

Making Love

By Rebecca McClanahan, from The Best American Poetry series

Why *make*? I used to wonder.
Is it something you have to keep on
making, like beds or dinner, stir it up
or smooth it down? Sex, I understood,
an easy creaking on the upholstered
springs of a man you meet in passing.
You *have* sex, you don't have to make it,
it makes *you*--rise and fall and rise again,
each time, each man, new. But love?
It could be the name of a faraway
city, end of a tired journey you take
with some husband, your bodies chugging
their way up the mountain, glimpsing
the city lights and thinking, If we can
keep it up, we'll make Love by morning.
I guess it was fun for somebody,
my grandmother once said. By then
I was safely married and had earned
the right to ask, there in the kitchen
beside the nodding aunts. Her answer
made me sad. In her time, love meant making
babies, and if I had borne twelve
and buried three, I might see my husband
as a gun shooting off inside me, each bullet
another year gone. But sex wasn't my question.
Love was the ghost whose shape kept
shifting. For us, it did not mean babies,
those plump incarnations the minister
had promised--flesh of our flesh,
our *increase*. Without them, and twenty years
gone, what have we to show
for the planing and hammering, bone
against bone, chisel and wedge,
the tedious sanding of night
into morning--when we rise, stretch,
shake out the years, lean back,

and see what we've made: no ghost,
it's a house. Sunlight through the window
glazing our faces, patina of dust
on our arms. At every axis, mortise
and tenon couple and hold. Doors
swing heavy on their hinges.