

My Life As A Series Of Houses (1968-2012)

by John Olson

In 1968 I moved to Arcata, California, and stayed with a friend until I found a trailer for rent in back of a Mexican restaurant. An old Italian man named Rocco was renting it. He was a tiny fellow with a welder's cap and a drop of snot on the end of his nose that never seemed to fully drop but hang there in mucilaginous defiance. I liked the trailer. It was tiny but quiet. My only neighbors, except for the restaurant, were a herd of cows. I lived there happily for two weeks feasting on William Butler Yeats and George Bernard Shaw until one day the water disappeared. I walked to the water department to see what the deal was and they told me the old man had tapped illegally into the restaurant. I told them I was living there. They shrugged their shoulders. They didn't give a shit. Rocco broke the law. You're out of luck kid. Plain and simple.

I found a room at the Arcata Hotel. It had a tiny sink and a comfortable bed and a desk. I had to share the bathroom, which was down the hall, but I didn't mind that. I kind of liked walking through the hall wrapped in a towel. The manager was kind and his nine year old son lent me his comic book collection when I came down with the flu.

While visiting friends in San José in the summer of '69 I got romantically involved with a young woman named Jacqueline. My old friend David introduced us. The romance brought me back to San José on a permanent basis. We got married at Jacqueline's parent's house in Saratoga. I took a semester off from school and got a job as a janitor in a tall black building at the Pruneyard Shopping Center. We rented in a one-bedroom apartment in Los Gatos, which I loved. Los Gatos is a great little town in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains. David, my old roommate, lived in the complex next door. He was within shouting distance. We also worked together,

which saved on transportation. It felt like the Honeymooners. I could hear him arguing with his wife, and he could hear me arguing with my wife. One night when David and I went out looking to snag one of those giant wooden spools the telephone company used which made terrific albeit somewhat wobbly coffee tables we encountered a young man with long wavy hair and a waist-length beard who appeared to be higher than a kite and totally lost. We tried to help him, but he never said a word. We gave up and left him to his hallucinations.

In 1971 I went back to school at San José State. The commute grew tedious, and expensive. We decided to move back down to the city. I hated leaving pretty Los Gatos, but we found a studio apartment in a quiet neighborhood overlooking the thickly wooded ravine that was Guadalupe Creek. This was a cool place, very cozy and green. One entire wall was glass. A group of raccoons came up every night to eat the dog food we put out for them in large tin bowls. Sometimes I'd be sitting at my desk and feel something watching me. I'd look down and see a raccoon, his hands against the glass, his eyes riveted on me. They seemed pretty friendly, but once, when I moved to pet a raccoon on the head, the animal snarled and bared his teeth. I remember how much that surprised me. Naïve, I know, I know.

In May, 1972, Jackie and I went to Europe and when we returned David's arm was in a cast. He'd hit the wall in an argument with his wife. He was now on his own. I found myself divorced a few months later. I found a small yellow house on Balbach Street within walking distance of San José State. There was a paint and body shop on the street and a porn theater where Deep Throat played for three consecutive months. Yet, what I remember most about that place, is the Middle Ages. I was taking a class in Middle English. I loved Middle English. I loved Chaucer and the Pearl Poet and Sir Thomas Malory. I hung Breughel prints on the walls of peasants skating and sleeping and making merry in the village square and burned candles and listened a lot to the Pentangles and Fairport Convention. I can't remember what made me decide to move from that place. That

whole part of my life is very hazy. I just remember the soft golden glow of the candle and peasants sitting at big long tables eating and playing music.

In 1973 I lived in a studio apartment for a short while just before I graduated. I dated a woman who pierced my ear and another woman I met in a James Joyce class who dumped me because I had no future. I moved in with a coke dealer in the Santa Cruz mountains. His house was enormous and very modern and beautiful. I took a liking to him. He was scary smart and self-determining and affable. He lived across the street from a very close friend where I'd been spending a lot of time hanging out, talking poetry, drinking wine, and carving wood. The dealer, a former electrical engineer, rented a room to me because he'd been busted and needed the money for his legal expenses. The surroundings were gorgeous, a thick forest of redwood and oak and Pacific madrone, but the dealer liked to stay up late night remodeling, running power tools and arguing with attorneys while his girlfriend clocked endless hours at playing pool. The pool table was right below my room. Click. Click click. Click click click. Click click click clickety click. One night just as I dozed off I was awakened by a circular saw going right next to my head. The coke dealer was working on his deck. His hair was biblically long and he wore a pair of goggles as he worked on his patio utterly oblivious to my presence just a few feet away. It wasn't long after that that I moved. He was a little suspicious of me since I always turned him down when he offered me a line of coke. I was still a little skittish after my catastrophe on acid. I just drank a lot. He was not terribly sorry to see me go.

In 1975 I moved back to Seattle. I found a spacious studio apartment on 15th Street on Capitol Hill with a huge kitchen and a fireplace. I got a job folding and dispensing towels at University Hospital. I only worked sixteen hours a week. And yet I could afford the studio and have enough left over after groceries and bills for a Guinness at the local watering hole which was called The Canterbury. The studio, which I rented from an Austrian chef, was \$125 a month. There was a used bookstore a couple of blocks down

the street where I discovered Ron Padgett and Ted Berrigan. I stopped writing ballads and began writing poetry à la Ron Padgett and Ted Berrigan. I lived in Seattle but imagined myself living in Manhattan on the lower east side.

In 1977 I got a job in the mailroom for the University of Washington which lasted nineteen years. I also got married again. That lasted about nine years. We lived in two apartments, one on Capitol Hill where we had a peeping tom problem with a local sixteen year old boy, another in Wallingford where I almost got arrested while checking the door as I was leaving for work and did not have the correct address on my driver's license, and rented a small white house in Lake City (where Gary Snyder grew up when Lake City was mostly pig farms), before we bought a house for \$69,000 dollars on a nearby street. This was a great little house. It had three bedrooms, one of which I used as a study, but the marriage was tenuous. When it ended, in 1986, I found myself back on Capitol Hill living in a studio apartment, somewhat dazed and suffering heavily from depression. In 1988 I began to feel better and met a piano tuner. We moved into a one-bedroom apartment on Roy Street which had a spectacular view of Lake Union. But then that relationship ended and I moved to a one-bedroom on Belmont where I once again assumed a hermetic life style. I quit drinking and began attending AA meetings.

I really began to enjoy the single life. There was a brief fling with The Girlfriend From Hell in 1990, but apart from that, I looked forward to a life of hermetic tranquility. I was totally fine living alone. I liked living alone. The meetings were going well. I quit smoking. I began running long distances. I had several years of sobriety. I completed my first half-marathon in 1993. Things were stabilizing. A way of life was developing. And then it all changed again.

A young poet named Tom Hunley nominated me for a poetry competition where I met a pretty young poet named Roberta. I was instantly smitten. We both won the poetry competition and began to date. Our first date was a ferry trip to Bremerton and back. We got

married on a warm sunny February afternoon in 1994 in the penthouse suite of the Sorrento Hotel. Eighteen years down the proverbial road I am happy to report we are still happily married and living in a one-bedroom apartment on Queen Anne Hill, not far from the apartment where, as a fourteen year old kid in 1961, I listened to Lonnie Donegan and His Skiffle Group sing Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor On The Bedpost Over Night.

