

January 2007

It is cold. The bed is a cocoon, soft and delightfully warm, but the air in the unheated greenhouse is frigid. My nose and ears register about 19 or 20 degrees. The extreme contrast between the temperature of the bed and the temperature of the air makes me reluctant to get up. I turn the electric blanket to high in an attempt to roast myself into action.

I've been lying here not asleep, but in a state where I could easily be there again. I'm listening to the birds. The crows call, so early at times that their cries get incorporated into my last dreams. Small songbirds collect in the yard and at the feeder in front of the greenhouse; finches, white throated sparrows, nuthatches, titmice, chickadees, downy and red-bellied woodpeckers. Wrens boldly hop through the open dog door, flit around inside the greenhouse and hop back out.

From the ridge above the greenhouse comes the constant "chuck-chuck-chuck" of wild turkeys.



Migrating birds add their seasonal melodies. In early winter, the trilling song of robins blends into my wake up call and, for up to two months a year, hundreds of Brewer's blackbirds roost in the bamboo groves. The flocks include some red-winged blackbirds, common grackles, and cowbirds, so the range of vocalizations is enthralling. One song sounds exactly like a gurgling brook.

Just before daybreak the blackbirds begin to softly chatter. Over a period of about 30 minutes the chatter crescendos to an exuberant cacophony. The noise stops abruptly, allowing a few seconds of silence. Then, with an immense whirl of rustling wings that is felt as well as heard, the birds catapult out of the bamboo forming a mile-long black stream on their way to their daily feeding grounds. The few stragglers, not organized enough to leave with the group, chatter quietly about their plight and decide to hang out at the feeder with the songbirds.

I am again aware of a sense of impending loss as the time to move into the house draws closer. The straw bales, fantastic insulation against the cold, will also insulate against sound. Winter mornings will be much warmer but also much more quiet. I have, however, begun to view this sense of loss in a different light.

The shift in my perspective reminds me of a time in 1998 shortly after I had been widowed. I was having coffee with a girlfriend, telling her how truly cherished and treasured I had been by my late husband. She looked me in the eyes and said very solemnly, "Weren't you lucky". She was right. I couldn't hear her then. I hurt too much, but later I felt the tremendous truth in her simple statement. Wasn't I lucky to have known

such a nurturing love. True, it was gone and I was in emotional agony, but I would have the memory of it.

I am glad I will miss this bohemian, quasi-camping life in the greenhouse. I have had something wonderful, something deeply satisfying, an experience that I have learned from and grown into, something worth missing. A big part of me does not want to let it go, but another part of me wants what living in a house will allow me - hot water on tap, a space to hang artwork in, a dining table and chairs, and room to have friends to dinner.

So we continue with our six-year-old house building project. Often detoured by the bothersome task of making a living, but like little ants on a long trek, eventually getting back on the trail and marching on. Last May Billy began stacking bales in the framework of the building. By late June, when the demand for his time at the studio forced him to shut the construction down, four of eight windows were installed and perhaps two-thirds of the bales were in place. The progress was thrilling. We quit referring to the structure as the pavilion and started calling it the house.

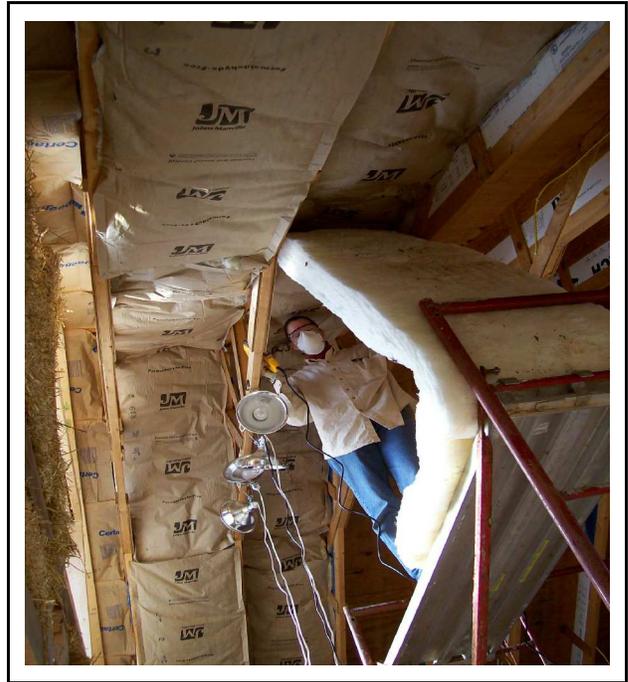
It was not until after our last show in early December that Billy was able to continue work on the house, but this time he had a helper . . . me! Until this point my input had been almost exclusively intellectual, in the form of design ideas and problem solving. I had helped move trusses and get the metal on the roof, and I assisted in the installation of some of the windows, but my total physical input had been negligible.

I had about a week to be a carpenter's helper and I loved it. Billy and I work well together and it was inspiring to see how much we could accomplish as a team. Unfortunately, I do not like working with straw bales. I think the idea of a straw bale house is very romantic, but there is nothing romantic about straw. Little pieces of straw are like tiny barbed spears. They can go in and in but they can't come out. Socks, cuffs, and collars were major collection sites. The washing machine was useless as far as spear removal went, so every night I had to turn my shirts and socks inside out and work the shards of straw out by hand.



Billy uses a chain saw to cut the bales into required shapes and sizes. Since this activity clouds the air with dust and straw particulate, we wear dust masks. It's hard to breathe through a dust mask. So for most of the time we were stacking straw, I was itchy and I couldn't breathe. Worse, however, was the combination of a dust mask and safety glasses.

I was 12' up on the scaffolding installing insulation in the ceiling, I had a dust mask on but when I reached the peak of the ceiling and began working directly over my head I put on safety glasses as well. The mask forced my warm moist breath out of the top of the mask and inside the cold safety glasses. The glasses immediately fogged up. Great, I can't breathe and I can't see - I guess it's time to go to work. At least when I fall off of the scaffolding, because I can't see, my safety glasses will protect my eyes from whatever I land on. Overall, though, my experience was empowering and I had a difficult time recommitting myself to the studio to prepare for a February show.



That taste of working on the house side by side with Billy has me anxiously awaiting the end of May. For the past three years we have been saving money in anticipation of a time when we would work on our place instead of at the studio. That time is 2007. Currently we plan on participating in only three shows in '07 and we'll be done by the end of May. So May represents the beginning of a possible nine month hiatus from the studio. Time to work not only on the house but on the place in general. Maybe build some rock walls, get the bamboo under control, and build some raised garden beds. Perhaps...even...pour a foundation for a studio. Ah...my dreams and schemes.

A wren has come in through the dog door. The 'skitch-skitch' of her feet as she hops around alerts my semi-conscious brain "bird in greenhouse!" and I become fully awake. The wren is fluffed up against the cold and her coloring, bright eyes, and uplifted tail feathers make her resemble a fat chipmunk. She hops and flutters, checking everything out looking for something to eat. She has a heyday on the worktable. It is an absolute mess covered with tools we've been using in the house. Circular saws, chain saws, drills, a box of dust masks, a stapler, gloves; she hops on my tool belt and sticks her head into each pocket. Finally at the cat food dish she is rewarded. She eats the tiny crumbs under the edge of the dish. I lie still and watch her. I want her to come over to the bed and hop around and check me out, too, but the work table is much more interesting and my strategy to roast myself out of bed is working. I get up and the startled wren flies off the worktable and hops out the dog door.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Rebecca and Billy