

5 | Domesticity and Art

It speaks a language of its own, sometimes in such insistent tones that it interrupts the quietness of my own thoughts. At times, my house seems haunted like the castle of fairy tales in which the clock, the teapot, and candelabra whisper secret admonition: “Careful beauty. Here lurks a beast.”

When oft upon my couch I lie, in vacant or in pensive mood... No such luck in my house, not for long. It chatters. It nags me. “Mop those spills,” shrills the kitchen floor. “Observe the smudge where you’ve done aerobics,” the carpet nudges in urgent tongues; “use Resolve.” And the blob on the bannister where Zoe’s peanut butter and jelly hugs hair and dust reproaches me like her jammy baby face – “*bad mother, bad housewife, bad.*” My house admonishes me – as demanding as a mother or toddler – so much so that I flee it for tranquility, taking ill-earned vacations in Japan, Israel, Holland, New Zealand, the ends of the earth.

Though it often radiates serenity. I like to walk around my home – bright and airy. The garden and the woods spill in through the skylights, the picture windows, the French doors. In the evening hours when the light from the Tiffany lamp burns a deeper red on the burgundy carpet, and the quick beams of the hanging brass lamp from India dart sapphire and amber, ruby and emerald, echoing the smoldering stained glass windows; and the house and everything bright and beautiful in it glows like a chapel at dusk – I fairly purr with contentment. This beauty I have assembled, no, created, if making a collage is creation.

Then the house seems a mosaic of the life my husband Roy and

I have created together, our taste and our past, our passion for art, the countries we've lived and traveled in, our friends, their gifts. "Every man is the builder of a temple called his body to the god he worships," Thoreau says. How much easier to make your house a museum of your ideals and passions! For without the sweat and bother of calculating minutes or calories or grams, you can create – within the limits of time, money and imagination – beauty, "that superfluous, that necessary thing."

In this, our ninth year of marriage, I often look around and think – *yours*, before we got married; *mine*, before... (increasingly fewer since we upgrade when time or money show up, striving to fill our home with beauty) and *ours* – the handwoven silk carpet from Kashmir, its vines and flowers a tangle of tendrils; or the glass paperweight from Cambridge, England, with entrapped royal blue crocuses, the color of tropical skies at dusk, yellow flames at their deep hearts. Gifts leap out, dissonances in our taste – the clock from 50,000 year old Kauri wood from New Zealand given by Roy's parents, with a too gleaming lacquer; the ponderous, antique Chinese monarchs carved, with delicate filigree tracery, from walrus tusks, given by my parents. And in this mellow mood, which calls for Grand Marnier or Drambuie, everything in the mosaic speaks of love – difficult, tentative love. Oh forget love, vague, overused word; let's say goodwill. I sit on our Queen Anne couch, its lush upholstery the color of a "vintage that hath been cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth, tasting of Flora and the country green, dance and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth" and bask in the bright color, savoring a brief interlude of harmony.

What most depresses me about the work of houses is that it is not linear, but cyclical. You may never step into the same river twice, but you step, so to say, into the same dishes twice, the same rugs, the same laundry. Nothing can rescue you from them, not virtue, wisdom, time management, or the seven secrets of highly effective people. I like linear things. "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet a success undreamed of in lesser hours," Thoreau declares. Emerson says,

“No matter where you begin, read anything for five hours a day and you will soon be knowing.” (*Five hours a day to read!* I had them once.) You work at writing for two hours a day, or, better still, four (*four hours?*) and begin to forge a style. Bring up a child wisely and lovingly, and you will eventually have an new friend, fascinating to you. But in the eternal circularity of housework, you joust with the same house, seared, bleared, smeared day after day, battle the same smells and smudges. Fiddly little things. Fingerprints on the mirror, a raisin trodden into the hardwood floor. Ignore them at your peril. They peck at your spirit, inanimate petitioners, presenting their mute To Do list each time your eyes fall on them. And time, life, leaks away.

The best way to deal with housework is the way they advised us in school to study for exams. Everyday, throughout the year, a little at a time. Like weeding – little and often. But, as Parkinson’s law drearily predicts, housework expands all the available time . There’s always more – dusting baseboards, washing windows, organizing closets. I think of Coleridge’s lament, “Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve.”

Metaphors in Greek mythology illuminate housework – spectral soldiers that sprang from the slain dragon’s teeth, and each bone of each slain soldier sprouted a fresh army; the heads of the hydra; Sisyphus hefting that stone up the hill only to have it rumble down again; or mint! The nymph Minthe was discovered in the arms of Pluto by his wife Persephone, who crushed the little creature savagely underfoot. Pluto metamorphosed her into mint which, in response to pruning, sends out new growth, that rascally herb, except that I cannot have too much of herbs. I use them for tea and fragrant baths and pestos; in bouquets and winter fires and occasionally – risky this – as medicine.

Sartre said he wanted to know more than anyone else in the world which explained the state of his room. But I feel the dissonance of making beautiful art surrounded by disorder and squalor. In fact, cleaning my house often feels like a creative act, restoring it to quietness, conjuring (like a Michaelangelesque deity) order from the chaos it degenerates into in the periods – the time out of time – when I live in my head, and nothing is more real than the book I am absorbed in reading,

or the essay I am lost in writing.

Our rules are the strings of a kite, explained the Principal of St. Mary's Convent, my strict Catholic boarding school in the Himalayas. Their strictures steady you, help you fly. My house is what those rules were claimed to be: a scaffolding, an exoskeleton. I crumble when I rebel against its carapace, the demands of a balanced life – making time not just for reading and writing, but also for playing and reading with my daughters; for exercise; prayer and Scripture; housework; and for my hour of gardening which is family time, meditation, and therapy rolled into one. For reading and writing can colonize, take over a life. I overwork, I grow exhausted. During my four residencies at idyllic artists' colonies, where all I had to do was read and write, I often felt written out and restless, whereas within the narrow channels of my old life, I was a limpid stream. Having only an hour or two to write in – like knowing you will be executed in the morning – concentrates the mind. The freedom at the colony, those long hours to read and write amid the river of molten silver, the waterfalls, the covered bridges, the green mountains, in fact make me feel disoriented and depressed. I missed the carnival of our fast-paced family life and my high-spirited toddler. Depression, the specter at the feast, stalks days set apart for pleasure – birthdays, Christmas, a week in Paris. Joy comes unsought like the bluebird that surprises us at our feeder. Hunted, it is elusive.

I used to attend a writers' conference a year when I first started writing – waited tables at Bread Loaf, went to Mount Holyoke, Wesleyan, Chenango Valley...wherever I got a scholarship. And I'd go home in a mania of resolution, full of decisions to revise my life, with lists of books to be read, essays to be written, followed by a memoirs, historical or biographical creative nonfiction, who knows what, Catherine Wheels of excitement in my head. And then – life. Distraction. A toddler, housework, marriage, friends, dinner parties, mail, the telephone, tiredness. And the dream of creating exquisite literature can grow more tenuous until it becomes a secret garden to retreat to and dream. If only...some day...when – more hours, more money, more

energy, no child, no spouse, no housework, no house, no life... But no, art must bloom – we must let it – quiet and determined in the cracks of time left us by the vexations of life, like saxifrage, tiny blue flower that splits rocks.

And if an hour is all our brimming lives offer us to write, we write for but an hour. An hour was the most I had in the months I raised my infant daughter, Zoe, as puzzled as that duck rearing a cygnet. She seemed of another species, kittenlike, puppyish, so mysterious her cries. She was tiny, six pounds, twelve ounces, and fragile. Her head had to be supported like an antique doll's. Her arms and legs were spindly. "She's smaller than a doll-baby!" children said. Her lips were as perfectly contoured as a rosebud; her eyes large and gray, then later hazel; her fingers long and sensitive – an artist's fingers, people said; a pianist's. A gynecologist's, I said, who had just had my cervix checked in a most old-fashioned way in an otherwise high-tech pregnancy.

How magical and downy is a creature straight from the womb, how small. I could not sleep near her. I thought of the harlot in the Book of Kings who rolled over her sleeping baby and killed him. I could not sleep away from her. I wondered if she had cried for me until she had choked on her tears and throw-up, and had died of exhaustion and a broken heart. I rushed to her crib. I could not sleep. Death and disaster seemed to threaten her on every side – the stairs, electric sockets, cleaning supplies under the sink, the telephone ringing while she was on the changing table, the stove, the iron, my rambunctious dog, the neighbor's cat who I've heard might lie on a newborn's chest attracted by its sweet, milky breath, and suck the life out of it – and then malign visitants like SIDS. If she slept unusually long, I raced to her in terror, placing my face against hers to hear, to feel her breathe, and, of course, she woke, crying, and that was it for writing for that morning, that afternoon. For the eighteen overwrought months that I looked after her full time, I held my breath. I didn't exhale and, of course, I didn't write, except for bittersweet journals full of the wonder of Zoe, but also of despair at "that one talent which is death to hide, lodged with me useless" – frustration and sadness mixed with an almost physical, passionate, longing love of my daughter, journals I cannot read

today. It's painful.

Two years, three months (and some green and white pills) after the birth of Zoe, I made peace with my life. If I were to choose a figure from mythology as inspiration and hope, it would not be Apollo, Sun God of music and poetry, bright and free, uncaring about babies, diapers, or better homes and gardens he, but Antaeus, whom I imagine as massive, bowed, like Rodin's "Thinker." And when enemy pressure forced him to the earth, from the earth he drew strength, and energy from failure.

To distill art from my daily life. Before Zoe came, I considered writing about the Mughal dynasty of India – Babar, Humayun, Akbar, who invented a religion of his own, Din-i-ilahi, divine light, a melange of every religion he knew; Shah Jahan, esthete, who had the Taj Mahal carved in memory of his beloved dead wife, Mumtaz; and Aurungzeb, his son, religious fanatic who hated the father who best loved his older brother, and ultimately killed them both. I wanted to write too, fiction or "creative nonfiction," of the Pre-Raphaelites, delirious with youth and golden dreams, painting murals on the walls of the Oxford Union, not caring if they would last; or Milton, the master poet who decided "to justify the ways of God to man," stoic, disciplined, admirable in his high-minded misery. The austere blind poet, in his study each morning, a canto of Paradise Lost in his head, waiting to be "milked."

Now the catalyst for my essays could be houses, gardens, babies, busyness, domesticity. My daily life provides inspiration and material, which is just as well, for, at present, I lack much time or energy to rummage in the second-hand gift shop of Art or other people's lives. "Write about what your everyday life offers you," Rilke says in his heartening Letters to a Young Poet. "And if your everyday life seems poor, don't blame it, blame yourself; admit to yourself that you are not enough of a poet to call forth its riches," to (segueing into another visionary) "see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour."

You can almost hear the silence. The milkmaid serenely fills her earthenware bowl. "The Young Woman with a Jug" pauses to dream out

of the window. The lacemaker is lost in her work. I gaze at Vermeer's women. I trust most things that help me lose track of time – reading, writing, gardening, hiking, the sea, art galleries, prayer, sex, good movies, good conversation. Vermeer's women lose themselves in: housework. It glows! Is this domesticity? Can it be? That's the way I want to live my life, like "Woman Holding a Balance," slowly, tranquilly, not fighting the irrelevant relevant, the distracting, trivial and necessary tasks of my days, but embracing them as an oasis of contemplation in which desert flowers may bloom.

Vermeer's paintings, poems one might say, on the radiance of domesticity are more moving when we learn of the hurly-burly of his household – a wife, eleven children, and a feisty mother-in-law. Those paintings that could have been called "Shanti, shanti, shanti" or "Tranquility" instead of "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window" are probably sighs of yearning, images of an elusive Eden. They hint how manual work – if used as time for contemplation – might be redeemed, the chores we all have in an egalitarian society, save those with a somewhat rarefied life, like the wife of a college president, who told me she gets her laundry done – even your lingerie and night-clothes? I asked; everything, she said – and, what's more, picked up off the bedroom floor; her silver polished and porcelain dusted; her flowers arranged; and meals cooked and served and cleaned up by the staff of the President's House. Or people with illegal immigrant maids. And they don't really have more free time; they are as busy as the rest of us. For work encroaches on their chore time, time to catch one's breath and think – if we live calmly, creatively – with a touch of Old World realism, the acceptance of inevitable imperfection. To fight the trivial that sprouts in its insistent dandelion way around the intense, focussed life we strive for, is to saturate what could have been the fruitful soil of our lives with resentment, making of it a sad burden. How much better to live as Vermeer's women, and use distraction, housework, as a salt lick, a breathing space, the clearing in the forest for pixie thought to dance.

In Vermeer's "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" Mary sat

at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said" while "Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made." Jesus responds to Martha's complaints, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better." Poor Martha. What a put-down for domesticity. Though I identify with Mary, for I too, given the presence of Martha, would have sat rapt at Jesus' feet, detached from the domestic hurly-burly. Traditionally, Mary represents *otium sanctum*, "holy leisure," the contemplative life while Martha represents the active life. "You write about houses; I work on our house!" – a postscript to the fax my husband sends me at the Vermont Studio Center, an artists' colony. I draft this essay on domesticity while he halts his mathematical research to re wax our tile floors, refinish our hardwood floors, repaint our walls and decks.

I read his faxes on the baroque process of refinishing hardwood floors – five sandings with a belt sander until the floor was as smooth as a baby; the staining with two coats of Golden Maple; the spraying with four coats of polyurethane. Your sweat-equity makes your house gleam for you, I muse, makes it your own, like a hand-knitted sweater, fruit of time, labor, and attention. It's like marrying a man, adopting a dog, creating a baby. You love them because you chose them, bought them, bore them. But what makes them more precious to you is the time you've invested in them – the hours you have spent with your daughter so that her chatter is predictable, and yet amusing. Or the long years with your husband, which makes his habit of thinking the best of the most incorrigible rascals; his naivete as he swallows your imaginative fictions; his sense of humor, his laughter, beloved – even his occasional, almost comic despondency at the intractability of his wife and child and life.

Marriage should be a true communist state: from each according to his ability to each according to her need, I fax Roy back. And Roy is the mathematician, gifted with numbers and with the esoteric facets of money, but also skilled with his hands, strong. My hands fly on a computer keyboard – "the pooter," Zoe calls her rival – but they falter at detail work. I can, though, imagine the elegant and beautiful in photographic detail. So we have achieved "a winning combination" (so I say;

Roy's ambivalent) where I conceive of the enchanting room, the Edenic garden, and Roy executes it, making curtains, and mantelpieces, and bogs to grow cranberries. Though both of us would rather be the brain, and not the hands – unless those hands are on the keyboard. “There are three brains in this house,” Roy says, exasperated, “but only one pair of hands. And that is the problem.”

How holy is work in Vermeer's art. I remember seeing – on long bus trips from Delhi up to my boarding school in Nainital in the Himalayas – “Work is worship” splashed white on the rocks of the hillsides by the sort of man with a mission who spray-paints “Jesus Saves” on bridges across America – a hit and run operation. I wonder if the Catholic Vermeer knew of the old Benedictine ideal, *Laborare est orare*, work is prayer. Surely. I like the idea – all of life, sacred, to rejoice in, whether we work with our hands or pens or paintbrushes; or love and play and pray. As I wash my windows, I sing, lyrical hymns, and my spirit soars. He who sings prays two-fold, Augustine declared; the melody provides an updraft to the emotion of worship. The work of writing absorbs all your attention like a stained glass window. But domestic work is a clear pane of glass, through which the spirit wings. I am enveloped in stillness – even joy – while my hands clean.

I tidy my study, working around the trampoline where my daughter Zoe sits cross-legged, spellbound by the cheery domesticity in *Snow White*. Zoe, at three, refuses to be in any room except the one where her mummy is; she often sleeps on my side of the bed. Cinderella waltzes with her broom. *Snow White* sings as she scrubs. How effortless these Disney heroines make labor seem. *Laborare est orare*, work is prayer; but more – work can be joy. I tend to do my housework slowly, dreamily shining the antique silver I've inherited before a dinner party, while minutes. Housework is a form of settling down, organizing and clarifying my thoughts, no less than my house. If you do them contemplatively, I've discovered, domestic chores can be bursts of grace, time to slow down and praise the beauty of the day, the trees outside the window: disguised leisure to think. I am absorbed in the rosary of work until it fades away, becomes mechanical, while “the mind from pleasure

less, withdraws into its happiness.”

“Are you dreaming?” my husband comes upon me, startling me. I have been shining my grandmother’s silver filigreed salver for – I don’t know – five minutes, ten? Yes, I say sheepishly. I’d lost track of time. The guests will be here in thirty minutes and I have but half our formal living room room cleaned – not just cleaned but sparkling, the silver shined, the brass buffed, but in the kitchen, spills on the linoleum, and Zoe’s stuff sprawls over the family room. “Prioritize,” my husband says, “Prioritize.” And he whisks through the house, mopping counters, sinks, floors, bathrooms. Roy’s faster than that cleaning lady famous in Williamsburg, who cleans a house in forty-five minutes, and charges as much as a psychiatrist, and for whom there is a waiting list – and as our first guests ready their smiles at the doorbell, wondrously, our house is ready too.

I hope the guests won’t notice any holdouts of dust and dirt, and, of course, they don’t seem to. One of the lessons my house has taught me: No one knows your house as you do. So no one sees the flaws you see. The spots, the cracks beneath its sheen never jar another as they jar you. The artist obsesses about the dragonfly-winged columbine she’s painted crooked in a corner; the viewer blinks, dazzled at the canvas on the wall.

I visited the Daffodil Festival at Gloucester, Virginia, an arts and crafts fair, with friends from church: an accountant, an engineer, a hospital administrator; superwomen who wake at five and exercise, earn good money, have beautiful homes and bouncy children. Susan asked us what we would do if we were to choose, once again, a career. I said I might be a Christian psychotherapist. The zigzag to maturity, occasionally assisted by therapy, has been for me a process of transforming cognitive leaps – and of spiritual leaps. Immersing myself in the Gospel accounts of Jesus, that wise, entirely original God/man, studying Jesus, trying to live his teachings within the perimeters of my life as a writer, mom and faculty wife in suburban America and – ah – my courage is gradually changing me. I cannot fathom the chaos if I chose another way to live.

Anyway, the others decided they would be – no, not stay-at-home moms as punitive misogynistic moralists might surmise, but – interior decorators. Interior Decorators! They detailed a creative life as we walked: buying houses, furnishing and decorating them, exhibiting them in the Southern Parade of Homes, and then selling them – to embark on the whole process again. Huh!

Had I missed something? I avoid opening those glossy magazines in the optometrist's office, fearing the wave of restlessness, followed by the next wave of time-consuming, money-devouring ideas. I've felt covetousness and desire germinate as I looked at *Better Homes and Gardens*, or as an impoverished professor we know mourns, "Better Homes Than Yours" and swiftly closed it. I have neither time nor money to squander, I told myself severely. But I did buy a book on interior decoration.

Buddha would have laughed at the thing, the Buddha who, attaining enlightenment after his sojourn under the Bodhi tree, formulated his Four Noble Truths: Life is suffering; Suffering originates from our desire for pleasure; Suffering can be eliminated by destroying desire; desire is eliminated by the noble eight-fold path of right belief, aspirations, livelihood, mindfulness, speech, conduct, exertion, and meditation. That's too quietest, and self-protective a way for me. Perhaps, you can avoid suffering by avoiding desire. but I don't want to live like that. I want to live intensely, flinging myself into experience, and not hold back because my heart might be broken. Let it! The heart-break does not neutralize the glimpse of "splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower."

Would Jesus have looked at my book on interior decoration, Jesus with his compassionate interest in everything, everyone – prostitutes, demoniacs, blind men, tax collectors, and lepers – that leapt past social constraints, his loving outward gaze? To think of him is to introduce a lighthouse's pulsar of luminosity into turbulence. What a great writer he could have been, with his kind and penetrating eyes; his gentleness, wisdom, and shrewdness! But he did greater things, illuminating the counter-intuitive surprising paths to joy. He who seeks to save his life

shall lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake shall save it. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it yields a mighty harvest. In the largesse of self you receive – fruitfulness, joy. Though not a word he wrote survives, his words and life still blaze. Jesus may well have looked, if he had the leisure. But what would he have said?

He himself dispensed with a house during his intense, dramatic three years of public life when he was, strictly speaking, homeless. I study the gospels each morning; in the tired evening, I occasionally leaf through the catalogs that, through the machinations of omniscient computers, heap my mailbox – Winterthur, Toscano, Earthly Treasures, the lifestyles of the rich and frazzled. And I hear his quiet voice caution, “Beware of covetousness. Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

As I leaf through my new books on the Arts and Crafts Movement, the aesthetic I feel the most kinship with, I call Roy over to look at beautiful and austere furniture, carpets, lamps, vases, tapestries – art that works, art that’s part of life. His nose wrinkles. “Get rid of those books,” Roy exhorts me. “Immediately. They will waste our time, add to our possessions, more stuff to maintain. But – if you donate them to the library, we get a tax deduction!” But what about making the home you live in a haven of beauty? I argue. A cool magical peaceful space, like a museum. Surely if you do it in your spare hours – if it comes second to forming a beautiful spirit, child, book, or life – it’s not a trivial pursuit, I maintain, uncertainly. (Spare hours?) I read out the recommendation of Dr. Andrew Weil (the alternative medicine guru I consult as I recover from anachronistic complications after a miscarriage, and a man of good sense, whose simple advice actually works – not true which of every best-selling dreamer who promises an ageless body on an impossible diet!). It’s imperative, the good doctor declares, for those who dwell in cities to make their home “a place of serenity, beauty, and order...a quiet place to relax.”

I consider creation – from the delicacy of the deep purple Dutch iris, its yellow tongue a flaming invitation to pollinators, to the colony of seals flippering on the pancake rocks, where the sea surges through blowholes in the South Island of New Zealand with its glowworm caves, rain forests, glaciers, and icy mountain tarns – all encountered in a day’s drive. The world: So various, so beautiful, so new, fickle, freckled, (who knows how?) Our homes should reflect some of nature’s loveliness – or am I rationalizing? How much? Wisdom probably lies in Aristotle’s golden mean between extremes: in this case, between the drably functional, and a cold pursuit of beauty that ignores those for whom beauty would be a blanket, a meal, a shack of their own. How do we, practically, find a balance between sipping the richness of life, and retaining compassion for others without which beauty can turn to ugliness of spirit – a wilted wild flower, a mangled butterfly, the manna of the ancient Israelites in the desert which, when hoarded, rotted and wriggled with worms? I myself, pretty much since I’ve had any money to speak of, have followed the ancient practice of tithing – giving away ten percent of one’s income to “the wretched of the earth” – recommended in “that nice clever book,” the Bible (as my naturally religious three-year old Zoe, an anima naturalater Christianita, calls it; “That cutie Jesus,” she amusingly says). It is a clever idea, easy to calculate; and since each possession devours time – acquiring, dusting, repairing, fretting – in giving, you receive time and space and an increased immunity to the siren song of money, tricky substance: life-enhancing if you use it lightly, creatively, or share it; sterile, Midasian, yet addictive if it’s hoarded (which is substance abuse). A good servant, but a bad master – like coffee, melatonin, or red wine.

Oh no! For all their warm fuzzy connotations – family values; one’s secret castle; enchanted island – talk of houses inevitably snakes to the murky, socially taboo subject of money which artists are meant to disdain, and which, like sex, one can more or less do without – for a time – but it’s rough. Our two great areas of secret curiosity about our acquaintance: sex and money, how much, and how, and with how much sweat or fun. It takes, among other things, money (or leisure, the fruit of money) to produce beauty or art – a crass truth, like Jamaica

Kincaid's observation that it takes wealth to create a Paradisial garden, a universal truth rarely acknowledged. And yet, and yet, how many of humankind's heroes have shed this bourgeois stuff – the Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, Francis of Assisi, Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi... They tramped ill-clothed, ill-fed, ill-housed and free, with little, and little to worry about. It's like the Pegasus wings you sprout when you reduce your life to a suitcase and go traveling – with its burst of new ideas and its enlarged perspective.

The radiant Walden was conceived in Thoreau's shed of a cabin – his flamboyant symbol of the simple life! Simplify, simplify, he says, oppressor – but when I consider beauty made by human hands, whether the mosaics in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the stained glass rose windows of Notre Dame de Paris, or the sweetest perfumes, a blend of high, middle and low notes, I realize an antiphonic retort also serves as a definition for beauty: complicate, complicate. For beauty, whether in art, interior decoration, or a life, is a montage of simplicity and complexity, just as delicious prose is a symphony of long sentences and short, the long transporting us with verbal loveliness; the short, startling us, enforcing attention. No more lotus-eating luxuriance. Now think.

Our houses are the ornate tortoise shells we haul. For though dead cells like nails or hair – or the shells of abalone or coral – they are part of us, an extension of us. At times, we stagger beneath the sheer heft of them, but at other times, the intricacy of their carapace lends vibrance to our lives. I would feel restless in Thoreau's cabin, and crave color, a subdued classical elegance. I often think of the sheer beauty of the Italian Gothic interior of the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, and of Giotto's campanile a short walk away! I want everything in my house to be both beautiful and useful, I decided even before I heard of Ruskin's exhilarating aesthetic. I was charmed by Japanese homes, the austere decoration which breathed quietness. Instead of the clutter of bric-a-brac, the necessary mirrors, tissue boxes, paper knives, carved, engraved, inlaid, were art. We brought back a black lacquer tray on which a spare maple wept gold leaves into a gold stream, onto a

single gold rock, the Zen focal point for walking meditations. On our return, I decided to gradually exchange each of the necessary objects in my house for beautiful ones, adding pottery bowls the color of lapis lazuli that smoke out a wisp of pleasure each time I look at them; salt and pepper shakers, with spirals of brown, deep red and orange, made from the burnished heartwood of Rosewood, Dalberga, from Brazil; and pottery planters, with wild iridescent sweeps of amethyst and azure for our indoor garden of bananas, tangerine, cardamom and bay trees – beauty without the jostle of additional possessions.

I resolve my ambivalence. For an hour or so a day, I organize my house, trying to make it exquisite, bright, surprising, tranquil. A room, a home, reflects one's spirit. They are an outward sign of inward grace or turbulence. So I hope, in reverse, that to create a home that could be called *La Serenissima*, most serene, will entice its sweetness to steal over you. Of late, two of the things I pour extra money into, when I have it, are travel (ah, the hassles of home!) and (ah, the hassles of travel!) my home, trying to create within it, beauty. "Will we soon have guided tours to the Mathias Art Gallery, Garden and Library?" Roy enquires. I love those houses converted to art galleries – the Frick, the Phillips, and, especially, the Isabella Gardner with its headstrong eclecticism, kitsch and Vermeer cohabiting, Mrs. Gardner's sensibility the only apparent aesthetic. My other favorite, the Huntington Library, Art Gallery and Botanical Garden in Pasadena, a collector's garden with 207 acres of the flora of every practicable climate zone, evokes in me deep pleasure, not without a restless desire for emulation. We attempted "edible landscaping," converting our suburban lawn, backyard, and wooded lot in Williamsburg, Virginia into an orchard of exotic fruit trees and bushes; planting dozens of herbs, the only thing I collect; and every flower we have room to grow that the herds of deer that haunt Kingmill, our wooded community on the James River, turn up their dainty noses at.

The true cost of things, Thoreau wrote, is the "life" it takes to earn the money to buy them. I look around me. Life leaking into the perfection of crystal water pitchers, or the vase from Japan handpainted

with the understated elegance of purple irises, my favorite flower, a motif in our home and garden. Whoa! But how was that money – that, according to Thoreau, represents life – acquired? That is the question. Mine, by playing with words and ideas; my husband's – ah! – by researching the arcana of mathematics which he enjoys. (Does this sound vague? So is my understanding of his work. “How do you research mathematics?” people ask, or “Can you explain your research to me in terms a layperson would understand?” Then I switch off, as I suspect, do they.) The trade-off of leisure for beauty one enjoys daily was not a ridiculous exchange my husband decided, as he resolved that, if we eventually needed the money, he'd teach his favorite courses some summer so we could, without guilt, buy in Florence the antique black Belgian marble chest inlaid with sixty semiprecious stones in the Medici tradition of *pietre dure*, their names like a magical chant out of Revelation – malachite, rhodocrosyite, chalcedony, lapis lazuli, jasper, jade, onyx, moonstone, tiger eye, falcon eye... In Venice, Roy succumbed to a monumental paperweight, a collector's treasure, which had trapped in heavy glass, floating as in a sea, the millefiori, the thousand iridescent flowers of Murano glass, each a brilliant mosaic of many more, that intricate loveliness a master craftsman's work. “I guess I'm a sucker for beauty,” he sighed.

And I? I would not directly trade leisure for beauty – or work a job other than writing to acquire the most bellissimo object. Though I do happily exchange money my essays earn in the feast or famine way of art, for work of other artists that captivates me with its loveliness – such as my bowl of woven glass, the variegated, jewel-like ribbons of violet, crimson, magenta, maroon and purple crisscrossed with sudden surprise strands of pink, blue, white, and black. And if my writing cannot be exchanged for money – a risk you take when you follow your bliss in creative work? Well, I would still have beautiful things I've slowly made, with my hands on the keyboard, work I'm proud of, like an old-fashioned craftsman.

My work is like Thoreau's: reading, research into life, writing up conclusions. This he considered the noblest work, the work that alone was life. To work jobs to earn money to buy things was to trade life

for things. In his Thorovian arrogance, however, he assumed that an architect, a mathematician, a carpenter, a gardener could not enjoy their work as much as he enjoyed his, and, therefore, happily exchange the fruit of work they loved to acquire things they loved. For him, work was tainted by Adam's curse to painful, sweaty toil. "Trade curses everything it handles; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business," he wrote. So he tried to narrow "work" (growing beans) to six weeks a year to "live" (read and write) for the rest of it. But how blessed not to be at war with half your life, to be able to unite "vocation and avocation, as the two eyes make one in sight," to consider all your life – making money, housekeeping, reading, writing, friendships, gardening, thinking – as your work; and all your work – beans and books – as your life.

I considered intellectual work sacred, a sea to slough grief. In my twenties, the Thorovian conflict of work and life was won, overwhelmingly, by "work" – reading and study, though I have never worked a "regular" job, having quit my Ph.D program to stay home, and write, read, and nurture children. I am beginning, in my ninth year as a more or less stay-at-home woman, to consider it all one. I no longer mind domestic work if there is not too much, nor too much pressure, if I can tackle chores dreamily after a bout of intellectual and creative work. Domestic work is then a way of relaxation, of rumination. I think while I work in my house or garden; I think and record while I write. It is all one. I remember stress rising when, as an undergraduate studying English at Oxford, and – like almost every other undergraduate studying English there – aspiring to be a writer, I encountered the sweeping statement of Alexander Pope, "Writing well, immortally well, is such as a task as does not leave one time to plant a tree, be a useful friend, much less to save one's soul." Oh no, would I never have a dog?

"The intellect of man is forced to choose, perfection of the life or the work," Yeats lamented. Well, I eschew Willa Cather's "God of art that demands human sacrifices." Perfection of the art from a cramped, narrow life? No, a too intensely focused life cramps the omnivorous interests, the broad experience and empathy which provide the sinews

of great art. So: a full life and excellent art, if not perfect art. That's enough for me. Art need not be perfectly perfect – as Mona Lisa, Venus de Milo or Diana, Princess of Wales are great beauties, not perfect ones. You grow the best art you can in the soil of the life you have chosen. Who needs to be Trollope and write seventy books? Who reads all seventy anyway? Now – mellowed from my anxious, striving twenties into my wry, better-balanced thirties (a great decade!) – I no longer believe that creating good art must come at the expense of the “the last, the greatest art,” the good life – or vice versa. I want to make art that is beautiful, rich, wise, interesting. And I wish it to spring from a life that is rich, wise, interesting. A modest proposal: Good art from a good life. I think that's my goal for the remaining sixty four years, I hope, left to me – to be “busy at home,” reading, writing, sending out work, nurturing my children, gardening, having friends visit, creating a home that is beautiful and serene – the nesting instinct, powerful in women as in pigeons, drawing me homewards.