



*Alexander Calder. Quilt II. Painted in 1965.*

## **Subtraction**

Sandra Kelso

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An assortment of marble, alabaster, travertine, and granite sculptures clutter the interior of the house. Where one might ordinarily situate a lamp between couches, a heavy black pedestal as tall as a grown man's hip takes its place, and on top, a stone figure watches over. The figures on these pedestals range in form and subject. For instance, in the living room on the mantel over the fire, a small figurine of the Mother Mary carved from lapis lazuli dons the center. Along the railing that separates the staircase to the basement from the rest of the house, three abstract figures are on display. The polished milky stone of each piece folds into itself, revealing a woman twisting over her left shoulder, a couple entwined in embrace, or something akin to the ripple of water over a lake. Sparsely dotted with furniture, the house is less home and more the storage collection of a small museum. Out the front door on the other side of the driveway, a shed mirrors the house in shape and size. Walking between the two at dusk, you'll find white footprints of work boots stamped along the asphalt ground.

Nancy often doesn't wake up until midday and even then, it is only for a cup of water or buttered slice of toast. She spends less than an hour with us before returning to rest behind the closed door of the main bedroom. Don, her husband, has a circadian rhythm of his own yet finds himself called to bed when she wakes. In the morning, he always seems to stir about before the rest of us, climbing down the carpeted staircase that leads to his office in the basement with a mug of coffee in hand. The few times I've been invited inside the office during the growing morning, it's to answer questions about the computer. An email disappeared, a photograph never sent, the font suddenly reduced.

During high school, my mom worked in a lumber store. Between the time school let out and the end of her shift I used to wait for her, walking along the aisle of pallet racks filled with wood running the length of the warehouse. The racks extended tall beyond the point artificial light was able to reach so their mass towered over you. Inside the shed in Wisconsin, two pallets are stacked full of uncut stone from around the world. Walking along their length, looking for a stone of the desired size, I am reminded of the daunting mass of the wooden sheets and two-by-fours in the lumber store.

The lever of the air hammer is switched on around ten o'clock depending on who wakes first. Its low steady hum echoes inside the shed so that you never feel alone in its quiet vastness. The wiring of tools starts up soon after and the falling of offcuts onto the padded floor shakes the wooden benches underneath the stone. The buzzing of the drill against arthritic hands lulls to a state of sedation. The room becomes empty. The day falls away. Meals no longer seem relevant. All that's left is you and the stone together to wrestle until the breaking of dusk. A choreography performed with the assistance of electric tools, colored pencils, and whisk brooms. There is slowness in the mind, contemplation, and an attempt toward communication. The blowing of white dust gets tangled in your hair. It pours out of your work pant's pockets and finds its way into the dermis of your skin, burying itself deep as the deer ticks outside burrow in prey. In the house, after the sun sets safe under hot shower water, you soak, scrub, and moisturize but it has no effect except to remove the smell of perspiration from nervous sweat. In dreams, you cut better, more precise, listening to the blade, controlling its path without hesitation.

The basement of the house is framed by bookshelves running along every wall containing a library organized alphabetically by genre, subject, and period. Before your time, Nancy was a quilt maker and the Editorial Director of a now-retired publishing firm, Pfiefer-Hamilton. They produced several children's stories including *The Quiltmaker's Gift*, *Reach for the Moon*, and *Old Turtle*. *The Quiltmaker's Gift* is the most popular of the firm's oeuvre, an ornately illustrated book by Jeff Brumbeau and Gail de Marcken. It is often taught to elementary school students for its tale of generosity that questions the material value of objects and wealth. It tells of a quilt maker working from a cottage in the blue mountains of a far-off land. Her quilts seemed to fall to the earth from heaven, made from squares and rectangles sewn in repeating patterns of geometric shapes, and complimentary colors, each with their own sentimental name — Grandmother's Flower Garden, Milky Way, All Kinds, Toad in a Puddle, Baby's Block, True Lover's Knot. Nancy's own quilts are stored in plastic containers along the third pallet rack inside the shed.

The university museum in town is having an exhibition on mathematics, art, and science. You visit on a rainy morning, to escape the pull of the shed for a short while. Toting names like Hepworth, Aycok, Hunt, Diebenkorn, and Cage, the exhibition brings together a collection of mostly works on paper documenting the exacting mathematic precision each seemed to innately understand. Toward the back corner of the gallery, a beam supports Anne Linberg's sculpture of thread wrapped around its body, *Impossible Red* (2023) portrays the melancholic relationship between material and structure.

Back in the dusted white room of the shed's studio, your head tilted left, you rise and fall from your chair, circling the stone resting on its bench. As a quilt is sewn together by the steady rocking of a chair and the pulling of a needle's tip, so too does the figure hidden beneath the layers of strata only reveal itself along the rhythmic variation of drilling, cutting, pacing, sanding, and chipping. It is the careful subtraction of everything that is not.