I was three or four years-old when my eyes met the world of Dali on the inside cover of a dream book. Out of the pomegranate came the fish, from which a tiger sprang, from whose mouth another chased a rifle pointed at a female nude.

When I was a six year-old Russian, my eyes saw foreign robot-fighting dreams on a theater screen and foreign imaged-stories in black-and-white. I saw Star Wars, RoboCop and RobotJox (a forgettable robo-fighting adventure from the 80s). My hands used paper, graphite and ink to comprehend these waking dreams.

My grandfather – a self-taught artist – taught me to understand these dreams with lucidity, to draw them as they were. Sometimes I followed his advice but my mind told my hands to create new visions. So they did.

One day I drew a simple robot, the type I’d drawn many times before. Excited, I ran to show my father. “… Another robot. Andrei, you always draw robots; why don’t you draw something else?” my father said as my spirit fled.

I kept drawing the fighting mechanical humanoids.
When I was fourteen I developed an interest in the art of combat. I bought Bruce Lee’s book “The Tao of Jeet Kune Do”. He was a master I admired from childhood. I read it, watched his movies, various documentaries and sought to learn about the man, his philosophy and his fighting ways, expecting to become a kung-fu god, to fight like him.

He constantly trained to perfect his technique, speed, power and balance because that was important in combat. He rejected the notion of martial art styles; styles become ways of truth to be defended at every cost; they blind the martial artist with strict rules, narrow tradition and dry-land swimming. To learn how to swim, the swimmer perfects their technique by swimming in water, not on land. Combat is a furious ocean, always changing, always flowing, never rigid; and so the martial artist must adapt to the changes, and becomes one with the chaos, one with the present. Or so Bruce Lee believed.

He drank the salt water of the sea-in-turmoil, kept the useful fresh water and spit out the useless salt.

I like to do useless things -- like finding cool pictures on Google.

My fighting ambitions died and I wasn’t God, but I still admired my idol. One day, I found a drawing of Bruce Lee. The artist was Jim Sweet. He drew macabre images with a pencil and his technique was superb and his shading was smooth and he was self-taught. I admired his craft and his vision.
Hunched over, I sat for hours, sketching, shading and blending -- trying to draw like Jim Sweet.

The clocks melted. Existence ceased. I was slowly improving.

One day I turned a sketch of a head in profile into a collage of fingers for noses and hands for hair. My mind ran wild.


After a full day of drawing and nicotine breaks I finished the piece. Poor technique amused the ghost of Dali.

5.

My search for new art led me to DeviantArt.com – a site where anyone could have a gallery of drawings or photos or poems. There I found surreal work by an artist in-training who complained that her professor didn’t understand her vision. I left a comment on her page saying that nothing should stand in the way of artistic expression. Rigid academia cannot understand the mind of the artist, I thought. I dreamt her praising my comment.

I checked my messages; she responded. She said that historically, painters, potters and sculptors were craftsmen, not artists; that practicality and commodity have always a greater role in art than self-expression; that I had no idea what I was talking about.

Her words stuck.
“Why do you say I have no talent?” Paul asked.

We were drinking on my front porch and talking about art. Paul was a good friend. Another ex-comrade. He was short, with black hair and big eyes. He was twenty-three -- a year older than I. He called himself ‘The King of Drawing’.

“You have natural abilities, yes, but you need to develop them. Only a few people are truly talented. I wish I was talented. Michelangelo, you know, said that if people knew how much he had to bust his ass then it wouldn’t seem all that wonderful.”

“You saying I can’t express myself? I’m an artist and a talented one. I was born knowing how to draw.” He was fond of logic and required logical explanations of illogical concepts.

“I’m just saying that if Michelangelo had to work his ass off, then maybe you and I need to do the same. I’m talking about technique -- you develop it. Salvador Dali learned to draw, Michelangelo too. There’s a lot to learn and we definitely don’t know everything.”

“You’re wrong. You are either born knowing how to draw or you just a fan of art.”

“Whatever dude.” Brick walls hurt my head.

Our friendship disintegrated after disagreements on tanning and fashion.

“You’re a freaking idiot,” Andrew said. My best
friend was tall, pudgy, caring and few years younger than I. He worked at a store that traded various collectible cards; his boss was looking for an artist to draw Magic the Gathering themed T-shirt designs. Magic the Gathering was a card game, and I loved the fantasy artwork of the cards; I even used one of the card drawings as an inspiration for Tree Girl – a drawing I never finished because after twenty or so hours of work I was just too scared to touch it again. Andrew considered me for the job.

“Dude, I’m in no shape to draw this stuff. I’m not good enough. Adam is a much better artist than I – I can’t compete with him,” I said. I declined the offer. I could see that it angered Andrew. He mentioned that I was better than Adam at detailed shading, but it takes more than detailed shading to create good work.

The job went to a friend of Andrew’s who went to an art school. He’s a great artist – a better fit for the job. He mastered what I had yet to learn; practiced when I didn’t; created good images instead of poorly rendered nonsense that only skinny Russian would see as Picasso-inspired artistic vision.

8.

I still see the world with the rifle that came out of the tiger coming out of another that came out of the fish, coming out of the pomegranate. It’s still bewildering.