acord wanted "Monstrance" to be a masterpiece in the medieval sense—a work that demonstrated all the skills required of a master craftsman. In the stonework, at least, he has reached his goal, displaying the full vocabulary of surfaces and techniques cited in the Stoneworkers' Manual.

The column tapers from eighteen by thirty-one inches at the bottom to eleven by twenty-four inches at the top. Its surface has the texture of very fine sandpaper, apparently smooth to the eye but rough enough to refract a lot of light; depending on the time of day, the color runs from ghostly gray to sooty white. Acord could have achieved more or less the same shape and surface by having the rough block cut with a wire saw and then blasted with ball bearings to produce a sparkly "stepped" finish. Instead, he chose to cut down to the trapezoidal planes with plug drills, pound away the excess granite with a four-point, rough out the surface with a nine-point, and finish it with a four-cut bush chisel. The only evidence of his hard work and careful engineering is small hash marks, like faint brushstrokes, left by the four parallel blades.

The sides of the pedestal meet in bevelled margins that taper from about two inches in width to an inch and a half, emphasizing the upward thrust of the frustum. Acord worked out the proportions by eye (and a lot of heavy

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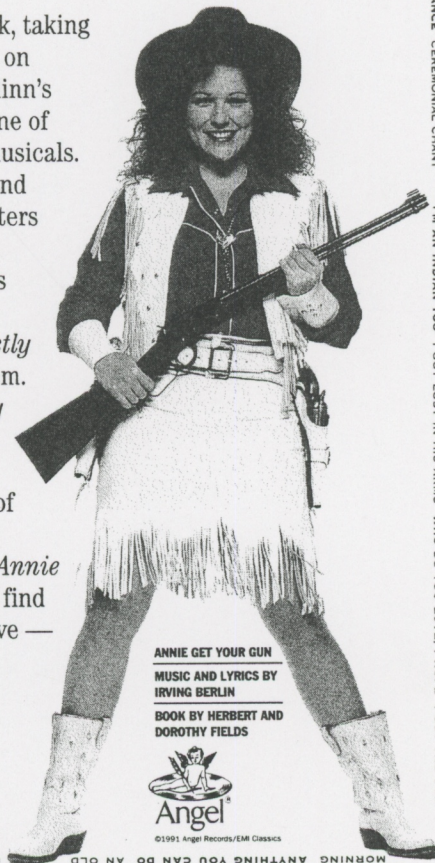
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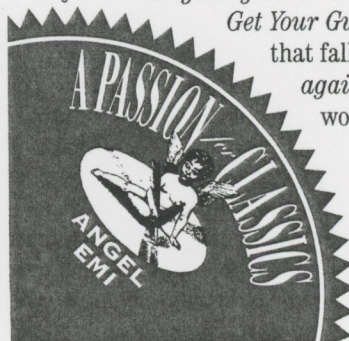
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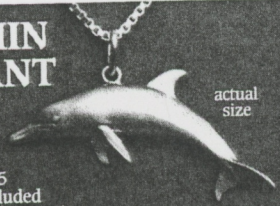
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labor), and then discovered that the relation of all the complex angles corresponded to some auspicious architectural formula (which he can no longer remember). Certainly the result looks inevitable, like the fluted bulge on a Doric column. To heighten the contrast with the bushy surface of the sides, Acord planed down the margins with a two-inch-wide chisel held almost parallel to the stone. When the quartz crystals are rubbed flat by this method, there are fewer facets to throw back the light, and the stone takes on a bluish cast. The technique, known as bluing, leaves a slight roughness to the touch, but the texture is as close to a polish as you can get with a carving machine. Bluing and bushing are often used together to enhance three-dimensional effects, especially in deep-flowing corrugations in the robes of saints and Virgins. Side by side, the surfaces seem to differ not in texture but in light and color. The combination is subtle, a kind of tangible chiaroscuro.

On "Monstrance," the tapered pedestal leads the eye to the horse's head. Above a crisp border at the top of the column, the stone is hand pointed with a hammer and chisel, producing a pebbly texture that looks like natural granite, a fine-grained echo of the planned rock-pitching on the base. The skull itself rises out of the rough stone like a fossil. After the subtle simplicity of the column, the horse head bursts forth in a rich interplay of planes and curves. The surface is a sampler of finishing techniques, yielding a range of colors from bone white to the slate-blue shade of the North Atlantic in winter. To bring out a sun-bleached brightness along the top of the nose and cheeks, Acord attacked the stone with a single chisel perpendicular to the surface, cracking the crystals one at a time. The eye sockets sink two inches into the skull, their sides polished to enhance the darkness and their bottoms bushy to give just a twinkle of light from within. The zygomatic arch, or cheek, a blued shadow on its underside, bends sharply beneath the eye. The molars, each one different from its neighbor, line up evenly, six to a side, to divide the skull horizontally. The elliptical mouth cuts

clear through the stone, a small void within the mass. Different levels of polish give the gleam of enamel to the teeth and the slickness of saliva to the mouth.

The skull does not reveal all its riches at first glance; indeed, some changes in texture are detectable only to the touch. Seen in profile—that is, from the front of the sculpture—the head at first appears to be a starkly literal rendition of animal bone, austere, naturalistic, and nearly two-dimensional. As you shift your position, however, the piece comes alive. The shapes are so varied and so complex that the slightest change in angle alters your entire impression of the work. Viewed head on, the skull sweeps back in radical perspective, the polished incisors project forward in a menacing smile, the cheekbones spread out like

wings, and the eye sockets flare in a furious stare. The back of the head appears to be an entirely different sculpture; it resembles an abstract, low-relief Romanesque return, the corner decoration in a frieze. Only the very tall (or someone with a stool handy) can see the domed cranium, surmounted by the crossing of the parietal bones.

I have thought, from time to time, that "Monstrance" might be a white knight from some gargantuan chess set, or a memento mori for a Horseman of the Apocalypse. Acord maintains, however, that he just liked the way the skull looked. "Well, the horse was a shape I was familiar with," he reminded me once. "After all, I'd been a cowboy for a year. Proportion and size were real important, too, and a horse's skull was just the thing for a stone that was five feet high, with a top two feet long by a foot wide. It also gave me a chance to work with a long linear shape, which is much less boring than a spherical shape like a human skull."

"But the more I look at it..." I said.

"The more abstract it gets, yeah. And I know I can clearly remember putting away some of the horses' teeth that I was looking at and saying, 'To hell with it. Y'know, it's time to actually start developing the form here.' There comes a moment when you've got enough confidence to let your hands



Westman

carve by themselves. The mind disengages, it coasts, and the saurian brain takes over."

"Saurian brain?"

"It's your lizard brain," he said. "I love that—lizard brain. It's something very primitive, very basic, that you don't consciously control. In a way, you don't even need your eyes, but it's fun to watch the process as it unfolds. And *that* frees your mind to think ahead and imagine different possibilities. It's a higher state—I don't know how else to describe it. Your hands become an extension of your imagination, you're playing with form while you're carving, and the sculpture comes to life before your eyes. So the horse's skull was just a departure point. But it's still pretty close to the real thing. In the end, it turned out that the dimensions of the carving came within about one per cent of the real skulls I was looking at."

"The lower jaw isn't there," I pointed out.

"That's right, it isn't there. But the *shape* is there. Some of the subtleties—the way that mandible does a little double turn, for instance—now, those things in the end got very abstract. But the outer mass and form and direction of angle are just right to actually make the jaw work. And those upper teeth—Well, in fact, I've had two veterinarians look at it, and they were just flabbergasted, you know. They'd turn to me and shake their heads and say, 'Good teeth.'"

ACORD and I were walking in Hope Cemetery, which holds the largest, most elaborate collection of granite art in Barre, and perhaps the nation. As we walked, Acord pointed out various wonders of Barre craftsmanship: a full-round angel in front of a rock-pitched cross (a difficult trick to achieve without breaking the wings); a twelve-foot sarcophagus hollowed out from one end (a job that meant weeks of tunnelling for some unfortunate carver). "You know, for the past fifty—no, one hundred—years, the vast majority of practicing professional artists have come from backgrounds where to actually *do* something was not part of the program. The idea was enough. And, as a consequence, artists have been divorced from the mundane applications of the skills that they might use to express themselves. In other words, they don't paint billboards for a living.

There are exceptions, of course. Andy Warhol was one, but he drew a different lesson from his commercial experience. Most of the others aren't oriented in that direction at all, so even the best of their work has a certain shoddiness to it, technically speaking. And often that hasn't detracted from the power of the art in any way. Vincent van Gogh comes to mind here. He wasn't a very careful painter, you know, and they're having a lot of trouble preserving some of his paintings. Now, I don't hold that against Vincent at all. He was doing a helluva job, and his mind was on other things. But that made it easier for a whole school of people coming along afterward to also not pay much attention to technique. After all, it's a lot less work, and after a time it became almost a mannerism. So it then became easy to criticize work that was done in a more craftsmanlike way, because it immediately looked like something from the workplace rather than something in the artplace. You know, if it looks well done, it must be commercial, therefore it can't be art."

Acord stopped and patted his pockets. With his left hand, he took out a pack of cigarettes, shook one loose, and pulled it free with his lips just at the moment that his right hand brought up a lighted lighter and touched it to the tip. He took a deep drag and continued talking. "And then, on the other side, if you look around here you see a lot of good technique but not much in the way of new ideas. Even in the best work, there's often something missing." He bowed slightly and held out his arm to introduce me to Little Margaret, the grave marker of a young girl who died a century ago. Little Margaret's lace collar was a dainty web of perforations. The tiny hands on the pocket watch pinned to her dress told the hour of her death. One button of one of her boots had been left undone. Very fancy work. Yet the blankness of her expression suggested not tranquillity and peace but an eternal lack of spirit. And the exquisitely detailed boots appeared to contain two right feet. "I imagine that the guy who did this must have been a simple stone carver with ambitions," Acord said. "Whoever he was, he was good, real good, no doubt about that. But he could have used some help. In the Renaissance, you know, a lot of statues only received five to maybe eight per cent



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of their total work time from the hands of the Master himself. But great works were produced. The Master kept a close eye on his people while they were working. Went over and gave them advice, chastised them perhaps sometimes for not being careful enough. He watched, and when the time came, he took over. That doesn't happen anymore. Nowadays, as often as not, the artist just sketches something on a paper napkin, or whips up a model out of coat hangers and modelling clay, and sends it out for construction, leaving the craftsmen to try to figure out what he meant. He doesn't know what needs to be done, he couldn't do it himself, and he may not even see the piece again until it's installed. Now I no longer insist, like I used to, that the true artist must carry out every step himself. But there are, I still believe fervently, parts and portions of every sculpture project that must come to birth under the artist's hand alone, for it to really take on that inner life, that magic that makes a real work of sculpture—one that has the enduring capabilities of bristling the hair on the back of your neck centuries later."

ACORD's second winter in Barre was a long one. The aches in his body each freezing morning brought back vivid memories of old climbing accidents, and the fresh scrapes and bruises from the previous day's carving seemed to sting more sharply than they had before. He no longer found it romantic to chip through the ice on his leftover coffee. And these daily agonies were augmented by greater woes. In December, his cabin back in Index, on which he had been making payments all this time, burned to the ground; he suspected that a careless house sitter had fallen asleep with a cigarette in hand. There was no insurance, of course. Then, in February, Gefion took sick; in March, she went blind; in April, she had to be put down. Acord took her out for a final picnic in the country, and after lunch he dug her grave. Then he slipped from her neck a silver rabbit talisman he had cast for her years before, and shot her through the head with a Colt .41 revolver. One of his women friends planted a box of marigolds on the wooden awning above his studio door, a memorial to Gefion and a hopeful omen for the coming spring—if it ever arrived.

Meanwhile, Acord was quickly going broke. In order to make enough to live, let alone enough to support his own sculpture, he would have to work at Gaylord's full time (or overtime, if the union allowed it). But he knew what that would do to him. He had seen how the granite sapped the strength of his colleagues, and how the production line of kitsch drained their spirits. He knew mechanics and pipe fitters who had more creative spark and more passion for their work than many of the sculptors in Barre.

Acord figured that he had accomplished what he had come for, and there was no real need for him to stay on. He felt that he'd already suffered enough. ("Barre," he said. "Say it twice and it's a disease.") But then, in late winter, he began to hear rumors of a strike. The contracts for both quarriers and cutters were due up in May, and neither group was satisfied with management's proposals. On top of a salary offer lower than the rate of inflation, management was trying to cut back disability benefits and take away some of the union's privileges. The manufacturers of markers also wanted to install new equipment that might eliminate some workers' jobs. Acord was outraged (and secretly delighted). He saw an opportunity to get back at the companies, show up the G.C.I.A., and rekindle the flames of the radicalism of the nineteenth-century immigrants. He volunteered his services to the union, and, to his surprise, he was invited to chair the strike committee. When the membership voted to strike, in early May, Acord got busy.

The first order of business was to stop the manufacturers from shipping rough granite out of Barre. "As long as the raw product keeps moving, the manufacturers can keep up with their overhead," Acord explained at the time to a writer from *The Vermont Vanguard Press*. "The job of finishing stone is our legitimate work, and they're trying to get the work done elsewhere. As long as they can move granite, they'll never settle with us." Although the granite haulers were non-union, Acord's picketers were able to persuade most of them, through reasoned argument or force of personality, not to cross the lines. Roving bands of strikers patrolled the town to make sure that no trucks slipped out through the back streets. Strikers were not permitted to carry weapons of any sort, but

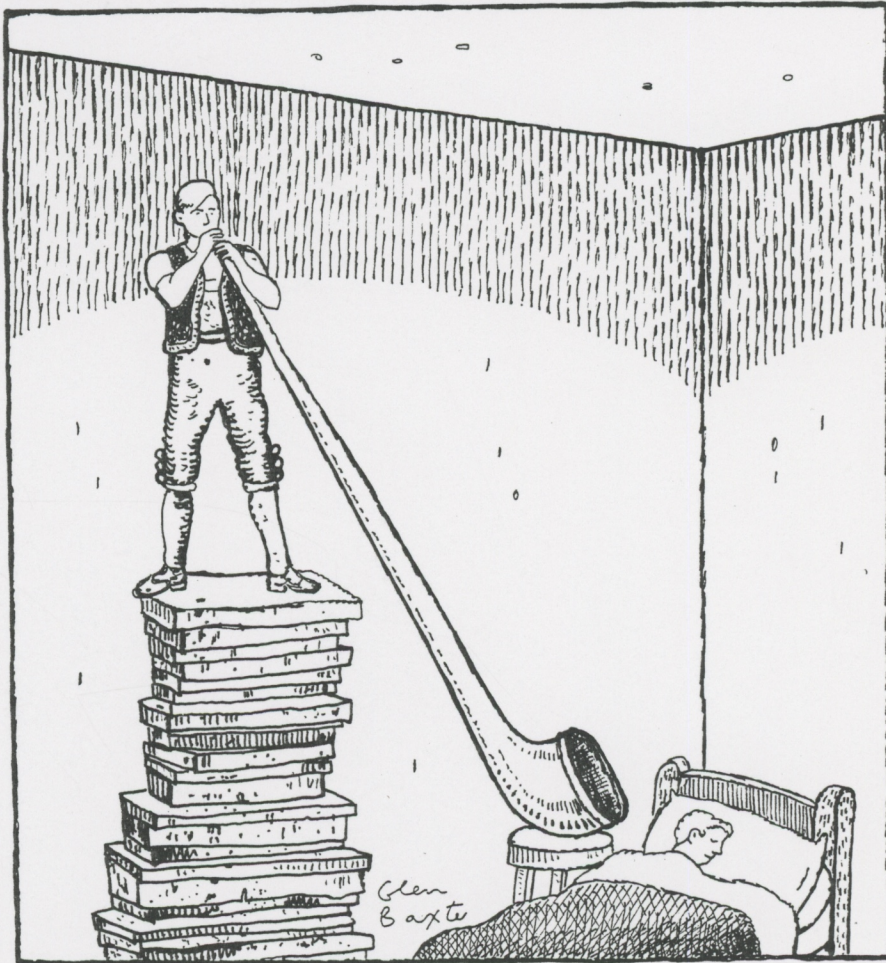
some of the men stapled their picket signs to baseball bats, until the police reminded them that there were also limits to the permissible dimensions of the sticks.

As head of the strike committee, Acord was carefully watched by Barre's finest. He was arrested along with other picketers for criminal trespass, but the charge was later dismissed. One night, he came home from the picket lines to discover a cruiser in front of his door and a policeman up on his roof, poking through his flower box, in search of marijuana among the marigolds. Finally, after following him one evening from picket line to picket line they nailed him for driving while intoxicated. Keeping up the men's spirits, Acord explained in court, was just part of his job as strike chairman. The judge fined him five hundred dollars and took away his license.

The strike ended after two weeks, when the granite cutters voted to accept a wage-and-benefits package that management had offered months before. The manufacturers also won the right to introduce new machinery, but a cosmetic compromise provided for consultation with the union. Furthermore, management now agreed to renegotiate salary after two years. The strikers' greatest victory, however, was the preservation of the right of the union representative to walk on any shop floor without permission. The union rep himself, Louis Partlow, contended, "It was a fairly decent strike. Mm-hmm."

Acord would have liked to keep fighting; the drama was cathartic. But when it was over he could at least console himself with the thought that the granite cutters had done better than the air-traffic controllers. In saving union rights, he felt, they had done something to revive the G.C.I.A.'s past and protect its future. The rank and file were sufficiently satisfied with Acord's performance to elect him president of Local 219. His presidency lasted less than six weeks.

Acord had been planning to spend his last months in Barre working on his own projects alone, but the convergence of financial and legal problems changed his mind. He could no longer afford to stay in Barre, and he could barely afford to leave. After his D.W.I. conviction, he resigned as president of Local 219 and posted notices of sales



LIFE WITH HANS WAS NOT ALWAYS A BOWL OF CHERRIES.

of his worldly goods—his household possessions, his welding equipment, his compressor, and the truck that had brought him to Vermont. The sales covered his debts and bought him a bus ticket to New York. Acord crated up his carving tools and two stones—"Monstrance for a Grey Horse" and the granite half of another work called "Reliquary for Two Hands"—and shipped them collect to himself in Seattle. He left behind a wax positive for the casting of the second reliquary hand, an eight-foot piece of black granite that he had just begun roughing out, and a lot of mixed emotions.

BACK in Index, on the deck of his friends' house, Acord looked up at the saw-toothed mountain. The shadows in the rills were growing darker and climbing higher. "This might be a good time to go take a look at the falls," he said, pulling himself to his feet. He held his beer bottle to the light

once more and then emptied it over the deck railing; a yeasty gray sludge oozed out and dropped down the slope in blobs. "That ought to make the earthworms happy," he remarked. We walked back through the house, out the front door, and into the woods. The river rustled softly on our right, out of sight behind a heavy curtain of evergreen. After a few hundred yards, we came to an old railroad trestle, still in use. As we walked across, Acord looked intently at the silvery rails against the iron-gray ties. "Good use of unlike materials," he commented. Just past the trestle, we followed a dirt road down toward the riverbank. A plank bridge crossed the end of a still pool, where the river backed up behind a wall of granite. We stood on the bridge and watched dragonflies dodging this way and that across the water. Clouds of gnats hovered just above the surface, a golden haze in the setting sun. The falls were still invisible, but the air

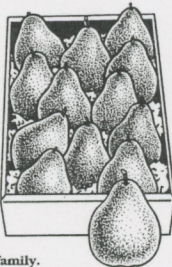
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grew heavy, and we could hear a hissing sound at the far end of the pool. "That's it," Acord said, pointing to a ten-foot gap in the granite wall—the spillway for the reservoir and the head of the falls. We moved on in that direction across a broad table of granite between the reservoir and the slope.

By the standards of Victoria or Niagara, the falls at Index are unspectacular. The riverbed drops just fifty feet in the space of a hundred yards, and eighty feet altogether in the course of a quarter mile. There is no dramatic panorama: on one side, the channel bends along the base of a cliff; on the other, a line of boulders, some left by the river and some brought by man, block the falls from view. For most of the year—except in spring and late autumn, when the water sweeps across the flat and up the sides of the valley—the cascade is confined to this narrow channel. The only way to see it is to climb inside.

As we scrambled over the wall of boulders, the hissing turned into a roar. On the opposite bank, the gray rock rose in great, sweeping curves to a height of eighty feet. "That's the scale I'm after!" Acord shouted. Then he gestured straight across, down closer to the water, where the cascade had chiselled a ten-foot-high frieze of delicately fluted, sharp-edged niches, each about the size and shape of the zygomatic arch on "Monstrance for a Grey Horse." "Good detail work, too."

Two feet below us, the water was tossing and tumbling, churning and frothing, twisting and spouting through the chute. It plunged past faster than the eye could follow, yet the strength of the current and the contours of the channel forced it into shapes that looked frozen in place. But looks deceive: what we were seeing was not quite water but a mousse, six feet deep, whipped up by the rocks. The occasional kayaker foolhardy enough to shoot these rapids loses buoyancy in the foam and gets ground up by the granite and the falls. Someone tries it just about every year, but the result is nearly always fatal.

We squatted on the rocks for a good long time, staring into the maelstrom. The atmosphere was terrifying and seductive. Surrounded by the sound, walled in by the rock, and bathed in

the moisture, I felt enveloped by the falls. The water seemed to beckon us to come even closer. I knew how quickly the current would knock me off balance and pull me down, but I was still strongly tempted to test the flow with a hand or a foot. I began to wonder where I could borrow a kayak.

In the slow-fading light of the summer's dusk, the water began to look grayer, harder, colder. My knees started aching, and the mist was giving me a chill. "Time to get back?" Acord sug-

gested. I pulled my gaze up with some difficulty, and again looked across at the far bank, just a few feet away. After half an hour of trying to hold the water steady, my eyes now made the hard rock swirl, and my head and stomach turned with it.

"I couldn't tell anymore what's liquid and what's solid," I said as we walked back along the table toward the bridge.

"Exactly," Acord replied. I wasn't telling him anything new. "I mean, you could see them as a single substance, two manifestations of a single force and entity. Because, you know, when you carve granite it's as if it were a frozen river, the way the grain and the structure runs in the stone. And when you look down into a quarry you can see the granite as it *flowed*, because in fact it did flow. For that matter, you can see it right here." He ran his hand along a striated outcropping. "Remember, granite is an igneous rock, and in its molten state it really was a liquid," he continued. "So the waterlike nature of the granite deposited it with a water pattern. Then it set up and became the surface of the planet. A lot later by our standards of time, but intermediate in the life of the granite, perhaps, it was exposed to real water, running water—like a river running, running through it, raindrops falling on it. The force of the water responds to the already existent pattern of fluidness in the stone, but the water sculpts the granite at the same time."

"Doesn't that mean that the water will eventually dissolve your sculpture, too?"

"Well, yeah, but not before the sculpture's done its job. I'm designing my work for thirty thousand years, but it'll probably last longer than that. I mean, it's taken Nature maybe a billion years to get these mountains in the



shape they're in. Don't get me wrong—she's done a nice job, a real nice job. But it's slow work, and, all things considered, the granite's holding up pretty well. Besides, it's mostly not a *dissolving* process. It's ablation. My sculpture will be subject to lots of destructive forces, no doubt, but I'm not planning on setting it up in the middle of a river."

Acord crouched down over a hole in the rock about the size and shape of an espresso cup. Around us I could see similar holes, anywhere from a shot glass to a highball in diameter, and all of them filled with water. The edges were as clean and smooth as if bored by a diamond bit. "During the spring, the river spreads out across this whole table, and these holes are like eddies in the current. The water is carrying little particles of granite. You can see 'em down in the bottom of the hole—grains of dust and small pebbles that bump into the solid mass and slowly wear it away. Then, in the winter, these little pools freeze up, and if they're along a fault the expansion might shear away some of the rock, and you get that fluted effect." He dug

his finger deep in the hole and fished out a pebble the size of a pea. "Yeah, it's self-carving stuff," he said, rolling the pebble in his hand. "If our lifetimes were a lot longer, I might have been a shoe salesman, or something. I wouldn't have had to do what I'm doing. But we can't wait millions of years, you know, and I can speed the process up so much."

IN January of 1986, five years after he left Barre, Acord finally finished carving the head and column of "Monstrance," and he turned his attention to a search for high-level radioactive waste. He briefly contemplated extracting uranium from his own granite waste. The uranium was in there, in amounts of between ten and twenty-five parts per million, and Acord knew how to get it out: he had long ago learned the alchemical techniques used by the German chemist Heinrich Klaproth, who first described the element, in 1789. But to get the amount of uranium he needed he would first have to crush about three million pounds of granite, and that was more than he thought he could handle with

his stone-carver's hammer. All he wanted was thirty-three pounds—roughly enough for a small nuclear device. Acord planned to separate the uranium into two subcritical masses securely isolated from one another; once sealed in the core of the sculpture, the fissile material would pose no threat to the environment. Even with his careful planning and skilled execution, however, he was fairly certain that no one would let him have a decommissioned warhead—at least, not right away.

Spent reactor fuel, on the other hand, seemed like a good compromise. "I kept hearing that everybody was trying to get rid of the stuff, you know, and I thought I'd help them out," Acord explained to me. "Additionally, there was a real appeal to spent fuel. I mean, here was this uranium that had been wrestled from the ground, its nuclear powers extracted, now totally amixed and cojoined with plutonium and other materials. That's a tremendous challenge to me as an artist. I'd be working with these extremely difficult, highly toxic, man-made elements, whose essence is so dramatically altered by

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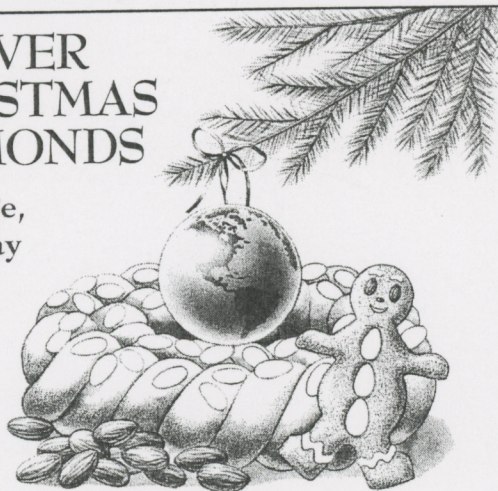


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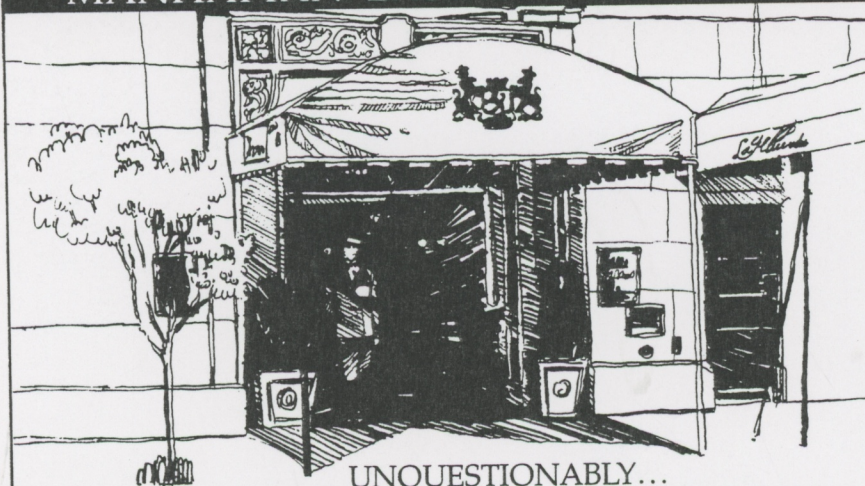
shape alone. It was just too appropriate for words. After all, sculpture's so uniquely human. It also seemed like a creative solution to the existing bottleneck in the marketplace—the lack of money for sculpture. For one thing, we're talking about *used materials*. I mean—wow!—I'd finally found a way to get back in the mainstream of modern art. But the punch line is that *this* scrap is hazardous, so instead of trying to keep the price down I can use the very best of processes and materials, because no one would want this to be unsafely contained. It would give me a legitimate reason to do good work. So, in any event, I called the Trojan Nuclear Power Plant—in northwest Oregon—"and asked them if they had some spent fuel. I said I didn't need very much, I was gonna just use it in a sculpture project, and if they wanted to give me an old fuel assembly, I'd be happy to drive down in my pickup and pick it up." Acord looked quizzically at an imaginary telephone clenched in his left hand. "On that call I think the line went dead."

Over the next few months, Acord placed dozens of telephone calls with similar results. When he wasn't left on hold, he was told that the person he wanted was out of the office. When he finally made contact, he was referred to a different division, department, agency, office, or bureau. In the end, the answer was always the same: to read the regulations and forget about the project. Finally, however, he got lucky. Nancy Kirner, then a health physicist at the Office of Radiation Control in the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, referred Acord to Michael O'Brien, the radiation-safety officer in the Department of Environmental Health and Safety at the University of Washington. After some initial reluctance, O'Brien, in turn, provided Acord with a list of so-called exempt materials—commercial products that contained radioactive substances but were available to the public without regulation. On the list were lantern mantles (thorium), hearing-aid batteries (tritium), and a variety of substances, including heavy water, that were sold by chemical-supply houses. Of all the exempt materials, one in particular caught his eye: uranium-glazed Fiesta ware.

—PHILIP SCHUYLER

(This is the first part of a two-part article.)

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