

# Building Houses Out of Words

*by* Mark Waldrop

I remember sitting there on the first unfinished rooftop, watching you building houses out of words. You hammered in grammar and punctuation; you said these things needed to be hammered in by hand. You drove the long straight exclamation points carefully. "These have a specific purpose," you said, "one here and maybe another over there."

You pointed. I nodded, and the heat was so real I thought it hated us both.

You let me sit as close as I wanted and you'd let me hammer too. I bent all my nails and you wouldn't give me any more. You made me straighten them by hand.

We stopped for lunch to eat burritos because that's what people eat when they're building houses out of words.

When the clouds pursed lips and blew muddy kisses through dust we sawed pages. "Sawing pages is the most important goddamned thing about building houses out of words," you said.

When I thought we were done, sun-baked-dry the first summer evening you made your way down the ladder as carefully as you had hammered. "We need to stir the paint." I was working on bent nails and you said, "houses made of

words need people in them."

When I started painting you told me I was better with big brush strokes that were there for making the backgrounds, so I used a roller to wipe out the people I made. When you told me that was the beauty of painting people on walls I believed you.

