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A Canticle of Houses

Frances Hall

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FRANCES HALL

A CANTICLE OF HOUSES

The house I was twelve in—
 This was home,
 With its loquats and its fig trees,
 Its barn that you could see the light through,
 And a larger family to put a roof over
 Than there were rooms to put them in.
 In that saffron house
 I moved from headlong childhood
 Into an arrogance of knowing
 That time could never make me vulnerable
 Although my life might grow and change.

Then the house of the apple orchard:
 The yellow and the rosy names of fruit
 Scenting the summer, scenting autumn
 With a fragrance deep in consciousness
 Like a meaning separate from the word that
 'is its symbol.
 The winter nights of stillness,
 The late dawns and the small birds stirring,
 The fire on the hearth and the fire in the mind
 Burning productively together—
 In the past, in the present, glows the house.

The house of loving:
 Of the self changing to match another's image,
 Shedding old leaves like oak trees
 With new growth coming steadily
 So the branches were never bare.
 A house of acorns falling sharply in the night
 And a blue jay taking them in the morning
 While a gray cat washed his face in the sun.

Now this last house so newly ended
Where the generations sat,
The grandparents and the children,
The kitchen caverned deep with pantry,
The windowed sweep of rooms,
The turning stair, the tallness,
The bends in hallways
Like a heart turning an unintended corner—

I will sit in some uncommitted place
And let memory dust old furniture
In vanished houses.

ROBERT SWARD

GIFTS

Every day is Groundhog Day,
Omens and signs. I will not move,
I am stopped in all my ventures.
Great things are delivered by close friends.
The friends are troubled. They come
With gifts. They present them badly.
Surrounded by gifts, anxious friends
And wives, children wailing
I make once more my peace with the world.
Am I at last beyond distraction,
No longer contemptuous, inconsolable?
A trial to wives, my children, my friends?
I step out into light, the day
Look about casting shadows
Left and right. I turn, amazed,
Walk off with them
Back into the world.