

In the North Woods (or, The War of Art)

by Marshall Moore

In the North Woods condominiums, our plastinated goldfish are a way of life. They're pretty that way: cold and sparkly, with their onyx eyes and orange scales. We buy our kids exotic orandas and those dime-store orange things, and after we let them swim around in circles for a few days, we plunge them into liquid nitrogen. This causes the bowls to shatter. Sometimes the fish shatter, too. Those still intact at the end of the process, we promptly encase in lucite. Plastination: it's the new bonsai.

Over in the townhouse canyons of South Hills, parents teach their daughters to apply make-up with a spatula. The more forward-leaning families do the same thing with their sons. You perfect your pucker from an early age. *Hold still darling, just close your eyes. I'll try not to swing the canvas too hard. Don't flinch. There, won't that look nice when it's framed?* It's costume and theater and backdrop and props all in one. Green paint, purple lips, black eyes, South Hills.

For the residents of Oak Morrow, entropy is an art form. They break their own windows and crash their cars into their living rooms. Grannies and pets can usually scoot out of the way before they're crushed under the juggernaut of creativity. The descendants of Eastern Europeans, those Oak Morrow folk, they're used to crumbling façades and a layer of soot upon everything. They are said to paint their living rooms white in the fall, and to plug their own chimneys, come winter. Whether or not there's a drought in the summer, Oak Morrow people don't water their lawns. Dead vegetation and broken windows make for captivating photos.

Glen Haven Meadows is located next to the Forever Lawn Rest Gardens. At first glance, the homes in that section of town look almost Victorian. It's amazing what you can do with the architecture of bones. Can you name another neighborhood of tract mansions where every refrigerator contains formaldehyde, and every closet contains at least one complete skeleton in addition to all those black clothes? And you didn't think those cameos they all wear were made of ivory, did you? Grave-robbing: fun for the whole family.

Creative battles rage below the surface of the headlines: a skirmish here, a casualty there. Another elaborately choreographed car wreck, another little girl with a puffy but colorful face, another mausoleum emptied of its occupants. In the North Woods, we've depleted all the pet shops: there are no more fish to be had. Maybe next we'll crystallize iguanas or peacocks or dogs... maybe ourselves if someone will volunteer, or even our kids. Nothing is a crime when undertaken for aesthetics, and the winners will live forever at the Civic Art Museum.

