

# Possessions

*A man's self is the sum total  
of all that he can call his.*

(William James, 1890)

**T**hat statement by William James nearly a hundred years ago has an aftertaste like bitter beer, and I pity the man who said it. The things we love and call ours do much to shape us, for in a sense they are our world.

Far from home in a city he didn't like, Col. Harold Sheldon wrote to Philip H. Babcock, author of *Falling Leaves* and *Tales from a Gun Room*:

Chicago, Ill.

Jan. 19, 1943

Dear Mr. Babcock:

It seems to me that most of my thoughts these days are lead pencil thoughts, and I ask your forgiveness of the failing, and am assured that I would have it if you could see me in my present sorrowful condition. . . .

I doubt if any "long hunter," setting out from Lancaster for this same region 200 years ago, chose his equipment more carefully than I did. Two or three of my pet guns, a rod and a good line, shooting clothes and a dozen books from a rather extensive library were the indispensable items that I brought along. . . .

Possessions, if they are worthy of the name, possess the possessor as he possesses them. They are singularly his if there are no others

exactly like them, as Sheldon's "shooting clothes" could have been no one's but his.

Looking out the end window of the Long Room through tall rhododendrons to the fieldstone springhouse with its big iron dinner bell under the overhang, I see it as a hand-built form over 200 years old like this house, giving me a sense of Time and continuity and rightness, and I feel a possessiveness of everything that is Old Hemlock, removing all the people who have lived here and used it and mistreated it or loved it before Kay and me.

We have three waters out of our land, crystal, pure, each of different mineral content and flavor. The spring inside the springhouse flowing day and night, whether we are home or away, pours out of the hillside and overbrims the carved stone basin to fill the shallow milk trough that provided cooling for milk and cream and butter for the early residents and gave us refrigeration for ten years before "the electric" was brought into this region, emptying into the twenty gallon tile overflow of cold drinking water for the Old Hemlock settlers since Blue, soft sweet water seeing the light of day for the first. There is the upper Hickory Spring in a thousand-gallon underground concrete reservoir whose fifty-foot drop gave us gravity flow and running water in the house in the years until electric power was available; it gives us water still with a turn of a valve when power fails in violent storms, spring water with a "sec" limestone taste, good for the bones. And there is the drilled deep well that never diminishes, the water we use most, for its healthful mineral balance. I hold it to the light at dinner in a cut-glass tumbler—clear, cold, full flavored, nothing less than elixir. We bathe in this glorious liquid, like bathing in *Pouilly-Fuissé*, a drink for a king. These are wild mountain waters out of high land, waters that belong only to us and no one has used before. That is possession.

Walking up our lane with Kay with our sugar maples sifting gold, I try to think what it would be like to see such a house with its boxwood, sleeping away its centuries under these giant trees in the dignity of solitude, and not possess it, and I grasp that Indian summer and all of this is just for Kay and the settlers and me.

Half-wild lavender rockets come each June, growing on the grounds as on other early homesteads, brought by pioneer women

years forgotten from I don't know where, perambulatory blooms seeding themselves to migrate from the springhouse area into the abandoned orchard or the old garden plot; another year they are a sheet of vibrant lavender in surrounding woods, always moving, always with us in June, spots of color and fragrance among new green.

Possessions are a symbol not of wealth but means, the means to happiness, to see the simplicity of this land, the house and its objects that live because I love them beyond price. The moment you put mere price on things you possess, you denigrate them.

This chair, which fits me as if it had been poured around me, shed its antebellum black horsehair for the blue velvet under my hands generations after it had been in the house of a cousin of Stonewall Jackson. That it should kindly accept me from across the Mason-Dixon Line is a gracious thing. My fingers find the toothmarks in its carved walnut arm and I see Briar again as a puppy, innocently looking up at me as he gnawed it. Sitting in this chair, I held Bliss in my lap after cleaning our gun on countless shooting days, nursed Ruff while trying to eat breakfast balanced on a tray. I have probably used and loved this chair longer than Kay's ancestor who first owned it before The War.

Belton and Quest are spread on the floor near me, watching me from the corner of their eyes. I almost make the mistake of counting them among my possessions, but dogs are so much more. When men love dogs it would be only kind if they would live twice as long as man, but who would look after them when we were gone? To care, is knowing it will end. Perhaps that is why it is so comfortable to love a gun that will outlive you by a hundred years.

I stand among the mammoth hemlocks on the southern end of our land and lay my hand on their enormous girths and own them and feel like God. I viewed the great springhouse white oak as immortal with its twenty-two foot circumference, and then in 1974 in a summer storm I learned what mortality was. Thirteen years later, the hole in the sky is beginning to fill in with tall sugar maples and hemlocks, and the massive stump is crumbling, eaten by fungi more than 300 years after it sprouted as an acorn.

Sometimes it is the small thing that lasts. I saw the miniature crystal jewel box with its sterling cover on my mother's dressing

table as far back as I can remember. Then it was only glass with a tiny Greek female on the silver lid, drawing an arrow from a quiver about to shoot at a deer. Now, as with many things we come to see differently, I cherish it as a charming relief sculpture of Diana who metamorphosed Actaeon the hunter into a stag, later torn to pieces by his pack of fifty hounds. I question the ferocity of her modesty—all he did was see her bathing—but that is the legend of the hunting goddess.

There are no things in this house we do not love, perhaps because our maturing tastes have set value upon that which is closest to our lives. I look around at a milk-glass lamp and a student lamp that illuminated our evenings in the first decade we lived here, at wrought-iron thumb latches and spear-end hinges that serve us as they served those others before us, at a chunk of sandstone from the barn foundation that evolved under my sculptor's chisels into Ruff's head in his prime with eyes that seem to follow me still as they did in life, a spirit that entered the stone as much from his sensitive beauty as from any talent of mine.

One man's trivia are another's treasures. Six demitasses from an old house on Bloomery, a trout stream made memorable by a large rainbow taken one West Virginia springtime, repose in the corner cupboard. Their burnished gold inner surface reflects candlelight on rich black coffee at the end of a woodcock dinner. What these lovely things meant to their original owner I can't know; I know only what they mean to us, bringing back the old friend who gave them to us.

There is an antique china clock on our bedroom mantelpiece, its rococo form hand-painted with flowers in Bonn a long time ago. Several years my senior, it came from my parents' house and sets a good example of survivorship from treatment no clock should have to endure, stopped each night to quiet its ticking and striking that would disturb our sleep, restarted each day when I set the hands and give it a jerk, upon which its pendulum picks up its heartbeat in the rhythm it left off. Charming old thing, you are family, your aging yellowing face telling off my hours.

My guns mean too much for me to tell of here, like the hundreds of coverts I possess, but there are those many small associations with shooting that at heart are memories. There is a ragged shooting

vest I can't discard because of a blood stain soaked through the game pocket from a woodcock shot over a high-standing point by Bliss a generation ago. On my gun cabinet ledge there is an Abercrombie & Fitch gift card from the old Madison Avenue store with an engraved buck a'leaping, inscribed: *To the Shootin'est Gen'-man from his followin' lady*, conjuring up a faraway Christmas after the War.

I have joy in some sensations I possess that would be sinful to a Methodist: the vanilla/cinnamon woods bouquet after first frost; white azalea, called "run honeysuckle" in these mountains, with its exquisite fragrance along trout streams in June; the boxwood's strange primordial essence rooted deep in my senses.

The North Porch Maple was a sapling no more than three inches in diameter when we came 48 years ago, scarcely reaching above the first story of the house. Today its dark gray plated trunk is two feet across and its fan of branches tops the east chimney to twice the height of the roof. I seem to feel closest to this tree because I find myself among its branches when I step through the Dutch door of our bedroom onto the second story porch. One summer I watched a red-eyed vireo construct a hanging nest at eye level on one of the slender branches, pressing grasses into a deep cup shape with its feet. I see Autumn come in September in the first yellow edging of its leaves like gilt-edged pages of a book. There is the translucent orange-green of the September/October transition, then on October 8th, or very nearly always, there is full gold blazing in my face like fire so intense I feel the warmth, the branches turning blacker as the leaves explode, and the North Porch Maple is displaying her loveliness to me. It is small wonder that the Scandinavians fancied their myth of Embla, the first woman, as created by the gods from a tree. Rain picks up color, dripping from the maple's wet branches and yellow leaves like melted ore. By the second week of the shooting, the leaves on the North Porch Maple have thinned to where I can count and smell each leaf I loved since May.

On a dry day a rude wind stirs the warm Indian summer air and I see her leaves go with a beauty that is pain. No Indian summer comes and goes—and there have been a lot of them—that I don't look out my bathroom window as I shave and watch the North

Porch Maple from first-gold through intensity of blaze to the last brittle leaf aquiver in cold November winds.

After the leaves are gone there are the bare aorta trunk and main branches and capillary twigs, a pattern I have come to know without realizing I had memorized it. In rain the tree looks like diamond jewelry, the drooly drip-drop, drip-drop telling me there will be no gunning today. When those drops of light stop moving along the slanted branches toward the trunk and become stationary pearls I know there is a good chance the weather is breaking and the dogs and we will get to hunt.

In November's sunshine the tree's twigs and branches are etched pink-gray against dead-russet goldenrod and dark rich shadows of the hemlocks. When those hemlocks and the maple's branches whip and writhe I know it's no use going out, for wind and grouse don't mix.

One day in the breathless stillness of early morning the bone-gray branches were immobile except for one twiggy extremity extending beyond view, hidden by the porch ceiling—that single branch jerking illogically as in a wind. When I opened the Dutch door a flash of motion from above became a grouse rocketing from the maple across the clearing to a grapevine in the spruce woods.

I watch the North Porch Maple in all weather and all seasons. I see hoarfrost furring the twigs on a cold daybreak; I see two dried leaves brought back to golden life by a soaking December rain in brief resurrection, then next day turn brown again in Death; after a wet snow its branches delineate parallel lines of black and white, looking like an iced cake decorated with a cock cardinal waiting to be fed.

In a far future some knowledgeable person will examine the shaggy bark for spile-hole scars and announce that this is one sugar maple that has never been tapped, and he'll be wrong. One March a wet spot on a branch caught my eye and, waiting, I saw our resident rascal the red squirrel hanging slothlike to the underside sipping new-run sap. He had pierced the bark with his incisors, leaving gashes bleeding in the warm sunshine. Each March he is back, working the same branch when the sap is running.

The first prick of luminous Winslow Homer green are the erect

leaf spikes like diminutive candles on a Christmas tree, then in May the upper branches develop stemmed seeds while the rest of the tree is not yet in lace.

What never ceases to be a wonder to me is that the leaves are the same form each year, like the working of genes that governs a line of setter gun dogs. In 1984 the North Porch Maple grew larger than normal leaves. It was a wet spring and summer, which had something to do with it, but she seemed to put out a greater burst of vitality with a realization that she was getting age on her.

After late hay-fever summer, September comes once more, bringing a touch of gold to my tree and promise of *The Season*. From the opposite side of the house her crown fans far into the sky. There was a time when it was disturbing to contemplate what age I would be when the North Porch Maple would reach that height. Nearly fifty years after first I saw the young sugar maple as a sapling at the corner of the house and decided to let it grow, I find a strange comfort in the years she has given me, the two of us growing together. It takes decades for a tree to grow that tall and rich and full of Time, Time nothing can take from you.

Possessions are not pleasure alone; they involve responsibility on the part of the possessor, a concern for the future, for in a sense they are your offspring. Only you could have brought them into being exactly as you have loved them; it is yours to see that they are cared for and, if possible, loved by someone else. There is a factor that will affect these things that are part of you that is more than the erosion of Time—the indifference if not actual greed of strangers who do not care. I see it in certain attitudes toward grouse, those magnificent birds I want to see go on forever. It is particularly evident in the constant pressure to exploit the land, “improve” it in the form of subdivision for “recreation”—the hunger of Thoreau’s financial pauper who can’t afford to let things alone.

Nothing is more touching than to see the belongings of someone recently gone being scattered to the wind, like the dead flowers from his grave, the spectacle of a public sale with the babble of the auctioneer setting prices on possessions that once were priceless.

Richard Johns told me a bizarre story of a house in the Poconos in northeast Pennsylvania. It had been the home of a setter fancier

containing his treasure of old sporting books and Edmund Osthaus prints. For a year after his death, his son kept the house and his father's possessions intact. Then one day he saturated the walls with gasoline and touched a match to it in a symbolic funeral pyre, reducing everything his father had loved to ashes. The impact of the story has stayed with me, but over the years the initial shock has changed, and I wonder if the son didn't, in a way, dignify his father by placing those possessions his father had cherished, including the house, beyond the grasp of profane hands.

Old Hemlock is not just a house and trees on 200-odd acres of the Earth's skin, it is a possession all the way down, converging to the core, radiating upward to the mountain constellations whose starlight in some strange way purifies the air.

Looking out the sunset window through an interweave of hemlock branches, I see the big trees getting bigger. They, like the old clock, tell that Time is passing, telling us that we have lived more fully than we dreamed when Kay and I were dreamers.

These things I love. I need only Time enough to possess them.