

The Anatomy of a Home

I had not expected houses in my neighborhood to host estate sales. The word estate had always made my brain pull up an image of a huge mansion, set on a hill with acres of lawn and hedges and a butler, probably. An estate so full of things that the owners simply

had to sell them, to make room for the newer and shinier things. So when I stepped into the garage of this house that the neon signs had led me to, I was surprised to find it not

much bigger than my own, a bit more crumbly. The other kind of estate, the last will and testament kind, had somehow slipped my mind, but was slowly inching its way back now.

Looking through someone's house while they are not there feels almost voyeuristic, like

seeing something intimate that I wasn't given permission to see. It feels still more invasive to trot through their space, rifle through their belongings and size up their worth. Maybe if the person who lived here was alive, it might feel a little more like nosiness than sacrilege.

“But as it is, they are dead, and I am the vulture picking my bloody beak at what they left behind.”

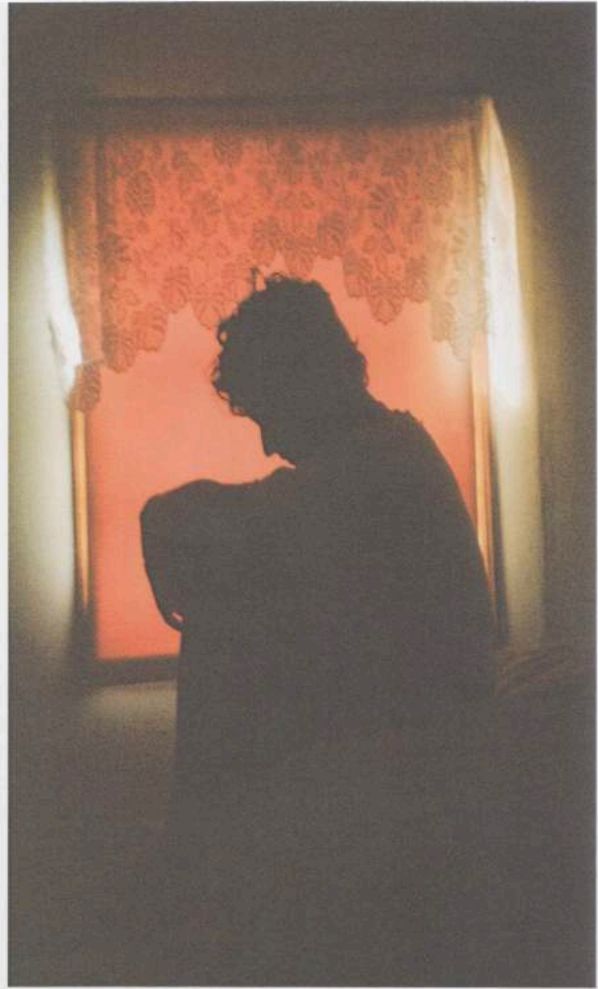
But as it is, they are dead, and I am the vulture picking my bloody beak at what they left behind.

That person had touched each of their things one

last time, leaving everything slightly off-kilter, tilted just a touch off-center. Then someone came in and dragged everything out, piled an entire life onto a plastic folding table for display. Then I walk in and touch these pieces with a ghost's fingerprints all over them, extending the lineage of touch.

The objects in our houses have a gravity to them; they exert a force on us the same way we exert a force on them. As we move through our lives, we move our things and they move us back. We arrange and rearrange them, take them out and put them away. We pick up coffee mugs and they hold our hands in the hard curves of their handles. We press a button on a remote and the rubber bounces back against the grooves of our fingertips. We push a chair across the room and feel the stubborn weight of its resistance against our palms, a gentle push. We touch these mundane things every day in the name of function, so briefly that we don't think about the mark being made. We touch other things in the name of sentimentality or beauty, lingering on the feel of them in our hands. A baby blanket, a figurine, a crystal collection. We run our thumbs again and again across soft fuzz or moonstone. We're pulled into the orbits of these small pockets of joy, littered across the house.

When I was 11, my parents decided to move away from the mobile home we had been living in for my entire life. At first, I was excited at the novelty of the move and at the prospect of a bigger room. As the move grew closer, I was more and more unsettled by the thought of living somewhere that wasn't this tiny blue house. I would never be able to come back to this space that had contained me for so long. The house would soon be taken over by its new tenants, and would no longer be able to recognize me either. I fixated on every small, tactile detail about it: the hum of the heater, the way the drywall had more pronounced ridges than in the new house, the plum tree that brushed gently against my bedroom window with each breeze. These details would not be present at the new house, and I knew I would notice their absence like a phantom ache every time I walked into a room.



I had thought that a home was a house. And it was, but only in an incidental, interchangeable way. We pour a sense of home into our things, everything we use and wear and cherish, and then pour our things into our house - a nesting doll of belonging. The house is not the heart of a home - the house is the exoskeleton, the backdrop. When my family packed away the contents of that house, we tucked our home into cardboard boxes to be placed into another empty house. The same objects and people, plopped into a new, unrecognizable setting. But day by day, a life takes root again: not simply a life lived, but a life lived here. The new house became a new home, growing out of the things and people inside it.

We left our old home sitting empty, waiting for its next inhabitants to move their own boxes in. The life cycle of a house mirrors the life cycle of those that live in it: people put their lives inside a house, and then they take them out so that someone else can put their life inside. Sometimes when someone dies, they leave their life in the house still intact, their things still claiming space. Here is where the decomposers come in: the ones who turn its guts inside out for the vultures to raze, estate sale scavengers metabolizing the innards, clearing out the remains so the cycle can begin anew.

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But decay is a kind of birth—a transformation. On this particular day, in this particular house, I choose a ceramic lidded dish shaped like Pierrot's head out of a room chock full of clown paraphernalia. I take the trinket out of the house, and it becomes just a thing again. Just clay and glaze, nothing more. Then I put it in my own house and suddenly it's part of my own ecosystem. I put my earrings inside him, touch his little head every time I want to accessorize. He grows dust on my dresser; I wipe it off dutifully. I wonder if Pierrot remembers what he did in his past life, before he guarded my jewelry. I wonder if this ghost of his old house is floating around the air of my own house, afterlife and life swirling together. I know that my army of secondhand belongings has secrets that they'll never divulge to me, but I like the white noise hum of their history.

A house needs a lifeline; abandoned, it will crumble into disarray. Houses are made of organic matter, after all, and susceptible to rot. Without a life inside, holding up its walls, a house begins to cave in on itself. A house needs to be a home in order to live, needs people constantly painting and decorating its walls, tearing parts out and replacing them with new ones, moving things around. A home needs to be a habitat: full of the things that allow living to be possible – sustenance and storage and pleasure.

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