

GORDON LISH

In September

THERE WAS A TIME when nothing was so important to me as growing up old enough for me to get money enough for me to get a pair of penny loafers. Imagine it. Can you imagine it, that there was a time in your life when there was nothing as important to you as this thing, and if it were not this thing, then it was that thing?

There were times in my life when it was like that.

The leaves of brown
come tumbling down
September
in September
in the rain.

My son Ethan was born in November. My son Atticus was born in September. There was a time in my life when nothing was so important to me as the births of these sons. Unless it was that there was a time in my life when the most important thing to me in my life was my daughters, when I would take them out of doors with me to go outside with me to garden in the yard with me, Jennifer, born in October, Rebecca, born in December.

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Where we all of us dwelled together when we all of us dwelled together, it was in a cottage, it was in a bungalow, it was in a little low-roofed house on Concord Way, the number of it cised into the little gabled door like this—No. 711—do you see, did you see?—a detail which we would all of us take care to pronounce seven-eleven for the good fortune in it. Oh, the good fortune we all of us had in that little low-roofed house, a playground one street, no, two streets away, in that direction over there, whereas going the other way was the way

you would go to deliver a child to the kindergarten, and thereafter to collect the child and to conduct it—ah, to accompany it—over the course of the little walk homeward.

Home.

Schoolward was the way you went if you had a motorcar and were in need of fuel for it when you were not far away from Concord Way—the Gulf Oil Station could be found the schoolward way, unless it was the Shell Oil Station that could be found when one was going that way—but we did not have a motorcar back in the long-ago day I am telling you about, nor a mother in the little low-roofed house neither.

If it comes to that, and of course it does indeed come to that.

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The time I am telling you about was too long ago for me to regain details such as certain details the specifics of whose particularity would hardly have mattered to us if I had selected the right details in the first place.

We had no motorcar.

We liked to say it that way—not automobile but motorcar.

We liked to say bungalow, say cottage, say seven-eleven on Concord Way.

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It was a very little house. The doors did not have locks on them. Indeed, no door inside of nor into the little house did. You could not lock any of the doors that had anything to do with the little house. But I do not think locklessness ever made any of the children afraid.

Or, anyhow, very afraid.

I think we may have thought the two big trees made us safe inside.

Well, I told the children they did—beech, ash, eucalyptus—a pair

of gigantic trees probably akin to something like one of these which I have just named.

Jennifer.

Rebecca.

Ethan.

Atticus.

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I must admit that, insofar as I was concerned, the little house conferred an exalted status on those who lived in it. This feeling I sought to aggrandize with drawings I would encourage be undertaken by persons stopping by, if claims of artistry were made, for back in those accomplished days it was not at all uncommon for a talent in visualizing to be stated, and when it rather often was, one of us would hurry to bring out drawing paper and very sharpened pencils and the drawing pen we kept at the ready for the uses of historiographing our cornering of beauty—a gift, it was, a house gift, a housewarming proffering, as the expression had had it back in those gullible days.

Who knows?

It may still have it that way.

One might be brought a house gift if someone happened by, or had even made it a point to contrive a visit.

Come see us.

That sort of thing.

You know what I mean.

Probable mothers not impossibly did.

Skip it.

Who really remembers?

What I remember is how, just to the side of me, oh how strict was the manner of the child who stood standing in a version of tremendous attention, every stitch of the body devoted to the bearing up of a tray of baffled foundlings arraigned for me to scoop each one free from where it sat waiting in furious aspiration.

Everything now is now so long ago.

You must know what I mean.

Oh, flat, flat—I think the nurseryman called such a tray a flat.

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We mainly spent what money we could manage honoring the little house with plantings and with primpings to the appearance it would cut when the neighbors might lean over to favor us with a look, when passersby would be willing to pretend to inspect our exception, especially when we ourselves stood riven beholding the place in the mood prescribed for a late-afternoon swoon in a Sunday species of light.

We were all of us mad for the little funny-roofed house.

It bestowed, bespoke, betokened grandeur on a deftly limited deliriously precious kind of scale.

You could propose it to yourself—I did, I never didn't!—in a picture-book, in a storybook, in a make-believe era in a make-believe world—ours, all ours, resolutely, stoically, defiantly, the Lish house, little and darling, little and brave.

Do you see it?
Exquisite.
The plantings.
Do you see us?
A family.
More or less.
Okay, here we go again.

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Making our way just beyond the village laundromat onward to the village nursery to fetch home a tray of something plantable where there was no mother to pitch in, no mother to lend a hand, no mother to assist, no chatelaine to come with a watering can, or do I just say any or all of this for want of feelings to correspond with the word watering, the word assist, the word lend?

Yes, that's what I think it was which the nurseryman would call it, counseling us by dint of his silence for us to so call the tray too, flat, a flat, a bounded span of possibles—sproutlings, seedlings, appliqués of abidings that would twist your heart with yearning, all the weekend long, of that glorious implication that enclosed us with its ecstasies, spending what we could scrape together for us to spend among the discounted choices, hastening back across the railroad tracks with a child or two or three or four for fear the striplings in the fabulous containment would perish in the morning chill before, one by one, each prospect could be laid beneath a quilting of soil so cozy so loamy that . . .

I'm so sorry.

This is so very tiring for me.

So cozy so loamy that what—or is it so what?

I don't know how best I might have filled in something wordful enough back there for it to duly do the ding back there.

Jennifer, then Rebecca—Ethan, then Atticus.

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The idea was to develop the grounds, make sallyings forth over the railroad tracks to the village nursery where whatever you took home with you turned out to always have been perfect, just right—incredibly benevolently tastefully on sale.

“Here, Mr. Lish, you can have what's in this flat for a dollar if you get the box back to us before the close of business tomorrow.”

Those quotation marks, you needn't be told they're excusably fraudulent.

Oh, how solemn stood the child who stood.

All those ess words—solemn, studious, sober, stern.

Sullen?

Severe?

No, my friend, no!—yet I do indeed concede these were serious children who wished only to take part, to be of service, to stand gardening with Daddy while Daddy gardened, who stood each of them with such solemnity, with such gravity, with such—well, they were

poised children, forever poised as little children go, a little austere possibly, not impossibly a little wearied, holding out a chuggyjam tray trembling with it steadied for Daddy, Daddy crouched at his country labors, householder using the big kitchen spoon to get out the next numinous thing to go in and commence its goddamn growing, goddamn it to goddamn hell.

You know what I mean.

You can see what I mean.

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Get the tender thing scooped gently out and settled down into the place in the earthy loam that had been opened for it to glow in, beam-
ing back its scrumptious promise of durability at us, its accordance with belonging, with its being enfolded, its brazen consent to the community of our scheme.

Or say I said loamy earth.

The father knelt, the big kitchen spoon both blackened and shining, the child standing alongside, whichever child, stern aspect, stolid affect, the house-proud family bent to its superlative enchantment—sort of superlatively smitten.

The child, a child, solidly standing.

Holding the burden of our worth aloft.

The rest is figurative.

Even that much of it, every fraction of it, it's already debased by its being prose.

What matter?

Is there harm in it?

Nobody loses an eye when all it is is just an old man conniving with sentences whilst squat on his tuffet at an old man's table.

Or vice versa.

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But how about this?

That dyad of bushy leviathans swooping—swooped!—down onto the wig-a-poo kick-a-poo hugga-mugga cottage, bungalow, property, our property, stance—how about just that right there!

My children.

This gatherment.

Everything grew in it.

Anything grew in it.

The loam alone, as folly might prompt one to say, and I just said it.

It was so wonderful to dig with the big kitchen spoon down into the helpmeet of it, that pillowy ooey reciprocity the nurseryman told us could not be other than loam.

The terrific good fortune of it.

Seven-eleven Concord Way.

Like this—No. 711 scored into the arch of the cookie-house door.

Jen.

Bec.

Eth.

Att.

Very serious, very solemn—what word did I choose?

Did I say stern?

I laid things into the earth there.

All of it flourishing, success a certainty, that lucky address.

Assurances spreading from thing to thing, flower, shrub, hedge—an earnest privet encircling the whole unscrupulous affair, the mossy brick curdling of a broken chimney gamely battling the colossal elms overhead, or oaks or stringbarks or whatever the what-have-you they were, for I do not know what in God's name those horrors were—for room for all of it to breathe, get its measure of breath, let us all of us agree to say it, for eminence, for dignity, for air?

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Lovely.

Ever lovelier.

It was like words in a song a fairy tale made.

Daddy's little helpers.
Whichever child.
Arms outstretched.
The tray, the flat, leafless biddies, row on row, aching for the impression of maternity.
Arms stretched out all of the way out.
Saturday.
Sunday.
Such greenery.
The home we were almost all of us in.
In-dwelling in.
The hyphen, that hyphen, was it unnecessary?
Just mentionably excessive just mentioning it?
The very word—hapless, shameless, a swindler's fucking snare.

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The new people there, rumor of abuses reached its way to us over the years.

Accusations, evidence of different sensitivities.

I mean the people who came to occupy the place did—philistines, barbarians, crass influxion of a scandal and a half.

Succulents, ocotillo, acacia, sotol, not improbably juniper pine, even palmilla and grama and cholla and sage.

Oh, and carrizo cane.

Or so we heard—and may have thereafter ornamented the defamiation—the rudeness of it, the offense in it, georgics itself scorned, repudiated, sent thither on zigzags of impious confusionary strains.

I remember the children seemed not to remember the old habitation.

How green it was—all those words—lush, voluptuous, verdant, verdance, unless it's spelled verdence and is not even a word as such, even disruptively not all that G R E E N to begin with.

Or is it correct to say had been—as to how green it all of it was, it being, that is, No. 711 Concord Way.

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Well, they are, of course, all of them gone from me now.

Of course.

I, for my part, think of them not often and, when I seldom do, I must tell you that I sense myself entered by a dispensation of superb unfamiliarity, desert flora in forlorn profile on an otherwise empty plain, nothing much to be encountered there, nought to tarry for for a further rapturous look at it, no reason to pause respectful of surprise.

Isn't exhausted the word?

Let me tell you this, though.

It's strange.

It is rather as if passages—no, colorful tailings—that I have read in books, wherein features of the relentless firmament were being treated, have somehow usurped the presences of everything else to do with this bounty I have been speaking of, these children, this offspring, and that my mind, that a father's mind, has in flying buttress of his benison only what writers of a scrappy know-howly spleen have written—a vicious disposition of scrub, of nopal, of whitehorn, of catclaw, of switchback and willow bracken, and of something someone matchlessly able has memorialized as the high chaparral.

Were I younger, stronger, spryer, actually interested to any action-able degree, or is it extent, I'd get myself up and see if I could get that last one looked up—inasmuch as up on a dictionary stand there is a big dictionary standing very near to almost alongside me, and I only have to reach, take up the magnifying glass, shove around the pages in the way, spot the entry—chaparral, high chaparral, the high chaparral, and then maybe confirm the spelling of the word silhouette.

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The dictionary.

A house gift, as it were, from—oh, no question about it—from

one of the dead mothers, I reckon it must be, or to have been, who meant, in all loving grace, to improve the household with the reference's utility, abetting the tenants left behind by her absence.

Landsakes, did you ever!

Let me tell you—if I ever again have it in me again to look anything up again, it had better be the identifying of whoever it was who thought up the words of those haintings hauntings sonorities we have been listening to. I mean, you know—those ones, these ones, the ones coming, the constituent blue authorities of our old true refrain.

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