

**Bruce Agte**

## THE GLASS SHOP

for Whit Blake

Look back.

150 years and the farmers are gathering.

Look back, and a place on the earth  
at Woodbury, Long Island is being cleared  
for a schoolhouse, and all manner of spare  
or nearly spare lumber is being brought:

here's 19 maple rafter beams from Tredwell

(the remaining third of his burned barn dismantled),

here's a half load of random floorboard from Rodgers,

here's stone from the mason Ketcham,

Langland has 10 chestnut floor joists

(full length to run from sill to sill),

Van Elwell's team comes in dragging a ridgepole on a skid

(34 feet end to end),

now 10 sometime builders lay the stone

in what time they can spare

(or in what few hours

their land and livestock can spare),

now the deck is laid before noon

(they go off whistling with empty water jars,

pick up with their familiar teams

where they left off the familiar work),

now the plates are marked out and the walls framed

(see McKay's new rosewood handle square at work,

see the others at work on McKay for using the fine

shop tool at a roughing site),

one evening the fourth wall is raised in the dimming  
light,

one evening the top plates are set plumb and tacked,

the chisels are oiled and wrapped in cloth,

one evening the fathers linger smoking on the deck,

one evening the sons are sent home



but linger, too, almost unseen at the edge of light's  
apron  
(and stare and talk among themselves about the new  
school standing now in the last rose light  
of the summer evening).

The men talk, tomorrow this, tomorrow that,  
their smoke curls and disappears in the limbs  
above them  
(does the smoke leave a trace in the leaves?  
and when the leaves fall in autumn  
does the presence of smoke enter the earth?  
and does it stay there for 5 or 10 or 100 years  
until it is carried through root-hair and heart-  
wood to new leaves? and when those leaves fall  
and we pick them up, can we be in the presence  
of those men?  
and where are their words now?),

in the morning walls are sheathed, roofing put up,  
the sun rises, the doors and windows are hung  
(the site now the busiest place in the county,  
with 3 times as many men to finish the schoolhouse  
as those who began, even a wagon from Cold Spring  
this morning—as two Woodbury wagons will appear  
at Cold Spring school site the next summer),  
before the first big crops are brought in  
the bell is rung, the house filled and the history  
begun.

Walt Whitman, 21 years old,  
spent an 1840 summer here as schoolmaster  
then moved on.

So I look back.

It's because of Walt I imagined the building  
of this schoolhouse.

Because of Walt, I spent my 1983 summer here  
repairing and painting this old place.

Walt lingers here.

As the Woodbury farmers, maybe, lingered one evening  
on the just-built deck of this schoolhouse,  
their sons nearby,

as the lumberman today, after ripping down some pine  
boards for me, turned off the shop saw and let it whirr  
down as he emerged into the sunlit yard, lit a smoke  
and leaned on the fender of my truck, so we passed  
some time that way, lingering),

and now the summer has lingered into fall.  
I walk down the parallel rows of apple trees  
toward the schoolhouse made sound by a month of  
carpentry  
(square nails pulled rusty and stubborn  
from the hundred-fifty-year grip of maple and oak,  
the rotten sill plates pried out with a flat bar—  
most of the wood crumbled and powdery, white  
termites and trouglines of ants exposed—  
the building jacked up and blocked above the earth,  
joists lifted and spliced solid again,  
cracked clapboards pulled down,  
cracks closed and spliced,  
doors and window frames repaired, rehung,  
as close to square as can be

now), as the apples ripen and the last roses bloom,  
as the schoolhouse is cleared,  
as all 18 windows are taken from their casings in the walls,  
as they are laid flat on long sawhorse tables

(2 floors now in this house:

my feet on the lower made of wood,  
my hands on the upper made of glass),

as the broken glass is removed, the rotten putty dug out,  
as the new panes are bedded, set with points,  
as the glazing is done,  
as I bend over them now with a brush

the low autumn sun angles almost flat in  
through the empty casings, lights  
rows of panes. 162 panes lit,  
the glass shop illuminate,  
lights here, and here, and here in front of me  
(how is it that we can all of a sudden,  
through an almost imperceptible change



in earthlight or motion,  
come into the presence of a place?  
or the presence of a spirit?),  
part of Walt here, and here, and here,  
steady reflection of a tree in this one, Walt here,  
sudden reflection of a thrush in this one, Walt here,  
Walt different the same in all the plates of glass

from which, now, I raise my head in the clear autumn  
and see Walt direct  
in sky, in passing cloud,  
in amber trapezoid of light on the wall,  
in beamlit particle of sawdust suspended  
    (invisible float of generations still present,  
    invisible float of generations to come),  
in the visible lingering last direct ray,  
in closing day and closing summer leaves hung  
    dark green in the fragrance,  
in the wash of Long Island Sound not distant,  
in the surf, in the last brush of white foam  
    below me.

The last window glistening white, the work done,  
I sit shoulder high to this span of glass  
and listen.  
The friend is singing.