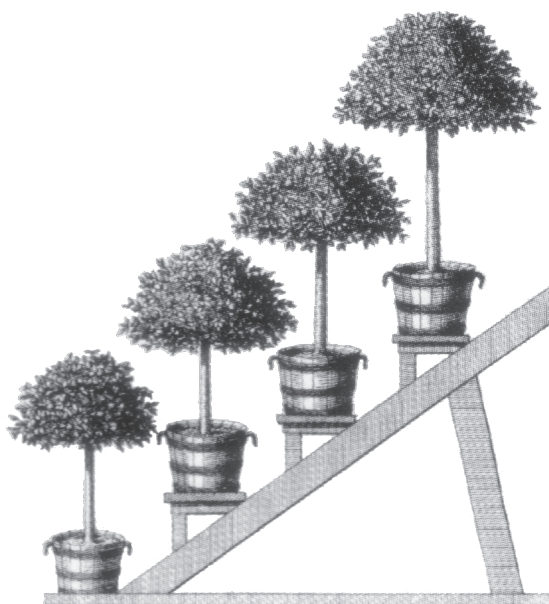


Under Glass

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The Girl with a Thousand Christmas Trees

Jen Hirt



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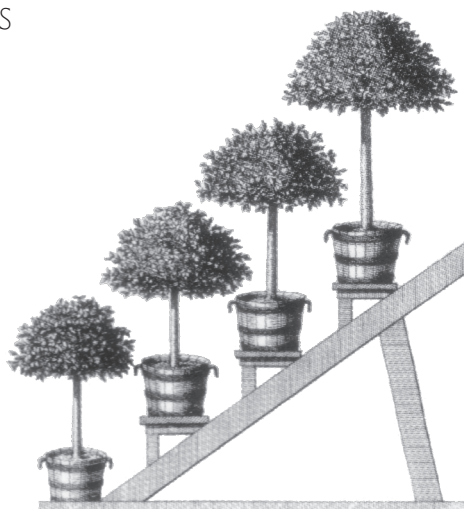
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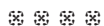


In the spring of 1915, Samuel and Anna Hirt purchased the Lark property at the southeast corner of Pearl and Royalton Roads. During that summer, with the help of their sons Paul and Howard, they had a greenhouse constructed and started raising flowers and vegetable plants. That greenhouse is the nucleus of the present complex and is still in use today in perfect condition.

—from the “Hirt’s Greenhouse” entry in *The History of Strongsville*,
written in 1968 by Howard Hirt’s wife, Maude Hirt

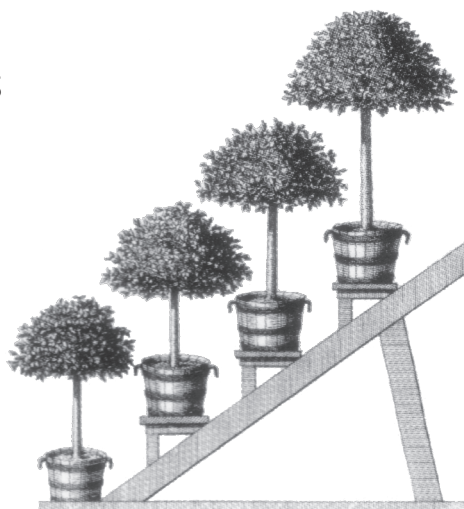
Without a glass palace life is a burden.

—from *Glasarchitektur* by German architect Paul Scheerbart (1863–1915)



Introduction

Glass Always Breaks



On my thirtieth birthday, I had the blueprint of a greenhouse tattooed on my left bicep. Young men loitering in the tattoo parlor wondered what the straight lines and strong angles of beams were all about. I explained: the blueprint was a Dutch “winter garden” designed in 1737 by Pieter de la Court van de Voort. The simple schematic showed a one-room greenhouse with a loft for retaining warmth, a glass wall oriented south, and stepped benches so the four potted citrus trees had ample sun—cutting-edge architecture, not surprising for the early years of the Enlightenment.

“Cool,” said one guy, “you must be Dutch.”

“No,” I said. “I’m greenhouse.”

The guy nodded, but he looked confused. He wandered off. I’d have to come up with a better explanation.

I’m greenhouse? I am. My ancestry, my bloodline, my memories, my identity. Hirt’s Greenhouse in Ohio, to be exact. Four generations

of my family worked there from 1915 to 2005. In 1915, my great-grandpa Sam Hirt bought the land and built one small greenhouse. In 2005, my dad sold the land and fourteen old greenhouses for \$2.5 million to developers holding blueprints for an entirely different building, a CVS pharmacy. My dad wanted the money; the corporation wanted the location—in the center of town at the corner of a major intersection. My brother, next in line to run the business, hoped some of the sale money would allow him to continue the business elsewhere, and it did. Today, the latest incarnation of our family business thrives under new greenhouses.

But on the day I got tattooed, no one knew for sure what would happen to the family business. All we knew for sure was that the greenhouses would be demolished. A corporate pharmacy had no use for them.

The uncertainty spread to my immediate family. My mom was ill with multiple sclerosis, diagnosed in 1996. My dad had left her in a brutal divorce after thirty years of marriage. Their relationship, once a cornerstone of the family business, had demolished itself in 2000, and no one had bothered to clear the rubble. Because of the divorce, no one was really surprised by the sale of Hirt's Greenhouse. Saddened, yes, but surprised? No. We'd all grown jaded by then. In fact, we wondered why it hadn't happened sooner.

I'd decided on the tattoo in February 2005, a few months before the demolition, when I knew the sale was pending. It was a bittersweet time. I was a writer fueled by the memories of a childhood spent under glass, so I hated to see the old greenhouses come down. On the other hand, the financial windfall might allow my brother and dad to sustain the family business on new land, with modern, heat-efficient greenhouses designed for their burgeoning online sales. The family no longer needed huge greenhouses open to the public for holidays and planting seasons. Internet shoppers could imagine whatever greenhouse they liked. Whatever jungle, whatever season, whatever glass. Whatever.

But I couldn't haul out my Generation X *whatever*. Internet shoppers didn't need a real glass greenhouse, but I did.

My brother, on the other hand, shrugged off sentiment effortlessly. The eve of the official sale was the eve of his twenty-eighth birth-



*Demolition day, looking south toward where the main greenhouses
and offices once were. Week of June 5, 2005*

day. He downed a shot of liquor at a bar, called me, and said he felt like Cortez burning his ships—nowhere to go but forward, onward, bravely. My tattoo healed with the salve of my brother's wild enthusiasm. How unexpected.

So the greenhouses built over four generations were demolished in one week in June 2005. From my apartment in Idaho, where I'd been living since graduate school, I stared at demolition photos my dad sent in email attachments. Jutting angles of snapped frames, wooden and metal, crusted with white lead paint. Wires and insulation from the offices. Slabs of concrete. Piles of glass from the ninety-year-old greenhouse, the sixty-five-year old greenhouses, and the eleven others I'd played in as a child. Broken, dismantled, heaped. Gone. I stared at the photos, zoomed in, zoomed out. They weren't violent, but post-violent. I cuffed my hand over my tattoo, those dark lines of ultimate permanence. My greenhouses were gone.



My grandpa's brother, Art (left), and my grandpa, Hobart (right), circa 1940

Greenhouse history celebrates the ingenuity behind advances, like the loft and benches in my tattoo. Even more history notes their demise, because if greenhouses do anything, they fall apart. Fragile glass always breaks. It's a law and a doctrine and a prediction and an apology. For example, the fierce British winter of 1739 vanquished the greenhouse at Beddington, a famous orangery. World War I drained the workers and coal from the Great Conservatory at Chatsworth, England, and all the plants died. A smoldering cigarette leveled the Crystal Palace in 1936, and Londoners saw the spectacular pyre in the distance. Glass always breaks. Still, I expected my greenhouses to last forever. They were a constant for my first thirty years. Their absence became a blueprint I never considered.

Until I started considering that absence, that is. I've spent the greater part of my adult years writing about it, about glass and light and metaphors, about privilege and redemption, about trying to figure out what it means to be the fourth generation of something that almost ended. The result of that writing is twelve essays, each on a theme, not at all chronological, each a line in a larger blueprint, a less permanent tattoo.

Why the tattoo? So I can carry my four generations and my four immediate family members as images of four trees that are perpetually thriving in the perfect location. So forces beyond my control will stop taking away my foundations. So I can stake my own claim to a place. Mostly, I just like the idea of a tattooed blueprint, a permanent plan for the future. In the simple lines of instruction and geometry, both Pieter de la Court van de Voort and I see an expectation of a time to come. We both know that this is where the sun will slant, and here the plants will thrive.

When strangers ask about my tattoo, I explain its history and my history, but I never get to the sentence about the greenhouse being gone, that all-important merger of its history with my history. What are the right words for that loss?

These twelve essays might be the right words, a stroll through the final seven years or so of Hirt's Greenhouse. The first step: December 2000, when I realize what's going on. The final stride: December 2007 with a chance encounter on my grandparents' former land that makes me realize I do know how to let the greenhouses go. My essays are sides in a prism; the words, light refracted.

The Girl with a Thousand Christmas Trees



My great-grandpa, an Austrian Jew who called himself Sam Hirt, was naturalized in Chickasaw County, Iowa, on March 22, 1888. He had, as far as any of his descendants can tell, the classic American dream: emigrate, start your business from nothing, hang on through tough times, have a family, and die a success. He could not have imagined that 117 years later a great-granddaughter would pay \$150 to get a 268-year-old greenhouse blueprint inked on her arm in a postmodern fit of rebellion against the grand narrative.

In 1915, Sam and his wife Anna (née Hobart) built a simple greenhouse, rectangular, maybe one hundred feet long and twenty feet high. They grew some plants, and one day posed for a portrait on their front lawn, sitting in chairs, looking toothless and doughy. No smiles. Anna wears a frumpy dress; she is overweight. Sam, bearded like Lincoln, is so thin that a Midwest thunderstorm might blow him out of his suspenders. A photo is the only way I know them.

Cue the American Dream just in time for World War I and their oldest of seven sons, Paul, shipped off as a merchant marine on the *HMS Otranto*. But the *Otranto* was ill-fated, and so was Paul Hirt. Here is October 6, 1918, and here is the heavy fog off the coast of Scotland. Here are rough seas, and here is the *Otranto* colliding with a ship called the *Kashmir*, then splitting in half, then spilling its merchant marines into the cold waters, right at the end of the war. An accident. An heir lost, no body recovered to ship home. Sam passed the greenhouse to the other sons, but as the family story goes, none were as worthy as the one lost.

My grandfather, Hobart, was one of those other sons. Even though he weathered the Great Depression working as a cab driver in Columbus, Ohio, the greenhouse was his passion. He married Onalee Baker, from nearby Columbia Station. She was the daughter of German storekeepers, and she was an intellectual, spending four years at Baldwin-Wallace College in Ohio, studying Latin and Greek. With the greenhouse, the two of them set to work every day, even holidays, always reinvesting profits.

The greenhouse pulsed as their beautiful glass heart, and they raised three kids, employed the legions of relatives descended from the brothers, and became a name in the city of Strongsville. They built more greenhouses around the original structure—two quaint greenhouses with curved glass and stone floors, then two giant workhorse greenhouses in the 1940s, plus a garden store and offices and a massive walk-in cooler for fresh cut flowers. Grandpa was one of the first retail growers in the region to light his greenhouses at night with plain old electricity. In 1943, the trade magazine *Florist Review* sent a photographer to capture the greenhouses at night, lit up like beacons against a darkness that doesn't seem to exist anymore, the light reflecting off the wet brick road.

In 1973, they gifted the entire retail business to their two sons, my dad, Alan, and my uncle, Clare. Both boys had graduated Ohio State University's horticulture program, educated and primed for the greenhouse business. If the greenhouse merely pulsed under my grandparents, it thrummed with potential in the seventies. Picture three acres of glints and reflections. Interior steel scaffolding supported frames of redwood

and cypress coated with white lead paint. The frames held at least three thousand panes of glass. The place abounded with thousands of plants, depending on the season—pink cacti, Juniper bonsai, white jasmine vines, seedlings of black tomatoes from Serbia, even expensive bouquets of red and white roses, flown in from South America.

My dad had married Karen Vogely, a long-haired sociology major he'd met at a sorority dance. Mom earned her sociology degree but set it aside to keep the financial books at the greenhouse. Dad and Uncle Clare grew the plants. Grandpa bought his sons and their wives houses in the suburbs, just a five-minute drive from the greenhouse. My parents bought a shepherd mix puppy named Sadie. Mom hung up her fringed leather vest, her hippie bellbottoms; Dad put away his Army garb but kept his Bob Dylan-inspired haircut. They had me in 1975. Soon, Dad slung apathy at the suburbs, trading up for a large house in the woods of Valley City, a fifteen-minute drive from the greenhouse, farther away than any blood relative had lived from the greenhouse. His parents did not approve.

He and Mom had my brother Matt in 1977, and along with a handful of cats (a Siamese named Jack, a black stray named Hobo, and a gray tabby, found at the greenhouse one morning, named Josee), the family was complete. All through the 1980s, Matt and I played in our private jungle of drips and sunrays, fronds and petals. In springtime, we watched the workers plant thousands of trays of seedlings; dirt mixed with urgency and skill everywhere we looked. During long summers, the Ohio humidity amplified by the glass, we sat in the air-conditioned office and drew pictures on Hirt's Greenhouse stationery. Come autumn, we buried our hands in the sawdust-filled boxes of bulbs, studying the photos of promised springtime flowers, their outrageous colors and petals ten times better than Disney.

And winter? Winter came with the unbearable excitement of Christmas trees, wrapped and stacked on a flatbed truck from Michigan. Blue spruce, white pine, and firs called Douglas, Frazier, and Concolor. Every December, I was the girl with a thousand Christmas trees. My parents would bring a tree to my classroom at Liverpool Elementary, and they would donate another for the lobby, by the cafeteria. The whole



Greenhouses under construction, 1940s

school knew my parents, my mom with her long blonde hair, my dad with his thick, curly brown hair and his beard, the two of them pulling up in our silver minivan, unloading free Christmas trees for the school, the local Santas of fresh pine.

Classmates knew my parents not just from the yearly Christmas tree donation. My parents were small-town celebrities, their images on TV and their voices heard on their own gardening radio show. My dad called himself the North Coast Gardener, and he did seasonal segments on the local morning talk shows, or, at the height of his popularity, the camera crews would come to the greenhouse and shoot live for an evening news segment. Eventually, an AM station, WWWE, gave him his own radio show, with Mom as his sidekick co-host. People came to our greenhouses just to meet my parents. Fans were appreciative of my dad's instant knowledge on anything plant-related; as for my mom, they loved her long blonde hair.

As I grew up under all this glass, I convinced myself of *always*. I would always scamper down the aisles between tropical plants. I would always have my pick of white pine from which to hang my many glass orna-

ments. I would always remember the splash of rain on a glass roof, or the cacophony of a thunderstorm. I would always be able to say, “I’m going to the greenhouse now,” just like the three generations before me. Dad would always be on TV and radio, Mom always behind the scenes or at his side, strangers always stopping them to rave about the shows.

Most importantly, the greenhouse would always be there simply because of always. In my fierce perception of reality, I claimed the space as the heiress to this kingdom. Nothing would ever change. And if it did, it would only brighten, because that’s what greenhouses are for—not just controlling the light but showcasing the light.

It’s difficult for me to pinpoint the downturn, the moment when nothing more perceptible than a slight wilt of leaves or a lone cloud blocking the sun changed things. It’s not the moment of Mom’s diagnosis, or Dad’s first infidelity, nor the moment of the sale, not the dark week of demolition. Those are huge moments, colossal uprootings, ships sinking and sons lost. I don’t even know if a singular moment exists, or if a chain-reaction of moments made my family resist the greenhouse as our center, our root and ground and sun. It was just a few years, but it changed everything.

It starts with what is dreadful in a greenhouse: disease. Mom was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1996. The symptoms she’d brushed off for years. The temporary blindness that happened in the seventies was alleviated with steroids but never explained. When she had trouble walking in the nineties, she blamed a 1964 lawnmower accident that had mangled her right toes. An MRI showed what was up, and it wasn’t muscle problems with her feet. The problem sat at the other pole, her brain and spine, where there were patches of dead nerves, hardened (sclerotic) and multiple. The spate of blindness decades ago suddenly made sense. It was the MS virus attacking her optical nerve, which doctors now realize is the classic MS onset symptom. While the optical nerve recovered, the patches of dead nerves in her brain never recovered, and there would be more patches. For the rest of her life, she would lose movement, endure chronic pain.

Next, move to a decision antithetical to a family business: divorce. As the reality of paralysis lingered in the empty spaces of daily activities



The greenhouse at night, 1943. Reprinted with permission from Florists' Review Enterprises

in the autumn of 1999, Dad took up with a younger, healthier woman. Six months later, Mom caught on, making the connection between long nights alone, unaccounted whereabouts, and new numbers on the phone bill. First they were going to work it out; then one of them filed for a legal separation. The other countered with a full-fledged divorce. My memory is so muddled, I can't even tell you who filed what, when, why. All I remember is that lawyers ponied up, eyeing the family business and knowing that my small-town, high-status parents would battle to the end over who got what.

And they did. Each refused to leave the house. Mom could no longer go up and down stairs, so Dad moved upstairs. Stalemate, standoff, battle lines drawn. Their thirty-year marriage imploded in a matter of weeks. Mom took a photo of every single item in the house and made a photo album for the lawyers. She was ready to litigate for every object. Dad, I believe, started shuffling money away from the greenhouse accounts and would litigate for every dollar.

However, for many days through the early stages of their divorce, they got in the car and drove to the greenhouse together and worked side by side in their office.

Almost eighty years of family precedent said that was the way to do things. In a family business, you might be husband and wife, but you

are also owner and bookkeeper, and even if you are furious at your spouse, you still have to water the plants and pay the bills. For four generations, there had been this tacit agreement that private problems stayed outside the glass walls. There were few divorces in our family; Great-Grandpa Hirt married once before he met Anna and moved to Ohio, and some of Grandpa's brothers had married again after the loss of a first wife. Of course there were affairs and betrayals, but if the situation careened beyond resolve, my family tapped into their Midwest repression. There was a business to run. Even I knew the code. It was a strand in my DNA. A Friday night fight with my parents about curfew and with whom I was hanging out might end in slammed doors and privileges revoked, but on Saturday morning it was understood that I would be at the cash register, and Mom would be at her desk, Dad at his. We'd get along as coworkers for eight hours.

If divorces and lasting arguments were rare in our family, long-term medical issues of the caliber of multiple sclerosis were almost nonexistent. No one had encountered this—not my grandfather who smoked unfiltered cigarettes, not the uncles who drank, not my grandmother with osteoporosis. I think, as the twentieth century came to a close and our family's little life was hitting a *fin de siècle* of its own, precedent failed us. We had nothing else. We had no way to cope. When my grandfather heard about Mom's MS diagnosis, he reportedly said, "Is it contagious?" Insensitive, yes. Selfish, yes. Ignorant, definitely. But also spoken like a true greenhouse manager, owner emeritus, always keen to what might run rampant through his plants or his workers, be it aphid or beetle or virus.

At first, in 1999 and 2000, the greenhouse did what it always did, nurturing the generations of seedlings and flowers. But something had changed. In the past, maybe there had been a cracked pane of glass here, a leaky water pipe over there, one bum planting of flowers beyond salvaging: little things, one-at-a-time crises, handled in due course and with a larger perspective. But eventually, too many crises hit all at once. Fatigue from MS made Mom stay home more and more; Dad was distracted with his affair and the terrifying reality that he was watching his



Matt and me at Easter in the greenhouse, circa 1979

wife, his business partner, slide into paralysis; my grandparents fell ill with aneurysms and dementia. I was in Iowa for graduate school, every day distancing myself from greenhouse work as I pursued an English degree. My brother remained, the only boy in the fourth generation, by patriarchal default the inheritor of the whole thing, but he was stuck. He had dropped out of college twice, leaving a negative space in the horticulture degrees held by the two men above him in rank, his father and uncle. He fell into the safety net of the greenhouse at a time when the whole thing was falling apart. It was like the greenhouse's great glass heart, unseen but always felt, could sense a gathering loss, and it thumped erratically under all the glass that could once control light so well but was now failing in the new world of disease and divorce.

Every visit home, I could see it falling apart. At one point, so much glass had slipped from panes that shards lay like sharp leaves fallen in a brutal autumn. I gathered them, studying the water stains, the white-

wash, the slick algae and moss. When had we stopped repairing, stopped tending? When had we shifted from beginnings to ends? I know that answer no more than I know what Pieter wanted to plant in his Dutch winter garden, or what my dad, as a boy, first planted in the greenhouse, or what was anybody's first symptom, first lie, or first step toward the end. I do know that a lot of old glass is gone, but somehow, I'm still the girl with a thousand Christmas trees.