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Guidebook on Making a house A Home

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Recommended Citation

Stallings, Alana, "Guidebook on Making a house A Home" (2023). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 2136.
https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/2136

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Guidebook on Making a house A Home

Poems by

ALANA STALLINGS

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR LIU

PROFESSOR DECKER

DECEMBER 12, 2022

The Architect

i

begin to know this house by the creaks

in the floorboards. Or, more, the ones that don't.

A wax coat cloaks their squealing perfidy –

groaning from my stepping on its toes.

My missteps turn, in fumbling duet,

to chorus! Oaken symphonic release!

I'll make them rhyme and say, in this vignette,

“We heave and leech and bleed and beg and take your tread to bed.”

Again, again – perfect heredity.

ii

A feathered thing crones listless in the rafters –

it sounds like the floorboards –

with eyes of sundials that measure

daylight and slither it

into my tea.

iii

The feathered thing wakes from its post in the rafters,

and glibs slick down the walls to my feet.

It lurches on beside me in silent laughter as I make my rounds,
walk the halls, check the locks, off with the switches, shut the blinds,
Me and the lights, we are heaving together in time – like a family.

We pass doors, me, the lights, the feathered thing,
who, when too unruly, I soothe too sweetly, murmuring:
“You are my great albatross, my great winged sea-beast,”
and it calms, climbs the walls, and passes for shadow
weaving in and out of doorways, a visitor, as it would if it were.

Out of reverence, we keep facing only forward, the three of us
regarding one another in profile, for the comfort of our tenants.
For some, my feathered thing passes uninterrupted,
the inhabitant electing to stay shut, anonymous,
and nothing bleeds out but a slant of light from the floor-gap.

We let these be – they aren't ready yet.

I

What Walks on Four Legs Cannot Run.

Morals from the shelf by the twin-sized bed

(mayoclinic.org says mental illnesses are, in general, thought
to be caused by a variety of factors including genetics.)

I:

white elephant double-helix in ivory

I've traced my thumb through
the index of my spine,
fashioned of ivory the shelves
and the ladders with steps like tomes.

My hands, starved dry, drink stories from the bones
through bundles of paperwhite -
fingers brush covers but never the seams
leafing through pages and hoarding the morals.

You place the words. I'll discern the meaning.
Urgent, flurried and like bird bone
between what you say and my ardent hurrying
certain I will find the real feeling.

II:

Clytemnestra Complex

If a maiden lies beneath the tree,
its roots may churn
her to soil.

Rooted, waiting, weaving seeds

of earth, needle-eyed
again, again through a space
left open for conquest.

Its limbs extend up,

frozen timber in a shock-stun,
but caution is her virtue -
she bobs lightly through the tides
and swells of growth-disrupted ground.

She swirls in rhythm with its leaves like furies
given shape in the spaces between.

IV:

You, casting shadows, in interpretation

~~~~~

~~~~~

My heartbeat subordinates

under the weight,

the echo of my step,

undiscerning between the heeding drip of the

damp

call response,

walls volley,

I walk and return

in the same footfall.

Both move forward and meet

myself, ricocheted.

It is great

to be a thing,

my lungs crackling

while the weight of a cackle

bubbling out of their lining

haunts the damp.

I walk and the walls prowl alongside

a friend calls through me

landing darkened

on the wall.

Her impact an etch, reading:

“this is the praxis of things like us.”

In between the letters

hide the smaller memories.

~~~~~



## The family dog, confused.

The back garden, parched in summer heat,  
emits a sound like a smoker's cough  
while I watch for our rook through the shrubs.  
You had told me it bit you. I've taken up guard.

last night I dreamed my hedge maze dreams  
with dark vine-giants scraping the edges,  
dragging their branches across the paint on my ceiling.  
Their shaking of the leaves reminds me of the heat-parch.

And the whisper of the wind tolls  
A preening that I could, could, mistake for the rook,  
but at least she's heedful; I've scared her off.

My preoccupation shifts to the porch fence,  
and my questions surrounding the inscrutable gate lock  
bring out well-read worms from the slats,  
but they sizzle crisp, egg-like, under the sun's scrutiny  
before I could imagine if they'd answer.

The younger, protected (at the least, assume an unsure and artless tone)

I

Out back, in the garden, in the dry heat,  
there's something stalking in the leaves.  
Sometimes, at breakfast, I call out, un-echoed, for tea  
or a simple spread of jam bread and butter.  
Even strangers, I say, need nourishing.

Sometimes, at lunchtime, she rustles her wings  
and I can hear her, softly, picking at the kale greens.  
My plea for a name rings a deafening nothing  
but that's ok, I say, I will call you my groundskeep.

I once saw a beak – mistaken as ripe in my fruiting tree –  
and caressed it with the intimacy  
I save for insentient things.  
She, startled, bit down through the leaves.

II

Take my hand and guide it through the cupboards.  
put me on your shoulders and show me what forms  
I'm not yet tall enough, old enough, to see.

You stand above me, flour-brushed,  
but I only reach up to the edges of the countertop.

You are folding layers and layers and layers.

I'm blind but for your guiding touch,  
but the eyes of my young mind know just trust -  
you'll know what I need,  
you must know what it means to grow.

I can only trust that you know.

I may decide to shut my eyes -  
all the same, all the same.

I don't ask what forms lie in the dusk of the cupboard  
that must be too large for my grasp  
you have felt my grasp in the palm of your own -  
it must be only for my good.

In my palms, I gather they might slip break shatter,  
but I am not to question the qualms of mother.

### III

Sister, that lives sitting in quick-growing laurel,  
never misses the littlest thing.

At the top of the hedge-maze,  
The wind rocks the walls like ships cast to sea.

She, as if coated in stone and grotesque,  
looks down from her perch - a gargoyle - preening.  
there is motion at the bottom she strains to see.

It is twilight at the top of the hedge-maze.  
the dark, in motes, hasn't settled in the corridors -  
from the ledge there is something up  
coming up from the bottom.

## The Feathered Thing

### I

Don't be afraid. I only molt the way  
you pluck a lash to wish.  
Crooning gilded kisses, sweeping you up  
into a down-layered bed kept by  
the fruits of my shedding,  
a soft place to land makes for easy forgetting -  
and when you didn't see what bit, it was me  
in the brush  
adopting the shape  
of your cradle-love.

But, hush, I've seen through more than you.

I held the hands that built this place,  
and when the lights go dim  
I will hold yours too.

### II

I, too, donned a new coat with the window hinge,  
when you saw to it that the house needed paint.  
We've kept our shape in the intermission of your want.

It is, isn't it, easier not to think?

Pretty words only make pretty things.

I swoop from the rafters and drink your disbelief.

### III

If you traced your finger along the plaster beige edges,

rough snow molting down to the floorboards,

you might hear a scuttle-mimic of the sandpaper made between

your skin

and the home's skin.

I'll teach you

to bleed from

the water-stain leak.

### IV

I watched her bring your hands to the sink

and wash them clean of flour -

I swear I've never seen you so glistening,

glinting, in my eye, your fleeting company in the beams.

## **II**

**Understanding the previous section's title as riddle, and moving on to more palpable things.**

The architect, voyeuring for a moment through the window. What on earth have  
they done with the house?

I performed alchemy after our phone call.

I set straight to the work desk and spliced into life  
what fragments i remembered in my rage.

Maybe I'll write a cage-bird, an ironic twist,  
but you are too strong to be a cage-bird.

I cannot fathom capturing you.

I believe, too, you wouldn't let me.

In the move, in August, you shed your things like you were dying,  
how noble to say to my daughter that my mother  
lived a life of things and then lived another with none.  
In her hunger to remember, I'll peel pieces of myself,  
and shape for her the form of my hunger  
that wears your face.

I will give you feathers - no, not like my Thing - maybe just wings  
in giving you molting I whisper, "grow back."

Un-shed un-travel come back come back.



## Dues

I came from the wall-belly like some bed-wetting foal-legged fool.

Wet and fresh from the water stain bulge, a tumbling flurry  
my body bogged down in the amniotic mire I made of the hardwood,  
ripe-smelling like the grin-scar on your stomach.

I left the plaster in flaps, grinning like your stomach.

Grinning in mirror image with  
The shiny slick that ruined your floors

In my mind you were there, brandishing a letter blade  
in the face of this water-stain infringing  
on the creamy pristine of the hallway ceiling.

Your glint-giving promise faced the wet pregnant, craving,  
yearning the way my fingertips yearned  
when you showed me your grin-scar,  
the way I yearned to traverse the ridged skin of my heritage  
that traced its way between hip bones like dimples,  
and it smiled at me like you smiled at me,  
both saying:

“Look - you are mine.”

And you press-punctured me into the light.

Daddy's favorite / he used to call me precious / the youngest, again, in tantrum

I

I woke this morning with my body in lockstep.

Her orphaned echo – she has known bloodshed –

roamed homeless in my skull: the head of an army commanding

*MARCH,*

*MARCH! YOU WILL KNOW BLOODSHED.*

Too predisposed playing dead for the army nurse,

I'd neglected to answer your text.

II

I'm wanting these words with urgency but

I pull them from me with catgut cord

born of my body and it strains resistant in being taken

from its mother. How was I supposed to know that you stayed home

- december, last year - that you took time off to be alone

in the snow storm, 3-feet strong, to have a fire and walk

on the cold-blinded beach.

You would know how to be alone. You put your soap in a shell

scavenged from the shore on one of your morning

visits to sit on the sea wall, coffee in hand, indifferent

to the “no shell-harvesting” law.

### III

In the summer, I visited wearing a mask of two years’ distance

The first morning, I came downstairs. I was

ancient and mud-covered. I flaked dried time for you,

as per our agreement (to leave prints in the refuse)

but instead you had made me breakfast.

The giddy goes, as it is wont to do,

and I am squirming, an un-dirtied worm, in this wet yearn of a place.

### IV

My grandfather was the seventh of seven sons

born on the 7th of the seventh month.

When I was born to you, you said:

“Here –

here is a beast.”

You created me beautiful.

On the 7th you told me he’d disappeared,

and in my young mind I thought him woods-bound.

My tongue caught brambles, stuttered wild with the image.

The shivering earth fancied me gooseflesh and I thought:

“Here –

here is a beast.”

In his wake, he left a knack for disappearing.

When I was five, you gesture, 5, you lost *me* for a morning.

You had found him at the crosswalk down the street.

I did not understand the reasons behind the words

“psychotic break,”

but neither, I think, did you.

I felt your frenzy coursing through the halls

that you paced and yelled – I saw you through the window.

But all the while you searched,

I hid beneath the dining room table

thinking myself a beast.

## Learning and Relearning

In my blueprint, worn rounded warm-toned and flaked on the edges, I take notes from the way the woman at the table adjacent lifts all but her pointer and thumb drinking from a styrofoam cup. The rush of my unfurling, later in the tinker-shop, unearths plumes nestled in the creases of my skin and folds molded from the shape of a pocket I'd stored it in. Glints grace the wall from my scalpel.

When I imagine how I, versus you, might react to a proposition of fraudulence, I believe my own use-born smooth might pave the way for softer acceptance. That is to say, I'm not sure where I'd land in the moral quandary, if I enjoyed the way the villain lifted her fingers. Yes, the fingers. I slide metal between flesh, leaving room for improvement, but improved enough for now.

The shelves in the workshop room, bulb-lit and glowing, bear cloudy jars full of more of my bodies, a nose in one, an eye, something somewhere between a tuberous root and a foot lays claim to another. For the aid of formaldehyde I flake inside them more slowly, I think, than I do on the blueprint.

I'm closer to it than I've ever been.

## Tantruming –

### Evening

I've done my shitwork and have moved to the letters,  
invitations I will send in silver-fettered words  
glistening in arcs from the page to the eyes.

I'll adorn the placemats with role-embossed placards,  
it can only be tasteful – I know what I am –

“Predator”

on one, or, perhaps, more simply

“The Pied Piper, That Marks Children For Prey”

or

“Beast-Charmer”

on another, with a fit for a flute,  
different *of course*, in form from the piper.

For the last final honor I still need time  
before guests arrive for their welcomed visit –  
what character might I write that rings

“Complicit”

?

In any absence, in pause, I feared I would dwindle.

but I spooled myself on the fated spindle  
and wove into the shape of scissors.

I'm thinking of complaining at dinner.  
Of filling plates with mouthfuls of what I have to say,  
make my guests beg for water in light of my dry wit.  
I have waited too long to be told that I must sit.

In this fanciful state, even fantasy,  
how dare you dare to call me craven.  
There's not room anymore. It's no longer yours.  
Lock the doors and serve the plates.  
I coat this like sound coats a wine glass.

told v. heard

Before I may come, as you say, “to terms with it,”

I think I’ll engage in courtship –

approach it, a jezebel,

at some ridiculous fool’s ball.

“Look at them,” I’ll say,

“spinning like tops,”

masquerading away

in their sybaritic lockstep.

In my words, I venture

a whisper of a brushstroke

painting fallacy from my fingertips

onto its silk sleeve.

My volto-faced confidant

amid arlecchino jesters

might deign a slight quiver

at my bare-faced brazen,

but fret not, I fancy

it in the confines of an affair



that I spin from lips to webs to tops  
to the embellishments of desire.

I'll yet move its marble skin,  
but I could not dare to capture more  
than this frozen clinging to my revelries.

The architect, having left the window, is unmoored.

I

Cinder-fingered, wavering in a wistful runoff  
of the stoplight's washing across the pavement: a blood sea.  
A faraway someone's swung gate's cacophony, like pigs to a trough,  
needles through my ears. I cross the street.

I nestle, some spittle, in the sparkling burnish of the concrete,  
eavesdropping on the gate and wind in cahoots, conversing.  
The street-sweep's long finished; their careful buff must have missed me –  
the hemorrhage of my stalking casting a pall over an earth-hearse.

The branches overhead have swallowed the stars in their wet leaves –  
those celestial-bodies-turned-embellishment to bone,  
reduced to gossiping whispers in their trapped penury  
on sinews, a body, pointing past me towards home.

II

Even now, from the outside of all that I've built  
the gaps in a tree's silhouette on the skyline  
haunts me with the visage of your wandering eye

III

But despite this poltergeist that squanders and hawks blood,  
my best quality has been in forgetting.

I'm upside down with my feet against the surface-break  
gazing up at the black flits of sand-ridges formed from the sky waves  
falling in and out and farther away.

These great murmurations –  
these threat-moved flocks  
of beaten-steel featherweight  
weaving snags in the fabric of the gloaming.  
Shades upon shades in synchronous escape,  
becoming distance-misty, or only thinning?

They move in time like a family -  
I do not know if I am the falcon or a starling.

Regardless, I'll volley with the fluttering:  
my heart their nest and chest the burnished evening bay.

**Discovering Oneself, Unexpectedly, to be Like a Hermit Crab**

## high dry and hightailing

on the way back from where  
you've made your home  
the plane thrum raced  
down smogged alleyways and corners and clashed  
like thunder in the empty space where i could not bear  
to place the thought that i am away  
from where you made your home.

i wear the betrayal on my skin like the slight  
you etched into secret pages i was not supposed to see  
scratching your feelings for her in my sight  
feeling like a bumbling one-eyed beast that knew you as Nobody  
the corners of my mouth grape-stained with your comfort  
and stumbling drunk on confessions that "you meant it then"

but what you mean now is a stake aflame through this,  
your single-sighted devotee -  
and i love you still, my Nobody.

it looks an awful lot like useful timber once the walls have come down

I caught you in the dark with dirt in your nails.

I hadn't done well enough in comfort and endings.

You are patient for the return of your lover

that's never known others, who frets

in the fetters of too unscrutinized a love.

My dear my heart breaks to think

of your tolerating my accolades

and compulsion toward thanks.

it was all true, had you only held.

I hope you know we stand here at a wake.

The skylight filters like ribs of a beast

and we all cluster in the room

on the spacious cusp of an exhale,

crowded in the periphery between.

i am tired of homemaking

you, beast, took me to your home

and behind clench of your jaw that held my body

I mistook it for my own.

the bones of your other pierced the soles of my feet

when you opened your awful maw and dropped me.

she'd been secret save for the lifeblood

that her serration drank.

when I saw it at the corners of your mouth upon your tasting me

I mistook the blood for vulnerability

and I did not look down.

but we level the soil and pour the concrete

I gather the fragments and knot and harden and  
make something pure.

I was sure.

Speak and your words - they're still sweet -  
will paperweight the edges  
of a blueprint I'd stuck crumpled  
under a conviction of dispensability.

But I care for this home, returning again  
to waterproof the punctures your teeth left in my skin.