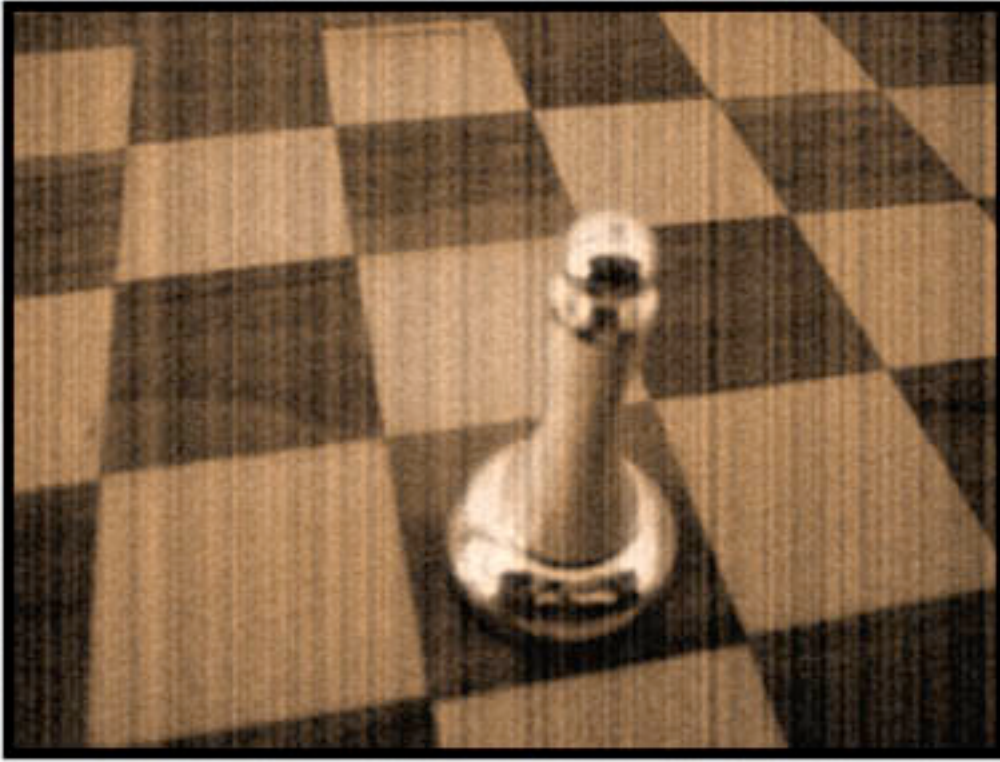


WHAT TREES HAVE DONE
By Nicholas Pendleton



1.

Who I Am

I am Dennis. I lived on what would have been a farm but for the fact that there was nothing there. No cows, hogs or chickens in the barn, stalls or coops. No crops in the field beyond the north fence. A skunk resided in a flaw in my home's foundation, a pest that had never been destroyed or otherwise gotten rid of. I lived in the house with my uncle Wendell.

I do not remember if Wendell was the brother of my father or the brother of my mother—both passed—or if the appellation of uncle was bestowed upon him as a statement of his power over the house and my life.

Wendell invented personal items to be sold at the marketplace down the winding dirt road into town. Wendell has invented many interesting devices to improve lives.

At the marketplace Wendell often traded his inventions for the inventions of others, which is why when we returned home and pooled our resources we had very little for food and other items that would improve our lives. Aside from the newly acquired inventions, that is. Up to this point, very few of his acquisitions had been edible, and of those, very few actually could be kept down without inducing vomiting and diarrhea or temporary, yet dramatic, motor-function decay.

What I Made

I built homemade chess sets. I created the chessboards as well as the chessmen. Some sets took months to finish while others took merely hours. Each were signed and numbered and appeared as conversation pieces in many homes—both poor and fecund alike—throughout the surrounding counties.

Wendell played chess and tested every new chess set I created for flaws or awkward play. Our living room was filled with chess sets—on the floor, on the bookshelves, atop the radio cabinet, on TV trays, on windowsills and even the coffee table I built before I took up making chess sets. At any given time, Wendell maintained anywhere from ten to seventeen concurrent games in varying stages of engagement.

He critiqued my boards and pieces as the games progressed, sometimes complaining, “This one is too loud,” or “The pieces are decomposing,” or “These pawns smell as if they intend to kill me.” Wendell’s feedback was crucial to the successful creation of an endearing, handmade heirloom chess set.

When games were completed, I listed his comments on the slate board under columns of Pros and Cons. If a game was found lacking, Wendell and I took it to the smokehouse which we’d converted to a kill shelter (to dampen the silent noise) to put them to a swift end. Each assemblage was different, no two alike or made completely with the same materials. Therefore, different methods of destruction were required. We tried to do the job as swiftly and painlessly as possible. At our disposal were various garrotes, spikes, hammers, bludgeons, knives and a shotgun. Occasionally (though thankfully rarely) we would misjudge a chess set and silent screams were emitted, causing nose and ear bleeds in Wendell and myself. We were only human, after all. Neither the surrounding homesteads nor the skunk in my home’s foundation had been affected by these shrill expulsions, though, since the silent screams cannot pass through cured wood, of which the kill shelter was made.

After a successful kill, the chess set was ground into its most basic components and was used appropriately around the home. Never was any portion of a dead chess set recycled for use in another.

Those chess sets that survived Wendell’s play criteria were treated as viable product and were thus wrapped in newspaper and deposited into cardboard boxes to be loaded onto the cart bound for the marketplace. I sold these at my table in the marketplace, setting up two or three on the table as a way of drawing people’s interest and showing off my handiwork. They sold very well.

Uncle Wendell's Play Criteria

Holistic:

- 1.1.) Do the accumulated objects work as a simple time dissolving machine?
- 2.1.) Could the accumulated objects conceivably be utilized for other purposes (such as listening devices, potency enhancement instruments or life-death crossover facilitators)?
- 3.1.) Is there a unified theme in the construction that could provide necessary insight into the essential nature of the materials used to construct the objects?
- 4.1.) Could a thinking creature get lost in there?

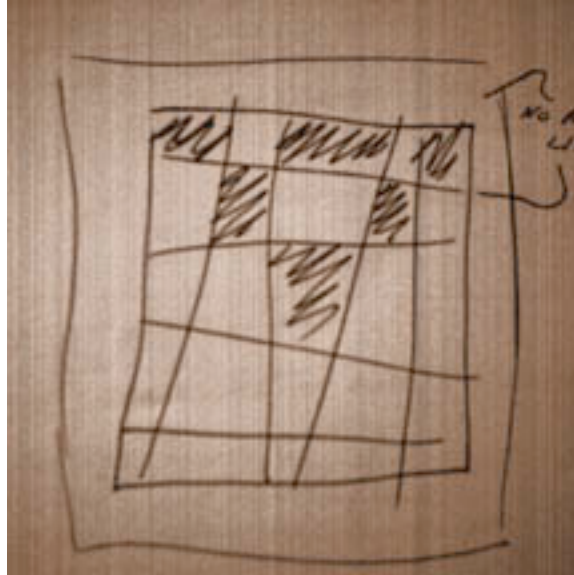
Specific:

- 1.2.) Does the chessboard conform to known physical laws of inanimate, non-moving matter?
- 2.2.) Is the color scheme of the chessboard in direct harmony with conventional cone-and-rod eye function?
- 3.2.) Do the chessmen speak words? Shout? Cry? Laugh? or otherwise emote?
- 4.2.) Do the chess pieces disintegrate when not under constant surveillance?
- 5.2.) Do the chess pieces grow, change shape or conform to the hand when touched?
- 6.2.) When examining the fine detail work of the pieces and board, do I immediately understand that the person who created this set means me harm?

What I Learned From Chess

I, Dennis, had learned nothing. I had never played chess. I was not a hero, just an artisan.

Only Wendell had ever played in our living room, carrying on ten to seventeen simultaneous games against himself on any given day.



What A Chess Set Is

A series of objects used in tandem to absorb time and stimulate complex, strenuous motionlessness.

A board, consisting of eight rows of eight squares, totaling an area of 64 squares, alternately pigmented dark and light.

A product of my vocation.

Two sets of sixteen chess pieces. One set is pigmented dark and plays defense. One set is pigmented light and always sets the play into accelerated motionlessness. (This is sometimes confused with slowness.)

Eight Pawns: Children thrown to the wolves. Orphaned and left in the care of an uncle.

Two Knights: In no way resembling the horse heads traditionally used to represent them. They have only peripheral vision and love and hate indiscriminately.

Two Bishops: Blotters. Consumers. Oafish and overdressed. Contrary.

Two Rooks: All give and no take. Sad.

One Queen: Breathless. Annoyed. Dominant. Paranoid and passive-aggressive. Pliable and transparent.

One King: Tunnel visioned. Televised. Mocked and humiliated. When he falls, universes end. God's autopsy.

A Ouija board controlled by the living. A parlor trick posing as an heirloom and/or conversation piece.

A simple machine with a complex function utilizing human thought as a substitute for an outside power source.

The tangible and specific venue for a game an uncle may refuse to teach a nephew.

What I Used To Build My Chess Sets

Boards were usually cut with a saw and sanded. The checkerboard patterns were either etched or painted. The pieces were either carved or, in specific instances, poured into latex molds using a silicon release agent for easy removal.

Materials: Plaster, glass, polyurethane resin, slate, canvas, stone, concrete, India ink, spray paint, permanent markers, Plexiglas, stain, acrylic pigments, lacquer, tin, aluminum, steel, brass, Sterling silver, cotton cloth, fiberglass, leather, bone (found animal), ceramic tiles, Formica, but mostly wood. Wood to carve the pieces. Wood to construct the boards.

Wood is a flesh that is dead but does not give off the stench of decay. Its screams are silent. Silent screaming and unscented decay are defined as “character.” And if there’s one thing a homemade chess set must have in spades, it is character.

Wood is a flesh that cannot be eaten. It can be chewed, and doing this allowed me to glean a deeper understanding of its nature. I liked to have a mouthful of pulp as I carved a chess set from wood. It taught me the secret forms, the curves and planes hidden inside an unworried block.

Wood is a dead flesh that may acquire a new life, and often does. Wood is the skeleton of the worlds we build. Wood is solid, malleable and porous like living bone. Wood is everything waiting to be born. Wood can be easily stained in dark pigments, then lacquered, producing a very earthy and therefore real chess set. Cured wood stanches the silent screams of dying chess sets. Pulped wood makes excellent paper, like the newspapers and cardboard boxes in which I transported my chess sets.

And as I have come to understand, wood is the flesh of a thinking and breathing thing. Wood is control.

What I Found At the Marketplace

I would rarely see my uncle Wendell from my table at the marketplace. He wandered, pulling his cart of inventions, looking for other inventions worthy of trade. He never traded his inventions for garden fresh vegetables, cured meats, eggs, bread, hand-dipped homemade chocolates, clothing or baking soda-based hygiene supplies. These things were only obtained by the exchange of the money I earned from selling my chess sets.

When Wendell would meet me at the end of the day, he would bring with him the new life-improving inventions he had gotten. There was the hair restoration cap. There was a longevity potion derived from rattlesnake venom, the Jacobsen Family Secret mixture of herbs and grain alcohol. There was the True Breath salve, to be swabbed at the back of the throat. There was the cold boiler. There was the telescoping cane pistol for the lame person’s self-defense. There were bromides, elixirs, contraptions, traps, tinctures,

technology wands, devices and artificial life quality enhancers.

There was also at that time the silent noise reader. Wendell said, "This will come in handy when testing the chess sets under the play criteria." My interest was piqued and he demonstrated the reader for me. He placed the device on my table, twisting knobs on the device's loose gray husk. He slid a bale of paper into the open front aperture, feeding one end around a cylindrical spindle. He poured a jar of sludgy black ink into a reservoir connected to a thin, hollow metal tube that hovered just above the paper. A flexible hose emerged from the back of the reader, the end affixed with a rusty tin funnel. Wendell held the tin funnel to one of my chess sets as he adjusted the volume control beside the speaker's grille.

For a while there was only a faint static, white noise. Soon, however, a far-off wailing could be heard. And as Wendell passed the funnel over the chess set, a more defined set of chirps, chitters, warbles and moans crackled from the speaker. A clear, tinny pattern of whines emoted from the speaker, ascending and descending the scale unpredictably in an inhuman song.

The hollow metal tube of the reader was set into motion, wiggling over the paper as it rolled over the spindle and fed out of the machine. Occasional streaks of ink troubled the clean, white surface of the paper.

When Wendell turned his reader off, he showed me the marks on the paper. The marks mimicked familiar letters, clustering together occasionally to resemble words. Were they words written by a human hand, they would have read "where is the light" and "i cannot feel."

I had heard my first chess set speak.

The man who invented the silent noise reader was packing his own cart for the day. I spoke with him about the reader. Trade secrets were gold in the marketplace, and he was not forthcoming. On his cart of wares I spotted a truly wonderful device, a device I wanted to have for my very own.

He told me what the device was and the nature of its function. I wanted it even more as his explanation sunk in, and so I gave him all of my day's earnings as he gave me the device in exchange. I slung my new object over my shoulder and walked away. It was the alpha and omega of inventions from the marketplace. It was to accelerate my motionlessness into a new beginning, complete an old ending.

Wendell was very angry when he saw me with the new device because he understood that I'd spent the money that was to purchase our food rations. He brusquely confiscated my new invention as punishment and packed it with his things on the cart. He made me carry my unsold chess sets in my arms all the way back up the winding road to the homestead. My chess sets were not built to be light, and the walk home proved to be arduous and painful.

What My New Device Was and What It Did

It was an apparatus to be worn. Bulky canvas coveralls that zipped in the front up

to the neck. Stiff rubber gloves that reached the elbows. Thick-soled rubber boots that ended in waist-cinched trousers. A stocking for the head with an open face. A facsimile of a backpack carved in wood with nylon shoulder straps, to be worn on the back. A dull, bowl-shaped hat with a chin cup, for the crown of the head. A refurbished antique gas mask for the face with a long, flexible plastic tube extending from below the goggles. The flexible tube was designed to be attached to the trunk of a tree.

Moving parts: human body.

Power source: thought and breath.

It was a device for communicating with living wood.



What an Uncle Is

The brother of your father or mother. A man of no relation adopting a title of assumed superiority and/or false control. It is said some are fun and carefree. Many, though, are serious and detached and constantly busy inventing products to improve lives.

A man who moves into your family home and plays chess in your living room and eats your food and shaves in your sink and defecates in your toilet. A man who audibly screams, mostly in his sleep. A man who has made offers to reinvent a nephew with the technology of his own body in the kill shelter, surrounded by various weapons of iron and wood, offers that cannot be refused without threat of pain.

An uncle is a person who decides whether chess sets live or die, whether chess itself lives or dies. A man who has every conceivable variation of the chess apparatus at his fingertips, created by caring hands, in every possible combination of every available material, yet prefers to play on a drug store-purchased set made from factory injection-molded plastic and foldable laminated cardboard (which amounts to nothing but checkers reaching for the sky, clad in a nauseating, insulting disguise).

An uncle is a man who forces you to carry heavy materials long distances. A man who takes things that belong to you and refuses to give them back. A man who ignores you as you watch him enjoy your possessions.

What an Uncle Says

“You have no business with such things.”

“What will we eat?”

“It is confirmed. Your chess sets hate me and wish me dead.”

“Build a better chess set.”

Uncle Wendell and My Apparatus

My object fit Uncle Wendell’s tall, wiry frame poorly, but this did not hinder him from experimenting with its capabilities. “I will go down to the creek and talk to the trees,” he said, his voice muffled by the mask. “I will find one with a respectful disposition, then you will chop it down and carve a proper chess game.”

For the remainder of the day, I worked in my shop. In clay, I sculpted a new pawn in the likeness of my uncle Wendell. I set it on the shelf to dry until morning, when I would sand its contours smooth and begin creating the mold. These pawns would be large, and thus I began to sketch out and do the math for an appropriate sized board.

The pieces would be cast in plaster and then hand-painted. The pawns would stand at 6” tall. The king would be an even foot. The board would be constructed from squares of stained oak. It would measure 34” long by 34” wide and 1 1/2” thick. A surface area of 1,156”. A total volume of 1,734 cubic inches. In complete opposition to Play Criteria 4.1.

I left the workshop shortly after moonrise and marveled at how quickly time had passed. In the living room the silent noise reader continued to spit out reams of blank paper (the ink reservoir now long empty) as the speaker rasped out a symphony of bellows and weeping. Uncle Wendell, upon returning from the marketplace, had set up the reader in the midst of the chess sets in the living room. He had tied the receiving funnel to a rickety music stand and pointed it at the ceiling, where the noiseless voices of my chess sets echoed. In such close proximity to so much nonsound, the speaker had blown immediately. The newly acquired rasp of the speaker made the silent noise of the chess sets sound almost human. From the kitchen, one could imagine a congregation of dying old people holding council in there.

Uncle Wendell was not in the house. I stepped outside to see where he had gone.

The homestead was bathed in moonlight, so no artificial illumination was needed after my eyes had become accustomed to the dimness. Wendell’s shed, where he built his inventions, was silent and dark. I passed the row of empty farrowing stalls and was greeted only by crickets. I followed the dirt path until it ended at the expanse of clover leading to the copse of trees where I harvested the wood for my homemade conversation pieces. There, seated at the foot of an old oak, was my apparatus, stuffed with the body of my uncle Wendell. He sat there, the plastic face tube of my apparatus attached to the bark, motionless, as if in deep meditation.

The muscles of my fingers and toes became restless, my head clouded with dark urges. My understanding of everything, of wood, of chess, was there at the foot of the oak

tree. Every piece of me screamed silently to be there, to be in my object, to be in communion with the foundation of the earth.

Wendell's head turned suddenly, the moonshone lenses of the mask spotting me at the edge of the clover field. I ran back to the house.

Uncle Wendell did not come home that night.

How I Slept In My Empty House

Fretful.

Reluctant.

Thin.

Cold and hot.

Angry.

Sad.

Alone.

Hearing dying voices from the downstairs living room.

—TO BE CONTINUED—