The Poseur

I met The Poseur at a gallery opening some months back. He called himself Pollock, just Pollock, like Madonna or Pink. He had not taken the name in tribute to Jackson Pollock - I know because I asked him. He responded with a sneer, and his sneer was magnificent, a work of art in itself. It started in the eyes, then the tremble and lift and curl of lip over strong looking white teeth, carnivores' teeth, and ended with a sweeping turn of his head as he walked away. When Pollock sneered at you, you goddam well knew you'd been sneered at.

He was hard to miss, a tall man, broad and fat. He seemed almost as wide as he was high. His head was big and round, with large prominent features, dark eyes, dark hair, heavy eyebrows and a dark diabolical goatee. His limbs and torso were large, round, his fingers like sausages. He was an imposing figure. He wore a dark ankle length coat, more a cloak, anachronistic in style, impossible not to notice. And a dramatic, black wide-brimmed hat. It looked like the hat of a Parisian artist in 1910, as it might appear in photographs of Avant-garde painters lounging in a café, or in Picasso's studio.

Pollock was dramatic, purposely so, and he always made an impression. But for me the effect was spoiled. Every time I saw him I thought of Haystack Calhoun – a wonderful professional wrestler from the 50's. He was in fact as tall and wide as a haystack. Except for this physical similarity Haystack was the opposite of Pollock; he presented a sly buffoonery instead of self conscious inflated dignity; he was blunt and unassuming in dress instead of exaggerated and foppish (he wore overalls – he was supposed to be a country boy). Haystack was a great favorite of the crowds, representing that archetypical American character: the shrewd humble farmer with simple American virtues – direct, guileless but powerful and determined. Maybe a bit of a redneck, but so is America. Once again, the opposite of the Machiavellian Pollock, who was somehow corruptly European, scheming and social and tilting this way or that in the social wind. Or maybe I'm reading too much into this. Anyway, every time I saw Pollock I thought Haystack Calhoun.

If Pollock's elaborately orchestrated dramatic posturing was lost on me, it succeeded with others, many others. I saw him at every cultural event in town – first

night at plays, symphony performances, the art shows. He quickly became a force in the community, somehow getting invited to be on the board of the art association and the museum. He soon had an entourage of pale unhealthy looking young art students, half dozen or more who were with him everywhere, dressed in black, slender, wan, sensitive.

He appeared on the Birmingham art scene in September, and by Christmas he had *arrived*, as Libby whispered to me, italicizing the word. Libby was a barometer of social status, a spare attractive woman in her forties who was an uber-networker. She had connections everywhere with everyone, and if they were shallow and tenuous they were also redundant, massive, heavy as angel hair pasta if you wrap enough of it around a fork. She was the weather vane of – what to call it in the post 20th century world? I suppose the old beatnik phrase 'hipness' describes it as well as anything else. Pollock was hip. Pollock was In. People flocked to him at the parties and openings, him large, dark and faintly malignant, unmoving in the center of a swirling crowd of hangers-on, supplicants, sycophants, and the curious, reeds that bend whichever way the wind is blowing. He was in with the In Crowd. He *was* the In Crowd.

Of course, to me he still looked like Haystack Calhoun. But who was I, anyway? No one.

A few months after Pollock made his debut on the art circuit another artist came to town, to quite a different reception. Billy Barking Dog was an 'outsider' artist. He had no formal training; I believe he'd been a carpenter or mason. He was a compact man of medium height with olive skin and intense black eyes. He signed his work Billy Barking Dog and let it be known that he was a radical Native American activist – as though you couldn't tell by his art. He did bizarre sculpture and big crude paintings – house paint on plywood – of native Americans being ground to destruction under the black boot heels of European (meaning white American) culture. And I mean that literally. The paintings showed enormous black jack-boots crushing teepees and peace pipes, bows and arrows and the like. I'm not a big fan of primitive art, but I liked Billy's stuff pretty well. It was bright and busy. He wasn't afraid to tell you how he felt about things, with no coyness or pretense. In his way, he was the opposite of Pollock. Consequently, he did not have Pollocks popularity, in fact quite the contrary. He was politely tolerated. As Libby said, he was such a talent but…*declasse*. Maybe so,

but he was energetic and a wonderful promoter of himself, and soon ubiquitous.

Billy made a name for himself with his installation called "Smoke Signal: a Message to America" downtown on the sidewalk outside the Federal Courthouse. He found a small noisy diesel engine welded into a metal frame, with a fifteen foot smoke stack painted to resemble a cigarette, right down to the brown filter at the bottom. He had some kind of damper that contained the smoke, then released it on a short irregular cycle, say every two to five seconds. This produced random puffs of intensely black oily smoke that floated up into the air and, if the breeze was light, did not disperse. The effect was wonderful.

So, on one bright clear Monday morning he started the engine and sat back to enjoy the show. I got there early and stayed until Billy was carted off by the Birmingham Police, and the engine was silent. The trees nearby were coated with soot, as were the parked cars, the sidewalks, streets, and even the sides of the buildings. It was a virulent message he'd sent America, and America wasn't very happy to get it.

That was the first time I'd seen his 'art'. After that I recognized his work immediately. The formula was to take the shoddiest item of western culture and coat it with a veneer of Indian cliché and stereotype. So flimsy aluminum toolsheds became teepees, novelty corncob pipes became crassly ornamented 'peace pipes', and frilly cheap bedspreads from Wal-Mart became buffalo robes. He had a hard time with costume jewelry – when he tried to pay his gallery fee with beads, all he could do was offer…beads. Well, there's a limit to the irony his one note perspective would support.

If he had one trick and ran it into the ground a little, he was at least clever and sometimes very inventive. I liked very much the child's water slide he turned into a water fall with stuffed salmon 'leaping' up against the 'current'. That was from the 'Nature Hates Euro-Americans' installation he had on display at the Bonnie Marks gallery for a few months. He was a pretty fair craftsman, and the plastic rods he used to attach the fish to the slide were transparent and seamlessly fastened, and on first startled glance the salmon appeared to be in live mid-flight.

As I said, I liked his stuff pretty well, and if others didn't, they kept it to themselves. I presume this was out of a 'politically correct' reluctance to criticize

the product of a 'minority' artists and a cautious reluctance to set him into a raging tirade. These both seemed good enough reasons to me, though I wasn't afraid of his tantrum and knew something most people did not. At that time my wife Joyce was on the board at the DAC, a downtown art association. When Billy applied to rent gallery space, he was required to show his driver's license and pay by check, which revealed his real name. He was a minority all right, an Italian. His name was James Alessandrini. My natural inclination is to stay on the sideline. There seemed to be no point to exposing his charade, and he was lively, entertaining and not afraid to say what was on his mind. And so, I also said nothing.

With Billy Barking Dog and Pollock prowling the scene it was shaping up to be a pretty interesting season for Central Alabama artists. I knew what Billy was and the kind of art he made, but Pollock was still something of a mystery. He was here, and everyone knew it, but no one was quite sure what he did. I heard that he was a painter of large expressionist abstractions, which seemed to me not a bad guess – it was flamboyant enough for him. Then I heard he was a sculptor. Libby called me on the phone to tell me that, and with breathless joy asked me how it felt to have a little competition. I said it felt great, let me know when his next show came around. But it never did. In fact the weeks went by and he never had any kind of exhibit, never placed any work in a gallery. Then it all came clear:

"He's a critic," Joyce said.

"Ah, of course," I responded. Joyce showed me a lengthy review/assessment of the Central Alabama art world that the Downtown Art Community had printed in their quarterly journal, right in there with the poems and story fragments and color pictures of paintings.

"It looks long," I said, handing it back to her. "What's he say?"

"Well, in one way or another, and in so many words, everybody stinks."

"That's what I thought," I said.

After that, when I saw him around town pointing his big sausage finger at a painting or beaming his high voltage sneer across a room, I knew it was just a scam, a shtick. And though Billy was a pain in the ass and under it all a Poseur too, he at least rolled the dice and created something.

I was there the first time they met, at a BAC members show, and it was beautiful. They eyed each other

across the crowded gallery, Pollock in his Paris bohemian outfit, Billy in his contemporary Native American get up. They circled for a while, each observing the other's disdain for the art on display (a set of bland watercolors by an unlucky young University student). Pollock responded to the pictures with his sneer and Billy with that pugnacious impatience he showed toward almost everything and everyone. There may have been a difference in style, but the posture was the same: we're better than you. No wonder they hit it off.

And hit it off they did. Before the evening was ended, they were tete-a-tete in the corner, slugging back wine and exchanging snide remarks. They stayed until the show shut down for the night, and while I was helping Joyce clean up, I saw them through the window – Pollock admiring Billy's motorcycle with it's feathers and fringed leather and symbols painted on it. Joyce paused on her way to the back with a bag of empty wine bottles, looked out at them and passed by with a snort.

So, they were friends for a while, or at least two dogs running in the same direction. It was a meeting of egos, and I had no idea if they would recognize each other as kindred spirits and form a kind of art mafia that would dominate the central Alabama art community – or fight it out. And if the latter, who would win.

I saw them here and there. Once in the Five Points Starbucks one Sunday morning, where the banjo pickers who met regularly at that time provided a surreal Deliverance style soundtrack for them. They sat at a table in the balcony overlooking the store like haughty dowagers at an opera, talking intensely, while the few of the Pollock entourage that could get up that early sat at a separate table, listening. Once I saw them riding down 14th Street in Pollock's big old battered Mercedes, one of the flunkies driving. A few days later I saw them in the Galleria mall, where they looked completely out of place. Their elaborate getups were made for street theater, not for buying a coffee maker at Sears.

It must have been a deliriously intense honeymoon, and it lasted only ten days.

The romance was over the first time Pollock saw Billy's work and *reviewed* it. If Billy had been a little more flexible, or had a sense of humor, he would have brushed it off; Pollock gave everyone a bad review. It happened on the sidewalk outside the Kidd Gallery, the old one they had before they moved 'over the mountain' into Homewood. It was a store front downtown near the DAC, close

enough so that Pollock and Billy walked by it one evening and there in the window was one of Billy's most flamboyant pieces. It was one of my favorites, so bizarre that it's difficult to describe. This was made mostly of plaster. Picture a man in a business suit, European-American of course, on his back on the floor, arms stretched out over his head, hands palms together and toes pointed in a divers posture, but with his innards scooped out and replaced the brief wooden bench of a canoe, and a paddle. The whole piece was about seven feet long and trim, and very shocking, as the man's face was serene and fatuous, and the hollow portion showed cross-sections of the organs at the scoop point. The whole thing was garishly painted. The title was "Euro-American Business Man as Useful Mode of Transportation". As I say, it's difficult to describe but it had a shocking presence, and if that's not art, then hey, what is?

Of course, Pollock hated it. He had a gift for disparaging wit, and though he had to realize that Billy was the artist it did not slow him down at all. I was not close enough to hear what he said, but Billy's wildly gesticulating arms and distorted face told the story. And when Pollock turned on his heel like a gyroscope, with sweep of cape and haughty flick of the head, I knew I was seeing the climax of one of his famous Pollock Sneers.

"Well, it was nice while it lasted," Joyce murmured.

"Not that nice," I said.

"Nicer than what's going to happen next," she replied.

We could always tell where Pollock had been, due to his extravagant use of perfumed grooming products. On some days he was a walking medley, amalgamation of smells, leaving a trail of heavy sweet confusing scents as he walked from room to room at the Museum, or plowed through the thicket of a crowded party. The odor was penetrating, evidently moving through the air without benefit of air current, just on its own active restless impulse to spread and coat every object in its path. It would have killed the sensitive nose of a dog, and possible the whole dog along with it.

It was evidently agony for Billy Barking Dog, the hybrid naturalist, the urban Indian, who prided himself on his heightened senses – a genetic trait, he said, inherited from his race, his tribe. I have my doubts about that, but I believe he did have something of a sensitive nose, though

no more so than many people of many genetic makeups. But Billy, in his forthright way, was the only one who remarked on it directly to Pollock. Directly and as the weeks went on, frequently. By now it was a full-blown feud, and the 'stinking white man' comments were just one of many that were exchanged each time the two met.

Feuds within the 'Culture' community are most entertaining when the participants are writers. They are the most articulate of the artists and have the advantage of reviewing their volleys at leisure and honing their responses. That makes for an interesting exchange, and possibly grist for the biography mill, if they are in that class of writers. Feuds between visual artists can be as intense but are rarely as well documented. Still, if you happen to be on the scene when the conflicts take place, there is nothing more exciting, in a dangerous embarrassing way. There are some grand tantrums.

The feud between Billy Barking Dog and Pollock was ignited by the 'White Man Canoe' incident and burned brightly for several weeks, with flare-ups at the parties and shows they both attended. One manipulative climber even held a dinner party to which he invited both, each without the other knowing it. The anticipated fireworks were to be the evening's entertainment. It would have worked too, but for the flu that Billy contracted, and which kept him incapacitated and off the circuit for about ten days. The dinner party, with Pollock as a solo act, was a bust.

It was impossible for me not to feel some sympathy for the pseudo-Indian. Beneath the rage I caught glimpses of a genuine anguish, a sadness. For all his posturing and grandiosity, he was just one of us, trying to get along. On the other hand, Pollock was impenetrable. The carapace of ego was so thick on him that it was his essence, it was him. I would like to say that he ceased to be human; in fact, he was all too human. But to him, no one else was. And that was his flaw. Not tragic or noble, just a deformation of character that made him capable of endless hurt in the service of his own gratification. For that reason, I had to conclude that the whole business would come to a bad end for Billy, as Pollock was emotionally and, I think, spiritually dead. He could not be wounded. By this time I had stopped thinking of the man in any comical way. I no longer saw Haystack Calhoun in the costumer of the Parisian avant-garde artiste. I saw a destructive self-serving malignancy.

They call these kinds of disastrous situations *train wrecks*, and it is as apt a cliché as I've ever used.

I stayed away from the art crowd to avoid being witness to the *train wreck* that was sure to conclude the feud. This was not a bad thing under any circumstances. The getting on with of my own life, leaving off the pettiness, the empty social hours. I was again reminded of why I loved stone. It is silent and, if selected judiciously, true to the stroke of the chisel. And for better or worse, as close to eternal as I would ever get, a serene reproach to the ephemeral disturbances we dwell on.

So, the days went by and I heard a few murmurs of gossip from Joyce, who continued to serve her volunteer hours at the Art Community. If it hadn't been for the weight of the great wooden display pedestals that Billy Barking Dog insisted using, greater than Joyce could move by herself, I might not have witnessed it. But she needed help arranging the gallery for Billy's grand debut, and there I was, front row central.

Billy was early, of course, shifting his statues to a more favorable angle and hanging a picture a little to the left or right. He was dressed to the nines in his urban Indian style, including a construction workers hard hat festooned with feathers. He had a leather vest with fringe, each strand wrapped in tin foil bright against the black leather, and huge yellow fireman's boots, the bright rubber uppers painted with a crude vivid surprisingly lifelike animals face, so that if you stood talking to him and glanced down, there they were, looking back up at you. One was winking. The only thing missing was an animal tail made of garden hose, which he sometimes wore on what he considered to be formal occasions. I don't know why it was missing tonight.

As an art show it went pretty well. Billy's work had an impact, and he had some new pieces. It drew a good crowd. The gallery was crowded and noisy, and Billy circulated, looking very pleased. I was helping Joyce pour crushed ice into the bucket of wine bottles when Pollock made his grand entrance, complete with hangers-on. He'd taken to carrying a cane, like a magician or Fred Astaire – which for some reason irritated me more than any of his other affectations. He paused at the door, and then started a slow circuit of the room, murmuring comments to his followers. Billy ignored him.

One of the small pieces on a pedestal was a head dress, a war bonnet, one of the kinds with dozens of feathers in a mane. Instead of feathers Billy had strips of jagged aluminum cut from beer cans. I kind of liked that

one – it was on a department store manikin head, one of the stylized faintly effeminate very Nordic kind you see in ultra chic men's clothing stores. That piece really worked for me. But not for Pollock. He wheeled around, paused and moved closer to look. Then he used his cane to poke at the piece, causing the strips of bright aluminum to shiver. One became detached and floated to the floor.

There was something a little shocking about the act, the desecration of a work of art, no matter how ill-conceived or poorly constructed. Even the most amateurish is the product of an intimate experience, and its public display is an act of courage. Pollock's gesture was shameful, and all those in the room felt it.

Billy walked over and the two stood face to face. Then he removed the war bonnet from the manikin head, turned and carried it through the gallery, out the front door and disappeared into the street.

"Well, that was easy," Joyce said. I wasn't so sure.

Pollock looked more puffed up and pleased with himself than usual. He pointed his cane at the aluminum 'feather' that was still lying on the floor and said something that made his crowd laugh. The room was just settling into the low hubbub aftermath of the incident when Billy came back into the gallery, this time wearing his beer can war bonnet.

"I don't like the looks of this," I said.

Billy made a bee line for Pollock, shoving through the pallid black jacketed entourage. He let out a piercing shriek that I think was supposed to be a war cry, though it sounded like something from Halloween IX: The Scalping. Before I could get close enough to grab him, I saw that Billy had a tomahawk, and true to his artistic theme it did not strive for authenticity, and so was not made of blunt chipped stone strapped to a stick. It appeared to be a Harbor Freight Hand Axe, made in China, cheap and shoddy, but for all that still a sturdy sharp useful tool. All of which was bad news for Pollock.

Billy sped across the floor, gathering speed and slammed into the big man with his shoulder, like a really vicious running block by a really vicious pro lineman. Pollock staggered backward, one uncertain step, then two, but he stayed on his feet. The crowd was stunned and immobile, except for Pollock's entourage who dithered and flapped their hands and shouted for help. I pushed my way through them but before I could get to Billy he had darted behind Pollock and leaped high up on his back, clamping his

legs around the man's thick waist. He knocked the broad black hat to the floor and grasped a handful of oiled hair and pulled it taut and raised the ax high. Before he could complete the stroke Pollock teetered under the weight and began again his staggering backward walk. In an instant they fell sprawling on the floor, knocking from its stand Billy's sculpture of the American Eagle being roasted on a spit, and jarring the ax from Billy's hand. It skittered across the floor and came to rest at my feet. I picked it up and dropped it in the ice chest.

For an instant they both lay panting on the floor, side by side. Then Joyce was standing over them, using her mother's command voice to tell them to stop it, stop it right now. Billy struggled to his feet, looking for the hatchet. I grabbed him around the chest and walked him to the door and out into the cool air of the street. He stopped fighting to escape. I let him go, staying between him and the door. He looked at me, angry and trembling, and then walked away down the street.

I went back in to see Pollock rise, with the aid of his group. That was something of a project, like a crew of marine biologists trying to lift a great beached whale back into the water. Eventually he was up and moving around, shaky and pale faced. Without his hat his head looked too big for his body, and the hair, thick dark and ropy with oil, was still twisted and standing out from his head. It was the first time I'd seen him without his invincible self-assurance. He looked shaken. He made a perfunctory tour of the rest of the show and left. The opening limped on for another hour, and by ten o'clock the last guest had left, and the gallery was quiet.

So, peace returned to the art village. In the aftermath of the incident Billy's stature rose, for some reason. Perhaps it was the series of paints he called "Scalpings", which he produced at the rate of two or three a day and hung around the downtown streets on the walls of vacant buildings or nailed to trees or just left propped against the buildings on a busy sidewalk. Within a few weeks there were dozens of them, all with the same theme: a very creditable likeness of Pollock in various stages of a lurid bloody scalping. It must have been unnerving for the big man, for he disappeared from the galleries and parties for a time. When he returned, he lacked his forceful invulnerable manner. In the spring his entourage shrank from a throng to just a moth-eaten motley few. He published a few nasty reviews in the local magazines, but after a time those ceased to appear. And one day, he was just gone.

I heard he went to Atlanta, later I heard it was Florida, to Tampa, and then no one talked about it at all. And a strange thing happened. With Pollock gone, and the feud well over, Billy seemed to lose interest. I saw him around town, but he was distracted and withdrawn. He bore no grudge against me for intervening, and in fact one night at a loud drunken party he drew me aside and thanked me for stopping the massacre.

"I would have ended up running the art program in the state prison," he said. "It wouldn't have been worth it."

"I guess not," I said, thinking about it, "Though you would have run one hell of a program."

He looked at me to see if I was mocking him, and though I was, just a bit, he took it well, and almost smiled. I thought that perhaps he'd learned something from the episode. Possibly.

The last public display by Billy was his "Native American Social Security", which was a cigar store Indian with a few modifications. Where he'd found a wooden Indian God knows; they're collectors' items and pricey. He evidently didn't care about that. It was a big fine specimen, well carved and well cared for, shiny with polish. But he'd drilled a hole through the chest and inserted an enormous ball point pen – actually of course a plaster model of one – so that it entered the front, pierced the heart and came out the back bloody and dripping with gore. On the barrel of the pen was the stenciled label "Bureau of Indian Affairs".

It was displayed in an exhibition for local artists at the Museum of Art and was well received. Since Pollock was gone art reviews were more positive, but Billy had really earned this one. The message was obvious, but the piece was well crafted and had a real presence.

I went to the show on opening night. Billy was there in full ironic regalia, standing by the piece, explaining with gestures and fierce polemic the meaning of it. As if it needed explanation. There was a crowd flowing in and out of the rooms, but during a lull I went over to him.

"Really nice work, Billy," I said, shaking his hand.

He didn't answer, just looked at me for a long moment, then said:

"I've had it with this town. I'm going back to the reservation."

Before I could stop myself I said:

"In Newark?"

I thought he'd flare into anger, as he did so often, but instead he gave a sly, sheepish smile and said:

"No, Trenton."

Then some eager art lovers came to admire and be shocked, and Billy started working the crowd. I stepped back and as I turned away, he caught my eye and winked. I waved and wandered through the exhibition, looking for Joyce. She was admiring the Joan Mitchell paintings – her favorites were the women Abstract Expressionists – but she came with me to the sculpture garden and the refreshment table they'd set up. We got plastic cups of wine and sat on a bench with a good view of Botero's wonderful plump reclining nude woman, brassy, shining, surreally voluptuous.

"Billy says he's leaving town," I told her.

"I heard," she said.

We drank for a minute. I wondered how Botero managed to get the proportions so exaggerated and natural at the same time.

"I'm going to miss that Indian," I said.

"Native American," she corrected me.

"Yes," I said. "Native American."