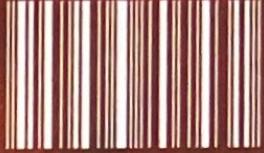


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POETRY & PHOTOGRAPHY

The Prairie School

Will Stokes

As Frank did it, seven semicircles
framing a home's front door, all art-glass
and butterflies—flat horizontals
and half-steps appear, unnoticed,
out of the ground.

Nothing here rises past its place:
tallness is hidden, shunned.
Even the roofs conceal their inner workings:
sixteen levels shouldered
by molded plaster frieze;
this building has no finials,
just more lines of now-green copper
that sink back to the ground with only
the slightest upturned edges,
tall grass, bent and moving.

If you enter, visitor, through this low dome door
to a cave of red-stained wood,
see the woman, Nature,
rising from her pedestal,
delicately gesturing at the architectural form
sprouting from her feet, her own body—
Flower in the Crannied Wall,
sculpted by Richard Boch, after Tennyson.

She knows this monstrous tower is of her own flesh,
seeing it meld with her flowing gown
and reaching her shoulders, she can consider it
with downcast eyes, or look away, if she pleases.
Like the owner, Susan Lawrence Dana,
Nature sees the rising tide of the inevitable, and as her
soft hair turns to helmet, intricately patterned, reflecting
in the form beneath her,
sees in it her own beauty, and invites it to stay.

Nature wears sumac, and the house dons her robes—
sumac frescoed on plaster, sumac in glass
held together with zinc beading,
stripped of its curves, letting through
only the ochre rays of the sun,
lighting the dark interior with a blaze of earth.

If you climb the stairs, visitor,
gasp a breath in the first open volume -
from seven feet to thirty in one jarring step.
Start with compression, said Frank, then let
the visitor expand, into triple-height rooms
and lines of sight towards
every plane of movement.

Nearly every room is a unified whole—
paneled walls and white oak furniture,
but at Susan's request and Frank's dismay,
one room tells an older story. This was not
the first home on this plot: her father's
Italianate villa, funded by a fortune in silver mines,
a tall pillbox of a thing, with handsome columns
and a protruding cap, with windows
to see above the trees—Susan left one room behind,
a parlor in the Victorian style of the day,
its original grey marbled mantle and red velvet chintz
showed not even she was ready to dive
headfirst into Frank's pool of reflection.

As the years went on, Susan lost children,
three husbands, and a beloved cousin,
became reclusive, lost interest in politics,
drifted into the occult, held seances
in the barrel-vaulted gallery under
statues of Hermes and Frank's torii gate.
Like Tennyson grappled with his flower,
observing its roots plucked from a cranny,
wondering in these strange organic forms
where the life comes from, Susan—
in making her home on this great flat expanse,
filling it with unrealized dreams
and a thesis of the future—Susan
asked to know the nature of things,
and whether she could shape them.