

Marija Andrijašević
LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS
(selected poems)

Translated from Croatian by Vesna Marić

Poem 1, page 7

Mowing the grass comes first. The brambles need clearing, for they are poison, food and landscape. I've long handled them without gloves. Nothing can pierce the skin on my hands. I have your palms and our fingers are the same length. On them it is written that before starting work, I was foraging for asparagus. The marks could not be washed off even by the drizzle that evoked snails, and I went out wearing rubber boots and a raincoat. A sunny day emerged, and we came to build the house. You sat on the stone heap all morning working out the direction of the sun's movement on that piece of paper of yours, the height and position of the roof, the location of the skylights, writing room, solarium. Your sister doesn't have a house of her own. You descended the stone heap just before the rain came in. You've worked everything out. In your hands is the drawing that you will lay out onto the ground. I walk towards you as if driven by happy news. At your back is a cloud that ploughs the sky and seduces snails onto skewers. We glance at the drawing from which our home will sprout. We are silent. Words are not used when there's nothing left, in our world. For us they are, and this isn't news to anyone, only the beginning.

Poem 2, page 11

I dream of father. We take stones from the heap and build a drystone wall. He crushes each stone with a hammer. For this he uses his hand, eye and knee. He beats the stone on a raised leg. When he strikes, I feel a rush of blood in my thigh. The drystone wall sprouts in the spot where a wire fence once stood. We clear out the stone heap that has sat outside the barn for at least one hundred years. Its stones once marked the boundary of a small piece of land, a field, even the forest. In the dream father does not speak, only gives the first signal, setting off the works. It's a winter dream, which makes it hard for me to read. I find the world hard to read in winter, and without this skill I slowly wither. The vein in my thigh bursts, blood doesn't reach my stomach and lungs, but I live. Clarity returns together with some desires. I want the wall to be a string of low right-angle colonnades carved from Carrara marble. I also want it to be full of veins, not everything was always clean. And I want us to fell the tree under which father passed away and turn it into a skylight window frame. He too will live in my house.

Poem 3, page 15

I'll sort through the stone heap, circle the house with it, plant an orchard, this is how I put my thoughts in order. I'll dig up the land the way uncle, still young and lean, had dug up a pool in the Cetina canyon. Made a path to the river, conquered it. He heaved up the spade at least fifty times a day. Sat in the shade of a wild beech. Watched the overgrown water mill. Afterwards he watched his children, his brother's children as they bathed safely in the river. Uncle dug so that we wouldn't be carried away by the force of the water, the city. He earned his apprenticeship in these clay fields. He used his hands mostly for gathering. In the town where I live, gathering is a tame activity, life doesn't depend on it. Maybe just the taste of food, or a state of mind. Here you gather wood for heat, stones for the heap, clay for pots, fruit for winter supplies. I'll plant a plum, apple, walnut and almond tree. A fig will sprout by itself somewhere. Those are tangible trees, resistant and loyal, like me. Some of them are already propping themselves up from my city windows. I started from seed. I know I'm not my own heroine and there was no one who could or would teach me about the land. I display a natural talent for it, and its cruelty attracts me. Anything can be cruel for the living, even the brevity of the day. Or not having an orchard. A house.

Poem 4, page 17

I don't contemplate the interior much. I'm horrified by any thought of what might be inside while there is still no house. There could be a hanging shelf packed with pots, stairs leading to the upper floor, a freshly enamelled bath that emits the fragrance of a car paint shop upon touching warm water. I once wanted there to be a child I could bathe inside it. I'd have left the city and the village for that man, replaced the river canyon with a delta in a south more southern than this one, replaced the dream of my house with his. If only I had been less attached to a child who would have my childhood. I didn't know much about freedom or love back then. Or that youth is a myth, life is short, and that everything that really matters sits within. Within book covers, a warm bed, a mother's heart, a house. I may allow myself one thought about the interior after all. About the bath. Ample, white, with a deep boundary. During hot and sweaty days instead of showering I like to rest my thigh on the edge of the bath, one leg inside, the other out. Then I wash the hole that could have produced a child with soap and warm water. As I wipe myself, I look out of the window at the mountain that props itself up into a petrified wave. The sea is on the other side, so I cannot see it, I can't see my house yet either, though I am looking from within.

Poem 5, page 21

Yes, the dog is dead. I look around, under my feet, whistle. The dog is dead. There is no one left to respond to my call. I whistle, whistle, whistle, but nothing happens. Joy does not follow pain. Happiness does not follow suffering. A truce does not follow violence. Love does not follow loneliness. Friends do not follow friends. I have learned a lot. Mother encourages me. Towers over me like the shade of a fruit tree and cradles me. For a moment, I am in my orchard, and my two pale legs are sticking out from under the vine covered pergola. I watch the dog's grave. My dog is a wonderful example of a poplar tree. It protects the house from damp and sprouts mushrooms. I didn't take the dog to the pit and throw it in there. My dog is within reach. And soon there'll be a meal at a table I have yet to imagine. I have a hard time with yearning. It has a particular shape. It is a small four-legged body whose fur resembles the patterns of a Guernsey cow. It's all bark, no bite. There are no lies in it, no untruths, no figments of the imagination or rich fantasy. At least two of those characteristics would save it from this void of human achievement. And if there had been a house that I'd built in time.

Poem 6, page 23

No life inside me. Like sticking your hand inside soil for the first time and finding nothing to discern. You sigh, stand up, put your hands on your hips, then wipe the sweat off your brow with your shoulder. There's so much to do. So much. I freeze, I don't know where to start, I wait. No life inside me ever again. Like inside frozen earth. Porosity is weak, muscles are dying, the brain is fading, the heart withers. Winter demands hibernation, but I have nowhere to dig my den. There is no getting inside me, and whatever I try, any human means, the body finds alien. Intimacy backs away and fears for itself. Blood throbs. Looks for a path and does not give up. Where will I go? Where will I go? Where will you go, Marija? The initial thoughts are not good. I'll go into the darkness. I'll follow father into the woods. I'll follow aunt Mara towards the fence, to find the lost lamb. Into the field, bury myself inside the soil. The soil is ice cold, a house is not built in winter and foundations are not laid inside a freezing earth, and neither is a body. No life inside me. I wait. I don't know this yet, but I wait for the puppy, mother, brother's pencil strokes on paper, the first thought of the house. I wait to circle the field with my life, springtime. This is where the door would be, I tell my brother in the green field. He draws it, I push it open, break into the soil, into myself, the house: it's all one thing.

Poem 7, page 33

Dawn is breaking. The field is burning. Mara is burning. Her soft, young woman's belly. Her untouched thighs. I wash her, my peer, in a hospital. Under her skirt and knee-high socks, a flare, no one acknowledged her. When she pulls shut the wooden lock at night, she locks it after herself, alone. Nothing chimes behind her. Only old age, occasionally. She tops age up, like with those half empty wine barrels she adds water to, and it turns into vinegar. She digs up the soil alone, kneads bread dough alone, goes to bed alone, tends the house alone. Things sprout from the dark soil, things grow inside the oven, nothing will ripen under the folds of her skirt, no one will come to ask for her hand. Unspoilt Mara, do you dream? Who will fill up your belly, your barn, your flock. One must first get the fire going, feed the brothers, attend to the children, give water to cows, take sheep to pasture, dig up the vineyard, pick fruit, pray to the saint, be fresh at bedtime, eager upon waking. A dream is a migratory bird. It will puncture her skin when it finally gets her. Same with the flames from the fireplace. Mara is burning. Screeches through the village like a hoopoe bird. Unspoilt field, do you dream? Who will fill your belly, your barn, your flock? Your house.

Poem 8, page 35

Writing about the house, suffering. Imagining the house, suffering. Making any move that might make it real, suffering. Building a house in a field, suffering. Entering the house alone, suffering. Waking up the dead so they might live in it, suffering. Planting an orchard, suffering. Thinking of ancestral paths, suffering. Knowing that they didn't make me change my course because I'm not a river, suffering. Taming the blood, suffering. Solitude, suffering. Word, suffering. You're right, nothing has started, except suffering has started. Pain from a beautiful recurring dream feels like punishment in this city. It becomes more dense and in many ways more destructive than a nightmare. All that is nearby, but nowhere near. Even when it appears as a nightmare, father says what use is a house, my child, for me to look at? You're right, nothing has started, suffering has started. Father dies inside a deep forest. A dog in my lap. Mara in the flames of the fireplace in the old house. I keep on building my house for all of us. I am building, building, building, thinking, thinking, thinking, the mind remembers, remembers, remembers. The house picks up a pencil and writes.

Poem 9, page 39

Geographically, everything will be in its right place. I will settle the world permanently like the heroine from father's atlas which I have inherited. Apparently I don't have a story about it that could fit inside a poem. The atlas is from 1881 and its spine has been gnawed away. From it, father learned about the Earth, that paper can reproduce it to an extent and that the boundary between fields is a matter of small localities. It also taught him about climate and the average temperature in Pennsylvania throughout the year. The facts it holds are based on measurements taken in 1874. He learned what the average rainfall was in that state for that same year. And in some other states. And that there is a bird called Blue Jay. Mother has an unusual resistance towards sentiments developed for objects that remain. This resistance prevents mother from properly storing the atlas, making it absorb damp over the years. Purple stains appear on the maps. When you zoom in, the stain that has settled on our very village has a shimmer inside it. Some type of sediment, a sentiment. A Jay Bird's nest on the roof of my house.

Poem 10, page 41

I put the drawing of the house inside my rucksack. Mother sews seams so they're invisible. She does something with the needle, and the seam flips. Teach me, I'll teach you, you didn't teach me, you can't be taught. That's how our day goes by. A day also goes by in travel. The first seam is a way out of the tunnel. This one feels close to me because I can still see mother's flat on the hill as we emerge. Building a house is a ritual, like a burial. It is a carving of the ground, and separating the worlds of the living and the dead. A house is a boundary. At the station, which is also a resting spot, I watch an old railway officer's house. Its seams are visible all over, the height has been raised three times. Someone occupies one of the rooms. It's like the old village house. Stones were taken off the heap for the heap, and were heaped up again. For a life in one room. I take out the drawing from the rucksack, study the roof plan and I know something is wrong with it. I can't yet see what. But I've already laid the foundations. It will be a trunk of an old oak covered with a thick layer of jute and hay. The dead will return from the field and have a place to rest. When I imagine my house, I do something with the needle, it flips, and the house is a seam.

Poem 11, page 43

I also once saw a stone heap being knocked down. All sorts of things crawled out. Bugs, spiders, lizards, snakes. No harmless snake bides where a viper lives, they're not like humans. Father takes me to gather stones. It's my first gathering. I'm small, but strong, a good worker. I step across the red soil. I know the shape of the stone we need to take back to the caravan. I am not gathering stones for his or my house. It's not a dream. It's no longer reality either. It's one distant image over which I draw a line and don't allow it to appear completely in a poem. I'll outgrow that image. I'll never outgrow father. When I think of the stone heap, I think of father. He piled and piled, didn't feel that the heap too was a type of house and that there would not be enough time for it to be cleared. What use is a house, my child, for me to look at, father repeats when he approaches me, dead, and walks across my field. There is nothing for him to enter and there's nowhere he can go, so he returns to the forest, barefoot. We offload the stone heap from the caravan. Dust billows up. Father is full of life when he's on the land. Something shifts in his body. Maybe this is where his blood finds its flow. My stomach turns when I remember his end. Mother says be quiet, don't wonder how it happened, it has already happened. You'll attract it to yourself. That is why I wonder how it feels to knock down a stone heap, dispel a viper, brush your daughter's hair, build your own house.

Poem 12 page 51

I am not a house. I don't require a lot of work. I don't need to be fenced in, the soil to be tilled, the stone heap tightened, all I need is that my blood be still. I just need to be protected from this blood, which pounds tirelessly against an exhausted landscape. The city. I need to be protected from myself. Mother manages it somehow. Washes up, protects me. Walks the dog, protects me. Does the crossword, protects me. Watches the TV, protects me. When I finally get up on my feet, she walks with me and protects me. She walks next to me and the blood stops pounding. I have always felt this throbbing inside me. It is nothing but a flow that has nowhere to go. When it starts, it is violent. It wants to break through the muscle, flesh, skin, sometimes it even rushes through the bones, when it goes completely wild. When we are on good terms, it lays quietly inside me. It responds, it's reliable, and I forgive its quick temper. It sighs when I sigh, kisses when I kiss, writes when I write, thinks when I do. When thoughts of the house come it doesn't back away, but turns playful and responds with thoughts about the house.

Poem 13, page 69

The earth is patient. When you sow the idea of a house, it takes years to sprout. Sometimes it skips a generation. I knew that. This abandoned world raised me. Distanced me. Spent my whole life making me more alone, replaced softness with suffering, and made suffering a rigour. Only a rigorous person can decide to build a house alone. I learn about book writing as I write. It takes years to lay foundations and raise a structure, to practice solitude. The foundations are not where you cut corners, that's the only real rule of laying foundations. It is where everything is invested so that the house can one day faithfully take its true form. Stand alone. Who could teach me this better than I could teach myself. Nothing was spared when laying my foundations. It was intentional, lonely, patient, the way the earth is. The earth is the house. The house is the story. Laying my foundations is laying the foundations of the house.

Poem 14, page 73

Oh house, don't let me go. Oh house, grip me harder. Oh house, carve me into the soil as you are carved. Oh house, let me grow as big as you. Oh house, let's both go up on the hill at dawn, you with your shadow, me with a coffee cup between my fingers. Oh house, to dawn is one of my favourite verbs. Oh house, when the day dawns, it ripens and grows light. Oh house, to grow light. Oh house, I sometimes grow light when I think about you and when I write. Oh house, sometimes when I love too, but not often. Oh house, all that hurts, and the years have gone by, but has not let go. Oh house, don't let go. Oh house, I am not you, but we have the same designs. Oh house, I had to protect myself the way you protect the home from gusts of wind or from the dead. Oh house, laying the foundations of Marija was one of the most difficult foundings of all Marijas. Oh house, I too erected my own walls for years. Oh house, Marija isn't crumbling. Oh house, it's impossible with all these walls. Oh house, if anyone ever really gets to know me, it will be you. Oh house, nowhere as lit up as on the inside. Oh house, I also love the verb to want. Oh house, I have wanted a lot more than I have wished for and that should have told me something about myself. Oh house, I will you will he she it will we will you will they will. Oh house, I'm near the end, and it's my turn. Oh house, imagine! Oh house, imagine! Oh house, you being my house.

Poem 15, page 79

To get closer to Mara, father, the dog, the dead. To get closer to life. To get closer to all that is out of hand's reach here. The purple fig, mulberry, wild apple, quince, the lonesome walnut, a fist whose force would open it like it occasionally opens a ripe plum tomato in the rented flat. To leave the city, its fog. To stop blending in with a landscape that only contains a whiteness. To survive. That's how I will survive. I've experienced many survivals and this is not alien to me. Father knew when the dam would be raised, and he'd shout: get out of the river! Father knew when a snake would splash on the water and he'd shout: get out of the river! Father knew when a whirlpool was approaching and he'd shout: get out of the river! Father knew many things, and he also didn't know many things. I remind myself of him. I know a lot, but not how to distance myself from Mara, father, the dog and the dead. Sometimes I don't even know how to leave the city I no longer recognise. I know, however, that the whiteness can also be a breakthrough. And that almost no one swims in the city river. They're constantly issuing warnings about air and water quality. A fig picked by the roadside tastes like sugary tar. No one here issues advice on how to survive. No one ever shouts: get out of the river! No one ever says: get away, escaping can be honourable too! No one thinks, not even to themselves: go, build a house of your own!