



Gourd Masks

by Ken Otterbourg

When I was in the fifth grade, all of us kids started out the year having art class together. Then one day, the teacher split the class. About a third of the kids would get to have better instruction and encouragement. The rest of us ... well, they appreciated our effort.

I was crushed. I knew I wasn't the best drawer in the class, but I didn't think I was the chaff. Maybe just low-grade wheat.

Since then, art's been pretty much something I've figured out on my own. Despite that rejection, I never stopped making things and working with my hands.

I got into gourds about twenty years ago, when I had my first garden in Durham. It was a big sunny expanse with a cinderblock wall at the back. I strung up a trellis and planted some seeds, and by summer's end, I had a half-dozen long-necked gourds hanging from the vines. I made my first mask that fall. Most of those first gourds were about the size of my head, so it sort of made sense.

There's something nice about growing your canvas. Gourds are these incredible plants. They sprawl and spread. You can almost hear them growing on warm summer nights. And they come in all shapes and sizes. I like the way gourds change. At harvest, they are green and heavy. Over time, they dry to browns and tans

and become incredibly light and durable and often very strong. Some of my masks are very delicate, while others are almost hard enough to be weapons. I try to keep my masks simple, adding to the gourd with sticks and other things I find walking around the neighborhood or in the garden or at the beach. Sometimes I'll combine a gourd with a broken tool. But the general idea is to let the gourd guide the mask and figure out what it needs.

Through the years, I've probably made 50 or more masks. Most I've given away, and I like to imagine these silent observers in hallways and living rooms and kitchens. Eyes always open, almost ready to speak.