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about 1200 words

CHIMING WITH MOTHER EARTH

by

Vicki Leon

* Among the Cambria pines in San Luis Obispo county lives Art Beal, a 78-year-old half-Klamath Indian who has spent his life building an architectural love-possion of stone, shells, flotsam, jetsam, and junk from life's travels. *

Clinging and flowing impenably down a slope known locally as "Nitwit Ridge", Art's organic anti-Hearst castle is the ^{handiwork} ~~dream and the~~ ~~work~~ of an American Gaudi. Ask him when he will finish the splendid confusion of rooms and arches that honeycomb his five acres, and "Captain Nitwit" barks, "Never! Never!"

The morning sun seems to warm the bones of Nitwit Ridge and its iconoclastic occupant earlier than it touches surrounding ridges. You drive past the self-conscious new buildings that clot the main streets of the village of West Cambria Pines, up to Art's multi-storied aerie, rife with fuchsias. ~~From first light to dusk a trickle of tourists,~~ ~~the smell of coffee, almost ever-present~~ ~~drawn by word of mouth to the bizarre beauty~~ ~~by the aroma of a hundred kinds of plants, welcomes you. There is a~~ ~~sense of serene organic activity here, punctuated by~~ a torrent of anecdotes, philosophical bullying, and sassy mountain-man humor. ~~See~~

Art is saying, ". . . a man asked me if I'm a left-winger. I says

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nope. He says are you a right wing? I says nope. I'm the bird between those two wings. Pshaw! He didn't know any more than a pig wearin' a rubber shirt in the rain."

The only human resident of Nitwit Ridge is Art, but he prefers to say, "I live here with two old women -- Mother Earth and Dame Nature," gleefully anticipating visitors' looks of bewilderment and eventual comprehension. Art's love affair with his two "old women" is evident in his concern for the earth and the things of the earth.

His own phantasmagorical creation, hanging dizzily on a 50-degree slope, is nevertheless firmly anchored to its site. Art, an inspired seat-of-the-pants engineer, built it on a granite slab and designed the maze of buildings around the handsome pines, whose root systems are vital to keep the hillside in place.

Long before it became fashionable, the old man on the ridge talked to plants and communed with animals, who responded lovingly to his sound and touch. Nasturtiums, bluejays, kittens, banana trees, and two kinds of garlic flourish side by side. The plant life threatens to obscure the fleet of rump-sprung couches and chairs that are scattered up and down the warren of rooms, stairways, and corners.

He also knows the interconnectedness of nature and accords it his respect. "You gotta be here! There are so man-y lit-tle things!" Art says, earnestly gesticulating with snuff-stained fingers as he strives to make people understand what the word "ecology" really means.

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-also known as "Dr. Tinkerjaw"-

"Captain Nitwit" is a mulligatawny stew of contradictions. He has a wide nose of Emmett Kelly proportions and the haunting brow-ridges of an Australian aborigine, but beneath the aboriginal brows twinkle the blue eyes of a naughty young satyr. Gritty years of piecing together his gigantic, joyous sand-castle have made Art's hands and feet resemble shapeless leathery flippers, yet he can deftly splint a robin's leg or cook an omelet. He has the wiry body of an athlete (he was a champion long-distance swimmer in the '20s) and the soul of a visionary (among his dusty memorabilia you will find five poetry anthologies in which his works appear). Orphaned by the 1906 San Francisco quake, Art was "barely educated", yet his command of the English language is richly allusive and wildly Rabelaisian. He takes a firm stand on semantic integrity as well. "It's birthday anniversary, not birthday," he patiently explains over and over. "You only have one birth-day....once you're kicked out that door you can't go back."

Art has an intense feeling for West Cambria-Pines, past and present. One of the area's original settlers ("I came here after the first German fracas --World War I-- when West Cambria Pines was nothing but open range"), he mourns the fact that much of the history of the tiny town is being irretrievably lost. One of his continuing feuds is with the Post Office, who persists in lumping West Cambria Pines with Cambria, a move which Art blasts as "misrepresentation, fraud, and conspiracy!"

Although Art stoutly maintains his bachelorhood through life

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membership in what he calls the "Ajax club --I work fast and leave no ring", children swarm instinctively to him. One day it may be a group of mentally retarded children, brought to Nitwit Ridge on a field trip to show them that different can be beautiful. Another time it manifests itself in hundreds of hours of labor and materials which Art donates to help build a playground for the school children of Cambria.

① Art is at that stage in life where age and eccentricity are a boon, not a handicap. ② But behind the picturesque raconteur, ~~self-styled "revolutionist"~~, and plant charmer lies a somberer picture.

③ Art is in a tragic struggle against time and circumstance, his biggest battle being the encroachment of the developers.] ~~After putting a lifetime into Nitwit~~ the bizarre beauty of Nitwit Ridge is

④ Remorseless in their desire to masticate what remains of the village of West Cambria Pines into a wonderland of kitsch, the developers toil just below Art's place to put up what is heralded as an Authentic Old Western Town. ⑤ "Racketeers and gangsters from Los Angeles, that's who's behind it," snorts Art. ⑥ They are beginning to cast covetuous eyes toward Art's piece of prime acreage, now completely surrounded by expensive homes. ⑦ (Never mind that some of the houses have already slipped down the steep hillsides; as Art says, "I tried to tell 'em, you got to work with Mother Nature, not against her.

⑧ They wouldn't listen. ⑨ Cleared off the trees and now where's their property? ⑩ Running downhill with each year's rains.")

In one ~~of his things~~ ~~when you see~~ ~~one of Art's poems~~ ~~puts~~: "Beauty is a fanner shore / Beauty lives forever more." For 40 years more

⑪ In his confident youth Art once wrote: Now, nearing 80 and heirless, Art is not so sure that ^{the} beauty he has created will survive.

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Unhappily,

Art's claim to his own property is a tenuous one, (based on a 12-year-old "gentlemen's agreement".) In 1961 Art fell ill and was hospitalized; in those straitened circumstances he deeded his land to an old friend (who is, coincidentally, a land speculator) who promised to keep the taxes paid on it and deed it back to Art when he was more solvent. Art's solvency hasn't improved much since then, and his erstwhile friend still owns the land, now worth many times the original price that Art paid. As long as the old friend remains a gentleman, Art is relatively safe. But Art fears that the benign neglect of their agreement will eventually turn into malignant activity when heirs inevitably inherit his friend's estate.

Such fears are kept private, for Art is a proud and an independent man. *Realizing that 2 groups of community people recently began proceedings to incorporate Nitwit Ridge with the hope of gaining clear title to the property*

(13) ~~What~~ that will happen to Nitwit Ridge when Art is no longer there to chaff visitors, feed the plants and animals, and add to his never-finished symphony of stone and shells? (14) Could an ersatz Wild West ever replace the home-grown beauty and truth of a monument to human uniqueness like Nitwit Ridge?

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in italics

Steps are currently...
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