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The Art of Staying in Limbo

Stealing Houses in the Rust Belt

Chimney Swift, Raven

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2007, Spring

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the Birdhouse Propaganda Ministry; painstakingly dismembered
and reconstructed by your beleaguered editors, who bear the
responsibility if anything is screwy. Taken from Rolling Thunder

#4

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ing; the house is meant to be our hideout away from this death machine—but this is a big project.

Our strategy of staying in limbo creates very powerful extremes—our highs are very high and our lows are very low. All these issues are serious and not completely resolved. However, we have begun something that we all see as beautiful and relevant to the larger community of radicals and squatters. Our model can and will work for others, and we invite you to descend upon our city and others like it in a screaming, scheming horde. Squatting, especially the way we have done it, is not for everyone. It is, however, an inspiring and effective strategy for growing together and distancing ourselves from capital and the state. When you see us fly past in V formation overhead, railroad spikes in hand, feel free to join the flock. To paraphrase a famous Haymarket martyr, we are indeed the birds of the coming storm.

slowed down a lot. I'd say we have become more like a family, taking care of each other when we are sick or sad and always meddling in each other's business. But the way we are branching off into new houses—we've started two new houses since this one's inception—I feel like a tribe, like we are creating a culture here with our own stories and myths. So from gang, to family, to tribe—and now the logical conclusion, the cult: "Everybody wake up and stretch. Look ahead at the great crow and flap your wings together. Caw caw caw."

The shifting makeup of the house also means we occasionally fall into vanguardism. This has been a recurring phenomenon; it's hard to avoid with such a large group in such a complicated situation. There was a time when we had a really high turnover rate, and whenever we get new roommates we have to fill them in on everything. It takes a certain kind of person to live here and many don't last until they get the full story. It can be difficult to find people to bottomline some tasks, as they must be competent, motivated, and possess a complete grasp of the situation. Sometimes it seems easier to do something yourself than to show a new person how to do it, especially when you doubt they'll be around in a few months; but that's how power gets distributed unevenly. Some of us at the house are ex-communists, and I feel that initially our playful vanguardism went to far. Today, looking at the house's "inner circle," I think there is less of a dividing line between new and old residents, and the newer comrades fit in really well.

It can be hard to live with your friends, but a lot of amazing relationships have come out of this. I've spent over a year with these people—sometimes weeks straight, especially in winter. Honestly, I can't say collective living is for everyone. You really have to ask yourself: can I handle living with all of these people, in each of their cycles of energy and isolation, with all their messes and idiosyncrasies? Our house is a social experiment. We are all bipolar and have each snapped a few times, but we act as a support group for each other. The dominant culture is deranged and traumatiz-

Get out of my courtroom." We looked at each other: all four of us were wearing mismatched sports coats and slacks and looks of confusion. This was the big day, the conclusion, the showdown, the verdict.

"But what about the house? Are we going to get it?" I asked, "ahem, your honor."

The verdict came down from on high: "You're done here. Get out of my courtroom. That's it."

That was the much-feared verdict from the judge, the most powerful manifestation of the state our group had encountered so far: the feeble pronouncement of a figurehead who only wanted to get on with the day's business.

Almost a year earlier, in August, we'd gone to the 13th district court wearing the same mismatched suits to attend the housing court date of the deceased owner of the estate. The judge looked at us with suspicion. "Why are you here and where is Richard Starr?"

We exchanged glances and lied: "We have permission to live there and we are interested in fixing up the house." He said he needed more information and called us to return three months later.

When November rolled around we were nervous but wouldn't show it, not even to each other. The judge began by listing housing court violations. Then he asked if we wanted the house. He knew the owner was dead; whether or not we really had permission to live there was irrelevant: they were *working on a strategy to give us the house*, to expedite our progress through the legal system. By moving in, we'd cut the red tape—we'd even brought ourselves to court.

It turned out the violations were cosmetic: lead paint chips on the exterior, five-foot weeds in the yard, broken fencing, broken and boarded up windows, gutters and drains. He even said that if anyone from the Starr family were to step forward for the house he would prosecute them—but not us. He was giving us a chance—six months to fix these violations—and then we would meet again.

Six months later, we left the courtroom in confusion. What did it all mean? We asked our court liaison. “Well,” he answered, “you fulfilled your end of the bargain. Now we’re trying to get you out of this court and into surrogate court so you can get the deed.”

Get the deed! He knew we were squatters, but the city prosecutors here have bigger fish to fry. In fact, the success of our case has inspired some city officials to try to rewrite housing court law. There is talk that they may use our house, among others, as a model. The beginnings of industrial collapse in Buffalo have put us at an advantage. The city’s financial woes, the overworked housing courts, and the crumbling housing market have forced the state to conclude that we, enemies of property that we are, are their best bet for this building and this neighborhood. For diametrically opposing reasons, we wholeheartedly agree.

Entering Limbo

The ideal situation is a property that is in limbo. These are everywhere. Dead owners, deadbeat landlords, absentee owners with too many properties. Many people are actually trying to get rid of houses that are falling apart. It costs a lot of money to demolish a house, and some cities pursue violators with serious fines and threats of jail time. After you find a house that seems to be in limbo, the next step is moving in.

Successful long-term squatting demands the appearance of legitimacy. Some may say the fun in squatting is in the risk. I disagree—the fun in squatting is in dumpstering a king size bed, building musical instruments and cabinets and lofts all day, and NOT PAYING RENT TO A LANDLORD. Sneaking around might seem safer and easier, but in the end it’s neither. Borrow a van and park it in front. Pry off the boards in broad daylight at noon on Sunday. Knock on the neighbors’ doors; make sure you’re seen. Move the fuck in.

for each other, the way we promoted crime and mischief, and the way we saw cops and the courts.

When we moved in, this neighborhood was Crip territory; then there were a bunch of murders and this year the Bloods are in control. They are aware of us, as are the Puerto Rican drug dealers on our street, but we’ve never had any problems with them. They see two dozen kids swarming around the house at all times, screaming and singing and building and destroying, and they leave us alone.

We have conflicts with plenty of other people, though. Every time we bike somewhere as a group it seems we get in a confrontation. Although Buffalo is the birthplace of the bicycle and many of the roads were originally designed for bikes only (seriously—look it up), this is not a bikefriendly place. A bike mob of ten kids going dumpstering, or to a party or even to the corner store, is liable to run into trouble. We bike in V formation and CAW at the top of our lungs. I could recognize that CAW for blocks away, and here I come, sharpened railroad spike in hand and blood lust at the ready. We’re banned from many houses in the college area, many of us are banned from stores in the vicinity, and everyone recognizes us as those bike kids, the crazy kids in the ugly house on the corner. That’s us, the Birdhouse gang—caw caw.

Essentially, we are a clique of friends, but a clique numerous and crazy enough to flip a car and run out of stores with our arms full as an unstoppable mob. This gang mentality has sustained us through countless uncertainties and difficulties, though it can also negatively influence the way people treat us. Many people have come to the house once and only once. They formulate judgments of us based on tall tales; I’d say the majority of our peers have the wrong impression of us. While this has alienated the in-crowd, for the most part I think people in our neighborhood are impressed with what we’ve done. Which is more important?

The gang mentality has begun to die out as the makeup of our group has changed. In the beginning we were all angry, penniless criminals with an urge to have fun at any cost. Now things have

entire phone line from the basement to the third floor, every sink and every toilet. We had to redefine “work ethic.” At first, we made the house our top priority.

Each utility was a crisis of its own. We had to build it all from scratch: first electricity, then water, gas, phone, and finally internet. Once they were in place, we also had to learn about using them. At first we turned the heat all the way up and used the utilities all hours of the day—we had the fastest DSL and unlimited long distance. It all sounded good, and with so many people it didn’t seem like it would be too expensive—but during that period, when our decadent poverty was the most decadent, it was the least sustainable. We spent the entire next year cleaning up after the mistakes we made that first winter with utilities companies.

Inside the House

I want to say all of us knew what we were doing. I want to say we knew we were going to keep the house and that they couldn’t touch us. I want to say that we knew that one year later, we would have such luxurious, leisurely lifestyles, making music and art all day and dancing and exploring and bonding every night, that we would have three computers and DSL and hot water and so on. But we didn’t. We told ourselves that we were invincible, but individually we were afraid: When are the cops going to knock on the door? When are we going to get that letter? As a group, we constantly reassured each other that we had it all figured out. We not only reaffirmed it but shouted it at the top of our lungs: “Fuck ’em, let them try to stop us.” Together, as a large group of sketchy, wild eccentrics, we cultivated a camaraderie that I have come to view as a gang mentality. Not because of the way a gang controls territory or deals drugs, or because of the violent and misogynistic tendencies associated with gangs, but because of the way we looked out

Adverse possession, the statute by which an occupant claims the right to property after a period of occupation, is the battle cry of squatters everywhere. Rumor has it that if you move into an empty house here in New York and establish proof of residence there, in ten years the city has to give you the house. Ten years! In fact, this is possible, so long as you get out of housing court and no one looks up your address on the city website and gets an inspector to demand a certificate of occupancy, deed, or lease agreement. Adverse possession is the method most commonly used in squatter victories, including the famous established squats in New York City—Serenity, Casa del Sol, C Squat, ABC No Rio, and Dos Blocos.

This isn’t our situation exactly, at least not yet. We have become owner-occupants and are actually trapped in limbo. In the eyes of the court, once we fixed the majority of our housing code violations, we weren’t doing anything wrong. The owner died and his son, the overseer of the estate, wants nothing to do with the house because of a \$40,000 mortgage and back taxes. The bank wrote the house off as a loss. The house is a hazard and an eyesore to the neighborhood and the government, and this is where we come in.

We forged the lease agreement to get the house inspected and they never set foot inside due to our construction efforts. After we took care of the cosmetic housing court violations, the city practically left us alone. They only contacted us periodically to invite us to court to dialogue with the judge and his liaisons about how much we want the house and how much they want to give it to us. The city knows about us, but they don’t have enough money to evict or demolish us; in fact, they need us—that is, they need people to move into the thousands of vacant houses in the city.

This is the opposite of the situation in New York City, the American standard for squatter legitimacy. New York City has a very unique housing situation and a long history of rent strikes, tenant battles, deadbeat landlords, and gentrification, not to mention overpopulation. It also has a sizeable radical community and quite a few politicized lawyers and legal advisers. All of the squats men-

tioned above came out of a certain time and place in history and relied on a fairly similar strategy. Our project must take a different approach. Although we have neither the community of support nor the inspiring history of victories that characterize squatting in New York, the situation here in Buffalo and throughout the cities of the Rust Belt is ripe for our purposes. A once-mighty economic machine is rapidly decaying into overlooked ruins.

Inhabiting Industrial Collapse

Buffalo was once among the biggest cities in the US. In the 1920s, with the steel industry at its peak and the Erie Canal opening up the Great Lakes to trade, Buffalo was bursting at the seams. In terms of infrastructure and industry, Buffalo really grew during this era and began to rely heavily on the canal and waterways as a means of local economic growth. Then the steel industry took a dive and the Great Depression set in. Buffalo was doomed. After opening the canal and setting the stage for the economic growth of other Great Lakes cities such as Cleveland, Chicago, and Milwaukee, Buffalo's economy slowed and slowed until NAFTA stopped it cold. The population has been in steady decline since the 1950s. For a city the size of Detroit, Buffalo has the population of Des Moines. Everything is abandoned, everything is falling apart—and we are dancing in the ruins.

There is a serious housing crisis here. There are 20,000 houses awaiting demolition and 100,000 abandoned. Many of them are in limbo due to utilities, loans, and mortgages, and tens of thousands are held for use as assets by private creditors like our very own New York governor. We have an MBBA list with 6000 houses owned and used as assets by a company for taking out huge loans. These houses are unmoderated and unmaintained; in parts of our neighborhood, there are two or three every block.

In the beginning we were a completely unemployed house. Perhaps it was ridiculous that we did a work-trade with a framer and gallery owner, moving her entire shop from one location to another in return for coffee, a big pizza, and cut picture frame glass to refit all of our windows, when we could have just spent \$20 on each window and been done—but that was more money than we had at the time, even collectively. Besides, it was a fun group project and it gave us more connections. Only one of us ever had a stable job, which she used to get a loan and a house account from her workplace, the local cooperative credit union. This proved to be a secret weapon. The collective house account is essential: it enables us to all dump money into an abstraction and argue for larger scale purchases without having to pass the hat around.

We took out a \$5000 two-year loan with the intention of paying it off in one year. This was a big investment, since we didn't know whether we'd still be in the house in a year. In the back of all of our minds, we figured the house was temporary. After long deliberation—our sixteen-person meetings lasted hours and hours, and as drinking was banned from them they usually concluded with us slamming beer and whooping each others' asses—we agreed to pay \$60 a month plus utilities. The loan payment was \$400 a month; ten people paying \$60 each added up to \$600, so we would have \$200 spending money. It rarely happened like that in practice. The nature of our house account allowed a cushion for those with little to no money. Almost half of us could be late on bills and we wouldn't be in trouble financially. In theory, we could take turns “taking care of each other,” or “taking breaks from working,” and it would only affect our project money; on the other hand, the more money we did get the more ambitious our projects could be.

We needed the house account for collectively purchasing necessities we couldn't routinely steal such as trash bags, toilet paper, light bulbs, condiments and spices, and materials for home repair. We had to redo every water line, almost every electrical line, the

ple point out to me that I am dirty and smell like wood smoke or musk. I feel like we are homesteading when we willingly turn off the gas for good, when we're eating wild green salads and potato bug patties while waiting for the tomatoes in the garden to ripen, when the brew room is full of the music of fermentation, when we all eat breakfast together in the morning and scheme for the whole day. We are exceedingly ambitious; that's the most concrete manifestation of our privilege.

Decadent Poverty and Squatter Economics

The class dynamic interests me because of the twofold nature of our situation. The giant mansion might give some the appearance of luxury—yet we arrived here with nothing. Others might see the house as a ruin, a crackhouse, a money pit—but I look at all the space, the hardwood floors and hardwood molding, the library and dining room, and I see magnificent decadence. We are pauper kings and queens living the high life.

Together we generated the concept of decadent poverty. Initially, it was an inside joke that arose out of dumpster extravaganzas and home-cooked feasts. Decadent poverty evolved into a way for us to brag to our friends and houseguests, to heckle people who are invested in their jobs and the work ethic. Back when there was still freon in it, we would point to our double fridge full of a beautiful dumpster smorgasbord and say, "This is free, help yourself, never ask again if you can eat here, look at this—decadent poverty." We would point people to our cellar, shelf after shelf of canned goods and ageing homebrew next to a stocked refrigerator and freezer: "This is wealth at no cost, all trashpicked, homemade, or stolen." We have a ten-burner double convection oven Vulcan gas stove, and when we were cooking three meals at once and making beer and tea we would proclaim, "Fuck work, fuck money, fuck the economy, fuck'em—decadent poverty. This is a fucking mansion."

We have weak enemies. The city and county are broke. The economy is sluggish and sinking. People are leaving town in droves; according to some of my moving company friends, the ratio of people leaving to coming in is as bad as seven to one. I believe the population is around 250,000. The state spends all its money on New York City and most politicians in the state live there.

It's turned out we had less to fear than we thought. For example, there used to be a block club in this neighborhood—a group of "concerned neighbors" who got together to discuss houses they considered problems, gossip about people, complain about dogs, and snitch about housing code violations. Block clubs, by and large, are the bane of squatters and underclass occupants in general. We feared the block club, at least until our first meeting with them. We realized then that they were falling apart and needed a new volunteer moderator to schedule meetings. So we invited them to have a meeting at our house and naturally volunteered one of us to become the new block club president. We forgot to organize the next meeting in time and decided against organizing any more, and in a few weeks the block club was dissolved. Eureka, coup d'état.

We have strong friends. The judge on our case comes from a Democratic dynasty family and "deeply cares about the housing crisis"—that is, he's interested in developing the slums, moving people into abandoned houses and businesses into shop fronts. One housing court liaison actually lives on our street and knew the family that once lived in our house; she remembers when the house was a nursing home. She drives a police cruiser and hates our decorations but is no longer a threat to us. Another housing court liaison is among our more powerful friends. He helped us out a lot in the beginning. He understands that we are not only squatters but anarchists as well—before I realized what I was doing, I rambled to him about my view of the courts, the landlords, and the state. He is working on a strategy for us to acquire the deed through "receivership." Finally, we befriended a group called PUSH, People United for Sustainable Housing, that works in the lower West Side on ur-

ban gardens and the housing crisis; they also just started a cooperative apartment building. Our friends from PUSH have supported us with legal advice and connections since the beginning.

The First Days

Rumors of an abandoned mansion rippled throughout the punk community in Buffalo. A few kids from a punk house scoped it out. Word got around to one of us—R. He pulled up in his mother’s van and began mowing the lawn. He talked to a few skeptical neighbors and informed them that he was the new owner of the house, then broke in through the basement window, kicked the boards off the back kitchen door, installed locks there, and began using it as the main door. Soon after, the police came, presumably having been called by a neighbor R. hadn’t talked to yet.

They took his keys and gave him a trespassing violation. Later that week R. called the officer whose number was on the ticket and told him he was going back to the house. The officer asked him not to, and that was that—the birth of the *Fuck’em* mentality. The court hadn’t issued a vacancy order yet and the case was still pending. The house was trapped in limbo with no overseer; without a legitimate complaint from the landlord or the block club, they had to wait. Almost mysteriously, we’ve had no more trouble with the police.

R. finally realized that he needed help, and began asking around in the punk and radical communities. Everybody seemed really interested in the possibilities, but also skeptical and afraid. It’s a lot to ask of people that they drop everything and dedicate all their time to something they will almost certainly lose, especially in a privileged community such as the college-age, North Buffalo punk community. Luckily, around this time a punk house down the street was getting evicted and someone had the idea to rent a moving truck, load it full of all of the furniture from the closing house, and

ready to throw up bars and barricades, but the cops never came—and we didn’t want to be the only house on the block with barred windows. However, the fact is the city simply didn’t have enough money to demolish our house, or even to pursue us for trespassing.

From a purely financial perspective, we have not raised the value of this house. A once-empty broken estate in shambles is now a half-fixed estate in shambles disguised by a colorful paint job. This neighborhood is full of houses caving in on themselves and families too poor to fix housing violations, and that is not going to change anytime soon. According to the *Buffalo News*, forty percent of buildings stand unoccupied in the city. There are many buildings like ours; we are not in a unique or even an unusually advantageous situation. These factors make squatting this area and towns, cities, and neighborhoods like it the future of occupation and the frontier of a new chapter of decay and resistance.

In fact, our neighborhood welcomes this house in a way that we have never seen a squat accepted before. We love our neighbors and they respect us. We have a powerful informal neighborhood watch—we smash the car windows of a drug dealer with bats and the neighbors say “he must have hit a tree”—and gift economy: we share everything from chainsaws and ladders to lawn mowers, occasionally exchange weed and venison, and constantly volunteer labor and time and stories. We fit in better with our low-income Puerto Rican neighbors than any of us ever have with punks, artists, or college students. The values of many of our neighbors mesh well with our own goals. I’ve raided abandoned buildings with our next-door neighbor. Unlike many of our punk and college student friends, he is not shocked by this kind of activity—on the contrary, he respects us for it. Our young white friends do not visit us and nowadays we are rarely accepted in their homes and neighborhoods. We are clearly recognized as a lower class than them. I feel like a squatter when I notice that a quarter of all the houses in my neighborhood are abandoned, when I remember I have no job and I spend all day stealing and scamming or loitering, when peo-

spective, it becomes clear that squatting has existed far longer than homesteading, indeed much longer than the idea of property itself. Squatting, in its most basic sense, means looking at land without boundaries, without any concept of ownership. In this view, animals, insects, and plants are all squatters—indeed, in the eyes of developers they are pests to be removed or exterminated. Squatting feels natural: right of occupation by virtue of use.

Homesteading is the American tradition in which one moves into “unoccupied” territory to fix it up, i.e., kill anything that moves. The homesteading era was characterized by brutal violence and destruction; these were essential to the capitalist reworking of the physical and mental landscape of North America. The literal occupation of the West was the front line of the conquest of the wild by civilization and the acre-by-acre establishment of the closed system of modern ownership.

This seems to illustrate the class difference between homesteaders and squatters—but it’s not that simple. Many homesteaders were lower class. As the cities got bigger and bigger, more and more people left them, pushed out by poverty, wanderlust, or persecution, and headed West. Their contemporary counterparts are more likely to squat than to seize property with the backing of the authorities. Our dominant culture comes from the history of homesteading that preceded this era, but we trace our heritage to the much older and broader squatting community.

We do take advantage of the privilege we have to protect ourselves from the court system and the prying eyes of the upper class, yes. It helps that the neighbors assumed we acquired the house legally. We acknowledge this privilege, but we don’t want to perpetuate it. We don’t want to be gentrifiers. Fuck development. Just because some of the court liaisons find us attractive doesn’t mean we’re good for them—smokers crave cigarettes without them being healthy, and indeed we intend to spread like a cancer through their city. We only have this house because we fought for it with lies, threats, relentless pursuit, and over-the-top confidence. We were

bring it to this new mansion in order to appear legitimate. Besides, the former residents needed a new place to live.

The truck pulled up in broad daylight. “Yeah, we own this house.” People began prying boards off of the window. The same police officer from before drove by and waved—we were terrified, but nothing happened so we started working. Soon, on July 1st, everyone began actually living in the house. Thus began an endless series of house projects, an explosion in all of our lives and the lives of everyone around us. It was shocking—suddenly we lived in the house of our dreams. We’d opened up a frightening infinity of possibilities, of hopes and desires and disasters.

The House

The house is located in Buffalo’s West Side, just across the tracks from the river that separates Fort Erie, Ontario from Buffalo, New York. Our house was built in the mid-1800s and has gone through many changes—structure is built upon structure from the dining room up. There are rumors in the neighborhood that the mayor grew up in our house, but I’m not sure I believe them. The house definitely belonged to a well-off family at one point: we have a butler staircase next to the main staircase—wouldn’t want to see those servants incessantly going up and down the stairs, pish posh—and servants’ quarters. After passing through many hands, the house became a nursing home; at that point, an intercom system was installed, a kitchen was added to the third floor, and the swimming pool was filled with dirt. We tried to dig out some of the dirt for skateboarding, but regardless of our plans at that time the pool is a garden now. Our neighbor says that after the nursing home went under the house became a tenant-run nursing home. After they went bankrupt, the house was abandoned, then became a crack-house, and now it is a palace—the beginning of our journey.

As for us, we're mostly men—women have never outnumbered men, but have come close a few times—and mostly white: we're all eurotrash and Hispanic, at the border of a Hungarian/Polish ghetto and a Puerto Rican/Latino ghetto. We're also all dropouts: most of us never finished high school, none of us spent more than a month in college, and there's hardly any work among us.

Squatting versus Homesteading: Class, Privilege, and Gentrification

The house can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. On one hand, obviously, it's a squat: we have no landlord, no certificate of occupancy, no lease agreement, no deed. We are squatters and this is occupied territory.

Culturally, the word squat has a lot of baggage. It generally implies a temporary living situation. Since property is owned by banks and landlords and protected by judges and police, it would seem that the logical end to squatting is getting discovered and kicked out. Isn't the eviction the glorious climax of every squatting war story? And what's the point of fixing up a place you're doomed to lose in the end?

So squatting also implies inhospitable conditions: a dilapidated old house, a decaying industrial center, an abandoned cereal plant, a camp under a bridge. Squatting means laying in broken glass, peeing in the corner, smoking cigarette butts in piles of liquor bottles and garbage. Squatting is for those with no money, no ingenuity, very low standards, and very high tolerance.

In light of these assumptions, I often get dirty looks when I mention that I'm a squatter; at the same time, I often find I have little in common with other squatters. In many ways, our squat has little in common with other squats: it's only as temporary as we let it be—and it's not an inhospitable hovel, it's a fucking mansion.

Admittedly, until the first winter, we trashed the porch all the time and the front of the house looked like it was abandoned. That changed when we got into the court process. Now we see the porch as a facade that should be kept orderly; although we have dogs, we do the yard work and the neighbors all love us. In fact, one year later we have been here longer than most of them. We still occasionally take out interpersonal problems on the walls and appliances, but unlike most squats we've become a sort of family. Our relationships are the foundation this house is built on. I like to think that we are held together by love for each other and our work as a group as much as hatred for the outside world.

So from another perspective, this isn't a squat, it's a home. In that regard, you could say we're homesteading. Peeing on the floor or break bottles out of disrespect and you are likely to get tackled. This is the most beautiful thing any of us have ever had—it's the only thing some of us have—and we love it. We are always scheming up new ways to compromise less while simultaneously making our lives more comfortable. This is our experiment in self-sufficiency in the midst of collapse, in living out our dreams in the midst of the nightmare of modern life. In the past, I've referred to the house as a militant homestead—squatting without the transience, no-compromise homesteading. In fact, this house is a spider web of compromises; like many aspiring insurgents, we dream of a world free of compromise but are doing our best with what we've got.

Squatting and homesteading have different class associations. Visualize a group of settlers marching to the top of a hill, establishing camp, and settling down. That's homesteading, the most longstanding method of obtaining ownership in American history, or at least the history of those settlers' descendants. Centuries later, imagine a squatter breaking into the abandoned hotel now atop the very same hill. From this perspective it appears that the difference between homesteading and squatting is first a matter of era, and then of class. But if you pan back and take an even broader per-