

An arch never sleeps.
—James Fergusson, “History of Indian and Eastern Architecture”

1.

My dog follows me around the house.

He believes I wear food.

The listless click of his toenails on the carpetless floorboards of an adjacent room is so familiar that only its absence is audible.

This old house is set out in a succession of tiny rooms like shoebox dioramas, easily crowded, unalterably dark. In 1917, when it was built, Modernism hadn't yet robbed the working man of ornamentation, and the window cases and door frames all wear heavy oak crowns, made edgeless by coats of paint, buried by dust as thick as a layer of worthless topsoil.

The dog arrived here in spring and I in the fall before, 16 years ago—a moment as banal and mildly irritating as changing trains or picking up groceries, just another shift in a decade and a half of constant but seemingly random gestures, like a restless night.

I remained a stranger to the evolving circumstances of my life, cradled in a woolly autism, a seizure of carelessness about everything except how I *felt* at a particular half hour in time.

The dense Southern Pine joists and cast iron weighted sash windows of my new home hardly made an impression on me. I thought only of where to locate the piano; I laid my pretty sweaters down in the drawers again and jogged my stacks of sheet music.

I might have been in a motel.

It wasn't until the Saturday we pulled a handful of 70-year-old Christmas cards from out of the eerie void between walls where pocket doors had been tucked that I began to adore my home.

~~~~~

Instead of doing homework, on weeknights during my high school years I sat at my bedroom desk drawing floor plans for imaginary houses.

I had never seen a floor plan until, on one of the innumerable walks through model apartments that my mother took on Saturday mornings to chase away the blues or get fresh decorating ideas, I took one page each of three or four different layouts. This was the early 1970s, and expressive graphics had finally progressed beyond magazines and coffee can artwork. The

butterscotch, moss, and burnt sienna exterior colors of the buildings themselves were echoed in brochures and folders, printed on heavy, textured stock and peppered with a single logo—often a stylized fruit tree or the initial letter of names such as *Willowbrook* or *Orchard View*—that sealed the architect's vision.

At home, I pondered the diagrams.

The certainty of the right angles, the fussiness of indicating *both* window pane and sill, the arc denoting a closet door's infringement on a tiny bedroom, and the delicate cross-hatching intoxicated my eye. But it was the hollow white spaces thus created—Marianne Moore's imaginary gardens with real toads in them—rooms fragmented by implied sunlight, deep corners bearing the outline of an invisible grand piano, the echo of an obstinate cabinet door in a tiny pantry suggested by two thin vertical lines, that let my imagination out to run.

I still have the flat white plastic ruler with the 1965 calendar printed on the back that I used to create my own right angles. The purchase of a drafting board and T-square would have struck my mother not as extravagant, which it certainly would have been, but as an *unwarranted* investment. So I drew walls, flipping the sheet 90 degrees to observe with depression the amateurish slant of my developing structure.

The Robin's egg blue file folder of over 70 drawings is the oldest article of documentation I have of my early life, other than photographs. I'm foggy on the chain of events that resulted in its safe keeping over two decades as hysterical and senseless as a drunken argument. Yet here they are, with only slight foxing near the edges—and a bark-like frailty, perhaps, on handling—my teenaged graphite dreams: side porches and butler's pantries in a guessed-at scale, an earnest mimicry, as much of the architect's technical shorthand as his vocation.

~~~~~

Thirty-five years later, I feel a little jab of metaphysical contentment that I grasped the truth about emotion instinctively: It is bound up in *place*. Like a heavy old piece of machinery that cannot be moved when a building is sold, it sits out the decades in the identical spot, looking out of the same windows.

A gap in my driving license, or a shortage of time (or cash), or maybe just a lack of anyone else to go along has kept me from returning very often to the places of my childhood.