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House of the Spirits

The first thing I felt was welcome, welcome and hidden in a place out of time yet full of history. The oak trees were old and big and the land forested but what greeted me on arrival was a clearing in the oak forest just big enough for a house and grounds, as if there had been one there before, from another time, perhaps one of the first homes in the area back in that murky and confused era after Sir Francis Drake had supposedly landed here, when the Spanish settlers, the natives, the Russian fur traders, and the early American adventurers mingled and flowed like the kelp, sea weed, oysters and reeds of the nearby estuary.

The light was soft and dappled and the Pacific Ocean air still cool and refreshing but calmed and warmed by its ride over the ridge to the west or its sail down the long bay to the north. There was a view out through the forest clearing to an open grassy slope that eased down to the bottom of bear valley then up the hills on the valley's east side with looming Black mountain and Mt Barnaby and the high ridges beyond comprising the formation that sealed off Pt Reyes from the rest of Marin County and the populous environs of the SF bay beyond, ensuring it's rural and rustic nature for at least another generation or two.

It was a piece of land that ended a search of some kind or another for me, although I would have been hard pressed to name it at the time. I set something down

the moment I walked onto it the way I would a bag of groceries on the kitchen counter after shopping or a suitcase on the bed at end of a journey.

I felt a beneficent presence or perhaps a number of presences in the light and the air there. The feeling was particularly strong around the clearing. The surrounding woods were not especially dense and looking through the woods from the clearing was like looking through veiled layers that gradually built up into substance with distance. As I gazed through the layers of forest I had the distinct impression that I was also looking through layers of time, that this place, like the nearby bay, had currents of history and nature and spirit gently swirling in it, rising to the surface in continually differing configurations and forms. I longed to stay and experience a winter storm, a fog filled morning, a starry night, to see who and what would materialize. I wanted to stay and grow old there, to lie down at the end of my time and disappear amid the oak leaves on the forest floor, to cast off my spirit into the eddies of time and place, to join the others on the shore of this clearing.

House ideas came to me. I saw an abandoned shipwreck, a life boat on its side full of leaves, a woman in Chinese silk with knowing eyes, the Pillars of Heracles, a ship's captain in a big chair, an old California farm house, the kind with the lone palm tree and the circular drive. Paths leading away from the house and dissolving into the forest floor as they left the clearing, walls that did the same, house as ruin, gauzy curtains, screens and shades, canopies, framed mirrors that were windows onto different dimensions or parts of the house, roofs partially blown away opening onto the sky, the architecture never fully resolving into one particular style before suggesting another, unexpected orientations when moving from one wing of the house to the another. Moving through the house like moving through time with the demarcations becoming less distinct and the walls falling away and finally being deposited back into the woods without having ever felt fully enclosed. A big front porch that wraps around the building and leads back to the woods with an open end. The whole enterprise being one of multiple superimpositions.

A week later my lover and I rented a vacation cabin in the area and at the end of a glorious day of sun, champagne bubbles, skin and ecstasy, chanced on a poem hand written and tacked to the pantry wall by Carolyn Miller, a prior resident, called 'Why we sleep' that ended like this....

"...because our lives ebb and flow like the tides outside these windows;
because we are practicing for death in the midst of life,
because the earth, like a great boat, is carrying us toward the sun;
because the sun waits for us on morning's shore."

A few weeks, later I came across some old literature put out by the National Park Service about that same area. It told of a ship wrecked on the coast there in 1595 from which only a life boat was salvaged that the surviving crew had eventually rowed to Mexico in, and of the cargo of Ming China and silks that washed up on shore and into the hands of the local natives, who confounded later settlers into thinking they had overshot their destination and landed in China when they came upon the native women wearing the elaborate and brightly colored silk robes.

When we looked back at the photos taken while picnicking on the land with family, the light seemed to have substance, almost like smoke, taking form in the photos like vaporous presences following the camera, always looking back at it, there in every shot.

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