Mark Doty

In his autobiographical *Heaven’s Coast* and *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, poet Mark Doty reveals gay preservation sensibilities, his own and those of his late partner Wally Roberts. This narrative combines excerpts from those two works, describing Doty’s and Roberts’s immersion in New England old-house rehabilitation and auction-going in the 1980s. Doty lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts.¹⁶

I HAVE AN OLD SILVERPLATE PITCHER, a sturdy and serviceable thing made for use in a hotel, or a boardinghouse, or on a train. Simple, shapely. It sits now in the center of a painted blue round table, beside a white tureen holding a small shell-pink begonia from the A&P, the flowers clenched, a little reluctant to open indoors, in March, in New England. It has been a long time since the pitcher has been in service, exactly; now it radiates a sort of dignity, acquires from the company of other things a different sort of status of being. It holds the image of the room—small rectangular frames of windows, walls bending inward—upside down in the irregular sheen of its various metals. Where the body of the vessel bells out, at its midriff, the silver’s worn away, revealing the brass beneath; it’s here it must have been rubbed the most, as it was washed, year after year. Along the base there are dents and indentations, abrasions where it’s been set down, hard, or pushed across a counter, or jostled in a sink. These marks and wearings-down mark the evidence of time, the acclimation of the object’s body to human bodies. They are what make it beautiful; it may have been handsome, to begin with, but I believe that its beauty is the result of use, of being subject to time.

When my partner, Wally, and I moved to Vermont, we bought a thirteen-room Italianate Victorian house, built in Montpelier in 1884. Let me hurry to say, lest this summon visions of grandeur, that this was never a grand house—it was built, most likely, as housing for granite workers, at the foot of a granite hill where the homes of the better-off rose in the winter sunlight. We were down in the hollow, pitched into winter shade, and in January saw little of the sun. And the house in fact seemed to have been heading downhill since it was built; the floors sloped with fun-house abandon, and the floorplan had been mysteriously altered until it also bore a certain resemblance to a carnival maze. The outside was clad in mustard-yellow clapboards with brown trim, and the whole place was ringed by a particularly sorry-looking brown picket fence, half its points snapped away by neighbor kids.
But we were eager, and full of visions of possibility, and if the house was a daunting prospect, it was a palace nonetheless. We had been together for only a couple of years, living in and around Boston; I’d been a temporary typist and a part-time teacher, Wally a designer of window displays for a failing department store, and the idea of actually having our own house seemed astonishing. But I was offered a teaching job in Vermont, and I had a grant from the Massachusetts Artists Foundation, and here was a house we could actually afford. Driving by on the way to show us something else, the realtor had said, *Oh, you don’t want to look at that, that needs to be torn down.*

Which was really all we needed to hear, contrary creatures, scavengers, aficionados of barn sales and other people’s attics that we were. And it did turn out to be like a barn sale, really—except that we bought the barn, for twenty-nine thousand dollars. It had no insulation, an antique wood-fired furnace that consumed whole cords of timber in a wink, and period plumbing of unquestionable authenticity. Whether the flat roof was a concession to poverty or the Italianate fashion I never knew, but in the course of one Vermont winter the absolute madness of the idea became clear. Snowfall after snowfall meant shoveling the roof, and as soon as there was a bit of a thaw ice dams pushed at the spongy old roofing material until the melting water began to drip, and then to cascade, into our bedroom.

But that was all down the road. First the sellers, Clayton and Rita, taught us the intricacies of the furnace, the mysteries of a kerosene-burning stove. Rita worked in a clothespin factory and made all Clayton’s meals; he gathered mushrooms and cut firewood, though I never saw him do anything but sit at the kitchen table and smoke. They sized us up in five minutes, and seemed perfectly happy to accept us as a couple, especially once they’d figured out that Rita could talk to Wally about where to shop while Clayton told me about maintenance, shoveling, plumbing—men’s work. He’d even make jokes about the fussy concerns of wives, winking at me and nodding in Rita and Wally’s direction.

Once Clayton and Rita vacated for their new house, we found ourselves alone in thirteen rooms of linoleum concealing wide-plank floors, cheap lumberyard paneling covering up layer upon layer of wallpaper roses. The house had long been inhabited in the manner of poor Vermonters who made do, got by, put a patch on what broke. It had been a long time since that house had gotten any serious attention; had it ever gotten serious attention? But it didn’t matter a bit how much work confronted us, or that the renovation would turn out, eventually, to be unfinishable work—what mattered was it was ours, a great rambling dream of a house, eccentric, temperamental, rife with character, capable of being profoundly loved. And we were
thrilled; the house was ours to rescue, to uncover, to inhabit, to play with, a piece of the world on which to make our mark.

For the five years we lived there—in which time my hands, or Wally’s, must have touched every surface of that house, inside and out, as we painted and plastered and stripped and cursed, built and caulked and wept—every penny we could make went into the house. Mustard and chocolate gave way to a creamy colonial yellow, white trim, and blue shutters; the town paper suddenly carried an article about “the rising tide of gentrification.” In a while it had a rainproof roof shielding new insulation, new chimney linings, a huge soapstone woodstove big enough to defeat—almost—the bitter Januaries of the snow queen.

The house had a narrow double front door, still sporting its figured brass hardware, patterns half-obscured now with a hundred years of paint—handsome doors, but not very practical ones, since it was impossible to effectively block their drafty cracks and seams. For a while we sealed them off with plastic, six months of the year, and then it seemed time—the rest of the house was at least that much ready—to use the front door as it was meant to be used. At a salvage company I found just the right thing—for the proverbial arm and leg, but it was grant money, and it was for our house. Oh rationalization that justified many an expense we couldn’t afford, many an hour spent in the hard folding chairs of auctions, many a Saturday rooting in some collapsing barn! Just the right thing was a pair of oak doors, multipaned; they were French doors, really, but with the right varnish and framing they made the most splendid storm doors imaginable. It was the storm door raised to the level of art, and so the entryway of the house took on its proper dignity, a happy transition from the outer world to the inner one. At Christmas they were best, decked out and inviting.

It’s true the invitation was mostly to ourselves, and for a few good friends at the college where I taught, since we fit into our little Vermont town none too well; we were the only out gay male couple in the whole place, and though we were thoroughly accepted by the town’s liberal community (that overlayer of exiles which make Vermont culture tolerable) we were strange new creatures to the ur-layer of native Vermon ters who made up the town’s human bedrock. And who, significantly, made up most of our neighborhood. Our house wasn’t cheap just because the floors sagged; it took us a while to learn what people meant by that insistent talk about location.

But we had a world for ourselves there, and one very real advantage to living with a window designer was that he could make anything look good—the right arrangement, a little fussing with the details: splendor! The high ceilings accommodated a huge tree at Christmas, thus making use of the ornaments Wally had been squirreling away for a lifetime, souvenirs of other
people’s childhoods collected at a decade of yard sales: Bohemian glass beads strung into crystalline snowflakes, great garlands of shimmering glass, an under-tree world of ancient toys. The big granite cellar was perfect for the universe of display props Wally used for store windows. For me, a realm of gardens, borders of perennials out front (against the now properly white picket fence, every new picket of it cut with my own hands) and herbs and vegetables out back.

And doors to deck. One Christmas we made boxwood wreaths from cuttings I took from the ruins of a formal rose garden at the college; one hung on each of the gleaming oak doors. They looked so classic, and lasted so long, that by early spring they were still hanging there, plain without their ribbons and trim, cheerful and promising—qualities which Vermonters need desperately, suicidally, in February and March.

There was nothing small about the interior of that house, room after slopey room, and it sent us out into the world of yard sales and sale barns and flea markets, and that is how we found our way to the realm of auctions, a time-honored system for the redistribution of the possessions of the dead.

There is a whole community built around the reassignment and redistribution of things. It pretends to be concerned with value, and of course on one level it is; there are precious objects that escalate in price, and represent concrete forms of wealth. But many things next-to-worthless, or only of ordinary value, like my scarred pitcher, are also there to be dealt with. Things must go somewhere when they are relinquished; orphaned belongings must be placed, settled, in order to keep the world aright.

I loved best the auctions that took place at people’s houses, for then the narrative of a life was most available; then those cases of canning jars and boxes of ancient magazines, those collections of screws and old latches, mixing bowls and tin cookie-cutters, horse tackle and amateur paintings of birds made a kind of sense. It was like a kind of excavation, seeing things carried out, up from cellars, out of attics and back rooms, out onto a lawn where people gathered under a tent, or on folding chairs, warming themselves with bad coffee and cheap hot dogs bought on the spot. The auctioneer droned on and on, telling jokes to spike our interest whenever attention flagged, attempting to mix desirable items in with long runs of the irredeemably dull. Often there would be one thing we wanted, and if we wanted it badly enough we would wait and wait, as he slogged through numbered lots toward the one that intrigued us. I learned to bring schoolwork with me; I’d read my students’ poems and essays while the gavel fell and another armoire or lawnmower or carnival glass punchbowl was carried to the block. We befriended one auctioneer and his wife, whose sales we used to go to regularly; she’d sign us up for a bidding number and always want to talk a while, taking
us both in with her eyes and nodding in a way that somehow acknowledged
our status as a couple without it ever being specifically named. She held some
special affection for us that was conveyed in the way she’d greet us and take
time to talk; she handed us our rectangular bidding number as if it were a gift.
And every once in a while, when we’d venture a small opening bid on some
little thing, her husband would cry “Sold!” and it would be ours before any-
one else had a chance—an auctioneer’s way of rewarding a regular customer.

There are specific things I remember buying, beloved things. A green
stepback cupboard, with upper doors of rippled glass, and beautiful grooves
where the turning of the latch had worn the milky apple-green paint away. A
wooden panel painted (badly, but delightfully) with seven different wild birds,
shown in impossible proximity: eagle and hawk and owl side by side on a
branch. A huge oak table—which I no longer own, and its loss pains me—
from an old hotel in Barre, all its drawers autographed and dated by bellhops
and waiters and kitchen staff. A big mercury glass ball, of no discernible use.
An astonishing yellow chest of drawers, painted with an urn of weepy-look-
ing lilies. A simple, cream-colored chair, with a seat of woven wooden splats,
on whose ladder rungs someone painted, quite delicately, three perfect red
cherries. An unfinished violin, in bird’s-eye maple, in two parts—the top
carved out as a single piece, complete, and the violin-shaped block of uncarved
wood that would have been the fiddle’s bottom half, the two parts together
purchased for a dollar, and feeling, in the hand, like music emerging out of
silence, or sculpture coming out of stone. A perpetual wooden emblem: some-
thing forever coming into being.

These things are informed for me, permanently, by the narrative of the
auction, an experience of participation. The auctioneer and his runners—an
odd assortment of small-town Vermonters, from teenagers to old men, all in
their heavy work-clothes, their flannels and boiled wools—made up one cast
of characters, repeated from sale to sale, with variations in the crew. We
buyers or potential buyers comprised the other, an odd mix of gnarly dealers
and stylish couples furnishing old houses, well-heeled buyers from elsewhere,
women in handknit sweaters with sheep on them, a sprinkling of gay men.
We were of a tribe who understood ourselves as curators of objects, some of
which would outlast us. We eyed all that was offered, imagining where it had
come from, talking to other bidders or competing with them or both. Some-
times deals were made on the spot; you could own something for a few min-
utes and sell it again to an eager collector, or refuse to. This one wanted only
junk; this one had so much money that it was useless to bid against her; these
two liked precisely what we liked. Wally had wickedly comic names for them,
all of which have vanished from my memory in the years I haven’t seen these
people we hardly knew anyway.
There was an odd feeling of adventure about it—one might be caught up in the fever of the moment and buy something entirely unanticipated; one might take some strange risk. My heart always used to start pounding, at the moment of bidding, a little adrenaline rush, as if what was taking place were deeply risky and consequential. Well, we were poor—that was certain, so there was an element of risk, but we never spent *that* much. Instead, it was about being part of a drama, an enactment of community that went on around this box of plates, this trunk of Masonic temple costumes, this ruby glass compote. And a feeling of magic, too—no matter how early we came or how carefully we looked, the auctioneer would always hold up something we’d never seen, offer something we hadn’t noticed before, as if he pulled things up out of a bottomless well.

Indeed, these things could go on and on. I used to love the moment, late in auctions, when stuff began to be crammed together into “box lots.” By then the crowd would be thinning, the best things gone; only the diehards remained and the auctioneer and his carriers were running out of steam. So they began to toss things together, producing boxes from who knows where and crying, Do I hear a dollar? How many times we fell for this temptation I couldn’t say; we seemed to always have boxes to sort out once we got home. They’d yield perhaps one lovely old pressed wineglass, or a single volume of some beautiful leather-bound nineteenth-century encyclopedia, or one handsome photograph. And endless Tupperware, chamber pots, rusty kitchen utensils, old tins of paint, and jam jars full of nails and screws. It wasn’t long before we’d filled the rooms of the house we actually used, tableaux and still lifes of old things spilling over, one season’s purchases crowding out the last’s. Then we turned an unused upstairs room into a storeroom, and soon it was piled to the ceiling, with pathways weaving in between the towers of things.

What a fragile thing a house is, though it doesn’t seem so. All the energy we poured into the house in Vermont couldn’t complete it; it was so big, and so needy, that I used to dream, even after five years, of part of the house falling away, the sloping floors gone their way at last, tumbling in the direction they’d always pined for. Or I’d dream of whole rooms I hadn’t even discovered yet—rooms which, of course, needed immediate and serious attention. By the time I was just getting to some project I’d long postponed, I’d find that something done years before needed doing again. There was barely time to enjoy that particularly homosexual pleasure, decor; there was too much work to be done. Paint peels, plaster cracks, and gardens, of course, are the most ephemeral constructions of all.

What disappears faster than a garden without a gardener?