

*I have concluded that the whole misfortune of men comes from a single thing, and that is their inability to remain at rest in a room.*

—Pascal

# STILLNESS

by Scott Russell Sanders

THROUGH AN AISLE of waving woodland sunflowers and purple ironweed, I approach a cedar hut where I plan to sit quietly for a few hours, gathering the scattered pieces of myself. Resting at the foot of a hill between a meadow and a forest, surrounded by a deck and railing, the tiny cabin seems to float on the earth like a gabled houseboat the color of whole wheat bread. Grasshoppers lurch aside with a clatter as I move along the path, but hummingbirds and butterflies continue blithely feeding. Here in southern Indiana the tall grasses have bent down under the weight of their seeds, the maples and sycamores have begun to release a few crisp leaves, and the creeks have sunk into their stony troughs.



I climb the stairs and leave my sandals on the deck. The boards feel warm against the soles of my feet. The pressure of sunlight draws the fruity smell of cedar from the clapboard siding. I turn a key in the lock, swing the door inward, then hesitate on the threshold, gazing into this room where I hope to recover my balance. The two carpenters, friends of mine, who built this hut for me to use as a studio have removed the last of their tools and swept the place clean. The vacancy both attracts and daunts me. The pine floor, still unmarked, is fragrant and shiny with varnish, like a bare stage the moment before a play begins. The walls seem watchful, for they, too, are covered with planks of yellow pine, and the knots burn like a constellation of eyes.

Overcoming my wariness, I go inside, carrying with me only a pen, a journal, the clothes on my back, and the buzz in my head. I have come here in hopes of calming that buzz, the better to hear voices aside from my own. I open the windows and sit cross-legged on the floor with my back against a wall and my face to the east, where the meadow brightens with morning. I draw in a deep breath, let it go, and try to shed a feeling of decadence for sitting here alone, idle, on a Sunday morning.

My wife knows I am here, but she is the only one, and she urged me to come. As of one o'clock this afternoon, Ruth and I will have been married thirty-three years, and in that time our lives have been braided together so tightly, so richly, that I cannot imagine myself apart from her. And yet we both recognize my periodic need for solitude and stillness, a need that has grown more acute over the years.

We arranged for the building of this hut on some land we own at the edge of a state forest a few miles from our house in town, so that I would have a place to withdraw. I realize what a privilege it is to have such a refuge, what a luxury to claim a second roof when so many people lack any shelter at all, and I do not know how long I can bear to keep it. "Don't spoil your studio by feeling guilty," says Ruth, who has come to know my guilt all too well since the day of our wedding. She drove me out here this morning to inaugurate this quiet space, dropped me off at the end of the gravel path with a kiss and a blessing, then went on about her errands. We'll rendezvous this evening to celebrate our anniversary by sharing a meal with friends.

Although I must eventually return to house and work and a host of obligations, for a few hours, at least, nobody will disturb me. There is no telephone in this room, no television, no radio, no computer, no electrical device at all except for a light and a fan overhead. I do not switch them on, because the sun gives me all the light I need and a breeze through the windows keeps me cool. Although cars rumble past now and then on a road that skirts the far side of the meadow, they disrupt the stillness only briefly. Otherwise, I hear the churr of cicadas and crickets, the rattle and purl of birdsong, the drumming of a woodpecker, and the trickle of these words as they run from my mind through my fingers onto the page.

Sunlight pouring through a southern window forms a bright rhomboid on the wooden floor. Even without a watch, by tracking this brilliant shape as it changes through the day I could

mark noon as the moment when the corners are square. If I stayed longer, if I devoted myself to recording the dance of light over the gleaming boards, I could trace out sunrise and sunset, equinox and solstice, all the cycles of the turning year. But I will not do so, for I wish to shrug off time for a spell, to dwell in the present. I drift so often into past and future, jerked around by memory and expectation, that I lose the savor of the moment. I have come to this empty room to break free of tasks and deadlines, to cast off worry and grief.

## DUST MOTES

FLOAT LAZILY before me in a shaft of light, twitching as they collide with one another. I learned in freshman physics class that this perpetual shimmy is called Brownian motion, and the higher the temperature, the faster the particles move. In that same class I was also told that if you put a frog in a pot of cold water on a stove and then gradually raise the heat, the poor benighted creature will boil before it has the sense to jump out of the pot. I never tested this claim on a frog, but I have come to believe that a version of it holds true for many people, including myself.

As the demands on our time and attention multiply, we move faster and faster to keep up with them, crowding our calendars, shuttling from place to place and deadline to deadline, strapping phones to our belts, carrying chores everywhere in satchels and laptops, working through lunch and supper and weekends and holidays, getting and spending twenty-four hours a day. Many of us take pills to lull us to sleep, pills to wake us up, and pills to soothe our

nerves. Many of us hire strangers to raise our children, to buy presents for our loved ones, to clean our houses and cook our food. Instead of slowing down when the pace becomes frantic, we enlarge our highways and pipelines and cables, we buy gadgets and software guaranteed to help us do everything more quickly, we push down on our accelerators. Instead of deciding there's something wrong with this pot as the water roils about us, we flail our arms and thrash our legs to keep from drowning.

I have decided to climb out of the pot, which is why I've come to this empty hut on a Sunday morning. The room is four paces wide by five paces long, about twelve feet by fifteen, and open to the steep rafters overhead. All the surfaces are wood, a reminder that this place is a gift of trees. There are windows in each wall and two skylights in the ceiling. Looking east I see the meadow, a sweep of grasses polished by sun. To the south I see a grove of sycamores, a thicket of blackberries, and a field grown up in goldenrod and ragweed and saplings. The forest begins just beyond the railing of the deck to the west, mainly oak and maple and hickory and beech, rank after rank of big trees rising up a slope into deepening shade and continuing on for several miles before yielding to the next road. Through windows in the north wall I see a welter of blowzy flowers and weeds, and a path leading to the gravel drive where Ruth dropped me off.

On a Sunday morning in town I could have worshiped with any of several dozen congregations, from staid Episcopalians to Holy Rollers, but they are all too noisy for my taste, too intent on scriptures and formulas, too eager to

lasso the great mystery with words. I could have sat in silence with Buddhists or Quakers, waiting for insight, and yet even they often quarrel about the truth as soon as they rise from meditation, and over the years their arguments have led to schisms and feuds. The world is manifestly one, and each of us is part and parcel of that unity, so our quarrels about religious doctrine can only estrange us from the reality we seek.

Although I can't let go of language entirely, as witness these lines stretching across the pages of my journal, I do manage to sit for long spells in a wakeful hush. I keep my eyes open because I wish through stillness to enter the world, not escape from it. I wish to bear in mind all the creatures that breathe, which is why I've chosen to make my retreat here within the embrace of meadow and woods. The panorama I see through the windows is hardly wilderness, and yet every blade of grass, every grasshopper, every sparrow and twig courses with a wild energy. The same energy pours through me. Although my body grows calm from sitting still, I rock slightly with the slow pulse of my heart. My ears fill with the pulse of crickets and cicadas proclaiming their desires. My breath and the clouds ride the same wind.

IN HIS *PENSÉES*  
PASCAL REMARKS:

"When all are moving precipitously toward excesses, none seems to be so moving. He who stops makes the mad rush of the others perceptible, as would a fixed point." Those others may decide for themselves whether their lives have sped out of control. The mad rush that concerns me is my own. By sitting still,



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*I'm tempted to run  
away, beyond reach  
of the needy voices.  
So I make of this  
hut a hiding place.*

I can measure the crazed motion of my customary days.

In those customary days, I work almost every waking hour. Even during the rare pauses—while shaving, taking a shower, waiting for the teakettle to boil, pedaling my bicycle to and from the office—I find myself compiling lists and scheduling tasks. I read as I dash from appointment to appointment, jot notes on a clipboard in the car, lug everywhere a backpack stuffed with chores. When I lie down in exhaustion at night, sleep seems like an interruption in the round of toil. So far I haven't swallowed any pills to soothe my frazzled nerves. I've resisted the sales pitches for tools designed to speed up my life. I carry neither beeper nor cell phone nor palm pilot, feeling already too thoroughly connected to other people's demands. And yet, so long as I'm awake I feel driven to accomplish things, to redeem the time.

Why do I keep such a frantic pace? Not to rake in more money, because my wife and I could live quite well on half of what we earn. Nor to win fame, because I recognize how small and brief my life is. Nor to secure happiness, because I realize that happiness comes to me only in the moments when I slow down. Nor to meet the expectations of a boss, because I am my own boss. Then why the endless toil? Maybe I'm still trying to satisfy the insatiable needs of my parents as I sensed those needs in childhood. Maybe I'm still trying to ease the ache that drove my father to drink, even though he is long since dead, and I'm struggling to relieve the dismay and anger my mother felt because of his drinking. Or it could be that I'm trying to placate the Protestant God I learned

about as a boy, the stern judge who watches us every moment, recording how we use our days, a God I've tried to banish from my thoughts but who keeps burrowing back in through the mind's basement. Or perhaps, like anyone who can't help seeing damage and pain in every direction, I'm only trying to avoid the bite of conscience.

I've been spared the turmoil of war, the pain of exile, the cramp of hunger. As far as I know, I'm free of disease. No one treats me with spite or scorn. I lead a blessed life, a rarity on this suffering planet, and yet much of the time I feel torn asunder by the needs I see around me, needs that outstrip my power to respond. From the circle of my family and friends, on out through the ever-larger circles of my students, my neighbors, the members of my community, the people in this country and in distant lands, and the earth itself with all its imperiled creatures, there are far more claims on my thought and compassion than I can meet.

I would not speak of this dilemma if it were only mine, but I watch many others race again and again through the cycle of widening concern, frenzied effort, and exhaustion. Whatever the source of conscience—parents, God, solemn books, earnest friends, the dictates of biology—it is adapted to a narrower space than the one we inhabit. Limited to a small tribe or a community of a few hundred people, conscience may prompt us to serve others in a balanced and wholesome way. But when television and newspapers and the Internet bring us word of dangers by the thousands and miseries by the millions and needful creatures by the billions; when pleas for help reach us around the clock; when aching faces greet us on

every street—then conscience either goes numb or punishes us with a sense of failure.

I often lie awake at night, rehearsing the names of those I've disappointed by failing to give them all they asked. I don't say this to make myself out as a generous soul. I am hardly that; I feel defenseless rather than virtuous. The truth is that I've come to fear the claims that other beings make on me, because their numbers grow relentlessly. I wish to love my neighbor, but the neighborhood has expanded so far, and the neighbors have become so many, that my love is stretched to the breaking point. I'm tempted to run away, beyond reach of the needy voices. So I make of this hut a hiding place.

## SITTING

**CROSS-LEGGED.** eyes open to this room filled with light, I ride my breath in and out as if it were the swells and troughs of a mild sea, and soon the strings of duty that bind me to the world begin to fall slack. Thoughts of the sea remind me of kayaking in Glacier Bay twelve months ago with my son and his fiancée and an Alaskan friend. Some days the water was choppy and we had hard going, especially into the wind. Other days the water lay as smooth and glossy as the pine floor in this room, and we glided over the surface with ease. My breath now feels like that effortless paddling.

I remember the way otters floated on their backs among the kelp beds, the way seals bobbed to the surface beside our kayaks and studied us with their dark eyes, the way humpback whales breached with a snort from their blowholes and a wave of their flukes, and I remember

how the water erased all sign of their passage moments after they dove again. Even a storm tousled the sea only so long as the wind blew, leaving no mark after the sky cleared. Gradually I breathed in the equanimity of this imperturbable sea. By the end of our week in Glacier Bay, after camping each night on shore in the neighborhood of bears and eating fresh salmon cooked over driftwood fires and talking under the stars with people I love, I felt as serene as those waters on the calmest days.

We began our trip home from Alaska by taking a sauna and bathing in a creek at my friend's house on an island near Juneau, a house almost as simple and not much bigger than the hut where I record these memories. He had built the cabin and its furniture with timber salvaged from the beaches of Glacier Bay. We ate food from his garden and root cellar, drank water from his cistern, relieved ourselves in his privy with a view into the dripping forest of hemlock and spruce. His place was so close in spirit to the wilderness that it left my newfound tranquility unruffled.

My son and his fiancée and I parted from my friend and flew in a shuddering single-engine plane through rain to Juneau. Already in that small airport I felt dizzy from the onslaught of noise, the blabbing televisions, the clutter of machines, the milling, fretful travelers. From there we flew to Seattle, where the crowds and racket and hard surfaces and bustling carts and droning conveyor belts seemed like the stage props of nightmare. Then we stopped over at the airport in Las Vegas around midnight, and a two-hour delay forced us to leave the plane and make our way into the pandemonium of grunting loudspeakers,

maundering drinkers, clanking slot machines, and wailing sirens. I felt I had descended into bedlam. I could not fathom how this midnight delirium and the serenity of Glacier Bay belonged on the same planet. Here was a frenzy beyond anything I had ever seen, and I knew with absolute certainty that it pointed the way to madness.

But was my life back home so different? Was my crowded calendar, my backpack stuffed with chores, my head crammed with duties, any less crazed? What jackpot was I after? Measured against the serenity I had felt in the wilderness, my usual life seemed as hectic and frazzled as this delirium in the casino. The twin images of Las Vegas and Glacier Bay have stayed with me ever since, like the opposite poles in a force field.

**THE HUT CREAKS** as the boards expand in the sun, like an animal stretching as it wakes. Tonight, after the sun goes down, the joints of cedar and pine will creak again as they cool. The hummingbirds will keep darting from blossom to blossom until the cold drives them south for winter. The crickets will keep on singing day and night until the first heavy frost, and then they will carry their song with them into the ground. Even in the depths of winter, beneath soil frozen as hard as iron, hearts will beat in burrows, and the creek will run beneath a skin of ice. There is no absolute stillness in nature. In the nails that hold this building together, electrons whirl. Even the dead yield their substance in a ferment of decay.

As I write these words in my journal, I'm forced to acknowledge a deeper source for the frantic pace of my ordinary days. I suspect I'm trying to stave off

death. If I work without ceasing, maybe death will think I'm a good boy, useful and industrious, too valuable for extinction. If I serve others all my waking hours, maybe death will pass by the ones I love. If I write books, teach classes, give speeches, donate money, lobby politicians, and march in the streets, maybe death will spare the millions of species endangered by our prodigal ways.

When I was growing up in the country, a neighbor boy warned me never to lie still for long in an open field, because the turkey vultures would spiral overhead, waiting to feast on me. Especially if you're lying down, he told me, keep fidgeting, so they know you're alive. Except for rare passages of calm, I have kept fidgeting ever since.

On our drive out here this morning, Ruth and I passed a vulture that was tearing bright red strands from a possum flattened on the road. At the sound of our engine, the bird hunched protectively over its meal and thrust its beak into the bloody mess for another scrap. I found nothing gruesome in the sight, for the vulture was doing necessary work, obeying an appetite as clean and simple as gravity. This gawky black bird with its featherless head the color of blood was not death itself but only one of death's janitors. Without all the dutiful scavengers, from bacteria to wolves, our planet would be layered in corpses. Instead, the living dismantle the dead, and out of the debris new life rises.

Over the past few years, Ruth and I watched Alzheimer's disease whittle her mother to a thin reed, which finally snapped. Month by month, each of our surviving parents has lost certain blessings of body and mind—a range of hearing and sight, fine control of the

fingers, strength of legs, precision of memory, the names of familiar things. Ruth and I have ached over this paring down, even as we know our own turn will come if we live long enough. Age strips away our powers as well as our possessions. By giving myself to this empty room, perhaps like the monk who sleeps in his coffin I am only preparing myself for an emptiness over which I will have no choice.

### THE HEBREW ROOT OF SABBATH

means "to rest." In anticipation of this Sunday morning's retreat, I copied into my notebook the fourth commandment delivered by Moses to the people of Israel:

*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.*

So keeping the sabbath holy means not only that we should rest from our own labors but also that we should grant rest to all those beings—both human and nonhuman—whose labor serves us.

According to Moses, God went further in demanding restraint from this wandering tribe once they entered the promised land. Every seventh year the land was to be left fallow; the fields were not to be plowed and the grapevines not to be pruned; and whatever grew of itself on the land was to be left alone. Every fiftieth year, slaves were to be set free, leased property was to be restored to its original

owners, and the earth was to be granted a solemn rest. Why? Because, God proclaims through Moses, "the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants."

These ancient rules are instructions in humility. For six days we make the Creation serve our needs, but on the seventh day we must leave the Creation alone. We may hold title to the land, but we may not claim it for our own, as if it were ours to do with as we choose. Whatever our religious views, we might do well to recover the idea of the sabbath, not only because we could use a solemn day of rest once a week, but also because the earth could use a respite from our demands. Whether or not we accept the idea of a Creator, we should admit we're not the makers of this bountiful and beautiful earth, we're only guests here, just passing through, and we have no right to devour the promised land.

### A SPIDER

LOWERS ITSELF by a thread from a rafter, settling a few inches from my outstretched feet. It's only a smidgen of life, no bigger than a grain of rice, with a bright red dot for a body and legs so fine they're all but invisible. Even in so small a creature—and in ones much smaller, as I know from gazing through microscopes—there is room for hunger and purpose. The spider sets off across the floor, slowing up at the joints between boards like a skier straddling crevasses. Against the caramel grain in the pine, the bright spark of a body glows like a burning coal. It crawls over the carcass of a ladybug, stops to examine a dead wasp, eventually trundles into a dark corner where it begins laying out the warp for a web.

The spider does not rest every sev-

enth day, nor do the warblers singing now from the branches of a sumac just outside the window, nor do the crickets sawing away at their lovelorn tune in the grass. They pursue their passions as long as their breath holds out. They needn't be reminded to restrain themselves, for nature curbs their appetites soon enough with frost or drought or some other calamity. Among all the menagerie, it seems, we alone must be taught to curb our own appetites. We alone need reminding that the condition of our lease on the promised land is that we restrain ourselves.

**THE INDUSTRY OF THE SPIDER** makes me notice the stiffness in my legs. How long have I sat here? Two hours? Three? Whenever she finishes her errands, Ruth will be coming to pick me up. I rise and stretch. The gleaming floor, so smooth, tempts my feet. I wonder for a moment if the holy sabbath allows for dancing, then I dance anyway, a slow and clumsy shuffle, the way a bear might dance. My feet brushing the wood make the whispery sound of a broom. Since nobody is around to hear how badly I sing, I go ahead and sing. It's a love ballad that I'll repeat for Ruth tonight when we celebrate our anniversary. At the sound of my voice, the crickets and cicadas and warblers surrounding the hut cease their chorus, but in a little while they resume, overcome by desire, and we sing together our amorous tunes.

Before long the dancing covers me in sweat. I lie on the floor where a breeze from the windows cools me. This room is a haven. Eventually I'll put a table, a chair, a lamp, and a meditation cushion

in here, but for now I prefer to leave it bare. The two skylights in the ceiling open onto rectangles of blue. Clouds drift across those openings, coiling and merging like foam at the confluence of rivers. Every few seconds, barn swallows wheel across, there a moment and then gone, like thoughts. Suddenly, through my framed patch of sky, two red-tailed hawks glide past. I leap to my feet and throw open the door and step onto the deck to watch them sail away beyond the rim of trees.

And so, without planning to leave my hermitage, I'm drawn outside by a pair of birds. Standing in the open air, I realize I'm hungry. I'm thirsty, and I'm eager for company. I want to see Ruth, my bride of thirty-three years. I want to walk with her through our neighborhood in the evening as lights come on in the houses. I long to hold my children and catch up on their lives. I want to share food with friends. I want to sit with my students and talk over the ancient questions. I want to walk among crowds at the farmers' market and run my hands over the melons and apples and squash. I want to do good work—not every waking hour, and not for every worthy cause, but enough work to ease some pain and bring some hope and free some beauty in a few lives. I want to carry back into my ordinary days a sense of the stillness that gathers into the shape of a life, scatters into fragments, and then gathers again.

Waiting in the sunshine, I listen to the rumble of cars approaching the hut along the blacktop road, for one of those cars will bring Ruth, who will find a husband more peaceful and joyful and grateful than the one she left here this morning. ✎



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