

The Logic of Divination

by Dolly Laninga

I am sitting cross-legged in a sea of dusty artwork. Across my bedroom floor, underwater trees grow violet bubbles instead of leaves; colonies of voluminous Siamese cats drift like clouds in expansive skies; a series of dead-eyed ghouls engage in a sort of penciled audition to be named the creepiest swamp-man. It looks as though my high school portfolio exploded, and now I am wading my way through the detritus of a discarded dream.

Really, I should have known better. It was late morning when I started this task (the intent was to purge the worst stuff, organize the others and pack them neatly and permanently away); now I can no longer make out the pine branches hovering just outside my window. If I stood, my body would remember that I've ignored its needs for hours. If I stood, I would see my neighbor's kitchen light on, illuminating the aftermath of his dinner preparations (something akin to nuclear fallout). If I stood, my hands would have to stop drawing, this sketchpad would fall off my lap, and I would have to catch up with all the work I was supposed to do on this day off.

A disruption is imminent. One of the Katies I live with is surely about to burst through my door to share some hummus or an anecdote from her day. The doorbell will ring. The newlyweds downstairs will do their thing—loudly—and I will have to flee my room. The spell will break and I will revert back to the path I have chosen, which has no room for this. Because objectively, I know drawing is a distraction—more so than other forms of recreation because I get to moping over the loss. I can see that these illustrations surrounding me are not that good: they're imaginative, sure, and they have a certain charm, but my techniques were largely self-taught and underdeveloped. My pastels and charcoals are not winning any prizes. But for a fraction of my teenage years I was intent upon creating bizarre children's books. I saw myself as the next Bill Pete, the next Shel Silverstein—those authors who fed my inner weirdo as I grew up. None of my artist friends were safe from my incessant chatter, my jubilant yelling (which is what I tend to do when I'm excited) on my Big Plans. I transferred to a university with a more impressive art and design program and a horde of faculty recently culled from a nearby art school. For a while I buzzed, euphoric that *finally* I knew what I wanted to do with myself.

There has been a marked pattern to my every major life decision: I talk the possibilities to death with friends over coffee or wine; do some haphazard research of dubious relevance; make obscure and possibly insane visual representations of the pros and cons of each option; sulk. Ultimately, my omens are plucked at random from the tumult of daily life. I wait until happenstance inspires what I hastily deem an “epiphany,” which in truth is just the bastard child

of my odd, idiosyncratic superstitions and self-defeating refusal to listen to advice. From then on, my task is to legitimize this divination with rhetoric, pretending I've shaped my life with something as sophisticated as logic.

Now I'm thinking that the word "hobby" is a terrible one. It fails to consider that for a lot of people, the relaxing activities we do on the side of Serious Business fulfill our driving desires. These activities say more about our values than more conventional defining attributes (the job title, the social class, the city of residence).

Why do we choose to do one thing over the other? It clearly has little to do with what we love the most, so what does this decision-making process look like? Perhaps it involves a list of pros and cons; perhaps a couple dice or a deck of cards. Most likely the process represents an acquiescence to financial demands and involves extensive consideration of each option's economic feasibility.

I didn't question my future career in art until a friend of mine took me to a student show at a nearby art school. After seeing the output of people my age and younger, I started to wonder whether I could keep up with other, more conventionally-trained artists. I worried especially about what would happen after graduation (assuming I made it that far), where I knew the real test of ability and perseverance would come. Eventually I bowed to my insecurities and moved on to another major, abashed by the audacity of my former goal.

Art is not an interaction with life: to draw is to retreat totally into my head. It's an odd habit, probably, but occupying my hands in that familiar way triggers some kind of door closing in my brain. As figures take shape on the page, the day's chaotic input fades and I am cocooned, safe even from my own thoughts. It is a comfort like hibernation. And any ideas that might bubble to the surface belong to something larger than me. They linger but a moment, visitors from a collective reservoir of thought. I can never seem to recreate all their contours later—the details are not, it seems, mine to keep.

This distance from life doesn't characterize every creative pursuit. In order to write I have to be alert and totally engaged with everything that has ever or could ever happen. I have to understand more than I ever could and I have to phrase it just right. This is as exhausting as it is necessary—though I tried so hard and for so long to avoid it. But the stories hovered in my periphery nonetheless and interjected themselves in the most inappropriate places (novella emails, overly creative analytical papers, purely fabricated conversational anecdotes).

And so this college thing, this career-choice, has not taken a normal path (conundrum, resolution, action, closure), but instead has been like a yielding to some kind of magnetic force. It felt as though, when I test-drove a series of possible careers, that I was being active in my life, taking agency and laying the foundations for some future years. But really, each possibility was based upon the shadows of conviction. A skill in rhetoric is equivalent to a skill in crafting

illusions; I handily obscured what I wanted, even from myself, by aping other people's resolve.

In our minds there is an incessant clamor of Could Have Beens. A person can be perfectly content, and still the brain whines that a mistake has been made somewhere, nags that life is less than it could be. Should we choose to entertain her, the temptress If Only seduces us with fantasies starring our hypothetically more glamorous, better-dressed selves; we're led to believe fantastic feats could have been realized if we'd only been a little wiser, a little bolder. These scenarios feed on themselves, become outlandish: we tell ourselves that our fortunes could have been made in an instant by a moment of well-deserved luck (what if it was but an hour earlier, what if he heard me say, what if the photo fell from her fingers), and all we had to do was look lovely, wait patiently by for fortune to bless us. Instead, at the crucial moment we wrung our hands and chose pragmatism—which is the surest route, we later think bitterly, to obscurity.

I turned off my mobile phone earlier today (trying to prolong this suspended state), but in the other room I hear the shrilling of the landline. The answering machine proffers its robotic pleasantries, and I can hear thirty seconds of static hissing when it begins to record. Incessant slow-tempo beeping will follow, alerting me to the presence of a message, until I play back and erase the white noise. I have to be done with this now—I have to resolve this distance between what I want and what I can have with words. I need to articulate my quandaries to understand them, to subject my shapeless needs to the rigors of language. This is how I can think and dream. This is how I can be part of the world.