

A poem was "poem-shaped,"  
Yes, just as a human being was man-shaped,  
unless she was a woman.

Finally, we were told, "a poem should not mean, but be."  
Be what?

To answer the question for myself  
I wrote a term paper.  
"A Definition of Poetry."  
The instructor gave it an A.

But I never wrote  
A poem.

### The Fine Art of Ineptitude\*

Sue Winemiller

Each of us knows at least one of them. They are perched before easels duplicating the spring's emerald meadows and the autumn's turbulent skies. Clad in leotards, they pirouette and pas de buerre their souls into the "Nutcracker Suite," while their colleagues entrance the audience with skill in the orchestra pit. Not content with a monopoly of the fine arts, their type is found fashioning Christmas angels from empty toilet paper rolls, making doll houses out of old cereal boxes, and whipping together gourmet dinners from cans of Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup. I speak of my personal nemesis, the artist—one who, by inborn talent or by inclination, excels at his craft.

It is said that everyone has a talent for something, although some hide it better than others. In an attempt to have me develop into a well-rounded individual, my parents and respective schools have, in the past nineteen years, launched me in several artistic pursuits. I have managed to fail at all of them. The first such attempt resulted from my mother's realization that her skinny, spindly-legged, five-year-old daughter was utterly devoid of any grace or coordination. Having read in *McCall's* that ballet was a cure-all for such ills, my mother packed me off to dance class. There the middle-aged instructor surveyed her gangly charges and sniffed her patrician nose in a manner that intimated she would like to revive book-burning as a pastime—starting with *McCall's*. For several weeks I whiled away Saturday afternoons imitating butterflies, birds, and swaying trees. Much to the instructor's chagrin, my impersonations looked amazingly alike, although I did have the sense not to run during the tree act. At any rate, my career as a ballerina ended with my pirouette into a wall of the studio, which damaged three fingers and my tutu.

Art classes began in kindergarten in the hour-a-day session with construction paper, round-end scissors, and pots of paste. In my extreme youth I excelled at paper chains and, given enough chances to start over, cutting out hearts as Valentines. Unfortunately, I never progressed past that stage—I continually stabbed myself with sharp scissors and snapped the points off my crayons. As the years went by, my lack of talent became painfully obvious as teachers tried in vain to keep straight faces when I turned in my drawings. One labor of love I handed to the teacher was met with hysterical laughter. Needless to say, I quit taking art classes as soon as possible.

Although it has fallen into disrepute in recent years, house-keeping is an art, and the area in which my colors as a "klutz" fly highest. My first attempts at culinary creativity were the result of my membership in 4-H. For ten months I practiced making butter cakes for my county fair entry. The morning that the entries were to be judged I prepared my dessert. The ingredients were measured precisely, the batter beaten the exact amount of time suggested, the oven carefully set, and the pan perfectly prepared. As I gently poured the batter into the pan and placed it in the oven, I was positive I had created a

blue-ribbon delicacy—at the very least. At the sound of the timer, I opened the oven door, only to be horrified by the monstrosity I had baked. It had burned around the edges, developed a crater diagonally through the middle, sprouted a hump, and remained raw through the center.

Seeing that I posed no threat to Julia Child, Mother decided I should learn to sew. Herself a fine seamstress, she guided me through the mysteries of laying on the pattern, marking the fabric, and cutting out the pieces for a pair of slacks. Then she turned me loose. For every minute I spent stitching I spent thirty minutes ripping. I sewed the legs together no less than five times, put the zipper in wrong side out, and cut a hole in the waistband. Still, I persevered. After a month, the material had frayed so badly that it was impossible to sew.

I used to bemoan my general lack of ability in these artistic endeavors. I soon came to accept it, however, and to realize that this acceptance was itself an achievement in our success and self-improvement oriented culture. The pressure to succeed at some type of art form is evidenced by the popularity of community-sponsored art, craft and dance classes; and this pressure results in the inability of many to accept their failures. Of course, success will always be preferred to failure, but there are benefits of ineptitude. Incompetence serves to keep one humble and to boost a bystander's ego. Secondly, the incapable person learns to accept and relax with failure; since he does not regularly experience success, he does not expect it, and so is less disappointed at failure than his artistically inclined counterpart. Realizing ineptitude's benefits can result in a special type of lifestyle. Freed from the fear of failure, one becomes willing to try new things simply for experience's sake and is relaxed enough to slough off a failure and go on to the next thing. It is in this respect that ineptitude becomes a fine art.