

HAROLD AND THE JANUS-FACED LINE

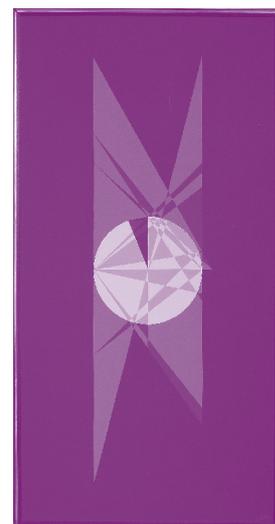
Yara Flores



In 1955, the American Marxist artist David Johnson Leisk (1906–1975), who cartooned under the pseudonym “Crockett Johnson,” published a 62-page, illustrated children’s story entitled *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. Restless one evening, the small boy Harold sets out for a walk by moonlight. Finding no moon by which to meander, and no path for his sleepless feet, Harold draws both with a thick purple crayon that becomes, in the pages that follow, the wand by which the world is conjured. And that world? It is *outlined*. And never thicker than the tip of a slim wax stick. Harold, in his pajamas, draws the horizon for a while. Tires of this. Tries a tree. With apples. Fears for its safety (Will thieves pick it clean?), and summons a guardian — a purple-toothed monster of purple. Regarding his creation, Harold, as if dosed with Don DeLillo’s Dylar, suddenly cannot distinguish between signifiers and what they signify: he backs away from the purple maw of his own beast, trembling. His crayon (Can he *ever* lift it from the page?) leaves an unsteady sinusoidal index of his fear. And now the fairy tail takes a sharper turn to darkness: before he understands what is happening, that wavy line *becomes* what it most nearly appears — water. Harold will drown in a sea of his own creation, itself merely an artifact of his own terror. (His terror of what? Of the dragon spawned from his desire to protect private property. Leisk was, after all, art editor of the communist journal *New Masses* in the 1930s). But no. This is 1955. Harold thinks fast, and no sooner has his head slipped below the waves than his hand doodles a saving bark — a trim little sailboat. Is he lost at sea? Hardly. He “makes land” and there draws himself a picnic of pies. But where is his home? He cannot say. And so he promptly describes, with his crayon, a craggy mountain from which to survey his surrounds. But no sooner does he reach the summit, than he loses his balance and falls into the empty space beyond his own line. The lesson seems to be that an artist can draw himself a meal, but when he lifts his pen he is doomed(?). The abyss yawns, and Harold hurtles through the void. The mythopoetic ideality of *Harold and the Purple Crayon* is very pure, and the text can be thought of as something like an analog-era version of *The Matrix*: there as here, there is nothing to fear, really, but the failure to recall that one is perfectly sovereign in a world of absolute ideation. Harold, falling, remembers

this. And draws a balloon. And floats back to an earth he fills in, and then builds out, tessellating the page with windowed skyscrapers. He is looking for his home, but none of the structures he erects feels like the place he has left. Despairing, he draws a policeman, and asks him the way. The policeman points the way he was drawn to point. So Harold, like most of us, decides to defer to the hypostasized authority of his own desperate projection, and he walks where the policeman directs. But he finds his own home and bed only when it occurs to him how he can locate his window. His window, he knows from experience, always frames a low-hanging moon. And so, if the moon is *there*, then he need only draw his window around it and he will have arrived. Is this lunacy? Perhaps. But in a moment, Harold has made himself a bed, and climbed in it. He draws up the covers, and is a sleep in a moment. The purple crayon falls to the floor beside him.

Harold and the Purple Crayon is a parable of the line. Or, to speak more precisely, it is a parable of one side of the line. Since every line should be understood as a long, slim Janus: one face sets limits, the other gives permission; one side establishes a boundary, the other issues an invitation; one mouth says, “stop right here!” and the other says, “play with me!” To draw and to write — these involve going from side to side, these involve going back and forth. Crockett Johnson wrote seven “Harold” books between 1955 and 1963. In 1966 the artist read, and grew increasingly obsessed by Nathan A. Court’s textbook *College Geometry*. For the last decade of his life, the author of *Harold*, dedicated himself almost exclusively to a vast series of highly austere works of geometrical abstraction, all of them based on the geometrical diagrams in mathematical treatises (titles include “Point Collineation in the Triangle [Euler],” and “Law of Orbiting Velocities”). It is tempting to suggest that at some point in the mid-1960s, David Johnson Leisk, a.k.a. Crockett Johnson, crossed a line. But it was very definitely a line he drew. And he drew both sides.



This is a PDF version of a poster, published as part of the book *Tennis* by Peder Alexis Olsson (Drucksache, 2015). Yara Flores is a New York-based artist who works with text and image. Recent work includes: “Blood, Language, and Voom” (*Cabinet* #52, 2014); “Pound vs. Stevens: The Rematch” (Part of the “The Aesthetics of Information” exhibition at Princeton University, 2014); and “The Death of Scheherazade: Fragments” (*Tribes* #14, 2013). With D. Graham Burnett and others, she contributed to “Waljagd Im Wald” (*Parkett* #93, 2013).