

PANDEMIC COUNTDOWN

*a month
of instructions
for our survival*

written and illustrated by
JANE ROSE SPEISER
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*to all of those
who
did not make it
through the night*

introduction:

As my own professional endeavors as a social satirist, via images and words, are considered 'non-essential' to our survival as a planetary community, it is with a certain humility that I submit my only weapon against the uncertainty and despair that this pandemic has produced. It could be called a 'pandemic countdown.'

How did this book come about? After my own close encounter with the virus, which lasted a month and a half from the end of February to the beginning of April, followed by another three months of convalescence and still counting, I decided that I had acquired enough familiarity with the disease to bear witness to its effects on my body and mind.

Why have I written and drawn a book that makes the reader laugh, in the midst of an unspeakable tragedy? Humor, as described by Art Buchwald, is the strongest way of expressing rage.

I did not set out to indict a specific government or politician. I try to write about the human condition, whose faults are unfortunately spread democratically all over the world. Humans, like all living species are in evolution; after us something better will eventually come into being. We are the beta version of what we aspire to be.

The illustrations for this book are culled from fifty plus years of my efforts to create images for various books and monographs of social satire. Each drawing was

enthusiastic about being given a second incarnation, after many seasons in my dusty archives. They are essentially the legacy of my life's work. Some are more elaborate than others, but they all try to make the viewer laugh and cry at the same time. At their best they highlight the absurdity of our lives. My drawings contain many of my favorite animals: elephants, camels, giraffes, lions, ostriches, whales, swallows. The nice thing about animals is that they act rather than talk. These animals do not live in Italy where I have resided for the past forty-two years. But living inside my imagination they have become world travelers.

There are thirty-one chapters to this book, one for each day of the month. Following that the reader can start from the beginning again, as the new month begins, for however long we will be facing these events. Clearly, as an author, I have an editorial viewpoint. I believe that as individuals and governments throughout the planet, we are at a critical turning point. We must decide whether we actually wish to survive, and if so, we must enact a complete reset of our most basic and deeply held values. This reset must engender a different use of our time and energy, in actual practice. But I have tried to avoid 'preaching' as we need to ask ourselves questions. We don't need to be fed predigested 'good advice.' I hope I have led my readers to ask useful questions of themselves, so that each may find their own answers.

Jane Rose Speiser

IN THE BEGINNING

day 1

Italy's first look at the arrival of the corona virus. Note the intense focus of the eyes tightly closed, as sand is an irritant to the eyeballs. Also the graceful media feathers waving optimistic assessments in the desert breezes.

Any resemblance to the reaction of other countries you may know of is purely coincidental.



STRATEGY

day 2

As soon as Italy recognized that the virus existed, the country had to decide what to do next. As you can see from the picture, of an unidentified member of the government, this guy has got a plan: HE IS WAITING FOR HELP TO FALL FROM THE SKY.

He has a hopeful expression, a wide arm extension, and a sturdy sheet to provide a soft landing for stray asteroids, unidentified flying objects, and generous pigeons who might be flying overhead. We are not sure whether his plan will work, but we will soon find out. (Disclaimer: any resemblance to other governments and their leaders, who might come to mind, is purely coincidental.)



BE PREPARED

day 3

Social distancing is not an easy art to master. In the picture below, only the giraffe has been smart enough to put a full six feet between his nostrils and his fellow travelers. The other passengers are sitting on an averagely overcrowded means of public transportation.

Will buses, trains, airplanes always be laid out this way? Or will each of us have a whole over-sized sofa to stretch out on in the future, as we move around our planet?



LOOKING FOR ANSWERS *day 4*

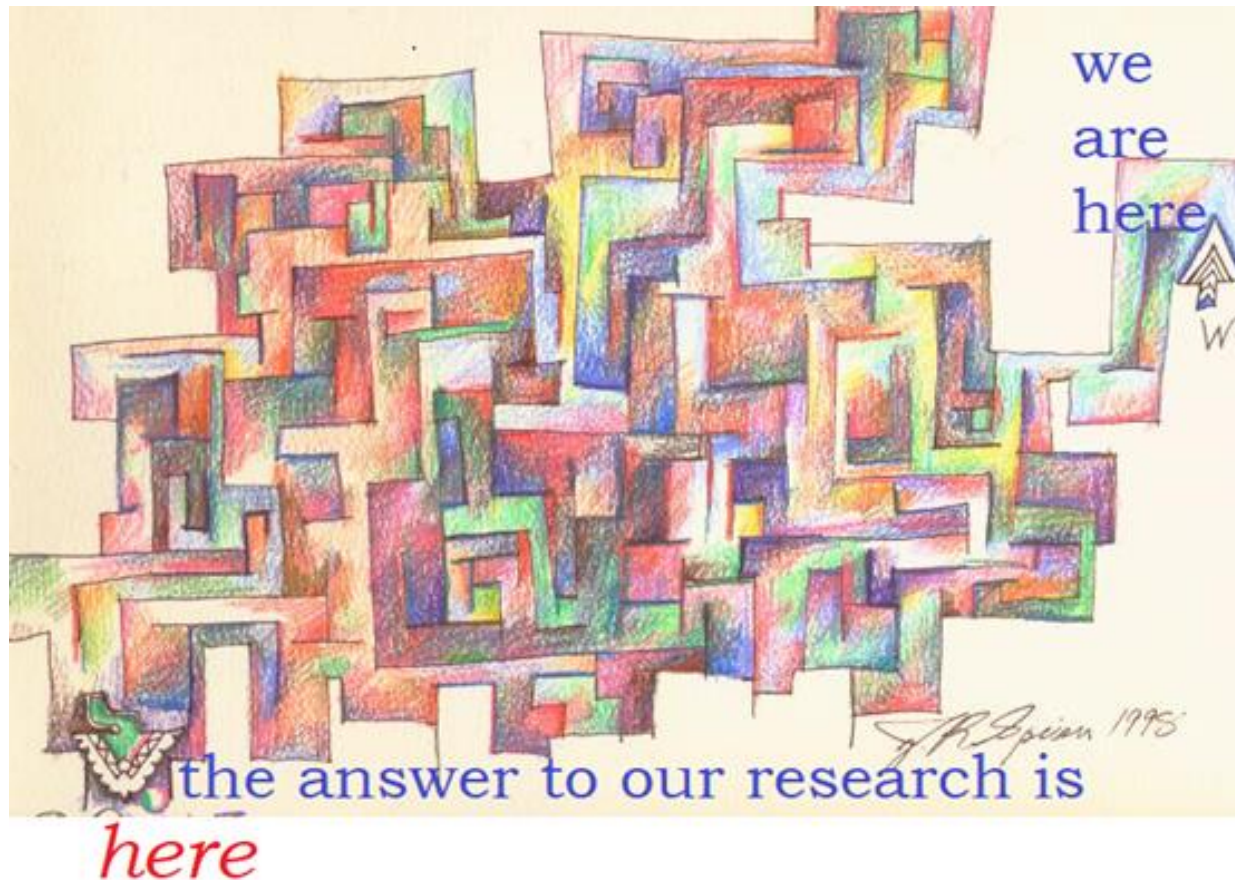
The first thing to do when facing a very serious medical problem is to try to understand it. We see here a devoted scientist, carrying out
EVIDENCE BASED SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH.

His zeal and humility should not be underestimated.

As you can see on the following page, this is what he has come up with:



day 4 (continued)



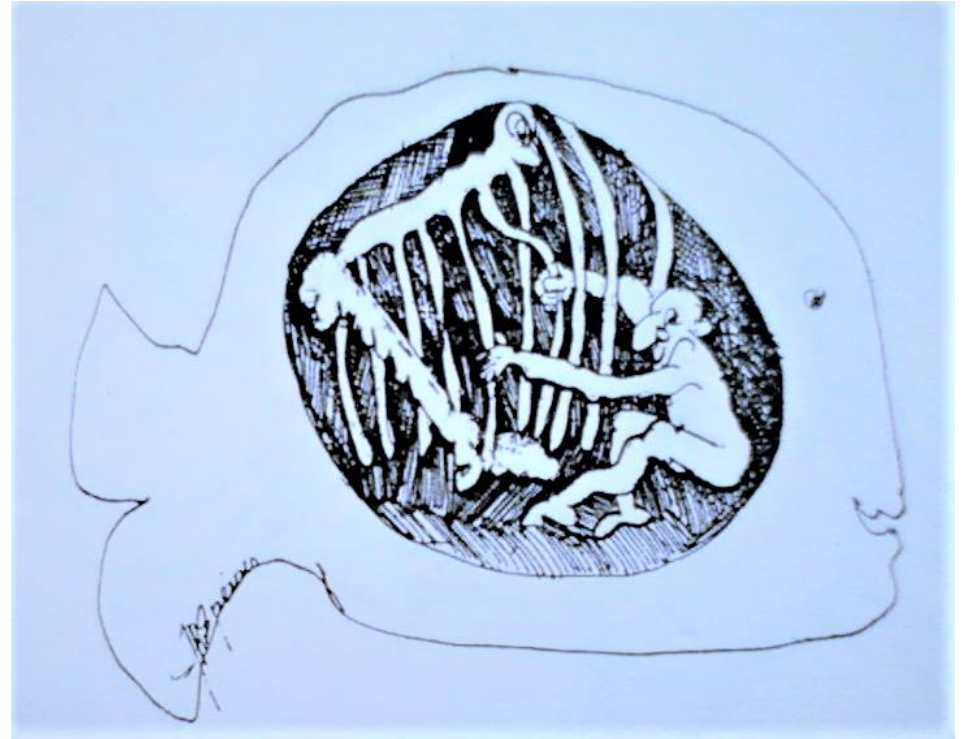
The road leading to the possible solutions is not as straightforward as those with opinions carved into granite would like to think. The cure??? The prevention??? Our future as an interdependent community on this planet???? *quien sabe*

MELODIES & CHORDS

day 5

In the picture below, we see Jonah, in lock down, in the belly of the whale. It is dark down there. No ram's horn to connect with the outer world. Cold and damp. Lonely. No knowledge of when the whale will get tired of trying to digest him and spit him out onto dry land.

Jonah has found something to occupy his time. He is learning to play the harp with the ribs of the whale. He did not expect to become a musician in his former life. But these things happen.



THREE MEALS A DAY

*day 6**bon appetito a tutti.*

We are being inundated with suggestions from all corners of the web, as to what will fortify our immune systems against the virus. These indications are like a huge orchestra in which every instrument is out of tune and trying to drown out the others.

I, as a person who contracted and battled the virus for many months, and survived to tell the tale, have whittled down this myriad of information to three simple rules:

1. if you have to choose between arrugola and rum, choose rum: it has more zing. If you want your aperitivo to feel organic, you can add fresh mint, (from my garden) and ginger to the rum.
2. If you are undecided between broccoli and beef stroganoff, choose the beef: it has more protein, and the sauce composed of fresh cream and cognac gives you energy.
3. If you don't know whether to pick celery or sachertorte, select sachertorte, it is full of chocolate which cheers you up.

Stirring the soup of good advice

MANAGING THE CRISIS

day 7

Most governments would like to believe that they have everything under control. They are like the elephant in the picture who has conquered his fear of the mouse. The docile mouse in question is gliding obligingly under the masterful grip of the elephant's four hundred pound foot.

However, in the still of the night the elephant has bad dreams. In the picture we see how he dreams.

As usual any resemblance to any specific government's conduct during the pandemic is purely coincidental.



PROPHEESIES

day 8

As you can see, foretelling our future is a complicated business.

Our fortune teller is concentrating, but she looks worried.

However her customer is hopeful that the lines in his hand point toward the princess and not the lion.

There is always the third choice, of the freeway diving off the cliff. Where will the pandemic lead us to? Time will tell.



STRESS

day 9

Most of us have been brought up in a world in which 'time is money;' a world where our time has been measured and sliced in terms of its economic return. Perhaps the pandemic will change that.

Maybe, just maybe, after this hiatus, time will return to being time: that fluid entity, that flows like a river, in which one can think one's own thoughts, watch the roses grow, develop one's interior life, ponder the unanswerable questions.

We will value it more, and use it more wisely.

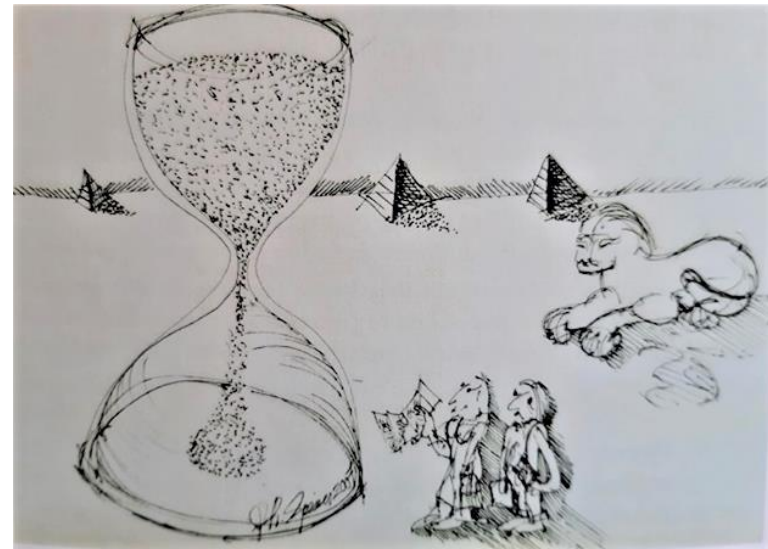


NEW INVENTIONS

day 10

Our scholars of the desert sands are studying the kind of sand to put in their newly created hourglass. It is just the right size for the long wait we will have until the contagion of the virus goes down enough to feel safe, and a vaccine or valid cure is developed so that our beloved friends and relatives are in less danger.

Their latest model of the hourglass is pictured here. It is the height of the medium sized pyramid, seen in the distance. An hourglass will be installed in each country, one next to the Statue of Liberty, one alongside of the Arche de Triomphe, one in the Piazza del Duomo and another by the Taj Mahal.



PUPPET SHOW

day 11

It has been known to happen that in a moment of crisis the head of a government decides to modify his rapport with his electors and staff. He reconfigures his relationship to his staff in the manner illustrated in the drawing.

For lack of space I have not drawn the great void below the feet of the staff: a drop of three thousand feet, so as to discourage them from trying to cut their strings. This has occurred on occasion in countries far away from where you live, on other continents, but at times in a country closer to your own.

Perhaps even in your own country.



BOTANY LESSON

day 12

Sometimes during this pandemic I start to think that plants are smarter than human beings. If humans had plants inside their brains instead of grey matter, and skilled gardeners to tend them, they would be better off.

Plants turn toward the light. They are flexible, they bend with the wind. They heal themselves when they have been wounded by unskilled pruning. They welcome other species, the birds and the bees, as an enhancement to their survival and propagation, they don't treat these species like invaders.

Plants are patient. They get through the Winter without complaining too much. They weather droughts and floods with stoicism. We could learn something from plants.



SWEATSHOP

day 13

In the picture below, our valiant tailor is sewing Italy back together, stitch by stitch, the North and the South. He has started just outside Naples, and if all goes well and the thread does not break too often, and the needles do not splinter going over the hard rock of the Apennine mountains, he should reach the Adriatic Sea before the end of the decade.

You might know of other countries that need to be sewn back together...purely coincidental. (For those of you who do not live in Italy, those in the “North” consider that the “South” starts at every point three yards closer to the equator than the edge of their back yard.)



HAUTE CUISINE

day 14

Along with all of us confined to our homes with four walls, there are those whose homes are rather unorthodox. In the picture below, two of them are making dinner under their favorite bridge. The menu calls for sauce for the spaghetti, but they have not yet figured out how to make sauce out of the tennis shoe and the compact disk that they have just fished up from the river.

To be homeless in the midst of the pandemic, in Winter and without food is no laughing matter.



MUSIC FROM HEAVEN *day 15*

In order to help you deal with the pandemic and all of its health and economic consequences, I have sent you a guardian angel. This particular angel has musical aspirations, despite its unusual instrument. It was bumbling around Heaven, feeling rather bored on the cloud it was assigned to when finally, after a couple of eternities it was given the responsibility of keeping all of my friends and relatives safe from harm.

This is something it is quite good at. If you feel something winged brush against you in the middle of the night, that is the angel, just checking up on you.

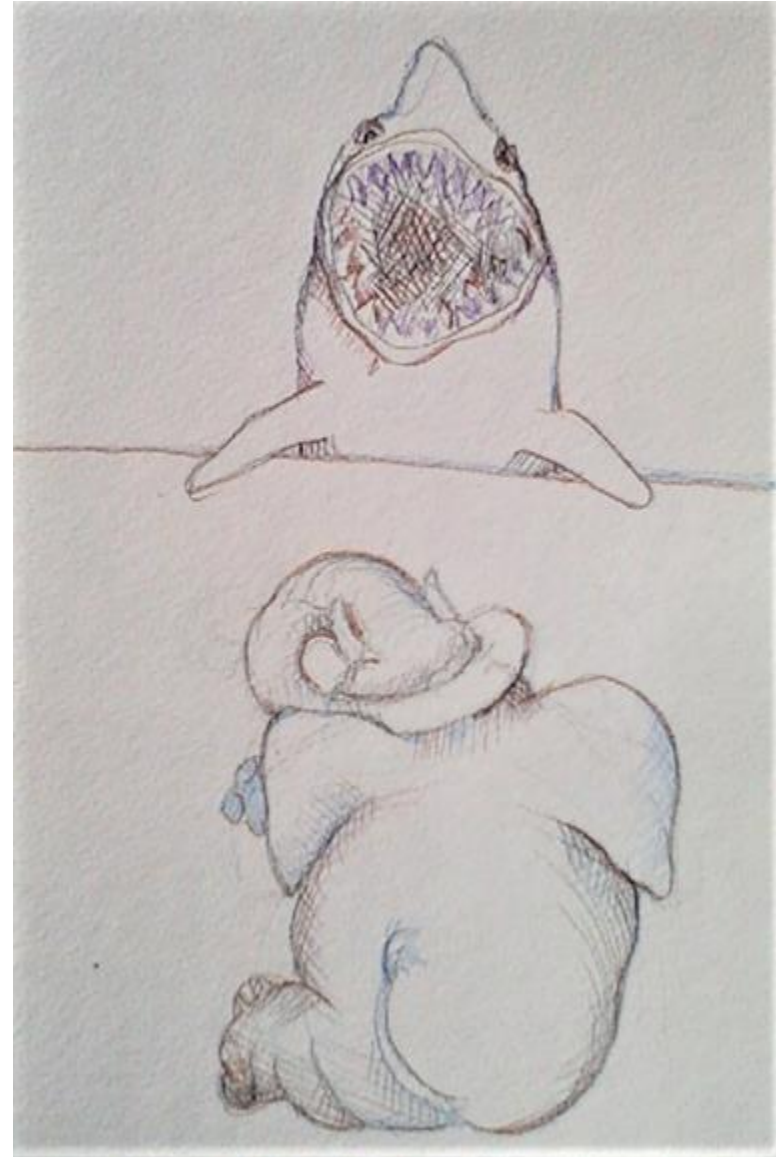


HIGH FINANCE

day 16

We have returned to earth from the heavenly spheres of our angel, and my favorite elephant is dealing with the economics of her situation during Covid-19. She is meeting with her bank manager and has covered her eyes with her trunk for safe keeping. But she has made a great discovery. Her problem is that she does not owe enough money to the bank. All she has is a seventy thousand dollar mortgage on her home. Plus a seventeen dollar overdraw at the end of this month.

If she owed the bank seven million dollars, or six million nine hundred and thirty thousand (plus the seventy thousand already on their books) she would become a very valued customer. The bank would be making enough interest on her each month to treat her with respect, even deference. If she owed seventy million, she might even qualify for a rescue. Seventy billion would merit her a bailout. But she is not greedy, so if you know of any nice bank that would like to lend her the original six million nine hundred and thirty thousand, let me know and I'll pass on the information to her.



NUMBER CRUNCHING *day 17*

To understand what's happening, with regard to the pandemic, Italy has been creating a huge statistical database, to measure contagion, cures, numbers in intensive care, self-isolation, deaths, and their rate of change, throughout every province of the entire country. This will give the nation I live in an enormous amount of information to work with, to make present and future medical and public health decisions, and hopefully improve the chances for survival of its citizens. The conscientiousness and precision with which this has been done is evident. I read the output online with great attention, at six every evening.

However there are aspects of this pandemic which cannot be measured: the grief of losing a loved relative or friend prematurely, the fear in the eyes of that person when he is wheeled into the I.C.U., the fear in one's own heart that something might happen to any of us in the near future. No numbers can encompass these emotions.



PASTA AL FORNO

day 18

As often happens, as seen in the picture, a crisis does not necessarily produce cohesion in a society. It appears that Italy is no exception. The pandemic has produced an even greater separation between people of varying opinions about how the world we live in should function.

Its population is exceptionally talented at making pasta, but when they put *their own nation through the pasta machine, the results are not encouraging. Any resemblance, to any other country you may know of, is purely coincidental.*



A RECKONING

day 19

There are moments, in the midst of a crisis when the actual crisis is interrupted by a single event which is even worse. I believe that the death of George Floyd is the equivalent in the United States, to what the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, in Tunisia, was to the Arab Spring. It is the event which will set other events in motion, to create an profound reckoning and actual change.

I have included the photograph which I took fifty four years ago, in 1966, at the demonstration against the War in Vietnam, at the Pentagon, in the midst of the tear gas, as I was starting not to breathe, as others were starting not to see, as the authorities were gassing us.

As a person who has worked for civil rights for more than a half a century, I believe that finally my country will change. After an uncountable number of injustices, one single event has created the critical mass necessary.

The United States has steam rolled its way into prosperity on the backs of slaves. It has bull dozed its way into progress on the backs of expendable industrial workers. It has bludgeoned its way into world prominence on the graves of those who fought in ill-advised wars. And now it has slammed up and splattered itself against the wall of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

As the martyrdom of Mohamed Bouazizi was not in vain, the martyrdom of George Floyd will not be in vain. Change will be made inevitable, if my country is to survive.



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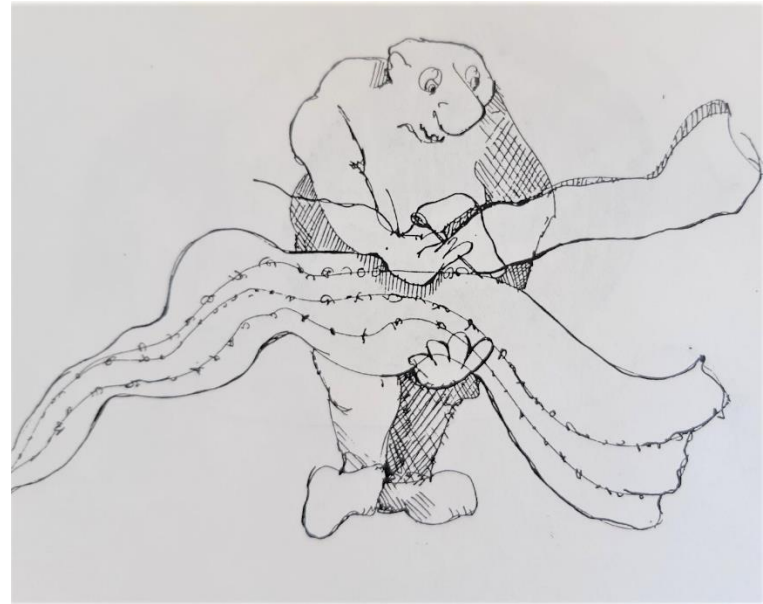
Pandemic Countdown

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EARNING A LIVING.... *day 20* OR A LIFE

Remember work? That was the activity people used to do in their waking hours, in exchange for what was called a salary, with which they could pay their bills, and if there was any left over, buy things such as school books for their children. Or go out to dinner with their families. For so many of us being out of work, we have all this time in which to re-imagine what our work could be, if it ever appears on the horizon again.

Suppose you had a job you loved...that did not pay as much as the one you had before, but that did not leave you despairing and exhausted at the end of the day? Suppose it was nothing like your former job, but it made you feel optimistic about life? A whole new way of earning a living, such as sewing rainbows, or filing the horns of unicorns, pictured in the adjoining images. It's worth rethinking work.



OASIS ON THE FREEWAY *day 21*

One of the very few pluses, in this season of the pandemic, is that in many large cities the air pollution has been reduced as people have not been driving their cars. Air pollution is one of the contributing factors to severe cases of the virus, therefore it is clear that we will need a non-polluting source of transportation, as pictured.

Some of its advantages include: it never rusts, it gets forty miles to a gallon of water, its two soft furry shock absorbers never wear out, it provides two seated automatic social distancing, and you don't need a license to drive one.

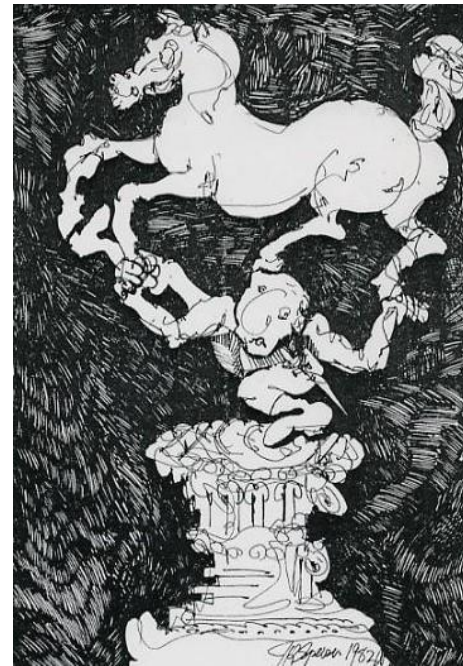
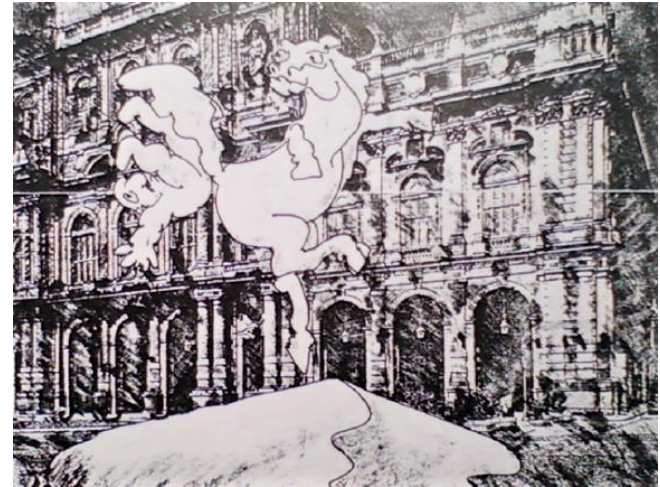
It does not need a muffler as it does not make noise, even when it spits, and it walks at the right pace for a more serene lifestyle, and patiently waits in traffic jams. What more could you want to move from place to place?



THE WINNING HORSE *day 22*

As too many people have been dying from the virus, twice as many among the non-white, impoverished population, these events have intersected with other equally grave events. As a result, many statues have been overturned. What is important is what they must be replaced with: those of the millions of people in humble jobs, who have been undervalued, underpaid, and neglected for far too long. Those are the people whose repetitive and exhausting work has kept so many countries functional in these past months.

It is they who must be on the pedestal. They must be supported by their once comfortable riders. My horse is a symbol of those forgotten workers.



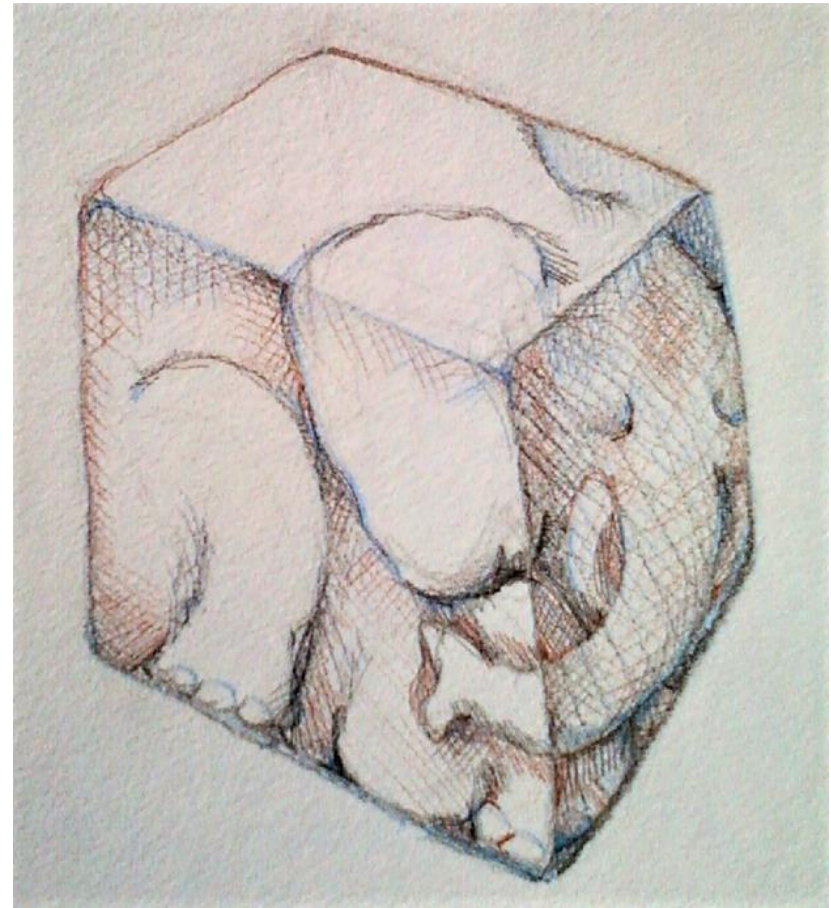
TIGHT QUARTERS

day 23

It's time to talk about the elephant in the room. As you can see, elephants take up a lot of space. This one has entirely filled up the room. He is very uncomfortable, as elephants are notoriously round, but the room is a cube with painful right angles.

The elephant in the room, in the case of the pandemic and its accompanying tragedies, is the fact that we will need to rethink our whole values, our entire way of going about our lives. We cannot merely change a law here, a habit there.

We must do a complete and deeply felt reset, so that we will create the time, energy, imagination and economic means to actually take care of our health, as individuals and as a collectivity. The pandemic has shown a spotlight on our inadequacies as a community that cares for its members. If we don't look the elephant square in the eye, it will grow and grow until it bursts the walls of the room and the whole house will fall down.



EVOLUTION

day 24

I just received an important communication from Elsie, the brontosaurus in the picture. Sometimes she sends me information from brontosaurus heaven so that I will keep up to date on the Jurassic age.

She says “When our species was starting to decline, some outliers said ‘We must stop tromping through our swamps and destroying them; we must not eat so much, nine hundred pounds of vegetation a day is making us too fat.’

The others answered ‘That’s ridiculous, the swamps are eternal, we are just the right size.’ The outliers countered ‘The tyrannosaurus rex are gaining on us. They are more agile and have a bigger brain for their body size.’ The majority answered ‘Fake news, our brains are more powerful than theirs, even if they are tiny.’

And so on and so forth. This went on for eons and eons. You know the answer: we have been replaced by your measly, two legged, know-it-all species.”

Any resemblance to other species that risk extinction is purely coincidental.



AN EMPTY STOMACH

day 25

It is not easy for any species when it has to change all of its habits and values, due to an unexpected event that overturns its survival prospects. In the picture below, we have a lion. It is learning to eat lobster for lunch. The grass valleys of its hunting grounds have dried up and gazelles are very hard to find.

Our lion is understandably confused and worried. The lobster does not even look like a gazelle. Who knows what it could taste like. But lions are brave. It will conquer its fears and remake a very different diet and life for itself. We humans hope to do as well as the lion.



A FEW INTELLIGENT PIGS *day 26*

A charming group portrait of some of the piglets I interviewed last week. As you can see they are thoughtful and affectionate creatures. I asked them how they envisioned their future. The first one said “Bacon” the second answered “Spareribs” the third replied “Prosciutto crudo” the fourth decreed “Baked with an apple in my mouth.” And so on.

None of them imagined that the answer could have been “Alive.” Those who work in the meat packing establishments in different parts of the world are also contemplating their future.

They too would like to use the word “Alive” but, considering their working conditions, out of caution and superstition they don’t dare to do so.

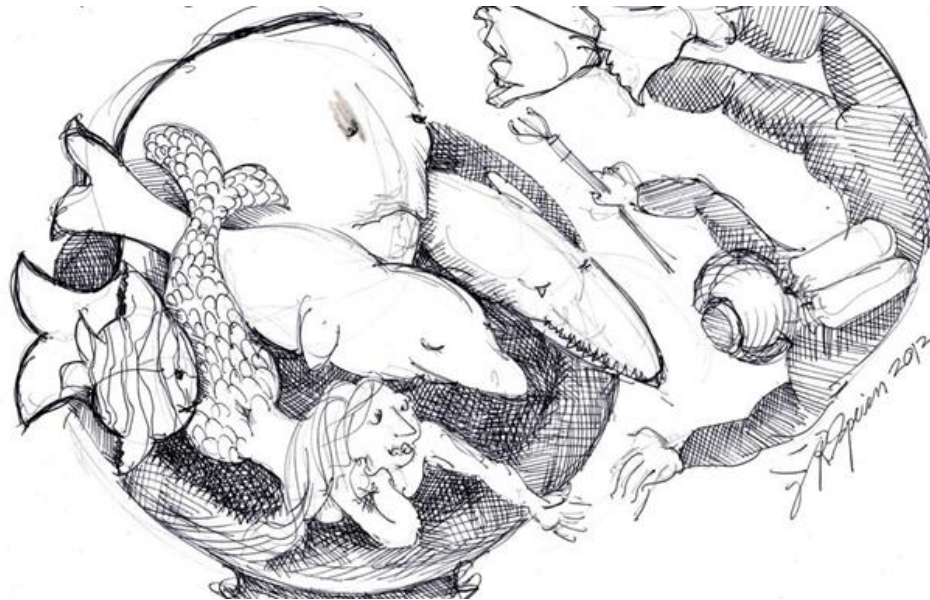


day 27

Sometimes, when events overturn one's own life, and the whole society in which one lives, one has to do something drastic. One must move away from everything familiar, try out a new approach, have the courage to carry out what one has never done before.

In this case our diver has decided to descend to the depths of the deep blue sea and make friends with a mermaid. He doesn't know how this adventure will turn out. He sees that he has a lot of competition, from the other species surrounding this mermaid, but he is determined to reach his goal.

The pandemic will give us all the opportunity to enact analogous exploits.



WINGS AT WORK

day 28

After too much bad news, one needs something cheerful, to revive one's spirits. To accomplish this, I look to birds. The cousins of the ones in the picture have been chirping away at dawn every day on the branches of the cherry tree in my garden. n. b. *these birds do not twitter, they chirp.*

Birds are smarter than we think. They do not manage hedge funds, but they do manage to fly from one continent to the other without GPS. They do things together, in harmony with the other members of their species. They reliably take care of their young. They do not build their investment portfolio, but they do build their own homes. We could learn from these tiny bird brains.



day 29

All living species are in evolution, including humans. Their mutations, however small, help them to survive. The elephant in the picture has evolved to grow wings. She is learning to fly over the ocean, with the help of the birds of yesterday's communication. It is something she has never done before, but she is delighted to embark on a new adventure. Even humans can learn to do what they have never done before in order to survive the pandemic. They could learn to have more compassion for those around them, to have more tolerance, dialogue, generosity of spirit. For humans that would be the equivalent of growing wings.



THE GENERAL

day 30

As most of us have realized in the course of the pandemic, you cannot exterminate a virus with a bomb. You cannot steamroller a virus with a tank. You cannot perforate a virus with an AK-47. You cannot obliterate a virus with a drone. So why are we spending so much money on military defense? Why?

In hopes that those who play the bomb will come to their senses and spend an equivalent amount of funds on health care, to keep the entire community from dying.



DO, RE, MI, FA, SOL

day 31

As a necessary counterpoint to the preceding image, we have a musician who is playing a new song, on a dove.

The dove's soft feathers and patience is lifting melodious cooing sounds in the air, as its back is being scratched by the musician's bow.

The musician is not a composer; he is executing the music written for him.

The score itself must be written by all of us:

to remake a world
where fewer people
risk dying
of neglect,
incompetence
and skewed priorities.



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