# and suddenly it's all right

In the middle of my grandfather's yard there was a small pentagonal house, well, a structure anyway, about ten feet high with a pointed roof and wooden walls in which the planks ran up and down. The walls sat on a concrete foundation, and high in the walls there were four diamond-shaped coloured windows, in the middle of each wall except the one with the door facing away from the house, which had its own red and blue diamond lower down in the middle of the door. Grandfather went there at 8 every morning and stayed there till 11, when he came indoors for brunch. He spent the rest of the day writing letters, on an old manual typewriter, and doing odd jobs. I did not go through that door until I was fourteen, and then I was taken aback by the beams of coloured light falling on the books shelved along three walls, all the walls except the door and the back wall where grandfather sat for hours every morning, a yellow writing pad across his knees, on a wooden surface. Waiting, he said, just waiting.

When I first marvelled at the bright shards fingering the walls, grandfather said to me "The windows were here first. They are from the original place on this spot, and they are what matters most. That's the way you do it: you begin with a few details and then add the structure. Then you add the remaining details."

I had no idea what he meant about structure and details, so I asked my mother. Only then did I learn that grandfather was a poet, a famous poet, someone written up in books and discussed as a significant figure of late twentieth century verse. One of the few who had influenced the way we speak in everyday life. He spent all that time in the

mornings writing. Or as he said, waiting. He had done this for forty years, first in a little wooden place at the same location. His work was known for its evocation of the patience that is needed to understand another person or to see the significance of one's own life. Discerning critics said that his central device was the use of the difficulty of producing poetry, finding the right word and achieving a long-distance interaction of sounds and meanings, as an image for the patience and indirection that are needed in life. Sitting and waiting, but always remaining alert. Some saw zen in it. Phrases expressing this patient impatience have entered everyone's speech. "Worrying is worse than getting there", "you want it then you dread it", "and suddenly it's all right". I first heard the last of these on television, without the "and": I used it in grandfather's presence and he was angry; told me to say it again and properly. I was privately annoyed. Does he think he owns the language?

The books on the shelves were big volumes of poetry: Milton, Tennyson, Yeats, Auden. A year after I was first allowed to look behind the door, I was doing a school assignment on Milton. I had never read a line of him. I didn't even know if he was still alive, and whether he spent his mornings in a little building by himself. There was no copy of Milton in the house, so when it was safely afternoon I went out to Grandfather's place of isolation to look at the copy there. It was easy to find, right beside the seat. I took it off the shelf and brought it into the house. The book opened easily and there was a table of contents, but beyond that it was hollow. In the hollowed out middle was a roll of toilet paper. *Paradise Soft*, in pencil in grandfather's tiny meticulous handwriting at the bottom of the contents page. I closed the book and smuggled it back.

A few days later grandfather was clearly in an irritable mood. He had a yellow pad in the house, in the afternoon, something I had never seen before. He was jotting on it some of the enigmatic expressions of patience and suffering that had entered the language. "Sooner is not worth waiting for", "the tangible immanence of what you cannot feel", "the part we try for is not the part that matters". The doorbell rang and an earnest woman was introduced. Professor Prescott reluctantly accepted a cup of coffee and pulled out her own yellow pad. She began to ask grandfather about the "creative crisis" he had experienced in the 1980s. Apparently a decade after he began to be recognized for "the characteristic and inimitable tenor of his voice" he produced nothing for three years, before resuming in much the way as before, though at somewhat greater length. Was he blocked by success or by the unexpected arrival of his happy domestic life? Gramps muttered something that only I could hear. "Because they said it had to be running water", and then more loudly "I found it hard to maintain my own-ness and my own vital rhythm during this time. But I fixed it with a new return to the old, which you can see there." He pointed out the window. A teasing look rolled over his face. "Mim's healthy soups may have had something to do with it, too." Professor Prescott relaxed: she was dealing with his unique metaphorical sensibility, and she must take what he said as an indirect representation of the inexpressible. Grandfather relaxed too, when he saw her put down her yellow pad. "And the new structure helped a lot, as did Mim's thick pie-crusts." I cannot say Professor Prescott looked any wiser when she left.

I was curious, though. I knew now that grandfather was revered by many, but I could read his face better than most, and it just didn't add up. The next afternoon I went stealthily to The Structure, and opened the door. Since it

faced away from the house I could look around without being seen. The door was connected with flimsy rusting hinges to the wooden cladding on the outside. Within this there were brick walls resting on the concrete foundation, but the walls only rose a couple of feet above the floor. Above that point there were just the old wooden walls, with their coloured windows. And pipes. There were large round copper stopcocks on the pipes. They were turned all the way in, to Off.