

Dear A. Lien

by John Olson

Let me describe life on our planet.

Everything on our planet has a name, including our planet, which is called Earth. The names are developed out of a substance called language, which is an amalgam of sounds. Each sound has a meaning. A meaning is a significance. A significance is a meaning. I am going in circles. I don't know how to tell you what a meaning is.

The revolutions of our planet are divided into time. Time is a form of sandwich. Each component of the sandwich is nestled between night and day, which enclose it like slices of bread. There are minutes, hours, and seconds. Seconds are tiny, like sesame seeds. Minutes are a little larger. Think of them as pickles. Hours are long and big. Think of them as pastrami. Or ham. Everything else is lettuce.

We like to put our sensations into art. Make art of what we feel. We meaning humans. The other animals are happy just to eat and sleep. But humans need art.

Some people paint. Some people write. Some people dance. Some people sing. Some people sing and dance and write and paint. And some people make shapes out of clay and stone. There are even some people who artfully fold napkins into convoluted forms that humor our hunger with their vaginal folds.

You may wonder what art is. You may not have art on your planet. Art is to life what flavor is to food. It is a vital superfluity. We don't need it; therefore we need it. We need to need what we don't need. Otherwise life is pointless. We struggle, we fight, we grub for food and attention, we age, we wrinkle, we die. Art makes this palatable. It is our immunity against futility.

One might begin to make art by smearing paint onto the surface of a canvas with an intention to twisting and distorting reality in order to arrive at a higher truth, keener perception, deeper insight. The organs of perception are not enough in themselves. The eyes are balls of jelly. There are nerves behind them that lead into the brain, where thoughts form. Dreams and ideals. Dissatisfactions and hypothetical arguments.

It is possible to make a great amount of wealth in painting. But you must die first. Living artists do not make as much money as dead artists.

Except for the people that dance and sing. They make tons of money. Alive. They live in mansions, appear on TV, and get angry when photographers take their picture.

TV is a system for transporting images through the air. This is done electronically. The images are sent as dots and spread in lines across a screen. The effect is riveting. Hypnotizing. Hard to take your eyes off of it, even when the images are not saying anything of interest, or making jokes about human biology, sex and defecation. Sex and defecation are of supreme interest to humans. They are a perpetual amusement.

People who sing and dance like to be seen on TV, but do not like it when photographers take their picture unexpectedly, such as throwing a telephone at a hotel concierge, or washing their hair at an ashram.

Our planet is small, but amiable. It's round, like most planets, with two poles, five oceans, seven continents, 18,995 islands, countless rivers, countless lakes, 1,511 active volcanoes, approximately four billion mismatched socks and a greasy spoon, all of it in elliptical orbit around a single star, which we call a sun. It confuses people if you call it a star.

I live in a one-bedroom apartment. The walls have been freshly painted misty rose and papaya whip.

I have a wife named Alessandra. She decorates cakes and writes poetry.

A cake is a form of food. It is soft and crumbly and full of sugar. Sugar is a sweet crystalline carbohydrate. It radiates the mouth with happiness and joy. Unfortunately, it must be consumed in moderation, as it has a tendency to make people fat. There are a lot of fat people on planet earth.

Poetry is a food for the mind. It used to be delivered orally, but now it is mostly written on paper. It cannot be turned on like a faucet, but must be wrestled into existence. It is difficult to create, and difficult to ingest. It is an engine of words on a chassis of lips. The mind sips at its waters, and the reflections waver. Gargoyles look up from below. Knives of sound break the air into a thousand shards of trembling reality.

Here on earth we distinguish that which is false from that which is true and call it reality. The difficulty resides in separating the false from what is true. Sometimes what is true is embedded in what is false and what is false is embedded in what is true. And sometimes there is more truth in a lie than lies in a truth. Truth is slippery, being subject to human perception, which has its limits, and can be easily manipulated. Contemplative immersion can bring us closest to that which is immanent in the world, the sense of the divine, shall we say, which some people call God, an invisible, all-powerful force which they prefer to think of as inhabiting the sky. Others find this divinity in themselves, and in everything around them. By speaking, it becomes something which moves in itself. That is to say it emerges and makes itself known in strange places and on odd occasions.

This dynamic of immanence is, in a sense, an encapsulation of what art is. A universe in a drop of paint, a divination in a deviation.

I also have a cat who likes to chew on my hand. A hand is an appendage that hangs from the arm, which is similar to the branch on a tree. There are five fingers on each hand which, when splayed, resembles the rays of a star.

Write when you get a chance. I look forward to hearing from you.

