

**His manner suggested there was something normal about a clown on a bus.**

**T**WELVE PEOPLE WERE WAITING for a bus. One was a clown. Pink wig, goofy-sad face, bulbous nose, outfit of stripes, dots, layers, and patches, giant shoes — but he wasn't clowning, just taking a bus, carrying an old suitcase where the rest of us had lunch pail, attaché case, or bag. We all did our best not to stare. The bus came and we boarded. The clown, suitcase in lap, sparked giggles down the aisle, his matter-of-fact manner suggesting there was something normal about a clown on a bus. The social walls of public places melted, warmth spread, and we were more at home, more human, than on most days. He took something out of his suitcase and worked it with his hands. When he got up to leave we saw it was one of those long, thin balloons for twisting into sculptures. He'd made a perfect little poodle dog, and gave it, with a bow, to the driver. She beamed and put it on her door-opening lever. Then the clown was gone, and we all reverted to standard bus decorum. The only other times I've known such warmth on buses were when the drivers have strayed from routes, a break in routine making people briefly anxious, then jolly, swapping stories and laughter with strangers as the driver looped back (at times needing directions from riders, more fun), until the route was regained and, as if by a switch thrown, the social walls went back up. The clown's poodle balloon left a lingering glow. Riders getting off the bus joked with the driver and she, charmed by his gift, answered all with bubbling cheer.

**Turnip Island**

During World War II one-sixth of all US federal prisoners were conscientious objectors. "We don't have time to stop for fast food, dear. Just take a pizza from the dashboard freezer and pop it in the microwave." The café radio plays Wieniawski's violin concerto: a volcano of lush desire and mad dancing frenzy. Who can resist? One soars, weeps, exults: sheepish, foolish, grateful.

"We are moving toward serenity by simplification of ideas and means," says Henri Matisse. "Our one true aim is wholeness." *Make a delicious extra-fancy sandwich with all your favorite ingredients. Wrap it in aluminum foil many layers thick. Tape a picture of a famous movie star on the top. Lend it to a museum. Four ideas rule the modern world: everything is matter; people are good; life's aim is happiness; history moves in endless progress. Bip.*

To make a "turnip island," cut the top off a turnip and place it in a dish with some water. Soon the island will sprout little trees. Water it daily to keep the sea level up. "When we listen to the news, we end up shouting 'Liars!' and going out to work in the garden to calm down. It seems we can only save our sanity by digging in the earth with our bare hands, joining into the promise of life."

**The Blood of Your Relations**

At the frame shop, a customer brought in an old piece of paper bearing a letter in beautiful archaic hand, more like what we call calligraphy than today's writing: stately grace and delicate flourishes revealing slow, painstaking effort. We studied the document, guessing what it was: apparently written during the US Revolution by someone in America to someone in England: "You are a Member of Parliament, and One of that majority which has doomed my country to destruction. You have begun to burn our Town, and murder our People. Look upon your Hands! They are stained with the Blood of your Relations. You and I were long Friends. You are now my enemy, and I am,—" Here the page was torn, signature gone. Our customer said the paper was found in a family Bible, probably written by an ancestor. Who was that writer, and what was that friendship, long ago, broken by war, and renounced? *Before the peasant villagers have running water, plumbing, paving, or electricity, they must build concrete bunkers to protect them from US bombers.*

"I feel like a man in the middle of something," says Richard Ploetz. "It's time to sit still and let whatever's coming overtake me." *Don't worry, we'll burn that bridge when we come to it. Chimpanzees are outgoing and curious, gorillas shy. All apes are peaceable.*

**Strong Enough to Love**

*O, squiggle bop-bop, squiggle, bop-bop.* "Between 35 and 40," writes Jim Ryan, "hope for happiness, satisfaction, and success in the world dropped away, leaving me naked with my few talents and many faults. The new generation rose, screaming its idealistic insults at me; the old looked down severely from its seat of practical wisdom. No longer fool enough to hope, nor wise enough to believe, and only strong enough to love from time to time, I continue to be my insufficient self." *At dawn we broke the ice.*



**How to read Rollmag: bits and pieces, slowly absorbing. Give it time to sink in.**

# With no big system, you are doing fairness now. Can the whole economy do this?

A bus driver, asked directions by a truck driver, didn't know, and asked the passengers. Pamela studied the paper: "1200 Pawo Ramie Blvd," an unlikely name. Then she got it: Panoramic Highway, a main street, easy to find. "All of us long for peace and freedom; but few of us have much enthusiasm for the thoughts, feelings, and actions that make for peace and freedom. Few want war or tyranny, but most find intense pleasure in the thoughts, feelings, and actions that make for war and tyranny." Rain soaks the earth, turns soil to mud, turns mud to gullies. We listen.

## Zigzagging down the boulevard? Why not just ... take the hypotenuse!

Few people can count musical time in 7 beats to a bar (most add an eighth beat, making march time) yet that same cycle over a long span is our rhythm of life: 7 days a week. Music in 7 jars most ears; 6 or 8 feels better. But a week of 6 or 8 days would be oppressively regular, and we thrive on the cycle of 7 days. Why do we feel so differently about the short and long periods of the same rhythm? And is it not a marvel that we live by the irregular cycle of 7 days?

**Ice age?** "In war," wrote Hobbes in 1651, "force and fraud are the cardinal virtues." **Acorns?** "The government has ceased to function," Theodore Dreiser noted in 1932. "The corporations are the government." **Hat.**

## Everything People Want

The hot new lifestyle activity is *legends*: multiple fake personal identities. Rich people are hiring discreet *legend shops* (the name comes from spy novels) to create complete documentations of fictional selves for business and fun, with records inserted into bank, IRS, and employment files, help with disguise and acting, and real-time backup. TrendX's Lia Liqué says, "Legends are everything people want: fake financial books, spy intrigue, show biz glitz, and the power to be whoever you want, at will. They're the ultimate elite privacy, way beyond unlisted phones and bodyguards, and they remind people nostalgically of their youthful fake IDs. Legends are the key to deals, litigation, and romance, because no one knows who you are. And the sheer fun of deceiving others is divine!" Give me your huddled masses.

"In December 1953 I discovered the Earth once had a second moon which exploded, fell as chunks of molten lava, and became the continents. I called the lost moon Shashoona." Rumors buzzing, the crowd follows Hutchins to the auditorium balcony, where Witherspoon mesmerizes them with mumbling jingoisms. China leaps forward.

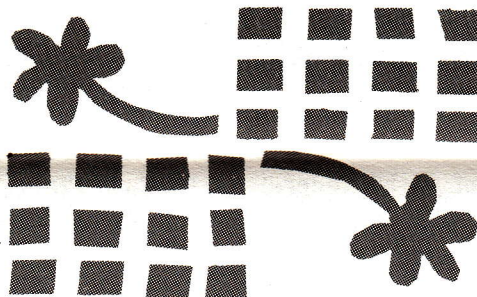
Eli Epstein likes rice. But at two-and-a-half he adds "no" to everything he says. When his dad offered him a forkful of rice he cried, "No rice!" and refused the offer a second time. Dad said, "This isn't rice. It's no-rice." Eli ate a plate of no-rice. *The solid world exists! It must!*

## Doing Fairness Now

Weary of greed, seeking better ways, we can note how you, the Rollmag readers, pay for this paper. Choosing your price from three levels, you have paid, in the two years I've tracked it, an average of a dollar over regular. No one needs to give any reasons. (A few ask if it's okay to pay the low rate, which knocks me out: how could I not be pleased that a poor person buys this paper?) In fact there are five levels. Some readers, out of the blue, pay big sums (\$50, \$100, and more); they subsidize free copies to people with no money. It works. With no big system, you are doing fairness now. Can the whole economy do this? Imagine: at the market a clerk rings up our items, then asks our rate; we say 100%, 150%, 75%; the clerk multiplies, and we pay our fair price. Over a day and a year, it evens out — we even out. Is this too fanciful? Nature does this all the time; we can too, with our human nature. A class I taught in New Haven was set to run eight weeks. The students paid a small fee to the center which paid me from grants. At the end we wanted to go on. The director said, "Fine, use the room, but I can't pay you." The students wanted to pay, but some were poor. A woman said, "I earn plenty, I'll pay twice the average." Soon it was settled. Those paying most were quickest to set their rates; others resisted accepting charity, until a man said, "If we see it as what we're able to pay, we all pay the same." The class continued for a year. Shared-out fees set by open talk, your Rollmag subscriptions — voluntary fairness can work, without big programs. Why not rents and food? Abuses? Sure; we're human. But worse than now, with our laws and lawyers? Direct openness works better. We know how to do these things. When young we grab and push, then learn to take turns. People cut in, but we keep taking turns because it works. The pain our greed causes is all we need to insure our cooperation, and it's pleasant to give oneself over to simple, sensible habits. Yes, we can do fairness now — as you, the Rollmag readers, are showing every day. **Ping.**

## Helium Balloons

*You don't mind if I drop into a light trance, do you?* "The American character shows itself in a foreign train compartment," says Mr. Longwog, "by asking, 'Where are you from? What do you do?' Americans' peace of mind needs this pigeon-holing. Each must have a place, because we are all, always, competitors." *Clank.*



## **“We’ve always loved you, and you’ll always have a home under this roof.”**

“Making the simple complicated is commonplace,” says Charles Mingus. “Making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that’s creativity.” Al chose suffering as the escape from his vanity. Not until his later years did he begin to speak with his own voice. *Mr. Svensk loved helium balloons. He bought handfuls daily when walking home from the factory. Then one day he bought a few too many, and was carried aloft, and we never saw him again.*

### **Life In The Commune**

Back in the days of cheap gasoline, a friend scribbled in crayon across a credit card application, “Hi Esso, I can’t fill out this form too good, but I buy Esso every week down at the corner. Thanks.” The credit card came by return mail. **Seven comedians hold an election.** “When I was young,” writes Dennis Haley, “my pursuit of happiness, like that of most young men, was mainly the fleeing of fears — family, traditional roles, responsibilities.”

To gild refined gold, to paint the lily, to throw perfume upon the violet, to smooth the ice, or add another hue to the rainbow, is wasteful and ridiculous excess. “Your message reached me today. I still cannot meet you halfway.” **In 13th century Europe new monastic orders arose everywhere to house the old, the sick, and the poor.** “There is no way of keeping profits up,” wrote David Ricardo in 1820, “but by keeping wages down. *Logic is the guest of intuition.*”

“I believe in courtesy,” says Kenneth Clark, “the ritual by which we avoid hurting other people’s feelings by satisfying our own egos.” It is useful that others know our faults, eh! To keep us humble?

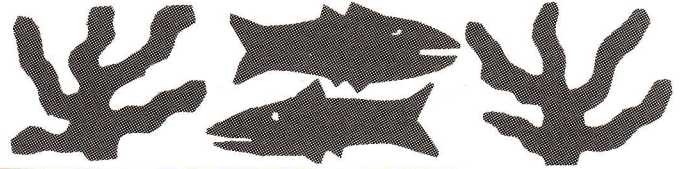
**Play just enough notes to hear the border between silence and sound.**

“Society,” says Robespierre, “must provide for the support of all its members, by procuring work for them or assuring a livelihood to those unable to work.” *You broke my will, but what a thrill.* Life in the commune was okay, but after a year I longed for privacy, nice carpets, and manicures. *Financial talks go well.*

### **A Home Under This Roof**

Andrew Carnegie says, “This is the duty of the man of wealth: First, to set an example of modest, unostentatious living; to provide moderately for the immediate wants of those dependent upon him; and after doing so to consider all surplus revenues coming to him simply as trust funds, which he is called upon to administer in a manner best calculated to produce the most beneficial results for the community. A man of wealth is the mere agent and trustee for the poorer brethren.” *Baby your wig is blown!*

A woman when living in Ireland had a lover she’d never realized, until the TV news reported his murder by British police, was a main IRA man. At the wake his mother told her, “Of course we couldn’t tell you, dear. It would have put you in needless danger. But we’ve always loved you just the same, and so long as this old woman breathes, you’ll always have a home under this roof.” All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned, and humanity is at last compelled to face the real conditions of life. *Bake bread; scrub floors; sleep.*



**Artist:** Pamela Worthington. **Sources:** Howard Zinn, J. Bragg, Jacques Ellul, Shakespeare, Aldous Huxley, Marx & Engels.

## **Frame Shop Mistakes**

ONE AFTERNOON in the frame shop Matthew broke a large piece of glass. Under pressure of a deadline he was getting a metal-framed nautical chart ready to send over to my table for fitting, or final assembly. With minutes to go he said, “Well, it’ll take longer than expected. I broke the glass, because I made the backing a bit too thick. So I’ll have to glue up new backing as well as cut new glass.”

I said to Robin, “It’s always disappointing to break a piece of glass, especially when you’re experienced and feel maybe you won’t break any more.” Matthew has worked in the shop 30 years — a master craftsman deeply in tune with pace, materials, and the subtlest details.

“I’ve come think that’s what glass does,” Robin said. He too is a fine craftsman. His range of skills is legendary, and he excels at devising new methods and solutions. Once when I broke a ceramic piece, and my heart sank, he dove into action: gathered the pieces, ground up stray bits of clay with binder and color to mix an invisible glue, and clamped it ingeniously, mending the piece so well you couldn’t see it had broken — a challenge delighting his intelligence.

### **Strengthen Souls**

I wasn’t sure what he’d meant. “Glass breaks?”

“Right. Glass breaks. That’s what it does. Every time you break a piece, you learn something, and you don’t get hung up on the emotional aspect.”

There’s also the financial aspect. Often breaking glass erases the profit for that job. Our shop works on principles not limited to adding up dollars — we make things with our hands as a way to strengthen souls, even as the frame hangs on your wall — but it’s a business that must be kept afloat, and no one likes wasting materials. Breaking glass asks, “What are we here for?” The answers come over time.

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## I do not seek mistakes, but they seek me, and they make me whole.

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When I was first in the shop I winced when I broke glass. But the absence of reproach spoke to me. Breaking glass drew no more response than washing it. Inwardly I'd be lashing myself but Matthew or Dick would pull a new piece from stock, cut it, and hand it over. In time I caught on. Glass, as Robin said, breaks. And the shop was doing more than calculating the results of human deeds. We were making things — some to see and hold, others to live by.

### Big Mirror

Long ago, Pieter broke a big mirror. He is another fine craftsman whose rich finishes on the raw woods, exquisite taste in design, and exemplary work habits inspire us still, years after he moved away. Hour by hour Pieter stood at his table so calmly he seemed not to be doing much, until you noticed the work heaping up, done with the kind of beauty which, more than skill, reflects greatness of soul.

A customer had brought in an old mirror to frame and it needed cutting down. Across the back it had blobs of old glue. The cut had to avoid the blobs; they wouldn't break with the glass. By long habit Pieter attends to everything he does, and he knew he had to avoid the glue blobs, so it's hard to guess how he forgot. But he did. The mirror broke in the worst way.

The financial aspect was keen since it was the customer's mirror; the shop had to replace it. Pieter, fiercely conscientious, wanted to pay for the new mirror. But Dick and Matthew wouldn't hear of it. To them it was a simple mistake, as much a part of the craft as Pieter's beautiful finishes. In the face of their acceptance, his own acceptance grew.

Workplaces differ. When waitress at a local café broke a glass pot during rush hour against a sharp steel corner, the owner barked that the replacement would come from her wages. A kindly woman slipped her five dollars. "You were rushing for us, dear." The waitress burst out crying.

### To His Liking

People come in our shop for framing — and to talk to Dick. One of life's true listeners, generous beyond measure, he cheerfully embraces human diversity. And he has a good sense of what people want. One man just leaves his work for Dick to design. Dick knows the man's taste and usually he's pleased. But once Dick had a slightly new idea for his work. When he came to pick it up he said, "Well — it's not quite my cup of tea — but I'm sure it'll be fine." He paid and left. Dick went to the phone and left a message the man heard on arriving home: we'd do it again, and right away since he wanted it for a party that night. He came down and we reframed it, to his liking, while he did an errand.

A while ago I made the biggest mistake in my 12 years at the shop. I was fitting a large plastic display case to its backing. Plastic is tricky to clean. It scratches quickly, and rubbing it creates static cling drawing dust bits. At the time I dreaded plastic, though I've since made my peace with it, by realizing it's not at all like glass, which it resembles, and must be handled differently: plastic is electric gelatin, glass is nervous rock. In distinct ways, they're both easy to ruin.

This was my first big box — I was just then inheriting some of Pieter's jobs. Aside from the usual plastic pitfalls, big boxes have delicate corner seams easily and irreparably cracked. I washed the box, dusted it out, and screwed the backing on. Turning the last screw I saw a dust bit inside. Dust removal is a major framing nuisance, a stern teacher of patience. I unscrewed the box and lifted the edge.

### Heat of Remorse

A friend once said, "A little inattention can go a long way." Big plastic boxes must never be lifted by the corner. The weight can twist the box and break the joints. I knew this but, like Pieter with the mirror, I somehow forgot at the crucial moment. I lifted the corner and *crack!* the box broke.

Chagrin seized me. I wished the heat of my remorse to weld the corner back together. But it didn't. We gathered around and pondered. Might the crack remain unnoticed? Well — no. A new box had to be bought. This piece was the last in a big order; delivery and payment for all of it would be delayed. It was

Christmas, so time for redoing it would be tight. And the customer was inconvenienced. I put the box away.

Matthew said, "That's the biggest box you've fit so far. They're tricky. It took Pieter time to learn them too."

### Doorways to Dignity

Thus my remorse found its place in a larger plan. The craft we work at is a river of achievements and mistakes. We learn, we do what we can, we keep at it. Our craft, here before any of us was here, and sure to outlast us, lifts us up by its rhythms of success and disappointment.

Thus at the frame shop I have come to love mistakes. They insult our pride of skill, they chew up money, yet they make us think, grope for what matters. Humbling us, they are doorways to dignity.

Our mistakes urge us to do our best, they prompt us to new ideas, they correct our habits. They insist we forgive, they bind our little selves to the greater common whole, and they guarantee our humility. They are steadfast friends.

I do not seek mistakes, but they seek me, and by their pain and guiding hands, they make me whole.

