

Paul de Barros / IN A DRAW

for Richard Gates

Vancouver. Home is where the heart is. The hearth is. Soon, he thought, my heart will be where my home is. The blackbirds crowed alone, each by each, atop the rooves when spring came they did. They were larger than the blackbirds at home. Also, their wings had creamy speckles and their beaks were slightly orange, stood out against the sky. They went to a party over there, stood in the kitchen drinking beer when they could get one. He heard a sound, as if it were raining, which he fully expected given the dripping hemlocks, only to find, as he reached the porch, that the sound was of a rushing creek. They were in a draw.

It became the hottest, stillest, quietest day of the fall. Voices and airplanes cracked the daylight sharply dividing the silence, then disappeared, leaving no wake, only vastness. Across the lake the colors were gone, off the face of the ridge, those bright yellow seas which in the bar that day at Lac La Hache had reminded him suddenly of something at once totally familiar yet unretrievable, had invited him to sit staring out across the lake through the apparently tinted (polarized) glass at the hillsides, wondering what it was (the lake there rollicked like San Francisco Bay, was dark, cold, gunblue) . . . a place, yes, a place, but where? . . . what was it about those patches of Inca gold that would not let go his eyes? He searched in them over two, three, four beers, then suddenly graced once more by that child's eye view, he got it: it was the hills of California he was seeing there! Thanks to a momentary optical illusion, the raised bunches of poplars against the evergreens had shown as patches of golden grass among the oaks. The oaks, the oaks, the oaks, and golden wild oats in early summer . . . and the air, too, today had reminded him of that same California benevolence, a word which could so

rarely be applied to the Canadian bush it had begun to paralyze him. Even the berries, the fish, were somehow niggardly and pinched when he thought of those lush Yokuts valleys, Castanoan shellfish and Spanish extravagances. Here the fall and winter moved in over the landscape like a frigid god: the trees were sered, stripped and milked of their color then left to freeze like so many sticks, bare masses of grey across the lake, trunks and branches mottled between the dusty firs and spruces, pines. Who could call it beautiful?

Worse, he felt in himself the same gradual dessication of generosity that was going on outside, and knew that he was as helpless to combat that as he was to contest the coming of winter. This air, thin and warm, marked the fulcrum of the seasons. He and Katy had seen it many times before — always it had signalled their departure and the conclusion of an industrious summer working on the house. But never before had they felt so absolutely sapped.

He looked out of the window of the little cabin they had rented — the cold had finally driven them out of camp — and watched a beaver glide by, or rather the beaver's nappy head, as the rest of him worked beneath the surface. "Raise the level of the pond, then live beneath it." *Canadian Mammals*, 1974. Canadian indeed! And yet, was it not just that line across the map which had seemed to present such an obstacle to their freedom of movement? Hadn't they found, whenever they approached the border driving north that the shell of velvet sky over the Pacific Northwest suddenly cracked and left them pinched into the southwest corner of something else? Here on the mouth of the Fraser lay the far-west polis of another space. Perhaps, perhaps if they were to go there where all this water was going . . . (the beaver had gone, his wake only a faint disturbance among others on the surface, presumably across the bay to the lodge they'd watched him building) . . . maybe that might ease the pain which gripped them each time they set out for either place, these poles they'd imposed on their world — San Francisco and Bridge Lake. Vancouver? It was worth a try.

It had started to rain. Imperceptibly, the puffs of morning cloud had dissipated into stratus, as they often did towards noon, and filled the sky with water. He allowed his head to sink slightly toward the checkered vinyl tablecloth. In his dreams there roamed witches, gigantic birds and horses. "The horses are avengers," Katy's cousin Nathan would say at Francois Lake, "of violated innocence. Terrible in the night." "The visual," he noted in his book, as his mind leapt backward to that astonishing moment in Lac La Hache, the beer in the glasses mirroring the poplars' yellow leaves . . .

He shook his head free, rose, and stoked the tiny cookstove. Katy would be disappointed when she got back from town that he'd done nothing on the house. But even if they did finish cutting and nailing all those endless rows of cedar shakes, the dormer windows (Snoring in the dormer! — that's where he wanted to be, asleep) there remained the floorboards, the windows to be installed: they'd never get into it this year, not sane, anyway. No, they'd have to go back to California, only to turn around six months later. He remembered what a traitor he'd felt when little Mary on Shotwell Street had cried when he told her they were leaving. Was that all it meant to be a citizen — pure sentiment? It was easy to be unsentimental about this plywood cabin. He chuckled. The last resort.

If only they could finish the house, it would no longer be necessary, this wandering around, living in other peoples' places. He imagined them as having no space to live in, none, at least, which did not force them into elaborate contortions. Yet he also noticed that they carried patterns with them wherever they went, and imposed them rather arbitrarily. Here the car would be parked, there the scrap metal stacked; there the mustard, here the firewood. He remembered that in the campsite visitors had often unwittingly urinated on the living-room carpet, mistaken furniture for natural phenomena. One had only to build one's house around one's habits. At the architect's, his drawing mapped the traffic, rabbit runs, they'd wear it in the cold, inhabiting the house like . . . rabbits, in their hutches, nests or dens, they'd have their room at last, their rooms. "*Cabe uno mas*," the cabbies said in Mexico, expressionless behind their thin moustaches, and for him it meant squeeze in beside that dress, those legs. Always he felt squeamishly they did not fit; cramped.

"When they finished the house": it had become a litany, a reckoning. "When they finished the house" they could, for example, spend long winter evenings together, drinking rum and reading aloud to one another instead of this ceaseless shouting of instructions about things which neither of them understood. When they finished the house, they could travel, catch that Yugoslavian freighter they'd always planned to out of Chicago, tour Italy, then turn on their heels and head for the house. Waiting would be the cords of firewood, the black stove and the baby in his crib, perhaps grown a little hungry in their absence, but, after all, sober and content. Life itself would be a sober, balanced affair without these troublesome ups and downs. "Happy as a clam," he'd heard her cousin say.

But wasn't the subject, after all, not the house itself, but the attractions it held in store? It seemed to function like a maypole, so that wherever they might go, they were never allowed to strike off at a tangent from the circle described by its pull. In Mexico even, they had felt it tugging at their sleeves, had cut their journey short. Each time they left, it seemed to have more of them than when they had arrived. They certainly talked about it in those terms, as a storehouse, a vault, almost, where they might store things of value. Even the walls were fortress-like, as it grew, windowless, doorless; they'd felt relieved to finally cut the chunks out for the door and watch them topple to the ground. What were they preparing to protect in there? — this nest, this — Yes! It was their future they were banking there.

He knew what was bothering him now but resisted squaring off with it. In no way could he imagine the space he might command as father. It was, after all — the house — to be nothing more for him than an expanded bedroom, one he could recall from childhood. Katy and the others, whoever they might be, he had obviously envisioned as mere characters on the landscape. But then why — if that were really so — why was he sponsoring the destruction of that very childhood, by setting out to house some other child there? For that was the plan, wasn't it, their tacit meaning built into that second dormer window? He suddenly had a rare memory of himself as an eight-year-old squatting on the cold cement of the garage, humming as he nailed together scraps of wood with string and rags to make a sailboat. Wasn't that him, here, now? — humming as he split the cedar shakes? Had there ever been room for anyone but himself?

Or closer to home, did he really want to make room? Obviously a part of him did, the part that had been trying to open up a space deep in the pines for them to sleep together in; while another part had been resisting — that was clearly the “something” he had sensed out there all summer that was “out to get them,” reducing him to tantrums every time he stuck his head back in beneath the hood of that accursed truck! But it wasn’t just himself he quarreled with: Katy, too, carried some imperative about the house which he felt tethered by. “But we’ve got to get back there and finish the house!” she’d blurted out to a surprised old friend in Berkeley at the New Year’s Eve party when he reproached them yet again for leaving town. “Don’t you understand?” The house had grown around their marriage, almost bound it now, he felt. Stood for it. And this word marriage, too, was like a maypole, always he pictured streamers with it or carnations. It was as if they could not share that bed without the house surrounding them. It was their wedding ring.

How had this happened? How had their marriage become contingent on what sheltered it? He went over in his mind as he had a thousand times the sequence of events which had brought them here — Katy’s cousins . . . But no, it was more like a list:

1. Katy’s cousins in the Kootenays (Vietnam . . .
2. Wanting a cabin in the country.
3. Katy’s four years in Mexico . . .

He put down his pen and went over to the stove. It always came back to that, didn’t it, that he was not expatriating and she perpetually was. Outside the orbit of her family — mother country, fatherland — she felt free, where he felt homesick and confused. Tugged back to those oaks and hills. And yet, he had a nagging intuition that if they did go home now, back to that nostalgic vision (“And why not?” he’d challenged at the pub. “Why *put* ourselves through all this?”) they’d never share a household of their own. Not here or anywhere.

He sat back down at the little table with his coffee. Okay then. Vancouver. There was a curious pleasure, even, in just surrendering to it. Some place not on this private map they’d drawn and followed. “The coast,” the ranchers called it. A neutral ground to wait the winter out against. His mind flooded with the grey sky of it. There would be no color, no movement, no attachment. They would barely even be there. They would be noplacé.

No place.

He knew it wouldn’t last. But he could hardly wait to tell Katy.