

“Building the House” by Mary Oliver

Originally published in *Shenandoah*, Mary Oliver’s “Building the House” was selected by Cynthia Ozick for the 1998 volume of *Best American Essays* and was later included in Oliver’s 2000 collection *Winter Hours* (Mariner). Oliver, a longtime resident of Provincetown newly relocated to Florida, has received the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for poetry.

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I know a young man who can build almost anything – a boat, a fence, kitchen cabinets, a table, a barn, a house. And so serenely, and in so assured and right in a manner, that it is a joy to watch him. All the same, what he seems to care for best – what he seems positively to

desire – is the hour of interruption, of hammerless quiet, in which he will sit and write down poems or stories that have come into his mind with clambering and colorful force. Truly he is not very good at the puzzle of words – not nearly as good as he is with the mallet and measuring tape – but this in no way lessens his pleasure. Moreover, he is in no hurry. Everything he learned, he learned at a careful pace – will not the use of words come easier at last, though he began at the slowest amble? Also, in these intervals, he is happy. In building things, he is his familiar self, which is he does not overvalue. But in the act of writing he is a grander man, a surprise to us, and even more to himself. He is beyond what he believed himself to be.

I understand his pleasure. I also know the enclosure of my skills, and am no less pert than he when some flow takes me over the edge of it. Usually, as it happens, this is towered the work in which he is so capable. There appears in my mind a form; I imagine it from boards of a certain breadth and length, and nails, and all in cheerful response to some need I have or thing I have, aligned with a space I see as opportunistic. I would not pry my own tooth, or cobble my own shoes, but I deliberate unfazed the niceties of woodworking – nothing, all my life, has checked me. At my side at this moment is a small table with one leg turned in slightly. For I have never at all built anything perfectly, or even very well, in spite of the pleasure such labor gives me. Nor am I done yet, though time has brought obstacles and spread them before me – a stiffness of the fingers, a refusal of the eyes to

switch easily from near to far, or rather from far to near, and thus to follow the aim of the hammer toward the nail head, which yearly grows smaller, and smaller.

Once, in fact, I built a house. It was a miniscule house, a one-room, one-floored affair set in the ivies and vincas of the backyard, and made almost entirely of salvaged materials. Still, it had a door. And four windows. And, miraculously, a peaked roof, so I could stand easily inside, and walk around. After it was done, and a door hung, I strung a line from the house so that I could set a lamp upon the built-in table, under one of the windows, across the yard, in the evening with the lamplight shining outward, it looked very sweet, and it gave me much satisfaction. It seemed a thing of great accomplishment, as indeed, for me, it was. It was the house I had built. There would be no other.

The labor of writing poems, of working with thought and emotion in the encasement (or is it the wings?) of language is strange to nature, for we are first of all creatures of motion. Only secondly – only oddly, and not naturally, at moments of contemplation, joy, grief, prayer, or terror – are we found, while awake, in the posture of deliberate or hapless inaction. But such is the posture of the poet, poor laborer. The dancer dances, the painter dips and lifts and lays on the oils; the composer reaches at least across the octaves. The poet sits. The architect draws and measures, and travels to the quarry to tramp among the gleaming stones. The poet sits, or if it is a fluid moment, he scribbles some words upon the page. The body, under this pressure of nonexisting, begins to draw up like a muscle, and complain. An unsolvable disharmony of such work – the mind so hotly fired and the body so long quiescent – will come sooner or later to revolution, will demand action! For many years, in a place I called Blackwater woods, I wrote while I walked. That motion, hardly more than a dreamy sauntering, worked for me; it kept my body happy while I scribbled. But sometimes it wasn't at all enough. I wanted to build, in the other way, with the teeth of the saw, and the explosions of the hammer, and the little shrieks of the screws winding down into their perfect nests.

2.

I began the house when I returned one spring after a year of teaching in a midwestern city. I had been, for months, responsible, sedate, thoughtful, and, for the most of my daylight hours, indoors. I was sick for activity. And so, instead of lingering on the porch with my arrangement of tools, banging and punching together some simple and useful thing – another bookshelf, another table – I began the house.

When anything is built in our town, it is more importantly a foundation than a structure. Nothing – be it ugly, nonconforming, in violation of bylaws or neighbors' rights – nothing, once up, has ever been torn down. And almost nothing exits as it was originally constructed. On our narrow strip of land we are a build-up, add-on society. My house today, crooked as it is, stands. It has an undeniable value: it exists. It may therefore be enlarged eventually, even unto rentable proportions. The present owners of the property would not dream of discarding it. I can see from the road, they have given it a new roof and straightened out some doubtful portions of the peaked section. To one end of the peak they have attracted a metal rod which holds, in the air above the house, a stature of a heron, in the attitude of easy flight. My little house, looking upward, must be astonished.

The tools I used in my building of the house, and in all my labor of this sort, were a motley assortment of hand tools: hammer, tack hammer, drivers of screws, rasps, planes, saws small-toothed and rip pliers, wrenches, awls. They had once belonged to my grandfather, and some of them to my

great-grandfather, who was a carpenter of quality, and used the finer title cabinetmaker. This man I know only from photographs and an odd story or two: for example, he built his own fogging, of walnut, and left it, to be ready when needed, with the town mortician. Eventually, like the tiniest of houses, and with his body inside, it ease consumed by flame.

These tools, though so closely mine, were not made therefore easy for me to use. I was, frankly, accident-prone; while I was making anything, my hands and shins and elbows, if not other parts of my body, were stacked with dirt and nicks. Gusto, not finesses, was m trademark here. And often enough, with these tools, I would come to a place where I could not wrest some necessary motion from my own wrist, or life, or cut through. Then I would have to wait, in frustration, for a friend or acquaintance, or even a stranger – male, and stronger than I – to come along, and I would simply as for help to get at that instant, that twist of the screw. Provincetown men, though they may seem rough to the unknowing, are as delicious and courteous as men are made. “Sure, darling” the plumber would say, or the neighbor passing by, or the fisherman stepping over from his yard, and he would help me, and would make a small thing of it.

3.

Whatever a house is to the heart and body of a man – refuge, comfort, and luxury – surely it is as much or more to the spirit. Think how often our dreams take place inside the houses of our imaginations! Sometime these are fearful, gloomy, enclosed places. At other times they are bright and have many windows and are even surrounded by gardens combed and invitational, or unpathed and wild. Surely such houses appearing in our sleep-work represent the state of the soul, or, if you prefer it, the state of the mind. Real estate, in any case, is not the issue of dreams. The condition of our true and private self is what dreams are about. If you rise refreshed from a dream – a night’s settlement inside some house that has filled you with pleasure – you are doing okay. If you wake to the memory of squeezing confinement, rooms without air or light, a door difficult or impossible to open, a troubling disorganization, or even wreckage inside, you are in trouble – with yourself. There are (dream) houses that pin themselves upon the windy porches of mountains, that open their own windows and summon in flocks of wild and colorful birds – and there are houses that hunker upon narrow ice floes adrift upon endless, dark waters; houses that creak, houses that sing; houses that will say nothing at all to you though you beg and plead all night for some answer to your vexing questions.

As such houses in dreams are mirrors of the mind or the soul, so an actual house, such as I began to build, is at least a little of the inner state made manifest. Jung, in a difficult time, slowly built a stone garden and a stone tower. Thoreau’s house at Walden Pond, ten feet by fifteen feet under the tall, arrowy pines, was surely a dream-state come to life. For anyone, stepping away from actuations where one knows one’s measure is good. It shakes away an excess of seriousness. Building my house, or anything else, I always felt my self-becoming, in an almost devotional sense, passive, and willing to play. Play is never far from the impress of the creative drive, never far from the happiness of discovery. Building my house, I was joyous all day long.

The material issue of a house, however, is a matter not so much of imagination and spirit as it is of particular, joinable, weighty substance – it is brick and wood, it is foundation and beam, sash and sill; it is threshold ad

door and the latch upon the door. In the seventies and the eighties, in this part of the world if not everywhere, there was an ongoing, monstrous binge of building, or tearing back and rebuilding – and carting away of old materials to the (then-titled) dump. Which, in those days, was a lively and even social place. Which in those days, was a lively and even social place. Work crews made a continual effort towards bulldozing the droppings from the trucks into some sort of order, shocking at least a dozen categories of broken and forsaken materials, into separate areas. Gulls, in flocks like low white clouds, screamed and rippled over the heaps of lumber, looking for garbage that was also dumped, often in no particular area. Motels, redecorating, would bring three hundred mattresses in the morning, three hundred desks in the afternoon. Treasures, of course, were abundantly sought and found. And good wood – useful wood – wood it was a sin to bury, not to use again. The price of lumber had not yet skyrocketed, so even new lumber lay seamed in with the old, the price passed onto the customer. Cutoffs, and lengths. Pine, fir, oak flooring, shingles of red and white cedar, ply, cherry trim, also tar paper and insulation, screen doors new and old, and stovepipe old and new, and bricks, and, more than once, some power tools left carelessly, I suppose, in a truck bed, under the heaps of trash. This is where I went for my materials, along with others, men and women both, who simply roved, attentively, through all the mess until they found what they needed, or felt they would, someday, use. Clothes, furniture, dolls, old highchairs, bikes, once a metal bank the shape of a dog, very old, once a set of copper-bottomed cookware still in its original cartons, once a bag of old Christmas cards swept from the house of a man who had died only a month or so earlier, in almost every one of them a dollar bill.

Here I found everything I needed, including nails from half-full boxes spilled in the sand. All I lacked – only because I lacked the patience to wait until it came along – was one of the ridge beams; this I bought at the local lumber company and paid cash for; thus the entire house cost me \$3.58.

Oh, the intimidating and beautiful hardwoods! No more could I cut across the cherry or walnut or the oak across stone! It was pine I looked for, with its tan patter of rings, its crisp knots, its willingness to be broken, cut, split, and its fragrance that never reached the air but made the heart gasp with its sweetness. Plywood I had no love of, though I took it when found and used it when I could, knowing it was no real thing, and alien to the weather, and apt to parch and swell, or rot. Still, I used it. My little house was a patchwork. It was organic as a garden. It was free of any promise of exact inches, though at least it achieved a fair if not strict linearity. On its foundation of old railroad ties, its framing of old wood, old ply, its sheets of tar paper, its rows of pale shingles, it stood up. Stemming together everything with sixpenny nails, eight penny nails, spikes, screws, I was involved, frustrated, devoted, resolved, nicked and scraped, delighted. The work went slowly. The roof went on, was shingled with red cedar. I was a poet, but I was away for a while from the loom of thought and formal language; I was playing. I was whimsical, absorbed, happy. Let me always be who I am, and then some.

When my house was finished, my friend Stanley Kunitz gave me a yellow door, discarded from his house at the other end of town. Inside, I tacked up a van Gogh landscape, a Blake poem, a photograph of Mahler, a picture M. had made with colored chalk. Some birds' nests hung in the corners. I lit the lamp. I was done.

There is something you can tell people over and over, and with feeling and eloquence, and still never say it well enough for it to be more than news from abroad – people have no readiness for it, no empathy. It is the news of personal aging – of climbing, and knowing it, to some unrepeatably pitch and coming forth on the other side, which is pleasant still but which is, unarguably, different – which is the beginning of descent. It is the news that no one is singular, that no argument will change its course, that one's time is more gone than not, and what is left waits to be spent gracefully and attentively, if not quite so actively. The plumbers in town now are the sons of our old plumber. I cut some pine boards for some part of an hour, and I am tired. A year or so ago, hammering, I hit my thumb, directly and with force, and lost the nail for half a year. I ease recently given a power drill, which also sets and removes screws. It could be a small cannon, so apprehensive am I of its fierce and quick power. When I handle it well (which to begin with means that I aim it correctly), difficult tasks are made easy. But when I do not, I hold an angry weasel in my hand.

I hardly used the little house – it became a place to hold some gardening tools, boxes of this or that. Did I write one poem there? Yes I did, and a few more. But its purpose never was to be shelter for thought. I built it to build it, stepped out over the threshold, and was gone.

I don't think I am old yet, or done with growing. But my perspective has altered – I am less hungry for the busyness of the body, more interested in the tricks of the mind. I am gaining, also, a new affection for wood that is useless, that has been tossed out, that merely exists, quietly, wherever it has ended up. Planks on the beach rippled and salt-soaked. Pieces of piling, full of the tunnels of shipworm. In the woods, fallen branches of oak, of maple, of the dear, wind-worn pines. They lie on the ground and do nothing. They are travelers on the way to oblivion.

The young man now – the carpenter we began with – places his notebook carefully beside him and rises and, as though he had just come back from some great distance, looks around. There are his tools, there is the wood; there is his unfinished task, to which, once more, he turns his attention. But life is no narrow business. On any afternoon he may hear and follow this same rhapsody, turning from his usual labor, swimming away into the pleasures, the current of language. More power to him!

For myself, I have passed him by and have gone into the weeds. Near the path, one of the tall maples has fallen. It is early spring, so the crimped, maroon flowers are just emerging. Here and there slabs of the bark have exploded away in the impact of its landing. But mostly, it lies as it stood, though not such a net for the wind as it was. What is it now? What does it signify? Not Indolence, surely, but something, all the same, that balances with Ambition. Call it Rest. I sit on one of the branches. My idleness suits me. I am content. I have built my house. The blue butterflies, called azures, twinkle up from the secret place where they have been waiting. In their small blue dresses they float among the branches, they come close to me, once rests for a moment on my wrist. They do not recognize me as anything very different from this enfoldment of leaves, this wind-roarer, this wooden palace lying down, now, upon the earth, like anything heavy, and happy, and full of sunlight, and half asleep.