

Tree Fort

I should never feel peevisish about a house blessing but my wife Julie brought a book, some guide to rituals and spells, that she dug out the day we moved in. I thought we had a tradition. When we moved into a new place, this our fourth, we ordered take-out from a Chinese restaurant, sat on a mattress on the floor and drank white wine. Now she wanted to sprinkle salt in the corner of each room, light a candle and say what we hoped for that room. I didn't want to sprinkle salt. Or light candles. I wanted to drink. I never asked to move to Florida. So I picked a fight.

Our new house needed work, which was fine, because I needed a job. Knob-and-tube wiring, strung in 1923, still shot through the attic. The galvanized steel plumbing had rusted. A stairway leading to where the old owners kept their grow lights was not up to code, and a leak by the chimney had rotted out the plaster above the hearth. The list was endless. I spent the next five years stripping, scrubbing, hammering, patching and painting.

Popular myth holds that people move to Florida seeking paradise. Ponce de Leon, the legend goes, was looking for the Fountain of Youth; more close to the truth, he got squeezed out of Puerto Rico. A job took me here, someone else's job, and I struggled with the move. Julie felt liberated from winter, I sweat through summer. She slid into tenure at her university, I cobbled together an academic career from scraps. I looked for ways to love this state. I worked on our house. I learned the plants. I paddled the rivers. Eventually I found my professional footing and a dog, a barky coon hound named Virgil, to guide me through my middle years, my "mezzo del cammin."

But I recovered slowly from the forced relocation.

Virgil and I have a ritual. Each morning, I creak through a series of crooked yoga poses then we walk the four blocks down to Tampa Bay. I stop at a bench before sunrise at Lassing Park, a strip of grass mowed by the city. Virgil sniffs the bushes while I watch the horizon blink from indigo to umber-pink. Then we go back home. Virgil naps. I work on a poem.

By the end of February
the browning oranges have
hardened on their stems,
the morning light from
off the bay strikes
the hearth windows
at such an angle
as to create a forest
in our living room
and the heart pine glows.
Stripped of a deep walnut
stain then white lead paint

then unscrubbable pink,
each close grained plank,
amber, unmarred by knots,
can recall the anonymous
flatwood from which it came,
taking us back to some time
now lost to us in Florida,
some time that never was.

It helps as a writer, and for one's own psychic health, to have at least a sense of literary tradition. Back in the seventeenth century, when history reamed open the universe and Christianity stumbled, English poets like George Herbert prayed in verse. I think about the Puritan Anne Bradstreet, who rhymed her way to peace with frigid Massachusetts. Here is Bradstreet as her house burned:

And when I could no longer look
I blest His name that gave and took,
That laid my goods now in the dust;
Yea, so it was, and so 'twas just --
It was His own; it was not mine.

Far be it that I should repine.

At her best ("Far be it ..."), Anne Bradstreet threads between sarcasm and resignation, alienation and return.

Paradise did not settle me in Florida, family did. After Julie and I bought our house in St. Petersburg, my sister and brother-in-law moved here too; their two sons were both born at the city hospital, just up the road. Next came my mother, and after her a brother, then Julie and I adopted a child of our own, an eight-year old boy out of foster care, and the kid has made me a Floridian, bound me emotionally -- bureaucratically -- to this state.

Poems from the park have helped me sift through the transitions. My son never asked to be adopted. We both get angry, and from the outside, our house can sound pretty ugly. As my son works through the trauma, more pain than a little boy has words for, I look for happy things to do together. We build stuff -- a tree fort, a skateboard ramp. We fish. We camp. A friend gave him a kite, which mostly hangs on his bedroom wall.

... though sometimes I worry
how you've grown accustomed
to the steady pull of anger,
to the tug of opposition which
gives shape and lift to your days.

A walk to the bay clears my head, helps me figure out where I need to be as a parent:

So much noise in this city --
traffic, conchs battling
in the sea grass (the crabs
really do scuttle sideways)
and my son with a net,
scouring the kettles --
he has not said a word
about what he is thinking,
no bruised resentment
about his adoption,
just heron tracks and
the silhouettes of rays,
bedded in the sand.

When a writing idea hits me, I make a file. I think in manila folders. One morning, as several scraps came together, I started a file called "Lassing Park." That very afternoon, a chapbook came in the mail by St. Petersburg poet laureate Peter Meinke called *Lassing Park*. So I changed the file name, to "Happy Neighborhood," but I kept the idea. It's a good one.

Happy. Not willfully ignorant, not ersatz-zen complacency, but contentment -- an effort to settle the spirit, to fill the hole in my heart my wife says I project onto my kid. When Julie and I adopted a child, we adopted his adoption.

Poetry sifts through the second-hand grief. I think about George Herbert. I think about Anne Bradstreet's restless, reassuring intelligence. I remember the core lessons of Christianity -- gratitude, compassion, letting go, forgiveness, *forgiving one's self*. Julie and I cannot dismiss our child's trauma. But we can at least give him a place to call his own.

Or maybe he has that already.

The kid and I built the tree fort with scrap lumber from my ten-year renovation. We framed the beams against a stand of cherry laurels, hung old lap siding and screen windows on two sides, and half a door to make a hinged wall over the neighbor's yard.

After we finished, the kid seemed to lose interest in the tree fort -- or so I thought. He said there's nothing to do up there. But when I mentioned off-hand leaving Florida, maybe taking a job somewhere else, the kid would have none of it. "We can never sell this house," he said. I asked him why.

"My tree fort is here."

-- Thomas Hallock