

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

August 24, 2007

## Friday Poem

Filed under: poetry — alecsothblog @ 1:23 am

In yesterday's obituary for Grace Paley on NPR, Neda Ulaby wrote:

Paley told her students at Sarah Lawrence College that writers need two ears: One ear, she said, for the literary canon, the stories and poems you study in school, and another for "family and childhood and specifically the ordinary language of your time — which, though I use the word 'ordinary,' is always extraordinary, I think."

### **House: Some Instructions**

by Grace Paley

If you have a house  
you must think about it all the time  
as you reside in the house so  
it must be a home in your mind

you must ask yourself (wherever you are)  
have I closed the front door

and the back door is often forgotten  
not against thieves necessarily

but the wind oh if it blows  
either door open then the heat

the heat you've carefully nurtured  
with layers of dry hardwood

and a couple of opposing green  
brought in to slow the fire

as well as the little pilot light  
in the convenient gas backup

all of that care will be mocked because  
you have not kept the house on your mind

but these may actually be among  
the smallest concerns for instance

the house could be settling you may  
notice the thin slanting line of light

above the doors you have to think about that  
luckily you have been paying attention

the house's dryness can be humidified  
with vaporizers in each room and pots

of water on the woodstove should you leave  
for the movies after dinner ask yourself

have I turned down the thermometer  
and moved all wood paper away from the stove

the fiery result of excited distraction  
could be too horrible to describe

now we should talk especially to Northerners  
of the freezing of the pipe this can often

be prevented by pumping water continuously  
through the baseboard heating system

allowing the faucet to drip drip continuously  
day and night you must think about the drains

separately in fact you should have established  
their essential contribution to the ordinary

kitchen and toilet life of the house  
digging these drains deep into warm earth

if it hasn't snowed by mid-December you  
must cover them with hay sometimes rugs

and blankets have been used do not be  
troubled by their monetary value

as this is a regionally appreciated emergency  
you may tell your friends to consider

your house as their own that is  
if they do not wear outdoor shoes

when thumping across the gleam of their poly-  
urethaned floors they must bring socks or slippers

to your house as well you must think  
of your house when you're in it and

when you're visiting the superior cabinets  
and closets of others when you approach

your house in the late afternoon  
in any weather green or white you will catch

sight first of its new aluminum snow-resistant  
roof and the reflections in the cracked windows

its need in the last twenty-five years for paint  
which has created a lovely design

in russet pink and brown the colors of un-  
intentioned neglect you must admire the way it does not

(because of someone's excellent decision  
sixty years ago) stand on the high ridge deforming

the green profile of the hill but rests in the modesty  
of late middle age under the brow of the hill with

its back to the dark hemlock forest looking steadily  
out for miles toward the cloud refiguring meadows and

mountains of the next state coming up the road  
by foot or auto the house can be addressed personally

House! in the excitement of work and travel to  
other people's houses with their interesting improvements

we thought of you often and spoke of your coziness  
in winter your courage in wind and fire your small

airy rooms in humid summer how you nestle in spring  
into the leaves and flowers of the hawthorn and the sage green

leaves of the Russian olive tree House! you were not forgotten

#### **4 Comments**

1. Not sure if your trusty assistant informed you of this yet, but the folks at Urban Outfitters are stoked on you.

<http://blog.urbanoutfitters.com/blog/category/Minneapolis/>

*Comment by tucker — August 24, 2007 @ 3:38 am*

2. Oh no, so sad to learn here of Paley's death. Her thumbed and crumpled Collected Stories and Just as I Thought, have been in the pile next to my bed for years. I always think of her first when I think of New York.

*Comment by kate kirkwood — August 24, 2007 @ 8:06 am*

3. zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

*Comment by EVW — August 25, 2007 @ 2:57 am*

4. reminds me of that Kafka's The Burrow

*Comment by Alex Edouard — August 31, 2007 @ 8:52 am*