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To Build a House

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To Build a House • Donald Hall

A model! A model! What in hell would I do with a model? When I need to check something I go to my wife and lift her chemise.

—Aristide Maillol

We consider that we have succeeded when hysterical misery turns into ordinary unhappiness.

—Sigmund Freud

Gazing at May’s blossoms, imagining bounty of McIntosh,
I praise old lilacs rising in woods beside cellarholes;
I praise toads. I predict the telephone call
that reports the friend from childhood cold on a staircase.
I praise children, grandchildren, and just-baked bread.
I praise fried Spam and onions on slices of Wonder Bread;
I praise your skin. I predict the next twenty years,
days of mourning, long walks growing slow and painful.
I reject twenty years of mid-life; I reject rejections.
The one day stands unmoving in sun and shadow.

When I rise at eight o’clock my knuckles are stiff.
I sit for an hour wearing my nightgown in a sunny chair.
Hot water from the faucet, black coffee, and two aspirin
unstick my fingerjoints, and by these hands I join
the day that will never return. This is the single
day that extends itself, intent as an animal listening
for food, while I chisel at alabaster. All day I know
where the sun is. To seize the hour, I must cast myself
into work that I love, as the keeper hurls
horsemeat to the lion:—I am meat, lion, and keeper.
This afternoon the King and Queen of Norway drove uptown from their consulate to my studio. As we sat drinking tea together, they were fastidious and democratic; I had been told: It was not required to curtsey . . . When the entourage disappeared into Second Avenue I changed into jeans and climbed on my sore ankle to the marble under the skylight. Matisse said, “Work is paradise”; Rodin, “To work is to live without dying”; Flaubert, “It passes the time.” For three hours my mallet tapped while Donatello hovered above me.

There are ways to get rich: Find an old corporation, self-insured, with capital reserves. Borrow to buy: Then dehire managers; yellow-slip maintenance; pay public relations to explain how winter is summer; liquidate reserves and distribute cash in dividends: Get out, sell stock for capital gains, reward the usurer, and look for new plunder—leaving a milltown devastated, workers idle on streetcorners, broken equipment, no cash for repair or replacement, no inventory or credit. Then vote for the candidate who abolishes foodstamps.

I embrace the creation, not for what it signifies, but for volume and texture thrusting up from the touched places. I marry the creation that stays in place to be worked at, day after day. The sparrow lights on my fire-escape once and once only;—there is only the one self; my day is to carve it. That my mother disintegrated while I watched her flies past my window once; that I burned white houses in middle-life flies past my barred window once. To know how the sparrow flies turns hours to marble.
After the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia the delegates started for home on horseback and in carriages for the former colonies of Massachusetts and Virginia, for York State. They visited with friends telling stories. They traveled all day; at nightfall they rested in taverns. The moon waxed and waned; days grew long and shortened again; it snowed; spring melted snow revealing gray grass. Some sold horses to board steamboats working the rivers, then disembarked for trains that shook out sparks setting fire to grassy plain, sheepbarn, and farmhouse.

Some delegates hitched rides chatting with teamsters; some flew stand-by and wandered stoned in O'Hare or borrowed from King Alexander's National Bank: None returned to plantation, farm, or townhouse. They wandered weary until they encountered each other again, converging on Hollywood Boulevard bordered with bars in their absurd clothing like movie extras, Federalist and Republican descending the cloverleaf together to engage another Convention at the Hollywood-La Brea Motel—wearing their nametags, befuddled, unable to argue.

There are ways to get by. When we bought this grownover orchard from Bone's widow, we burnt birch the first winter and worked odd-jobs part-time: sugaring, logging, substitute teaching, schoolbus-driving. The first summer we culled old trees past saving (next winter we kept ourselves warm in the scent of applewood); others we trimmed and topdressed. Next spring we set out three hundred semidwarves in the old hayfield that sloped north by the disused railroad under the pasture turned into woodlot: McIntosh mostly, New Hampshire's goodness, October's fiery compacted
appleflesh; Cortland, Empire, Strawberry, Astrakhan, Baldwin, Spy . . . We order our days by the paradisal routine of apples: from winter of pies and cider through spring's trim and exaltation of blossom, through summer's attention and repair: then picking with neighbors, selling at roadside, packing for market . . . We age among apples—in dread of icestorm, wet snow in May, drought, August wind forcing an early drop; wary of bark-eating deer, of bears that break branches climbing. From the first orchard to the last is one day and eternity.

Smoke rises all day from two chimneys above us. You stand by the stove looking south, through bare branches of McIntosh, Spy, and Baldwin. You add oak logs to the fire you built at six in the castiron stove. At the opposite end of the same house, under another chimney, I look toward the pond that flattens to the west under the low sun of a January afternoon, from a notebook busy with bushels and yields. All day in our opposite rooms we carry wood to stoves, we pace up and down, we plan, we set figures on paper—to converge at day's end for kisses, bread, and talk; then we read in silence, sitting in opposite chairs; then we turn drowsy. Dreaming of tomorrow only, we sleep in the painted bed while the night's frail twisting of woodsmoke assembles overhead from the two chimneys, to mingle and disperse as our cells will disperse and mingle when they lapse into graveyard dirt. Meantime the day is double in the work, love, and solitude of eyes that gaze not at each other but at a third thing: a child, a ciderpress, a book—work's paradise.
From north pole and south we approach each other; Atlantic encounters Pacific, up meets down: Where extremes meet we make our equator:—Your body with narrow waist and carved shoulders, hips comely, breasts outswooping; my body intent, concentrated, and single. We enter this planisphere without strangeness, betrayal, or risk; our bodies after bright tumult float in shadow and repose of watery sleep, skin's fury settling apart and pole withdrawing to pole: A bed is the world.

Or: Buy fifty acres of pasture from the widower: Survey, cut a road, sub-divide; bulldoze the unpainted barn, selling eighteenth-century beams with bark still on them; bulldoze foundation granite that oxen sledded; bulldoze stonewalls set with lost skill; bulldoze the cape the widower lived in; bulldoze his father's seven-apple tree. Drag the trailer from the straggly orchard to the dump: Let the poor move into the spareroom of their town cousins; pave garden and cornfield; build weekend houses for skiers and swimmers; build Slope 'n' Shore; name the new road Blueberry Muffin Lane; build Hideaway Homes for executives retired from pricefixing for General Electric and migrated north out of Greenwich to play bridge with neighbors migrated north out of Darien. Build huge centrally heated colonial ranches—brick, stone, and wood confounded together—on pasture slopes that were white with clover, to block public view of Blue Mountain. Invest in the firm foreclosing Kansas that exchanges topsoil for soybeans. Vote for a developer as United States Senator. Vote for statutes that outlaw visible poverty.
I crashed like my daredevil pilots; it was what I wanted. For two years I moved among institutions, admitted because of barbiturates—I took pills to keep from dreaming—alcohol, and depression. Electroshock blanked me out. If I worked my hands shook; when I carved, my chisel slipped making errors:—I contrived art of errors. For five years I talked with a white-haired woman three times a week. Once toward the end I complained: “Is it possible, ever, to be single-minded?” I spoke in discouragement, glimpsing the erratum-slip on my psyche: “For love read hate throughout; for hate read love.” White eyebrows wavered: “In this life?” she asked; but she added: “One day you will love someone.” I wept the whole hour with relief and without confidence. If singleness is impossible, how do we discover its idea that mocks us? Our longing for being, beyond doubt and skepticism, assembles itself from moments when the farmer scything alfalfa fills with happiness as the underground cave fills with water; or when we lose self in the hourless hour of love.

The one day clarifies and stays only when days depart: “The days you work,” said O’Keeffe, “are the best days.” Whole mornings disappeared through my hand into elmwood before me. I did what I wanted: As my hand strengthened I lost day after day that did not return doubled and burnt in drug-time’s cindery lapse. No longer did I rage at my young father for dying in the wrecked car. I slept all night without murder. I talked with my friend; with my children I visited the zoo on Wednesday; teasing I cooked them dinner.
When I was forty I married again. I kept him twelve years until the occlusion snapped him off like a light.
Now when I am painful, when the beekeeper’s shadow approaches up the desolate block, I number his disappearance among the griefs and cinders where it belongs; but neither the howl of loss nor ecstatic adventure remains largest in store: My grainshed keeps the single repeated green-valley day, repose of imaginable summer, long hours not hours at all, vacant of number: Like great Holsteins we chewed the voluptuous grass.

From burnt houses and blackened shrubs, green rises like bread. Because the Revolution fails; because men and women are corrupt and equal; because we eat topsoil and Massachusetts smokes Virginia’s tobacco; because dancers twist in Alexandrine and millennial light and lemons grow smaller in the groves; because the old house burnt, because I burnt it, we carry green inside from the hill: Potted plants on shelves braced at every window or hanging in rope fingers take sunlight: We drowse on a green bed in the valley of the third thing.

Here, among the thirty-thousand days of a long life, a single day stands still: The sun shines, it is raining; we sleep, we make love, we plant a tree, we walk up and down eating lunch: The day waits at the center when I reached out to touch the face in the mirror and never touched glass, touched neither cheekbone nor eyelid, touched galaxies instead and the void they hung on. The one day extended from that moment, unrolling continuous as the broad moon on water, or as motions of rain that journey a million times through air to water.
Years later when I fell down drunk in Albany,
at the bus depot, among strangers, in rage and confusion,
when police behaved rudely to me, when I was nothing,
the day regarded me from its green distance
with pity—bewildered, yet steadfast as bread or apples.
When I woke again in the yellow Albany morning,
the day resided with me still. The wrist’s knuckle
celebrates only the deject passion of self-regard;
cigarette smoke builds a house of daydream or idleness
to mimic clapboard and granite of the house we live in.

The one day speaks of July afternoons, of February
when snow builds shingle in spruce, when the high sugarmaple
regards the abandoned barn tilted inward, moving
in storm like Pilgrims crossing the Atlantic under sail.
The one day recalls us to hills and meadows, to moss,
roses, dirt, apples, and the breathing of timothy—
away from the yellow chair, from blue smoke and daydream.
Leave behind appointments listed on the printout!
Leave behind manila envelopes! Leave dark suits behind,
boarding passes, and soufflés at the Chancellor’s house!

The great rock at the side of the road reminds us.
Long ago we slipped, rodents among ferns like redwoods;
elongating our claws we climbed the baobab;
for millennia we hung by one hand eating with the other
until we dropped to hide in lengthening grass;
by the waterhole we walked upright sniffing for cats;
we chased elephants into the bog with our brothers;
for ten thousand years we scudded beneath bushes: I leaned
from ladder into tree; you watered the Burgundy Lily.
When we die it is the cell’s death in a hair-end.
At the close of one day, nearly overcome by shadow, the breath makes permanent house: spirit never visible. Because we never catch glimpse of it, unobserved it animates the day, like wellwater after harvesting under September sun; like my mother’s painful hand that rubbed my father’s head all night when he lay dying; like the color green. Nebuchadnezzar and the grocer fish with the same pole: Nebuchadnezzar listens to his chief of staff complaining; the grocer’s son has broken his arm in Texas.

I walk around a corner in the strange town and arrive at the first street of my childhood—the house half-blue, half-yellow, the black Pierce Arrow beside it. The tomcat plays with his mother, sucking and teasing; he cuffs his mother’s jaw. The tomcat limps home in the bloody morning, ear torn. The tomcat sleeps all day in a portion of sun, fur tatty over old scars, pulls himself to the saucer of milk, and snores going back to sleep, knowing himself the same. The kitten leaps in the air, her paws spread like a squirrel’s.

The one day stands unmoving in sun and shadow: like the tuft of grass left behind in the pasture when the Holstein heard the farmer call her for milking and remembered fresh millet; like Tunisian aqueducts and butcherblock counters; like Blackwater Pond with its dirt road; like the committee meeting’s styrofoam cup that lives so briefly to contain coffee and its whitener for ten minutes between the cellophaned stack and the trash compactor; like the granite boulder that the glacier deposited by the orchard’s creek.
We visit our friends in their house at the town's edge. My best friend is fifty now, his wife ten years younger. They have a stout, strong baby named for a President who stands in his highchair adorned with oatmeal and waves his fists over his head like a boxer, making bird-noises and laughing. As we watch the vigorous father and mother laughing with their son, we know that they undertake with energy to enter the final determination of their lives; in muscular bodies they walk to their deaths together.

Now as sun elicits seed planted after the full moon's last frost in the springtime; or as crops ripen south to north in August, slowly, as corn turns green to gold; or as leaves redden in the northcountry, gradually at first, a few branches, then whole trees led by carmine swampmaples, hillsides brilliant overnight, and then leaves falling, fading in November rain—so their deaths enter upon them, while their brash baby makes bird-noises standing in his highchair, the invisible death hatching inside him also.

We return to inhabit this old house over Bone's orchard that we will abandon in death only, our bodies slow to assemble each morning as we gaze north at our trees. We congregate, we grow to diminish again, we drowse. *I remember the dead fox warm on the barn floor, inexplicably dead, and how my grandmother tenderly lifted the body on her pitchfork, strands of hay under the delicate corpse of the young red fox, to the burying place by the willow at the garden's edge where we left the barncat's kittens killed in the road.*
When my body shook again with the body's passion, it was possible only because I expected nothing. The storm's rake that uprooted rockmaples granted shape to the hill. Of course I must visit again the burnt car and the sodality of white houses where a wretched child stands carrying toys and staring under the sun that will not let her sleep. I will never read again the inscription, false with clarity, that once I lived by; neither will I deny the unreadable book printed from these abandonments.

There is also the day of general anaesthesia, when one pushes the other's stretcher into the elevator that descends to the operating room in the dark of dawn. When the surgeon telephones midmorning he reports cancer. As you return from Recovery I sit by your bed to tell you: No one else may tell you. For a week as the pathologist studies dyed tissue, we hold each other, we weep, we repeat reasonable words of reassurance; but the mind projects reel after reel of horror, pity, and self-pity.

The bed is bodily pain and the solitary deaths of preparation for death. The awake nightmare comforts itself by painting the mourner's portrait: As I imagine myself on grief's rack at graveside I picture and pity myself. When pathology supplies the jargon of reassurance, I have buried your body a thousand times. Gradually we recover pulse to return to the bed's world and the third thing: Still the stretcher forever enters the elevator going down, and the telephone lacerates silence.
Now the lost friend or the repudiated self
sinks into wood of the table, throat heaving with veins,
hands trembling to hold the beer for waking up with,
tumbler of whiskey to steady his hands until lunch.
He is fat now, transparent hanging flesh, and he sighs
for lost love and betrayed day:—for what he wanted.
Or he walks the criminal’s yard in the penitentiary
at Clinton, cursing and mumbling, seeing no one,
tracks on his arm scabbed over—that one shaking there,
gray-faced, who once was eager in pursuit of honor:

He walks delicately, impeccably, trembling in outrage,
among criminals in New York, like a sick fox
seeking the hay-floor. When my sister drowns
my lungs fill also: We are one cell perpetually
dying and being born, led by a single day that presides
over our passage through the thirty-thousand days
from highchair past work and love to suffering death.
We plant; we store the seedcorn. Our sons and daughters
topdress old trees. Two chimneys require:
Work, love, build a house, and die. But build a house.

Now pews fill for a Baptism; now white doors open
on a weekday for a funeral:—We file past the raised
lid of a coffin, confirming, and bury our neighbor
in the churchyard’s village where flags fray over graves
of the 24th New Hampshire Volunteers under hemlocks
as dark as shutters. If once a lay preacher stole
the collection money; if a deacon hanged himself
in his barn,—each December Advent circles to return
and again Advent’s child cures in Good Friday sun.
On the first Sunday of every month we assemble
molecules of Jesus from their diaspora and drive downward to the dead of Zion's parish. As we pray for the unborn they look backward upon us. The day solves itself in love and work because the hands of the hospice worker and her voice provide connection. When the rain drives on the poppies they hold bright petals to the rain. From pew to pew we construct together geographies of a day—as in Beijing at Easter, in the eight-sided wooden Church, the choir's Chinese voices roar the hymn, and up from the grave he rises.

*When I was ninety I spent my days beside the window, looking at birds from my wheelchair; sometimes I sketched. To go to the White House for the President's Medal, I needed help, and the Secret Service was helpful. I omitted my diuretic that morning; that day I fasted. A limousine took me to the airbase where I was hoisted into Air Force One for the brief flight to Andrews. I remembered little of the day, although with old friends gathered for the ceremony I chatted about the past. I felt no pain except when I stood for the medal.*

This morning we watch tall poppies light up in a field of grass. At the town dump, one styrofoam cup endures eight hundred years. Under the barn, fat and ancient grandfather spider sleeps among old spoked wheels: Breathing we shake his web: It is always this time; the time that we live by is this time. Together we walk in the high orchard at noon; it is cool, although the sun poises upon us. Among old trees the creek breathes slowly, bordered by fern. The toad at our feet holds still.