

The Peculiar Adventures of Far-seeing Greta, Following Commo Perry to Japan

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with Art by Bruce Brooks



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Introduction

This is an exploration of the interaction of visual art and mythical creativity.

In 2005 I was asked to do some consulting at LaGuardia Community College. It was an act of mercy on the part of the president of LaGuardia, Gail Mellow. President Mellow was a friend of my wife's and had heard that again, I had been told that, rather than work for an educational institution, I should become a consultant. That is, I had been fired as a financial vice president for the second time in a year.

I was to replace a fine woman in President Mellow's office who had acted, I guess, as a sort of chief of staff. One of her duties had been to keep track of the president's contingency funds, and, after checking with the president, making small awards. As a former CFO, I could do that. Occasionally those small awards had gone to art department folks to support public art at the college.

One of those folks was Professor Bruce Brooks. I was happy to help, and Professor Brooks was happy to orient me. He proposed a tour of the college's art. I figured a quick 30-minute walk through the college's three converted industrial buildings would be fun. We set off. It seemed that the college had a lot of art that Professor Brooks and his colleagues had endeavored to put up on every floor of the college. Three hours later, we neared the finish.

Some of the work had been produced by Professor Brooks. It was remarkable. A combination of painting, collaging and general gluing of objects seemed to be his primary medium. The images crashed on me, and the more I looked, the more I saw. The figures were in motion, spoke to each other, jumped out at me. The colors cried for attention. The references were sly, confusing, random, disorderly. The Silver Surfer seemed a favorite character.

After the tour, whenever we could get together, we talked about art and education. Professor Brooks was a revered teacher. I came quickly to agree that creativity should be an important competency to impart to our students. After graduating from the twenty-first grade, I was trying to unlearn the tight behaviors I had picked up. Our society needed people who could create solutions, not just write good English and solve algebraic conundrums.

After a while, I took a fulltime director's position at LaGuardia. Consulting was no more my calling than CFOing. As a lowly director, I would work normal hours and would not have to meet with wealthy trustees, my particular challenge. One day my boss, a vice president, said that he was giving back the painting installed by the art department. It was a Bruce Brooks. I asked that, instead, it should be moved to my office.

Oh, what a painting. It was too aggressive for my boss, a fish turning into a tiger, flames from his mouth. It had glorious details that took months to tease out: there were chickens, small owls, a naked woman, a desert house with an atomic explosion in the front yard. The paint was thick and wrinkled. A river of spruce needles crossed a corner. When people came to sit with me, I asked whether they would like to turn their back to the tiger or face it.

In 2017 I retired and purchased the fish-tiger painting to take home. I am looking up at it now in my study. The facing wall was blank. I asked Bruce to sell me another. I now have a blue elephant with DaVinci's Ermine Lady, a section of H-O railroad track, much gold foil and a couple of Turkish vases.



My Study

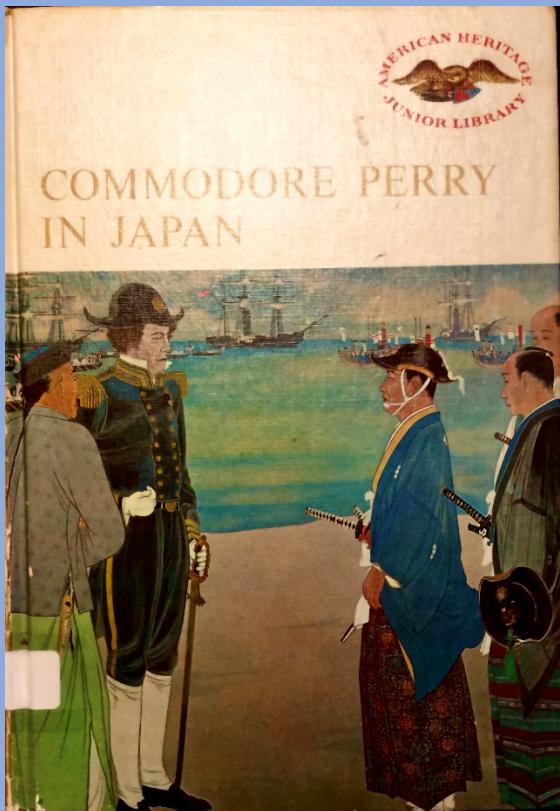
When Bruce delivered it, he also gave me a book. On the covers, inside covers and each of the 150 pages he had made a small painting in the same collaged, painted, glued on manner. The book had been "Commodore Perry in Japan," an American Heritage Junior Library book.

In many of Bruce's paintings, the Commodore Perry words and illustrations peek through. I found another copy of the book online. This helped me identify some of the characters that populate the paintings. I also learned about the Commodore.

I knew that the only way to honor his gift was to write an epic poem with his art as illustration. This work was thus born.

I am not a great poet. This work attempts merely to mirror Bruce's creativity. It took him a year to produce the book. My poem is only intended to do him honor.

As an epic, the poem needs a hero. I chose a young Swedish girl called Greta. I think you know who I mean. She is a brave, far-seeing person who would change the world, if she could. Many books have sought to ride on her fame. This work should bring me no recompense. I do not wish to embarrass or use her. She inspires me. If there is a great accident and there is recompense, the funds will go to an appropriate environmental charity.



By Robert L. Reynolds. Discarded by the Bay View Library, Bay View, Michigan. Given by Mr. & Mrs. Marvin H. Swift, 1984.

Thus, there are three themes that drive the poem: the story of Far-seeing Greta sailing from the US to Japan, following Perry's route to warn of the dangers of building sixteen new coal-fired power plants; the historical story of Commodore Perry, who appears as a ghost or a memory of America's once strong belief in Manifest Destiny; and the details of Bruce's painting as the monsters, dreams, and heroes of the sailors on Far-seeing Greta's craft.

Emily Wilson's new translation of Homer's *Odyssey* (Norton, 2018) gave a basis for the sea epic. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (Canongate, 2005) nurtured ideas of the lost female voice. Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* (Norton, 2000) gave more clues on the proper behavior of heroes. The ship's crew of endangered animal species was inspired by the Alexandre Dumas (père) fairy tale, *The Two Brothers* that I had earlier adapted and translated (Bahar Books, 2014). An exhibit of paintings of the Ramayana with the Monkey King and his army at the Metropolitan Museum of Art also inspired the ship's endangered species crew.

My favorite animals with the crew are the gibbons. I once had an apartment in Adams-Morgan at the back door of the zoo—a fourth-floor walk-up. In the evening the gibbons would serenade me. My, they could scream. Now, habitat degradation threatens them.

As a warning, the Commodore is herein called Como Perry, a sly reference, decodable only by those who watched the Ed Sullivan Show in the 1950s.

Each page has received two stanzas of four lines. Each line is (almost always) twelve syllables long. Every other line in the stanza rhymes. The rhymes are mostly good, very few near, sometimes made with an invented word, sometimes with a weird word order. The beats in the

rhythm, however, are sloppy. A thousand-year oral tradition will not form around this epic. While my meters are hexa, my iambs are ick, in other words.

I photographed each page of Bruce's book. I am not a photographer. I used my iPad mini. I did not flatten the book. I had enough trouble with the reflections. My photos do not do the paintings justice. The metallic silvers and golds lose their sheen. The bends in the page cause shadows, even though I used four indirect lights. I had trouble getting many of the reds to look true. (And if they aren't true to me, a red-green colorblind person, woe unto you!) I could have scanned the pages to get better color authenticity, but that would destroy the book.



My workshop photography studio

Pratt graduate, where he fenced. His life's narrative continued as he painted.

About the time I was retiring, Bruce died momentarily. In front of a LaGuardia building he suffered a heart attack and fell to the sidewalk. One of our nursing faculty was heading for class. She and security brought Bruce back. A quadruple bypass gave him hope to return to the handball courts.

He may have more to add to this initial draft. He is one cool dude!

There is much whimsy in Bruce's paintings. There is much whimsy in the poem, but the story turns serious as the ship approaches the end of its journey. If we do not give our children a future, we may lose them.

You are a rare, privileged reader. I hope you enjoy it, although you may find it hard to finish. Please use the poems to tease you into looking more carefully at each painting. Look for things I missed.

You may say that the paintings were not intended to hold a narrative. I cannot speak for Bruce's intention, but I know that every day of our lives is a chapter in our own narratives. Bruce's life is no different. He is a New Yorker, a



This is the cover Bruce created. The frame is glued on and sticks out about three-quarters of an inch. Inside the frame are spruce needles.



This is an edge view of the book. You can see the width of the frame on the cover.



Inside the front cover. Note that the book with Bruce's art, unlike the library copy, is well worn.