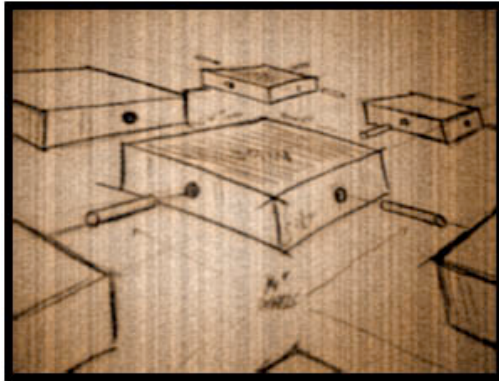


WHAT TREES HAVE DONE
By Nicholas Pendleton



PART 2 (OF 3):

How to Build THE LOST CHESSBOARD

In the early light of morning after a night of tossing and turning in your bed. In your workshop with the open windows welcoming a cool breeze. With planks of 1 1/2" thick oak that you've planed and sanded by hand from trees you've harvested yourself. Using a right-angled ruler to measure out 4" x 4" squares which you cut on your table saw with an even hand and a fine-toothed blade. By cutting 68 perfect squares (four extra in case of mistakes). With a top-quality staining product, to be applied to half the squares in three coats with a sponge brush for even distribution (the other squares to be left their natural hue). With a fine grit sanding block to clean the edges of splinters. By drilling a single hole into each of the four sides of each square big enough to accommodate a small wooden dowel pin to secure the squares into a familiar checkerboard pattern with a high-grade epoxy that holds fast yet allows for expansion and contraction of the wood.

By remembering to stop and eat a warm meal for the first time in two days.

By going to the kitchen and finding your uncle already sitting at the table, staring into the near distance, your apparatus on but for the head and face gear, which sits in a heap on the floor beside his feet.

What Uncle Wendell Came Back To Say

"I'm going back to the trees shortly, and I won't be back for a long time."

"They speak very slowly."

"They know how to play chess."

What I Noticed About Uncle Wendell

His face was red and his cheeks and eyes had sunken into his skull. What hair he had left was now gone, revealing a flaking scalp. When he pulled off the rubber gloves, I could see that his fingernails were black and split, bloody at the cuticles. He appeared dry, sapped of all moisture. The new hue to his skin seemed artificial, less flushed than dyed with some fashion of natural pigment. He wouldn't look at my eyes when he spoke, as if he were in the kitchen by himself talking to a ghost or imaginary friend.

I stood in the entryway as he spoke. I longed for my object to be back in my possession once again. Staring at the head and face gear on the floor, I had the very real feeling I might never see the apparatus again; that Uncle Wendell would leave for the trees and never return, would disappear into the cool dampness beneath those canopies and just dissolve from existence like other relatives I'd known; that when he dissolved, my property would dissolve with him, taking its secrets and promises with him.

"Have you found a proper tree, as you said you would?" I asked.

He did not answer, but got up from the table and shuffled on stiff legs to the sink. He dipped his head beneath the spigot and drank for a long time, perhaps in an attempt to return to his body what had been drawn out. He paused for a moment after drinking, a look of discomfort twisting his face, then regurgitated the water onto the floor. It splashed onto my apparatus' boots and on the linoleum, still as clear as it had been before it had entered his body. He shook his head sharply, belched, then gathered up the head and face gear of my object and went back out. Back to the trees for the last time.

As the contorting shape of my possession receded from the screen door, I managed a short whine beneath my breath: "It's mine..."

How to Build THE LOST CHESS PAWNS

Step 1:

Sand the flaws in the image of your uncle smooth with fine grain sandpaper.

Step 2:

Examine carefully for skewing or improper balance. Make necessary adjustments with the tools at your disposal. A wide variety of sandpapers, sponge sanding blocks and chisels are recommended.

Step 3:

Remove excess dust with a horsehair paintbrush, taking special care in the detail areas and in crevices or indentations.

Step 4:

Coat the finished prototype with a fine mist of silicone release agent.

Step 5:

When dry, apply layers of liquid latex. This is the creation of a flexible mold. The first three layers are painted on lightly for quick drying. Be mindful of coverage, especially in detail areas. The subsequent seven layers can be applied as thickly as desired.

Step 6:

Try not to dwell on your recent unbearable losses. Building a chess set under these circumstances is not an endeavor unto itself, it is an act of distraction. The longer the object is gone, the more you long for it. Because it's yours. You know it's yours. But worst, and most confusing and saddening, he knows it's yours.

Step 7:

Try not to refer to Step 6 repeatedly throughout the day. You will fail at this, and you will find it impossible to move to Step 8, which may just be Step 6 again, anyway. In this case, skip ahead to Step 9.

Step 8:

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Step 9:

At this point you can either:

- a.) Kill yourself.
- b.) Kill your uncle.
- c.) Spit out the chewed pulp, eat some crackers and go to sleep.

What I Did When Not Sleeping

That weekend I packed Wendell's cart with chess sets and went to my table at the marketplace. Sales were moderate, but I made enough to purchase essentials. Available to me were fine candies and chocolates, cakes and oven-warm fruit pies. These were things I was never permitted to buy when Wendell was with me, but now he wasn't. It didn't matter. I wanted none of those things now.

I packed the cart and went home early. I had already decided I wouldn't return the next day.

At the homestead, between mundane chores and fractured hours in my workshop, I ventured down to the copse of trees hoping to catch even the faintest glimpses of Uncle Wendell, which I did. No matter the time of day, he sat with his legs crossed beneath him, motionless. Not one flinch or adjustment of position could be detected. He was frozen in a state not of accelerated motionlessness, but true stillness. It was as if he'd been locked into one moment of time and preserved. He would stay like that, swathed in the apparatus,

communing with the trees that could teach me chess, for the remainder of the week.

Wendell's cluttersome array of bartered acquisitions stood out in mocking relief throughout my house. Most of the inventions he had traded for were useless or had been useful for only a short time and were now simply acting as space consumption devices.

Actually, one invention was designed to be just that. Uncle Wendell thought the idea whimsical enough to trade up for the only invention he'd built that was of any real practical use: The Manna Hearth. He'd managed to create a mechanism by which large, flaky loaves of a bread-like substance would appear on the kitchen counter overnight. The white, yeasty hunks were invigorating and filling, causing no ill aftereffects. A truly wonderful, life-improving product. And he'd traded it for a purposely useless rusted dome of iron and ductwork that took up a quarter of what used to be the dining room.

There were things called "tibits," or character coins. These were thoughts, sold for pennies and widely available in the marketplace. Usually they were shallow, circular copper containers with a hinged lid, resembling flat, featureless lockets containing handwritten scraps of insight or knowledge which could in turn be attached to a special copper necklace and worn at the throat.

In this fashion, the bromides, catch phrases or beliefs could be integrated into a person's overall character, thus theoretically enhancing the owner's personality. Since the talismans and necklace were made from copper, the owner could go out into the world without the apparatus, the telltale green ring left behind on the skin—a shadow or stain to remind one of their new dimensions of humanity.

Many of Wendell's tibits had proven useless or had remained unintegrated into his self, while others with shreds of truth were left open and discarded about the house.

"A penny saved is a penny earned."

"We do not war with nature: we are defined by it."

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death, I shall fear no Evil."

"FBI: Female Body Inspector."

"I'm with Stupid."

Even the silent noise reader had ultimately proven itself to be a letdown. Being simply a receiver, and not a communicator, it was too novel a device to perform the constant upkeep. A new speaker would be required, the first of probably many. The ink, paper and batteries needed to be replenished frequently and were too expensive to be practical.

My house was filled with wide misses, high concept tinkering and unfinished games. It was filled with longings for purpose. Non-brilliance. Waste. Choking

mediocrity. Dead objects with no function.

The object that was me, Dennis, could not be excluded from this failing of a new Play Criteria.

Pouring THE LOST CHESS PAWNS

Plaster, as a medium for creating oft-handled objects like chess pieces, is inappropriate. Things cast in plaster are purely ornamental. Plaster is dense, yet brittle. It breaks easily at the slightest drop or mild impact. It is like flesh, but it is not like wood.

Two parts plaster of Paris to one part water creates a quick-setting but workable solution. Invert the mold you've made in the image of your uncle. Look inside him. Fill him with moisture until full. Watch as the moisture magically vaporizes before your eyes, as his image becomes solid inside your object, as he becomes dry, as his color passes from cement gray to porcelain white.

Peel away the flexible mold. Examine your uncle's image: it looks like stone. Flick it with your finger: it clinks like glass. Snap the head off easily between your fingers. Smash the body against the wall of your workshop. Grind it into powder once again beneath your shoe.

Go to the kill shelter where the weapons are stored and arm yourself for war. To take back what has been stolen.

Walk with quiet purpose to the trees, where your apparatus has been secreted away from you. Walk without trembling. Walk without silently weeping or muttering under your breath. Carry the hatchet firmly in your fist, but keep your wrist loose.

Take back what has been stolen.

Take back your home.

Take back chess.

Take back wood.

Take it back.

What Happened To Uncle Wendell

I touched his shoulder, and he fell sideways to the grass. The face tube of my apparatus wrenched free of the oak and danced briefly in the air before following him down. Uncle Wendell stayed there and wouldn't move unaided again.

I had not lifted or dropped the hatchet on him; had not even brought it to the trees with me. I had pitched it into the empty farrowing stalls, having lost my will or courage.

I could not kill my uncle Wendell. I had not been out into the world, but I knew of

grisly business and could not transpose myself into that place nor keep my heart that dark for long. I know what it is to lose something. Someone. More than one.

Here was another one, turned to wood, become lignified, formed in the image of a man who may or may not have been my relation. Wendell was now a contoured mass of dead flesh that did not ooze putrefying fluids or stink of rot. I could not mourn his passing any more than those of my inadequate chess sets in the kill shelter.

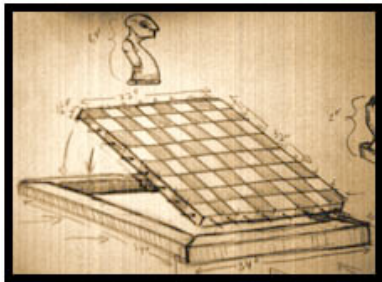
My possession, my object, my apparatus, on the other hand, was intact and undamaged. It fit me well enough.

Completing THE LOST CHESSBOARD

Wearing your device for talking with trees, cut four strips of oak at these dimensions: 34" long by 1" wide by 1 1/2" thick. These will act as a border frame around your completed checkerboard pattern. Bevel the ends at a 45-degree angle. Sand away splinters and smooth the surfaces. Stain dark. Drill eight holes to match the previously drilled holes in the checkerboard. Fit together with dowels and epoxy and be mindful that all corners are flush. Clamp it together until dry. Finish with three light coats of a high-quality water-resistant finish. Glue a 33 1/2" x 33 1/2" patch of green or black or brown or burgundy felt to the bottom. Sign and number it.

Your chessboard is complete. Maybe it is THE LOST CHESSBOARD, or maybe just the last.

Go to your living room and collect the pieces of your uncle's favorite store-bought chess set. Take them with you when you go to talk to the trees.



2.

The Things That Trees Have Done

Being inside the apparatus is like being in a small room and viewing the world outside through a smudged window. Things happen-objects move and sounds are created-but all you are aware of is your own breathing. It is not hot or cold in the apparatus. It is

not as hard to move about in your environment in the apparatus as it would be a small room, but almost. The loose skin is bulky, the wooden backpack oppressive on the shoulders and the boots clunky and foreign.

The apparatus separates one completely from the world. Your only connection to the outside is a long, flexible tube through which you inhale and exhale, revealing the suit to be a teacher. The lesson you take away is that the air you breathe is the only thing that matters; it is the only reason the planet allows you to exist. The apparatus teaches you that you are you and that everything else is not. A familiar dirt path, an expanse of clover, a copse of trees: they are an unexplored, alien world. You are the pioneer, traversing the distances, breathing in and out the sounds of this place you've never quite seen before.

At a cluster of trees, you inhale many crowded whispers. Taste them on your tongue. Smell them in your nostrils. The voices pass down your windpipe and accumulate in your lungs. They burst forth into the blood, racing to every extremity, every organ, every cell. And it is there that you finally understand what they are saying, because it is to the blood that a tree talks, through the very oxygen they release to us, the very oxygen we cannot live without on this hostile plane.

Trees give us instruction, direction and protection. Most importantly, they give orders to the blood of the breather. In this way the apparatus teaches you that you have no true will of your own. That the trees have a subtle dominion over the mobile living. That wood is control.

You learn that there is only one way to speak with the ones who control you, and that is through breath. You have what they need, a poisonous gas on which they thrive, and through this language of exhalation you can pose your most pressing question.

I asked the grove before me, "Who will teach me to play chess?"

The whole congregation exhaled at once, their whispers swirling through me, eager and possessive. Some suggested old ideas to maintain the status quo, while others had fresh and radical agendas they wanted to play out through this new medium who had been, up to this point, a boy named Dennis. Many were simply pleased by the communication for reasons I did not yet understand. They uttered their approval of me, saying, "He is the one."

Even Uncle Wendell spoke to my lungs, sad and terrified and lost from deep in the soil, while his earthly carcass remained a discarded mannequin at the feet of the controllers. Soon his whispers faded, vanished, dissolved and assimilated into the trees themselves. His former body, though, rested in the grass, left victim to the brutality of time and weather. His skin was unfinished, uncured; a fresh stump for ants and termites and burrowing

larvae. In the end, Wendell had been correct in his assumption: Wood had meant to harm him. His final silent scream reached me as a thin, high-altitude breeze: “where is the light?”



--TO BE CONCLUDED--