

Sticks and Stones

You can choose the place, or the place can choose you. Place (genius loci) has proved herself so much wiser than humans. And place is willing to be loyal to more generations of humans than humans tend to be to each other. The Folly is looking toward the children who will grow to be the sixth generation to make their mark, and scuffs and scars, and gentle wear on her old floors and woodwork. As our predecessors did, as we do, they will look through the wobbly glass of her oldest window and marvel at how the place stays up in defiance of gravity and the right angle.

Any Foundation

What do you do when the plow thuds
Dead against one of those boulders?
That's the place you build the house.

Unhitch the plow. Drag enough rocks
Into something like rows. Then
Drop enough logs across to support

A floor. Add walls. Balance a roof
On top. Hitch the plow again, and
Turn. Somewhere you will find

Enough soil in one place to make
A field, or at least a garden. Or,
You will have to go back to the house,

Find something to make a door with.
Think about what you will do
To heat your shelter while you think.

Bellflower

The place was cobbled, clobbered together of refuse
From the lumber mill southwest of it a few miles.
Or maybe it clobbered itself, from unfinished
Planks of raw red pine seasoned only by the place
In the slash pile they had found themselves in
For the unforgivable heresy of warp. The boards
Were only sinful in a market place. Sloughed off
By the first and last attacks upon the pine logs

Pushed through the killing line at the lumber stockyard
And shambles, they had lain somewhere in the sun
Waiting for the ignominy of burning for no virtue
Save burning. So the genie of the cabin picked up
The junk, paid for some of the wood perhaps,
Wrapped itself in tar paper and slapped those slabs
On the outside to keep the tar paper from wandering.
But underneath the living shell (even a shell of essent tar
And paper) where the soul lies of the builder,
Is such character as ever existed here. The cabin
Is perched on local boulders dredged up from the lake
Shore and dragged to the dug out base by harnessed
Mules who had volunteered for the job (because mules
Are trained to enjoy pointless labor at any old time).

The boulders dropped themselves onto the cleared
And leveled sand. It may have been the piles
Of unfinished lumber and slash themselves,
The piles of material that eyeballed the tops
Of the unthinking boulders for a level vaguely
Like the horizontal. A few of the boulders
Had to be topped off by smaller rocks, half-boulders,
Before the cabin felt secure enough to lay itself down
And cement the rocky foundation by virtue only
Of its own weight. Then the shack rested and waited
For the right lodgers to find it, or anyone really,
Hospitality having been dear to the hasty carpentry
Of this log pile, long after hospitality had lost fashion
Among the humans who might have laid claim
To the warm innards of the cabin's invisible kindness
Of arrangement, occupied now by chipmunks, bats,
Hornets, rot, and maybe, even still, a bellflower.

*I've said this more than once during our annual association meeting introduction solemnities,
but for the sake of something like history:*

*My grandparents bought the tarpaper shack that Carol and I live in back in 1945. Cheap. But
what they really bought cheap was some 750 feet of less than ideal shoreline. Coming along with
that was the shack, a rickety garage, the burn-out remains of a barn (I like to think that the fire
was the result of an exploding still, but this bit is history and not an occasion for more rhapsody),
and 20-some acres of "back lots," that included a good size swamp, or, as I like to think of it,
"Fentons' Fen."*

Walking Softly in the World

—It can't be done, said my grandfather.
At any rate, it shouldn't. It'd take money.
We might as well just bulldoze the thing.

—It can be done, said my father. Besides,
We can do it cheap, and then we can
Use the shack until we've figured out
How much we need to do for a real cabin.

—It's not worth the effort. Let's burn it.

—We can fix it up, Hugh, and take a year
Or two to plan the rest carefully.
The foundation's in good shape.

—Oh, well. I still think the whole idea
Is folly. But if you want to go to all
The work, I suppose you will anyway.

Probably it is still folly. Which is why
We still call it the Folly. We still keep
It up for a year or two. That is official

Folly policy. Dry rot is creeping in
From the weather side of the cabin,
But we are learning to walk softly there,

And in the rest of the world too. It'll last
Another year or two. It's folly to live
This way, but we learn to walk softly.

Which is why the sign on County Road 40 has read "Fentons' Folly" for over 65 years. The only changes have been to artistic (!) design and the placement of the apostrophe. My way acknowledges that we are more than one Fenton, and my way is correct, until the next linguistic purist comes along.

Inward Bound

Once an outside window,
Made redundant by a new
Geography of rooms –

The brute interference of a hired
Carpenter's stale geometry –
This tier of shelves appears
To the eye atilt, askew, awry,

But the truth of the level
Proves the shelves dead plumb.
It is the house itself that wryly
Scuds among the quadrants
By volition only of sag and season.
My only astrolabe is likewise
The sag of my house and melt
Of myself. But who am I to ask
Of Folly "whither bound?"
Who unbidden sails for free?