

Mother Earth's Gifts

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Joseph James John Jenkins, known to friends back in Barkersville and the art community as Jay-Four, is the worst artist in San Francisco. His works have been rejected for shows; he has never sold anything, except his first effort, a papier-mâché horse made when eleven years old. Uncle Eddie paid him ten dollars, although it looked like a stepped-on lizard. Three days later, he found the “horse/lizard” in Uncle Eddie’s trashcan. His fastidious Aunt Mildred had thrown it out, not good old Uncle Eddie.

Jay-Four looks like a large bent wire clothes hanger. He stands six feet three inches tall; another three inches if he straightens. He is a super-ectomorph, the undisputed King of the Skinnies. Ribs on a round barrel-shaped chest stick out like those of an old horse living on soil-poor dry grasslands. Bony protuberances top his shoulders, like barnacles on a rock. Jay-four has a beak a woodpecker would have killed for and bright bobbly blue eyes, widely set on a long thin, almost squashed-in-from-the-sides face. His ears are flat to his head, offset vertically from each other half an inch. A rope-recorded, long muscular egret-like neck is ready to strike out and spear a fish from the water. His mouth has Mr. Potato Head’s stick-on lips. Longish jet-black hair extends rebelliously backward. He greatly admires Salvador Dali, cultivating a waxed twisting black mustache, unfortunately curling up on one side and curling down on the other. It misbehaves after each waxing effort.

When walking, it is a loose swinging gait, as if Jay-Four were a marionette. His feet seem not to touch ground; you want to look for strings. He leans forward, wind or not. Strong coastal winds may have so deformed his body, with his long unruly hair sticking backwards like the branches of a *divi-divi* tree. Jay-Four’s long arms and hands flap about, with scrawny curved pitchfork fingers. His belly sticks out a bit and his butt sticks in a lot. He has no bottom. At least no one can kick him in the ass!

Jay-Four has always thought an artist should look like an artist. Uncle Eddie, who sold perfumes and cosmetics, door to door, once said, “Joseph James John, personal presentation is important. Note how I am dressed.” He looked like a retired movie playboy with slicked back thinning brown hair, a bright yellow sport coat with a broadly

striped red and blue silk scarf arranged inside an open collar white shirt with large wide lapels, dark brown pleated pants, puckered by a belt desperately struggling to keep his potbelly under control, and polished shoes with a weave imprint on the leather. "My appearance appeals to my older female clientele; it helps me sell. Everyone sells. Doctors sell, lawyers sell, teachers sell, and politicians sell. We all have to have an appearance that sells either a product or us. Someday you will be selling something."

Remembering Uncle Eddie's advice, he develops his appearance. "A smock, a white smock, yes, a good start!" At the Army Surplus Store on Carson Street, he acquires a bright red military beret, cutting off the symbols of war. He has always loved the hippie era, so blue and white striped bell-bottoms seem a good addition. When his Uncle Eddie died, he begged Aunt Mildred for the red and blue silk scarf. He sweeps this around his neck, thrusting it into the collar of his smock.

His shoes. Jay-Four has size 16 feet, hard to buy shoes for, and even harder as the wide spread and length of his toes make that portion of his feet a good size 18. This is resolved in Tijuana, after many years of pinching feet, where he comes across the internationally famous open sandals with the one-and-one-half inch thick truck tire tread bottoms. The Mexican shop vendor laughingly says to him, "Señor, you will never go flat with these sandals, they are Michelins."

This is the now 28-year old Jay-Four. Even thinner, no mustache and dressed in dark T-shirt and blue jeans with scuffed up white basketball shoes, and you have him as a typical teenager of the middle 1980s. Not taking the horse/lizard thrown away by Aunt Mildred as a dark portent of his artistic future, Jay-Four dreams of an artistic career. During his high school years he involves himself in painting sets for minimalist plays put on by the well known, at least in the surrounding 10-mile radius, Barkersville High School Drama Club. Unfortunately, the plays emphasize actors with little need for sets. Thus, he paints simple background colors on drop sheets used behind the actors. He tries without success to persuade Mrs. Alice Oglesby, the Drama Club advisor, that plays would be better with more detail in the set paintings.

Graduation from high school is perhaps more important for Jay-Four than for his classmates, it marks what he knows will be a rush to artistic fame. He is off to college and art school. He fills his days with great times with artistic friends, but also filled with

more lizard-like art objects. Students are encouraged to explore a wide range of art media; his efforts tend to produce lizards. Everything he makes looks like a lizard: pots that look like lizards; lizard-like sculptures; bronze lizards; wire frame lizards, and carved wooden lizards. Even weavings never come out right, looking like large multi-colored rumped-up lizards.

Jay-Four is oblivious to his lack of artistic talent. In his little lizard-shaped heart, he knows his day will come. He says, "It comes for all famous artists, doesn't it?"

However, where to go now he is a trained artist? His admiration of things "hippie" awakens an urge to go to San Francisco. Little does he know that there he will encounter more lizards and similar creatures, such as skinks, chameleons and geckos.

Perception of failure is alien to Jay-Four's vision. He is a lovable sort of guy, if you can love someone who looks like a bent telephone pole wearing artist's clothes. Quickly he makes friends, faster and more of them than anyone. He joins a concept work group experimenting in new approaches to old media and old approaches to new media. Everything continues to look like lizards. There is no demand for lizards in shows, nor does anyone buy them. His friends are in shows and have patrons; he has none, so he sells art supplies in a small shop. In this way, he supports himself. His apartment is in a post-1906 earthquake building, so decrepit and structurally feeble that it is very close to being pre-1906 and ready to collapse with the next big shake.

In his most recent effort to achieve recognition, Jay-Four begins to paint stills of fruits and vegetables. His big artistic idea is to accumulate one of each type of fruit or vegetable from the Farmers Market, and to paint them.

He heads to the market area. Vendors and merchants will not sell him just one of each fruit or vegetable. Therefore, he purchases bunches of bananas and small baskets of apples, red, green and yellow. "Oregon and Washington produce the best," one says. Onto his cart, he places radishes, lettuces, and greens of all types. He loads up a basket of Georgia peaches. An understanding merchant sells him one watermelon; he is lucky not to have to buy the whole crate. He buys cantaloupes, grapes of various sizes and colors, papayas, and potatoes of all shapes and types, baking, boiling and sweet. Next come onions, tomatoes, parsnips, turnips, beans through the entire bean genetic spectrum, beets, corn, oranges, grapefruit and other citrus that he locates, pears, mangos, guayabas,

tamarind fruit, the list is endless. Out of control, he decides to add grains and spices; they are abundant in this international port.

In his small red rust-eaten Toyota pickup truck with a "Buy More Art" bumper sticker, he carefully places his treasures, requiring two trips. Driving home, he salivates about eating the leftovers.

Covering his kitchen table with a black silk cloth, he arranges his bounty into a juicy, grainy, spicy and very healthy artistic mound. Placing a large dumpster-scavenged Mexican basket next to it in a cornucopia-like manner, Jay-Four chuckles. In a deep dramatic voice, he calls his artistic wonder, "Mother Earth's Gifts." Working late into the evening he completes the arrangement and wobbles off to bed, filled with excitement, knowing his career is finally going to blossom.

In the morning, he collects paints, brushes and a newly stretched canvas. Donning his new white smock and red beret, twisting his freshly waxed, refusing-to-cooperate, Dali-style mustache, he heads into the kitchen. Aghast, he screams. Mother Earth's Gifts have rolled onto the floor, smashed and cut, with many small and large bites on some of them. "Ruined, ruined, ruined!" he cries. At first, they are tears of anger; then turn to dramatic tears, as he recalls actor friends from his set-painting high school days. Jay-Four turns tragedy into an opportunity to perform. In a world full of crybabies, he is a laugher.

He has a truckload of artistic material available. Again, he arranges fruits, vegetables, grains and spice. They look better the second time than the first. However, in the morning they are all over the floor, smashed and eaten.

Not a quitter, Jay-Four once again lovingly makes his arrangement. Next morning, disaster again. Challenged, he carefully arranges Mother Nature's Gifts, but not before going to Radio Shack to buy a surveillance camera to which he attaches a video recorder. What is happening each night? Before going to bed, he points the camera at his masterpiece, switches the camera on, setting the video to record very slowly, using up as little of the tape as possible.

In the morning, no need to tell you what happened. It is all on videotape. Yes, rats and mice and cockroaches running all over the fruit and eating away, the cat jumping after them and the whole pile tumbling to the floor.

He collects oil paints, brushes and the newly stretched canvas. Donning the white smock and red beret, and twisting his freshly waxed Dali-style mustache, one side still succumbing to gravity, he heads into the kitchen and pops the videotape into a VCR player and watches. Smiling, he begins to paint the big arrangement of a banana, a red, a green and a yellow apple from Oregon and Washington, a radish, lettuces, and one of each type of greens, the Georgia peach, one watermelon, a cantaloupe, a single grape each of the various sizes and colors, a papaya, all types of potatoes, an onion, a tomato, a parsnip, a turnip, a beet, the beans, one ear of corn, an orange and a grapefruit and one each of other citrus, a pear, a mango, a guayaba, a tamarind fruit, the complete and almost endless list, topped and accompanied by piles of grains and spices, is truly Mother Earth's Gift. Watching the videotape, rats and mice and roaches begin to appear, scurrying about and chewing and chomping and masticating and munching away. He adds all to the painting. The cat shows up and the full rodento-insecto-feline action begins with the entire hoard running back and forth, jumping or flying up and down, into and out of the pile of Mother Earth's Gifts, with the entire arrangement tumbling and falling. Continuing to paint, he is ecstatic!

Jay-Four steps back. What action, what a mess, deliciously captured on canvas. Moreover, none of the fruit, none of the vegetables, none of the grains and none of the spices look like lizards. The rats look like rats! The mice are mice! The cockroaches look just plain gross! Even the watermelon looks like it should, not a fat dark green and light green striped lizard. The cat? Well, he does sort of look like a furry yellow and white lizard, but he is hardly noticeable, partially covered by the tumbling Mother Earth's Gifts.

It is late. He is beat and drained. Sleep blows into his body. He should have eaten some fruit for energy. He cleans up the vegetative mess and sets the painting on the counter to admire it one more time and to let it dry overnight. Off to bed!

In the morning, he dons paint-covered white smock and red beret, and twisting his freshly waxed Dali-style mustache, it still not knowing up from down, and heads into the kitchen to admire his work.

He screams, "Ruined, ruined, ruined!" This time, he cries and he cries. There is no thought of being dramatic. His painting of Mother Earth's Gifts is on the floor, still

tightly stretched in its frame, but with small holes and large holes chewed by rats and mice and cockroaches. Yellow and white cat fur is here and there stuck to the almost dry paint. Imbedded in paint are still kicking cockroaches. A rat, dead, and three mice, one headless, equally dead, are stuck to the hardening paint. One rat-tail extends from the painting, a lucky one that got away. Rodent and insect and cat footprints are all over the surface. The cat sits in the corner licking paint off its fur and puking multi-colored bits of rodent.

Jay-Four slumps slowly two inches from his already slumping six feet three inches. Hands flap idly from side to side, eyes no longer bobbling he stares straight ahead. Even his guaranteed non-flattening sandals seem to be deflating. Jay-Four meltingly gives up.

Kicking the frame to one side, he bends over, picks it up and sets it on the easel. The doorbell rings. It is his friend Arnie Golub, a prominent art dealer and show organizer. He rushes to a surprised Arnie, hugging him and sobbing.

“What’s wrong Jay-Four, I have never seen you like this.”

Sobbing in big gallops, unable to say anything, he drags Arnie into the kitchen and points. Arnie throws out his arms and slams his feet to the floor, and says, “This is unbelievable; I have never seen anything like this before; this is wonderful!”

Jay-Four stands straight up, all six feet six inches plus the now seemingly re-inflated one-and-one-half inch thick truck tire sandals. His eyes blink rapidly. He holds his hands to his ears.

“What are you talking about?”

Before he can tell about the disaster and his ruined painting Arnie says, “You have produced the most remarkable painting I have ever seen in my years as art dealer and show coordinator, no one has painted like this before; you are an innovator! You are a leader! Will you please allow me to enter it into the upcoming Grand New Artists Show?”

Looking down out of the corners of his eyes, he notices that the freshly waxed Dali-style mustache is slowly curling upward on both sides. Jay-Four dazedly smiles, “Yes, if you think so.”