

Essays of Place

HAVING
EVERYTHING
RIGHT



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A James R. Hepworth Book

CONFLUENCE PRESS / 1986



*The Barn
and the Bees*

MY PARENTS and I were driving along Boone's Ferry Road early one Sunday morning with a ripe load of horse manure in the back of the family station wagon when we saw a hand-lettered sign nailed to a telephone pole: "2 × 4 is 25 cents, 2 × 6 is 50 cents." There was so much fog on the glass we had to open the side window to see an arrow in red crayon pointing up a road to the west. Even the steam from the hot stuff behind us couldn't blunt the chill that went through me. Up that road was a barn I had admired since I was a child, and I knew it had fallen. In the same moment I felt the thrill of honest greed.

Twenty minutes later I stood alone in the jumbled ruin of red boards, straw, and the sweet stink of old dairy. No one was around, except the swallows careening overhead where the eaves had been and their nests hung once. Like me, they clung to the vacancy of the familiar. Blackberry vines had held the barn upright for years, and now that it was down the vines trailed over the tangle, dangling in a veil from the south and east walls that still stood crooked somehow. I scrambled up a slanted timber wedged into the pile to survey the place. The deep litter I stood on had a fragile architecture to it, not quite fallen clear down in a crisscross balance of long sagging rafters propped in chaos, with bent tin roofing over half-collapsed rooms where the side bays had been, the rusted stanchions wrenched into twisted contraptions, and everywhere tangles of baling wire and splintered fir siding. The heap made a ticking sound as it settled in the heat. There seemed to be too much light on it all, the fragrant

old mystery bleached away and done. Then I heard a low hum from the dark southeast corner.

Lifting a jagged sheet of tin aside, I clambered into the long tunnel of slanted posts and rafters down the nave, stepping from one nail-studded board to the next, putting my body through a snake's contortions without a snake's grace, every pop and squeak of wood on wood a warning, every ping of corrugated tin in the deadfall. I passed a boat filled with hay, its bow beached on a bale that sprouted green, its keel turned to earth. I passed a wagon with no wheels, split in half where a beam had dropped through its bed to the floor. Mice scattered before me, and a bumblebee struggled out from a ball of wool, its nest that had fallen gently to a new niche in the rusted skull-hollow of a drinking pan. I had to inhabit what was left of this palace before it came all the way down, and the bees were beckoning me from their half-shattered hive now thirty feet ahead.

Others were in church. I was in a trance. In the honey-sweet gloom of the back corner I stepped up onto a patch of floor. This dusty vestibule had the privacy of prayer, the solitude of visible history. The combs hung down from a four-by-four rough-cut brace on the wall, and the bees massed quietly there, working. The small back door opened onto acres of blackberry, and a thorned vine held it ajar with a double turn around the knob. Inside, a scatter of oats glittered on the threshold. A wheelbarrow stood mounded with jars. A curry comb worn down to nothing hung from a nail on the wall where each knot-hole was mended with the rusted lid from a tin can. If I stirred, my boot would crush broken glass, so I held still and watched the bees climb each others' backs to toil, to turn over pollen and flower-sap in their mouths in a flurry of wings and touch. The blunt, heavier shapes of a few drones waited among them to be fed – so inept they could not lick their own food from underfoot. The

queen must have been on the inner combs, laying like mad at this season for the main summer honeyflow. From one mating flight, one meeting with a drone, she bore children all her life. If I stood in the dark, they would not bother me. It was light and work each gave her custom to, spinning out through the open door on the quickly tightening spiral of her errand.

I crawled out and away, the fragrance of the hive, the quiet of that dark corner filling me. Across a field, in what must originally have been the farmhouse, a neighbor of the barn in a heap gave me its owner's phone number, along with a sad look. "They finally got it," she said through the screen door, as she brushed a wisp of hair aside. "I was hoping they'd forget to." She was going to say more, but a child shouted and she closed the door instead. Back home, I called and asked for Peter. It's best not to talk about money at first.

"Howdy," I said. "I was wondering about your plans for the scrap from that barn off Boone's Ferry Road."

"Yeah? Well I don't want anyone in there, the shape it's in. On account of my liability."

"I can understand that, but I noticed some boards piled out in front, and there *was* a sign about it."

"Sign? I didn't put up any sign. Must have been the guy I hired to tear it down. We're stalled on account of some bees in there."

"I can take care of those bees for you."

"Listen, you take care of those bees, and you can take anything you like. I've got to get everything out of there. Some guy complained to the County about it being a fire hazard, and they gave me a week. But do you really think there's anything worth saving? What do you want it for?"

"I want to build a barn."

IN THE SHORT LIGHT at five a.m. I was there in my bee-gloves and veil, mechanic's coveralls and tall rubber boots, threading my way down the tunnel of boards and tin by memory and luck. I carried a hive-box and a spray bottle of water and a soft brush. Bees never sleep, but they generally don't fly when they're chilled. I found them as they would be at that hour, packed together on the combs with a low, sociable hum. Once the sun hit that wall behind them, they would fly.

I stepped on the wrong board, the architectural balance above me groaned and shifted, a dozen bees lifted off with an altered pitch to their buzz, and the whole hive quickened. In their sudden, ordered turmoil, I was seeing a mood-change inside a friend's brain, something naked and fair. I waited without a word. Bits of straw flickered away as the guard-bees settled back onto the wall and climbed into the mass that quieted with their return. The warm scent of wax and honey came my way. Through the doorway, mist settled over the gray sweep of the blackberry meadow. It was in full blossom, and the bees must have been working it hard. I could see the white wax over capped honey cells whenever the mass of bees parted like a retreating wave from the comb's upper rim. There would be sweet enough to keep them alive once I dampened their wings, carved away the comb entire, and swept the chilled bees into the hive-box I carried. Through my veil I saw them in the cleft they had chosen, their little city compact with purpose in a neglected place.

By dawn I had them boxed, sealed in and humming in the shade beside my car. A few had escaped my work, had followed me, then doubled back with the buzz of anger sinking to a different note. No one is quite sure what stray bees do when the home hive is destroyed and the swarm disappears without them. They might follow other bees to a foreign hive and try to take

on its scent and be admitted. Or they might hang around the old vacancy, working the local blossoms and resting under a leaf until their wings are too frayed to hold in the air. Bees die when they sting, or when work finally shatters their wings.

Several days after the wall that had harbored the hive came down, I would still see a few bees hovering precisely where the combs had been. At midafternoon I would turn over a board with the print of wax across its grain — some panel or brace that had boxed in the hive — and find a solitary bee fingering the pattern like a disbelieving relative reading by braille the name new-carved on a tombstone. I shared their nostalgia for a shape in the air. And so did others, in their own ways. As I worked on the lumberpile, neighbors came by in little groups or alone to leave with me some story about the barn, and to seek some scrap of it to carry away.

First came three boys to watch me work, to pick their way around the heap so glorious with its ramps and tunnels, its pedestals of triumph and hollows of secrecy. When the pile shifted under them, they leaped off and skittered away, then came back with their father from across the road. They wanted a treehouse made, and he wanted to see the barn. He was in his yard-work clothes, not in a hurry.

"You know the woman that used to live in that old farmhouse and own this barn was a strange one," he said to me, while the boys scattered again toward the ruin. "She'd show up at our place every fall to trade walnuts for whatever we had to trade. We always took the unshelled ones, her hands were so dirty. Or maybe they were dark from the hulling. She had gunny sacks tied around her feet with baling wire."

"When was this?" I asked.

"Before they were born." He gestured toward the three boys

now waltzing along a beam thrust like a bowsprit from the pile. "Looks like I'd best get them home."

The four of them went away carrying the small roof from the ventilator cupola. It had somehow stayed intact, riding the whole structure down as it fell, and ending perched on top of the heap. As they drifted across the road, they looked like four posts under the Parthenon.

Next came a gentleman in pressed yellow slacks and a shirt with a little alligator over his heart. His hands were clean and thin. He watched me labor for a while in silence.

"Hard work for a Sunday," he said. I stood up and let the sweat cool on my face.

"Well, I wanted to save some of these boards," I said. "The barn's gone, but there's some lumber left."

"Eyesore. I'm glad to see it finally come down." I looked at the mouth that had said this. I had nothing to say. Away across the pasture a solitary maple stood dark in its neglected shade.

"But say," he said, "I need a board to repair the rail on my deck — two-by-four, about twelve feet long. . . ." He skirted carefully around the perimeter of the pile, picking at the ends of likely boards clinched firmly into the weave of collapse, now and then looking my way appealingly. I knew who had called the County about the fire hazard, about the old barn settling too slowly deeper into moss and blackberry, the stack rattling in winter storms and the tin roof pinging through each summer's heat. I pulled an eighteen-foot clear-grained length of fir from the stack I had plucked of nails, and he went off with it at an awkward march, holding the board far out to the side of his body with his fingertips. Soon I paused in my work to hear the whine and ring of his powersaw toiling through the wood. I counted seven cuts, then silence.

The woman who had bought the farmhouse, who had given

me the owner's name, came down to offer a glass of lemonade. The cold sweat from the glass ran down my wrist.

"I never let my kids go inside." She squinted into the patches of darkness where walls still leaned together. "They get into enough trouble as it is. But I always felt we owned the barn, along with the house — even though we didn't. You should have seen the place when we moved in: a car in the back yard filled with apples; a drawer in the kitchen packed with red rubber bands, and another with brown ones; mice in the walls and a possum in the attic. The house had been empty a long time too."

I set the glass down, and bent to my work, wrestling heroically with a long two-by-six mired deep in the hay.

"Are you going to keep these Mason jars?" She nodded toward a dozen blued quarts lolling in the grass.

"You'll use them before I do." I shook the sweat out of my eyes to watch her cradle eleven of them somehow in her arms, with one clenched tight under her chin. She started out with a crooked smile to walk hunched and slow up the lane toward a yard littered with bright toys.

"I'll come back for the glass," she called over her shoulder. Then she turned slowly, like a ship halfway out of harbor. "Or bring it up to the house for a refill."

The afternoon was a long season of history, a plunge into the archeological midden of my own midwestern ancestors, a seduction of my hands by wood the flanks of the milkers polished. What was a stall of straw but a nest for stories, even under the naked, open light of the sky? Burlap lace around a jar blue with time held something without a name but kin to pleasure. I had to stop, I had to walk away from it, to visit the outlines of the pasture and the farm, to carry the glass to the farmhouse so I could know the rooms of its people, to walk again and rest from the persistent unity of the ruin, to lie down in purple vetch and

listen to bee-women sip and dangle on the small blossoms. When the sun woke me and I stood up, there was a shape of my own dwelling in the grass.

By now I had a stack of white, six-by-six posts that had held the stanchions in a row, a heap of two-by-fours in random lengths dried hard as iron, twenty-four sheets of tin rusted on the bottom side from generations of cattle-steam and piss in hay, a whole raft of two-by-sixes in twenty-foot lengths, each dried and set precisely to the same roof-sag. When I built my barn, I would turn them over so the roof began with a slight swell. Over time, they would sag back flat and right.

I was just admiring my favorite stick – the four-by-eight hay-beam from the gambrel's point, complete with a patch of lichen where it had thrust out into the weather, and a rusted iron ring bolted through that had pulleyed up ton after ton of feed – when a red sports car came creeping along the nail-studded road. I glanced at the clouds reflected in the windshield when it stopped, then lowered the beam to the ground.

The driver waited inside, watching me, or finishing a song on the radio, just long enough to show he was in no hurry, then climbed out slow, slid his hands into his pockets, and looked at the sky.

"Name's Peter. Finding anything good?" He stood by his car.

I pointed a crowbar at the hay-beam. "Just what you see: lumber with rot on both ends but some good wood in the middle."

"What about the bees?"

"Right there." I aimed the crowbar at the hive-box humming quietly in the blackberry shade. "I caught all but a few."

"A few?"

"Five."

He nodded slowly, like a bear with ponderous thoughts. "I think I might want those doors," he said, nodding toward the

two big wagon doors slapped face-down where they had fallen. He started gingerly around the heap's perimeter in his rubber running shoes. "My wife likes antique stuff – you found anything like that? It doesn't have to be pretty, so long as it's old. My own idea of old is black-and-white TV, but she sees it different."

"There's a wheelbarrow with the bottom rotted out and one handle gone – something like that?"

"She'd love it. Could you wheel it out and leave it by the doors? The County's given me a week to scrape this down to bare dirt. Anything left after Friday will cost me a fine. And the man I hired to take it all down should be along soon. He may have stuff he wants too." He looked at the sky. A quick rain had begun, and he backed away toward the car. "Try to have everything you want out pretty quick. And don't get hurt."

He paused to say more, looked at the ground, then turned and folded himself carefully into the car. The crowbar was warm in my hand, and slick with sweat. The rain felt good. The lights of the car came on, flickered to high-beam, then died as the windshield wipers started to wag. He backed out the long track across the field, his tires spinning a few times on the wet grass.

A cloud moved and sunlight rippled glistening across the field after him. The lumber around me began to steam. My footing was slick but the air was clean. As I worked with steel-hafted hammer in my right hand and crowbar in my left, swinging each long board through the loving rhythm of lift, pound and tease, roll and balance, flip, shove and drop-slap to the stack of clean lumber, I heard the unique machine of the fallen barn flex in the heat, the rippled ping when tin changes its mind, the shriek of a sixteen-penny nail jerked from the sheath rust wedded it to for seventy years, the see-saw rub and grabble of a rafter waggled from the heap, and in a pause the plop of sweat sliding off my

elbow to a stone. Before me loomed the raw, steaming tangle of chaos with a history of order, a flavor of tradition, the stiff, wise fiber of old growth; behind me, stacks of lumber rose with a new barn intrinsic in each board, in the rivet of right work I had yet to do to knit it all together again. My hands were twin apprentices to the wreck, to the knowing fragments of joinery still buried there.

As I curled my spine over the tangle to grasp a clear length of one-by-twelve fir, two causes made my task hard: the persistence of the builder, circa 1910, and the haste of the wrecker, 1980. The builder had known how to make things hold, clinching nails that bound the battens down, and pinning the whole fabric of the walls with extra braces scarfed to the frame wherever it might be vulnerable to the wind's pivot or gravity's drag. The wrecker, on the other hand, was in a hurry.

Maybe he heard the bees when he first drove up, and decided not to go inside at all. Maybe the doors were so woven with thumb-thick ropes of blackberry he didn't take the time to pry them apart and find the mahogany skiff locked together with bronze screws, or the wagon bed, the kerosene lamp, its wick last trimmed before he was born, now crushed flat under a three-hundred pound stick of fir. He never saw the stack of two-by-six spare joists, ten foot long and clear. Those the farmer had set aside for years of so much hay even this cathedral wasn't ample enough. With them he would lay an extra hay-floor over the stanchion alley. Instead, the wrecker threw a grappling hook high over the roof and pulled it all down. That must have brought out the bees to kiss him in the eyes. I found the hook abandoned — it had stabbed into a punky rafter with twenty feet of rope dangling where the wrecker had cut it away and fled. I coiled the rope and hung the hook from a volunteer cherry at the field's edge.

Somewhere way down Boone's Ferry Road I heard the low hum of a big bike coming. I heard it slow for the turn, and accelerate with a roar the last two-hundred yards up the side-road toward me. Then it came popping and growling over the field. A nail came out for the crowbar and flipped past my face. I was listening too hard and not watching what I did. I turned.

My face was small and double in the dark glasses on the up-turned face of the Gypsy Joker idling his big Harley ten feet away. On the shoulder of his black jacket were stitched the red names of his friends or victims: *Rick, Joe, Rollo*. When the engine rumbled and faded and coughed dead, the black leather of his gloves creaked as he flexed his right hand free.

"Finding some good stuff, buddy?" My double body was still in his glasses. His beard pointed to the field behind me. "I had a nice stack of boards all pulled out over there, but some bastard went and hauled them away."

"Oh, that was me," I said.

"Was, huh?"

"Peter said I get the bees out, I could take any lumber I wanted."

"You talked to Peter about it? I guess that's okay. But what about those bees? Christ, I blow up my truck trying to pull this wreck down, then these bees come busting out with my number in their tails. I don't mess with them little guys. No way." He looked around, raised his hand to his shades, but left them on. "They gone?"

"They're gone," I said.

"Well, hey, soon as I get my truck fixed I'm gonna start hauling this pile to the super dump, so take everything you can." His head turned toward my Chevy low in the grass, then slowly back to me. "I'm on fixed rate. The less I have to haul, the better. Jesus, take it all for firewood. You ain't never going to get

another chance like this." He kicked his smoking bike to life with a roar, and had to shout. "I tell you what: I wreck buildings for my living, and I never see pickings easy as these." With a tight nod he turned the bike and bounced across the field, a shrug and hunch restoring his solitude as he waggled away through the grass.

Wind riffled over the mounds and valleys of the blackberry patch, lifting off a harvest of white petals that skimmed across the swell. The two swallows twittered as they spiraled overhead, and a cricket, undisturbed by catastrophe, began to chant from somewhere near the fallen barn doors.

Along toward dusk, as I began sliding the longest boards onto the roof of my car named *The Duchess*, I saw a little boy come furtively down from the farmhouse, through the lilac hedge, through the wild hawthorn grove and out to the edge of the barn's debris. From the slow bob and swivel of his head, I could read how his gaze followed the outlines of the building that had stood there — first around the footing-wall perimeter, then down the stanchion bay, out into the central floor where the wagon had been, up some invisible ladder to the loft, then south to the back wall. He looked at me. I was part of the treachery. He was polite and said nothing. I began to wrestle a twenty-foot six-by-six, authentic with manure, onto the car.

"It wasn't dangerous," he said quietly, and I knew it was. I got the beam to the balancing joint and stopped to rest.

"Did you go in there a lot?"

"Just sometimes."

"What was it like?"

"It was always dark, and you had to know where you were going. There was broken glass, too, a whole floor of it. But I put a board across it so I could walk."

"What about the ladder?" I said, once I had the beam all the way up at rest on the car roof.

"I knew the good steps to step on. You just go slow, and hold onto other things at the same time. And there were bees in there. They never hurt you. I came up that close." He held his hand in front of his eyes. His face was a blur against the pale swathe of the hawthorn. "They kept working. They never bothered you. Once I even tasted some of their honey that dropped down on the straw." He looked back at me. "What are you going to build here, mister?"

"I'm not going to build anything here," I said, reaching for another board so he wouldn't go away. "Someone just wanted the barn taken down."

"What happened to the bees?"

"They're right there. Can you hear them?" I pointed to the hive-box that glowed a dull white and hummed. We both stood still.

BY DARK I unloaded the mossy timbers and curve-cured boards at my home, carried them one at a time around the house through the memorized tunnel of plum arch, apple tree, grape arbor. I stacked them in different ways, season by season, putting them to bed under tin, listening to the rattle of rain and fitting them in mind on my pillow to an old shape that would happen simply by happening slow. Whenever I hefted a timber so heavy I feared for my collarbone, or teased a splinter from my palm, I remembered how these boards stood face-to-face in a forest harvesting nineteenth-century light, how they slid through the saws side by side, how the green-chain grader's crayon marked them with a C for clear or an S for standard.

