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House of Tears

Carl Chew

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House of Tears

Carl Chew

I remember a small artwork I made called the *House of Tears*. I am sitting with my daughter when I think of it. I wonder if I was feeling sad when I drew it? I don't think so.

My memory flags. The picture isn't called *House of Tears*. It's called *House of Waves*.



A small boy is loud and fooling around, and making believe he is tough and mean. He is always so full of gestures and big words. *Me! I said so! That's right!* I am tired of asking him politely to be quiet. I want to know if he goes to the mosque. He says, yes. Do you pray? Yes. What would happen if you disturbed

everyone at the mosque? I would get in trouble, he says. What kind of trouble? They would hit me. Too bad, I say. I want to say, I don't believe in hitting children, but I stop myself. I say, I am your teacher and they don't let me hit students, but I want you to pretend something. What? I want you to imagine that I will hit you just like in the mosque when you are being noisy and rude. I can't really hit you, I don't want to, but I want you to pretend that I will. Maybe that will help you behave.

A few days later my students are taking a big test. It is the same test all fifth graders take in March. I watch the small boy and see him moving his pencil over the multiple choice answers. He's doing eenie, meanie, mynie, moe. I say, hey, what are you doing? Are you doing eenie, meanie, mynie, moe? Yes, he says. Stop it! I say.

We were downtown. Mom and me were crossing the street to go into Old Navy. Just then there was a really cool Caddie with hydraulics come down the street. It started to turn circles around us, right there in the street. When it stopped this guy with dark glasses got out and it turned out to be my brother. We went into Old Navy and everyone was staring at us. One white woman was staring at me. I said, who you lookin' at?

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Me and her was walking with my three year-old cousin, Miki. Miki was givin' everyone the finger. We was laughin' and all. She even gave Loquitia the finger. That was too funny.

I find the original *House of Waves* in an old Crane's paper box with a lot of other prints. I take it out and scan it. When I look at it, there don't seem to be enough waves. It doesn't feel like a house of waves. I want it to be more like a quantum house of waves – not here, not there, not anywhere in particular. I start working on it.



It is a very rectangular piece, lots of straight lines, everything crisp and in focus. I will change that. I work on the vertical and horizontal lines, manually putting a wiggle into them. I try that for quite awhile. It doesn't really help. I decide that laying a wave filter over the entire house may solve the problem. I try

numerous configurations of waves – sine, tangent, cosine, small and large amplitude with no luck to speak of. An hour goes by.

While working, time disappears. I notice time only against my backdrop of fatigue. It gets late and I still want to work, I rest my eyes for a second or two, and then jerking awake, startled, I realize I cannot go on, that I have to go to sleep.

I layer a copy of the house on itself, apply more waves, blur it, merge it, make another copy, layer it, flip it vertically, blur it more, add ripples, merge it. These things are never finished!

I'm not always successful at this. Actually, I don't believe artistic expression should have to be successful. If one is to give in to the subconscious for inspiration it seems only natural that a lot of indecipherable nonsense will stream out instead of intelligible perfection.

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Children live with horrible burdens. In four years I have taught a boy who saw his sister kill his younger brother with a knife, a girl whose father killed her mother and then took his own life, a boy whose family abused him so violently he had a metal plate in his head and took seizure medicine, a girl who lived with her homeless mother in the airport, children whose parents were in jail, several students whose lives were forever changed by mothers who took drugs during pregnancy, several children who didn't know where their parents were, a boy who was convinced his father was killed when the World Trade Center collapsed. These were just the biggest burdens.

I don't know what to do for these children.

I went to school to find out, but so much of what I learned does not apply. I keep trying and trying. I listen, copy and layer them, apply waves, blur, merge, copy, flip horizontally, shear, pinch, saturate. These children are never finished! Am I sure teaching should have to be successful? If one is to give in to the subconscious for inspiration it seems only natural that a lot of indecipherable nonsense will stream out instead of intelligible perfection.

While teaching, time disappears. Only fatigue brings it into focus. It gets late and I still have to teach, I rest my eyes for a second or two, and then jerking up minutes later I realize I cannot go on, that I have to leave and go to sleep.

What are students supposed to do? They come to school to find out, but so much of what they learn does not apply. They keep trying and trying. They watch, and listen, copy and paste, apply waves, blur, merge, flip vertically, shear, sphere-ize, and resize. Can we start over? – they plead. It's messed up. They sigh.

Does learning have to be successful? If children are to give in to the subconscious for inspiration it seems natural that a lot of indecipherable nonsense must stream out instead of intelligible perfection. And while learning, time drags for many of them. Boredom. It gets late. Students rest their eyes for a second or two. Minutes, hours later I jolt them awake. Pay attention!

It must be time for all of us to go home and go to sleep.

I want to go to Mars! I want to go to Mars now! Now!

Carl, be reasonable. We can't afford to send you just now.

I don't care. You always say that.

What about your daughter's education?

I want to go nowwww!

And your retirement?

I don't want to retire!

Carl, stop it! You don't really mean that.

You never give me what I want! I hate you!

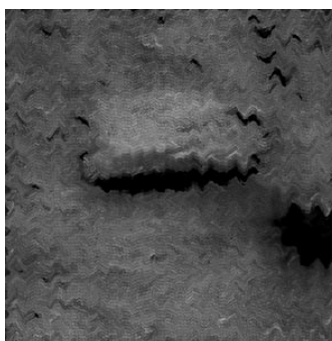
Carl, go to your room! Now!



This is one of the first pictures I download from the NASA Mars site. It was taken by the rover Spirit. I look at it for a long time. Doesn't the large rock to the right look like a petrified tree limb? I wonder if the NASA geologists see it.

It is probably not petrified wood or I would have heard about it already.

I think about reducing the picture down to a few basic pixels to give it some mystery



Welcome to the planet Mosaic Herringbone.

Mr. Chew I'm done.

Don't quit now, it's just getting good.

It's done. It's messed up anyway.

The longer you work on it the better it will get.

Do I have to?

Yes, you have to. This is just like any other subject.

Like math and reading. Keep working.

How much more do I have to do?

Keep working until it is finished.

When will that be?

You will know.

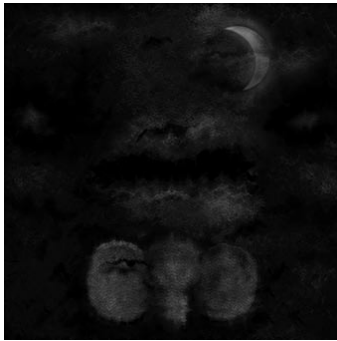
I do already know.

Then keep working until the bell rings and we will talk about it later.



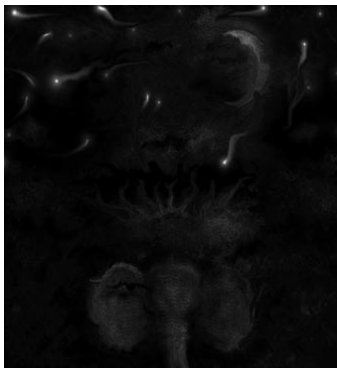
I now copy, paste, flip horizontally, merge at 50 percent opacity, notice an elephant-like creature with a short trunk, notice some crows, notice a skull, add shadows, enhance highlights, saturate and darken the red. It is dark and mysterious. Scary. Two

days have passed since I first looked at the Mars picture. I print out several copies and pin them to my wall. I go to bed.



I dream of my picture. It is nighttime, sapphire, blue and purple and magenta. A dusty yellow crescent hangs in the sky amid large black birds. It is so still I can hear the air pulsing under their wings. The little elephant is there: aquamarine, sleeping, soft.

Recess duty. A fourth grade girl sits on the asphalt and weeps piteously. Try to listen. I ask her what's wrong. She weeps. You can tell me. It will be okay. Was someone mean to you? No. I put my hand on her back to comfort. What's wrong? My, my uncle...is...a...a...gigolo. Weeping. Do you know what a gigolo is? Yes! My aunt calls him that. They are breaking up. I say: You know, one of the good things about coming to school is that you can leave those troubles at home and be here with teachers and friends who like you and care about you. She cheers up a bit. I help her up and we walk around the school yard for awhile.



I must be in a mood for greater complexity. Finally, the elephant grows a longer trunk! White sparks appear and spiral through the air trailing luminous afterglow. The moon becomes orange and ragged. I'm uncomfortable though. I don't like it now and I don't know what to do.

A special Vygotskian concept, the **zone of proximal development**...refers to a range of tasks that the child cannot yet handle alone but can accomplish with the help of more skilled partners. To understand this idea think of a sensitive teacher or parent who introduces a child to a new activity. The adult picks a task that the child can master but one challenging enough that the child cannot do it by herself. Or the adult capitalizes on an activity that the child has chosen. Such a task is especially suited for spurring development forward. Then the adult guides and supports, breaking the task into manageable units and calling the child's attention to specific features. By joining in the interaction, the child picks up mental strategies, and her competence increases. When this happens, the adult steps back, permitting the child to take over more responsibility for the task.

Infants, Children, and Adolescents, Laura E. Berk

I simply cannot do this job! It is too much for me. It is too impossible. I hate tests and I hate children who make messes and won't clean them up and I hate parents who don't care and I hate budget cuts and I hate moving into the new building and I hate the rug on the floor and I hate the school board and the superintendent and I hate myself.

I really shouldn't be around children.

Inside there are so many sighs. Inside there are so many tears. Crying for the children. Crying for me. Crying for parents. Sighing. Weeping inside. Grey and cold and damp inside. Hungry inside. There are so many sighs. Sighs. What can I do? What can anyone do? Everyone is sighing. Everyone is shedding tears, and more tears. Inside is so much anguish. Anguish for the children. Anguish for me. Sighing for parents. Crying. Anguish inside. Wet and cold inside. There is so much anguish. Trembling. What can I do? What can anyone do? Everyone is sighing and weeping, and anguished and in tears, and trembling. Trembling, in anguish and trembling. Trembling for the children. Trembling for me? Trembling for the parents. Sighing. Weeping and trembling inside. Dull and lonely and cold inside. Tired inside. Frightened. Anguished. Sighing. Trembling. Crying. Shaking. Inside,

This is how I am feeling. So it goes on the picture...

*I'm done.
Don't quit now, it's just getting good.
It's done. It's messed up anyway.
The longer you work on it the better it will get.
Do I have to?
Yes, you have to. This is just like anything else.
Like brushing your teeth and doing the dishes.
Keep working.
How much more do I have to do?
Keep working until it is finished.
When will that be?
You will know.
I do already know.
Then keep working until the bell rings.
There is no bell.
Yes there is, tomorrow at 9:05, there is a bell.
You're right.*

Dear A,

The other day you gave me a note that you and your mom had written. In it you explained how you were sure I had mixed you up with someone else, and that I had punished you harshly. I feel like the only thing I am guilty of has been a failure to inspire you to do the right thing. Truly I am saddened and sorry that I have been unable to do this for you.

You are a wonderful young woman and like your parents I want the very best for you. The truth is though, I am worried and I am scared for you. During this school year I have seen you unable to speak out for, and act clearly in the defense of, what is right, caring, and good.

I certainly don't want to choose your friends for you, but I know I have been correct to plead with you to help your friends make positive decisions. In the end though, you have erred on the side of playing along with behavior that you describe as "joking," behavior which is really mean spirited, dangerous, and disruptive.

In going along with your friends you have been a partner to bullying on the playground, you've broken rules about bringing food into class, you've disrupted us by loud talking and rough housing when asked not to, you've been argumentative and disrespectful to adults in charge, you've not followed directions,

and you've encouraged others to make poor choices by your tacit approval of their hurtful behavior.

I know that someday you will come to understand that I am right about this, and that it is reasonable for me to be upset with you. My job is to teach. Your job is to learn. I would love it if it ended right there. There is not a single reason for you to take any other path (or detour) while at school. Look around, there are students who stick to business and it doesn't do them any harm. Quite the contrary, they are thriving, getting good grades, and joyfully preparing for their futures.

Yours,

Mr. Chew



Sometimes it is more important to have friends than anything else.

Sometimes our dilemmas are profound.

And sometimes so are our friends.

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