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# Playing House

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ROBERT COOVER

*Playing House*

Once there was a house, whispers someone in the dark (we are learning about another house, our own house, the one in which we live), and it had windows everywhere and walls as thin as skin and it was full of light.

Even at night?

There were no nights.

Our walls are thick and windowless, but alterations can be made. Even now someone can be heard chipping away with a hammer and a chisel.

Inside that house, the outside came and went by whim or will, not as a guest, but as though it too resided there, continues the whispering storyteller, until the inside felt more like a visitor inside the house that was itself.

Inside our house, the outside remains no more than an architectural project, in the planning stages still. We imagine it in terms of the unseen walls and floor and ceiling. The absence of.

To possess the light is to be possessed, the storyteller whispers, and in the dark we can see that this is so, and a great longing overtakes us. To be possessed!

Unseen, the structures of our house—the rooms and so on—but known to us; we get about by touch, our toys our tools, and dream, a game we play, of building light. Though out of what, we're not yet sure. The materials used so far—steel, stones, bones, water—have yielded only obstacles to light, suggesting that, as that fable we've all been told would have it, light cannot be built or even found, but someone must bring it in.

Another game we play is naming things. We call the hammer hammer, chisel chisel. Claw hammer, we say. Cold chisel. Some say that naming things creates them, but we've named the light and no light comes. We call the new hole under construction a window, though as we understand windows (not well), it is really more a window-yet-to-be. Or more likely only another door. We take turns peering into it and describing what we see there, or rather, what we

wish to see. I see a tree! The moon! A lake, a bay! Another house! Perhaps this wishing is the light and all there is of it.

With the outside in, whispers the storyteller, the inside withdrew further in, and that is how the dark began. Oh well. Another happy ending. Presumably. We've heard this nursery tale before. We leave it and its teller and squeeze through one of the old holes we've made that we call doors.

These doors, most of which began as windows, lead to other rooms, the rooms we play in, or else to a corridor. We think there may be fifteen or twenty of these rooms and corridors, but now and then a new one's found, brought about perhaps by the making of our doors, or else an old one, subtly altered, feels like new, our imagined floor plans thus less like storied gameboards than the pieces moved about on them. So, several, maybe, better said. Several in a cluster (new doors sometimes find old rooms thought several rooms away: if these rooms are like beads on a string, as some believe, then that string is knotted).

These several rooms in which we play all have walls (from one to many, curved or straight), floors (just one each, though sometimes stepped), and ceilings (entire or not) some ways above us, known to us only by the knocks we hear when we throw things up at them, the corridors these elements as well, though sometimes in the corridors the ceilings can be touched. Tunnels might be another word.

Once there was a house, goes another story we have heard, called the House of Anxiety, in which the corridors all led onto other corridors, provoking ceaseless motion without respite, the rooms all trapped somehow between, if in fact there were any. The story says there were, but how can a story know? We suppose these rooms exist in a story where they do not exist simply because a house *qua* house is unimaginable without them. We call it the Fallacy of the A Priori Judgment. Still naming things.

In our story, as we might call our lives, rooms do exist, even if as yet unseen; we play in them. We make things in them with our tools, more doors, for example, and play, among others, what-am-I-holding and where-are-we-now games. We tell stories, kiss, stack stones, and read the walls with our fingertips. In the legendary House of Anxiety, there was nothing to read; the corridors, though well-lit, were all smooth-walled and empty and identical to one another, their precise dimensions chilling to the touch and to the

naked but illumined eye, the dubious moral of the story being: Light is not what's missing.

In our lightless rooms and corridors, some walls and floors are smooth, but most are rough, uneven, woolly even; we like the rough ones best of course. They're more our own somehow, and we know them when we've returned to them; the smooth ones could be anywhere and sometimes we get lost in them. Here's one! someone in such a room will shout, meaning a door, and everyone will then scramble toward the voice and out through the opening there, afraid to be left behind in a space where nothing can be known.

The objects in these rooms are few and mostly things we've left behind ourselves when playing here before, some made by us, some found: an awl, a teaspoon, a cuplike thing, a piece of pipe, small heaps of stony rubble from the doors we've built or come upon, but in one such room, newly discovered, a large one-walled one (it is circular, or nearly so), we find a cupboard standing in the middle, one unattached to any wall. Have we made this? No, someone must have come, we think. And if, as fabled, they've brought the light, then the light they've brought may be inside!

The prospect of light in a house so long unlit fills some of us with exhilaration—at last!—but others with deep disquiet, a fear of pain and disenchantment: Leave it alone! Don't touch! Here's one! (A door, they mean.) Come on, let's go! But few follow. There are always those who plead for caution and those who blindly rush ahead; we rush ahead, blindly by necessity.

The tall boxlike cupboard, standing free, has four sides at least—a fifth and sixth if roofed and floored—and one of them, we all suppose, must have or be a door, though none have handles; barrel hinges felt down one side's edge soon give the game away, and tools are sought to pry it open. A slender tack lifter's tried so as to limit damage to the frame and door, and then a butter knife, but both are quickly bent and, our patience soon evaporating, a wrecking bar is used.

No light flows out when the door at last pops open with a splintering crack and we all fall back. We're left still in the dark. Sighs of relief are heard, but also of exasperation. But if not light, enlightenment (we know now what next to do), for what's found inside's a ladder, aluminum by weight and feel, extendable, with rope and

pulley to make it easier to raise and lower, far better than the toy ones we have made.

The holes we've constructed as windows-yet-to-be as yet lack sashes or casements and panes of glass before they can be proper windows. Such finished windows come in many shapes and sizes, imbedded flat within the walls or bowed or set on piers or bressumers as bays and oriels, some louvered or fitted with mechanisms to pivot, tilt, and turn; we have imagined all their kind, and have fashioned prototypes for most. But, as someone cries out now (the ladder did it): Of course! There are sky lights too!

As architectural elegance is frequently the consequence of conceptual economy, so wisdom springs most often from the simplest thought. We have supposed light to be something that exists independently of us and have sought it laterally, but where light might be found in such a maze no one can say; that it's overhead somewhere, if the universe is not without it, seems beyond all doubt.

And so we set about with fresh enthusiasm to build a sky light, astonished only that we never thought of this before. The room we're in is cavernous, but the ceiling's within easy reach of the ladder when extended, so we decide to start in here, remembering to sandbag the ladder's foot for safety's sake and to use wall hooks and ring bolts at the top. Even so, tampering with a stony ceiling, especially in the dark, is dangerous; soon bits and pieces are raining down, there are casualties, but they're removed and eagerly we press on, break through at last.

What we discover, however, is not light, but yet another room, a kind of loft, we think, perhaps too hopefully, for we might as easily be deeply cellared beneath a structure of countless subterranean levels. One by one, we crawl up into it to see what it contains, and what by touch we find is a large stack of lumber in different shapes, wood for making things, hammers, nails, sheets of glass.

We are at first somewhat bemused, but then someone whispers: I remember now. Once there was a house. . . . We gather round to listen. These family stories have eased us past perplexities before. Once there was a house, the storyteller continues, which was struck by a hurricane and turned inside out, the outside enclosed within it, its own dimensions infinite and unknowable at what was once the core, now more like edge. Those within moved out, which of course was further in, and there they built a new house looking out

in all directions upon the inverted old. Over time, they enlarged the house and as they added rooms, the old house gradually backed away and faded out of sight. Of course it was not forgotten and there were those who left the new house and set off in quest of the old, but they were never seen again, so the continuing existence of the old house was never proven and ceased in time to be an article of faith, and became instead a story, one idling in the depths of memory, unneeded until now.

Inspired by this legend of the house turned inside out, we lower a portion of the wood supplies to the room below—that is to say, we drop them: it's a hardhat area now—and commence to construct a new house, a kind of playhouse, as it were (we call it that as what at least we'll have if all else fails), within the house in which we live, but a proper house with, above all, proper windows, through which the light we seek might find us.

To take advantage of work completed, as good builders do, we decide to start with the cupboard and build the new house around it. But what kind of house? someone asks, thereby unleashing the chaos of architecture, said by some to be the cause of the invention of madness. Disputes arise, some quite violent (stones are thrown in the dark, tools are used improperly, the chamber echoes with angry black shouts), as to the intended house's size and shape, disputes of a nature at once functional—the treatment of space, scale, scope, surface and depth, elasticity, connection and obstacles to connection—and ontological: to wit, what is a “house,” or what might, here within this other house, if it is a house, yet be one? In short: the mind-body problem as expressed in a war of invisible floor plans.

Insofar as the ontological questions are largely, because of the darkness, epistemic in nature, and in any event understood by almost no one outside of architecture's more esoteric cults (god-damn them all), it is finally resolved that they are, at least until there is light, irresolvable, a resolution that does nothing, however, to temper the enflamed passions of the disputants, who have momentarily forgotten, alas, that the goal is not the house but a window. Such is the maddening power of schism. There is the clash of timber swung blindly, a *whutter-whutter* through the black air of T-squares flung like boomerangs, the bellowing of ancient dogma.

In such a melee, the search for common ground is doomed. Though we all acknowledge that a house is largely made of air, for example, we can none agree on how much air is to be used and in what proportion it is to be boxed and parceled, the more impatient among us wanting, quickly, one simple room alone (let's get the walls up and those windows in and see what happens!), the more ambitious wishing to construct a proper multileveled house with play den, bathroom, domes and bartizans, solarium, nursery, and perhaps a central well as a neutral linking space through which to get from room to room, arguing that the structure must be of sufficient quality and intricacy to attract the light to it, else all our efforts will be in vain. Even the question of ornament is no small matter, they cry out (the din is terrible), for if there is light we will see and be seen and we must want what is seen to be seemly!

A cessation of hostilities is suddenly achieved when it is recognized that all the competing designs include what might be called a hallway or vestibule and, though those demanding a single room are loathe to call it that instead of a house, we all agree to start there, and let all thereafter each go our own way.

But the peace is short-lived, for calling it a room instead of a house does not free us from sectarian conflict, and soon there is the danger that what we make, if we ever do, will become more martyrrium than vestibule. There are those, for example, who insist on a simple cube, crisp and clean and precisely figured according to the sophisticated laws of harmonic proportions, while others, referring bitterly to these "suffocating laws of barbaric contortions," cry out for more exuberant and curvaceous forms akin to rumors about nature: a flower, a cocoon, a termite hill, a womb, a bird in flight, a peapod. As no one has actually seen these things and despite threats of sabotage from the self-styled naturizers, a simpler boxlike or diamond shape with the ladder cupboard in one corner is finally decided upon and work begins.

The decision to corner the cupboard, though controversial (*corners* are controversial!), is a practical one, making maximum use of the structure already in place, for simply by extending the two incorporated walls (the advocates of a design based on a bird in flight are momentarily pleased), nearly half the new construction will already be completed, lacking only two walls and a ceiling—or a roof as some, still screaming, prefer to call it.

First, however, trenches must be dug for the foundations, so work details are sent out to round up picks and shovels, quarry stones, make mud, while the rest of us gather up the scattered missiles and weapons, now known once more as tools and building materials, restack the timber, count and measure it (in the dark the shouted estimates vary wildly), and seek to pacify the last of the belligerents with singing, kissing and guess-what games, the telling of old family stories.

Once there was a house—! someone cries out; then, still breathing heavily, that person firmly exclaims: Once there was a house . . . , and finally manages to whisper (and can be heard, as the clamorous dissent dies away at last as though drifting off into other rooms): . . . Once there was a house . . . built of water . . .

Have we heard this story before? If so, we have forgotten it. But the very thought of water has a soothing effect on us all. Tell us, someone says, and the room is awash in a ripple of concurring murmurs. Tell us about the house made of water!

Its pure clean form, the storyteller continues, was deemed the most beautiful in the world, praised for its elegance, clarity, and cool restraint, yet at the same time—and this was part of its universal appeal—it was utterly amorphous and so infinitely mutable, its shape changing from hour to hour as the mood or climate changed, or for no reason at all other than to exhibit its own inimitable and multiform beauty. Nearly perfect though it was, however, embracing all other forms as it did, it could not be lived in, for it lacked one utterly necessary element, which, if incorporated into it, would have caused it to cease to exist.

The storyteller pauses, leaving the riddle of the house made of water floating heavily in the hushed air like a balloon filled with the very material with which it had been built.

Ah! someone gasps. A door! It could not have a door!

And we all take it up: A door! Yes, a door!

And so (our family stories never fail to instruct) a door is imagined for our new house within a house, and not merely a disappointed window like those before, but, hung on powerful hinges, a proper door, framed by an architrave and broken up into rails, stiles, and panels, with a brass knob and lock on the shutting stile and a knocker on the muntin. A door, in short, that stands as hinged postulate of an inside and an outside, opposing states than can abut



but never intersect or partake of one another, a thought that excites us and spurs us on.

The trenches are forsaken, the walls, foundations, floor plans, house, our fevered imaginations focused entirely now upon the making of the door. The work crews return to lend a hand, skilled craftsmen among them, caught up in the infectious enthusiasm—it all makes sense! It's as if a mathematical problem has been resolved by factoring it to its irreducible components: door → light.

A six-panel rail-and-stile door with mortise-and-tenon joints is the carpenters' choice. With the hint of arches in the upper rail, softly sanded to feel like the inside of a knee, they add, carpenters being of an infamously sensuous nature. That's so old-fashioned, proponents of the new school of architecture object, eager to press on without delay. This is a matter of function, not beauty! A simple batten door will do! Slap it together, let's get on with it! Light, respond the carpenters, is also old-fashioned. Also beautiful. And what, if our stories be true, could be more sensuous? We must do it honor, draw like to like. Bah! Elitism! scream their adversaries, suffering from a hallucination of efficiency and functionality, and again there is the clatter of thrown tools. Schools of architects can be compared to schools of fish only if the fish are species that eat each other.

We need carpentry more than doctrine so the carpenters win the day. The new-schoolers are relegated to tool-gathering tasks (they may be right but they cannot be tolerated) and the percussive melodies of carpentry soon fill the air, soothing all spirits, the darkness suffused with the invigorating fragrance of fresh-cut wood. Aromatic hours pass, perhaps days (days! will we soon experience what till now have been but the stuff of legend? or will light just come and stay like the darkness has?), filled with heady imaginings. And with trepidation: the fear of failure; the fear of success (what is light? does it hurt? will our kissing in it be the same?). We stand, as the door comes together, on the edge of the unknown. Perhaps the unknowable.

Once there was a house, someone says, and even the carpenters pause in their labors. A house whose doors and windows moved about as if in search of a perfect arrangement, forever denied them. This restlessness disturbed those living in the house, dizzying them with endlessly shifting outlooks, and they sought some way to fix

the doors and windows in their places. But nothing worked, not even steel restraining bars. They moved a few of the walls, hoping to confuse the doors and windows, only to augment their anxiety and accelerate the shuffle. To spare themselves the giddy flutter of changing views, they blackened all the windows, whereupon, in their blindness, the windows collided with one another and with the slower-moving doors, sending explosive shatterings of black glass flying and knocking doors off their hinges. Finally, those living in the house decided simply to let what must happen happen in the hope that one day the doors and windows would discover their longed-for arrangement and settle down. So far as we know (we have murmured our understanding), this never happened, but in time the occupants grew accustomed to the ceaseless shuffle and came to believe that their ever-changing perspectives defined them, and indeed they did.

We return to the building of the door, prepared for come what may. Our anxieties are not lessened, but they are contained, in the way that a verb is contained in a sentence. The door itself is nearly finished, the carpenters applying their final rubdown. We all take turns stroking the door for luck and courage, and it's true, the subtle arches in the upper rail are soft as the softest parts of us. A door, however, cannot stand alone. Lacking a wall's rough opening in which to install it, a frame of header, trimmers, and threshold is built and a platform is constructed to set it on, the raw planks of the mock rough framing hidden behind a finished casing, complete with jambs and architrave. This solves another problem: by building the frame around the door, any geometric irregularities (our levels are made of strings and weights) are conveniently echoed in the frame. When it is finished, the door is hinged and hung and the latch installed.

So the moment has arrived. We line up behind the door. We don't know if the light will come blindingly, all at once, or only individually to each of us as we step through. The carpenters are given pride of place, though cowardice by others may have pushed them there. Our breaths are held. The latch is turned.

The well-oiled hinges are soundless but a carpenter's steps can be heard on the wooden platform as he steps through. Nothing happens, at least nothing the rest of us can see. But no one's breathing yet. The door clicks closed. The carpenter is silent, perhaps struck

dumb with awe, more likely stilled by disappointment. The rest of us take turns, opening the door, stepping through, closing the door. There's a certain thrill in doing this, but there is no light. We take a count, making certain all step through at least once. Even the skeptics take their turn, obliged but also, however faintly, hopeful. But: no light. A failure. One elaborate and abject. We have suffered others but none so felt as this.

It is a moment ripe for another family story. Perhaps about illusions puffed up into belief, or about shortcuts taken and rued—the story of the hasty house doctor and the pantry by-pass, for example. We wait in a silence heavy with despond. And wait in vain. Well, no need, the story awaited is the one we've just constructed, building a door to welcome light without a house to hold it. Those to come will be regaled by our brainless folly.

Back to the original floor plans, the site preparations, the trenches and foundations. We are determined now to press on with the task in all its detail, though our appetite for nuance has withered. We are one with the functionalists: get it up, get on with it. No further self-deceptions, frivolous aesthetics. Angled by the cupboard, the four walls are paced off, marked with pegs and cord, and we commence to dig the trenches for the foundations with the shovels, picks, and spades collected by our crews. If one pauses to remark on the noble beauty of the shovel, say, or the erotic symbolism of cubes, the warp and weft of wall and floor, no audience is found, and those who trip over the staked cords in the dark get only barked scoldings for their clattering pratfalls, our sense of humor gone with our appetite for frill. And perhaps, somewhat gone as well, our hopes: we are preparing, even as we strive, to accept the unending dark. How long has the cupboard been there? Perhaps it has always been there, our discovery of it far too late. Perhaps we put it there ourselves in another time and forgot about it.

The trenches, excavated, are filled with stones quarried from the walls, framing posts are sunk at the three new corners, and those who have to go, go now, sealing the stone-filled trenches with the mud they make. The corner posts are long enough to reach the stony ceiling overhead, so we decide to build the walls that high, avoiding rafters, beams, a wooden ceiling (with only one ladder, scaffolding would have been necessary), and incorporating the new-found loft into our house, as most of us still choose to call it, and

the carpenters, humbled now into a gloomy silence, dutifully take over the construction of the frame. Mud sills are set in place, floor joists, subfloor and sole plate, top plate more like a capping frame, a plank floor's laid.

Decisions must be made about doors and windows before the studs are set in place, and once again disputes break out, more surly now than exhortative. Doors will be needed for internal walls, windows for external walls only, and the issue is, as before, one room or many? If one, no internal walls exist. Our impatience with décor is matched by our impatience with sectarian discord. The disputants are drowned out by a loud voice vote, electing a wall opposite the cupboard for the front door, already built, the two side walls for door frames, either internal or external, the narrow back wall for a patio door (a passing whim), with a fan-light overhead. Large windows are chosen to flank the front door, the twinned hopes we skeptically cling to, but simple frames are put in place where once were imagined bays, a decision distressing to some, uninspiring to all. The game that we began with has decayed to labor, obligatory and dull.

Once there was a house, someone says suddenly, startling us. Sighs of relief are heard. Tools are downed. A communal smile can be imagined. Once, the storyteller continues, voice ringing in the fallen hush, there was a house with copulating parts, a design feature installed by the architects seeking a more fluid, evolutionary architecture and organic paths to innovation. The imagined smile widens. Out of it almost immediately came the inverted dormer window, the floating family-room module, undulating rooflines, and the lickable split-level candy-coated x-frame. New economies were realized with the intimate commingling of the plumbing and electrical systems, flowing ecstatically into one another, though a premature attempt at a ménage-a-trois with the gas boiler temporarily melted the circuit breakers. These bursts of passion were difficult to restrain. New designs were born, but to increasingly short lives, and others rushed hotly past utility into self-demolishing excess, bringing down bearing walls and chimney stacks and pulverizing the masonry. And though a limited feature originally intended for the basic structures only, the erotic fever soon spread to peripherals, décor, and outbuildings, where copulations were less conventional and also, or consequently, less generative, lascivious delight

displacing the productive function. The raucous interplay of the cornices, drain tiles, hipped gables, finials, festoons, flashing, and gingerbread vergeboards was far short of exemplary, architecturally speaking, though it did introduce baroque elements into the waste pipes and boot room and turned stairwells into exotic dancers. In spite of the restrictive building codes, watching the copulations soon became a popular entertainment, audiences drawn more to the perversities of the superficie, needless to say, than to the stodgier reproductive behavior of the structural elements. All this passionate agitation could be hazardous: there was a ceaseless seminal spray of shingles, tiles, and shattered glass, and fatalities occurred the night the ceilings tragically embraced the floors. Prophylactic I-beam kingposts—now known as nay-beams—were inserted, though that only seemed to provoke splintering back porch and crawl space eruptions and lethal high-speed appliance riots. But in spite of the dangers, the crowds kept coming. The house was no longer even minimally habitable—it was as though what was erotic was also, at the root, deeply dysfunctional—yet everyone wished to inhabit it, making of this architectural experiment both a radical failure and a crashing success.

The story is applauded. It was meaningless, teaching us nothing. Except to laugh at ourselves. Which is to say, it has taught us everything. We all kiss and mate happily with one another and go back to our housebuilding with lighter hearts.

Which now proceeds speedily, the rough framing quickly completed and the sheathing no sooner begun than done: simple wallboards with board-and-batten siding, the historic dialogue between the frame and its infilling reduced to plain declarative sentences, stripped of superfluous modifiers. The side doors, too, are kept simple: hollow-core and flush, the veneer to follow when the light comes, if. The patio door and fanlight are postponed, their framing boarded up, all attention now upon the paired windows at the front. The carpenters suggest shuttering the windows on the inside so that, if there is light (there is no longer a real belief in light, nor even much desire for it, its mythic existence merely a tenet to be acted upon for lack of any other), we have a shield against it if it tries to hurt us. Moreover, shutters would give us something to open as a welcoming gesture, like a friendly handshake or a kiss. The suggestion of the carpenters is accepted without dissent, but

not solely for the reasons they advance. Our headlong rush to complete our house, or at least this room of it, has aroused old fears of light's possible malevolence and, with the erecting of the walls, apprehensions about what might be outside now that an outside exists. (There *is* an outside. We are all now inside.) Building shutters takes time, time we can use to consider what we are doing and brace ourselves. None of us, however, wish all our labor to have been in vain, merely for lack of courage, so, doing what we call singing, we lend the carpenters a hand when we can and our encouragement when we cannot, reassuring one another with our hopeful odes to light.

But when, with appropriate ceremony, the completed shutters are hung and, with caution, opened, the result is as it has always been. The dark remains. Defeat feels final. We have worked so hard. Despair sets in. Where did it come from, we ask, this mad dream of light? We feel betrayed by our own restless natures which want but cannot have. There is no consolation. The game of building light, which has filled and defined our lives, is over. We cannot step into light, but we cannot step back into our old games in the dark either. When, in desperation, old family stories are launched—Once there was a house...!—their tellers are cursed and rudely shushed. Fuck it, someone says. Who wants a game of mating tag? There are no takers. Another proposes opening the door we've made and taking turns running at it full tilt in the dark: those who miss the door and hit the wall lose. Why not? says someone and opens the door.

And light floods in, swirling about our ankles, splashing against the walls, swooping upwards to crash against the ceiling, falling upon us with such force we are thrown to the floor, then exploding silently outward to the remotest corners and beyond, its punishing brilliance ever more searing. We could not see in the dark. We can see even less in this fierce thing called light. One can hear cries but of a strangled whimpering sort as if the light had invaded throats and stifled the chords' vibrations there. All of our orifices feel penetrated by the light, our brains, too, the light without indistinguishable from the light within. We carried the dark within us, too, for that is what the light's displacing, but this is not the same. We were together in the dark as though the dark were a sea we swam in hand in hand. Now we are alone, disconnected from everyone and everything except our own shocked perceptions. In the dark we

could see with our imaginations and our other senses and did not think we did not see, but now all imagination has been stunned by light, all thought and sensation has. Light is everywhere. We cannot shut our eyes against it. Even the insides of our lids are lit. We have a fleeting remembrance of that storied house in which all wishes, catastrophically, came true, and then that too is blotted out.

Then, slowly, the walls emerge, the ones we've made, luminous shapes within the general luminosity, and we begin to see other radiant forms, lumpy and quivering: each other, cringing in terror on the floor. Windows come into view, the open door, the impenetrable sea of light beyond. It is not as if the light is retreating, but as if it is relaxing, trying to, making itself at home, adjusting its density just to be more at ease, while folding us into itself the way that lovers do. Do we feel loved? No, more like netted by a hunter, overpowered, possessed. But we are adjusting, too, shock and fright gradually giving way to awed curiosity, the thrill of seeing. Everything, still soaked in light, is strange, yet oddly familiar. With our first glimpse of forms, it is as though we have always seen them: our house with its shoddy workmanship, our scattered tools, and our bodies, which are both more beautiful and less beautiful than we'd imagined, yet in form no different than we'd supposed.

Gathering courage, we creep toward the open door, peer out into the candescent glow beyond the threshold. Some say that they can see the encircling wall of the room in which we built our house: it is like a far horizon, they say (we already know about horizons), but others say: No, no, that is the horizon! If so, there is nothing on it. The space beyond the door is as barren as our room once was. We step cautiously out into it, out onto the vast white plain, and as we do, things seem to grow from it, bushy things and piles of rocks and what must be trees and even hills, if those are hills, a landscape shaping itself before our eyes—or perhaps our eyes, adjusting, are seeing now what has been there all along, light slowly releasing its humbling grip on us, and as these things appear, it is as if we are not discovering them so much as remembering them, returning to some place we've been before. Another cautionary house tale comes to mind but immediately vanishes just as the dark has vanished, a shadowy whisper from the dead past. No more of that. Already, it is the dark that is becoming unimaginable. We are enraptured by the present moment and where our feet are now (we can see our

feet! they are dancing!) and—no more whispers!—we are shouting, calling out in our exhilaration to the more timid, still hiding in the house, to come out and play.

Our old games, played in the dark, the where-are-we-now, guess-what, and find-the-door games, no longer amuse us. We invent new ones, using the things we find, sticks, stones, holes full of water or else of air, old tools we'd lost, and other things as yet unknown to us by touch alone. The game of naming things becomes the game of filling old names with all the things we see. We fill "sky" with sky and "grass" with grass, if that is what it is, and not moss or weeds or hair. Everything is beautiful. We can't stop looking. Details excite us, colors do, the motions of things, being looked at does: we perform for one another's looking, amazing ourselves with ourselves. Distance fascinates us, now that we can see it, and we play running, throwing, measuring and find-the-horizon games in it. We leave our house far behind, and caution, too, and spread out on the flowering plain, reveling in boundlessness and all its wondrous stuff, and when at last, to catch our breath, we return, the house has grown new wings and towers and more levels, with accoutrements like loggia, balconies and terraces, parapets and onion domes. The carpenters, it seems, have been busy. A new construction is sprouting like a mushroom (we have already considered the word "mushroom" and filled it up) on the side of a rising cube, even as we watch.

Inside, too, there have been changes. Gone is the rough-hewn vestibule with the cupboard in the corner, the little anteroom some grandly called a house, and in its place a glittering rotunda with spiraling staircases and ornate balustrades, tiled walls, high arched doorways, filigreed columns, fountains and statuary (we are immortalizing ourselves!), colored glass pictures in the windows and a painted cupola high above. The carpenters, now the chief among us, reply to our expressions of amazement: It's simple. We are merely the servants of light. That is the secret of construction. There is a chaotic profusion of corridors and rooms leading off the rotunda and its staircases, all kinds of rooms—kitchens and pantries, dining halls, exercise rooms, ballrooms, toilets with white ceramic walls for drawing messages on (drawing!), theaters and art galleries, carpenters' workshops, pools, patios and amusement parlors—indeed the house seems bigger on the inside than out. No bedrooms unless in some distant unseen corner, but who



can sleep with so much to see and do? We run through the rooms, playing our games, and sometimes the rooms play games with us, walling us in and hiding the doors, opening their floors to drop us into other rooms, rotating suddenly to tumble us out of our mating games. Sometimes they divide up into a cluster of tiny rooms, isolating us from one another, then expand outward as if stretching (a new wing is forming!); sometimes they merge with other rooms, a ballroom invading a laundry room, shower stalls appearing in the dining hall. There's no pattern in this; it's just mischief, a kind of playful restlessness in a house still trying to understand itself. As we it, in our eager explorations.

And so a certain time passes, one cannot say how much, the light is constant as the dark was, unmarked by phases or transitions, as we search out the marvels of house and landscape, of sight itself, filling up the names we know with things we see and making new names when the old run out. The question arises: But what of the old house, the one we used to play in in the dark, where is it now? And that room we built, the cupboard and the storehouse loft? The ladder: is it still propped against a wall somewhere? These are names that are empty still of the proper things to fill them. We ask the carpenters, they can't remember. Probably behind some door, they say. And so a new game of find-the-cupboard is launched, just for fun for most, though some want to honor it somehow, create a kind of shrine. We spread out through the house, opening door after door, in search of the place where light found us, or we it, feeling as if caught up in one of our old family stories, which have also got lost somewhere. Our task is complicated by the house's ceaseless multiplication of doors and rearrangements of the old, the house our playful, if playful, adversary in this new game.

Rumors arise as rumors do: that the cupboard is constantly receding ever more deeply into an inaccessible black core into which the entire house will eventually implode; that some have actually stumbled upon the original cupboard and have vanished, sucked back into the dark; that darkness leaks from there as from an unclosed wound, a darkness destined to overtake the house entirely, flooding in as light once did; that our search for the cupboard is inspired by the spirit of the dark and puts at risk the entire community. There are many now who have forgotten darkness or who never knew it, nor believe it ever was, and simply think us mad. There is a movement to outlaw our

cupboard-hunting games as a dangerous breach of the building code. Corridors are walled off and some doors grow locks.

Such rumors, threats, and obstacles only provoke a greater longing to know again the dark, remembered more for its peaceful depth than for its agitated breadth, and when now it's walled away from us, it returns as an illegal substance, purchased in soft little bags the size and feel of scrota. Is it the real thing? Who can say? It's said to be gathered from the cupboard's leakage, and real or not, when squeezed against the eyes or tongue or down the throat, it seems to obliterate for a moment or at least to dim the omnipresent dazzle of the light and isolate us from the loud voracious frenzy of the busy house, wherein maddening regulations have broken out like a malignant rash and the architecture wars have returned and even the carpenters are squabbling among themselves. Once there was a house, someone whispers as a signal, and we lock ourselves away in unused bathrooms to share our bags of dark and listen to old family stories thought forgotten.

Once there was a house, the storyteller continues (we quietly applaud the existence of the storyteller as a gentle dimming settles in and furtive shadows are glimpsed), whose inhabitants lived in total darkness. They got about by touch, their toys their tools, and dreamt, a game they played, of building light. . . .