ODE TO AN ARTIST

by David Taylor

You don’t get much warning. A clearing opens up on the left from late summer undergrowth and woods, and suddenly there they are: two school buses chocked at angles to each other, and in front of them a tableau of painted wooden figures. You see Pine Mountain beyond and Mount Airy in the distance. Across the road is the old frame house where James Harold Jennings’s mother lived for years.

We’ve come from Charlotte, two hours south. My friend Lance befriended James Harold a year ago, which is how Lisa and I meet him (unaware that he might chase off visitors who disregard his UNWELCOME sign and the chain across the driveway). He’s dressed for work when we show up: jeans and a plaid flannel shirt, and a worn tool belt that bulges with awls and brushes hanging off. Light paint splatters his boots.

James Harold is in a good mood, and when Lance asks him how he’s doing, he gets to talking. As the noon hour warms up, he invites us onto his bus for a “mason jar.”

Stepping up through the accordion door, you enter his world. It isn’t like any school bus I got on as a kid, where you lost your individuality and submitted to the institutional culture and the gossip brigade. No, getting on James Harold’s bus you enter a space where pretty much any whim can be indulged. He has ripped out the seats in the back to make way for a workshop—tools, paints, plywood, old books and chippings. There are yellow-spined National Geographics, children’s books, dictionaries, and books on witchcraft.

James Harold wandered in his youth and it made him a more nuanced artist than, say, Howard Finster in his appreciation of human nature. It gave him a bigger pantheon. At his place in Pinnacle, North Carolina, the figures pile on top of one another: a woman in polka dots straddles a wide-eyed man, pummeling him; a cat walks with tail erect, a knothole in its rear end, through which starlings fly in and out—it’s a birdhouse.

He began constructing his creatures after his mother died in 1974, and by the late 1980s had a horde of found materials—wood scraps, bottlecaps, metal shards—squirrelled away on the bus. He saves postcards that friends have sent him and torn-out ads that remind him of places he’s been, but the other materials are used for creating the “multimedia” environment of brightly colored tableaus and quasidioramas. He integrates other worlds into his own, making scenes like “Bad Girl Beats Up the Devil,” where a character in a Wonder Woman outfit straddles a no-gooder, and whirligigs and six-foot windmills spin above them in the Piedmont breeze.

James Harold invites us to sit down in a cozy space he’s carved out on one side of the aisle—on a pallet where he sleeps. Some windows are open, but the day feels sultry. Outside the windows floats a ridgetop vista toward Mount Airy.

He doesn’t talk about his past jobs—his time as a night watchman or a film projectionist at a drive-in, though he tells us the Bad Girl works suggest movie influences. But he shares mason jars of lukewarm beer, shows us postcards he’s received from far away, and speaks with care about “the spirits” and his work.

I didn’t see him again. In the next decade, James Harold got more visitors than he wanted. As the millennium drew closer, paranoid fears and doomsday predictions got the better of him. I don’t know if Bad Girl came for him or what, but on April 20, 2009, he shot himself in the head with a pistol.

In Baltimore’s American Visionary Art Museum, you can see several of Jennings’s whirligigs on display, and out front sits a school bus that’s tricked out in a glittery, mirrored mosaic (not the way he’d do it, but still). Yet it’s the visit to Pinnacle that continues to affect me, how in a few hours he revealed the essence of freedom in a world made from scraps.