

The Memory Hole by Michael Chabon, *Details*, May 2006

Almost every school day, at least one of my four children comes home with art: a drawing, a painting, a piece of handicraft, a construction-paper assemblage, an enigmatic apparatus made from pipe cleaner, spangles, and clay. And almost every bit of it ends up in the trash. My wife and I have to remember to shove the things really down deep, lest one of the kids stumble across the ruin of his or her laboriously stapled paper-plate-and-dried-bean maraca, wedged in there with the junk mail and the collapsed packing material from a 12-pack of squeezable yogurt. But there is just so much of the stuff; we don't know what else to do with it. Of course we don't toss all of it. We keep the good stuff, or what strikes us, in the zen of that instant between scraping out the lunchbox and sorting the mail, as good. As worthier, somehow: more vivid, more elaborate, more accurate, more sweated-over. A crayon drawing that fills the entire sheet of newsprint from corner to corner, a lifelike smile on the bill of a penciled flamingo. We stack the good stuff up in a big drawer and then when the drawer finally gets full we pull the good stuff out, and stick it in a plastic bin that we keep up in the attic. We never look at or revisit it. We never get the children's artwork down and sort through it with them, the way we do with photo albums, and say, "That's how you used to draw curly hair," or "See how you made your letter E's with seven crossbars?" I'm not really sure why we're saving it, except that getting rid of it feels so **awful**.

Under the curatorship of my mother, the collected artwork of my brother and me is, if I may say, a vastly more impoverished archive. From the years preceding high-school there is almost nothing at all. The countless scenes of strafing Spitfires taking heavy German ak- ak fire, the corrugated-cardboard-and-foil George Washington hatchets, the clay menorahs (I never did make any draydls out of clay), the works in crayon-resist and papier-mache and yarn and in media so mixed as to include Cheerios, autumn leaves, and dirt-- gone, all of it. Do I care? Does it pain me to have forever lost this irrefutable evidence of my having at one time been, if neither a prodigy nor an embryonic Matisse, a child? If my mother had held on to more of my childhood artwork, would I be happier now, would the narrative that I have constructed of the nature and course of my childhood be more complete? I guess that ultimately I have no way of answering these

Commented [TDS1]: My children create artwork and we often throw it away and feel a little guilty about it.

questions. It's like wondering about whether or not sex would be more pleasurable if I had not been worked over by an old Jew with a knife at the age of eight days. How much more pleasurable, really, do I need it to be?

When I run across one of the pieces of artwork that my mother did save--paintings that I made in my junior and senior years of high school, for the most part--the prevailing emotion I experience, with breathtaking vividness, is the acute discontent that I felt at the time of their creation, a dissatisfaction purified of any residual sense of pride or accomplishment. Their flaws of perspective and construction, the places where I cheated or fudged or simply could not pull something off, even a faint tempera-scented whiff of the general miasma of mortification and insufficiency in which I then swam, all present themselves to my sight and recollection, looking at my artwork, with a force that makes me a little ill.

I'm not trying to excuse the act of throwing my children's artwork away. The crookedest mark of a colored pencil on the back of a bank deposit envelope, vaguely in the shape of a fish, is like a bright, stray trace of the boundless pleasure I take in watching my kids interact with the world. The set of processes joining their minds to their fingertips is a source of profound interest and endless speculation, a mystery that, through their artworks, my children endlessly expound. I know that if I live long enough, a time will come when their childhoods will strike me as having been almost mythically brief. Almost nothing will remain of these days, and they will be women and men, and I will look back on the lost piles of their drawings and paintings and sketches, the cubic yards of rubbings and scratchings consigned to the recycling bin, the reef's worth of shells, sand and coral glued to their decoupage souvenirs of vacations in Hawaii and Maine, and rue my barbarism. I will be haunted by the memory of the way my younger daughter looks at me, when she chances upon a crumpled sheet of paper in the recycling bin, bearing the picture, the very portrait, of five minutes stolen from the headlong rush of their little hour in my care: she looks betrayed.

"I don't know how that got in there," I tell her. "That was clearly a mistake. What a great dog."

"It's a girl kung fu master."

"Of course," I say. Then when she isn't looking, I throw it away again.

Commented [TDS2]: I lost more of my childhood artwork than my kids have lost, and I can't say it's had a bad effect to have lost it.

Commented [TDS3]: Mostly, when I see the artwork of my youth, I'm mortified by it.

Commented [TDS4]: It's not that I'm trying to excuse throwing away my kids' artwork. I realize how fleeting this all is.

Only it's not just her artwork that I'm busy throwing away. Almost every hour that I spend with my children is disposed of just as surely, tossed aside, burned like money by a man on a spree. The sum total of my dear memories of them—of their unintended aphorisms, gnomic jokes and the sad plain truths they have expressed about the world; of incidents of precociousness, Gothic madness, sleepwalking, mythomania and vomiting; of the way light has struck their hair or eyelashes on vanished afternoons; of the stupefying tedium of games we have played on Sundays in the rain; of highlights and horrors from the encyclopedic display of odorousness they have collectively put on; of the 297,000 minor kvetchings and heartfelt pleas I have responded to, over the past eleven years, with fury, tenderness, utter lack of interest, or a heartless and automatic compassion—those memories, when added to the sum total of photographs that we have managed to take, probably adds up, for all four of my children, to less than one percent of everything that we have undergone, lived through and taken pleasure in **together**.

Commented [TDS5]: But we can't capture every moment. It's all fleeting. We can't save it all.

The truth is that in every way I am squandering the treasure of my life. It's not that I don't take enough pictures, though I don't, or that I don't keep a diary, though iCal and my monthly Visa bill are the closest I come to a thoughtful prose record of events. Every day is like a kid's drawing, offered to you with a strange mixture of ceremoniousness and offhand disregard, yours for the keeping. Some of them are rich and complicated, others inscrutable, others barely more than a stray gray mark on a ragged page. Some of them you manage to hang on to, though your reasons for doing so often seem hard to fathom. But most of them you just ball up and throw **away**.

Commented [TDS6]: The truth is, I'm squandering the treasure of my life. Every day offers you something of value, but most of it, you throw out.